

Getting inside Fundamentalist Atheism

*The Gentle Atheism of Dawkins,
Hitchens, and Harris*

“Fundamentalist atheism” is a term that will annoy Richard Dawkins.¹ So let me be clear: fundamentalism is not meant as a term of abuse. The authors of the booklet series called *The Fundamentals*, which appeared in the United States between 1910 and 1915, were sincere, intelligent, thoughtful scholars. They articulated their commitments to the inerrancy of Scripture, a substitutionary atonement, and a literal return of Jesus to Earth with precision and thoughtfulness. And in so doing, they carved out for themselves a position that was uncompromising and committed. There is no room for ambiguity or humility or even nuance in *The Fundamentals*. They argue for their worldview deeply confident that they are entirely right.

So the description “fundamentalist atheists” should invite a parallel because of the equally clear assertion of uncompromising truth. The commitments are different – “science is incompatible with belief in God,” “religion is deeply destructive,”² and “atheists can be moral.” But the result is the same – an unambiguous assertion of a worldview in which the authors are entirely confident that they are right.

It is no coincidence that both the Christian fundamentalists of the early twentieth century and the atheist fundamentalists of the early twenty-first century do not even try to understand their opponents. None of our atheist fundamentalists have studied theology. Herein is a crucial difference with the tradition out of

which this book is written. For this author, my Christian faith requires me to work as hard as I can to understand the arguments of Christian fundamentalists and atheist fundamentalists. And the tradition out of which I am writing is classical Catholicism as expressed in its Anglican form.³

This is an important point. In terms of method, classical Catholicism contrasts markedly with the approach of both versions of fundamentalism. The remarkable thirteenth-century Dominican Friar, Thomas Aquinas (1224–74), has a deeply generous methodology. Having trained as an Augustinian Platonist, he then spent much of his life exploring the world of Aristotle. He read Muslim and Jewish thinkers with care and sought to synthesize the thought of Aristotle with his Augustinian training. The very structure of his *Summa Theologiae*⁴ is a testimony to his generosity and care when presenting the arguments of his opponents. In this remarkable text, Aquinas always starts by presenting the strongest arguments he can find against the position that he holds. He then identifies the hinge argument for his position before going on to explain why this position is the correct one. And the position taken by him in the *Summa* was, for his day, controversial and pioneering. In 1270, the views of Aquinas were investigated and condemned by a papal inquiry, which was organized by the bishop of Paris.⁵

Why was Aquinas so willing to read widely and explore a tradition that wasn't his own so carefully? The answer is that Aquinas had a primary obligation to the truth. The quest for the truth is a moral absolute. If God is, then God must be the author of all truth. Aquinas saw this clearly. No text was forbidden; no viewpoint inappropriate to explore. And one follows the truth wherever it goes.

So it is this spirit of classical Catholicism that contrasts so markedly with our Christian fundamentalists and atheist fundamentalists. And it is in this spirit that this book will start with a careful, fair, and even sympathetic exploration of the arguments found in three books. The best known is *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins. The second is by Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*;⁶ and the third is by Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*.⁷

These books share one thing – they are all well written. They are compelling. My goal in this chapter is to put the cases of Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris as accurately as I can and in fact, in certain places, to strengthen their arguments. I will engage in this exercise because it is an act of Christian duty and fidelity to be fair to those with whom you disagree. There is a moral obligation on me to make sure that when I have conversations with others I can fairly represent the position they hold, such that if Richard Dawkins was reading this book he would say “yes, you have understood what I am trying to say.” There are seven arguments found across these three books. I shall now look at each in turn.

The Concept of God is Incoherent

Sam Harris admits that having a worldview free of all contradictions is difficult. We have so many beliefs that to examine them all is – on a practical level – hard to do. Yet, Harris writes, “given the demands of language and behavior, it remains true that we must strive for coherence wherever it is in doubt, because failure here is synonymous with a failure either of linguistic sense or of behavioral possibility.”⁸

Harris is entirely right. Imagine for a moment a person who insisted that she has a chair that isn’t a chair. Imagine further that after questioning the person, she rejects the possibility that this is a stool or an odd table that is used as a chair. Instead, she really means to affirm the two propositions “I have a chair” and “I do not have a chair” as true. What would you think? I suspect all of us would conclude that this is a nonsense use of words and impossible to accommodate in terms of lifestyle. Given chairs are intended for sitting, you cannot sit on a chair that simultaneously exists and yet doesn’t exist.

Now this is an obvious contradiction. Most contradictions are more indirect. It is contradictory, for example, to believe that “our lives are entirely determined by the stars” and at the same time to believe that “all humans are entirely free.” At first sight, the assertion about human freedom does not directly contradict the

assertion about the truth of astrology. However, as one thinks further, the contradiction is exposed because if all lives are entirely determined by the stars then they cannot be entirely free.⁹

If God exists, then one must give a coherent account of what this God is like. We cannot believe in something that we cannot explain. Granted there might be plenty of mystery, but it cannot be all mystery. If it is all mystery, then we are agnostics (i.e., a person who believes that there is insufficient evidence to determine whether there is or there is not a God). We don't know what we are talking about.

This is quite good territory for the atheist (i.e., a person who believes that God's non-existence is highly likely). Believers are notoriously vague about precisely what they affirm. It is surprising that Dawkins only explores this problem in passing. When he defines God, he tends to think it is relatively easy. So, for example, he writes, "Instead I shall define the God Hypothesis more defensibly: *there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*"¹⁰ However, he does feel that when it comes to the Abrahamic God, the definition needs to be modified. And at this point, he touches on the problem of coherence:

The simple definition of the God Hypothesis with which I began has to be substantially fleshed out if it is to accommodate the Abrahamic God. He not only created the universe, he is a *personal* God dwelling within it, or perhaps outside it (whatever that might mean), possessing the unpleasantly human qualities to which I have alluded.¹¹

Dawkins should have developed the bracket "whatever that might mean." Christians have had enormous problems explaining the relationship of God to the universe. Take time, for example. For Aquinas, God had to be timeless – so there is no duration in the life of God. However, if God is timeless, then how can God do anything? All actions require time. You need a moment before the action, a moment during the action, and a moment after the action. If God is timeless, then God has quite literally no time in which to act. It looks incoherent. It looks like

Christians are simultaneously affirming “a perfect changeless God” and at the same time “a God who acts and therefore changes.” How can we affirm both of these assertions simultaneously?

One major question for believers is this: what exactly do we mean by God? Are we claiming that God is some sort of energy that is present in the universe? Are we claiming that God is something separate from the universe and if so what? Does God have space or live in time or not? If persons of faith cannot explain what they are affirming to exist, then atheism has won. If I invent a word, say “bloop,” and cannot then explain what it means, then others are entitled to ignore me. We need an account of God; and often persons of faith are not very good at giving an account of God.

Of the three, it is Sam Harris who makes this a central issue. Harris makes much of the problem of evil: why does God allow so much evil if God is all powerful, all knowing, and all loving? This is a classic coherency problem in the philosophy of religion. If God is all powerful, then he must be able to eradicate all evil; if God is all loving, then God must wish to abolish evil; but evil exists, therefore God cannot be both all powerful and all loving. It looks like theism is self-contradictory given the reality of evil in the world. Harris says quite explicitly that in his view this is a decisive reason for unbelief. There is no acceptable way for Christians to evade the problem of evil. It is such a fundamental issue. Harris writes:

The problem of vindicating an omnipotent and omniscient God in the face of evil (this is traditionally called the problem of theodicy) is insurmountable. Those who claim to have surmounted it, by recourse to notions of free will and other incoherencies, have merely heaped bad philosophy onto bad ethics. Surely there must come a time when we will acknowledge the obvious: theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance. Indeed, it is ignorance with wings.¹²

As theists, we should be willing to concede that (a) we need to provide an adequate account of God, and (b) the problem of evil is a major problem for belief. There is one last point that our

trinity of atheists stress. They have a problem with the theological discourse in general. Christians have a technical vocabulary. For Dawkins, theological language about the Trinity is unintelligible. Having quoted St. Gregory the Miracle Worker's views on the Trinity, he observes: "Whatever miracles may have earned St. Gregory his nickname, they were not miracles of honest lucidity."¹³ Again Christians are often not helpful at this point. There are so many Christians who seem to take a perverse pride in not understanding the point of the Trinity. Once again Dawkins is on strong ground at this point.

Faith and the Lack of Reasons

What is the basis of belief in God? This is the second area of attack for our trio of atheists. Sam Harris starts his book by contrasting "reason" with "faith." Harris explains that "religious faith is simply *unjustified* belief in matters of ultimate concern – specifically in propositions that promise some mechanism by which human life can be spared the ravages of time and death."¹⁴ It is true that the word "faith" is often used in this way. The moment in a conversation with a Christian, when the problem of evil arises, is often concluded by the Christian invoking two words, "mystery" and "faith." It often appears that we don't have reasons for what we believe is true.

Richard Dawkins is right to complain about those who insist that belief in God is justified by the fact that God's existence cannot be disproved. Dawkins quotes with approval, Bertrand Russell's parable of the teapot.

If I were to suggest that between the Earth and Mars there is a china teapot revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit, nobody would be able to disprove my assertion provided I were careful to add that the teapot is too small to be revealed even by our most powerful telescopes. But if I were to go on to say that, since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense. If, however, the existence of such a teapot

were affirmed in ancient books, taught as the sacred truth every Sunday and instilled into the minds of children at school, hesitation to believe in its existence would become a mark of eccentricity and entitle the doubter to the attentions of the psychiatrist in an enlightened age or of the Inquisitor in an earlier time.¹⁵

This is a fair point. It is clearly insufficient for the theist to ground belief on the inability of the atheist to provide a proof for the non-existence of God. Or, as Dawkins puts it: "That you cannot prove God's non-existence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is *probable*."¹⁶

Given this, the question then becomes: are there any good arguments for the existence of God? Richard Dawkins identifies eight arguments that have been offered for the existence of God and concludes that none of them are persuasive. To anticipate later chapters in this book, this is an area where I will want to challenge Dawkins. However, for now, let us concede there is no argument that will persuade every right-thinking person. And, although perhaps he is a little too cavalier in his treatment of the traditional proofs, Dawkins is in good company with his conviction that these arguments are not decisive. For example, John Hick, a Christian philosopher of religion, finishes his survey of the arguments for faith and writes, "From this discussion, it is evident that the writer's own conclusion concerning the theistic proofs is negative. None of the arguments which we have examined seems qualified to compel belief in God in the mind of one who lacks that belief."¹⁷ John Hick also takes the view that the arguments for atheism are in an equivalent position: they are not decisive. However, our three atheists disagree with this. They think there are good and decisive arguments for atheism.

Arguments for Atheism

There are differences between these three books. And it is especially apparent at this point. Richard Dawkins has his own,

rather distinctive, argument for atheism, while Hitchens and Harris reiterate some of the more traditional ones. In my view, Dawkins's attempt at formulating an innovative argument is less successful than Hitchens's argument that God belongs to a pre-modern age and no longer makes sense in the twenty-first century. And Hitchens's argument is the one that our imaginative friend Fred makes central to his atheism.

So let us start with Dawkins. Dawkins summarizes his argument thus: "This book will advocate an alternative view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.*"¹⁸ He then goes on to develop the argument, which seems to involve the following. All the evidence that we have about the emergence of complexity in our universe requires a process, analogous to natural selection, because the processes of natural selection enable complexity to emerge. In other words, a process such as natural selection is essential to enable us to go from amoebas at the bottom of the pond, at the start of our pre-history on this planet, to evolved humanity with all of our complexity. The complexity is a result of natural selection. Now, given that the God hypothesis requires an entity with enormous power, enormous knowledge, and the capacity to create this huge vast universe, it is inconceivable that such a complex entity could simply exist prior to any process.

For Dawkins, the primary objection to the theistic arguments is the age-old question – who made God? Dawkins believes that anything capable of creating a universe of this complexity must be a complex entity, which requires some sort of process and explanation. Now of course Dawkins has opened up a possibility at this point: perhaps the creator of this universe is a supernatural entity that was the result of some sort of complex process.¹⁹ The cosmologist Edward Harrison has suggested that perhaps the universe was created by intelligent beings living in another universe.²⁰ So we have the possibility of a universe created by aliens – or from our perspective – mini gods. Much like the fish tank, the "universe" is cleaned and organized by larger complex beings outside the fish tank, Dawkins's argument does not exclude the logical possibility of this universe being the equivalent of the fish

tank and the controlling complex entity being a result of a process. So it is not a proof for atheism. However, setting this point to one side, it is also not a very good argument. The axiom that Dawkins must establish as logically necessary is that “any agent that can create must be a result of some sort of physical process.” By logically necessary, I mean it is inconceivable that there could be a creating entity that did not go through a process analogous to natural selection. This, I suggest, is a difficult axiom to establish.

Although it is true that within the physical world a dog can do much more than a carrot because of its complexity, the religious claim is that God – as spirit – creates. So, although the axiom is often true within the physical world, the Christian claim is that it is not true in the transcendent realm. Dawkins needs to demonstrate either the truth of materialism (that everything must be connected to the physical) or the impossibility or unlikelihood of a transcendent spiritual realm in which different rules operate.²¹ He does not do this. He simply asserts that in this realm agency depends on complexity made possible by natural selection. Now a theist can agree: in this realm this does seem to be the case. But that has nothing to do with the actual claim the theist is making.

We have already noted that Dawkins thinks a divine designer would need explanation. Now Christian theologians and philosophers have a sophisticated response to this. The God hypothesis, they insist, is an elegantly simple one. Now, at this point, Dawkins is deeply perturbed. Dawkins writes:

A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe *cannot* be simple. His existence is going to need a mammoth explanation in its own right. Worse (from the point of view of simplicity), other corners of God’s giant consciousness are simultaneously preoccupied with the doings and emotions and prayers of every single human being – and whatever intelligent aliens there might be on other planets in this and 100 billion other galaxies.²²

Now granted if God is a giant computer, then God must be complex. But this ignores the central claim of theism: God is

not a physical entity. God is more analogous to ideas than to atoms.

Thomas Crean is helpful at this point. The cause of an object is often simpler than the object. Crean's illustration is a cathedral.²³ Cathedrals as buildings are very complex: they are made of stone; they have shape and location; they are full of pews and are shaped like a cross. The idea of the cathedral is much more simple: ideas do not have a location; they do not take up space; and they are not made of stone. Yet these simpler ideas are the reason the more complicated cathedral exists.

Dawkins might insist that ideas depend on a physical brain. This is the philosophical position known as materialism. And once again in the physical realm, ideas are located in brains; however, Dawkins needs to demonstrate that ideas cannot be located in non-physical realms. This he does not do. As it happens, the precise relationship between the brain and ideas is complicated. When I imagine the moment I celebrate the winning of the lottery, it is not identical to the electrical impulses in my brain cells. One cannot look at those brain cells and say that is "me winning the lottery." Thomas Crean is right when he writes:

Materialism, then, is absurd. A thought cannot be a material thing, nor can it be caused by a material thing, nor can it be the property of a material thing. The only possible conclusion is that thought as such is something independent of matter, that is, something *spiritual*.²⁴

Dawkins's problem is that he is no longer a biologist but a philosopher. And for his particular argument, he needs to defend materialism in such a way that he eliminates entirely a different realm with contrasting rules. He does not do this: so he does not establish the intrinsic implausibility of God.

Fortunately, for Dawkins, his co-atheists are rather more effective. And at this point, Christopher Hitchens is especially good. Hitchens goes for the more traditional argument. God is associated with a pre-scientific worldview; science has made God very unlikely. Hitchens makes the point like this:

Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody . . . 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). Today, the least educated of my children knows much more about the natural order than any of the founders of religion, and one would like to think – though the connection is not a fully demonstrable one – that this is why they seem so uninterested in sending fellow humans to hell.²⁵

Laplace (1749–1827) and William Ockham (1287–1348) are the heroes for Hitchens. Laplace is the French physicist who had the temerity to explain to Napoleon that his view of the solar system had no need for the God hypothesis. And William Ockham was the one who insisted that the simplest explanation for data is normally the best. For Hitchens, put these two men together and you have the reason why faith is now out of fashion. The aspects of the world that used to be explained by the existence of God are now explained differently.

An illustration might help. Once upon a time we were puzzled about why hurricanes and tornados occurred. Why it is sometimes sunny? And why does it sometimes rain? The pre-modern picture of the universe postulated a God who was a direct causal agent of the weather. But, courtesy of Newtonian physics and modern science, this picture of the universe has been displaced with a meteorological explanation. And, of course, everyone accepts the scientific explanation for weather. God has been displaced as an explanation.

For a time, God was moved one stage back. God became the designer of the universe. However, with natural selection, God has been eliminated from this role. Hitchens is very critical of those who suggest that evolution is God's mechanism for creating the world. He writes:

To imagine that God is behind the evolutionary process, turns God into a “fumbling fool of their pretended god, and makes him out to be a tinkerer, an approximator, and a blunderer, who took eons of time to fashion a few serviceable figures and heaped up a junkyard of scrap and failure meanwhile.”²⁶

Given that the evolutionary hypothesis makes such compelling sense of the data (which I accept entirely), it strongly suggests that God does not exist. It is such a long, drawn-out process; it is also very cruel. Hitchens writes:

We must also confront the fact that evolution is, as well as smarter than we are, infinitely more callous and cruel, and also capricious. Investigation of the fossil record and the record of molecular biology shows us that approximately 98 percent of all species that have ever appeared on earth have lapsed into extinction.²⁷

For Hitchens, God made some sense in a pre-scientific age and culture. But now, our understanding of the world has evolved. The God hypothesis has been made redundant. We need to move on.

For this stage of the summary of the arguments found in these three books, my view is that Hitchens's more traditional argument for atheism is stronger than Dawkins's more innovative argument for atheism. So, as the book develops, it will be with Hitchens's arguments in view.

Atheism Provides a Healthy and Well-balanced Worldview

Our three atheists do not simply want to affirm the truth of atheism, but also to celebrate the worldview it creates. They are offering a vision: one can be rational, tolerant, committed to progressive causes, and moral.

Starting then with rationality, Sam Harris makes this a major theme. Harris writes:

It is time we recognized that the only thing that permits human beings to collaborate with one another in a truly open-ended ways is their willingness to have their beliefs modified by new facts. Only openness to evidence and arguments will secure a common world for us.²⁸

For Harris, many religious people clearly disdain "reason" and the consequences can be horrific. He provides two illustrations – the

Holocaust and the Inquisition. The Holocaust has its roots in the anti-Semitism of the Christian tradition: Luther's tract "Concerning the Jews and their lies" was reproduced and implemented by the Nazis. And the Inquisition was an overt religious program of torture, where communities were destroyed in the quest for the witch. Regardless of the arguments, too many religious people refuse to open their minds. Even today, creationism is a good illustration. Dawkins is right when he points out that too many Christians refuse to look at the evidence for evolution fairly. Despite the classical Catholic tradition of intellectual inquiry, it is true that plenty of Christians are prejudiced and refuse to allow their worldview to be challenged by good arguments.

When it comes to toleration, the atheists are also on strong ground. Harris documents with some detail the delights of the Inquisition – the lack of process, the absurdity of the crimes (consorting with the devil), and the imaginative torture techniques. Then Harris moves on to anti-Semitism. He writes, "Anti-Semitism is as integral to church doctrine as the flying buttress is to a Gothic cathedral, and this terrible truth has been published in Jewish blood since the first centuries of the common era."²⁹ Harris is right. The history of Christian anti-Jewishness is deep and widespread. Although Hitler was hardly an orthodox Christian, the tragedy of the Holocaust was assisted by the anti-Semitic environment the Church had created.

On progressive causes, all three authors feel, with some justification, that secular atheists are more likely to progress the social issues of their day. Dawkins believes that the Western worldview is more moral than its religious predecessors. On racism, just war, and sexuality, there is a much more gentle and tolerant worldview. And the opponents of such enlightenment are invariably religious. So Dawkins on homosexuality writes, "Once again, the unmistakable trade mark of the faith-based moralizer is to care passionately about what other people do (or even think) in *private*."³⁰ Meanwhile, the atheist secularist would happily affirm the requirement that one should "enjoy your own sex life (so long as it damages no one else) and leave others to enjoy theirs in private whatever their inclinations, which are none of your business."³¹

Let us concede that religion has often been a destructively conservative force in society. The Church has not on the whole been a major advocate of progressive causes. The Church provided an elaborate justification for patriarchy and coexisted with slavery for centuries. Our authors make much of the fact that religions can be deeply intolerant of each other. With many of the wars in the world, there is often a religious dimension to the conflict. Religion often exacerbates conflicts. And on slavery, segregation, and patriarchy, religious forces have often been the least enlightened.

On morality, there is a slight tendency for our atheist authors to be a little defensive. They resent deeply any suggestion that morality is difficult to justify on a non-religious basis. Dawkins sets out four Darwinian reasons for altruism: "First, there is the special case of genetic kinship. Second, there is reciprocation: the repayment of favours given, and the giving of favours in 'anticipation' of payback. Following on from this there is, third, the Darwinian benefit of acquiring a reputation for generosity and kindness. And fourth, if Zahavi is right, there is the particular additional benefit of conspicuous generosity as a way of busy-ing unfakeably authentic advertising."³² For Dawkins, there are sound Darwinian reasons for ethical behavior. He deplores the propensity to link morality with a divine cosmic lawgiver who is watching our behavior. This is not moral. True morality is when one is virtuous simply because that is the appropriate way to behave.

For all three of our atheists, the lack of belief in God is not a threat to our moral worldview. Later in this book, I will revisit this debate. For now, I am more than happy to concede that the Church has not always been on the right side of social issues. In addition, there are many good "atheists" and plenty of utterly unpleasant religious people. There is a slight tension, however, between the strongest argument for atheism and the attitude to morality. Hitchens makes much of the fact that the belief in God has its roots in a pre-modern setting, which is less and less intelligible for us with a modern worldview. However, this is also true of moral discourse: moral language has its roots in a pre-modern setting. The issue, perhaps, is less the practice of atheists and

believers but the justification for the underlying discourse. But this is to move on too quickly. At this stage, we pause and recognize that there is some force in these arguments.

Indeed, there is a social vision in these books. Rather movingly, Hitchens concludes his book with a call for a renewed Enlightenment. He writes:

Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse. And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.³³

Islam is especially misguided

Perhaps it is inevitable that after September 11, 2001, Islam would receive particular attention. All three use Islam as an illustration. Perhaps this is Sam Harris's major theme. He starts the book by imagining a suicide bomber, strapping on the bomb, and calculating the best moment to cause the optimum mayhem. Sam Harris writes:

We are at war with Islam. . . . It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been "hijacked" by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith, which recounts the sayings and actions of the Prophet. A future in which Islam and the West do

not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam.³⁴

Everyone can agree (including my Muslim friends) that there are groups of Muslims who pose a significant challenge to Israel and the West. It is true that the September 11 attack and the July 7 bombings (in London) were committed by Muslims. However, Harris and Hitchen (in particular) are guilty of the sin of “excessive generalization.” Later in this book we shall look at Islam in more detail. Suffice to say, on this question our atheist trio is not on the side of the progressive social cause. They are feeding Islamaphobia; this is not helpful and reflects the particular time in which we live.

Christianity and Judaism are problematic

To be fair to our atheists, while Islam receives particular attention, they do not spare Christianity and Judaism. Hitchens and Dawkins provide a brief summary of the contemporary scholarly attitudes to certain issues and conclude that the Bible is ethically damaging and historically unreliable. So Dawkins, for example, writes: “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.”³⁵

Both Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens provide the reader with a brief introduction to some contemporary scholarship on the Bible. And some of the points made are entirely valid: biblical inerrancy (i.e., the Bible is completely historically and scientifically accurate) is impossible to sustain; the Virgin Birth narratives have a range of interests at work, which therefore question the historicity; and the construction of the canon is complicated.

This section of their argument is one that can be treated primarily as a challenge. In what sense does Scripture have authority, given the way it was constructed and some of its content? This is a question that will be taken up later in this book.

Bringing up children in a faith is an act of child abuse

Richard Dawkins writes:

Faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument. Teaching children that unquestioned faith is a virtue primes them – given certain other ingredients that are not hard to come by – to grow up into potentially lethal weapons for future jihads or crusades. . . . Faith can be very very dangerous, and deliberately to implant it into the vulnerable mind of an innocent child is a grievous wrong.³⁶

Christopher Hitchens asks the question: “How can we ever know how many children had their psychological and physical lives irreparably maimed by the compulsory inculcation of faith?”³⁷ For both of them, parents who inculcate religion into the young are guilty of a form of child abuse.

Now the argument here seems to be this. First, one should teach children to approach life rationally (i.e., look at the arguments and determine which one makes most sense of the evidence). Second, metaphysical questions are very complicated. So, writes Dawkins, “small children are too young to decide their views on the origins of the cosmos, of life and of morals.”³⁸ So children are not in a place to think rationally about metaphysics. And, third, parents end up abusing their power when they use their authority to tell children what to believe.

To the obvious objection that atheists are inculcating their children into atheism, they would retort that “atheism” is a good place to start. Dawkins would argue that to decide that Loch Ness is probably empty, or that UFOs are not watching us, is where everyone should start until the evidence proves otherwise. Children should be given the tools to think; and then as the child

gets older they can apply these rational tools to the issues of the Loch Ness monster, aliens, and, of course, God.

While conceding that this is a legitimate argument, this is a key area of disagreement. Later in the book, I shall argue that the capacity to appreciate the God discourse depends on the cultivation of the “spiritual sense.” The appreciation of the liturgy is like the appreciation of poetry or opera – one needs to be trained. And in the same way that children can absorb languages effortlessly, so they have a natural spiritual sense that can and should be cultivated.

Now this concludes the sympathetic presentation of the arguments embedded in these books. This presentation should not mislead. There are aspects of these books that display a shocking ignorance and a basic lack of willingness to research. So, for the sake of the record, I will provide one illustration. And this is Christopher Hitchens’s rather odd excursus on pigs.

Hitchens on Pigs

It comes as a shock. One has just eased into Hitchens’s delightful exposition of atheism and suddenly we have “a short digression on the Pig; or, why heaven hates ham.” The point is to show how silly religion can be: or, as Hitchens puts it, “In microcosm, this apparently trivial fetish shows how religion and faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world.”³⁹

The target here is the food forbidden by Islam and Judaism – in particular, the shared prohibition of the cloven-hoof, cud-chewing animal, known as the pig. Hitchens starts by explaining how pigs are intelligent, thoughtful animals, which are much maligned. “This fine beast,” explains Hitchens, “is one of our fairly close cousins. It shares a great deal of our DNA, and there have lately been welcome transplants of skin, heart valves, and kidneys from pigs to humans.”⁴⁰ Hitchens then goes on to argue that this ban has nothing to do with health, in particular the danger of “the worms of trichinosis.”⁴¹ On this point, Hitchens is entirely right. However, Hitchens then develops his own original explanation for this – what he believes to be – irrational practice. He writes:

The simultaneous attraction and repulsion derived from an anthropomorphic root: the look of the pig, and the taste of the pig, and the dying yells of the pig, and the evident intelligence of the pig, were too uncomfortably reminiscent of the human. Porcophobia – and porcophilia – thus probably originates in a night-time of human sacrifice and even cannibalism at which the “holy” texts often do more than hint.⁴²

So the ban arises because of the similarities between humans and pigs; and as a result of the ban, Hitchens argues, Muslims continue to behave badly (some European Muslims apparently want “Three Little Pigs” banned), while Christians in Spain used to check on the authenticity of Jewish conversions by offering charcuterie (pieces of pork). All of this cruelty, argues Hitchens, is grounded in the divine’s hatred of the pig.

The irony of this rant is that it is the complete opposite of the truth. With the exception of the observation that the food laws are not health related, this is a deeply misguided critique. Instead, the truth about food laws is that two themes emerge: the first is an eco-friendly affirmation of life; and the second is holiness and separateness from the nations.

Instead of striving for “originality,” Hitchens should have spent some time with Jacob Milgrom’s rather large commentary on Leviticus 1–16. The text, explains Milgrom, assumes that some humans will eat animals, but that the Israelites will deliberately abstain from some of these animals. The permitted animals are sheep, cattle, goats, fish (several different sorts), locusts, pigeons, turtledoves, and certain birds. After an extended discussion, Milgrom explains that the rationale underpinning this selection is as follows:

Its purpose is to teach the Israelite reverence for life by (1) reducing his choice of flesh to a few animals; (2) limiting the slaughter of even these few permitted animals to the most humane way; and (3) prohibiting the ingestion of blood and mandating its disposal upon the altar or by burial as acknowledgment that bringing death to living things is a concession of God’s grace and not a privilege of man’s whim.⁴³

So when Hitchens suggests that “a strong case is now made by humanists that it [the animal] should not be factory-farmed, confined, separated from its young, and forced to live in its own ordure,”⁴⁴ he comes close to describing the intent of the food laws.

To understand Leviticus, the picture we need here is this. There are many animals that humans everywhere can eat – all of which are good. However, as part of the covenant between God and the Israelites, there is an obligation to appreciate the significance of taking life and to set themselves apart from the other nations (the holiness project). Even though the other nations are allowed to eat pork, the Jew has been asked to abstain.

Now it is true that the pig is especially interesting. Milgrom does discuss the pre-Scriptural layer, which provides the context for the food laws. He writes:

Thus it is clear from the evidence of the ancient Near East that the pig was not only universally reviled but, at the same time, revered in chthonic cults [cults linked to the underworld], which penetrated into Israel as late as the sixth century, arousing the wrath of prophet and priest alike.⁴⁵

And it is clear that the addition of “cud-chewing” made sure that the pig was included in those animals that cannot be consumed. Given that most meat eating in this culture would be around celebration (and therefore giving thanks to God by sacrificing the animal on the altar), there was a sense that the association the pig has in other cultures made its exclusion important.

But the prohibition has nothing to do with cannibalism or with the similarity with humans. And it is also not manifestly irrational or misguided. Primarily, the prohibition is related to an appeal for the taking of animal life for human consumption to be done with care and respect.

As I have demonstrated in this chapter, there are some good arguments in Hitchens’s book. And these good arguments need serious and careful attention. However, at other points, Hitchens needed to do some more reading. There are plenty of sections where this is the case and this is one such illustration.

This concludes the case for this trio of atheists. We are moving from Fred's perspective to an exploration and defense of Natalie's perspective. I hope that Fred perceives that I understand and feel the intellectual force of the arguments in favor of atheism. And I hope that Natalie feels that the intellectual tradition underpinning Western skepticism has been given a fair hearing. The time has now come to start formulating the response. We shall begin by suggesting that the implications of atheism have not really been faced by this trio of atheists. I will now show that this is a middle-class university atheism. So Dawkins, for example, is providing a very benign, quite attractive, Oxbridge atheism. If you look closely, you can see the conversations and humor of the university common room, his affection for the King James' version of the Bible, and his love of choirs. This "middle-class university atheism" will be contrasted in the next chapter with "real atheism" – the atheism of Nietzsche. Nietzsche argued that atheism had dramatic implications for how one understands morality and truth, while for Dawkins there are no implications of atheism for morality and truth. As we compare Dawkins and Nietzsche, we shall discover that Nietzsche has the better arguments. Such that at the end of chapter 2, the choice will be clarified – it is either Nietzsche's atheism or theism.