

Dr. Jim Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7, The New Atheism

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This is Dr. James Spiegel in his teaching on the Philosophy of Religion. This is session 7, The New Atheism.

Okay, now that we have looked at a number of arguments for the existence of God and reasons to believe in God, let's take a look at the opposite view, atheism, and a movement that had quite a cultural impact a few years back called The New Atheism.

Look at some of the arguments of The New Atheist, and I'm going to offer a kind of analysis of atheism that I believe is a biblical analysis and that provides certain considerations that I think should be kept in mind by Christians as they contemplate this phenomenon of atheism. So, what is this so-called New Atheism? It's a movement that basically started with the publication of Sam Harris' book, *The End of Faith*, in 2004, and then there were, in fairly quick succession, a number of other books that were published by people like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett. In fact, those four scholars, Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett, became known as the four horsemen of the atheist or the New Atheist apocalypse in some quarters.

Here's just a sampling of some of the rhetoric of New Atheists, including Richard Dawkins, who is a long-time biologist at Oxford. He says 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. So that's his description of God and God's delusion.

There's Sam Harris, who bears a certain resemblance to Ben Stiller in that photograph. He says that when considering the truth of a proposition, one is either engaged in an honest appraisal of the evidence and logical arguments or not. Religion is one area of our lives where people imagine that some other standard of intellectual integrity applies.

That's from his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which is a fascinating book because it's written entirely in the second person. Harris also says that the men who committed the atrocities of September 11 were certainly not cowards as they were repeatedly described in the Western media, nor were they lunatics in any ordinary sense. They were men of faith, perfect faith, as it turns out, and this, it must finally be acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be.

Christopher Hitchens says, I suppose that one reason I have always detested religion is its sly tendency to insinuate the idea that the universe is designed with you in mind, or even worse, that there is a divine plan into which one fits whether one knows it or not. This kind of modesty is too arrogant for me. So there have been atheists from time immemorial; as far back as we can explore historically, there have always been religious skeptics, agnostics, and atheists.

What is unique about what we're calling the new atheism, the brand of atheism that we get from the likes of Hitchens and Harris and Dawkins and Dennett? How do the new atheists differ from the older traditional atheists, your grandmother's atheists? One, I think, is just a difference in attitude. There's a much more brazen and aggressive approach than, say, you find in the works of David Hume, John Dewey, or Bertrand Russell. Maybe they're more like Friedrich Nietzsche, who was very aggressive and harsh in his condemnation of theism.

And there's a certain, at least purported, scientific emphasis that you find in the new atheists. They tend to insist on a scientific justification for religious belief. In failing that, you are irresponsible in believing in God, according to the new atheists.

So, when you read their primary objections closely, there are two main objections that seem to prevail in their works. One is the old problem of evil. How could an all-powerful, perfectly good God allow evil? We will discuss that in a separate lecture.

That is a main concern in the inquiry into religious belief generally, and it does constitute a problem for the theist. We can grant that for sure. The new atheists, though, assume consistently that this problem cannot be solved.

It can't be answered adequately. So, that would be one of the primary reasons for their atheism. The other is an objection from science that belief in God, and specifically doctrines like the virgin birth of Christ, the resurrection of Jesus, the divine inspiration of the Bible, and various miracles in scripture, that these things cannot be verified or explained scientifically.

They're anti-science. And so, if you're a person who's rigorously rational, you should reject all of those doctrines, all of those beliefs. That's a consistent theme in the new atheists as well.

How do we respond to scientific objections? We will talk about this in more detail in a separate lecture, but I can note right now that to insist that all of one's beliefs be scientifically based or subject to confirmation through empirical inquiry is what is sometimes called scientism or positivism. The problem with positivism or scientism is that it's self-refuting. This demand that all truths be scientifically provable is something that itself cannot be scientifically proven.

So, it's self-refuting. It saws off the limb on which it's seated. It undermines itself, however you want to put it.

It's certainly not a claim or a view that can be maintained consistently. Secondly, scientism or positivism rules out the possibility of knowledge of such things as moral truths, knowledge about beauty, or even the meaning of life. You can't get any of that from science.

Science is an empirical means of inquiry, and it gives us accurate, very useful, factual descriptions of the world, but it is completely blind to values, beauty, and ultimate meaning in life. So anyone who insisted on scientism would have to surrender all of their beliefs about all of those things, which is a bit scary because such a person would have to be a complete moral skeptic and say we don't have any moral knowledge and such a person would be a bit scary to be around, really. Usually, well, maybe always, at least every time I've seen one of the new atheists deal with this question, they insist that, oh no, we know that there are moral truths.

We know that certain things are right, certain things are wrong, and that justice, just the treatment of others, and respect for people are good things. So, they affirm these moral values and presumably strive to live accordingly, but the point is that if they really are devotees of scientism or positivism, then they can't consistently affirm moral truths and values. It's something that that perspective has no room for.

Science itself is based on certain unprovable articles of faith, and this is an important observation to make here as well, is that for all of the emphasis that one might place on science and the need to be scientifically rigorous about all sorts of issues, science itself is founded on faith commitments like our belief that our senses are generally reliable, that effects have causes, that nature is uniform, that thought reflects reality. These are all things that can't be proven scientifically. They must be assumed from the outset.

So again, if someone's a positivist or affirms scientism, there's another inconsistency there because science cannot prove any of those things but must assume them as basic philosophical articles of faith. Here's another thing we can note in response to the new atheism is that there actually is overwhelming evidence for God, and a lot of it does come from science as well as from morality or common sense beliefs about ethics and right and wrong as well as personal experience. Many leading Christian apologists, from C.S. Lewis to Lee Strobel, who once were atheists, were converted in large part through an exploration inquiry into the evidence for faith and the existence of God.

A recent dramatic example of this is Anthony Flew, who was a leading atheist intellectual for the better part of 50 years. Beginning in the 50s and 60s, he produced a number of scholarly works that had a huge influence on the philosophy of religion,

putting theists, Christians, and other theists on the defensive and giving them the burden of proof. He insisted that we should begin with a presumption of atheism, and it's the responsibility of the theist to prove the existence of God.

Otherwise, the theist has no rational right, no epistemic right to believe in God. Their duty is to demonstrate and prove that God exists, and then and only then would they be satisfying their epistemic obligations and being a religious believer. So Flew played a huge part in creating that atmosphere in the academy, especially in the philosophical guild, with this presumption of atheism.

But something happened around 2004 or 5. He became a theist of sorts, not an orthodox Christian, but certainly someone who believed that the universe had to have been caused by a supernatural being. When the news broke about this, I think it was about 2005, and it was an international story. And he subsequently wrote a book called *There Is a God*.

There, he recounts the sorts of considerations that prompted his conversion to a kind of theistic perspective. One is just thinking more deeply and in light of emerging evidence related to cosmology, the existence of the cosmos, and the need for the universe to have a causal explanation. And cosmic fine-tuning, which we've talked about over the decades, as more and more information has been gathered with regard to just how finely tuned the various laws of nature are to allow for the possibility of life in the universe.

It's this exquisite convergence among all these different laws of nature for the possibility of life. It really looks like the universe has been designed for that possibility. That had an impact on Flew as well.

And then the emergence of life, how do we explain the origin of life from non-living inert matter? That's always been a challenge for atheists. But for Flew, more and more inquiry into just how problematic that is from the perspective of a naturalist, too, had a major impact. So, he finally converted to a kind of theism.

When he wrote his book, *There Is a God*, who asked him to write a kind of appendix regarding Christianity? It was N.T. Wright, the great New Testament scholar, reflected the depth of Flew's respect for N.T. Wright and the significant possibility, if not likelihood, that if some particular brand of theism in terms of a religious tradition with a history of alleged special revelations from God, if one of them is true, that it's most likely Christianity. And Flew said that because of the charisma of Jesus of Nazareth, the nature of his discourses, as well as the scholarly genius of the Apostle Paul, both of those things made it such that to his mind, to Flew's mind, if one of these theistic traditions is true, it's most likely Christianity. I don't know if he ever came to a full-fledged Christian belief, but there were certainly indicators that he

was sympathetic with the idea that Christianity might be the true or truest form of theism in terms of major religious traditions.

So, we've talked about evidence for God and different theistic arguments. If theism really does have strong evidential support and atheism is fundamentally irrational, then people don't become atheists because of the evidence. So, the question is, what is the cause of atheism? When the New Atheist Movement was really taking off, I kept expecting someone to write a book that kind of clarified what the biblical explanation for atheism is.

And it's not just a problem with the evidence, but each book that came out kind of dealt with the evidence for God and didn't address a primary, maybe the primary, biblical analysis of atheism. So, I thought, well, somebody's got to write the book. Nobody else is doing it, so I'll do it. My book, *The Making of an Atheist*, was published in 2010.

And here's kind of a summary of some of the main ideas that I developed in that book. What I'm looking for is simply a biblical explanation or account of atheism. And here are some key biblical texts that provide us with what seems to be going on when people become at least hardcore atheists.

We're not talking about people who just have doubts or even agnostics or people who are undecided, but people who are convinced and even dogmatic atheists like Dennett, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens. So, Romans 1 deals with this issue in a very straightforward way. The Apostle Paul's writing says the wrath of God is being revealed from heaven against all the godlessness and wickedness of people who suppress the truth by their wickedness since what may be known about God is plain to them because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world, God's invisible qualities, His eternal power and divine nature have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made so that people are without excuse.

So Paul is telling us there that God has made Himself plainly known in creation. You have no excuse not to be a theist.

And it's a kind of hardening or suppression of truth by vice or what he's calling wickedness that prevents certain people from acknowledging the reality of God. In Ephesians 4, he says, I tell you this and insist on it in the Lord that you must no longer live as the Gentiles do in the futility of their thinking. They are darkened in their understanding and separated from the life of God because of the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts.

Again, you have this theme of ignorance about God due not to lack of evidence but because of a kind of hardening of the heart. There's a certain resistance of the will to the truth of God. And then in John 3, and this is Jesus talking, He says, this is the

verdict: light has come into the world, but people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil.

Everyone who does evil hates the light and will not come into the light for fear that their deeds will be exposed. But whoever lives by the truth comes into the light so that it may be seen plainly that what they have done has been done in the sight of God. So again, the theme of resistance to the truth, Jesus uses this metaphor of light because of a person's particular disposition.

It's a willful resistance and rejection. It's not for lack of evidence or even ambiguity of evidence. So, the upshot here is that unbelief, when it comes to the reality of God, is a consequence of disobedience.

In one of the chapters in my book, I lean heavily upon the work of Alvin Plantinga in his Reformed Epistemology, which we'll talk about separately. He has a chapter in the third volume of his great trilogy on Warrant, the book being called. The third volume is called Warranted Christian Belief. He has a chapter there on the cognitive consequences of sin.

Human cognition was designed to function in a certain way, just like our various organ systems. And when there are inimical factors that compromise the proper function of our cognition, then we're less reliable in terms of the formation of true beliefs. And so, one of the things that compromises cognitive function, Plantinga notes, in addition to things like, say, mind-altering drugs or large amounts of alcohol or physical brain damage or bad philosophy, that can compromise cognitive function on all sorts of issues.

Another factor that compromises cognitive function is sin, immorality, and vice, which can corrupt the way we think about all sorts of issues, especially moral and spiritual issues. So, sin corrupts us cognitively. It compromises our cognitive function.

It damages what John Calvin is called, and Alvin Plantinga uses this term as well, the *sensus divinitatis*, which is a natural, divinely endowed, innate awareness of God. Sin damages or compromises our ability to perceive what really is clear evidence of God, as the Apostle Paul says. God's invisible qualities, his eternal power, and his divine nature are evident from what has been made so that no one has an excuse.

But as we give ourselves over to certain sins, I would say especially the sin of pride, abject pride. I think that is a sin that we all struggle with, and in the case of hardcore atheists, dogmatic atheists, there is a kind of succumbing to the temptations of pride in that case. And then other things as well, depending on the person, the kinds of sins that they might give themselves over to that might create that kind of cognitive block in terms of belief in God.

So, there are cognitive consequences of sin, as Plantinga notes in my book. I discuss this at length. There's a positive side here, though, in terms of the impact of behavior and lifestyle on belief formation and cognitive function, and that is that obedience enhances cognition and, therefore, our moral-spiritual awareness.

And there's an indication of this in a number of passages in the Proverbs and the wisdom literature, you know, that God grants wisdom and understanding and insight to those who are humble and voluntarily submit themselves to the Lord. A person who has relatively little education can actually become very wise as they submit themselves to God and obey his word. In the book of John, chapter 7, I think we also have a confirmation of this idea.

Again, this is Jesus speaking. He says that if anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God or whether I speak on my own, which is an interesting kind of promise here because it reverses the way we normally think about it, where I'm going to do inquiry, right? I'm going to investigate this, particularly those of us who are academics. You know, you're going to do a kind of rigorous analysis, and then once I can be sure that it's true, I will live accordingly. Well, Jesus is saying, trust me, do God's will, and then you will get a kind of greater insight and enlightenment, in this case, regarding his own identity and whether he speaks for God.

In my book, I discuss a number of considerations from other fields, including psychology, that confirm this thesis specifically that personal vice compromises our proper function and our thinking about God, but more generally, just the impact that behavior has upon belief. Paul Witts, who's a former atheist who came to believe in God after many decades, wrote a book called *The Faith of the Fatherless*. In that book, he actually followed the lead of some influential atheist scholars, Ludwig Feuerbach and Sigmund Freud, who attempted to explain away religious belief psychologically. What Witts, in his book *The Faith of the Fatherless*, is he does a kind of psychological explanation of atheism.

He gives a psychological account for why it is that some people become atheists, which, looking at it just from a statistical standpoint, makes of this what you will, but they're anywhere from, you know, maybe five to eight percent of the population is atheist, depending on the polls you read. So that's a small percentage of the population that's atheist. And the great majority of humanity has always been, you know, believers in some sort of higher power.

So here you have the atheists who are trying to explain away the beliefs of 90 percent of the population regarding God as somehow failing cognitively in a severe way. I mean, we're talking about the most important issue of them all in philosophy. Is there a God? And to have over 90 percent of the population fundamentally deluded about that, that's a very disturbing and dark view of the human condition.

Whereas, from a statistical standpoint, if you think human beings are, you know, at least decently adjusted to the nature of reality, then probably the great majority, it's more likely the great majority have it approximately right when it comes to the God question. It's only, you know, less than 10 percent of humanity that has this so fundamentally wrong. At least, that's a less pessimistic view.

If it's only a small minority of the population that's so misguided on this question. But Paul Witts offers a kind of psychological account for how it is that, you know, five to 10 percent of the population ends up atheistic. It's his defective father's hypothesis that atheism is precipitated by a broken relationship with one's father.

He comes to this conclusion, or at least he develops this hypothesis on the basis of a historical analysis of all of the major atheists in the modern period forward into the 20th century. And every one of them, you know, from David Hume to Freud, Bertrand Russell, Dewey, Nietzsche, every one of them, Marx, they had a severely broken relationship with their father, either the father died, the father left the family, or was extremely abusive. So, there's a consistent theme there, which is very suggestive.

Meanwhile, he looks at the major theists and influential theistic thinkers in the period, and all of them had, if not a decent relationship with their father; there was a significant father figure in their life who was a kind of positive influence on them. Now, I hasten to add that there are plenty of people who are strong theists and Christians who have had severely broken father relationships. And that's consistent with Witts's thesis.

He's not saying it's a sufficient condition for atheism. Maybe it's a necessary condition. So plenty of people, devoutly religious, Christian, and otherwise, have had broken father relationships, and they have just not responded in the way that the hardcore atheists do.

So, it's still a choice that a person makes, whether they're going to maintain a kind of atheistic orientation or be bitter, I would say, bitter towards the God that in their heart of hearts they know is there. And you might say, give God the silent treatment. Some have presented it in those terms and maintain that everybody knows in their heart of hearts there's a God.

Plenty of former atheists would say that. I would say that. I was kind of agnostic for a while.

But I knew, even when I would call myself agnostic, I knew all along there was a God, and that I was resisting that God and his call on my life. Paul Johnson's book, *Intellectuals*, is a fascinating examination of many leading modern intellectuals who

really use their scholarly inquiry and theories to rationalize kind of or justify or minimize their own personal debauchery. E. Michael Jones's book *Degenerate Moderns*, kind of does the same thing in a fascinating and disturbing way.

He looks in particular at scholars like Margaret Mead and Alfred Kinsey, certain members of the Bloomsbury Group, who develop their theories, again, as in so many ways rationalizations of their own lifestyles, which were anything but Christian. I talk about William James's *Will to Believe*, which I talk about in the book as well, which we've already talked about in another lecture, and how the will often plays a significant role in belief formation. Psychological studies have confirmed that when there's a conflict between a belief and one's behavior, the most likely thing to give way is actually the belief to conform to the behavior.

We might naively think that, well, when there's a kind of cognitive dissonance there, a person will just change their behavior to conform to their beliefs. Well, in many contexts, that certainly is the case. But in moral contexts, particularly when there's a lifestyle choice here that's contradicted by certain beliefs that one might hold, it's a lot easier just to change your convictions or say, well, I've looked into it a bit more, and my mind has changed on that.

I don't think that's wrong after all. So that's why I still live, say, a sexually promiscuous life. I don't think it's really wrong so long as I'm treating these people respectfully along the way.

It's a lot easier to change your beliefs than your behavior. Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science is also relevant here. Kuhn maintained that a person's theoretical commitments, the theoretical paradigm that they subscribe to in a context of science and scientific inquiry, have an effect on the way that they interpret the data and how they analyze it in the inferences that they make regarding the data.

A person's standing belief commitments and theoretical affirmations impact how they interpret the data. So, this is all a part of what Kuhn calls the theory-ladenness of scientific observation. Well, this is true not just in a context of science but in so many other life contexts.

When we have a theoretical commitment in place, we tend to see the world in those terms. Take a geocentrism and a heliocentric, for example. The geocentric believes that the sun revolves around the Earth.

They go outside and they see the sun orbiting the earth. That's what it looks like to the geocentrism because that's the belief system they have in place as geocentrism. Meanwhile, a heliocentrism goes outside and sees the same thing, the sun going from east to west throughout the day, every day, and they would say, well, I am

indirectly observing the rotation of the earth that creates this impression of the sun traveling around the earth.

So, the geocentrist and the heliocentrist are observing, you might say, the same thing, but each is observing it through a theoretical framework that impacts at a fundamental level exactly how they are interpreting the data. Well, that's just kind of a basic illustration of what goes on in so many other contexts as we interpret the data of human experience through the theoretical lenses that we have in place. If you have an atheistic framework, and you get locked into that, then even what should be clear evidence for God are, you know, they don't have an impact.

They are interpreted naturalistically so that we have this consequence that the Apostle Paul talks about in Romans 1, the kind of suppression of the truth and preserving this ignorance of God, though he is displaying himself in nature in all sorts of vivid ways in terms of the plants and animals that we see around us, just the fact of the cosmos, all these different galaxies, and the fine-tuning of the universe, and all these things we've already talked about. They don't make an impact because of what I call paradigm-induced blindness. I also talk about self-deception, when there's a motivated bias to believe something that is false, even when there's clear evidence that contradicts a person's beliefs, they may still persist in that belief, like in the case of A.J. Ayer, who had a near-death experience.

He was eating, I think, some salmon, and it got caught in his windpipe. He passed out, and eventually, he was brought back to consciousness, and he reported experiencing some things that were supernatural. He later confided to his family physician with dismay that, now I'm going to have to change all my books because he had been writing from a logical positivist perspective all these decades.

Evidently, he decided against that because he never recanted. Unlike Anthony Flew would later do, A.J. Ayer never publicly confessed his belief in the supernatural, so he had a motivated bias because he wanted to maintain a certain, I guess, scholarly integrity, at least not to come out publicly, as someone who was a, I don't know if he ever became a theist, but he did write a little essay, I can say this for him, called, *What I Saw When I Was Dead*, where he reports this, but based on other reports that have come out with regard to conversations he had with his family physician, this was actually far more impactful with regard to his recognizing the significance of this for belief in the supernatural than he ever let on publicly. Anyway, that would certainly be a motivated bias for a lot of scholars who are atheistic or religious skeptics, as well as just ordinary folks who persist in their atheistic perspective for reasons that are more personal than logical.

And then finally, in my book, I talk about the blessings of theism and how theistic belief provides motivation for virtue. It improves our cognitive health. The more

attuned you are to the reality of God, the more obedient you will be, and the more obedient you are, then the more attuned you will be to the reality of God.

It's kind of a virtuous cycle there. So, our obedience and faithful living improve our cognitive function. And then another benefit of theism is it provides us the right to complain, as well as the privilege to thank, both of which are psychologically beneficial.

To have someone to complain to, like the psalmists do over and over and over again. A lot of biblical writers and characters complain to God about so many things, and this is a right and good thing to do. So, all I can say is respectfully and earnestly complaint to God: why have you subjected us to this injustice and suffering, and how long, oh Lord, before you save us?

That is a cathartic kind of thing to do, and it's very psychologically beneficial, as is the ability to thank someone who is responsible for the universe and all its beauty, all of the many blessings that we have from art to technology to just plants and animals and the beauty of nature. We have someone to thank for all those things. I know an atheist would say, well, we can thank those who invented air conditioning and the toaster oven.

That's not the depth of gratitude or thanks that the theist has an opportunity for in terms of thanking the God who endowed human beings with rational capacities to come up with these sorts of technologies. But certainly, when it comes to nature, and the beauty that we observe all around us, or the things that we discover about the human body and how remarkably designed it is, we theists do have someone to thank: our creator who made us this way and gave us these abilities. If you believe that we are the result of eons of natural selection and genetic mutations, and that's it in a naturalistic universe, you really have no one to thank for our remarkable human bodies as well as all of the beautiful creatures, flora, and fauna in creation.

So those are some of the benefits of theism, and that's how I conclude my book. So those are my thoughts on the New Atheism.

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