

Dr. James S. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7, The New Atheism Resources from NotebookLM

1) Abstract, 2) Audio podcast, 3) Briefing Document, 4) Study Guide, and 5) FAQs

1. Abstract of Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7, The New Atheism, Biblicalelearning.org, BeL

Dr. Jim Spiegel's Philosophy of Religion lecture, Session 7, examines the New Atheism movement, tracing its origins to authors like Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett and their assertive critique of religious belief, particularly focusing on the problem of evil and perceived scientific contradictions. The lecture then shifts to a biblical analysis of atheism, suggesting that unbelief stems from a suppression of truth and a hardening of the heart due to sin, referencing Romans, Ephesians, and John. **Spiegel discusses Alvin Plantinga's concept of the cognitive consequences of sin, impairing the innate awareness of God, and contrasts this with the idea that obedience can enhance spiritual understanding.** The lecture further explores psychological explanations for atheism, including broken father relationships, and highlights how personal biases and theoretical commitments can influence belief. **Finally, Spiegel concludes by considering the blessings of theism, such as providing motivation for virtue, improving cognitive health, and offering a framework for gratitude and complaint.**

2. 21 - minute Audio Podcast Created on the basis of Dr. Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7 – Double click icon to play in Windows media player or go to the Biblicalelearning.org [BeL] Site and click the audio podcast link there (Theology → Apologetics → Philosophy of Religion).



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3. Briefing Document: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7, The New Atheism

Briefing Document: The New Atheism

Overview: This briefing document summarizes the main themes and important ideas presented by Dr. Jim Spiegel in his lecture on the New Atheism. Spiegel outlines the origins of the movement, its key arguments, and offers a critical analysis from a biblical and philosophical perspective.

Main Themes and Important Ideas:

1. Definition and Origins of the New Atheism:

- The New Atheism is a movement that gained cultural prominence following the publication of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* in 2004.
- Key figures associated with this movement include Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, often referred to as the "four horsemen."
- Spiegel notes a shift in tone compared to traditional atheism, characterizing the New Atheism as having a "much more brazen and aggressive approach" than earlier skeptics like David Hume or Bertrand Russell. He draws a comparison to Friedrich Nietzsche's aggressive condemnation of theism.

2. Rhetoric and Key Arguments of the New Atheists:

- New Atheists employ strong and often inflammatory rhetoric against religion. Richard Dawkins's description of the Old Testament God as "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction" is cited as an example of this aggressive tone, portraying God as "jealous," "unjust," "vindictive," and various other negative attributes.
- A central argument revolves around intellectual integrity and the demand for evidence. Sam Harris argues that religion operates under a different standard of intellectual honesty, stating, "Religion is one area of our lives where people imagine that some other standard of intellectual integrity applies."
- New Atheists also critique the perceived dangers of religious faith, pointing to events like 9/11. Harris states, "The men who committed the atrocities of September 11 were certainly not cowards... nor were they lunatics... 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 criticizes religion for its "sly tendency to insinuate the idea that the universe is designed with you in mind," deeming such an idea as arrogant.
- Two primary intellectual objections from the New Atheists are identified:
- **The Problem of Evil:** The apparent contradiction between an all-powerful, all-good God and the existence of evil. While acknowledging this as a problem for theists, Spiegel notes the New Atheists' assumption that it is unsolvable.
- **Scientific Objections:** The claim that religious doctrines (e.g., the virgin birth, resurrection, miracles) cannot be scientifically verified and are therefore "anti-science."

3. Spiegel's Biblical and Philosophical Analysis of Atheism:

- Spiegel critiques the New Atheists' reliance on "scientism or positivism," the insistence that all beliefs must be scientifically based or empirically verifiable. He argues that this position is "self-refuting" because the claim itself cannot be scientifically proven.
- He also points out that scientism would rule out knowledge of moral truths, beauty, and the meaning of life, areas that science is "completely blind to." He notes the inconsistency of New Atheists often affirming moral values while adhering to a strict scientism.
- Spiegel argues that science itself is based on unprovable "articles of faith," such as the reliability of our senses, the uniformity of nature, and the causal nature of reality.
- He asserts that there is "overwhelming evidence for God" from science, morality, and personal experience, citing the conversions of former atheists like C.S. Lewis, Lee Strobel, and most notably, Anthony Flew.
- The conversion of Anthony Flew, a prominent atheist philosopher who shifted to a form of theism, is highlighted. Flew's reasons included cosmological arguments, cosmic fine-tuning, and the challenge of explaining the origin of life. Flew also reportedly considered Christianity the most likely true theistic tradition due to the "charisma of Jesus of Nazareth" and the "scholarly genius of the Apostle Paul."

4. The Biblical Explanation for Atheism (Based on Spiegel's Book, *The Making of an Atheist*):

- Spiegel proposes that if theism has strong evidential support, then atheism is not primarily driven by a lack of evidence but by other factors. He seeks a biblical explanation for "hardcore" atheism.
- Key biblical texts cited include:
- **Romans 1:18-20:** Paul argues that God has made himself plainly known in creation, so people "suppress the truth by their wickedness" and are "without excuse."
- **Ephesians 4:17-18:** Describes Gentiles living in the "futility of their thinking," with darkened understanding and separation from God due to "the ignorance that is in them due to the hardening of their hearts."
- **John 3:19-21:** Jesus states that people "loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil," indicating a willful resistance to truth driven by moral disposition.
- Spiegel concludes that unbelief is often a "consequence of disobedience," not a lack of evidence.

5. The Cognitive Consequences of Sin (Drawing on Alvin Plantinga's Reformed Epistemology):

- Spiegel discusses Plantinga's concept that sin "compromises cognitive function," affecting our ability to form true beliefs, especially on moral and spiritual issues.
- Sin damages the "sensus divinitatis," the innate awareness of God.
- Pride is identified as a particularly significant sin contributing to atheism, creating a "cognitive block" to belief.

6. The Positive Impact of Obedience on Cognition:

- Conversely, obedience and faithful living "enhance cognition" and moral-spiritual awareness.
- Jesus's statement in John 7:17 is cited: "If anyone chooses to do God's will, he will find out whether my teaching comes from God." This suggests that obedience can lead to greater spiritual insight.

7. Psychological Perspectives on Atheism:

- Spiegel references Paul Vitz's *The Faith of the Fatherless*, which offers a "psychological explanation of atheism." Vitz's "defective father's hypothesis" suggests a correlation between broken father relationships and the development of atheism among prominent atheists.
- However, Spiegel clarifies that this is not presented as a sufficient condition, as many religious individuals have also experienced broken father relationships.

8. The Role of the Will and Theoretical Commitments in Belief Formation:

- Paul Johnson's *Intellectuals* and E. Michael Jones's *Degenerate Moderns* are mentioned as examining how intellectuals sometimes rationalize their personal behavior through their theories.
- The "will to believe" (referencing William James) and psychological studies are cited to show that people often adjust their beliefs to align with their behavior, rather than the other way around.
- Thomas Kuhn's philosophy of science and the "theory-ladenness of scientific observation" are used to illustrate how pre-existing theoretical frameworks (like atheism) can influence the interpretation of evidence, leading to "paradigm-induced blindness" to evidence for God.
- The phenomenon of self-deception and "motivated bias" is discussed, using the example of A.J. Ayer's near-death experience, suggesting that personal commitments can prevent individuals from accepting evidence that contradicts their beliefs.

9. The Blessings of Theism:

- Spiegel concludes by highlighting the benefits of theistic belief, including:
- Motivation for virtue.
- Improved cognitive health through a virtuous cycle of obedience and attunement to God.
- The psychological benefits of having the "right to complain" and the "privilege to thank" a personal God, contrasting this with a purely naturalistic worldview.

Quote Highlights:

- **Richard Dawkins on the Old Testament God:** "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."

- **Sam Harris on intellectual integrity and religion:** "Religion is one area of our lives where people imagine that some other standard of intellectual integrity applies."
- **Sam Harris on the 9/11 attackers:** "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 on designed universe:** "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."
- **Paul (Romans 1:18):** "...people who suppress the truth by their wickedness..."
- **Jesus (John 3:19):** "...people loved darkness instead of light because their deeds were evil."

Conclusion:

Dr. Spiegel's lecture provides a comprehensive overview of the New Atheism, outlining its key figures, arguments, and rhetorical strategies. He offers a critical analysis from both philosophical and biblical perspectives, highlighting the potential weaknesses in the New Atheists' reliance on scientism and their dismissal of evidence for God.

Furthermore, he proposes a biblical understanding of atheism as stemming not primarily from a lack of evidence but from a willful suppression of truth rooted in disobedience and a hardening of the heart. He also explores psychological factors and the role of personal commitments in the formation and maintenance of atheistic beliefs, concluding with a discussion of the positive benefits associated with theistic belief.

4. Study Guide: Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7, The New Atheism

The New Atheism: A Study Guide

Quiz

1. What event is generally considered the starting point of the New Atheism movement, and which four individuals are most closely associated with it?
2. According to the New Atheists, what is a primary reason to reject religious beliefs, particularly doctrines like the virgin birth and miracles? How do they view the relationship between science and religious faith?
3. What is "scientism" or "positivism," and what is the primary philosophical critique against it, as presented in the source material?
4. According to the source, what are some of the fundamental "faith commitments" that underpin science itself? Why is this point raised in response to the New Atheism?
5. Who was Anthony Flew, and what was the significance of his change in philosophical stance regarding the existence of God? What were some of the reasons for his shift?
6. According to Romans 1, Ephesians 4, and John 3, what is the primary biblical explanation for why some people become atheists? What role does personal behavior play in this understanding?
7. Explain Alvin Plantinga's concept of the "cognitive consequences of sin." How does this idea relate to the ability to perceive evidence for God?
8. According to Paul Witts's "defective father's hypothesis," what is a potential psychological explanation for atheism? Is this presented as a sufficient or necessary condition?
9. How does the source explain the psychological phenomenon where beliefs can change to align with behavior, particularly in moral contexts? How does this relate to the persistence of atheistic beliefs?
10. What are some of the "blessings of theism" discussed at the end of the lecture? Provide at least two examples and briefly explain them.

Answer Key

1. The New Atheism movement is generally considered to have started with the publication of Sam Harris's book, *The End of Faith*, in 2004. The four individuals most closely associated with the movement are Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett, often referred to as the "four horsemen."
2. The New Atheists argue that religious beliefs, especially those involving events that cannot be scientifically verified or explained (like the virgin birth and miracles), should be rejected by rigorously rational individuals. They tend to see a fundamental conflict between science and religious faith, asserting that a lack of scientific justification makes religious belief irresponsible.
3. Scientism or positivism is the insistence that all genuine knowledge must be scientifically based or subject to empirical confirmation. The primary critique against it is that it is self-refuting because the claim that all truths must be scientifically provable is itself a statement that cannot be scientifically proven.
4. The source suggests that science itself is based on unprovable articles of faith, such as the general reliability of our senses, the principle of cause and effect, the uniformity of nature, and the idea that thought reflects reality. This point is raised to show that even science relies on assumptions that cannot be empirically proven, undermining the New Atheists' demand for scientific justification for all beliefs.
5. Anthony Flew was a prominent atheist intellectual for about fifty years who later shifted his position to a form of theism. His change was significant because he was a leading voice for atheism who came to believe that the universe required a supernatural cause due to considerations like cosmology, cosmic fine-tuning, and the origin of life.
6. According to these biblical passages, atheism is primarily a consequence of a willful resistance and suppression of the truth about God due to wickedness, a hardening of the heart, and a love of darkness because of evil deeds. It is not primarily attributed to a lack of evidence but to a moral and volitional rejection of what is already known or evident.
7. Alvin Plantinga's concept of the "cognitive consequences of sin" suggests that sin, immorality, and vice can corrupt the proper functioning of our cognitive faculties, similar to how physical ailments can impair them. This corruption can damage or compromise our innate awareness of God (*sensus divinitatis*) and our ability to rightly perceive the clear evidence for God.

8. Paul Witts's "defective father's hypothesis" proposes that atheism in some individuals is psychologically precipitated by a broken or negative relationship with their father. This hypothesis is presented as a potentially necessary but not sufficient condition for atheism, suggesting that while many with difficult father relationships remain theists, it might be a common factor among prominent atheists.
9. The source explains that when there is a conflict between one's beliefs and behavior, especially in moral contexts, it is often easier for individuals to change their beliefs to align with their actions rather than alter their lifestyle. This can contribute to the persistence of atheistic beliefs as individuals may rationalize their behavior by rejecting theistic moral frameworks.
10. Some of the "blessings of theism" include providing motivation for virtue, improving cognitive health through obedience and attunement to God, and offering the right to complain and the privilege to thank. The latter are psychologically beneficial as they provide outlets for processing negative emotions and expressing gratitude for the world and its blessings.

Essay Format Questions

1. Analyze and compare the key arguments and rhetorical strategies employed by the New Atheists as presented in the source material. In what ways do they differ from traditional atheism?
2. Critically evaluate the philosophical arguments presented in the source that challenge the central tenets of the New Atheism, such as the demand for scientific justification for all beliefs.
3. Discuss the biblical perspective on the causes of atheism as outlined in the lecture. How does this explanation differ from sociological or purely intellectual accounts?
4. Explore the relationship between personal behavior and belief formation as presented in the source material. How do concepts like the cognitive consequences of sin and the influence of the will contribute to an understanding of atheism?
5. Consider the psychological and philosophical implications of Anthony Flew's conversion from atheism to theism in light of the arguments and perspectives discussed in the lecture.

Glossary of Key Terms

- **Atheism:** The disbelief in the existence of God or gods.
- **New Atheism:** A contemporary movement that gained prominence in the early 2000s, characterized by a more assertive and often critical stance against religion, often emphasizing scientific naturalism.
- **Theism:** The belief in the existence of one God who created and sustains the universe.
- **Scientism (or Positivism):** The view that the only genuine form of knowledge is scientific knowledge, and that scientific methods should be applied to all areas of inquiry.
- **Empirical Inquiry:** A method of gaining knowledge through direct observation and experimentation.
- **Problem of Evil:** The philosophical challenge of reconciling the existence of an all-powerful and perfectly good God with the existence of evil and suffering in the world.
- **Cosmic Fine-Tuning:** The observation that the fundamental constants and parameters of the universe appear to be precisely balanced to allow for the possibility of life.
- **Naturalism:** The philosophical belief that only natural (as opposed to supernatural or spiritual) laws and forces operate in the universe.
- **Reformed Epistemology:** A school of thought in the philosophy of religion, associated with thinkers like Alvin Plantinga, that argues belief in God can be rational even without traditional empirical or logical proofs.
- **Sensus Divinitatis:** A Latin term meaning "sense of divinity," referring to an innate human awareness or inclination towards belief in God, as described by John Calvin and discussed by Alvin Plantinga.
- **Cognitive Consequences of Sin:** The idea that sin and moral corruption can negatively impact our ability to think clearly and accurately, especially about moral and spiritual truths.
- **Theory-Ladenness of Observation:** The philosophical concept that our pre-existing beliefs and theoretical frameworks influence how we perceive and interpret sensory data.

- **Paradigm-Induced Blindness:** The phenomenon where adherence to a particular worldview or paradigm can prevent one from recognizing or accepting evidence that contradicts it.
- **Self-Deception:** The act of persuading oneself to believe something that is false, often due to motivated biases or desires.
- **Logical Positivism:** A philosophical movement that asserted that only statements verifiable through empirical observation or logical analysis are meaningful.

5. FAQs on Spiegel, Philosophy of Religion, Session 7, The New Atheism, Biblicalelearning.org (BeL)

Frequently Asked Questions on the New Atheism

1. What is the "New Atheism" and when did it emerge? The New Atheism is a movement that gained significant cultural traction in the early 2000s, particularly following the publication of Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* in 2004. It is characterized by a more outspoken and aggressive critique of religion compared to traditional atheism. Key figures associated with this movement include Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, often referred to as the "four horsemen."

2. How does the New Atheism differ from older forms of atheism? Several key differences distinguish the New Atheism. First, it exhibits a more brazen and confrontational attitude towards religious belief, contrasting with the often more reserved skepticism of earlier atheists like David Hume or Bertrand Russell. Second, New Atheists place a strong emphasis on scientific justification as the primary standard for truth claims. They often argue that religious beliefs, lacking scientific verification, are therefore irrational and irresponsible to hold.

3. What are the main arguments or objections raised by the New Atheists against religious belief? The New Atheists commonly raise two primary objections. The first is the problem of evil: how can an all-powerful and perfectly good God allow the existence of suffering and evil in the world? They often assume this problem is insurmountable for theists. The second major objection stems from science, asserting that many core religious doctrines, such as miracles, the virgin birth, and the resurrection, are scientifically implausible and contradict a rational, scientific worldview.

4. How can one respond to the New Atheist objection that religious beliefs are unscientific? One significant response to the New Atheists' scientific objection involves addressing the philosophical position known as scientism or positivism, which claims that only scientifically verifiable statements can be true. This position is self-refuting because the assertion that all truths must be scientifically provable is itself not scientifically provable. Furthermore, scientism would necessarily exclude knowledge of morality, beauty, and the meaning of life, areas where scientific inquiry is not the primary means of understanding. It's also important to note that science itself relies on certain unprovable foundational beliefs, such as the reliability of our senses and the uniformity of nature.

5. According to a biblical perspective, why do some people become atheists? From a biblical standpoint, the rejection of God is not primarily due to a lack of evidence but rather a consequence of willful resistance and the suppression of truth. Passages like Romans 1, Ephesians 4, and John 3 suggest that people turn away from God because of their "wickedness," a "hardening of their hearts," and a love for "darkness" due to their "evil deeds." This perspective emphasizes a moral and volitional dimension to unbelief, where personal sin and pride can create a cognitive blindness to the reality of God.

6. What is the concept of the "sensus divinitatis" and how does sin affect it? The "sensus divinitatis," a term used by John Calvin and Alvin Plantinga, refers to a natural, divinely endowed, innate awareness of God present in all human beings. According to this view, sin and immorality can damage or compromise this natural capacity to perceive God's existence and the evidence for it, which the Apostle Paul states is clearly evident in creation. Certain sins, particularly pride, can lead to a "cognitive block" regarding belief in God.

7. How does personal behavior and lifestyle relate to belief formation, according to the provided source? The source argues that personal behavior and lifestyle have a significant impact on belief formation. Obedience and a virtuous life can enhance cognitive function and moral-spiritual awareness, leading to a greater understanding of God. Conversely, engaging in vice can compromise cognitive function and create a bias against belief in God. This is supported by psychological observations that people are more likely to change their beliefs to align with their behavior than vice versa, especially in moral contexts. Additionally, a person's existing theoretical framework or "paradigm" can influence how they interpret evidence related to God.

8. What are some of the potential psychological benefits of theistic belief? Theism can offer several psychological benefits. It can provide motivation for virtuous behavior and improve cognitive health through a positive feedback loop between obedience and spiritual awareness. Furthermore, theistic belief provides individuals with the "right to complain" and the "privilege to thank" God, both of which can be psychologically beneficial for processing difficult emotions and expressing gratitude for life's blessings. The ability to attribute the beauty and design of the universe and human capacities to a creator also offers a deeper sense of gratitude than a purely naturalistic worldview might allow.