

A PRIEST RESPONDS TO THE NEW ATHEISTS

By the Rev. Dr. John R. Mabry

I'm not sure how it got started, but soon after the spate of offerings by the New Atheist authors (such as Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, etc.) someone started calling their books "atheist porn." It made me laugh when I first heard it, probably because it's not far from the truth. Pornography can be titillating and fun (just ask any 16-year-old discovering PLAYBOY whether he's having a good time)—but it's also objectifying, sapping the real people portrayed of their humanity and falsely representing them for the profit and gratification of others.

Similarly, the New Atheist literature is fun, even titillating—who doesn't like to see the New Atheists take potshots at goofballs like Pat Robertson and the Ayatolla Khomeini? But it also objectifies religion, intentionally misrepresenting it as a one-dimensional, universally fanatical phenomenon.

I do understand the impulse: it's far easier to set up a straw man and knock it over with a clever rhetorical one-two punch than it is to grapple with the reality of religion in all of its complexity, variety, and nuance. Dawkins, Hitchens, and the like are smart enough to know that, so either they are being intentionally disingenuous, or they need to get out and mix more—with someone other than James Dobson and Osama ben Laden.

What they would discover if they did is that the God that they don't believe in, most religious people don't believe in, either. A great number of religious people—especially in first world countries—do not insist on the exclusive truth of their particular religious brand, do not wish death or sanctions against those who believe differently (or don't believe at all), and do not reject the scientific method or philosophical inquiry.

As a religious educator, training chaplains and spiritual directors for ministry in hospitals, hospice, and private practice, it is vitally important that my students understand and are prepared to meet the variety of religious experience and expression that will confront them in their workplaces. If the religious scene were as the New Atheists depict it, not only would my students be out of jobs (since religious people would all be reactionary fanatics who would only deign to be ministered to by their proprietary clergy), but none of them would even be there, since none of them are religious conservatives.

In my book *FAITH STYLES: WAYS PEOPLE BELIEVE* (Morehouse Publishing, 2006), I outline six ways that people hold faith: Traditional Believers (who believe their faith is the only legitimate one), Liberal Believers (who believe that their faith is one among many valid spiritual expressions), Spiritual Eclectics (who follow not one faith, but pick and choose elements from many spiritual traditions), Religious Agnostics (who enjoy the benefits of spiritual community, but are not convinced of its truth claims), Ethical Humanists (atheists and agnostics who may find a sense of belonging and connectedness to the cosmos), and Jack Believers (those who believe the Traditional Believer paradigms but cannot adhere to their ethical codes).

Of these six ways of holding faith, the New Atheists only acknowledge three: Traditional Believers, Jack Believers, and Ethical Humanists. Fully half of religious humanity is not represented in their model of reality, and that, sad to say, is no model of reality at all.

Unfortunately, when they do bring up moderate and liberal religion, it is only to dismiss it out of hand within a paragraph for not being “authentic.” But who are the New Atheists to determine that only conservative, intolerant, and fundamentalist expressions of religion are “authentic”? I contend that I am more of an expert on my own spiritual life than anyone else, including Christopher Hitchens. I also contend that dismissing the religious faith of a vast cross-section of humanity—indeed invalidating the faith of even one person—is as much religious violence as any of the intolerant behaviors the New Atheists condemn.

Although you wouldn’t know it from the writings of the New Atheists, the truth is that there ARE such things as religious moderates, religious liberals, and religious progressives. There are people who believe that critical thinking in matters of religion is essential to mature faith, and indeed, a key component to religious faithfulness. There are people who understand that our images of divinity are the result of a primal human impulse to anthropomorphize Mystery, because it makes it easier to live in relationship with it. There are people who understand that symbols are not identical with the things they signify, who do not turn ideas, images, and ideologies into idols. There are people who do not think that violence is the proper response to dissent, who, in fact, see tolerance, compassion, and liberty as the litmus test of authentic spiritual expression. There is no serious consideration of this vast cross-section of religious life in the writings of the New Atheists, but then again, you don’t expect that kind of nuance, realism, and complexity from porn.

Now, I must confess that I actually love the New Atheist literature. I have scarfed up every book I could get my hands on: *THE GOD DELUSION*, *GOD IS NOT GREAT*, *THE END OF FAITH*, even Bill Maher’s film “Religulous.” I have enjoyed them all immensely, and find myself agreeing with about 90% of what they say. But it’s the 10% they completely ignore that torpedoes their credibility.

And that's too bad, because there is a lot of value and validity in much of what they say. Intolerant, violent, and exclusionary forms of religion OUGHT to be challenged and questioned. But forms of religion that are not extremist, reactionary, and uncritical in their approaches do exist, and need to be acknowledged. So I call the New Atheists to the same integrity that they, as philosophers, would insist upon in their academic writings. I invite them to do their homework, to get to know people who don't fit into their cookie-cutter approaches to religion, to an accurate depiction of contemporary religious life.

Mr. Dawkins, I recommend you check out the worship at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, where gay and lesbian people are accepted as full and worthy members of both laity and clergy, where the very tolerance and liberality you pretend does not exist in religious communities is on display in full pageant. Mr. Hitchens, I invite you to my own community, where the Gospel readings are proclaimed side-by-side with readings from the Hindu Upanishads and the Buddhist Sutras. Mr. Harris, perhaps you should find a Quaker meeting house, a Reformed or Reconstructionist or Renewal Synagogue, a Sufi group, or a Green Sangha, and get to know the very real people there. I invite you to come to understand the faith that inspires them to compassionate action, appreciative dialogue, and interfaith cooperation on behalf of the poor and the oppressed.

Granted, the New Atheist literature wouldn't be as much fun were it not drawn in simplistic, black-and-white dichotomies portraying intelligent and reasonable "us" against the ignorant and belligerently religious "them." But acknowledging the reality and the authenticity of moderate, liberal, and progressive forms of faith would make for a literature that was, at least, accurate, realistic, and honest. Philosophy only has integrity when it describes the world we actually live in. The New Atheists, unfortunately, are writing fantasy, as indeed, pornography always is.

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