



New Atheism: A Critique by way of Marxian Materialism and Scientific Skepticism

Ronald Gaul

Abstract

In the mid-2000s, a new form of atheistic polemic hit the world stage. It came by way of the works of the scientists Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris, social and political critic Christopher Hitchens, and many others. I come to this topic as a layman, and a longtime student of Marx's materialist philosophy as outlined in his writings in the 1840s. I will also apply scientific skepticism, as defined by scientist and humanist advocate, Carl Sagan, who coined the term, yet its methodology predates him.

The critique will center on three aspects of New Atheism: idealism, scientism, and pseudo-science. The scope of this paper, while broad, doesn't touch on the political questions that that often get embroiled with New Atheism. There are arguments that can be made from a leftist perspective against New Atheism's pro-capitalist, racist, and misogynist characteristics. These debates are best handled in political fora. Using Marx as a philosophical guide certainly touches a political nerve, but no specific invocations on class struggle are needed in this article to make use of his historical materialism. New Atheism also introduces scientism into its debate with religion. It takes the form of dismissing philosophy as a serious intellectual pursuit. The third component of my argument concludes that New Atheists engage in science denialism. This especially egregious New Atheism purports to excel in scientific analysis.

This paper is not meant to deny, apologize for, belittle, or otherwise delegitimize those who suffer from, or have survived, physical and/or emotional abuses in any religious institution, or from any extremist theology. Examples of this dominate our news on nearly a daily basis. My point is to show that belief in a deity, or any supernatural force alone, does not ordain any crimes and travesties from the get go. Any closed organization or society runs this danger, (e.g., the military, penal institutions, etc.), and a separate social-psychological phenomenon is at play in that instance.

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Idealism

“Religious suffering is, at one and the same time, the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people.”¹

There was a time, (and maybe still for some), that this was the clarion call to abolish religion. This quote, especially the last sentence, was a specter that haunted the anticommunist world during the Cold War. Yet in proper historical context, it is not the condemnation of religion that it seems to be. This is notwithstanding the atrocities against the religious and religious institutions under Stalin and other dictatorships. Marx never advocated for crimes against religion to be done in his name. He wanted religion heartily critiqued, but then to move on from there into a deeper materialist analysis. Similarly, the biblical Gospels did not compel the Crusades and countless inquisitions, albeit they were also done in Jesus’ name.

Let’s contrast Marx with Christopher Hitchens, who claims that “people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons everything.”² Marx’s view of religion is the opposite of Hitchens and the other New Atheists. Marx saw religion as a *reflection and consequence* of human suffering. Hitchens, et. al., see it as a *predominate cause* of humanity’s misery. The usage of the metaphor "opium" vs. that of "poison" tells us much. Religion is relief from pain, not the *injury* that requires painkiller.

Digging deeper into Hitchens’s logic:

God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization...Religion is man-made.²

¹Marx, Karl. “Introduction.” *A Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, 1844.

² Hitchens, Christopher. “Religion Poisons Everything.” *Slate Magazine*, 25 Apr. 2007.

Compare again to Marx:

Man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is, indeed, the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man...But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man – state, society. *This state and this society produce religion.*¹

Both Hitchens and Marx use the word “Man” when they refer to the progenitor of religion, but they mean completely different things. When Marx says “Man is the world of man – state, society. This state and this society produce religion,” he means the material conditions that constitute society, the technology, the productive forces, factories and tools that spring from that, and the class relations that are layered over that. This gives humanity the leisure time to build a legal, philosophical, and theological infrastructure, they spring from those material conditions. This is how “man makes religion.” To Hitchens, “man” is a prophet or a messiah, and the proselytizers who succeed or flank them. Then the ideas and written words that spring from the minds of this small group go forth, and then those ideas are primarily responsible for the transformation of the material world of humanity, it’s economy, state, jurisprudence, and class relations.

New Atheism sees written scripture as key to this fabrication of the material world of man. Sam Harris has accused the *Quran* of having words that especially inspire violence:

We are at war with Islam. This is not to say that we are at war with all Muslims, but we are absolutely at war with the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran...the fundamentals of Islam are a threat to us. Every American should read the Koran and discover the relentlessness with which non-Muslims are vilified in its pages.³

Yet there are many passages in the *Quran* that say the following: "God does not forbid you from being good to those who have not fought you in the religion or driven you from your homes, or from being just towards them. God loves those who are just."⁴ Muslim societies throughout history have

³ Harris, Sam. ‘Mired in a religious war’. *Washington Times*. 2004.

<https://m.washingtontimes.com/news/2004/dec/1/20041201-090801-2582r/>

⁴ *Quran* 60:8

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had periods of very tolerant and advanced caliphates, much more so than contemporaneous kingdoms in Christian Europe. There were swings during the centuries between enlightenment and fundamentalist darkness in Islam. Yet throughout all that time, the wording of the *Quran* remained unchanged.

This is idealism, albeit a crude idealism, not a sophisticated Hegelian idealism that Marx so definitively “turned on its head.” This idealism is replicated in the broader world of New Atheism. It is the staple of their vocal and visible internet community. Litanies of horrors are recounted online, with the sole blame laid upon words in a holy scripture or the ideas from the heads of the holy. Nary is there a mention of a society’s level of technology, economy, or other customs and norms that predate said religion, and which, in turn, shape the character of any religion overlaying it. For them, belief in the divine or supernatural is the primary trigger for war, misery, and persecution.

Scientism

“the fact that the secular basis [atheism] lifts off from itself and establishes itself in the clouds as an independent realm can only be explained by the inner strife and intrinsic contradictoriness of this secular basis.”⁵

“atheism, the last stage of theism, a negative recognition of God.”⁶

As a participant in the Christian apologist online forum, *Reasonable Faith Forums*, I have read many wonderful proofs, disproofs, and syllogisms on all manner of arguments for and against the existence of a deity. Many of the site’s participants, both atheist and theist, show remarkable elan in the language of philosophy and logic. It’s good fun. Even though an atheist myself, I enjoy sifting through, critiquing, and evaluating various kinds of theology. The body of Christian theological thought through the centuries is complex, nuanced, and sophisticated. I usually evaluate a theology based on its internal logic, and compatibility with methodological naturalism, historical materialism, and scientific skepticism.

⁵ Marx, Karl. *Theses on Feuerbach*, 1845

⁶ Marx, Karl. *The Holy Family*, 1844

New Atheists are in a perpetual state of critiquing theologies. The problem is that they evaluate every species of theology as a testable hypothesis, to be torn down by the sledgehammer of falsifiability. This is a good thing when theological assertions actually posit a testable hypothesis. The best known of these are Intelligent Design and Young Earth Creationism. Scientific Skepticism comes into play appropriately in these instances. But New Atheism wants to dismiss all theology, all religion, with scientific skeptical inquiry. This is a symptom of scientism. Many types of theology are dependent on personal revelation, or in a moment of creation beyond the observable Cosmic Microwave Background. These areas of theology are not testable or falsifiable.

A positive view of the natural world and human history is an important stage in any intellectual journey. A materialist analysis of history and a naturalist view of the evolution of life and the cosmos can, and should, stand on its own. Marx and Engels left behind their focus on religion after the 1840s. They moved on to economic and historical analyses. Besides Marxian materialism, there are other positively asserted non-religious creeds, humanism being one. It overlaps with the Marxian worldview, but diverges in many other areas. For the most part, Humanism also avoids debunking religion.

Consequently, New Atheism is stuck on religion, yet refuses to engage theology outside of science. A constant refrain from the New Atheist chorus is that they are not a movement, not a religion (of course), not a grouping, they just don't believe in a deity. They deny accountability in representing any coherent philosophy, other than some unspecified naturalism. They want to tear down ideas, yet they do not come up with any enlightened ones of their own. In turn, the New Atheist polemic does away with delving into the intricacies and particularities of various theologies. *They refuse to even pass through "the last stage of theism"*. Religious apologists as a result get frustrated that the atheists they encounter don't posit a cogent positive argument that they can critique. The New Atheists in turn solidify their refusal to engage theology in a philosophical context. Their debates on the Reasonable Faith Forums devolve into straw man vs. straw man.

As a part of New Atheism's eschewal of philosophy, they dismiss the arguments of great theologians, "These mighty scholars may have written many evil things or many foolish things, and been laughably ignorant of the germ theory of disease or the place of the terrestrial globe in

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the solar system, let alone the universe, and this is the plain reason why there are no more of them today, and why there will be no more of them tomorrow. Religion spoke its last intelligible or noble or inspiring words a long time ago: either that or it mutated into an admirable but nebulous humanism, as did, say, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, a brave Lutheran pastor hanged by the Nazis for his refusal to collude with them.”⁷ Holding any theologian or philosopher to the standards of science is, again, scientism. It is the New Atheists’ denial that philosophy can “solve problems.” It is at heart a form of anti-intellectualism. It is an anti-humanist creed that denies humanity’s search for meaning, except as something that can only be solved by science. Hitchens begrudgingly gives Bonhoeffer a nod for bravery, as he surely exhibited. But to dismiss his theology as “nebulous” is unfair. Certainly, the Nazis did not see it as being too nebulous, it was sharp enough to give them a reason to kill him.

The website *Existential Comics* points out the essence of New Atheism’s rejection of philosophy: “if philosophy was solved, then we probably wouldn’t need philosophy. Philosophy, however, has not been solved. Furthermore, if it is going to be solved, it certainly won’t be solved by a bunch of people who don’t even read or engage in philosophy.”⁸ Sam Harris, who should know better as a neurologist, goes as far as to invoke MRI scans to explain away philosophy. He does this by comparing opinions with known facts, as they light up in the same region in the brain:

[T]he physiology of belief may be the same regardless of a proposition’s intent. It also suggests that the division between facts and values does not make much sense in terms of underlying brain function...This finding of content-independence challenges the fact/value distinction very directly: for if, from the point of view of the brain, believing ‘the sun is a star’ is importantly similar to believing ‘cruelty is wrong,’ how can we say that scientific and ethical judgments have nothing in common?⁹

Scientism meets reductionism. Their baby is pseudoscience. This assertion is a non-sequitur, devoid of any exhaustive studies of other subjects

⁷ Hitchens, Christopher. “Religion Poisons Everything.” *Slate Magazine*, 25 Apr. 2007.

⁸ Mohler, Corey. “The Philosophy Force Five vs the Scientismists.” *Existential Comics*

⁹ Harris, Sam. *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values*. Simon and Schuster, 2011.

scanned, or done with a double-blind peer-reviewed study, with negative and positive controls. Christopher Hitchens did have a wonderful aphorism which is applicable here, it is his take on the Burden of Proof requirement: that which is asserted without evidence, can be dismissed without evidence. But as we see in the next section, New Atheism commits deeper errors than idealism and scientism. Misrepresenting neurology is a relatively minor offense in their forays into pseudoscience.

Pseudoscience: Mental health

Infantilizing theology is the most commonly seen form of pseudoscience in New Atheist polemics, and a corollary of their scientism. This is a staple in the broader internet critiques of religion by New Atheists, repeated in untold numbers on blogs, posts, and articles. Belief in a deity is equated with believing in the tooth fairy, Santa Claus, etc. Firstly, this kind of magical thinking by children is seen by some professionals as healthy. Many consider it a natural part of a child's psychological development. Child psychologist Vanessa LoBue points out, in defense of Santa Claus:

fantasy in general is a normal and healthy part of child development. Children spend a large amount of time pretending, especially between the ages of five and eight. They are also constantly exposed to media in which animals can talk, people can fly, and objects magically appear out of thin air. Why should a group of flying reindeer be any more fantastical than a talking mouse or a singing snowman?¹⁰

She later points out that children grow out of this rich fantasy life by about nine years old. The New Atheists insinuate that there are perhaps billions of humans who don't grow out of a normal childhood phase. You would think psychology researchers would notice this aberration. Add to this the contempt New Atheism holds for the nuances of a mature, adult theology, it is no wonder they cannot distinguish it from childhood fairy tales.

But it gets worse: pathologizing religious belief. "Religion is a mental illness" is a claim touted and insinuated by a broad range of a loud (minority) of atheists. David Silverman, former president of American Atheists states in a Facebook post: "We must recognize religion as

¹⁰ LoBue, Vanessa. "Why It's OK for Kids to Believe in Santa Claus." *Psychology Today*, Sussex Publishers, 2016.

brainwashing. We must recognize the (hyper) religious as mentally damaged.”¹¹ Sam Harris opines: “it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions.”¹² This from a neurologist, at that. In his 2008 movie, *Religulous*, Bill Maher called religion a “neurological disorder.”¹³ Richard Dawkins calls it a “hereditary mental illness.”¹⁴ There are many more articles and blogposts from lesser known authors asserting the same theme. Some with a laundry list of “symptoms” that religious believers have that suggest schizophrenia and other mental illnesses. There are two problems with this: 1) the authors are for the most part untrained in the mental health professions, and 2) even if they were experts, armchair diagnoses are unprofessional, and widely condemned by all psychiatry and psychology boards and associations.

The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM), is the standard classification of mental disorders used by mental health professionals in the U.S., and is published by the American Psychiatric Association. It is updated regularly and is the best available science on mental health and personality disorders. Nowhere, absolutely nowhere in the DSM is religious belief mentioned as a condition. It never has. Again, like with the infantilization argument, you would think mental health professionals would push the panic button if billions of people were so mentally ill. It is true that certain types of psychoses or paranoia may involve religious topics, but these disorders aren’t reliant on religious belief. In fact, in the modern era, secular entities are replacing religious ones in these paranoid and hallucinatory disorders, e.g., space aliens, corporate and government spies, etc. Those who purport to be “skeptics”, and in many cases involved elsewhere in debunking pseudoscience, (as many New Atheists do), should be especially ashamed of their blatant hypocrisy here.

Pseudoscience: social-psychology

In the final section of this paper I will rely primarily on an excellent article, entitled “Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A

¹¹ Silverman, Dave. *Facebook*, 2014

¹² Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith*. W. W. Norton & Company, 2004: p. 72.

¹³ Wolpe, David. “Maher’s Mockery Misses the Point.” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 Oct. 2008

¹⁴ @richarddawkins. *Twitter*, 27 July 2014, 2:17 a.m.

Skeptic’s Guide to the Debate” from the magazine *Skeptical Inquirer*¹⁵ The authors are: Scott O. Lilienfeld, PhD, a professor of psychology at Emory University in Atlanta, Georgia, and Rachel Ammirati, PhD, a postdoctoral fellow in the Department of Psychiatry also at Emory University. In the article, both writers disclose that they are atheists.

Would society be better if there were no religion? The body of work on this, both by scientists, journalists, and bloggers is voluminous. It is not an issue that sociologists and psychologists have reached a scientific consensus on, yet. But what is clear is that New Atheists misrepresent data, and make false equivalencies, so as say with certainty: Religion = Bad. There are many limitations to a scientific study on this, as noted in the article:

In practice, the question posed here is probably not answerable with certainty because a genuine experimental test of the question is impossible. For both pragmatic and ethical reasons, we could never randomly assign individuals to a condition in which they were raised in a religious environment and randomly assign others to be raised in a nonreligious environment.¹⁶

Some may point to North Korea as an example of a religion-free society, but the state mandated veneration of the Kim family dynasty says otherwise. The ruling Kim family are imbued with supernatural powers. They are associated with ancient Korean symbols of their nation’s origin, like the dormant volcano, Paektu Mountain. In fact, North Korea could be mistakenly used as an argument for the harm religion does. The vibrant reemergence of religion in China and Russia shows that it was never eradicated there, despite heavy repression and persecution of religious institutions.

But what is “better” is hard to quantify in any scientific study. For the purposes of the article the authors define it in two ways: “(a) lower levels of criminal and antisocial behavior, including violence, and (b) higher levels of prosocial (altruistic) behavior than a world with religion.”¹⁶

¹⁵ Lilienfeld, Scott O. and Rachel Ammirati. “Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A Skeptic’s Guide to the Debate.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2014.

¹⁶ Lilienfeld, Scott O. and Rachel Ammirati. “Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A Skeptic’s Guide to the Debate.” *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2014.

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This is notwithstanding the clearly institutional harm that some religious denominations or churches may inflict on individuals within it. There are plenty of examples of crimes committed by church hierarchy, both sexual and otherwise, and the resultant coverups of these crimes. But these dynamics happen in many closed organizations, like the military, or psychiatric or penal institutions. It's not an ideology-dependent phenomenon. There are also certain theologies that instill shame and harm congregants who are LGBTQ. Or, many times those who suffer real mental illness, like depression, are discouraged from medical care, and told to "pray more". But other non-religious political groups and trendy self-help "psychotherapies" might also make the same errors in each case. This article instead speaks to overall societal impacts of believers. "It should perhaps go without saying that the question of whether the world would be better off without religion has no logical bearing on the ontological question of God's existence."¹⁶ In the above quote, and in following passages in their article, the authors point out logical fallacies of conflating the two questions. One is a testable hypothesis, the other a philosophical question, beyond the scope of scientific inquiry. The article goes to illustrate how New Atheist philosopher, Daniel Dennett, and Richard Dawkins completely ignore studies on the correlation, or lack thereof, between violence and religion. Furthermore, New Atheists do not take up the atrocities by regimes not motivated by religion, e.g. China under Mao, USSR under Stalin.

In an interview conducted by Laura Sheahan, Richard Dawkins is asked if he sees any benefit from religion. "It's true that some kind, nice, sympathetic people are also religious, and they might say that their kindness is motivated by religion. But equally kind people are often not religious. I really don't think I can think of anything; I really can't."¹⁷ Leading New Atheist and prominent philosopher, Daniel Dennett admits there is no consensus, but lapses into intellectual laziness over the question of any societal benefit of religion:

Nothing approaching a settled consensus among researchers has been achieved, but one thing we can be sure of is that if there is a significant positive relationship between moral behavior and religious affiliation, practice, or belief, it will soon be discovered,

¹⁷ Dawkins, Richard. Interview by Laura Sheahan. *Salmon River*, 2007.

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since so many religious organizations are eager to confirm their demonstration underlines the suspicion that it just isn't so.¹⁸

Well maybe it is to Dennett's chagrin that it took two scientifically skeptical atheists to do the job he so negligently tried to outsource to a theologian, or religious institutions.

Lilienfeld and Ammirati continue:

Indeed, the question of whether religion increases or decreases the risk of genocidal and other large-scale violence may never be answered to our satisfaction. Nevertheless, the more circumscribed question of whether belief in God specifically, and religiosity more generally, are correlated—statistically associated—with criminal and antisocial behavior, including violence, has been investigated in dozens of studies.¹⁹

The authors cite many studies. And while not a slam dunk, they tend to show a slight benefit of religion in society.

In conclusion, New Atheism has ironically suffered from the very same pitfalls it sees in religion. The wishful thinking of idealism, the dogmatism and anti-intellectualism of scientism, and from that flows pseudoscience. Their insistence on being "skeptics" brings an unseemly arrogance to their public debate. This, in turn, has turned away a vast majority of non-religious professionals, writers, and laity from any affinity for, or identification with, New Atheism. Unfortunately, fundamentalist religious polemicists and apologists latch onto New Atheism, using it as a strawman in their arguments against science, "moral relativism," secularism, "post-modernism," and "cultural Marxism." New Atheism's dogma makes their arguments and fear-mongering all too easy.

¹⁸ Dennet, Daniel. *Breaking the Spell*. Penguin, 2006.

¹⁹ Lilienfeld, Scott O. and Rachel Ammirati. "Would the World Be Better Off Without Religion? A Skeptic's Guide to the Debate." *Skeptical Inquirer*, vol. 38, no. 4, 2014.

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Ronald Gaul was born and raised in LA. Gaul was radicalized as a communist and atheist at the tender young age of 13. He took a sabbatical years later and delved into Buddhism, Zen, and Taoism, which he still studies. Gaul now trains in Aikido, studies the post-Soviet implications of historical materialism, and the features of emerging post-religious thought and religious deconstructivism. Gaul is now retired, but he is an older retired dad of a nine year old, and nanny to his three year old brother from another father.

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