

INTRODUCTION
BELIEF UNDER ASSAULT:
SCIENTIFIC ATHEISM
VS.
FAITH AND SCIENCE
By Cory Hayes

Today we will be looking at an issue of extreme importance to the relationship between faith and science – the growing assault on belief by a growing number of outspoken atheists in Western society. Religious Belief is being attacked by people who are claiming that to be a Christian, or a believer in God of any kind, is to be an enemy of science, and that science has proven that God does not exist, or at the very least, that there is no evidence whatsoever that warrants belief in God.

This enemy doesn't have a sword like the slide may suggest. But it does have a voice, and does have a pen. As we are going to see, this is an enemy that doesn't simply reject Christianity or religious belief as an option for their own personal belief. Rather, it rejects the right of Christianity and religion to exist at all. It considers it a disease, much like a mental version of the AIDS virus. And it says that science has proven this to be true.

My presentation today will have three parts: First, I will define scientific atheism and show its weaknesses as a coherent worldview. Second, I will describe the attacks of scientific atheist on God, faith, the Church and religion in general using their own words. Finally, I will introduce you to one such atheist who is said to have “flown” the atheist coop so to speak– the English philosopher Antony Flew

THE ABC's OF ATHEISM – WHAT YOU SEE IS ALL YOU GET

It's not too hard to define atheism, but it can certainly be a lot of fun coming up with new ways to describe, what I take to be, the same big mistake – the unprovable assertion that there is no God.

Here's a good example of an attempt at a definition. *The belief that there was nothing and then nothing happened to nothing and then nothing magically exploded for no reason, creating everything and then a bunch of everything magically rearranged itself for no reason whatsoever into self-replicating bits which then turned into dinosaurs.*

But, my favorite actually comes from a tombstone. Some students of C.S. Lewis once asked him what he thought about an inscription on tombstone they had found. It read, "Here lies an atheist, all dressed up and nowhere to go." Lewis answered their question in the following way, "I bet right now the poor fellow is wishing that inscription were true." Of course all atheists have one thing in common – they all deny the existence of God. But believe it or not, there are many different kinds of atheism.

The kind of atheism that is attacking the Church today is a very specific kind – *scientific atheism*, the belief that science has disproved the existence of God and has made belief in God a ridiculous superstition. Scientific atheism is also the belief that "science alone can put us in touch with the ultimate depths of the world."¹ Another name for scientific atheism is *scientism*. To understand what scientific atheism is, we have to understand two other –ism's that are always a part of the worldview of scientific atheism: materialism and reductionism

Materialism is the notion that "lifeless and mindless 'matter' alone is real."² Put another way, materialism is the conviction that only the visible universe, that is, things that are capable of being seen, smelled, touched, heard, and tasted (or at least in principle capable of being observed and measured by instruments and sense experience) are actually real. Materialists believe that only natural science is capable of getting in touch with reality, because only natural science makes physical, touchable, measurable things the main object of study.

¹ John F. Haught, *Deeper than Darwin: The Prospect for Religion in an Age of Evolution* (Boulder: Westview, 2003), 32.

² John F. Haught, *God After Darwin: A Theology of Evolution* (Boulder: Westview, 2000), 1.

Closely related to materialism is *reductionism*, the idea that all of reality is reducible to its smallest physical parts. In this belief system, what seem to be higher levels of existence (like actually existing animals and humans) are merely new collections of smaller elements, arranged in a different order. Perhaps the most famous statement of reductionism came from the well-known American scientist Carl Sagan, who once said, “I, Carl Sagan, am nothing but a collection of atoms bearing the name ‘Carl Sagan.’”³

Of course, most people recognize that physical creatures are made up of atoms, just as Sagan said. However, reductionism is the belief that physical creatures, humans included, are *nothing but* collections of atoms. In other words, the collection of atoms is what is really real.

Obviously, any view of the world that involves materialism and reductionism is atheistic. Such worldviews obviously allow no room for the Christian Faith as a source of truth. As the Christian Faith is concerned ultimately with God, who is spiritual and not physical, those who deny that there are any non-physical realities have little patience with the claims made by Christian Faith and other theistic religions. Since scientific atheists see science as the only way to gain knowledge of things as they really are, they consider religion to be inherently incompatible with scientific thought.

There are two things we should note right away about scientific atheism. First, scientific atheism is a *belief system*, a conviction or assumption about reality. It must be clearly distinguished from science as such. Science, which examines the elements of the visible world, is not the same thing as materialism, which holds that the elements of the visible world are the only things that really exist. Nor is it the same thing as reductionism, which says that all things are reducible to their physical, observable parts. In short, *science is not scientific atheism*. Belief that only science can reveal the truth (scientism) is not a requirement for the study of science, just as the study of paintings does not require denying that other forms of art are also valuable.

The second thing that should be noted is that *scientific atheism* involves a fatal logical flaw – it is based on an assertion that contradicts itself. As we said above, it is based on the belief that only science, which observes and measures physical realities, can

³ Clarke, 247.

put us in touch with truth. And yet the very statement “only science can put us in touch with truth” is itself not able to be verified scientifically, that is, by observation and measurement.

If you are having a hard time grasping this, think about this statement, which is similar because it is also logically inconsistent: “No one is at the football game, because it’s just too crowded.”

In the same way, if the statement “only science can put us in touch with truth,” is true, then it must be scientifically verifiable. But what the statement asserts cannot be observed or measured through science. Therefore, the very logical foundations of scientific atheism are false, a contradiction in terms. Right away we can enjoy a little bit of irony at the expense of scientific atheists. The proponents of scientific atheism consider their point-of-view to be a smarter, more intelligent way of viewing the world. In fact, Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins, two leading spokesmen for scientific atheism, actually want us all to give up the term scientific atheism. Instead they want us to call them “brights,” as in “Bill is a really bright guy.” Dawkins defines a bright as someone who embraces “a worldview that is free of supernaturalism and mysticism.” According to Dennett, “We brights don’t believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny – or God.”

The irony is this – scientific atheism is actually based on an error in logic, as we saw before. So perhaps instead of brights they could come up with some more appropriate title, like “dims” or “broken bulbs.” Whatever you call its proponents, scientific atheism of this sort is certainly not bright.

Yet, let’s give Drs. Dennett and Dawkins a little more credit; they are, after all, very intelligent and learned men. Let’s make their claim a bit more modest and defensible. Let’s say that a scientific atheist admits that his own position is a belief and that he also admits that it cannot be scientifically verified. But, what he does claim is that it is the only kind of belief worth having. In other words, believing or assuming that only science and sense experience can put us in touch with truth is the most reasonable thing to hold because science can reliably and accurately explain why our world is the way it is and acts the way it acts. A God is not needed to account for or explain the world; science can do it just fine. If this is true, then what possible reason could one have to bother with

God anyway? In response to this line of argument, one might ask the following question: Can observable and measurable reality account for or explain everything?

While it is true that scientific inquiry can explain and demonstrate quite well something like Newton's universal law of gravitation, it can have nothing to say as to what accounts for its *lawfulness*. Why are physical laws so lawful to begin with? What about the laws of logic and mathematics? Is it explainable by scientific means why something like the Pythagorean theorem would be true even if there were no minds to think it? Why is there any universe at all? Why is it intelligible? How can a brain that is nothing more than a complex physio-chemical process (as a reductionist would hold) have an insight into and gain accurate knowledge of other physio-chemical processes? Can science account for moral values or oughts? What about meaning and all the really important things we worry about? In line with its own commitments, scientific atheism must say that matters such as these will either one day be explained scientifically (can we scientifically argue what science will achieve in the future?) or that they are unanswerable in principle. In short, there seems to be much about the world that does not explain itself.

Blind Fury: The Assault by Scientific Atheism on Christianity

Now that we have defined and critiqued scientific atheism, let's take a look at what it has to say about the Church and Faith. We will start with the Church.

The Catholic Church as Wicked Stepmother of Science – An Atheist Fairy Tale

According to scientific atheism, the first and greatest problem with Christianity, a religion that, as we shall see later, they think needs to be eradicated, is a historical problem. They constantly make reference to the Church as a great persecutor of scientists throughout history.

Their version of the story is a lot like Cinderella. It is a battle between good and evil, with the good guys being the scientists and the bad guys being bishops and popes. The good guys are just trying to do their thing, to come up with new and liberating forms of knowledge that will be a blessing to the whole world. Cinderella wanted her dream of a prince to come true. In the scientific atheist's story, these scientists are hoping for, not

a prince, but a new theory. *No matter how your heart is wrenching, if you keep on experimenting, the theory that you wish will come true...*

But there's a shadow hanging over the lab. Scientella (this story's Cinderella) has a wicked stepmother, the Ecclesia, which has authority over everything she tries to do. And she doesn't want Scientella to discover anything that might ruin the hopes of her two ugly daughters, Ignorantia and Superstitionilla. So Ecclesia locks her away in a terrible dungeon and takes away her Bunsen burner, where she dies of a broken heart. Sounds a little melodramatic, doesn't it? But this is the tale that scientific atheists tell.

Daniel Dennett accuses the Catholic Church of having "a legacy of persecution of its own scientists."

Sam Harris, another outspoken atheist, says that the Church has a tradition of "torturing scholars to the point of madness for merely speculating about the nature of the stars."

But the whole history, according to SA can be summed up in the events surrounding a single scientist – does anyone know who he is? GALILEO. Poor Galileo. If you read the writings of SA's as they attack the Church, you will hear about him a lot. Can anybody tell us what happened to Galileo? Correct.

Carl Sagan fills in the end of the story by informing us that, due to his heretical view that the earth moved about the sun, Galileo was put "in a Catholic dungeon and threatened with torture." There's one little problem with the Scientella story, as romantic and moving as it may be. **The problem is that it is not true.** With the exception of the Galileo affair, the Church has been a heroic supporter, not a wicked persecutor, of science.

In fact, not only did the Church not persecute scientists, it actually helped Western civilization to give birth to science and also supported its growth.

Science vs. Faith

The first attack on the Christian Faith, we saw above, is an historical one. But that is not their main attack. Instead of simply attacking the Church as an institution, SA's spend most of their time attacking the very stuff the Church is made out of – religious faith.

Every time any Catholic priest baptizes an infant, he always asks the parent the same question – “What do you ask of God for this child?” And the parents answer with one word – FAITH. So as you can see, the very first thing one gets when they become a Catholic is the gift of faith. Faith is the stuff that makes us members of the Church. SA’s don’t want us to be members of the Church. So it isn’t surprising that they attack faith as a bad – no- as the worst thing possible, a disease of the mind and heart.

Faith is belief in God. All you have to do is listen to the titles of their books to see what SA’s think of faith:

Richard Dawkins bestseller is called *The God Delusion*;

Sam Harris’ is called *The End of Faith*

Victor Stenger’s is called *God: The Failed Hypothesis*

Christopher Hitchens is called *God is Not Great*

When we look at what they say in these books, it gets even more vicious: Nobel Prize-Winner Steven Weinberg: “Anything that we scientists can do to weaken the hold of religion should be done...”

Sam Harris: “We cannot be blind to the lunatic influence of religious belief”

Christopher Hitchens: “All religions and all churches are equally demented.”

Here’s a quote from one of Daniel Dennett’s most famous books, called *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*:

“The kindly God who lovingly fashioned each and every one of us and sprinkled the sky with shining stars for our delight -- that God is, like Santa Claus, a myth of childhood, not anything a sane, undeluded adult could literally believe in. That God must either be turned into a symbol for something less concrete or abandoned altogether.”

Another even more influential scientific atheist is the British author Richard Dawkins, who wrote the book *The God Delusion* and who is famous for characterizing religion as something like a mental virus which we must eradicate. Here’s Dawkins on science and the idea of God:

“Science offers us an explanation of how complexity (the difficult) arose out of simplicity (the easy). The hypothesis of God offers no worthwhile explanation for anything, for it simply postulates what we are trying to explain. It postulates the difficult to explain, and leaves it at that.”

It is a matter of freedom of speech that these SA’s should be able to speak their minds and publish their thoughts. But they have suggested that they don’t think believers should have the same freedom. In fact, in the background of all this one can see a very specific initiative – that it may be a good idea to make illegal the teaching of one’s children to believe in God.

According to Christopher Hitchens, the world would be a better place if “religious instruction were not allowed until the child had attained the age of reason.” Richard Dawkins says directly what Hitchens only hints at: “It’s one thing to say people should be free to believe whatever they like, but should they be free to impose their beliefs on their children? Is there something to be said for society stepping in? **Isn’t it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought out?**”

All of this anger toward religion is based on the claim that science has made belief in God an outdated superstition. Is it true? Is God an unnecessary hypothesis, a pre-scientific leftover?

What if it can be demonstrated that, far from pointing away from the existence of God, the discoveries of modern science can actually point in the direction of God’s existence? Just when everyone thought science was pointing away from God’s existence and had all but disproved the claims of the Christian faith and theistic religion, some think that the discoveries of the 20th century have showed us they were wrong.

Epilogue – The Interesting Case of an Atheist Who Flew the Coop

Before we conclude, I want to share with you one last story. It has to do with a great hero of scientific atheism – a man named Antony Flew.

Antony Flew can rightly be called the Grandfather of Contemporary Atheism. In 1953, as a doctoral student at Oxford, he published a paper entitled “Theology and Falsification,” in which he argued against the existence of God. It was an extremely

intelligent argument against God's existence. It became the foundation stone of the whole movement which I am calling scientific atheism. And he became known as the leading atheistic thinker in the world for a half-century.

Here's the argument that made him famous:

Let us begin with a parable. Once upon a time two explorers came upon a clearing in the jungle. In the clearing were growing many flowers and many weeds. One explorer says, "Some gardener must tend this plot." The other disagrees, "There is no gardener." So they pitch their tents and set a watch. No gardener is ever seen. "But perhaps he is an invisible gardener." So they set up a barbed-wire fence. They electrify it. They patrol with bloodhounds. But no shrieks ever suggest that some intruder has received a shock. No movements of the wire ever betray an invisible climber. The bloodhounds never give cry. Yet still the Believer is not convinced. "But there is a gardener, invisible, intangible, insensible, to electric shocks, a gardener who has no scent and makes no sound, a gardener who comes secretly to look after the garden which he loves." At last the Sceptic despairs, "But what remains of your original assertion? Just how does what you call an invisible, intangible, eternally elusive gardener differ from an imaginary gardener or even from no gardener at all?"

Take such utterances as "God has a plan," "God created the world," "God loves us as a father loves his children." They look at first sight very much like assertions, vast cosmological assertions... Someone tells us that God loves us as a father loves his children. We are reassured. But then we see a child dying of inoperable cancer of the throat. His earthly father is driven frantic in his efforts to help, but his Heavenly Father reveals no obvious sign of concern. Some qualification is made — God's love is "not merely human love" or it is "an inscrutable love," perhaps — and we realize that such suffering are quite compatible with the truth of the assertion that "God loves us as a father (but of course...)." We are reassured again. But then perhaps we ask: Just what would have to happen not merely to tempt but also to entitle us to say "God does not love us" or even "God does not exist"? "What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a disproof of the love of, or the existence of, God?"

This argument launched his successful career as a philosopher, not to mention 1,000 atheist ships. And then, 51 YEARS LATER, at a debate in New York in 2004, he

made an announcement. Flew had flown the atheist coop. He had changed his mind. Three years later, in 2007, he published this book. What caused him to change his mind? Here's a little piece of his explanation:

“I now believe that the universe was brought into existence by an infinite Intelligence. I believe that this universe's intricate laws manifest what scientists have called the Mind of God. I believe that life and reproduction originate in a divine Source. Why do I believe this, given that I expounded and defended atheism for more than half a century? **The short answer is this: this is the world picture, as I see it, that has emerged from modern science.**”

He spends most of his book explaining what data and discoveries of modern science were involved in his “pilgrimage of reason,” as he calls it. One has to do with the origins of life and the genetic codes present in all living things.

In the development of any living being, the formation of each and every cell is subject to the transmission of a code – the genetic code. The genetic code in DNA is duplicated and then copied from DNA to RNA. Then the code is conveyed to the amino acids which are assembled into proteins.

The key for Flew is the existence of a code in this process, the coordination of information in a way much like human writing, substituting the pen, paper and alphabet with amino acids, proteins and DNA.

Here's the big question: “Can a language-like structure, coded chemistry, be explained without reference to intelligence?” Can meaningful information emerge spontaneously from a collection of mindless molecules?

Flew answers “no.” Genetic instructions are not the kind of information that you find in other physical systems. In fact, there is no underlying physical principle for the genetic code in the laws of nature. Biologists have not dug deeply enough when they stop at the level of the physical in regard to the origins of this amazing intelligent process.

He quotes Nobel Prize-winning physiologist George Wald, who recommends that we assume the following: “mind... has always existed as the matrix, the source and condition of physical reality... It is mind that has composed a universe that breeds life,

and so eventually evolves creatures that can know and create: science-, art- and technology-making creatures.”

In short, modern science is the reason Antony Flew has flown the coop of atheism. I would like to conclude with the new parable that Flew offers in *There is a God*:

Imagine that a satellite phone is washed ashore on a remote island inhabited by a tribe that has never had contact with modern civilization. The natives play with the numbers on the dial pad and hear different voices upon hitting certain sequences. They assume first that it's the device itself that makes these noises. Some of the cleverer natives, the scientists of the tribe (even though Flew calls them a “tribe” they are apparently quite advanced), assemble an exact replica and hit the numbers again. They hear the voices again. The conclusion seems obvious to them. This particular combination of crystals and metals and chemicals produces what seems like human voices, and this means that the voices are simply properties of this device.

But the tribal sage summons the scientists for a discussion. He has thought long and hard on the matter and has reached the following conclusion: the voices coming through the instrument must be coming from people like themselves, people who are living and conscious although speaking in another language. Instead of assuming that the voices are simply properties of the handset, they should investigate the possibility that through some mysterious communication network they are ‘in touch’ with other humans. Perhaps further study along these lines could lead to a greater understanding of the world beyond their island. But the scientists simply laugh at the sage...

In this parable we see how easy it is to let preconceived theories shape the way we view evidence instead of letting the evidence shape our theories.... And in this, it seems to me, lies the peculiar danger, the endemic evil, of dogmatic atheism.

Flew suggestively ends the parable with this: “... I therefore put to my former fellow-atheists the simple central question: ‘What would have to occur or to have occurred to constitute for you a reason to at least consider the existence of a superior Mind?’”

We have heard this question before. It is the same one Flew put to theists 55 years ago. He is indicting dogmatic atheists (read Dawkins, Dennett, etc.) for not following reason boldly enough. It's a similar challenge to the one Vatican I put to Catholics in 1870:

“...there can never be a real conflict between faith and reason, since the same God who reveals mysteries and infuses faith has bestowed the light of reason on the human mind, **and God cannot deny himself**, nor can truth ever contradict truth.” In other words, don't be afraid to follow where the evidence leads – it ultimately leads to God. Antony Flew has shown that, when we boldly embrace science, it seems it can lead away from the close-mindedness of atheism.