

# Journalistic apologetics

A review of  
*The Delusion of Disbelief:  
Why the New Atheism is a  
Threat to Your Life, Liberty,  
and Pursuit of Happiness:*  
by David Aikman  
Tyndale House, Carol  
Stream, IL, 2008

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Over the past several years, four atheist authors appeared on the bestseller lists, catching many people by surprise. Why all the interest in atheism? So asks David Aikman in the first chapter of his new book, *The Delusion of Disbelief*. Many possible answers come to mind. Could it simply be that the “New Atheists” were outstanding communicators, the kind of authors that could make any reasonably interesting subject into a “best seller”? Or could it be that the “new atheists” touched a nerve that had always been sensitive but had been left alone for a time? There are of course other possibilities. Aikman suggests that the international concern with Islamic terrorism opened a door for criticizing religion in general. He also thinks that United States politics were a factor—interest in atheism constituted a backlash against an internationally unpopular presidential administration that was perceived as very religious.

Interesting possibilities, certainly. But whatever the proximate cause, the bestseller lists made it clear that there is a lot of interest in the ancient debate over atheism. It did not take long for the rebuttals to begin coming off the presses—among them *The Delusion of Disbelief*. The author, David Aikman, trained as a historian (B.A. from Oxford, Ph.D in history from University of Washington), but is best known for his long career as a correspondent for *Time* magazine.<sup>1</sup> Aikman’s background

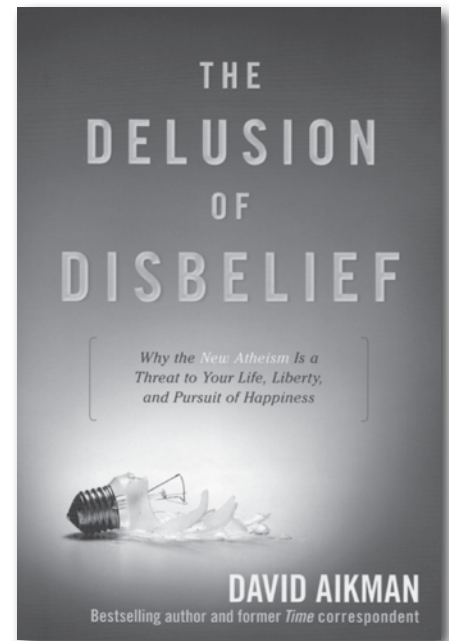
provides both the greatest strengths and the greatest weaknesses of this book as an apologetic.

In fact, the apologetic purpose of the book barely comes across in the first chapter. From a journalist, I would have expected an argument like an editorial, but instead found a straightforward news report. The “news report” style persists into chapter two, “The Attack of the Four Horsemen”. Aikman offers detailed introductions to the four authors who have been the collective public face of the “new atheism”: Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. He describes their respective educational backgrounds, career paths, and key writings.

It is possible that Aikman’s “no comment” approach is designed to let Dawkins and friends embarrass themselves with their own over-the-top rhetoric. This might be effective for a time. But it cannot carry on for too long without risking annoyance from readers: The reader can tell that Aikman doesn’t like the atheists’ positions, but cannot tell if Aikman has a thought-out position of his own. Perhaps he relies on his previous book *Hope: The Heart’s Great Quest* (1995) to argue that real hope is to be found in the truth of Christianity.

## “They Hate God”

Aikman moves on to consider the atheist’s underlying attitude with a bluntly titled chapter, “They Hate God”.<sup>2</sup> It is not hard to prove this point. From Dawkins’ now-famous line, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction”, to Harris’s indictment of Jesus for failing to repudiate Old Testament “barbarism”, the atheist authors have made their distaste plain. Hitchens goes so far as to deny that religion has had any positive influence on mankind. Compared to these assertions, Aikman notes that philosopher Dennett is very restrained—although it could be added



(an opportunity Aikman missed) that Dennett has reserved a different kind of disdain for the followers of God. (Dennett apparently wishes religious belief could be eliminated, but thinks that some specimens could be kept in something like a cultural zoo.<sup>3</sup>) In any case, all of the atheists are agreed that God is bad news.

It is at this point that Aikman begins a more extended critique, taking apart Hitchens’ absurd contention that nothing positive has ever come from religion. But the very willingness of Hitchens and the other New Atheists to go out on a limb with such far fetched claims is merely an indicator of their hatred of God, Aikman says. “They claim not to believe that he exists, but their animosity is so personal that it is hard to escape the conclusion that they are combating a personality who in some intuitive way they know is real” (p. 61).

## Science

But the New Atheists insist that “he” is *not* real. How do they know? Science has the answer, and according to the New Atheists, that answer is that God does not exist. This is what Aikman comes to consider next. It would seem that the chapter on science could (and should) be a



Lenin (center) with two of his lieutenants, Stalin (left) and Kalinin (right). David Aikman argues that the oppressive regime that Lenin instituted, and Stalin carried on, was made possible by their atheistic philosophy.

centrepiece of any argument against the New Atheists. But Aikman spends this chapter running down rabbit trails. He dives into a discussion of memes, the idea that ideas themselves propagate (and are subject to natural selection) in a manner analogous to genes. This was Dawkins' pet theory, which he has tried to employ to explain religion. The most important hole in Dawkins' reasoning that Aikman points out is that, assuming the accuracy of Dawkins' basic theory of memes, those memes that survive do so in a natural selection struggle; so survivors should be more fit. Why, then, does religion survive, if it really is half as bad as Dawkins says it is? Dawkins tried to give explanations (arguing that religion memes are virus-like), but Aikman argues that the "explanations" fall short—for Dawkins is unable to show why religion is more likely than atheism to be a delusion foisted upon us by memes beyond our control.

Only after an extended discussion of memes and the "religion-as-a-virus" perspective does Aikman take a step back to look at the bigger picture. The "Four Horsemen" are not satisfied with a world in which science is respected and valued; they want a universe where all knowledge is reducible to science. This has rightly been called "scientism". Aikman rightly but rather weakly responds that scientism is not a view shared by all scientists. Many scientists

are devout religious believers; others who are not (Stephen Jay Gould, for one) have acknowledged that science cannot logically disprove the existence of God. Aikman briefly mentions Owen Gingerich, who found faith to be reasonable because it fitted so well with the "fine tuning" of the universe (p. 91). Aikman then spends several pages discussing Albert Einstein, providing evidence that, while Einstein had no belief in a *personal* god, he would have been opposed to some of the claims of the New Atheists. Aikman adds a final page discussing the role of religion, medieval Christianity in particular, in the development of science. He barely scratches the surface of this important subject, though, before the chapter is over.<sup>4</sup>

The chapter was disappointing. The space devoted to issues like memes and Einstein's personal beliefs dwarfed the amount of space spent on evolution and design, with little discernable relationship between the importance of the issue and the number of words expended on the subject. And the arguments themselves were not particularly compelling. The fact that there are scientists who believe in God does not show that they are rational in doing so. The wide disparity of views among the scientists discussed raises more questions than it answers: Einstein with his vague deistic or pantheistic views;<sup>5</sup> Gould who simply

said that science cannot rule out religion<sup>6</sup> (though he was an atheist himself); "theistic evolutionists" who find no conflict between evolution and theism.<sup>7</sup> All of this is reported, and none of it discussed. Even if Aikman did not intend it, a reader could get the impression that Aikman is offering a smorgasbord of ways to fit faith and science together: pick the one you want, so long as you believe in God (or, perhaps, god). Not a very effective—or biblical—apologetic tactic.

Beyond that, Aikman left some of the most serious arguments untouched. How about answering accusations of poor design (which, atheists allege, gives a choice between evolution, or a god that is either malevolent or stupid<sup>8</sup>)? How about a critique of the atheists' basic assumption that naturalism (cosmic and biological evolution) can account for all of nature? Most importantly, how about a discussion of pain, suffering, and evil in a world created by God? This is probably the single most important argument for atheism, and it is one that is very much connected to science. For instance, if God created via evolution, then God "created" via eons of death, pain and suffering.

Dealing with this issue should, in turn, have brought forth some sort of discussion of design versus Darwinism, and an explicitly biblical account of the fall (as opposed to a defence of theism in general). But alas, Aikman missed the opportunity. And as a result, his science chapter does not do a very good job defending the faith, and comes nowhere near demonstrating that "disbelief" is a delusion.

It's especially disappointing because Aikman has previously recognized that his native England has gone much further down the path of secularism than America because it embraced Darwin more quickly and completely. He also said:

"Probably no other single critique of the Bible has been more destructive of the authority of Scripture than the ridiculing of the Genesis account of six-day

Creation. People just laugh and say, well, that's just a myth. They are not encouraged to look for a consistent scientific understanding of the biblical view of Creation."<sup>1</sup>

Speaking to the Christian creation magazine, *Creation*, he added, "You guys are obviously doing a lot of encouraging work."<sup>1</sup>

### "Wicked atheists"?

Finally, though, Aikman moves into the territory suggested by his subtitle, with a chapter on "the problem of wicked atheists." "Nothing puts the New Atheists more on the defensive than people of faith who, having listened to the atheists" inevitable laundry list of the wickedness perpetrated the world over by adherents of religion, then chirp up with, "Well, what about atheists such as Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot?" (p. 94). While Aikman does not suggest that the barbarities perpetrated by some atheist dictators are an automatic consequence of atheism, he does contend that atheism provided necessary conditions to make their crimes possible.

At last, Aikman is on the offensive, with a simple but effective core argument:

"Atheism sets mankind at the very center of the universe. That is, atheism makes the assumption that there is no authority for rightness or wrongness of human behavior outside of human beings themselves ... Atheists are quick to point out that, even with such absolutes in place, religious people often have transgressed clearly known moral restrictions. That is true, of course. But for religious people, the moral restrictions on acceptable behavior are acknowledged and can be openly examined and discussed. People of faith who transgress them can be—and are—held accountable, not only by those who subscribe to the same faith but even by atheists .... For atheists, who have no consensus on absolutes outside of themselves and their

own community, the line separating good from evil is potentially in a state of constant flux" (pp. 100–101).

From here, the pace of the book picks up as Aikman begins to illustrate his argument with historical examples. The first atheist regime in modern history, France in the 1790s, foretold what was to come in the atheist regimes of the twentieth: totalitarianism and violence. "In the wholesale bloodletting of the ten-month Reign of Terror, 18,500 to 40,000 French men and women were executed, including thousands of priests and their protectors" (p. 101).

Some fifty years later, Karl Marx proclaimed that "the criticism of religion ... is the prerequisite of all criticism" (p. 105) as he laid the ideological foundations for future atheistic regimes. Lenin aggressively turned this belief into policy when he had the power of the state at his disposal, and in the process curiously anticipated Dawkins in proclaiming that religion is a "plague" (p. 110). Government propaganda machines went into high gear, denouncing belief in God and religion. The situation deteriorated more when Stalin succeeded Lenin, with mass arrests of priests and pastors. Dawkins claimed in *The God Delusion* that no atheist would "bulldoze" religious holy sites, but Aikman notes that Dawkins forgot about Stalin's church-destroying binges (p. 116).

In covering Stalin, as well as Mao, Pol Pot, and Kim Il Sung, Aikman only scratches the surface of decades of human suffering under Communist regimes, suffering for both religious and non-religious people. Aikman also discusses Adolf Hitler, who perhaps more than any other person has become the personification of modern-day evil. Aikman points out that, while Hitler

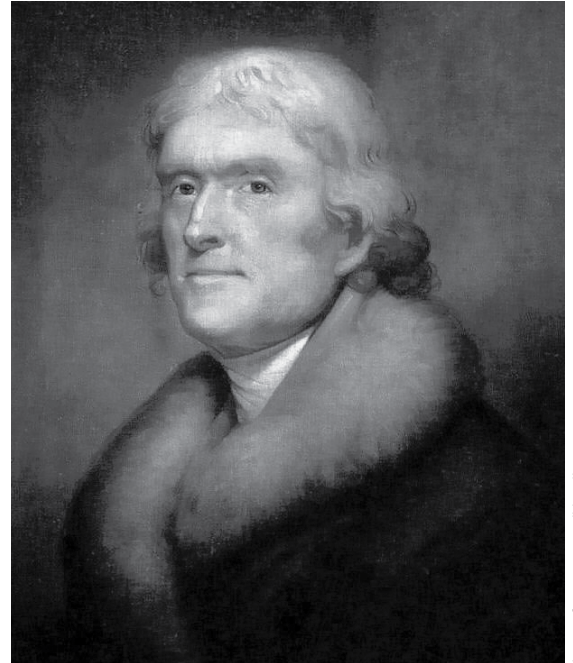


Image from <www.wikipedia.com>

American founding father Thomas Jefferson wrote, "Can the liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?" David Aikman asks the same question in *The Delusion of Disbelief*.

at times used Christian terminology to communicate to the masses, he privately regarded Christianity as "an invention of sick brains" (p. 132).<sup>9</sup>

The New Atheists, naturally, want nothing to do with these totalitarian rulers, and are emphatic in denouncing the genocide and persecution. What, then, does the mountain of historical examples prove, if the New Atheists agree that these historic atheists were wicked and wrong? Aikman reiterates that his point is not that atheism automatically leads to totalitarianism and brutality, or that all atheists are necessarily nasty dictators; it is rather that atheism opens the door for totalitarianism and brutality by destroying the foundations of morality. "The awkward fact ... is that it is exceptionally difficult to define 'wicked' in a precise way without reference to some transcendent moral authority of good or evil" (p. 133). A quote from Mao illustrates his point: "Morality does not have to be defined in relation to others ... Of course, there





The reconstructed Cathedral of Christ the Savior in Moscow. The original building was destroyed on Stalin's orders in 1931, a fitting symbol of Stalin's militant anti-theism.

are people and objects in the world, but they are there only for me ... People like me only have a duty to ourselves; we have no duty to other people" (p. 125). Aikman's argument has the potential to be a very powerful one, but it could have been developed further. The historical examples Aikman spends so much time on should really be the support for his arguments, but instead his arguments almost get buried under the mountain of facts.<sup>10</sup>

Historically, the tragedies of modern totalitarianism were a "product of a shifting moral environment in European culture" (p. 133). The United States was spared, Aikman suggests, because of its solid grounding in the Christian tradition.

### Christianity and liberty

The New Atheists have often argued that America's founding fathers were not men of faith and that the freedoms they enshrined in America's founding documents were products of the forward looking, free thinking enlightenment. Aikman dissents. First, he provides evidence that none of the founders were themselves atheists; many were self-professed Christians, and even the most unorthodox among them had some belief in God.

Second, Aikman argues that this shared belief in God was essential to the founder's conception of freedom. A famous quotation from Thomas Jefferson represents the sentiments of many of the founders: "Can the

liberties of a nation be thought secure when we have removed their only firm basis, a conviction in the minds of the people that these liberties are the gift of God?" (p. 144). Many of the founders expressed the view that freedom requires virtue, and virtue requires religion; hence, religion is essential to a free society. Alexis de Tocqueville, the Frenchman who visited the United States in 1831, remarked of the young country, "In France I had almost always seen the spirit of religion and the spirit of freedom pursuing courses diametrically opposed to each other; but in America I found they were intimately united, and that they reigned in common over the same country" (p. 160).<sup>11</sup>

De Tocqueville was not the last person to make a connection between faith and freedom.<sup>12</sup> In a fascinating section, Aikman relates that contemporary scholars and commentators in China of all places are making the same observation. In a paper presented to a Chicago meeting of the American Political Science Association, Chinese journalist Hong Xu described his own search to discover the foundations of freedom. "A major reason for the stillbirth of freedom in non-Western societies is that the bedrock for the building of liberty was missing ... ." For much of their history, these countries suffered rule by men with no checks on their authority, the antithesis of freedom. Xu concluded that "faith in God as Lord is the beginning of freedom" (p. 169). Aikman writes that Xu "is not alone in his conclusions", and mentions several other Chinese writers and intellectuals who are "increasingly coming to the same conclusion" as the American founders: "atheism was the worst possible worldview a society could adopt" (p. 171). This is one of Aikman's most powerful narratives, both as argument and rhetoric.

Aikman's concluding chapter expands his argument to include all of western civilization as a positive fruit of a Christian worldview. Christianity, not atheism, converted Europe from superstition to rational living, making

possible an unprecedented growth of freedom, art, scholarship, and science. In fact, Christianity made possible the rise of atheism itself. But the atheistic worldview, Aikman says, is an impoverished one. The “New Atheism offers nothing new”; it is a negative worldview, one that denies much without much consensus on what it affirms. It is a worldview without a moral compass,<sup>13</sup> and a universe without a spiritual dimension. The choice of worldviews is clear.

Or is it? It should be, and Aikman’s conclusions on this count are right on. But the problem with *The Delusion of Disbelief* is that, while the conclusions are often good and the arguments point in the right direction, the presentation is less than compelling. It’s rather like going to a news report to answer a philosophical question. A *New York Times* article on disagreements between Aristotle and Plato might provide a very helpful overview of the debate; it might also reveal the reporter’s own biases or leanings on the issue. Yet it probably would not convince many readers to change sides. Unfortunately, Aikman’s book probably will not either.

Aikman is a skilled writer. He is on the right side of the issues. Many points he makes are good ones. There are some very fine sections of the book. In particular, the argument that Christianity leads to free societies deserves further use in apologetics.<sup>14</sup> But on the whole, the arguments as Aikman presents them do not meet the challenge of the atheist assault. The real danger with a work of Christian apologetics that does not present the arguments forcefully is that those who read it think that the Christian apologetic actually is as minimal as what they are reading. It is not. If someone wants to read a response to the New Atheists, some hard-hitting books are available.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, I cannot say this book is one of them. But for those familiar with Christian apologetics, *The Delusion of Disbelief* contributes facts that are worth knowing, and many of the arguments

it makes are ones that ought to be made—and made stronger.

### References

1. See also his interview, Standing firm, *Creation* 19(4):52–53, 1997; <creation.com/aikman>. He also narrated CMI videos *Raging Waters* and *In the Image of God*.
2. Hence, as Batten argues in, “Is Richard Dawkins an atheist?” <creation.com/dawkatheist>, he should rather be called a misotheist from Greek μισέω miseō = hate; θεός theos = God.
3. Dennett, D., *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, Simon and Schuster, New York, p. 519, 1995. On this point, Alvin Plantinga wrote a delightful critique of Dennett’s idea, asking, “Should we put barbed wire around those zoos, and check to see if perhaps there is room for them in northern Siberia?” Plantinga, A., Darwin, mind, and meaning, *Books and Culture* (May/June 1996); <www.calvin.edu/academic/philosophy/virtual\_library/articles/plantinga\_alvin\_darwin\_mind\_and\_meaning.pdf>. If Dennett meant something less than this, he should be embarrassed that he failed to be clearer; if Dennett actually *did* mean something like this, perhaps we should speak about Dennett’s dangerous idea.
4. For detailed discussion of the Christian worldview’s contribution to the origins of science, see Stark, R., *For the Glory of God*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, NJ, 2003; Stark, R., *The Victory of Reason*, Random House, New York, 2005 (both reviewed in *J. Creation*); Nickel, J., *Mathematics: Is God Silent?*, rev. ed., Ross House, Vallecito, CA, 2001. John C. Lennox makes good use of this historical data in a popular level apologetics work, *God’s Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?*, Lion, Oxford, pp. 19–22, 47–50, 2007. Also, James Hannam, who recently completed his Ph.D. on the History of Science at the University of Cambridge (UK), has written *God’s Philosophers: How the Medieval World Laid the Foundations of Modern Science*, currently in press, which promises to be an important contribution to the literature (see <http://jameshannam.com/Godsphilosophers.pdf>).
5. See Grigg, R., Einstein, the universe, and God, *Creation* 23(1):50–53, 2000 (warning Christians to be careful when using Einstein for apologetics).
6. Gould’s point (NOMA, non-overlapping magisteria) is hardly helpful for the Christian apologist—see Sarfati, J., *Refuting Evolution* 2, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, pp. 38–39, 2002.
7. For theological and exegetical difficulties with the theistic evolution position, see Sarfati, J., *Refuting Compromise*, Master Books, Green Forest, AR, 2004. See also Weinberger, L., Harmony and discord: A review of *The Language of God* by Francis Collins, *J. Creation* 21(1):33–37, 2007.
8. See, e.g. Dawkins, R., *The God Delusion*, Houghton Mifflin, New York, p. 134, 2006; See also Bell, P., Atheist with a Mission: Critique of *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *J. Creation* 21(2):28–34, 2007; <creation.com/delusion>.
9. See also Bergman, J., Darwinism and the Nazi race Holocaust, *J. Creation* 13(2):101–111, 1999; <creation.com/holocaust>.
10. For facts on what has been termed ‘megademocides’, see Rummel, R.J., *Death by Government: Genocide and Mass Murder*, Transaction Publishers, Brunswick, N.J., 1994; excerpts available at <www.hawaii.edu/powerkills/NOTE1.HTM>.
11. The critic might object that France demonstrated that freedom could advance without religion. But France’s antireligious “spirit of freedom” in the 1790s was certainly responsible for some unpleasant results.
12. Zimmermann, A., The Christian foundations of the rule of law in the West: a legacy of liberty and resistance against tyranny, *J. Creation* 19(2):67–73, 2005, <creationontheweb.com/christianlaw>.
13. Aikman quotes an exchange between Francis Collins, director of the Human Genome Project and an evangelical Christian, and Richard Dawkins. Collins asked Dawkins whether he believed that “outside the human mind ... good and evil have no meaning”, and Dawkins answered, “Even the question you’re asking has no meaning to me. Good and evil—I don’t believe that there is hanging out there, anywhere, something called good and something called evil” (p. 182).
14. Consider Evans, M.S., *The Theme is Freedom*, Regnery, Washington, D.C., 1994; Alvarado, R., *A Common Law: The Law of Nations and Western Civilization*, Pietas Press, Aalten, The Netherlands, 1999; Kelly, D.F., *The Emergence of Liberty in the Modern World*, Presbyterian and Reformed, Phillipsburg, NJ, 1992; Noebel, D.A., *Understanding the Times*, Harvest House, Eugene, OR, pp. 573–645, 1991; Zimmermann, Ref. 12.
15. Consider, for instance, Wilson, D., *Letter from a Christian Citizen*, American Vision, Atlanta, GA, 2007; Wilson, A., *Deluded by Dawkins?*, Kingsway, Eastbourne, UK, 2007 (see also my review: Weinberger, L., Fighting fire with fire, *J. Creation* 22(1):20–23, 2008).