

Answering atheist objections

Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target

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Atheism is nothing new. Putting aside the debate about whether one can find genuine atheists in the ancient world, it is certainly the case that modern atheism extends back several centuries. One can find outspoken atheists—individuals who denied the existence of God—as far back as eighteenth-century France, where (in the words of one scholar) a number of “radical writers sought to eliminate the transcendent altogether”.¹ Deeply immersed in the rationalistic *milieu* of the Enlightenment, the skeptics and atheists believed that the end of religion and of belief in God was simply a matter of effectively reaching the masses with the truth about reason and science. Three centuries later, this is still the hope of atheists.

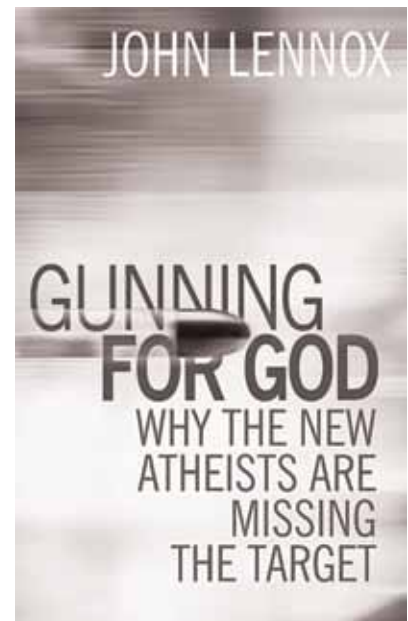
In the mid-2000s, a spate of books espousing atheism hit the bestseller lists. It started when Sam Harris, at the time a doctoral student in neuroscience, published *The End of Faith* in 2004. Framed as a response to the terror attacks on the United States on 11 September 2001, Harris attacked ‘religion’ as the ultimate cause of terrorism. It remained on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 33 weeks.² Harris rocketed from an unknown to a highly visible public ‘intellectual’. A number of other atheists who were already prominent public intellectuals—most notably Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and

Daniel Dennett—welcomed him and soon published their own books. Several of these books climbed to the top of the bestseller lists. Most impressively, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006) stayed on the *New York Times* bestseller list for 51 weeks.³ People were certainly interested in atheism.

Many have pointed out that the arguments of these ‘New Atheists’ are not new. But their visibility is. Atheists were energized by the aggressive presentation and newfound attention generated by the writers who became known as the New Atheists.

On the other hand, for Christians, Jews, and other theists, the New Atheists became the target for a barrage of apologetic materials. Books poured off the presses, offering responses to the arguments of Harris, Dawkins, Hitchens, and the rest—sometimes individually, sometimes together. Many of these books have been reviewed in *Journal of Creation*.⁴ Some have been outstanding, many others helpful or at least competent, and a few disappointing.

Among these books, John Lennox’s *Gunning for God* demands attention if for no other reason than the stature of its author. Lennox is Professor of Mathematics at the University of Oxford—note that in the UK, unlike the US, the title ‘Professor’ is awarded only to the highest academic rank. This is worth noting, for the idea that atheism is scientific and rational (while religion is reactionary and irrational) is a central part of the New Atheists’ rhetorical strategy. To have responses to the New Atheists coming from a senior academic at one of the world’s most respected universities is in itself a powerful reminder of the shallowness



of the New Atheists’ rhetoric: they do not in fact have all the academics, or all the scientists, on their side. *Gunning for God* is also worth noting in light of Lennox’s track record as an apologist: his first book on the New Atheists, *God’s Undertaker*, was on the whole a very good apologetic work (apart from several compromise positions on biblical history).⁵

God’s Undertaker was a tightly argued case for the existence and reality of the God of the Bible, with the main attention directed to the role of science in the debate. *Gunning for God* argues the same basic point, but without the emphasis on science. Lennox says in his introduction that this book was born out of public debates Lennox participated in, with Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens as his opponents. In *Gunning for God*, Lennox says he wants to devote more extended and detailed treatment to the ‘central issues’ that arose in the debates—science and much more.

It takes just a bit longer for Lennox to hit his stride with so many issues on the table. The early chapters in *Gunning for God* sometimes feel

unfocused, as Lennox juggles a few too many topics at once. In the first chapter, he starts with a quick discussion of the historical role of Christianity in promoting science, moves to a discussion of Stephen Hawking, and ends up with a detailed analysis of the meaning of ‘faith’. It’s all good stuff, and it all connects—but just barely. Things get considerably better as the book progresses.

Lennox on science

Science has played such a key role in the arguments of the New Atheists that Lennox cannot avoid dealing with this issue. In the process, Lennox rehashes some of the issues he dealt with in his previous book, *God’s Undertaker*: laws of nature, the relationship of faith to science, and the Christian foundations of modern science. Modern science relies on the assumption that the physical world is knowable and accessible to human reason. In other words, scientists have to believe that the physical world behaves in such a way that it can be understood—why else would a scientist study the natural world? The Christian worldview provides good reason for believing that the natural world is understandable, since it was created by a supremely intelligent God who then made humans in His image. Atheists lack this grounding for the faith they nevertheless maintain in the scientific method.

Faith, as Lennox points out, is something that everyone has to have. The question is what one puts their faith in, and what evidence one has to support their faith. One of the fundamental myths perpetuated by the New Atheists, Lennox writes, is the idea that ‘faith’ means “belief unsupported by evidence” or even “belief *despite* the evidence”. Faith *may* mean that, but it does not *usually* mean that—and *does not* mean that in the Bible. So for Christians, it *should*

not in fact mean that. Instead, for Christians, faith is nothing more or less than belief—and in the case of Christians, there are plenty of good reasons to support belief. The conflict between ‘faith and reason’, ‘faith and evidence’, or ‘faith and science’ that the New Atheists refer to repeatedly is a conflict of their own making: it is the New Atheists, not the teaching of Scripture, that define ‘faith’ in such a way as to be opposed to reason, evidence, and science. And, Lennox notes, this is a cheap shot—atheist propagandists berate theists because of a false definition the atheists themselves came up with!

What of natural law? Lennox tackles the common atheist argument that miracles are opposed to the law of nature. He begins the discussion by dissecting the classic critique of miracles by skeptical Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776; figure 1). Lennox finds Hume’s critique to be flawed on multiple levels, as Hume’s argument is open to charges both of circularity (he assumes what he sets out to prove) and internal incoherence.⁶

At a more general level, the atheists’ argument from the laws of nature relies on the false idea that the laws could somehow constrain God’s action. Instead, “the laws of nature predict what is bound to happen if God does not intervene; though, of course, it is no act of theft, if the Creator intervenes in his own creation” (p. 175). It would be more theologically precise to say that the laws of nature predict what will happen if God does not intervene in an extraordinary way—for even the normal operations of nature are sustained by God—but the basic point here is spot on. To claim that “the laws of nature make it impossible for us to believe in the existence of God and the possibility of his intervention in the universe” is fundamentally flawed. Always a gifted communicator, Lennox excels at explaining these

kinds of knotty issues with easy to understand analogies:

“It would be like claiming that an understanding of the laws of the internal combustion engine makes it impossible to believe that the designer of a motor car, or one of his mechanics, could or would intervene and remove the cylinder head. Of course they could intervene. Moreover, this intervention would not destroy those laws” (pp. 175–176).

At a few points, Lennox uncritically refers to big bang cosmology. At another point he also references the fact that even atheists must accept the fact that there was an original ‘human’ couple at some point in human evolution (he sees this as an evolutionary concession to a view more compatible with the Christian tradition). He does not attempt to reconcile these positions with the Genesis creation account—and, indeed, they just don’t fit.⁸ Disappointing though these concessions are, one can at least be glad that they do not constitute major points in Lennox’s arguments. These are the only points that should concern readers with a



Figure 1. Scottish philosopher David Hume (1711–1776) offered a famous critique of miracles that is still referenced by today’s ‘New Atheists’. John Lennox provides an easy-to-read rebuttal to Hume’s argument.

biblical, historical understanding of the Genesis account. Otherwise, Lennox's analysis of science and Christianity is outstanding: incisive and well-written.

Is Christianity good for the world?

Science is only one of the avenues of attack used by the New Atheists, and it is one Lennox has grappled with before. The atheist attacks on the issue of morality provide Lennox material he has not previously engaged in book form: religion has been bad for the world; religion isn't necessary for morality; and the God of the Bible is himself immoral.

On the question of whether Christianity has been bad for the world, Lennox lists a few of the historical benefits of Christianity (creation of hospitals and the promotion of human rights,⁹ for instance). He also

describes some of the literature about the psychological and emotional benefits of religious belief and prayer. He makes his most telling points in explaining why not everything done in the name of Christianity (and certainly not everything done in the name of religion more broadly) can be attributed to *authentic* Christianity, as defined by Christ and presented in the Scriptures.

Is atheism good for the world?

Lennox then tries to turn the tables on the atheists by asking whether atheism has been good for the world. It is easy to list off twentieth-century atheistic regimes that engaged in brutal repression, aggression, and murder: Mao, Stalin, and Pol Pot,¹⁰ to name a few of the most prominent. It is true that the elimination of belief in God has often been a prerequisite for the drastic redefinitions of morality that could

allow a Stalin or a Mao to intentionally starve and murder millions of people in pursuit of power or of revolution. But this terrain is dangerous because it is in fact all too easy for the apologist to come across as accusing all atheists of being amoral monsters in the making. I have never encountered a serious apologist who intends to make such a suggestion. But I have come across some who aren't careful enough with the way they frame their discussions and risk alienating their more open-minded readers by coming across as too bombastic.

Lennox momentarily stumbles in this minefield. He seizes on a couple of off-the-cuff remarks by atheists, such as Steven Weinberg's call for "scientists to contribute *anything* we can do to weaken the hold of religion [emphasis in original]" (p. 92). In this, Lennox finds a "hint of totalitarianism". He admits it "may only be a straw in the wind. But straws serve to show where the wind is blowing, and not so long ago that same wind blew in the direction of the Gulag" (p. 92). Weinberg's comment is very hostile to religion, but without more—much more—I don't see how the leap to worrying about a Gulag is justified. Lennox might have somewhat more justifiably worried about what Daniel Dennett had in mind when, years ago, he suggested that religious belief would someday be relegated to "cultural zoos".¹¹ But taking Weinberg's statement as far as Lennox does makes him sound for the moment a bit paranoid. This is the kind of thing that I suspect a Christian might read right past without a second thought, but which a skeptic considering Lennox's arguments might find deeply offensive. It doesn't much matter that the New Atheists indulge in all kinds of rhetorical excess in their writings; as Christians, we have to hold ourselves to a higher standard.



Figure 2. Women visit the empty tomb of Christ in a 15th-century painting by Fra Angelico. In *Gunning for God*, John Lennox gives an excellent apologetic account of the Resurrection.

Atheism and morality

Lennox does a much better job with another, and much more fundamental, point about morality: the New Atheists have no grounding for morality. So even though they are, on the whole, moral individuals who care about right, wrong, and justice, they have no justification for doing so. This is particularly ironic when the atheists' critique of the Bible itself is considered. The New Atheists often argue that the God of the Bible is immoral—but how do they know what is moral or not? In fact, as Lennox shows, the New Atheists' basic moral standards are borrowed—from the Bible which they so despise.

But since the atheists are in fact borrowing ethical standards from the Bible, isn't there an internal contradiction between the Bible's ethics and some of the actions in the Bible—most of all, God's command to destroy the Canaanites? Lennox doesn't shy away from this issue. These are not easy issues and Lennox spares us the glib, "I-have-an-easy-answer" style that can be so destructive to real apologetic engagement with unbelievers. But at the same time, he is not afraid to give the hard answer that gets to the heart of the matter—it's all about sin and God's authority to judge it.

Sin, Atonement, and the Gospel

The discussion of sin and judgment nicely segues into the final chapters of the book, where he examines Atonement, the Cross, and the Resurrection (figure 2). Atheists have often claimed that substitutionary atonement is immoral and nonsensical. Lennox argues that this critique merely shows that the atheists don't understand what's going on at several levels. Firstly, sin is serious. Secondly, God is just. And finally, God is loving. That is what was going on with the

incarnation and the crucifixion of Jesus. And with the Resurrection of Jesus, God in Christ completed His work in complete victory over sin and death.

Ironically, Lennox contends, the Resurrection is the event with which the New Atheists have never truly engaged. It is the central event of the Bible. An enormous body of circumstantial evidence testifies to its historical veracity. Yet the New Atheists have never even taken it seriously.

Taking the Resurrection seriously is what Lennox asks of his readers as he concludes *Gunning for God*. He offers a blow-by-blow analysis of the Gospel's Resurrection accounts, demonstrating at each point the urgency and authenticity of the New Testament narrative. Lennox's exposition is not original, but it is clearly and winningly presented.

Conclusion

The atheists set out 'gunning for God', but they are missing the target. In *Gunning for God*, Lennox hits the target most of the time. It is not a perfect book. It has stylistic and substantive issues at some points. But on the whole it is a very helpful presentation of the truth of Christianity and a strong rebuttal to the New Atheist critics. And when Lennox is at his best—as he is in his discussions of sin, Atonement, and the Resurrection—the book is powerful and moving. *Gunning for God* is another valuable contribution to apologetic literature.

References

1. McGrath, A., *Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, Doubleday, New York, p. 30, 2006.
2. Schuessler, J., Inside the List, *New York Times*, 2 September 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/09/11/books/review/inside-the-list.html?_r=0, accessed 16 September 2013.
3. The God Delusion One-Year Countdown, 2 September 2007, old.richarddawkins.net, accessed 16 September 2013.

4. See, for example, Kay, M., Can God stop being God? *J. Creation* 20(1):26–28, 2006; Cosner, L., Mostly masterful defence of Christianity; pity it's slack on creation, *J. Creation* 22(2):32–35, 2008; Weinberger, L., Fighting fire with fire, *J. Creation* 22(1):20–23, 2008; Cosner, L., Excellent refutation of 'new atheists' flawed by heterodox open theism, *J. Creation* 22(3):28–31, 2008; Weinberger, L., Journalistic apologetics, *J. Creation* 23(2):25–29, 2009; Davidson, D., The search for meaning, and what it means, *J. Creation* 26(3):18–20, 2012.
5. Lennox, J.C., *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* Lion, Oxford, 2007; and see review: Weinberger, L., Grand undertaking, *J. Creation* 23(3):35–38, 2009. The compromise is worse—and takes centre stage—in Lennox's other book, *Seven Days that Divide the World* (2011). See review, Cosner, L., Who is being divisive about creation? *J. Creation* 26(3):25–28, 2012; creation.com/lennox.
6. In short, Hume's argument against miracles rests on a strong view of inductive proof, while elsewhere, Hume denies that induction can prove uniformity in nature and denies necessary causation. This case was made powerfully by non-Christian John Earman in *Hume's Abject Failure: The Argument Against Miracles*, Oxford University Press, 2000.
7. See Hebrews 1:3; Colossians 1:17.
8. See Henry, J., Christian apologists should abandon the big bang, *J. Creation* 23(3):103–109, 2009.
9. For example, see legal scholar Dr Augusto Zimmermann's book *Western Legal Theory: History, Concepts and Perspectives*; reviewed by Davidson, D., *J. Creation* 27(3), 2013. See also 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; creation.com/christianlaw.
10. Hitler is sometimes included in these lists. Hitler was emphatically not a Christian, and an argument (though not a definitive one) can be made that he was personally an atheist. The Nazi regime was also anti-Christian. But it was not officially atheistic in the same way that the USSR was under Stalin. So one must be cautious about lumping all of these individuals and regimes together. See, for example, Bergman, J., *Hitler and the Nazi Darwinian Worldview*, 2012; reviewed by Woodmorappe, *J. Creation* 27(1):45–49, 2013.
11. See Johnson, P.E., Daniel Dennett's Dangerous Idea, *The New Criterion*, October 1995; www.arn.org/docs/johnson/dennett.htm.