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# The End of Reason: New Atheists and the Bible

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### RÉSUMÉ

Le Nouvel Athéisme est maintenant devenu un phénomène social et culturel. Grâce à ses principaux porte-parole, Richard Dawkins, Peter Hitchens, Daniel Dennett et Sam Harris, les « Quatre cavaliers » du Nouvel Athéisme, celui-ci est aussi devenu un phénomène appelant une réponse apologetique publique. Après une brève présentation des arguments principaux du « Nouvel Athéisme », cet article explore les représentations bibliques caricaturales souvent caractéristiques de leurs écrits. Il fait alors apparaître leur « herméneutique utilitariste » comme l'un des éléments fondamentaux

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### ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Der Neue Atheismus ist heutzutage zu einem sozialen und kulturellen Phänomen geworden. Durch seine Hauptvertreter, die selbsternannten „Vier Reiter“ Richard Dawkins, Peter Hitchens, Daniel Dennett und Sam Harris, wurde er auch zu einer offenen apologetischen Herausforderung. Dieser Artikel legt zunächst kurz die grundlegenden Anklagen der Neuen Atheisten dar und untersucht die falsche Darstellung der Bibel, die so häufig charakteristisch für ihre Schriften ist. Dabei tritt die funktionale Hermeneutik deutlich hervor, welche die Grundlage ihrer Kritik am christlichen Glauben darstellt.

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### SUMMARY

The New Atheism has become a social and cultural phenomenon. Through its main spokesmen, Richard Dawkins, Peter Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris, the self-proclaimed 'Four Horsemen', it has also become an open challenge to Christian apologetics. After a brief presentation of the basic grievances of the New Atheists, this article first surveys the misrepresentation of the Bible which often characterises their writings. In doing so, their one-sided hermeneutics will clearly appear as founda-

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### 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Since the first publication, in 2004, of Sam Harris's *The End of Reason* we have witnessed the rise of a

de leur critique de la foi chrétienne. Ensuite, l'article évalue la méthode de reconstruction théologique des « nouveaux athées », laquelle les conduit à remettre en question toute entreprise théologique. Cette partie indique que le manque d'arguments théologiques et logiques solides, dans la perspective critique du « Nouvel Athéisme », pourrait bien être synonyme de démission de la raison. Enfin, l'auteur conclut en mentionnant trois principaux chantiers apologetiques sur lesquels le « Nouvel Athéisme » nous convie à œuvrer : celui de la compréhension de notre société, celui de l'unité de l'Église, et celui de la défense de la légitimité du langage religieux.

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Im Anschluss daran betrachten wir die Methode der theologischen Rekonstruktion, wie sie von den Neuen Atheisten verwendet wird. Sie führt letztlich dazu, dass jegliches theologische Unterfangen in Frage gestellt wird. Als Schlussfolgerung daraus ergibt sich, dass der Mangel an soliden theologischen und logischen Argumenten, wie ihn die Kritik der Neuen Atheisten ausweist, so gut wie dem Ende der Vernunft gleichkommt. Der Artikel weist schließlich auf die drei hauptsächlichsten Herausforderungen hin, die an den christlichen Glauben gestellt werden: das Verständnis der Gesellschaft, der Dienst an der Einheit der Kirche und der legitime Gebrauch religiöser Sprache.

\* \* \* \*

tional to their criticism of the Christian faith. Second, we explore the method of the New Atheists' theological reconstruction which leads to their questioning of all theological endeavour. This part concludes that the lack of solid theological and logical arguments in the New Atheists' criticisms could well be synonymous with the end of reason. The article finally mentions three main challenges to the Christian faith: those of understanding our society, of serving the unity of the Church, and of legitimising the use of religious language.

\* \* \* \*

cultural and philosophical position known as the 'New Atheism'. It rapidly became a social phenomenon with the subsequent publication of Richard

Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (also 2006) and Christopher Hitchens' *God is not Great* (2007). These four books together form the English 'canon' of New Atheism.<sup>2</sup> To these we should add Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), Victor Stenger's *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (2007) and Dan Barker's *Godless* (2008); A.C. Grayling's *Against All Gods* (2007) had much influence in the U.K. as did Michel Onfray's *Atheist Manifesto* (2007) in France.

The four main promoters of this informal atheist movement, Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett and Harris, were labelled by Dawkins the 'Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse' as if to mark the end of all religion and of the Christian faith in particular.<sup>3</sup> According to a 2007 Wall Street Journal article following the publication of Hitchens' *God is not Great*, 'atheism's newest champions have sold close to a million books'.<sup>4</sup> This impressive number indicates that, at the very least, New Atheism is a cultural phenomenon not to be blindly disregarded. This, in fact, is what two authors, Bradley and Tate, have argued in their investigation of the philosophical and literary connections of the New Atheism. Exploring the reasons behind the incredible rise of the Four Horsemen in just four years, they conclude that the main reason does not lie in the realm of philosophical or scientific analysis but in the realm of social imagination.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, 'it might be more convincing to see the *New Atheism* as a response to a very specific cultural and political climate: the so-called return to the religious in the supposedly secular West'.<sup>6</sup> Certainly, the renewed visibility of religion in western societies forms the background of New Atheism, especially after the 9/11 attacks and the rise of Christian and Islamic fundamentalism. Indeed, the New Atheists have not missed the chance to capitalise on what they saw as the evil done in the name of inherent evil religions.<sup>7</sup>

Against this cultural background, some have questioned the expression New Atheism: what precisely is new: their arguments or something else? In fact, the New Atheism's novelty lies more in the social context from which it came than in the persuasiveness of the arguments. In this respect, they are children of their age, an age of emotional non-argumentation. Thus the fear expressed by some Christian thinkers regarding the strength of New Atheist writers is partly misplaced, as is the case with Peter Hitchens' statement that Philip Pullman, an atheist writer of fantasy books, was

'the most dangerous author in Britain' – as if an average work of fantasy literature could endanger one's faith.<sup>8</sup> Peter Hitchens, a celebrated journalist,<sup>9</sup> brother to the late Christopher Hitchens and himself *former* atheist, gives Pullman and other New Atheists writers too much credit.<sup>10</sup>

Although the necessity to engage with the New Atheists does not come from the need to respond to any cogent argument against the existence of the biblical God, the challenges posed by these writers are nonetheless serious.<sup>11</sup> Reviewers have noted that despite being received with ridicule by many theologians, the New Atheists cannot be easily dismissed. They have also pointed to the noteworthy questions that appear in the New Atheists' attacks on Christianity; questions that should in their opinion challenge every honest Christian believer.<sup>12</sup> Even though I agree that the questions are *at times* worthy of interest, they might not pose a threat to every Christian. As we shall see, most of the New Atheists' best attacks against Scripture, for example, are not the result of careful consideration. However, because the New Atheists have a social voice and regularly misquote Scripture, we need to consider their *use* of Scripture and the challenges before us.

## 2. The rise of Bible utilitarians

### 2.1 New Atheism's misrepresentations of the Bible

One of the most striking features of the New Atheists' use of the Bible is their almost exclusive use of the Old Testament in general, and the Book of Deuteronomy in particular, to attack the Christian faith. To the New Atheists, the God who revealed himself at the Sermon on the Mount is also the God of the Old Testament that some would describe as guilty of premeditated mass-murder. Like the other three Horsemen, Hitchens makes much use of the so-called genocides of the Old Testament, in which he finds the essential nature of the biblical God.<sup>13</sup> Commenting on Numbers 31:17 ('Now therefore kill every male among the little ones, and kill every woman that has known a man by lying with him'), a passage concerned with regulation for war against the Midianites, Hitchens concludes:

Now this is certainly not the worst of the genocidal incitements that occurs in the Old Testament ... but it has an element of lasciviousness that makes it slightly too obvious what the rewards of a freebooting soldier could be.<sup>14</sup>

Suffice to say that Hitchens never really tries to explore the meanings of the key concept of *herem*; he is merely content with quoting crude descriptions of biblical violence.<sup>15</sup>

To the New Atheists, Old Testament violence has always been an argument of choice to support the impossibility of belief in God. Under Harris' pen, even the Golden Rule becomes trivially ridiculed:

We read the Golden Rule and judge it to be a brilliant distillation of many of our ethical impulses. And then we come across another of God's teachings on morality: if a man discovers on his wedding night that his bride is not a virgin, he must stone her to death on her father's doorstep (Deuteronomy 22:13-21).<sup>16</sup>

Such violence infuriates the New Atheists and according to them justifies dismissing any positive reference to the New Testament.

In fact, the New Atheists often take the Bible's depictions of human sin to be positive accounts, as if God himself approved, even recommended, these actions.<sup>17</sup> This use of Scripture is again *utilitarian* in nature, disregarding the obvious meaning of texts to suits their needs – as in the case of the last three chapters (19-21) of the book of Judges. Hitchens can then conclude: 'The Bible may, indeed does, contain a warrant for trafficking in humans, for ethnic cleansing, for slavery, for bride-price, and for indiscriminate massacre ...'<sup>18</sup> Hitchens seems to blame the Bible for merely reporting and describing cruel events. If this becomes the norm, reporters and journalists should be forbidden to report on wars, famine, genocides or even poverty; maybe Hitchens himself should be blamed for reporting on wars throughout the world.<sup>19</sup>

The sheer nonsense of this proposition is obvious. It is, however, the hermeneutical method of the New Atheists: the mentioning or reporting of violence is taken to be the justification of violence. Again, Bible passages are used in a rather strange *utilitarian* way; there is no consistent presentation of the Old and New Testaments, nor is there any regard for historical developments in God's revelation.<sup>20</sup>

Despite their simplistic and literalistic use of the Bible, the New Atheists are challenging.<sup>21</sup> We could of course deny this by (rightly) saying that if they offer no critical interpretation of the Old Testament, they have not proven anything – they have merely quoted a few sensational, violent pas-

sages for emotional purposes. Indeed, they have successfully psychologically influenced their audience without making any cogent demonstration. Nonetheless, their use of the Old Testament needs to be challenged because their goal is to demonstrate that violence is inherent to the Christian faith. We need to re-explain those passages. We do not need to answer the New Atheists, who clearly do not care much about theological understanding, but we need to reach those attracted to their arguments and realise that for all of our talk about fulfilment in Christ, the usual explanations may not seem legitimate to most people. The New Atheists challenge us to present our biblical scholarship in contemporary and popular terms.

In fact, the New Atheists also challenge our christological reading of the Old Testament by regularly attacking Christian theologians for their selective and inconsistent reading of Scripture and of the Old Testament in particular. Sam Harris, for example, states that Christians can only argue that stoning an adulteress to death was not practised anymore because they read the Old Testament selectively. Whatever we may think of the strength of his argument, we must recognise that, at the very least, he and the other Horsemen challenge us to present a defence of our own reading. Such a defence should use the concept of history of redemption, which I take to be the most important framework for interpreting both testaments.

Interestingly, the New Atheists often present themselves as expert exegetes even though most of them never had any formal training in either Greek or biblical Hebrew. As an example, let us consider Hitchens' use of Psalm 121. He points out that

the celebrated opening of psalm 121, for example – 'I shall lift up mine eyes unto the hills, from whence cometh my help' – is rendered in English as a statement but in the original takes the form of a question: where is the help coming from?<sup>22</sup>

The statement that the Psalm should begin with a question is no doubt a cutting remark directed at theologians of all confessions<sup>23</sup> but Hitchens overlooks several crucial factors. He is unaware that most translators do actually translate Psalm 121:1 as a question; this is the case for the following translations: the ESV, the Jerusalem Bible, the NIV, the ASV, the Darby Bible, the New American Standard Bible, the New Life Version, the Wycliffe Bible and Young's Literal Translation ... among others, and only in the English language. Only the

Douay Rheims and the King James Version have translated verse 1 as a statement. Hence Hitchens' assertion that verse 1 is rendered as a statement does not stand scrutiny. Although he poses as an expert exegete, he does not even consider the actual translations worth checking.<sup>24</sup>

Harris makes an even better case for evaluating the New Atheists' use of Scripture. The youngest of the Four Horsemen regularly attacks the 'God of Abraham' as if Abraham were the archetype of biblical violence and wickedness. Of course, if Harris ever wanted to misrepresent the Bible, he could have chosen a better example to suit his purposes: Moses (the choice of Dawkins and Hitchens). It is indeed a rather unusual reading of Genesis that leads him to take 'the God of Abraham' as the best example of religious intolerance. Let us, for counter-argument's sake, mention that Abraham enters into an alliance with foreign nations and that he is called to be a blessing for all nations. One should also remember that the 'God of Abraham' even blesses Ishmael and his descendants; strange indeed for a God of religious intolerance!

Harris' arguments rest on isolated quotations from disconnected texts as if a collection of verses could make a solid case against the God of Scripture. His use of the Bible can be summarised in the following manner:

- (1) the Old Testament says A
- (2) the New Testament says B
- (3) therefore the OT and the NT are false

As if there was no possible literary, logical and theological relationship between the two testaments. There is not the beginning of an argument to show, even at a distance, the relation between the premises and the conclusion. This strikingly mistaken form of reasoning unfortunately plagues the writings of all the New Atheists.<sup>25</sup>

## 2.2 New Atheism's theological reconstruction

Based on their utilitarian reading of the Bible, the New Atheists often provide a criticism of Christian theology, which they cannot but despise – Harris calls theology 'ignorance with wings'.<sup>26</sup> The New Atheists use the same non-rational method to attack Christian theology as they use against the Bible. In Hitchens' chapter 'The Metaphysical Claims of Religion are False'<sup>27</sup> the 'proof' consists only in a random enumeration of Scripture verses summarised in the following argument: 'Another explanation is possible hence, the religious explanation is false.'<sup>28</sup> This is another logically faulty

argument: brandishing a naturalistic theory does not necessarily entail that religious explanations are false. Hitchens would first have to disprove the religious explanation and, second, prove the naturalistic one to be true.

The New Atheists' favourite theological target is the doctrine of revelation. André Comte-Sponville, the second main representative of New Atheism in France, asks rhetorically:

Which father would be content, in order to raise his children, with a word given to other people, dead for centuries, a word that would be transmitted only by equivocal or dubious texts?<sup>29</sup>

But Comte-Sponville forgets to tell us what he would rather have and leaves the reader with a deconstructive argument. Moreover, his ignorance of theology blinds him to a crucial point of which every student in theology is aware: that providence, inspiration and the work of the Spirit also account for the authority and continuous relevance of Scripture. Yet despite this caricature, Comte-Sponville's assertion challenges our theological interpretation and demands that we clarify our reasons for maintaining our doctrine of revelation.

However, such theological considerations would certainly be too much to ask from the New Atheists. In fact they are satisfied with observing that there is a diversity of religious revelations. Hitchens, for example, notes that:

Since all of these revelations, many of them hopelessly inconsistent, cannot by definition be simultaneously true, it must follow that some of them are false and illusory. It could also follow that only one of them is authentic, but in the first place this seems dubious and in the second place it appears to necessitate religious war in order to decide whose revelation is the true one.<sup>30</sup>

He makes three remarkable mistakes. The *first* is to posit a logical relationship between 'there is a diversity of revelations' and 'that one can be true is dubious'. Certainly, Hitchens would not reason in the same way with scientific explanations: the diversity of scientific models does not say anything about the validity of such models.

His *second* logical mistake is that his argument seems to run like this: if several revelations exist, then all of them are false; or in syllogistic form:

- (1) given A
- (2) given B

(3) therefore A and B are both false

Of course, he immediately indicates that he cannot draw such a conclusion and that the diversity of revelations might still allow for one of them to be true. However, he refutes this possibility by stating that this would necessarily entail religious war. Here is his *third* mistake: an error of categories. His conclusion, briefly stated, is that the diversity of revelations (and consequently of religions) necessitates that they eradicate each others until only one remains: if one is true, it will annihilate the competing options. Here he mistakenly takes a metaphysical and epistemological statement ('there is only one revelation') to be a socio-political one. Instead of reading this statement as meaning the certainty (epistemology) that only one revelation is true, he reads it to mean that only one must remain socially.<sup>31</sup> There are other examples of the same simplistic argumentation against revelation.<sup>32</sup>

Other kinds of arguments used by the New Atheists are psychological explanations, especially in the case of the New Testament, and of Paul in particular. In this respect, Michel Onfray is a perfect example. In his public courses on the history of philosophy given at the Popular University of Caen, Onfray draws heavily on a psychosomatic analysis of Paul's religion along Nietzschean lines. To put it simply, because Paul was, by his own account, weak and irremediably sick, he developed a theology of weakness and destruction of the body.

What is highly remarkable here is that, ironically, Onfray is one of the few New Atheists to take the New Testament texts for granted. Indeed, he has only two options to construct his account of Paul's theology. His first option is to accept the Pauline epistles as reliable. In this case, he can build a critique of Christianity based on Paul's psychosomatic obsessions. But in this case his intellectual honesty – if he has any – requires that he allows theologians to build alternative explanations based on a wider range of New Testament texts such as 1 Corinthians 13. His second option is to consider the New Testament accounts as *not* reliable. In this case, and by logical consequence, Onfray must refrain from presenting a reconstruction of Pauline theology based on non-reliable documents! But in the end Onfray chooses the inconsistent route of relying on non-receivable texts to build a biographical account of Paul's theology. In this, his Nietzschean hermeneutics proves its limits.

To conclude this first part, the New Atheists

are obvious witnesses to the rise of emotional reason.<sup>33</sup> As David Bentley Hart rightly summarises, 'Sensation sells better than reason.' If they gain more influence in the years to come, the challenge to the Christian faith will become more significant, but not for sound philosophical reasons. We will probably see an emotional extremism rise from the ashes of rational atheism. This new wave of atheism will be non-argumentative, willingly offensive and radically condescending.<sup>34</sup> There is no proper way to describe New Atheism other than pointing to its long and excruciatingly painful descent into triviality and narcissism.<sup>35</sup>

Unfortunately, the contemporary fascination yields two alarming conclusions: first, that 'sensationalism sells better than sense'<sup>36</sup> and second that 'it probably says more than it is comfortable to know about the relative vapidness of our culture that we have lost the capacity to produce profound belief'.<sup>37</sup> At any rate, the New Atheism could well be synonymous with the end of reason.

### 3. Apologetic challenges

#### 3.1 The challenge of understanding the society

In this second part I want to draw key apologetic points from the above. The first challenge is simply that of understanding our society. As I mentioned at the beginning of this article, there is considerable debate regarding whether the New Atheism adds anything new to atheistic thought. I, for one, do not think it has more to offer as criticism of religion, and Christianity in particular, than previous atheistic philosophical movements. One of its rare claims to novelty is that they advance their position on the basis of radically materialistic thought. But they do not provide, in my opinion, any consistent construction of a new atheistic philosophy.<sup>38</sup>

However, we should also evaluate the importance of the New Atheism by looking at its audience. In fact, this is most likely the main novelty. The conditions of belief in our hypermodern western societies are significantly different from the context of atheist thinkers such as Albert Camus or Jean-Paul Sartre.<sup>39</sup> Previous atheist thinkers were more willing to engage with religion at an intellectual level as they were willing to debate the reality of the human predicament.<sup>40</sup> Theirs was a time of erosion of certitude, but also of serious philosophical and rational investigation, as well as of social disorder. Our socio-cultural context has

dramatically changed: new generations are much less conscious of the necessity of presenting a consistent position, most likely because of the erosion of rational truth in favour of a diversity of narrative truths. Moreover, our age of cynicism and emotionalism keeps many people from engaging in critical thinking. It is therefore no surprise to find that the contemporary audience is eager to read books that offer no reasoned account for the truth of atheism or for the falsity of religion. Hence the first challenge does not come from the New Atheist writers themselves but from understanding contemporary culture, society and people. At the end, it is only because people read their books that the New Atheists are well known, and not because of their philosophical insights!

This brings us to the issue of vernacular theological language. A key thing we learn from the New Atheists is that the language we use accounts for much of our relevance in society. We have often stressed the necessity of a consistent and true worldview over against the need to be understood, even at a very basic and popular level. But I suspect that this concern of ours is not shared by most of our contemporaries. The success of the New Atheists shows that people are willing to be inconsistent as long as they *understand* that other people stand for the same inconsistency – as long as they *understand* that they belong to an accepted social community. Maybe we need an equivalent to Dawkins, who holds the Chair of the Public Understanding of Science.<sup>41</sup> Colleagues in the area of biblical studies, we may need a Chair for the Public Understanding of Biblical Interpretation.

### 3.2 The challenge to the unity of the Church

Secondly, the New Atheists ironically and unwittingly appear to be a real challenge to the unity of the Church. This is not because their positions pose a serious threat to the Church but because of the answers given by theologians. Answering the New Atheism, theologians have engaged their writings in a variety of ways. Among the best responses ranks David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions* which points to serious mistakes in the New Atheists' scholarship but also provides detailed answers to the main questions of the Four Horsemen. Alister McGrath has also produced several good responses to the New Atheists' challenge. Other theologians have chosen a simpler path, pointing to the limitations and inherent simplistic caricature on the part of the New Atheists.<sup>42</sup>

Yet other theologians have engaged in what I

am convinced is a necessary and crucially important field: that of hermeneutical presuppositions. For example, Tina Beattie, professor of Catholic Studies at Roehampton, argues in her *The New Atheists* that the main representative atheist writers are no threat to the mainline Christian church because their attacks are directed at a specific part of Christianity, Fundamentalism.<sup>43</sup> To her, the New Atheists mistakenly read the Bible in the same way Fundamentalists do: they read the Bible as if it was historical. Her conclusion is clear: we should choose to take 'the Bible as fiction, but fiction worth reading'.<sup>44</sup> Beattie also reminds her readers that even though Christian theologians have successfully answered the New Atheists on their own ground, they have in doing so overlooked the real challenges internal to the Christian community. In this respect Beattie may well be correct. However, one should not revisit the nature of Scripture merely because of social challenges but on exegetical and hermeneutical grounds – biblical studies and systematic theology always go hand in hand. Yet, nothing in the New Atheists' writings necessitates revisiting the nature of Scripture.

Beattie is not the only scholar to make such claims. In *God and the New Atheism* John Haught also shows that the New Atheists have adopted the same obsolete hermeneutics as Christian Fundamentalists:

Here again it is only because he embraces a creationist hermeneutical method that Dennett can claim so triumphantly that evolutionary biology has exposed Genesis as a mere fossil.<sup>45</sup>

I believe Haught is mistaken. If Dennett can claim that evolutionary biology has exposed Genesis – and other specifics of the Christian faith – as mere fraud or legend, it is not because of a so-called creationist hermeneutic but because Dennett has, like all other New Atheists, adopted a materialist epistemology and metaphysical foundation.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, Haught's reference to a 'creationist hermeneutic' is a red herring. It would seem that Haught's point is clear enough: Creationists are the chosen opponents of the New Atheists. However, to refer to a specific 'creationist' hermeneutics is misleading for it has no methodological reality. There is of course a 'creationist' reading of, say, Genesis 1-3, but there is no 'creationist hermeneutic'.

What is at stake in the New Atheists' criticism is not a particular reading of the Bible but the mere existence of the Bible as Word of God – no matter

how you explain this. Haught and Beattie are in this respect blind to the fact that the New Atheists' attacks are not prevented by claiming that only the Fundamentalists hold to such and such biblical claims. If that was the case, one would have to defend the Christian position by showing that only Fundamentalists believe God to be Creator (by supernatural or natural processes) of the universe, that Christ has ever historically existed, that he died and was raised from the dead. But I take it that not only American Christian Fundamentalists believe in these particular doctrinal points.<sup>47</sup> Of course, the danger here would be to warrant the New Atheists' charges on these grounds. I am convinced that Haught gives too much ground to the New Atheists.<sup>48</sup> In fact, we should always be suspicious when someone argues against any given position merely because of its supposed 'anachronistic' nature, as if the past could not convey truth. In many ways, what Haught rejects as 'obsolete theology' is obsolete because it never existed.

I said that the second challenge was the preservation of the unity of the Church. Indeed, Beattie and Haught are eager to separate themselves from 'Christian Fundamentalism' because they think they have found a perfect line of defence. The New Atheists attack Christian Fundamentalism, not Christianity itself. In doing so, they unintentionally but irremediably threaten the unity of the Church by ostracising one tradition of the Christian Church. In many ways Haught and Beattie's responses to the New Atheists are as much a challenge for us as the New Atheists themselves. When taking up the New Atheists' challenges, we should not forget that our words should not endanger the unity of the Church.

### 3.3 Feuerbach and the challenge of religious language

The third challenge is that of religious language. The New Atheists seem not to care for precise argumentation because to them religious language is not worth discussing. In this respect, some of them, particularly French New Atheists, rely heavily on Ludwig Feuerbach's theory of religion. Incidentally, it is remarkable that Hitchens does not include any text by Feuerbach in his collection of essential atheist readings, *The Portable Atheist*.<sup>49</sup> The absence of Feuerbach is an interesting indication of the differences between continental and Anglo-Saxon philosophical traditions, especially if one keeps in mind the more existential direction of continental atheists compared to the scientific

atheism of Dawkins and the like.

So the present challenge comes from Feuerbach's theory of the emptiness of religious language. He is a more serious influence than some Christian theologians and apologists have yet acknowledged. Moreover, of those who have hinted at the possible influence of Feuerbach, many have at times seriously misread the German philosopher. Tina Beattie, for example, thinks that Feuerbach's theory that religion is a projection of human desire can be summarised this way: 'the associations between masculinity and divinity mean that Christian beliefs about God are influenced by masculine fantasies and projections'.<sup>50</sup> This is a serious misrepresentation of Feuerbach's theory of 'projection' for even a superficial and cursory reading of his work shows that when he refers to 'man's projection' he does not have in mind a *gendered* notion but a *universal* one.<sup>51</sup> Religion is the projection of humanity's desires, not masculinity's desires.<sup>52</sup> As Nathan Hilberg, professor of philosophy of religion at the University of Pittsburgh, indicates:

when Feuerbach wrote about God, he was not referring to the God typically associated with the Western theistic tradition: the Creator of heavens and the earth, for example. Rather, by 'God,' Feuerbach was describing a projection of our *species-consciousness*.<sup>53</sup>

Projection of desires is one of the basic tenets of his understanding of the nature and rise of religion. Desire is the origin of the gods. This particular point is clear in his *Theogony* (1857) and can be considered his most elaborate explanation of the religious phenomenon. In *The Essence of Christianity* his conclusion is even clearer: the root of religion itself is desire, not understood morally but *metaphysically*.<sup>54</sup> This metaphysical desire is what Neusch also calls will to live, self-development or the instinct for happiness. This desire for happiness is, according to his reading of Feuerbach, the deepest layer within humankind.<sup>55</sup>

This clarifies what Feuerbach means when he famously concludes that 'the secret of theology is anthropology'.<sup>56</sup> Everything begins with his statement that 'all therefore which, in the point of view of metaphysical, transcendental speculation and religion, has the significance only of the secondary, the subjective, the medium, the organ – has in truth the significance of the primary, of the essence, of the object itself'.<sup>57</sup> The complexity of Feuerbach's *Essence of Christianity* precludes the

possibility of presenting a simple summary but one thing stands out from the previous quote: everything that is predicated of God, must be predicated of the human essence. Everything that belongs to the human nature – the secondary – is in fact primary, that is, it belongs to the human nature in the primary sense. Humans possess love, goodness, etc. not by virtue of being created by God but by and in themselves. All other divine attributes are only desires to transcend the limitations of the human species (or species-consciousness).<sup>58</sup>

Hence for Feuerbach, the essential organs of religions bear witness to the essential subject of human essence. This means that if feeling is the essential organ of religion, the nature of God is an expression of feeling; but also, and more importantly, that if humanity is the essential organ of religion, the nature of God is an expression of human nature. In this sense, Feuerbach has simply taken a radical anthropological understanding of the incarnation. Barth, for example, perceptively notes that when Feuerbach identifies human essence and divine essence, he merely claims to be part of the Lutheran tradition.<sup>59</sup> This, for Barth, is mainly the result of a Lutheran stress on the elevation of Christ's human nature.<sup>60</sup> If, for Feuerbach, the true nature of religion is the study of human nature, it entails that the proper object of religion is not God but something the notion of God has subjectively hidden from our view. In fact, the object of God is then nothing else than God's own nature taken objectively, and since the nature of God is nothing objectively, it must be in itself the objective subject of its originating thought process,<sup>61</sup> that is, humanity's self-consciousness. We can then conclude that 'theology is anthropology and, therefore, the hidden meaning of Christianity is atheism'.<sup>62</sup>

Some among the New Atheists use Feuerbach to suggest that the Bible is exclusively the Holy Scripture of the Christian community, and then that it is only the expression of this community's projected desires, not the expression of something universally human. In this way we can understand what Onfray says about the nature of Christian theology: it is the projection of the Christians' desires. However, we can challenge the New Atheists' reliance on Feuerbach for, in the end, his overall theory of religion relies heavily of something that is difficult to demonstrate: that religion comes from the projection of objectified human desires. This assumption has been seriously questioned. Eduard von Hartmann wrote nearly a cen-

tury ago: 'it is perfectly true that nothing exists merely because we wish it, but it is not true that something cannot exist if we wish it. Feuerbach's entire critique of religion and the proof of his atheism, however, rest upon this single argument – a logical fallacy'.<sup>63</sup> It can be rather surprising to find New Atheists like Michel Onfray openly building on such assumptions without interacting with the relevant critical scholarship.<sup>64</sup>

Nevertheless, the challenge of Feuerbach's atheism is not to be taken lightly. The New Atheists may not have taken the critical evaluations of his work into account, but this does not mean that we do not have a difficult challenge ahead of us. Certainly, the New Atheists, particularly Onfray, are open to the charge of presenting a dubious theory of religion. But I am convinced that they do not need to answer previous criticisms of Feuerbach. In fact, the New Atheists take the counter-arguments against Feuerbach to be irrelevant, which is quite a solid position given their assumption that religious language is devoid of objective meaning.

### 3.4 The legitimacy of theological construction

The last challenge before us is that of hermeneutics and theological construction. In fact, many remarks made by the New Atheists strike a chord. We have become so used to interpreting the Scriptures that we may have forgotten that biblical interpretation can look obscure and even illegitimate to our contemporaries. For example, the christological interpretation of the Old Testament, even if necessary, still needs to be justified in order for our contemporaries to see its legitimacy. To repeat a point already mentioned, when the New Atheists charge theologians with selective reading of the Bible, they may actually have a point. Not that their remarks are in themselves warranted, but, in the absence of clear explanation on our part, our contemporaries are left with no alternative but that of the Four Horsemen.

This particular challenge may prove one of the most difficult because of the intense theological debate regarding hermeneutics, especially regarding the New Testament's use of the Old Testament.<sup>65</sup> In this respect, recent comments by some biblical scholars about the rather odd use of the Old Testament by the New may well work in favour of the New Atheists. They make similar remarks regarding the non-contextual, and at times illegitimate, handling of the Old Testament by the New Testament. This argument, which

makes the point that the New Testament understands the Old Testament in ways the latter in itself does not warrant, is behind much of the New Atheists' criticism.

The real difference is that, whereas theologians are legitimately concerned with a christological reading that would respect the integrity and diversity of the Old Testament books, the New Atheists are concerned about the way theologians disregard parts of the Old Testament. This is particularly clear in their attack on religious moderation. Harris, for example, says that 'in America, religious moderation is further enforced by the fact that most Christians and Jews do not read the Bible in its entirety and consequently have no idea just how vigorously the God of Abraham wants heresy expunged'.<sup>66</sup> This remark, even if hopelessly superficial, illustrates what might be a problem for our contemporaries: how the Old Testament is read through the New; how some of the difficult and radical passages of the Old Testament can legitimately be read in a christological and eschatological manner.

We could of course present several answers to the New Atheists' challenge of our reading of Scripture. We could stress, in true postmodern fashion, the exclusively narrative and communitarian reading of Scripture. In doing so, we would certainly secure the possibility of reading the Old Testament through the New. However, in doing so we would partly give up our epistemological ground by making revealed truth a function of communitarian narrative. Some scholars argue that the New Testament uses the Old in creative ways; however, what do 'creative ways' precisely mean and can they be warranted as comprehensive hermeneutical methods? If we do not provide a convincing answer, we cannot expect our contemporaries to be convinced by claims about the authority of Scripture. Still others say that the New Testament does not provide a consistently legitimate reading of the Old Testament. In this case, we are on the verge of arguing that the New Testament does not provide a justified interpretative reading of the Old Testament. At best, we are again open to the charge of arbitrary and selective reading of the Old Testament.

Again, the New Atheists challenge us to provide a consistent and biblical interpretative method. In doing this, we will also position hermeneutics in the necessary metaphysical ground: that of the self-attesting and self-revealing God. They challenge us to explain *which* ground we have in reality for

the *how* and *why* of our hermeneutics. That is, they demand that we provide a *metaphysical* ground for our *epistemological* understanding of scriptural *hermeneutics*. Here probably lies another problem: that our hermeneutics, whatever its method or key concept, has not yet been explained in a manner that can be understood by our society. I would argue that we need to make a clear case for biblical theology<sup>67</sup> as well as for a renewed historical-redemptive reading of the whole Scripture.

### 3.5 Nietzsche and Onfray

I would like to end with another main influence on many continental New Atheists, Friedrich Nietzsche. Again, it is striking that Hitchens' *Portable Atheist* does not contain anything by Nietzsche. The absence of the two fathers of modern atheism strikes me as rather strange. Could it be that Hitchens finds that Harris' and Dennett's superficial writings serve his purpose better than the deep, challenging thoughts of Feuerbach and Nietzsche?<sup>68</sup> I have no doubt that, indeed, Harris and Dennett are better representatives of the current surge of emotional atheism than the radical position of, say, Nietzsche.

Michel Onfray has made a good case for the current relevance of Nietzsche's philosophy of the body. To Onfray, the crucial value of Nietzsche lies in the realm of epistemology. Against the numerous views that locate knowledge in one specific part of human nature, Nietzsche argues that we think, because the body thinks. Nietzsche's messianic idea is precisely that: thought does not think, neither consciousness, neither intelligence or reason, but the body alone.<sup>69</sup> Onfray can therefore conclude that knowledge is biography<sup>70</sup> and take as an example a towering figure of French literature, Michel de Montaigne's *Essays*, in which Montaigne affirms that if he speaks of himself it is only because talking about himself makes his discourse universal.<sup>71</sup> With this example, Onfray's Nietzsche argues that a proper methodological reading (or hermeneutics) must consider that the context is never *historical* in itself, but is the *history of the body*. Thus hermeneutics becomes, properly speaking, exegesis of the body and philosophy becomes *transfigured* physiology. Onfray summarises Nietzsche's hermeneutics by saying that 'philosophy (and so theology) is always a body trying to resolve a problem coming from his idiosyncrasy'.<sup>72</sup> The motto of this new epistemology is that knowledge of oneself is knowledge of one's *body*.<sup>73</sup> One can even say that knowledge of a philo-

sophical moment or of a religious tradition comes only *by and through* the personal acts of a given author. Religious texts are constituted mainly by ‘the smallest door of personal experience through the hugest fortress of *Existing*’.

Again, the later Feuerbach supports this view, adding to his earlier philosophy of religion the convictions that (1) mind and body are just two aspects of one material organism; and (2) this organism is animated by an overwhelming drive for fulfilment (*Glückseligkeitstrieb*) which, in turn, manifests itself in needs and desires. Onfray’s criticisms of Pauline Christianity might in this case be unwarranted. Of course, on Onfray’s own basis, one may wonder how we can truly understand anything about the world or ourselves while our bodies are acting upon us *independently* of our thoughts and ideas. Can we have any control over the events of our history as well as the truth of the world surrounding us? To my mind, there is little doubt that Onfray must surrender all possibility of finding a solid ground on which to establish a proper ethical or political philosophy. His hermeneutics of the self and the world is doomed to be merely an exegesis of individual events. That is to say, we have here the opportunity not only to answer the challenge of Nietzschean hermeneutics but also to challenge this hermeneutics.

#### 4. Conclusion

At first, the New Atheists’ challenges do not appear to be as serious as one might have feared. Their crusade against religion sounds like a disorganised diatribe rather than a thoughtful confrontation of ideas and worldviews. Their arguments are like ‘a meditation upon some rather arbitrarily chosen aspects of the world’.<sup>74</sup> As I have shown, their case is so plighted with categorical, logical and hermeneutical errors that the intellectual challenge is not much of a threat.<sup>75</sup> Moreover, the unfortunate nature of the New Atheists’ criticisms often prevents us from engaging them in any significant way.<sup>76</sup> This, however, does not mean that the challenge is not real, on the contrary. Even if we can agree with Pascal when he concludes that ‘atheism shows strength of mind, but only up to a certain degree’, the New Atheists’ refusal to engage with theological scholarship demonstrates that we have not yet taken into account that in the realm of philosophical debates, they have surrendered reason for the tyranny of emotionalism.<sup>77</sup> Maybe we could even consider, as Michael Novak

has done, that these books display ‘an odd defensiveness ... as though they were a sign not of victory but of desperation’.<sup>78</sup>

This myopic caricature of Christian epistemology and belief leaves us wondering in which way we could significantly engage them. As one reviewer has said,

because [the New Atheists] lack any concept of context or necessary connection, we are never offered the thorough coverage of any question, breaking down a case into simpler elements and building up the patterns of relation; rather, we are given the tracing of single elements (often a word) through different frames and contexts.<sup>79</sup>

It is difficult to interact and establish a real dialogue with these writers. However, even the shallowness of their writings demands a serious apologetics. In order to engage the Four Horsemen, we should never review their positions on our terms but on their basis.<sup>80</sup> In order to engage in effective apologetic defence of the biblical faith, we need to reconsider our presentation of biblical hermeneutics and show the manner in which our biblical theology provides a consistent and epistemologically legitimate reading of Scripture. But this epistemological challenge also reveals another area in which we have to engage the New Atheists for, in the end, they take the debate within the realm of metaphysics, as Hart perceived:

The only points at which the New Atheists seem to invite any serious intellectual engagement are those at which they try to demonstrate that all the traditional metaphysical arguments for the reality of God fail. At least, this should be their most powerful line of critique, and no doubt would be if any of them could demonstrate a respectable understanding of those traditional metaphysical arguments, as well as an ability to refute them.<sup>81</sup>

Metaphysics is precisely where Christian theology has always been at its best and it can thus be the field where we should also take the challenge of New Atheism. Merely to answer the biblical challenge would be a serious mistake because it would overlook the necessity of broader apologetic responses.

To answer the New Atheists’ challenge, apologetics should point to the essential inconsistencies of their endeavour. Indeed, if their cultural anthropological premises are true, if all we have left is a materialistic or Nietzschean epistemology with its corresponding view of the world, the New

Atheists must surrender all prospects of providing a global theory grounded in reality – reality being an individual body-made notion. Given the New Atheists’ use of Scripture and their alliance of epistemological materialism with scientism, apologetics should demonstrate that their position can only lead to a non-existing reality. This can be achieved, I surmise, by restating our traditional understanding of the nature of God, of creation and Scripture in contemporary terms. Here, the Christian faith can demonstrate the uniqueness and necessary presence of the God of hope and salvation. After a long absence metaphysics must be brought back into the philosophical debate.

We should not grant too much ground to the New Atheists when they endanger the unity of the Church. The challenges we face require a strong biblical and theological apologetics embodied in a public understanding of biblical interpretation. This is all the more necessary because, if our biblical scholarship does not integrate the necessary epistemological and metaphysical ground for Christian knowledge, we have given the New Atheists ground for charging us with fideism and even relativism.<sup>82</sup>

Two different conclusions are in order, by which I mean not a conclusion in two points but two different conclusions. The *first* is that the New Atheists’ challenges are an opportunity to reassert the *unified* and *unique* metaphysical and epistemological foundation for knowledge, including knowledge of creation and Scripture (God’s two revelations). In this case, we should not fear their challenges for we can find ground in the one who himself interprets his world and his Word for us. The *second* conclusion is that if we do not take our hermeneutical scholarship in the realm of public theology, if we do not embody our scholarship in contemporary and popular expressions of faith, we might already have lost the apologetic challenge.

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### Notes

- 1 This is the edited version of a paper presented at the 2012 conference of FEET, the Fellowship of European Evangelical Theologians, in Berlin.
- 2 ‘The best-selling books by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris form the “canon” of the new atheism, but media in the form of magazines, Web sites, blogs, online

- forums, and other books have also played an important role in driving this social phenomenon.’ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, ‘The New Atheism and the Formation of the Imagined Secularist Community’, *Journal of Media and Religion* 10.1 (2011) 24-38. *Taylor Francis Online*, <http://www.tandfonline.com>, accessed August 12, 2012.
- 3 Richard Dawkins, ‘The Four Horsemen’, *The Richard Dawkins Foundation*, <http://richarddawkins.net>, accessed August 12, 2012.
- 4 Peter Berkowitz, ‘The New New Atheism’, *Wall Street Journal* July 16, 2007, <http://online.wsj.com>, accessed August 12, 2012.
- 5 Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate, *The New Atheist Novel: Fiction, Philosophy and Polemic after 9/11* (London, New York: Continuum, 2010) 2, conclude that the rise of this atheistic movement is the result of a new creation myth which emerged from a particular socio-cultural narrative beginning with the alliance of American politics with the Religious Right, and lasting well into the opening of the 21st century. If the New Atheism is ‘undoubtedly surfing some sort of cultural *Zeitgeist*’, the fact remains that ‘unlike older models of atheism that depend on complex philosophical or theological arguments, New Atheism is intentionally designed for mass consumption. All of the authors adopt a conversational tone. They write in the first person, and try to avoid technical language. This open and personal way of addressing the reader also makes the New Atheists a remarkably emotional group. They are not opposed to religion on a purely intellectual level. Religion makes them angry.’ Lightning Peter Jay, ‘Misunderstanding Religion: A Critique of the New Atheists’, *Wesleyan University* (2009) 5.
- 6 Bradley and Tate, *The New Atheist Novel*, 3.
- 7 Paul Copan makes the same point in the opening of his book *Is God a Moral Monster?* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2011) 16ff.
- 8 Peter Hitchens, *Mail on Sunday*, 2002.
- 9 Peter Hitchens was winner of the 2010 Orwell Prize for foreign correspondence.
- 10 Terry Eagleton notes that Pullman criticised a god that had little to do with the transcendent God of Judeo-Christianity.
- 11 Christian and non-Christian writers have pointed to the inherent limitations of the New Atheists: ‘There are atheists, such as Richard Dawkins, whose minds are closed, and whose hatred of all religions blinds them to the range and diversity of human potential.’ Vivienne Blackburn, ‘Albert Camus: The challenge of the unbeliever’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 64.3 (2011) 313-326, here 312.
- 12 ‘I suspect that what many theists, including many Christians, find troubling about the New Atheism are not the questions that can too easily be answered but those questions that, if we are honest, we struggle to answer or simply cannot answer.

- In this regard, I find several of Hitchens' favorite attacks on Christian theism to be noteworthy ...' Jacob H. Friesenhahn, 'Evil, the New Atheism, and the God of the Trinity', *The Other Journal* 20 (July 12, 2012), <http://theotherjournal.com>, accessed August 12, 2012. The beginning of the article is also worth quoting: 'some theists, especially those of a more academic stripe, scoff at the fad of New Atheism. They speak of its intellectual inferiority and draw unflattering comparisons between today's atheist celebrities and past philosophical giants of atheism, such as Arthur Schopenhauer, Ludwig Feuerbach, Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, and Sigmund Freud.'
- 13 Hitchens' fourfold objection to 'religion' and to Christianity in particular often revolves around this point. See the four 'irreducible objections' to faith he claims to identify: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of the universe; that it combines the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism: that religions are the cause and consequence of sexual repression; and finally that they are grounded in wishful thinking.
  - 14 Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York, Boston: Twelve, 2007) 126-127.
  - 15 Regarding genocide, Walter Moberly, an OT scholar at Durham University, notes that the injunction 'to destroy them and show them no mercy' is followed by the commandment not to marry stressing the holiness of separation from other people; see Ian S. Markham, *Against Atheism: Why Dawkins, Hitchens, and Harris Are Fundamentally Wrong* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).
  - 16 Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Vintage, 2008) 49.
  - 17 See John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville, London: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008) 97.
  - 18 Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 102.
  - 19 Hitchens is the one Horseman who has, to his credit, consistently taken sides with the weak and the oppressed.
  - 20 Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 62-66.
  - 21 The challenge also comes from the observation that the New Atheism is a form of rational fundamentalism. Hart is among those critics who have identified the position of New Atheists as atheistic fideism. He regularly attacks the New Atheists' 'invincible tendency toward fundamentalism'. They often refuse to argue and are merely content to quote self-attested authorities without decent critical reasoning; see David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and its Fashionable Enemies* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2009) 231.
  - 22 Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 253.
  - 23 In fact, Hitchens shows no basic interaction with recent decent scholarship. Of course he quotes from several sources including H.L. Mencken's *Treatise on the Gods* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997) and Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason* (and from a secondary source!). However, Mencken was an American journalist, essayist, magazine editor, satirist and Paine a great political and social deist activist. Neither of the two was a trained theologian or exegete. Even if that were the case, one would expect more interaction with recent theological and philosophical material. Dawkins also has no understanding of basic theology, a point made by critics, Christian and non-Christian, such as Terry Eagleton in the opening lines of his review of *The God Delusion*: 'Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the Book of British Birds, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.' Terry Eagleton, 'Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching', *London Review of Books*, <http://www.lrb.co.uk>, accessed August 12, 2012.
  - 24 It is surprising to see that Hitchens is a 'King James Only' believer since he takes the King James version to be the only Bible worth quoting from. On Psalm 53, 'The fool has said in his heart, there is no God', Hitchens remarks that 'all that we can tell for sure from the otherwise meaningless assertion is that unbelief – not just heresy and backsliding but unbelief – must have been known to exist even in that remote epoch.' Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 254.
  - 25 Another kind of biblical argument greatly favoured by the New Atheists is the differences between, or internal to, biblical books, as with the accounts of the Synoptic Gospels. Hitchens is troubled by discrepancies between gospel accounts such as the flight of Joseph and Mary to Egypt. To him, the accounts of Matthew and Luke are irreconcilable: in Matthew, Joseph was warned in a dream to make immediate escape to Egypt while according to Luke the 'holy family' stayed in Bethlehem for some days. However, to any Sunday school child these discrepancies are easily explained – not dismissed. Regarding New Testament difficulties, Hitchens even credits C.S. Lewis with intellectual honesty, referring to the apologist's famous argument (trilemma) that Jesus was either a fraud, a lunatic or indeed that he was what he claimed to be; see C.S. Lewis, *Mere Christianity* (London: Collins, 1952) 54-56. But Hitchens rhetorically concludes: 'Either the Gospels are in some sense literal truth, or the whole thing is essentially a fraud and perhaps an immoral one at that.' (Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 142)
  - 26 Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 96.
  - 27 Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 73-84.
  - 28 Or rather, if a natural *evolutionary explanation* is

- possible, all other explanations are false. Dennett regularly makes the same point: ‘One reader of an early draft of this chapter complained at this point, saying that by treating the hypothesis of God as just one more scientific hypothesis, to be evaluated by the standards of science in particular and rational thought in general, Dawkins and I are ignoring the very widespread claim by believers in God that their faith is quite beyond reason, not a matter to which such mundane methods of testing applies. It is not just unsympathetic, he claimed, but strictly unwarranted for me simply to assume that the scientific method continues to apply with full force in this domain of truth.’ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996) 153.
- 29 André Comte-Sponville, *Présentations de la philosophie* (Paris: Albin Michel, 2000) 97.
- 30 Hitchens, God is not Great, 97.
- 31 Moreover, if consistency were the only criterion for validity, as his first sentence seems to imply, the whole New Atheist endeavour would soon crumble.
- 32 To take another example, consider Harris’ remark: ‘The idea that any one of our religions represents the infallible word of the One True God requires an encyclopedic ignorance of history, mythology, and art even to be entertained – as the beliefs, rituals, and iconography of each of our religions attest for centuries of cross-pollination among them.’ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (London: Free Press, 2005) 16. There are several logical and categorical mistakes here. Harris affirms that to state that one’s religion is the true one is to reject the reality of other religions; but no believer thinks that other religions do not exist! Harris takes a metaphysical statement to be a historical one. This confusion is surprising for it takes an ignorant philosopher to bypass so easily the distinction between these two categories! Harris’ second mistake is to support the conclusion that the diversity of religions entails the falsity of all, making the same logical fallacy found in Hitchens. Finally, even if the cross-pollination of religions was substantiated, it does not in itself constitute proof that all sacred texts are false.
- 33 As when Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 110-111, attacks the gospel accounts of Christ’s crucifixion by picking a fight with Mel Gibson’s movie *The Passion of Christ*, as if the so-called sectarianism of Gibson’s Catholicism was to be legitimately universalised.
- 34 ‘Third, how dare we be so condescending? I don’t have faith. I really don’t. Rowan Williams does as do many of my fellow philosophers like Alvin Plantinga (a Protestant) and Ernan McMullin (a Catholic).’ Michael Ruse, ‘Dawkins et al bring us into disrepute: There’s a schism alright, and I seem to find myself on the unfashionable side of it’, *The Guardian* Monday, November 2, 2009, <http://www.guardian.co.uk>, accessed August 12, 2012.
- 35 The most narcissist of the Four Horsemen might well be Harris, who proclaimed: ‘The fact that my continuous and public rejection of Christianity does not worry me in the least should suggest to you just how inadequate I think your reasons for being a Christian are.’ Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 4.
- 36 Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 220.
- 37 Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 220.
- 38 This critical judgment may not apply to Michel Onfray, who is probably the most consistent New Atheist. A large portion of his works can be seen as a system of ‘atheist hedonism’ including ethics (*La sculpture de soi* [Paris: Grasset, 1993]), a political theory (*Politique du rebelle* [Paris: Grasset, 1999]), aesthetics (*Archéologie du présent* [Adam Biro, 2003]), epistemology (*Féeries anatomiques* [Paris: Grasset, 2003]) and metaphysics (*Traité d’athéologie* [Paris: Grasset, 2005]). His works are nonetheless often poorly written (unless one likes random successions of irrelevant adjectives) and their arguments often pointless.
- 39 I am not talking here about plausibility structure, which is an expression often taken out of context these days, but only about the socio-cultural context in which the New Atheists are writing.
- 40 There are crucial differences between Onfray and Camus beyond the obvious intellectual ones. For example, Camus knew Christianity well; in fact, his chosen topic for the diploma in *Diplôme d’Etudes Supérieures* was ‘Christian metaphysics and Neoplatonism’, displaying a great sensitivity to Augustine. This explains Camus’ early engagement of the Christian faith from his atheist position. For him, dialogue was possible, unlike for the New Atheists. Cf. Nicholas Lash, *Theology for Pilgrims* (London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2008) who suggests that looking for truth is not a concern of the New Atheists who identify themselves with Dawkins and the like. I give two quotes from Albert Camus, *Camus at Combat* (Princeton University Press, 2005): (1) ‘No-one wants to see a dialogue between Christians and unbelievers more than we do, because we think both sides would benefit.’ *Camus at Combat*, 27 March, 1945, 181-182. (2) ‘Christians are taught to love their neighbour. Yet others who do not share their faith may yet hope to arrive at the same goal out of a simple concern for truth, a spirit of selflessness and an appreciation of man’s greatness.’ *Camus at Combat*, 8 September, 1944, 32.
- 41 Timothy Jenkins has hinted at the possibility that we need to take Dawkins, for example, seriously, because of his ability to communicate his atheist position: ‘We should consider the positive case that Dawkins proposes, for that is what moves his

- sympathetic readers ...' Timothy Jenkins, 'Closer to Dan Brown than to Gregor Mendel: on Dawkins' The God Delusion,' *Scottish Journal of Theology* 62.3 (2009) 269-281, here 276.
- 42 On the side of apologetics, see R. Albert Mohler Jr., *Atheism Remixed: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) or Ravi Zacharias, *The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008). Unfortunately, often criticisms do not include questioning the deeper presuppositions of New Atheists or tracing back their philosophical background. However, an effective apologetics must account for these backgrounds in order to demonstrate the inherent contradiction within the New Atheists' worldview.
- 43 Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2007) 5-6.
- 44 Beattie, *The New Atheists*, 82.
- 45 Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 34. His quote is from an interview with Dennett who said: 'Darwin's idea has banished the Book of Genesis to the limbo of quaint mythology.' See John Brockman, *The Third Culture* (New York, Touchstone Books, 1996) 187.
- 46 Haught further suggests that the New Atheists are wrong because they equate the Christian faith with the creationist and Intelligent Design folks. But then, he also refers to the equation between Christianity and biblical literalism in the New Atheists' perspective. Biblical literalism is the mirror error to scientism because, in Haught's words: 'the religious literalist assumes that the full depth of what is going on in the real world is made evident to the true believer in the plainest sense of the sacred text' (*God and the New Atheism*, 30). The issue for Haught, then, is clearly hermeneutics.
- 47 Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 5, also thinks that the New Atheists argue against a now obsolete theology (conservative) – over against more 'progressive' theologians. To him, an example is the New Atheists' reference to faith as propositional and narrowly intellectual, exactly as conservative believers put it. He adds: 'Theologians today understand faith as the commitment of one's whole being to God. But the New Atheists, echoing a now obsolete theology, think of faith in a narrow intellectual and propositional sense.' Haught's examples do not refer to established or influential theologians in my own evangelical Reformed tradition, even though most of the theologians referred to have a degree of theological interest and insight.
- 48 Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, 35-55, gives a helpful summary of the New Atheists' position, faulting them with a series of reductions: reducing monotheistic religions to scriptural literalists and dogmatic extremists; reducing the cultural role of theology to constant underwriting of religious abuse; reducing the meaning of faith to mindless belief in whatever has no evidence; reducing the meaning of evidence to what is 'available to science'; reducing the whole reality to what is known by science; and finally reducing the idea of God to a hypothesis.
- 49 Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo Press, 2007). Hitchens' only passing reference to Feuerbach puts him with the German Idealists, a debatable choice (*The Portable Atheist*, 75).
- 50 Beattie, *The New Atheists*, 127.
- 51 I use the English word 'projection' to translate the German term *Vergegenständigung*. An alternative translation might be 'objectification'. See Marx W. Wartofsky, *Feuerbach* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977) 206-210. In fact, the Feuerbachian concept of 'projection' is not easily understood, even with a solid Hegelian background, since it never functions without the complementary notion of 'objectification' and can never be understood apart from its outcome, 'alienation'. The fact that Feuerbach never used the German word 'Projektion' but many other synonyms (including 'vergegenständlichen') does not help to clarify his meaning; see Van A. Harvey, *Feuerbach and the Interpretation of Religion* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 32.
- 52 Feuerbach cannot be clearer when he says: 'The fundamental dogmas of Christianity are realised wishes of the heart – the essence of Christianity is the essence of human feeling.' Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity* (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1957) 140.
- 53 Nathan S. Hilberg, *Religious Truth and Religious Diversity* (New York: Peter Lang, 2009) 59.
- 54 Marcel Neusch, *Aux sources de l'athéisme contemporain: Cents ans de débats sur Dieu* (Paris: Le Centurion, 1977) 61.
- 55 As Barth well summarises: 'Hence, according to Feuerbach, man could not admit natural religion but as the illusory expression of natural nostalgia and wishes of the human heart.' Karl Barth, *Dogmatique*, I/2\*\* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1954) 81.
- 56 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 270.
- 57 Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 9.
- 58 'God as God, that is, as a being not finite, not human, not materially conditioned, not phenomenal, is only an object of thought. He is the incorporeal, formless, incomprehensible – the abstract, negative being: he is known, i.e., becomes an object, only by abstraction and negation.' Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 35.
- 59 Barth, *Dogmatique*, IV/2\* (Genève: Labor et Fides, 1968) 83-86.
- 60 Barth, *Dogmatique*, I/2\*\*, 83. Feuerbach says that

- ‘Unlike Catholicism, Protestantism is no longer concerned with what God is in himself, but only with what he is for man; hence, it knows no speculative or contemplative tendency like Catholicism. It has ceased to be theology – it is essentially Christology; that is, religious anthropology.’ Ludwig Feuerbach, *Principles of the Philosophy of the Future* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1986) 5.
- 61 ‘And here may be applied, without any limitation, the proposition: the object of any subject is nothing else than the subject’s own nature taken objectively.’ Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 12.
- 62 Harvey, *Feuerbach*, 25.
- 63 Eduard von Hartmann, *Geschichte der Logik*, 2 vols (Leipzig, 1900) II:444.
- 64 Unfortunately, Onfray regularly takes recourse to sarcasm, ridicule and ignorant caricature, such as when he summarises five centuries of history of the Church and theology with the expression ‘boulle patrologique’ and when he refers to Jean-Luc Marion and René Girard as witnesses to the ‘permanence of scholasticism’, most likely conveying an exceedingly negative meaning. He forgets that philosophy, especially analytic philosophy, can in part be traced back to the scholastics. See Alain de Libera, *Penser au Moyen Age* (Paris: Le Seuil, 1991).
- 65 See for example the debate between G.K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to the New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2008) and Richard Longenecker, ‘Who is the Prophet Talking About?’ Some Reflections on the New Testament’s Use of the Old’, *Themelios* 13 (1987) 4-8.
- 66 Harris, *The End of Faith*, 18.
- 67 A significant work of biblical theology is Brevard S. Child, *Biblical Theology of the Old and New Testaments* (London: SCM, 1992). Works by Herman N. Ridderbos, *The coming of the kingdom* (Phillipsburg: Presbyterian & Reformed, 1962) and Geerhardus Vos, *Biblical Theology: Old and New Testaments* (1975; repr. Eugene: Wipf & Stock, 2003) should also be rediscovered. More recently, see Daniel J. Trier, ‘Biblical theology and/or theological interpretation of Scripture?’, *Scottish Journal of Theology* 61.1 (2008) 16-31.
- 68 This seems to be Hart’s personal conclusion: ‘As a whole, Dennett’s argument consists in little more than the persistent misapplication of quantitative and empirical terms to unquantifiable and intrinsically non-empirical realities, sustained by classifications that are entirely arbitrary and fortified by arguments that any attentive reader should notice are wholly circular.’ Hart, *Atheist Delusions*, 7.
- 69 In this, Feuerbach is close to Nietzsche when he says: ‘that thought realises itself means, accordingly, that it makes itself the *object of the senses*. Thus, the reality of the Idea is *sensuousness*, but reality is also the *truth* of the Idea – hence sensuousness is the truth of the Idea.’ Feuerbach, *Principles*, 50.
- 70 Michel Onfray, *Contre-histoire de la Philosophie*, vol. 11, ‘Mort de Dieu, naissance des hommes’ (Paris: Frémeaux et Associés, 2009).
- 71 Of course, Onfray does not talk about himself: his philosophy is not biography, hence, his philosophy, according to his own criteria, is nothing philosophical! It is pure thought, abstract thought, a model, a system without any universal relevance.
- 72 Michel Onfray, *Contre-histoire de la Philosophie* vol. 14, ‘Nietzsche’ (Paris: Frémeaux et Associés, 2010).
- 73 Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, ‘Preface,’ second aphorism, <http://nietzsche.holtof.com>, accessed August 12, 2012.
- 74 Jenkins, ‘Closer to Dan Brown’, 279.
- 75 Haught, *God and the New Atheism*, xi: ‘It’s not that my livelihood as a theologian is remotely at stake – although the authors in question would fervently wish it were so.’
- 76 ‘The most disappointing feature of *The God Delusion* is Dawkins’s failure to engage religious thought in any serious way. This is, obviously, an odd thing to say about a book-length investigation into God. But the problem reflects Dawkins’s cavalier attitude about the quality of religious thinking. Dawkins tends to dismiss simple expressions of belief as base superstition.’ H. Allen Orr, ‘A mission to convert’, *The New York Review of Books*, January 11, 2007, 22-24, at <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/archives/2007/jan/11/a-mission-to-convert/?pagination=false>, accessed July 23, 2012.
- 77 Blaise Pascal, *Pensées*, trad. Roger Ariew (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2005) Fragment 225, 51.
- 78 Copan, *Is God a Moral Monster?*, 16.
- 79 Jenkins, ‘Closer to Dan Brown’, 274.
- 80 That might be one of the rare mistakes in Terry Eagleton’s review of *The God Delusion* (Eagleton, ‘Lunging, Flailing, Mispunching’).
- 81 David Bentley Hart, ‘Believe it or not’, *First Things* <http://www.firstthings.com>, accessed August 12, 2012.
- 82 As far as relativism is concerned, I thank German attendees of the 2012 FEET conference for mentioning an interesting point made by some German atheist philosophers. In their opinion, atheism has two main opponents: postmodern plurality and fundamentalism. Both are advocating the value of religion, fundamentalism in claiming the absolute necessity of the deity, postmodern plurality in merely pointing to its *possibility*. But the mere possibility for God is, logically enough, already too much for the New Atheists – and in fact for any consistent atheist. Among the German atheist philosophers, one must at least be aware of Michael Schmidt-Salomon, *Manifest des evolutionären Humanismus* (Aschaffenburg: Alibri Verlag, 2006). My apologies for omitting other significant European atheist philosophers counted among the New Atheists.