

Excellent refutation of 'new atheists' flawed by heterodox open theism

A review of
*The Irrational Atheist:
Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of
Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens:*
by Vox Day
Benbella Books, Dallas,
TX, 2008

Lita Cosner

‘I don’t care if you go to Hell. ... Your soul is not my responsibility’ (p. 5). That is hardly the sort of opening one expects from a self-described ‘non-denominational evangelical Christian’ (p. 1) whose pen name is a play on the Latin for ‘Voice of God’. Vox Day does not have a Ph.D.; his biography lists no higher education, in fact. He is a video game designer, blogger,¹ and columnist,² who claims no intellectual achievement except ‘to have once convinced [conservative columnist and author] Michelle Malkin to skip an opportunity to promote herself’ (p. 3). However, Day’s lack of formal qualification does not affect the quality of his arguments, for the most part, in his book. He claims his purpose in writing *The Irrational Atheist* is ‘not to defend God, or even to argue for the truth of my particular religious faith’ (p. 1). Instead, he argues against the ‘fraudulent, error-filled writings’ of Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens, the ‘unholy trinity’ referred to in the subtitle of his book.

Which atheism?

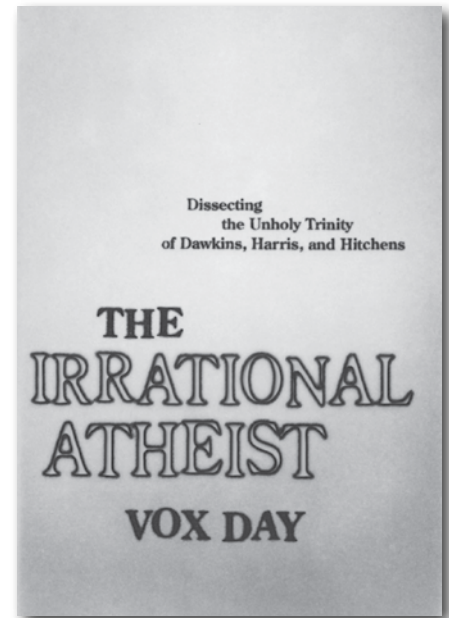
The definition of atheism varies depending on who is defining it, so Day begins by dividing the irreligious into two categories—‘high church’ and ‘low church’ atheists. ‘High church’ atheists tend to be wealthy,

highly educated and more law-abiding than the general population; they also share ‘undeveloped social skills ... so dramatic as to be reasonably described as a form of social autism’ (p. 16). On the other hand, ‘low church’ atheists tend not to even call themselves atheists, falling into the ‘no religion’ or ‘secular’ categories in polls. They are also much more likely to be incarcerated, and are less intelligent than both their ‘high church’ counterparts and religious folk. While the ‘high church’ atheists are more vocal and visible, the ‘low church’ atheists significantly outnumber them. Dawkins, Dennett and Harris all belong to ‘high church’ atheism, and it is this particular manifestation of non-belief that Day attacks.

Which science?

Atheists often argue that science has disproved the claims of religion in general and Christianity in particular. Day contends that ‘it is impossible to entirely separate atheism from science, because scientific materialism has such an influence on atheistic thinking even in matters where science is not directly involved’ (p. 28). So his next step is to define science. Day accepts the definition of an evolutionary biologist, who gives a three-fold definition: science is ‘a dynamic body of knowledge (scientage), a process (scientody), and a profession (scientistry)’ (p. 32). It is the second definition, science as a systematic study of the natural world through observation and experimentation, which Day refers to throughout the book.

Having defined science, Day is free to explore whether it is really in conflict with religion. The popular view is that the Church repressed science and knowledge leading to



the Dark Ages, which was ended by bold non-believers who ushered in the Enlightenment. Day shows that ‘The Dark Ages’ is actually a reversal of a Christian metaphor of ‘pagan darkness giving way to the Light of the World’ (p. 35), and was created by the Italian poet and Christian Francesco Petrarca (Petrarch, 1304–1374) in contempt of German invaders, not Christian faith. Although historians have discarded the notion of the Dark Ages as a period of religious oppression for nearly a century (indeed, even the term ‘Dark Ages’ has been replaced with ‘Middle Ages’), many atheists still promote this mistaken theory.

In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris argued that religion is too dangerous in light of the advent of nuclear, biological and chemical weapons in warfare: ‘Words like “God” and “Allah” must go the way of “Apollo” and “Baal,” or they will unmake our world’ (cited on p. 43). Day argues that the five major religions of the world have been around for 116 centuries, collectively, without causing the extinction of humankind. Modern science, however, after existing only 350 years, has created ‘a veritable witches’ brew of potential dangers to the human race, ranging from atom-shattering explosive devices to lethal genetic modifications’ (p. 45). Day argues

that if science mixed with religion is a formula for the extinction of the human race, it is more reasonable to attempt to eliminate science rather than religion, as there are far fewer scientists than religious people, and while religion has never been completely stamped out, scientific development has been (pp. 53–54).

A 'New Enlightenment'?

For all their pseudo-scientific arguments, Day argues that the New Atheism really has nothing to do with science; rather, science is only useful to them so far as it promotes their goals (p. 68). Their real goal is to obliterate Christianity, and to replace it with their own code of morality. The New Atheists look forward to a 'New Enlightenment' where religious texts will be replaced by literature and poetry (the religious texts apparently containing neither literature nor poetry) and one could practice unlimited licentiousness without fear of an afterlife or societal prohibitions in this one. As ideal as this humanist paradise sounds, the first Enlightenment, instead of an atheist utopia, led to the French Revolution and its associated Reign of Terror, Marxism and the European Union. Hitchens, a former Marxist, provides the insight that humanists who are anti-authority support authoritarian government actions because 'temporary expedients considered necessary for the achievement of a primary goal are easily transformed into dogma that cannot be questioned lest the attainment of the goal be jeopardized' (p. 75). This explains why so many atheists in power have committed horrific crimes in pursuit of an ideal.

Does religion cause war?

Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins both claim that religion is responsible for enabling war-making, because the belief in an afterlife makes a person more willing to risk his earthly life. However, their whole argument is flawed, because the vast majority of wars over the history of mankind have had nothing to do with religion. Day shows

that, other than conflicts that involve Muslim religious violence, there are currently very few religiously-based wars, and some that are assumed to be religious are actually primarily ethnic, political or linguistic conflicts (p. 85). For example, the IRA's ideology was mainly atheistic and Marxist, and had nothing to do with Christian teachings. If religion inspired hawkishness, one would expect to find that militaries of religious countries have higher volunteer rates for their military forces than do secular countries, however, this is not the case (although it would be more valid to examine the military volunteer rates of religious *individuals* instead) (p. 91).

Since America is the most religious nation in the Western world, if the atheists' hypothesis about religion fuelling a warlike attitude is valid, then America should be particularly aggressive and that its wars should be religiously motivated. However, Day shows that the vast majority of American wars have been against primarily (at least nominally) Christian enemies, and only one of them, the War on Terror, could be properly said to be a religious war (pp. 99–102), but even this war is only against violent extremist Muslims, not Islam as a whole.

Making atheists look ridiculous

Having addressed some arguments that the New Atheists have in common, Day focuses on the individual members of the 'New Atheists'. He attacks Harris first, who he calls 'a grave embarrassment to atheism, intellectuals, and the Stanford University philosophy department' (p. 113). Day accuses Harris of ignorance about the religions he attacks, and of intellectual dishonesty. He documents factual and logical errors in *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*,³ and in particular refutes the ridiculous assertion in the latter that 'Red' (or Republican, so allegedly more Christian according to Harris) states are more prone to crime than 'Blue' (or Democrat, so more secular) states. Indeed, most of the crimes in 'Red' states are committed in their 'Bluest' counties.

Dawkins is 'the world's foremost spokesman for secular science' (p. 136), yet his recent works contain very little actual science. While Dawkins finds the idea of God utterly incredible, Day shows that he has no problem believing other things without evidence. In *Unweaving the Rainbow*,⁴ Dawkins professes to believe that science can inspire art and poetry as easily as religion, despite centuries of evidence to the contrary. Day cites



Atheists blame religion for the Crusades and Spanish Inquisition, but atheist regimes in the 20th century have killed far more people than all religiously-caused 'atrocities' combined.

the atheist academic Camille Paglia, who argues that religion is an artistic necessity, and it is because of atheism that ‘anything goes, and nothing lasts’ in modern art (p. 142). Dawkins’ beliefs that wars are won through blind obedience, atheists are less likely to destroy religious architecture, humanity is innately good, Christian theocracy is as bad as Islamic fascism, and Catholicism is more damaging than childhood sexual abuse, are similarly refuted.

Day calls Christopher Hitchens ‘the last and least of the Unholy Trinity’ (p. 161). However, he also calls him the most honest of the New Atheists, since he does not try to disguise his hatred of Christianity. The main criticisms that Day levies against Hitchens are of inadequate research, making claims without sufficient evidence, and overreliance on personal experience.⁵ Apparently not wanting to be open to the criticism of not having enough evidence for this criticism, Day provides a nearly four-page-long list of the unsupported assertions in *God is not Great* (pp. 167–171).

In contrast to the other New Atheists, Daniel Dennett’s writing is reasonable and tame, despite his ignorance of basic history and theology. Dennett, instead of assuming from the outset that belief in God is a harmful delusion, argues for putting aside all assumptions to examine the evidence reasonably. Day also compliments Dennett’s readiness to admit ignorance and to not take an opinion on areas outside his interest or expertise. However, ‘the philosopher shows himself to be repeatedly susceptible to missing similarly obvious things, usually due to a failure to draw a correct logical conclusion from the evidence on hand’ (p. 183). For instance, he has no problem with people accepting Einstein’s famous equation, $E=mc^2$, without understanding it and putting faith in the scientists who do understand, yet condemns people who trust their pastors on matters of religion as immoral. Still, Day suggests that ‘Dennett’s call for an open spirit of inquiry into religion is worthwhile and should be welcomed by Christians and other religious individuals’ (p. 193).

Michel Onfray is a prolific writer, nearly unknown in the English speaking world, but very popular in France and Italy. He has published 31 books on a wide range of topics (p. 197), and his *Traité d’athéologie*, published as *In Defence of Atheism* in England and *Atheist Manifesto* in the United States, ‘performs the invaluable task of demonstrating that atheism possesses the inherent potential to be every bit as unrepentantly evil by traditional Western moral standards as Christians have always believed it to be’ (p. 199). Onfray criticizes the other New Atheists for adopting a mostly Judeo-Christian ethic even as they reject the biblical God, calling such individuals ‘Christian atheists’ (p. 201). Indeed, Dawkins has called himself a ‘cultural Christian’.⁶ Onfray wants to discard the values of charity, temperance, compassion, mercy, humility and forgiveness, among others, embracing a sort of utilitarian hedonism. His complete rejection of Judeo-Christian ethics, and his own hellish alternative, is the logical end of the philosophy that the other New Atheists embrace, even if most will never admit it.

Hitler, the Inquisition, Crusades and human sacrifice

Having gone on the offensive for most of the book, Day turns to the accusations most commonly made about Christianity. Atheists love to claim that Hitler was a Christian, and Christians often claim that he was an atheist, but Day shows that both sides are wrong: Hitler was actually a pagan totalitarian (p. 213). However, many of his policies were based on Darwinism.^{7,8}

The Spanish Inquisition is another ‘crime of religion’ that atheists showcase. But the sole purpose of the Spanish Inquisition was to root out people who professed to be Christians but were secretly practising other faiths; it had no control over professing Jews, Muslims or atheists. Torture was rarely used, and only when there was strong evidence that the accused was lying. Even then there were strict controls in place. And in nearly 350 years,

only 3,230 people were sentenced to death, hardly the bloodbath of millions that it is sometimes made out to be (pp. 217–219).

Some atheists go back even further to the Crusades to find material with which to accuse Christians; Day similarly handles this issue. These were defensive wars against centuries of Islamic aggression against major historic centres of Christendom. However, until the fighters of the Second Crusade foolishly attacked a Muslim ally, Christians and Muslims had mutually beneficial alliances, which allowed Christians to keep the gains made by the First Crusade. It was greed, not religious faith, which turned the Crusades into the fiasco they became.

Atheist atrocities

While atheists blame atrocities on religion, Day shows that an atheist leader is much more likely, statistically, to murder a significant part of his country’s population than any religious leader (p. 241). He argues that this is because, lacking belief in any spiritual reality, the atheist’s ambitions are limited to the material realm. These ambitions tend to take the form of reshaping society to fit their own vision of utopia; when the atheist meets resistance to his vision, or the limitations of human sinfulness and fallibility render the vision impossible to realise, the atheist may try to force cooperation by using violence, since he does not recognize any higher moral law.

‘Omniderigence’ and the video game designer god

Many atheists come to disbelieve in the existence of God because they find it impossible to believe in an omniscient, omnipotent and omnibenevolent God who allows bad things to happen. Day argues that blaming God for the bad things that happen result from a mistaken belief in God’s ultimate complete control over events which He micromanages, a belief he terms ‘omniderigence’ (p. 276). Day explains:


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Vox Day compares God's omniscience with that of a video game designer, but the comparison has serious flaws.

'There are two possibilities. Either evil is part of God's plan and has been from the beginning, or God is somehow constrained in his ability to unleash his power upon this Earth. The biblical account describing how God gave man dominion over the Earth, a dominion which the Scriptures explain was subsequently handed over in turn to Satan, strongly suggests the latter ... if everything is in God's hands and moving according to God's plan, then what need would there have ever been for Jesus Christ to come to and die on a cross?' (pp. 277–278).

Day uses the experience of a programmer designing a computer game world to illustrate this principle. The programmer is 'omnipotent'; he could program anything into his pixellated world. He could stop or reverse time, and could look into the 'mind' of any AI character to see what that particular character would do if left to its own devices, and change its intended course of action if he wanted. That makes him 'omniscient' as well. However, the programmer can also choose not to exercise his 'omniscience' or 'omnipotence' and allow the AI world to operate without his interference.

However, Day's analogy is flawed, because God's omniscience and omnipotence is part of His very nature in a way that the programmers' knowledge and ability to manipulate his artificial world is not; indeed, the programmers' 'omniscience' is limited to what codes the programmer chooses to view. God cannot choose to not know what will happen; His very nature demands that He know everything. In the same vein, God is not only omnipotent when He chooses to supernaturally circumvent the way the physical world normally works; a decision by a truly omnipotent being to not intervene is itself an exercise of omnipotence.

Day argues that 'we are incapable of perceiving the difference between a god who knows everything and a god who merely knows a whole lot more than we do, moreover, the latter is the god that more closely fits the description of the biblical God' (p. 274). It would have been interesting for Day to cite some actual verses in support of this heterodox 'open theist' view. The Bible makes it clear that all things are possible for God (Mathew 19:26) that don't contravene His nature (e.g. Titus 1:2). The Bible also calls Him the 'Lord God Παντοκράτωρ' (*Pantokratōr*) (2 Corinthians 6:18, Revelation *passim*), which means 'all-ruler', and is usually translated 'almighty', or *omnipotens* in the Latin Vulgate.⁹ Day possesses no theological credentials, yet feels qualified to say that 'there is no theological significance whatsoever to a reduced form of omniscience and omnipotence ...' (p. 274).

Day's flawed view of God leads him to other theological errors; his answer to the problem of suffering seems to be 'Well, God must not have been looking that way at the time' (though it is not put in those words), and we are supposed to praise God for allowing us to be so free and make our own choices, and be glad we do not have a 'cruel and easily bored puppeteer' (p. 278) for a God. His view also ignores the Fall, which introduced death and suffering into the 'very good' world that God had created.

Conclusion

Vox Day does not claim to be a scholar, yet, except in the area of theology, he holds his own against atheist intellectuals. He is not content to refute them only, he mocks them relentlessly. Day's writing is filled with insults and delightfully sarcastic wit, and his footnotes are as likely to add on an extra insult as to cite a source. He makes his victims look ridiculous; however, as delightful as it is to hear him call Dawkins a 'supercilious old fart' (p. 68), sometimes after several pages of reading how stupid a particular argument is, one forgets the serious point he was trying to make. This makes Day's book an entertaining volume, but one that the reader might take less seriously than other criticisms of the 'new atheists'. That said, *The Irrational Atheist* is a good refutation of many core 'New Atheist' arguments, if flawed by Day's open theism.

References

1. Day's blog, Vox Popoli, can be viewed at <voxday.blogspot.com>.
2. <www.worldnetdaily.com/news/archives.asp?author_id=175>.
3. See detailed refutation, Holding, J.P., Letter to a Maladjusted Misotheist, 2 November 2006, <www.tektonics.org/gk/harrisletter.html>.
4. See review, Truman, R., Disappointing delusion, *J. Creation* 13(1):33–36, 1999; <creationontheweb.com/unweaving>.
5. This is independently supported by Sarfati, J., Christopher Hitchens—blind to salamander reality: A well-known atheist's 'eureka moment' shows the desperation of evolutionists, 26 July 2008, <creationontheweb.com/hitchens>.
6. Dawkins: I'm a cultural Christian, *BBC News*, 10 December 2007, <news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk_politics/7136682.stm>; see also <creationontheweb.com/christmas>.
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8. Bergman, J., Darwinism and the Nazi race Holocaust, *J. Creation* 13(2):101–111, 1999; <creationontheweb.com/holocaust>.
9. See also Sarfati, J., If God can do anything, then can He make a being more powerful than Himself? What does God's omnipotence really mean? 12 January 2008, <creationontheweb.com/omnipotence>.