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# The Hope of Grace: An Essay Exploring the New Atheism, the Church, and the Gospel<sup>1</sup>

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Eric I. Hanson

Pastor, Faith Lutheran Church, Andover, Iowa

The *new atheism* is one of the most unique and influential movements that has developed in the early twenty-first century. The wide-reaching and continued influence of the *new atheism* can be seen through the many books, articles, blog posts, and vlogs that have been produced in the past decade supporting the movement. While the *new atheism* objects to all major religions, the Christian church and Christianity are two of the biggest targets of the *new atheism*. In spite of this there have been very few attempts to examine what the *new atheism* means for Christianity and the church. Further, the *new atheism* has not been engaged adequately from a Christian perspective. This article explores some of the major core convictions of the *new atheism*, contemplates from a Lutheran perspective the meaning that the *new atheism* holds for Christianity as well as the church, and demonstrates the centrality of the Gospel for the church's life and future.

## Central convictions of the New Atheism

Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett are four primary people behind the *new atheism* who have had the largest impact on the movement. These four individuals are sometimes referred to as the *four horsemen*. By examining the works of the *four horsemen*, several core convictions emerge that reflect the *new atheism's* understanding of religion. The first of these is a distrust of any claims that religions make of revelation. Specifically concerning Christianity, the *new atheism* has, at minimum, a deep distrust of Christian doctrine and scripture. Each of the *four horsemen* maintains that biblical, scientific, and historical scholarship help to show how the Bible cannot be taken seriously as a source of revelation. Further, one of the *four horsemen*, specifically Hitchens, maintains that the concept of revelation is exclusivist because it asserts that God was only revealed in a specific context to a specific group of people, excluding all other people from this revelation.<sup>2</sup> Dawkins also focuses a great deal of attention on rejecting specific Christian claims of revelation and

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doctrine such as the Trinity<sup>3</sup> and the Bible.<sup>4</sup>

A second major conviction of the *new atheism* calls into question the ethics and morals that religion teaches and inspires. Each of the *four horsemen* acknowledges that people have been inspired to do both good and bad because of their religion. While there is no evidence that people who are religious live in ways that are any more ethical than non-religious people, the *new atheism* insists that the morals promoted and inspired by religion are actually horrific. Specifically, Harris claims that faith has been the inspiration for most of the horrific crimes throughout history.<sup>5</sup> Further, Harris believes that faith breeds hate<sup>6</sup> and that religion causes evil.<sup>7</sup> The *new atheism* also lifts up many observations about how religions create hatred and oppression between groups of people who believe differently from one another. For instance, Hitchens claims that competing religious beliefs cause hatred between groups who believe differently from one another and cites many examples of cruelty between people with different religious beliefs in support of this assertion.<sup>8</sup>

A third core conviction of the *new atheism* is about how religion defies rationality. In various ways each of the *four horsemen* assert that most people who are religious blindly follow the teachings of their religion. There is no room for engagement with reason or perspectives from other disciplines that may challenge their beliefs about religion. The *new atheism* describes how this way of thinking is dangerous for human development. Each of the *four horsemen* also asserts that modern scientific, historical, and sociological knowledge contradicts many religious claims. Further, the answers that these and other disciplines provide to questions

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3. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Mariner Books, 2008), 52–58.

4. *Ibid.*, 268–316.

5. Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 61–79.

6. *Ibid.*, 93.

7. *Ibid.*, 106.

8. Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, 18–28.

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1. This article is based on a Master of Divinity thesis that was completed at Wartburg Theological Seminary which has the same title.

2. Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 97–122.

about life and the world are more reasonable and satisfactory than those provided by religion. Each of the *four horsemen* maintains that belief in God defies rationality because there is no sound evidence for God's existence and there is much evidence to suggest that God does not exist.

A fourth major conviction of the *new atheism* is the belief that religion must be examined more deeply by other disciplines. While some of the *four horsemen* make allusions to this conviction, the one who argues it the most explicitly is Dennett. Dennett points out how religion has captivated many people for centuries and many people have devoted their entire lives to religion. However, very rarely have any disciplines outside of theology sought to understand religion's value or importance for humanity and the world. Dennett lifts up how this must change because religion is too important and prevalent not to be subjected to examinations regarding its value and usefulness. Dennett proposes a multidisciplinary investigation of religion, so that it can be better understood.<sup>9</sup> Thus, the *new atheism* considers it necessary to use other disciplines, such as science and history, to determine things about religion, including how religion affects people, whether or not religious beliefs can be trusted or verified, and whether or not religion is dangerous for humanity.

A final core conviction in the *new atheism* is active resistance against religion. As seen in many of their works, the *four horsemen's* goal is to make their readers into atheists through the arguments that they raise. Further, many of these works consider religion to be destructive for humanity. They offer a vision of the world without religion. Thus, there is a strong resistance against religion in the *new atheism*.

### Christian engagement with the new atheism

In light of the influence and impact of the *new atheism*, there has been very little engagement from the church with the *new atheism*. It is concerning that the church remains largely silent and unchanged in the face of the *new atheism*. This is concerning because the church is both remaining complacent about this important dimension of modern history and ignoring the prophetic voice that the *new atheism* offers. There has been, however, some limited engagement with the *new atheism* from a Christian perspective.

Alister McGrath is one of the few theologians who has engaged the *new atheism* from a Christian perspective in his book, *Why God Won't Go Away*. McGrath examines the claims, convictions, and arguments from each of the *four horsemen* in the *new atheism*. McGrath does an excellent job of demonstrating how some of the *new atheism's* conclusions are drawn using biased sources to support their claims. McGrath also thoroughly explains some of the ways that the *new atheism* can be countered by using information and observations that are ignored by the *new atheism*. Finally, McGrath's work demonstrates that there are extreme limits in using science and reason alone to examine things. This is important because so

9. Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2008), 3–28.

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many of the conclusions in the *new atheism* are drawn using only science and reason. Thus McGrath's work correctly points out some severe shortcomings in the *new atheism*.<sup>10</sup>

While McGrath's work offers important points to consider, this is only a start for engaging the *new atheism*; his work has some limits. For instance, McGrath loses sight of important pieces of theology in his analysis and as a result his work does not have a solid theological foundation. Specifically, McGrath does not emphasize enough how the Gospel counters the understanding of Christianity in the *new atheism* by offering good news to all of humanity. Because McGrath does not focus enough on the Gospel, he does not establish what meaning and significance the Christian faith holds for non-believers. Further, McGrath does not consider how the Gospel compels the church to engage the *new atheism*. McGrath's work also only briefly touches on how the *new atheism* can be a prophetic voice to the church.<sup>11</sup> Another shortcoming in McGrath's work is that it does not fully engage all of the important criticisms and challenges that the *new atheism* presents to the church.

While McGrath does provide some excellent analysis around some points of criticism in the *new atheism*, his work does not engage all of the important criticisms and observations in the *new atheism*. McGrath dismisses the *new atheism* and some of its important convictions without enough evidence. He also suggests that the *new atheism* is starting to lose influence in the world.<sup>12</sup> However, a recent study titled *Religious Landscape Study* from the Pew Research Center about the religious identification of people in the United States challenges this suggestion. This study provides evidence that both atheism and having no religious affiliation are prominent ways that people in the contemporary United States identify themselves religiously.<sup>13</sup> Because of the shortcomings of McGrath's work and lack of other engagement by the church, we are called to engage with the *new atheism* at a deeper level. The starting point of this engagement lies in the Gospel.

10. Alister E. McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away: Is the New Atheism Running on Empty?* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010).

11. *Ibid.*, 61–62.

12. *Ibid.*, 142.

13. Pew Research Center's Religion & Public Life Project. "Religious Landscape Study." Washington, D.C.: May 11, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/> (Accessed 1-20-16).

## The centrality of the Gospel as response to the new atheism

One of the most striking things in the *new atheism* is the understanding of the Christian message in the movement. Christopher Hitchens asserts that religions such as Christianity function on the conviction that all of humanity is born into sin. However, if one makes the correct choices in life, death will not be the end. On the other hand, the souls of non-believers are all in eternal danger because they have not made the correct choices in their lives. Hitchens asserts that this belief is both arrogant and insulting to non-believers.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, in challenging the authority of Scripture, Sam Harris writes: “tell him [a Christian] that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever.”<sup>15</sup> Finally, Richard Dawkins describes how the Christian doctrine of original sin instills in people a theology of punishment and guilt. Dawkins asserts that this is horrible and immoral. He proposes that Christians usually seek a way out of this dilemma by asserting that God became incarnate in a human being to pay the debt for human sins. However, Dawkins asserts that this is problematic because if it was God’s will to forgive the sins of humanity, then God should have done so without requiring death and punishment.<sup>16</sup>

The Gospel, which is the foundation of Christianity and the church, offers a very different message than the distorted understanding of Christianity with which the *new atheism* operates. The Gospel also counters the negative observations about Christianity that the *new atheism* offers. Martin Luther proclaims in the *Small Catechism*:

Jesus Christ, true God, begotten of the Father in eternity, and also a true human being, born of the Virgin Mary, is my Lord, He has redeemed me, a lost and condemned human being. He has purchased and freed me from all sins, from death, and from the power of the devil, not with gold or silver but with his holy, precious blood and with his innocent suffering and death. He has done all this in order that I may belong to him, live under him in his kingdom, and serve him in eternal righteousness, innocence, and blessedness, just as he is risen from the dead and lives and rules eternally.<sup>17</sup>

Luther’s words proclaim the Gospel message that God’s saving act in Christ restores a broken humanity through the forgiveness and new life that is given in Christ and received by faith inspired

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by the Spirit through hearing the Gospel. Restored because of God’s action in Christ, believers are freed from all evils that used to have power over them and they are freed for living out this grace freely given by God as a call for serving others. This Gospel message is something that God wills for all of humanity. God “desires everyone to be saved and to come to the knowledge of the truth” (1 Tim 2:4). Further, Paul proclaims that Christ “died for all” (2 Cor 5:15). Moreover, in Romans Paul proclaims that “one man’s act of righteousness leads to justification and life for all” (Rom 5:18).

It is also important to note William Lazareth’s assertion that the Gospel has two functions. The first function is what God has done in Christ for the salvation of a fallen humanity. The second function of the Gospel is what the Spirit does through believers for the service of their neighbors.<sup>18</sup> Knowing that they have been saved by God’s act of redemption in Christ, “faithful Christians may freely throw themselves into the vocational service of others.”<sup>19</sup> This leads to the “parenetic function of the Gospel—‘faith working through love’.”<sup>20</sup> In the parenetic function of the Gospel, God’s love “received by faith is at once conveyed by faith to needy neighbors (the lost, the last, and the least) in society.”<sup>21</sup> Christians are now completely free “in finding persons and places to love in the Spirit.”<sup>22</sup> Thus Christian life is characterized by inward faith in God and outward love for one’s neighbor.<sup>23</sup>

One final aspect of the Gospel is the meaning of the cross. Dorothee Soelle describes how the cross is a symbol of reality, but not a symbol that glorifies either suffering or punishment in any way.

The cross is neither a symbol expressing the relationship between God the Father and his Son nor a symbol of masochism which needs suffering in order to convince itself of love. It is above all a symbol of reality. Love does not “require” the cross, but *de facto* it ends up on the cross...The cross is no theological invention but the world’s answer, given a thousand times over, to attempts at liberation...But *de facto* love ends up on the cross and within visible reality God chooses to act paradoxically.<sup>24</sup>

14. Christopher Hitchens, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2007), xvi.

15. Harris, 19.

16. Dawkins, 284–287.

17. Martin Luther, “The Small Catechism” in *The Book of Concord: The Confessions of the Evangelical Lutheran Church*, 345–375. Timothy J. Wengert and Robert Kolb, eds. Charles P. Arand, Eric Gritsch, Robert Kolb, William Russell, James Schaaf, and Jane Strohl, trans. (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2000), 355.4.

18. William Lazareth, *Christians in Society: Luther, the Bible, and Social Ethics* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2001), 199.

19. *Ibid.*, 203.

20. *Ibid.*, 205.

21. *Ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*, 216.

23. *Ibid.*, 205.

24. Dorothee Soelle, *Suffering*, Everett R. Kalin, trans. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1975), 164.

The cross is a source of good news for humanity because it proclaims that Jesus suffered not out of some obligatory punishment. Rather, Jesus suffered for the sake of all who suffer and became human in order to defeat death.<sup>25</sup>

### A call to proclaim the Gospel to the new atheism

There is nothing in the *new atheism* that demonstrates even a rudimentary understanding of this Gospel message as the center of Christianity. This great gap between the *new atheism's* understanding of Christianity and the Gospel message serves as evidence that the church has failed to faithfully witness to the Gospel in word and deed. Luther wrote that “the entire spiritual estate—all the apostles, bishops, and priests—has been called and instituted only for the ministry of the Word.”<sup>26</sup> This asserts that the church is called to witness to the Gospel through proclamation. Because the church is called to proclaim the Gospel and also because of the universal scope of the Gospel, the church is called to notice the great discrepancy between the *new atheism's* understanding of Christianity and the Gospel. In light of this discrepancy the church is called to proclaim the Gospel in ways that are faithful, creative, and contextual.

The *new atheism* also provides the church with evidence of how we have failed to witness to the Gospel in our actions. There are some instances of the church faithfully witnessing to the Gospel in its actions, such as the work for God's peace and justice in the world done by some Christian congregations and organizations.<sup>27</sup> However, the *new atheism* also serves as a reminder that the church is far from being the body of Christ that the Gospel calls and empowers us to embody. The *new atheism* reminds the church of all of the ways we too often participate in injustice, hatred, oppression, division, and prejudice. Thus there is a huge gap between the body of Christ, which the Gospel calls and empowers the church to be, and our actions as the church. The way that this gap is usually explained in Lutheran theology is through the understanding of *simul justus et peccator* (the belief that we are simultaneously saint and sinner). *Simul justus et peccator* will always be part of the church's identity and there will never be a time when the church is without sin. However, the church is also called and empowered by God to do good works. Further, the observations from the *new atheism* serve as evidence that the church's shortcomings go beyond the reality that we are *simul justus et peccator*. Instead, we as the church too often are representing a *cheap grace* which denies the living Word and justifies sins instead of sinners, against which Dietrich Bonhoeffer warned.<sup>28</sup> In this way the *new atheism* serves as a prophetic voice as to how we as church have failed to witness

## The Gospel is hope for all of humanity.

faithfully to the Gospel in both our actions and proclamation.

For these failures we as the church are called to repent. We are called to realize that we have not witnessed to the Gospel through proclamation clearly enough. We are called to discern ways to proclaim the Gospel that are faithful yet also contextual and creative. We, as the church, are also called to move beyond the ways that we participate in the sins of injustice, hatred, oppression, division, and prejudice of which the *new atheism* convicts us. We, as the church, are called to move beyond our complacency and move into true service of our neighbors. Finally, the church is also called to continually engage the *new atheism*. This article points toward necessary engagement with the *new atheism* and is meant to be a building block for more work. We as the church are called to engage the *new atheism* seriously and faithfully.

Moving forward the church is called to consider how to develop better relationships with non-Christians, including those influenced by the *new atheism*, in order to work together for God's peace and justice in the world. According to Luther's two kingdoms paradigm, God uses all people, both Christians and non-Christians, through the left-hand kingdom to work for order and justice in the world. The church is greatly neglecting the calling to partner with people who are not Christian to work together for justice and order in the world. There is a huge commitment in the *new atheism* to understandings of justice, peace, and order to which the Gospel also is summoning us. The church is called to recognize these shared commitments and begin to partner with those who are influenced by the *new atheism* to work together for God's justice, order, and peace. Through these partnerships everyone will in some way be participating in God's mission.

In the midst of the church's failures and need for repentance, the Gospel message speaks hope and good news to all of humanity as hope for the church's future. This Gospel offers to the church ever anew the opportunity for confession and forgiveness where we are granted absolution on Christ's account for our shortcomings and sent out into the world to witness faithfully to the Gospel. This is hope for the church in the midst of our brokenness. Moreover, the Gospel provides answers to the questions, doubts, and hesitations that the *new atheism* raises about Christianity when the church itself cannot do so. Finally, the Gospel is hope for all of humanity because it always speaks good news to all people of every belief and in every context. This is the eternal hope of God's grace in Jesus Christ.

25. Ibid., 166.

26. Martin Luther, “The Freedom of a Christian”: *Martin Luther's Basic Theological Writings*, 2nd ed, 386–411. Timothy Lull, ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2005), 394.

27. For example the work done by the Christian organization, Bread for the World.

28. Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship*, R.H. Fuller and Irmgard Booth, trans. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1959), 43.