

# The 'New Atheism'—A Bahá'í Perspective

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### **Introduction**

Since the publication of Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* in 2004, a number of books extolling the virtues of atheism have gained prominence in North America, notably Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*, Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, and Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*. Other books have also appeared, but none achieved the fame of these four. These texts adopted a pugnacious and even contemptuous tone towards religion and theists of all kinds. Even the mildest of them, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, suggested that atheists ought to rename themselves "brights"—which suggests that theists are obviously less 'bright.'

According to the 'new atheists' as they were called, the only truth-claims we can accept are those meeting the standards of modern science. They rejected the existence of the super-natural or super-sensible aspects of reality. In addition, they attempt to dismantle various philosophical proofs of God, develop theories about the pathological origin of religion, catalogue of crimes committed "by religion" and challenge the link between religion and morality.

This is a response to the philosophical claims of the new atheists, i.e. an analysis of the philosophical foundations of their beliefs both from a logical point of view, and from the perspective of the Bahá'í Writings. Logically and philosophically speaking, their works are deeply flawed and, as is to be expected, they are often in disagreement with the Bahá'í Writings—though on a number of issues they are in agreement with them. Not unexpectedly, the number of differences between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings far exceeds the number of agreements or convergences. Writers calling for the wholesale abolition of religion and all concepts of the super-natural or super-sensible, are not likely to have much in common with the scriptures of any religion, even one that accepts evolution, rationalism, and the essential harmony of religion and science or that promotes the independent investigation of truth. We must remember that the goal of the new atheists is to put as much distance as possible between their ideas and religion. They have a programmatic disinterest in finding common ground.

Given the scope of their disagreement with religion, not to mention their generally combative style of self-expression, is there room for debate with the new atheists?

The answer is a qualified yes, certainly on the basis of a number of agreements. We can also agree to explore each other's viewpoints to improve mutual understanding, although, given the contempt they express for theologians and/or theistic philosophers, there is room only for a guarded optimism at best. There is, of course, no reasonable hope for philosophical agreement since the absolute denial of super-sensible realities undermines any basis for agreement with religion. In other words, there can be no agreement on foundational essentials, although there may be coincidental agreement on other, non-essential issues.

### **PART I: SOME MAJOR PROBLEMS WITH THE NEW ATHEISM**

#### **1: What is the New Atheism?**

The 'new atheism' is the name given to contemporary atheism as spear-headed by the work of Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. It is a form of *explicit atheism* which requires a conscious and intentional rejection of belief in any form of Deity and the super-sensible or super-natural realities. It is distinct from *implicit atheism* which is absence of belief in God, gods or the super-natural without any conscious, i.e. intentional rejection. Implicit atheism may be the result of ignorance of religious or spiritual concepts or indifference to them.

We must also distinguish between the explicit, strong, positive or dogmatic atheism which requires the conscious denial of any super-sensible realities, and a "negative theoretic atheism"<sup>1</sup> which is based on the lack of sufficient data to assert the existence of super-sensible realities, and on the inherent limits of human intelligence in knowing the existence of such realities. This second type of atheism is close to agnosticism.

Finally, we must distinguish between atheism which denies the existence of personal a God or gods but accepts the existence of a super-sensible ground-of-being and an atheism which rejects the existence of any and all super-sensible entities, personal or not. Theravada Buddhism is often cited as an example of the former, as is Jainism.

The new atheism has 9 characteristics that define its nature:

1. A commitment to explicit, strong or dogmatic atheism as the only rational choice for modern, independent, free-thinking individuals. The new atheists reject agnosticism as too weak a response to the dangers of religion.
2. A categorical rejection of any and all super-sensible beings and realities and a corresponding commitment to ontological (metaphysical) materialism in explaining all phenomena.
3. A militant agenda and tone which opposes, not just of religion itself, but even the *tolerance* of any religious beliefs in others; this agenda and tone is driven by the belief that religion *per se* is pathological in nature.
4. A strident, aggressive, provocative and insulting way of expressing themselves and indulgent use of polemic and rhetorical devices.
5. Commitment to the ability of science to answer all human questions by means of the scientific method with its criteria of measurability, repeatability, predictability, falsifiability.
6. A belief that faith is inherently an enemy of reason and science that and no reconciliation between them is possible. Viewing religion as inherently irrational, they are naturally in a perpetual conflict that must end with the victory of one or the other. Faith is defined as "belief without evidence."<sup>2</sup> They adhere to the conflict model of the relationship between religion / faith and reason.
7. A belief that religion is part of our past but not of our future, i.e. part of our evolutionary heritage that we must learn to overcome.

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<sup>1</sup> *The Catholic Encyclopedia*, <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/02040a.htm>

<sup>2</sup> Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.

8. An insistence on reading scriptures literally and a consistent rejection of centuries of non-literal theological interpretations of the relevant scriptures.
9. An insistence that humankind has an innate and reliable moral sense or “ethical intuition” that does not require the guidance of religion; morality is not inherently connected to or based on religion and our morals have less to do with religion than we tend to think.

## **2. Are the New Atheists Really New?**

If Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris and Dennett are the dominant figures in the ‘new atheism,’ who are the representatives of the ‘old atheism’? Since 1800, four major figures stand out, Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Freud.

Feuerbach developed an anthropological view of God in which God is nothing more than the projection of human nature, i.e. of emotions, wishes, fears, dreams, hopes and ideals projected outward in a larger-than-human form. In other words, God is man writ large; God is made in man’s image. Ontologically, there is no such being as God.

Influenced by Feuerbach, Marx proposed that God is an invention used by the ruling classes to control those beneath them. Marx’s atheism is based on three principles:

dialectical materialism—according to which only matter is real;

(a) historical materialism—according to which all historical and cultural developments are based on economic factors;

(b) radical humanism—in which man, not God, is the supreme being in the universe.

(c)

Nietzsche’s most famous contribution to the development of atheism is his statement that “God is dead”<sup>3</sup> which may be interpreted as a claim that our current conception of God is dead, or that the idea of a metaphysical God is dead. He believes that we can live more authentically human lives without a God Who stands in our way and prevents us from choosing and asserting our own identity and values, and Who weakens our commitment to and appreciation of earthly existence in the name of an abstract spiritual heaven. Rather he proclaims “Dead are all the Gods”<sup>4</sup> so that the way is cleared for the evolution of the Superman. Nietzsche rejected the concept of metaphysical aspects of existence.

Finally, Freud asserted that God is an illusion surviving from humankind’s childhood and that this illusion prevented us from attaining intellectual and moral maturity. God was a father figure to Whom we turned for protection instead of doing what was necessary for ourselves. Thus, belief in God infantilizes us.

A survey of the “old atheists” work shows that very little is substantially new in what the new atheists say. Almost all major themes—materialism, the adequacy of science to solve all problems, religion as part of our evolutionary past, the inherent conflict of reason and faith or religion, the

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<sup>3</sup> Nietzsche, “*The Madman*” in *The Gay Science*; see also sections 108 and 343.

<sup>4</sup> Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, Pt.1, XXII, 3.

rejection of super-sensible aspects of the universe and the militant denunciation of religion—have all been anticipated by the “old atheists.”

What is new in the new atheists is their denunciation of religious *tolerance* (which they see as pandering to dangerous religious superstition); their rejection of the freedom to be religious; their rejection of belief in belief which is viewed as adopting a second-hand faith instead of facing the truth of atheism; their attempts to link religion to our evolutionary genetic endowment as well as the assertion that religion is child abuse. Finally, when compared to the work of the “old atheists” their work shows a willingness to engage in polemics and rhetorical theatrics that is unprecedented in Feuerbach, Marx and Freud, though it has some, though not nearly as extreme, roots in Nietzsche.

### **3. Ontological and Methodological Materialism**

From the point of view of the Bahá'í Writings, the first problem with the new atheists is their adherence to ontological and methodological materialism or physicalism. This philosophy is also referred to a *naturalism*, according to which “everything is natural, i.e. [everything there] belongs to the world of nature and so can be studied by the methods appropriate to studying that world . . .”<sup>5</sup>

The first part of this definition covers ontological naturalism or materialism which is the view that “the world is entirely composed of matter,”<sup>6</sup> that reality is fundamentally physical (matter or energy) and that non-physical entities have no part in composing reality. Consequently, “the super-natural does not exist, i.e. only nature is real, therefore supernature is not real.”<sup>7</sup>

The new atheists reject any appeal to non-physical causes or beings on the grounds that such appeals violate Occam’s Razor, according to which “entities should not be multiplied unnecessarily” in ontology and in our explanations. We should keep things simple. Thus it is clear that the new atheists accept both ontological and methodological materialism since the failure to do so would open the door to belief in super-sensible beings and realities, i.e. God, gods, non-material dimensions, either as parts of reality or as causes in physical phenomena. The new atheists cannot allow this because their aim is to abolish belief in such non-existent entities and all the superstitions associated with them. As Dawkins says, “I decry the super-naturalism in all its forms.”<sup>8</sup>

From a Bahá'í perspective, the new atheist’s naturalistic or materialistic ontology is unacceptable. Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that he categorically rejects the view that sensible material reality is all that exists. Speaking of the people of New York, he says they are “submerged in the sea of materialism”<sup>9</sup> and further,

<sup>5</sup> Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 604.

<sup>6</sup> Simon Blackburn, *The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*, p. 233.

<sup>7</sup> Steven Schafersman, “Naturalism is a Essential Part of Scientific and Critical Enquiry” (Presented at the Conference on Naturalism, Theism and Scientific Enterprise, u of Texas, Austin, 1997) <http://www.freeinquiry.com/naturalism.html>

<sup>8</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.57.

<sup>9</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262.

...are not interested in attaining knowledge of the mysteries of God or understanding the secrets of the heavenly Kingdom; what they acquire is based altogether upon visible and tangible evidences. Beyond these evidences they are without susceptibilities; they have no idea of the world of inner significances and are utterly out of touch with God, considering this an indication of reasonable attitude and philosophical judgement whereof they are self-sufficient and proud . . .

Therefore, if it be a perfection and virtue to be without knowledge of God and His Kingdom, the animals have attained the highest degree of excellence and proficiency. Then the donkey is the greatest scientist and the cow an accomplished naturalist, for they have obtained what they know without schooling and years of laborious study in colleges, trusting implicitly to the evidence of the senses and relying solely upon intuitive virtues.<sup>10</sup>

Later, he compares their mental condition to that of animals:

For instance, the cow denies God and the Holy Spirit, knows nothing of divine inspirations, heavenly bounties or spiritual emotions and is a stranger to the world of hearts. Like the philosophers the cow is captive of nature and knows nothing beyond the range of the senses. The philosophers, however, glory in this, saying, "We are not captives of superstitions; we have implicit faith in the impressions of the senses and *know nothing beyond the realm of nature which contains and covers everything.*"<sup>11</sup>

In other words, Bahá'í Writings and the new atheists disagree fundamentally about the nature of reality in their respective ontologies since the Bahá'í view does not restrict reality to what is material or sensible. In fact, Abdu'l-Bahá satirizes this view. If it is true, he says, "why should we go to the colleges? Let us go to the cow."<sup>12</sup>

The Bahá'í Writings, in sharp contrast to the new atheists, do not think that nature is sufficient to explain itself, i.e. cannot explain such fundamental questions as how or why nature itself came into existence, or how or why natural laws arose, or how or why particles and other fundamental entities have their particular natures. Answering these fundamental questions scientifically requires us to apply the scientific method, which is designed to study quantifiable, repeatable physical phenomena in time and space, whereas these questions refer to the conditions that make physicality, quantifiability, repeatability and time and space possible in the first place. Consequently, these questions lie beyond the scope of the scientific method and exclusively natural explanations, which is to say, nature does not explain itself.

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<sup>10</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262.

<sup>11</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 311 -312; emphasis added. Note this reference to ontological materialism.

<sup>12</sup> 'Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 361.

The same conclusion may be attained by recalling that the Writings posit the *principle of sufficient reason* (PSR), i.e. the view that everything that happens or exists does so for a reason that is sufficient to explain the fact of its existence and why it exists or happens the way it does.<sup>13</sup> In short, everything is as it is and happens for a reason. The PSR is evident in Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "the existence of everything depends upon four causes,"<sup>14</sup> i.e. the material cause (wood), the efficient cause (the carpenter), the formal cause (the form of the chair) and the final cause (the purpose). The purpose is the reason why the chair exists and why it exists in the way it does. Without a final cause or purpose the chair would have no reason to exist. Elsewhere he says that "everything which happens is due to some wisdom and [ ] nothing happens without a reason."<sup>15</sup> Similarly, physical creation also exists for a reason or purpose:

Lauded be Thy name, O Lord my God! I testify that Thou wast a hidden Treasure wrapped within Thine immemorial Being and an impenetrable Mystery enshrined in Thine own Essence. Wishing to reveal Thyself, Thou didst call into being the Greater and the Lesser Worlds . . .<sup>16</sup>

Here, too, we observe that there is a reason for the existence of nature, which is to say, we observe the PSR implicitly at work in the Bahá'í explanation for the existence of nature. One may disagree with the Bahá'í explanation for the existence of nature but what remains is that the PSR, which is the basis for all rational and scientific explanations, makes it clear that no purely naturalistic explanation suffices to explain why nature exists or why it exists in the way it does. The reason for this is straight forward: for any natural phenomena X posited as a cause, the question always arises about how X came to be and got the qualities that allow it to act as a cause—and this leads either to an infinite regress of natural X's or an admission that something super-natural or super-sensible is needed for a final and adequate explanation.

Among the new atheists, only Dawkins seems peripherally aware of the PSR, in his rejection of the view that "only theology is equipped to answer the why questions. What on Earth is a why question?"<sup>17</sup> He tries to dismiss them: "Some questions simply do not deserve an answer."<sup>18</sup> He dismisses them, failing to distinguish between questions that can be justified by the PSR and those that cannot. Asking about the existence of a phenomenon like the universe is certainly justified, especially if we want a complete and logically adequate explanation.

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The second part of our previously given definition of naturalism refers to methodological materialism i.e. the view that "everything there is ... can be studied by the methods appropriate to

<sup>13</sup> Leibniz, "Nothing can be true or real or existing unless there is a sufficient reason that makes it so and not otherwise." *Monadology*, par. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280.

<sup>15</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 46.

<sup>16</sup> Baha'u'llah, *The Kitab-i-Aqdas*, p. 175.

<sup>17</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 80.

<sup>18</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 80.

studying that world.”<sup>19</sup>In other words, all phenomena must be studied and explained scientifically, i.e. in strictly material or physical terms; we cannot appeal to any non-physical causes in our explanations. All studies must adhere to the methods of natural science, i.e. be measurable/quantifiable, repeatable, objectively observable, and falsifiable. Ideally, we should be able to conduct or at least conceive of an actual experiment to help determine what is true, or minimally, what is false. Only that which can be scientifically established or at least is not forbidden by the scientific method can be called truth.

The adherence to methodological materialism creates several serious problems for the new atheists. First, there is the self-contradiction between the ontological claim that there are no super-natural or super-sensible aspects to reality<sup>20</sup> and the demand that all genuine knowledge meet the criteria of the scientific method. A scientific experiment, by its very nature, can only tell us about physical things and nothing at all one way or another about super-sensible entities. How then, could an experiment prove or disprove the existence of the super-natural or super-sensible? Thus, the new atheism’s basic ontological premise is undermined by its demand for scientifically verifiable knowledge.

Similar problems arise with the claim that only knowledge meeting the demands of the scientific method is genuine knowledge, i.e. is not faith or “belief without evidence.” How could such an epistemological claim be verified scientifically? What experiment could prove that no other kinds of knowledge-claims are valid? Obviously, the new atheists’ claim about genuine knowledge refutes itself because it cannot meet its own criteria for testing knowledge claims. Hence, their position is untenable.

If the new atheism’s foundational claims are self-undermining and self-refuting, then the assertion of these claims as if they were genuine truth is no more than an act of faith, or as Dawkins puts it, “belief without evidence.”<sup>21</sup> This leads the new atheists into another self-contradiction insofar as they are opposed to believing anything on faith. Harris, whose book is called *The End of Faith*, says “faith is simply *unjustified* belief”<sup>22</sup> by which he means “unjustified” by the scientific method, while Dennett approvingly quotes Mark Twain’s jest, “Faith is believing what you know ain’t so.”<sup>23</sup> Hitchens, too, views faith as belief without evidence.<sup>24</sup> Consequently, the new atheists are in the same position as their target, religious faith, and, ironically, make themselves the inadvertent target of their own grand pronouncements about the untenability of faith: “Our enemy is nothing other

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<sup>19</sup> Ted Honderich, editor, *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, p. 604.

<sup>20</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 57.

<sup>21</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.

<sup>22</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p.65; original emphasis.

<sup>23</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 321.

<sup>24</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p.150.

than faith itself,"<sup>25</sup> "It is therefore the very nature of faith to serve as an impediment to further inquiry,"<sup>26</sup> "faith and superstition distort our whole picture of the world."<sup>27</sup>

What all this demonstrates is that the philosophical foundations of the new atheism, specifically, the epistemological and ontological root premises, are flawed inasmuch as they seem not to meet the basic logical criterion of internal consistency or non-self-contradiction. However, other serious philosophical problems remain.

#### **4. Is God a "Scientific Hypothesis"?**

Another problem grows out of ontological materialism, especially for Dawkin's view that "the God question is not in principle and forever outside the remit of science"<sup>28</sup> and "the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other."<sup>29</sup> These statements entangle him in a flagrant self-contradiction. How could a natural, material experiment prove or disprove the existence of a non-material entity? How could God, Who is not a natural object, Who does not exist in the limitations of time and space be proven or disproven by an experiment precisely limiting itself to entities that exist in time and space? God is subject to scientific study and experimentation only if He is a quantifiable, physical or material being, i.e. part of nature—but He is not. In the words of Abdu'l-Bahá,

The Divine Reality is Unthinkable, Limitless, Eternal, Immortal and Invisible . . . It [the "Infinite Reality"] . . . cannot be described in terms which apply to the phenomenal sphere of the created world.<sup>30</sup>

Quite obviously, the existence or non-existence of God is beyond the reach of natural scientific study, though, as we shall see below, it is not necessarily beyond the man's *reasoning* capacity.

This problem also dogs Dennett's work, though from a different perspective. He proposes to study religion scientifically—a project not in itself in disagreement with the Bahá'í Writings—but studying the human phenomenon of religion scientifically in evolutionary terms and establishing atheism, the denial of God's existence, on a scientific basis are two different things. Science is somewhat equipped to do the first, but as seen above, is entirely unequipped to prove or disprove God's existence. Dennett confuses and conflates these two different projects.

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<sup>25</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 131.

<sup>26</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 45—46.

<sup>27</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 41.

<sup>28</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 96.

<sup>29</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 72.

<sup>30</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 50; also *SAQ* 293.

### **5. The Problem of Scientism**

A third major difficulty with the new atheist's adherence to naturalism is their dogmatic belief that science can adequately deal with all human questions and problems, a position often referred to as 'scientism.'

In ethics, for example, it is difficult to see how a scientific experiment could establish whether it is right or wrong to cheat on a spouse or speak to the nature of honour, justice, goodness, or the nature and extent of human rights. Nor can the scientific method tell one what values to adopt or whether one's sense of having a meaningful existence is justified. Science cannot tell us who is worthy of love or not, nor about personal authenticity, justice, or beauty. To deal with such subjects, science would have to reduce them to a physical and measurable behaviour—such as counting how many times a nurse smiles at a patient to measure her level of caring and concern. No great reflection is needed to discover such counting is neither appropriate nor adequate to the task.

### **6. Meme Theory and HADDs**

A fourth difficulty is that the New Atheists—especially Dawkins, Dennett and Harris—also demonstrate a logical inconsistency by violating their own demand that all genuine knowledge must conform to the requirements of the scientific method.

According to this paradigm, knowledge claims not scientifically testable are no better than superstition or religion. Yet what are we to make of Dawkins' and Dennett's adherence to meme theory?

In order to explain the spread and powerful hold of religion, they assert that religion is a *meme*, i.e. a "unit[] of cultural imitation"<sup>31</sup> which functions like a gene for ideas, beliefs, customs, feelings, skills, etc. These are transferred through teaching, imitation and law. As Dennett points out, these memes operate for their own benefit, and must be studied in light of the question "*cui bono?*"<sup>32</sup> i.e. who gains?

The basic problem with meme theory is that it does not meet the demands of the scientific method. To examine this further, I offer ten reasons why memes are no more than metaphors and not products of reasoning by the scientific method: Memes do not exist in space

- (10)are not physical
- (11)have no internal structure i.e. no physically separate or component parts or clear boundaries
- (12)are not involved in any measurable energetic interactions within themselves, amongst themselves or with other beings
- (13)do not show action, agency, e.g. competition, accommodation

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<sup>31</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 223; also Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 78.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 84.

- (14) have no inherent interests or even self-interests (all their interests are attributed to them externally)
- (15) have no intention and cannot act intentionally
- (16) have no inherent reproductive capacity
- (17) cannot be quantified
- (18) "have no chromosomes or loci or alleles or sexual recombination."<sup>33</sup>
- (19)

Memes also lack definitional precision. How, for example, do we distinguish between the meme phenotype and the genotype? The examples provided by Dawkins and Dennett could refer to either. This lack of precision matters because evolutionary theory requires this distinction; without it meme-theory is simply not a scientific evolutionary theory.

Consequently, Dawkins' and Dennett's meme theory is based on a fallacy—that is, a false analogy—not only because memes are so unlike genes, but also because, unlike genes, memes are not scientifically testable. Furthermore, treating memes as if they had inherent interests is an example of a logical mistake known as the *pathetic fallacy*, which treats inanimate things as if they were alive. Since a non-living thing has no intentions or goals, it cannot have any inherent interests to achieve or lose. Any 'interests' it has must be imposed from the outside. In other words, Dennett and Dawkins ignore the overwhelming list of dissimilarities that undermine any attempt to establish a valid analogy in order to explain their naturalistic theory about the prevalence of religion.

Dennett's claim that memes exist "because words exist"<sup>34</sup> is also untenable. In the first place, identifying words with memes does not escape the problems noted above. A word may exist physically as sound or as physical marks on paper, but how does it have intentions or interests or a reproductive mechanism? What internal energy processes are involved in it?

The second problem is that the suggestion is confused. By "words" is he referring to the *word-form*, or the *idea-content*? There is no necessary connection between a word-form and what it means, e.g. 'dog' can be 'Hund', 'perro,' 'cane' and 'koira.' The form of the word and its content are not identical; the same idea-content can be expressed by different word-forms. In that case, which is the meme—the word-form or the idea-content? If the meme is the word-form, then different words for the same thing must express different idea-content; this creates problems vis-à-vis translation between different languages and even dialects of one language: different form equals different meaning. If the meme is the idea-content, then word-forms cannot be memes. But if the meme is the idea-content where does it exist? How does it have interests or intentions?

In the third place, we can see the possibilities of various confusions between genotype (idea-content) and phenotype (individual expression) arising here. If Dennett's suggestion is true, how are the genotype (idea-content) and phenotype (individual word) connected? Since there is no necessary connection between a word-form and its idea-content, how can one be the expression of the other?

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<sup>33</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.223.

<sup>34</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 80.

In meme theory, Dawkins and Dennett attempt to establish their own unscientific superstition in order to explain the prevalence of the superstition of religion. Similar remarks might be directed at Dennett's theory of the HADD, the brain's supposed 'hyper-action agent detection device' which attributes agency or intention to events and entities around us.<sup>35</sup> This HADD is the alleged origin of our belief in super-natural phenomenon including God or gods.<sup>36</sup> Dennett provides no evidence for the HADD's existence, merely accepting it as a convenient supposition for his purpose. In short, memes and HADDs are no more than reified concepts. To his credit, Dennett admits that the HADD and memes are no more than a theory<sup>37</sup> but that admission only leads to a further problem: Why does he spend so much time advocating an explanation that is frankly unscientific and for which there is no scientific evidence of any kind?

Obviously there is an enormous inconsistency in criticising religion for its speculations and lack of scientific explicability and at the same time indulging in such speculations in order to explain religion away. This is a clear case of the logical error of *special pleading*.

When we strip away memes and HADDs, a significant portion of Dawkins' and Dennett's argument falls by the wayside. Without them, they simply lack their sought-after naturalistic explanation of the origin and spread of religion. Their indulgence in sheer speculation means they have failed in "investigating the biological basis of religion,"<sup>38</sup> and indeed, have failed to investigate religion scientifically at all. They have reified a concept—just as they claim religion does—and then treated their reification as an established fact.

#### **7. Adopting Eastern Mysticism**

Harris falls into a similar self-contradiction regarding his demand for scientific rigour for all religious claims on one hand, and his reliance on non-scientific claims on the other. He asserts that eastern mysticism offers a rationally valid alternative to religion. In defence of mysticism he writes,

*Mysticism is a rational enterprise. Religion is not. The mystic has recognised something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic has reasons for what he believes and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science) or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism).<sup>39</sup>*

Aside from the fact that his initial claim that mysticism is rational is an unsupported assertion, there are numerous other problems with his claim. First, if mysticism is "consciousness prior to thought," then it cannot be "susceptible to rational discussion," which is entirely dependent on conceptual and

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<sup>35</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 109—115.

<sup>36</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 123.

<sup>37</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 310.

<sup>38</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 71—72.

<sup>39</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 221.

rational thought to work. This problem is one of the reasons many mystics resort to metaphor, poetry, story, myth in an effort to convey in words that which is beyond conceptual thinking. We simply cannot discuss anything that is “prior to thought.”

Second, how could a mystic justify, i.e. provide “reasons for what he believes” if what he has experienced is “prior to thought”? What reasons could adequately justify that which is beyond all thought? *Only the purely subjective experience itself can provide adequate justification.* This conflicts with Harris’s adherence to the scientific method and its rejection of subjective experience as a valid source of knowledge. Genuine, true knowledge is objective and scientific.

Third, Harris’s phrase “the roiling mystery of the world” is, in light of his advocacy of empirical, scientific knowledge, a piece of non-sense. What does it even mean? How could one devise an experiment to determine how mysterious the world is? Obviously Harris, in his advocacy of eastern mysticism as a supposed anti-dote to religion is, like Dawkins and Dennett, in serious contradiction to the scientific premises he supposedly adopts as the basis of his thinking.

#### **8. Disproving God’s Existence**

Because the new atheists realise that atheism requires denial of God’s existence, they naturally attempt to refute or dismiss various arguments for God’s existence. We shall review a number of them.

Hitchens, for example, tries to disprove the First Mover argument by pointing out that the alleged First Mover or First Cause of all beings, God, must himself have a designer.<sup>40</sup> In other words, Hitchens asks, ‘Who made God?’ or as Dennett puts it in launching a similar argument, “What caused God?”<sup>41</sup> Unfortunately, asking this question implicitly assumes that God is a natural object like all others, subject to the same laws and conditions of existence, such as time, space, and the need for an external cause. In this oversight, he is, as shall be shown, joined by Dawkins, Dennett and Harris as well, all of whom engage in this logical category mistake which confuses one kind of object with an altogether different one. God is a super-natural; treating Him as a natural object is simply beating a straw man and not dealing with God as religions actually conceive of Him. It should briefly be noted that Abdu’l-Bahá accepts the First Mover argument and rejects the concept of an actual infinite sequence of causation as “manifestly absurd.”<sup>42</sup> A First Mover is a logical and physical necessity.

Dawkins rejects the “unmoved Mover” argument, the “uncaused Cause” argument and the “cosmological argument”<sup>43</sup> by arguing that proponents assume that God is exempt from infinite regress. If, as Dawkins believes, God is not exempt—i.e. if he believes God is like all other natural objects in requiring an external cause and a mover—then Dawkins is opening the door to the

<sup>40</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 71.

<sup>41</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 242.

<sup>42</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*, p. 18.

<sup>43</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p.100—102.

concept of an actual infinite regress (as distinct from a abstract infinite regress of numbers). This creates logical conundrums of which he seems unaware. For example, consider the case of infinite regress in motion: if each object depends on an external mover to fulfill the conditions of its own coming into motion, in an infinite regress of objects no object will ever go into motion because the external condition for coming into motion is never fulfilled. Each object will always be waiting to be put into motion by some other object. That is precisely why Abdu'l-Bahá says that the idea of an actual infinite regress in motion is "manifestly absurd."<sup>44</sup> Other absurdities of an actual infinite can be discovered by contemplating the problems of Hilbert's Hotel, which has an infinite number of rooms.<sup>45</sup>

Abdu'l-Bahá accepts the argument of the Uncaused Cause, otherwise known as the argument from contingency. "Nothing is caused by itself"<sup>46</sup>—i.e. the existence of the universe and the things in it is not *necessary* but is *contingent* or *dependent* on something else. As Abdu'l-Bahá says, if "a characteristic of contingent beings is dependency, and this dependency is an essential necessity, therefore, there must be an independent being whose independence is essential."<sup>47</sup> Without something outside of them that exists necessarily, *by its own nature*, contingent beings could not come into existence in the first place. For this reason he says,

The least change produced in the form of the smallest thing proves the existence of a creator: then can this great universe, which is endless, be self-created and come into existence from the action of matter and the elements? How self-evidently wrong is such a supposition!<sup>48</sup>

In his reference to the universe, he also shows his acceptance of the Cosmological Argument according to which the universe did not have to exist and therefore requires a Creator—i.e. a non-physical being exempt from the contingent existence of natural objects. This being is God. Applying this principle specifically to humankind Abdu'l-Bahá says, "One of the proofs and demonstrations of the existence of God is the fact that man did not create himself: nay, his creator and designer is another than himself."<sup>49</sup> This statement also shows support for the controversial idea of design. This idea, so vigorously castigated by the new atheists, is clearly advocated in the following statement:

This composition and arrangement [of the cosmos], through the wisdom of God and His preexistent might, were produced from one natural organization, which was composed and combined with the greatest strength, conformable to wisdom, and according to a

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<sup>44</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Tablet to Auguste Forel*, p. 18.

<sup>45</sup> See for example <http://www.woodford.redbridge.sch.uk/rs/year10-11/hilberthotel.html>

<sup>46</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 100.

<sup>47</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6.

<sup>49</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 5.

universal law. From this it is evident that it is the creation of God, and *is not a fortuitous composition and arrangement*.<sup>50</sup>

Those who are concerned about a clash between science and religion on this issue, should bear in mind that the idea of design and evolution are not necessarily in conflict. God may have created matter with its stock of inherent potentials and evolution is the process by which these potentials are actualized. In assuming that the concept of design and evolution are necessarily antagonistic, the new atheists have simply leapt to an unwarranted conclusion.

Dawkins repeats the logical category mistake of naturalizing God when he presents the concept of God as a scientific hypothesis "like any other . . . God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact, discoverable in principle if not in practice."<sup>51</sup> However, as noted previously, God is not a natural object, and therefore, not amenable to study by the scientific method. Consequently, the existence of God cannot be a "scientific hypothesis." Dawkins must take this view because to admit the possibility of an object not amenable to scientific study opens the door to other modes of knowing that he does not wish to acknowledge. Nor does he explain by what method we might discover God, even if only in principle.

Dawkins commits the category mistake of naturalizing God by stating that the universe—or a Dutchman's Pipe plant—is too complex to have been created by a simple being. Thus, God would have to be at least as complex as His creation—and the existence of such a super-complex being is even more "improbable"<sup>52</sup> than the chance developments of evolution. Later he elaborates the idea that God must necessarily be super-complex: "A God capable of continuously monitoring and controlling the individual status of every particle in the universe cannot be simple."<sup>53</sup> He also describes God as a "calculating agent"<sup>54</sup> of improbable complexity. Underlying Dawkins' assertions is the assumption that God is a natural object, composed of matter subject to time, space and causality, and Who reasons discursively in linear logical sequence. But that is precisely what religion says God is *not*. Once again, Dawkins sets up a straw man—his naturalistic definition of God—and then tries to disprove it. *He does not really deal with God as presented by religion.*

Furthermore, Dawkins tries to defuse the traditional argument from degree according to which the degrees of certain qualities such as goodness, perfection, or truth require that there be a highest degree as a reference point for the lesser degrees. He replies that there must also be degrees of smelliness and therefore, a final "peerless stinker"<sup>55</sup> must exist. Obviously he does not understand the argument, which requires us to distinguish between concrete descriptors (smelliness, redness) and "transcendentals"—i.e. attributes of being itself such as unity (one-ness), goodness (in itself),

<sup>50</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 181; emphasis added.

<sup>51</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 72.

<sup>52</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 146; see also 176.

<sup>53</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 178.

<sup>54</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 176.

<sup>55</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 102.

truth, and perfection. These can be applied to all beings—which smelliness or redness cannot be. Once again, we observe how Dawkins sets up a straw man argument and thinks he has demolished the traditional argument when he has not even addressed it in the first place.

In *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Bahá advances the argument from perfection as a proof for the existence of God.<sup>56</sup> He says, "The imperfections of the contingent world are in themselves a proof of the perfections of God."<sup>57</sup> To say that something is imperfect or approaches perfection more than something else implies the existence of a perfect standard by which to measure imperfection. Such a perfect standard, ultimately, can only refer to God Who possesses all perfections to a supreme degree, including the perfection of existence. Dawkins tries to defuse this argument by referring to Kant who allegedly identified the "slippery assumption that 'existence' is more perfect than 'non-existence.'"<sup>58</sup> The obvious problem is that it makes no sense to say that 'non-existence' is as perfect (or imperfect) as 'existence' since we cannot ascribe any attributes to 'non-existence' at all, while it is rationally meaningful to assert that existence has certain positive qualities—i.e. perfections.

The idea that existence is a perfection is essential to the ontological argument,<sup>59</sup> which Dawkins and Dennett discuss at some length, making a great deal of its difficulties. This is rather disingenuous insofar as the ontological argument is controversial even among Christian philosophers. Aquinas, for example, rejected it as invalid and it has never been a mainstay of arguments for the existence of God. Rejection of the ontological argument does not necessarily entail rejection of God and so disproving the ontological theory does little or nothing to advance the cause of atheism. Curiously enough, however, the great 20<sup>th</sup> century logician Kurt Goedel revived it, as did philosophers Charles Hartshorne and Alvin Plantinga. The continuing philosophical debate about this argument shows that the issue is more complex than Dawkins and Dennett let on.

A survey of the new atheist's work shows their handling of the issue of philosophical proofs for God's existence is very weak, and demonstrates little understanding of the subject. Aside from the problems noted above, it should be noted that no major philosophers, even those with religious commitments, have ever seriously considered the "argument from scripture," the "argument from admired religious scientists," the "argument from personal experience," or the "argument from beauty"<sup>60</sup> as proofs for God's existence. Pascal's Wager is, of course, not an argument about God's existence as Dawkins seems to think, but is an argument about belief.

## 9. Morality Versus Religion

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<sup>56</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p.5. The chapter is entitled "Proofs and Evidences of the Existence of God."

<sup>57</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 5.

<sup>58</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 107.

<sup>59</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 241; Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 103—110.

<sup>60</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 110—132.

One of the major goals of the new atheists is to separate morality from religion in order to undermine the argument that we need religion to be moral. They argue that enormous harm has been done in the name of religion and do not hesitate to provide exhaustive lists of horrors perpetrated in the name of faith. However, problems arise with their belief that such crimes are less likely to be committed in the name of atheism and that atheism has a more humane record.

In fact, the record of Marxist-Leninism—Communism—in which atheism is a foundational and integral part, shows that such is not the case. In the single century of Communist rule, approximately 100 million people were programmatically killed in purges, vast slave labour camp systems, and manmade famines—not to mention the brutalities of the secret police.<sup>61</sup> Even a cursory examination of the history of Communist countries makes it clear that atheism (which was taught as a school subject) and atheists have no edge on moral behaviour. The notion that the abolition of religion and its replacement by programmatic atheism would bring the end of murderous fanaticism is not borne out by history.

Only Harris seems fully aware of this problem—and his response is to say that “communism was little more than a political religion.”<sup>62</sup> In other words, he tries to re-define communism as a religion—despite the fact that atheism is integral to the ontology, epistemology, ethics, philosophy of man, and social and political philosophy of Marx, Engels, Lenin and Mao. For obvious reasons Harris’ response is not credible. Hitchens admits that “emancipation from religion does not always produce the best mammal either”<sup>63</sup> but this is a statement made in passing and is not explored as to its implications for his indictment of religion.

The New Atheists believe that we do need not religion as a basis for our values. The two must be separated because in their view we can rely on reason as the basis of our morals because we want to “commit ourselves to finding a rational foundation for our ethics.”<sup>64</sup> Says Hitchens : “We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion.”<sup>65</sup> For support, he turns to Kant’s categorical imperative which states “I am never to act otherwise than so that I could also will that my maxim should become a universal law.”<sup>66</sup> The chief problem with the categorical imperative (CI) is that it is an empty claim: it gives no specific guidance: a psychopath might very well agree that all people act as he does; Hitler, Stalin, Mao etc. expected them to—and struck first. In fact, the CI ultimately prohibits nothing and leaves our own subjective tastes as a standard for morals. This is obviously unsatisfactory as a basis for social order which requires unified moral standards.

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<sup>61</sup> *The Black Book of Communism*, London: Harvard University Press, 1999.

<sup>62</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 79.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Hitchens , *God Is Not Great*, p. 250.

<sup>64</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 177.

<sup>65</sup> Christopher Hitchens , *God Is Not Great*, p. 6.

<sup>66</sup> Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>

In a similar vein, Dennett writes, "Maybe people everywhere can be trusted and hence allowed to make their own informed choices. Informed choice! What an amazing and revolutionary idea!"<sup>67</sup> Superficially this sounds good and reasonable, but if we ask "What principles shall guide these informed choices?" difficulties multiply. Whose principles? What shall ground them? Why should I accept them? What happens if I disagree with them? Moreover, an even deeper question arises for all ethical systems grounded only on reason: "Why should I be reasonable? What if it's to my advantage to act unreasonably? What if I don't feel like being reasonable to others?"

There are two problems with this position. The first is that, as Abdu'l-Bahá points out, ethical systems based purely on human reason can lead us to different, conflicting and even self-contradictory answers.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, ethical viewpoints may be little more than rationalized personal preferences. Obviously, such a plethora of competing viewpoints makes society unworkable since the existence of society depends on *an objective standard applicable to all*. In other words, ethical systems based only on reason lack authority and they lack an objective foundation applicable to all.

#### **10. The Need for Absolute Ground in Ethics**

The new atheists reject the necessity of an enforcing authority for morals. Dennett, as we have seen, thinks we can rely on individuals making their own choices,<sup>69</sup> and Harris thinks we can rely on our moral intuitions (more below) as well as Kant's other formulation of the categorical imperative i.e. that we must treat others as ends-in-themselves and never as merely a means to another end.<sup>70</sup> Hitchens, it is fair to say, speaks for these authors when he writes, "there is no requirement for any enforcing or super-natural authority."<sup>71</sup>

There are two problems with this position. First, while it may (or may not) be an ideal to strive for, the practical problem remains that without consequences—without reward and punishment—any ethical system becomes a dead letter, a mere set of suggestions that some will follow and others will not. That is why the Bahá'í Writings state "That which traineth the world is Justice, for it is upheld by two pillars, reward and punishment. These two pillars are the sources of life to the world."<sup>72</sup> Bahá'u'lláh also says, "the canopy of world order is upraised upon the two pillars of reward and punishment."<sup>73</sup> There must be consequences to action in order to encourage obedience.

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<sup>67</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 327.

<sup>68</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 297.

<sup>69</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 327.

<sup>70</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 186; this is another formulation of the categorical imperative in Kant's *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, <http://philosophy.eserver.org/kant/metaphys-of-morals.txt>

<sup>71</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 266.

<sup>72</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p.27.

<sup>73</sup> *Tablets of Bahá'u'lláh*, p. 126.

The second problem is that mere human authority, be it of reason or government lacks the authority to make people accept moral precepts; they lack the inherent authority of a God Who is the author of all that exists. They lack the guarantee of correctness, the certainty, the objective viewpoint and foundation that only God can provide in guiding our actions. Yet this objective foundation is exactly what people need—as the new atheists themselves acknowledge. This is precisely why Kant thought God was necessary as a regulative idea or principle in morals.

As an objective ground for ethics, the new atheists propose either an innate moral sense that exists in all human beings, or in the case of Dawkins and Harris, in biology, i.e. genetics. These provide an absolute ground or absolute reference point needed to make moral choices more than the mere expression of personal preferences. Hitchens tells us that “conscience is innate”<sup>74</sup> and that “Human decency is not derived from religion. It precedes it.”<sup>75</sup> Harris also asserts the existence of an innate moral sense:

*Any one who does not harbour some rudimentary sense that cruelty is wrong is unlikely to learn that it is by reading . . . The fact that our ethical intuitions have their roots in biology reveals that our efforts to ground ethics in religious conceptions of “moral duty” are misguided. . . . We simply do not need religious ideas to motivate us to live ethical lives.<sup>76</sup>*

Dennett’s willingness to trust everyone’s informed choices also implies that we all possess an inner moral standard of reasonableness to which we will adhere. Dawkins tries to ground the innate moral sense in our genetic make-up.<sup>77</sup>

From the view-point of the Bahá’í Writings, this position is not so much incorrect as incomplete, and, therefore, leads to an untenable conclusion. Humankind has a divine or spiritual aspect,<sup>78</sup> that might be compared to the innate moral sense posited by the new atheists. However, the Writings also note that humankind has an animal nature in conflict with our spiritual nature, and may overcome it by force or self-deception. The new atheists have not taken this animal nature into account in the unfolding of our moral lives and, therefore, have over-simplified the issue of innate moral intuitions. As Abdu’l-Bahá says,

*The promptings of the heart are sometimes satanic. How are we to differentiate them? How are we to tell whether a given statement is an inspiration and prompting of the heart through the merciful assistance or through the satanic agency?<sup>79</sup>*

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<sup>74</sup> Christopher Hitchens , *God is not Great*, p. 256.

<sup>75</sup> Christopher Hitchens , *God is not Great*, p. 266.

<sup>76</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 172.

<sup>77</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Chapter Six.

<sup>78</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 118.

<sup>79</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 254.

Because this question cannot be answered immanently—i.e. from the standpoint of reason or intuition alone—we require an external guide or objective standpoint by which to evaluate our ethical promptings and decisions. This is precisely the role filled by God and the Manifestation of God (i.e. an Avatar or Prophet such as Krishna, Christ or Bahá'u'lláh). “He [man] has the animal side as well as the angelic side, and the aim of an educator is to so train human souls that their angelic aspect may overcome their animal side.”<sup>80</sup> However, if we reject God as the ground of our morality, then all moral systems inevitably fall into relativism and conflict as various moral conceptions compete. This is not conducive to the peaceful world both the new atheists and Bahá'ís want to establish.

In other words, the Bahá'í Writings lead us to believe that there is an *innate moral sense* as part of our spiritual nature but that this moral sense is only potential until it is *activated by education* from parents, teachers but above all, by the Manifestations of God. The view that this innate moral sense may have biological roots is not a problem from a Bahá'í perspective, indeed, is to be expected given that man is an embodied creature. Thus, Bahá'ís may agree that science can study the biological *basis* of ethics, without at the same time succumbing to the reductionist view that all ethics can be *reduced to biology*.

### **11. Faith Versus Reason**

The new atheists posit an inherent conflict between faith and reason. Hitchens sums up their views when he writes, “All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule.”<sup>81</sup>

Harris claims, “Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity—a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.”<sup>82</sup>

For his part, Dawkins says, “religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others.”<sup>83</sup> Such sentiments inevitably lead us to questions about the nature and scope of reason.

The new atheists' work makes it clear that in their model of reasoning, they identify reason with science and the scientific method, i.e. with a naturalist view of reason in which reason must function within the limits of nature as understood by science. Any knowledge-claims that allege transcendence of the natural realm—and that therefore cannot meet the scientific standard of knowledge—are not true knowledge. Consequently, reason is fundamentally incompatible with

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<sup>80</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 235.

<sup>81</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, p. 64.

<sup>82</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 25.

<sup>83</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 346.

belief in super-natural or super-sensible beings or realities, and is also incompatible with faith—which is “simply unjustified belief.”<sup>84</sup>

Indeed, faith shows an unwillingness “to stoop to reason when it [faith] has no good reason to believe.”<sup>85</sup> In effect, faith is inherently irrational and, therefore, inherently incompatible with reason. Whatever we designate as knowledge must be rational, i.e. explicable in rational terms, and must fall within the limits of nature as established by science. *There is no such thing as knowledge that transcends our natural limits*; reason only functions correctly when it limits itself to the natural world. Any attempt to reason beyond physical nature opens the way to theological superstition.

We have already discussed the logical short-comings of this viewpoint, i.e. its inability to meet its own standards for genuine knowledge. Since experiments are limited to the natural realm, no experiment can tell us anything one way or another about the existence or non-existence about super-natural or super-sensible aspects of reality. Consequently, this viewpoint is itself a form of faith, i.e. “belief without evidence.”<sup>86</sup>

Because the new atheism rejects all knowledge and reasoning that is not compatible with naturalism, it is not only a form of positivism but also a form of rationalism. Positivism, as we have already seen, is fundamentally incompatible with the Bahá'í Writings: Abdu'l-Bahá is very clear in his criticism of positivism's exclusive reliance on sense knowledge.<sup>87</sup> He identifies this position with materialism. At the same time he also points out the limitations of reason, i.e. that it does not necessarily lead to genuine knowledge or to certainty. Of course, this does not mean he demotes reason—the Bahá'í Writings go to extraordinary lengths to promote it and extol its importance—but it does mean that the model of reasoning inherent in the Writings recognizes that, while reason is absolutely necessary, it is not sufficient to the acquisition of knowledge of reality. There are some things that reason alone cannot tell us. This position may be described as ‘moderate rationalism:’ *reason has inherent limitations*.

That is why Abdu'l-Bahá points out that the mind—which is “a power of the human spirit”<sup>88</sup>—must be augmented by a super-natural power if it is to acquire knowledge of super-sensible realities: “the human spirit, unless assisted by the spirit of faith, does not become acquainted with the divine secrets and the heavenly realities.”<sup>89</sup> Reason alone cannot take us beyond the natural realm to acquire super-sensible truths. Nor can it provide complete certainty which is why other ways of knowing are necessary. Abdu'l-Bahá points out that

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<sup>84</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 65.

<sup>85</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 66.

<sup>86</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232.

<sup>87</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 297; *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, 20.

<sup>88</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208

<sup>89</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

*the bounty of the Holy Spirit gives the true method of comprehension which is infallible and indubitable. This is through the help of the Holy Spirit which comes to man, and this is the condition in which certainty can alone be attained.*<sup>90</sup>

Similarly, in discussing various proofs of God, Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*if the inner perception be open, a hundred thousand clear proofs become visible. Thus, when man feels the indwelling spirit, he is in no need of arguments for its existence; but for those who are deprived of the bounty of the spirit, it is necessary to establish external arguments.*<sup>91</sup>

In other words, when the mind is clear and open, we can perceive directly that which we otherwise must laboriously prove by discursive reasoning. We acquire knowledge by immediate insight because we are enlightened by the “the luminous rays which emanate from the Manifestations.”<sup>92</sup> Hence, while the new atheists tend towards an extreme rationalism joined with positivism, the Bahá'í Writings espouse a moderate rationalism that recognizes the strengths and limits of reason as well as other ways of knowing the super-sensible aspects of reality.

Consequently, in the Bahá'í view, there is no inherent clash between faith and reason which for the new atheists is rooted in their naturalistic model of reason and knowledge. In their model, faith can only be akin to ignorance, “belief without evidence” as Dawkins says, and, therefore, blind. Obviously this is not the Bahá'í view, given Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that faith is “first, conscious knowledge, and second, the practice of good deeds.”<sup>93</sup> The identification of faith with “conscious knowledge” emphasizes—not just the importance of knowledge in the Bahá'í view of faith—but the importance of reflective, thought-through knowledge. Furthermore, Abdu'l-Bahá says, “If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.”<sup>94</sup> Here we observe the Bahá'í allegiance to rationalism, although not to the naturalistic or positivist rationalism of the new atheists. This statement clearly implies faith and reason must work together just as he portrays faith and knowledge working together like the two wings of a bird.<sup>95</sup>

From this we may conclude that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings agree on the undesirability of blind faith, but they do not agree on the nature of reason or its legitimate scope.

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<sup>90</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 299.

<sup>91</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 6; emphasis added.

<sup>92</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 108.

<sup>93</sup> *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 383; also *Tablets of Abdu'l-Bahá*, Vol. 3, p. 549.

<sup>94</sup> *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 240.

<sup>95</sup> *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 382.

## 12. Intolerance Against Religion

One of the areas of major disagreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheism is the latter's emphatic rejection—not just of the intolerance shown by religions—but also for inter-religious *tolerance*. Sam Harris writes,

*...religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others. I hope to show that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every person can believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principle forces driving us toward the abyss.*<sup>96</sup>

It is worth pointing out that this *atheist intolerance* is a peculiar self-contradiction, given the new atheism's attack on *religious intolerance*. It is a case of special pleading insofar as they apparently believe that atheist intolerance is somehow salutary. However, the new atheists go farther. Harris writes, "It is time we recognized that belief is not a private matter . . . beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are."<sup>97</sup>

If beliefs are as public as actions, then they are subject to law and punishment like actions. Here we observe a more repressive side of the new atheism, which also becomes apparent when Dawkins writes

*...children have a right not to have their minds addled by nonsense, and we as a society have a duty to protect them from it. So we should not allow more parents to teach their children to believe . . . than we should allow parents to knock their children's teeth out or lock them in a dungeon.*<sup>98</sup>

As with Harris's challenge to the concept of religion as a private personal matter, Dawkins' claim suggests the instrument of law may have to be used to "protect them [children] from it [religion]." Hitchens' suggestion that teaching religion is "child-abuse"<sup>99</sup> implies a similar line of action since child-abuse is not something any society should tolerate. He would at the very least forbid religious instruction until a child has attained "the age of reason."<sup>100</sup> Admittedly, Hitchens says he would not ban religion even if he could, but in light of his extreme rhetoric throughout his book, and especially in light of his claim that religious instruction is child abuse, this statement rings hollow. The intolerance of the new atheists—though it must be noted Dennett is largely free of this—also manifests itself in their expressions of contempt, insults, and other rhetorical hyperbole during their discussions. This might make their works more entertaining, but it does nothing to strengthen the their arguments.

<sup>96</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 15.

<sup>97</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 44.

<sup>98</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 367.

<sup>99</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 217.

<sup>100</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 220.

### 13. **Belief in Belief**

Perhaps the best portion of Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* deals with Dennett's concept of "belief in belief,"<sup>101</sup> which he describes not as belief in God but belief that belief in God is a good thing, "something to be encouraged and fostered wherever possible."<sup>102</sup> He points out that "It is entirely possible to be an atheist and believe in belief in God."<sup>103</sup> He also suggests that some individuals who find their faith in God waning, try to restore that faith by enlisting others to believe in God. According to Dennett, while many believe in God, "Many more people believe in belief in God"<sup>104</sup> which he regards as a kind of unconscious or unadmitted atheism. People no longer believe in God but in a concept.

This raises an interesting question: 'Is belief in the belief in God a kind of belief or unbelief?' Can a person who believes that belief in God is a good really be considered an atheist, or is belief in the goodness of the concept of God itself a kind of faith in God? Has such an individual not taken the first intellectual step towards belief in God, i.e. is such a person not already on the road to faith insofar as he or she recognizes that a unique goodness lies in a certain kind of belief? If, moreover, we combine this belief or faith with action, as required by Abdu'l-Bahá, then belief in belief may, indeed, be a kind of faith.

The *Bible* also contains a relevant passage on this issue. The father of a child whom Christ was asked to heal said, "Lord, I believe; help thou mine unbelief."<sup>105</sup> Like Dennett's believer in belief, he, too, suffered from unbelief—yet because he recognized the goodness of belief, Christ accepted his statement as a statement of belief and healed the child. Unlike Dennett, therefore, we may interpret belief in belief as a species of belief in God, at least in principle.

### 14: **Literalism**

One of the new atheists' major problems from a Bahá'í perspective is their consistent literalism in reading Jewish, Christian and Muslim scripture. They read scripture in its explicit and most obvious sense and reject non-literal understandings. Dawkins rails against theologians who "employ their favourite trick of interpreting selected scriptures as 'symbolic' rather than literal. By what criteria do you decide which passages are symbolic, which literal?"<sup>106</sup> Assuming there is no rational answer, he simply continues his literalism, a practice supported by Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. In this sense, the new atheists resemble their fundamentalist opponents who also have a strong tendency to literalist readings of scripture.

<sup>101</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 200.

<sup>102</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 221.

<sup>103</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 221.

<sup>104</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 222.

<sup>105</sup> *Mark*, 9: 24

<sup>106</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 280.

There are two kinds of problems with new atheist literalism. The first concerns their neglect of centuries, indeed, millennia of non-literalist interpretation of scripture. This is not the appropriate place for a survey of scriptural interpretation, so we shall be content with two examples from Christianity. Already as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> Century A.D., Augustine in his *"The Literal Interpretation of Genesis"* states that the creation story does not refer to seven actual days and that the time framework is not to be taken literally. The story conveys a spiritual meaning not a scientific account that can be expected to replicate modern cosmological findings. In more recent times, we have developed existential ways<sup>107</sup> of reading scripture as well as Bultmann's de-mythologizing which understand scripture as dealing with the possibilities and conditions of human existence and decision-making.<sup>108</sup>

In addition, we might consider the point that the spiritual teachings are communicated through "symbolic forms . . . which are designed to reach the more hidden levels in us of instinct, feeling, and intuition."<sup>109</sup> Dawkins seems unaware of these possibilities and gives no reasons why this history should be ignored, i.e. why we should simply accept his unsupported assertion that symbolic readings are all a "trick."

Whether we read symbolically or literally depends entirely on how we understand the intention or main idea of scriptural passage or story. It need not always be to convey actual historical events. It may, for example, function as a 'myth,' i.e. as an account in external worldly terms of inner psychological and spiritual processes. It may be to convey the nature of (an) existential choice, such as Abraham's or to draw attention to our need to recognize overwhelming and mysterious powers in our existence as in Job. In light of the history of scriptural interpretation, we can only conclude that the new atheists adopt literalism because it suits their polemical purpose of presenting religion in its most negative light.

From the viewpoint of the Bahá'í Writings, the second problem with literalism is that it precludes any non-literal or symbolic readings of scripture. Perhaps Abdu'l-Bahá sums up the Bahá'í position most succinctly when he states "The texts of the Holy Books are all symbolical."<sup>110</sup> For example, in *Some Answered Questions*, Abdu'l-Bahá provides extensive symbolic interpretations of Biblical books and stories; indeed, of the story of Adam and Eve, he says "if the literal meaning of this story were attributed to a wise man, certainly all would logically deny that this arrangement, this invention, could have emanated from an intelligent being."<sup>111</sup> Clearly he recognizes its irrationality at the literal level. Similarly, Baha'u'lláh's *Kitab-i-Iqan (The Book of Certitude)* is a non-literal, symbolic reading of portions of the Qu'ran and Muslim theological statements. Baha'u'lláh

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<sup>107</sup> For example, *An Existential Theology* by John Macquarrie.

<sup>108</sup> *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Vol. 1, "Rudolf Bultmann," p. 424.

<sup>109</sup> Jacob Needleman, *Why Can't We Be Good?*, p. 10.

<sup>110</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 220.

<sup>111</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 123.

makes it clear that those who do not apprehend the inner, symbolic meaning of these terms, will inevitably suffer:

*Yea, inasmuch as the peoples of the world have failed to seek from the luminous and crystal Springs of divine knowledge the inner meaning of God's holy words, they therefore have languished, stricken and sore athirst, in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness.*<sup>112</sup>

Insofar as the new atheism has confined itself to the outward, explicit meaning of scriptures, it is, like fundamentalism, lost “in the vale of idle fancy and waywardness.” He adds, that “the commentators of the Qur’án and they that follow the letter thereof misapprehended the inner meaning of the words of God and failed to grasp their essential purpose.”<sup>113</sup> This would certainly include the new atheists.

### **15. Presentism**

The final issue I’d like to discuss with regard to the new atheism is *presentism*, i.e. the logical fallacy of evaluating past societies which existed in completely different physical, cultural, economic, social and psychological circumstances by the standards of 21<sup>st</sup> century ideals as developed in advanced post-industrial nations. Presentism is a particular form of the logical flaw known as *anachronism* which distorts our understanding of past societies and actions by introducing incongruous standards into our study of past societies. It is rooted in overlooking, ignoring or misunderstanding the fact that earlier historical circumstances may have required responses that would strike us as immoral.

Hitchens’ discussion of the Old and New Testaments represents the presentism found throughout the work of the new atheists. His discussion of the “pitiless teachings of the God of Moses”<sup>114</sup> shows no awareness of the time-frame he is considering, nor of the cultural conditions and political circumstances with other tribes. The laws may, indeed, strike us as harsh or odd—but to expect the ancient Jews living in a ‘tough neighbourhood’ to have been governed by laws suitable for 21<sup>st</sup> century post-industrial democracies shows enormous historical insensitivity. Speaking of Christ’s beatitudes, Hitchens writes, “several are absurd and show a primitive attitude to agriculture (this extends to all mentions of plowing and sowing, and all allusions to mustard and fig trees)”<sup>115</sup> Why he would object to the agricultural references in parables delivered in a time when the vast majority of humans were involved in agriculture?

Ironically, the new atheists’ presentism is also a failure to adopt an evolutionary viewpoint on human development, a failure to recognize that just as humankind’s body has evolved, so has its capacity to understand moral and religious concepts. For that reason, expecting the same level of moral and religious understanding from ancient peoples living in wholly different circumstances is

<sup>112</sup> Bahá’u’lláh, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 105.

<sup>113</sup> Baha’u’llah, *The Kitab-i-Iqan*, p. 115.

<sup>114</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 100.

<sup>115</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 118.

not a rational response. Furthermore, presentism involves the new atheists in a self-contradiction with their declared evolutionary principles. Consequently, this self-contradiction undermines their claim to base their arguments in strictly rational and scientific principles.

## **PART II: AREAS OF CONVERGENCE OR AGREEMENT**

Despite the significant differences between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheism, there are at least seven points on which they agree or at least converge.

### **16. The Evolution of Religion**

Because of their advocacy of the scientific method, the new atheists agree that religion should be explored and discussed in evolutionary terms. Dennett, for example, says that the super-natural creatures “that crowd the mythologies of every people are the imaginative offspring of a hyperactive habit of finding agency wherever anything puzzles or frightens us.”<sup>116</sup>

The HADD (hyper-action agent detection device), which started out as a coping mechanism, a “Good Trick, rapidly became a practical necessity of human life”<sup>117</sup> and thereby came to control and blind us. Hitchens traces the origins of religion to earliest man’s “babyish attempts to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge.”<sup>118</sup> Now that we have science, we have outgrown religion.

Dawkins presents two theories about the evolutionary origin of religion. In one, religion’s roots are the evolution-based tendency for children to “believe without question whatever your grown-ups tell you.”<sup>119</sup> The other is that religion “is a by-product of the misfiring of several of these modules”<sup>120</sup> (i.e. data processing units in the brain as it evolved). Thus religion is essentially pathological, “an accidental by-product—a misfiring of something useful.”<sup>121</sup> The time has come to correct this widespread mistake.

From a Bahá'í perspective, there is no inherent difficulty with an evolutionary approach to understanding religion. Indeed, it is amazingly close to the teaching of progressive revelation according to which “the exoteric forms of the divine teachings”<sup>122</sup>—which are adapted to physical, historical and cultural conditions—evolve over time, while the inner or “esoteric

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<sup>116</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 123.

<sup>117</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, p. 116.

<sup>118</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 64.

<sup>119</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 203.

<sup>120</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 209.

<sup>121</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 218.

<sup>122</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 75.

meaning”<sup>123</sup> or “eternal verities”<sup>124</sup> remain constant to meet the universal needs of our human nature. Each Emissary from or—to use Bahá’u’lláh’s terminology—Manifestation of God

*restates the eternal verities enshrined in previous religions, coordinates their functions, distinguishes the essential and the authentic from the nonessential and spurious in their teachings, separates the God-given truths from the priest-prompted superstitions.*<sup>125</sup>

The Bahá’í Writings agree with Hitchens that much of what passes for religion is man-made. By distinguishing the essential from the non-essential and the man-made from the God-given; however, the Manifestation renews religion, providing it with a new outward form appropriate to new circumstances and new teachings or restatements<sup>126</sup> of universal truths suited to a new era. He cleanses religion of that which is “man-made.”<sup>127</sup> Through this process of cleansing reform and augmentation, religion evolves and continues to evolve without any foreseeable end.

Consequently, Bahá’ís are not surprised to find that different—perhaps to us shocking—laws were proclaimed in earlier times, that different practices held sway along with substantially different beliefs. Rather than condemn them from our current viewpoint we should try to understand these laws, practices and beliefs as agents in creating a unified society, often struggling for survival against implacable enemies. What the progressive evolution of religion shows is that God works through history and within the limitations of human beings endowed with free will, who often find themselves caught in very difficult circumstances. In these circumstances, it may have been necessary to punish adultery or theft very harshly for the cohesion and well-being of the group.

We should also remember that perhaps one people was more receptive to or perhaps more needful of God’s message than others and, thereby, became a special vehicle for human religious evolution. Surrounded by mortal enemies, these peoples may have been forced to take what strikes us now as gratuitously harsh action.

From a Bahá’í perspective, there is no difficulty in saying that religion started with a HADD, for example, or has roots in a child’s trust in its parents. Hitchens informs us there would be no churches “if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse and all manner of other things now easily explicable.”<sup>128</sup> This may be true, but anyone who thinks this disproves the truth of religion is simply committing the genetic fallacy, a logical

<sup>123</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 120.

<sup>124</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.

<sup>125</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.

<sup>126</sup> Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day is Come*, p. 108.

<sup>127</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 99.

<sup>128</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 65.

I took the liberty of adding “or perhaps more needful” to this in view of the idea that the Manifestation comes not to the most worthy but to the most needful. mkb

error according to which we de-value something on the basis of its origin instead of its present state.<sup>129</sup>

HADD, childish trust or childish fear are only the avenues by which religious phenomena first appeared in the world—and these avenues of emergence, determined as they are by their cultural circumstances, do not necessarily negate the truth value inherent in the beliefs that appear. Given the vulnerability of their rather short lives, it makes no sense to expect that our ancestors would have the same sophisticated religious understanding that is available in our day. However, their lack of sophistication does not prove they were not ‘onto something’ in their intuitions about super-sensible realities. If we demythologize these beliefs, we may indeed find valuable insights.<sup>130</sup>

### **17. Crimes in God’s Name**

Another area of significant agreement between the Bahá’í Writings and the new atheists concerns the crimes that have often been committed in the name of religion, not to mention injustice and corruption. The Writings make no effort to conceal or sweeten the misdeeds that have been perpetrated under the guise of religious teachings. Frank recognition of these sad developments is integral to the doctrine of progressive revelation since all religions and civilizations follow the seasonal cycle which begins with a pure spring inspired by revelation but ends with a winter in which, according to Abdu’l-Bahá,

*only the name of the Religion of God remains, and the exoteric forms of the divine teachings. The foundations of the Religion of God are destroyed and annihilated, and nothing but forms and customs exist. Divisions appear . . .*<sup>131</sup>

Elsewhere he says,

*The beginnings of all great religions were pure; but priests, taking possession of the minds of the people, filled them with dogmas and superstitions, so that religion became gradually corrupt.*<sup>132</sup>

These corruptions led to false doctrines that encouraged war and destruction:

*I wish to explain to you the principal reason of the unrest among nations. The chief cause is the misrepresentation of religion by the religious leaders and teachers. They teach their followers to believe that their own form of religion is the only one pleasing to God . . . Hence arise among the*

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<sup>129</sup> For example, Hitchens commits this fallacy in the chapter entitled “The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin”: Religion’s Corrupt Beginnings.” P. 155.

<sup>130</sup> Paul Radin, *Primitive Man as Philosopher*.

<sup>131</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 74.

<sup>132</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Abdu’l-Bahá in London*, p. 125; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 406.

*peoples, disapproval, contempt, disputes and hatred. If these religious prejudices could be swept away, the nations would soon enjoy peace and concord.*<sup>133</sup>

In the words of Christopher Hitchens, “religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot.”<sup>134</sup> Overcoming these prejudices and divisions is the purpose of Baha’u’llah’s mission:

*The utterance of God is a lamp, whose light is these words: Ye are the fruits of one tree, and the leaves of one branch. Deal ye one with another with the utmost love and harmony, with friendliness and fellowship . . . So powerful is the light of unity that it can illuminate the whole earth.*<sup>135</sup>

The Writings also denounce religion’s attempts to suppress the development of science,<sup>136</sup> the ignorance of the clergy,<sup>137</sup> the undue wealth of the churches compared to the poverty of Christ and the masses<sup>138</sup>, and its interference in politics, among other things.<sup>139</sup> Although the Bahá’í Writings do not express themselves as flamboyantly as the new atheists, they are equally clear in condemning the abuses perpetrated by religion and are equally determined to eliminate such practices. Moreover, like the new atheist philosophies, the Writings view the elimination of religion as a better alternative to continued division and conflict: “If religion becomes the source of antagonism and strife, the absence of religion is to be preferred.”<sup>140</sup>

The Bahá’í Faith and the new atheists differ on this issue only insofar as the new atheists want to remedy this problem by abolishing religion altogether as an irremediable destructive force, while the Bahá’í Faith sees the solution in progressive revelation and above all, in the revelation of Baha’u’llah. In the Bahá’í view, atheism and strictly man-made moral systems will not achieve the desired goal of a world that is at peace with itself and its environment.

However, we must not forget that the new atheists and the Bahá’í Revelation are responses to the same problem, i.e. global disunity, ignorance and the depredations of corrupt religion. This fact forms a basis for positive dialogue with the new atheists despite the difference in solutions. Unfortunately, the dogmatic denial that religion has anything worthwhile to contribute to such a debate makes such a dialogue unlikely.

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<sup>133</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Paris Talks*, p. 45—46; see also *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 265.

<sup>134</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great*, p. 36.

<sup>135</sup> Baha’u’llah, *Gleanings from the Writings of Baha’u’llah*, p. 288

<sup>136</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 137.

<sup>137</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 104.

<sup>138</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 135.

<sup>139</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 136.

<sup>140</sup> Abdu’l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 117.

### **18. Respecting Science and Reason**

Another significant area of agreement between the Bahá'í Writings and the new atheists is importance of reason and science in human existence. Since we have already explored the new atheism's commitments to reason and rationality in the previous section, we shall point out a few Bahá'í statements on this subject to show that a basis for dialogue exists. For example, Abdu'l-Bahá says that "in this age the peoples of the world need the arguments of reason."<sup>141</sup> Elsewhere he proclaims, "Science is an effulgence of the Sun of Reality, the power of investigating and discovering the verities of the universe, the means by which man finds a pathway to God."<sup>142</sup> He sees no inherent and necessary conflict between reason, science and religion, a concept emphasized in the following:

*The third principle or teaching of Bahá'u'lláh is the oneness of religion and science. Any religious belief which is not conformable with scientific proof and investigation is superstition, for true science is reason and reality, and religion is essentially reality and pure reason; therefore, the two must correspond.*<sup>143</sup>

Also:

*Material science is the investigation of natural phenomena; divine science is the discovery and realization of spiritual verities. The world of humanity must acquire both . . . Both are necessary--one the natural, the other super-natural; one material, the other divine.*<sup>144</sup>

Finally, he points out the intimate connection between faith, belief and rationality, making clear that irrational faith is not just undesirable but essentially impossible:

*Unquestionably there must be agreement between true religion and science. If a question be found contrary to reason, faith and belief in it are impossible, and there is no outcome but wavering and vacillation.*<sup>145</sup>

These statements demonstrate that according to the Bahá'í Writings, faith is not just "belief without evidence"<sup>146</sup> or "blind faith." Indeed, in the foregoing quotation, Abdu'l-Bahá makes it clear that genuine faith in opposition to reason cannot exist since it leads to "wavering and vacillation." Faith must include knowledge and understanding, because without them, even the strongest commitment is bound to weaken.

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<sup>141</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 7.

<sup>142</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 49.

<sup>143</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 107.

<sup>144</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 138.

<sup>145</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 181.

<sup>146</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, p. 232;

Abdu'l-Bahá's pronouncements potentially form the basis for a far-reaching dialogue about the nature, strengths and limitations of reason, as well as the relationship between reason, science and religious faith. However, it must be admitted that such a dialogue will be fraught with challenges given the new atheist's insistence on a positivist and materialist view of science and reason and the Bahá'í Writings' allegiance to moderate rationalism and to belief in the super-sensible.

### **19. The Independent Investigation of Truth**

The new atheists certainly agree that the quest for truth should be independent—i.e. unhindered by religious institutions such as the Inquisition or by religious beliefs. Otherwise, how can we know what the truth is on any subject? As Abdu'l-Bahá says,

*The first is the independent investigation of truth; for blind imitation of the past will stunt the mind. But once every soul inquireth into truth, society will be freed from the darkness of continually repeating the past.<sup>147</sup>*

Elsewhere he says,

*God has conferred upon and added to man a distinctive power, the faculty of intellectual investigation into the secrets of creation, the acquisition of higher knowledge, the greatest virtue of which is scientific enlightenment.<sup>148</sup>*

Bearing in mind that *science* here does not refer to naturalistic or material *scientism* that Abdu'l-Bahá rejects elsewhere<sup>149</sup>, we see that the quest for knowledge is one of humankind's distinguishing features. This independent investigation is necessary not just for a few but for "every soul" so that all human beings can take responsibility for what they believe. Consequently, there can be no inherent objection to a Bahá'í investigating the new atheism and testing its arguments by the standards of logic, philosophy, science, history and theology. Nor is there any objection to Dennett's suggestion that we teach children "about all the world's religions, in a matter of fact, historically and biologically informed way."<sup>150</sup> The only stipulation would be that such teaching must be complete—i.e. students must also be equipped with understanding of the inherent limitations of naturalistic science, so that their understanding may be conscious and critical and so that one faith-based preference is not simply replaced by another. In that way, each individual will be able to be able to give informed consent to whatever ideas she or he adopts.

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<sup>147</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Selections from the Writings of Abdu'l-Bahá*, p. 248

<sup>148</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Bahá'í World Faith*, p. 244

<sup>149</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *The Promulgation of Universal Peace*, p. 262, 311.

<sup>150</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 327.

## 20. Ethical Realism

Although the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings disagree about the role of religion in ethics, they do agree on ethical realism—i.e. the view that moral beliefs are not simply a matter of individual preference but rather that “in ethics, as in physics, there are truths waiting to be *discovered*—and thus we can be right or wrong in our beliefs about them.”<sup>151</sup> This view is already implicit in their belief in some kind of universal ethical intuition (see Section 10 above) which can be applied to all peoples at all times. Leaving aside the issue of how this universal ethical intuition might be manifested in different evolutionary circumstances, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings can agree that certain ethical virtues are objectively valid, among them compassion and goodwill,<sup>152</sup> justice and fairness, tolerance, generosity and a dedication to truth.

An ethical realist position also means that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings agree on the rejection of relativism in ethics—i.e. they agree that ethical viewpoints are more than reflections of person preferences. They reject the view that we cannot judge ethical viewpoints because we lack an objective, Archimedean standpoint from which to make judgements. For the new atheists, this standard consists in our innate moral intuitions, and for Bahá'ís, this standard is established by God and is sometimes available through the moral intuitions of our spiritual nature.

The issue of ethical realism gives the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings common ground in their opposition to ethical relativism as exemplified in postmodern philosophy.<sup>153</sup> It also provides common ground in regards to the essential unity of human nature, in regards to ethical intuitions and their possible genetic basis, i.e. a universal human nature which provides an objective basis for unity.

## 21. Objective Correspondence Epistemology

The agreement between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings on ethical realism has far-reaching implications—in the area of epistemology for example. If there are universal, objectively knowable (and innate) ethical standards, then it follows that at least some knowledge is objective, that it is possible to evaluate at least some knowledge *vis-à-vis* truth and falseness. This lays the basis for an objective epistemology, i.e. the claim that all truth-claims are not necessarily mere individual or cultural constructions without correspondence to reality.

The new atheists' adherence to an objective epistemology is self-evident from even the most cursory survey of their books; after all, the whole enterprise of science is predicated on the principle that our discoveries correspond to or tell us something about *reality*. There may be

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<sup>151</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, p. 181.

<sup>152</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, 301.

<sup>153</sup> See Ian Kluge, “*Postmodernism and the Bahá'í Writings*,” and “*Relativism and the Bahá'í Writings*,” forthcoming publication in *Lights of Irfan*.

interpretational differences whether this knowledge is about reality in itself or about reality in inter-action with us, but in the final analysis we gain some testable and objective knowledge about reality itself. This agrees with Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "the rational soul gradually discover[s] ... [and] comprehends the realities, the properties and the effects of contingent beings."<sup>154</sup> In other words, the rational soul does not *construct* these realities—these "realities" exist independently of the human perceiver.

Elsewhere `Abdu'l-Bahá states,

*the rational soul as far as human ability permits discovers the realities of things and becomes cognizant of their peculiarities and effects, and of the qualities and properties of beings.*<sup>155</sup>

Again, the emphasis is on discovery and on acquiring knowledge, becoming "cognizant" of the attributes of things. These properties are not "subjective," i.e. ascribed to things by humankind either as individuals or as cultures. Here is another statement from Abdu'l-Bahá:

*The mind and the thought of man sometimes discover truths, and from this thought and discovery signs and results are produced. This thought has a foundation. But many things come to the mind of man which are like the waves of the sea of imaginations; they have no fruit, and no result comes from them.*<sup>156</sup>

Here Abdu'l-Bahá goes into more detail. Discoveries lead to "thought [that] has a foundation"—i.e. a foundation in reality or corresponding to reality. This, in effect, asserts an objective, correspondence theory of truth in which correct thought has a "foundation" or basis in reality, which is to say, corresponds to reality. `Abdu'l-Bahá also differentiates such thought from imaginations which he says lead to no real results. He also states,

*Reflect that man's power of thought consists of two kinds. One kind is true, when it agrees with a determined truth. Such conceptions find realization in the exterior world; such are accurate opinions, correct theories, scientific discoveries and inventions.*<sup>157</sup>

Here he speaks specifically of a knowledge that "agrees with a determined truth," i.e. knowledge that *corresponds* to reality. He also provides a test for this knowledge: it leads to "accurate opinions" and "correct theories" which conform to reality as well as to discoveries and inventions. In other words, such knowledge has real results testable with the reality in question.

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<sup>154</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 217—218; emphasis added.

<sup>155</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 208.

<sup>156</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 253; emphasis added.

<sup>157</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 251; see also 3, 9; emphasis added.

Abdu'l-Bahá reinforces the correspondence theory of knowledge in a variety of statements. As already noted, he states that "Philosophy consists in comprehending the reality of things *as they exist*, according to the capacity and the power of man."<sup>158</sup> To comprehend "the reality of things *as they exist*" is nothing other than to have one's knowledge correspond to reality. Naturally, this comprehension is limited by our capacities but this does not mean that what we do in fact comprehend does not correspond to reality.

For example, the statement that the interior angles of a triangle add up to 180 degrees is true—but only in plane geometry. This statement is true but limited. The same holds for our true but limited knowledge of reality.

### 23. **Realist Ontology**

Along with a realist ethics and a realist epistemology, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings share a realist ontology. In its simplest terms, *ontology* is one's theory of reality, its nature and modes of being. Although ontology seems far removed from ordinary human concerns, all human beings and cultures possess an ontology, although it is usually unconscious. For example, the simple statement, "I shall walk the dog" assumes (a) that an "I" exists in some way, (b) that "I" could make such a decision, (c) the dog exists in some way, (d) that "I" and the dog are distinct and separate entities, exterior to each other, (e) that motion is possible and real and that (f) the city street outside also exists. While this may seem self-evident to some, to others, such as those who believe the world is an illusion, or who believe that the self is an illusion, none of these points are necessarily obvious.

It is undeniable that the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings disagree about the ontology in regards to the existence or non-existence of any super-sensible reality. Naturally, the new atheists reject the super-natural. However, they do agree with the Writings that the world is real in its own right—i.e. exists independently of human perception and possess some "principle, foundation, or reality"<sup>159</sup> which gives it existence in itself. In SAQ, Abdu'l-Bahá flatly rejects the view that reality is a phantasm created by humankind:

*Certain sophists think that existence is an illusion, that each being is an absolute illusion which has no existence-- in other words, that the existence of beings is like a mirage, or like the reflection of an image in water or in a mirror, which is only an appearance having in itself no principle, foundation or reality. This theory is erroneous.*<sup>160</sup>

It is noteworthy that Abdu'l-Bahá refers to those who maintain that the world is an "absolute illusion" as "sophists," a term traditionally associated with flawed and deceptive reasoning. Use of this term signals his rejection of "illusionism" or "phenomenalism" which is confirmed by his statement that "[t]his theory is erroneous."

<sup>158</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 221; emphasis added.

<sup>159</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>160</sup> Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

Further support for ontological realism is found in Abdu'l-Bahá's statement that "each being" <sup>161</sup> in the exterior world is real—i.e. it possesses some "principle, foundation, or reality" <sup>162</sup> which gives it some degree of existence "in itself." In other words, "each being" has at least some degree of innate existence, is individual, is distinct and possesses some detachment or independence from other beings and is, in that sense, unique. As Abdu'l-Bahá says in a later section of this passage, "in their own degree they [things in the exterior world] exist." <sup>163</sup> Each thing "in the condition of being [] has a real and certain existence." <sup>164</sup> They are not mere "appearances" of something else—i.e. epiphenomena, passive side-effects or by-products that possesses no "principle, foundation or reality" of their own. This idea is re-enforced by the following statement:

*for though the existence of beings in relation to the existence of God is an illusion, nevertheless, in the condition of being it has a real and certain existence. It is futile to deny this. For example, the existence of the mineral in comparison with that of man is nonexistence . . . ; but the mineral has existence in the mineral world . . . Then it is evident that although beings in relation to the existence of God have no existence, but are like the mirage or the reflections in the mirror, yet in their own degree they exist.* <sup>165</sup>

This statement makes it unequivocally clear that according to `Abdu'l-Bahá while degrees of reality differ, every being is, in its own degree, undeniably real. It is worth noting that he flatly rejects any contradictory viewpoint: "It is futile to deny this," he says, thereby foreclosing any argument to the contrary. He emphasizes the reality of creation elsewhere by stating "Now this world of existence in relation to its maker is a *real* phenomenon." <sup>166</sup> In other words, it has its own, undeniable degree of reality.

The new atheists also accept the objective reality of the exterior world, which they understand as being purely material or physical and amenable to adequate study by the scientific method. Of course, where the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings differ is whether the objectively known reality, which exists independently of human perception and possess its own degree of reality, is limited to the physical or includes the super-sensible. This is a serious difference but it should not blind us to the fundamental agreement about ontological realism.

Ironically on this, and the previously noted fundamental philosophical issues, the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings share more common ground with each other than they do with postmodernist philosophy.

<sup>161</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>162</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>163</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>164</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278.

<sup>165</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 278; emphasis added.

<sup>166</sup> `Abdu'l-Bahá, *Some Answered Questions*, p. 280; emphasis added.

### Conclusion

As is to be expected, there are far more differences than similarities between the new atheist philosophies and the Bahá'í Writings—though the extent of the similarities and their foundational nature is surprising.

The question remains, however, “Are these similarities enough to allow a meaningful dialogue between the two?”

Can the differences between the new atheists and the Bahá'í Writings be bridged? In other words, is there anything the two can build on together?

On the foundational issues there is no common ground: they cannot agree on

- (1) the existence or non-existence of super-natural or super-sensible beings (God) or realities (Abha Kingdom, Holy Spirit). [ontology]
- (2) the adequacy or inadequacy of the scientific method and reason as the sole determinants of what constitutes genuine knowledge. [epistemology]
- (3) the new atheist belief that religion is inherently pathological and no longer as a part in humankind's future evolution.

Change on any of these issues would require a reassessment of core identities.

On the accidental or non-foundational level, there are several bases for dialogue and building together.

- (1) the evolutionary outlook on religion: the Bahá'í doctrine of progressive revelation
- (2) can help the new atheists sharpen their analysis to avoid the problem of presentism
- (3) the need to eliminate religious prejudice and a frank recognition of the crimes committed in the name of religion.
- (4) respect for science and reason and a continued dialogue about their nature.
- (5) the independent investigation of truth.
- (6) ethical realism, ontological realism and correspondence epistemology—i.e. the new atheist and the Bahá'í opposition to various forms of contemporary philosophy which reject realism in these areas.

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