



# New Atheism

## *A Review by Ian Crumpton*

*God and the New Atheism:*

*A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*

by John F. Haught

Westminster, John Knox Press © 2008

John Haught teaches at Georgetown University, a long established Catholic and Jesuit institution in Washington, DC. He specialises in the relationship between science and religion, and in this small volume he offers an eloquent and readable theological critique of recent books by the three authors: Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* (Refer to the "Workshop Section" of the website for a Power-point-like tutorial presentation) , Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, and Christopher Hitchen's *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. He refers to other recent works that might be included in this category as well – especially philosopher Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* and Steven Weinberg's *Dreams of a Final Theory: The Search for the Fundamental Laws of Nature*.

Haught's main thesis is that the three authors, drawing their concept of God and religion from fundamentalist and literalist religion, produce a similar kind of atheism: superficial, literal, and lacking engagement with the long-standing intellectual traditions of the Western religions. He recognises a far more thorough-going atheism in the likes of Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre. He finds in the "New Atheism" no understanding of the thinkers who have helped shape his own faith – including Paul Tillich, Alfred North Whitehead, Rudolf Bultmann and many others. He lists the "shrinkages" of religion that the new atheists perpetrate as reducing ..

... the entire monotheistic religious population to scriptural literalists, dogmatic extremists, escapists ... and fanatics.

... the cultural role of theology to the systematic underwriting of religious abuse.

... the meaning of faith to whatever has no evidence

... the meaning of "evidence" to whatever is available to science.

... the whole of reality to what can be known by science.

... the idea of "God" to an Hypothesis."

So, for example, the idea of God as a hypothesis "... reduces the infinite divine mystery to a finite scientific cause" and, he adds, "to worship anything finite is idolatrous." It seems to me that many of Haught's criticisms of the new aetheism are pertinent whether you understand God in a theistic way, or as a richly nuanced symbolic representation of all we hold to be good, true, and right. Indeed, Haught usually uses such phraseology himself when referring to the Divine: "Faith," he says, "is neither an irrational leap nor belief without evidence. It is an adventurous movement of trust that opens reason up to its appropriate living space: namely, the inexhaustibly deep dimension of Being, Meaning, Truth, and Goodness. Faith is not the enemy of reason, but its cutting edge ... Without the clearing made by faith, reason withers, and conduct has no calling. Faith is what gives reason a future, and morality a meaning." (p. 75)

One of this book's most important insights is to show how all human enterprise, even that which works in a fully rational or scientific way, must be based on a prior trust, or faith, that is not scientific, not rational. There must be faith in a consistent, ordered, discoverable universe; faith that the universe can be intelligible, that truth is worth seeking, and that we can trust our minds as we reach towards deeper understandings and truth.



The book is an elegant and systematic demolition of the three works in question: it is Christian apologetics at its finest. Under chapter headings such as “How atheistic is the new atheism?” “Does theology matter?” “Is God a Hypothesis?”, and “Why do people believe?” Haught exposes the deficiencies of the new atheism, without sanitising religion to any degree. Much of [atheists’] criticism of religion has been known for decades by theologians themselves: that the scriptures are humanly constructed documents; they are often inconsistent, they present a wide range of understandings of the divine, from vengeful and genocidal to the embodiment of love itself.

Religion and religious scripture are always multi-layered, heavily nuanced phenomena, embodying many ways of understanding: mystical, practical, poetic, mythic and symbolic, to name but a few.

**New Atheism is “superficial, literal, and lacking engagement”**

In his second to last chapter entitled “Is God personal”, Haught shows how this concept has become difficult for people to find meaningful since the Einsteinian depersonalisation of the universe by physics, and the Darwinian biologists' demystification of life. Yet he claims, “Ultimate reality, the deepest dimension of being, cannot be less than personal if it is to command our reverence and worship... Experiencing ultimate reality only as an impersonal “It” rather than also as a personal “Thou” would leave the believer in God psychically, socially, and religiously unsatisfied. In one sense God is the ultimate in Being, Meaning, Goodness, and Beauty, but unless these impersonal absolutes are animated by the pulse of personality, they cannot attract personal beings at the deepest levels of our existence.” (p. 88)

For myself, those animations are provided in the rich tapestry of saga, legend, ritual, story and song which comprise the sacred scriptures, traditions and liturgies of the Abrahamic Faiths.

**Notwithstanding this, I found Haught's apologetic a coherent and erudite presentation of these monotheistic faiths in general, and above all, a well reasoned critique of the three books in question, and the fundamentalist religion that gave rise to them.**

*Ian Crumpton, Christchurch*