

# ***The New Atheism***

**by Victor Stenger**

reviewed by Yonatan Fishman, Ph.D.

## **- A deft and compelling defense of atheism, science, and reason -**

In what may be his best book to date, Victor Stenger (Professor Emeritus of Physics) provides a much needed summary, elaboration, and defense of the main theses of the so-called “New Atheists” (NAs), known for their widely-publicized, unrelenting, and passionate critiques of theism and religion in general. Among these NAs, Stenger includes authors of recent bestsellers in the United States: Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and himself. Not only does the book provide an excellent review of NA arguments, but it skillfully rebuts many of the primary objections voiced by critics of the NAs, coming from both theistic and atheistic camps. While Stenger is hardly a “new” atheist, having written numerous books and articles over the past decade that deal critically with religious and paranormal claims from a scientific perspective, his recent bestseller, *God: The Failed Hypothesis* (GTFH), meshes harmoniously with the perspectives of the other NAs.

Two primary issues run through the books and articles of the NAs: (1) Whether or not God and other supernatural entities exist, and (2) Whether or not belief in such entities, and the religious doctrines that accompany them, are ultimately harmful or beneficial to individuals and to society at large. It is worth noting that these are independent questions, as belief in a falsehood might still turn out to be beneficial (e.g., the placebo effect). Both of these issues are covered well within the approximately 250 pages of Stenger’s book, but would require larger tomes to be fully fleshed out. According to Stenger, NAs advance the following general arguments in relation to these two issues. First, religion should not be entitled to a level of respect or to a special immunity from criticism beyond that granted to other areas of human experience and discourse, such as politics and economics. Second, contrary to the views of some philosophers and scientists, religions do indeed make substantive claims about the nature of reality (e.g., concerning the existence of supernatural entities such as gods and the truth of religious doctrines); these claims, NAs argue, are in principle amenable to scientific inquiry and evaluation. Third, by continuing to preserve and promote the framework of religion and its attendant superstitious and irrational ideas, religious moderates, while themselves relatively innocuous in their liberal and non-literal interpretations of scripture, are inadvertently aiding and abetting practitioners of more harmful fundamentalist forms of religion. Indeed, in adhering more faithfully to the basic tenets of their religion, Fundamentalists at least display the virtue of being less hypocritical than their moderate counterparts. Fourth, morality is a natural biological and cultural phenomenon that does not come from religion. Indeed, many religious precepts, such as those supporting slavery and the subjugation of women, would be considered highly immoral from a modern perspective. Fifth, religion and irrational thinking in general have caused considerably more harm than good in the world throughout history and continue to jeopardize the future survival and flourishing of humanity.

In his earlier book, GTFH, Stenger defended the view, shared by other NAs, that the existence of God is a legitimate hypothesis that is amenable to scientific evaluation. Specifically, the characteristics of the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam imply certain observations that can be empirically confirmed or disconfirmed, similarly to the predictions of any other scientific hypothesis. After a thorough examination of the evidence, Stenger concludes, beyond a reasonable doubt, that the God of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam does not exist. In the present book, Stenger recapitulates and elaborates on some of the arguments presented in GTFH and further disputes the maxim “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” often made in the context of arguments concerning the existence of God. On the contrary, absence of evidence, *where it is expected to be observed*, does indeed constitute evidence of absence. While this observation is not new, and can be found in the earlier works of “Old Atheists” such as philosophers Keith Parsons and Julian Baggini, Stenger is unique in his systematic application of this principle to the question of God’s existence. While the presently available evidence would seem to count against theism, Stenger reminds us that scientists are not (or should not be) closed-minded or dogmatic. He writes, “[i]f and when anyone finds evidence for the existence of God, gods, or the supernatural that stands up under the same stringent tests that are applied in science to any claimed new phenomenon, with no plausible natural explanation, then honest atheists will have to become at least tentative believers.” (p. 15).

Stenger’s comparatively calm and respectful tone contrasts with the more aggressive and sometimes condescending posture of several of the other NAs. Indeed, Stenger’s less confrontational approach may be more successful in winning converts to a naturalistic worldview than one which immediately alienates the reader by provoking a defensive reaction as soon as the book is opened. One also cannot fail to be impressed by Stenger’s economy of words and succinct arguments, features apparent also in his earlier works.

While Stenger presents “New Atheism” as a novel movement in the cultural landscape of the United States, the differences between the “New Atheists” and the “Very Old Atheists” (and agnostics), such as Diderot, Hume, d’Holbach, Shelley, Ingersoll, and Russell are rather modest. Some of these latter authors are well known for their merciless and vociferous criticisms of religion. For instance, d’Holbach’s 18<sup>th</sup> century works, *Good Sense* and *System of Nature*, are widely considered masterpieces of anti-religious philosophical literature, written from an unabashed atheistic perspective. Perhaps, as Stenger notes, what primarily distinguishes the NAs from the Old Atheists is the boost atheism has received from an advanced scientific understanding of the world (quantum physics, relativity, cosmology, and evolution being the most relevant areas), and from the public’s interest in and receptivity to critiques of religion in light of the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks (which, Stenger argues, were motivated directly by Islamic ideology). Thus, the NA movement is perhaps more a reflection of the public’s interest in ‘anti-religion’ than of the content of the NA books *per se*, which can be found also in the works of Julian Baggini, Richard Carrier, Joseph Daleiden, Theodore Drange, David Eller, Nicholas Everitt, AC Grayling, Michael Martin, and Keith Parsons (just to name a few), whose books were available several years before the bestsellers of the NAs were released. Nonetheless, Stenger’s book ranks among the finest of contemporary critiques of religion and defenses of a naturalistic worldview.

Several particularly strong points in Stenger's book deserve special mention. Stenger swiftly neutralizes the claim, often made by critics of the NAs, that 20<sup>th</sup> century secular regimes, such as those of Stalin, Hitler, and Mao, had committed more atrocities against humanity than in all of the religious wars throughout history combined. Stenger notes that none of these regimes killed in the name of atheism *per se*, but rather in the name of dogmatic political ideologies that demanded an unwavering quasi-religious adherence. Moreover, these leaders collaborated with religious institutions when advantageous, and persecuted and killed indiscriminately, both the religious and non-religious, whenever they perceived a challenge to their authority. Stenger argues that Hitler was not an atheist and that Nazi ideology vis-à-vis Jews was rooted in the soil of Christian anti-Semitism. Finally, Stenger observes that it is not the number of victims that is relevant (as this depends in part on the technologies of war available), but rather the number of perpetrators of the atrocities; there have been many more religious perpetrators of violence than atheistic ones throughout history.

Stenger is especially effective in dealing with issues related to his primary areas of expertise: physics and cosmology. He challenges the claim, made by some theists and critics of the NAs in arguing for divine creation, that the universe had a beginning in a singularity. Stenger remarks that there is no solid scientific basis for this notion, one which even Stephen Hawking, to which the idea is frequently attributed, has explicitly repudiated. On the contrary, Stenger maintains that the universe probably had no beginning. Stenger's critique of the popular theistic argument to design from the apparent fine-tuning of the constants of physics is unparalleled in the atheistic literature, which is not surprising given that he has dealt with this issue extensively over the past decade in his books and articles.

Stenger also provides an insightful analysis of recent sociological studies that demonstrate a negative correlation between markers of societal health and religiosity. Indeed, some of the happiest and healthiest nations in the world are also the least religious, thus undermining the claim that religion is necessary for societal health. He further notes that there is nothing inherently dismal about an atheistic worldview, and that a life free from the fetters of religion can be lived with happiness and fulfillment. While atheism cannot compete with the self-centered allure of eternal life promised by many religions, knowing that life is transient and that this is the only one we will ever have makes it all the more precious. As Stenger comments, "...new atheists are not trying to take away the comfort of faith. We are trying to show that life is much more comfortable without it." (p. 17). While the appeal of a godless worldview might be questioned by someone living in abject conditions without basic necessities, and without the security and benefits of a modern society offering social services such as healthcare, Stenger makes a good case for the virtues of a naturalistic worldview.

In the interest of offering a "fair and balanced" review, I am obligated to note also where I feel the book is deficient. First, the NA contention that religious moderates are inadvertent accomplices in the crimes committed by religious fundamentalists is not entirely persuasive, given that many religious moderates are explicit in their rejection of literal interpretations of scripture and are vocal opponents of fundamentalist views. This is not to say that the NAs are necessarily wrong on this point, but I feel this argument needed further elaboration. Second, in his book, *The God Delusion*, Dawkins' characterization of early religious indoctrination as 'child

abuse' raises some important and difficult questions that deserved greater consideration. Indeed, if Dawkins is right, should religious indoctrination at home be banned by law? Needless to say, this issue has profound implications for religious liberty. Finally, I found Stenger's defense of Richard Dawkins' main argument against the existence of God, as presented in his book, *The God Delusion*, to be a bit too quick and his dismissal of the objections to it premature. In particular, Stenger's rebuttal to Thomas Crean's critique of *The God Delusion* appears to overlook a key component of Dawkins' main argument. Dawkins goes beyond simply arguing that God is complex and therefore also requires a designer, *ad infinitum*. Indeed, if this were the case, then Dawkins' argument would amount to little more than a restatement of David Hume's argument from his *Dialogues*, which simply shows the failure of the traditional argument for design. Dawkins goes further and claims that not only is God complex, but he is *improbable*. As Dawkins writes, "However statistically improbable the entity you seek to explain by invoking a designer, the designer himself has got to be at least as improbable (p.114)... any God capable of designing a universe, carefully and foresightfully tuned to lead to our evolution, must be a supremely complex and improbable entity who needs an even bigger explanation than the one he is supposed to provide (p. 147)...a God capable of designing a universe, or anything else, would have to be complex and statistically improbable." (p. 153). Along with Dennett, Dawkins considers his "Argument from Improbability", the lynchpin of *The God Delusion*, to be "unrebuttable". However, as Christian philosopher Alvin Plantinga remarks in his review of Dawkins' book (*The Dawkins Confusion*), Dawkins does not provide a rigorous definition of "complexity", nor does he demonstrate a necessary connection between complexity and improbability. Furthermore, the assessment of statistical improbability is only meaningful relative to a background context or set of underlying laws, which are absent in the case of God, since he is supposed to be an ultimate explanation. Plantinga's criticisms of Dawkins' argument have been echoed by other theists and by some atheists as well (e.g., see blogs of Bradley Monton and Alejandro Satz). To my knowledge, neither Dawkins nor any of the other NAs have yet provided convincing replies to these critiques (this is not to say, however, that these criticisms are unanswerable, or that Plantinga's review does not suffer from flaws of its own). Nevertheless, it is important to note that the failure of Dawkins' argument would in no way undermine the case for atheism, as supported by other arguments such as the argument from evil and gratuitous suffering, in addition to those presented in Stenger's book, which stand on their own merit. Notwithstanding these minor shortcomings, *The New Atheism* represents one of the most lucid and persuasive defenses of a naturalistic worldview to date and a powerful endorsement of science and reason as the only reliable means we have for understanding the universe and our place within it.

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