

## Preface

Intellectual history records several rounds of atheist attacks on religion. Arguably, none have been more visible than the early-twenty-first-century “new atheist” contention that religion—all religions—are both false and toxic. Reading these books and articles as a science-loving religious person triggered some thoughts.

More than sympathizers of these books might suppose, many of us Christians concur with their litanies of our failings. Moreover, given the ever-present tendency of religious people to construct false idols and to associate their own ideas with God’s, we need to be challenged by the voices of reason.

The faith tradition that has nurtured me shares considerable common ground with the new atheists. It encourages the humility and curiosity that underlies free-spirited science. It assumes the unity of mind and body (rather than Plato’s bodily imprisoned

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immortal soul). And it does not view God as a celestial vending machine controlled by our prayers.

Psychological science, which it is my vocation to report on in textbooks and other writings, offers big ideas that are deeply congenial with big ideas from Jewish-Christian thought. Human nature looks much the same, whether viewed through the lens of ancient biblical wisdom or modern psychological science.

Although religion in some forms has indeed fed prejudice and atrocity, the available evidence is pretty compelling: In the Western world, at least, religiosity is more often associated with good—with happiness, health, generosity, and volunteering—than with evil.

I develop and offer these and other reflections not as a sophisticated defense of theism (I leave it to others to engage the new atheists, whose critical intelligence I respect, on philosophical issues such as the problem of evil). My ambition is also not so bold as the reverse of Richard Dawkins' hope that religious readers will be atheists when they put his book, *The God Delusion*, down. I hope, more simply, to help skeptical readers, many of whom are among my esteemed friends, to appreciate the common ground they share with many people of faith. For those whose thinking has moved from the religious thesis to the skeptical antithesis (or vice versa), I offer some

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pointers to a science-respecting Christian synthesis. I aim to suggest to skeptical friends how someone might share their commitment to reason, evidence, and, yes, even skepticism while also embracing a faith that makes sense of the universe, gives meaning to life, connects us in supportive communities, mandates altruism, and offers hope in the face of adversity and death.

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