

The end of 'New Atheism'?

***Coming to Faith Through Dawkins:
12 Essays on the pathway from new
atheism to Christianity***

Denis Alexander and Alistair
McGrath (Eds.)

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Has the New Atheism¹ movement failed? The agenda of the 'four Horsemen' (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett) has been to try to demonstrate that religion in general, and Christianity in particular, is not just wrong, but is positively dangerous and needs to be neutralized. So, has this aggressive slogan-driven project been a success, or have the New Atheists scored an own goal?

According to Alistair McGrath and Denis Alexander (figure 1), New Atheism is definitely on its way out. In an interview about the newly released book *Coming to Faith Through Dawkins*, McGrath says:

"The reality is, an awful lot of people are coming to faith because of their reaction against the overstatements, the misrepresentations, and the existential inadequacy of the 'New Atheism'."²

He goes on to point out that a lot of the younger generations, if they have heard of it at all, just see New Atheism as an exclusive, irrelevant group of predominantly old white men (the same demographic as Alistair McGrath). Many have never even heard of Richard Dawkins.

Against that backdrop, McGrath and Alexander noticed that a lot of people were telling them of how they became Christians *through* Dawkins. Intrigued by this, they managed to get 12 of them to write down their stories,

in some detail, and this book is the result (see table 1).

Most of the stories are quite encouraging, but a couple are extremely disappointing. Some are very emotional, others more cerebral (with little about their own testimonies, just the arguments themselves). There are some delightfully humorous incidents recounted.³ The writers come from many different countries and backgrounds, but all are well educated—several scientists, a historian, a drama graduate, an artist, an engineer, a philosophy lecturer, a high-level public servant, among others.

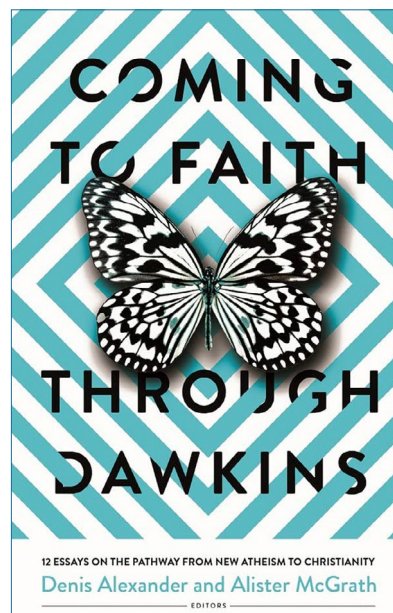
But, sadly, both editors are committed theistic evolutionists, as, it seems, are many of the contributors. The book does a great job of deconstructing many of the arguments and assumptions of the New Atheists. In many places it shows the power of the Gospel of Jesus Christ to transform lives. But, for the most part, it does very little to instil confidence in the truth of the Bible (that is not its aim), and in some cases, undermines it.

It is also worth pointing out a few minor anomalies, despite the title. A couple of the essayists were already Christians when they came across the New Atheists, but they claim that their faith was really cemented by these encounters. A couple of others were not as strongly influenced by Dawkins as by other New Atheists, specifically Peter Singer and Christopher Hitchens.

Common themes

Given the wide range of backgrounds of the authors, we should not be surprised that there is also a wide range of perspectives, ways of approaching the task of writing the essays, and, frankly, the quality and usefulness of the contributions.

Nevertheless, there is a common pattern among most of these testimonies. Contributors are typically



introduced to New Atheism and become quite enamoured, motivating them to study it in more detail. Some events or realisations leave them unsettled, questioning or disillusioned, marking a turning point in their journey. They then sometimes follow some other pathway (e.g., Buddhism, New Age), or at least a process of some sort, before finally embracing the good news of Jesus Christ.

Within these near-universal themes, there are also some common patterns. One of these is the frequent determined refusal of many New Atheists (especially Richard Dawkins) to debate Christian apologists of any stature⁴ (particularly William Lane Craig⁵). We should not be surprised about this at all—not only would they struggle to make a convincing case, but agreeing to such a debate would also undermine the central narrative that Christian apologists (and creationists in particular) are not worthy of debate, only of contempt. It is no surprise that so many are coming to faith in Jesus Christ *because of* such polemics; this condescending attitude is childish—hardly a persuasive, compelling case for atheism.

Another is the weakness of Dawkins' central argument—essentially that the universe we observe is so complex



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Figure 1. Denis Alexander (left) and Alister E. McGrath (right), editors of *Coming to Faith Through Dawkins*

(and thus its existence is so improbable), any being that created it must be even more complex, and less probable. Of course, this logic fails at many levels; it only makes sense to talk about probabilities where the outcome is unknown. Since the universe exists, its existence has a probability of 100%, so Dawkins' premise is wrong.⁶

Sadly, theistic evolution is also a very common theme—not in the sense of having helped anyone come to faith, but just the fact that it is just assumed, without question, through a lot of the text. Anything to do with biblical creation is treated dismissively, almost in a mocking way⁷—some of the contributors have the same approach to biblical creation as they see in the New Atheist approach to any belief in a deity.

A deeper look at a few of the essays

Due to the number of essays and the length of the book, I have picked out a couple of the best and the worst, to go through in more detail. Thankfully, most of the others veer towards the better end of the spectrum.

Wrestling with life's biggest questions, by Sarah Irving-Stonebraker

This testimony is arguably the most encouraging one in the book. Sydney-born Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, while starting her career as a history professor at Oxford and Cambridge, in the interests of academic integrity, set out to determine whether the atheism she had been born and raised in was true.

During her doctoral dissertation, she realized that Dawkins' claim that science and faith were fundamentally in conflict was simply untrue. Scientists she was studying, such as chemist Robert Boyle and microscope inventor Robert Hooke, routinely referred to the Bible (and biblical creation)—indeed depended on its presuppositions. To them, it provided the rationale, motivation, and methodology for doing science.

"One of Boyle's chief interests was how to develop a method of establishing reliable and verifiable knowledge about the natural world. How do we minimize the error that arises from human fallibility? Can we rely upon our senses to gain knowledge of nature, and if we can, to what extent and under what conditions?

"These were questions that also concerned Boyle's colleague and laboratory assistant Robert Hooke. Hooke's work *Micrographia* (1665) is one of the most important pioneering works on the microscope and the methodology of experiment to which instruments like the microscope are central. In his introduction, Hooke turns straight to the Bible. He believes that, in the garden of Eden, before Adam and Eve rebelled against God in an episode known as the 'fall' from grace, these two original humans possessed perfect senses and a perfect knowledge of nature. This interpretation of Genesis was commonplace among Protestants in the seventeenth century.^[8] Adam's ability to give names to all the creatures, described in Genesis 2, reveals his state of perfect knowledge of and authority over the creation. Through the fall, however, when Adam and Eve rebelled against God, disobeying his command, not only did they lose their dominion over the creation, but their once-perfect senses were damaged by the effects of sin. Our vision, for example, is now merely a poor reckoning of the perfect sight Adam and Eve had before they turned away from God. In fact, precisely this idea is the driving force behind the creation of scientific instruments. Here is an excerpt from Hooke's introduction: 'By the addition of such artificial Instruments and methods, there may be, in some manner, a reparation made for the mischiefs, and imperfection, mankind has drawn upon itself ... resulting from a corruption, innate and born with him'" (p. 49).

She became very unsettled by the ethical implications of her atheism as presented by Peter Singer. While she had assumed every sensible person believed in the inherent dignity of all, she was confronted by Singers' clear way of demonstrating the logical ethical implications of atheism.

Table 1. List of essays covered in *Coming to Faith Through Dawkins*

Section no.	Title	Author
Introduction	The ambiguity of Richard Dawkins	Alister McGrath
1	A new Christian meets new atheism	Sy Garte
2	Wrestling with Life's Biggest Questions	Sarah Irving-Stonebraker
3	From Dawkins to Christ via William Lane Craig	Peter Byrom
4	A winding path through new atheism to faith	Anikó Albert
5	Hearing God through an enchantment with nature	Andrew G. Gosler
6	An Afrikaner's faith pilgrimage	Johan Erasmus
7	Coming to faith via <i>The God Delusion</i>	Nick Berryman
8	<i>The God Delusion</i> and probability	Louise Mabile
9	My Egyptian journey to faith	Rafik Samuel
10	From lukewarm theism to committed faith	Judith R. Babarsky
11	From religion to agnosticism to faith in Christ via Dawkins	Waldo Swart
12	Seeking the truth via new atheism and psychedelic drugs	Ashley Lande

“Singer’s belief that not all human beings are of equal moral worth alarmed me, but soon I began to question why I was alarmed. As Singer had explained, this position follows necessarily from an atheist view of human life. So on what basis could I disagree, other than simple emotivism? Just because I feel something is wrong does not make it wrong. Another aspect of the logical consistency of Singer’s ethics with atheism was that I could not think of these arguments as held only by an extremist fringe of atheist philosophers. Far from it. Singer sits in the company of [other academics]. The second option available to us [is that] ... all reasonable and sensible people agree that all people are valuable and entitled to the same basic rights, and that is all there is to it. I must admit, until attending Singer’s lectures, this was my position, which I had thought was unremarkable and not up for serious debate. But reading the work of Singer and his colleagues made me realize the naivete of my position, which is simply an ungrounded

assertion The equality of all human beings is not a self-evident truth, as Singer and other world-class secular philosophers are more than happy to remind us” (pp. 53–54).

She was also troubled by blatant inconsistencies in Dawkins’ position:

“It’s perfectly consistent to say this is the way it is—natural selection is out there and it is a very unpleasant process. Nature is red in tooth and claw. But I don’t want to live in that kind of a world. I want to change the world in which I live in such a way that natural selection no longer applies” (p. 56).⁹

She realized, with some angst, she could not rely on Richard Dawkins’ answers to theistic challenges, but needed to confront the issues for herself. She reluctantly realized that the ethical principles she held so dearly did not arise from atheism at all, and that atheistic ethics would be completely unliveable.

“Would not such a life lack integrity? If I believed that there was no God, and consequently no objective morality or inherent value to human life, then surely

I ought to have the integrity to actually live in accordance with my belief. To invent an ethic of care for the marginalized and weak would actually deny my atheist naturalism; it would be a blatant slap in the face—to both my atheism and my integrity. As I thought this through, I had an awkward sinking feeling. Care for the marginalized and the equality of all human life—principles to which I clung so dearly—did not stem from atheism at all. They were actually (I cringed) Judeo-Christian principles” (pp. 56–57).

She ended up reading the Bible, and asked herself the following compelling question:

“If God created all humanity in his image, then all people were inherently and equally precious. What a beautiful idea. But could it be true?” (p. 59).

Thankfully she ended up embracing the Gospel, and is quite open about it:

“Rather, my intention is to give you a vignette—a window of entry, as it were—into how an atheist historian, grappling with some of the most

profound questions in life, realized that the God revealed in the Bible is real, that he loves us, and that Jesus Christ is his Son who died for you and for me so that we may have a relationship with God.” (p. 49)

The God Delusion and probability, by Louise Mabile

South African philosophy lecturer Louise Mabile has done a masterful (although somewhat hard-to-read) job of deconstructing the primary argument put forth in *The God Delusion*. She says very little about her own journey except that she had a thoroughly secular upbringing and was already a philosophy lecturer (with a particular interest in Nietzsche) when *The God Delusion* was published. She had great expectations about new arguments the author might raise. But, as a philosopher with an interest in the sciences, she was extremely disappointed, leading to her eventually coming to faith in Jesus Christ.

The remainder of the essay outlines Dawkins’ primary argument (that because the universe is so complex it is highly improbable, and that if there was a creator, it (He) must have been even more complex, and thus more improbable), but here Mabile also spends time destroying it.

A lot of it is quite difficult to follow, but as she herself says:

“I believe when one places *The God Delusion* in relation to the other sciences, its arguments go nowhere. If anything, they point right back at God. However, this will mean some serious engagement with other fields of science, such as probability theory. Kindly bear with me—it will be rewarding, I promise!” (p. 173).

Mabile shows how Dawkins confuses randomness and causation, misapplies the Law of Large Numbers (LLN), and makes a category mistake, treating probability as a property of an object in the same sense that mass, colour, and even complexity are properties.

She provides a thoughtful (though sometimes hard-to-follow) critique of

Dawkins’ understanding and use of randomness in his arguments against design, highlighting his misunderstandings. Randomness is no more than a description of our inability to detect a pattern or predict an outcome. Mabile describes it as “a lack of order, purpose, cause, or predictability.” Yet, to Dawkins, randomness, when combined with natural selection has almost divine power to generate complexity.

In claiming that life and the universe being improbable entails whatever/whoever caused it to also be improbable, Dawkins is in effect saying that the random activity that caused it is improbable. He admits as much, and invokes natural selection, a non-random process, to rescue his position. He thinks that by breaking the process down to a set of simpler steps (hierarchical reductionism) it becomes more probable. While this sounds reasonable on the surface, the simpler, smaller steps are actually of no help:

“The hierarchical reductionist ... attempts to explain something complex on a particular level in terms of the next, more essential level of complexity until the explanatory possibilities of that level is [*sic*] exhausted. Obeying Occam’s razor, he continues down the line until he finds the simplest explanation possible. Naturally, it goes without saying that the kinds of explanations that are suitable at high levels in the hierarchy are quite different from the kinds of explanations that are suitable at lower levels. It depends on the context, of course: ‘This was the point of explaining cars in terms of carburettors rather than quarks.’ However, when one makes ultimate, fundamental claims about the nature of reality, one has to go all the way down. After all, ‘reductionism, in this sense, is just another name for an honest desire to understand how things work.’ What makes our attempt so significant is that we are prepared to go down the organizational hierarchy to a point where explanations in concrete

terms no longer work, where the obvious and tangible become abstract and counter-instinctual” (pp. 177–178).¹⁰

Dawkins completely ignores all this, treating biology as a fundamental ‘first-cause’ science.

Speaking about Dawkins’ appeal to LLN to imply that abiogenesis will eventually happen if there are enough ‘experiments’ on enough planets, Mabile states:

“And if we are to take Dawkins at his word and apply the law of large numbers to the universe in general, we may just as well say that not only will life pitch up sooner or later but so will the Flying Spaghetti Monster, Batman, E.T., and Darth Vader. If the law of large numbers as Dawkins understands it is consistently applied, it means in effect that sooner or later, given the infinity of time and space, *everything* will turn up [emphasis in original]. *This implies that, sooner or later, a redeemer will be born from a virgin* [emphasis added]. Who says you need Stephen Jay Gould’s non-overlapping magisteria to reconcile science and religion? Apparently, according to the law of large numbers, anything is quite literally possible” (p. 181).

Hearing God Through an Enchantment with Nature, by Andrew G. Gosler (the most disappointing essay)

I will not say too much about this essay, except to alert the readers, highlight the variation in the quality of the essays covered in this book, and assure them that it doesn’t get any worse. Andrew Gosler, an ornithology professor and minister (of what must be a very liberal denomination), writes at length about the greater honeyguide, an African bird that has developed a symbiotic relationship with the local tribal people. It has a stomach that can digest beeswax, and it is rather impervious to bee stings. It guides humans to wherever it finds a hive, the humans can smoke out the hive, collect

honeycomb, extract some of the honey, and give the wax to the honeyguides. Evolution is assumed and referred to repeatedly throughout the essay.

His primary argument against Darwin and Dawkins is that they promote evolution as a competitive, unpleasant process, whereas to him it is a cooperative, joyous process. I doubt that the less fit creatures destroyed in the process would agree. Any biblical creationist will find it painful to read.

A new Christian meets new atheism, by Sy Garte

Slightly better than Andrew G. Gosler's contribution is that of Sy (Seymour) Garte, a biochemistry professor. He gives a good account of having grown up in a committed Marxist, militantly atheistic family, discovering that communist and atheist propaganda presented a very distorted view of religion's involvement in world conflict. So, after a long period, he became a very new and quiet Christian, just before the New Atheists burst onto the scene. He was actually relieved to find that they did not have anything new and challenging to add to the conversation. So his faith and confidence in the Bible was strengthened, and he became more outspoken.

But he unfortunately assumes theistic evolution, and believes he can successfully marry it with his Christian faith:

"When, after becoming a Christian, I learned that it was not necessary for me to immediately denounce evolution as a plot of the devil or reject any part of my long-held scientific worldview, I was quite relieved. But I also came to understand that, due to my acceptance of evolution, I was considered by both atheists and some Christians to be a 'moderate Christian'. I thought that being in that camp would allow me to be able to dialog effectively with more conservative, fundamentalist Christians as well as with atheist

scientists, since I shared so many viewpoints with each group. I even made a comment or two on Jerry Coyne's blog, *Why Evolution Is True*.

"How naive I was! One of Coyne's followers let me know that 'moderate Christians', including those who accept evolution, are actually the worst kind of enemy, for while they have learned 'the truth', they continue to indulge and support the great lie of theism. It turned out that this attitude was a common New Atheist trope, and that making common cause to promote good scientific education was harder than I thought" (pp. 40–41).

Does he realize he is in an untenable position? The only "more conservative, fundamentalist Christian" he has ever debated is Kent Hovind, and it shows.¹¹ This would not surprise any biblical creationist.¹²

Conclusion

As Christians and biblical creationists, we should be pleased that the influence of the New Atheists seems to be waning, and alert to where the next battle fronts are. One thing this book achieves is to highlight how deeply theistic evolution is entrenched within large swathes of the Christian community (especially among intellectuals) and is seldom challenged.

It contains a lot of useful material, but the tacit support for theistic evolution can undo a lot of the good.

References

1. 'New Atheism' refers to a cultural movement that began around 2006, with the publication of *The God Delusion*, among several similar titles, which captured the imagination of large sections of the liberal media and academia. It seeks to paint science as the only way we can know anything, and any sort of belief in a deity as so bizarre as to not even be worthy of debate, only of contempt.
2. (2280) How Richard Dawkins ACCIDENTALLY Led People TO GOD, youtube.com.
3. For instance, Peter Byrom talks about the incredible frustration with Richard Dawkins' absolute refusal to debate William Lane Craig. He recounts: "Then the idea hit us! Dawkins had been behind the launch of the British Humanist Association's 'atheist bus campaign' back in 2009. We could turn this upside down, putting banners on Oxford buses that, instead of reading

'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life', read 'There's probably no Dawkins. Now stop worrying and enjoy Oct. 25th at the Sheldonian Theatre' (i.e., expect a no-show from Dawkins and enjoy a substantial critique of *The God Delusion*)."

In another incident, Johan Erasmus, an Afrikaner raised in the Reformed Church, describes the following incident that occurred in the middle of his enchantment with his new-found New Atheism: "I was visiting family friends, and the eldest daughter of that family was home from the United States, where she was studying theology. I asked her a little about her studies and whether she knew anything about the likes of Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris. Those names seldom meant anything to most of the Christians I interacted with, and those brave enough to venture a guess thought they were sports stars. Her answer, however, caught me completely off guard. In a disappointed tone she said, 'You seriously need to get yourself some better atheists.'"

4. See: Wieland, C., *World atheist convention rejects Australian creationist debate challenge*, creation.com, for an example of the New Atheist's response to a challenge to debate scientists from *Creation Ministries International*.
5. Unfortunately, while William Lane Craig has been a very capable and effective apologist for Christian belief in the past, he is now publicly expressing doubts about some of the fundamental truths of the Christian faith, including the virgin birth of Jesus Christ—see: Sander, L., Price, P., and Carter, R., *William Lane Craig on creation and anthropology*, creation.com.
6. See: Kastelein, N., *The probability of God: a response to Dawkins*, *J. Creation* 32(3):63–69, 2018.
7. For instance, in *From Dawkins to Christ via William Lane Craig*, Peter Byrom writes: "Religious people, by contrast, were those simplistic, backward folks who saw everything in black and white, believed the world was only six thousand years old, and got easily offended." In *From Religion to Agnosticism to Faith in Christ via Dawkins*, Waldo Swartz writes: "The conflicts between what I read in the Bible and what I knew about science became much more apparent. The order of the creation days in Genesis was wrong; it didn't fit with what we now know about the world, what I learned from science books and documentaries."
8. See also Weinberger, L., *The Fall and the inspiration for science: A review of The Fall of Man and the Foundations of Science* by Peter Harrison (2007), *J. Creation* 24(3):18–21, 2010.
9. This was part of an answer he gave during an interview in *Skeptic*. Miele, F., *Darwin's dangerous disciple: an interview with Richard Dawkins*, *Skeptic* 3(4):80–85, 1995.
10. See: Catchpoole, D., Sarfati, J., and Batten, D., *Natural selection cannot explain the origin of life*, creation.com.
11. See: Wieland, C., Ham, K., and Sarfati, J., *Maintaining creationist integrity: a response to Kent Hovind*, creation.com.
12. See Richard Dawkins: "Theistic evolutionists are deluded", creation.com.