

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

Dr. James P. Eckman, President Emeritus
Grace University, Omaha, Nebraska
24 August 2013

Reflections on the New Atheism

Many today speak of the “New Atheism,” which is best represented in the writings of the Four Horsemen of the New Atheism—Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel C. Dennett and the late Christopher Hitchens. In many ways, they are not making any new arguments in their defense of atheism, but there is militancy about these individuals, especially Richard Dawkins. One of the more significant dimensions of this phenomenon is that former Christians, or at least emerging adults who came from Christian homes, are expressing an interest in atheism. To that end, Larry Alex Taunton of the Fixed Point Foundation endeavors to bridge the gap between Christians and atheists in a spirit of gentleness and mutual respect. (Taunton attended Grace University in the 1980s). Taunton recently launched a nationwide campaign to interview college students who are members of Secular Student Alliances (SSA) or Freethought Societies (FS). Taunton argues that “these college groups are the atheist equivalent of Campus Crusade: They meet regularly for fellowship and even proselytize. They are people who are not merely irreligious; they are actively, determinedly irreligious.” In a recent article in *The Atlantic*, Taunton summarizes the results of his research. He provides a composite sketch of American college-age atheists. Here is a summary of his findings:

1. They had attended church. Taunton discovered that most participants had chosen atheism in reaction to Christianity.
2. The Mission and message of their churches were vague. They seldom saw the relationship between the message of social justice, community involvement, Jesus Christ and the Bible. They did not see their churches proclaiming the teachings of Jesus Christ and their relevance to the world.
3. They felt their churches offered superficial answers to life’s difficult questions. When asked what they found unconvincing about the Christian faith, they spoke of evolution vs. creation, sexuality, the reliability of the biblical text, Jesus as the only way, etc. Others hoped to find answers to personal significance, purpose and ethics. For them, church services were largely shallow, harmless and ultimately irrelevant.
4. They expressed their respect for those ministers who took the Bible seriously. These students expected deep-seated convictions that stem from the Bible and expect Christians to try and convert them. If not, “why do you believe it is true” was common!!
5. Ages 14-17 were decisive. For most, the high school years were the time when they embraced unbelief.

6. The decision to embrace unbelief was often an emotional one. Amazingly, the decisions were often not only rational but a “deeply emotional transition” as well. Personal, emotionally traumatic situations were often decisive (e.g., an emotionally abusive father, a father’s death, a physical abusive father).
7. The Internet factored heavily into their conversion to atheism. Vague references to YouTube or website forums were common.

As Taunton writes, theirs has become a kind of church: “A Church of Unbelief complete with a saint (Christopher Hitchens), a high priest (Richard Dawkins), and holy writ (anything Dawkins writes).” But, atheism has no creed, “no principles, and can give no guidance. It is but to have a settled disposition on a single question: Is there a God?” Historically speaking, Taunton also convincingly argues that “Proponents of a society free from religious influence can point to no nation or civilization that was focused upon atheism that we might call even remotely good. The story of those regimes [e.g., the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany, etc.] is well documented and may be summarized in a word—murderous.” Finally, consider one other observation: An atheist sees no eternal value to a human being. Thus, why does it matter what happens to a human or what the state does to further its interests? After all, the USSR and Nazi Germany viewed humans as mere instruments, a means to an end—their totalitarian end. Insignificant humans serve the state only! In conclusion, Taunton makes a final observation about young atheists who gather in the rallies to celebrate atheism: “So as the rally for nothingness meets to celebrate, well, nothing in particular, reflect for a moment on the world they would give us. One need not imagine it. It has been done.”

One additional point: Many years ago, G.K. Chesterton remarked that “when people stop believing God, they don’t worship nothing; they worship anything.” In Postmodern American culture, we now worship ourselves. Since, practically speaking, there are no ethical absolutes, then a thoroughly self-centered culture will redefine its terms. Consider, for example, the term equality—a precious word. Without ethical absolutes in this “values-anarchy culture,” equality itself becomes an overarching absolute. Equality in that framework becomes autonomy. Equality-as-autonomy means the right to pursue same-sex marriage, unbridled sexual expression, and self-centered marriages with no-fault divorces when they fail, etc. This reminds me of the early church in the Greco-Roman world. Early Christians were charged with atheism because they refused to worship the ancestral gods of Greece and Rome. Theologian Michael J. Ovey comments: “Christians were thought of as atheists who undermined the state. And this is not too far from the way ‘atheist Christians’ [today] who do not sacrifice at the altar of equality or liberty in personal hedonism can be thought of as atheists who are public enemies, bad citizens.” Christians today refuse to worship at the altar of equality-as-autonomy in America. For those of us who are Christians in America today, we are thoroughly countercultural for we believe and adhere to ethical absolutes rooted in God’s revelation. For us, personal equality-as-autonomy is sin and only the power of Jesus Christ enables us to overcome such sin.

Both the new atheism and genuine, biblical Christianity are sincere. But sincerity does not trump truth. As Taunton argues, “After all, one can be sincerely wrong. But sincerity is indispensable to any truth we wish others to believe. There is something winsome, even irresistible, about a life lived with conviction.” As an example, Taunton reviews a familiar historic event from the

18th century. The famous Scottish philosopher and skeptic, David Hume, was in the crowd listening to George Whitefield preach. [Whitefield was the key preacher of the First Great Awakening.] This was the exchange:

“I thought you didn’t believe in the Gospel,” someone in the crowd asked Hume.
“I do not,” Hume replied. Then, with a nod to Whitefield, he added, “But he does.”

May we serve our God with conviction in a culture thoroughly engrossed with equality-as-autonomy and one dabbling in the “New Atheism.” And may we represent Him well!

See Larry Alex Taunton, “Listening to Young Atheists,” in www.theatlantic.com (18 July 2013); Larry Alex Taunton, “The Rally for Nothing in Particular,” in www.foxnews.com (24 March 2013); Michael J. Ovey, “From Moral Majority to Evil Disbelievers,” in *Themelios* 38:2 (August 2013).