

New Atheism and Religion

by Swami Sunirmalananda¹

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For those who haven't heard still, New Atheism is a recent movement. Sam Harris is the leader of New Atheism. Actually, A. C. Grayling (*All Against Gods*, 2004) and Sam Harris are both pioneers. Gary Wolf coined the name 'New Atheism' (in *Wired* magazine, November, 2006 issue). Some important new atheists are, the biologist, Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), the philosopher, Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a New Phenomenon*, 2006), Victor Stenger (*God: The Failed Hypothesis*, 2007), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*, 2007), also Grayling's *The Good Book* (2010). In fact, it's raining books, blogs and articles. Some say New Atheism is a fringe movement and will die soon. Others say New Atheism is popular and worrying. The faithful have taken it seriously. Religionists are writing articles and books, countering new atheists, but commentators feel they are weak and defensive.

Biting its head off

What do New Atheists say? They reject God (the Semitic Creator), religion (the monotheistic faith), ethics (the fear-based forced morality) and everything connected to religion. Let's empathize with them for some minutes to see why New Atheists are angry. They say that God's creating the world in six days and resting on the seventh is a kindergarten story. Next, God's wanting Abraham to kill his son is bad, but Gab-

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riel saved him. Further, the Ten Commandments are man-made, they say. Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*, 2007) says: “However little one thinks of the Jewish tradition, it is surely insulting to the people of Moses to imagine that they had come this far under the impression that murder, adultery, theft and perjury were permissible.” Further, the ‘Moses and Aaron’ story, the killings, Moses’ pronouncements in Deuteronomy, etc. – all are questioned. They say that the four New Testament Gospels were written, not by the famous four authors, but by scholars subsequently. New Atheists add that much of Christ’s life history is fiction and adjustment. Though the ire, fundamentally, is against the three monotheistic religions, the new atheists take all faiths to task. The Hindu system of caste and its consequences, the Suttee and its outcome, the story of Hindu hell etc. – all come under scrutiny.

New Atheists don’t argue irrationally, or say ‘God is dead,’ like Nietzsche. They accept God and other related ideas as hypotheses and say they can disprove them scientifically. Dawkins stands on Darwin’s theories. Victor Stenger writes that God is a failed hypothesis, and God with the three O’s, omnipotence, omniscience, and omni-benevolence simply cannot exist: “Absence of evidence is evidence of absence.” He adds that evidence for many religious doctrines is either terrible or non-existent.

Stenger and Hitchens quote John Stuart Mill, who wrote about his father’s atheism: “He regarded it (his religion) with the feelings due ... to a great moral evil. He looked upon it as the greatest enemy of morality...; making it consist in doing the will of a being, on whom it lavishes indeed all the phrases of adulation, but whom in sober truth it depicts as eminently hateful.” Victor sums their situation up in his *The New Atheism*: “I show how naturalism, the view that every

thing is matter and nothing more, is sufficient to explain everything we observe in the universe from the most distant galaxies to the inner workings of the brain that result in the phenomenon of mind. Nowhere is it necessary to introduce God or the supernatural to understand the world.” If religionists argue that science has no business with religion, New Atheists reply that religion has been interfering with science always. They question religious texts, practices, faith, ethics, religion and, finally, God, and reject religion. They suggest secular humanism for morality, materialism for life, and science for phenomena.

Why this reaction? Firstly, since ages, ‘religion’ has led thousands up the garden path, threatened, killed and enslaved them. In the past, while some converted ‘aborigines,’ saying that what they did was all superstition, others used the sword. As education spreads, those who got converted seeing bread baited to hooks are asking questions.

Secondly, non-essentials have become prominent in religion. To the herd, ‘religion’ is a supermarket: go buy health, wealth, and happiness for you and your family. But God must sell everything cheap or be ready for bitter criticism: “We offered incense worth \$2, put two coins into the beggar’s box, fed rice to two sparrows, and you, heartless God, didn’t give me a bank job.” If it rains, criticize; if it doesn’t rain, criticize.

Thirdly, ‘religion’ is materialism. ‘Religions’ do everything under the sun other than think of God. Prayer congregations are political meetings. Some prioritize the protection of husk – senseless rituals, meaningless junk, worthless fables. In India, some turn round and round a tree, eat prasad, and boast how many gallons of water their gurus turn into petrol every day. Some others think superstition and miracle-mongering is

religion: to be a saint you must levitate or do some magic. Some are busy deciding solutions to social problems. So 'religion' is criticized – since ages.

Atheism is not news. There were atheists and materialists before. In India we had materialist Charvakas, God-rejecting Samkhyans and Yogis, atheistic Jainas, atomistic Vaishesikas, the Buddhists – the list grows. Indians have respected all these atheists, honouring them as philosophers. Elsewhere, there have been many types of atheists who have voiced their opinions from time to time. New Atheists know all this; but they are powerful due to science. Science is both atheists' stronghold and human weakness. 'Science' is a magic word.

A case for religionists

But for some moments, let's empathize with the religionists. We begin with a tribute to 'science.' Whether or not scientific theories go on changing every day, whether or not it's true that the first moon landing was telecast (live) from 384,400 km, whether or not 'Pluto' is a planet, whether or not the 'bang' was really that 'big' for scientists to hear the echo now after '300 million years', whether or not the velocity of light is the upper limit, whether or not $E = mc^2$ now to ground all theories, whether or not NASA is right in that there's water on the moon – 'science' is our weakness.

Look at the creation theory itself – the bone of contention. If the Biblical story is a fable, what is 'scientific fact'? Basking on two Einsteinian theories, they write the history of the huge and vast universe, sitting on a tiny speck of a planet, and scientifically explain what happened before, during and after Planck time. One says the universe is 20,000,000,000,000 years old, another adds three more zeros, yet another says it's 367 million – and all get awards.

We can't verify; so we swallow these sensational discoveries stories hook, line and sinker!

Lamarck's (or was it Darwin's?) theory of natural selection has been adapted by many species but not the human being, sadly. While still in the womb, baby-giraffes heard their mothers whisper for generations to 'lengthen your neck, kid,' they became long-necked. All animals grew longer beaks and wings. But human thieves did not develop wings, and so police are still successful. Despite millions dying in wars since ages, we fools didn't understand the 'survival of the fittest' theory like the birds, and did not grow wings.

If 'religion' is bad because 'it' burned some at stake, 'science' too is not without fault. 'Science' as a peculiar social theory of equality and godlessness has killed thousands of faithful – including monks and nuns, has robbed and desecrated religious places, imprisoned monks and destroyed thousands, if not millions. Russian, Tibetan, Chinese monks – all have suffered under godless people. Dharmashala is still in India. Further, science through its media incites peaceful people into religious conflicts.

To test some drug, chemical or food, many (even children) have been maimed or killed in poorer countries. Bhopal is in India. Nuclear waste is not dumped in New York City. They neglect the starving millions (even children) in Africa, but spend billions of dollars to build the LHC, maintain thousands of scientists there – all to prove some theories. Millions of dollars are spent on moon-bombing while children starve nearer at home. Maybe conspiracy theorists are fools, but if Aldrin and Armstrong have such bright sunlight on them while on the moon – why is the sky around so dark? Where are the stars if that's moonlight?

Atomic and nuclear bombs, guns, chemical warfare – all

still in their infancy – have already killed millions. Wait to see what is in store as this roguish infant grows. In ignorance, ‘science’ becomes arrogant: something which it doesn’t, or cannot know, does not exist. We speak of yogic mental capacities. However, Patanjali was a scientist and not a religious man. He worshipped no God; he scientifically showed in his Yoga Sutras what super capacities our mind has. His fault was, he wrote in Sanskrit. Fortunately Newton did not choose Sanskrit. ‘Science’ is all-knowing, but it’s still unclear how many planets revolve round the sun, how to create life, what sun flares do, what makes us think, how to cure common cold – the list is long.

If ‘religion’ spread superstitions, ‘science’ does too. Millions swallow vitamins, aspirin, over-iodized salt etc., seeking health for decades upon scientific advice. Finally, ‘science’ declares that they aren’t good for health. By that time many have died. Millions consume antioxidants to stop rancidity in the body and to live long – on ‘scientific’ recommendation. But who knows your date of death? Orthodontists say all girls should wear dental clips for some time. Or else, they shall have protruding teeth. And just see how you are coaxed (or compelled) to buy things – to want more than you need – through ads. So people go crazy, wanting glitter. The funniest ‘scientific’ joke is to insist that there’s no extraterrestrial life at all and to declare simultaneously that life on earth came from extraterrestrial sources, through meteors, comets, etc. One last example: Antidepressants! It’s a depressing story.

Where things go wrong

These are the glories of ‘religion’ and ‘science’. Evidently, neither Science nor Religion is wrong: their misuse is. Consider superstitions themselves. We all love superstitions, its

language (science or religion) notwithstanding. Superstition is talking the herd language – coax or threaten. Secondly, senseless crime and injury have been perpetuated in the name of both religion and science, not by religion or science. To cheat using the science-tool is easier than to lie and cheat using the religion-tool. Remember the recent ‘swine-flu’ panic (sorry, epidemic)? (‘100 deaths the very first day in Mexico!’). So ‘herd’ is the word. Sheep know neither religion nor science: they want to be led and to survive. Therefore, neither science nor religion is to blame.

Let’s put it this way: if New Atheists use ‘science’ to kill ‘religion’ – well done! They are only helping religion by removing the junk and husk, because religionists themselves should have done this long ago. Religionists should have encouraged scientific research long ago and welcomed newer discoveries. The husk is the ‘religion’ of the herd. Junk accumulates because religion is handled both by fools and scholars alike. Masses thrive on nonsense than on subtle ideals. So they create new scriptures, rituals, theories – all superficial. In time, Religion faces stiff opposition for mixing things up: fable with philosophy, ritual with mysticism, ‘religion’ with spirituality, service with sentimentality, God with politicians and, importantly, religion with society. To defend some fable, worthwhile philosophy is sacrificed; to defend some meaningless ritual, mysticism is sacrificed. So atheists come down heavily upon religion.

Of the several criticisms, we take up only one for want of space: ‘Do not kill’, ‘do not steal’, etc. are written in the Bible not because ancient races did not know such things were bad, but such things have to be written somewhere. Similar ideas are found in many texts. In Yoga Sutras, “non-violence, truthfulness, non-stealing” are mentioned as basic moral virtues.

Religion should not worry if minor details, or stories, are to be given up. Religions will not go away if you go with the times so far as some non-essentials are concerned. Even scientists believed that there was nothing beyond the sea before the voyages began. You may consider stories as allegories. Hinduism has many stories of creation: all are ridiculed by practising Hindus themselves. Krishna says to Arjuna in their greatest work, Bhagavad Gita, that the Vedas (the most sacred books) have their limitations and that he must go beyond them. We have travelled all along on carts and now use cars. Just removing a 't' doesn't destroy Christianity. Suppose you believed all along that Jesus travelled on a donkey. A scholar accidentally buys some broken pieces of pot in Cairo, glues them as he thinks best, and discovers that the meaning of the original Aramaic word for 'donkey' had changed to 'horse' since 87.6 AD. Was Jesus afraid of horse riding? Scientists made the world believe that Pluto was a planet till yesterday! Since religion is handled by anybody and everybody, mistakes and failures happen, non-essentials increase; some soldiers fall. Does that not happen in science? Millions of dollars are spent on failed experiments in labs and thousands of guinea pigs are sacrificed. Many rockets fall down.

If religion erred, science too can err. If humans misinterpret things, God is not to blame. Swami Vivekananda says: 'If you want to be a Christian, it is not necessary to know whether Christ was born in Jerusalem or Bethlehem or just the exact date on which he pronounced the Sermon on the Mount; you only require to feel the Sermon on the Mount.'

Listen to the sane voice

New Atheism is popular because atheists are sincere seekers after truth. They want to know things correctly. To

answer them, Religion should have proper representatives. Who can answer them? Not the ‘religious’ with swords or the so-called ‘religious’ leaders. Pundits, scholars, loud hailers, shepherds, sword-wielders – none would do. A truly religious person is needed.

A true religious leader is a spiritual person – a true child of God. He is impartial, open, scientific, rational, not given to superstitions, ready to renounce pet theories, not self-seeking, truthful, and a knower of Truth. He manifests the best scientific spirit: of enquiry, rationality, sincerity, and openness on the one hand, and also the best religious spirit: of truth, faith, purity, love, selflessness, etc. on the other. This personality has no regional or denominational limits. The world is global now, religion is global, and our problems are global. So he should be a global spiritual leader. This leader belongs to no religion – Eurocentricism, Ecumenism, Americanism, etc. Moreover, religions are mutually complementary. So renouncing superiority complexes, we should look for such a leader. Do you have one? If not, we can show one.

He stood on the platform of the Parliament of Religions in Chicago in 1893 and told the world:

“...holiness, purity and charity are not the exclusive possessions of any church in the world.... In the face of this evidence, if anybody dreams of the exclusive survival of his own religion and the destruction of the others, I pity him from the bottom of my heart, and point out to him that upon the banner of every religion will soon be written, in spite of resistance: ‘Help and not Fight,’ ‘Assimilation and not Destruction,’ ‘Harmony and Peace and not Dissension.’”

This was Swami Vivekananda. He was no mere mortal or angel or miracle monger. He represented Truth. He spoke the

truth, from experience. He called a spade a spade. It's not possible to show all that he said about this subject, unfortunately. However, here are a few ideas. In the face of atheist attacks, let's listen to his sane words. If not, suffer.

What Vivekananda Says

First of all, Vivekananda has plain words for 'religionists' who are fighting to save the husk called 'religion':

"We are all atheists; let us confess it. Mere intellectual assent does not make us religious. We are all atheists, and yet we try to fight the man who admits it." "Jesus saw God and Buddha saw God. If you have not seen God, you are no better than the atheist." "It is better to be an outspoken atheist than a hypocrite."

Does Vivekananda mean that we are all atheists? Yes, if we have no faith in ourselves.

"You must believe in yourself, and then you will believe in God." We have neither faith in our religion nor in ourselves, but pretend to be 'religious'. What should we do now? "Think for yourselves. Become atheists! Become materialists! That would be better. Exercise the mind!"

Vivekananda says that we all should be real truth seekers. He declares:

"Religion can be realized. Are you ready? Do you want it? You will get the realization if you do, and then you will be truly religious. Until you have attained realization there is no difference between you and atheists. The atheists are sincere, but the man who says that he believes in religion and never attempts to realize it is not sincere."

Questioning never means being atheistic; it only

strengthens faith. If a Sam Harris or Richard Dawkins questions to know and your faith totters, let that fragile faith go. Vivekananda says:

“There is no difference between theories and atheism. In fact, the atheist is the truer man.”

All true atheists are truly religious people, are sincere seekers of truth. They may not belong to any denominational faith, but they reject the husk. Vivekananda says:

“We must each have our own individual religion, individual so far as the externals of it go.”

Hinduism accepted that antagonism towards God too as a devotional path, though negative. Those who hated God – Kamsa, Ravana and others – thought constantly about God and attained Him. Evil is perpetuated because we condemn people as evil, as sinners.

“If a man, day and night, thinks he is miserable, low, and nothing, nothing he becomes. We are sparks of the infinite, divine fire. How can we be nothings?” Vivekananda says, “Man is not travelling from error to truth, but from truth to truth, from lower to higher truth”

Now, Vivekananda answers the atheists. No arguments, but placing facts. New Atheists reject God. But Vivekananda replies:

“There are two ideas of God: the one, personal, and the other, impersonal. The idea of the personal God is that He is the omnipresent Creator...Then ... the Impersonal, where all those adjectives are taken away as superfluous.... And what are our relations with this Impersonal Being? – that we are He.”

New Atheists reject religion saying that it is all man-made. But Vivekananda replies that the germ of religion is in:

“the struggle to transcend the limitations of the senses” (2:59).

Why struggle? He says:

“...man is not only a gross material body; not only ... the finer body, the mind, but there is something yet greater, something beyond, the Atman – I cannot translate the word to you for any translation will be wrong.”

New Atheists reject faith, calling it blind. But Vivekananda says:

“When it was discovered that ‘I and my Father are one,’ the last word was said of religion. In true religion there is no faith or belief in the sense of blind faith. No great preacher ever preached that.”

Regarding the scriptures, New Atheists reject the theory of creation. Vivekananda says:

“Unlike all other races of the world, we do not believe that this world was created only so many thousand years ago, and is going to be destroyed eternally on a certain day.”

Atheists consider morality to be man-made. But Vivekananda says:

“Man learns to give up the attempt to express the Infinite through the finite. This giving up, this renunciation of the attempt, is the background of ethics. Renunciation is the very basis upon which ethics stands.”

Vivekananda sympathizes fully with the cause of the atheists:

“Materialism prevails in Europe today. You may pray for the salvation of the modern sceptics, but they do not yield. They want reason. The salvation of Europe de-

pend on a rationalistic religion, and Advaita – the non-duality, the Oneness, the idea of the impersonal God – is the only religion that can have any hold on any intellectual people.”

However, who is a real atheist?

“The idea of God and the ideas of brute and of man are within illusion (maya), and as such are equally hallucinations; all of them are dreams. But you must take care not to argue like some extraordinary men of whom we hear at the present time. They say the idea of God is a delusion, but the idea of this world is true. Both ideas stand or fall by the same logic. He alone has the right to be an atheist who denies this world, as well as the other. The same argument is for both. The same mass of delusion extends from God to the lowest animal, from a blade of grass to the Creator. They stand or fall by the same logic.”

Can there be a global definition of Religion? Vivekananda says:

“Each soul is potentially divine. The goal is to manifest this Divinity within by controlling nature, external and internal. Do this either by work or worship or psychic control or philosophy – by one or more or all of these and be free. This is the whole of religion. Doctrines, or dogmas, or rituals, or books, or temples, or forms, are but secondary details.”



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