

Why God Won't Go Away: Is the New Atheism Running on Empty?

Alister E. McGrath

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"A robust defense of the God of the Bible...This is a book for serious thinkers who wish to make God real in a world that has forgotten its Creator and Maker." -- Joni Eareckson Tada

In a decade embroiled in fanaticism and fear, a renewed interest in the age-old debate over the question of God has reignited, giving rise to a new group of media-savvy contenders dubbed the "New Atheists." As expressed in the works of best-selling authors like Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, the New Atheists have found a foothold in today's cynical society, and have ramped up their efforts to debunk the existence of God.

Renowned historian, theologian, and scholar Alister McGrath is on the frontlines of this conversation, publicly debating many of these prominent skeptics. In this thoughtful and accessible volume, McGrath gives a spirited rebuttal to the claims of the New Atheists, critiquing the New Atheism on its own merits and exploring the fundamental questions:

Who are the New Atheists, and what do they believe?

Is religion delusional and evil?

Are human beings fundamentally good?

How do reason and science prove or disprove faith?

Is the best hope for humanity a "New Enlightenment"?

Why God Won't Go Away explores how the movement's ideas are defined and propagated, helping us understand the agendas and anxieties of this global movement and its appeal to society as a whole. Why God Won't Go Away explores what is "new" about New Atheism, critiques the movement on its core themes of violence, reason, and science, and asks, where does the New Atheism go from here?

Why God Won't Go Away: Is the New Atheism Running on Empty? Details

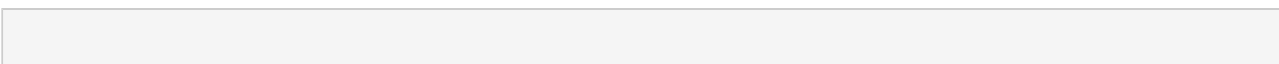
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Alister E. McGrath**

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Thomas Freeman says

I received this book free from the publisher through the BookSneeze.com® book review bloggers program. I was not required to write a positive review. The opinions I have expressed are my own. I am disclosing this in accordance with the Federal Trade Commission's 16 CFR, Part 255 : "Guides Concerning the Use of Endorsements and Testimonials in Advertising."

Why God Won't Go Away by Alister McGrath

A better title might be, "New Atheism Won't Run God Off!". I wasn't familiar with McGrath before reading this book but I have since seen his name around several theological volumes. Because of the title, I really looked forward to the opportunity Thomas Nelson gave me to review this book. It reminded me of Francis Schaeffer's book "God Is Hear and He Is Not Silent". Turns out this book is much more about New Atheism than it is a defense for confidence in God.

"The New Atheism is different. It's defined not so much by being white, male and middle class--though it is worth noting that its four leading representatives are all Anglo-Saxon Protestant males from remarkably similar backgrounds of privilege and power -- as by its anti-theism -- an intense anger against religion, which is held to poison everything Christopher Hitchens puts it with a commendable conclusion: "I am not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist." This anti-theism is equally evident in the writing of the other "Four Horsemen." But surely this leads to the group defining itself by what it's against rather than what it's for." (McGrath, pg. 36)

McGrath quickly shows the heartbeat of New Atheism is really Anti-Theism. I was excited to learn that I was going to find good research into New Atheism and quickly dug into it. He does a good job of keeping it interesting and covering all the basics in an introductory manner.

I will keep this book around for whenever I want to "brush up" on this topic, the primary proponents and some basic weaknesses to explore.

McGrath breaks the book into three parts:

1. What is the New Atheism?

His approach is to first introduce us to the four men who have done the most to encourage this so called "new" form of atheism. By following simply biographies on these men we begin to see the personal character that is propelling them to such angry and cynical rhetoric. It is easy to then begin to understand the definition quoted earlier. Who are these "Four Horseman"?

A. Sam Harris, author of "The End of Faith" (2004)

Harris argues that Faith provides an age of "weapons of mass destruction" to do truly evil things.

"Note that Harris's primary concern in "The End of Faith" is not to defend atheism but rather to portray religion as dangerous and deluded. Ideas that should be regarded as symptoms of mental illness--such as praying--are tolerated in Western culture simply because we've gotten used to them. Religious moderates blind society to the danger of religious extremists. The problem is not extremism or fanaticism as such but religion, which engenders such attitudes in the first place." (McGrath, pg. 5)

B. Richard Dawkins, author of "The God Delusion" (2006)

Dawkins is a British writer who has taken great lengths to carve a niche out of carving up Biblical Theism.

"First, Dawkins declares that faith is fundamentally irrational. There's no evidence for the existence of God. Those who believe in God are therefore running away from reality, seeking consolation in a make-believe, fairy-tale world... Faith is "blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence." It's a "process of non-thinking" or "a persistently false belief held in the face of strong contradictory evidence." It's "evil precisely because it requires no justification, and brooks no argument." (McGrath, pg. 13)

C. Daniel Dennett, author of "Darwins Dangerous Idea" (1995)

Dennett is not nearly as abusive in his language and is thus less recognized. But his primary contribution to New Atheism lies in his efforts to explain belief in God as a result of evolution. He sees natural selection as the cause of man's desire to believe in a God that does not really exist. He chooses to start from this proposition rather than discovering that God does not exist empirically and then determining to explain why man persists belief in God.

D. Christopher Hitchens, the late author of "God Is Not Great" (2007)

McGrath says that Hitchens' book is, "by far the most entertaining of the New Atheist works. It's driven by a passionate anger about religion, unquestionably fueled in part by the events of 9/11. But it reveals a deeper anxiety, which I believe underlies the work of other New Atheist writers as well--namely the obstinate refusal to die out as predicted by secular theorists since the 1960s. God just won't go away." (McGrath, pg. 26)

This section of McGrath's work is very interesting. He does a good job of showing the inconsistency and ridiculous notions of Hitchens.

2. Engaging the New Atheism: Three Core Themes

In the next section McGrath gives us several key thoughts that expose the weaknesses in New Atheism philosophy. His primary points are:

A. Religion is a false universal.

The new atheist go to great lengths to talk about religion as if it is a universal concept. McGrath argues that individual religions exist but not a universal concept.

B. They refuse any rationality to religious faith.

The default position of New Atheism, in the proponents minds, does not need to be defended but is just accepted. (Sounds like blind faith.) Instead, they work from the position that there is no intelligent rationale for religious faith. McGrath engages this and just be exposing the often unspoken platform reveals the weaknesses of these arguments.

C. Science is based on evidence.

Finally, McGrath shows the fallacy of depending on science as arguments against faith when the New Atheist begins from a position of faith. Their faith is that God and faith are irrational. But they have no empirical evidence to conclude this. To be agnostic and doubt God is very different than to claim there is no God for with that claim you are claiming to have proof. Without proof, you simply have faith. We can argue how reasonable the faith is but that is all.

"In a sense, the natural sciences are the one remaining aspect of the Enlightenment project that has stood the test of time. The experimental method is universally valid and blind to the culture, race, religion, or gender

of its researchers. But while science may use rational methods of investigation, most notably the careful accumulation of evidence through observation and experiment, it does from time to time witness developments that are deeply counter intuitive and seem completely irrational (quantum theory providing many choice examples). Yet the question a scientist will ask is not, "is this reasonable" but, "What are the reasons for thinking this is true?" (McGrath, pg. 108)

3. Where does the New Atheism go from here?

In this concluding section McGrath shows that "New Atheism" will not be widely accepted and is already on a steady decline. They gain a lot of attention with their angst and ridicule but have no long term arguments. Instead, God is not gone and is not in danger of going away anytime soon!

The facts are:

New Atheism is a flash of anger and cynicism.

It finds its greatest attention in the flamboyance of its proponents.

God and religious faith are not in danger from it.

This is a very good book and I do recommend it. It will provide both a good introduction and a good resource for further engagement with the "New Atheism" movement.

Gary says

An interesting little read. McGrath gives far too much away to his opponents and starts his debate with them assuming too many enlightenment myths. But he makes a number of very valuable factual statements and shows up the intolerance of the New Atheists brilliantly.

Liked it.

Michael Boling says

Alister McGrath provides a brief yet well researched overview of New Atheism. McGrath divides his text into three main sections where he discusses the development of the New Atheistic ideal, how to effectively engage those who adhere to such a belief, and where McGrath believes the agenda of New Atheism is headed. I must note this book is not an apologetic for Christianity; conversely, it is a discussion of New Atheism, its agenda, and how to address this movement. With that said, McGrath nevertheless uses biblical truth as his foundational premise for interacting with the dangerous New Atheistic viewpoint.

McGrath has extensively debated supporters of New Atheism such as Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens and his experience dealing with New Atheism can clearly be observed throughout the text. This book is well written providing the reader with a understandable summary that should prove enlightening to both scholar and layman alike. Moreover, McGrath's engaging writing style is scholarly yet approachable, a quality often missing from works on this topic. This book is replete with valuable information yet does not get bogged down with over argumentation or extensive interludes into philosophical discussions.

While arguably not as an extensive work on the subject as provided by others such as Ravi Zacharias or

William Lane Craig, McGrath nevertheless extensively engages the subject matter with a deft, logical, reasoned approach thoroughly demolishing the arguments against biblical truth by those who seek to push New Atheism. Ultimately, McGrath proves quite clearly that despite repeated attempts throughout history to shut God out of society, God Won't Go Away! I highly recommend this book as it provided me with a number of solid arguments to utilize in further discussions with those who have been duped into believing Biblical faith is irrational.

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David says

This is a fairly good exposition of the weaknesses of the "new atheism". He drives home the point that thorough-going atheism just does not sit well with the human psyche. He also makes a good point, however, that persons of religious faith need to at least consider some of these challenges -- that only by analyzing one's faith can it ever advance beyond naivety.

Kristofor Hellmeister says

It was a good book, which I wish had an updated format!

Ethan says

McGrath has come out with another book on New Atheism: *Why God Won't Go Away: Is the New Atheism Running on Empty?* In it, McGrath attempts to summarize the situation, condition, and challenges with New Atheism as of 2010: the four main protagonists for New Atheism, the existence of a virulent web community advancing New Atheist views, the works written by the four protagonists, the issues as they relate to religion/belief, reason, and science, along with some concluding comments regarding the waning influence of New Atheism.

For someone who is relatively new to the challenges posed by New Atheism, this book is a great primer to understand the situation. If one has already read works by McGrath on the subject, they will find a nugget or two of different arguments perhaps not seen in other works, but on the whole, McGrath has written much more comprehensive, poignant, and explanatory books on this subject. *The Dawkins Delusion?* and *The Twilight of Atheism* dig deeper than *Why God Won't Go Away*; nevertheless, for a basic introduction to the issue, *Why God Won't Go Away* is a good start.

On the greater philosophical level, I fear that this book is a continuation of the trend for Christian authors to keep beating a dead horse and keep controversies alive in the name of apologetics. This is not to criticize the substance of the work nor the need to aggressively defend the faith in the face of the assaults of New Atheism; yet, as with *The da Vinci Code*, so with New Atheism. Much of society has moved on from this particular permutation of atheism; New Atheism never really said anything new; one cannot help but

conclude that the mission of New Atheism has all but ended in utter failure. If that's the case, why keep providing them a fresh audience with these books? Perhaps it would be better to shift away from New Atheism *per se* and focus on the challenges of atheism in general.

McGrath does well in restraining himself when it comes to his descriptions of New Atheism and its sheer hypocrisy. He provides the evidence that New Atheism, on the whole, represents a group of people who believe in their own superiority, refusing to listen to any other perspectives, utterly convinced of their own rightness, thoroughly unwilling to subject their own views to the critical scrutiny to which they subject other views, hyper-simplistic in viewpoint to the point of being laughable, and being quite caustic, condemnatory, and dare it be said, hateful, of that which they have denounced as condemnatory and hateful. The conclusion is inescapable: many New Atheists share the same basic view of the world as the fundamentalists which they despise, merely with a different set of assumptions and ideas. Little wonder, then, that New Atheism has been seen for what it really is, and has been soundly rejected by most on either side of the God issue.

One will be hard-pressed to find a theist with a more sympathetic view toward atheists and some of their arguments than McGrath; he is willing to concede that some arguments made by atheists pose challenges, but wants the same hearing for theistic arguments. He does well at showing in the book how existence is more complicated than the triumphalist Enlightenment view can allow. The book has great value for the analysis of reason, science, and belief within it alone.

New Atheism seems to be on an irreversible decline; good riddance. But believers do need to come to terms with the effect they might have on people who have heard various tidbits in news reports. However directly or indirectly, many have absorbed a lot of the ideas promoted by New Atheists, and a lot of our cultural assumptions about existence, religion, and science are shared by the New Atheists in their tirades. We must learn how to expose the fallacies of the worldview constructs that undergird the triumphalist scientism that is so rampant and which passes as intellectually serious in much of society. We need to expose just how complicated knowledge, proof, reason, belief, and existence are, and point people back to a view of God and themselves that is rationally respectable yet without need to always defer to reason. To these ends McGrath has done us many favors in pointing the way forward; let us press on in our service to our Creator!

*--book received as part of early review program

Chuck Bonadies says

In this book McGrath introduces the reader to the characters of the New Atheism movement as well as their ideas. He does a good job showing that the movement is much more bark than bite. Those who are well-versed with New Atheism will probably discover little new here. The book, however, would serve a great introduction.

CB

Adam Lewis says

A stimulating and sometimes correct critique of the "New Atheism" but it ultimately fails to make its case.

After initially finishing writing this review, I looked down and saw that it was a 2,500 word monster. To make it more reader-friendly, I cut out everything except the central issue that I had with the book and a very brief concluding remark.

The biggest problem in this book is the faulty critique of the by-product theory of religion. Briefly stated, the by-product theory of religion posits that religious cognition is not separate or unique. Rather, religious thought arises as part of the mundane processes in our minds that evolved for other reasons. Indeed, it could nearly be expected given cognitive evolution. In other words, gods don't have to exist for them to be believed in. Many books such as *In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion* (Evolution and Cognition) and *Religion Explained* have made this powerful point under the banner of cognitive science of religion (henceforth CSR).

Given the strength and level of development of this approach to religion, McGrath's critique of it is rather superficial and incoherent. To quote him directly:

"Dawkins does more than argue that scientific belief undermines belief in God; he argues that it explains it away as an unintended outcome of human evolution. Believing in God is an "accidental by-product" of the evolutionary process. Religion arises from a "misfiring of something useful. ¶ It has always seemed to me that there's a problem here. If Darwinian evolution is indeed a random process, how can we speak about 'accidental' or 'unintended' outcomes?" [p. 16-17]

First, evolution is not totally random. McGrath holds a PhD in molecular biophysics, so it is highly strange for him to even hypothetically posit such a thing. Perhaps he means "undirected by agency" which would be correct but that is neither here nor there in the point he is making. Organisms have to have at least some level of adaptation to their environment or they will not survive and produce offspring. Pointing this out shows us why his argument is flawed. By looking at function we can tell which things serve actual biological functions and which are by-products.

Take the Peacock's tail. Sexual selection more than likely gave it its flamboyance. It functions and serves the needs of the animal in that it gives it a reproductive advantage. In that regard, it serves a central function in this animal's survival. But it also functions as a flamboyant flag to predators. It is this second function that can accurately be termed "unintended" or an "accidental by-product". In the grand scheme of peacock life however, the tail's function as a feature essential to reproduction outweighs the occasional predated individual. How McGrath misses this quite elementary point is beyond me. (Perhaps his point is semantic as, strictly speaking, there are no "intentions" to speak of here, but surely he must know the metaphorical nature of language usage.)

How this relates to religion is quite straightforward. During human cognitive evolution, the human social environment was, if not the most important selective pressure, at least one of central importance. There is a host of cognitive features that evolved as a result such as the tendency to think in terms of agency [see *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Cognitive Science of Religion Series)]. When people are constrained to think in terms of social causation and agency, they might even invent the agent to maintain the heuristic.

Indeed, as I recently argued in a master's thesis, social cognition pervades our thought and is the basis for religion. Just as the male peacock's tail evolved primarily to facilitate reproduction, these features of social cognition evolved for the primary function of navigating the social world. Where a biological feature is doing the job it evolved to do, it is often very good at it. But just as the colorful tail can have the by-product

function of attracting predators when not in its specific functional domain, the social cognitive systems of our mind can lead us to accept false beliefs about the world when utilized outside the realm of natural human agents.

Specifically, a nearly default view on causation is of a social nature because the *real* social domain is so pervasive in our world. It is an easy step to use that type of thinking outside its domain. This is where and how many erroneous supernatural beliefs arise: mechanistic, natural causation is interpreted as being social in nature.

"Everything happens for a reason" is taken as a truism because everything caused by human agents happens for a reason. This interpretive social heuristic is simply applied scattershot across all domains. This is why gods are imagined to "do" so many things in the world from answer prayers to send "signs" in the form of natural disasters--theology as practiced by most believers across a panoply of gods and religions is simply misapplied social heuristics. This constitutes a by-product by almost all definitions.

I suspect the reason McGrath advances such a faulty critique of one of the central positions of CSR is because it is "More Dangerous than Dawkins", as one review of Jesse Bering's new book *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life* put it. Granted it would be fallacious to explain religion naturalistically and then call it false on those grounds, but couple it with the strong philosophical arguments against and the dearth of scientific evidence for gods and one gets a powerful multi-pronged attack on any theological realist interpretation of religion. McGrath probably realizes this.

To make a very brief remark about the general content of the book, I'll conclude by saying it is probably worth your while to read if you are interested in the subject. It is at times a stimulating counterpoint to certain themes in New Atheist literature like the ridiculous notion of "memes" being scientific. But in the end many of McGrath's arguments are fatally littered with flaws.

In Gods We Trust: The Evolutionary Landscape of Religion

Why Would Anyone Believe in God?

The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life

???????? says

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Chris French says

I received this book for free via the Booksneeze program from Thomas Nelson. *Why God Won't Go Away* is a dissection of the New Atheism Movement. McGrath starts off the book with a quick synopsis of the four literary leaders of the movement: Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens. Each has written his own book espousing the greatness of the New Atheism. It's "new" because it's different from your run of the mill atheism. This one's angry! This anger is one of the main tenants of this type of atheism. The New Atheists don't particularly want to debate a creationist. They mostly want to grandstand

and mouth off at the ignorance and danger of religion.

The New Atheism started right after 9/11. When everyone was thinking how awful the actions of a select extremely radical group of religious people were some people, the above authors included, started thinking how awful religion itself is. They're not blaming any one religion. They hate them all! Islam, Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, and all the other religions in the world should be abolished, they say. If it wasn't for God and religion there wouldn't be any wars! Wait, what? Of course there would be wars without religion! To be honest I haven't read "the four horseman's" (term of endearment for the above literary leaders) books, but McGrath gives a pretty good overview of their works. Most of their logic doesn't make sense. They dismiss religion not because of any argument, but because they think it's stupid. They do this with a lot of important sounding words and flowery speech (mostly from Christopher Hitchens), but in reality it's not that their argument is poor. It's that they don't have an argument at all! Calling something stupid isn't an argument.

The New Atheism is different from the atheism most of us are familiar with in that the New Atheists don't just want equality with religion, they want religion gone. Normal Atheists use positive arguments. By that I mean that they have their point and bring in evidence to prove that point (faulty evidence, but evidence nonetheless). New Atheists only have negative arguments. They don't have a position by themselves. Their only move is to disavow something a creationist says, they have nothing to say that would build their argument. New Atheists are atheism's rabid dogs. They bite anything and everything that has any connection with religion. Even the regular atheists are ashamed of their actions.

I did enjoy reading *Why God Won't Go Away*. McGrath is a collegiate professor of Theology, Ministry and Education at King's College in London. This guy is smart and he knows what he's talking about. He's well read on the New Atheism and even checks out their websites sometimes. He's debated a few of the New Atheists and several of the normal atheists. His thoughts on the New Atheism are well structured and quite thorough. The only negative I found was the derision with which he treats the New Atheists. The book is filled with their snide comments. I didn't really need any more sarcasm or venom from him. Other than that I found the book to be informative and helpful. This is definitely an introduction to the New Atheism, but he's got some deep things that we need to think thru as Christians too.

Nikole Hahn says

"Yet I've noticed recently that all is not well within these virtual communities. They had an upbeat feel in the heady days of 2006 and 2007 when the New Atheism seemed to be like a bright new sun dawning on the world. But not now. Is a "crisis of faith" beginning to emerge?" - Pg. 41

A recent debate with atheists and memories of old debates with atheist family members gave rise to the yearning to learn more about atheism and its roots. Alister McGrath, a former atheist, holds the chair of theology, ministry, and education at King's College London, "having previously held the chair of historical theology at Oxford University." This atheist-turned-Christian challenges the "Four Horsemen" of the New Atheism.

"The term New Atheism was invented in 2006. Gary Wolf was writing an article for *Wired*, a British magazine aimed at "smart, intellectually curious people who need, and want, to know what's next." Wolf was looking around for a snappy slogan to refer to a group of three men who'd attracted media attention through best-selling popular books advocating atheism: Sam Harris with *The End of Faith* (2004), Richard Dawkins

with *The God Delusion* (2006), and Daniel Dennett with *Breaking the Spell* (2006)....In 2007, the New Atheism movement gained a new hero when Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great* became the latest atheist best seller. The phrase the Four Horsemen began to be used to refer to these writers, who rapidly assumed celebrity status and are now collectively identified as the intellectual and cultural spearhead of the New Atheism.” - Pg. 3-4

McGrath engages the New Atheism in friendly fire. He's objective, having read books and publications from atheist writers, and proceeds to tirelessly refute each of their objections with grounded reasoning. He uses historical context to show the harm of the New Atheism. The shocking agenda of the New Atheism and the lengths they would go to eradicate all religion from society shocks other atheists. “Even says Sam Harris, 'some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.' This may seem an extraordinary claim, but it merely enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live.”

“Killing such people, he tells us, could be regarded as an act of self defense. The Inquisition, the Gestapo, the Taliban, and the KGB could not have put it better. To be honest, I found Harris's statement to be morally repulsive.” - Pg. 10

The chapters are easy to follow, but you do have to read slowly. McGrath makes every sentence count and it reminds me of studying in school. There are two pages (front and back) of suggested “further reading” for those believers or atheists who choose to learn more, and 13 pages of notes detailing his sources. His index allows for readers to investigate certain phrasing without thumbing through the pages like I do in some book reviews. McGrath's last chapter makes the New Atheism less threatening. Truth does not shy away from debate nor does it stick its head in the sand. Truth is open to discussion.

Book provided by publisher to review.

Kathy Robbins says

“Christopher Hitchens recently slammed Mother Teresa, declaring her ‘a fanatic and a fundamentalist and a fraud,’ arguing that ‘millions of people are much worse off because of her life’ It was a shame, he declared, that there was no hell for her to go to. It was a foolish move, and Hitchens later generously apologized for it. (One of Hitchens’s former colleagues drolly commented, ‘My sympathies were with Mother Teresa. If you were sitting in rags in a gutter in Calcutta, who would be more likely to give you a bowl of soup?’)”

The above quote is found on page 37 of *Why God Won't Go Away*. This is a quote belonging to Christopher Hitchens, who is one of four contemporary authors who have been nicknamed, “The Four Horsemen.” According to this book, the other three authors include Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett, who all have contributed atheistic ideology that have collectively become known as “The New Atheism.”

Why God Won't Go Away is a scholarly critique of this movement. The critique is divided into three parts. The first part defines “The New Atheism,” and investigates the main fathers of this movement, analyzing the arguments put forward by each of the authors. The second part of the book discusses “The New Atheism” within the framework of three themes: violence, reason and science. Part three discusses the current status of “The New Atheism” and where the future may lead. This also concludes the critique of the movement postulating that the purpose of the movement, that being the end of religion, has failed.

Initially, before reading this book, I was intimidated by the subject matter, with which I am not well versed.

My fear was that the details would be above my understanding from start to finish. This was not the case. The author painstakingly and patiently explains this ideology from the beginning of the movement, including commentary from bloggers and other world authorities from many different disciplines. Although the ideas are very deep at times and the vocabulary is sometimes challenging, it follows a logical thought pattern and is very illuminating. Basically, the author shoots down the logic of "The New Atheism", and explains the fallacies to the theory.

I recommend this book for anyone who is capable of critical thought and who is even remotely interested in the current and historical debate between atheist thought and religious thought.

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Becky says

4+ stars. The author explores the New Atheism movement, exposing the elitism and arrogance of many of its adherents. He outlines its history and quotes their spokesmen "the Four Horsemen", as he calls them. The language of this book is erudite, which may be difficult to digest for some readers (I had to lookup a few words at times).

The + I added to the four stars is due to the last chapter, which concludes on a positive note "God can no more be eliminated from human life than our yearning for justice or our deep desire to make this world a better place. We have a homing instinct precisely because there's a home for us to return to. That's one of the great themes of the New Testament. We are created with an inbuilt yearning for God..."

Adam Lewis says

A stimulating and sometimes correct critique of the "New Atheism" but it ultimately fails to make its case.

After initially finishing writing this review, I looked down and saw that it was a 2,500 word monster. To

make it more reader-friendly, I cut out everything except the central issue that I had with the book and a very brief concluding remark.

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Given the strength and level of development of this approach to religion, McGrath's critique of it is rather superficial and incoherent. To quote him directly:

"Dawkins does more than argue that scientific belief undermines belief in God; he argues that it explains it away as an unintended outcome of human evolution. Believing in God is an "accidental by-product" of the evolutionary process. Religion arises from a "misfiring of something useful. ¶ It has always seemed to me that there's a problem here. If Darwinian evolution is indeed a random process, how can we speak about 'accidental' or 'unintended' outcomes?" [p. 16-17]

First, evolution is not totally random. McGrath holds a PhD in molecular biophysics, so it is highly strange for him to even hypothetically posit such a thing. Perhaps he means "undirected by agency" which would be correct but that is neither here nor there in the point he is making. Organisms have to have at least some level of adaptation to their environment or they will not survive and produce offspring. Pointing this out shows us why his argument is flawed. By looking at function we can tell which things serve actual biological functions and which are by-products.

Take the Peacock's tail. Sexual selection more than likely gave it its flamboyance. It functions and serves the needs of the animal in that it gives it a reproductive advantage. In that regard, it serves a central function in this animal's survival. But it also functions as a flamboyant flag to predators. It is this second function that can accurately be termed "unintended" or an "accidental by-product". In the grand scheme of peacock life however, the tail's function as a feature essential to reproduction outweighs the occasional predated individual. How McGrath misses this quite elementary point is beyond me. (Perhaps his point is semantic as, strictly speaking, there are no "intentions" to speak of here, but surely he must know the metaphorical nature of language usage.)

How this relates to religion is quite straightforward. During human cognitive evolution, the human social environment was, if not the most important selective pressure, at least one of central importance. There is a host of cognitive features that evolved as a result such as the tendency to think in terms of agency [see *Why Would Anyone Believe in God?* (Cognitive Science of Religion Series)]. When people are constrained to think in terms of social causation and agency, they might even invent the agent to maintain the heuristic.

Indeed, as I recently argued in a master's thesis, social cognition pervades our thought and is the basis for religion. Just as the male peacock's tail evolved primarily to facilitate reproduction, these features of social cognition evolved for the primary function of navigating the social world. Where a biological feature is doing the job it evolved to do, it is often very good at it. But just as the colorful tail can have the by-product function of attracting predators when not in its specific functional domain, the social cognitive systems of our mind can lead us to accept false beliefs about the world when utilized outside the realm of natural human agents.

Specifically, a nearly default view on causation is of a social nature because the *real* social domain is so pervasive in our world. It is an easy step to use that type of thinking outside its domain. This is where and how many erroneous supernatural beliefs arise: mechanistic, natural causation is interpreted as being social in nature.

"Everything happens for a reason" is taken as a truism because everything caused by human agents happens for a reason. This interpretive social heuristic is simply applied scattershot across all domains. This is why gods are imagined to "do" so many things in the world from answer prayers to send "signs" in the form of natural disasters--theology as practiced by most believers across a panoply of gods and religions is simply misapplied social heuristics. This constitutes a by-product by almost all definitions.

I suspect the reason McGrath advances such a faulty critique of one of the central positions of CSR is because it is "More Dangerous than Dawkins", as one review of Jesse Bering's new book *The Belief Instinct: The Psychology of Souls, Destiny, and the Meaning of Life* put it. Granted it would be fallacious to explain religion naturalistically and then call it false on those grounds, but couple it with the strong philosophical arguments against and the dearth of scientific evidence for gods and one gets a powerful multi-pronged attack on any theological realist interpretation of religion. McGrath probably realizes this.

To make a very brief remark about the general content of the book, I'll conclude by saying it is probably worth your while to read if you are interested in the subject. It is at times a stimulating counterpoint to certain themes in New Atheist literature like the ridiculous notion of "memes" being scientific. But in the end many of McGrath's arguments are fatally littered with flaws.

Frank Peters says

This was an excellent book which is well titled. After recently reading the book by Lennox "gunning for God" on a similar topic, I assumed that the books would also be similar. This was not the case. This book my McGrath does not seek to answer the questions of the new Atheism or to provide any apologetic for Christianity. Instead McGrath provides a short biography of the four dominant new atheists: Dennett, Harris, Dawkins and Hitchens. Then he proceeds to first outline their main lines of argument and to show that the arguments are typically contradictory, overly simplistic or in the case of Dawkins especially, mostly just wrong (due to a lack of scholarship). McGrath then continues his history of the new atheism demonstrating how the groups that are being spawned are looking more and more like militaristic fundamentalists, and as a result are causing academic atheists to distance themselves from this now embarrassing movement. The book winds down with McGrath describing why he believes the movement is already dwindling, and that God just will not go away (the title).

McGrath is an interesting author, and his books range from brilliant to horribly dull. From my perspective, I find that his essays are generally outstanding, while I have found many of his larger books nearly impossible to get through (I get bored). This tiny volume reads like a series of interconnecting essays, and as a result is an outstanding read.
