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Review of "The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason"

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Book Review | *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*

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***The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*, Victor J. Stenger, Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009, 282 pages, \$19 (pbk), ISBN 978-1-59102-751-5**

What has been called "The New Atheism" is no longer new. Victor J. Stenger reminds us of this in the beginning of his *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (2009). Victor J. Stenger, the author of the *New York Times* bestseller "God: The Failed Hypothesis" (2007), takes time in his new work to "review and expand upon the principles of New Atheism", taking into account the many Christian responses to the New Atheism and showing that "their criticisms are misguided and their arguments easily countered" (14). It was Victor J. Stenger who's "God: The Failed Hypothesis" argued that because there is no evidence, when it should be there, that it "is now sufficient to conclude beyond a reasonable doubt that the God worshipped by the Jews, Christians, and Muslims does not exist" (12). In his recent book Stenger responds to those who have written against notable "New Atheists" like Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett, by theologians and Christian apologists including Dinesh D'Souza, Becky Garrison, John Haught, Alister and Janna Collicut McGrath, David Marshall, Francis Collins, and Thomas Crean. These, according to Stenger, do nothing more than misrepresent and ignore key points in the New Atheist literature.

The crux of Stengers (as well as others) argument for atheism, as well as his reasons for rejecting "moderate religion" is that if God were to exist and interact in the physical world then God, visa-verse his actions, should be testable, observable, and falsifiable. He disagrees with the National Academy of Sciences, Stephen Jay Gould's famous

"non-overlapping magisteria" (NOMA), and should disagree with the double causation of Thomism or the "two-worlds hypothesis" because it thinks of God and science as two completely separate enterprises, each of which has nothing to say of the other. For Stenger science has more than enough to say to religion, especially to a God who supposedly interacts with the physical world. Stenger, as well as other New Atheists, would fall under the "Conflict Thesis" proposed by Ian Barbour because they think of science and religion as holding conflicting claims about the world. I would assume that Stenger would classify the "post-Conflict theologians" under the rubric of "moderate religion" that, according to him, does not come to terms with what science tells us about God.

Stenger makes interesting use of his books format. He speaks on a plethora of issues, sometimes just in passing and sometimes with lengthy retort, but taken together his work is a *tour de force* of the New Atheism. Since his new work is only ten chapters I will summarize each chapter chronologically. His first chapter deals with "Atheism on the Offensive", namely, how the New Atheism rejects modern notions of religion being "beyond critique" simply because it deals with issues of sanctity, holiness, and most importantly, a sovereign God who deserves to be worshipped. Daniel Dennett's position on how we ought to study religion *scientifically* breaks this taboo. This chapter shows how the New Atheism, over the past six years of literature, has contributed to what Dennett calls "breaking the spell." Stenger begins by chronologically listing what he considers to be the most important of the literature: Sam Harris' *The End of Faith* (2004), Richard Dawkin's *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel C. Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), his own *God: A Failed Hypothesis* (2007), and Christopher Hitchen's *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). He uses these authors to expand upon and create a picture of what might curiously be called the *tradition* of the New Atheism.

Stenger's second chapter is about "The Folly of Faith." He notes how America treats faith with a certain respect and approval, unwilling to see its folly. "Faith", according to Stenger, "should not be exonerated, should not be treated with respect, but rather disputed" (46). He continues through this chapter to show how damaging religious faith can be to society. He notes how faith was used in the delineations of the Bush administration, the popular Evangelical response which said that 9/11 was God's punishment, the *neocons* and *theocons* of the Religious Right, the apocalyptic and anti-worldly sentiments of Tim LaHaye and Jerry B. Jenkins and their famous *Left Behind* series, and many other examples. These *empirical* examples of the folly of faith are only secondary to the *epistemic* examples of folly. Stenger wonders how, when religious persons are asked to provide evidence for their beliefs, they stumble to find any. They may attempt to provide evidence by pointing to the empty tomb, the death of the early Christians, Josephus, and the New Testament text as examples, but Stenger considers these unjustifiable. The empty tomb can be easily debated, the death of early Christians does not say much, Josephus' supposed sections about Jesus have been

debunked as 4th century interpolations, and the texts of the New Testament only shows that they were copied and transmitted repeatedly. None of these examples give us evidence to believe in God or Jesus. Not to mention the work of theologians like Søren Kierkegaard, Friedrich Schleiermacher, Albert Schweitzer, Rudolf Bultmann, and others who did not think that evidence was as important as existential concern, faith, and hope. I am sure Stenger would critique these theologians as well, for not basing their beliefs on evidence, but suffice it to say these theologians radically shifted debates over evidence during their time. But here we are, back at it again. And since no evidence has been provided it should point to the absence of what should have evidence; or as Stenger puts it: “Absence of evidence is evidence of absence when the evidence should be there and is not” (58).

In chapter three we see how Stenger deals with science and religion, as he wields what he calls “The Sword of Science.” He takes to answering those who think of science as pretentious, arrogant, and based on as much faith as religion. He notes Paul Davies piece in the *New York Times* 2007 “Science has its own faith-based belief system” and says in response: “our [the New Atheists] confidence in science is based on its practical success, not some logical deduction derived from dubious metaphysical assumptions” (71). The “faith” that atheists are accused of having is faith that the universe is rational, or at least ordered in some way. But Stenger thinks that “it's not the world that is or isn't rational. It's human beings” (71). Science, for Stenger, “simply applies rational methods in taking and analyzing data, following certain rules to ensure their data are as free from error as possible” (71). To Stenger and many others science is simply a method, not a metaphysic. The second half of the chapter is about attempts to reconcile science and religious faith. He notes the attempts made by John Templeton, Stephen Jay Gould, and Jerry Coyne. More recently Stenger mentions the efforts of those at the Vatican (from which I assume the 20 year venture of the VO/CTNS series on divine action, on which I have written) who “address the question of God's action in the universe” and suggest, “quantum mechanics and chaos theory provide possible mechanisms” (83). He refers to his other recent book *Quantum Gods: Creation, Chaos, and the Search for Cosmic Consciousness* (2009) and says simply that the problem with these pursuits is that they “still require a God to violate the laws of physics when he steps in to change the motion of bodies” (83).

Chapter four, “The Design Delusion”, surveys the arguments and literature centered on the issue of “design” in and of the universe. He notes the two main ways that theologians have argued about design: the first is the *fine-tuning* of the universe and the second is about the design apparent in living beings. He argues that both of these are refutable. The refutations for the former of the arguments (the *fine-tuning* argument) has four key points: 1) “we cannot know that more than one set of parameters is possible” 2) “we have no way of knowing that a huge range of parameters is possible or anything about the distribution of those parameters so that any given set is unlikely by chance” 3) “we have no way of knowing what sets of parameters might still lead to

some form of life different from ours” and 4) “we have no reason to assume there aren't many universes” (89). From here Stenger goes into more detail fitting to his academic interests in physics and astronomy. He covers the ratio of electrons to protons, the ratio of electromagnetic force to gravity, the expansion rate of the universe, the mass density of the universe, and the cosmological constant. If not taken too far back after all this, Stenger proceeds to challenge the later argument from design, the design apparent in living beings. Stenger argues, along with Charles Darwin and Alfred Wallace, that “complex biological systems can evolve from simpler ones by means of natural selection” (98). Stenger also notes how he thinks evolution has not gone far enough in the modern religious consciousness. He argues that Pope John Paul II did not go far enough when he said that “evolution is more than a hypothesis” since the Pope noted that there are several different competing theories about evolution, which Stenger says is “hardly the position of today's evolutionists” (99).

In his fifth chapter, “Holy Smoke”, Stenger takes issue with the violence and social atrocities committed in the name of religious belief. He says that today most of these acts occur in radical Islam but that their roots are found “in the early pages of the Bible” (108). Stenger notes that the God of the Old Testament, YHWH, demands the killing of those who do not worship him (Exodus 12: 29-30, Deuteronomy 13:6-11, 1 Samuel 6:19, 1 Chronicles 21:14, etc.). Stenger also points out the problems with the sayings of Jesus. Jesus, as it seems from some passages of the New Testament, encouraged the beating of slaves (Luke 12:47-48), never spoke on poverty, compares himself to the LORD (YHWH) of Old Testament, and thinks of himself as coming to bring judgment to the world at the eschaton (Matthew 13:41-42). Even moderate religious believers, ones who may not interpret these passages literally, or believe them too strongly, “feed the extremism of others” (111). Stenger then recalls the “historical horrors” of religion: the Crusades, the Inquisitions, the thirty years war, acts of Islamic extremism, the Mountain Meadows Massacre, and many others. These make one question the existence and impact that religious beliefs have had and continue to have in contemporary society. Along with other New Atheist's Stenger thinks that religious belief is the *direct and sufficient cause for the evil committed by religious persons*. It is not so much their political, economic, or social status, but their personal religious beliefs that cause atrocities. Bertrand Russell, whose outstanding skepticism about religion is obvious, said “religion prevents us from removing the fundamental causes of war,” even if religion is not the cause in and of itself.

In chapter six Stenger deals with issues relating to suffering and morality, and argues for a completely naturalistic approach to them. He goes through certain passages of the Old Testament, specifically from the Prophets, where God punished his people for their sins (Amos 3, Hosea 13) and quotes from the biblical scholar Bart Ehrman who notes that “this is not the kind, loving, caring God of nursery rhymes and Sunday school booklets. God is a fierce animal who will rip his people to shreds for failing to worship him” (138). Stenger then examines the typical religious answers to suffering and

morality: the free will defense, redemptive suffering, eschatological justifications, and others. He also looks at how suffering is dealt with in Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, and Taoism. From this Stenger challenges the view that sources morality in religion. The problem is that “scientific facts--objective observations of human behavior—as well as logical analysis tell a different story” (150). This story is that of people killing for their particular religion, or God. The Christian story is one where a supposedly good God allows, and at worst controls, the suffering and evil experienced by humanity. But as Plato points out “either God defines what is good, in which case it is arbitrary, or God is inherently good, in which case goodness is defined independent of God” (150). Similarly, we must decide which God we are talking about. Is it the Christian, Muslim, or Jewish God that sources morality? Stenger notes this as a problem since “there are no moral principles that are shared by all religious people, independent of their affiliation, that are not also shared by atheists and agnostics” (150). Stenger, as well as most atheists and agnostics, find morality sourced in humanity. It can be traced biologically to evolution and natural selection, and socially, to group behavior and group interest.

In chapter seven, “The Nature of Nature”, Stenger elaborates on matter, the laws of nature, and the immaterial “spirit” many assume to be working behind the scenes of the universe. He begins by sorting through issues relating to naturalism and scientific materialism. To those who reject either because they cannot rule out a supernatural cause, Stenger says that “science does not have its mind closed to the supernatural...Science has looked and simply sees no evidence for anything beyond nature” (161). Stenger does not think of scientific materialism as absolute or necessarily true, since it is “provisional.” But just because it is provisional does not mean that it is wrong; materialism is “based on our best current knowledge” (161). This does not sound like the dogmatic “scientism” which many accuse the New Atheist’s of holding. From here Stenger expounds upon the nature of matter and its movements. He then notes the differences between matter and spirit: “matter does not perform miracles; spirit does. If we ever saw a miracle, then that would be evidence for spirit. So far we have not” (166). Some wonder whether or not something “spiritual” occurred at the origin of the universe, namely, whether God created the world “at the beginning” or whether the universe always existed. Stenger notes Dinesh D’Souza, Ravi Zacharias, and Peter Kreeft as examples of theists who think that Big Bang cosmology shows there was a creation of the world, space, and time. Stenger speaks of how Christian apologists have used Stephen Hawking and Roger Penrose’s 1970 paper to argue for a “singularity” at the beginning of the universe. But, Stenger shows how both Hawking and Penrose rejected this notion because it did not take into account quantum mechanical explanations.

In chapter eight Stenger talks about “The Nature of Mind.” Stenger speaks on the many ways in which the concept of “mind” has been equated with “soul” or “spirit.” He contrasts these views with naturalism, saying that “according to naturalism there is

no immaterial soul, and mind is the product of matter and nothing more” (179). Naturalism, for Stenger, can provide a more than adequate explanation for what some call “religious experiences.” Stenger compares the soul with other psychological folklore like psychic experiences, near-death experiences, and out-of-body experiences, all of which have dubious reports in the scientific community. For Stenger this shows evidence not to believe, especially since “the soul looks just like it should look if it does not exist” (183). On the theistic side of things, Stenger discusses how some believers, like John Haught, Thomas Crean, Stewart Goetz, and Charles Taliaferro, use consciousness and cognition to argue against naturalism; to them naturalism ignores the subjective experience of individuals and the irreducible nature of the mind and mental causation. To substance dualists like these Stenger asks: “How does this immaterial thing that carries no energy or momentum provide energy and momentum to particles in the brain?” (187). Stenger thinks that even though our current scientific models of the subjective side of mental experience are not complete, it does not mean that they will always be or that we need something non-physical to close the explanatory gap. Actually, Stenger is “looking forward to living long enough to see that final gap closed by matter alone” (197).

In chapter nine Stenger examines “The Way of Nature” found throughout the world religions. He uses Karen Armstrong’s *The Great Transformation: The Beginning of Our Religious Traditions* (2006), as well as Karl Jaspers’ notion of the *axial age*, to examine the historical uprising of the world’s great religious traditions. He questions Armstrong’s usage of words like “spiritual” and “mystical,” cautiously opting for “the attitude that nothing supernatural need be involved” (202). Stenger contrasts the “metaphysics or theology” that has been of central concern for Western religious traditions with the Eastern “compassionate life” where “morality [is] at the heart of their teaching” (203). He then proceeds to analyze Hinduism, Judaism, Greek Philosophy, Buddhism, Confucius, and Lao Tzu, saying that these “are marked by the return to the self as the center of religious consciousness” (211). He questions the efforts that seek to connect Eastern philosophy to quantum mechanics; efforts made by Fritjof Capra, Maharishi Mahesh Yogi, and Deepak Chopra. These and many others center on what Stenger calls *quantum spirituality*. To those interested in this subject, as well as an atheistic response to it, Stenger invites to read his *Quantum Gods: Creation, Chaos, and the Search for Cosmic Consciousness* (2009). He goes on to critique forms of religious practice that try to empty one of their reason and critical thinking. He wisely notes that “it is hard to see how using *less* of our brains we can learn *more* about the universe” (220, italics his). In contrast Stenger argues for an atheism that appreciates life, where a man “take[s] responsibility for his own morality” (221). This atheism may be compatible with Eastern traditions if they are interpreted naturalistically. We can use “the way of nature” as an alternative path to supernaturalism and spiritualism.

In his final chapter, “The Future of Atheism,” Stenger lays out the values and goals shared by atheists throughout the world. He begins by addressing questions about a possible “god gene” saying that if it exists “it most likely would have been put there by evolution,” but that “more likely, it does not exist” (226). Stenger makes the point that “if there were [a god gene], then there wouldn’t be over a billion nonbelievers in the world” (227). Along similar lines Stenger traces the growth and reduction of various forms of religious practice, along with the staggering growth of secularism. Many conservatives see this growth as a threat to peaceful society. Stenger quotes from Pat Robertson, Ann Coulter, Bill O’Reilly, Keith Ward, and John D. Caputo showing how many think of atheism as harmful for society. To this Stenger replies: “Any number of societies now exist where the majority has freely abandoned religion and God. Far from being dens of iniquity, these societies are the happiest, safest, and most successful in the world” (233). One wonders how anyone could equate religion with a moral, peaceful society. Continuing on, Stenger highlights some recent atheistic literature that centers on “living without religion.” In brief he mentions works by Eric Maisel, S.C. Hitchcock, and Ronald Aronson. For philosophical contributions to atheism Stenger notes recent works by David Mills, Guy P. Harrison, David Ramsey Steele, Thomas W. Clark, Susan Jacoby, Austin Dacey, and Taner Edis. In ending his book, Stenger revisits the works of New Atheism and argues for their place in the modern intellectual landscape. He challenges those who only see this movement as “negative” because “for every negative we have an even greater positive. Faith is absurd and dangerous and we look forward to the day, no matter how distant, when the human race finally abandons it” (244).