

"A positive whoosh of fresh air." Adrian Plass

The Atheist Who Didn't Exist

*Or the
Dreadful
Consequences
of Bad
Arguments*



ANDY BANNISTER

Foreword by Ravi Zacharias

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“This is a remarkable and timely book: intelligent, funny, and elegant.”

– **Michael Coren**, author, broadcaster, and journalist

“Andy Bannister’s book is a breath, a gust, a positive whoosh of fresh air. Made me laugh, made me think, made me cry. The words bounce across the page. A sane Christian! Whatever next?”

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“Every atheist vs believer debate I’ve been to has made me want to gouge out my eyes with a spoon. Bannister’s book, however, is exactly what this sceptical believer needed.”

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“In a brilliant work that is as humorous as it is damaging to atheist arguments, Bannister demonstrates the consequences of implementing New Atheist arguments in real life (that is, out of the realm of stuffy office speculations). His work is a wild ride that takes the reader from stories to theory to end game. Writing with eloquence and imagination, he illustrates the supposed ‘safe ground’ of New Atheist thought as truly no ground at all.”

– **Professor Mary Jo Sharp**, Houston Baptist University

“Andy Bannister provides a set of powerful and accessible arguments that can be used by ordinary people in responding to the tsunami of atheist sound bites flooding public discourse in the West. His tongue-in-cheek humour gives a certain lightness which does not in any way undermine the rigour and force of the book’s arguments. This is not a negative study – though atheism is certainly taken to the cleaners – and it is also profoundly positive in presenting compelling arguments for the central claims of Christianity.”

– **Dr Peter Riddell**, Professorial Research Associate, History, SOAS, University of London

“A book that tackles heady things with humour and grace and in a way that ordinary people like myself can actually understand. Highly recommended; I read it twice!”

– **Jeff Allen**, comedian

“This lively, witty, and engaging book provides a powerful and thoughtful critique of the New Atheism associated with Richard Dawkins and others. This is a lovely book, which draws deeply on high-quality philosophical, historical, and scientific thinking. A readable, thoughtful, and humorous challenge to those who hold New Atheist beliefs. Highly recommended!”

– **Professor Steve Walton**, St Mary's University, London

“This book is for you, whether you're an atheist, a doubter, or a believer. In an age of overdone rhetoric that lacks substance, Andy Bannister has done what few writers on the topic of God have done: made it fun and fast-paced, yet fair and sincere. Andy has the rare ability to use humour to expose the faulty logic of bad arguments while at the same time being respectful to the people who might use those same arguments. You'll laugh in these pages even as your intellect is stimulated and your thinking is challenged. The Atheist Who Didn't Exist is a thoughtful book that will stimulate the humour and intelligence of the atheists who do exist. I wholeheartedly recommend it!”

– **Abdu Murray**, speaker and author of *Grand Central Question: Answering the Critical Concerns of the Major Worldviews*

“It's the 'God Debate', but not as you know it. In this conversational, well-researched and accessible volume, Andy Bannister offers an intelligent, provocative, and humorous engagement with the New Atheism. Andy asks big questions and challenges some dominant assumptions. Share and enjoy.”

– **Paul Woolley**, Deputy Chief Executive, Bible Society

“I would especially highlight this book’s accessibility. Although it is well endowed with references, its populist, racy style may well appeal to readers who would be unlikely to engage with yet another ‘academic’ treatise on faith and secularism. On these grounds, I recommend it as an important addition to the debate on the most fundamental issue confronting any person, anywhere, at any time: are there good grounds for believing in a God or are believers such as Christians suffering delusional irrationality? This book may help each reader to come to a conclusion based on argumentation and evidence presented with satirical humour: a very valuable addition to the library!”

– **Baroness Caroline Cox**, founder of Humanitarian Aid Relief Trust

“This is the most enjoyable critique of popular atheism I have read. It is serious fun, by which I mean it somehow offers deeply thoughtful responses to modern scepticism while regularly making you laugh – often laughing at Andy’s true wit, sometimes at that ‘British drollery’! Oddly, for such an entertaining riposte to fashionable atheist arguments, the book is remarkably free of smugness and self-congratulation. I could – and will – give this book to my sceptical friends.”

– **Dr John Dickson**, Founding Director of the Centre for Public Christianity, and Honorary Fellow of the Department of Ancient History, Macquarie University

About the Author

Dr Andy Bannister is the Director of RZIM Canada. He speaks and teaches regularly throughout Canada, the USA, Europe, and the wider world. From universities to churches, business forums to TV and radio, Andy regularly addresses audiences of all faiths and none on issues relating to faith, culture, politics, and society.

Andy holds a PhD in Islamic Studies, a topic on which he has taught extensively, especially since 9/11 and the huge interest that was sparked in the subject by the events of that day. He has spoken and taught at universities across Canada, the USA, the UK, and further afield on both Islam and philosophy, and is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths at Melbourne School of Theology. He is also author of *An Oral-Formulaic Study of the Qur'an*. He has a substantial following on Twitter: @andygbannister

When not travelling, speaking, or writing, Andy is a keen hiker, mountain climber, and photographer. He lives in Toronto with his family.

**The Atheist
Who Didn't Exist**
**Or: The Dreadful
Consequences of Bad
Arguments**

ANDY BANNISTER

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Oxford, UK, and Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA

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In Memoriam
Peter Hicks (1940–2013)

*“Who holds that if way to the Better there be, it exacts a
full look at the Worst.”*

Thomas Hardy, *In Tenebris II*

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The Loch Ness Monster's Moustache (or: The Terrible Consequences of Bad Arguments)

I remember the first time that I saw *the* bus. An old friend of mine had telephoned me out of the blue a few days before, and in a conspiratorial whisper had hissed: "You need to get down to London. There are *atheist* buses here."

"Atheist buses?" I replied, bleary-eyed. It was long past midnight. "How much have you drunk, Tom?"

"Only four pints," Tom replied indignantly.

"Well, I've always personally thought that the slightly devil-may-care attitude of many London bus drivers to road safety tends to bring people *closer* to God, rather than drive them away."

"This bus didn't try to drive me away; it tried to drive *over* me. Admittedly, I was lying semi-comatose in the road at the time –"

"I *knew* it!"

"– at Hammersmith, and the atheist bus almost ran me over."

“You do realize”, I explained, in the patient tone I reserve for small children and airline check-in agents, “that just because a London bus almost flattens a liberal Anglican lying on a zebra crossing, it doesn’t necessarily mean that Richard Dawkins is resorting to hit-and-run attempts to keep the religious affiliation statistics favourable.”

“I’m used to being nearly run over, I’ve holidayed in France many times,”¹ snapped Tom. “But this was an *atheist* bus, I tell you.”

“You’re sure about this?”

“Yes! Now come down to London and see. Besides, you owe me a beer from that time when you lost the bet about the Archbishop’s beard.”²

And so it was that I found myself, on a rainy July afternoon a few weeks later, standing among a crowd of damp tourists outside Oxford Circus tube station. We watched the traffic as cars, taxis, lorries, and the occasional sodden cyclist trundled past. And then, at last, a bus rounded the corner. A big, red London bus sporting a huge advertisement on the side, which announced in large friendly letters: “There’s Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.”

Later, back in the comfort of a nearby pub, I did a little research.³ It turned out that the bus advertisements had been sponsored by The British Humanist Association along with a group of secular celebrities, including the well-known Oxford

1 It has been remarked that you can tell which European city you are in by how the motorists treat pedestrians. In London, motorists generally stop for you. In Rome, they weave around you at disconcertingly high speeds. In Paris, they change direction, accelerate, and aim at you, seeing it as some kind of competitive sport.

2 I’d once bet Tom a beer that the magnificent beard sported by the previous Archbishop of Canterbury had been a fake. Tom had met Rowan Williams at a literary festival and had conclusively proved it was real, winning the bet along with a police caution and a restraining order.

3 A writer’s euphemism for “I looked it up on Google”.

atheist Richard Dawkins, and represented, in their words, an attempt to provide a “peaceful and upbeat” message about atheism. The advertisements promoted a website where those who browsed could while away their journey on the number 137 bus to Battersea reading about the joys of life without belief in a god.

The atheist bus is a good place to begin our journey, because it illustrates two reasons why this book exists. First, because the slogan, despite its friendly pink letters, is a perfect example of a really bad argument. An argument so bad, so disastrous, in fact, that one has to wonder what its sponsors were thinking. More on that in a moment. But, second, it illustrates how quickly bad arguments can disseminate, spreading like an infestation of Japanese knotweed into popular culture. For while many critics – including many *atheist* critics⁴ – were quick to point out the flaws in “There’s Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life”, it has nevertheless continued to pop up on the sides of buses not just in London but also around the world.

The bus advertisement typifies what’s come to be termed the “New Atheism”, a phrase coined back in 2006 by *Wired* magazine to describe the group of media-savvy atheists – men such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and the late Christopher Hitchens – whose books attacking religion in general and Christianity in particular have sold by the truckload.⁵ What’s new about the “New Atheism”? As many have pointed out, not so much its *arguments*, which tend to be old ones, as its

4 See e.g. Julian Baggini, “Yes, life without God can be bleak. Atheism is about facing up to that”, *The Guardian*, 9 March 2012 (<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2012/mar/09/life-without-god-bleak-atheism>).

5 See the article by Gary Wolf, “The Church of the Non-Believers”, *Wired* magazine, November 2006 (<http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism.html>). There’s also a good survey in Vox Day, *The Irrational Atheist: Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2008, pp. 5–26.

tone – which is one of apoplectic anger. Why the anger? Well, I suspect partly because God was supposed to have disappeared a long time ago, as the Great Secular Enlightenment trundled inexorably onward. As far back as 1966, *Time* magazine could slap a question like “Is God Dead?” on the cover (with the strong implication that the answer was “Yes”). Today, however, religion is alive and well and shows little sign of disappearing.⁶ The failure of God to roll over and die on cue has led to the denial, disappointment, and anger that can be seen underpinning much of today’s more popular form of atheism.

And, my word, has the New Atheism become a popular movement. Richard Dawkins’s book *The God Delusion* alone has sold several million copies.⁷ Atheism has gained a voice and a confidence, and that’s fine – in the past, it was tough to be an atheist, when most societies were overwhelmingly religious. Recently, however, there’s been a cultural volte-face in many Western countries, with atheism now seen as the default position. Many people assume that atheism is, indeed, the *only* position for somebody who wishes to be considered educated, sophisticated, urbane, and rational. This is precisely the way the media often treats the issue too: atheism is portrayed as scientific, contemporary, and for those with brains, whereas religion is characterized as stuffy, outmoded, and irrational, something for old ladies or fuddy-duddies.⁸

But there’s a problem. Well, several problems. Chief among

6 See section six of Rodney Stark, *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became The World’s Largest Religion*, New York: HarperOne, 2011.

7 Largely helped, at least in North America, by his British accent. As an Englishman living in Canada, I have lost count of how many people have remarked to me after lectures, “You could have said *anything* in that accent and I would have been impressed.” They always look crestfallen when I point out that this is not a compliment.

8 It also used to be the case that religious believers were associated with poor fashion sense, but several of the New Atheists have taken admirable steps toward redressing the balance in that regard.

them is this: that much of contemporary atheism thrives on poor arguments and cheap sound bites, advancing claims that simply don't stand up to scrutiny. Like a cheaply made cardigan, they're full of loose threads that, if tugged firmly, quickly begin to unravel. Let me demonstrate what I mean by returning to that notorious bus advertisement, "There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life". Let's ask a few critical questions about that claim for a moment. What's wrong with it? Well, one might begin by noting the preachy, condescending, and hectoring tone.⁹ I've known many atheists over the years whose chief beef with religion has been that they can't escape it. If it's not televangelists with perfect teeth, it's church billboards with dodgy graphic design or giant advertising hoardings warning of hellfire and damnation. "You religious types insist on preaching at us" is the complaint. Well, now the boot is very much on the other foot and the New Atheism is zealously evangelistic, not merely content with denying deities but offering health benefits at the same time (No worries! Enjoyment! Good hair!).

But there's a deeper problem, too. For atheists like Richard Dawkins, God does not exist, right? That, after all, is what the very term "a-theist" means. Of course, there's a myriad of other things that don't exist: fairies, unicorns, the Flying Spaghetti Monster, successful England soccer squads.¹⁰ But here's my question: what's the connection between the non-existence of something and any *effect*, emotional or otherwise? There probably aren't any unicorns, so cheer up. The Flying Spaghetti Monster is just a secular parody, so take heart. There's no God, so quit worrying.

9 Which, when I first saw it, struck me as sounding a bit like a slightly grumpy elderly uncle: "There's probably no dessert, young man, so stop dawdling and eat up your sprouts."

10 The English specialize in inventing sports, and then getting beaten by the rest of the world at them. I like to think this displays not so much a lack of sporting prowess as modesty; we like to give other nations a chance.

How, precisely, does that work? Somebody once remarked that a nonsensical statement doesn't become coherent simply because you insert the term "God" into it, so let's illustrate the problem by rewording the atheist bus slogan for a moment:

There's Probably No Loch Ness Monster. So Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life.

Imagine, for a moment, that you're down on your luck. Life has dealt you a series of terrible hands and nothing seems to be going your way. You've recently lost your job. Your wife has just left you and taken the kids with her.¹¹ This very morning, a letter from your bank has arrived, declaring you bankrupt. The doctor's surgery has just rung to inform you that those worrying headaches are actually Creutzfeldt-Jakob disease. Oh, and you're a Bradford City FC fan.¹² Life really sucks. Have no fear, however. Put all that aside. Fret no more. For there is hope. There is an end to all worries. "There *is*?" I hear you cry, wiping back the tears. Yes, there is. Because (are you ready for this?) *the Loch Ness Monster doesn't exist*. Never mind the fact that you may be jobless, loveless, penniless, and hopeless, doesn't it warm the cockles of your heart to know that holidaymakers in Scotland can munch their sandwiches by Urquhart Castle and paddle their feet in Loch Ness, safe in the certain knowledge that no monster from the Jurassic era will rear up from the deep and drag them off to a watery grave. So, are you feeling better now? No, probably not.

So the first half of the claim – no God, no worry – fails spectacularly. The second half doesn't fare much better either:

¹¹ If you're a parent of teenagers, feel free to reword this to "*left* the kids with you".

¹² These cultural references are tough, aren't they? For Canadians, think of the Toronto Maple Leafs, or, for Americans, think of the Chicago White Sox. I've concluded that the only reason people follow teams like these is either that misery loves company, or that masochism never entirely goes out of fashion.

“Enjoy your life.” What could be wrong with that, unless you’re one of those masochistic religious types who prefer guilt to glee? Well, Francis Spufford nails this one perfectly:

I’m sorry – *enjoy your life? Enjoy your life?* I’m not making some kind of neo-puritan objection to enjoyment. Enjoyment is lovely. Enjoyment is great. The more enjoyment the better. But enjoyment is *one emotion*. The only things in the world that are designed to elicit enjoyment and only enjoyment are products, and your life is not a product ... To say that life is to be enjoyed (just enjoyed) is like saying that mountains should have only summits, or that all colours should be purple, or that all plays should be by Shakespeare. This really is a bizarre category error.¹³

In other words, there is considerably more to life than just enjoyment. Indeed, the full gamut of human emotions spans the alphabet. To be fully, authentically human is to have experienced anger, boredom, compassion, delight, expectation, fear, guilt, hope, insecurity, joy, kindness, love, malice, nonchalance, obligation, peace, queasiness, relief, sensuality, thankfulness, uneasiness, vulnerability, wistfulness, yearning, and zealousness.¹⁴ Given all this, why does the atheist bus advertisement zero in on “enjoyment”? Now obviously I’m not privy to the interior mental state of those who penned the slogan, but I do wonder if it’s a symptom of a more general trend in our culture – one that says that the purpose of human life is simply to be happy, to flit merrily from one experience to

13 Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense*, London: Faber & Faber, 2013, p. 8.

14 I tried hard to find a feeling beginning with “x”, I really did, but the best I could come up with was “xenophobic”. It staggers me there aren’t more emotions beginning with “x”. I blame the French; that usually works.

another in an effervescence of ecstatic enjoyment. Product after product is sold to us this way: buy *this* coffee, take *that* holiday, wear *this* shade of lip gloss, and you'll be successful, popular, and joyful. The atheist bus is simply riding the cultural wave – think like *this*, it says, and you'll be happy.

But what if you're *not* happy? What if you're like my earlier example – jobless, friendless, penniless, and hopeless? What if you're at a point in your life where all is smelling not of roses, but rather suspiciously like a sewage farm on a hot afternoon? Indeed, half the world's population lives on less than \$2.50 a day and that amount is not going to keep you in lattes, lipstick or trips to Lanzarote, which means that, if the advertisers are correct about where enjoyment is located, you're in trouble, so you'd better pull yourself together. I stress *you*, second person singular, had better pull yourself together, because, if the atheist bus slogan is right and there is no God, there's nobody out *there* who is ultimately going to help with any pulling. You're alone in a universe that cares as little about you (and your enjoyment) as it does about the fate of the amoeba, the ant or the aardvark. There's no hope, there's no justice, and there's certainly nothing inherently wrong with poverty, incidentally, so quit protesting. Life favours the winners; some get the breaks, and others get the sticky end of the stick. Still others get to make millions selling books on atheism,¹⁵ enough for a lifetime of lattes. Enjoy your life? Nice work if you can get it.



15 Or by charging people \$100,000 to have a private breakfast with you: see Andrew Brown, "The bizarre – and costly – cult of Richard Dawkins", *The Spectator*, 16 August 2014 (available online at <http://www.spectator.co.uk/features/9286682/the-bizarre-and-costly-cult-of-richard-dawkins/>).

The atheist bus advertisement illustrates the danger not just of poor arguments, but especially of *argument by sound bite*. It's easy to sloganize lazily, to try to reduce complex arguments to something that fits on the side of a bus or sounds good on Twitter, but in so doing you usually lose nuance and depth. In fact, it's worse than that: the temptation to sloganize can result in arguments that are not merely wrong but are utterly bizarre and have some terrible consequences when you turn them around. Let me further illustrate what I mean with an example from one of New Atheism's founding fathers, Richard Dawkins. His publishing success has helped to make atheism hip and cool again but while he has done terrifically well in print, his other cultural forays have not always been entirely successful. For instance, his attempt at a movie, *The Unbelievers*, bombed at the box office, while his faux pas on social media have become somewhat legendary.¹⁶ The danger of being a celebrity is that fame can lure you into believing that every fluttering thought should be served up raw to the masses. It's awfully easy, for example, to tap out something like this quickly on one's smartphone:

Stalin, Hitler and Saddam Hussein were evil, murdering dictators. All had moustaches. Therefore moustaches are evil.¹⁷

I imagine your reaction on reading that is to think "Huh?" *Sans* context, it does look a little baffling. Alas, I'm not entirely sure

¹⁶ See Brendan O'Neill, "Let the fate of Richard Dawkins be a lesson to you all – Twitter brings out the worst in humankind", *The Telegraph*, 13 March 2014 (online at <http://blogs.telegraph.co.uk/news/brendanoneill2/100263460/let-the-fate-of-richard-dawkins-be-a-lesson-to-you-all-twitter-brings-out-the-worst-in-humankind/>).

¹⁷ Richard Dawkins (@RichardDawkins), 2 March 2014, 5:14 p.m., <https://twitter.com/RichardDawkins/status/440233751965364224>.

that adding context helps, but here goes. What Dawkins was trying to do via this tweet was to respond to his critics who have said that it's a little troubling to try to label religion as the "root of all evil",¹⁸ given the many *atheist* mass murderers who litter the historical record. If you're trying to advance the claim that religion is *bad* and atheism is *good*, the likes of Saddam Hussein, Joseph Stalin, Pol Pot, and Mao Zedong are somewhat troubling, slugs on the otherwise pristine lettuce of atheism.¹⁹ It's one thing to point out the evils of religion (the Crusades and the Spanish Inquisition being among the favourite whipping boys), but what about atheism's own chequered history? Stalin was responsible for the deaths of some 20 million people, while the death toll for Mao's regime is at least double that. These were avowed atheists, so what is the zealous young secularist to do? Enter Richard Dawkins's tweet, one that he probably thought a brilliant rhetorical move. Sure, all of those mass-murdering psychotic despots were atheists, but that's got nothing to do with their villainous genocidal tendencies. Yes, they had *atheism* in common, but they also had *moustaches* in common. Perhaps it was their facial hair, not their secular air, that led to their causing the deaths of tens of millions of people.

Does that work? In a word, "no". Listen to me very carefully here. I have no intention, none whatsoever, of laying

18 That was the title of Dawkins's 2006 TV series that later got expanded into *The God Delusion*. Personally, I always thought that the root of all evil was folk music.

19 Hitler is a somewhat unique case. Christians and atheist apologists are both occasionally guilty of suggesting Hitler was a card-carrying member of the opposite side, but the truth is that Hitler seems to have cobbled together a unique set of beliefs, drawn from religion and science and mashed up to produce a toxic nationalistic myth. When you read the history of the Third Reich, what you discover is that nobody comes off well. Too many Christians and atheists stood by and did nothing, while there were also brave men and women of all beliefs who took a stand. One famous Christian example is the German pastor Dietrich Bonhoeffer, whose stance against the Third Reich ultimately led to his death. See Eric Metaxas, *Bonhoeffer: Pastor, Martyr, Prophet, Spy*, Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2010.

the blame for what these men and others like them did at the feet of my atheist friends. But my point is this: we can read the writings of brutal tyrants such as these and discover what they themselves said about their motivations. For example, Stalin once stated: “You know, they are fooling us, there is no God ... all this talk about God is sheer nonsense.” But Stalin was not content with mere words; he also acted on them. In 1925, he actively encouraged the founding of the League of Militant Atheists, which for over twenty years acted out its slogan, “The Struggle Against Religion is a Struggle for Socialism”. It began with popular campaigns in the media against religion, aiming to persuade citizens that religion was irrational and toxic. But soon things became considerably more violent:

Churches were closed or destroyed, often by dynamiting; priests were imprisoned, exiled or executed. On the eve of the Second World War there were only 6,376 clergy remaining in the Russian Orthodox Church, compared with the pre-revolutionary figure of 66,140. One dreadful day, 17 February 1938, saw the execution of 55 priests. In 1917 there were 39,530 churches in Russia; by 1940, only 950 remained functional.²⁰

Similar stories could be told of Pol Pot or Mao Zedong, or numerous other atheistic dictators. When I lived in Europe, I frequently travelled and taught in former communist countries such as Hungary and Romania and heard story after story of the violence that had been endemic before the Iron Curtain fell in 1989. One woman in Bucharest told me how she'd missed out on large amounts of education as a child, because

20 Alister McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism*, London: SPCK, 2011, p. 51; see also Roger Moorhouse, *The Devils' Alliance: Hitler's Pact with Stalin, 1939–1941*, London: Bodley Head, 2014.

her parents were religious. They'd been given a stark choice by the communist authorities: give up your faith, or give up your child's education.

Here's the problem, then, for Dawkins's attempt to claim that the atheism of Stalin is unimportant. When we look at Stalin's actions, his atheism seems entirely *central*, quite frankly. When he came to power, Stalin did not ban razor blades and announce a pogrom against barbers, but he did burn churches and synagogues and have thousands of religious leaders arrested, tortured, and executed. Yet if Dawkins is right, we can ignore all of this. We can lay aside what Stalin did and said – ignore *Stalin's very own reasons* – and instead offer a random explanation of our own making, one that suits our own purposes. Look, Stalin had a moustache!²¹ Don't look at his atheism; look at his facial hair!

The problem is that, like all terrible arguments, this cuts both ways.²² Let me illustrate what I mean by considering Dawkins himself. Why do you suppose that he wrote his atheist manifesto, *The God Delusion*? If you read the preface of the book, he claims that it was to advance atheism, to persuade people to abandon religious faith, and to raise “atheist pride”. But, of course, those are *his* explanations and, as Dawkins helpfully reminded us with Stalin, you can't simply take a person's own words and assume they are, well, gospel. So what should we do? Well, perhaps we should, à la Stalin's moustache, settle on

21 In the light of Dawkins's tweet, it's curious to observe that Pol Pot and Mao Zedong actually appear to have spent most of their life clean-shaven. Either Dawkins is privy to some collection of antique photographs unbeknown to historians, or it's worse than we thought: Pol Pot and Mao Zedong knew their moustaches would betray them as potential mass murderers, so they carefully bleached their facial hair so fine that it couldn't be seen. Am I the only one who thinks that *Invisible Killer Moustaches* sounds like an amazing title for a Hollywood blockbuster?

22 Unlike Stalin's razor.

something purely at random to explain *The God Delusion* – perhaps Dawkins’s predilection for garishly coloured neckties, or his fondness for prawn cocktail.²³ However, that would be woefully simplistic. We can be *way* more scientific than that. Listen to these words from another atheist writer, the philosopher Patricia Churchland:

Boiled down to the essentials, a nervous system enables the organism to succeed at four things: feeding, fleeing, fighting and reproducing ... Truth, whatever that is, definitely takes the hindmost.²⁴

In this astonishingly bleak passage, Churchland is trying to argue that human beings are just like any other animal, driven by our basest, most primal instincts to feed, fight, flee or reproduce. Our cherished belief that we are concerned with truth or meaning is just an illusion, a trick played on us by our DNA in order to get us to cooperate.²⁵ Impressed? You should be; after all, this is Science™. Well, actually it isn’t; it’s philosophy, wearing a false nose and rubber ears and *masquerading* as science. But, nevertheless, let’s apply Churchland’s four options to the vexed question of why Dawkins wrote *The God Delusion*. Perchance he wrote it for reasons of *feeding*. After all, the book has presumably funded numerous hearty dinners at places like Gee’s in Oxford²⁶; indeed, the sales figures suggest that Dawkins won’t be found shopping for groceries at Lidl for some time to

23 He has the shellfish gene.

24 Patricia Churchland, “Epistemology in the Age of Neuroscience”, *Journal of Philosophy* 84.10, 1987, pp. 544–553, citing 548.

25 Of course, that raises an excellent question: if human beings are unconcerned with truth, why did Churchland bother typing that sentence? Or any sentence? Why go through the pretence of arguing for anything? If she were consistent, Churchland ought to quit teaching, take up jogging and kick-boxing, and spend any remaining free time munching cheeseburgers and seducing undergraduates.

26 Try the sea bass.

come. Alternatively, perhaps the book was written for purposes of *fleeing*. Should Dawkins be startled by a bunch of militant Mennonites in a darkened Oxford alley, he can fling it at them, yell “Permian extinction”, and, while they’re thumbing through the extensive index,²⁷ he will have time to scarper. The third of Churchland’s options, *fighting*, is a little harder to see, but it occurs to me that *The God Delusion* is a brick of a book, so one might certainly wield the hardback edition quite usefully in a pub brawl. And, finally, what about *reproducing*? Well, one can easily imagine how “I’m a famous author, don’t you know?” could open many a hotel-room door at the kind of secular conferences frequented by pretty young sceptics. In short, we can ignore every single one of Dawkins’s protestations that he wrote *The God Delusion* to advance atheism and come up with our own reasons. What goes for Stalin goes for Dawkins. *Moustouché*, one might very well say.

You will be very relieved to learn that all of the above is in jest. But there is a serious point, a *very* serious point, and it’s this: the thing about bad arguments, about sound bites without substance, is that they are extremely vulnerable to satire. They may sound clever, bright, and shiny when you first hear them, especially if they are accompanied by an Oxford accent or the jangle of PhDs and titles. But stick a pin in them and they deflate quite rapidly.

So how can we learn to spot which arguments are good ones and which are not? One of the tests is to see what happens when one transfers an argument to a different setting. This is what we have just demonstrated with “There’s Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life” and “Moustaches Are More Dangerous Than Atheism”. When one pokes at them a

27 Unless they have the e-book edition with them and can simply hit “Search”, in which case he’s basically toast.

bit – and especially when one tries applying them to something else – one quickly sees the flaws. They are both examples of not just weak arguments, but extremely bad arguments. Arguments so terrible, in fact, that you wonder what possessed people to place them on buses, reproduce them in print, or tweet them to a million hapless followers. When you see such things in the media, or hear them on the lips of friends, don't be afraid to ask a few questions, tug at loose threads, to gently expose them for what they are.



One last thought. I come at this discussion as a *Christian* philosopher, but I have been struck by how many of my *atheist* friends are deeply embarrassed by these terrible sceptical arguments.²⁸ I have lost count of how many times I have quoted Richard Dawkins at atheist friends only to have them roll their eyes, eject steam from both ears, and retort, “Please don't assume we're all like him” or “I won't wave Fred Phelps at you if you don't pin the New Atheists on me”. And that's a very fair point, although I do wish a few more of my atheist friends would speak out, so that the media and the Twitter crowd would realize that there are more thoughtful secularists out there.

And so the aim of this book is simple: to clear away some of the weeds of bad arguments so that a more sensible dialogue can be had. Because here's the thing: the “God Question” is arguably the most important question that anybody can think about. Whether or not God exists is not a mere intellectual curiosity, up there with “What's the ten trillionth digit of Pi?” or “Did Newton invent the cat flap?”, but a question that has

28 See e.g. Theodore Dalrymple, “What the New Atheists Don't See”, *City Journal* 17.4, 2007 (online at http://www.city-journal.org/html/17_4_oh_to_be.html).

implications for every area of our lives, not least because it is directly tied to the question of meaning: is there something that we are meant to *be*, or is a life spent playing computer games and eating pizza as valid as one spent fighting poverty or serving the cause of justice?

At the beginning of *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins is very honest about the chief aim of his own book:

If this book works as intended, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down. What presumptuous optimism! Of course, dyed-in-the-wool faith-heads are immune to argument, their resistance built up over years of childhood indoctrination using methods that took centuries to mature.²⁹

That's a clever paragraph, when you think about it. If you read Dawkins's book and *don't* become an atheist, it's not that the arguments are as suspect as a \$50 Rolex from Tooting Market but because you're an ignorant brainwashed cretin, your head so full of woolly thinking that there's no room for the fresh winds of Reason™ to waft through. My aims for *this* book are a little more modest (and, I trust, a little more optimistic) than those of Dawkins. If you come to this book as an atheist, my hope is simply that you will at least commit to being a *thought-through* atheist – perhaps a doubter, rather than a sceptic; somebody who is willing to think deeply and think well. (It has been remarked that the difference between a doubter and a sceptic is that a doubter is somebody who hopes there *might* be an answer; a sceptic hopes that there *isn't*). Abandoning bad

29 Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, London: Transworld, 2006, p. 28; a similar rhetorically sophomoric strategy is pursued by Peter Boghossian, *A Manual for Creating Atheists*, Durham, NC: Pitchstone Publishing, 2013, p. 51, who suggests that if you disagree with him, it's not because his arguments are poor, but because you're brain-damaged.

arguments is a great way to begin.

Conversely, if you come to this book as a religious believer, my hope is that it will encourage you not to be afraid of some of the atheist sound bites that are frequently hurled like brickbats from various directions in our culture. If you can learn to laugh at bad arguments and their flaws, their mystical power evaporates and you can see them for the paper tigers that they are. I also hope that I might encourage you to see past the ranting of the New Atheists to recognize that there are thousands of far more open-minded atheists out there, people who are friendly, good-humoured, and open to discussion. What the world needs more than ever is a reasonable dialogue between those who believe in God and those who have questions or doubts (however deeply held), not a clash of fundamentalisms.

So, wherever you stand as you start this book – atheist or agnostic, seeker or sceptic, doubter or disciple – I hope that we can *all* agree that, when it comes to the big questions of life, we need more than sound bites. Let's aim instead for a grown-up, proper conversation about the things that matter the most and leave the buses to the fundamentalists.

For Further Reading

Vox Day, *The Irrational Atheist: Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Dallas, TX: BenBella Books, 2008)

John Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford: Lion, 2011)

Alister McGrath, *Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism* (London: SPCK, 2011)

Francis Spufford, *Unapologetic: Why, Despite Everything, Christianity Can Still Make Surprising Emotional Sense* (London: Faber & Faber, 2013)

Acknowledgments

The very first seeds of *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* were planted on 11 May 2001, a date forever etched in my memory, as that was the day that one of my childhood heroes, the humourist and writer Douglas Adams, died suddenly of a heart attack. He was also an atheist, friends with Richard Dawkins, and when I first read Dawkins's book *The God Delusion* I was intrigued to see a quote from Douglas on the dedication page: "Isn't it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe there are fairies at the bottom of it?" What Dawkins failed to tell the reader was that the quote comes from Douglas' best-selling novel *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a book that also fires a few shots at brash and overly confident forms of atheism. For sure, Douglas was an atheist, but unlike some he was generous and knew well the difference between humour, satire, and sheer ridicule.

When it comes to the "God Debate", I think we badly need a fresh dose of humour and satire amidst the ground-shaking thuds of philosophical howitzers being fired from entrenched positions on both sides. Humour is powerful because it can prick pomposity and puncture delusions of self-importance. There have been many times in history when it's been organized religion that has needed this critique: Jesus aimed it at the Pharisees in the first century, just as *Monty Python's Life of Brian* did it to the church 2,000 years later. But now, a decade and a half into the twenty-first century, it's a different

fundamentalism that needs deflating: atheism, or at least the New Atheist flavour of it. When you're so convinced of your own self-righteousness, intellectual superiority, and sheer sophistication that your arguments become as bad as some of those I have collected for this book, something has gone badly wrong. I hope that *The Atheist Who Didn't Exist* will encourage you, even if you describe yourself as an "atheist" or an "agnostic", to be somebody who thinks *well* and avoids terrible arguments like the plague.

A lot of people have helped to make this book possible; while space does not permit me to list them all, a few deserve special mention. First, I must profoundly thank Andrew McCausland and Minehead Baptist Church for so generously giving me office space in which to lurk for a summer. Not least because the North Somerset coast is a beautiful place to write, and whenever I needed to clear my head I could walk deserted beaches for miles; strolling the wrack line between the tides where all manner of interesting things await the walker.²⁹³ Next up, I must thank friends and colleagues who patiently acted as sounding boards for some of the material in this book. In no particular order: Simon Wenham, Nathan Betts, Abdu Murray, Stuart McAllister, Carson Weitnauer, Nabeel Qureshi, Jeff Allen, Rick Manafo, and Cameron McAllister. Authors seeking to sound humble often say that they "stand on the shoulders of giants"; given my diminutive stature and the fact that so many of my colleagues are distressingly tall, this is very much the case. Thanks are also due to Tony Collins and his team at Lion Hudson for first believing in this project, commissioning it, and helping to see it to fruition. Finally, I must thank my wife, Astrid, and daughter, Caitriona, for their support and

293 Especially if you don't watch where you are putting your feet.

encouragement while I was buried away writing chapters.

Large portions of the book were written to the accompaniment of Kate Rusby's beautiful album *Ghost*, a soundtrack that often helped me to clear my head, refocus, and remember what beauty sounds like.

All that is good, helpful, and true in the book I owe to those listed above and to others too numerous to mention; any faults or shortcomings are entirely down to me.

End of free sample chapter

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