

Book Review

Tom Gilson & Carson Weitnauer (eds), *True Reason: Confronting the Irrationality of the New Atheism* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2013), 315pp, US\$17.99 (paperback), ISBN 978-0-8254-4338-1

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The present work is quite openly a work of Christian apologetics. Its aim, as the title suggests, is both to counter the work of the so-called “new atheists” and to offer a defence of the reasonableness of Christianity. Its essays cover an extraordinarily wide range of topics. These include the theological problems posed by religious diversity, the so-called “naturalism” of the modern sciences, the relations between faith and reason and religion and science, the role of religion in supporting our moral convictions, the reliability of the biblical accounts of Jesus’ life, and the problems posed by biblical endorsements of slavery and genocide. No review could do justice to so wide a range of issues, so my aim here is simply to offer some general reflections on the strategies employed.

Defeating the New Atheists

I have described the first aim of this volume as that of defeating the new atheists, a group of popular writers that includes Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris. Do contributors succeed in this task? In some respects they do. No thoughtful atheist is likely to be wholly convinced, for reasons I shall discuss. But the new atheists are notorious for their sweeping claims and less than fully informed criticisms, and contributors have no difficulty in countering these.

Take, for example, the idea that religious faith involves what Dawkins called (in *The Selfish Gene*) “blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence.” In response to this idea, David Marshall and

Timothy McGrew offer examples of Christian thinkers who praise the use of reason in regard to the faith and use philosophical analysis to explore its implications. The point they make is a fair one. I myself have long respected the intellectual acumen of St Thomas Aquinas, although it remains difficult to feel affection for a man who would have consented to my being burned to death as an apostate. Despite the dogmatism that has so often led to intolerance and persecution, Christianity does have a long intellectual tradition, of which the new atheists appear to be almost entirely ignorant. Even if (as I shall argue) Christian faith is not based on evidence, is it often reinterpreted in the light of evidence, so as to be more consistent with reason.

It is relatively easy, too, to counter the claim that there exists a necessary conflict between religion and science, a claim frequently made by Sam Harris. Here, too, the new atheists provide an easy target, for their criticisms sound like a revival of the nineteenth-century “warfare” thesis defended by John William Draper and Andrew Dickson White. If this is taken to mean that the Christian churches have consistently opposed scientific knowledge, then it is clearly false, and contributors to this volume have no difficulty in showing this. Sean McDowell, however, goes too far in effectively blaming Galileo for his confrontation with the Church. Even Pope John Paul II was willing to admit that the Church authorities made serious errors in dealing with the Galileo case. McDowell seems unwilling to go even this far.

McDowell's views are indicative of a broader problem, which is an unwillingness to admit that the atheists' case has any merits at all. In particular, contributors consistently fail to treat atheist views charitably. One of the first things I teach my students in philosophy is to direct their criticisms at the strongest, not the weakest form of their opponents' position. The new atheists certainly fail to follow this rule, but then so do the contributors to this volume. One of their strategies is to tacitly identify "atheism" with the "new atheism," so that by countering the often weak arguments put forward by new atheists they can give the impression of having defeated atheism *tout court*. But this strategy fails to engage with atheist thinking at its best.

Take, for example, the chapters by David Wood and Lenny Esposito directed against naturalism. Wood dismisses "methodological" naturalism – the view that science should deal only in natural causes – by remarking (without evidence) that "the past few decades have seen a growing shift from mere methodological naturalism ... to metaphysical naturalism (the claim that the natural world is all that exists)" (p. 109). Perhaps so, but it is methodological naturalism that many opponents of proposed theistic explanations *claim* to be defending. It is certainly easier to defend. When it comes to metaphysical naturalism, both contributors apparently fail to realize that its meaning is hotly disputed, even by atheists. Philosophers can agree that (as far as we know) the natural world is all that exists and yet disagree vigorously about what this entails.

Once we realize this, we can see the problem with Wood's strategy. He produces a familiar list of facts – or alleged facts – that he claims a naturalistic science cannot explain: the existence and so-called "fine-tuning" of the universe, the complexity of living organisms, consciousness, reason itself and logic, the uniformity of nature, and value. Esposito adopts a similar strategy, but focusing on our ability to reason. Their conclusion is that "it is more reasonable to believe in a Creator God than to believe in atheistic naturalism" (p. 106).

What is the problem here? There may exist phenomena, such as consciousness, that seem inexplicable given our current understanding of the natural world. But it does not follow that we should posit the existence of a non-natural, or "supernatural" entity in order to explain them. A theistic explanation of these

phenomena may face difficulties of its own, difficulties that render it unacceptable even when we have no other explanation on offer. Sometimes it's better simply to admit our ignorance and to hope that a better understanding of the natural world will emerge. Take, for example, philosopher Thomas Nagel, whose recent criticisms of a certain kind of naturalism are here repeatedly cited as though they provide support for Christianity. But Nagel remains an unrepentant atheist, indeed one who criticizes precisely the kind of theistic explanations that Wood and Esposito offer. Do we hear about his criticisms here? We do not.

This silence is indicative of the wider problem to which I have already referred, which is a general lack of engagement with serious atheist thinkers. It is not that contributors are unaware that there exist stronger arguments for atheism. Carson Weitnauer admits, at the end of the book, that contributors "haven't been writing about all atheists everywhere" (p. 303) and David Marshall concedes that atheist philosophers generally offer better arguments (p. 75). But even when the work of atheist philosophers is mentioned, there is little serious engagement with it. There is only one chapter on the argument from evil, which fails to do J. L. Mackie's defence of the logical form of that argument. (Mackie claims that God could have created creatures who always chose the good. This does not entail, as John DePoe suggests, that such beings would not be free.) It also deals in too summary a fashion with evidential arguments from evil, which are generally considered more persuasive. Indeed the most powerful of these – that offered by Paul Draper – is not mentioned.

So what we have here is a one-sided discussion that focuses on easy targets and fails to engage with more sophisticated arguments. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that the attitude expressed by contributors to this volume is simply the mirror image of that which they attribute to the new atheists. They have, it seems, "a preordained set of conclusions" at which they are "determined to arrive" (p. 56).

Defending the Faith

There is, I think, a reason for this, which has to do with the volume's second purpose, that of defending the reasonableness of Christian faith. The book belongs to a long tradition of rational Christian apologetics

whose arguments must be taken seriously. But many atheists suspect that Christians' apologetic arguments are a mere façade, hiding a commitment that has quite other grounds. This suspicion is well grounded.

The key issue here is the nature of Christian faith, a question regarding which these authors display a kind of ambivalence. This can be illustrated by David Marshall's argument defending the rationality of Christian belief. Marshall first defines faith as "holding firmly to and acting on what you have good reason to think is true, in the face of difficulties" (p. 139). Like all contributors, he lays great stress on the "good reason," countering the claim that Christian faith requires one "to check your brain in at the door" by noting that even the New Testament writers produce arguments and evidence in support of their views. But Marshall has already *distinguished* faith from reason. Employing an unusual metaphor to illustrate a commonplace Christian view, he writes that faith and reason are "two chopsticks, with which the human mind feeds on truth" (p. 139). Faith and reason are, it seems, distinct, although complementary means of attaining truth.

What is problematic about this view? It is that it gives rise to what I shall call *the dilemma of faith*. If, on the one hand, there are good arguments in support of Christian beliefs, then one chopstick should be enough: we would need nothing other than reason in order to believe. Indeed, there would be no distinction between faith and reason. We would simply have reason, which directs us (if the apologists' arguments are sound) to accept what Christians believe. If, on the other hand, faith provides answers for questions for which reason has no answer, then atheists are right to ask how Christians can know these things to be true. If faith is not based on reason, then what is it based on?

What gives rise to this (unacknowledged) dilemma? It is that the role of reason with regard to the faith is more limited than these authors admit, at least in the present volume. Christian faith might find support from evidence and arguments, but it has not traditionally been based on evidence and arguments. The arguments Christians produce have normally been rationalizations and defences of an act of faith that made on quite different grounds. More seriously, Christian thinkers have generally held that no evidence and arguments should be permitted to undermine the act of

faith. The only permissible use of reason is to better understand and defend what Christians already believe.

This is not a hostile accusation; it is simply spelling out the nature of religious faith, as Christian thinkers have traditionally understood it. On this view, faith is not the kind of belief that occurs spontaneously when one is presented with adequate evidence or arguments. It is an act by which one accepts some propositions on the authority of God himself, whether or not one has any direct evidence that these propositions are true. This is why an understanding of the arguments provided by apologists are not required for the act of faith. Even those who have limited intellectual abilities or educational opportunities can have a faith that is just as meritorious, if not more so, than that of a Christian philosopher.

What does it mean to accept some proposition on the authority of God? In practice, it seems to involve feeling a certain attraction to the belief in question and understanding this attraction as the voice of God, summoning us to believe. In the sixteenth century John Calvin called this "the internal testimony of the Holy Spirit." For Calvin, as for Aquinas before him, an act of faith based on this inner light gives rise to a degree of certainty that mere human reason can never obtain. To take something as true on the authority of God is to regard it as sacred and therefore unquestionable, so that the role of reason is restricted to understanding and defending what is believed. In other words, faith is not only distinct from reason, but has a greater degree of authority. Any deliverance of reason that is incompatible with the faith must be rejected. This is why there *can* arise a conflict between science and religion, a conflict that would be incomprehensible if both were simply exercises of reason.

Is this traditional view of faith shared by contributors to the present volume? It is difficult to be sure, although at least one of them elsewhere endorses it. In *Reasonable Faith*, the philosopher William Lane Craig writes that "although arguments and evidence may be used to support the believer's faith, they are never properly the basis of that faith" (p. 46). What is the basis of that faith? It is, he writes, the "self-authenticating" witness of the Holy Spirit (p. 43). This "experience of the Holy Spirit" will sometimes "imply the apprehension of certain truths of the Christian religion" and the assurance it provides is not mere-

ly “subjective assurance” but “objective knowledge” (ibid.).

What, then, is the role of reason with regard to the faith? Craig here adopts a distinction made by Martin Luther, writing that reason has only a “ministerial,” not a “magisterial” role.

The magisterial use of reason occurs when reason stands over and above the gospel like a magistrate and judges it on the basis of argument and evidence. The ministerial use of reason occurs when reason submits to and serves the gospel. In light of the Spirit’s witness, only the ministerial use of reason is legitimate. Philosophy is rightly the handmaid of theology. Reason is a tool to help us better understand and defend our faith. (pp. 47–48)

David Marshall writes, in the present volume, that “faith must be tested by reason” (p. 139). But on the traditional view of faith, that testing has very strict limits. Reason must never be permitted to undermine the faith: it may be used only to better understand or defend it.

Let me assume here that open-mindedness is an intellectual virtue. By open-mindedness I mean a willingness to examine arguments against one’s beliefs, with a view to altering those beliefs if the arguments are sound. By way of contrast, a determination to hold on to one’s beliefs under any circumstances would count as dogmatism. The idea that only the ministerial use of reason is permissible looks like a dogmatism of this kind: it permits the Christian to follow the dictates of reason only insofar as they lend support to the faith. Contributors to this volume argue that the new atheists also display a kind of dogmatism (pp. 72, 225). Perhaps they do. Even so, there is an interesting asymmetry here. The dogmatism of the new atheists is, by their own lights, a vice: if they were to act consistently with their ideals, they would abandon it. But the dogmatism of Christian apologists has traditionally been considered a virtue, indeed nothing less than the virtue of faith.

The traditional conception of faith outlined by Craig seems to me ultimately untenable, for reasons already highlighted in the nineteenth century by David Friedrich Strauss. How can one know that this experience

of an inner light – the alleged witness of the Holy Spirit – is indeed divine? You could argue, as Craig does (following Calvin), that it is somehow “self-authenticating.” But self-authentication is too easy. “Whatever is written by the author of this review is true” is an act of self-authentication, but I don’t expect my readers to take it seriously. If, on the other hand, you take this inner light as divine because you seem to have good reasons to do so, then you are no longer believing on the authority of God, but on the authority of your own reason. If the Christian follows this option, the distinction between faith and reason collapses and faith loses its distinctive sense of certainty and confidence

Even if the dilemma is not fatal, this traditional view of faith is very different from that which a reader might infer from the present volume. In offering evidence and arguments in support of the faith, its contributors give the impression that their faith is based on such evidence and arguments. But on the assumption that their view is the same as that of Aquinas, Luther, and Calvin (an assumption that we know to be true for at least one of them), it is not. The confidence that contributors so boldly display here is based on nothing less than a conviction that God has spoken to them, a conviction that evidence and arguments should never be allowed to undermine. If an attitude of this kind represents “true reason,” then I, for one, would like to see less of it.