



## Lesson 109

### The Rise of New Atheism

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The United States is not a Christian nation. The number of Americans that identify as Christian (including Catholics) has been steadily declining; it was 69% last year when it had been at least 80% before 2010. And while the number of Christians has been declining, the number of atheists and people who are unaffiliated has been rising. Less than half of Americans are Protestant now. So, in this lesson we are going to look at atheism. Specifically, the atheism of today, or new atheism. We learned in a previous lesson that atheism is part of the trinity that is often found on the far-right. We are going to understand more about that and also see how atheism deals with the test for our time.

## Old vs. New Atheism

### Old Atheism

Atheism previous to the 21<sup>st</sup> century is called old atheism. Religions such as Christianity, Judaism, and Islam are called theistic religions. Theism is a belief in the existence of a god or supreme being who is all powerful and in some religions created the universe. As Christians we believe in God, who is all powerful and created the universe. However, everyone doesn't share this belief. People who don't accept theism are called atheist- they refuse to believe in deities, instead forming their own opinions of the universe. Atheism dates back to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries where the word began to be used, but of course we know people denied God existed long before that. The way today's atheists behave and what they believe is different than previous to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, which is why atheism around the 1800s and 1900s is called old atheism. Old atheism is based on "logic" and arguments against religion that were mainly aimed at scholars. Old atheists argued against religion, but they tolerated it, rather than being direct activists against it. But when you don't believe in a being who created humans and animals, you have to invent ideas to explain how humans came about, and a popular explanation is Darwinism. Charles Darwin was an English naturalist, geologist and biologist. He was born in 1809 and grew up believing in God and the Bible, but in the mid-1800s he began to question the Bible and religion. In 1859, Darwin published a book called *The Origin of Species*, which was a formalized version of his beliefs. Darwin believed that species evolve, or "descent with modification", and that all living things have a common ancestor. Yes, we know all humans have common parents, but animals and humans don't have a common ancestor. Darwin believed that a way for evolution to take place was natural selection, which means "heritable traits" that are better for species to survive are passed down and become more common. Even though it's incorrect, Darwinism is accepted today as a legitimate scientific theory, and in atheism it's used as an argument against creation. Back in the 1800s, an ideology stemmed from Darwinism called Social Darwinism. Social Darwinists believe that some people gain more power in society because they are inherently superior. This ideology is used to justify racism, sexism, imperialism, and other social inequalities. So not only do atheists not believe in God, but many of them believe in Darwinism, which leads them to support inequality. This is what old atheists believed in, and while several atheistic beliefs have changed, Darwinism is one that is still prevalent amongst atheists and scientists today.

## New Atheism

New atheism is essentially just 21<sup>st</sup> century atheism although there are some key differences between 'new' atheism and 'old' atheism. While old atheists mostly kept to themselves and tolerated religion, new atheists are more active in their fight against the church, the government, and women. For example, new atheists believe that religion should be challenged, especially if it is influencing the government. The new atheist movement emerged not long after September 11, 2001. "Avowing to champion the values of science and reason, the movement offered a growing number of unbelievers — tired of faith-based foolishness mucking up society for the rest of us — some hope for the future." "From the Enlightenment to the Dark Ages: How 'new atheism' slid into the alt-right". Despite the obvious, there are serious problems within the new atheist movement which include racial profiling, allegations of rape at the conferences, white supremacy, homophobia, and misogyny.

## The History of New Atheism

### 2001 & 2004: *The End of Faith*

The terrorist attacks on 9/11 caused several different reactions. Some Evangelical Protestants used it as a catalyst to get people to become more religious, but some other people used it for the opposite reason. One of those people was Sam Harris, he is an atheist and he started to write a book right after the terrorist attacks - on September 12<sup>th</sup>. On August 11, 2004 he published that book titled *The End of Faith* (after some difficulty finding a company to publish it). In the book he compared and contrasted religion and reason, saying that people who are religious don't have any evidence to support their beliefs, something that he strongly opposes. Harris even quoted Bible passages literally and without historical context to try to prove his points on how irrational religion is. In *The End of Faith*, he used his understanding of neuroscience and philosophy to try to prove his points. Also in the book Harris focused a lot on terrorism and how he believes religion created this problem. He tried to say that all religions are unreasonable, dangerous, and can ultimately lead to extremism. He attacked extremists and non-extremists alike. He also opposed conservative Evangelicals that were trying to get the government to pass religious laws, but Harris did not just call for the separation of church and state - he called for the destruction of religion. In *The End of Faith*, Harris says that religion should not be tolerated or respected. Some people loved Harris' book (like Richard Dawkins who we will talk about later) but others deeply opposed it. Despite all of the opposition, *The End of Faith* won an award (PEN/Martha Albrand Award) in 2005 and also in that year it was a *New York Times* Best Seller.

## 2006: *The God Delusion* and “New Atheism”

Two important events connected to atheism took place in 2006. One of those events was when the term “new atheism” was coined. It was invented by the journalist Gary Wolf, and it was meant to describe the beliefs of some atheists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century- earlier we saw what a few of those beliefs are. The second important 2006 event is centered on a book. New atheist leader Richard Dawkins published a book titled *The God Delusion* in which he argued that God doesn’t exist. He contended that religion is a delusion, one evidence being people don’t need religion to be moral (which is true, but his conclusion is still incorrect). The book became very popular amongst atheists, ranking #4 on the *New York Times* Hardcover Nonfiction Best Seller list. More than 3 million copies were sold, and many books were written in response. These two events are what helped mold new atheism during 2006.

## 2007: The Four Horsemen

On September 30, 2007, Christopher Eric Hitchens, Daniel Clement Dennett III, Richard Dawkins, and Samuel Benjamin Harris, met at Hitchens’ home in Washington DC. The four men were titled “the Four Horsemen” of atheism as they were some of the most influential people of the new atheist movement. (Hitchens died from pneumonia on December 15, 2011. Ayaan Hirsi Ali, who was supposed to attend the meeting in 2007 but had to cancel, became known as the “plus one horsewoman”.) “Contrary to the book’s [*The Four Horsemen*] subtitle, the ‘atheist revolution’ was not sparked by this cocktail-fuelled pre-dinner round of chat and backslapping, which took place in 2007. By then the participants could already salute one another for the impressive sales of their books, boast about how willing they were to cause ‘offence’, and reminisce about how brilliant they were when they befuddled this or that bishop with some debating point” “The Four Horsemen review - whatever happened to ‘New Atheism’?”, *The Guardian*. According to that article, the discussion between the four horsemen wasn’t very deep, instead they spoke about issues that were already agreed upon and ignored ones that wouldn’t support their ideas. One such idea was that religion impedes science, despite the fact that some well-known scientists, such as Isaac Newton, were religious. “At one point Harris complains about a leading geneticist who is also a Christian. This guy seems to think, Harris spits incredulously, ‘that on Sunday you can kneel down in the dewy grass and give yourself to Jesus because you’re in the presence of a frozen waterfall, and on Monday you can be a physical geneticist’. Harris offers no reason why he can’t, except that the combination is incompatible with his own narrow-mindedness” “The Four Horsemen review - whatever happened to ‘New Atheism’?”, *The Guardian*. The meeting lasted two hours and was recorded. The transcript was published in a book titled *The Four Horsemen*. Also in 2007, Hitchens wrote an article for *Vanity Fair* titled “Why Women Aren’t Funny”. In the article, he explains that men’s sole purpose in life is to appeal to the opposite gender, and because “Mother Nature ... is not so kind to men ... she equips many fellows with very little armament for the struggle” (Why Women Aren’t Funny), including his ability to make women laugh. And since women apparently already control men, with their bodies, they have no such need for humor. Not only is this viewpoint based on evolution, but it is also sexist.

# The Four Horsemen

## Dennett and Harris

Two of the Four Horsemen of atheism are Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett. Sam Harris is American and he was born in 1967. His father had a Quaker background and his mother was Jewish; he lived with his mother. Harris wasn't raised religious though – but he wasn't raised atheist. He left college and traveled around south Asia for some years where he learned from Buddhist and Hindu teachers. It was around this time that he became an atheist. By 2000 he had come back to the United States and gotten a degree in philosophy, and because of 9/11, as we mentioned earlier, he published the book *The End of Faith* in 2004. Harris is a leader in new atheism, and he is also a philosopher – he focuses on subjects like religion (especially Islam), the mind, and neuroscience. Harris has written seven books. He currently hosts a rather popular podcast, he also has an app that focuses on meditation and being moral without religion. He does not like religion at all and he has often debated the subject. He is very sexist; he believes that men and women are essentially different. Harris said in 2014 that most atheists are men because atheism is critical and usually provocative - which according to him, is something intrinsic to men not to women (to attract women, he says you need something nurturing and harmonious). Daniel Dennett is another of the Four Horsemen of Atheism. He was born in America in 1942, but his family moved to Lebanon shortly thereafter where his parents worked during World War II. In 1947, Dennett's father was killed so his family moved back to the United States. He, like Harris has a degree in philosophy, but Dennett is also considered a Cognitive scientist. He is also a writer and deals with subjects like the mind and especially evolutionary biology. He believes that everything came through evolution. He is currently a professor at a university in the United States. Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett are just two of the Four Horsemen of atheism and they still support those ideas.

## Dawkins and Hitchens

The other two of the Four Horsemen are Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens. Richard Dawkins is a British evolutionary biologist and author, but he is more commonly known as an atheist leader. He was born in 1941, in Kenya, during the British colonial rule, and moved to England in 1949. Dawkins grew up Christian, and was interested in natural science, but as he got older, he decided that evolution was a better explanation of how things were created over believing in a God who created them. In 1976, Dawkins became famous when he published a book titled *The Selfish Gene* which made the gene-centered view of evolution and natural selection popular. In 1982, he published the book titled *The Extended Phenotype* in which he further explained his positions on evolution. In 2006, Dawkins founded the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, which supports science and secularism, and we know that year he also published *The God Delusion*. However not everyone likes him, his tweets are known to be offensive, and some say he is fueling anti-muslim sentiment. He is also known to be sexist, although he claims to always have been a feminist. Despite this, Dawkins has become one of the faces of atheism, having over a million followers on Twitter, and many supporters elsewhere. The last of the Four Horsemen was Christopher Hitchens. He was born in 1949, and was raised as a Christian, but when he was 38 years old, he discovered he had Jewish origins so he began to identify as a Jew. Hitchens became an author and journalist, writing and/or editing over thirty books. Hitchens eventually rejected religion and called himself an anti-theist. He claimed you "could be an atheist and

wish that belief in God were correct", but 'an anti-theist', a term I'm trying to get into circulation, is someone who is relieved that there's no evidence for such an assertion." In 2007, he published a popular book titled *God Is Not Great*, in which he argued against all religions, saying they were "the main source of hatred in the world." This book aligned him with other new atheists and he became a prominent new atheist figure. Unfortunately, Hitchens had been a heavy smoker and drinker, and in 2010 he announced he was being treated for cancer. The next year on December 15<sup>th</sup>, he died of pneumonia. Of Hitchens, Richard Dawkins said, "He was a polymath, a wit, immensely knowledgeable, and a valiant fighter against all tyrants, including imaginary supernatural ones." Even though he's dead, Hitchens is still a prominent figure in new atheism, and his beliefs are still maintained today.

## **New Atheism and Feminism**

### **Their view of feminism**

Atheists believe that feminism is a religion. Obviously, atheists do not believe in creation, they believe in evolution. And according to evolution, men evolved to be the ones who provided for the women and children. A woman's sole purpose is to reproduce and raise the children. Feminism is about, among other things, women being able to provide for their families and doing other things than raising children. That concept isn't supported in evolution. Therefore, it is not based in "fact". New atheists believe that they are rational thinkers, not emotional thinkers. They see religion as emotional, since it isn't based in "rationality". They view feminism the same way- it is emotional. Feminism, they believe, is emotional and not based on fact, therefore, it is a religion and should be fought against at every possible opportunity.

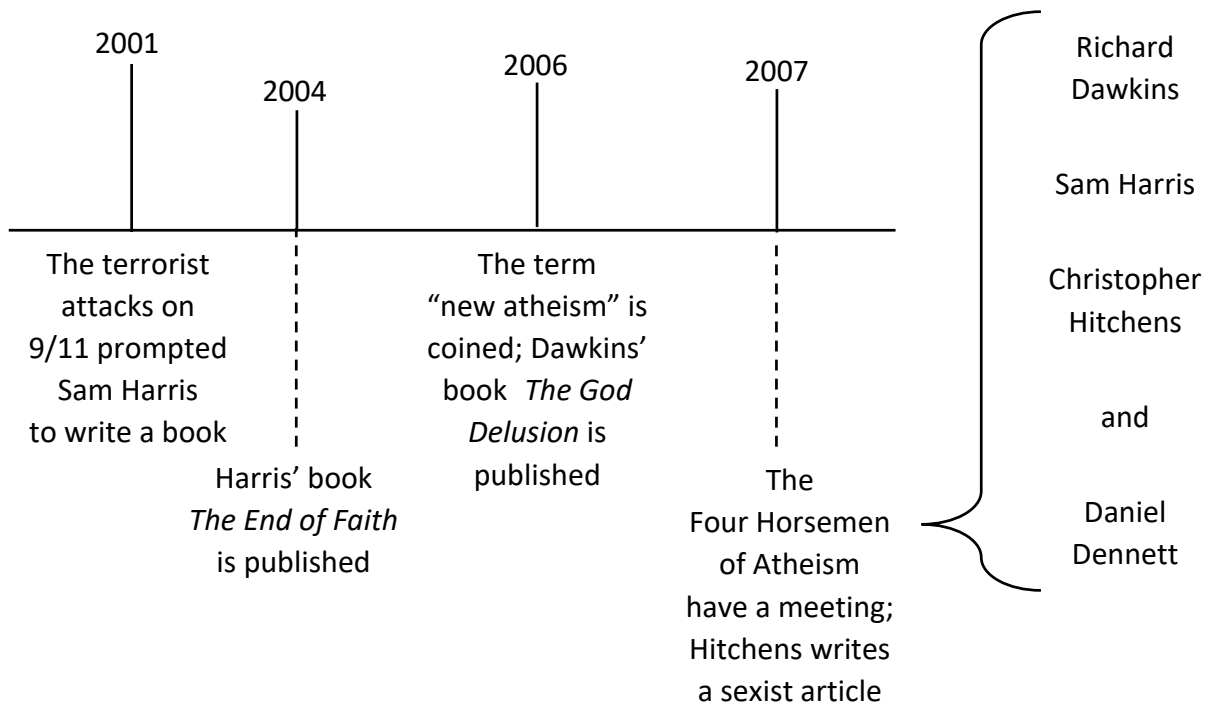
## In summary:

### Old Atheism

- Didn't believe in God
- Believed in evolution/  
Darwinism
- Supported things like racism,  
sexism, and imperialism
- Left religions alone

### New Atheism

- Doesn't believe in God
- Believes in evolution/  
Darwinism
- Supports things like racism,  
white supremacy, sexism, and  
homophobia
- Actively fights religion



### We saw that new atheism is sexist:

- Through evolution, new atheists think women are inferior to men.
  - They also think that feminism is irrational.
- They even consider feminism to be a religion - and they believe that religions should not exist.

Official Youth Prophecy Group website:

[youthprophecygroup.org](http://youthprophecygroup.org)

If you have any questions or comments on any of the material contact us at:

[youthprophecygroup@gmail.com](mailto:youthprophecygroup@gmail.com)

Find all the YPG lesson videos at:

[https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeltzVajTXgSQRL-o2XOq\\_g](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCeltzVajTXgSQRL-o2XOq_g)

Link to YPG Zoom meetings which are at 10:00am Pacific Time on the 1<sup>st</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Sundays of the month:

<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87170293849>