

Atheism

In this position statement, the religious position of atheism is considered as it has been expressed in the past, and as it is being expressed today. The material below is divided into several sections: I. Introduction, II. Atheism, III. Anti-Theism, IV. Responses to Atheism and Anti-Theism, and V. Practical Atheism.

I. Introduction

With terms like the “New Atheism” in the news, perhaps defining a few terms is a good place to start. Theists are those who believe in God, and usually restricted to one God, but not always. To be more explicit, the term monotheist may be used. Theists may not be Christians, but they hold to some form of religion that includes belief in the existence of God. There are only three main monotheistic religions, those being Christian, Jewish, and Muslim. If the term theism is used in the broad sense, then monotheism is not implied, but may include polytheism (the belief in many gods), or pantheism (the belief that God is everything and everything is God: God is impersonal). A narrowly defined usage of theism is the belief in one God who has created the heavens and the earth and is known by revelation. This definition allows distinction between theism and deism. Deism is a monotheistic belief, but where God created the heavens and the earth but has since no control over it nor any interest in it, nor has He revealed Himself in any way other than through nature. Deism has often been, historically, the God of philosophers. The term theism, in an intermediate definition, also includes Christian-based cults, other cults, or those who claim to be Christian but be considered to be heretical by many.

In this position statement, I will restrict the definition of theism to its most narrow definition, that of referring to the beliefs of conservative Christians: that there is one God who has created the heavens and the earth and all things therein, who remains in control of all things, and has revealed Himself in the Bible. The reason for this is simple. It is this narrow definition that seems to be of greatest concern at least in the West where the influence of Christianity has been strong and remains significant, and it is this definition that is mostly under attack by militant atheists.

Another definition of importance is that of agnosticism. Agnostics hold that they do not know about, nor have strong convictions about, the existence of God. Most would likely be of the persuasion that not only do they not know about the existence of God but that others also do not. There is a range of conviction here as well as with theism. A moderate position would be simply that they don't know about the existence of God. A strong position would be that not only do they not know about the existence of God but that others also do not (as above), but also that such things are beyond the ability for humans to know about: no one knows nor can anyone know.

The term atheism is defined as the belief that there is no God. The key is the “a” in front of theism – without. The atheist is *without* God. The agnostic questions the existence of God, but the atheist believes there is no God. Atheists may claim that they *know* that God does not exist. Since their position goes beyond what an agnostic would claim, and professes conviction that God does not exist, true atheists seem to be as they have always been, an extremely small minority of any population. Nevertheless, they can be very vocal and influential. Atheists are often highly educated, well read, and may hold their convictions strongly. They also seem to be of the opinion that the default position is atheism, and the burden of proof falls on the theist, not the atheist. It would seem that agnosticism would perhaps follow from this line of thinking as the default position, but that is not what atheists claim. Atheists claim that they follow where science and evidence in general leads, and that neither they nor anyone else has the right to hold to beliefs that are, in their opinion, without compelling evidence. This seems to contradict their position that they believe God does not exist, nevertheless, this appears to be their position. Hence, in their thinking, theists must provide compelling evidence for the existence of God, and until they do atheism is what must be held. Of course, in their opinion, they are the ones that determine what constitutes compelling evidence.

Atheists tend to assume atheism is true, often perhaps without a great deal of thought going into it, and require that if one is to be a theist, proof must be given that God exists. Other atheists are more thoughtful, philosophical, and have a carefully held view of atheism that provides, or at least attempts to provide rational arguments for atheism. These atheists are open to dialogue, and seem reasonable.

Anti-theism is a stronger position than atheism, although not in as much use. The key to the definition is the prefix “anti”, meaning *against* or *hostile to*. The recent term of “New Atheism” is just a more Madison Avenue way of expressing anti-theism. Anti-theists not only do not believe in God, but they are in-your-face hostile against *theism*, almost always meaning conservative Christianity. They are vocal against God in debates and in the writing of books. Anti-theists tend to mock religions and religious people, but provide little, if any, rational argument for their atheistic position. They are often arrogant and abusive.

The New Atheists have been in the news of late. According to the “New Atheism” entry in Wikipedia (accessed on October 8, 2011): “**New Atheism** is the name given to a movement among some early 21st century atheist writers who have advocated the view that ‘religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.’ The phrase is commonly associated with five writers: Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Victor J. Stenger. Several best-selling books by these authors, published between 2004 and 2007, form the basis for much of the discussion of New Atheism. Proponents of New Atheism argue that recent scientific advancements demand a less accommodating attitude toward religion, superstition, and religious fanaticism than had traditionally been extended by many secularists.” This Wikipedia entry also refers to the “Four Horsemen”: “Referring to a 2007 debate, Dawkin’s (*sic*) website refers to four members of the movement – himself, Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens – as ‘The Four Horsemen’, alluding to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse.” The “New Atheists” are nothing other than anti-theists.

As was noted among theists and agnostics, it should also be noted among atheists and anti-theists that there is a continuous scale. There are some anti-theists who are only mildly aggressive, and there are atheists that are a little more aggressive, such that the difference between an aggressive atheist and a more moderate anti-theist may not be much, etc.

II. Atheism

Well-known atheists of the past include the following: Albert Camus, Denis Diderot, Ludwig Feurbach, Sigmund Freud, David Hume, Aldous Huxley, Sir Julian Huxley, Robert G. Ingersoll, Karl Marx, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Nietzsche, Bertrand Russell, Jean-Paul Sartre, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Percy Bysshe Shelley. These atheists assume atheism to be true: they assume that it is the default position and that the burden of proof falls on the theist. Atheism is their starting point. In their writings, atheism is assumed, and there is very little that could be considered as a well developed argument for their position. I have looked in vain, although not exhaustively, in their writings for a rational defense of their positions.

For example, one might reasonably hope that a book with the title *Bertrand Russell on God and Religion*, edited by Al Seckel, Prometheus Books, 1986, would have some cogent arguments for atheism found therein. The opening line of this book is “I think all the great religions of the world – Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, Islam, and Communism – both untrue and harmful”, quoted from Russell’s *Why I Am Not A Christian and Other Essays on Religion and Related Subjects*, Simon & Schuster, 1967. One of the primary essays in this volume, “Why I Am Not A Christian,” is reproduced in this volume edited by Seckel. However, the bulk of this volume, when specifically addressing Christianity, is of the form given in the above quotation. We may come away with a better understanding of what Russell believed, but not necessarily why he believed it. Although we do perhaps find Russell’s best explanations as to why he is an atheist in “Why I Am Not A Christian,” yet those explanations ring hollow and disingenuous. He dismisses philosophical arguments for God’s existence, in that he does not find them convincing. That is well and good; perhaps he does not find such arguments convincing. But then he questions whether Christ even existed, dismissing the whole thing in one paragraph. Then he questions Christ’s moral character because He believed in hell! Russell also just didn’t like the “tone” of Christ’s teaching! He also thought that moral progress in the world was opposed by Christianity, and by implication, that greater moral progress could be made with Christianity out of the way. A full three paragraphs were devoted to the development of this concept, if we can claim that there was any development as opposed to simply stating his views. His views expressed here begin to sound more like that of anti-theists, but not quite as bombastic. But even some sort of development as referred to above is appreciated, as most writings of atheists do not even contain that much, if anything.

As another example, I purchased the book *The Philosophy of Jean-Paul Sartre*, edited by Robert Denoon Cumming, Vintage Books, 2003. Sartre, being a well-known atheist, and this being a book about his philosophy, one would expect that the subject of atheism versus theism, or the existence of God, would be part of the volume, but such is not the case. Perhaps Sartre is the supreme example of assuming atheism without feeling any need to justify the assumption. Here are a few quotations allegedly from Sartre, obtained from <http://www.brainyquote.com> on Sep-

tember 5, 2011: “That God does not exist, I cannot deny, That my whole being cries out for God I cannot forget”, “Hell is other people”, “I do not believe in God; his existence has been disproved by Science. But in the concentration camp, I learned to believe in men”, “God is absence. God is the solitude of man.”

It appears that the best statements for atheism are given by lesser known atheists:

Peter A. Angeles, *The Problem of God: A Short Introduction*, Prometheus Books, 1980.

This book is concerned exclusively with philosophical arguments for the existence of God from a negative perspective, that is, Peter Angeles doesn't find any of them convincing. To read my review of this book, click [here](#).

B. C. Johnson, *The Atheist Debater's Handbook*, Prometheus Books, 1981.

Jeffrey Stueber's review of this book may be obtained by clicking [here](#).

Malcolm Murray, *The Atheist's Primer*, Broadview Press, 2010.

This is an interesting and well-written book that I can recommend. Although I strongly differ with the author's position, I found the book to be helpful in understanding an atheist's beliefs, and at least one man's arguments as to why he is an atheist. Good arguments for an atheist's position are difficult to find. Although, referring to them as good arguments may be taking it too far. Murray reads like an intelligent and thoughtful person who has read widely on arguments for and against belief in God. As is true of most atheists, Murray considers the default position to be atheism, and it is up to theists to prove to atheists that God exists. I disagree with this position, as by far the majority of people on planet earth find belief in God, or at least some deity, as intuitively obvious. As suggested above, it would seem to me that an intellectually neutral position, if one distrusts his own intuitions, would be agnosticism. Therefore, Murray's book is almost entirely debunking theism, as best he can, while making little, if any, positive case for atheism. Murray seems like an honest and open person who has considered both sides carefully, and I recommend his book.

George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, Prometheus Books, 1979.

According to Wikipedia, this book by George H. Smith “became one of the bestselling works on atheism published during the 20th century”. I acquired my copy in 1982. Although published many years ago, it is still in print and available via Amazon, and probably other sources as well. The position he takes in this book is that of anti-theism. Smith is not associated with the New Atheists, which is a more recent phenomenon, but he is an anti-theist, which shows that the New Atheists are not really new: anti-theists have been around for awhile. As with other atheists, he holds in this book that atheism is the default position, that atheists have nothing to prove, and the burden of justification resides entirely with Christians. This book is completely concerned with being critical of Christianity: the existence of God cannot be proved, faith in God is irrational, the Bible is full of errors, etc. Although he is extremely anti-God, he does strive to make his case in a logical, well thought out way, and he is a good writer. In other words, at least for me, I can read the book and know what it is he is saying without being offended, unlike Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Harris. On the positive side, he has no kind words for liberal theologians, and rightly believes that the issue depends on whether or not the Bible is true (which he holds to not be true).

Gordon Stein, editor, *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, Prometheus Books, 1980.

III. Anti-Theism

Recently there has been a flurry of new books promoting atheism. There has never been a lack of such books, but these are written by very vocal, in your face, aggressive anti-theists who are also very well educated, appear in the public media such as TV and on college campuses, etc., and their books have been very well received with large volume sales. Some have achieved some measure of fame, based in part on their atheistic writings. Some of those are Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Victor Stenger.

Richard Dawkins

By far the most popular of the New Atheists is Richard Dawkins, due in part because he has been in the public eye for decades. Richard Dawkins is Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, and is a well-known, and out-spoken, advocate of materialistic evolution. Dawkins won both the Royal Society of Literature Award and the Los Angeles Times Literary Prize in 1987 for *The Blind Watchmaker*. He also won the 1989 Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London and the 1990 Royal Society Michael Faraday Award for the furtherance of the public understanding of science. In 1994 he won the Nakayama Prize for Human Science. He was awarded an Honorary D.Litt. degree by the University of St. Andrews in 1995. He received the Humanist of the Year Award in 1996. Since 1996 he has been Vice President of the British Humanist Association. Dawkins was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature in 1997. His many books intended for the general public include the following:

- *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design*, Norton, 1996 [1986].
- *The Selfish Gene*, second edition, Oxford University Press, 1989.
- *River out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life*, Phoenix, 1995.
- *Climbing Mount Improbable*, Viking, 1996.
- *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion and the Appetite for Wonder*, Penquin Books, 1998.
- *A Devil's Chaplain*, Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2003.
- *The God Delusion*, Mariner Books, 2008 [2006].

To give some indication of how well Dawkins represents the views of noteworthy contemporaries (you may recognize the names) on evolution and its meaning, in addition to the awards mentioned above, below are listed a few quotations from endorsements on pages i and ii and on the back cover of the 1996 edition of *The Blind Watchmaker*:

Edward O. Wilson: “The best general account of evolution I have read in recent years. It is deep enough to be useful to biologists, yet sufficiently simple and well-written [*very well-written in fact*] to appeal to the same large audience that enjoyed *The Selfish Gene*.”

John Maynard Smith: “The secret of good science writing is that one should understand the ideas oneself: good writing comes from clear thinking . . . In *The Blind Watchmaker* I was repeatedly astonished at the clarity with which Dawkins sees the problems . . . It is abundantly clear, however, that Dawkins has not lost his sense of wonder at the natural world as he has gained intellectual understanding of it . . . I wish I could write like that . . . Dawkins has done

more than anyone else now writing to make evolutionary biology comprehensible and acceptable to a general audience.”

Isaac Asimov: “A lovely book, original and lively, it expounds the ins and outs of evolution with enthusiastic clarity, answering, at every point, the cavemen of creationism.”

Michael Ruse: “It succeeds quite brilliantly. Most particularly, again and again, it brings home the nature and force of the central evolutionary mechanism of natural selection in a way that I have never seen or felt previously. The closest analogy I can think of is Galileo’s Dialogues which made reasonable the Copernican Revolution, and I hope I will not be thought to be pushing things to an embarrassing point if I say that Dawkins’ book can be compared to Galileo’s, not only in type but in standard.”

Douglas J. Futumaya: “I could heartily recommend *The Blind Watchmaker* just for the pleasure it will afford the reader who is looking for a treatment of evolution that is not only educational but fun. But the more important reason for reading Dawkins’s book is that this is his answer, in clear and often insightful terms, to the opponents of neo-Darwinian evolutionary theory.”

The above quotations, as well as his distinguished position and many awards, serve to provide evidence that Richard Dawkins and his ideas are not straws. Rather, Dawkins, in case you are not already aware of it, is one of the most eloquent speakers and writers alive today that presents the case not only for biological evolution, but also for a materialistic philosophy of life. He speaks and writes passionately in favor of atheism. His book, *The God Delusion*, has been enormously successful, at least in terms of sales. The book has evoked a significant number of responses, most from Christians, who point out Dawkins’ weak arguments. Below, we will focus on Dawkins’ very successful *The God Delusion*:

Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, Mariner Books, 2008 [2006].

If you’ve seen the documentary movie *Expelled* by Ben Stein, you may recall the interview of atheist Richard Dawkins by Ben Stein. At one point Dawkins, with his book in hand *The God Delusion*, quotes from the book his diatribe against the Old Testament God. Stein also interviews Alister McGrath in the documentary, although it is of shorter length, where McGrath opposes Dawkins’ point of view. Given the description above of Richard Dawkins and his accomplishments, the things stated in Dawkins’ book cannot be dismissed as those of some crackpot, those of somebody on the lunatic fringe. In many ways he is now main stream, at least in academia. What Dawkins’ writes in *The God Delusion* is embarrassing to anyone who wants to discuss these issues rationally. For more of my comments, please see my review by clicking [here](#). This review is brief and combines Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* with a review of Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, IVP Books, 2007.

Daniel Dennett

Daniel Dennett is the Austin B. Fletcher Professor of Philosophy at Tufts University in Medford, MA, and is the Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies. Dennett’s personal web site is located as follows: <http://ase.tufts.edu/cogstud/incbios/dennettd/dennettd.htm> As noted above, he is considered to be one of the “Four Horsemen” among the New Atheists. He is clearly an anti-theist, but writes in a reasonable tone such as can be followed, and steers away from the bombastic writing of a Dawkins, Hitchens, or Harris. I can read him and follow where he is go-

ing. I do not share his position, to say the least, but he does not go out of his way to be deliberately offensive, and seems to be at least rational. He is a committed Darwinist, and seems to see natural selection operating everywhere such that it explains everything.

Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, Penguin Books, 2006.

In this book, Dennett is concerned to break the spell of religion that he observes to be almost universal. He acknowledges that religion may have served some useful purpose in the past, and that as a result evolution has selected it as a meme to be preserved, but that it has now out-lived any usefulness. He makes the appeal for open and honest discussion about religion, which is an appeal that I can wholeheartedly agree with. However, as the subtitle indicates, he wants religion to be discussed only within the context of it being a natural phenomenon, which I could not agree to. As this book indicates, Dennett is an absolutely committed Darwinist. And in a sense I can understand his position. Given that Darwinian evolution is true, and that natural phenomenon can explain all things, then his position seems almost inevitable. But what if Darwinian evolution is not true, in that it does not explain the origin of species, and that the empirical evidence does simply not support it? Then, it would seem, Dennett's position falls apart.

Two noteworthy full reviews of this book are available on the internet, along with others. The first one that I will mention here is by Leon Wieseltier, as published by the New York Times, February 6, 2006. To view this review, click [here](#).

The second one that I will mention here is by Andrew Brown, as presented in the Guardian, February 25, 2006. To see his review, click [here](#).

Sam Harris

Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, Norton, 2004.

Christopher Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, Twelve, 2009.

Victor Stenger

Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*, Prometheus Books, 2009.

Victor Stenger is a physicist and a philosopher. Based on the subtitle of this book, one might expect a reasoned presentation of the new atheism based on science. Unfortunately, such is not the case. I have written a much longer review of this book than what I usually do, due to the nature of his claims, claims that simply do not pass the test of reasoned inquiry. My review of this book may be obtained by clicking [here](#).

IV. Responses to Atheism and Anti-Theism

In response, numerous books have been written, primarily by Christians, critical of the writings of the New Atheists:

David Aikman, *The Delusion of Disbelief: Why the New Atheism Is a Threat to Your Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness*, SaltRiver (Tyndale), 2008.

David Aikman is a journalist for *Christianity Today* and the *Wall Street Journal*. Prior to that, he was a reporter for *Time* magazine for some 23 years. He has also written some eight books. The title of the immediately above book summarizes his convictions about the New Atheism. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason & the War on Religion*, Orbis Books, 2008.

Tina Beattie is a serious feminist theologian and thinker. For a review of her book by Richard Norman, click [here](#).

David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions*, Crown Forum, 2008.

David Berlinski holds modern-day atheists in contempt, ridicules and makes fun of them. This could not be pulled off by probably anyone but Berlinski, but he does it with great skill and humor. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

John Blanchard, *Does God Believe in Atheists?*, Evangelical Press, 2000.

John Blanchard is a British author, teacher and conference speaker. He is, perhaps, much better known in England than he is in the United States. The title of the book is certainly an interesting question, sort of turning things on its head. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Paul Copan, and William Lane Craig (editors), *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists & Other Objectors*, B&H Academic, 2009.

Paul Copan is professor and Pledger Family Chair of Philosophy and Ethics at Palm Beach Atlantic University, and William Lane Craig is Research Professor of Philosophy at Talbot School of Theology. They are editors of this volume, consisting of 18 authors, each writing a chapter for this volume, responding to the New Atheists. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Thomas Crean, *God Is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins*, Ignatius Press, 2007.

Thomas Crean does not find much in Dawkins' *The God Delusion* that makes a true argument against theism, but Crean refutes the arguments he does find. Many Christians find it difficult to even attempt a reasoned response to Dawkins, but Crean has taken him seriously and has written a carefully reasoned response. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

David Bentley Hart, *Atheist Delusions: The Christian Revolution and Its Fashionable Enemies*, Yale University Press, 2009.

This book by David Bentley Hart is one of the better responses to the New Atheists in print. Hart gives a very compelling presentation by one who is very well informed and has clearly thought deeply about this subject. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

John F. Haught, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, Westminster John Knox Press, 2008.

John F. Haught is a Senior Fellow in Science and Religion at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. Haught, who has taught theism/atheism college courses and is very knowledgeable of the subject, severely criticizes the New Atheists compared to atheists of an earlier generation. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Peter Hitchens, *The Rage Against God: How Atheism Led Me to Faith*, Zondervan, 2010.

Interestingly, Peter Hitchens is the brother of Christopher Hitchens, where the latter is one of the more outspoken anti-theists alive today (see above in Section III Anti-Theism). Peter Hitchens' book is neither philosophical nor theological, but rather personal and sociological. He describes how things have changed dramatically during his life time in England, for the worse, and how Christianity is losing (mostly has lost) its influence, and how this has greatly harmed England. He describes his childhood, his loss of faith, his becoming an atheist, and after many years returning to Christianity. Perhaps his greatest contribution in the book is his detailed description of how the atheist state of the Soviet Union was very anti-God, and in carrying out its program to destroy Christianity created an intolerable, corrupt, oppressive state where civilization itself was lost. This was done, in Peter Hitchens' opinion, as a result of the leadership in the Soviet Union being committed atheists. He implies that a similar result awaits the West if we continue on our current path.

Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World*, Doubleday, 2004.

Alister McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University. He has a PhD in molecular biophysics, and is principal of Oxford University's Wycliffe Hall and director of the Oxford Centre for Evangelism and Apologetics. In this book, McGrath documents the history of atheism, and his own journey from atheism to Christianity. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Alister E. McGrath, and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, IVP Books, 2007.

The McGrath's acknowledge that there isn't a lot worthy of a response in Dawkins' book. However, they fear that if no response is given that many would simply think that Christians have no response to offer. My review of this book is brief and combines this book with Dawkins' *The God Delusion*. For my review, click [here](#).

Eric Reitan, *Is God a Delusion?: A Reply to Religion's Cultured Despisers*, Wiley-Blackwell, 2009.

Eric Reitan teaches philosophy at Oklahoma State University, and writes from a very liberal Christian point of view. In this book, he is very critical of the New Atheists, and I found many of his observations to be perceptive and penetrating. For my review of this book, click [here](#).

Douglas Wilson, *Letter from a Christian Citizen*, American Vision, 2007.

Doug Wilson's book is not only a response to Sam Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation*, but a response to atheists in general. To view Bill Muehlenberg's excellent review of this book, click [here](#).

V. Practical Atheism

We could stop with the above, however Christians should consider one more sub-topic, and that is practical atheism. It is possible, perhaps even likely, for Christians to feel somehow superior to atheists. They should not feel superior, if indeed they understand their own weaknesses, but no doubt some do. No matter how weak I may feel in the faith, no matter how much I still struggle with sin, and no matter how cool I may feel about spiritual things, I at least believe in God

and in Jesus Christ! How silly those atheists are for not believing what seems clear to me! However, the truth of the Gospel will not allow us this complacency. Whether we like it or not, we are called to continually examine ourselves. One who is uniquely qualified to help us do so is Stephen Charnock in his book *The Existence and Attributes of God*, vols. 1 and 2, Baker Book House, 1979. Other printings are also available. In volume 1 of the above printing, Discourse II, pages 89 through 175, is titled “On Practical Atheism.” Charnock writes as follows on pages 93 and 94:

All sin is founded in a secret atheism. Atheism is the spirit of every sin; all the floods of impieties in the world break in at the gate of a secret atheism, and though several sins may disagree with one another, yet, like Herod and Pilate against Christ, they join hand in hand against the interest of God. Though lusts and pleasures be diverse, yet they are all united in disobedience to him. All the wicked inclinations in the heart, and struggling motions, secret repinings, self-applauding confidences in our own wisdom, strength, &c., envy, ambition, revenge, are sparks from this latent fire; the language of every one of these is, I would be a Lord to myself, and would not have a God superior to me. The variety of sins against the first and second table, the neglects of God, and violences against man, are derived from this in the text; first, “The fool hath said in his heart,” and then follows a legion of devils. As all virtuous actions spring from an acknowledgment of God, so all vicious actions rise from a lurking denial of him: all licentiousness goes glib down where there is no sense of God. . . . “By the fear of God men depart from evil” (Prov. xvi. 6); by the non-regarding of God men rush into evil. Pharaoh opposed Israel because he “knew not the Lord.” . . . In sins of omission we own not God, in neglecting to perform what he enjoins; in sins of commission we set up some lust in the place of God, and pay to that the homage which is due to our Maker. In both we disown him; in the one by not doing what he commands, in the other by doing what he forbids. We deny his sovereignty when we violate his laws; we disgrace his holiness when we cast our filth before his face; we disparage his wisdom when we set up another rule as the guide of our actions than that law he hath fixed; we slight his sufficiency when we prefer a satisfaction in sin before a happiness in him alone; . . . It is such a vilifying of God as if he were not God; as if he were not the supreme Creator and Benefactor of the world; as if we had not our being from him; as if the air we breathed in, the food we lived by, were our own by right of supremacy, not by donation. . . . A man in every sin aims to set up his own will as his rule, and his own glory as the end of his actions against the will and glory of God; and could a sinner attain his end, God would be destroyed. . . . Now though the light of a Deity shines so clearly in man, and the stings of conscience are so smart, that he cannot absolutely deny the being of a God, yet most men endeavor to smother this knowledge, and make the notion of a God a sapless and useless thing (Rom. i. 28): “They like not to retain God in their knowledge.” It is said, “Cain went out from the presence of the Lord” (Gen. iv. 16); that is, from the worship of God. Our refusing or abhorring the presence of a man implies a carelessness whether he continue in the world or no; it is a using him as if he had no being, or as if we were not concerned in it. Hence all men in Adam, under the emblem of the prodigal, are said to go into a far country; not in respect of place, because of God’s omnipresence, but in respect of acknowledgment and affection: they mind and love anything but God. And the descriptions of the nations of the world, lying in the ruins of Adam’s fall, and the dregs of that revolt, is that they know not God. They forget God, as if there were no such being above them; and, indeed, he that doth the works of the devil, owns the devil to be more worthy of observance, and, consequently, of a being, than God, whose nature he forgets, and whose presence he abhors.

Christians are not atheists, by definition. We not only believe in the existence of God, but we qualify for the narrow definition of theists as given above, that there is one God who has created the heavens and the earth and all things therein, who remains in control of all things, and has revealed Himself in the Bible. However, as developed by Charnock, Christians can, and often do,

live, at least some of the time, as though there is no God. Living this way, according to Charnock, is practical atheism. Therefore, we are not theists or atheists in an either/or sense. We may profess to be theists, we may profess to be Christians, but our actions, as James would remind us, speak more clearly as to what we really are.