

BOOK REVIEW

of

David Aikman,

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

January 2009

This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

There have been a number of books written in response to what David Aikman calls the “New Atheism,” for example, David Berlinski’s *The Devil’s Delusion*, John Cornwell’s *Darwin’s Angel*, Alister and Joanna McGrath’s *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, and Eric Reitan’s *Is God a Delusion?.* Among this chorus of opposition to the new atheism is this fine book by Aikman. Read it, along with others, to your delight and edification!

Aikman is a 23 year veteran of *Time* magazine. He currently writes for *Christianity Today*, the *Wall Street Journal*, *The American Spectator*, and *The Weekly Standard*. He has written eight books, including the noteworthy *Jesus in Beijing: How Christianity Is Transforming China and Changing the Global Balance of Power*. He also teaches history and writing at Patrick Henry College.

The book under review contains six chapters, a conclusion, and an appendix. Chapter 1 is titled *The Four Horsemen*. Chapter 2 is titled *The Attack of the Four Horsemen*. Chapter 3 is titled *They Don’t Like God*. Chapter 4 is *The Science Problem*. Chapter 5 is *The Problem of Wicked Atheists: Stalin, Hitler, Mao, and Pol Pot*. Chapter 6 is *The Christian Worldview Is the Foundation of Liberty*. The Conclusion is titled *The New Atheism Offers Nothing New*. The Appendix is titled *The Four Horsemen and the Bible*.

In Chapter 1, Aikman identifies who he means by “The Four Horsemen.” They are as follows: Sam Harris, the author of *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, Daniel Dennett, author of *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, and Christopher Hitchens, author of *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. Aikman approvingly quotes Michael Novak: “*Civilization is constituted by reasoned conversation. Civilized humans converse with one another, argue with one another, offer evidence to one another. Barbarians club one another*”. Aikman clearly is of the opinion that there is way too much clubbing going on when it comes to belief in God, and not nearly enough reasoned conversation. With this he sets the tone for his book. He continues in Chapter 1 by questioning why there is a “new atheism” at this point in time. He speculates that it may be because of (1) the number of openly Christian political leaders serving in high office, including President Bush, and (2) the in-roads made in openly questioning the scientific validity of Darwinian evolution.

In Chapter 2, Aikman criticizes the attacks of the four horsemen. He complains about the “consistently surprising ignorance Dawkins displays toward the entire Christian experience”, and that “Harris overlooks the obvious point that the very concepts of good and evil came from a religious view of life, a view, moreover, that assumes that ordinary human beings have no difficulty in recognizing evil as evil or moral good as moral good when they see it. . . . This, indeed, is one of the underlying philosophical weaknesses of the entire corpus of the Four Horsemen, and indeed of the entire New Atheism approach in general.” At the end of the chapter, Aikman summarizes what he perceives to be the seven arguments that the four horsemen make. In the remainder of the book, Aikman specifically addresses those arguments. Only the first one, that concerns the existence of God, does Aikman perhaps do an inadequate job, in my opinion. The other six, religion is bad, the God of the Bible is bad, science is opposed to religion, atheism does not cause people to do bad things, America does not have Christianity as a foundation, and that civilization needs atheism, Aikman responds to point by point.

In Chapter 3, Aikman argues that the four horsemen hate God, and that is what motivates them to write the things they do. “The overwhelming impression one gets from reading Dawkins, Dennett, Harris & Hitchens is that they are asserting the nonexistence of someone they sort of know – or at least think they know *about* – but whom they dislike venomously”. “The basic cry of the New Atheists, as of the old atheists, is that they hate God. They claim not to believe that he exists, but their animosity is so personal that it is hard to escape the conclusion that they are combating a personality who in some intuitive way they know is real.”

In Chapter 4, Aikman briefly addresses the “The Science Problem.” He does not provide scientific evidence for or against the existence of God. Basically what he does do is indicate that scientific knowledge does not, in fact, exclude faith, as indicated by the faith of some scientific leaders.

In Chapter 5, Aikman documents some of the atrocities of atheistic states in the twentieth century. Aikman writes “Richard Dawkins makes the very unlearned assertion on page 249 of *The God Delusion* that no ‘atheist in the world would bulldoze Mecca – or Chartres, York Minster or Notre Dame . . . A more careful student of history than Dawkins would have known, however, that an atheist did indeed do just that. That person was Joseph Stalin.” “Some observers have concluded that one of the reasons for the murderous ferocity of communist regimes was the ‘scientism’ of their rulers, the same scientism that we just encountered in the previous chapter.” What Aikman means by “scientism” is the deification of science.

In Chapter 6, Aikman argues that the Christian worldview is the foundation of liberty. He does this to answer the charges made by atheists that America does not have Christianity as a foundation and that civilization needs atheism. Aikman writes that “the utter ignorance of American history displayed by Oxford professor Richard Dawkins is nothing short of astonishing. . . . he

makes some observations about American history that are so ludicrous they have surely embarrassed his Oxford colleagues in the field of history.” Aikman continues, “Dawkins, in insisting that the early American republic had almost no Christian component, takes no notice of any of the ample historical evidence to the contrary”.

In the Conclusion, Aikman stresses that the new atheism is nothing but the old atheism and really has nothing new to offer. He adds additional comments about the lack of moral clarity on the part of atheists. For example, Aikman quotes Dawkins as saying the following in a debate in response to a question concerning good and evil: “Even the question you’re asking has no meaning to me. Good and evil – I don’t believe that there is hanging out there, anywhere, something called good and something called evil.” In response to this comment, Aikman writes “The kindest thing that can be said about Dawkins’s statement here is that it reveals an astonishing poverty of moral imagination. Even Harris and Hitchens seem to shy away from that degree of moral agnosticism.” Yet, in the real world there is a crying need for moral clarity in many important areas of life, such medical ethics, human rights, just and unjust war, as well as in personal questions of morality. Aikman questions as follows: “if atheism itself can’t agree on criteria for defining actions or people as good or evil, can atheists explain why there seems to be a universal human need to do so?” Is it true that atheists are as uncomprehending when it comes to morality as a deer in the headlights? “The atheists seem as tone-deaf to moral reality as deaf students on a field trip to a performance of Beethoven’s *Ninth Symphony*.”

The opening paragraph of this review mentions a number of books responding to the new atheism. This book by Aikman adds to the chorus. I suspect that those who are not open to a serious dialogue on these issues will not be convinced, no matter how well-written and reasoned the counter arguments may be. Nonetheless, the effort needs to be made, and Aikman has made his worthy contribution.