

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

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

John F. Haught is a Senior Fellow in Science and Religion at the Woodstock Theological Center at Georgetown University. Haught was Chair and Professor in the Department of Theology at Georgetown from 1970 to 2005. Haught is an adherent of liberal religion, and as an evangelical Christian I doubt that he and I would agree on much when it comes to doctrine. Yet this book by Haught is an interesting response to the New Atheism, with many insightful observations. As a secondary issue, this book also helps me to better understand the liberal mind and their concept of God. For example, on page 5 Haught writes: “Theologians today understand faith as the commitment of one’s whole being to God. But the new atheists, echoing a now-obsolete theology, think of faith in a narrow intellectual and propositional sense.” I think I know what he is saying, that the Bible isn’t really true in any historical, intellectual, or propositional sense. But rather, we should be completely committed to God with our entire being, even though the Bible isn’t literally true in any sense. And then, of course, he even implies that those of us who are committed to the literal truth of the Bible cannot be, or at least are not in practice, committed to God with our whole being. Now that is saying a lot: the above two quoted sentences are pregnant with a lot of subtle meaning. Why should a commitment to the literal truth of the Bible exclude one from a “commitment of one’s whole being to God”? And if you are not committed to the literal truth of the Bible, just what does the word “God” mean to you? If you look into it, the liberal’s concept of God is not the God revealed in the Bible. Well, where do they get it then? Sorry, I can’t answer that one, but apparently liberals think their concept of God, from wherever they get it, is superior to that revealed in the Bible. Nevertheless, liberals do have some sense of the Divine. The New Atheists apparently do not, or at least say they don’t. Haught, in this book, makes some telling criticisms of the New Atheists, and therefore makes a valuable contribution.

The book under review contains a Preface, an Introduction, and eight chapters. Chapter 1 is titled *How New Is the New Atheism?* Chapter 2 is titled *How Atheistic Is the New Atheism?* Chapter 3 is titled *Does Theology Matter?* Chapter 4 is *Is God a Hypothesis?* Chapter 5 is *Why Do People Believe?* Chapter 6 is *Can We Be Good without God?* Chapter 7 is *Is God Personal?* And Chapter 8 is *Christian Theology and the New Atheism.*

What follows is not a complete review of this book by Haught. I found Chapter 2 to be the most interesting and the most helpful, and therefore this review focuses on that chapter.

Haught has taken atheism seriously for years. As a professor at Georgetown he taught an introductory course on theism/atheism, and I suppose that is why he has found the New Atheism of some interest and felt that he could offer a unique response. In Chapter 2 Haught describes that (page 15) “For many years I taught an introductory theology course entitled ‘The Problem of God’ to Georgetown University undergraduates.” He explains that (page 16) “in my own classes the new books by Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens would never have made the list of required readings.” Although, he explains, they may have served (page 16) “to see how well the relatively light fare the new atheists serve up compares with the gravity of an older and much more thoughtful generation of religious critics.” He goes on to explain how he exposed his students to more serious atheists of the past: “After coping with the science-inspired atheism of Sigmund Freud or Bertrand Russell and the humanistic idealism of Ludwig Feuerbach and Karl Marx, the new atheism would have appeared rather haggard since it provides little in the way of a new understanding of why religion can be so dangerous.” He continues on page 17: “During our one-semester course students would already have encountered in Freud’s book, *The Future of an Illusion* the claim that science alone is a reliable road to true understanding of anything. And they would have learned from other readings that this claim is a profession of faith known as *scientism*, a modern belief system that has *the additional mark of being self-contradictory*”

(emphasis mine in the last phrase). On page 18: “Most of my students would have had no difficulty realizing that scientism is also the self-subverting creed that provides the spongy cognitive foundation of the entire project we are dignifying with the label ‘new atheism.’” Continuing: “after taking ‘The Problem of God’ course, the vast majority of our undergraduates would have deemed it silly for anyone to maintain that science can decide the question of God.” Here, I think, he is referring to science in the more restricted sense as applied in the physical sciences and is not thinking in terms of simply a thorough, detailed, critical, investigation.

Beginning on page 19, Haught discusses the demands of true atheism: “Unlike the sheltered circumstances that the socially conservative new atheism seeks to save, the classical atheists, whose writings my students were required to read, generally demanded a much more radical transformation of human culture and consciousness. This *transformation* became most evident when we moved on from Freud, Feuerbach, and Marx to the much more severe godlessness in works by Friedrich Nietzsche, Albert Camus, and Jean-Paul Sartre – the really hard-core atheists.” Commenting on the wimpy kind of atheism represented by the New Atheists, Haught writes on page 21: “This approach to atheism, of course, is precisely the kind that nauseated Nietzsche and made Camus and Sartre cringe in their Left Bank cafés. Atheism at the least possible expense to the mediocrity of Western culture is not atheism at all. It is nothing more than the persistence of life-numbing religiosity in a new guise. Please note that I am not promoting Camus’s absurdist philosophy or Nietzschean and Sartrean nihilism either. But these more muscular critics of religion were at least smart enough to realize that a full acceptance of the death of God would require an asceticism completely missing in the new atheistic formulas.” He continues on page 22: “If you’re going to be an atheist, the most rugged version of godlessness demands complete consistency. Go all the way and think the business of atheism through to the bitter end; before you get too comfortable with the godless world you long for, you will be required by the logic of any consistent skepticism to pass through the disorienting wilderness of nihilism.” On page 26, Haught comments on the air of moral superiority over religious people displayed by some of the New Atheists: “If we allow the hard-core atheists into our discussion we can draw this conclusion: If absolute values exist, then God exists. But if God does not exist, then neither do absolute values”.

The number of books written that are critical of the New Atheists continues to grow. Virtually all of the critics find certain things in common: (1) the New Atheists appear to be blatantly biased, (2) they are emotional and a little incoherent at times, (3) they have not made their case, and (4) in spite of their advanced degrees display very poor scholarship. In this book under review, Haught adds his complains that they have not really made the case for atheism anywhere near as good as have atheists of prior generations, and they do not seem anywhere near as committed to atheism as well. However, in spite of all the good responses, the New Atheism books have sold millions of copies, and I suspect that the good responses have not. This is, perhaps, a commentary on our culture. Many Christians who have read Dawkins, including this reviewer, are so dumbfounded and baffled by almost everything that Dawkins has written in *The God Delusion* find it difficult to even attempt a reasoned response. Haught is to be highly praised that somehow he has risen above this reaction and has given an excellent response. I have concluded with a similar comment before but I’ll do it again here: There are many good books challenging the New Atheists, and it has given Christians an open door to present the case for Christianity to a new generation, and this book by Haught, with the reservations indicated in the opening paragraph, is one of those that I would warmly recommend.