

**THE NEW ATHEISTS:**  
**The Twilight of Reason & The War on Religion**  
Tina Beattie DTT, 209pp, pbk 978 0232527124, £8.99

Rarely might one expect to find parallels between the thought of Sts Anselm and Thomas Aquinas on the one hand, and a twenty-first-century feminist theologian on the other. But in *The New Atheists* Tina Beattie, Reader in Christian Studies at Roehampton University, undertakes her defence of religious belief in the awareness firstly that theology and the philosophy of religion are always, for Christians, the result of *fides quaerens intellectum*; and also that encountering God in religious experience is historically prior to the arguments which explain his existence. To the ‘new atheists’ against whom her work is directed – Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Polly Toynbee *et al.* – Beattie attributes a fundamental ignorance of this.

Reading this book one quickly realizes that Beattie is a serious theologian and thinker; fortunately, her career in academia has not blunted her capacity to produce entertaining invective: among the epithets which she lands upon her opponents is the wonderful claim that the ‘new atheism is a puritanical brand of godless Protestantism, full of moral bombast and preachy rhetoric, but intellectually limited and culturally parochial’. This quotation reveals one of the central contentions of Beattie’s argument: that the new atheists are railing against a God created in their own image: ‘Dawkins’ God is as much a thoroughly modern English bully as an ancient supernatural tyrant.’

Throughout the eight chapters of her book Beattie conducts a wide-ranging evaluation of the intellectual and social histories which have culminated in the present campaign against religious belief by militant scientific atheism. She does this from the critical perspective of feminist theology, but does not fall prey to the academic ill-discipline for which this school of thought has acquired an unfavourable reputation.

Beattie ably exposes the poverty of the new atheists’ knowledge of theology, showing them to be ignorant of many of the fruits of contemporary scholarship in this field. She offers a response to the challenge of rising secularism in today’s society that is obviously not from the same stall as the religious extremism and scriptural literalism from which the new atheists, along with most religious believers, rightly distance themselves.

However, the most important contribution of this title to the current debate is Beattie’s critique of scientific rationality. *Intellectum* has always been subservient to *fides*, and this holds true in the scientific sphere as much as in the theological one: the realities to which the scientist and the theologian attend are lived and experienced as much as they are analysed and systematized. Thus rationalism can never be separated from the experiential material to which it is applied: any theory, therefore, which ‘offers too reductive an understanding’ of experience – which is the truly fundamental aspect of life – ought to be rejected. So-called ‘reductive materialism’ is an empty theory of the meaning of life, because it denies what one might term ‘the encounters in irreducibility’ of which our lives consist.

After his mystical experience while saying Mass, Thomas declared, ‘I can no longer write, for God has given me such glorious knowledge that all contained in my works are as straw – barely fit to absorb the holy wonders that fall in a stable.’ Let us nevertheless hope that Dr Beattie’s contribution to the debate is not yet quite over.

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put into Times New Roman font, and reformatted a little. No text was deleted, added, or changed in any way.

According to the Tina Beattie web site at

<https://sites.google.com/site/tinabeattie/thenewatheists>

this review appeared in *New Directions*.