

BOOK REVIEW

of

Eric Reitan,

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

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This review is by Larry D. Paarmann.

There have been a number of books written in response to what some call the "New Atheism," for example, David Berlinski's *The Devil's Delusion*, John Cornwell's *Darwin's Angel*, Keith Ward's *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins*, Thomas Crean's *God is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins*, Tina Beattie's *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*, John F. Haught's *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, William Lane Craig's *Contending with Christianity's Critics: Answering New Atheists and Other Objectors*, James Sire and Carl Peraino's *Deepest Differences: A Christian-Atheist Dialogue*, Alister and Joanna McGrath's *The Dawkins Delusion?: Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, and David Aikman's *The Delusion of Disbelief: Why the New Atheism Is a Threat to Your Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness*. Among this chorus of opposition to the new atheism is this fine book by Eric Reitan. Reitan writes from a very liberal Christian point of view, which is not my own, but I appreciate his contribution and he helps me understand how a liberal thinks.

Reitan obtained his Ph.D. in philosophy from the State University of New York at Buffalo, and is currently an Associate Professor at Oklahoma State University. He specializes in ethics, social and political philosophy, philosophy of religion, and nonviolence theory. He has some 20 publications in refereed journals in the general area of philosophy, plus numerous other publications.

The book under review contains an Introduction and ten chapters. Chapter 1 is titled *On Religion and Equivocation*. Chapter 2 is titled "*The God Hypothesis*" and the *Concept of God*. Chapter 3 is titled *Divine Tyranny and the Goodness of God*. Chapter 4 is *Science, Transcendence, and Meaning*. Chapter 5 is *Philosophy and God's Existence, Part I*. Chapter 6 is *Philosophy and God's Existence, Part II*. Chapter 7 is *Religious Consciousness*. Chapter 8 is *The Substance of Things Hoped For*. Chapter 9 is *Evil and the Meaning of Life*. Chapter 10 is *The Root of All Evil?*.

From the writings of the New Atheists, you would think that the only people who oppose Darwinian evolution and materialism in general are uneducated, fundamentalist, religious kooks, who can be counted on to be irrational, and would burn at the stake any who oppose them, given half a chance. Now you would think that such nonsense would be immediately dismissed, and such would probably be the case if it weren't for the impressive credentials, elevated positions, and awards received by some who write such things, such as Richard Dawkins, Professor of the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, recipient of the Royal Society of Literature Award, the Los Angeles Times Literary Prize, the Silver Medal of the Zoological Society of London, the Royal Society Michael Faraday Award, the Nakayama Prize for Human Science, the Humanist of the Year Award, elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Literature, and received an Honorary D.Litt degree from the University of St. Andrews. Nevertheless, as may be indicated by the numerous books written, in part, in response to Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, many, as perhaps indicated above, also highly educated and articulate and not likely to want to burn him at the stake, there has been a voluminous literary response very critical of Dawkins and others. Some of these are evangelical Christians, but not all. What I particularly liked about Reitan's book is that it illustrates how there are good arguments for the existence of God, for meaning and purpose to life, and for morality apart from quoting chapter and verse from the Bible. This agrees, of course, with what the Bible itself teaches, such as in the opening chapters of the book of Romans. It also gives me some assurance that liberal Christians really do have some reason for gathering together for worship on Sunday mornings, the same as we evangelical Christians do. My position is that liberal Christians are woefully misinformed, and do not properly worship the One, True God. But I am reassured that they may not be quite as irrational as I previously assumed them to be. Contrasting liberal and conservative Christianity was not Reitan's purpose in writing, and should not be the primary part of my review of his book either, however, I do comment further below on liberal religion.

In the Introduction, Reitan complains that "In terms of philosophical acumen, Dawkins' *The God Delusion* is dwarfed by the works" of better writers against Christianity. It is a curiosity that Dawkins' book has been so enormously successful when so many reviewers find it to be inferior to others. Reitan continues, "in my judgment, [it is] rendered puerile in comparison with the writings of the most thoughtful and meticulous of the atheist philosophers". Nevertheless, Reitan does think that Dawkins makes some good points and is worthy of a response: "In fact, insofar as *The God Delusion* nicely summarizes the main objections of contemporary atheists to religious faith, it seems to me it should be required reading for all who have yet to seriously confront a forceful statement of these objections."

In Chapter 1, Reitan attempts to define just what "religion" is, and in the process he offers a criticism of Dawkins that is quite important. And that is, in spite of his credentials, awards, reputation, etc., Dawkins doesn't think very clearly when it comes to religion. "Imagine an author who sets out to prove that music glorifies violence but who spends most of the book fixated on gangsta rap and then attributes the vices of the latter to music in general. As already noted, this kind of mistake is called *equivocation*. Dawkins' rhetorical excesses and inattention to nuanced differences do not just make him susceptible to this

fallacy. When he tries to make the case that religion is pernicious, Dawkins moves will-nilly from an attack on *particular* religious doctrines and communities to conclusions about religion and belief in God *generally*. And this, of course, is entirely typical of religion's cultured despisers. . . . The fact is that Dawkins attacks 'supernatural religion' in *one* sense and applies his conclusions to 'supernatural religion' in *any* meaningful sense. If one were looking for examples of equivocation to include in a critical thinking textbook, one couldn't do much better than Dawkins' arguments against religion."

In Chapter 2, Reitan attempts to describe something of who God is. In much that has been written recently by atheists, Richard Dawkins included, and also by those responding to recent atheistic writings, a lot has been said about religion and about the existence of God. But what is meant by the word "God"? Everyone throws the word around as if there is some universal agreement about who God is. Actually, there is some agreement (see more about this below). But, when it comes to the details, there are almost as many gods as there are religions. "Everything we care about – and, more significantly, everything we *should* care about – is something that the universe of 'blind physical forces' just *doesn't* care about. A materialist view of reality turns morality and goodness into the idiosyncratic concerns of a single species that might never have existed (and if we hadn't, the universe wouldn't have cared a whit). When we are gone (as we will be), the universe will once again just be a world of meaningless facts and events. The world of things *without* life, *without* personality, *without* a capacity to care – this, according to the scientific picture endorsed by Dawkins and Stenger and others, is the ultimate reality." Reitan, to his credit, rejects materialism, and believes in God. He does so because of feelings of awe and wonder that he has, and some sense of the divine and of morality and goodness. To disbelieve in God and embrace materialism would be an awful thing for Reitan, resulting in sentiments as expressed in the immediately-above quotation. Many would say that these Reitan's sentiments are not universal, and atheists at least say that they do not share them. However, the Bible does teach that we all have some sense of the divine, and that we even know something of God's attributes. The Bible also teaches that we can sear our conscience and suppress our knowledge of God. Maybe by the time one has been sufficiently indoctrinated with materialism there is little left of our internal knowledge of God, but I suspect that we owe the fact that religion is almost universal, and that a good deal of commonality seems to exist for basic morality around the world, to our God-given sense of His reality. But, the details of God's attributes, and what He is accomplishing in the world, that is, details of who He is, requires instruction from the Bible. I, for one, am very thankful that my knowledge of the One, True, God, is not limited to feelings of awe and wonder, and a sense of goodness. Such thoughts suggest to me that one could only find solace in them if one was to also be rather ignorant of human nature and knowledge of personal sin. Nonetheless, I value Reitan's contribution. Near the end of the chapter, Reitan writes "the cultured despisers of religion don't understand their subject. And so they treat real problems for religious belief (such as the problem of evil) as trivial, while devoting enormous attention to concerns that, in Plutarch's terms, are problems for superstition."

In Chapter 3, Reitan distances himself from historical Christianity and sides with the new atheists in his abhorrence of the God of the Bible. To a conservative Christian this may seem strange, but it is in good agreement with what liberal "Christianity" is. Reitan's ideas about God are informed by the Bible, but, like liberals in general, he feels free to pick and choose which passages in the Bible he considers to be authoritative. Because of this picking and choosing, it seems fair to say that Reitan, and again liberals in general, do not consider the Bible authoritative at all. This is not meant to be an insult, but rather it is an attempt to be clear. Reitan does not like the God revealed in the Bible, but the question that surely comes to mind is, just who is this god that he believes in? How do we know anything about him? From his book, it appears that his concept of god is based solely on subjective feelings of awe and wonder, and some sense of the divine and of morality and goodness. Where does the Bible come in? It is apparently a book, like any other book, of human origin, and contains stories of human struggle trying to make sense of life and the inner sense of the divine. For example, Reitan writes as follows: "Consider the doctrine of 'plenary verbal inspiration,' which holds that every word in the Bible is directly inspired by an infallible God. It isn't just the new atheists who find this doctrine abhorrent. So do many theists – at least those who are devoted to a *good* God." Clearly, Reitan does not think that the God of the Bible is good.

In Chapter 4, Reitan argues that God is not subject to scientific investigation, and that Dawkins and other atheists are wrong in thinking that there should be evidence for the Creator. This chapter shows more differences between liberal religion and historic Christianity, and it also shows some inconsistencies in Reitan's position. Reitan bases his argument, in part, on the transcendence of God, that such an attribute says that God is beyond our sense experience. And yet, and this shows his inconsistency, Reitan's bases for believing in God is his sense of awe and wonder, etc. If God is beyond sense experience, then how can Reitan have any experience of Him at all? Historic Christianity's concept of transcendence is that God transcends the physical universe, but that He is also immanent: He is everywhere. The Bible is also clear that not only did God create the universe and everything in it, but that we are responsible for knowing that – that is, it should be obvious. So, the true religion that Reitan argues for, namely liberal religion, does not appear to have any real support. It's not based on the Bible, and it's not based on sense experience either. In his defense, I don't think he means that awe and wonder, or arguments from morality, etc., are sense experiences that can be investigated scientifically, but that they can be argued for philosophically. So, his religion is detached from all historical or scientific investigation, and he is free to believe in his god of goodness. This seems to be more of a religion of the ancient Greeks than having any relationship with the God of the Bible. Reitan writes that "The main point I want to make in this chapter is that Dawkins and Stenger are just wrong about this. When it comes to God, absence of scientific evidence is simply not a reason for disbelief because belief in God is *different in kind* from belief in Santa, orbiting chinaware, or space lobsters." His position does have the convenience of apparently not being open to scientific investigation. But it is also devoid of anything objective. Have you ever had the experience of being in a worship service, and questioning just how much did those officiating believe what they were saying? It would seem that Reitan may think such questioning to be irrelevant: "The

non-literal nature of religious language entails that religious beliefs resist empirical falsification. At least in theory, they might be consistent with just about anything we happened to observe.”

In Chapter 5, Reitan argues that when it comes to Dawkins’ debunking of Aquinas’ cosmological arguments for the existence of God, “he has no idea what he’s talking about.” Writing positively of Aquinas: “In any event, Aquinas seems to employ something like Ockham’s razor when reflecting on these arguments. What they show, he thinks, is that the existence of the world we know requires an unmoved mover, an uncaused cause, a necessary being, something that maximally embodies all positive qualities, and a purposive intelligence. And it just makes sense to suppose, for simplicity’s sake, that it is the *same thing* that performs all these functions. And this thing is what we call God.” Returning to criticism of Dawkins, Reitan writes “Dawkins commits the crude logical blunder of treating the conclusion of Aquinas’ argument as if it were an assumption. . . . this book was born because I felt the need to counteract a wave of popular attacks on religion in which careless thinking and intellectual laziness are masked behind bluster and bravado. Dawkins’ mangling of Aquinas is a perfect example of this wretched trend.”

In Chapter 6, Reitan makes his case for the existence of God based on the cosmological argument. “What the cosmological argument ultimately does is force each of us to make a choice: either we accept the principle of sufficient reason, which then forces us to accept a transcendent cause of the world; or we deny any such transcendent cause and thereby also deny that there is ultimately *any* explanation for things at the most basic level.” “For those whose intuitions say there must be a reason for it all, a reason why there is something rather than nothing, religious experience can and should be treated as more than just the result of neural misfiring. If we experience in our lives a presence that feels at once personal and ineffably vast, as if we’ve come into the presence of an ultimate loving reality sustaining the world – well, why shouldn’t we treat that as experiential evidence for a personal God?” The upshot of Reitan’s argument is that we each must choose, either we decide that there is *no reason* for all that there is, or, based on intuition and the cosmological argument we decide that there is a God, and that there are sound philosophical reasons for believing such. While I can appreciate Reitan’s efforts here, it seems to me that his arguments are weak, or perhaps more accurately, he concludes too much. The cosmological arguments can provide an abstract philosophical basis for a faith in God that you already have, but if it is your starting point, it is difficult to see how one can arrive at “an ultimate loving reality sustaining the world”. The intention of the cosmological argument, as well as other arguments for the existence of God, is not to prove that God exists, as the argument contains very little about the nature and attributes of God. The intention, as I understand it, is to provide an independent, intellectual argument for the existence of the God you believe in, being informed about Him through some other means, such as the Bible. If the cosmological argument begins and ends as an intellectual, philosophical argument, then even if you believe that the argument is sound, what do you have? If this is correct, then Reitan is left with only his intuition, and what real reason does he have to suppose that he has some sort of relationship with his “ultimate loving reality sustaining the world”? Granted, it may be of some use in debating or arguing against an atheist, which I think is Reitan’s primary focus in this book, but he seems to be doing more than that here, in fact, arguing for his liberal religion. His liberal religion, apparently, has very little content to it.

In Chapter 7, Reitan gives additional apologetic for his liberal religion, while criticizing atheists for their lack of receptivity to religious experience. Reitan complains that “when the new atheists take on religious experience, their arguments betray a deep ignorance of their subject.” Notice here that Reitan appeals to “religious experience”. He does not adhere to the philosophical arguments for the existence of God, he does not appeal to God’s self-revelation in nature as does the Bible, he does not argue for the accuracy of the Bible, he does not appeal to miracles, or fulfilled prophesy, or anything objective: he appeals to religious experience only. Perhaps he should not be too surprised when those who claim to be without religious experience “take on religious experience, their arguments betray a deep ignorance of their subject.” That is precisely the point: they claim to not have any religious experience, and they are skeptical of those who claim they have. Reitan makes his case for liberal religion based solely on his ideas of religious experience. Some, with a different background than Reitan’s, may experience dread, and awe, and a supreme consciousness of personal sin and fear of hell, when experiencing God, but not Reitan. Apparently, for Reitan, “the experience has an intense emotional content that is unambiguously positive. It is joy, love, even ecstasy. The message is unswervingly optimistic.” But how does he know that his religious experience is valid, and that fear and dread are not? “What it comes down to is this: the reason we generally trust our sense experience is because it feels like an authentic encounter with reality. But mystical experiences *also* feel like such encounters, with one important difference: for mystics in the grip of them, they feel *even more real than sense experience*.” But, again, how is one to distinguish between such experiences and the experiences of fear and dread experienced by others with equally strong mystical experience? It would seem that at some point something objective, historical, philosophical, etc., must be appealed to, which, admittedly he did do, however weakly, in Chapter 6.

In Chapter 8, Reitan attempts to tie things together and suggest some practical steps as to how one may pursue a religious life. He believes that he has made the case that belief in God is reasonable, and that positive religious experience can be trusted, but how is one to pursue this type of world view? His argument is that here is where faith comes into play. If we don’t like the implications of materialism, then we must choose to exercise faith. “Materialism leaves the most intimate dimensions of our lives a mystery (since it is hard to see how consciousness can be produced by inanimate matter, no matter how complex its organization). More significantly, perhaps, such materialism turns the part of our experience that is most significant – the conscious life of the mind – into a mere by-product of things that are essentially mindless and dead.” Reitan explains: “For most, faith appears to be a decision made when reason and evidence can take them no further, a decision to live in hope, a hope that calls them to trust in a God of love.” Reitan gives examples, but gives little help in determining what religion to place one’s faith in, other than in a personal God of love. “It isn’t my cognitive faculties that motivate my belief in God. Rather, it’s a spirit of

hope. . . . it *could* be true. . . . To trust is an act of hope, a decision to live *as if* the grounding beliefs for such trust are true, in the hope that they are true instead of out of the fear that they are not.”

In Chapter 9, Reitan deals with the perplexing problem of evil. While he, no doubt, would be the first to admit that he has not the final word on this subject, he does, once again, point out that materialism certainly has nothing to offer: “If we assume that materialists like Dawkins are right, that the whole of reality is encompassed by the world of matter and energy that science can explore, then the evils that many endure in this life are monumental. If what happens to us on this mortal coil, over the course of a few decades of material existence, comprises the *entirety of our existence*, then many lives are swamped by evil.” Reitan continues with insight concerning the position of Dawkins: “According to Dawkins, ‘The truly adult view . . . is that our life is as meaningful, as full and wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed’ . . . Dawkins is speaking from a place of extraordinary privilege. His statement is not just appallingly naive, but appalling.” In spite of these insights, Reitan offers little more than wishful thinking, such that belief in God offers some comfort.

In Chapter 10, the last chapter, Reitan challenges the notion that religion is the root of all evil, as some of the new atheists would have it. Reitan responds with perception: “My general answer to this view is that the problem doesn’t lie with religion at all. The problem lies with *humanity*, with tendencies endemic to human beings who are by disposition tribal, who want easy answers, who hunger for security and cheap validation. If ‘true’ religion is hard to maintain, it’s because it is humans who are maintaining it. To condemn religion for that reason would be no wiser than condemning science because most people who attempt to do science do it badly or denouncing the Sibelius Violin Concerto because only the rarest violinists can play it well.” Of course, we should expect that those who profess to know God will live better lives than they would have otherwise have done, but the Bible is relentless in exposing human moral weaknesses, and the truthfulness of religious claims must be found elsewhere. Unfortunately for Reitan, his liberal religion is based on works-righteousness. He denounces weak believers in God who do not live up to their profession, seemingly oblivious to the fact that he is one of them (I can say that, because none of us do). For example, Reitan writes “To care for others, to nurture them and promote their welfare [does that include weak believers that embarrass Reitan?], takes effort. It is an effort of love. We may well ask, with Teihard de Chardin, whether when we exert that effort any of us are *really* operating in the belief that it will all come to naught in the end.” In contrast, the evangelical response is that no one is worthy of God’s favor, and that this was the reason for God the Son to die on the cross in our place, and the only real righteousness that we can obtain is that imputed to us by God, resulting in faith and sanctification. In other words, whatever righteousness one may achieve comes from God by faith. The evangelical focus is significantly different than that expressed by Reitan, and therefore so is the apologetic. His claim is that true religion can be seen in those who practice righteousness, and that the new atheists claim that religion promotes evil has lumped the truly religious with those of weaker faith. Evangelicals acknowledge human frailties, but point to true religion as that that is taught in the Bible. Reitan’s apologetic is very subjective, while that of evangelicals is more objective. Reitan’s religion is not open to testing or verification, but the religion of the Bible is open to falsification from history, logic, etc. Although I differ with Reitan as far as the content of religion is concerned, I do appreciate his insights. For another example: “it seems a stretch to blame religion *as such* for the violence in Belfast and Bosnia – about as much of a stretch as it would be to blame economic theories for the Cold War. When one racial group brutally oppresses another, we blame racism, not race. When people of different nations go to war out of misplaced pride, we blame nationalism, not nationality. When rival ethnic groups practice ‘ethnic cleansing,’ we blame ethnocentrism, not ethnicity. Likewise, I would suggest that what we should blame for all the violence that has been done in the name of God is not *religion* but what might be dubbed *religionism*.” Reitan does not hesitate to label the new atheists as examples of those who adhere to religionism: “When ideologies of collective violence co-opt religion, what we have is religionism, an evil every bit as pernicious as racism. And the seeds of a unique brand of such religionism – one that divides the world between the enlightened atheists and the benighted ‘faith-heads’ (to borrow Dawkins’ disparaging phrase, the ‘kike’ or ‘chink’ or ‘faggot’ of his preferred bigotry) – are found in the angry ravings of the new atheists.”

I purchased and began reading this book primarily because I found the title interesting and I wanted to discover what Reitan’s response was to “Religion’s Cultured Despisers”. He did not disappoint me, as I found many of his observations to be perceptive and penetrating. What I also found, and didn’t expect, was a reasoned presentation for liberal religion. Prior to reading this book, I thought of liberal religion, or liberal Protestantism as I would have thought of it, was that it was mostly just the formal remains of evangelical Protestantism after belief in the Scriptures as the revealed Word of God had been removed. Reitan has helped me see liberal religion in a clearer light. He, and presumably others like him, do have a personal experience of the divine, and that experience is very valuable to him. However, he has also helped me appreciate what J. Gresham Machen wrote about in the 1920s, when he stated that liberalism is not Christianity (see his book *Christianity and Liberalism*, Eerdmans, 1923 (reprinted in 2001 and available on Amazon)). I think it must be a very difficult position for Reitan to hold to. He has some faith, but as a university professor, he must be aware of how that faith seems to be based only on some nebulous experience, with very little intellectual support. In summary, I found this book to be informative, challenging, helpful and insightful, both as a response to the new atheism, and as a reasoned presentation for liberal religion.