

GOD IS DEAD (AGAIN!): SECULAR FUNDAMENTALISTS FIGHT BACK

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. "Whither is God?" he cried; "I will tell you. We have killed him---you and I. All of us are his murderers."
—Friedrich Nietzsche, *Joyful Wisdom* §125

Nietzsche is dead.
—God

The tone of this Charge of the Atheist Brigade is often . . . intolerant and mean. It's contemptuous and even a bit fundamentalist.
—Nicholas Kristof

The ugly giant of the Religious Right, Jerry Falwell, is dead; Pat Robertson discredits himself nearly every time he speaks; and Ralph Reed, the founder of the Christian Coalition, cannot even win a primary election in Georgia.

In the 2006 election, former Senator Rick Santorum, a darling of the Religious Right, lost to Democratic Governor Bob Casey by 18 percentage points. Senator Sam Brownback, the GOP presidential candidate most compatible with conservative Christian positions, drew, in most recent ABC poll, one percent compared to liberal Rudy Giuliani's 32 percent.

The GOP coalition between Goldwater and early Reagan conservatives and the Religious Right is in shambles, and the birth of Vice-President Cheney's grandson to a normal lesbian family marks a symbolic turning point.

"Left-wing" evangelicals such as Jim Wallis are making headlines and speaking all over the country: "I say at every stop, 'Fighting poverty's a moral value, too.' There's a whole generation of young Christians who care about the environment. That's their big issue. Protecting God's creation, they would say, is a moral value, too."

Leaders the National Association of Evangelicals agree and have issued the following statement: "We affirm that God-given dominion is a sacred responsibility to steward the earth and not a license to abuse the creation of which we are a part."

What a change from former Secretary of the Interior James Watt, testifying before Congress in 1981: "God gave us these things to use. After the last tree is felled, Christ will come back."

Although I certainly respect their right to speak out and actually agree with some of their points, this is the worst possible time for atheists such as Sam Harris ("The End of Faith" and "Letter to a Christian Nation"), Richard Dawkins ("The God Delusion"), Daniel Dennet ("Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon"), and Christopher Hitchens ("God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything") to stoke the fires of the culture wars.

It is a sad fact that theological illiteracy is found among the nation's non-believers as well as its believers. There is a whole range of religious options between the two extremes of religious fundamentalism and atheism of which most people are unaware. The Atheist Brigade seems to forget that we are emotional beings as well as rational beings, and need I remind them that there are many things in this world that reason cannot comprehend?

I have a degree in philosophical theology, and I taught philosophy of religion for 30 years. What always struck me at my professional meetings was the fact that some reformulations of the traditional arguments for God's existence are still holding their own.

One can perhaps excuse the amateurs in the Atheist Brigade, but philosophy professor Dennet should be ashamed of himself when he claims that it is not necessary to address the arguments of his professional colleagues.

Because of his lack of respect for others' expertise, Dawkins has been rightly ridiculed for his "Ultimate 747" argument, previous forms of which most of my students saw through easily. Biologist Dawkins has always rejected such argumentative sloppiness by critics of evolution.

Moderate evangelicals, such as Richard Mouw, president of Fuller [Evangelical] Seminary, admits that "we have done a terrible job of presenting our perspective" and that "whatever may be wrong with Christopher Hitchens' attack on religious leaders, we have certainly already matched it in our attacks."

But extreme Calvinists such as Douglas Wilson make no concessions (as is his wont), and is thrilled to have one more chance to fly the banners of a Christian Crusade. His book "Letter from a Christian Citizen" is a response to Sam Harris' second book and is a now a Conservative Book Club selection.

Wilson and Hitchens had a debate in the May, 2007 issue of "Christianity Today." After despairful dealings with Wilson's over many years, I totally agree with Hitchens' description of his writing as "mildly amusing casuistry," but I not always happy with Hitchens' rhetorical excesses.

John Green of the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life states: "These writers share a few things with the zealous religionists they oppose, such as a high degree of dogmatism and an aggressive rhetorical style. Indeed, one could speak of a secular fundamentalism that resembles religious fundamentalism."

At the turn of the 20th Century many conservative Christians urged the return to the "fundamentals" of biblical inerrancy and the divinity of Christ. Our atheists want everyone to use science and empirical tests for guidance in their lives. I certainly prefer the latter to the former, but it is still far from being the whole truth and nothing but the truth.