

The New Atheists (Fr. John Garvey)

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Head Nebula

The recent reports of Mother Teresa's long dark night made more news than they should have, I thought. Then I had second thoughts: this might lead to a serious discussion of faith and certainty, which are not at all the same thing. There were a few thoughtful letters to the editor, and Christopher Hitchens's tin-eared *Newsweek* review, and not much more. But certain themes kept cropping up, and they matter in the debate between serious believers and serious nonbelievers. I stress the word "serious" here because the more public debates about belief (the ones involving the religious beliefs of politicians, creationism vs. evolution, etc.) are not serious at all. But the debate about faith and certainty does matter, and the stakes are high because there are important moral visions at both ends of the argument.

According to the new atheists, what cannot be demonstrated scientifically should be believed only in the most tentative way. They go further than this: faith means absolute certainty, they say, and is false because, unlike the scientific method, it

doesn't offer the possibility of proof or falsifiability. Mother Teresa's experience of God's absence, her doubts, are seen as signs of a lack of faith.

This idea of faith as certainty without provability has nothing to do with the experience of most of the believers I know. Certainty isn't the point. It may be for some fundamentalists, but they aren't the people you find in most churches or synagogues. For most of the faithful, what is interesting about the new atheism is what it does not find valuable.

When you reduce everything to a materialistic level—when you say that what can really be believed is only that which can be weighed, tested, replicated, or falsified—you marginalize everything that is of most value to most people. You say, in effect, that love, honor, nobility, beauty, generosity, or anything wonderful or virtuous, are epiphenomena; those things we value most are possibly illusory readings of essentially material events. They are all subjective reactions, and have no grounding in material reality, which has, finally, no meaning, no essential goodness. Goodness itself is something with no objective reality.



MotherTeresa

Mother Teresa lived in a larger universe, as did Thérèse of Lisieux, who had a similar experience of God's absence toward the end of her life; also the doubting father who wanted Jesus to cure his son: "I believe; help my unbelief." What they place their faith in is not certainty, but rather the belief that the universe is grounded in meaning, and this meaning is to be found not in proofs but in the most profound movements of the heart.

The problem believers have with the new atheists comes down to this: What atheists see as epiphenomenal is all that matters to most of us. The love that we feel, the joy, the delight in natural beauty, the ways we are moved by acts of compassion, heroism, and generosity—all of these are, we believe, essential to the way the universe is. The glory we find in looking at the Horsehead Nebula is not our subjective reaction to a meaningless phenomenon; the glory is part of a dialogue

between us and God. We are meant to find it beautiful, and this is part of our own meaning.

But there is a moral element in the new atheism that believers can miss. It is a protest against the cruelty of a universe in which believers can insist that a good God is in charge, when children can be terribly abused, or can be swept away in tsunamis. This is not an unreasonable response to the smugness of some comfortable forms of religious belief—the sort that can say, when war has claimed the life of your next-door neighbor’s son and yours has returned home safely, “God was with us.” Well, yes—and not with your neighbor? There is something wrong with forms of belief that are so sentimental and complacent, and anyone, believer or nonbeliever, is right to find them shallow.

Pope Benedict’s new encyclical, [*Spe salvi*](#), rightly emphasizes the connection between hope and faith, and also acknowledges the moral element in nonbelief. I think he is right in his analysis of the ultimate end of nonbelief: it is finally a form of nihilism and hopelessness. Although the encyclical does have a number of moments when the pope’s academic background is all too apparent, it is very much worth reading. I hope Orthodox and Protestants understand that this is not some internal Catholic message, but a word that challenges all believers, and all nonbelievers. Without a universe grounded in meaning, and meaning understood as finally compassionate, nothing can be celebrated, and nothing can be condemned, in any honest or serious way. What atheists of the new variety see as epiphenomenal is the ground of what most human beings have celebrated from the beginning of human history, even before they knew the joy of the gospel.

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