

Under this heading I intend to write a series of articles on apologetics – “the reasoned defence of the faith.” It is a subject that demands our attention, for the attacks on the Christian religion are multiplying. Leading these attacks is a group of militant atheists whose names are becoming increasingly familiar. I am referring to men like Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and others, who use every possible medium to spread their ideas – books, magazines, lecture halls, television and Internet – and whose influence has been exploding in recent years. We meet them at every turn. So do our students.

Fortunately, the spate of books by atheists is more and more being matched by the volume of Christian apologetic writings, and it is my intention to introduce a number of these. I will begin the work by describing a project, undertaken by an international committee of Reformed educators, to develop courses in apologetics for our schools. The first-fruit of this project is a bibliography with short descriptions of relevant writings. That work I will introduce at the tail end of the present article. In subsequent installments I hope to review a number of books that do not (yet) appear on the list, or that deserve a more extensive introduction than is possible in an annotated bibliography.

Before turning to the main topic, however, I must give some background information on the current atheistic attacks.

The new atheism

Hostility against the biblical faith is as old as Christianity. There was a lapse during much of the Christian Middle Ages, but large-scale assaults resumed in the modern period, beginning with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. They continue apace. There is a difference, however, between the battle as it was fought in the Enlightenment and in subsequent centuries. In the eighteenth century most of the attackers were deists. True, there were atheists as well. There always have been, also during the Middle Ages. Even the O.T. knows of people who said in their hearts, “There is no God” (Ps. 14). But by denying the supernatural, atheists were unable to answer the question about the origin of the universe and all it contains. Their influence was therefore limited. That drawback was removed, in the opinion of many, during the nineteenth century as a result of the triumph of evolutionism. Charles Darwin made it possible, according to contemporary scientist Richard Dawkins, to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist. And indeed, after Darwin the enemies of Christianity would increasingly be atheists. They would also increasingly look for scientific arguments to prove the non-existence of God.

One would think that in our postmodern age the struggle would have abated. After all, religiosity and belief in the supernatural are fashionable again. At the same time the question about ultimate truth has lost its urgency. Postmodern orthodoxy proclaims that there are no universal truths; that we are free to make up our personal ones. So why the intolerance? Why should atheists want to proceed in their hostility to Christianity? But in fact the struggle does continue, and the militancy of the attackers is as great as it has ever been. More disconcertingly, their message is popular. The anti-religious writings of Richard Dawkins, evolutionary scientist at Oxford University and generally seen as leader of the new atheism, are best-sellers, and so are the publications of his fellow-militants. The attacks of these men are as blunt as any in history. This is already evident in the titles of their books. Some examples: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (2006); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2007); Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007); Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004).

Why the fury?

There are, as I see it, at least three reasons why militant atheism has found it necessary to intensify the war in recent years. They are: (1) important developments in Christian philosophy, (2) recent scientific discoveries that challenge the old skepticism, and (3) the rise and spread of militant Islam.

Firstly, the renaissance of Christian philosophy. Christian philosophers in North America and England have since the late 1960s launched an increasingly successful defence of Christianity by demonstrating the rationality of belief in God. Perhaps best-known among them are Alvin Plantinga, Nicholas Wolterstorff, William Alston, William Lane Craig, and Richard Swinburne. In the July issue of *Christianity Today*, one of them, William Lane Craig, writes that as a result of this renaissance, “The face of Anglo-American philosophy has been transformed. . . . Atheism, though perhaps still the dominant viewpoint at the American university, is a philosophy in retreat.” This may sound a bit optimistic, but as Craig shows, non-believers also speak of the apparent “desecularization of academia that evolved in philosophy departments since the 1960s.” Concerned about this development, atheists have closed ranks against their Christian opponents.

Secondly, some twentieth-century scientific discoveries. The following have been of special significance:

a. The end of determinism. During much of the late-modern period atheists have, as I already mentioned, increasingly looked for scientific arguments as weapons in their war against Christianity. Until the early twentieth century they were fairly successful. The prevailing scientific model (mechanism) implied a belief in determinism (the idea that all events in nature, as well as all human thoughts and actions, are caused by an unbroken and unbreakable chain of prior events). This determinism implied, firstly, that divine intervention, including miracles, was impossible; and secondly, that human beings (who were no more than machines) could not claim freedom of the will. In fact, being machines, they had no will. Whatever they did, thought, or decided was determined by prior causes that were absolutely outside their control. In the early 1900s, however, physicists discovered that at least at the sub-atomic level events take place that have no discernable causes. Thinkers reasoned that non-determinism in the natural world may imply non-determinism in human thought and behavior. They also realized that the new physics had seriously undermined the arguments against the existence of the supernatural.

(b) The Big Bang. Twentieth-century astronomical discoveries added to the naturalists’ problems. To avoid the need for a supernatural creator, it had long been scientific orthodoxy to assume that the universe had always existed. In the course of the century, however, a number of astronomers developed the so-called Big Bang theory of cosmic origins and demonstrated that the universe is expanding. This meant that the cosmos was not eternal after all. There had been a beginning, and it seemed logical to conclude that there had been a creator as well. (True, some scientists have come with non-theistic alternatives to the standard Big Bang interpretation, but these tend to be speculative.) Largely because of the theistic implication, a majority of physicists and astronomers began by stridently opposing the new theory. Finally, however, they had to admit that the evidence for a beginning was overwhelming, and the Big Bang model is now generally accepted among scientists. (I realize that some of our readers will be surprised to hear that many an atheist objected to the Big Bang theory because it seemed to favour Christianity, and that many a Christian welcomed it for the same reason, but such was nevertheless the case.)

(c) *The fine-tuning of the universe*. I have written about this before¹ and will not repeat myself here. I only want to remind the reader that the discovery of the fine-tuning, and the “anthropic principle” built on this discovery and on related ones, constitute, even according to self-proclaimed agnostics and atheists scientists, the most striking evidence for a supernatural origin of the cosmos.

In short, the tables are being turned: One scientific discovery after another appears to support a non-materialistic view of the universe, its origins and its history. This is shocking to militant atheists, who have always been convinced of both the infallibility of science and its tendency to support atheism. They have their work cut out for them.

Thirdly, atheists have intensified their assault because of the resurgence of militant Islam and, especially, the horror of 9/11 and of subsequent terrorist attacks in other western countries. This religion-based terrorism has provided a welcome argument against religion. Many of the militantly atheist writings, in fact, appeared shortly after the year 2001. And if fear of religion-fueled terrorism plays a role in inspiring today’s militant atheism, it probably also helps explain why the anti-Christian writings become best-sellers, for the authors tend to paint all religions with the same brush. Christianity, according to them, is no better than Islam or other major religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Shintoism, and so on. And it is true, Christians also have been guilty of bloodshed and violence. Think of the crusades, the Inquisition, the religious wars, the African slave trade, western colonialism. The conclusion, for Hitchens and others, is that it is in the very nature of religion to poison and kill; that religious faith is a malignant virus and must be rooted out.

The new apologetics

Atheists are correct in accusing historic Christianity of its failings. True, arguments to relativize some of the accusations can be found. Apologists have pointed out, for example, that Christianity still provides a better basis for a peaceful society than atheism. Religion-based violence among Christians may have killed thousands but is primarily a matter of the past, whereas the victims of atheistic systems like Communism run into countless millions and these killings continue today. Also, episodes like the crusades may be regrettable, but they were at least in part responses to Muslim aggression and therefore not just offensive but also defensive in intent. History further makes clear that Christianity has been instrumental in guaranteeing personal freedoms, whereas no atheistic system has ever done so. The atheists’ trust in such a system is therefore naïve at best.

But the fact remains that Christianity is widely being judged today by its failures, rather than by its accomplishments. Christian apologists have an important task in rectifying, or at least qualifying, the current picture. More importantly, they have a task to re-acquaint society with the central message of Christianity, which is by now all but unknown. Apologetics today involves proclaiming and explaining the gospel. At the same time it involves reminding *Christians* of the need for humility and a spirit of service. The time is gone when we could impose our moral views upon society. We must learn again – like the early Christians – to illustrate the truth of Christianity not simply by our talk, but also, and especially, by our walk.

Yet *intellectual* arguments remain necessary. And the good news is that interest in the reasoned defence of the faith is growing in tandem with the interest in atheistic arguments. The July issue of *Christianity Today*, to which I already referred, quotes in an editorial the following remark by apologist Lee Strobel: “It wasn’t too many years ago that scholars were writing off apologetics because we live in a postmodern world where young people are not supposed to be interested in

¹ See, for example, the articles I published in *Clarion*, Nov. 23 and December 07 and May 9 and May 23, 08.

things like the historical Jesus. The biggest shock is that among people who communicated to me that they had found faith in Christ through apologetics, the single biggest group was 16- to 24-year-olds.” The editorial also mentions overflow crowds of students at apologetics conferences in the United States, Canada, and Europe – often led by North-American and English apologists. Apparently today’s young people want to hear both sides of the issue; and apparently they are searching for universal truth after all. One wonders if postmodernism is in decline in academia. Some believe that it is. But perhaps it is precisely the postmodern openness to the supernatural that explains the wide current interest in arguments for both the existence and the non-existence of God.

Teaching apologetics

In any event, we live in exciting times. The intellectual and scientific attacks on Christianity may be more severe than they have been, but the scientific evidence in support of Christianity is also greater than it was in former ages. As one author writes (Hugh Ross, in *The Creator and the Cosmos*), in biblical times God often gave evidence of His existence in proportion to the level of resistance to the gospel, and He appears to do so again today. The need to make our students and our entire community aware of the truly striking abundance of evidence against an atheistic materialism was behind the decision, mentioned at the beginning of this article, to develop a course in apologetics for our Reformed schools and to prepare for that work by issuing an annotated bibliography. The course in apologetics which the committee envisages should serve first of all, as we can read in the introduction to the bibliography, “as a means of helping students deal with the ongoing attacks upon the faith in our post-Christian society. It should not only, however, serve as a defensive strategy but also as an offensive one, enabling students to answer questions about and objections to the faith by outsiders (1 Peter 3:15).”

The bibliography, which is very much a work in progress, contains at present some 35 titles of books dealing with apologetics proper and with related issues such as worldview analysis and theory of knowledge. Each of the four sections is preceded by an introduction providing background information on the issues in question. Although the work is incomplete, I believe that even in its provisional phase it can help acquaint educators (and others) with developments in the field of apologetics. I hope that it will also encourage some of them to contribute to the work. The bibliography is (or should soon be) available on the website of the Teachers College:

www.covenantteacherscollege.com

So much for the curriculum project. In the next installment I hope to review one of the recent works on apologetics, namely *The Reason for God: Belief in an Age of Skepticism* (2008), by Timothy Keller, the well-known founder and pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in Manhattan, New York.