

A Christian Approach to Atheists

The “unholy trinity of neo-atheists” have recent best-selling books attacking religion (first three books below):

- Richard Dawkins (1941– , evolutionary biologist) *The God Delusion*, 2006.
- Daniel Dennett, (1942– , philosopher) *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 2006.
- Sam Harris, (1967– , philosophy, religion, neuroscience) *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, 2004.
- Steven Weinberg (1933– , physicist) *Facing Up: Science and Its Cultural Adversaries*, 2001.
Quote: “Religion is an insult to human dignity. With or without it, you’d have good people doing good things and evil people doing bad things, but for good people to do bad things, it takes religion.”
Responding quote: “This is true as far as it goes, but we must add: ‘And for bad people to do good things, that takes religion.’ ” – Albert T. Wong
- Not to mention the truly insane stuff: Brown’s “Da Vinci Code”, and Cameron’s “We’ve got Jesus’s DNA!”

Dennett and Harris are professional atheists; Dawkins has significant achievements as a biologist, but this is not his best work; Weinberg has the Nobel prize in physics. I’m not suggesting that you read these books,

We’ve always had critiques of Christianity, but if we’re going to read one, we should pick something good:

- Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–1881, existentialist, worried about existence of God) *The Brothers Karamazov* — a spiritual drama of the moral struggles between faith, doubt, reason, and free will. A famous part is: “The Grand Inquisitor” section. Quote: (The Grand Inquisitor of Seville at the time of the Inquisition to Christ, who came back to visit His people) Hast Thou again forgotten that to man rest and even death are preferable to a free choice between the knowledge of Good and Evil? Nothing seems more seductive in his eyes than freedom of conscience, and nothing proves more painful.
- G. B. Shaw (1856–1950, believed in the “life force”) *Man and Superman* A famous part is: “The Don Juan in Hell” section. Quote: THE OLD WOMAN. Where are we?
DON JUAN. In hell.
THE OLD WOMAN [proudly] Hell! I in hell! How dare you?
DON JUAN. Señora, I assure you; hell at its best....
THE OLD WOMAN [indignantly] Oh! and I might have been so much wickeder! All my good deeds wasted! It is unjust.

Originally I wanted to talk about Dawkins and other atheists. For simplicity, I’m only going to talk about one:

- B. F. Skinner (1904–1990, atheist, materialist, behaviorist psychologist)
Walden Two, 1948. A novel describing a utopian society based on controlled human behavior. Has been extremely popular, particularly after the 1960’s. It was the foundation for over 30 actual communities, two of which still exist. Review on the back cover: “Alluring in a sinister way, and appalling, too.”
Beyond Freedom and Dignity, 1971. Skinner’s most important treatise on behaviorism.

My thesis is: We can learn from these atheists, not just about the world and about ourselves, but about *scripture*, the Bible. On the subject of Jesus, and his admonition to “love your enemies,” Skinner’s main character in *Walden Two* expresses his admiration for Jesus, and says:

To “do good to those who despitefully use you” has two unrelated consequences. You gain piece of mind Let the stronger man push you around — at least you avoid the torture of your own rage. *That’s* the immediate consequence. What an astonishing discovery it must have been to find that in the long run you could *control the stronger man* in the same way!

Jesus's sayings: "love your enemies" and "turn the other cheek," seem completely impractical, unworkable, almost like bad jokes. So what does Skinner mean about "control"? Well, the first saying is a typical paradoxical statement by Jesus, because he who loves his enemies has no enemies. On a practical level, by refusing to be an enemy, Skinner's "stronger man" has no one to fight, no target. Over time this man is changed. I have seen this approach work in daily life. The second saying is actually an aggressive response, and can also lead to control of the stronger man.

In *Beyond Freedom and Dignity* Skinner talks at length about "freedom," a tricky word (Leibnitz: "the power to do what one wants to do"). For Skinner, this full freedom is undesirable. Society restricts freedom with negative reinforcement. Positive reinforcement is far more desirable, but sometimes it is misused to achieve "delayed aversive results." His ideal is "control which does not have aversive consequences at any time."

Dostoevsky's Grand Inquisitor states that Jesus rejected Satan's temptations in favor of freedom. The Inquisitor thinks that Jesus has misjudged human nature, that humanity cannot handle this freedom. Jesus, in giving humans freedom to choose, has excluded most from redemption and doomed humanity to suffer. The Inquisitor says that under him, all mankind will live and die happily in ignorance. The Inquisitor will be a self-martyr, spending his life to keep choice from humanity. [Summary from Wikipedia.]

Homework: What kind of "freedom" does Christ bring us? (Jesus sets very high standards for us, and in facing those standards, we make ourselves over into better people than we are.)

As for the current crop of atheists, instead of seeing their works as attacks, they should be seen as a "challenge" and "a wake-up call to religious liberals," as stated by the head of the Union Theological Seminary. Instead of attacking in return, we should welcome a dialog. This is not only the right thing to do, but it is more *effective*.

Abercrombie & Fitch made tee shirts about West Virginia. Even though the firm *A & F* is despicable, West Virginia should not have fought back in the same vein, but should have "turned the other cheek."

- "It's All Relative in West Virginia" (2002)
- "West Virginia: No Lifeguard at the Gene Pool" (2004)

The *Cursillo* movement ("short course" in Spanish) is a popular method of renewal. I found out about them from Lloyd Johnson, who is new to S. Luke's. They sometimes write their own parables. Here's one of mine:

Parable: The Invisible Fence

A man had three dogs. They helped him with the work of herding and guarding on his farm. He wanted to keep the dogs from running off. Instead of fencing in the farm, he enclosed it with an electric line and put three special collars on the dogs. If they came too close to the line, they got a shock. Soon they became accustomed to this "invisible fence," and always stayed within its boundaries.

Later the man's son took over the farm. The son felt sorry for the dogs and wanted to give them their freedom, even though he still needed their help with the farm. So the son disconnected the electric fence and turned off the collars of the dogs.

The first dog, the youngest, immediately went into the wilderness, became lost, and perished. The second dog cautiously investigated the lands beyond the farm and loved to roam about, yet he always came back to do his work. But the third dog, the oldest, never crossed the old fence, and he spent the rest of his life inside the farm without visiting the world outside.