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### Chesterton, the New Atheism, and an Apologetics of Common Sense

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# Chesterton, the New Atheism, and an Apologetics of Common Sense



Marianne Kuipers-Sedee

# **Chesterton, the New Atheism, and an Apologetics of Common Sense**

**Marianne Kuipers-Sedee**



# **Chesterton, the New Atheism, and an Apologetics of Common Sense**

Proefschrift ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan Tilburg University

op gezag van de rector magnificus, prof. dr. W.B.H.J. van de Donk,

in het openbaar te verdedigen ten overstaan van een

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geboren te Pijnacker

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It was the soul of Christendom that came forth from the incredible Christ;  
and the soul of it was common sense.

G.K. Chesterton, *The Everlasting Man*





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# Preface

After studying theology (BA) at Tilburg University from 2009 to 2012, I had the opportunity to study theology (MA) at the Université de Fribourg, Switzerland, from 2012 to 2014. In the first year, this was as an exchange student from TiU, where I had started my Research Master. After a few months, I decided to finish the second year of my Master at the UniFr. This was partly because of the possibility to specialize in systematic theology. In Fribourg, I became familiar with the connection between theology, philosophy, and literature in a course called “Einführung in die Theologiegeschichte: C.S. Lewis. Auf Wegen zwischen Literatur, Philosophie und Christentum.” The content of this course gave me so much joy that I decided to write my Master’s thesis in the same direction. My supervisor, Dr. Martin Brüske (UniFr), suggested I explore the writings of G.K. Chesterton, an English apologist of whom I had never heard before. I am grateful for this suggestion and for Dr. Brüske’s supervision of this thesis because it led to the idea to study the works of Chesterton more thoroughly in a PhD project.

In January 2015, I started as a PhD candidate at TiU. This felt like coming home again, only this time as an employee, and not as a student anymore. I prepared my research proposal with the help of Prof. Dr. Archibald van Wieringen (TiU). I want to thank him for his suggestions and his support in preparing my application. One of his suggestions was to ask Prof. Dr. Marcel Sarot (TiU) to become my supervisor. Although Prof. Sarot did not know me personally, I am happy that he accepted my request. From that moment on, we have kept in close touch. The six years that followed were not without struggle, but looking back I believe we were a good team and we both learned a lot. I want to extend my heartfelt thanks to him for his patience, his understanding, and his wisdom. It has been a pleasure to have him as my supervisor. Prof. Dr. Mark Knight (University of Lancaster) was also willing to become my supervisor, solely based on some email communications. I am grateful for his confidence, his views, and his constructive criticism. His broad knowledge and expertise on Chesterton have been of vital importance.

The first part of this study was dominated by obtaining my STL, the degree of *Sacrae Theologiae Licentiata*. The examiners of the project thus far were my own supervisor Prof. Sarot and Dr. Harm Goris (TiU). Throughout my study, I have also enjoyed the support of other colleagues and fellow PhD candidates at Tilburg School of Catholic Theology. In addition, I have learned much from the helpful feedback of my fellow students and instructors of the NOSTER seminar on Dogmatics, Ethics, and Philosophy of Religion. Their contributions have been of great benefit. One of the major things the feedback from all these fellow researchers taught me was that I had to pick my battles. Research can always be more profound and text can always be improved, but, at the same time, it is impossible to satisfy everybody. I am afraid I learned this the hard way by first trying to address every suggestion, and then discovering that my own study had slipped through my fingers. While working on this project, I have been confronted with my perfectionism, and have learned to cope with this.

During the years of writing this study, I was blessed with the support of multiple people. Being a relatively young female researcher at a relatively more mature and male-dominated school comes with certain challenges. These challenges made me grow in multiple ways, and three women in particular have helped me in this respect. Firstly, Prof. Dr. Monique van Dijk-Groeneboer (TiU) offered to become my confidential advisor. I am very grateful for her confidence, her help, and her feminine guidance. Furthermore, Dr. Penny Barter (TiU), who for a major part of this study shared her office with me, made our collective working days a joy and helped me to understand better the differences in culture and language. Finally, I found a sympathetic ear in Minne Oujamaâ-Wouters MA (TiU), a colleague who also became a dear friend once we both entered motherhood. These three amazing women never seemed to get tired of my wish to talk, and our informal conversations have been extremely valuable to me. I had underestimated the impact becoming a mother would have on my work. In my experience, writing a PhD thesis is not a job that takes place five days a week between 9am and 5pm, and little children naturally have their own demands. Therefore, it was a trial to find a satisfying work-life balance. Along the way, I have learned how to prioritize and how to compromise. Furthermore, I have learned a lot about myself and my passions. I had never thought that my PhD project would contribute so much to this personal development.

This PhD project was many things but it was not easy. However, I am so happy and proud that I persevered. This project has made me even more of a fighter than I already am by nature. I am very honored that a revised version of this thesis will be published by Peeters Publishers as no. 70 in its series 'Studies in Philosophical Theology.' I thank the editors for accepting this manuscript for publication in this series.



I want to conclude this preface by mentioning the support of two dear people very close to me. My late father, Wim Sedee, told me in one of our last conversations how proud he was that I was writing a PhD thesis. His words have helped me through the most difficult stages of this adventure. I deeply regret that he did not live to see this work completed. Lastly, my husband Thomas has always believed in me, and he has always been there for me. His support made me determined to push through this job. Without his love and unrelenting confidence, I am not sure whether I would have been able to reach this result. My sincere thanks go to them.

April 2021, Marianne Kuipers-Sedee



# Introduction

## 1. G.K. Chesterton, the New Atheism, and Common Sense

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was an English writer who wrote most of his works at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In many of his works, he defended the Christian and Roman Catholic faith. Today, he is still respected as a renowned apologist. Although he is not as well-known as apologists like John Henry Newman or C.S. Lewis, he is an eloquent and intelligent defender of the faith, and a person with whom it is worthwhile to get acquainted for multiple reasons. Chesterton's works have received relatively little attention from theologians, although I believe that his apologetics is highly valuable when it comes to accessible ways of defending faith. Chesterton was able to connect imagination and reason. In his apologetic works, he defended the Christian faith in an appealing way. His language is full of provocative images and his illustrative stories help people to see things from a different perspective. He approached topics from unique points of view and illustrated them vividly by providing fascinating examples and striking comparisons. He was a storyteller, and he showed that stories are sometimes better able to make an argument than reason alone. Sometimes, one needs imagination to understand complexity, and stories can increase the imagination and show the truth of an argument through their message. Chesterton was able to captivate his readers by the combination of imagination and reason. Although Chesterton described himself as a journalist or literary author rather than a theologian or philosopher, he wrote extensively about theological and philosophical subjects. His professional background enabled him to introduce difficult subjects in an accessible way. He defended the "common man"<sup>1</sup> against the elite, and common sense

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<sup>1</sup> IAN KER, *G.K. Chesterton: A Biography* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 84, 89.

against farfetched philosophies. His informal language is easy to understand, and his tone of voice is friendly towards his opponents. He helped his readers understand how certain complex subjects are connected. In his writings, Chesterton was able to range across topics such as determinism, materialism, and evolutionism, and explain how these subjects were related to each other. Moreover, he could also explain at which points these subjects could lead people to misleading trains of thought. Chesterton was always respectful towards his opponents. At all times, he attacked the opponents' *positions*, not the opponents themselves. In many cases, Chesterton was friends with his opponents. As Chesterton scholar William Oddie puts it, 'he was a controversialist because he hated heresy; but he had an extraordinary capacity for loving the heretic.'<sup>1</sup> Chesterton observed the Gospel of John (8, 1-11) by hating the sin, but loving the sinner. These characteristics caused me to want to study Chesterton's works more in depth and write a PhD thesis about his apologetics. I wanted to find out whether his apologetics is still valuable today.

To determine the ongoing value of Chesterton's apologetics, I wanted to identify a set of opponents that are vocal and strong in their criticism of the Christian faith. I found this set of opponents in a popular contemporary movement that has a highly critical view of religion, known as "the new atheism." This movement has become well-known because of the works of the prominent writers Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. These writers, as the main proponents of the new atheism movement, are often referred to, collectively, as "the new atheists." In the Western world, Christianity has lost its dominant position and secularism is growing. This means that a major decline is taking place in multiple religious indices, such as belief, ceremonies, or membership.<sup>2</sup> As a consequence, the Western worldview is changing and becoming less religious. The new atheism contributes to this change by not only advocating a more scientific understanding of the world, but also verbally attacking religion (and Christianity and Islam in particular) and seeking to describe religious belief in an unfavorable way. Though the new atheism movement has few real followers, its style of debunking religion reaches a large audience and influences public opinion, stirring up anti-religious prejudices in society. Its positions are rhetorically well defended, and they influence many people. Therefore, the new atheism should not be dismissed too quickly. Theologians such as Alister McGrath, John Haight, and Keith Ward have already noticed this influence and

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<sup>2</sup> WILLIAM ODDIE, "Introduction," in *The Holiness of G.K. Chesterton*, ed. William Oddie (Leominster: Gracewing, 2010), 9.

<sup>3</sup> STEVE BRUCE, "Secularization," in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 125.

have defended the Christian worldview against the worldview of the new atheism.<sup>4</sup> Philosophers such as Alvin Plantinga and literary scholars such as Terry Eagleton have also contributed to the debate.<sup>5</sup> Unfortunately, these apologists and the new atheists often talk at cross purposes. They tend to neglect the foundations of each other's worldview, use arguments that are unlikely to engage the other side, and speak in idioms that are incomprehensible without prior knowledge in the respective fields. This combination leads to unfruitful conversations. I believe the debate would be more rewarding if the conversation partners would focus more on the foundations of each other's worldview, provide arguments that find some common ground with their conversation partner, and choose words that the other side can understand. Therefore, I think the discussion should be approached in a different way. More attention should be given to the foundations of the opposing worldviews, to the type of arguments that one puts forward, and to the vocabulary that is used.

I found inspiration for this different approach in the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a "new apologetics." The Church acknowledges that the Christian worldview is under attack, and is calling for a "new evangelization," of which a new apologetics should be part.<sup>6</sup> This study is intended as an answer to this call and aims to make a contribution to the new evangelization. I expect that Chesterton is an apologist who can help carry on an insightful discussion with the new atheists because Chesterton's opponents had much in common with the new atheists. The hypothesis that I will test is that the content of Chesterton's apologetics has the potential to inspire a fruitful approach of apologetics towards the new atheism because many of Chesterton's arguments are still valid today. Chesterton's arguments in favor of Christianity have enduring value, and many of his cases against other philosophies of his time are still strong. Positions of the new atheism have much in common with positions of Chesterton's opponents, though often they are defended in novel ways. I will confront not only the new atheists' individual arguments, but also their underlying philosophy.

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<sup>4</sup> Cf. ALISTER E. MCGRATH, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life* (Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2005); JOHN F. HAUGHT, *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox Press, 2008); KEITH WARD, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins* (Oxford: Lion Hudson, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Cf. ALVIN PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); TERRY EAGLETON, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009).

<sup>6</sup> WILLIAM JOSEPH LEVADA, "The Urgency of a New Apologetics for the Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," April 29<sup>th</sup> 2010, [http://www.vatican.va/roman\\_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc\\_con\\_cfaith\\_doc\\_20100429\\_levada-new-apologetics\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20100429_levada-new-apologetics_en.html), accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

Studying Chesterton's apologetic works led me to his understanding of common sense. Common sense in the Chestertonian sense is a way of thinking that calls to see things as they are, rather than seeing deductions and eventualities. Common sense is about common things, about simple and basic truths.<sup>7</sup> Chesterton defended the worldview of Christianity in many of his writings by making an appeal to common sense. I have explored this concept and discovered that Chesterton's understanding of common sense could function as a helpful standard within an apologetic approach that could still be applicable today. Therefore, in this study, on the basis of an analysis of Chesterton's work, I aim to develop certain criteria of common sense, and test the worldview of the new atheists by these criteria of common sense, mostly focusing on various forms of naturalism. In addition, I test various Christian positions that oppose these naturalist positions by the criteria of common sense, which makes it possible to compare the worldviews, and decide which worldview is most in line with common sense and, therefore, most plausible.

In this study, I aim to show that common sense can play an important role in examining the plausibility of opinions and provide a valuable tool for apologetics. It lays the foundation for good judgment, insight, and understanding. By using common sense and relying on its criteria, it is possible to analyze the plausibility of worldviews. Drawing on Chesterton's insightful apologetics and his understanding of common sense, the goal of this study is to develop a solid apologetic approach towards the new atheism.

## 2. On the Methodology of this Study

### 2.1. Interpretation and Argumentation

In this study, I test elements of the worldview of the new atheists and corresponding elements of the Christian worldview, using Chesterton's criteria of common sense, and analyze which worldview is more plausible. I do this in three main steps. Firstly, I discuss the worldview of the new atheists. Secondly, I discuss the apologetics of Chesterton. Lastly, I develop an apologetic approach towards the new atheism inspired by Chesterton's apologetics.

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<sup>7</sup> DALE AHLQUIST, *G.K. Chesterton: The Apostle of Common Sense* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2003), 13-14.

My aim is to represent the vision of the new atheists in a way that does justice to what they have to say. To this end, I provide an intentional interpretation<sup>8</sup> of the worldview of the new atheists, while at the same time honoring the principle of charity. The goal of an intentional interpretation is to recover the meaning of the author. By providing an intentional interpretation, one interprets a text in light of the situation of the author and leaves aside one's own situation.<sup>9</sup> This means that an intentional interpretation aims to reproduce the argument in the way the author has meant it. The authorial intention is not necessarily the same as the textual meaning,<sup>10</sup> but I believe that if one wants to enter into a discussion with authors, it is fair to do so on the basis of an intentional interpretation. I want to represent the worldview of the new atheists as they want their readers to understand them. Even more, I want to discuss the strongest version of the new atheist arguments. This is what the principle of charity requires. The principle of charity demands that one interprets arguments in ways that 'maximize the accuracy and rationality of their utterances and beliefs.'<sup>11</sup> Sometimes, the strongest version of their arguments might not fully correspond to the intentional meaning of the new atheists. In these cases, I give priority to the principle of charity, depart from a purely intentional interpretation, and incline to a rational reconstruction of their arguments, which I explain below. I do this solely because I aim to represent the worldview of the new atheists at its best. I believe heeding the principle of charity is both ethically and epistemologically right. It helps to represent the arguments of the new atheists in the strongest way possible and elevates the intellectual standard of the subsequent discussion. I am well aware that I am still offering my own interpretation, as absolute objectivity is impossible. However, I attempt to distance my biases from the texts of the new atheists, and I abstain from evaluating and criticizing their arguments when interpreting their arguments intentionally.

When I get to the apologetics of G.K. Chesterton, I provide both an intentional interpretation and a rational reconstruction.<sup>12</sup> When introducing Chesterton's thinking in this study, I discuss him by representing his ideas as he intended them, just as I did with the ideas of the new atheists. However, in the subsequent chapters, I re-interpret his

<sup>8</sup> This concept is derived from VINCENT BRÜMMER, "Philosophy, Theology and the Reading of Texts," *Religious Studies* 27, no. 4 (1991), 452.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 451-52.

<sup>10</sup> MONROE C. BEARDSLEY, "The Authority of Text," in *Intention and Interpretation*, ed. Gary Iseminger, *The Arts and Their Philosophers* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992), 32. As a theologian, I do not intend to choose between the theory of authorial irrelevance and the identity thesis within literary criticism, but I merely indicate in which way I handle the texts of the new atheists.

<sup>11</sup> RICHARD FELDMAN, "Principle of Charity," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>12</sup> This concept is also derived from BRÜMMER, 452.

apologetics using rational reconstruction. By rational reconstruction, I understand the textual interpretation that ‘produces the most fruitful conceptual suggestions relevant to our own present situation.’<sup>13</sup> To this end, a hermeneutic dialogue between the text and the interpreter that generates something new is required. A rational reconstruction requires a creative fusion of the horizon of the text with that of the interpreter. Thus, interpretation becomes ‘a creative process in which the intuitive prejudices, assumptions and intensions of the interpreter play an essential role.’<sup>14</sup> Contrary to intentional interpretations, rational reconstructions are innovative rather than descriptive.<sup>15</sup> While intentional interpretation requires one to ‘maximize the accuracy and rationality’<sup>16</sup> of the texts’ claims, rational reconstruction requires one *to go beyond the texts*. Chesterton’s apologetics was directed at opposing positions of his time but, for the purpose of the current study, it is important to find ways in which his apologetics may be successfully directed at the new atheists. This means that I need to interpret Chesterton’s apologetic arguments in light of the discussion with the new atheists. His arguments should not only be understood against the background of *his* historical and cultural context, but also against the background of the discussion that is taking place *today*. To do this, I select several of Chesterton’s apologetic ideas that touch upon themes that are relevant in the discussion with the new atheists and analyze the concepts that these ideas contain in order to actualize them and use them as convincing arguments against the positions of the new atheists.

My study results in a discussion with the new atheism. In this discussion, I argue against positions of the new atheists and in favor of positions that are in line with a Christian worldview. The arguments are mostly inspired by Chesterton’s apologetics. Whether my arguments will be persuasive to the reader depends, in part, on the prior convictions of the reader. Discussions are both content-oriented and person-oriented; the arguments in a discussion do not function in isolation, but in a communicative exchange between people. Therefore, the prior convictions of the persons who are involved in the discussion play a big role. They determine whether the premises that are employed in the arguments of the conversation partner can be accepted, and hence, whether the conclusions can be accepted.

The acceptance of an argument does not only depend on the objective validity of the argument, but also on one’s subjective attitudes. The validity of an argument and the truth of a proposition are objective; they are independent of one’s subjective psychological

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<sup>13</sup> “Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection,” *Neue Zeitschrift für Systematische Theologie und Religionsphilosophie* 32, no. 1 (1990), 60.

<sup>14</sup> “Philosophy, Theology and the Reading of Texts,” 452.

<sup>15</sup> “Philosophical Theology as Conceptual Recollection,” 57-59.

<sup>16</sup> FELDMAN, “Principle of Charity.”



attitudes. The propositional attitudes of belief, doubt, and acceptance, on the other hand, are subjective; they have ‘psychological implications or content.’<sup>17</sup> This means that ‘a proposition can’t be true for me and not true for you, although you may, of course, not recognize this truth.’<sup>18</sup> However, a proposition can be believed by one person, and not by the other. The power of an argument depends on the prior convictions of the person who is to be convinced. The premises of the argument must be compatible with these convictions and be accepted. Only then can this person consider the argument to be a proof.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, arguments are not necessarily proofs of one’s position; proof is person-relative.<sup>20</sup> An argument cannot be characterized as a proof ‘purely in terms of truth and logic’;<sup>21</sup> it must also be cogent and convincing. An argument is cogent if it is sound, i.e., if the argument is valid and has true premises, and if the person at whom the argument is directed recognizes this soundness. Furthermore, an argument is convincing if the person at whom the argument is directed knows ‘its premises to be true without having to infer them from its conclusion.’<sup>22</sup> In short, an argument can only be considered a proof if its premises are accepted by the recipient independently from the conclusion. The recipient should not have to trace the premises back to the conclusion to be able to accept them. This shows that arguments are not merely objective, but that the persons involved in the arguments might decide to not accept the conclusions. Even if an argument is valid, one is not forced to accept the conclusions. However, if one does not accept the conclusions, one must reject one of the premises. Therefore, arguments do not exist by themselves; they are always entertained by persons. To these persons, the arguments must make sense; they must understand and accept these arguments, both the premises and the conclusions.<sup>23</sup>

In sum, arguments are not universal but person-relative. Therefore, arguments that I accept as proof do not necessarily convince somebody else:<sup>24</sup> ‘Proofs are relative to persons *because* they differ in education, training, and intelligence, *because* they differ in their spatio-temporal location or the information available to them, or *because* they differ in

<sup>17</sup> GEORGE I. MAVRODES, *Belief in God: A Study in the Epistemology of Religion* ed. V.C. Chappell, Studies in Philosophy (New York: Random House, 1970), 36.

<sup>18</sup> WILLIAM J. WAINWRIGHT, “Theistic Proofs, Person Relativity, and Rationality of Religious Belief,” in *Evidence and Religious Belief*, eds. Kelly James Clark and Raymond J. Vanarragon (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 83.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> In the context of a discussion with the new atheism, it is important to note that proof in this sense does not mean the scientific “evidence” that is exalted in the natural sciences. Proof in this sense means the philosophical proof that results from theoretic arguments.

<sup>21</sup> MAVRODES, 29.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 32-35.

<sup>24</sup> WAINWRIGHT, 82.

purpose or the state of their hearts.<sup>25</sup> This also goes for arguments that make an appeal to common sense. Although, for Chesterton, common sense is available to the “common man,” it is also the basis of the Christian worldview. Therefore, I am aware that the new atheists might not accept my arguments as proofs. I contribute to the discussion with the new atheists by bringing in Chesterton’s criteria of common sense. If the new atheists consider my arguments to be valid, they have two options: they can either accept the conclusions that are favorable for Christianity, or they can reject the criteria of common sense. Since they probably do not want to accept the conclusions, they must choose the second option. And if, as I expect, the rejection of Chestertonian common sense is unattractive to many people, my arguments will give these people a reason to reject the new atheism.

For me, the arguments of the new atheists are not proofs. They might be for people whose prior convictions allow them to accept their premises, but my prior convictions force me to deny them. The objections I raise in the discussion make clear why this is the case. In fact, this is the basis for a discussion. One is never sure whether one’s arguments are persuasive, but if they are valid and one cannot accept their conclusions, the arguments at least ensure that someone must reconsider one’s premises. Certain arguments cannot be united with certain convictions, and this causes conversation partners to evaluate their own view. Therefore, all arguments help the discussion move forward.

## 2.2. Limitations

The design of the current study is subject to limitations. These limitations concern the new atheism and G.K. Chesterton.

Firstly, by “the new atheists” I generally mean the four prominent adherents of the new atheism: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and the late Christopher Hitchens. As noted above, the new atheism is a growing movement, and other atheists such as Anthony C. Grayling, Victor Stenger, Paul Cliteur, Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and Herman Philipse have adopted and defended atheist positions that are in many ways related to those of the new atheists.<sup>26</sup> However, this study focuses only on Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. A.C. GRAYLING, *The God Argument: The Case against Religion and for Humanism* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013); VICTOR J. STENGER, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (Amherst, NY: Prometheus Books, 2009); PAUL CLITEUR, *The Secular Outlook: In Defense of Moral and Political Secularism* ed. Michael Boylan, Blackwell Public Philosophy (Chichester, West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010); AYAAN HIRSI ALI, *Infidel* (New York: Free Press, 2007); HERMAN PHILIPSE, *God in the Age of Science? A Critique of Religious Reason* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

because they are the best-known representatives of the new atheism (evident in the frequent description of them as “the four horsemen” of the new atheism).

Secondly, with respect to Chesterton’s work: Chesterton has written a wide range of books, articles, and poems, which forces me to limit the works I consult. Although God is a topic in many of his writings, implicitly and explicitly, I have chosen to focus primarily on Chesterton’s major apologetic works. Within these books, I focus on the themes that I find relevant to the discussion of the new atheism. This means that I ignore some aspects of Chesterton’s apologetics, such as asceticism, joy, and gratitude, not because I find them unimportant or unconvincing, but because they are to be found in works that fall outside the scope of this study or because they are not useful in arguing against the positions of the new atheists.

In addition, I also ignore many contemporary backgrounds of Chesterton’s writings because they are less relevant to my efforts to mount a response to the new atheism. Generally, unless Chesterton brings up his contemporaries himself, like H.G. Wells in *The Everlasting Man*, or several other authors in *Heretics*, I leave them out of consideration.

There are two further caveats I would like the reader to keep in mind.<sup>27</sup> Firstly, though Chesterton has written a massive oeuvre, he has not discussed all themes that are important to the worldview of the new atheists. As a result, in my discussion of these themes, I refer not to Chesterton but to other thinkers. With their help, I try to develop a line of argument that is in line with a Chestertonian way of thinking.

Secondly, my presentation of the arguments of the new atheists follows a different order from the apologetic approach that I develop. I capture the criticism of the new atheists in two comprehensive overviews in chapters 1 and 2, but the apologetic response that I formulate in chapters 6 and 7 follows a different line of reasoning. This is because in the presentation of the worldview of the new atheists, I attempt to make their position as strong as possible, while in the apologetic approach, I set the agenda for the discussion myself.

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<sup>27</sup> In addition, I need to make two short general remarks. Firstly, all translations of non-English works are mine, unless another translator is mentioned. Secondly, italics in quotations are the author’s, unless explicitly stated otherwise.

### 3. Overview of the Argument

In chapter 1, I provide a comprehensive overview of the new atheists' view of religion. In this overview, I try to present their arguments, against religion in general and Christianity in particular, in a way that renders them as strong as their authors intend them to be. Doing this, I primarily focus on the works of the four most prominent new atheists that have religion as their main subject. The new atheists have written many more books, also on religion, but in the selected books they explicitly focus on their critique of religion and discuss this in detail. I discuss the problems that the new atheists detect on the levels of religion itself, the relationship between science and religion, and society's attitude towards religion. As a central point of criticism, I take the allegedly immune position of religion within society. I analyze the causes of the problems the new atheists identify, their objections, and their alternatives.

In chapter 2, I continue my exposition of the views of the new atheists by investigating the philosophical positions of the new atheists on ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and ethics. To obtain a comprehensive understanding of the foundation of their thinking, I primarily focus on books the new atheists have written in their own fields of interest and expertise. Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist, Dennett is a philosopher of science and of mind, Harris is a neuroscientist, and Hitchens was a literary and cultural critic. Besides books on their respective area of expertise, several less prominent books that discuss religion, e.g., in a debate with a theologian or philosopher, are also taken into consideration. As in chapter 1, I gather the views of the new atheists and restructure them, without evaluating and criticizing them. In both chapters, my aim is to pay attention both to the shared position of the new atheists and the individual accents each of them brings to the debate.

By aiming to provide a charitable interpretation of the position of the new atheists on religion and on the philosophical foundations of this position, chapters 1 and 2 provide the position to be rebutted in subsequent chapters. In chapter 3, I examine several current apologetic approaches to the new atheists. I give special attention to the modes of argument employed towards the new atheism by consulting works and analyzing arguments of several apologists. I evaluate the various methods briefly and explain their advantages and disadvantages. Thus, I keep the new atheists as conversation partners in mind. Since this study aims at developing a Roman Catholic response to the new atheism, I also take the views of the Roman Catholic Church on a contemporary apologetics into consideration. In several official Church documents, the Church calls attention to a new evangelization and

a new apologetics. By consulting these documents, I try to tune into the position of the Church.

One of the recommendations of the Church for a “new” apologetics is to learn from “old” apologetics. In chapter 4, I introduce a successful “old” apologist who is my inspiration in the chapters that follow. Gilbert Keith Chesterton is not universally known, so an overview of his life is offered, as well as an introduction to Chestertonian apologetics. To introduce his thinking, I make use of an intentional interpretation of several of his apologetic ideas, aiming at a rational reconstruction of these arguments in chapters 6 and 7. The most distinctive characteristic of Chesterton’s approach is that, in his discussions with those who criticize religion, he applies the criteria of common sense. Since Chesterton himself never clearly introduces these criteria and does not argue for them, and since I intend to use these criteria in my own argument against the new atheism, I need to make these criteria explicit and argue for their plausibility. Therefore, I make explicit Chesterton’s understanding of common sense that was implicit in his apologetics. Lastly, I explain why Chesterton finds it so important to discuss one’s worldview, thereby legitimizing the apologetic approach that I will develop afterwards.

As a final necessary stage before entering into conversation with the new atheists, chapter 5 is an important bridge in the study because it aims to connect chapters 1-4 with chapters 6-7. I refer back to some foundations that I have discussed in the previous chapters, such as modern apologetic approaches and the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics, and define which elements I will adopt in the apologetic approach. I also define which elements of Chesterton’s apologetics I will adopt and which I will disregard. Moreover, I explain in which way I will implement common sense as a central theme in the apologetic approach, and what the views of the new atheists on this subject are. Finally, I respond to a major point of criticism of the new atheists that can be responded to without reference to common sense: the allegedly immune position of religion within society. I show that this criticism is over-simplified: religion is much more vulnerable than the new atheists suggest, and secularization shows that it is far from immune. After this objection has been tackled, the way is open for an apologetic approach that has common sense as its basis.

In chapter 6, I invoke common sense to show what is wrong with the worldview of the new atheism. This chapter builds an apologetics that is directed towards the new atheism. I argue that the new atheist views on different forms of naturalism betray “a lack of common sense.” Since naturalism plays such a big role in the worldview of the new atheists, arguments against naturalism get down to the core of the matter. I test several naturalist positions of the new atheists, and I argue why following common sense would

lead to conclusions different from those the new atheists draw. Most importantly, the possibility of the supernatural and the partial role of science in acquiring knowledge receives ample attention. I take this step first because I believe that my apologetics towards the new atheism will be more fruitful if I first dwell upon these themes before arguing in favor of Christianity.

While chapter 6 takes an offensive approach to the new atheism, showing what is wrong with it, chapter 7 introduces a defensive form of apologetics, showcasing the merits of Christianity. Again by means of a rational reconstruction of Chesterton's apologetics, I argue that the worldview of Christianity and, more particularly, that of Roman Catholicism satisfies all four criteria of common sense. I do this by focusing on three specific elements, elaborately discussed by Chesterton, that play an important role in the Christian worldview: the complementarity of reason and faith, the importance of Bible and tradition (the intellectual heritage of Christianity), and mysticism, which comes forth from the combination of philosophy and mythology. I continuously refer back to arguments that the new atheists made in previous chapters to make clear how common sense leads to different conclusions and a more plausible worldview.

In the conclusion, I recapitulate the outcomes of the preceding chapters and draw conclusions. My main conclusions are that the Christian worldview is more in line with common sense than that of the new atheists and is, therefore, more plausible. Chesterton's apologetics can still be a major source of inspiration for today's debate with atheists. Furthermore, I draw out the implications of this study. My Chestertonian approach towards the new atheist worldview aims to offer a contribution to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics, and I hope that it may function as an illustration of a way in which a conversation between worldviews can fruitfully take place. Finally, I suggest directions for future research. Research on the plausibility of worldviews is complicated but also very relevant in our global village. My recommendation is that more research should be done on this topic, both with reference to other criteria and with reference to common sense. It will be clear, however, that my own preference leans towards common sense.

# Chapter 1

## The New Atheism on Religion

### Introduction

In November 2006, Gary Wolf wrote an article called “The Church of the Non-Believers” in *WIRED* magazine.<sup>1</sup> In this article, the prominent scientists Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris were labeled for the first time as ‘the New Atheists.’ Since then, the term “new atheism” has become well-known. Many more people call themselves new atheists now, as the phenomenon has become widely popular. Together with Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris, the best-known new atheist is the late Christopher Hitchens. As a group, they are often called ‘the four horsemen (of the non-apocalypse).’<sup>2</sup> They also use this term themselves, mocking the four horsemen of the Book of Revelation in the Bible. In this study, I will restrict myself to these four prominent new atheists.

The new atheists take their stand in public, by writing books and articles, and by showing up on television shows and on stage. They are “new” in more than one sense. Physicist Victor Stenger characterizes the new atheist movement as one that takes ‘a harder line against religion than [has] been the custom among secularists.’<sup>3</sup> He says that the new atheists mostly write from a scientific perspective, and that they are not willing to view moderate religion as something benign. They see religion as something that should be a subject of science. Furthermore, ‘perhaps the most unique position of New Atheism is that

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<sup>1</sup> GARY WOLF, “The Church of the Non-Believers,” *WIRED* (November 1<sup>st</sup> 2006), [https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/?pg=1&topic=atheism&topic\\_set](https://www.wired.com/2006/11/atheism/?pg=1&topic=atheism&topic_set), accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>2</sup> “The Four Horsemen HD: Hour 1 of 2 – Discussions with Richard Dawkins, Ep 1,” YouTube video, 58:04, posted by “Richard Dawkins Foundation For Reason & Science,” upload February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2009, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DKhc1pcDFM>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>3</sup> STENGER, 11.

faith, which is belief without supportive evidence, should not be given the respect, even deference, it obtains in modern society.’<sup>4</sup>

The new atheists turn against the allegedly privileged position religion holds in our society today. According to them, religion is mostly immunized and not to be criticized. Religion is put on a pedestal and can do no wrong. However, criticizing religion is exactly what the new atheists desire to do. Below, I will present the positions of the new atheists regarding religion and I will attempt to do this from *their* point of view. I will discuss the problems with religion on three levels: on a level that focuses on the religions themselves; on a level that focuses on the relationship between science and religion; and on a level that focuses on society’s attitude towards religion. On each level, I will dwell on the causes of the problems that the new atheists detect, on the objections that they raise to the causes and their implications, and on the solutions that they offer to solve the problems. Again, it is the stand of the new atheists that this chapter will represent, not my own stand. I will do this in order to do justice to the new atheist position.

## 1. Problems within Religion

### 1.1. Believers are Intolerant

The new atheists accuse believers of protecting themselves and their religion against all forms of criticism. One may criticize everything, except religion, for it is too valuable, vulnerable and holy. The new atheists want to discuss religion, but they do not receive any engagement from the believers. Dennett says:

If theists would be so kind as to make a short list of all the concepts of God they renounce as balderdash before proceeding further, we atheists would know just which topics were still on the table, but, out of a mixture of caution, loyalty, and unwillingness to offend anyone “on their side,” theists typically decline to do this.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 15.

<sup>5</sup> DANIEL DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), (London: Penguin Books, 2007), 210-11.



The new atheists name various causes for this attitude. Most important are the attitude believers have towards tradition, and the value they attach to the truth claims of their religion.

### 1.1.1. Tradition

The first cause is a dimension<sup>6</sup> of religion that is highly valued by believers: tradition.<sup>7</sup> Religion has always been sacred, and this is why we cannot criticize it. Everything that has ever been said about it is a part of the religious tradition, and because tradition is so highly valued, it is unquestionable. Dennett calls this ‘brand loyalty.’<sup>8</sup> Even when statements are not rationally justified, they are not to be discussed. According to Hitchens, this is why Christianity persecuted atomism for such a long time. Atomism offered a more sophisticated explanation of the world, but the Christian tradition had always preached otherwise.<sup>9</sup> The religious attitude towards tradition makes it difficult to revise previous statements, as Harris also makes clear: ‘because most religions offer no valid mechanism by which their core beliefs can be tested and revised, each new generation of believers is condemned to inherit the superstitions and tribal hatreds of its predecessors.’<sup>10</sup> To illustrate in which ways tradition play an important role within religions, I will discuss two separate matters that the new atheists discuss elaborately: firstly, the various attitudes believers can have towards tradition and, secondly, the link between tradition and the upbringing of children.

Firstly, people live according to their beliefs; their beliefs determine how to respond to people with different convictions. The stronger the beliefs, the stronger the response to certain words or actions. According to the new atheists, the transition from moderate religion to extremism lies in the extent to which believers consider political and military action as an indispensable part of their belief. Harris amplifies, ‘in the best case, faith leaves otherwise well-intentioned people incapable of thinking rationally about many of their

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<sup>6</sup> Term borrowed from Ninian Smart. Cf. NINIAN SMART, *The World's Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989).

<sup>7</sup> In chapter 4 §2.2.2, it will become clear why believers attach so much value to tradition. Tradition is one of Chesterton's criteria of common sense, meaning that one can build one's own knowledge upon the knowledge of others, as long as this is done critically and is consistent with one's own thinking.

<sup>8</sup> DENNETT, 208.

<sup>9</sup> CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 313.

<sup>10</sup> SAM HARRIS, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004), (London: Free Press, 2006), 31.

deepest concerns; at worst, it is a continuous source of human violence.<sup>11</sup> When religion becomes a political and military issue, it becomes dangerous to our society in a direct manner.<sup>12</sup> In Hitchens' words, 'there is no right to change religion, and all religious states have always insisted on harsh penalties for those who try it.'<sup>13</sup> The context here is Islam, but the statement concerns all religions.<sup>14</sup> Harris observes that this is also true in Christianity and Judaism: 'a literal reading of the Old Testament not only permits but *requires* heretics to be put to death.'<sup>15</sup> This conclusion, drawn from a literal reading, is a typical characterization of extremism. Extremists know in advance that their belief is the truth because it is taken from a holy book.<sup>16</sup> It does not matter that this belief cannot be justified by other means; all that matters is what tradition, both oral and written, tells us.

The new atheists emphasize that we should not forget that extremism stems from the fundamentals of the religion, the same ones the moderates also accept. This means that, while extremism is dangerous in an obvious way, moderate religion is a veiled threat. Dawkins explains, 'this is one reason why I do everything in my power to warn people against faith itself, not just against so-called "extremist" faith. The teachings of "moderate" religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism.'<sup>17</sup> Moderate religion both creates a favorable atmosphere for extremism to thrive in and, moreover, tolerates extremism.<sup>18</sup> This makes moderate religion largely responsible for the religious conflicts in the world.<sup>19</sup> Harris pays special attention to the problems with moderate religion and extremism in light of Islam: 'nothing explains the actions of Muslim extremists, and the widespread tolerance of their behavior in the Muslim world, better than the tenets of Islam.'<sup>20</sup> Extremist Islam is dangerous, but not only on its own. The problem, for Harris, also lies in the content of the Koran and the hadith that is just as accepted by moderate Muslims (who, for that matter, scarcely exist, since Islam simply *is* a religion of conquest and therefore violent) as it is by extremists.<sup>21</sup> What makes it worse is that the extremists do not respect the moderates for tolerating them. On the contrary, 'from the perspective of those seeking to live by the letter of the texts, the religious moderate is

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 12-13, 30, 130.

<sup>13</sup> HITCHENS, 34.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 34-36.

<sup>15</sup> HARRIS, 82.

<sup>16</sup> RICHARD DAWKINS, *The God Delusion* (2006), (London: Black Swan, 2007), 319.

<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 345-46.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>19</sup> HARRIS, 45.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 137.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 109-11, 48.

nothing more than a failed fundamentalist. He is, in all likelihood, going to wind up in hell with the rest of the unbelievers.<sup>22</sup> At the same time, the extremists exploit their brothers and sisters by proclaiming that their religion is the same as the religion of the moderates.<sup>23</sup> The new atheists conclude that religious extremists play a double game by both condemning the moderates for their attitude and, at the same time, justifying their own behavior by referring to the same tradition—and the moderates accept this.

Secondly, the intolerance of believers comes to the surface when one regards the upbringing of children. This goes for both moderate religion and extremism. As Dawkins notices:

Fundamentalist religion is hell-bent on ruining the scientific education of countless thousands of innocent, well-meaning, eager young minds. Non-fundamentalist, “sensible” religion may not be doing that. But it is making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue.<sup>24</sup>

Children are taught from their youngest years onward that faith is something that goes unquestioned, needs no justification, and admits no contradiction. Children learn “at their mother’s knee” that faith is true by the letter and by tradition. In fact, Hitchens notices that all systems of absolute authority consider total control over the upbringing of children as something important, religion being no exception.<sup>25</sup> This is noticeable in both teaching and practice. For example, a significant part of most religious teachings concerns hell. Unfortunately, the descriptions of hell and eternal punishment that are given to children are ‘moral terrorism’: ‘it is easy to see that the priest’s words are designed *precisely* to frighten children.’ Especially in medieval Christianity, the prime concern of the colorful sketches and fantasies was ‘to keep the ignorant in a state of permanent fear.’<sup>26</sup> This indoctrination makes Dawkins furious: ‘what do you think of people who threaten children with eternal fire after they are dead? [...] I’d say those people are lucky there is no such place as hell, because I can’t think of anybody who more richly deserves to go there.’<sup>27</sup>

The indoctrination does not stop here. Children are also in practice labeled by the faith of their parents, in both the literal and figurative sense. Literally, it is noticeable in the practice of circumcision. Children are circumcised most of the time before they are able to

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<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>23</sup> HITCHENS, 190.

<sup>24</sup> DAWKINS, 323.

<sup>25</sup> HITCHENS, 262.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 260-61.

<sup>27</sup> RICHARD DAWKINS, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide* (New York: Random House, 2019), 100.

understand the custom, let alone to reject or allow it. In this case, Hitchens remarks, ‘if religion and its arrogance were not involved, no healthy society would permit this primitive amputation, or allow any surgery to be practiced on the genitalia without the full and informed consent of the person concerned.’<sup>28</sup> Figuratively, one can see this labeling simply in the designation of children. As Dawkins mentions:

One of my pet peeves is the habit of labelling young children with the religion of their parents: “Catholic child”, “Protestant child”, “Muslim child”. Such phrases can be heard used of children too young to talk, let alone to hold religious opinions. It seems to me as absurd as talking about a “Socialist child” or “Conservative child”, and nobody would ever use a phrase like that. I don’t think we should talk about “atheist children” either.<sup>29</sup>

Dawkins’ point is that children are not religious themselves; they are the children of religious parents. Knowing this would raise the consciousness of children that it is not self-evident to be a Catholic or a Jew or an atheist. Tradition would not keep them firmly in line anymore, but the children would be able to choose something else. Now, the labels confirm the tradition that faith is something not open to questioning.

### 1.1.2. Truth Claim

The other cause of the intolerance of believers, besides tradition, is the truth claim every religion contains. The problem with this is that all religions contain different truth claims. This leads automatically to intolerance. Harris says, ‘it is time we acknowledged that no real foundation exists within the canons of Christianity, Islam, Judaism, or any of our other faiths for religious tolerance and religious diversity.’<sup>30</sup> This makes the religious position of pluralism impossible to defend: ‘intolerance is thus intrinsic to every creed [...] Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.’<sup>31</sup>

When it comes to truth claims, every religion suddenly tries to be as rational as possible. Within Christianity the emphasis lies on the New Testament with its miracles and the life of Jesus Christ; these fulfil the prophecies of the Old Testament.<sup>32</sup> Hitchens points

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<sup>28</sup> HITCHENS, 270.

<sup>29</sup> DAWKINS, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*, 11.

<sup>30</sup> HARRIS, 225.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

out that here ‘religion arouses suspicion by trying to prove too much.’<sup>33</sup> It happens too often to be true that the Old Testament prophecies are fulfilled in the New Testament. Religions need this sort of confirmation to distinguish themselves from other religions. They cannot simply let the other religions be, for they consider these religions to be mistaken and heretical.<sup>34</sup> They have to look for a fight. Dawkins formulates it as follows:

Even more plausible as a motive for war is an unshakeable faith that one’s own religion is the only true one, reinforced by a holy book that explicitly condemns all heretics and followers of rival religions to death, and explicitly promises that the soldiers of God will go straight to a martyrs’ heaven.<sup>35</sup>

The truth claims of the various religions make it impossible for them to exist next to each other. Religions have to interfere with each other necessarily and in an intolerant way.

## 1.2. Intolerance Leads to Violence

As explained above, believers are intolerant towards criticism of their religion due to a surplus of respect both for their own tradition and for the truth claims of their religion that are incompatible with other religions. This intolerance injures the relationship between different faiths and between believers and non-believers because it makes it impossible to discuss, question, and criticize each other’s convictions without creating bad feelings. In the worst cases, this intolerance could result in violence, which can be arrayed against all non-believers, heretics, and adherents of other faiths. This problem of threatening violence demands that one tries to understand the ‘forces arrayed against us’<sup>36</sup> better. Harris explains why:

We can no longer ignore the fact that billions of our neighbors believe in the metaphysics of martyrdom, or in the literal truth of the book of Revelation, or any of the other fantastical notions that have lurked in the minds of the faithful for millennia—because our neighbors are now armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> HITCHENS, 137.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>35</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 316.

<sup>36</sup> HARRIS, 22-23.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

The new atheists want to explain why it is unjust to be intolerant if this intolerance is based on a high opinion of tradition or on truth claims. Primarily, tradition and religion are human products and therefore liable to error. In the second place, no matter how highly traditions or truth claims are valued, they should never hold children back from asking questions and forming opinions.

### 1.2.1. Tradition and Religion are Human Products

The new atheists argue that believers should understand and acknowledge that they cannot disapprove of any criticism of their faith from the very start on the ground that the tradition of their religion forbids them to question their faith. Tradition is not a valid argument. Dennett is very clear about this: ‘if we shouldn’t study all the ins and outs of religion, I want to know why, and I want to see good, factually supported reasons, not just an appeal to the tradition I am rejecting.’<sup>38</sup> The new atheists know that people learn by being taught by others; people learn by tradition. People believe others, most of the time simply based on their words. In some cases, one verifies whether what others say has been said before or is based on proof, but since it is impossible to investigate everything continually, people rely upon the knowledge of others. ‘This does not suggest, however, that all forms of authority are valid; nor does it suggest that even the best authorities will always prove reliable,’<sup>39</sup> Harris points out. People make mistakes; they are not infallible. People may also say things that were true at one time but are not true anymore. The fact that certain things were said a few centuries ago or even yesterday, does not necessarily mean that they are still valid today. According to the new atheists, this also applies to sanctity. The fact that something was considered to be sacred some time ago is no reason for it to be sacred today. Many occurrences that were highly valued in the past are now things about which society is ashamed (e.g., slavery, cannibalism, child labor). These practices did not prevent people from questioning them as phenomena; they were put under the microscope and criticized.<sup>40</sup> Religion does not deserve any other treatment; thus, tradition should not form an obstacle to study religion. Moreover, to people who do not belong to the tradition in question, or even reject it, tradition is no impediment to the investigation of that religion. To them, tradition does not make religion immune at all.

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<sup>38</sup> DENNETT, 18-19.

<sup>39</sup> HARRIS, 74.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 23-25.

The main reason why tradition is not a valid argument against criticism of religion is that tradition is constructed by people. People can make mistakes, which makes tradition fallible too. In fact, this is even true of religion in general. Religion, too, is a human product and constructed by people. This means that tradition goes back to something humanity has invented. Dennett explains, ‘there was a time before religious beliefs and practices had occurred to anyone. There was a time, after all, before there were any *believers* on the planet, before there were any beliefs about anything.’<sup>41</sup> The new atheists all emphasize this to throw religion off its pedestal. Hitchens even says, ‘thus the mildest criticism of religion is also the most radical and the most devastating one. Religion is manmade.’<sup>42</sup> Religion is a phenomenon that humanity once designed, with stories, statements, and structures included. Firstly, the stories and statements provided metaphysical answers to questions people could not answer otherwise than with the help of myths; not to scientifically explain them, but to give meaning to them. These answers were handed down through the ages and were considered final.<sup>43</sup> However, now humanity knows better, says Hitchens: ‘between them, the sciences of textual criticism, archaeology, physics, and molecular biology have shown religious myths to be false and man-made and have also succeeded in evolving better and more enlightened explanations.’<sup>44</sup> More than that, Harris claims that ‘even the least educated person among us simply *knows* more about certain matters than anyone did two thousand years ago—and much of this knowledge is incompatible with scripture.’<sup>45</sup> This is something believers should accept. Secondly, the structures that religions provided were aimed at improving relationships between people from the same group. Therefore, religion had social purposes. It was a way of exercising power. Social structures (e.g., hierarchy, rules, and rituals) are present in almost every religion, albeit with different appearances. They even show up in non-religious institutions.<sup>46</sup>

To illustrate that religion is a human product, the new atheists pay special attention to two significant religious dimensions: the notion of God and the content of Holy Scripture. In Hitchens’ words, these two dimensions demonstrate ‘that monotheistic religion is a plagiarism of a plagiarism of a hearsay of a hearsay, of an illusion of an illusion, extending all the way back to a fabrication of a few nonevents.’<sup>47</sup> Holy Scripture has been

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<sup>41</sup> DENNETT, 98.

<sup>42</sup> HITCHENS, 12.

<sup>43</sup> HARRIS, 71-73.

<sup>44</sup> HITCHENS, 179-80.

<sup>45</sup> HARRIS, 19.

<sup>46</sup> DENNETT, 24-27, 104-08, 71-73. I will return to this in chapter 5 §2.2, where I will discuss religious power.

<sup>47</sup> HITCHENS, 336.

written by people, and these people have borrowed stories from other religions to make their own stories and to explain their notion of God.

In general, believers consider God to be a supernatural creator. Moreover, he did not only create the universe in the past but is still interested in it now. He still influences the world's events and is involved in human affairs. This means that he answers prayers; he helps and opposes people, forgives, and punishes them. He is omniscient and omnipotent, and therefore worth worshipping. If scientists admit to being religious, it is often assumed that scientists believe in this supernatural God. However, this is not necessarily the case. Scientists can be religious in another way, as Dawkins explains by quoting Einstein: 'to sense that behind anything that can be experienced there is a something that our mind cannot grasp and whose beauty and sublimity reaches us only indirectly and as a feeble reflection, this is religiousness. In this sense I am religious.'<sup>48</sup> Dawkins calls this a 'natural religion,' as opposed to supernatural religion.

This distinction is important because the new atheists do not deny that there are phenomena in this world that are not (yet) explained. However, they are convinced that the solution to these inexplicabilities should not be offered by referring to something or someone supernatural or metaphysical. It is exactly the supernatural and metaphysical that they reject,<sup>49</sup> and it is of no importance to which religion this supernatural God belongs.<sup>50</sup> As long as he is a '*supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought*,'<sup>51</sup> as Dennett phrases it, he is rejected by the new atheists.

Thus, two types of religion exist: natural and supernatural. The new atheists do not have any difficulties with the natural variant, but they do with the supernatural. This is caused by the many different forms the supernatural can adopt (e.g., Yahweh, Allah, and Brahma). These differences cause intolerance and possibly violence. Hitchens explains:

God did not create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about, which is the painless explanation for the profusion of gods and religions, and the fratricide both between and among faiths, that we see all about us and that has so retarded the development of civilization.<sup>52</sup>

To answer questions that science could not answer, humanity created its own answer, which suited the situation. This would explain why so many various notions and images of God exist.

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<sup>48</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 40.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 31-42. This metaphysical point will be discussed more elaborately in chapter 2 §1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-57.

<sup>51</sup> DENNETT, 9.

<sup>52</sup> HITCHENS, 9.



Next to the notion of God, the content of Holy Scripture can make clear that religion is a human product. Despite the conviction of many believers that ‘the Creator of the universe has written a book,’<sup>53</sup> as Harris phrases it, this most probably is not true. This conviction must have been handed down by tradition and taken on its word because there does not exist any evidence of God’s authorship.<sup>54</sup> It is therefore more plausible that the holy books of the different religions in the world are written by people. As already said of tradition, because it is a human product, it is not infallible. The same goes for Holy Scripture. Although believers consider it holy, it has been made by people and is therefore susceptible to errors.

The new atheists provide various arguments for their claim that Holy Scripture is a human product. God, who is considered omniscient and omnipotent, would not have made any mistakes if he had written Holy Scripture. However, it is crammed with historical inaccuracies and other errors. Archaeological research, above all, has shown this. Dawkins and Hitchens both dwell on the stories of the books of Moses, which could not have taken place the way they were written.<sup>55</sup> In Hitchens’ words:

Long before modern inquiry and painstaking translation and excavation had helped enlighten us, it was well within the compass of a thinking person to see that the “revelation” at Sinai and the rest of the Pentateuch was an ill-carpentered fiction, bolted into place well after the non-events that it fails to describe convincingly or even plausibly.<sup>56</sup>

The fact, for Hitchens, that many events described in Holy Scripture could never have taken place—of course, this is not only the case with the Bible, but goes for other holy books too—can explain why a literal reading is untenable. Many theologians have also come to this conclusion and have therefore opted for a more symbolical or allegorical interpretation of parts of Holy Scripture. However, says Dawkins, ‘that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision.’<sup>57</sup> Believers themselves decide which book is the truth. Dawkins continues, ‘which religion, anyway? The one in which we happen to have been brought up? To which chapter then, of which book of the Bible should we turn—for they are far from unanimous and some of them are odious by any

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<sup>53</sup> HARRIS, 13.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>55</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 268-83.

<sup>56</sup> HITCHENS, 123.

<sup>57</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 269.

reasonable standards.<sup>58</sup> The nature of different texts of the same Holy Scripture is contradictory. God would not have done this if he had written it, for he is, according to the notion humanity has created, perfect and infallible. Surprisingly, these contradictions in Holy Scripture are still there.

Dubious as these contradictions already are, the many similarities between different Holy Scriptures and the way in which the newer ones fulfill the older ones may be even more suspicious. They also show, albeit in a different way, that Holy Scripture is a human product. Lingering on the Bible, but moving from the Old to the New Testament, Hitchens warns that ‘it will not be long before you learn that such and such an action or saying, attributed to Jesus, was done so that an ancient prophecy should come true.’<sup>59</sup> The Old Testament prophecies that are fulfilled in the New Testament make it seem as if the latter tried to prove too much. However, many other things that are said in the Gospels (e.g., the historical period in which Jesus was born) are confirmed nowhere, which makes the New Testament just as unreliable as the Old one.<sup>60</sup> Dawkins can find no evidence of the things that are described in the New Testament, and therefore concludes, ‘it’s unfortunately true—and the internet brings it home as never before—that people simply make stuff up. And rumours and gossip spread like epidemics, regardless of truth.’<sup>61</sup> Without evidence, the sources are not trustworthy.

The new atheists also apply their argument to the Koran of Islam, as it tries to be the ultimate fulfillment of a holy book:

Quite rightly, Islam effectively disowns the idea that it is a new faith, let alone a cancellation of the earlier ones, and it uses the prophecies of the Old Testament and the Gospels of the New like a perpetual crutch or fund, to be leaned on or drawn upon. In return for this derivative modesty, all it asks is to be accepted as the absolute and final revelation.<sup>62</sup>

Ultimately, the Koran is full of plagiarisms of books of other religions that have just been shown to be untrustworthy. Moreover, the parts in the Koran that are in fact new and unique are ‘hopelessly corrupted into incoherence by self-interest, rumor and illiteracy.’<sup>63</sup> This does not make the Koran any more trustworthy than its predecessors.<sup>64</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 81.

<sup>59</sup> HITCHENS, 129.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 115-45.

<sup>61</sup> DAWKINS, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner's Guide*, 23.

<sup>62</sup> HITCHENS, 159.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 147-64.

### 1.2.2. Children should be Free in their Thinking

Attaching value to tradition and truth claims is not a valid reason to become intolerant of criticism, let alone of criticism that could come from children. Many believers do not only raise their children religiously, but they also tend to forbid any alternative views inside their household. They practically force their own beliefs down their children's throats. They also often object to their children learning something about alternative worldviews. This is highly condemnable. In Dennett's words, 'if you have to hoodwink—or blindfold—your children to ensure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith *ought* to go extinct.'<sup>65</sup> If the religion in question indeed contains the truth, these children will eventually discover this for themselves. A true religion will be able to reveal its value, without parental force.

Enforcing one's own convictions upon children damages these children. It makes it impossible for them to make their own decisions. Dawkins says, 'this shows the amazing power of childhood indoctrination. People who are brought up in a religion have great difficulty shaking it off. And then they pass it on to the next generation.'<sup>66</sup> Therefore, what is true of tradition and authority in general applies even more to children. Children take the words of their parents for granted; they do not verify if what their parents say is in fact true. This is caused by evolution, as Dawkins explains: 'for excellent reasons related to Darwinian survival, child brains need to trust parents, and elders whom parents tell them to trust. An automatic consequence is that the truster has no way of distinguishing good advice from bad.'<sup>67</sup> This is true of all information, as well as information on a certain religion. Nevertheless, it is wrong not to let children discover, learn, and evaluate this information for themselves. Indoctrination of a certain religion deprives children of their freedom, which is a basic human right. Making decisions is something children have to learn; it is an important part of growing up. This is one of Dennett's concerns: 'let us spread the value of freedom throughout the world—but not to children, apparently. No child has a right to freedom from indoctrination. Shouldn't we change that?'<sup>68</sup> Dawkins says, 'the important point is that it is *their* privilege to decide what they shall think, and not their parents' privilege to impose it by *force majeure*.'<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> DENNETT, 328.

<sup>66</sup> DAWKINS, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner's Guide*, 64.

<sup>67</sup> *The God Delusion*, 205.

<sup>68</sup> DENNETT, 326.

<sup>69</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 367.

### 1.3. Start the Discussion

The intolerance of believers to criticism is an unjustifiable attitude. Dennett says to these believers, ‘you are being unreasonable in taking your stand.’<sup>70</sup> Tradition is not a valid argument against criticism, but should be a subject of the discussion itself. The same goes for religion and all its dimensions. They should be discussed in the same way as other themes; they should not be treated any differently. Therefore, the new atheists write their anti-religious books. As Dawkins states, ‘it is in light of the unparalleled presumption of respect for religion that I make my own disclaimer for this book. I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else.’<sup>71</sup> The new atheists notice that believers tend to respond to their feelings more than to their thoughts, so for Dennett, ‘part of my effort in this book is to get you to *think* and not just *feel*.’<sup>72</sup> This goes for Harris too: ‘my goal in writing this book has been to help close the door to a certain style of irrationality.’<sup>73</sup>

The new atheists focus on three subjects that they want to criticize in their books: religion, extremism, and religious upbringing. Below, I will illustrate in which ways the new atheists wish to discuss these subjects.

Firstly, the new atheists focus on religion as a subject of criticism. According to Hitchens, arguing with faith should be done for the following reason:

The argument with faith is the foundation and origin of all arguments, because it is the beginning—but not the end—of all arguments about philosophy, science, history, and human nature. It is also the beginning—but by no means the end—of all disputes about the good life and the just city.<sup>74</sup>

Therefore, the new atheists want humanity to be reasonable and start the discussion; criticizing religion should be allowed. This goes for believers themselves, too, as Dennett calls on them: ‘it is time for the reasonable adherents of all faiths to find the courage and stamina to reverse the tradition that honors helpless love of God—in any tradition. Far from being honorable, it is not even excusable. It is shameful.’<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> DENNETT, 296.

<sup>71</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 50.

<sup>72</sup> DENNETT, 329.

<sup>73</sup> HARRIS, 223.

<sup>74</sup> HITCHENS, 14.

<sup>75</sup> DENNETT, 298.

Secondly, extremism should be a subject of criticism. On top of making religion—any religion—a subject of discussion, believers should criticize extremism and disassociate themselves from it. Extremists *use* the tradition of the moderate believers to justify their own intolerance and violence. The moderates are responsible for this and should therefore object to this and make short work of this misuse. Dennett says, ‘we must hold these moderate Muslims responsible for reshaping their own religion—but that means we must equally hold moderate Christians and Jews and others responsible for all the excesses in their own traditions.’<sup>76</sup> Moderate believers are probably the only ones who could put a hold on extremism, and this means that they *must* question their own religion.

Thirdly, religious upbringing must become a subject of criticism. In other words, children should also be allowed to discuss and question the religion of their upbringing. As I will discuss below in chapter 1 §3.2.3, the new atheists consider religion to be one of the causes of evil in the world, and nothing can and will change in the future if the future generation is excluded from the debate. The new atheists consider it a major task of education to inform children about every religion. This must be done in an objective way. Then, once the children are old enough, they can decide for themselves what they want to do with all the information they have received. Dawkins states it as follows:

A good case can indeed be made for the educational benefits of teaching comparative religion [...] Let children learn about different faiths, let them notice their incompatibility, and let them draw their own conclusions about the consequences of that incompatibility. As for whether any are “valid”, let them make up their own minds when they are old enough to do so.<sup>77</sup>

This means, as Dennett makes clear, that in fact we need to ‘get *more* education about religion into our schools, not less [...] No religion should be favored, and none ignored.’<sup>78</sup> All dimensions of religion should be put under the microscope, and the information should be up-to-date, just as all other subjects of education are up-to-date. Religious education should be an obligatory part of education, in public schools as well as in private schools and home-schooling. The new atheists are willing to let parents teach their children about religion, as long as they adopt this air of open-mindedness.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 300.

<sup>77</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 382-83.

<sup>78</sup> DENNETT, 327.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 327-28.

An important part of objective religious education is the consideration of Holy Scripture. In Western culture, the Bible is the most important scriptural text. Atheists can also learn about the Bible, as Dawkins explains: ‘the main reason the English Bible needs to be part of our education is that it is a major source book for literary culture. The same applies to the legends of the Greek and Roman gods, and we learn about them without being asked to believe in them.’<sup>80</sup>

To summarize this point of the relationship between religion and the upbringing and education of children, Dennett says:

So, in the end, my central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives. Ignorance is nothing shameful; *imposing* ignorance is shameful. Most people are not to blame for their own ignorance, but if they willfully pass it on, they *are* to blame.<sup>81</sup>

## 2. Problems within Science

### 2.1. Religion is Distinguished from Science

It is scientists, as well as believers, who contribute to the immunity of religion. They do this in two ways: one is to protect religion against any form of scientific investigation; another is to give religion its own domain of research.

The new atheists notice that religion is often protected from scientific examination. The argument for this is that religious beliefs cannot be tested; they ‘have to be “taken on faith” and are not subject to (scientific, historical) confirmation,’<sup>82</sup> as Dennett makes clear. Evidence can neither verify nor falsify religious beliefs. Because of this, religion manages to stay isolated from any scientific enterprise. According to Harris, this has dramatic implications:

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<sup>80</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 383.

<sup>81</sup> DENNETT, 339.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

Criticizing a person's faith is currently taboo in every corner of our culture. On this subject, liberals and conservatives have reached a rare consensus: religious beliefs are simply beyond the scope of rational discourse. Criticizing a person's idea about God and the afterlife is thought to be impolitic in a way that criticizing his ideas about physics or history is not.<sup>83</sup>

In other words, God is beyond our comprehension, so we are not capable of understanding religious beliefs, let alone criticize them.

To illustrate how science and religion are separated, the new atheists refer to a scientific idea called 'Non-Overlapping Magisteria,' abbreviated to NOMA. Evolutionary scientist Stephen Jay Gould was the first scientist to use the term. By NOMA, Gould meant that science and religion both have their own 'domain of authority in teaching.'<sup>84</sup> In short, the domain of science is empirical, and the domain of religion is moral. Gould notes that the debate between science and religion has already been going on for too long,<sup>85</sup> so he wants to bring the discussion to a resolution. Avoiding both extremes of unification and opposition, he proposes the strategy of 'principled and respectful separation.'<sup>86</sup>

Borrowing a line from G.K. Chesterton, Gould illustrates his point: 'art is limitation; the essence of every picture is the frame.'<sup>87</sup> One can consider science and religion both as pieces of art, as paintings defined by their frames. In Gould's words, 'each domain of inquiry frames its own rules and admissible questions, and sets its own criteria for judgment and resolution.'<sup>88</sup> For those who practice science, the main tasks are investigating, describing, and explaining nature. Religion, on the other hand, is concerned with morality, value, and the search for meaning. Gould recognizes that religion is not the only discipline that focuses on these issues. The broader term "humanities," including philosophy and parts of literature and history, is also connected with these tasks. However, he chooses to use the term 'the magisterium of religion' because most societies connect ethics and the search for meaning with religion, rather than with humanities in general. Still, one has to keep in mind that the reasoning of this magisterium does not need to be religious at all. Gould himself is 'a scientist by profession and a theological skeptic and nonparticipant by

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<sup>83</sup> HARRIS, 13.

<sup>84</sup> STEPHEN JAY GOULD, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1999), 5.

<sup>85</sup> E.g., one can notice this discussion already at Immanuel Kant and Ludwig Wittgenstein.

<sup>86</sup> GOULD, 4.

<sup>87</sup> G. K. CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy* (1908), Collected Works I (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 243.

<sup>88</sup> GOULD, 52-53.

confession.<sup>89</sup> Regardless of the terminology of the two domains, it should be clear what their paintings are and how they are framed.

The difference between the domains is akin to the difference between the ethical “ought” and the factual “is”; both domains study the same phenomena but ask different questions. Both magisteria are therefore equally important and necessary. To receive any wisdom and to articulate a coherent view of life, one has to integrate the insights of both. Both magisteria are places of dialogue and debate, not of strict and unchangeable rules. The magisterium of religion is characterized by compromise and consensus; the magisterium of science by factual demonstration. Together they ‘interdigitate in patterns of complex fingering,’<sup>90</sup> and this is how one should understand their relationship. Both magisteria should appreciate each other’s outcomes to be fruitful themselves. Their images are inseparable but different, like spouses in a marriage.<sup>91</sup>

Both believers and scientists (including the new atheists) criticize Gould’s proposal. Many believers want to be allowed to pronounce upon scientific facts from the perspective of their religion (e.g., the origin of the universe), while many scientists want to have authority on ethics. According to the new atheists, there is no agreement on the dividing line between both domains, and therefore NOMA does not solve the debate on the relationship between science and religion.<sup>92</sup> Furthermore, many of the people who *do* support NOMA are religious. On the one hand, they do not want science to make any statements about religion because there is no proof in favor of God’s existence. NOMA excuses the lack of arguments of the religious and gives them a seemingly neutral reason to reject the arguments put forward against the probability of God’s existence. According to NOMA, it is impossible to falsify God scientifically. The new atheists detect a form of special pleading here because if science were to produce proof in favor of God’s existence, no religious apologetic would reject this proof. Religions apply double standards.<sup>93</sup> Besides, believers still do make claims about their beliefs and take them to refer to reality, but they merely refuse to produce proofs of these beliefs. On the other hand, since the beginning of Christianity, many theologians have tried to provide proofs of God’s existence. If anything could confirm that God exists, believers would take that opportunity to validate their faith. This is what Thomas Aquinas tried by his five arguments for God’s existence, Anselm of Canterbury by his ontological argument, and many other people by referring to the beauty

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid., 49-67. In chapter 6 §2.4, I will discuss NOMA and other possible relationships between science and religion more elaborately.

<sup>92</sup> DENNETT, 30-31.

<sup>93</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 79-85.



of the world, Holy Scripture, well-known religious scientists, or personal experience. Dawkins discusses these proofs of God's existence elaborately.<sup>94</sup> Dennett simply says:

The proposition that God exists is *not even* a theory [...] The assertion is so prodigiously ambiguous that it expresses, at best, an unorganized set of dozens or hundreds—or billions—of quite *different* possible theories, most of them disqualified as theories in any case, because they are systematically immune to confirmation or disconfirmation.<sup>95</sup>

Putting the point more succinctly, Hitchens writes 'extraordinary claims were being made without even ordinary evidence.'<sup>96</sup>

To summarize, the new atheists say that religious proofs in favor of God's existence are not real proofs, as they can neither be validated nor falsified. Once the arguments in favor of God's existence are proven to be wrong, believers often fall back on NOMA because, as Harris concludes, 'every religion preaches the truth of propositions for which it has no evidence.'<sup>97</sup> Religion and science are considered to be separate paintings, of which only the latter has to deal with evidence.

## 2.2. Science Should Study Everything

Much of the time, religion escapes examination by science and science is complicit in this lack of attention. Believers claim that religion and its dimensions cannot be studied scientifically, and a prominent position within the debate on the relationship between science and religion (i.e., NOMA) agrees. Since the new atheists do not agree with this, they make it their case to explain why science *should* study religion rather than leave it alone.

### 2.2.1. Religion as the Opposite of Science

If science did not study religion and its dimensions, the consequence would be that religion would become the opposite of science, which would be highly undesirable. Saying that religion and God fall out of the scope of science, would be cutting the link with reason altogether. This would make religion even more untrustworthy than it already is. Hitchens says that it is already hard to find a religion 'that can stand up at least for a while in a

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<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 100-36. In chapter 6 §2.4.1, I will discuss Dawkins' theory on the probability of God's nonexistence.

<sup>95</sup> DENNETT, 311.

<sup>96</sup> HITCHENS, 176.

<sup>97</sup> HARRIS, 23.

confrontation with reason.<sup>98</sup> If religion were officially to become a separate magisterium, this would become impossible.

Nothing should become the opposite of science. Science naturally strives for omniscience, in which religion should naturally take part. According to Harris, ‘surely there must come a time when we will acknowledge the obvious: theology is now little more than a branch of human ignorance. Indeed, it is ignorance with wings.’<sup>99</sup> In principle, there is nothing wrong with ignorance. Science also has to contend with it; more than that, science thrives on it. The difference is that science handles this ignorance in another way than religion. Science looks for answers to fill these gaps of ignorance by questioning, investigating, and experimenting. Religion, on the other hand, fills the gaps with God. In Dawkins’ words:

Admissions of ignorance and temporary mystification are vital to good science. It is therefore unfortunate, to say the least, that the main strategy of creation propagandists is the negative one of seeking out gaps in scientific knowledge and claiming to fill them with “intelligent design” by default.<sup>100</sup>

Science refuses to believe anything on principle, which makes the “God of the gaps” principle the polar opposite to any scientific enterprise. To the new atheists, it is of the highest importance that every claim, regardless of the person who makes the claim, is verifiable, or at least reasonable. This includes religion and its dimensions.<sup>101</sup>

### 2.2.2. Religion as a Subject of Science

The new atheists are convinced that religion belongs to the domain of science and consequently cannot have its own domain or magisterium. If religion would be allowed to say anything at all, this does not automatically mean that it also has the right to claim authority upon matters about which science would not be allowed to speak. Believers think that their religion contains all the essential information to solve problems and end discussions. This should stop, as Hitchens explains, because ‘such stupidity, combined with such pride, should be enough on its own to exclude “belief” from the debate. The person

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<sup>98</sup> HITCHENS, 74.

<sup>99</sup> HARRIS, 173.

<sup>100</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 152.

<sup>101</sup> This attitude towards knowledge is also called epistemological naturalism. I will discuss this theme extensively in chapters 2 §3.2 and 6 §2.

who is certain, and who claims divine warranty for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species.<sup>102</sup> Apart from that, religion may have had to offer solutions in the past, but it no longer suffices in its explanations about the world anymore.<sup>103</sup>

At the end of the debate on the relationship between science and religion, the new atheists wish science to triumph over religion. Although it would be best, from their perspective, if there was no need to speak about religion at all, and ‘if we [could] banish all religion from the discourse,’<sup>104</sup> in the current situation, science should be allowed to speak about religion and its dimensions. According to Dawkins, even God can be studied scientifically: ‘God’s existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice.’<sup>105</sup> Others let this issue rest, but they do want to study the phenomenon of religion itself. Dennett says, ‘notice that it could be true that God exists, that God is indeed the intelligent, conscious, loving creator of us all, and yet *still* religion itself, as a complex set of phenomena, is a perfectly natural phenomenon.’<sup>106</sup> This is how science can investigate religion: by considering it a natural phenomenon. Believers tend to deny this by referring to religion’s supernatural elements, such as miracles. To this Dennett objects:

If it isn’t entirely natural, if there really are miracles involved, the best way—indeed, the only way—to show that to doubters would be to demonstrate it scientifically. Refusing to play by these rules only creates suspicion that one doesn’t really believe that religion is supernatural after all.<sup>107</sup>

Hitchens does not think believers will ever be able to do this; for this purpose, the miracles (if any) are not miraculous enough. In his words, ‘remember, miracles are supposed to occur at the behest of a being who is omnipotent as well as omniscient and omnipresent. One might hope for more magnificent performances than ever seem to occur.’<sup>108</sup> As long as these miracles are not proven to be actual miracles, the new atheists refuse to treat them as such. Rather, they regard them as anomalies that eventually might be solved by science and turn out not to be miracles at all.<sup>109</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> HITCHENS, 30.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 340.

<sup>105</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 73. I will say more about this below in chapter 1 §2.3 and in chapter 6 §2.4.1.

<sup>106</sup> DENNETT, 25.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>108</sup> HITCHENS, 178.

<sup>109</sup> Anomalies will be discussed in chapter 6 §1.5.

The new atheists all want to investigate religion scientifically. Dawkins and Dennett do this most extensively by treating religion as an outcome of evolution. Their starting point is the attraction religion has to people. Dennett explains:

Our ability to devote our lives to something [in this case religion] we deem more important than our own personal welfare—or our own biological imperative to have offspring—is one of the things that set us aside from the rest of the animal world [...] This fact does make us different, but it is itself a biological fact, visible to natural science, and something that requires an explanation from natural science.<sup>110</sup>

The new atheists regard religion as a universal phenomenon that the theory of evolution can explain. Evolution is generally understood to be something genetic, but this does not apply to religion. Religion does not have anything to do with genes, but all the more with ‘memes,’<sup>111</sup> cultural genes that are the subject of a hypothesis that Dawkins developed: ‘the tendency to be religious is a property of human brains, as is the tendency to like music and sex. It’s therefore reasonable to guess that the tendency towards religious belief has an evolutionary explanation, like everything else about us.’<sup>112</sup> Without dwelling too long on the biological details, the point is that religion may have evolved, not in a genetic way, but in a memic way, and that this might even have been a natural mistake. Dawkins explains:

The religious behaviour may be a misfiring, an unfortunate byproduct of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or once was, useful. On this view, the propensity that was naturally selected in our ancestors was not religion *per se*; it had some other benefit, and it only incidentally manifests itself as religious behaviour.<sup>113</sup>

Hence, it is possible that, originally, religion was something completely different. Religion may even have been a memic mistake, as there are also genetic mistakes found in evolution.

One hypothesis to explain this has again to do with the relationship between parents and their children. Originally, children were told to obey their parents, no matter what; they were supposed to trust them (or other elders who were trusted by the parents) without

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<sup>110</sup> DENNETT, 4.

<sup>111</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 221. Memes are a scientific hypothesis developed by Dawkins, which he explains in many of his scientific books. Here, it would be getting too far off the subject to delve into this hypothesis deeply. Cf. *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). I will review memes in chapter 6 §2.4.4.

<sup>112</sup> *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*, 224.

<sup>113</sup> *The God Delusion*, 202.

questioning them. This is understandable in light of evolution, for otherwise children could not survive. Unfortunately, the consequence was that these children could not distinguish between good and bad. Once the children were grown-ups, they automatically passed their parents' wisdom on to their own children, varying from practical knowledge to complete worldviews. It is probable that religions were born in the same way.<sup>114</sup> As Dennett finishes the hypothesis:

Once the information superhighway between parent and child is established by genetic evolution, it is ready to be used—or abused—by any agents with agendas of their own, *or by any memes that happen to have features that benefit from the biases built into the highway.*<sup>115</sup>

Consequently, by passing on stories and knowledge from parent to child, a religious tradition was born. Still, it was not yet a religion as we know it today. At first, tradition established a folk religion: 'folk religions have rituals, stories about gods or supernatural ancestors, prohibited and obligatory practices.'<sup>116</sup> At the same time, as already explained above, religions also were used to achieve power and provide social structures. Over generations, folk religions evolved into organized religions. This was simply a Darwinian matter of survival of the fittest,<sup>117</sup> just not in genes but in memes:

There was a gradual process in which the wild (self-sustaining) memes of folk religion became thoroughly domesticated. They acquired stewards. Memes that are fortunate enough to have stewards, people who will work hard and use their intelligence to foster their propagation and protect them from their enemies, are relieved of much of the burden of keeping their own lineages going.<sup>118</sup>

The leaders of tribes used religion to maintain or even reinforce their power. This made religion a by-product of a bigger goal, but it had evolved and was now strong enough to survive.

Focusing on its evolutionary development, science can investigate and explain religion. In this way, religion can be a subject of science. Moreover, religion does not need to have its own separate magisterium because science can answer most questions (and in

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 200-08.

<sup>115</sup> DENNETT, 130.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>117</sup> Although this phrase was originally coined by Herbert Spencer in his *Principles of Biology* (1864), Darwin adopted it in his own works too.

<sup>118</sup> DENNETT, 170.

the future, it will be able to answer many more). If science cannot answer a question, this does not imply that religion can. In Dawkins' words, 'some questions simply do not deserve an answer.'<sup>119</sup>

## 2.3. Study Religion Scientifically

The new atheists want to study religion scientifically. Religion is too influential to leave alone. Dennett formulates this point in more detail:

It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. It affects not just our social, political, and economic conflicts, but the very meanings we find in our lives. For many people, probably a majority of the people on Earth, nothing matters more than religion. For this very reason, it is imperative that we learn as much as we can about it.<sup>120</sup>

Science should be allowed to understand the phenomenon of religion. As Harris states, representing a widely accepted attitude, 'nothing is more sacred than the facts.'<sup>121</sup>

According to the new atheists, believers often fill gaps in our understanding with God and religion. Dawkins proposes to fill the gaps with something else: 'it is often said that there is a God-shaped gap in the brain which needs to be filled [...] But could it be that God clutters up a gap that we'd be better off filling with something else? Science, perhaps?'<sup>122</sup> Other types of inspiration could also fill the gaps and solve the problem, like art or love, but we at least need to break out of the stigma that religion's holy bubble is the only thing that fits the gaps.

One example of scientific research of religion that Dawkins has elaborated most extensively is a counterproposal to the attempts of various believers to prove that God exists. *Proof* of God's (non-)existence may be impossible, but Dawkins investigates the *probability* of God's (non-)existence. His starting point is this: 'the fact that we can neither prove nor disprove the existence of something does not put existence and non-existence on an even

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<sup>119</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 80.

<sup>120</sup> DENNETT, 14-15.

<sup>121</sup> HARRIS, 225.

<sup>122</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 388.

footing.<sup>123</sup> He sets out the so-called ‘argument from improbability’ to justify the position of atheism.<sup>124</sup> This argument shows that the origin of the world and the origin of life can be explained without the help of a designer, which makes God superfluous. As a Darwinian biologist, Dawkins is convinced that natural selection is a much better answer to the question of these origins than a designer God.

The argument from improbability goes as follows: any complex thing is statistically improbable. Therefore, complex things cannot have come into existence by chance. However, this does not necessarily mean that they are designed: ‘a deep understanding of Darwinism teaches us to be wary of the easy assumption that design is the only alternative to chance, and teaches us to seek out graded ramps of slowly increasing complexity.’<sup>125</sup> The problem of improbability often automatically pushes people to think of a designer as a solution, but there is an alternative: natural selection. This alternative possibility of natural selection adopts a scientific theory called “the anthropic principle”. This principle can be explained in various ways; here I will focus on Dawkins’ theory.

Creatures live on the earth; therefore, we know that the earth is a planet where life is possible. To make life on a planet possible, this planet needs to dispose of certain qualities, such as the right temperature, access to water, and the right amount of gravity. The chances that all these qualities come together on one planet seem very small. To solve the problem of this low chance:

Scientists invoke the magic of large numbers. It has been estimated that there are between 1 billion and 30 billion planets in our galaxy, and about 100 galaxies in the universe. Knocking a few noughts off for reasons of ordinary prudence, a billion billion is a conservative estimate of the number of available planets in the universe.<sup>126</sup>

This means that even if the chances that a planet would have the right qualities to make life possible were only one in a billion, life is possible on 1 billion planets in our universe. This raises the odds so much that it becomes a scientifically acceptable theory:

And the beauty of the anthropic principle is that it tells us, against all intuition, that a chemical model need only predict that life will arise on

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 137-89.

<sup>125</sup> Ibid., 139.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid., 165.

one planet in a billion billion to give us a good and entirely satisfying explanation for the presence of life here.<sup>127</sup>

Once this tiny bit of luck is granted (which we know is reality for we live on such a planet), natural selection can start and warrant further life.

According to Dawkins, this scientific answer to the question of the origin of life on earth is much more satisfying than the religious answer of a designer God:

To suggest that the first cause, the great unknown which is responsible for something existing rather than nothing, is a being capable of designing the universe and of talking to a million people simultaneously, is a total abdication of the responsibility to find an explanation.<sup>128</sup>

This is because the designer may be an answer to the problem of the design, but this only raises a bigger problem: ‘who designed the designer or created the creator?’<sup>129</sup> The religious solution in fact makes the problem in principle even bigger. The only satisfying answer is a cumulative one, meaning that the first cause was something small that (by means of evolution) has been able to grow. Scientifically, it does not make any sense to postulate a giant first cause that created something smaller. The solution Dawkins is looking for is a crane, instead of a skyhook.<sup>130</sup>

If (which I don’t believe for a moment) our universe was designed, and *a fortiori* if the designer reads our thoughts and hands out omniscient advice, forgiveness and redemption, the designer himself must be the end product of some kind of cumulative escalator or crane, perhaps a version of Darwinism in another universe.<sup>131</sup>

In the end, the first cause *must* be something small and simple, and Dawkins’ explanation of the anthropic principle provides this.

This example illustrates a way in which science can study religion and its dimensions. The new atheists practice science with the presumption that God does not exist. If believers want to convince atheists that God does exist, they need to bring up

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<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>129</sup> HITCHENS, 82.

<sup>130</sup> Dawkins borrows these terms from Daniel Dennett. Cf. DANIEL DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1995), (London: Penguin Books, 1996).

<sup>131</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 186.



conclusive evidence. Until then, science tries to provide other solutions. In Hitchens' words:

Having no reliable or consistent witnesses, in anything like the time period needed to certify such an extraordinary claim, we are finally entitled to say that we have a right, if not an obligation, to respect ourselves enough to disbelieve the whole thing. That is, unless or until superior evidence is presented, which it has not been. And exceptional claims demand exceptional evidence.<sup>132</sup>

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### 3. Problems within Society

#### 3.1. Religion Seems Benign to Society

As a third cause of the immunity of religion, society in general shields religion from the debate. In Dennett's words, 'up to now, there has been a largely unexamined mutual agreement that scientists and other researchers will leave religion alone, or restrict themselves to a few sidelong glances, since people get so upset at the mere thought of a more intensive inquiry.'<sup>133</sup> Society cannot stand an extensive investigation of religion because the people just want to let religion be. Religion is too delicate a subject to study or criticize it, let alone offend it.<sup>134</sup>

Society provides one important reason why religion should always be respected. It would not be fair to criticize religion because it is considered to be fundamentally benign. This benignity is visible in multiple ways. Firstly, religion enriches people's lives.<sup>135</sup> Secondly, it is something important to many people, like love. Love is not taken away from people, so religion should not be taken away either. Thirdly, religion is hidden in every corner of history and society. This is something to be cherished. Fourthly, religion provides good things that all people need (e.g., community, morality, spirituality) and is alone in doing this. Lastly, the evil some people perpetrate, even if it is in the name of their religion,

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<sup>132</sup> HITCHENS, 170.

<sup>133</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 18.

<sup>134</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 42.

<sup>135</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 17, 39, 254.

does not originate from this religion, but is a product of our own human nature. In fact, religion is the only, or at least the best, remedy against these urges.<sup>136</sup>

### 3.2. Religion is not Benign

Religion is protected by society in general on the ground that religion is supposed to be fundamentally benign. This is generally accepted, but not by the new atheists. Dennett says, ‘it is cruel and malicious to interfere with the life-enhancing illusions of others—unless those illusions are themselves the cause of even greater ills.’<sup>137</sup> According to the new atheists, this is exactly the case because the illustrations and examples that should make religion benign are illusions. The argument that religion is something important to people, in the same way love can be, is misleading. Love can blind, and it is not something that goes unquestioned or uninvestigated. On the contrary, because it is so important, people want to know more about it. The same should go for religion. The fact that religion determines history should not protect it from criticism either; not all our history is praiseworthy. Harris explains that ‘the fact that religious faith has left its mark on every aspect of our civilization is not an argument in its favor, nor can any particular faith be exonerated simply because certain of its adherents made foundational contributions to human culture.’<sup>138</sup>

It is justifiable to criticize the illusions and break the spell, as the illusions cause a bigger evil: the complete immunity of religion. The new atheists want to make clear why religion is not fundamentally benign so that, finally, religion can be brought into discussion: ‘the fact that religious beliefs have a great influence on human life says nothing at all about their *validity*,’<sup>139</sup> Harris points out. It is not an argument in their favor. In fact, the argument of benignity comes across as a last shot, when all the other (and better) arguments have been proven false. In Hitchens’ words, ‘the argument that religious belief improves people, or that it helps to civilize society, is one that people tend to bring up when they have exhausted the rest of their case.’<sup>140</sup> At this point, the new atheists are ready to prove this last shot false too. As examples, they take morality, spirituality, and evil.

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<sup>136</sup> HARRIS, 13-15.

<sup>137</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 288.

<sup>138</sup> HARRIS, 109.

<sup>139</sup> *Ibid.*, 64.

<sup>140</sup> HITCHENS, 220-21.

### 3.2.1. Religious Morality

Religion is supposed to provide morality; this is one of the reasons it should go unquestioned. However, according to the new atheists, it is not true that religion provides morality. Harris is very explicit on this: ‘the pervasive idea that religion is somehow the *source* of our deepest ethical intuitions is absurd.’<sup>141</sup> Morality is something that predated religion. It is something natural that stands apart from religion, as is demonstrated by other animals. They do not have a religion, let alone Holy Scripture, but they do have a sense of caring about the others of their species. Morality is not something one learns from a holy book; it is something in one’s inner self, another product of evolution.<sup>142</sup> Morals do not have to be absolute. They can change, depending on technology, scientific knowledge, and global circumstances. As Dawkins notes, ‘something has shifted in the intervening decades. It has shifted in all of us, and the shift has no connection with religion. If anything, it happens in spite of religion, not because of it.’<sup>143</sup>

Furthermore, it can be true that religion developed moral rules (based on natural morality) that worked once, foremost at the time the religion came into existence. However, since then, the circumstances, and hence the moral standards, have changed. As Dennett explains:

Living by a few simple, locally applicable maxims could more or less guarantee that one lived about as good a life as was possible at the time. No longer. Thanks to technology, what almost anybody *can* do has been multiplied a thousandfold, and our moral understanding about what we *ought* to do hasn’t kept pace.<sup>144</sup>

The morality of today—also the religious morality of today—is different from the morality of Holy Scripture. In fact, some holy books are examples of the changing moral standards themselves. Dawkins illustrates this by the Bible: ‘well, there’s no denying that, from a moral point of view, Jesus is a huge improvement over the cruel ogre of the Old Testament. Indeed Jesus, if he existed (or whoever wrote his script if he didn’t) was surely one of the great ethical innovators of history.’<sup>145</sup> Since then, however, times have moved on. The Bible has not changed, but morality has moved along. In Dawkins’ words:

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<sup>141</sup> HARRIS, 171.

<sup>142</sup> More on the new atheist view on morality will be said in chapter 2 §4.

<sup>143</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 304.

<sup>144</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 293.

<sup>145</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 283.

The God character, in the books of the Old Testament, was only acting out the moral values that were “in the air” at the time. But, although we may make allowances for his moral values [...] that doesn’t stop us resolving firmly to do things differently in our time. And we are entitled to oppose those fundamentalists of today who try to drag us back to those times.<sup>146</sup>

Besides, believers insist that their religious morality originates from Holy Scripture, but this should not be something to be proud of at all. Dawkins recollects the Christian doctrine of atonement, which actually shows how immoral the omnipotent Christian God is:

God is supposed to be all-powerful [...] He makes the rules. The one who makes the rules has the power to forgive whomever he likes for breaking them. Yet we are asked to believe that the only way he could think of to persuade himself—*himself*—to forgive humans for their sins (most notably the sin of Adam, who never existed and therefore couldn’t sin) was to have his son (who was also himself) tortured and crucified in the name of humanity.<sup>147</sup>

Out of this type of thinking in Holy Scripture, organized faith was established. This faith condemns relatively harmless things as evil and approves of situations where people actually suffer. Harris clarifies:

Faith drives a wedge between ethics and suffering. Where certain actions cause no suffering at all, religious dogmatists still maintain that they are evil and worthy of punishment (sodomy, marijuana use, homosexuality, the killing of blastocysts, etc.). And yet, where suffering and death are found in abundance their causes are often deemed to be good (withholding funds for family planning in the third world, prosecuting nonviolent drug offenders, preventing stem-cell research, etc.). This inversion of priorities not only victimizes innocent people and squanders scarce resources; it completely falsifies our ethics. It is time we found a more reasonable approach to answering questions of right and wrong.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*, 131.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 89.

<sup>148</sup> HARRIS, 168-69.

On top of these immoral judgments, believers do not realize, in fact, how immoral it is to base morality on religion. The reason is that beside the crooked moral rules, the religious reason to be moral is not laudable either. Believers tend to do good because of the reward they will receive from God in heaven (or because of their awaiting punishments in hell if they do not). In this way religion is supposed to support morality. Dennett responds to this: ‘there are two well-known problems with this reasoning: 1) it doesn’t seem to be true, which is good news, since 2) it is such a demeaning view of human nature.’<sup>149</sup> The first problem Dennett mentions concerns atheists in general. They seem not to have any reason to do good, since they ‘don’t have to fear a great spy camera in the sky.’<sup>150</sup> However, it is not true that atheists therefore commit more crimes than believers or that they are immoral people. This means that there must be better reasons to do good than religion provides. Dennett’s second problem flows from the first: humanity has apparently fallen so deep that it would need a God to have a reason to be moral. Dawkins has a clear opinion on this:

If you agree that, in the absence of God, you would “commit robbery, rape and murder”, you reveal yourself as an immoral person, “and we would be well advised to steer a wide course around you”. If, on the other hand, you admit that you would continue to be a good person even when not under divine surveillance, you have fatally undermined your claim that God is necessary for us to be good.<sup>151</sup>

Moreover, he mentions that ‘even if it were true that we need God to be moral, it would of course not make God’s existence more likely, merely more desirable (many people cannot tell the difference).’<sup>152</sup>

### 3.2.2. Religious Spirituality

The new atheists do not pay much attention to the misunderstanding of the relationship between religion and spirituality. They find it more important to elaborate on alternative forms of spirituality. Still, they do briefly mention why religion is not responsible for providing honorable spirituality.

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<sup>149</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 279.

<sup>150</sup> DAWKINS, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*, 97.

<sup>151</sup> *The God Delusion*, 259. He quotes MICHAEL SHERMER, *The Science of Good and Evil: Why People Cheat, Gossip, Care, Share, and Follow the Golden Rule* (New York: Holt, 2004).

<sup>152</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 264.

There is no doubt that the world is in need of spirituality; people need spirituality to thrive. However, one should not base this spirituality on religion but on rationality, just as morality. In fact, as Harris briefly notes, ‘there is clearly no greater obstacle to a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience than our current beliefs about God.’<sup>153</sup> Many people do not realize that not only morality and religion are independent of each other, but that the same goes for spirituality and religion. Spirituality and religion do not necessarily cooperate. Even spirituality and morality do not always go hand in hand. As Dennett explains, ‘there is also the factual misconception to correct: plenty of “deeply spiritual” people—and everybody knows this—are cruel, arrogant, self-centered, and utterly unconcerned about the moral problems of the world.’<sup>154</sup> The new atheists therefore want to offer a “truly empirical approach” in order to make morality and spirituality cooperative, which I will explain below in chapter 1 §3.3.

### 3.2.3. Religious Evil

Society thinks that religion is benign because it is supposed to prevent people from doing evil. In cases where people do evil, this is not because of their religion, but because of human nature. Religion is then the only help or remedy against these human urges. According to the new atheists, this theory looks well thought through on the surface, but is in fact the opposite of the truth. Looking at religious extremism, it immediately becomes clear that extremists believe they will be rewarded when they do certain deeds many people consider evil crimes. Even if evil were not something religious but simply human, this extremist religious belief would not work as a remedy against doing evil, but as a motivation to yield to your sinful side. Hitchens notes, ‘there are, indeed, several ways in which religion is not just amoral, but positively immoral. And these faults and crimes are not to be found in the behavior of its adherents (which can sometimes be exemplary) but in its original precepts.’<sup>155</sup> Religion itself causes its believers to do evil, which makes religion immoral to its core. Self-evidently, the believers are still to be blamed, but it is religion that is the fundamental cause. Ironically, this would never happen to atheists, for they do not expect a special reward.

The fact that religion motivates people to do evil also becomes visible when eschatology is taken into account: ‘with a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks

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<sup>153</sup> HARRIS, 214.

<sup>154</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 305.

<sup>155</sup> HITCHENS, 245.

forward to the destruction of the world.<sup>156</sup> Practically every religion contains the eschatological vision that at the end of time, the world will be gone, or at least that we will not live there anymore. Therefore, violence and evil do not really matter. This has been the mindset of believers from the very start. As Harris concludes, ‘indeed, religion is as much a living spring of violence today as it was at any time in the past.’<sup>157</sup>

### 3.3. Offer an Alternative: Atheism

Society emphasizes that religion has good things to offer and should therefore be excused from any examination and criticism. Religion may indeed have some good qualities, but these qualities do not make up for its bad ones. Moreover, the good qualities also exist in other phenomena, so they do not make religion unique in that way. This leads to the conclusion that it would be good to look for an alternative to religion. This is what Dennett hopes for: ‘once there are alternatives on offer in the “marketplace of ideas,” bigger and better rivals compete for allegiance, including not just mutating religions but—eventually—secular institutions as well.’<sup>158</sup> Hitchens says, ‘above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman.’<sup>159</sup> Best would be if religion did not even exist as one of the possibilities anymore, as is Harris’ dream: ‘we must find our way to a time when faith, without evidence, disgraces anyone who would claim it.’<sup>160</sup>

To help their readers on their search for other possibilities, the new atheists draw the attention to the alternative they value the highest: atheism. Dawkins explains this very explicitly:

Atheists are a lot more numerous, especially among the educated elite, than many realize [...] The reason so many people don’t notice atheists is that many of us are reluctant to “come out”. My dream is that this book may help people to come out [...] If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>157</sup> HARRIS, 26.

<sup>158</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 188.

<sup>159</sup> HITCHENS, 340.

<sup>160</sup> HARRIS, 48.

<sup>161</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 26-28.

This is the new atheist dream: no religion anymore and no a-theism anymore as a pure negation of theism. Becoming religious should become an exception, not the other way around as it is now, for people do not need God or religion to live their lives fully, to be moral and spiritual. In Hitchens' words, 'no divine plan, let alone angelic intervention, is required. *Everything works without that assumption.*'<sup>162</sup> Time has moved on. One can know things now that people could not know in the past. At one time, people may have needed religion to survive, but this is not the case anymore today. People themselves are responsible for their actions and thoughts; one does not need God to give one's life meaning. God has become superfluous.<sup>163</sup>

### 3.3.1. Rational Morality

Morality can be fully founded on rationality. One can be ethical without being religious.<sup>164</sup> Ethics is about happiness, both one's own and that of others. In Harris' words, it comes down to this: 'there is a circle here that links us to one another: we each want to be happy; the social feeling of love is one of our greatest sources of happiness; and love entails that we be concerned for the happiness of others. We discover that we can be selfish together.'<sup>165</sup> At first, this may not seem ethical at all, but it actually is one way to explain Kant's Categorical Imperative. One must treat other people in a certain way not for other purposes (i.e., not merely as a means), but simply because other people deserve to be treated well (i.e., as an end in themselves). The Golden Rule, to treat others in the way one expects to be treated too, is another way of putting it, but it all amounts to the same principle: 'the point is that the disposition to take the happiness of others into account—to be *ethical*—seems to be a rational way to augment one's own happiness.'<sup>166</sup>

Dawkins makes use of the theory of evolution to reveal the final truth about morality: eventually, everybody is selfish. Of course, one can act altruistically or generously, but this behavior has a selfish goal: survival. Four types of altruistic behavior exist: 1) Genetic kinship. People care most about their own families. This serves our survival indirectly. 2) Reciprocal altruism. People do something for other people, so they owe them something. This altruism is based on trading. 3) Reputation. A better reputation caused by good deeds assures protection and hence survival. 4) Superiority. If people can "afford" to

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<sup>162</sup> HITCHENS, 112.

<sup>163</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 403-05.

<sup>164</sup> HITCHENS, 7.

<sup>165</sup> HARRIS, 187.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 192.



be generous, they show themselves to be better than others. This makes others look up to them, which puts them higher in position.<sup>167</sup> This seems very immoral, but Dawkins claims it to be just as moral as morality is always thought to be:

Do not, for one moment, think of such Darwinizing as demeaning or reductive of the noble emotions of compassion and generosity [...] Mercy to a debtor is, when seen out of context, as un-Darwinian as adopting someone else's child: "The quality of mercy is not strained. It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven upon the place beneath".<sup>168</sup>

These four reasons that Dawkins mentions are just as valid as any other reason to behave ethically. In the end, people do this to survive and to survive happily. There is nothing wrong with that. Even more, according to the new atheists, this is better than behaving ethically because a non-proven God orders it.

### 3.3.2. Rational Spirituality

Spirituality can also do without religion and be fully based on rationality. Dennett puts it into the following words:

Let your *self* go. If you can approach the world's complexities, both its glories and its horrors, with an attitude of humble curiosity, acknowledging that however deeply you have seen, you have only just scratched the surface, you will find worlds within worlds, beauties you could not heretofore imagine, and your own mundane preoccupations will shrink to *proper* size, not all that important in the greater scheme of things. Keeping that awestruck vision of the world ready to hand while dealing with the demands of daily living is no easy exercise, but it is definitely worth the effort, for if you can stay *centered*, and *engaged*, you will find the hard choices easier, the right words will come to you when you need them, and you will indeed be a better person. That, I propose, is the secret to spirituality, and it has nothing at all to do with believing in an immortal soul, or in anything supernatural.<sup>169</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 245-54.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid., 253. He quotes Shakespeare, *The Merchant of Venice* (1605).

<sup>169</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 303.

Spirituality is about consciousness, open-mindedness, and subjectivity. Many people falsely consider it to be the opposite of materialism, spirituality being good and materialism being bad, the first related to faith and the second related to non-belief. This stereotypical view is not true: ‘there is *no reason at all* why a disbelief in the immateriality or immortality of the soul should make a person less caring, less moral, less committed to a well-being of everybody on Earth than somebody who believes in “the spirit”.’<sup>170</sup>

Harris agrees with this, and he adds a neuroscientific dimension to the discussion.<sup>171</sup> The purpose of this, he says, is that ‘I hope to show that spirituality can be—indeed, *must* be—deeply rational, even as it elucidates the limits of reason.’<sup>172</sup> Experiences of spirituality can and should be studied scientifically, just as any other type of experience. Harris links spirituality with consciousness. People’s consciousness observes everything that happens to them and their surroundings, itself being insensitive to observations. Consciousness is only a witness, not a participant. Linking this with spirituality, Harris says, ‘investigating the nature of consciousness directly, through sustained introspection, is simply another name for spiritual practice.’<sup>173</sup> Consciousness stands in relation to the body; somehow it observes the body, for one says, “I have a body” and not “I am a body”. The moment one starts to talk about “I”, a process starts; people experience things as “selves”. This is the point Harris wants to make:

In subjective terms, the search for the self seems to entail a paradox: we are, after all, looking for the very thing that is doing the looking. Thousands of years of human experience suggests, however, that the paradox here is only apparent: it is not merely that the component of our experience that we call “I” cannot be found; it is that it actually disappears when looked for in a rigorous way.<sup>174</sup>

Spirituality should make the dualism of one’s experiences (i.e., one’s “self” and “the world”) go away by reflecting on one’s consciousness. Eastern philosophies have emphasized this for millennia, but the West is not used to this type of thinking. Western faith blocks the insight that one’s “self” as one knows it is not optimal. Subjectivity can be experienced differently, empirically, and religion should not be allowed to prevent this investigation. One can call it:

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<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 305.

<sup>171</sup> HARRIS, 204-21.

<sup>172</sup> Ibid., 43.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 209.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid., 214.

Personal transformation, or indeed liberation from the illusion of the self [...] The fundamental insight of most Eastern schools of spirituality, however, is that while thinking is a practical necessity, the failure to recognize thoughts as *thoughts*, moment after moment, is what gives each of us the feeling that we call “I”, and this is the string upon which all our states of suffering and dissatisfaction are strung. This is an empirical claim, not a matter of philosophical speculation. Break the spell of thought, and the duality of subject and object will vanish—as will the fundamental difference between conventional states of happiness and suffering.<sup>175</sup>

In the end, spirituality is something rational; it can be discussed and is empirically justifiable. This is the opposite of religion. Eventually, the rational approaches of one’s deepest concerns may triumph if this investigation were continued, and then religion will vanish.

### 3.3.3. Rational Community: The Brights Movement

Belonging to a religion means belonging to a community. Dawkins and Dennett suggest a concrete alternative possibility to a religious community, called the Brights Movement. Not all four prominent new atheists support this movement, however, Dawkins and Dennett both belong to this community themselves. Hitchens, in contrast, states that he is annoyed by the proposal for atheists to call themselves Brights,<sup>176</sup> and Harris does not mention it anywhere. (In fact, in the case of Harris as a new atheist, the founders of the Brights Movement are condemnatory. Gary Wolf wrote in *WIRED*: ‘the founders of the Brights, Geisert and Futrell, became grim at the mention of Sam Harris. “We don’t endorse anything from him,” Geisert said.’<sup>177</sup>) However, Dawkins and Dennett are fully active Brights and have given great publicity to the movement; therefore, it deserves some attention here as well.

The Brights Movement was founded in 2002 by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell. After the tragedy of 9/11 in 2001, many initiatives emerged to express sympathy with the victims, many of which were religious. To give the non-religious a voice as well, on November 2, 2002 the “Godless Americans March on Washington” took place. Geisert and Futrell participated in this, but they were not satisfied with the name of the event. This is

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>176</sup> HITCHENS, 6.

<sup>177</sup> WOLF.

why they introduced the umbrella term “Brights”, a positive neologism that was inspired by the Enlightenment and was meant to give people with a naturalistic worldview a common name.<sup>178</sup> Dawkins and Dennett, being two prominent scientists, supported the movement immediately and gave it an increasing popular appeal by writing about it in leading newspapers such as *The Guardian* (Dawkins on June 21, 2003) and *The New York Times* (Dennett on July 12, 2003).

The Brights Movement is centralized on the Brights’ Net, a website where people who identify themselves with the definition of a Bright can register. On the website, it states clearly what the Brights Movement contains:

Who are the Brights? We are participants in an international internet constituency of individuals. All of us have *a naturalistic worldview, free of supernatural or mystical elements*. A Bright’s ethics and actions are based on *a naturalistic worldview*. The Brights aspire to an egalitarian civic vision. We want citizens who have *a naturalistic worldview* to be accepted as full participants in civil society.<sup>179</sup>

Geisert and Futrell chose the name Brights because they wanted a term with a positive connotation. They wanted the name to develop in the same way the term “gay” has developed for homosexuals, as positive and a term that means something in itself, without the need of the opposite (heterosexuals in the case of homosexuals and theists in the case of atheists). Dawkins says in *The Guardian*:

Those of us who subscribe to no religion; those of us whose view of the universe is natural rather than supernatural; those of us who rejoice in the real and scorn the false comfort of the unreal, we need a word of our own, a word like “gay”. You can say “I am an atheist” but at best it sounds stuffy (like “I am a homosexual”) and at worst it inflames prejudice (like “I am a homosexual”).<sup>180</sup>

People with a naturalistic worldview can consider themselves as lower case “*brights*.” Once they have confirmed their worldview on the website, they are officially part of the movement and can call themselves “*Brights*” with an uppercase B. Although it is

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<sup>178</sup> “Inside the Brights Network: History of the Brights Movement,” YouTube video, 4:56, posted by “thebrightsnet,” upload August 8<sup>th</sup> 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g\\_eaxU0gg0s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g_eaxU0gg0s), accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>179</sup> “Home,” <http://www.the-brights.net/>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>180</sup> RICHARD DAWKINS, “The Future Looks Bright,” *The Guardian* (June 21<sup>st</sup> 2003), <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2003/jun/21/society.richarddawkins>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

often associated with atheism, the Brights Movement is not an atheist movement, for the reasons that this would be a negative term and not all atheists are necessarily brights. In addition to atheists, there are more worldviews that fit the Bright's "definition". Agnostics, rationalists, freethinkers, humanists, etc. can all be Brights, but do not necessarily have to be. The term is simply meant to bring people with a naturalistic worldview together.

The aim of the movement is 'civic fairness for all.'<sup>181</sup> The Brights argue that people with a naturalistic worldview are often discriminated against and marginalized, compared to 'supers'<sup>182</sup> (i.e., people with a supernaturalistic worldview). This should change. Dennett says in *The New York Times*:

But there's no reason all Americans can't support bright rights. I am neither gay nor African-American, but nobody can use a slur against blacks or homosexuals in my hearing and get away with it. Whatever your theology, you can firmly object when you hear family or friends sneer at atheists or agnostics or other godless folk.<sup>183</sup>

Most people are not aware that there are so many people with a naturalistic worldview. The Brights Movement wants to raise consciousness, just as Dawkins wants with his books:

It is intended to raise consciousness—raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral and intellectually fulfilled [...] Being an atheist is nothing to be apologetic about. On the contrary, it is something to be proud of, standing tall to face the far horizon, for atheism nearly always indicates a healthy independence of mind and, indeed, a healthy mind.<sup>184</sup>

Like Dawkins, the Brights Movement also wants to raise consciousness about the fact that people with a naturalistic worldview exist, and that they are more numerous than assumed. The more people subscribe, the more evident this will become. A positive name, such as

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<sup>181</sup> "The Brights' Principles," <http://www.the-brights.net/vision/principles.html>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>182</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 21. "Those who are not gay are not necessarily glum; they're *straight*. Those who are not brights are not necessarily dim. They might like to choose a name for themselves. Since, unlike us brights, they believe in the supernatural, perhaps they would like to call themselves *supers*. It's a nice word with positive connotations, like *gay* and *bright* and *straight*."

<sup>183</sup> "The Bright Stuff," *The New York Times* (July 12<sup>th</sup> 2003), <http://www.nytimes.com/2003/07/12/opinion/the-bright-stuff.html>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>184</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 23-26.

Brights, helps atheists or agnostics to “come out of the closet”, since a positive name makes this less scary. The name evokes curiosity, for it is a brand-new noun, and people who have not heard of it yet want to know what it means. As Dawkins states in *The Guardian*, ‘as with gays, the more brights come out, the easier it will be for yet more brights to do so. People reluctant to use the word atheist might be happy to come out as a bright.’<sup>185</sup>

Typical for the Brights Movement is the attitude towards “supers”. As Brights fight for equality between different worldviews, they have to acknowledge the view of supernaturalists too:

One may, in fact, strongly disagree with varied or numerous elements of it and say as much. However, such disagreement/disapproval notwithstanding, personally or collectively disparaging supers as people is not likely to move brights toward social acceptance and civic inclusion. Brights who hope to accrue to themselves civic respect will need to accord to supers equivalent consideration.<sup>186</sup>

The new atheist Brights Dawkins and Dennett do not always seem to keep this facet in mind, but this may be due to their fierce desire to defend their own case of atheism against the powerful and protected status of religion.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given an overview of the positions of the four most prominent new atheists on religion. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens find the immunity of religion in our current society unjust and they want to alter this.

First of all, they attribute the cause of this immunity to the attitude of believers, who are intolerant because of their attitude towards their tradition, which *is* fierce in the case of extremism and which *becomes* fierce when the upbringing of children is at stake, and because of the truth claims of different religions. The intolerance of believers can easily lead to extremist violence. This can be avoided if believers realize that the tradition they regard highly is only human, and that therefore tradition is not a valid argument for their intolerance. Even more, not just tradition but religion itself is human too. Believers should

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<sup>185</sup> “The Future Looks Bright.”

<sup>186</sup> “Synopsis,” <http://www.the-brights.net/movement/synopsis.html>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

keep this in mind when they come across different attitudes, and when they raise their children religiously. Therefore, the new atheists want to start the discussion and have faith, extremism, and religious upbringing criticized openly.

Secondly, science distinguishes itself from religion and protects religion from examination as well, which is reinforced by the position of NOMA in the debate on the relationship between science and religion. The distinction between science and religion is a bad and a false one. It is a bad distinction because religion becomes the opposite of science when it is not studied. This must be avoided at all costs, for it makes religion very untrustworthy. It is a false distinction because religion in fact *can* be regarded as a scientific subject. Science can explain religion as a natural phenomenon that evolved from folk religion to religion in its current form. Therefore, the new atheists want science to study religion like everything else.

Lastly, religion is protected by society on the ground that religion is supposed to be fundamentally benign and contains some unique qualities like providing morality, spirituality, and community. However, society's reasons for protecting religion are not valid. Religion may have some good qualities, but these do not counter-balance its bad qualities. Moreover, religion can be replaced by alternatives with the same good qualities. Therefore, the new atheists offer an alternative, which is atheism. The atheistic worldview they offer is purely based on rationality, which can lay solid foundations for morality, spirituality, and community.





## Chapter 2

# The Philosophy of the New Atheists

### Introduction

In order to understand the position of the new atheists on religion better and to be able to respond to them adequately, it is also useful to consider their underlying philosophical positions. Therefore, this chapter will be devoted to the views of the new atheists on the philosophical categories of ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and ethics. I have chosen these categories because they are most directly linked to the new atheists' understanding of religion. I will discuss the categories in this order with the following thought in mind: discussing their ontology will indicate what the views of the new atheists are on the nature of being and the nature of reality. Subsequently, I will narrow down the focus by discussing what their opinions are on a subset of this reality—namely, humanity—by dwelling on their anthropology. Next, I will discuss two specific themes that are characteristic of humanity: epistemology, where I will enlarge on the capability of humanity to acquire knowledge, and ethics.

Although distinct, the upcoming themes are not divided by clear boundaries. To avoid overlap, I will sometimes make references to other parts of the chapter where I will discuss the matter in question more elaborately. In my survey, I will try to preserve the mutual distinctions of the four prominent new atheists on the different matters, since they do not agree on everything. Just as in chapter 1, this chapter, too, will explain and elucidate *their* opinions, not mine. Although their opinions will not only be quoted but also interpreted, I do not intend to evaluate them here.

# 1. Ontology

Ontology studies the nature of being and the nature of reality. I will discuss two topics within this field: ontological naturalism and the relationship between this ontological naturalism and questions of meaning.

## 1.1. Ontological Naturalism

The new atheists can be considered ontological<sup>1</sup> naturalists. They do not believe in any form of the supernatural; instead, they believe that reality consists only of nature. Paul Draper, a philosopher of religion, defines “nature” as follows: ‘the spatiotemporal universe of physical entities together with any entities that are ontologically or causally reducible to those entities.’<sup>2</sup> This means that, according to ontological naturalism, all reality consists of physical entities or of entities that are reducible to physical entities. The new atheists echo this view in their writings. For example, Dawkins explains how everything can be reduced to physical events and physical entities, in the following case, brains:

Ultimately, it always comes back to our senses, one way or another. Does this mean that reality only contains things that can be detected, directly or indirectly, by our senses and by the methods of science? What about things like jealousy and joy, happiness and love? Are these not also real? Yes, they are real. But they depend for their existence on brains.<sup>3</sup>

No single emotional event is ultimately non-physical. Dennett agrees, ‘we are creatures of the natural order whose mental activity is dependent on the operations of our brains.’<sup>4</sup> Thus, mental events, which are events generally distinguished from physical events, still depend on physical entities and are therefore ultimately physical.

Confusion exists concerning Harris’ opinion on naturalism. He himself professes to be a naturalist when he says, ‘there is no question that (most, if not all) mental events are the product of physical events.’<sup>5</sup> However, adding “(most, if not all)” could make one

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<sup>1</sup> Also known as metaphysical and philosophical; in this case these terms are interchangeable.

<sup>2</sup> PAUL DRAPER, “God, Science, and Naturalism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Philosophy of Religion*, ed. William J. Wainwright (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 278.

<sup>3</sup> RICHARD DAWKINS, *The Magic of Reality: How We Know What’s Really True* (2011), (London: Black Swan, 2012), 18.

<sup>4</sup> DANIEL DENNETT, *Freedom Evolves* (2003), (London: Penguin Books, 2004), 103.

<sup>5</sup> SAM HARRIS, *Free Will* (New York: Free Press, 2012), 11.

wonder what mental events Harris tends to consider to be non-physical. Such sayings make people doubt if he really is a naturalist, as Alvin Plantinga illustrates:

Naturalism is trumpeted by, for example, three of the four horsemen of atheism: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. (The fourth horseman, Sam Harris, is an atheist, all right, but doesn't seem to rise to the lofty heights—or descend to the murky depths—of naturalism.)<sup>6</sup>

However, Harris does defend naturalism on philosophically delicate subjects such as consciousness:

However we propose to explain the emergence of consciousness—be it in biological, functional, computational, or any other terms—we have committed ourselves to this much: first there is a physical world, unconscious and seething with unperceived events; then, by virtue of some physical property or process, consciousness itself springs, or staggers, into being.<sup>7</sup>

Despite the fact that he cannot explain exactly how consciousness comes into existence, he is convinced that it depends originally on a physical entity or event. Like consciousness, ultimately all reality is dependent on and reducible to the physical world. With these sayings in mind, he can be considered an ontological naturalist, just like the other new atheists.

## 1.2. Questions of Meaning

Although ontological naturalism relies on the logical and empirical sciences,<sup>8</sup> it also attempts to answer questions of meaning. Therefore, one can consider it as a worldview, even a 'quasi-religion,' as Plantinga calls it.<sup>9</sup> Religion also answers questions of meaning, but ontological naturalists such as the new atheists do not accept these answers. Dawkins says:

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<sup>6</sup> PLANTINGA, 282.

<sup>7</sup> SAM HARRIS, *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion* (2014), (London: Black Swan, 2015), 56.

<sup>8</sup> I will discuss this methodological issue more elaborately below in chapter 2 §3.

<sup>9</sup> PLANTINGA, 311.

There is a sense in which science does indeed provide the equivalent of this [religious mythology], at least for the educated section of our modern society. Science may even be described as a religion [...] Sciences shares with religion the claim that it answers deep questions about origins, the nature of life, and the cosmos. But there the resemblance ends. Scientific beliefs are supported by evidence, and they get results. Myths and faiths are not and do not.<sup>10</sup>

Of the new atheists, Dawkins is the most vocal where questions of meaning are concerned. Initially, though, it may seem as if he doubts if these questions—which he calls ‘why questions’—are even worth worrying about at all: ‘what *are* “why questions”, and why should we feel entitled to think they deserve an answer?’<sup>11</sup> Dawkins distinguishes different sorts of questions with which science and religion normally deal (keeping NOMA at the back of his mind): science deals with the “how questions”, and religion deals with the “why questions”. As we have seen in the previous chapter, Dawkins does not agree with this division of tasks. He does not want to deny the importance of why questions and the answers to these, but denies the authority of religion to answer these. Instead, science should provide the answers.

It may be helpful here to include Dennett’s observation on “why questions”. He notices that the English word “why” is equivocal: ‘the main ambiguity is marked by a familiar pair of substitute phrases: *what for?* and *how come?*’<sup>12</sup> According to him:

Evolution by natural selection starts with *how come* and arrives at *what for*. We start with a lifeless world in which there are no reasons, no purposes at all, but there are processes that happen [...] At some “point” (but don’t look for a bright line) we *find it appropriate* to describe the *reasons* why some things are arranged as they now are.<sup>13</sup>

Asking for the reason behind something is multi-interpretable. One must be careful not to pick the interpretation that points towards a supernatural answer. *How come?* is a historical question that asks for causes; *what for?* is an adaptationist question that inclines to

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<sup>10</sup> RICHARD DAWKINS, *River Out of Eden: A Darwinian View of Life* (1995), (London: Weidenfeld&Nicolson, 2015), 37.

<sup>11</sup> “The Great Convergence,” in *A Devil’s Chaplain: Selected Essays*, ed. Latha Menon (London: Phoenix, 2004), 176.

<sup>12</sup> DANIEL DENNETT, *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2017), 38.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

speculation about reasons.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, according to Dawkins, the best way in which science can answer why questions is by following Charles Darwin: ‘Darwinism encompasses all of life—human, animal, plant, bacterial, and, if I am right in the last chapter of this book, extraterrestrial. It provides the only satisfying explanation for *why* we all exist, *why* [my emphases] we are the way we are.’<sup>15</sup> Below, in chapter 2 §2.1, I will describe how Darwin answered these questions and how the new atheists incorporate these answers into their own views.

## 2. Anthropology

Now that ontology has been discussed, the focus will be narrowed down to one specific phenomenon within this reality: humanity. Philosophical anthropology studies human nature in a broad sense. I will discuss two anthropological topics on which the new atheists, mostly Dawkins and Dennett, reflect: the origin and purpose of humanity, and the relationship between body and soul.

### 2.1. The Origin and Purpose of Humanity

The new atheists all accept the theory of evolution, more specifically the Darwinian variant that proclaims evolution by natural selection.<sup>16</sup> This theory also explains the origin of humanity. Following the theory of evolution, the existence of humanity is the consequence of a long chain of continual adaptation in the composition of living entities, starting from the simplest form of life possible. This form of life came into existence 4.1 billion years ago,<sup>17</sup> evolved, and caused a variety of living entities. The most successful genes were passed

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 58, 80.

<sup>15</sup> RICHARD DAWKINS, *The Blind Watchmaker: Why the Evidence of Evolution Reveals a Universe Without Design* (1987), 30th Anniversary ed. (London: Penguin Books, 2016), x.

<sup>16</sup> Dawkins and Dennett are outspoken Darwinists, preaching Darwinism in their books. Harris and Hitchens are no experts in this field, but they too mention Darwin various times.

<sup>17</sup> In which way this *first* form of life started, Darwinists cannot say with certainty. Dawkins explains it as follows: ‘we have no evidence about what the first step in making life was, but we do know the *kind* of step it must have been. It must have been whatever it took to get natural selection started [...] And that means the key step was the arising, by some process as yet unknown, of a self-replicating entity.’ RICHARD DAWKINS, *The Greatest Show on Earth: The Evidence for Evolution* (New York: Free Press, 2009), 419. Although science has not discovered yet of what this first form of life consisted, Dawkins also emphasizes that ‘the present lack of

on to the next generation (also known as the famous “survival of the fittest”), and this eventually led to the birth of all the different animals that are known, including humanity. It is impossible to indicate *when* exactly the first human being originated because everything came into existence gradually; this is one of the key concepts of evolution by natural selection. Dawkins compares it to a child that becomes an adult. There is no specific moment at which the transition took place; a person develops gradually.<sup>18</sup> The same goes for the origin of humanity. There was no specific moment at which mother ape bore the first human person. Dennett corroborates this statement, “[it] must have come into existence gradually, by steps that are barely discernible *even in retrospect*.”<sup>19</sup>

Darwinism states that nature evolves, and that humanity is one of the outcomes of this evolution. However, one should not think that evolution by natural selection took place with humanity as its purpose. According to Dawkins and Dennett, Darwin demonstrated that evolution by natural selection has no purpose at all.<sup>20</sup> Dennett explains that this is ‘perhaps the most common misunderstanding of Darwinism: the idea that Darwin showed that evolution by natural selection is a procedure *for* producing Us.’<sup>21</sup> On the contrary, evolution by natural selection is an algorithm, a completely natural process that, once started, automatically provides a certain result. Dennett continues:

It is hard to believe that something as mindless and mechanical as an algorithm could produce such wonderful things. No matter how impressive the products of an algorithm, the underlying process always consists of nothing but a set of individually mindless steps succeeding each other without the help of any intelligent supervision.<sup>22</sup>

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a definitely accepted account of the origin of life should certainly not be taken as a stumbling block for the whole Darwinian world view, as it occasionally—probably with wishful thinking—is.’ *The Blind Watchmaker*, 237.

<sup>18</sup> *The Magic of Reality*, 40-41.

<sup>19</sup> DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 200.

<sup>20</sup> To this day Darwinian experts are not united on this thought and it seems that Darwin himself changed his mind during his life. In his own words, ‘I was not able to annul the influence of my former belief, then widely prevalent, that each species had been purposely created; and this led to my tacitly assuming that every detail of structure, excepting rudiments, was of some special, though unrecognized, service. Any one with this assumption in his mind would naturally extend the action of natural selection, either during past or present times, too far.’ CHARLES DARWIN, *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871), (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1981), 153. Cf. JOHN HEDLEY BROOKE, “Darwin and Victorian Christianity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Darwin*, eds. Jonathan Hodge and Gregory Radick (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 198; MICHAEL RUSE, “Belief in God in a Darwinian Age,” *ibid.*, 335. Even though different views exist, in this chapter the opinion of the new atheists preponderates.

<sup>21</sup> DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 56.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 59.

Dawkins, too, emphasizes that evolution by natural selection is a mindless and natural process. He considers the theory of design, the religious argument that God created the earth and every form of life that it contains, to be the biggest rival to the theory of evolution. He wrote *The Blind Watchmaker* to finally bring down the argument from design and put the theory of evolution in its place: ‘anybody tempted by the arguments of creationists will find definitive refutations of them—I think *all* of them—in here.’<sup>23</sup> He admits that the current forms of life can so deeply impress us that it may *seem* as if they have been designed, but he states that this is just an illusion. Alluding to the watchmaker analogy of William Paley (1743-1805) that supported an argument from design, Dawkins says that the only “watchmaker” responsible for life in its current forms is natural selection. Natural selection, not being a supernatural deity but a natural force, is only a designer in a remote way; it is blind, unconscious, and stupid. In Dawkins’ own words, ‘natural selection is the blind watchmaker, blind because it does not see ahead, does not plan consequences, has no purpose in view.’<sup>24</sup> Considering the many people who believe that God has created the earth, including evolution, he is well aware that the theory of evolution provides no proof in the strict sense that God does not exist.<sup>25</sup> According to this view, science and religion are compatible. However, Dawkins emphasizes that there is no need to believe in God. Applying the principle of Occam’s razor,<sup>26</sup> he says that the theory of evolution makes the existence of God superfluous and therefore undesirable. It is exactly the power of the theory of evolution to explain the complexity of life out of its original simplicity. Dawkins says that although people may be tempted to rely on a supernatural explanation once they are trying to understand the magnificence of life, the only thing that this explanation does, is shift the problem to another level:

God himself is even more improbable than William Paley’s watch. Anything clever enough—complicated enough—to design things has to arrive late in the universe. Anything as complicated as a watchmaker must be the end product of a long, slow climb from earlier simplicity.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> DAWKINS, *The Blind Watchmaker*, xi.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>25</sup> This is called “Theistic Evolution.” The Roman Catholic Church is also receptive to this view. Cf. *Humani Generis*, 36.

<sup>26</sup> ‘The famous slogan known as “Ockham’s Razor,” [is] often expressed as “Don’t multiply entities beyond necessity.”’ In CLAUDE PANACCIO AND PAUL VINCENT SPADE, “William of Ockham,” in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2016).

<sup>27</sup> DAWKINS, *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*, 187-88.

If we accept the creation theory—even the variant that still allows the acceptance of evolution—another question arises: who designed the designer? If a supernatural entity like God was able to create the earth, he must have been utterly complex himself. However, it is exactly the complexity that needs to be explained.<sup>28</sup> Dawkins concludes:

The more we can get away from miracles, major improbabilities, fantastic coincidences, large chance events, and the more thoroughly we can break large events up into a cumulative series of small chance events, the more satisfying to rational minds our explanations will be.<sup>29</sup>

This means that not God but the theory of evolution by natural selection offers the right answers to the questions of how humanity came into existence and what its purpose is, even though these answers differ from the wishful thinking of so many religions.

The Darwinian conviction that evolution is purposeless has consequences for the appreciation and ranking of humanity within the cosmos. Darwinism does not conceive of humanity as a climax within the history of the evolution of nature because evolution by natural selection is a “blind watchmaker” that works purposelessly and mercilessly and cannot be stopped. Evolution by natural selection is an algorithm, and the outcome of humanity was probably inescapable,<sup>30</sup> but this does not mean that humanity was its goal. Dennett confirms, ‘evolution is not a process that was designed to produce us, but it does not follow from this that evolution is not an algorithmic process that has in fact produced us.’<sup>31</sup> Moreover, no indication suggests that the evolutionary process will come to an end now that humanity exists. Most probably, the existence of humanity is just a link in a chain that is to become much longer.

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<sup>28</sup> *The Blind Watchmaker*, 197-201.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 201.

<sup>30</sup> This position is not agreed upon by all Darwinists, e.g., Stephen Jay Gould (who came up with the term NOMA) proposes a thought experiment that he calls ‘replaying life’s tape.’ If one could go back in time by “pressing the rewind button” and then pressing “play” again, Gould claims that evolution would most probably turn out differently and that humanity would not exist. STEPHEN JAY GOULD, *Wonderful Life: The Burgess Shale and the Nature of History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989). Dawkins and Dennett oppose this view, cf. e.g., DAWKINS, “*Hallucigenia*, *Wiwaxia* and Friends: Review of *Wonderful Life* by S. J. Gould,” 238. ‘But the theory that Stephen Gould wrings out of his fossils is a sorry mess,’ and DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 262. ‘Another myth—Stephen Jay Gould, Refuter of Orthodox Darwinism.’ Hitchens, on the other hand, in a debate at the University of Notre Dame does refer to Gould’s work, when the question is asked if it could have turned out another way. Cf. “The God Debate: Hitchens vs. D’Souza,” YouTube video, 1:48:03, posted by “University of Notre Dame,” upload April 22<sup>nd</sup> 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9V85OykSDT8>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. 1:29:20. Here Hitchens seems to agree with Gould.

<sup>31</sup> DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 56.



## 2.2. The Relationship between Body and Soul

The other anthropological topic to be discussed here is the relationship between the human body and the human soul. The new atheists, as ontological naturalists, consider all reality to be ultimately physical. This is also reflected in their views on the apparently non-physical part of human beings, which they call, interchangeably, mind, soul, spirit, self, or consciousness.

Harris and Dennett discuss the relationship between body and soul extensively. Harris holds two opposing opinions. On the one hand, he does not want to jump to conclusions about the soul: ‘the idea that brains *produce* consciousness is little more than an article of faith among scientists at present, and there are many reasons to believe that the methods of science will be insufficient to either prove or disprove it.’<sup>32</sup> This quotation shows Harris’s desire to be very careful where consciousness is concerned. On the other hand, in his later work he asserts that ‘we know, *of course* [my emphasis], that human *minds* are the product of human brains.’<sup>33</sup> This statement suggests that it speaks for itself and is commonly accepted that the mind depends on the brain, and thus on the body. Harris repeats this statement several times and in multiple works,<sup>34</sup> which suggests that this latter opinion dominates. Harris argues that the view of the dependence of the mind on the body leads away from the religious and metaphysical convictions of an immortal and independent soul. Religious and metaphysical convictions lead too easily to unethical and undesirable behavior. For example, they could lead to martyrdom, in so far as the conviction that the soul is immortal and will have an afterlife can persuade a believer to sacrifice his mortal body. A view that links the mind to the body ‘represents progress toward a deeper, more consistent, and more compassionate view of our common humanity.’<sup>35</sup> Such a view leads to a healthier and more progressive image of the human mind and brain because “failures” of the mind can be connected to psychological disorders visible in the brain. Consequently, we can cure the mind by giving medicine and therapy to the brain.

Dennett confirms what Harris says and points out that ‘this idea of immaterial souls, capable of defying the laws of physics, has outlived its credibility thanks to the advance of the natural sciences.’<sup>36</sup> However, Dennett also observes that not only religious people are reluctant to accept this idea, but that many scientists are skeptical as well: ‘the problem with

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<sup>32</sup> HARRIS, *The End of Faith*, 208.

<sup>33</sup> *Waking Up*, 55.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. e.g., *The End of Faith*, 278; *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (2010), (London: Black Swan, 2012), 145, 204; *Waking Up*, 204.

<sup>35</sup> *The Moral Landscape*, 145.

<sup>36</sup> DENNETT, *Freedom Evolves*, 1.

dualism, ever since Descartes, is that nobody has ever been able to offer a convincing account of how these postulated interactive transactions between mind and body could occur without violating the laws of physics.<sup>37</sup> That is why he emphasizes multiple times that ‘our minds are just what our brains non-miraculously do, and the talents of our brains had to evolve like every other marvel of nature.’<sup>38</sup> This brings the discussion back to Darwinism because it means that not only has the human body evolved by natural selection, but the human mind has evolved as well. According to Dennett, the mind ‘*is* the brain, or, more specifically, a system of organization within the brain that has evolved in much the way our immune system or respiratory system or digestive system has evolved.’<sup>39</sup> This means that Dennett does not say that the mind is *linked* with the brain, or that it is *dependent* on the brain; he claims that the mind *is* the brain.<sup>40</sup> Dennett affirms that we have a soul, but only a soul that is part of the human body. Our soul is real, but therefore also natural and nothing miraculous. To conclude with one of his slogans: ‘yes, we have a soul; but it’s made of lots of tiny robots.’<sup>41</sup>

### 3. Epistemology

So far, I have discussed the study of reality and the study of humanity as one specific phenomenon within reality. Now I will narrow down the focus further and consider epistemology, the study of acquiring knowledge, with knowledge as one of humanity’s characteristics. I will examine three epistemological topics that characterize the new atheists: methodological naturalism, epistemological naturalism, and the legacy of logical positivism.

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<sup>37</sup> *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*, 14.

<sup>38</sup> *Freedom Evolves*, xi.

<sup>39</sup> *Breaking the Spell*, 107.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. e.g., *Consciousness Explained* (New York: Little, Brown and Company, 1991), 16, 33; *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 370.

<sup>41</sup> *Breaking the Spell*, 302.

### 3.1. Methodological Naturalism

The new atheists are not only ontological naturalists but also methodological naturalists. Methodological naturalism tells science to limit its explanations to natural ones. This means that within science, supernatural explanations cannot be accepted, not even in the absence of alternative explanations. Instead, scientists must continue to look for natural explanations and admit that they have not solved the problem yet. This position is self-evident to ontological naturalists such as the new atheists, but it is not the same as ontological naturalism. Ontological *supernaturalists* can be methodological naturalists too. Methodological naturalism only implies that one leaves God outside of *science*. Apart from this, the supernatural can still play a role in people's lives.

To the new atheists, methodological naturalism is of great relevance because it helps science to progress. Claiming that an event was caused by anything supernatural would suggest that an explanation had been found, which would consequently stop science from investigating the matter further. Dawkins illustrates: 'to say that something happened supernaturally is not just to say "We don't understand it" but to say "We will never understand it, so don't even try."' <sup>42</sup> Keeping answers open makes it possible for science to keep investigating empirical and logical possibilities. Dawkins continues: 'science thrives on its inability—so far—to explain everything, and uses that as the spur to go on asking questions, creating possible models and testing them, so that we make our way, inch by inch, closer to the truth.' <sup>43</sup> Or, in other words, 'they [scientists] cheerfully admit that they don't know. Cheerfully, because not knowing the answer is an exciting challenge to try to find out.' <sup>44</sup> Science must be neutral and progressive, and since the new atheists consider supernatural explanations to be subjective and lax, they must be left out of scientific inquiry.

### 3.2. Epistemological Naturalism

Accepting only natural explanations within science is a position that can be supported by both ontological naturalists and supernaturalists. It is something different to think that *all* reality can *completely* and *only* be understood by science. This conviction—that only scientific knowledge can be real knowledge, or at least that scientific knowledge is the

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<sup>42</sup> DAWKINS, *The Magic of Reality*, 22.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 186.

highest possible knowledge<sup>45</sup>—is called epistemological naturalism. This position is supported by some of the new atheists, but not by all of them. Therefore, I will discuss their positions separately.

Hitchens cannot be considered an epistemological naturalist. Being a literary and cultural critic, he believes that knowledge can be found ‘in the marvels and complexities of science, as well as in the higher and deeper reaches of literature.’<sup>46</sup> He does not elaborate on the valuable contributions of literature but, according to him, relying only on science is no safeguard against believing false things: ‘there is also [...] no special reason to credit “science” as the father or godfather of reason [...] A commitment to experiment and find evidence is no guarantee of immunity to superstition and worse.’<sup>47</sup>

Dennett acknowledges the limitations of scientific inquiry, saying that ‘we no doubt have some limitations on what we can understand, and there are surely many facts forever beyond our ken.’<sup>48</sup> However, he is also still convinced that science is up to great discoveries. Keeping in mind all science’s accomplishments so far, Dennett tends to focus more on the status that scientific knowledge has, more specifically, the status of the natural sciences. Sometimes he explicitly mentions the natural sciences, making clear their superior position compared to other sciences: ‘my fundamental perspective is *naturalism*, the idea that philosophical investigations are not superior to, or prior to, investigations in the natural sciences, but in partnership with those truth-seeking enterprises.’<sup>49</sup> He explicitly mentions the natural sciences as the conversation partners with which he, as a naturalist philosopher, wants to cooperate in his philosophizing. The other sciences are left out, which leaves the impression that they are not worth considering, or at least are less valuable.

Dawkins tends to focus on the natural sciences, but he also emphasizes yet another aspect of epistemological naturalism, which is that science in general is the highest, the best, and maybe even the *only* possible way to acquire knowledge. Myths are also ‘colourful and interesting,’<sup>50</sup> but the best answers to our questions are the answers that science provides. The proof that science offers is the only reason to believe anything and to take anything as real; myths offer no proof and, hence, provide no real answers on which we can count.<sup>51</sup> Moreover, science as Dawkins means it—Darwinian science—‘is the bedrock on

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<sup>45</sup> DRAPER, 280.

<sup>46</sup> CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS, *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: Da Capo, 2007), xi.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, xxi.

<sup>48</sup> DANIEL DENNETT AND ALVIN PLANTINGA, *Science and Religion: Are They Compatible?* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 76.

<sup>49</sup> DENNETT, *Freedom Evolves*, 14-15.

<sup>50</sup> DAWKINS, *The Magic of Reality*, 34.

<sup>51</sup> “Good and Bad Reasons for Believing.”

which rest all the disciplines known as the humanities.<sup>52</sup> This makes Darwinian science the most fundamental and valuable science of all. Dawkins has great faith in science: ‘wherever there is a gap in our understanding, people try to plug the gap with God [...] Darwin filled the biggest gap of all. And we should have the courage to expect that science will eventually fill the gaps that remain.’<sup>53</sup>

Harris’ position seems ambivalent. On the one hand, he does not believe that science is or will ultimately be able to resolve all the mysteries in the world. He writes the following about human consciousness and its relationship to meaning, morality, and values: ‘although science may ultimately show us how to truly maximize human well-being, it may still fail to dispel the fundamental mystery of our being itself.’<sup>54</sup> On the other hand, he does believe that science can eventually define universal moral values:<sup>55</sup> ‘if there are objective truths to be known about human well-being [...] then science should one day be able to make very precise claims about which of our behaviors and uses of attention are morally good, which are neutral, and which are worth abandoning.’<sup>56</sup> When mentioning science, Harris means science in general and not Darwinian science per se: ‘it is important to emphasize that a scientific account of human values [...] is not the same as an *evolutionary* account.’<sup>57</sup> However, as a neuroscientist he gives special attention to his own field of research. In the case of morality, he believes that neuroscience has many discoveries in store for us: ‘the neuroscience of morality and social emotions is only just beginning, but there seems no question that it will one day deliver morally relevant insights regarding the material causes of our happiness and suffering.’<sup>58</sup> In the end, he does not say that neuroscience (instead of evolutionary science) will become omniscient, but he does create the impression that science in general, and neuroscience and evolutionary science as parts of it, will approach omniscience.

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<sup>52</sup> *The Blind Watchmaker*, x.

<sup>53</sup> *Outgrowing God: A Beginner’s Guide*, 250.

<sup>54</sup> HARRIS, *Waking Up*, 79.

<sup>55</sup> Harris’ position on the relationship between science and morality will more elaborately be discussed below in chapter 2 §4. Here, his opinion on science is what matters.

<sup>56</sup> HARRIS, *The Moral Landscape*, 20.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 25.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

### 3.3. The Legacy of Logical Positivism

A philosophical movement that underlays the positions of methodological and epistemological naturalism of the new atheists is called logical positivism. Logical positivism arose in the 1920s and was popular in the 1930s. It sought to be a scientific, epistemological, and non-metaphysical philosophy. Generally, it claimed that statements were only significant if they were either empirically verifiable or true by definition (analytic).<sup>59</sup> This made metaphysical, religious, and ethical statements meaningless, as they did not meet either of these two criteria.

Logical positivism is no longer popular among philosophers. Its method was not convincing, since it did not meet its own criterion for significant statements; it was neither empirically verifiable nor true by definition. However, its scientific appearance was still appealing, and logical positivism left a legacy in the following decennia.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, its influence is still visible in the debate about the relationship between science and religion, as philosopher of religion Roger Trigg explains:

The legacy of logical positivism is to accord science a philosophical status that is denied metaphysics in general and theology in particular. The tendency will be to assume that the assertions of science have an epistemological priority that theology must always respect. In any dispute science must always be given priority.<sup>61</sup>

The influence of logical positivism is clearly visible in the views of the new atheists, since they focus on the physical world and neglect possibly supernatural aspects. They are no strict logical positivists, as they do make claims on metaphysics and ethics (which we will see below in chapter 2 §4), but the movement definitely has affected their opinions.

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<sup>59</sup> ALFRED J. AYER, *Language, Truth and Logic* (1936), (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1974), 12.

<sup>60</sup> MARCEL SAROT, *De goddeloosheid van de wetenschap: Theologie, geloof en het gangbare wetenschapsideaal* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 2006), 23-31.

<sup>61</sup> ROGER TRIGG, "Positivism, Logical," in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2003), 687.

## 4. Ethics

Like epistemology, ethics is another philosophical theme that is closely linked to religion. With respect to ethics, the new atheists are mostly concerned about two topics: free will versus determinism and the determination of a standard for morality. Although the discussion of free will versus determinism is normally considered metaphysical, I will discuss it below because the new atheists mostly mention it with reference to morality. By being linked to ethics, the issue will be mostly restricted to human behavior, and only remotely to reality in general. The discussion of the determination of a standard for morality is a meta-ethical one. Therefore, it will not cover ethical issues themselves, but is concerned with the nature of these issues.

### 4.1. Free Will versus Determinism

Ontological naturalism, which I have discussed above in chapter 2 §1, implies determinism. Christian apologist C.S. Lewis explains determinism as follows:

Each particular thing (such as this page) is what it is because other things are what they are; and so, eventually, because the whole system is what it is. All the things and events are so completely interlocked that no one of them can claim the slightest independence from “the whole show”.<sup>62</sup>

For ontological naturalists, this means that if nature is all that exists, the physical laws are always automatically obeyed. Lewis’ “whole system” is an algorithm that, just like evolution by natural selection, mindlessly produces its outcomes; one event necessarily leads to the next. About this, Dawkins and Hitchens are mostly silent. Dawkins avoids the question of whether determinism is true by responding that he has not thought it through well enough to have a clear opinion about it. He says he himself struggles with the conflict between the materialist view of determinism that he supports and the subjective conviction of autonomy that he cannot avoid.<sup>63</sup> Harris explicitly declares himself a determinist: ‘we know that determinism, in every sense relevant to human behavior, is true. Unconscious neural events determine our thoughts and actions—and are themselves determined by prior causes of

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<sup>62</sup> C.S. LEWIS, *Miracles* (1947), The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics (New York: Harper Collins, 2002), 307.

<sup>63</sup> “Something From Nothing - a conversation w/ Richard Dawkins & Lawrence Krauss - ASU Feb 4, 2012,” YouTube video, 2:00:22, posted by “Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason & Science,” upload February 14<sup>th</sup> 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gH9UvnrARf8>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. 1:58:02.

which we are subjectively unaware.’<sup>64</sup> Dennett, whose Darwinian philosophical research in large part deals with this topic, also accepts determinism. However, his opinion is more nuanced, which will become clear below.

Agreeing with determinism also has consequences for the belief in free will. Lewis explains:

Thus no thoroughgoing Naturalist believes in free will: for free will would mean that human beings have the power of independent action, the power of doing something more or other than what was involved by the total series of events. And any such separate power of originating events is what the Naturalist denies.<sup>65</sup>

Dennett does not agree with this statement. He actually declares, ‘naturalism is no enemy of free will; it provides a *positive* account of free will.’<sup>66</sup>

The philosophical position of Dennett in this debate between determinism and free will is called “compatibilism.” Compatibilism tries to reconcile free will with determinism. Dennett confirms free will, while denying any supernatural interventions:

The traditional view of free will, as a personal power somehow isolated from physical causation, is both incoherent and unnecessary as a grounds for moral responsibility and meaning [...] The phenomena of free will and moral responsibility, worthy items in the ontology of the human manifest image, survive robustly once we strip off some of the accrued magic of tradition and reground them in scientific reality.<sup>67</sup>

Dennett’s theory of compatibilism has a Darwinian origin: free will, just like everything else in this world, evolved and is still evolving. It is something created by humanity, comparable to music or money. In order to fully understand free will, one must perform a thought experiment and imagine the moment when some proto-type of free will came into existence. This proto-type evolved, it became more complex and it resulted in the free will that is known today. In Dennett’s illustrative words: ‘when life began, there was just one way of being alive. It was do A or die. Now there are options: do A or B or C or D or... die.’<sup>68</sup> Human beings are creatures that have learned to avoid death, and have improved their ways of avoiding. They have learned this by ‘anticipating the future, so that timely

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<sup>64</sup> HARRIS, *Free Will*, 16.

<sup>65</sup> LEWIS, 307.

<sup>66</sup> DENNETT, *Freedom Evolves*, 15-16.

<sup>67</sup> *From Bacteria to Bach and Back: The Evolution of Minds*, 368-69.

<sup>68</sup> *Freedom Evolves*, 144.



steps can be taken in better directions.<sup>69</sup> Determinism does not mean that the future is unavoidable; it means that the future is determined. According to Dennett, “unavoidable” and “determined” are not synonyms. If they are considered as synonyms, determinism is mistaken for fatalism:

Fatalism is the rather mystical and superstitious view that at certain checkpoints in our lives, we will necessarily find ourselves in particular circumstances (the circumstances “fate” has decreed) *no matter what the intervening vagaries of our personal trajectories*.<sup>70</sup>

Dennett says that one is capable of “changing” a future one is anticipating into another future. However, this is actually only a mind game because the anticipated future does not exist (yet). Free will means changing an *anticipated* outcome. ‘The *real* outcome, the *actual* outcome, is whatever happens, and nothing can change *that* in a determined world—or in an undetermined world!’<sup>71</sup>

Unlike Dennett, Harris is a so-called hard determinist. He devotes part of his neuroscientific research to the question of free will and has concluded that free will is an illusion.<sup>72</sup> According to him, choices *appear* in one’s mind; one cannot evoke them. Thoughts arise in one’s mind and one cannot steer this process. One’s will, therefore, depends on the thoughts that come up in one’s mind and is, consequently, not actually free. Harris says, ‘the truth seems inescapable: I, as the subject of my experience, cannot know what I will next think or do until a thought or intention arises; and thoughts and intentions are caused by physical events and mental stirrings of which I am not aware.’<sup>73</sup> This means that one does not really have free will, but Harris still thinks that the choices one makes are important. Like Dennett, he warns his readers not to confuse determinism with fatalism, even referring to Dennett’s work.<sup>74</sup> One’s choices, although they are

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>70</sup> DANIEL DENNETT, *Elbow Room: The Varieties of Free Will Worth Wanting* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1984), 104.

<sup>71</sup> *Freedom Evolves*, 59.

<sup>72</sup> However, it should be noted that Harris seems to have a different notion of “free will” than Dennett has. A distinction can be drawn between compatibilist free will and libertarian free will. Compatibilist free will can be explained as not being forced to perform an action against one’s will. Libertarian free will means that someone could have acted otherwise. MARCEL SAROT, “Christian Faith, Free Will and Neuroscience,” in *Embodied Religion: Proceedings of the 2012 Conference of the European Society for Philosophy of Religion*, eds. Peter Jonkers and Marcel Sarot (Utrecht: Igitur, 2013), 110. Following these explanations of the various notions of free will, one can see that Harris starts from the idea of libertarian free will, even though he does not mention this concept himself. Following Harris, libertarian free will is an illusion.

<sup>73</sup> HARRIS, *The Moral Landscape*, 137.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 139.

dependent on the options that unconsciously arise, lead to certain actions and behaviors. These in turn lead to new choices. Therefore, one should hold these choices in high esteem. However, that is all there is to it. One is not totally conscious and in charge of these choices: ‘the phrase “free will” describes what it *feels* like to identify with certain mental states as they arise in consciousness.’<sup>75</sup> Free will does not exist at all.<sup>76</sup>

Despite the differences of opinion the new atheists have on determinism and free will, they all agree on one thing: in the end, it does not matter if one has actual free will or not. The question of whether free will is real or an illusion is something that cannot be proven, but people have to deal with it anyhow. Dawkins says in an interview:

It doesn’t matter. There is no difference between the way it feels to have free will if there is this kind of fundamentally illusory free will that I’ve been talking about, or if in some other sense (which actually I can’t quite imagine what it would [be] like) we really did have free will. It wouldn’t feel any different.<sup>77</sup>

Morality still matters; focusing on morality itself is therefore probably more fruitful than arguing about the question of whether free will is real or not. This is why Hitchens, who is also asked if he believes in free will, only answers ironically: ‘yeah, I think there is free will. We have free will. We have no choice.’<sup>78</sup>

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<sup>75</sup> HARRIS, *Free Will*, 32.

<sup>76</sup> Dennett and Harris have argued about their differences of opinion elaborately elsewhere. Cf. e.g., Dennett’s review on Harris’ *Free Will*: DANIEL DENNETT, “Reflections on ‘Free Will,’” January 24<sup>th</sup> 2014, <http://www.naturalism.org/resources/book-reviews/reflections-on-free-will>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. and Harris’ reaction to this review: SAM HARRIS, “The Marionette’s Lament: A Response to Daniel Dennett,” February 12<sup>th</sup> 2014, <http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/the-marionettes-lament>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. In this discussion, they both do mention compatibilist and libertarian free will.

<sup>77</sup> “Richard Dawkins,” Faith and Reason, <http://www.pbs.org/faithandreason/transcript/dawk-body.html>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>78</sup> “Christopher Hitchens and Tony Jones: Does Religion Poison Everything? (Full Video, Full Screen),” YouTube video, 1:43:50, posted by “Zombro0,” upload March 3<sup>rd</sup> 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8W8iCgfWva8>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. 30:57.

## 4.2. The Determination of Moral Values

Whether free will exists or not, people still have to deal with moral issues in their daily lives. Not holding on to a certain religion when determining moral values, the new atheists have to rely on another standard and they all have different views on this.

Dawkins does not discuss this meta-ethical issue at length, but the few words he does spend on the issue are very outspoken: ‘science has no methods for deciding what is ethical. That is a matter for individuals and for society.’<sup>79</sup> Science can only be connected to moral philosophy by applying scientific principles to the moral views and by pointing out inconsistencies in moral thinking. Apart from this, he calls himself a consequentialist, which means that the consequences of an action are the basis for deciding the rightness or wrongness of this action, but he does not elaborate on this statement extensively.<sup>80</sup>

Hitchens does not talk about the determination of moral values more extensively than Dawkins. He states that he believes that morality is rooted in ‘innate human solidarity.’<sup>81</sup> “Innate” is the key word, but he does not explain exactly what he means by this. He only says, ‘our morality evolved. Just as we have. Natural selection and trial-and-error have given us the vague yet grand conception of human rights and some but not yet all of the means of making these rights coherent and consistent.’<sup>82</sup> Hitchens’ point is that morality should not be derived from the supernatural, as religions do. Morality is a *human* issue, not a supernatural one.

Dennett’s opinion is more philosophically grounded. He asks the classical philosophical question whether an “ought” can be derived from an “is”:

If “ought” cannot be derived from “is,” just what *can* “ought” be derived from? Is ethics an *entirely* “autonomous” field of inquiry? Does it float, untethered to facts from any other discipline or tradition? Do our moral intuitions arise from some inexplicable ethics module implanted in our brains (or our “hearts,” to speak with tradition)?<sup>83</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> DAWKINS, “Science, Genetics and Ethics: Memo for Tony Blair,” 39.

<sup>80</sup> “In Conversation with Richard Dawkins - Hosted by Stephen Law,” YouTube video, 1:28:52, posted by “ThinkWeekOxford,” upload March 13<sup>th</sup> 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zvkbIElAOqU>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. 45:49 and 1:17:22.

<sup>81</sup> CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS AND DOUGLAS WILSON, *Is Christianity Good for the World?* (Moscow, Idaho: Canon Press, 2009), 36.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 59-60.

<sup>83</sup> DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 467.

One should not hastily derive moral values from scientific observations, but one cannot refrain from deriving altogether. According to him, it is not fallacious to infer from one to another if this is done conscientiously: ‘the fallacy is *greedy* reductionism of values to facts, rather than reductionism considered more circumspectly, as the attempt to unify our world-view so that our ethical principles don’t clash irrationally with the way the world *is*.’<sup>84</sup> His view is that ethics cannot exist independently but depends on science and the natural world, a view which is consistent with his ontological, methodological, and epistemological naturalism. Therefore, he could be called an ethical naturalist too.

Harris is the most outspoken new atheist on the relationship between science and morality. He has written a whole book on the relationship between science and ethics in which he contends that science can be the universal standard for morality. The basis on which he founds this opinion is the following: ‘human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain. Consequently, there must be scientific truths to be known about it.’<sup>85</sup> Until now, science has only taught us how we have come to be the way we are. It has not provided any norms yet, but it is possible for science—pre-eminently psychology and neuroscience—to do so by focusing on the human brain. Knowledge about the human brain can help to determine what is right and wrong, by observing what actions increase happiness and what actions increase sorrow. Harris illustrates this opinion as follows:

For there to be objective moral truths worth knowing, there need only be better and worse ways to seek happiness in this world [...] Everything about human experience suggests that love is more conducive to happiness than hate is. This is an *objective* claim about the human mind, about dynamics of social relations, and about the moral order of our world.<sup>86</sup>

This is a highly simplified vision of determining what is morally right or wrong, but it gives an impression of what Harris means. In his own words, ‘morality should be considered an undeveloped branch of science’<sup>87</sup> for which he has high expectations. As long as there are still differences of opinion on moral questions, moral science has not yet reached its peak. In the end, diversity will have made way for one universal morality, which will be grounded on scientific truth.

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 468.

<sup>85</sup> HARRIS, *The Moral Landscape*, 13.

<sup>86</sup> *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), (London: Bantam Press, 2007), 23-24.

<sup>87</sup> *The Moral Landscape*, 15.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the views of the new atheists on the philosophical themes of ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and ethics. All new atheists are ontological naturalists. However, this does not prevent them from asking questions of meaning. Their attempt to answer questions of meaning is also reflected in their anthropology, as they have thought about the origin and purpose of humanity, and the relationship between the human body and soul. Their thinking about humanity has a scientific, mostly Darwinian, basis, especially for Dawkins and Dennett. In addition to being ontological naturalists, the new atheists are also methodological naturalists, and some of them are epistemological naturalists. Hitchens is an exception in this case. However, the legacy of logical positivism is visible in all their work, including in Hitchens's. On the topic of ethics, the ontological naturalist position of the new atheists is also reflected. The new atheists all struggle to various extents with the notion of free will and its relationship with determinism, which Dennett and Harris have most elaborately investigated. As a standard for morality, they all are convinced that this is something within humanity, but they differ in their opinion about whether science can help to find this standard or not.

As one can see in this survey, Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris have been referred to most often. This is because they express their philosophical assumptions the most clearly and extensively. Hitchens is less inclined to enlarge on philosophical matters. However, I have not completely left Hitchens out of this chapter, as he does make some valuable contributions and many times fits in the general picture of new atheist views. It is this general philosophical picture together with the new atheists' explicit opinions on religion to which a response needs to be formed.



## Chapter 3

# Contemporary Apologetics

### Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have investigated the views of the new atheists, both in regard to religion and philosophical themes that relate to religion. This resulted in a comprehensive overview of their range of thought. Now it is time to look at apologetics. The arguments of the new atheists have not gone unnoticed: various theologians and philosophers have responded to the new atheists, using different approaches. To be able to decide what is a fruitful apologetic approach in this study, this chapter will begin by considering approaches other apologists have used up to now. Then, I will evaluate these approaches to determine their advantages and disadvantages, specifically with the new atheism in mind. This chapter will end with an account on the question of what the Roman Catholic Church asks of a new apologetic strategy. Since this study is meant to answer the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics as part of the new evangelization project, it is important to also take this perspective into consideration.

### 1. Current Approaches of Apologetics

The choice of a certain apologetic approach depends on the epistemological view of the apologist, and whether this view is implicit or explicit. This is because the apologetic approach attempts to justify why it is rational to believe in God. Several ways of doing this are possible. I will first discuss the most common approach of apologetics, which is based

on the broader epistemological theory of classical foundationalism.<sup>1</sup> Then, I will focus on three alternative approaches that in some way criticize classical foundationalism and hence adopt an alternative apologetic approach. Since this study concentrates on the new atheism, I will describe only approaches that are used in the current discussion with the new atheism.

## 1.1. Classical Apologetics

The most common approach of apologetics is classical apologetics.<sup>2</sup> This approach is not only the most common in general, but also specifically the most common among apologists who write against the new atheism.

### 1.1.1. Classical Apologetics in General

Classical apologists who defend Christianity against the new atheism are John Haught, Alister McGrath, and Keith Ward. According to another classical apologist, William Lane Craig, the approach of classical apologetics endorses a specific way in which faith and reason are related.<sup>3</sup> Methodologically speaking, faith plays the main role in *knowing* Christianity to be true, while reason is the main instrument for *showing* Christianity to be true. This does not mean that reason is neglected in *knowing*, nor that faith does not play a role in *showing*; it only means that they exchange positions of priority. To believers, the Holy Spirit gives an inner assurance of the truth of Christianity, which can be confirmed by rational argument and evidence. So, the experience of the Holy Spirit, which belongs to

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<sup>1</sup> Classical foundationalism is the philosophical view that some propositions one asserts are not based on any other propositions and are therefore “basic.” Other beliefs one has are not basic, but to be rational they have to be inferred from (evidence that is ultimately founded upon) one or more basic propositions. F. LERON SHULTS, “Foundationalism,” in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel Van Huyssteen (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> The names of various apologetic approaches are used interchangeably by several authors. I call this approach “classical apologetics,” based on STEVEN B. COWAN, ed., *Five Views on Apologetics* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000); M.J. KATER, H.A. BAKKER, W. VAN VLASTUIN, eds., *Verantwoord geloof: Handboek Christelijke Apologetiek* (Kampen: Brevier, 2014). By calling this approach “classical apologetics,” one is able to distinguish between this approach, presuppositionalism, and evidentialism, while other authors take these approaches together and call this collection “natural theology.” Cf. R. DOUGLAS GEIVETT AND BRENDAN SWEETMAN, eds., *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992). Although all three approaches are based on classical foundationalism, they adopt different styles to apologetics. As far as the new atheism is concerned, only the approach of “classical apologetics” is commonly used. Therefore, I will not discuss the other two approaches, presuppositionalism and evidentialism.

<sup>3</sup> WILLIAM LANE CRAIG, “Classical Apologetics,” in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000).



faith, provides the most important way to know that Christianity is true. Reason plays only a subsidiary role in knowing; it only has a ministerial role to support one's belief, not a magisterial role to judge one's belief. As Craig explains, 'indeed, if the evidence in some situations actually turns against Christianity, the believer will not lose faith but will persevere in the hope and expectation that further evidence will once again tip the balance in favor of Christianity.'<sup>4</sup> When believers want to show the truth of Christianity, reason is initially used to convince the nonbeliever that Christianity is the most plausible worldview one can hold. Then, 'it is the role of the Holy Spirit to open the heart of the unbeliever and to use the arguments as a means of drawing people to himself.'<sup>5</sup>

Besides the specific way in which reason and faith are related, there are more characteristics of classical apologetics. The Dutch theologian Wim van Vlastuin names as the most important characteristic the idea that reality is created, organized, structured, and knowable, and precedes one's knowing. From this it follows that faith and reason both relate to the same reality, and that faith is, in principle, consistent with reason. Truth is something transcendent to reason, which means that reason can only *discover* truth, and cannot *determine* truth. However, this does not mean that people cannot argue reasonably about faith; the structured reality guarantees that faith can be defended by reason. This makes philosophy (above all, logic) a strong tool for the classical apologist. Most importantly, according to classical apologetics, philosophy and logic are a common ground for both believers and non-believers. This is because logic belongs to the basic structure of reality, which precedes one's knowing. The characteristics of reality lead classical apologists to also embrace science in general. Science can help prove the truth of the Christian faith: God manifests himself both in reality and in the Bible, so one can also know him through science, which studies reality, and the study of the Bible. However, science is not infallible. Reality is bigger than science and scientific insights can change over time. Faith goes beyond scientific research and physical reality and can therefore never be fully dependent on scientific proof.<sup>6</sup>

The typical strategy of classical apologists, which Craig also declares to be his own method,<sup>7</sup> defends faith in two steps: firstly, theism in general is defended by showing how reasonable it is to believe in God; secondly, Christianity in particular is defended.<sup>8</sup> This

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 53-54.

<sup>6</sup> WIM VAN VLASTUIN, "Klassieke Apologetiek," in *Verantwoord geloof: Handboek Christelijke Apologetiek*, eds. M.J. Kater, H.A. Bakker, W. van Vlastuin (Kampen: Brevier, 2014), 180-85.

<sup>7</sup> CRAIG, 48.

<sup>8</sup> STEVEN B. COWAN, "Introduction," *ibid.*, 15-16.

strategy is also visible in the works of Haught, McGrath, and Ward in which they confront the new atheism. Ward declares this explicitly in one of his books:

In this book I am not discussing the topic of revealed religion, or defending the Christian faith specifically. I am concerned with general reasons for believing in God, or for accepting the God hypothesis [...] But at this point I will just spend a little time on the strength of specifically Christian personal experience.<sup>9</sup>

Haught does the same:

My first seven chapters avoid approaching the new atheism from an exclusively Christian point of view. Instead, my critique is styled in such a way that non-Christian theists [...] as well as atheists and agnostics can easily follow along. Only in the concluding chapter do I sketch a Christian theological response.<sup>10</sup>

The defense of theism in general is often realized by use of arguments for God's existence, whether they are classical arguments or not. For example, the five ways of Thomas Aquinas are classical arguments for God's existence.<sup>11</sup> Dawkins rejected these in *The God Delusion*,<sup>12</sup> and Ward responds to this rejection by explaining the five ways in light of modern science and demonstrating their validity.<sup>13</sup>

Haught, McGrath, and Ward also defend theism by showing its reasonableness in general, contrary to what the new atheists maintain. This is visible throughout their books. They all confront the anti-religious views of the new atheists with their false assumptions and their wrongly drawn conclusions and reply to them with religious counterarguments. As McGrath introduces his book: 'this book is a critical engagement with Dawkins'

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<sup>9</sup> WARD, 137-38.

<sup>10</sup> HAUGHT, xv.

<sup>11</sup> It should be mentioned that Thomas Aquinas himself wrote the five ways in a different context from that in which the arguments are used today. Aquinas did not want to prove God's existence in an apologetic way, i.e., he did not defend his faith before non-believers. Aquinas did not put himself in the hypothetical position of the non-believer to reach the philosophical conviction that God must exist, as apologists do today. On the contrary, he believed it to be inherent to the faithful position of humanity to search intelligibly for God, and this is why he showed that God's existence is true. To Aquinas, theology was a science, an exercise to show the reason of faith. Aquinas 'still lived in the metaphysical age and saw coherence, purposiveness, truth and value everywhere, where the postmodern human being mainly sees chaos, coincidence, appearance and lies hidden by human constructions.' JOZEF WISSINK, *Thomas van Aquino: De actuele betekenis van zijn theologie* (Zoetermeer: Meinema, 1998), 75.

<sup>12</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 100-03.

<sup>13</sup> WARD, 104-20.

worldview, which sets out to ask whether his famously aggressive atheism is actually warranted on the basis of the arguments he presents.<sup>14</sup> McGrath counters Dawkins in many of his claims. For example, Dawkins sees an absolute conflict between faith and science, between God and Darwinism. In response, McGrath argues that this conflict does not have to exist at all; it certainly can, but it is not necessary.<sup>15</sup>

Another ever-returning theme is the questionable definition that the new atheists give of faith, which Haught counters as follows:

The new atheists think of faith as an *intellectually* erroneous attempt at something like scientific understanding, whereas theology thinks of faith as a state of self-surrender in which one's whole being, and not just the intellect, is experienced as being carried away into a dimension of reality that is much deeper and more real than anything that could be grasped by science and reason [...] The definition of faith that Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens all embrace is "belief without evidence." They think of faith as a set of hypotheses—such as the God hypothesis or the soul hypothesis—that lack sufficient scientific or empirical evidence for reasonable people to accept [...] For theology, however, the objective is to deepen faith, not eliminate it. In theistic traditions the essence of the ideal life, even the heroic life, is being willing to wait in faith, trust, and hope for ultimate fulfillment and final liberation. Consequently, when Harris and the others invite people to give up their faith and live only by reason, they have no idea what they are asking.<sup>16</sup>

The point of the apologists is that discrediting faith based on a definition that is not accepted by believers does not discredit the believers' faith at all. Faith and reason are interacting. The Holy Spirit plays the most important role in *knowing* Christianity to be true. However, reasonable arguments must be used here to *show* Christianity to be true. Haught will do this later on.

<sup>14</sup> MCGRATH, 11-12.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid., 51-72. To summarize a few of his points: firstly, God can neither be proven nor disproven scientifically, which means that science cannot make ultimate claims about the truth of faith; secondly, the statement that God is not needed to explain evolutionary theory is a statement that can also be accepted by believers and does not say anything about God's existence; and thirdly, the statements that Dawkins makes about God are often based on a concept of God (i.e., his well-known watchmaker, based on the analogy of the 18<sup>th</sup> century theologian William Paley) that is not generally accepted by believers, and the statements are therefore not reasonable.

<sup>16</sup> HAUGHT, 13. Cf. also MCGRATH, 84-102; KEITH WARD, *The Case for Religion* (2004), (Oxford: Oneworld, 2008), xi-xiii.

### 1.1.2. Attitude towards Science in the Debate with the New Atheism

Before I turn to other apologetic approaches, attention must be drawn to the relationship between these classical apologists and the practice of science. On the one hand, Haught, McGrath, and Ward embrace science. The question of God may not be a scientific one, but one does not need to leave science out of the picture altogether to make a case for God. Moreover, not only theological thinking but also philosophical thinking can be applied when discussing God's existence. On the other hand, the apologists also warn against the leaning of the new atheists towards scientism<sup>17</sup> and remind them of the boundaries and fallibility of science. In Ward's words:

Scientific explanation should be pushed as far as it can go. Belief in God supports this push, because it guarantees that the universe is ultimately intelligible. But it adds that scientific explanation is not the only form of explanation. Scientific explanation drives you back, in the end, to eternity and necessity—to the realm of timeless and necessary mathematical truths, to ultimately intelligible laws and fundamental forces. But what is also needed for a final explanation is appeal to consciousness, value, creativity and purpose. Personal explanation complements, but does not replace, scientific explanation. Both are necessary to a truly final explanation of the universe.<sup>18</sup>

McGrath emphasizes that Dawkins (but this could also count for other new atheists) extends his scientific love for Darwinism to a worldview that reaches far beyond science: 'yet Dawkins did more than just make evolutionary theory intelligible. He was willing to set out its implications for every aspect of life, in effect presenting Darwinism as a universal philosophy of life, rather than a mere scientific theory.'<sup>19</sup> McGrath seeks to prove that this extension is not scientifically correct, that science should and could never lead to metaphysical convictions but that its boundaries should be accepted. Science and faith are both reasonable, but they are different from each other. Haught states that the scientific attitude of the new atheists is a belief that is itself not based on evidence. The basis from which the new atheists argue is not scientific at all, but based on faith:

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<sup>17</sup> I will discuss scientism at length in chapter 6 §2.4.

<sup>18</sup> WARD, *Why There Almost Certainly Is a God: Doubting Dawkins*, 66.

<sup>19</sup> MCGRATH, 7.

Harris's and Dawkins's own scientism, the intellectual backbone of their scientific naturalism, is a belief for which there can be no "sufficient" scientific or empirical "evidence" either [...] Moreover, the claim that truth can be attained only by reason and science functioning independently of any faith is itself a faith claim.<sup>20</sup>

His point is that everybody always starts knowing by a leap of faith, by trusting one's sources, and by relying on the belief that it is possible to know anything to begin with. This means the new atheists do this too. One should not try to deny this or diminish the value that faith of any sort can have. One should acknowledge it and accept that there is more than reason and science.

## 1.2. Reformed Epistemological Apologetics

One of the apologetic approaches that criticizes classical foundationalism and classical apologetics results from a method of epistemology that calls itself 'reformed.'<sup>21</sup> Its best known representatives are the two American Christian philosophers, Alvin Plantinga, who also wrote explicitly against the new atheists, and Nicholas Wolterstorff. Both started developing this religious epistemology in the 1980s. The apologetic approach that flows from it is therefore one of the most recent approaches, but in its essence reaches back to the convictions of the Protestant reformer John Calvin. The basic position of reformed epistemology is that faith does not have to be based on evidence to be rational, as classical foundationalism and classical apologetics assume.<sup>22</sup>

### 1.2.1. Reformed Epistemological Apologetics in General

The fundamental principle of classical foundationalism is that rational statements must be based on evidence or be self-evident themselves. According to reformed epistemology, this principle is self-contradictory, or in Plantinga's terms, 'self-referentially incoherent.'<sup>23</sup> The

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<sup>20</sup> HAUGHT, 11.

<sup>21</sup> R. DOUGLAS GEIVETT AND BRENDAN SWEETMAN, "Introduction," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 6.

<sup>22</sup> KELLY JAMES CLARK, "Reformed Epistemology Apologetics," in *Five Views on Apologetics*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 2000), 266-84.

<sup>23</sup> ALVIN PLANTINGA, "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 135.

principle itself is neither based on evidence nor is it self-evident, and would therefore (if following its own standards) be irrational. So classical foundationalism speaks against itself when claiming that this is necessary for all statements we make. On top of that, even if the principle were not self-contradictory, it would still not be feasible. Many beliefs that people hold, even scientific ones, are not based on evidence, nor are they self-evident. Most beliefs are acquired because one is told that they are true, and one assumes that they are, based on the authority from which one hears the belief. Many things that one cannot prove still hold to be true, such as the fact that entities exist when one cannot see them, or that there exists something like a past.<sup>24</sup> People rely on authority in these beliefs and on their common sense. As reformed epistemologist Kelly James Clark summarizes, ‘we can’t help but trust our cognitive faculties [...] Reasoning must start somewhere.’<sup>25</sup>

Reformed epistemology suggests that belief in God can be rational without further verification and has some arguments to support this case. Firstly, few people believe in God because of theistic arguments. As has just become clear, one does not always need arguments for one’s beliefs to be rational, and belief in God is, according to reformed epistemology, no different.<sup>26</sup> Secondly, Calvin believed that one can be aware of God and know him without any theistic arguments because God created the human being with a “sense of the divine” (or *sensus divinitatis*). Unfortunately, this sense is affected by sin. As Plantinga explains:

Due to one cause or another, the faculty itself may be *diseased* and thus partly or wholly disabled ... [I]t is really the *unbeliever* who displays epistemic malfunction; failing to believe in God is a result of some kind of dysfunction of the *sensus divinitatis*.<sup>27</sup>

The *sensus divinitatis* is damaged and deformed; therefore, unbelievers resist turning towards it and instead willingly ignore it.<sup>28</sup> To regain the *sensus divinitatis*, one has to overcome the effects that sin has on one’s minds. Clark adds to this, ‘it is natural to suppose that if God created us with cognitive faculties that by and large reliably produce beliefs without the need for evidence, he would likewise provide us with a cognitive faculty that produces belief in him without the need for evidence.’<sup>29</sup> Just as one’s general beliefs are

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. *Warranted Christian Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 93-94.

<sup>25</sup> CLARK, 270-71.

<sup>26</sup> However, this does not mean that one cannot believe on the basis of theistic arguments. This is of course still possible, just not necessary.

<sup>27</sup> PLANTINGA, *Warranted Christian Belief*, 184.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>29</sup> CLARK, 272.

only valid if one's cognitive faculties function properly, belief in God is also only warranted if one's cognitive faculties are reliable, which is the case with the God-given *sensus divinitatis*. Lastly, belief in God is more similar to belief in a person than to belief in a theory or statement, and people cannot and do not require evidence when trusting a person, since the core of this trust is a relationship. Scientific methodologies can neither be applied to human relationships nor to one's relationship with God. Therefore, belief in God cannot require any evidence to be rational.

### 1.2.2. Alvin Plantinga and the New Atheism

Plantinga has developed his reformed epistemology over several years. In the 1980s, he said that belief could be a basic proposition itself along with other basic propositions, on which a Christian thinker could base his other beliefs, just as other thinkers could base their beliefs on propositions such as the existence of the past.<sup>30</sup> Even though the starting point of these thoughts may not be shared by everybody, belief in God is still justified as a perfectly rational starting point, since a Christian believes that God has gifted the human being with a sense of the divine and that one is therefore automatically drawn to Him. A Christian knows rationally that God exists because of the *sensus divinitatis*.

One decade later, in the 1990s, Plantinga wrote his famous "Warrant" trilogy, consisting of *Warrant and Proper Function* (1993), *Warrant: The Current Debate* (1993), and *Warranted Christian Belief* (2000). In the last book, he criticized classical foundationalism and dissociated himself from it again.<sup>31</sup> In addition, he elaborated on belief being "warranted" because it is produced by the *sensus divinitatis*, which is 'a belief-producing faculty (or power, or mechanism) that under the right conditions produces belief that isn't evidentially based on other beliefs.'<sup>32</sup> Belief based on the *sensus divinitatis*

<sup>30</sup> 'Perhaps the theist has a right to *start from* belief in God, taking that proposition to be one of the ones probability with respect to which determines the rational propriety of *other* beliefs he holds. But if so, then the Christian *philosopher* is entirely within his rights in starting from belief in God to his philosophizing. He has a right to take the existence of God for granted and go on from there in his philosophical work—just as other philosophers take for granted the existence of the past, say, or of other persons, or the basic claims of contemporary physics.' ALVIN PLANTINGA, "Advice to Christian Philosophers," in *The Analytic Theist: An Alvin Plantinga Reader*, ed. James F. Sennett (Grand Rapids, Mich.: W.B. Eerdmans, 1998), 303-04. Cf. "Is Belief in God Properly Basic?" 136-37.

<sup>31</sup> 'I'll conclude that in fact there is no reason at all to think that Christian belief requires argument or propositional evidence, if it is to be justified. Christians—indeed, well-educated, contemporary, and culturally aware Christians—can be justified, so I shall argue, even if they don't hold their beliefs on the basis of arguments or evidence, even if they aren't aware of any good arguments for their beliefs, and even if, indeed, there aren't any.' *Warranted Christian Belief*, 93.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

is warranted because this sense is a properly functioning cognitive faculty given by God and is therefore rational.

In 2012, Plantinga explicitly wrote against the new atheism in his book, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion and Naturalism*. In this book, he claims that ‘there is superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion, but superficial concord and deep conflict between science and naturalism.’<sup>33</sup> As I have explained in chapters 1 and 2, the new atheists maintain that the opposite is the case. Plantinga wants to show that they are wrong. The book does not elaborate upon his reformed epistemology, but it is certainly possible to derive some of his epistemological views from the main line of his argument.

Plantinga argues that science and religion are not in conflict, but that religion in fact supports science. He does this by focusing on evolutionary theory, thereby often referring to Dawkins and Dennett. He declares that, even when accepting evolutionary theory, one can still believe that life has developed because of design. Evolutionary theory does not say anything about the development of life being guided or unguided; this is something that Dawkins and Dennett have attached to the scientific theory. Actually, both scientists arrive at conclusions that are not supported by science, e.g., that the existence of God is improbable and that therefore God cannot exist,<sup>34</sup> or that because every living being *may* have come into existence by unguided natural selection, they *have* come into existence this way. Biology does not say a thing about this, yet the Darwinists hold this to be scientifically true, based only on the foundation that it is not unlikely. Furthermore, they declare theism irrational because God’s existence cannot be proven. According to them, the classical theistic arguments are not valid and therefore do not support theism. For belief to be rational, it has to be based on scientific evidence. No other sources exist that make belief in God rational or warranted; hence, without evidence, belief in God is irrational.<sup>35</sup> This argument is in agreement with classical foundationalism.

Plantinga does not agree with this type of argument. He argues that no good arguments exist for the existence of other selves or of the past; nevertheless, people believe that they exist, and this is not considered irrational. Things are no different with belief in God. This has been a philosophical discussion for a long time, but the new atheists ignore this whole debate.<sup>36</sup> Plantinga is convinced that ‘it is no part of reason to insist that there can’t be any other source of true or warranted belief; it is perfectly in accord with reason to

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<sup>33</sup> PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, ix.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 37-42.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 42-46.



suppose that there are sources of truth in addition to reason.<sup>37</sup> According to Plantinga, a belief has warrant if it is produced by ‘cognitive faculties functioning properly in the sort of environment for which we were designed (by God or evolution) according to a design plan successfully aimed at the production of true beliefs.’<sup>38</sup> It can even have warrant without providing any good arguments, even without the availability of any good arguments.<sup>39</sup> Christians can justify their belief in God by referring to their *sensus divinitatis*, their natural tendency towards belief in God. They can even refer to the convictions of both John Calvin and Thomas Aquinas, who were also convinced that this is naturally implanted in the human creature.<sup>40</sup> This belief does not just come from a book (as the new atheists tend to presume); according to Christians, it is based on the way God created humanity. God could have done this in many ways (and by means of evolution or not), but he has done it nonetheless.<sup>41</sup> He created the human being in his own image (the doctrine of the *imago Dei*), which explains why and justifies that we can have knowledge of ourselves, of the world and of God.<sup>42</sup>

The principle of reformed epistemology that belief in God can count as properly basic and, therefore, does not need any further verification does not mean that religious belief cannot be defeated. However, it does mean that in many cases when scientific evidence contradicts classical Christian truths, believers do not need to give up their belief immediately only because the scientific inquiry often presupposes a non-Christian foundation or “evidence base.” According to Plantinga, this evidence base (which is called ‘methodological naturalism,’<sup>43</sup>) could either be weak by not taking Christian truths into account, or be strong by explicitly denying these truths. By holding strong methodological naturalism, scientific inquiry inevitably leads to conclusions that contradict Christian truths. But, since Christians presuppose another evidence base, these conclusions do not defeat their faith. By holding weak methodological naturalism, scientific inquiry that leads to conclusions that contradict Christian truths do not necessarily need to defeat these truths, as the scientific evidence base is only a part of the larger Christian evidence base. Nevertheless, defeat is still possible: ‘one can indeed acquire a defeater for a belief held on the basis of the Bible; I can come to see that what the Bible teaches isn’t what I thought it

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 47.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 244.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 249.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid., 140.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., xiv, 4-5, 268-69. I will say more about the creation of the human being in the image of God in chapter 7 §3.3.

<sup>43</sup> I have already discussed this type of naturalism in chapter 2 §3.1. It is a scientific position in which supernatural explanations are not accepted.

was.<sup>44</sup> Scientific inquiry could lead to the conclusion that a certain interpretation of a Christian truth cannot be true. In this case, the believer had misunderstood the Christian truth, but by scientific investigation he has discovered this.<sup>45</sup>

The fact that human beings are created in the image of God confirms that one can rely on one's senses and, hence, can do science; one can grasp the laws of the universe and understand the world.<sup>46</sup> It is perfectly rational to rely on one's senses with this doctrine of the *imago Dei* in the back of one's mind. However, with naturalism and evolution as support, it is not self-evident to rely on one's senses, since evolution is not directed at truth but only at survival. If there is no good scientific argument to rely on one's senses, how can one scientifically justify that one does rely on them? This is why, according to Plantinga, there is a conflict between naturalism and science. One cannot accept both.<sup>47</sup> Religion however, instead of being a hindrance to science, supports science (among other things) with its doctrine of the *imago Dei*.

### 1.3. Apologetics Grounded on Religious Experience

Another apologetic approach that criticizes classical foundationalism and classical apologetics focuses on religious experience rather than on religious arguments and evidence. Adherents are philosophers like John Hick and William Alston. They suggest that for rational belief there is no need for religious arguments from which a believer might infer the existence of God. One can rationally acquire belief through experience. This experience does not constitute certain forms of evidence from which belief in God can be inferred. Rather, the religious experience itself suffices to provide warrant for the belief. Religious experience even provides warrant for others who have not had these experiences themselves but only know of them.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> PLANTINGA, *Where the Conflict Really Lies*, 186.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 163-90.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 277-313.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 314-49.

<sup>48</sup> GEIVETT AND SWEETMAN, "Introduction," 6, 12.

### 1.3.1. John Hick

John Hick summarizes his position as follows: ‘it is as reasonable for those who experience their lives as being lived in the presence of God, to believe in the reality of God, as for all of us to form beliefs about our environment on the basis of our experience of it.’<sup>49</sup> He explains that people trust their perceptual experiences in their everyday lives and that they rely on these experiences. They are aware of the fact that these experiences can be delusional, but this does not stop them from trusting their senses. Furthermore, as philosophers such as Descartes and Hume have pointed out, it is impossible to prove the existence of the world that one perceives; but, for most people, this is no reason to distrust their senses and not draw any conclusions from them. Hick draws a parallel with religious belief: just as one cannot prove the existence of the external world, one cannot prove the existence of God; and just as belief in the external world arises because of people trusting their perceptual experiences, belief in God arises because of religious experiences.<sup>50</sup>

Hick asks whether it is rational to believe in God’s existence based on one’s own experience or based on someone else’s experience.<sup>51</sup> He refers to ‘the great souls or mahatmas whose experience lies at the origin of the theistic traditions.’<sup>52</sup> They certainly had powerful experiences that God was real and, according to Hick, it was therefore entirely rational for them to believe in God’s existence. It would have been irrational if they had not linked their religious experience with belief in God. Just as they trusted their perceptual experience of the external world, they trusted their powerful religious experience and were convinced of God’s existence.<sup>53</sup>

However, just as perceptual experiences can be delusional, so can religious experiences. Hick states that religious experiences provide rational grounds for belief when these beliefs do not contradict any other facts. When they do conflict with other achieved knowledge, they are more plausible to be irrational: ‘generally it can only be rational for us to hold a belief on the basis of someone else’s experience if the belief is compatible with our other beliefs, supported as they are by the general body of our own experience.’<sup>54</sup> This applies both to belief based on one’s own experience and belief based on someone else’s experience.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>49</sup> JOHN HICK, “The Rationality of Religious Belief,” *ibid.*, 304.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 306-07.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 305-06.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 308.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*, 308-09.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 310.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 312-13.

Hick is aware of the fact that the same argument could be formulated to support a non-theistic cause. This world is religiously ambiguous since God's existence has neither been proven nor been disproven. Consequently, both experiences that lead someone to believe in God's existence and experiences that lead someone to believe in God's non-existence are rational.<sup>56</sup>

### 1.3.2. William Alston

William Alston states that perceptual experiences are defeasible, but that most people trust these experiences nevertheless, that is until there are sufficient reasons to doubt them. Religious experience<sup>57</sup> is also reliable, except when the experience 'yield[s] a system that is ineradicably internally inconsistent [or when it yields] results that come into ineradicable conflict with the results of other practices to which we are more firmly committed.'<sup>58</sup>

Perceptual experiences do have certain characteristics by which they are valued that religious experiences do not have. Generally, 1) they have standard ways to determine their accuracy, 2) they make it possible to detect regularities in the behavior of the observed objects, 3) they are experienced universally, and 4) they are universally objectified in the same way.<sup>59</sup> Even though one can doubt if these characteristics are correct, Alston agrees that there are still differences between perceptual experiences and religious experiences. However, these differences do not necessarily lead to distrust of religious experience. This would happen if experiences were only to be trusted when they met all four characteristics mentioned above, but this is not the case.<sup>60</sup>

Religious experiences do not generally deal with the perceptible external world, so there is no reason to suppose that these experiences should resemble perceptual experiences; hence, there is no reason to apply the same characteristics to religious experiences as to perceptual experiences. Many religions teach that a) God is completely different from people, which prevents one from finding any regularities in his behavior, b) one can only vaguely grasp what God is like, and c) human beings will only be able to grasp a vague truth

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 316-17.

<sup>57</sup> Alston himself does normally not use the term "religious experience" because he finds the term obfuscating. His category 'embraces only those experiences in which it seems that God "appears" or "presents Himself" to one as so-and-so.' WILLIAM P. ALSTON, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 34. However, since other works mentioned in this paragraph do use this term, I will also use it here to ensure the uniformity of the text.

<sup>58</sup> "Religious Experience and Religious Belief," in *Contemporary Perspectives on Religious Epistemology*, eds. R. Douglas Geivett and Brendan Sweetman (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), 299.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 300.

about God when they meet certain conditions.<sup>61</sup> These teachings alone already make it impossible for religious experience to satisfy the characteristics of perceptual experience, even if the religious experience would be genuine. Furthermore, teachings a to c are compatible with the thoughts that d) religious experience entails the awareness of God, e) even though the religious experience might be mistaken up to some level, it still contains some truth, and f) God has enabled human beings to increase the accuracy of their beliefs.<sup>62</sup> So religious experience could still be trustworthy even if it does not meet the characteristics of perceptual experience. In Alston's own concluding words:

My opponent has no basis for ruling out the conjoint state of affairs a-f, hence has no basis for taking the lack of 1-4 to show [religious experience] to be untrustworthy, and hence has no reason for denying that [religious experience is reliable unless there are sufficient reasons to regard it as unreliable].<sup>63</sup>

Alston admits that religious experience, although rationally valid, will not easily convince a non-believer of God's existence. This is why he adds that different rational grounds combined can make the case of God's existence more conclusive and religious experience can be one of those grounds. Without religious experience, the whole case for God's existence would be theoretical; it would be a hypothesis without further implications. This leads him to say that grounding one's belief on religious experience is an essential element in the whole apologetic discourse.<sup>64</sup>

### 1.3.3. Wil van den Bercken and the New Atheism

The Dutch historian Wil van den Bercken wrote an apologetic work focusing on religious experience, which also pays special attention to the new atheism. Although it is more a personal justification of his own belief than a scientific treatise, this does not detract from its apologetic value. He stresses that the Christian faith is not purely a rational affair:

Belief is not the outcome of rational argumentation and logical reasoning. Life as such is not based on logic either. A human being has, apart from reason, also feelings, even a multitude of feelings and conflicting feelings. Together they form the human cognitive and experiential power.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 301.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 301-02.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 302.

<sup>64</sup> ALSTON, *Perceiving God: The Epistemology of Religious Experience*, 290-304.

Christian faith is, except on the Bible, also based on this whole of human characteristics.<sup>65</sup>

Saying that the Christian faith is not rational is not the same as saying that it is *irrational* or *anti-rational*. Theological reflection is an important part of Christianity, but the mainstream believer is not so much concerned about this and belief is generally not based on rationality.

Van den Bercken states that the Bible does not have an intellectual character. The Church has given Christianity its intellectual character by making the implicit theology of the Bible explicit. Mistaking the Bible's character and without justification, some scientific atheists judge the Bible by qualifications that are foreign to it. They criticize it using biological, scientific cosmological, and other types of scientific knowledge, but this is methodologically inadequate. Furthermore, such criticism will not convince the believer because the believer (generally) does not take the Bible literally, as these scientists do.<sup>66</sup>

Christian ethics also makes clear that faith is not purely rational. This type of ethics is not rational or purely practical, but is almost a superhuman ideal. It requires more than a minimum of ethical behavior; it asks for a maximum. Van den Bercken argues that Christian ethics is more than the biological ethics that is inherently human. It is even more than "civil". Christian ethics is a maximalist ethics. It strives for God's own perfection, so it asks more of people than they can give. Christian ethics is therefore not a command but an ideal, which is unsettling for the Christian:<sup>67</sup> 'it is an undermining of belief in one's own perfection and at the same time a call for a higher degree of perfection. It is the opposite of mental self-satisfaction.'<sup>68</sup> It is not rational and achievable; it is supra-rational and idealistic.<sup>69</sup>

Van den Bercken claims that belief is based on 'existentially fundamental experiences.'<sup>70</sup> All people have these experiences, but they deal with them in different ways and interpret them differently. They are, firstly, a feeling of being created, secondly, a realization of being ethically imperfect, and thirdly, a longing for ultimate justice. Since these experiences are universal, it is rational to base one's faith on them.

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<sup>65</sup> WIL VAN DEN BERCKEN, *Geloven tegen beter weten in* (Amsterdam: Balans, 2014), 46.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-30. I will say more about the difference between the characters of the Bible and the Church in chapter 7 §2.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 37-45.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

<sup>69</sup> The maximalist ethics of Christianity will return in chapter 7 §3.4.

<sup>70</sup> BERCKEN, 47.

The first experience is the realization that one does not bring about oneself. Humanity is the result of an evolutionary process. Since people have never been able to explain the start of this process, the idea of a creator tries to give an explanation: ‘the idea of a creator is not scientifically provable, but it is not unreasonable either. It is a thought that forces itself on humans as beings that have not made themselves.’<sup>71</sup> People did not give permission for their existence themselves; religiously, this can be experienced as the will of God. The religious experience becomes Christian when people feel that God is personally concerned about them, when God becomes a Father who loves his children. God created the human being in God’s own image, which is an ultimately Christian thought.<sup>72</sup>

The second existentially fundamental experience that Van den Bercken names is the realization that people are ethically imperfect. It is the experience of the reality of evil within people themselves. Everybody falls short of one’s own ethical ideals. People in general have difficulties admitting that they themselves, personally, fall short in an ethical way. Van den Bercken says, ‘I would want to believe with the humanists in the natural goodness of humanity, but historical facts contradict this.’<sup>73</sup> Here, he does not only allude to extreme evil situations such as the Holocaust or the Gulag, but also to daily situations in which people naturally act selfishly as a result of their survival instinct. One way to deal with this realization is to understand it in the Christian terms of sinfulness and redemption: ‘the Christian thought about the ethical imperfection of humankind, i.e., sinfulness, is no attack on human dignity, but puts the ideality of the delivered human being before a practical humanist vision of humankind.’<sup>74</sup> Humanism gives, according to Van den Bercken, a too rosy picture of how things are and could therefore better be replaced by a Christian vision.<sup>75</sup>

Questioning whether this life is ultimately meaningful or meaningless and the corresponding longing for ultimate justice is the third existentially fundamental experience that human beings have. People long for their lives to be meaningful, and not only their personal lives, but the lives of the people that seem to be the unfortunates of history as well. It is a longing for eternity, for a life after death; otherwise, so many lives have been meaningless, and this would be hard to accept. Van den Bercken admits that psychologically speaking, this longing is a projection:

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<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 48-53.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 53-57.

But not one that is groundless, because the continuation of happiness is a common human longing, of which philosophers and scientists, writers and artists, wise men and prophets were conscious during all human history [...] Psychological theories about projection say something about the functioning of the human mind, but nothing about the (non)existence of a reality that is independent of the human psyche.<sup>76</sup>

A Christian answer to this longing is belief in life after death. The promise of eternal life is preached all over in the New Testament, and gives an answer to this deep human longing for meaningfulness and justice.<sup>77</sup>

All three existentially fundamental experiences that Van den Bercken describes can lead to belief in God. It is not irrational to reach this conclusion. In the end, it is a personal choice.<sup>78</sup>

Van den Bercken has a critical attitude towards humanism and materialist world views. This is because they fail when it comes to these existentially fundamental experiences. Especially where ethical problems are concerned, humanism eventually is an egocentric and optimistic philosophy, but this is historically and philosophically unfounded. The materialist worldview that life does not have a purpose and that the world keeps going by because of the laws of nature, leads inevitably to a stoic attitude towards ethics. One does not have any real freedom but is just a cog in the machine. At the same time, the materialist worldview states that people are their own creators of their world and their thoughts. According to Van den Bercken, this makes materialist worldviews contradictory.<sup>79</sup>

Van den Bercken not only makes some casual remarks that could be directed against the new atheism, but he also devotes a whole chapter to different forms of ‘contemporary scientific atheism,’ or ‘reasoned categorical atheism.’ He describes this atheism as ‘rejecting belief in God based on philosophical, physical, psychological, biological or neurological science. Contrary to [other forms of atheism], it combats religious faith with verbal means.’<sup>80</sup> Van den Bercken explains that this form of atheism is oblivious to the core faith, namely, religious experience, even if its arguments are rational and its criticisms justified. As argued above, belief is not based primarily on rational arguments, but on religious experience. This may make the relationship between reason and faith paradoxical, but not

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 57-60.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid., 77-82.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 60-70.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 108.



conflicting. The reasoning that the scientific atheists (and the new atheists) use against religion ignores this and wants to be purely rational, thus ignoring the personal side of faith.

Another aspect of Van den Bercken's criticism is that the atheists are not differentiating between different forms of faith. He calls this 'atheistic simplism.' This simplification of lumping all forms of faith together is confirmation that the atheists argue in the wrong way, ignoring the core of religious belief. Moreover, it is not scientifically sound to treat one's object of research this way:<sup>81</sup> 'reducing a human being to a rational being amputates the greater part of his behavior, feelings and thoughts and conflicts with the complexity of life [...] Life is more than logic.'<sup>82</sup>

The historical arguments that atheists use against religion and the existence of God are not sound either. They argue that misbehavior is a common human phenomenon but is inconsistent with faith and therefore worse if the misbehaving person is religious. Religion, they suggest, is sometimes even misused to justify certain behavior. However, this is not an argument against religion. Religion is more than only an institutionalized creed; it is also a personal conviction. The atheists seem to forget this.<sup>83</sup>

Specifically focusing on Dawkins, Van den Bercken says that this scientist disqualifies believers at the prospect; he does not take them seriously. This is also visible in his biased treatment of religion in which he focuses on extremist forms of religion: 'his intentionally chosen methodological one-sidedness would be qualified as unscientific in every academic paper.'<sup>84</sup> The statements he makes about religion are often not true and unscientific. Van den Bercken mentions many examples of this. Van den Bercken also disqualifies Dawkins's optimistic nonreligious vision of humanity. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins writes, 'the truly adult view [...] is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed.'<sup>85</sup> As also explained above, this optimistic vision is only applicable to people that are fortunate, not to the unfortunates of history. This, too, makes his argument weak. Dawkins overestimates his intellectual powers. He, and the other new atheists with him, do not understand that science and faith can go hand in hand within one human being.<sup>86</sup>

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 111-18.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 119-20.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 122-27.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>85</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 404.

<sup>86</sup> BERCKEN, 127-36.

## 1.4. Fideist Apologetics

The last apologetic approach that is also applied against the new atheism is grounded on fideism. Fideism is a collective term and can be divided into different sub-movements. What these sub-movements have in common is that they adopt a negative stand towards rational arguments that precede faith. Fideism is a reaction to rationalism in saying that faith does not rest upon reasonable proofs. Reason is limited. Faith goes beyond reason; it is supra-reasonable. Talking reasonably about God is only possible if reason submits to faith and lets faith lead.<sup>87</sup>

### 1.4.1. Fideism in General

Fideism does not focus on theoretical and dogmatic systems that explain faith, but rather emphasizes the personal relationship with God. As Van Vlastuin illustrates: ‘Jesus Christ has pointed at himself as the Road, and not at a set of truths about Him.’<sup>88</sup> Faith is primarily affective, not cognitive. Believers learn about God by experiencing him more than by reasoning about him. This is why fideists do not want to prove their faith by means of rational arguments and by proving that God exists. This would be like proving how special someone’s fiancé(e) is; a sign of weakness in one’s love. Rational arguments are too superficial to reach the core of faith. It is impossible to understand God because God is outside the cosmological order from which people reason. He is rationally beyond our reach. This does not mean that fideism has an overall negative attitude towards science and philosophy as such; science and philosophy are valuable as long as they focus on worldly affairs. Fideism advocates a separation between science and religion and supports Gould’s position of NOMA, about which I spoke in chapter 1 §2.1. This means that scientific arguments cannot prove or disprove God’s existence, and faith cannot be based on historical arguments or on wonders. Science and religion both have their own domains, and the two should not be brought together.<sup>89</sup>

Methodologically, fideism has a different way of doing apologetics than the three other approaches I have discussed. Fideists testify to their personal relationship with God, instead of trying to convince the non-believer rationally. Still, they can give a rational account of their faith, only not in the way of *proving* their faith to be right. In Van Vlastuin’s words, ‘out of personal knowledge of the crucified Christ blooms the certainty

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<sup>87</sup> VLASTUIN, “Fideïstische apologetiek,” 234-37.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 238.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 237-41.

of the existence of God.’ Fideists do not say that faith is irrational; rather that it is supra-rational. Therefore, fideists only testify to their faith, but they leave it to the powers of the Holy Spirit to convince the non-believer.<sup>90</sup>

### 1.4.2. Karl Barth

The Swiss protestant theologian Karl Barth has often been characterized as a fideist. His theology focuses on the revelation of God, which is necessary for believers to be able to know him. Because Barth emphasizes that theological knowledge is based and dependent on God’s revelation, philosopher and theologian Kevin Diller refuses to call Barth’s theology non-foundational. According to Diller, Barth only denies that theology is based on human foundations. Instead, Diller calls him a ‘theo-foundationalist.’<sup>91</sup> Theology is possible, but only if the theological knowledge has been experienced to be given from above as revelation. It is a top-down foundationalism instead of a classical foundationalism, which works bottom-up, arguing from evidence people can provide themselves. This conviction of theological knowledge only being acceptable if it is founded in God’s gift of revelation explains why Barth (and other fideists with him) criticize philosophy. In Diller’s words, ‘it is the *way* in which philosophy approaches the Truth that has provoked theology to take its artificially independent stand.’<sup>92</sup> Theology is a human science just as philosophy is, and they both seek the truth; but theology works top-down, and philosophy works bottom-up. This is the problem with classical foundationalism. Barth agrees that knowledge, including theological knowledge, should be founded on basic propositions. However, he does not agree with the assumption that these propositions should be based on grounds that are immediately accessible; according to Barth, they are only accessible as God’s gift.<sup>93</sup> In Barth’s own words:

As the Bible bears witness to God’s revelation and as Church proclamation takes up this witness in obedience, both renounce any foundation apart from that which God has given once and for all by speaking [...] They

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 241-42.

<sup>91</sup> KEVIN DILLER, *Theology’s Epistemological Dilemma: How Karl Barth and Alvin Plantinga Provide a Unified Response* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 46.

<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 68-69.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 67-70, 81-88.

cannot bring it on the scene themselves. They can only attest and proclaim it.<sup>94</sup>

We should be careful not to consider God's revelation as something created, since this would make it something that is within our power. Barth opposes the position 'that the Word of God is one of the realities that are universally present and ascertainable and therefore created [...] The essential point [is] that the Word of God is a reality only in its own decision.'<sup>95</sup> The Word of God is a gift, upon which theology should be founded.

Very characteristic for Barth's theology is that 'the possibility of the knowledge of God springs from God, in that He is Himself the truth and He gives Himself to man in His Word by the Holy Spirit to be known as the truth.'<sup>96</sup> Therefore, the relationship with God is necessary to obtain any knowledge of him. One first has to accept God and his revelation before any knowledge of him can be obtained. This gives Barth's theology anti-rational tendencies. However, what Barth is emphasizing is that it is of no use to rely on general philosophical and worldly foundations in trying to understand something about God.<sup>97</sup> Diller explains why this is the case: 'a strictly or fundamentally propositional view of Christian revelation would replace intimate, personal knowing with a theoretical, depersonalized abstraction.'<sup>98</sup> Doing apologetics in this way would be unfruitful because it would not take God and his gift seriously.

### 1.4.3. Terry Eagleton and the New Atheism

Terry Eagleton, a literary scholar, takes an apologetic stand against the new atheism with what can be considered fideist tendencies.<sup>99</sup> He delivered the Dwight H. Terry Lectures at Yale University in 2008, on which he based his book, *Reason, Faith, and Revolution: Reflections on the God Debate*. In this book, he addresses himself to 'Ditchkins,' a made-

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<sup>94</sup> KARL BARTH, *Church Dogmatics: Volume 1: The Doctrine of the Word of God. Part 1*, trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1975), 120.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>96</sup> KARL BARTH, *Church Dogmatics: Volume 2: The Doctrine of God. Part 1* (1957), trans. Geoffrey William Bromiley (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1964), 63.

<sup>97</sup> DILLER, 47-54.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 53.

<sup>99</sup> Note that I am not saying that Eagleton is a fideist himself. He explicitly calls fideism irrational and a caricature of faith and would therefore certainly not count himself as a fideist. EAGLETON, 148-49. However, I am arguing that his apologetics has features that correspond to the characteristics of fideism as described above, which is why I discuss his apologetics here.

up signifier for Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, who is, in his own words ‘talking out of the back of his neck’<sup>100</sup> when it comes to religion and theology.

Eagleton’s main point against the new atheism that I will focus on is that the new atheists view religion as an effort to offer an alternative and even rival worldview to science, but that this is not the case: ‘Christianity was never meant to be an *explanation* of anything in the first place. It is rather like saying that thanks to the electric toaster we can forget about Chekhov.’<sup>101</sup> In other words, the two have nothing to do with each other. The new atheists make an ‘error of genre,’ regarding the point of Christianity (and religion in general). Religion is not about explaining world history or about giving evidence. Science and religion generally do not talk about the same subjects because religion asks questions that science does not ask—ideological, fundamental and metaphysical questions.<sup>102</sup> Eagleton supports NOMA,<sup>103</sup> and states that theology’s subject is ‘nothing less than the nature and destiny of humanity itself, in relation to what it takes to be its transcendent source of life.’<sup>104</sup>

More than anything, Christianity as a religion focuses on love. Therefore, it rests more upon a relationship than upon a theory. God is a loving creator who created the world out of nothing and because of nothing; for this reason, God is attractive to many people. Eagleton says: ‘faith, Ditchkins seems not to register, is not primarily a belief that something or someone exists, but a commitment and allegiance—faith *in* something which might make a difference to the frightful situation you find yourself in.’<sup>105</sup> The new atheists may not need God in so far as they see the world as self-sufficient and good in itself; but people who are a little bit more desperate or ask questions that need religious answers might need it.<sup>106</sup> Belief in God is not just saying that one believes that God exists; rather, it is saying one has faith in God. It is a statement of hope, a statement of trust, not of doubtful knowledge.<sup>107</sup> In making this argument, Eagleton refers to the fideists Søren Kierkegaard and Blaise Pascal. The former said that a believer is, in the end, someone who is in love; the

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 1-15.

<sup>103</sup> NATHAN SCHNEIDER, “Religion for Radicals: An Interview with Terry Eagleton,” September 17<sup>th</sup> 2009, <https://tif.src.org/2009/09/17/religion-for-radicals-an-interview-with-terry-eagleton/>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>104</sup> EAGLETON, 167.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 37.

<sup>106</sup> Ibid., 37-46, 57.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid., 111-15.

latter said that before one can get to know something, one has to love it.<sup>108</sup> When it comes to faith, love is obviously the focal point, not reason.

Besides focusing on religion being about personal engagement, Eagleton does not refrain from criticizing the new atheists with respect to content. He points out many flaws in the arguments of the new atheists and does give some rational account of religion. However, he also emphasizes that, in the end, it is not about reason: ‘without reason, we perish; but reason does not go all the way down. It is not wall to wall. Even Richard Dawkins lives more by faith than by reason.’<sup>109</sup> The relationship between faith and reason is a complex one. For one thing, ‘none of this is to suggest, as Dawkins seems to suspect, that religious claims require no evidence to back them up, or that they merely express “poetic” or subjective truths.’<sup>110</sup> Religion is reasonable, just not *scientifically* reasonable. The new atheists tend to forget that something can be reasonable without being scientific. For another thing, it is often the case that:

Evidence by itself will not decide the issue. At some point along the line, a particular way of seeing the evidence emerges, one which involves a peculiar kind of personal engagement with it; and none of this is reducible to the facts themselves, in the sense of being ineluctably motivated by a bare account of them.<sup>111</sup>

In the end, everybody has to trust something other than just facts alone, and make a leap of faith before any real knowledge can be obtained. In Eagleton’s words: ‘a hunger for absolute justification is a neurosis, not a tenacity to be admired [...] Justifications must come to an end somewhere; and where they generally come to an end is in some kind of faith.’<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 116.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 124.

## 2. Evaluation of the Approaches

The four approaches of apologetics discussed above are all used against the new atheism. They reflect different views on epistemology, on the relationship between science and religion, and on the main characteristics of religion. In most cases, these views do not correspond to the view that the new atheists have on these subjects. The approaches will not all be as fruitful as they hope to be because I believe that it is important to share some fundamental views in order to have a rewarding discussion. Therefore, I will evaluate the approaches one by one, and assess their strong and weak points, considering their application against the new atheists.

### 2.1. Classical Apologetics

The way in which Haught, McGrath, and Ward enter into conversation with the new atheists does not, unfortunately, get them much further than discussing prolegomena, or some prefatory remarks. Above all, they focus on the terminology and definitions the new atheists use, and they draw attention to the mistakes the new atheists make. The apologists maintain that they enter the dialogue on a common ground, but this does not become visible in their actual arguments, as they mostly emphasize the differences.

However, this does not have to be that way. The main strength of classical apologetics is that it is based on classical foundationalism, which is also the ground of the philosophy of the new atheists. Classical apologetics makes an appeal to reason and attempts to show how reasonable faith is. In chapter 2 §3.2, I have described that to the new atheists, reason scores highest in the ranking of human capabilities and, therefore, the new atheists presuppose this principle too when discussing religion. Classical apologetics with regard to the new atheism focuses more on *showing* the truth of faith with the help of reason rather than on *knowing* the truth of faith with the help of the Holy Spirit because the powers of reason are more accessible to the new atheists than the powers of the Holy Spirit.

Another strong point of this approach is that classical apologists can make use of philosophical arguments to show the reasonableness of faith. They consider philosophy a common ground to both believers and non-believers. By applying philosophy, they attempt to make the conversation with the non-believers more fruitful. For a successful dialogue, it is helpful to presuppose this common ground from which a further discussion can develop.

The third strength of this approach is the strategy to defend faith in two steps: first, theism in general and, then, Christianity in particular. The new atheists criticize not only Christianity and Islam, but also religion in general as a phenomenon. They argue against the intellectual value of religion, against its supposed attitude, and against many more characteristics of religion in general. Therefore, it is worthwhile for an apologist to first invest in a proper understanding of religion in general, take away the preconceptions about religion, and show its reasonableness, before turning to a certain religion in particular.

In some respects, classical apologetics is a good strategy to defend theism in general and Christianity in particular by arguing for their reasonableness. In conversation with the new atheism, the focus on reason is important. Since the new atheists dismiss religion mainly because they consider it irrational, there is much to win in convincing them of the reasonableness of religion. However, classical apologetics will not reach much further. It does not have the power to convince somebody of the truth of a specific religion. As has become clear when discussing the other apologetic approaches, one needs more to become a believer. Therefore, classical apologetics will not convince the new atheists to become religious themselves.

## 2.2. Reformed Epistemological Apologetics

Although Plantinga has become well-known also due to his attack on the new atheists, the approach he has used to make his argument will not easily convince them. The statement that religion does not need to be founded on evidence to be rational, which is the basis from which reformed epistemological apologetics develops its strategy, is in flat contradiction with the classical foundational position of the new atheists. Moreover, I have argued in chapter 2 §3.3 that the new atheist philosophy could be traced back to logical positivism, which takes an even more radical standpoint. The opinion that statements are only meaningful if they are empirically verifiable or true by definition does not go together with reformed epistemology. Even though Plantinga has thought through this epistemology in great detail, since it fundamentally differs from the opinion of the new atheists, a dialogue will hardly be rewarding this way.

In a dialogue based on reformed epistemology, a common ground with the new atheism is missing. This becomes particularly apparent when it comes to defeaters of a certain belief. The reformed epistemological opinion that a disagreement between a scientific finding and a religious belief does not automatically lead to defeat of this belief is something that clashes with the conviction of the new atheists, who put science on a



pedestal. This makes it hard to come to an agreement on any subject that is related to science and religion.

As the basic position of reformed epistemology is already incompatible with the opinion of the new atheists, the theories that flow from it will not convince them either. The theories of the *sensus divinitatis* and the *imago Dei* might seem solid, but only when somebody already believes in God, which the new atheists do not. Thus, these theories are not likely to harmonize the two parties.

In the end, apologetics based on reformed epistemology contributes to the debate in the way it draws attention to the philosophical particularities of the Christian faith. However, since it fundamentally differs from the classical foundational and even almost logical positivist position of the new atheists, it is unlikely to be fruitful.

## 2.3. Apologetics Grounded on Religious Experience

Apologetics that is grounded on religious experience puts religious experiences on the same level as perceptual experiences. The new atheists, being ontological naturalists and tending to be logical positivists, cannot agree with this position. This makes the two positions fundamentally different. To the new atheists, religious experience either conflicts with one's (scientific) knowledge and is, hence, not reliable and rational, or, if they agree to argue along, the religious experiences of the new atheists point towards atheism. When exploring this apologetic approach, it was admitted that it is completely valid to reach this conclusion, but by doing so, further dialogue is put to a stop.

Moreover, the apologetic view that Christianity is not primarily rational, but a matter of personal experience and feelings, is something with which the new atheists agree. Only their point is that it is therefore *not* valid to become religious. Everything should be based on rationality, and if it is not or if it even contradicts other facts, then it should be dismissed. According to the new atheists, the fact that faith is not primarily rational damages religion more than benefits it.

On the other hand, Van den Bercken does not emphasize these fundamental differences, but he focuses on some existentially fundamental experiences that are common to all people. He has been able to find a common ground from which to make his argument, even though this common ground is not rational. This might help to broaden the view of the new atheists and make them see the possible origins of a religious conviction. Apologetics that is grounded on religious experience can point out that various aspects of religion should not be viewed rationally, such as the Bible (or other Holy books) and religious ethics. This might initially evoke resistance, but taking the existentially

fundamental experiences as a basis, the new atheists might be able to follow everything that rests upon this. The apologetics can, with the help of these experiences, rationally show that life entails more than reason.

Finally, apologetics grounded on religious experience may not be a first choice to enter into dialogue with the new atheists, as they do not consider religious experience to be on the same level as perceptual experience. However, the existentially fundamental experiences that Van den Bercken takes as basis are universal and, therefore, not to be neglected. Making an appeal to these experiences might lead to a fruitful dialogue, maybe even to some agreement.

## 2.4. Fideist Apologetics

Of all the apologetic approaches discussed above, fideist apologetics emphasizes most strongly that faith is not primarily rational. Instead, faith is about the relationship between God and people. This position will be faced with opposition from the new atheists. They value reason so positively and everything that is non-rational so negatively that a conversation between these two extremes of rationalism and fideism will not easily become fruitful.

The fideist statement that reason should submit to faith before being able to say something valuable about this faith, likely pushes things too far for the new atheists. They would say it is the other way around; that faith should submit to reason in all circumstances. In this respect, the new atheism and fideism are diametrically opposed to each other, which makes an insightful conversation almost impossible. In addition, the new atheists are opposed to opinions such as refraining from using rational arguments when explaining God and faith, the advocacy of NOMA, and the statement that reason has its boundaries. They contend that science and reason should hold sway over all conviction and all conversation.

Ultimately, no matter how noble the attempt of fideist apologetics, it is not likely that dialogue will go beyond discussing the two basic foundations on which the theories of the two parties are founded, namely, the fideist conviction that reason must submit to faith, and the new atheist conviction that faith must submit to reason. A personal testimony of one's faith is something with which the new atheists do not sympathize, for this subjectivism does not have any universal value to them.

### 3. The Call of the Roman Catholic Church

This study is meant to develop a fruitful apologetic approach in response to the new atheism, inspired by other apologetic approaches and based on the apologetics of G.K. Chesterton. It is also meant to do this from an explicitly Roman Catholic perspective. Therefore, the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new evangelization should not be neglected as this is closely connected with the call for a new apologetics. Investigating what the Church means by “new evangelization” and “new apologetics” can help to determine which approach I am going to take in the dialogue with the new atheism.

#### 3.1. The New Evangelization

The term “new evangelization” was first used by Pope John Paul II in a 1979 homily. He said, ‘a new evangelization has begun, as if it were a new proclamation, even if in reality it is the same as ever.’<sup>113</sup> He was not the first pope who emphasized the need for evangelization in the contemporary world. The Second Vatican Council already spoke about it, as one can read in texts such as *Ad Gentes*<sup>114</sup> and *Apostolicam Actuositatem*.<sup>115</sup>

##### 3.1.1. Paul VI

After the Second Vatican Council, Pope Paul VI sought an answer to the growing secularization in the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, he wrote the apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. Although he did not call the evangelization “new”, the foundations of the new evangelization are already laid in this document. Paul VI emphasized that evangelizing is the deepest identity of the Church and that this is the reason why the Church exists.<sup>116</sup> Evangelization should be done by all members of the Church;<sup>117</sup> when they truly have been converted, they themselves are automatically motivated to evangelize others:

<sup>113</sup> *Homily at the Shrine of the Holy Cross*.

<sup>114</sup> *Ad Gentes*, 35.

<sup>115</sup> *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2, 4.

<sup>116</sup> *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 14.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 21.

Finally, the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize others. Here lies the test of truth, the touchstone of evangelization: it is unthinkable that a person should accept the Word and give himself to the kingdom without becoming a person who bears witness to it and proclaims it in his turn.<sup>118</sup>

As all members of the Church are different, evangelization can also be done in various ways: primarily, it should be done by testifying to an authentic Christian life, by showing one has given oneself over to God.<sup>119</sup> Secondly, it should be done by preaching. The Christian message should be preached explicitly, in order to be a real and complete evangelization.<sup>120</sup> This preaching can be done in many ways, and modern means such as mass media can certainly be used to reach the people one is trying to evangelize.<sup>121</sup> However, one should not underestimate the value of personal communication. Additionally, other forms of evangelization are also valid, such as art, science, and philosophy.<sup>122</sup> Evangelization can be done in many ways as long as it is a testimony to God the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit,<sup>123</sup> and as long as the evangelizers show respect for the religious and spiritual situation of those being evangelized, ensure they do not spiritually wound those being evangelized, and only transmit certainties that are anchored in God's revelation.<sup>124</sup>

### 3.1.2. John Paul II

John Paul II, Benedict XVI, and Francis all adopted these points that Paul VI emphasized in his exhortation, and developed them all in their own way. John Paul II emphasized that the new evangelization should not be new in its content, as the content has always been there. The content of evangelization should always be based on the Gospel and the Tradition and should be focusing on Christ.<sup>125</sup> The new evangelization should be a major priority of the Church. The contemporary world is in high need of evangelization because it has become more and more indifferent to the Christian message; secularism and atheism are more present than ever, most of all in countries that once were very Christian and

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 42, 45.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 46, 51.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>125</sup> *Novo Millennio Ineunte*, 29.

religious. Therefore, ‘without doubt a mending of the Christian fabric of society is urgently needed in all parts of the world.’<sup>126</sup>

In the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II discussed this urgency of the new evangelization. He emphasized that no member of the Church is free from the duty to proclaim Christ.<sup>127</sup> Evangelization concerns the eternal destiny of humankind, and is therefore of the highest priority.<sup>128</sup> The new evangelization is primarily aimed at groups of people who have lost their faith, who do not live a Christian life anymore, and who no longer consider themselves members of the Church.<sup>129</sup> Evangelizing them could surely consist in testifying to the Christian faith since, today, experiences and testimonies are trusted sooner than teachings and theories. Besides this, explicit proclamation stays the most important form of evangelization. Preaching the mystery of Christ is essential to bringing people to faith, so this should not be omitted.<sup>130</sup>

To reach the people at which the new evangelization is aimed, John Paul II emphasized in later documents that it is tactful and even necessary to also make use of the techniques and technologies of the 3<sup>rd</sup> millennium, such as mass media, to make sure that the Gospel becomes more integrated in today’s culture.<sup>131</sup> Also needed is a philosophy that is in harmony with faith as this can add valuable contributions to the new evangelization by deepening the dialogue with those who are to be evangelized.<sup>132</sup>

### 3.1.3. Benedict XVI

Benedict XVI also gave the new evangelization high priority. John Paul II had developed the new evangelization mostly in a spiritual way through his encyclicals, messages, and letters. Benedict XVI developed the new evangelization by embedding it into the Church organization. In 2010, he established the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, which was meant to encourage reflection on the new evangelization and find ways to realize it. He also convened a Synod of Bishops in 2012 that discussed the new

<sup>126</sup> *Christifideles Laici*, 34.

<sup>127</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, 3.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 86.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 42, 44.

<sup>131</sup> “*Preach from the Housetops*”: *The Gospel in the Age of Global Communication*, 4; *The Rapid Development*, 2.

<sup>132</sup> *Fides et Ratio*, 103-04.

evangelization and he proclaimed the Year of Faith, which lasted from October 11, 2012 until November 24, 2013.<sup>133</sup>

In accompanying documents, he amplified practical initiatives. In his *motu proprio Ubicumque et Semper*, which was written for the establishment of the Pontifical Council, Benedict XVI explained once again that it is the main task of the Church to evangelize. He referred to Mt 28,19-20, which states the commandment of Jesus to the apostles to evangelize. He wanted to continue this assignment but in new ways appropriate for this age, and recognized that the advances in science and technology made it necessary for the new evangelization to take on new forms and employ new strategies. These forms and strategies vary per situation, as different situations have different needs. However, they all require ‘an expression of a new, generous openness to the gift of grace [...] Likewise, at the root of all evangelization lies not a human plan of expansion, but rather the desire to share the inestimable gift that God has wished to give us, making us sharers in his own life.’<sup>134</sup>

In the *motu proprio Porta Fidei*, which was written for the Indiction of the Year of Faith, Benedict XVI made it explicitly clear that it is the goal of the new evangelization to convert non-believers to faith. The Christian faith leads believers to evangelize themselves, and this ‘makes us fruitful, because it expands our hearts in hope and enables us to bear life-giving witness: indeed, it opens the hearts and minds of those who listen to respond to the Lord’s invitation to adhere to his word and become his disciples.’<sup>135</sup>

Lastly, in a speech to the participants in the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council, he reminded his listeners of the changing situation of the times, which is in high need of evangelization. These times tend more and more to exclude God from people’s daily lives and even from public life in general. Therefore, proclaiming the Christian faith and testifying to a Christian way of life is important to revive Christianity and its message in the regions in which this happens.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>133</sup> MIRJAM SPRUIT, ed., *Compendium voor de Nieuwe Evangelisatie: Een selectie uit kerkelijke documenten en toespraken van pausen, 1962-2016* (’s-Hertogenbosch: Betsaida, 2017), 29-30, 97.

<sup>134</sup> *Ubicumque et Semper*.

<sup>135</sup> *Porta Fidei*, 7.

<sup>136</sup> *Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization*.

### 3.1.4. Francis

Francis also attaches great importance to the new evangelization. He focuses on the attitude with which members of the Church should approach the other and on the foundation of evangelization. Already in his first encyclical, *Lumen Fidei*, he states that once somebody is truly evangelized, one cannot keep this good news to oneself but wants to spread the joy.<sup>137</sup> This reference to evangelization at the beginning of his pontificate suggests that Francis attaches high value to the new evangelization.

In a speech to the participants in the plenary assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization, he talks extensively about the new evangelization and about the three main points that are to receive special attention. The first point is the priority that should go to the testimony of faith and to expressing the language of mercy as ways of evangelizing. The second point is the willingness to encounter people who have lost their faith and to enter into conversation with them. The third point is the ‘shared commitment to a pastoral plan which brings us back to the essential and which is *solidly focused on the essential; that is, on Jesus Christ*.’<sup>138</sup>

In the apostolic exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Francis publishes the recommendations that came out of the Synod of Bishops held in 2012 under Benedict XVI. In this document, Francis elaborates on the three points mentioned above. Among other things, he repeats that evangelizing should not only happen through preaching, but most of all through testimony and witnessing.<sup>139</sup> All members of the Church are missionaries and therefore called to evangelize. They should do this in ways that suit them, depending on their function in the Church and their level of religious education. Everybody is to step out to others and enter into conversation with them.<sup>140</sup> When it comes to content, the evangelization should focus on the joy of the Gospel, which fills the heart of the believer. The encounter with Jesus is the salvation that is the message to be spread.<sup>141</sup>

<sup>137</sup> *Lumen Fidei*, 37.

<sup>138</sup> *Address to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Pontifical Council for Promoting the New Evangelization*.

<sup>139</sup> *Evangelii Gaudium*, 259.

<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 120.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 1, 3.

## 3.2. A New Apologetics

The call for a new evangelization is closely linked with the proposal for a new apologetics, according to Cardinal William Joseph Levada, prefect emeritus of the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith. At a conference on apologetics in Rome in 2010, he spoke about the high need of a new apologetics in this age:

We see the likes of Richard Dawkins and his fellow apostles of the so-called “new” atheism addressing thousands on college campuses, with books caricaturing the doctrines and philosophy of the Christian tradition on the best-seller lists. How ripe the times are for a new apologetics!<sup>142</sup>

Levada refers back to the first letter of Peter (3,15) as the basis of every apologetics: ‘always be ready to give an explanation to anyone who asks you for a reason for your hope. But do so with courtesy and respect.’ Furthermore, an apologetics should always be focusing on the truth of the Christian revelation and on the harmony between faith and reason, especially in this time. Faith and reason are both foundations of the Catholic faith; they should strengthen each other. A new apologetics should have a loving and non-defensive character, and it should have foundations in a philosophy that grants the sciences their autonomy, but not a preponderance. Most of the time, science has an agnostic attitude, which makes a dialogue with faith all the more important. Among other questions, the one about the relationship between evolution and the doctrine of creation deserves special attention.<sup>143</sup>

Levada also says that a new apologetics can learn from the “old” apologetics. He specifically mentions the Anglican apologist C.S. Lewis and the converted (from Anglicanism to Roman Catholicism) apologist Ronald Knox. Leaning on their experience, one can address questions about the beauty of God’s creation, about the relationship between right and wrong and good and evil, and about the validity of human reason in general.<sup>144</sup>

At the inaugural Reverend Richard R. Russell Lecture at Yale University in 2013, Levada spoke again of a new apologetics for the new evangelization. He explained that an apologetics is not only addressed to non-Catholic people, but also to Catholics themselves, with the goal to deepen their understanding of their faith. This understanding is necessary

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<sup>142</sup> WILLIAM JOSEPH LEVADA, “A New Apologetics for the Church in the 21st Century,” *Origins* 40, no. 01 (May 13<sup>th</sup> 2010), 8.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 7-9.

<sup>144</sup> *Ibid.*, 9-10.



to be able to enter into conversation with those outside the religious community. The essence of apologetics is that Christians explain why they believe what they believe; that they explain what makes the Catholic faith reasonable, rather than that the Catholic faith is true. Again, referring to 1 Pt (3,15), he says apologetics should give reasons for our hope.<sup>145</sup>

Concerning the method of apologetics, Levada proposes that it should primarily have a deep understanding of the faith and the history (and challenges) of the Church. Secondly, it should be both academically/philosophically and biblically developed, to be able to communicate with both secularists and fundamentalists. Thirdly, it should have a positive attitude. And fourthly, it should be personal and loving, willing to enter into dialogue rather than into diatribe.<sup>146</sup>

Concerning the content of the apologetics, Levada names six main subjects that are important in today's (American) world: the question of the existence and knowledge of God, questions that concern contemporary sciences (such as cosmology and evolution), human sexuality and love, the ethical question, the different forms of beauty that could support the credibility of faith, and the problem of individualism. A new apologetics should focus most on these subjects.<sup>147</sup>

Levada is also aware of the different reasons why a new apologetics is needed. He explicitly refers to the new atheists and the challenges they provide for today's apologists:

The appearance of aggressive apostles of atheism like Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris provides a double challenge because the arguments of these apostles of atheism are too often based on an unsophisticated caricature of Christian belief, at least from the point of view of the Catholic tradition. In meeting the challenge of such militant atheists it is not only necessary to consider the arguments they present but also to know the Catholic faith tradition as a unified and coherent intellectual construct.<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> WILLIAM JOSEPH LEVADA, "Giving Reasons for Our Hope: A New Apologetics for the New Evangelization," *Origins* 43, no. 03 (May 23<sup>rd</sup> 2013), 36-37.

<sup>146</sup> *Ibid.*, 38-39.

<sup>147</sup> *Ibid.*, 39-41.

<sup>148</sup> *Ibid.*, 39.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have given attention to various current approaches of apologetics that are used against the new atheists. The anti-religious actions of the new atheists have not gone unnoticed and many theologians, philosophers, and other academics have replied to them in different ways. The most common apologetic approach that I have displayed is called classical apologetics, which is based on classical foundationalism. It works in two steps: firstly, it argues for the reasonableness of theism in general and, secondly, it focuses on Christianity in particular. Classical apologetics makes use of rational arguments that are mostly philosophical and logical. Three apologetic approaches are turned against this rationalistic and foundational way of arguing in classical apologetics. Reformed epistemological apologetics states that faith does not need to be based on evidence to be rational, but is already a rational basis in itself. Apologetics grounded on religious experience argues that faith can be rational when it is based on religious experience without any other evidence, since people also believe other things based on experience. Fideist apologetics views faith as a personal relationship rather than a rational undertaking. Faith goes beyond reason and, therefore, does not rest upon rational arguments.

These four different apologetic approaches have their advantages and disadvantages when the new atheism is taken into consideration. In short, the approaches of classical apologetics and apologetics grounded on religious experience have more in common with the views of the new atheists than reformed epistemological apologetics and fideist apologetics. These last two approaches lack a common ground with the new atheism and, therefore, are less likely to be fruitful.

Next to these apologetic approaches, I have given attention to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new evangelization and a new apologetics. The Church emphasizes that the new evangelization is a task of all Church members and can be done in several ways, including an academic and philosophical way. The new evangelization should focus on the Gospel and on the Tradition, with Christ as its central subject. Its main audience is the formerly Christian Western world that has become more secular in the last decades, and this audience should be converted to Christianity again. The Church has connected a new apologetics multiple times with the new atheism. The strategy of a new apologetics should focus on the harmony between faith and reason, and certain scientific subjects should receive special attention. Apologists engaged in a new apologetics can learn from “old” apologists and lean on their successful experience. Methodologically, the new apologetics should be well-founded and developed (both biblically and academically), it should be positive, and it should be personal and loving. Some specific themes are proposed

that are the most relevant in today's world, and these will also be kept in mind when developing a new apologetic approach in response to the new atheism.

The evaluation of both some contemporary apologetic approaches and the call of the Roman Catholic Church enable me to develop another apologetic approach in response to the new atheism. This apologetic approach will be based on one specific "old" apologist. Before I draw any conclusions from the above evaluation and explain the approach I want to take, it is necessary to introduce this old apologist first. Only then will I be able to cover the fundamental elements of the apologetic approach that will follow afterwards.



# Chapter 4

## Gilbert Keith Chesterton

### Introduction

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By now, I have properly introduced the new atheists by means of an analysis of their thoughts on religion and of their philosophical views that are related to religion. Furthermore, I have displayed and evaluated some contemporary approaches of apologetics with the new atheists in mind. In addition, I have made clear that the Roman Catholic Church is asking for a new evangelization and a new apologetics, including a response to the new atheism. The Church has emphasized that a new apologetics does not have to stand on its own, but that it can also learn from “old” apologetics. Successful defenders of the faith of the past can be a source of inspiration for a new strategy.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was a successful “old” apologist. He wrote many books and articles about Christianity in a way that appealed to people of his time. He had a major influence on his readers and was able to help many to convert. Today, his writings can still be of important value. His apologetics can provide a unique angle from which apologetics today can be done. Thus, his clarity of argument and accessible style could be of service to this fundamental theological study. Drawing on G.K. Chesterton’s insightful apologetics, I aim to develop a fruitful and solid apologetic approach in response to the new atheism and the secular world. However, since he is not universally known today, it is helpful to first introduce him and some of his apologetic ideas before I dive into this new apologetics.

# 1. Biography

Gilbert Keith Chesterton was born in London in an English middle-class family on May 29, 1874. He grew up in a so-called liberal Christian environment. His father was politically a Liberal and a liberal Christian too. The family's religion was rather undogmatic and they were tolerant of the Roman Catholic Church.<sup>1</sup> The family seldom went to church, but 'were rather exceptional, among people so intelligent, in believing at all in a personal God or in personal immortality.'<sup>2</sup>

From 1892 to 1895, Chesterton went to the Slade School of Art, University College, London.<sup>3</sup> During that time and in the years immediately afterwards, he went through some crucial intellectual and spiritual experiences. He was desperately seeking a worldview that could put his mind and heart to rest and became involved with spiritualism, skepticism, pessimism, and optimism.<sup>4</sup> He went on to write the book *Heretics* (1905), in which he brought several of these worldviews up for discussion. His 'process of intellectual discovery [...] comes to a fairly clear *terminus ad quem* in 1908 with *Orthodoxy*.'<sup>5</sup> By this time, his worldview had a firm Christian foundation. In his mind and heart, he was already a Catholic, although Chesterton's understanding of Catholicism was still much broader than the Roman Catholic Church would define it.<sup>6</sup> He stated, 'in the matter of religion, I have been much concerned with controversies about rather provocative problems; and have finally adopted a position which to many is itself a provocation.'<sup>7</sup>

Chesterton left University College in 1895 and started his journalistic career working for several publishers: 'I had discovered the easiest of all professions; which I have pursued ever since.'<sup>8</sup> He started by reading, editing and reviewing manuscripts of others, but it did not take him very long to start his own writings. When he earned enough money with his writings, he was able to marry his fiancée Frances Blogg in 1901.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> KER, 12-13.

<sup>2</sup> G. K. CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography* (1936), Collected Works XVI (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1988), 140.

<sup>3</sup> MAISIE WARD, *Gilbert Keith Chesterton* (1942), (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman & Littlefield, 2006), 43.

<sup>4</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography*, 85-106.

<sup>5</sup> WILLIAM ODDIE, *Chesterton and the Romance of Orthodoxy: The Making of GKC, 1874-1908* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 7.

<sup>6</sup> MACIEJ REDA, *The Apology for Catholicism in Selected Writings by G.K. Chesterton* ed. Marek Wilczyński, *Transatlantic Studies in British and North American Culture* 21 (Frankfurt: Peter Lang, 2016), 10.

<sup>7</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography*, 85.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 102.

<sup>9</sup> KER, 40-43, 73-77.

Chesterton became well known as a journalist, a novelist, a poet, and a public figure. He studied various religious beliefs, was in great demand as a lecturer, and travelled through England. Thanks to his wife, he met several Anglo-Catholic clergy and other people in this circle, many of whom became his friends.<sup>10</sup> By this time, he started to contribute articles about Christianity to different papers.<sup>11</sup> In these articles, he often laid out the connection between Englishness and Catholicism, a combination that seemed rather impossible. His unique tone of voice made him a distinctive speaker and writer.<sup>12</sup>

Chesterton's conversion to Roman Catholicism was not an instantaneous event, but was rather a long, drawn out process. In 1911, two years after the Chestertons had moved out of London to Beaconsfield,<sup>13</sup> Chesterton told a good friend for the first time he had decided to become a Roman Catholic. The good friend was Father John O'Connor, Chesterton's inspiration for his famous detective stories about the Roman Catholic Father Brown. He was also the one to admit Chesterton eventually into the Church. At that time however, Chesterton did not want to tell Frances yet because while she had brought him to Christianity, she was, herself, a convinced Anglo-Catholic.<sup>14</sup> This made him formally an Anglo-Catholic who defended Roman Catholicism.<sup>15</sup> He finally joined the Roman Catholic Church in 1919, after returning from a journalistic trip to Jerusalem. Chesterton's reception into the Church took place on July 30, 1922.<sup>16</sup> Frances followed him in 1926.<sup>17</sup>

In the years after his conversion, Chesterton defended the Roman Catholic Church in his writings relentlessly, e.g., in *The Everlasting Man* in 1925. Besides his apologetic works, he also continued to write for several newspapers and, in the last years of his life, he started broadcasting for the BBC radio.<sup>18</sup> In 1934, he was given the title of Knight Commander with the star of the Order of St. Gregory the Great by Pope Pius XI for his personal service to the Church through his writings.<sup>19</sup> Unfortunately, his mission was not to last long. In 1936, Chesterton became ill. After losing consciousness, he died on June 14<sup>th</sup> in his own house in Beaconsfield.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>10</sup> WARD, 140.

<sup>11</sup> KER, 115-25.

<sup>12</sup> REDA, 7.

<sup>13</sup> KER, 251.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 265.

<sup>15</sup> REDA, 12.

<sup>16</sup> WARD, 374-98.

<sup>17</sup> KER, 556.

<sup>18</sup> WARD, 533-34.

<sup>19</sup> KER, 691.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 718-23.

## 2. Introduction to a Chestertonian Apologetics

I have introduced the views of the new atheists that are related to religion in order to locate the ideas that my apologetic approach attempts to answer. Before I can give an answer that is inspired by and based on Chesterton's ideas, it is necessary to outline his most important ideas. Therefore, below I will discuss his most important apologetic books and some ideas that often return in his apologetics. They will include the concept of common sense, Chesterton's view on mythology and philosophy, the symbolism of insanity and mystery, and the importance of discussing worldviews.

### 2.1. The Apologetic Trilogy

Chesterton defended Christianity and the Roman Catholic faith in many of his works, some of which he already wrote before he finally converted to the Church. His three most important works in this regard are: *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, and *The Everlasting Man*. *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* he wrote years before he converted; *The Everlasting Man* came afterwards. Although Chesterton did not conceive them as a series, they can be considered an apologetic trilogy. Chesterton himself said that he wrote *Orthodoxy* as a sequel to *Heretics*, not only to explain what was wrong with several philosophies of other people, but also to expound his own vision. This is part of what makes *Heretics* such an important book: 'Heretics is, then, a key book in Chesterton's *oeuvre*, and he intended *Orthodoxy* to be read in conjunction with it: these are complementary volumes in a two-part work.'<sup>21</sup> In *Orthodoxy*, he formulated his worldview while still searching for a definitive answer, and this worldview was markedly Christian. *The Everlasting Man*, published after Chesterton's reception into the Church, contained many of the same views as *Orthodoxy*, but approached them from a different perspective and developed them more fully. The three books dwell on similar themes, e.g., common sense, the exceptional animal that is the human being, and the relationship between reason and faith. All three themes are important to my study.

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<sup>21</sup> AIDAN NICHOLS, *G.K. Chesterton, Theologian* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 2009), 31.



### 2.1.1. Heretics

Chesterton published *Heretics* in 1905, when he was thirty-one years old. The book is actually a publication of several miscellaneous essays in one volume. In these essays, Chesterton discusses various philosophies that he considers heresies. Heresies, according to Chesterton, are characterized by a lack of common sense. They are not wrong per se, but they are incomplete in the sense that they do not contain the whole truth.<sup>22</sup> In *Heretics*, Chesterton argues with many literary, philosophical, and political opponents, about themes such as progress, science, and paganism. It is not his goal to attack these things and ridicule them, but to explain that there is more to them. He argues that progress does not have much value unless there is a goal,<sup>23</sup> that science is a noble activity but not everything in the world,<sup>24</sup> and that paganism has a relationship with Christianity that most pagans do not (want to) see.<sup>25</sup> *Heretics* is a book in which the reader is challenged to look beyond the prevailing ways of thinking at the dawn of the twentieth century.

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### 2.1.2. Orthodoxy

Chesterton himself admits that *Orthodoxy* is an answer to a challenge. Readers of *Heretics* were wondering what Chesterton's own philosophical views were, after criticizing so many philosophies of other people. He took up the challenge and in 1908 *Orthodoxy* was published as a sequel to *Heretics*. Chesterton was happy to have an excuse to write a new book, but he also immediately said, 'I have attempted in a vague and personal way, in a set of mental pictures rather than in a series of deductions, to state the philosophy in which I have come to believe. I will not call it my philosophy; for I did not make it. God and humanity made it; and it made me.'<sup>26</sup>

After experimenting with different philosophies, Chesterton decided to create a new one, a new heresy that perfectly met all his needs: 'I did try to be original; but I only succeeded in inventing all by myself an inferior copy of the existing traditions of civilized religion [...] I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered that it was orthodoxy.'<sup>27</sup> The philosophy in which he had come to believe was already thoroughly theistic and Christian and, in *Orthodoxy*, Chesterton describes this

<sup>22</sup> AHLQUIST, 35.

<sup>23</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 47-53.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 71-83.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 122-31.

<sup>26</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 211.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 214.

Christian tradition in a new language.<sup>28</sup> He describes his own spiritual journey that led to theism and to Christianity. The way he does this is by making an appeal to several feelings and perceptions that led him to certain philosophical and religious conclusions. He emphasizes that scientific theories cannot explain everything. Therefore, there must be more than science to discover the world. Chesterton believes that stories play a big role in this. Chesterton deals with paradox, the complexity of life, and the limits of reason. He explains how these problems demand the use of common sense. Common sense needs a combination of reason and imagination, of philosophy and mythology. This common sense, Chesterton argues in *Orthodoxy*, automatically leads to faith, more specifically to the Christian faith.

### 2.1.3. The Everlasting Man

*The Everlasting Man* can be considered the third part of Chesterton's apologetic trilogy, since it deals with many of the same themes as *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy*. Nevertheless, it is also a book that stands alone, as its approach differs from the approaches of the other two books. Where *Heretics* and *Orthodoxy* are rather philosophical and theoretical works, *The Everlasting Man* takes a historical approach, and deals with the history of the world. Chesterton does this in a storytelling way. It is, just as the other two books, a response to someone else; in this case, to his literary friend, H. G. Wells, who had published the book *The Outline of History* in 1920. Chesterton criticizes *The Outline of History* for the fact that it is everything except an outline. According to Chesterton, an outline should be a profile, the contour of a face, making clear who or what has been drawn. The important and unique things should be shown. However, Wells did not show the exceptions, but only the ordinary. Wells considered the human being nothing more than an evolved ape, but Chesterton thinks of the human being as a revolution in the history of the world and an incomparable creature. Moreover, Wells treated the religious history of Christianity in the same way as he treated other religious histories; but to Chesterton, Christianity is an outstanding religion that cannot be paralleled by other religions. These aspects of the history of the world should receive more attention according to Chesterton, who says, 'in short I do not believe that the best way to produce an outline of history is to rub out the lines.'<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> REDA, 9.

<sup>29</sup> G. K. CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man* (1925), Collected Works II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1986), 395.

In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton attempts to show the exceptions in the history of the world, and provide an actual outline. He reasons that not everything in the history of the world is the result of evolution, but that there are two major exceptions that are revolutions: humanity and Christianity. The human being is an animal that has unique qualities: one of these is the ability to have religious beliefs, another is the ability to reason. When Christianity came into the world, for the first time in history these two unique abilities of humanity were combined in the form of mythology and philosophy. These two elements are needed to deal properly with the paradoxes of life. Additionally, the Church has a unique third quality combined with the other two, which Chesterton calls ‘challenge.’ After two thousand years, the Roman Catholic Church is still living and growing because of its fighting attitude. The Church has died several times, just as God has; but time after time it has also resurrected again, just as God has. It did not give in to fashions and movements but stayed true to its tradition and doctrines. It was like a river flowing through a sea.<sup>30</sup> The unique combination of mythology, philosophy, and challenge is, according to Chesterton, the foundation of the ultimate common sense. Believing in the Christian God, and more specifically in the way of the Roman Catholic Church, can give answers to the questions with which humanity is dealing in a way that is in line with common sense and is, therefore, the key that fits the lock of the world; it is complex but true, and is thus like life.<sup>31</sup>

## 2.2. Common Sense

I have already touched upon common sense a few times when discussing Chesterton’s apologetic trilogy. Many people connect Chesterton to the concept of common sense because he used this concept often, and in the cases that he did not mention it literally, he explicitly used his own common sense to argue. Although he himself did not have an academic degree,<sup>32</sup> he was a highly intelligent man and read many academic works. The arguments he made were interwoven with intellectual knowledge but formulated in a way that was accessible to his audience. When translating the academic knowledge he had acquired, he stuck to some criteria that were, for him, a foundation of common sense, and he made an appeal to the common sense of his audience.

Basing this apologetic approach on the writings of Chesterton, choosing common sense as a central theme is an obvious link to the works of Chesterton himself. However,

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 356.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 380-81.

<sup>32</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography*, 13.

the concept of common sense is used in various ways and, therefore, an excursion into the concept is warranted. This excursion will explain the general background of common sense, Chesterton's relationship with common sense, and the meaning of common sense in the apologetic approach towards the new atheism I am developing here.

### 2.2.1. A Short Background of Common Sense

Etymologically speaking, common sense comes from the Greek κοινή αἴσθησις and the Latin *sensus communis*. In Greek, common sense originally stood for a part of the mind that assembles one's various sensory perceptions. In Latin, the concept originally meant the basis in one's mind from which any further thinking flows. In the course of time, the Latin meaning of the word prevailed.<sup>33</sup>

In the history of philosophy, common sense also refers to a Scottish school of philosophers who developed a philosophy around common sense as the elementary mental equipment of humanity. It is the foundation of one's thinking that is developed without specific studying or skill development. Principles that flow from one's common sense need no further verification, since everybody will agree on them; they are universal principles, independent of place and time. If another philosophy or philosophical position is in contradiction with the principles of common sense, this other philosophy must contain a fallacy, probably in its premises. In short, common sense philosophy trusts the conscience and rational faculties of ordinary people.<sup>34</sup>

To Thomas Reid (1710-1796), the founder of the Scottish school, common sense was something that preceded reason and, therefore, was the foundation of all thinking. It was more fundamental and more trustworthy than speculative and complicated reasoning and, in case of conflict, it was always common sense that prevailed. An important aim of the philosophy of common sense was 'to defend common sense against philosophical paradox and skepticism.'<sup>35</sup> It wanted to eliminate paradoxes. After Reid, adherents of

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<sup>33</sup> TH. LEINKAUF et al., "Sensus communis," in *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*, eds. Joachim Ritter, et al. (Basel: Schwabe & Co, 1995).

<sup>34</sup> CHARLOTTE R. BROWN, "Common-sense Ethics," in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>35</sup> S.A. GRAVE, "Common Sense," in *The Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Paul Edwards (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 156.

‘commonsensism’<sup>36</sup> adjusted the meaning of the concept slightly, but the core remained the same.<sup>37</sup>

Nowadays, people use the concept “common sense” generally without much reflection; it is simply imbedded in contemporary language. Common sense is both something within one’s mind and outside of one’s mind.<sup>38</sup> Within one’s mind, it is the process of thinking, the *modus operandi*; in this case, it is the subject. Outside of one’s mind, it is the product of the thinking; in this case, it is the object. As a subject, it stands for the ordinary understanding of mentally sane and mature people; as an object, it stands for the opinions that are generally shared by everybody. “Common sense” can be used in both ways, even indiscriminately.

## 2.2.2. The Meaning of Common Sense to Chesterton

Nowadays, Chesterton is often associated with common sense. He has even been called ‘the apostle of common sense.’<sup>39</sup> Scholars such as Nichols, Oddie, and Reyburn connect Chesterton to common sense as well,<sup>40</sup> and the two are generally recognized as inseparable.

On the one hand, common sense was and is a self-evident catchword that is used without much further reflection. In his writings, Chesterton defended common people against the elite, and common sense against farfetched philosophies. Modern philosophies seemed to belong only to the specialists, and always had an element in them that did not correspond to one’s “normal” sense of reality and that no “normal” person could believe.<sup>41</sup> Therefore, Oddie explains, ‘from the beginning of his career as a journalist, he profoundly believed he had a vocation to confront the notion that truth was the province only of an elite.’<sup>42</sup> According to Chesterton, common sense is available to ordinary people.<sup>43</sup> It is about seeing things as they are, instead of seeing mostly deductions or eventualities. It is about

<sup>36</sup> RODERICK M. CHISHOLM, “Commonsensism,” in *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1998).

<sup>37</sup> LEINKAUF et al., “Sensus communis.”

<sup>38</sup> ANDRE LALANDE, “Sens,” in *Vocabulaire Technique et Critique de la Philosophie* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1980).

<sup>39</sup> AHLQUIST, 14.

<sup>40</sup> Cf. DAVID W. FAGERBERG, *The Size of Chesterton’s Catholicism* (Notre Dame, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1998); E.g., NICHOLS; ODDIE; DUNCAN REYBURN, *Seeing Things as They Are: G.K. Chesterton and the Drama of Meaning* (Eugene, Oregon: Cascade Books, 2016).

<sup>41</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 514.

<sup>42</sup> ODDIE, 191.

<sup>43</sup> FAGERBERG, 56.

common things, about simple and basic truths.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, it is pure and sensible, and the only acceptable way to view reality.

On the other hand, common sense is not as common as the term suggests. Chesterton had a very specific vision of the common sense he wanted to defend. To him, common sense had everything to do with one's worldview; common sense is the basis of one's worldview. In Chesterton's time, common sense had become uncommon because the general worldview had changed. Therefore, what Chesterton wrote and said seemed refreshing and new to many of his readers, but he actually stated truths that had always been there, but that people had no longer wanted to see.

Chesterton himself did not structuralize his ideas on common sense, but other people did. In his book about the hermeneutics of Chesterton, Duncan Reyburn distinguishes five principles in Chesterton's philosophy of common sense.<sup>45</sup> I agree with the content of these principles and believe they are important to understand Chesterton's way of thinking, which is why I will describe them below. However, I do not think that they explain Chesterton's view on common sense itself. As I have explained above, common sense is open to more than one interpretation. It can explain one's way of thinking, or the *modus operandi*, and it can explain the products of one's way of thinking. Reyburn opted for the second interpretation. The principles all reflect Chesterton's philosophy and can be found in his works but are only products of his common sense thinking.

Firstly, Reyburn observes that in Chesterton's thinking doctrine and attitude are linked together. Doctrine stands for one's philosophy, and this philosophy is part of one's attitude or one's frame of mind. This means that the way one understands the world depends on one's belief; this belief can support or hinder someone's comprehension. One's 'ultimate attitudes towards life [are] the soils for the seeds of doctrine.'<sup>46</sup> Solely defending some loose concepts is not useful, as these do not stand on themselves but are always used in a certain context. This is the reason why one's worldview is very important to Chesterton, and why discussing worldviews should not be avoided.

Secondly, common sense is able to distinguish between truth and falsehood. This is more complex than it seems. Labels do not always describe objects accurately, and common sense recognizes this. A person can stick to labels, and common sense can properly deal with this:

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<sup>44</sup> AHLQUIST, 13-14.

<sup>45</sup> REYBURN, 141-62.

<sup>46</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 268.

We call wine “white wine” which is as yellow as a Blue-coat boy’s legs. We call grapes “white grapes” which are manifestly pale green. We give to the European, whose complexion is a sort of pink drab, the horrible title of a “white man”—a picture more blood-curdling than any spectre in Poe.<sup>47</sup>

Common sense makes the right distinctions, both ‘between black and white and between reality and illusion.’<sup>48</sup> Ultimately, it distinguishes between truth and falsehood. However, this does not mean that fiction is necessarily the opposite of reality. Chesterton rather sees fiction as a complement to reality. Fiction and ideas are real things, and they help us to comprehend the world. According to Chesterton, it is a ‘fundamental fact that ideas are realities; that ideas exist just as men exist.’<sup>49</sup> However, fiction or ideas should not become more important than reality; they are only a sub-reality and can never beat reality.

Thirdly, good should defeat evil. ‘The negative spirit’<sup>50</sup> of Chesterton’s time focused primarily on the bad but failed to determine what was good. The world had lost its sense of good and evil because it had lost its ideals. The standard by which things could be measured had been forgotten: ‘what is wrong is that we do not ask what is right.’<sup>51</sup> In other words, a standard of perfection is needed. Common sense is about aiming at this goodness, it is about ‘altering human conditions to fit the human soul.’<sup>52</sup>

Fourthly, faith precedes reason. In other words, ‘reason itself is a matter of faith.’<sup>53</sup> Reason does not stand by itself but is always rooted in faith. When this underlying faith is ignored or denied and reason is raised to an absolute, a ‘suicide of thought’<sup>54</sup> is committed. According to Chesterton, reason is not absolute; it cannot grasp reality completely. Reyburn continues, ‘for Chesterton, truth, which is linked to faith, [...] is not the mere facts [...] In fact, it is possible to accurately represent all the facts whilst still missing or neglecting the truth that holds the facts together.’<sup>55</sup> This is why the concrete facts should always be connected to the more abstract truth, otherwise ‘it is reason used without root, reason in the void.’<sup>56</sup>

<sup>47</sup> *Heretics*, 66.

<sup>48</sup> REYBURN, 149.

<sup>49</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 257.

<sup>50</sup> *Heretics*, 47.

<sup>51</sup> *What’s Wrong with the World* (1910), Collected Works IV (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1987), 41.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 104.

<sup>53</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 236.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.

<sup>55</sup> REYBURN, 155.

<sup>56</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 230.

Lastly, one should look at reality as if it were a picture rather than a pattern. Reason is like a pattern, predictable and flawless. It is ‘a perfect but narrow circle. A small circle is quite as infinite as a large circle; but, though it is quite as infinite, it is not so large [...] The lunatic’s theory explains a large number of things, but it does not explain them in a large way.’<sup>57</sup> Reasonable theories do make sense, but reality cannot be captured by reason only. Reality is not completely predictable and rationally understandable; it is not like a predictable pattern. Reality is like an unpredictable picture that has a meaning, contains conflict, and is open to multiple possibilities. More is needed to understand the meaning of reality, namely, common sense.

Reyburn’s principles of common sense point towards important elements in Chesterton’s thinking and apologetics. In the approach towards the new atheism, these elements will also return and indicate how they are inextricably bound up with common sense. However, they do not explain Chesterton’s way of thinking, his *modus operandi*. Chesterton did not explain his view on common sense itself either. His way of thinking was implicit in his worldview; and it was his worldview he defended, the product of his common sense thinking. Nevertheless, it is still useful to make his view on common sense explicit. When studying his arguments, other criteria that do explain this view reveal themselves. I would say that for Chesterton, common sense revolves around trust. In analyzing this trust, four criteria can be detected, which I will describe below.

Firstly, common sense means to trust one’s sensory perceptions. According to Chesterton, his time (the beginning of the twentieth century) is ‘the age of uncommon nonsense’<sup>58</sup> and needs to rediscover common sense. The perfect teacher to help do this, he suggests, is Thomas Aquinas. The philosophy of Aquinas *is* the philosophy of common sense, and it is the philosophy that corresponds ‘to everybody’s sense of reality.’<sup>59</sup> According to Aquinas and Chesterton, one’s sense of reality goes back to the five senses, so the five senses are the source of one’s common sense. People can trust that their senses do not deceive them because their senses are given to them by God. One’s senses are, consequently, the authority of one’s reason.<sup>60</sup>

This trust in one’s sensory perceptions is also expressed by philosopher of religion, Richard Swinburne. According to him, ‘it is a basic principle of rationality, which I call the principle of credulity, that we ought to believe that things are as they seem to be (in the epistemic sense) unless and until we have evidence that we are mistaken.’<sup>61</sup> People naturally

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 222.

<sup>58</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 425.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 514.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 429-30.

<sup>61</sup> RICHARD SWINBURNE, *Is There a God?* Rev. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 115.



base their knowledge on what they perceive through their five senses because if they do not, they can have no beliefs at all.

Secondly, common sense means to trust one's rational faculties. From the reality that people receive through their senses, they can deduce facts with their own reason. This is the most important way to come to any conclusions. One must first trust one's own rational faculties before leaning on the thinking of others. Chesterton explains in his *Autobiography* that this went wrong within several spheres of Intelligentsia:

While it thought a great deal about thinking, it did not think. Everything seemed to come at second or third hand; from Nietzsche or Tolstoy or Ibsen or Shaw; and there was a pleasant atmosphere of discussing all these things, without any particular sense of responsibility for coming to any conclusion on them.<sup>62</sup>

Therefore, common sense means that, initially, one trusts one's own reason more than the reason of others. When people build on the knowledge of others,<sup>63</sup> they must do this critically, and as soon as something contradicts their own thinking, they must reconsider. People are responsible for their own conclusions, so their conclusions must be in line with or follow from their own thinking. This is why the philosophy of Thomas Aquinas is common sensical, even though he based his philosophy on the study of Aristotle: 'his Aristotelianism simply meant that the study of the humblest fact will lead to the study of the highest truth.'<sup>64</sup> It was because the philosophy of Aristotle was in line with his own thinking that Aquinas could build on Aristotle. But it was still Aquinas' own philosophy, and he came to his own conclusions by himself and took responsibility for them.

Philosopher Richard Foley makes the same argument that one must trust one's own rational faculties: 'Most of us do intellectually trust ourselves by and large. Any remotely normal life requires such trust.'<sup>65</sup> Otherwise, people fall into skepticism, and skepticism will not answer their questions satisfactorily. This is also explained by philosopher Linda Zagzebski:

Self-trust and trust in others is asymmetrical [...] I must trust myself unless I have reason to think I am untrustworthy on some occasion, but since I

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<sup>62</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography*, 153.

<sup>63</sup> People should build on the knowledge of others. Chesterton also did this, and I also do this in this study. Below, I will explain to which form of trust this is linked.

<sup>64</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 471.

<sup>65</sup> RICHARD FOLEY, *Intellectual Trust in Oneself and Others* (2001), eds. Jonathan Lowe and Noah Lemos, Cambridge Studies in Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 3.

must trust myself in order to determine that something is a reason to think I am untrustworthy, trust in myself is a condition for counting anything as such a reason.<sup>66</sup>

Zagzebski calls this epistemic egocentrism. People can only trust others if they trust themselves first. The reason is that if people do not trust themselves, they have no valid reason to trust others. Of course, it is possible that they make mistakes in their thinking, and they discover this when they become acquainted with the thinking of others. When the thinking of others is not in line with their own thinking, they must take up the challenge and re-evaluate carefully. As Foley argues:

I can employ my faculties, procedures, and opinions to reexamine as best I can my way of thinking about the issues and to monitor myself in light of the challenge. This may sometimes prompt me to reverse my previous opinions and defer to others. Other times I may conclude that withholding judgment is the best option, at least until further investigation establishes which, if either, party is right. At least sometimes, however, the best option may be to retain my previous opinions, with at most only minor adjustments.<sup>67</sup>

In all these cases, one makes an appeal to the idea that one can trust one's rational faculties. Otherwise, one cannot evaluate the opinions of others and come to a satisfying conclusion.

Thirdly, common sense means to trust one's tradition. Although people need to think for themselves and trust their own reason and sensory perceptions, they should not neglect what other people have said before them, particularly a group of people through different ages: 'common sense [...] often comes to us in the form of tradition.'<sup>68</sup> One can build one's own knowledge upon the knowledge of others, especially when one is not able to verify the facts with one's own senses, as long as this is done critically and is consistent with one's own thinking. Chesterton does this too with a dry remark in his *Autobiography*:

Bowing down in blind credulity, as is my custom, before mere authority and the tradition of the elders, superstitiously swallowing a story I could not test at the time by experiment or private judgment, I am firmly of opinion that I was born on the 29<sup>th</sup> of May, 1874, on Campden Hill,

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<sup>66</sup> LINDA TRINKAUS ZAGZEBSKI, *Epistemic Authority: A Theory of Trust, Authority, and Autonomy in Belief* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 62.

<sup>67</sup> FOLEY, 79.

<sup>68</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 163.

Kensington [...] My birth (as I have said) is an incident which I accept, like some poor ignorant peasant, only because it has been handed down to me by oral tradition [...] Of course what many call hearsay evidence, or what I call human evidence, might be questioned in theory [...] Some of the skeptical methods applied to the world's origin might be applied to my origin, and a grave and earnest enquirer come to the conclusion that I was never born at all. But I prefer to believe that common sense is something that my readers and I have in common.<sup>69</sup>

Being unable to prove the date of his birth, he believes what others have told him. It is common sense to trust 'a consensus of common human voices.'<sup>70</sup>

Swinburne also argues for trusting one's tradition, although he uses different terminology: 'another basic principle of rationality, which I call the principle of testimony, that those who do not have an experience of a certain type ought to believe any others when they say that they do.'<sup>71</sup> Just as one trusts one's own experiences, one should trust the experiences of one's predecessors. Only in the case of counterevidence should one doubt these experiences. If one has a valid reason to think the other is lying, making a mistake, or misleading him/herself, then one should not rely on these testimonies. Otherwise, it is the only way to increase one's (scientific) knowledge.<sup>72</sup>

Lastly, common sense means to trust one's sense of wonder. If people only base their common sense on the criteria that have been stated above, something will be lacking. These criteria all are connected with reason, with the ability to think rationally about reality. According to Chesterton, reality cannot be grasped solely by reason. This is why a basic sense of wonder as a foundation of our common sense is also needed. This might seem counter-intuitive, as this criterion asks to let go of what one already knows, and to look at reality as if one sees it for the first time, but 'it is necessary to touch the nerve of novelty.' One needs one's sense of wonder in order to see reality as it is; one needs 'the imagination that can see what is there.'<sup>73</sup> This is also recognized by William Oddie. He connects the sense of wonder to an anticipation of surprise and says that, for Chesterton, this 'was at the root of his religious apologetic [...] The expectation that the everyday is the gateway to the

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<sup>69</sup> *The Autobiography*, 21.

<sup>70</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 250.

<sup>71</sup> SWINBURNE, 116.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>73</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 147-48.

unforeseen, that normality is a kind of veil hiding the possibility of surprise, even of wonder<sup>74</sup> is central in Chesterton's worldview.

The imagination compensates for too rational a view of reality. According to theologian Alison Milbank, 'the imagination is a philosophical tool that helps us reason by providing an epistemology, a way of knowing, that is inherently religious.'<sup>75</sup> Therefore, trusting one's sense of wonder is an important element in Chesterton's apologetics. Only when one allows the imagination to play a role in one's experience of reality is it possible to get 'access to the divine and to the reality and otherness of the world beyond the self.'<sup>76</sup> In his works, Chesterton constantly emphasizes the strangeness and magic in ordinary things. This technique helps people to engage with reality and awaken their religious sense.<sup>77</sup>

One can trust this sense of wonder by looking at life as a child. Children use their imagination and they see things clearly; their view at life is sane and pure. It is not yet obfuscated by arguments and illusions. Chesterton was very aware of the importance of the feelings and impressions he had himself as a child: 'I believe that in feeling these things from the first, I was feeling the fragmentary suggestions of a philosophy I have since found to be the truth.'<sup>78</sup> This sense of wonder is probably the most important foundation for Chesterton's philosophy and his view on common sense. The clearness with which children perceive the world can only remain if one implements this sense of wonder. Reason has its limit; therefore, one must rely on reason and imagination, on philosophy and mythology, and one needs both to retain common sense. 'Fairyland is nothing but the sunny country of common sense.'<sup>79</sup> According to Chesterton, reality consists of both laws and magic that ultimately come together in a paradox, and only the combination of one's reason and one's sense of wonder can handle this.

There is certainly some overlapping between the principles Reyburn distinguishes and the criteria I distinguish. However, the main difference is that the latter determine what is the *modus operandi* of common sense, and Reyburn's principles are the consequences or products of using this faculty. Together, they provide a clear description of Chesterton's view on common sense.

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<sup>74</sup> ODDIE, 19.

<sup>75</sup> ALISON MILBANK, "Apologetics and the Imagination: Making Strange," in *Imaginative Apologetics: Theology, Philosophy and the Catholic Tradition*, ed. Andrew Davison (London: SCM Press, 2011), 32.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>78</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography*, 40.

<sup>79</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 252.

## 2.3. Mythology and Philosophy

In addition to common sense, which is imbued in all Chesterton's writings, the concepts of mythology and philosophy also play important roles in Chesterton's apologetics. According to Chesterton, humanity has both a longing for storytelling and a longing for understanding. The concepts of mythology and philosophy comply with those wishes and, therefore, both are needed for spiritual fulfillment. In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton explains elaborately how these longings have come into existence, how they developed, and how they were finally united within one religion. In other apologetic works, he also dwells upon the importance of the balance between mythology and philosophy to develop and maintain a plausible worldview.

### 2.3.1. The Religious History of Mythology and Philosophy

In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton tells the story of the psychological religion of humanity. This story is not about scientific accuracy; it is Chesterton's way of explaining a certain concept in which mythology and philosophy play important roles. It is a story about several psychological longings of humanity that can be fulfilled by different activities. Chesterton calls them 'spiritual elements and influences.'<sup>80</sup> Within the psyche, the human being is religious in one way or another. Regardless of the official religious name, Chesterton divides this psychological religion into the following categories: God, the Gods, the Demons, and the Philosophers. All categories have their own characteristics and represent one element of the human religious psyche.

Originally, the human psychological religion started with a natural monotheism, with God. The idea of one God was taken for granted but could not easily be discussed. It was not easy to deal with this one God who was in some way absent—not non-existent, but like a void. However, the majority of the people needed and wanted to fill this absence or void. They did this in several ways.

One way was to lean upon mythology, a good form of paganism.<sup>81</sup> The original monotheism that people felt inside slowly turned into a polytheism, so that people could give words to their internal truths. The human being felt an inner hunger for tales, for

<sup>80</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 219.

<sup>81</sup> There is a huge amount of scholarly expertise on mythology in general and on mythology in the Bible as well. However, getting into this would lead me too far afield. Therefore, in this study I limit my explanation on mythology to the way in which Chesterton interpreted it. My understanding of mythology in this study is in this sense primarily Chestertonian.

locality, and for personality; by making myths, one could alleviate this hunger.<sup>82</sup> The implication of the development of mythology was that the original one God was further suppressed until God was almost forgotten.<sup>83</sup> ‘They may have regarded it as an enrichment of their religious life; but it meant the final loss of all that we now call religion [...] Exactly what it lost by these larger ideas is the largest idea of all. It is the idea of the fatherhood that makes the whole world one.’<sup>84</sup>

People had a poetical side and a creative urge, an urge for art. They could express this urge in mythology, by making tales and fables about multiple gods. Therefore, it is a lost cause to try to scientifically explain myths. Mythmakers did not make scientific statements, they made art. So, the myths should be judged as art.<sup>85</sup> However, this does not mean that the myths did not contain any truth:

The test therefore is purely imaginative. But imaginative does not mean imaginary. It does not follow that it is all what the moderns call subjective, when they mean false. Every true artist does feel, consciously or unconsciously, that he is touching transcendental truths; that his images are shadows of things seen through the veil.<sup>86</sup>

Still, although mythology was able to fulfill the human poetical longing for tales, it could not fulfill the practical longings of some people for “getting things done”; it was not efficient. To fulfill this longing, these people turned to the demons and became involved with a dark form of paganism, which was diabolism: ‘there is always in such a mentality an idea that there is a short cut to the secret of all success; something that would shock the world by this sort of shameless thoroughness.’<sup>87</sup> People started to call the spirits, turned to black magic, and accepted evil because they believed this would give immediate results. God was too far away by being too abstract, and even the gods maintained their distance through the stories. But the demons were close, and some people therefore turned to them.<sup>88</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 231.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 219-25.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 226-27.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 233-35.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 237.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 255.

<sup>88</sup> *Ibid.*, 248-55.

However, people also had a hunger for knowledge and facts, and this longing could neither be fulfilled by diabolism nor by mythology. Mythology was not religion, let alone theology; it did not touch upon reason:<sup>89</sup> ‘it is an attempt to reach the divine reality through the imagination alone; in its own field reason does not restrain it at all.’<sup>90</sup> Therefore, the last way to fill the absence or void of God was to turn to the philosophers. Philosophy was a totally different “spiritual element”; it was completely alien from the mythological and diabolic spiritual elements.<sup>91</sup>

Philosophers tried to grasp everything and to simplify everything. They did this in many different ways, but all ways were unnatural and unsatisfactory. The philosophers thought ‘that existence can be represented by a diagram instead of a drawing.’<sup>92</sup> After a certain time, ‘philosophy began to be a joke; it also began to be a bore. That unnatural simplification of everything into one system or another [...] revealed at once its finality and its futility.’<sup>93</sup> The philosophies might be true, but they were not comprehensive. The philosophers wanted to explain the world fully because they were convinced that there was something to be explained, but they did not succeed.<sup>94</sup> They could not succeed because it was impossible to grasp the world in a diagram or a pattern.

During all this time, the idea of the one God had still lingered on in the human mind, but people did not know their way out of the separate ways of mythology, diabolism, and philosophy to deal with this one God; that is, until Christianity came into existence: ‘in reality the rivers of mythology and philosophy run parallel and do not mingle till they meet in the sea of Christendom [...] The truth is that the Church was actually the first thing that ever tried to combine reason and religion.’<sup>95</sup> Christianity brought the two spiritual elements of mythology and philosophy together, satisfied the human spiritual mind, and returned humanity to monotheism.

This is already visible from the first beginnings of Christianity in the story of Christmas. In this story, both the shepherds and the magi came to visit ‘the child who was a father and the mother who was a child.’<sup>96</sup> In this story, the shepherds represent the makers of mythologies, and the magi represent the makers of philosophies, and even the element of diabolism is represented by King Herod.<sup>97</sup> From the moment Christianity entered the

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<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 241, 95.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 242.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 255-58.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 268.

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*, 293.

<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, 397-98.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 243.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 311.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 306-11.

world, the relation between mythology and philosophy changed, and finally the two could unite and cooperate. The “spiritual elements” within humanity could finally be expressed without clashing and they could nourish the soul in a healthy way.

### 2.3.2. The Importance of Mythology and Philosophy Today

Chesterton encountered many “philosophers” (nowadays called “scientists”) who valued science and facts so highly that they no longer attached any importance to the stories of mythology. A world that is entirely explainable intellectually was their ideal, and Chesterton objected to this. He said, ‘we cannot go back to an ideal of reason and sanity. For mankind has discovered that reason does not lead to sanity.’<sup>98</sup> At least reason *alone* does not lead to sanity. According to Chesterton, reason alone is not an ideal for which one should strive. There are things in this world that are not scientific but are spiritual.<sup>99</sup> The scientists whom Chesterton was opposing aimed at finding natural explanations for all their questions and ruling out any possible supernatural answers.<sup>100</sup> Chesterton objected to this, ‘take away the supernatural, and what remains is the unnatural.’<sup>101</sup> What he meant is that one cannot simply reject possible supernatural elements in life because by reducing everything to natural and scientific elements, one loses one’s mental sanity; it is unnatural to do this. The world cannot solely be investigated by philosophy; it must also be explored by mythology: ‘to accept everything is an exercise, to understand everything a strain [...] The poet [mythmaker] only asks to get his head into the heavens. It is the logician [philosopher] who seeks to get the heavens into his head. And it is his head that splits.’<sup>102</sup>

Life is more than only philosophy; it cannot be summarized in a formula: ‘life may sometimes legitimately appear as a book of science [...] But life is always a novel.’<sup>103</sup> At the same time, life is also more than mythology. Only telling each other stories does not provide the answers to one’s questions. One may prefer philosophy to mythology, or the other way around, but life exists of both elements, and both elements are therefore worthy.

Christianity knows that life consists of both mythology and philosophy and it is shown throughout its history that the Church honors both mythology and philosophy. For example, Francis of Assisi, about whom Chesterton wrote a biography, was a poet; Thomas Aquinas, about whom Chesterton wrote another biography, was a scholar: ‘you can make

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<sup>98</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 131.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 88.

<sup>102</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 220.

<sup>103</sup> *Heretics*, 143.



a sketch of St. Francis: you could only make a plan of St. Thomas.<sup>104</sup> Thomas reconciled religion with the intellect; Francis reconciled religion with the imagination. Both things were needed in the time during which the two saints operated. Chesterton told his readers that Francis once compared his body to a donkey, and that Thomas was compared to an ox. Just as both the donkey and the ox are part of the story of Christmas, both mythology and philosophy are part of the story of life.<sup>105</sup>

Chesterton wanted his readers to care ‘more for truth than for consistency.’<sup>106</sup> Philosophy can make a completely consistent system of the world, but this would not be the complete truth. The world is complex and cannot be fitted into a system. Looking at the world in a plausible way is like looking with both eyes open: one sees two images at the same moment and yet gives the best overall view.<sup>107</sup> Relying only on philosophy or only on mythology is like looking with only one eye open: one sees a limited and half-blind view of things. One must rely on both philosophy and mythology to see the world in its fullest and to maintain a plausible worldview.

## 2.4. The Symbolism of O, and †

Connected with the concepts of mythology and philosophy, Chesterton also repeatedly mentions the symbols O and † in his apologetic works. Since these symbols are related to different worldviews and are so important to Chesterton, it seems only right to explain these symbols here. Summarized, the symbol O can be defined as insanity, and the symbol of † as mystery.

### 2.4.1. O – The Symbol of Insanity

The circle is a sign of infinity and eternity. It never stops and is perfectly round. It is a symbol that could be depicted on the flag of science as a symbol of ultimate, universal, and never-ending reason. However, Chesterton explains that it is not as perfect as it seems. It is inflexible, slavish, and a sign of nullity. It goes on and on until it drives one crazy. Moreover, it is fixed in its size, and can neither grow nor shrink.<sup>108</sup>

<sup>104</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 421.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 430.

<sup>106</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 230.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 230-31.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*

For Chesterton, the circle is a symbol of expansive and exhaustive reason. It is universal, but only because some scientists ‘take one thin explanation and carry it very far.’<sup>109</sup> The symbol of the circle suggests that there is nothing outside itself; a circle cannot break out. It suggests a comprehensiveness; it does not allow any exceptions or anything unexpected. Everything should fit within the circle of reason. This suggests that everything can be reduced to an extreme simplicity. Some scientists try to simplify the world and force it into one all-embracing theory but, eventually, they cannot accomplish this, and the attempt will drive them to insanity.<sup>110</sup> They force reality into such a comprehensive theory that it becomes too simple to be sane. The circle values simplicity higher than the subtlety of truth.<sup>111</sup>

A circle might have a perfect shape but it is also narrow. Some scientists overestimate causality, and they assume that reason is all there is. This leads to madness and insanity. According to Chesterton, ‘indeed, the common phrase for insanity is in this respect a misleading one. The madman is not the man who has lost his reason. The madman is the man who has lost everything except his reason.’<sup>112</sup> It is insane to think that only reason is worthwhile because it makes the world smaller than it is. One needs more to understand the world; only relying on reason makes one shortsighted.<sup>113</sup>

Narrowness is also the term Chesterton often uses to describe heresies.<sup>114</sup> Heresies are not simply falsities; they very often contain a truth. The problem is that they contain only *one* truth and are therefore narrow. Even when the heretical philosophy or worldview claims to be universal, this only means that it takes *one* truth and applies it to everything.<sup>115</sup> ‘a heresy is a truth that hides all the other truths.’<sup>116</sup>

A heresy arises when one idea is taken out of a thousand other ideas and taken apart:

He [the heretic] takes it away with him into a wilderness, where the idea becomes an image and the image an idol. Then, after a century or two, he suddenly wakes up and discovers that the idol is an idol; and, shortly after that, that the wilderness is a wilderness. If he is a wise man, he calls himself a fool. If he is a fool, he calls himself an evolutionary progressive who has

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 225.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 219. For this moment, I will copy the terms that Chesterton used himself. In chapter 5 §1.3, I will say more about Chesterton’s use of various terms and the adaptation of these terms in this study.

<sup>111</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 267.

<sup>112</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 221-22.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>114</sup> FAGERBERG, 15.

<sup>115</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Autobiography*, 327.

<sup>116</sup> *The Well and the Shallows* (1935), *Collected Works III* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1990), 505.

outgrown the worship of idols; and he looks round him at the wilderness, spreading bare and desolate on every side and says, in the beautiful words of Mr. H. G. Wells: "I see no limit to it at all."<sup>117</sup>

Other truths are neglected, and only this one idea is supposed to carry value. The heretic cannot think any further than this one idea. This brings about a narrow and insane worldview.

In several apologetic works, Chesterton sees a connection between the symbol of the circle and Buddhism: 'the Wheel of Buddha always moves round and never moves on.'<sup>118</sup> The Buddhist "metaphysical discipline" might contain truth, but it is not complete. It is, as is well represented by the Wheel, hollow. It does not move forward; it does not progress. It is universal and includes everything but, eventually, it comes to nothing.<sup>119</sup> The circle suggests an inwardness, and this inwardness is something central to Buddhism. The Buddhist saint has his eyes closed and is looking inwards. He is introspective, but so much that he sees life as a science or a predictable plan, which must end up in a certain way and cannot end up differently.<sup>120</sup>

Only relying on reason does not provide a plausible worldview. It restricts people; according to Chesterton, it drives them insane because it holds them captive within the boundaries of the circle. Some scientists might want to believe that the world is reasonable, but time and again they discover that it is not. The trouble is that this is discovered at the last moment, or maybe even *after* the last moment, after they think they have completely grasped and understood it. Chesterton uses the human body to illustrate this. It seems duplicated but it is not. Although it has twin arms, legs, eyes, nostrils, and brain lobes, it only has one heart, and this heart is not even in the middle of the body. The human body seems symmetrical, but it is not. Countless times scientists might think they understand a certain matter completely until, at the last moment, the truth escapes and leaves the scientists scratching their heads.<sup>121</sup>

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<sup>117</sup> *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 317.

<sup>118</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 468.

<sup>119</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 263-66.

<sup>120</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 336-41.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-86.

### 2.4.2. † – The Symbol of Mystery

Once one experiences that the truth is too big to grasp with only reason, the moment has come to break out of the circle. One must admit that the circle is not satisfactory because the truth is not completely predictable. The truth is odd, and one cannot capture it within the limits of the circle. Chesterton understands this quite literally: ‘the cross, in fact as well as figure, does really stand for the idea of breaking out of the circle that is everything and nothing.’<sup>122</sup> In order to fully understand what Chesterton means with this, it is helpful to look at the cross as fact and as figure separately.

The cross as figure can be captured best by Chesterton’s own words:

The cross has become something more than a historical memory; it does convey, almost as by a mathematical diagram, the truth about the real point at issue; the idea of a conflict stretching outwards into eternity. It is true, and even tautological, to say that the cross is the crux of the whole matter.<sup>123</sup>

This is what the cross as figure represents. The whole of truths is complex: in the center is a conflict or a paradox, but the truths that cause this conflict, can stretch infinitely without losing their shape. The basis of common sense is to take both truths and the conflict along with them. One should not try to avoid the conflict and fit everything into one truth because, eventually, this is not tenable. Truth is more important than consistency, and the truth is complex. We must take advantage of the conflict rather than cover it up.

Chesterton was often criticized for his frequent use of paradoxes,<sup>124</sup> but he was convinced that paradoxes were a part of reality.<sup>125</sup> According to Chesterton, paradoxes do not obscure the truth; rather, they illuminate reality.<sup>126</sup> Paradoxes are not just a matter of style; they reveal a truth that otherwise would not be seen. Maisie Ward, a friend of Chesterton’s and his first biographer, describes it as follows:

What it amounted to was roughly this: paradox must be of the nature of things because of God’s infinity and the limitations of the world and of man’s mind. To us limited beings God can express His idea only in fragments. We can bring together apparent contradictions in those

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 266.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

<sup>124</sup> WARD, 136.

<sup>125</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 166.

<sup>126</sup> FAGERBERG, 14.

fragments whereby a greater truth is suggested. If we do this in a sudden or incongruous manner we startle the unprepared and arouse the cry of paradox. But if we will not do it we shall miss a great deal of truth.<sup>127</sup>

At this point, I want to refer to the spiritual elements of philosophy and mythology again. Where the circle only contained philosophy, the two lines of the figure of the cross may symbolize the two different spiritual elements of philosophy and mythology. The two lines can be prolonged infinitely, but they clash in the center. In the same way, philosophy and mythology both contain truths, but they might contradict in the middle. According to Chesterton, this is not a problem, but simply reality. The world is complex; therefore, the only acceptable way to understand it is to accept it with all its complexities and paradoxes. Different types of understanding expand infinitely and thereby provide a rich world. The basis of common sense is to discover this rich and complex world and stretch with it as the four arms of the figure of the cross stretch. To do this, one must embrace both philosophy and mythology and both trust reason and believe in stories too.

Concretely, for Chesterton, the foundation of the discovery of the truth lies in his childhood, more specifically, in the fairy tales read to him. Apart from the lessons fairy tales teach, there is something more fundamental in them, a certain way of looking at life: it is the trust of one's sense of wonder, one of Chesterton's criteria of common sense. This way of looking at life touches upon one's ability to see the difference between necessity and imagination. Necessity is about logic: two and two must make four; one cannot even think it could make three. However, trees do not necessarily grow fruit; one can easily imagine them growing coins. This is the difference between the real necessity of laws and the imagination of other possibilities: 'we have always in our fairy tales kept this sharp distinction between the science of mental relations, in which there really are laws, and the science of physical facts, in which there are no laws, but only weird repetitions.'<sup>128</sup> Chesterton considers the latter "science" to be magic rather than laws. One will only see the difference when one looks at the world with an elementary wonder, the same way as a child looks at the world.<sup>129</sup> Then one can see the first foundation of the truth, namely, that the world is wonderful, that indeed it is full of wonders.

As a child, Chesterton lived in a wild and startling world, which shaped his way of looking at the world. According to him, many things did not speak for themselves but could have been completely different. The world did not explain itself; it was full of magic. Later in his life, Chesterton discovered that modern thought contradicted this way of

<sup>127</sup> WARD, 137.

<sup>128</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 254.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 252-57.

looking at the world. Science considered the world self-explanatory, and repetition entirely rational. Chesterton, however, found repetition rather weird. Following his 'elfland' philosophy, things were not as predictable as science imagined, and repetition was an extraordinary phenomenon.

It was as if, having seen a curiously shaped nose in the street and dismissed it as an accident, I had then seen six other noses of the same astonishing shape. I should have fancied for a moment that it must be some local secret society. So one elephant having a trunk was odd; but all elephants having trunks looked like a plot.<sup>130</sup>

Science assumes that only dead things repeat themselves, like pieces of clockwork. However, according to Chesterton, it might also be true that living things just never get tired of repetition. It might be that things choose to repeat themselves, or even that *somebody* wants them to repeat: 'perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony.'<sup>131</sup>

With this thought, Chesterton added a second foundation to the first. The world is not only a place full of wonders, but the world might even be willful: 'in short, I had always believed that the world involved magic: now I thought that perhaps it involved a magician.'<sup>132</sup> To Chesterton, the world seemed something personal and living, not something mechanical and dead. He had felt this as a child, and this feeling had always been confirmed as his life progressed. Although there were periods in his life in which he wanted to deny this personality, this foundation obliged him to accept it and therefore to believe in a God.

With God finally entering Chesterton's worldview, the cross as fact emerges. The cross is not only a figure that symbolizes complexity; in the form of the Christian cross, it represents the worldview of Christianity, which is, in Chesterton's eyes, the ultimate common sense. One needs both philosophy and mythology to nourish one's common sense and create and maintain a plausible worldview. Still, this can be filled in by many philosophies and mythologies. In his apologetics, Chesterton works his way to one specific symbol, to the summit of crosses: the Christian cross. For Chesterton, the Christian cross is the symbol of mystery and health; it is a symbol that breaks out and escapes from the limits of the circle.<sup>133</sup>

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 262-63.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 263. I will elaborate this argument about repetitions in chapter 6 §1.5.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 264.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 231.

Applying the spiritual elements of philosophy and mythology to Christianity, one can say that the Gospel contained the mythology and the Church provided the philosophy: ‘as I should put it, of course, it is the Gospel that is the riddle and the Church that is the answer.’<sup>134</sup> After the stories of the Gospel, which were sometimes difficult to understand, the Church formulated doctrines, to help the people understand the Gospel and the world around them. Referring to the element of challenge, which has already been touched upon above in chapter 4 §2.1.3, these doctrines were often criticized over the course of time, but the Church did not give in to these criticisms. For example, the Church was attacked for being both too meek and too violent. The saints seemed to be very submissive, while the Crusades asked for military forces and violent actions. Chesterton gave many other examples, after which he concluded that, indeed, these things were very weird, and the attacks on Christianity were not all wrong. This rang a bell for him. Within the Church, both things were the case, every single time the Church was attacked for two opposite flaws: ‘perhaps (in short) this extraordinary thing is really the ordinary thing; at least the normal thing, the centre. Perhaps, after all, it is Christianity that is sane and all its critics that are mad—in various ways.’<sup>135</sup> Here, it becomes visible in a concrete way that conflicts are a part of reality; paradoxes belong in this world as well as in the Church. Christianity found ways to deal with these paradoxes, instead of avoiding them by looking for a simpler solution. Within theology, this conflict reaches its peak in Christology: ‘for orthodox theology has especially insisted that Christ was not a being apart from God and man, like an elf, nor yet a being half human and half not, like a centaur, but both things at once and both things thoroughly, very man and very God.’<sup>136</sup> Christianity did not try to find the middle when two separate ideas were true or praiseworthy. Instead, it kept both ideas, and by doing this, it accepted the complexity of life in the most extreme way.<sup>137</sup> According to Fagerberg, ‘this is the ultimate apology which Chesterton makes for Catholicism: that it is capacious enough to accommodate the paradoxical combinations which reveal reality.’<sup>138</sup>

The cross and the elements of philosophy, mythology, and challenge it represents are essential for a plausible worldview. According to Chesterton, they are essential for our common sense. They force one to look outwards, like a Christian saint with his eyes wide open, instead of looking inwards, like the Buddhist saint with his eyes shut. The Christian worldview is, in this sense, much more open than any other worldview. This is because the Christian does not look at existence as a preset formula but rather as a story, which can have

<sup>134</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 322. This comparison will be studied more extensively in chapter 7 §2.

<sup>135</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 295.

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 285-303.

<sup>138</sup> FAGERBERG, 15.

many different endings.<sup>139</sup> The thinking of the scientist is limited, just as the circle is limited. The thinking of the Christian is open, just as the cross is open. Consequently, the Christian is more open-minded than the scientist is because the Christian sees life as a story, and believes that many things can happen and that many things are possible.<sup>140</sup>

The scientist and the Christian have opposite ways of thinking, well symbolized by the circle and the cross, respectively. According to Chesterton, the Christian way of thinking is the healthy one. Mystery is an element of reality one should not try to annihilate; it is reality's complexity in its highest form. This is why the Church 'does not, in the conventional phrase, accept the conclusions of science, for the simple reason that science has not concluded.' Christianity is bigger than scientific theories because it also embraces mystery.<sup>141</sup> However, the debate with science will not stop either: 'to conclude is to shut up; and the man of science is not at all likely to shut up.'<sup>142</sup> The scientist will keep searching for a fitting, all-embracing theory that meets the circle. However, the Christian knows that this circle is hollow, and that only the cross can stretch far enough to contain the whole truth.

## 2.5. Importance of Discussing Worldviews

The different worldviews symbolized by the circle and the cross are fundamentally distinct. The worldviews are the foundations of all further opinions and views that a human can form. This is also the case in this study. Here, the circle symbolizes the worldview of the New Atheism and the cross symbolizes the worldview of the Roman Catholic Church. Both worldviews are different, and because they differ in their foundation, they differ in their separate arguments. Therefore, I believe it is necessary not only to discuss separate arguments, but to discuss the underlying foundation too.

Chesterton also acknowledged the necessity to discuss people's worldviews and the differences between them. He was convinced that all differences originate from religious differences.<sup>143</sup> The term "religion" is meant here in the broadest sense of the word, as it stands for all worldviews, not just theistic ones. Chesterton thought that at the beginning of the twentieth century people cared less about other's worldviews. "Details" seemed to be more important, such as opinions on art, politics, and literature; but one did not touch

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<sup>139</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 336-41.

<sup>140</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 263.

<sup>141</sup> I will amplify the relationship between Christianity and science in chapter 7 §1.

<sup>142</sup> CHESTERTON, *Why I Am a Catholic*, 131.

<sup>143</sup> *The Autobiography*, 215.



upon the foundation of these opinions, on one's worldview: 'everything matters—except everything.'<sup>144</sup> Chesterton held another belief. He said, 'but there are some people, nevertheless—and I am one of them—who think that the most practical and important thing about a man is still his view of the universe.'<sup>145</sup> To Chesterton, one's worldview was one of the most important things about someone.

Even more important than the worldviews of other people is the discovery of one's own philosophy. Chesterton believed that if people want to understand themselves, they must ask the questions that are often labeled as "unknowable". They must ask themselves whether they believe that people have a free will or not, whether people are mortal or immortal, perfect or imperfect.<sup>146</sup> Only when they can answer these questions are they able to know themselves. In order to form an opinion on any subject, people must first know their own worldviews that are fundamental to everything else.

Before one can discuss any matters that reveal seemingly superficial differences of opinion, it makes sense to start at the beginning and discuss one's general theories, one's theology, or one's 'real body of doctrine,'<sup>147</sup> which forms the foundation of all further thinking. Talking about this is important because a common theory leaves less room for quarreling. Even if there is no common theory, it is important to discuss one's worldview to avoid misunderstandings and disagreements about fundamental issues. To Chesterton, so-called "ultimate questions" are the most important questions of all. People must know each other's worldview because they must 'agree enough to disagree.'<sup>148</sup>

Discussion partners must understand each other's grounds otherwise no real discussion is possible at all. According to Chesterton, if one wants to argue with somebody else, one must argue on the grounds of the other person, not on one's own grounds.<sup>149</sup> There is no sense in arguing about the love of God with an opponent who does not believe in any god at all. Chesterton was convinced that in order to be able to discuss anything at all, one must discuss and explain one's worldview first.

<sup>144</sup> *Heretics*, 40.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>146</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 525-26.

<sup>147</sup> *Heretics*, 46.

<sup>148</sup> *Christendom in Dublin* (1932), *Collected Works XX* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2001), 53.

<sup>149</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 476.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have introduced the “old” apologist who is my inspiration for the apologetic approach towards the new atheism I aim to develop: G.K. Chesterton, an English journalist who wrote his main apologetic works between 1905 and 1936. After providing a short biography, I have introduced, explained, and illustrated several of his important apologetic ideas. I have provided some background information on Chesterton’s apologetic trilogy: *Heretics*, *Orthodoxy*, and *The Everlasting Man*. Other apologetic books I have left aside, but this does not mean that these other works are not worth considering. In the apologetic approach that I will develop in chapters 6 and 7, works such as *The Autobiography*, *The Thing*, and *St. Thomas Aquinas* will also receive ample attention. The reason I did not introduce them explicitly in this chapter is because, as books, they do not represent Chesterton’s own religious development as well as his apologetic trilogy does. In these other books, he sometimes describes several stages of his development, but these were mainly written after his conversion to Roman Catholicism.

I have also introduced some apologetic themes that often return in Chesterton’s writings and of which I will also make use. Most importantly, I have explored the concept of common sense, both in a general and philosophical way, and in the way in which Chesterton understood the term. In the latter part of my discussion of this concept, I described four criteria of common sense that I crystallized out of his apologetic thinking: trust in one’s sensory perceptions, trust in one’s rational faculties, trust in one’s tradition, and trust in one’s sense of wonder. Especially the last criterion counts heavily when it comes to convictions that are in line with common sense.

Next to common sense, I have also explained the recurring themes of mythology and philosophy, and the corresponding symbolism of the circle and the cross in the way in which Chesterton uses these concepts. The circle and the philosophy that matches represent the “insanity” that goes with an absolute science that aims to comprehend reality. The opposing cross and the mythology that comes with it represent the mystery that also belongs to reality, which cannot be grasped by reason alone. Chesterton argues that Christianity embodies both philosophy and mythology and is therefore in agreement with common sense. Other worldviews are differently balanced and are thus inconsistent with common sense. Because different worldviews do not clash only with regard to their separate arguments, but already with regard to their foundations, one can understand why Chesterton finds it important to examine different worldviews thoroughly and discuss them.

# Chapter 5

## A Contemporary Chestertonian Apologetic Approach

### Introduction

In this chapter, I aim to connect the preceding chapters with the ones that follow. The chapter will consist of two parts. Before diving into an apologetic approach towards the new atheism, I will outline the foundations of this apologetic approach. I will touch upon four themes that have all been discussed in the previous chapters. Firstly, I will go back to chapter 3, in which I analyzed several apologetic approaches towards the new atheism, and I will explain which elements of each I will include in the approach that I will develop. Secondly, also referring to chapter 3, I will describe in which ways I will respond to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics. Thirdly, I will make clear in which ways I will or will not follow Chesterton's apologetics, based on the insights of chapter 4. Lastly, I will explain how common sense will be used as a key concept in the apologetic approach that will follow by referring back to the chapters both on Chesterton and the new atheists, and by implementing common sense in the approach I will develop afterwards.

In addition, I will respond to an important point of criticism from the new atheists, as discussed in chapter 1. The new atheists assume that religion holds a position of immunity within society, and I will attempt to show that this is a questionable claim. On some interpretations, it is false; on other interpretations, it is true but innocent. I will do this in the current chapter instead of in one of the following chapters because it can be responded to without reference to common sense. My response aims to put a false assumption underlying the criticisms of the new atheists into perspective. In this way, I can start the apologetic approach that I will develop afterwards with a clean slate.

# 1. Foundations of a Fruitful Apologetic Approach

## 1.1. Selection of Contemporary Apologetics

In chapter 3, I discussed four contemporary apologetic approaches directed towards the new atheism: classical apologetics, reformed epistemological apologetics, apologetics grounded on religious experience, and fideist apologetics. I also evaluated these methods and considered their pros and cons with regard to the new atheism. Based on this discussion and evaluation, it is now possible to define which elements of the apologetic methods I will use in the next chapters of this study.

Balancing the advantages and disadvantages of the different apologetic methods towards the new atheism against each other, I suggest the following. Firstly, an apologetics will likely be most fruitful if its foundations have a common ground with the foundations of the new atheists, otherwise the debate will not proceed beyond some prolegomena and fundamental disagreements, and one will not be able to discuss the actual subject of religion. The apologetic approach that offers this common ground the most is an apologetics based on classical foundationalism. Classical apologetics focuses on rationality, evidence, and philosophy, and these are exactly the foundations on which the new atheists fall back as well. An apologetics based on these foundations will have a bigger chance of success than an apologetics that is based on other foundations, like a sense of the divine (reformed epistemological apologetics), religious experience (apologetics grounded on religious experience), or a personal relationship with God (fideist apologetics).

Secondly, speaking of rationality, evidence and philosophy, an important element of classical apologetics is valuing the relationship between faith and reason. Since the new atheists deny this relationship, it is a significant topic to bring up in a discussion with them. One of the goals of an apologetic approach in response to the new atheism should be to show the rationality of religion, and to defend this position, I must defend a clear view of the relationship between faith and reason. Furthermore, the scope of science should also be discussed. The apologetic approach that I will develop in this study holds both themes in high regard and will emphasize this.

Thirdly, it can be beneficial not only to defend Christianity in particular, but also to emphasize the rationality of supernaturalism in general. Christianity is one of the forms supernaturalism can take; therefore it is important to discuss not only the rationality of Christianity itself, but also the rationality of its underlying philosophical position. In this study, I will therefore apply an apologetic approach that proceeds in two steps. The first

step will be a form of offensive apologetics in which I will focus on some foundations of the new atheism that create an obstacle to supernaturalism and Christianity. The goal is to take the edge off these foundations so that I can defend the rationality of supernaturalism. The second step will be a form of defensive apologetics in which I will focus on some foundations of Christianity specifically that show its rationality. The themes that I will discuss overlap with themes that are important to the new atheists and are thus relevant to the debate.

Lastly, the supra-rationality of religion should not be forgotten, as other apologetic methods have emphasized. Despite the fact that a common ground such as classical foundationalism is important for the apologetic approach to defend the rationality of religion, this supra-rational characteristic of religion should also be integrated. An accessible way to do this is again by finding a common ground with the new atheists. As I have explained when discussing the apologetic approach of Van den Bercken, there are some existentially fundamental experiences that are relevant, like a feeling of being created, a realization of being ethically imperfect, and a longing for ultimate justice. These experiences are universal and might offer a way to discuss the supra-rationality of Christianity that is fruitful in the debate with the new atheists.

## 1.2. Responding to the Call for a New Evangelization

The apologetic approach that I will develop in the next chapters attempts to respond to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics as part of the new evangelization project. The Church suggests multiple forms of apologetics aimed at a broad variety of people. In the apologetic approach towards the new atheism, it is neither possible nor advisable to meet all the Church's needs, but I will clarify which suggestions I will adopt.

First of all, this apologetics, as part of a new evangelization, will not directly aim at conversion to Christianity but rather at showing the rationality of Christianity. This is also what Cardinal Levada emphasized in 2013.<sup>1</sup> Keeping the method of the classical apologetic approach in mind, I will focus more on *showing* Christianity to be true than on *knowing* Christianity to be true. Reason is the main instrument to show the truth, whereas faith plays the main role in knowing the truth. I will emphasize the role of reason, although I will not leave faith out of the apologetics either. Faith and reason are both foundations of the Christian faith, and they should strengthen each other.

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<sup>1</sup> I discussed Levada's position in chapter 3 §3.2.

Secondly, the Church asks for an academically and philosophically developed apologetics aimed at secularists. Secularism is becoming more and more prominent, and a new evangelization should primarily be oriented towards people who have lost their faith. Christianity is in harmony with science and philosophy, and this should be visible in the apologetics, since academic and philosophical values are often important to secularists. Therefore, I will address several scientific themes, such as cosmology and evolution, and several philosophical themes, such as naturalism and ethics. Levada warns that an apologetics towards the new atheism is a challenge as it must meet two requirements: firstly, it must carefully consider the arguments of the new atheists as they present them and, secondly, it must have a deep understanding of the rationality of the Catholic faith. I have attempted to meet the first requirement in chapters 1 and 2 and will make an effort to meet the second requirement in chapters 6 and 7.

Lastly, the Church encourages apologists to lean on the success of “old” apologists. This apologetic approach will do this too by drawing on G.K. Chesterton and his ways of defending the Christian and, more specifically, the Roman Catholic faith.

### 1.3. Application of Chesterton’s Apologetics

Chesterton wrote his works about a century ago. Although the context of today is different, I believe that his arguments and his way of practicing apologetics are, in many respects still valid. However, I will part ways with him on a number of points. Here, I will explain on which points and why. After that, I will explain which elements of Chesterton’s apologetics I will adopt in my argument against the new atheism.

First of all, I will avoid some of Chesterton’s terminology. Chesterton was a journalist, and he had a certain status that allowed him much freedom to choose his own words. Although words such as “nonsense” and “insanity” are morphologically neutral as Chesterton opposed them to “sense” and “sanity”, these words have an impolite undertone that I want to avoid. In chapter 4, when elaborating on Chesterton’s views, I have used these terms without hesitation because they are Chesterton’s own. In my own apologetic approach, I will choose alternative terms that are more respectful and just towards the new atheists, and more in line with the academic character of this work.

I will also be careful with words such as “heresy” and “orthodoxy”, as these are theologically and religiously charged terms. Chesterton used these terms rather rebelliously, and he felt free to call anybody with whom he did not agree a ‘heretic:’ ‘that is to say, a man whose view of things has the hardihood to differ from mine [...] a man whose

philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong.’<sup>2</sup> Conversely, he saw his own views as orthodox. ‘I did try to found a heresy of my own; and when I had put the last touches to it, I discovered it was orthodoxy.’<sup>3</sup> Even though Chesterton had his (rhetorical) reasons to use these terms, I will not follow him here. Terms like “heresy” and “orthodoxy” are out of place in a debate with conversation partners who do not share one’s faith, and even in a discussion with those who do; they should not be used without significant consideration.

Secondly, a very typical characteristic of Chesterton’s apologetics is his narrative writing style. Chesterton attached great value to both philosophy and mythology, but he himself wrote like a mythologist rather than like a philosopher. He was highly intelligent and well acquainted with the philosophy and science of his time, but he reached and convinced his readers most of all with his accessible narratives. This is also the case with the “story” of the history of religion. Many readers may be critical when reading his argument on the various “spiritual elements” of humanity, but I doubt that it was Chesterton’s aim to be historically correct. By telling the *story* of the history of religion, Chesterton rather wanted to show that the human being has different spiritual and mental needs that could be fulfilled in various ways. His ultimate argument is that Christianity fulfilled the right needs in the right way. He wrote about principles and ideas and did this in narrative and sometimes controversial ways. He did not make scientific claims but rather let his readers see the world from a new point of view. By his writing style, he triggered his readers’ sense of wonder, which is one of the criteria of Chesterton’s understanding of common sense and was therefore important to him.

Although Chesterton’s narrative writing style is at odds with current academic conventions in theology, in some respects it is attractive and useful. In Chesterton’s apologetics, this narrative mode functioned as a counterpoint to the scientific voice of the atheists he rebutted. Like Chesterton’s opponents, the new atheists value scientific verification in general so highly that they hold other ways of arguing as cheap. However, it is exactly Chesterton’s point, with which I agree, that science cannot provide an all-encompassing worldview and fails in the end to give satisfactory answers to ultimate questions. Chesterton shows in his writings that a narrative argument can help the reader to grasp certain principles better than a purely explanatory and scientific argument. Myths may contain truths, even if they are not scientifically accurate. A narrative approach might still have its value in a debate with the new atheism, even if one values factual correctness.

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<sup>2</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 46.

<sup>3</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 214.

By the way, Chesterton also valued accuracy very highly; it was only his writing style that was rather loose and not academic. In his own words:

I never meant my own criticism to be an impertinence to the truly learned. We all owe an infinite debt to the researches, especially the recent researches, of single minded students in these matters; and I have only professed to pick up things here and there from them. I have not loaded my abstract argument with quotations and references, which only make a man look more learned than he is [...] My criticism is strictly relative; I may say that the Pyramids are plainer than the tracks of the desert; without denying that wiser men than I may see tracks in what is to me the trackless sand.<sup>4</sup>

It was more out of humility than out of haughtiness that he wrote in a narrative way. In this study, I will refer to Chesterton's narratives while myself heeding academic conventions.

Chesterton defended faith in various ways by writing different sorts of work. He wrote novels, newspaper columns, biographies, poems, collections of essays, and longer arguments. In many of these works, one specific theme kept returning: common sense. The apologetic approach that I will develop finds its central link with Chesterton in this theme. According to Chesterton, common sense is something that belongs to faith and that is lost when faith is lost. It once belonged to all people, but due to the development of several secular philosophies, it is now lost to many people. To regain it, these people must reconnect with their roots and rediscover their traditions. Common sense connects people, and when this sense is lost, people lose this connection with each other too. According to Chesterton, the only thing that can unite people again and give them back their common sense is religion. However, many people think that other philosophies can fulfil them and that these philosophies can take religion's place. In his apologetic works, Chesterton shows that this is a mistake. By emphasizing the truth of Christianity and by repeating this truth all the time, he wants to show how Christianity is at one with common sense, and how important it is to rediscover this faith again and let it reign over other (false) philosophies.

It is not difficult to see the connection between the new atheism and this theme of common sense. Although many secularists would maintain that atheism is itself common sense and that believers have lost it due to the indoctrination of their religion, the apologetic approach that I will develop will argue for the opposite position. It is the secularists who, with their religion, have also lost their common sense. In the discussion

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<sup>4</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 406-07.



with the new atheists, it is therefore important to rediscover common sense. Chesterton's apologetics did this in various ways; I will follow his lead in my own apologetic approach.

My description of Chesterton's understanding of common sense might seem to dismiss the need for academic training or special knowledge. Therefore, it is important to realize that there is a difference between *using* one's common sense and *reflecting* on common sense. To Chesterton, common sense was a rather intuitive foundation of his thinking. Consequently, to practice common sense, one needs nothing special in particular. However, this work aspires to demonstrate that to reflect on common sense and to develop an academic understanding of common sense, one does require academic training and special knowledge. Only on an academic foundation can one have a fruitful apologetic discussion with the new atheism.

## 1.4. Common Sense as an Apologetic Approach

Common sense is primarily a way of thinking. It stands for one's ordinary understanding.<sup>5</sup> It is the basis of one's thinking, as the original meaning of the Latin *sensus communis*, which I discussed in chapter 4 §2.2, suggests. Here, it stands for the understanding of ordinary people and for the understanding of the common human being as well. Common sense is, in this respect, a strong concept to make an appeal to because it is independent of any expertise or specialization. Using common sense does not require academic training or special knowledge. This is also the common sense that Chesterton defended and, according to him, it is this common sense that is in line with the Roman Catholic faith.

Perhaps needless to say, in this study, common sense does not stand in the tradition of the Scottish school of the philosophy of common sense but rather in the tradition of Chesterton. Chesterton loved paradoxes and considered them essential in the world, so he certainly did not want to eliminate them by using his common sense, as the Scottish school pursued. On the contrary, he greeted paradoxes with open arms and wanted to show that common sense was the only way to deal with them properly.

In the apologetic approach I am developing, I will hold Chesterton's notion of common sense in high regard. It is needed to develop a plausible worldview and to cope with paradoxes, unsolved mysteries, and unpleasant feelings. It is my belief that the worldview of the new atheists lacks, in some respects, the common sense that the worldview of the Roman Catholic Church possesses. To determine whether a certain view is in line with common sense, I will investigate whether the criteria of common sense that I

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<sup>5</sup> GRAVE, "Common Sense."

discovered in Chesterton in chapter 4 §2.2.2 are adopted. When this is not the case, I will adopt these criteria myself and explain the view to which it leads.

Since common sense will play a pivotal role in my discussion with the new atheism, it may be useful to look at the new atheists' own appreciation of common sense. The new atheists rarely use the term "common sense." It is striking that in the rare cases they do refer to "common sense," the term nearly always has a negative connotation. Dawkins and Harris are the most outspoken; they consider common sense misleading,<sup>6</sup> superseded,<sup>7</sup> and subjective.<sup>8</sup> They set it against science and in line with religion, as something on which humanity relies but which is underdeveloped. For example, Dawkins says, 'I mean it as a compliment when I say that you could almost define a philosopher as someone who won't take common sense for an answer.'<sup>9</sup> In short, science continues where common sense stops. Science is not satisfied with the conclusions of common sense; it does not settle for appearances. As Harris explains, 'how the mind depends upon the brain, and the manner in which its powers can be disrupted, defies common sense. Here, as elsewhere in science, how things seem is often a poor guide to how they are.'<sup>10</sup> Science is superior to common sense because its conclusions are motivated by 'epistemic commitments', instead of by 'an unconscious emotional bias [...] and a belief that is comparatively free of such bias.'<sup>11</sup>

Suffice it to say that the new atheists have a very different understanding of common sense than the one I develop in my apologetic approach here. To the new atheists, the concept of common sense is underdeveloped and superseded by science, while in my approach, it is a way of thinking that does not take anything for granted but instead relies on multiple criteria. The fact that, to the new atheists, science is superior to other ways of increasing knowledge also becomes clear when one looks at Chesterton's four criteria of common sense. As I have demonstrated in chapter 4 §2.2.2, these criteria revolve around trust: trust in one's sensory perceptions, one's rational faculties, one's tradition, and one's sense of wonder. Of these criteria, the new atheists lay most emphasis on the trust in their sensory perceptions. Sensory perceptions are linked to evidence and, according to the new atheists, evidence is everything when it comes to knowledge. Dawkins is especially clear on this in his writings to children: 'scientists use inside feelings all the time to get ideas. But they are not worth anything until they are supported by evidence,'<sup>12</sup> and this evidence

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<sup>6</sup> DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene*, 98.

<sup>7</sup> *The God Delusion*, 100, 407-08; HARRIS, *The End of Faith*, 207-08; *Waking Up*, 54.

<sup>8</sup> *The End of Faith*, 267.

<sup>9</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 107.

<sup>10</sup> HARRIS, *Waking Up*, 116.

<sup>11</sup> *The Moral Landscape*, 177.

<sup>12</sup> DAWKINS, "Good and Bad Reasons for Believing," 289.

‘always comes back to our senses, one way or another.’<sup>13</sup> Dawkins wants children to understand the significance of proof before one can declare the truth of something. This statement, along with its philosophical consequences, belongs to the foundation of education.

The other criteria of common sense that are important to Chesterton receive practically no attention from the new atheists, or solely negative attention. Regarding tradition, especially, Dawkins is downright negative again in his writings addressed to children: ‘if a rumour is old enough, it starts to be called a “tradition” instead, and then people believe it all the more.’<sup>14</sup> This tradition is often made by an authority, and on this authority people tend to rely. According to Dawkins, an authority is only reliable if people themselves can check the facts: ‘of course, even in science, sometimes we haven’t seen the evidence ourselves and we have to take somebody else’s word for it. I haven’t, with my own eyes, seen the evidence that light travels at a speed of 186,000 miles per second. Instead, I believe books tell me the speed of light. This looks like “authority”. But, actually, it is much better than authority because people who wrote the books have seen the evidence and anyone is free to look carefully at the evidence whenever they want.’<sup>15</sup> Only if one can verify somebody else’s statement can this statement be trusted. Harris agrees:

We believe most of what we believe about the world because others have told us to. Reliance upon the authority of experts, and upon the testimony of ordinary people, is the stuff of which worldviews are made [...] This is not a problem. Life is too short, and the world too complex, for any of us to go it alone in epistemological terms. We are ever reliant on the intelligence and accuracy, if not the kindness, of strangers. This does not suggest, however, that all forms of authority are valid; nor does it suggest that even the best authorities will always prove reliable. There are good arguments and bad ones, precise observations and imprecise ones; and each of us has to be the final judge of whether or not it is reasonable to adopt a given belief about the world.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, it is acceptable and even unavoidable to gather a substantial amount of our knowledge by trusting our tradition, but only as far as one can verify the statements that are made. Ultimately, evidence again decides whether something is true or not.

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<sup>13</sup> *The Magic of Reality*, 18.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 241.

<sup>15</sup> DAWKINS, “Good and Bad Reasons for Believing,” 287.

<sup>16</sup> HARRIS, *The End of Faith*, 73-74.

When it comes to trusting one's rational faculties and one's sense of wonder, the new atheists remain remarkably silent. To the children, Dawkins wants to say, 'we should always be open-minded,' but he also ends this sentence as follows: 'but the only good reason to believe that something exists is if there is real evidence that it does.'<sup>17</sup> Evidence is everything and is much more important than common sense or any of its criteria.

Common sense can be seen as opposed to the epistemological naturalism of the new atheism. Both contain criteria that need to be met. The apologetic approach that I will develop will attempt to demonstrate how important common sense and all its criteria are to developing a plausible worldview, and in which ways the new atheists are in the wrong when it comes to their valuing of various forms of naturalism and common sense.

## 2. The Alleged Immunity of Religion

The new atheists declare that religion in our society today is immune to criticism. They consider this immunity to be one of the biggest problems of religion, and they want this immunity to vanish so that religion can become a subject of discussion and criticism, just like any other subject. Since this alleged immunity is one of the spearheads of the reasoning of the new atheists, this cannot be overlooked. Therefore, I will firstly explain how this alleged immunity is based on selective examples. After this, I will give attention to the fact that, in some cases, religion does seem to be immune and I will explain this immunity by basing it on the power that influential religious people can practice. To complete the picture, I will also nuance the view of the alleged immunity of religion by singling out the tolerant attitude of religions, especially Christianity, that shows that religions often are proponents of religious freedom and do not judge other religions, and by illustrating the current secularization of the West that diminishes the immunity of religion.

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<sup>17</sup> DAWKINS, *The Magic of Reality*, 15.

## 2.1. The Actual Vulnerability of Religion

As I have suggested in chapter 1, the new atheists claim that religion is immune. This statement is disputable. The arguments of the new atheists concerning the immunity of religion are based on observations that are mostly limited to cases in either the United States of America or the United Kingdom, or they focus on rather extreme cases. This makes their arguments narrow and subjective. The examples that Dawkins gives at the start of *The God Delusion* to illustrate ‘society’s overweening respect for religion’<sup>18</sup> are about Quakerism (which is mostly situated in the United States), the conflict between Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland, the civil war between Sunni and Shia Muslims in Iraq as a consequence of the Anglo-American invasion, public ethics discussions that take place in American and British media, and a religious case in the United States Supreme Court. All cases show a so-called ‘privileging of religion.’<sup>19</sup> Dawkins’s last example to illustrate ‘society’s exaggerated respect for religion, over and above ordinary human respect’<sup>20</sup> is the severe case of the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* that published twelve cartoons representing the prophet Muhammad and the various responses to this post that came from all over the world.<sup>21</sup> By these examples, Dawkins attempts to convince his audience that religion is undeservedly guarded by much more respect than any other aspect of human life. He wants to break down this wall of respect.

Hitchens prefers more extreme examples, again mostly restricted to the United States and the United Kingdom. In *God is Not Great*, he tells all the details of a certain practice of circumcision that is still common among a fundamentalist Jewish movement, and that has not been prohibited because ‘the free exercise of religion was not [to be] infringed.’<sup>22</sup> The fact that the practice was religious was considered more important by the mayor of New York City than any hygienic or sexual consequences of the practice. In *The Portable Atheist*, Hitchens refers to some violent religious actions in London and Glasgow that were defended by saying that the perpetrators ‘need only say that they have divine permission in order to read excuses for their actions from clerical authorities—excuses and euphemisms that are often published in respectable newspapers.’<sup>23</sup> Newspapers apparently bow down to religious explanations of crimes, which again shows how immune religion is.

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<sup>18</sup> *The God Delusion*, 43.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 43-50; Another example is given in DAWKINS, “Dolly and the Cloth Heads,” 180-83.

<sup>22</sup> HITCHENS, *God Is Not Great*, 57.

<sup>23</sup> *The Portable Atheist*, XV.

Dennett explains more abstractly the difference between religion and ‘its nearest neighbors among cultural phenomena.’ He declares, ‘the law (in the United States, at least) singles out religions for special status, declaring something that has been regarded as a religion to be really something else [...] Legal protection, honor, prestige, and a *traditional exemption from certain sorts of analysis and criticism*.’<sup>24</sup> By adding ‘in the United States, at least’, he shows his main area of interest, but he generalizes his statement by professing that *the* law, as if it were a universal law or a human right, immunizes religion.

Harris devotes entire sections of *The End of Faith* to ‘contemporary examples of governmental piety.’<sup>25</sup> These examples are restricted to the United States, varying from the faith-based politics of George W. Bush to cases in the Supreme Court and show the immunity and invulnerability of religion. ‘Because we are a people of faith, taught to concern ourselves with the sinfulness of our neighbors, we have grown tolerant of irrational uses of state power.’<sup>26</sup> By the examples, Harris attempts to show how faith interferes with rational decision-making. His book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, contains a letter to the Christians of the United States.<sup>27</sup> By providing mostly American numbers and examples yet, at the same time, universally discrediting religion in general and Christianity in particular, he globalizes America and gives a false representation of the situation.

The new atheists are not ignoring the rest of the religious world in their books, as they mention examples from Africa, Asia, and Europe that have nothing to do with their own personal experience or their own countries. However, these selective examples fail to make the case that the immunization of religion is a worldwide standard. The new atheists only mention the cases in which religion seems to be treated as immune, and they omit the cases in which religion is in fact vulnerable. In this way, they are trying to make their own argument stronger, but it is neither fair nor representative of the actual situation.

The new atheists throw light upon only one aspect of the matter. They are not giving a complete overview of the situation. Already at this point, it is helpful to consult Chesterton. In the introduction of *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton explains how this happened also in his time. Critics were not observing the subject from a neutral point of view. They were actually still partial to the subject and were, therefore, not able to report all the facts. To be able to do this, one has to be fully impartial. Already in the second paragraph of the book, Chesterton states:

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<sup>24</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 8-9.

<sup>25</sup> HARRIS, *The End of Faith*, 155.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> HARRIS, *Letter to a Christian Nation*.

The point of this book, in other words, is that the next best thing to being really inside Christendom is to be really outside it. And a particular point of it is that the popular critics of Christianity are not really outside it. They are on a debatable ground, in every sense of the term. They are doubtful in their very doubts. Their criticism has taken on a curious tone; as of a random and illiterate heckling [...] They cannot get out of the penumbra of Christian controversy. They cannot be Christians and they cannot leave off being Anti-Christians. Their whole atmosphere is the atmosphere of a reaction: sulks, perversity, petty criticism. They still live in the shadow of the faith and have lost the light of the faith.<sup>28</sup>

Although there is a time span of almost a century between Chesterton and today's new atheists, these words could have been spoken directly to them. Chesterton even continues to argue in which ways criticism is and is not possible:

Now the best relation to our spiritual home is to be near enough to love it. But the next best is to be far enough away not to hate it [...] The worst judge of all is the man now most ready with his judgments; the ill-educated Christian turning gradually into the ill-tempered agnostic, entangled in the end of a feud of which he never understood the beginning, blighted with a sort of hereditary boredom with he knows not what, and already weary of hearing what he has never heard [...] Their anti-clericalism has become an atmosphere, an atmosphere of negation and hostility from which they cannot escape. Compared with that, it would be better to see the whole thing as something belonging to another continent, or to another planet.<sup>29</sup>

As Chesterton explains, for a critic, it is better to treat a subject as something extraterrestrial and unfamiliar rather than as something about which one thinks one knows enough to judge it adequately. This also goes for the new atheists: they are neither religious nor unbiased; they are in the process of breaking away from religion by fighting it. Thus, they are too closely associated with religion to be fair towards it.

Following Chesterton's reasoning, the new atheists could only fairly judge religion to be immune under two circumstances: either they are *within* the religion themselves or they are completely *outside* of it. Only from within can one experience religion

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<sup>28</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 143-45.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

authentically, and only from outside can one have a complete overview. In Chesterton's words, 'to put it shortly, the moment we are really impartial about it, we know why people are partial to it.'<sup>30</sup> In *The Everlasting Man*, Chesterton announces that he wants to tell the religious and Christian story in a fair way from an imaginary impartial point of view. Of course, in reality, Chesterton was not impartial at all, since he was a confirmed Roman Catholic by the time he wrote this. However, he was convinced that he could do a better job than the common critic, and could 'help the reader to see Christendom from the outside in the sense of seeing it as a whole, against the background of other historic things; just as [he could help] him to see humanity as a whole against the background of natural things.'<sup>31</sup> To do this, he needed his common sense, and especially the criterion of trusting his sense of wonder, which I have explained in chapter 4 §2.2.2. Only by looking at the religious history, as if he was looking at it for the first time, could he tell the story "objectively."<sup>32</sup> Chesterton wanted to 'try to recover the candour and wonder of the child; the unspoilt realism and objectivity of innocence.'<sup>33</sup>

As a theologian, I stand *within* religion, and cannot look at religion from a great distance. Therefore, I cannot follow Chesterton by attempting to give an impartial description of the religious situation of today. Nevertheless, counter arguments are available, and they provide a more complete overview of reality. The representation by the new atheists of religion in today's society is that it is 'a vast and vague public opinion which has been prematurely spread from certain imperfect investigations, and which has made fashionable a false notion.'<sup>34</sup> As a result, I will now complete these "imperfect investigations" through other examples and numbers so that I can offer a more reliable picture of the situation, and so I can explain why religion is more vulnerable than the new atheists admit.

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 151.

<sup>32</sup> Philosophically, "objectivity" is a debatable term, and impossible for any person to fully achieve. Therefore, it was impossible for Chesterton to pretend that he did not have any foreknowledge. However, the attempt was honorable just as every other "objective" historical, philosophical, or scientific approach is honorable.

<sup>33</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 148.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 203.



## 2.2. Religious Power

First of all, sometimes religions do seem to be immune; however, this immunity is often justifiable, which is not as unique as the new atheists make it seem. This immunity can be explained by looking at the phenomenon of human power. Religious immunity within the communities themselves can be based on the power of religions, both the power of religious leaders within the faithful community and the power of religions as a collective within society. The power of religious leaders exists because the characteristic of religious power is that it offers “ontological security”. According to sociologist of religion Meerten ter Borg, adherents of a religion accept the power of an influential leader of this religion because this person is able to convince his or her followers that their worldview is true:

The rules and regulations, the sanctions, positive and negative, with which priests [or any religious influential person] exercise their power, are ultimately accepted only because they confirm the omnipotence of the divinity, who provides the ultimate legitimacy of the world view, and is thus the guarantor of ontological security.<sup>35</sup>

People need ontological security and religions provide this. Religions provide answers to the human condition in a unique way. People ‘need to feel that their world view, the meanings they attach to the world around them, will hold.’<sup>36</sup> Religion gives them this feeling through traditions, rituals, and dogmas. It is this need of security that creates the possibility within religion to practice power, in positive and negative ways.

Marriage is a good example of how religion exercises its power. Marriage was first institutionalized and later it was sanctified religiously, e.g., by the sacrament of marriage: ‘one of the most unstable and precarious relationships [is] given divine sanction [...] What threatens to be unstable is put on a firmer foundation by means of reference to a higher power.’<sup>37</sup> Lovers agree to live their relationship by the rules of their religion because it is in line with the answers to their need for ontological security.

Religions have the power to give people reasons to live their lives in a specific way. They provide reasons to demonstrate in public, and in many countries people are allowed

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<sup>35</sup> MEERTEN TER BORG, “Religion and Power,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Peter B. Clarke (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 203. For the sake of simplicity, Ter Borg calls all influential religious people “priests”: ‘a priest is a religious dignitary who exercises his religious authority on behalf of the community, and hence the power a priest possesses ultimately is, and remains, delegated power.’ 202.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 198.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

to do this because of religious freedom. A Christian example of how religious power is visible within society are anti-abortion movements, where people use religious reasons to demonstrate against abortions. Religions also release people from feelings of guilt because the word of the priest is very valuable, which is visible in the practice of confession, where people experience a remission of sins they have committed by the absolution they receive from the priest.

Religious power often goes hand in hand with other forms of power. Power is complicated and according to Ter Borg convertible as well.<sup>38</sup> Different forms of power can intermingle and influence each other. Economic, sexual, political, and religious power are often related. The human longing for power seems universal, and since religions are designed and practiced by human beings, religions are influenced by this longing too. Even though religions might have supernatural components, they are also human and natural in the ways in which they are lived. Forms of power can be found everywhere and, therefore, within religion as well.

The power of religion within society derives partly from the advantages of belonging to a group. Group solidarity makes a group strong. This is visible within religions as well as in other groups like the Brights Movement, discussed in chapter 1 §3.3.3. The Brights Movement is an explicitly non-religious movement that includes people with a naturalist worldview, to which Dawkins and Dennett belong. People can register on the website of the Brights' Net and identify themselves as Brights. By doing this, they become part of a group. The group was initiated because the founders found that nonreligious people did not have a strong enough voice when sympathies were expressed after the tragedy of 9/11 in 2001. By belonging to this group of Brights, people with a naturalistic worldview feel stronger and more confident. They are not alone; there are more people spread all over the world who feel the same way. There is nothing wrong with this. Together, people are strong; this applies within religions as well as outside of religions. It is this power that can provide some religious immunity.

The new atheists emphasize more than anything that religions are not only immune within the religious communities themselves, but also within the larger scope of society. Nevertheless, they do not provide arguments to make their point; rather, they give selective examples as evidence. It is not hard to provide examples that are evidence of the contrary. In the Netherlands, denominational education and public education are treated equally. One can debate whether this is right or wrong, but that does not change the fact that, in this case, religions are neither discriminated against nor privileged. Furthermore, religion might be privileged in some cases, but privilege as such is not religion's prerogative. For

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 205.

example, in many countries, cultural initiatives qualify for government subsidies, whereas initiatives in other sectors must bear the costs themselves. Privilege comes in all shapes and sizes and should not be discussed in a selective way. Only providing examples in which religion is privileged is not a fair representation of reality and does not give a valid foundation to conclude that religion is immune within society.

## 2.3. The Tolerance of Religion

The new atheists suggest that the power of religion, which can be considered a foundation of the immunity of religion, exists because religions are intolerant. This intolerance contributes to a strong group identity, and therefore to the power of religion. It is easy to give examples of cases in which religions show their intolerance towards other beliefs. Conflicts are displayed everywhere, especially when violence is involved. One only has to open a newspaper to be confronted by religious intolerance. The new atheists take these examples to demonstrate the maleficence of religion. However, these examples do not automatically lead to the conclusion that religion is intolerant and bad. This is an informal fallacy, a typical case of *secundum quid*, which takes one or multiple cases to draw general conclusions. The new atheists draw their conclusions too hastily by providing arbitrary examples of religious intolerance. It is not my aim to debunk the examples the new atheists provide. Rather, it is my aim to show the tolerant side of religion, to nuance the biased opinion of the new atheists, and give a more balanced overview. I am confining myself to the Christian situation.

Freedom of religion is a human right. Article 18 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) states:

Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief, and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief in teaching, practice, worship and observance.<sup>39</sup>

This freedom of religion is also expressed by Christianity. Christianity is a very tolerant religion. The World Council of Churches has published numerous documents on freedom of religion that are in line with the statement in the UDHR. Already at the first assembly

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<sup>39</sup> UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY, *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* (Paris, 1948), <https://www.un.org/en/universal-declaration-human-rights/index.html>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

of this council, a “Declaration on Religious Liberty” was adopted.<sup>40</sup> Looking at the Roman Catholic Church, the Second Vatican Council issued “a Declaration on Religious Freedom”, claiming that everybody has a right to freedom of religion. *Dignitatis Humanae* states that ‘the human person has a right to religious freedom’, and that ‘this right of the human person to religious freedom is to be recognized in the constitutional law whereby society is governed and thus it is to become a civil right.’<sup>41</sup>

Respect for freedom of religion requires a certain degree of tolerance. Therefore, it is, to say the least, one-sided to emphasize the intolerant side of religion only.

## 2.4. The Secularization of the West

Besides the fact that religions are more tolerant than the new atheists suggest, there is a lot of other evidence that religion today is not immune at all, even when one focuses, like the new atheists do, primarily on the United Kingdom and the United States. Since this is a Dutch study, I will add some information on the Netherlands as well. Studies show that secularization is taking place regardless of the religious index: ‘whether we count membership, church attendance, religious ceremonies to mark rites of passage, or indices of belief, we find that across the industrial world there has been a major decline in all religious indices.’<sup>42</sup> Statistics in the *Atlas of European Values* confirm that Western Europe in 2011 is secularized.<sup>43</sup> Only a very small minority subscribes to the statement that there is only one true religion, and this small adherence suggests a high degree of tolerance and vulnerability.<sup>44</sup> The *Atlas* states clearly that ‘the influence of the church on society declines.’<sup>45</sup> Religion retreats into the background, and has become mostly a private affair in Northern and Western Europe. People experience their faith more and more in untraditional and evolving ways that are unrelated to (state) churches.<sup>46</sup> All these statistics imply that religion in Northern and Western Europe is not immune at all, and that many more countries are heading towards secularization as well.

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<sup>40</sup> THE WORLD COUNCIL OF CHURCHES, *Declaration on Religious Liberty* (Amsterdam, 1948), <https://original.religlaw.org/content/religlaw/documents/wccdecreliglib1948.htm>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>41</sup> *Dignitatis Humanae*, 2.

<sup>42</sup> BRUCE, 125.

<sup>43</sup> LOEK HALMAN, INGE SIEBEN, AND MARGA VAN ZUNDERT, *Atlas of European Values. Trends and Traditions at the Turn of the Century* eds. Loek Halman and Paul de Graaf, European Values Studies (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 59.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 61.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, 68.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 71-72.

Turning to a questionnaire of the *World Values Survey*, which is built on the *European Values Study*, one can find the position of the United States in 2011 concerning similar themes. 33% of the people declare they do not belong to any religious denomination. On the other hand, 67% self-identify as religious people, and 87.7% say they believe in God. A majority (58.9%) disagrees with the statement that religion is always right when science and religion are in conflict, and a large majority (76.2%) disagrees with the statement that the only acceptable religion is one's own religion.<sup>47</sup> These outcomes suggest a much less absolute status of religion than the new atheists suggest. Religious organizations are not all-dominating, which is shown by the small number of people that belong to a religious denomination and the relatively large number of people that claim to believe in God. The above numbers show that religion is not immune, since most people think neither that their religion is always right nor that the only acceptable religion is their own religion. Religion is not as influential as the new atheists believe.

Consulting the *World Religion Database* of Boston University, one can see growing numbers where agnosticism and atheism are concerned, and decreasing numbers where Christianity is concerned in countries such as the Netherlands, the United Kingdom, and the United States.<sup>48</sup> In 2015, the five biggest worldviews in the Netherlands were Christianity (60.3%), agnosticism (28.5%), Islam (6.9%), atheism (1.9%), and Buddhism (1.2%). In the United Kingdom, the five biggest worldviews were Christianity (69.4%), agnosticism (19.8%), Islam (6.3%), atheism (1.4%), and Hinduism (1%). In the United States, the situation is a bit different: Christianity (74.9%), agnosticism (16%), atheism (2.9%), Judaism (1.8%), and Islam (1.4%). The database defines "agnostics" as follows: 'persons who claim no religion or claim that it is not possible to know if God, gods, or the supernatural exists.'<sup>49</sup> Leaving the details aside, the fact that in all three countries agnosticism is growing and now takes second place among the biggest worldviews in these countries suggests a rise of secularization.

To be fair, the new atheists are not completely ignoring the trends of secularization. Dawkins says casually that the number of atheists in the United States is increasing, but that the country nevertheless is still highly religious (despite 'the fact that the United States was not founded as a Christian nation'<sup>50</sup>). England on the other hand is among the least religious countries, even though it has a state church. Harris observes the same dichotomy.

<sup>47</sup> "World Values Survey: Round Six - Country-Pooled Datafile Version," eds. R. Inglehart, et al., JD Systems Institute, 2014, [www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp](http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/WVSDocumentationWV6.jsp), accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

<sup>48</sup> *World Religion Database*, eds. Todd M. Johnson and Brian J. Grim (Boston: Brill, 2018).

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 61.

He splits the situation between ‘much of the developed world’<sup>51</sup> and the United States. The least religious countries in the world are, at the same time, the most developed ones. The United States is an exception to this; it is developed but still highly religious. According to Harris, many of the problems that occur in the least religious countries do still have a religious origin. Religiosity hinders a country in its development and this is why the United States should get rid of it, just like North-Western Europe. Dennett also mentions secularization, but he does not trust the numbers that sociologists provide, at least in the United States.<sup>52</sup> Hitchens is the most optimistic when it comes to secularization, as he declares, ‘a terrible thing has now happened to religion. Except in the places where it can still enforce itself by fear superimposed on ignorance, it has become one opinion among many. It is forced to compete in the free market of ideas.’<sup>53</sup> Society is becoming aware that religious opinions are not ironclad rules, but that one can doubt these opinions and be critical.

Just as Dawkins and Harris, one can claim that the United States forms an exception in the secularization process. This is called “American exceptionalism”. The United States is often supposed to be unique in several fields, including the role of religion within society. The cause ‘tends to revolve around the formative role of sectarian Protestantism and the peculiar relationship between church and state that it shaped in the United States after the American Revolution.’<sup>54</sup> Opinions differ on whether a situation from so long ago can still influence the situation of today; but even if this is possible, one can doubt that the United States is an exception in the overall secularization process. All countries are unique in their processes and all countries have their own particularities; in this, the United States is not an exception. The numbers above show that religion is in retreat, also in the United States. The process of secularization in the United States might be younger, but the numbers clearly show a decline in religious commitment. This is also concluded by the Pew Research Center: ‘the Christian share of the U.S. population is declining, while the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is growing.’<sup>55</sup> The United States is also a large country, and religion plays different roles in different regions. It would be fair to divide the United States into different regions when it comes to secularization just as Europe is divided into different regions. As sociologist of religion Staf Hellemans states, ‘it

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<sup>51</sup> HARRIS, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 43.

<sup>52</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 318-21.

<sup>53</sup> HITCHENS, *The Portable Atheist*, XXV.

<sup>54</sup> JOHN TORPEY, “American Exceptionalism?” in *The New Blackwell Companion to the Sociology of Religion*, ed. Bryan S. Turner (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010), 145.

<sup>55</sup> PEW RESEARCH CENTER, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” 2015, <https://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/>, accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020.

is certain that the degree of secularization in Europe differs greatly from one country to another—indeed it also differs between regions within the same country.<sup>56</sup> This certainly also applies to the United States. Assuming that America is an exception concerning the role of religion is an over-simplification and sells other countries short.<sup>57</sup>

Religion is an important topic, even though it is not as immune as suggested. The new atheists want people to learn more about worldviews and be critical about them and, as a theologian, I could not agree more. Therefore, it is also important to learn more about the worldview of the new atheists themselves, and to discuss this worldview open-mindedly and critically. If religions should be open to discussion and receptive to criticism, so should the new atheist worldview.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have laid the foundations of the apologetic approach towards the new atheism that I will develop in the following chapters. To do this, I have often referred back to previous chapters that contain the necessary information to come to these foundations.

Firstly, an apologetic approach that is most likely to be fruitful will generally be based on classical apologetics. This apologetic approach provides common foundations with the new atheists, most importantly, a focus on rationality, evidence, and philosophy. Moreover, the relationship between faith and reason should also play a major role, since the new atheists give much attention to this relationship. In addition, the apologetic approach should not only defend Christianity but also supernaturalism in general to be able to discuss some of the foundations of the worldview of the new atheists effectively. Furthermore, attention should also go to the supra-rationality of religion to provide a more complete picture of faith.

Secondly, an apologetic approach that responds to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics should meet some extra criteria. It should aim at understanding and showing the rationality of Christianity rather than at conversion. It should also be academically and philosophically founded and discuss scientific and philosophical themes. Additionally, it is encouraged to base this apologetic approach on successful “old” apologists. My choice is the apologetic approach of G.K. Chesterton.

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<sup>56</sup> STAF HELLEMANS, “De grote transformatie van religie en van de katholieke kerk,” (Valedictory lecture at Tilburg University 2019), 20.

<sup>57</sup> TORPEY.

Thirdly, the apologetics of Chesterton cannot be adopted as it is. Chesterton lived and worked in a different context and took some liberties that I cannot take. I will use different terms and respect academic writing conventions. However, I will join him in turning to common sense as the key concept of my apologetic approach.

Fourthly, I have explained in which ways I will adopt Chesterton's understanding of common sense in the apologetic approach. It is primarily a way of thinking and stands for one's ordinary understanding. This understanding of common sense is in line with the Roman Catholic faith. It is able to cope with paradoxes and mysteries and revolves around four types of trust: trust in one's sensory perceptions, trust in one's rational faculties, trust in one's tradition, and trust in one's sense of wonder. The new atheists form a low opinion of common sense, but the apologetic approach that I will develop in the next chapters will argue that this common sense is necessary in order to understand the world.

After I have laid the foundations of the apologetic approach that I will develop afterwards, I have already responded to one main point of criticism of the new atheists before actually diving into the apologetics. The new atheists presuppose a certain position of immunity that religion is supposed to hold in society, and I have nuanced this opinion. I have argued that religion is much more vulnerable than the new atheists assume, but that the new atheists fail to see this because they both focus only on situations that support their view in the countries with which they are familiar, and they are too attached to the subject. I have also explained that the amount of immunity that does exist comes from certain forms of power. Power is innately human and can therefore also be found within religion. Moreover, the new atheists link religious power with religious intolerance, ignoring the tolerance that is also characteristic for religion. Lastly, by making use of global statistics, I have argued that the West is becoming more secularized, and that atheism and agnosticism are becoming more popular. The picture that the new atheists sketch of the immunity of religion is therefore incorrect.

Removing this cause of misunderstanding did not require making use of Chesterton's criteria of common sense, which is why I chose to do it first. Now it is time to continue this reply to the views of the new atheists by drawing on Chesterton's apologetics and by basing my arguments on his criteria of common sense.



# Chapter 6

## New Atheist Naturalism and Chestertonian Common Sense

### Introduction

In chapters 1 and 2, I elaborately discussed the separate arguments against religion and the general philosophical views of the new atheists. In the upcoming chapters, I would like to develop an apologetic approach that is based on G.K. Chesterton's understanding of common sense. This chapter will examine the philosophical basis for this apologetics. The opinions of the new atheists are what Chesterton would call "heretical" and, although in this study I will refrain from using this term, I do believe that (also in Chesterton's words) their 'philosophy is quite solid, quite coherent, and quite wrong.'<sup>1</sup> This chapter will be the first step of my apologetic approach in response to the new atheism; it will take an offensive approach, followed by a defensive approach in chapter 7. The worldview of the new atheists leads to several convictions that contradict common sense and unnecessarily lead away from theism and Christianity. Reayburn's first principle of common sense, which I described in chapter 4 §2.2.2, made clear that one's worldview and one's convictions (or, in his own words, 'one's attitude and one's doctrine') are inextricably bound together. With the help of Chesterton's criteria of common sense, I will attempt to show how several "doctrines" of the new atheists that are a consequence of their "attitude" are not in line with common sense. I will focus on the naturalist worldview that the new atheists embrace, both ontologically and epistemologically, and touch upon convictions of the new atheists that flow from that.

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<sup>1</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 46.

# 1. Ontological Naturalism and Common Sense

In chapter 2 §1.1, I explained that the new atheists are all ontological naturalists. They hold the view that reality consists only of nature and that there is no form of the supernatural. Eventually, everything is physical. Below, I will argue that this opinion runs counter to common sense. To do that, I will examine several elements of the naturalist worldview that the new atheists embrace.

## 1.1. Ontological Naturalism in General

In general, ontological naturalism is a worldview that is not in line with common sense. To explain this, I will refer back to Chesterton's criteria of common sense that I described in chapter 4 §2.2.2. Since one's sensory perceptions, on which Chesterton's first criterion of common sense is based, can neither verify nor falsify that reality is only natural and are therefore limited, one must have recourse to the other criteria of common sense. However, one's rational faculties, Chesterton's second criterion of common sense cannot verify or falsify the supernatural either. On the basis of one's perceptions, one can argue either that the supernatural exists *or* that it does not exist. In addition, trusting one's tradition, Chesterton's third criterion of common sense, does not decide the question either. Many thinkers have argued for and many against the existence of the supernatural, but no one has ever provided definitive evidence. The decisive factor in favor of the acceptance of the supernatural based on one's common sense is because of one's trust in one's sense of wonder, Chesterton's fourth criterion of common sense. When looking at reality as if one is seeing it for the first time, reality is full of anomalies, inexplicabilities, and complexities. One can choose to fight these experiences and explain them away, as naturalism does, or one can accept these experiences and, consequently, accept the possibility of the supernatural. This does not mean that one can no longer search for (natural) answers, but it is a search with an open mind.

The new atheists rule out the existence of the supernatural because it is supposed to be superfluous. They argue that one can perfectly understand reality without a supernatural agent, so there is no reason to complicate things. To recapitulate chapter 2 §2.1, this argument is an application of the philosophical principle of Occam's razor, which states that one should not multiply entities beyond necessity. However, necessity or superfluity are not standards by which one can decide whether the supernatural exists. This is also argued by Alister McGrath, a classical apologist and biochemist whom I introduced in chapter 3 §1.1.1. Even if one could prove that God's existence is not *needed* to answer one's

questions, this does not mean that he *does* not exist.<sup>2</sup> It is not necessary that I myself exist, but I still do. Occam's razor does not apply to the existence of entities.

Maciej Reda writes that to Chesterton, 'man's dignity has nothing to do with his physicality, but consists in his capacity for transcendence, far more enthralling than the empty, mechanical cosmos of the materialist.'<sup>3</sup> According to Chesterton, a naturalist world is like a prison. The fact that it is a large prison does not make it any more free:

These people [naturalists] seemed to think it singularly inspiring to keep on saying that the prison was very large [...] The cosmos went on for ever, but not in its wildest constellation could there be anything really interesting; anything, for instance, such as forgiveness or free will. The grandeur or infinity of the secret of its cosmos added nothing to it [...] So these expanders of the universe had nothing to show us except more and more infinite corridors of space lit by ghastly suns and empty of all that is divine.<sup>4</sup>

## 1.2. Evolution by Natural Selection

Dawkins and Dennett devote a substantial part of their research and writing to Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection, which I clarified in chapter 2 §2.1. They attempt to explain all life evolutionarily. In light of common sense, multiple things can be said on this subject. When one relies on one's sensory perceptions and one's rational faculties, one can safely say that evolution is a fact. But this fact alone says nothing about its importance for one's worldview. Chesterton compares the opinion of the 'Broad Churchman' to that of the Catholic Church, and although there is obviously a substantial difference between the Anglican broad church and the new atheism, in this case, one can replace the "Broad Churchman" with "the new atheists":

The difference between the Broad Churchman [or the new atheists] and the Catholic Church is not that the former thinks Evolution is true and the latter thinks it false. It is that the former thinks Evolution an explanation and the latter knows it is not an explanation. Hence the

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<sup>2</sup> MCGRATH, 57-60.

<sup>3</sup> REDA, 55.

<sup>4</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 265.

former thinks it all important; and the latter thinks it rather unimportant.<sup>5</sup>

Today, the Catholic Church accepts the theory of evolution as an explanation, but only as a biological explanation and not as a universal one. The value of the theory of evolution is therefore limited. Evolution is true and, because of it, one can understand the history and development of life on earth better than before, but one must be careful not to make it bigger than it is. It is a scientific theory and does not say anything about the supernatural.<sup>6</sup> Chesterton points out that the danger of the theory of evolution is that it makes people believe that they understand everything. However, they do not. They believe that they understand evolution because it is a very slow process; but the speed of a process does not determine whether one can understand it or not: 'there runs through all the rationalistic treatment of history this curious and confused idea that difficulty is avoided, or even mystery eliminated, by dwelling on mere delay or on something dilatory in the processes of things.'<sup>7</sup> It is not about whether things change slowly or fast, but *why* they change at all. Reyburn expresses this with his second principle of common sense, which I discussed in chapter 4 §2.2.2. Common sense is able to distinguish between truth and falsehood and knows in which lights certain facts should be seen.

The theory of evolution cannot answer the question *why* evolutionary change is happening at all. Also, the theory of evolution cannot tell us how the life that changes started in the first place either. Evolutionists say that it must have started naturally because to say it started supernaturally would mean there is a much bigger mystery that needs an explanation. However, Chesterton argues, 'it is absurd for the Evolutionist to complain that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing, and then pretend that it is *more* thinkable that nothing should turn itself into everything.'<sup>8</sup> Thus, the new atheists incorrectly treat the question of how the world came into existence as a scientific one. They do not see that this question is actually a metaphysical one and, therefore, cannot be explained in a natural way: 'for those who really think, there is always something really unthinkable about the whole evolutionary cosmos, as they conceive it; because it is something coming out of nothing; an ever-increasing flood of water pouring out of an empty jug.'<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 293.

<sup>6</sup> REDA, 56-57.

<sup>7</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 157.

<sup>8</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 534.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

One way to understand such metaphysical questions and start to look for possible answers is to allow one's imagination to step in, and to trust one's sense of wonder. Chesterton allows his readers to accept how strange the world is and how human life is special amidst all other life. The human being is a fact, not a theory of gradual change. For Chesterton, it is clear that humanity is an exception among all other animals. The human being has unique features that no other animals have. Humanity is not "simply" an evolution but is rather a revolution. Humans are the only creatures that are capable of art and religion; they are not only creatures but are also creators.<sup>10</sup> And, yes, this might have a natural explanation, but this does not eliminate the gap between humanity and other creatures. Humanity might seem 'a mere variety of the animal kingdom,'<sup>11</sup> but there is still a gap, and this gap cannot be explained naturalistically. According to Chesterton, 'this first superficial reason for materialism [this resemblance of humanity to other animals] is, if anything, a reason for its opposite; it is exactly where biology leaves off that all religion begins.'<sup>12</sup> The theory of evolution by natural selection is a great scientific discovery. However, it is no argument for naturalism because it cannot answer the questions that the theory evokes. The answers to the questions of how life originally started and why this gradual change takes place might just as well be supernatural.

Ontological naturalism is more restricting than ontological supernaturalism. One cannot validate either of the two positions, but it is possible to say that naturalism is more limiting than supernaturalism:

The [supernaturalist] is quite free to believe that there is a considerable amount of settled order and inevitable development in the universe. But the materialist is not allowed to admit into his spotless machine the slightest speck of spiritualism or miracle [...] Spiritual doctrines do not actually limit the mind as do materialistic denials. Even if I believe in immortality I need not think about it. But if I disbelieve in immortality I must not think about it. In the first case the road is open and I can go as far as I like; in the second the road is shut.<sup>13</sup>

Even if one cares more for facts than for anything else (as the new atheists do<sup>14</sup>), no case can be made against supernaturalism. Supernaturalism cannot be disproven by the theory of evolution, and common sense asks to keep open the possibility of the supernatural.

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<sup>10</sup> REDA, 58.

<sup>11</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 348.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>14</sup> HARRIS, *The End of Faith*, 225.

### 1.3. The Position of Humanity in the Evolutionary Process

I have touched already upon the position of humanity when discussing evolution by natural selection. In chapter 2 §2.1, I argued that according to the new atheists, humanity is a result of evolution by natural selection, and human beings changed gradually from apes to the people of today. Evolution by natural selection is a mindless algorithm that caused humanity's existence. It should be kept in mind that a mindless algorithm cannot purposefully produce anything. This means that humanity was not the goal of natural selection. Humanity happened but is not a climax. The algorithm does not stop with humanity but continues, which means humanity is evolving further.

It runs counter to common sense to treat humanity purely evolutionarily, albeit this would correspond to the scientific discoveries that have been made, which satisfy Chesterton's first three criteria of common sense, namely, one's sensory perceptions, one's rational faculties, and one's tradition. However, such an approach would neglect the last criterion, which is trusting one's sense of wonder and looking at humanity as if seeing it for the first time. This makes visible not a gradual difference between the human being and other animals but, rather, a fundamental difference:

It is not natural to see man as a natural product. It is not common sense [...] to see him as an animal. It is not sane. It sins against the light; against that broad daylight of proportion which is the principle of all reality. It is reached by stretching a point, by making out a case, by artificially selecting a certain light and shade, by bringing into prominence the lesser or lower things which may happen to be similar. The solid thing standing in the sunlight, the thing we can walk round and see from all sides, is quite different. It is also quite extraordinary; and the more sides we see of it the more extraordinary it seems. It is emphatically not a thing that follows or flows naturally from anything else.<sup>15</sup>

The scientific discovery that explains how humanity evolved biologically is valuable but is only one truth amongst many others. Evolutionists like the new atheists refuse to accept other ideas apart from this one idea of evolution. They take the idea of evolution, apply it to everything, and stretch it to universality. This truth of evolution becomes unbalanced because it is taken apart and made absolute. This is what the symbolism of the circle, which I discussed in chapter 4 §2.4.1, represents. Aiming to capture the whole world into one idea may result in creating a perfect theory, but it will also be a theory that is fixed and inflexible.

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<sup>15</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 168-69.

If one idea rules all other ideas, then the truth within the idea will get strained and become false.<sup>16</sup>

If humanity is approached as a solely evolutionary algorithmic product, one cannot do justice to the fundamental differences between human beings and other creatures. One's sensory perceptions testify that the human being is the only creature that is able to create complex works of art and be religious. This does not mean that evolution by natural selection is not true; rather, it means that it does not explain why and how humanity is the way it is. The theory of evolution has not been able to explain satisfactorily humanity's reasons for practicing religion.<sup>17</sup> Therefore, the concept of evolution can only remain acceptable and valuable if it is not completely isolated from other ideas about humanity and its history and development.

As Chesterton argues, contrary to the theory of evolution, the concept of the human soul is able to explain humanity's reasons for practicing art and religion. This is what makes humanity unique and a revolution rather than just a result of evolution. Because the theory of evolution can explain only the development of the human body but not the existence of the nonphysical human soul, one should investigate other ideas about humanity. In chapter 2 §2.2, I explained that as a result of their ontological naturalism, the new atheists deny the existence of the non-physical human soul. They seem uncomfortable when talking about this subject given the many terms they use when talking about it. They seem unable to pick one term and use it consistently and, instead, switch between different terms such as mind, soul, spirit, self, consciousness, to name a few. Dennett and Harris tend to link the soul with the human brain, which is physical and scientifically more comprehensible. By creating this link, they are able to physicalize the soul and they can avoid the difficulty that rises within ontological naturalism when it comes to the immateriality of the soul.

By making an argument for the human soul, Chesterton attempts to make clear that there is more to humanity than just physical bodies. To be fair, Chesterton, too, uses the

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<sup>16</sup> *The Autobiography*, 327-28.

<sup>17</sup> The natural sciences have argued in multiple ways that religious belief can be debunked. Recent theories from cognitive science of religion (CSR) have attempted to show that religious beliefs are unreliably formed, incompatible with scientific outcomes, and superfluous because of scientific explanations. This issue is discussed at length by Hans van Eyghen. He investigated these naturalist "debunking arguments" of religious belief, and concluded that 'CSR theories are not incompatible with the content of religious beliefs; that CSR theories do not show that supernatural beliefs are unreliably formed; that CSR theories do not undo the evidential value of religious experiences; and that CSR theories have only limited implications on the evidential status of a wide occurrence of supernatural beliefs.' HANS VAN EYGHEN, *Arguing from Cognitive Science of Religion: Is Religious Belief Debunked* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2020), 147. Below in chapter 6 §1.4, I will discuss an example of how evolutionary thinking attempts to explain religious belief, and argue why this argumentation does not satisfy the four criteria of common sense.

terms soul, self, and mind alternately, and he does not give any specifications on the terms. According to Chesterton, it is something that one must almost automatically accept when using one's common sense, and it is something that cannot be explained by evolution: 'there is nothing even faintly suggesting such a development of this human mind. It was not and it was; we know not in what instant or in what infinity of years.'<sup>18</sup> Chesterton finds that the ensoulment of humanity is something meta-historical and meta-scientific; it is metaphysical.<sup>19</sup> The soul is not a scientific matter but is nevertheless often treated as such, as one can also detect in the theories of the new atheists. It is a scientific fallacy to treat the soul as a scientific matter and consequently dismiss it. If one puts science aside for a moment and looks at oneself in the way one experiences oneself, it becomes clear that one has a soul, even though the soul is not verifiable. Therefore, one should not try to explain everything scientifically since not everything is scientifically explainable. The soul is a perfect example of this. In Chesterton's words, 'one may understand the cosmos, but never the ego; the self is more distant than any star.'<sup>20</sup>

## 1.4. The Rise of Religion

As a consequence of their naturalism, the new atheists believe that religion is a purely natural phenomenon too. Therefore, they attempt to explain the origins of religion in a natural way. More specifically, Dawkins and Dennett explain it within the theory of evolution, which I explained in chapter 1 §2.2.2. Dawkins develops a hypothesis on memes or cultural genes, which I will discuss below in chapter 6 §2.4.4. Dennett devotes his book *Breaking the Spell* to the explanation of religion as a natural phenomenon. He discusses the births of (folk) religions and concludes: 'extrapolating back to human prehistory with the aid of biological thinking, we can surmise how folk religions emerged without conscious and deliberate design, just as languages emerged, by interdependent processes of biological and cultural evolution.'<sup>21</sup> When he dives into the development of religions, he states: 'as human culture grew and people became more reflective, folk religion became transformed into organized religion; the free-floating rationales of the earlier designs were supplemented and sometimes replaced by carefully crafted reasons as religions became

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<sup>18</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 170. Chesterton states this again at page 174: 'his body may have been evolved from the brutes; but we know nothing of any such transition that throws the smallest light upon his soul as it has shown itself in history.' He was very firm in this position.

<sup>19</sup> NICHOLS, 134.

<sup>20</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 257.

<sup>21</sup> DENNETT, *Breaking the Spell*, 114.



domesticated.<sup>22</sup> Dennett searches for the natural origins of religions and attempts to let these origins cover the whole matter. As a naturalist, he carefully discredits any supernatural tendency and, instead, looks for answers solely in the convictions and behaviors of people. His hypothesis is that the origins of religion likely lead back to a human superstition. Human ancestors had a ‘built-in love for the intentional stance’, which could have caused them to believe in invisible agents that could explain the inexplicable phenomena of those days.<sup>23</sup> Dennett introduces the supernatural in a psychological way, referring to the Latin *cui bono?* question,<sup>24</sup> by arguing that religion was designed to benefit people. It benefited everybody within society by providing security and harmony. It benefited the elite by providing power to the people who had knowledge of the gods. And, it benefited societies as wholes by creating social and political groups.<sup>25</sup>

This may all be true, and it can be interesting to investigate religion in this way, but the new atheists seem oblivious to the fact that this theory does not say anything about the existence of the supernatural. The supernatural cannot simply be dismissed on the ground that religion might be explained in a natural way. Chesterton argues, ‘if a man desires to find out the origins of religions, let him not go to the Sandwich Islands; let him go to church.’<sup>26</sup> By studying religion in an exclusively evolutionary way, the new atheists make religion something alien and savage. They try to understand the religion of prehistoric times but can only do this with their own sophisticated minds. However, it is not possible to understand religion in this way.

The available pieces of evidence that point to the roots of religion are not enough evidence to back up a completely naturalistic theory. However, naturalists keep trying to do this, also in Chesterton’s time: ‘it is commonly affirmed, again, that religion grew in a very slow and evolutionary manner; and even that it grew not from one cause; but from a combination that might be called a coincidence.’<sup>27</sup> Elements that are often named are the fear of the most important person of the group, the occurrence of dreams, and the associations with sacrifice in the symbolism of harvest and resurrection in growing crops (e.g., corn). Naturalists (also in Chesterton’s time) tend to individualize these elements and develop a hypothesis that people invented a mystical feeling that could unite these separate elements. That would be the answer to the question of how religion came into existence. However, common sense leads to a different conclusion: ‘I think anybody’s common sense

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 152.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 118.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 90-92.

<sup>26</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 116.

<sup>27</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 179.

will tell him that it is far more likely that this sort of mystical sentiment did exist already; and that in light of it dreams and kings and corn-fields could appear mystical then, as they can appear mystical now.<sup>28</sup> This means that these separate elements are not the origins of religion. Rather, the mystical or religious feeling that preceded these elements is the origin of religion; but since this is a feeling, it is not traceable in an evolutionary way.

Following the criteria of common sense, one can conclude that religion cannot be a purely natural thing. Trusting one's sensory perceptions, several "original" elements are detected that do not seem to be connected. Artificially uniting these elements to create a mystical feeling is rather far-fetched. It would be as if 'this singular sentiment would be a combination of the habit of smoking Woodbines, the increase of the income tax and the pleasure of a motorist in exceeding speed limit.'<sup>29</sup> One cannot imagine a uniting sentiment because one cannot see a connection between the elements. The same goes for the supposed connection between a chief, dreams, and corn. The only possibility is that there already was a connection that caused these elements to become mystical. This is validated when one trusts one's tradition. Later religions have started this way too; therefore, there is a reason to assume that the origins of religion also lie here. Trusting one's sense of wonder, one can carry this thought even further. Following Chesterton, one can say that the new atheists 'are obsessed by their evolutionary monomania that every great thing grows from a seed, or something smaller than itself. They seem to forget that every seed comes from a tree, or something larger than itself.'<sup>30</sup> If one allows oneself to look at the situation open-mindedly, it is not necessary to create a religious feeling that comes forth from several separate elements. One can choose to let in the possibility that religion did not start evolutionarily from a small seed that grew, but from a large tree that bore fruits. This large tree can be this mystical feeling, this vague idea of the supernatural: 'the savage seems to be parading all the most repulsive and impossible parts of his belief [the myths] and concealing all the most sensible and creditable parts [the vague idea of the supernatural].'<sup>31</sup> Nowadays, the myths are left behind, but the vague idea of the supernatural remains hidden. Trusting one's sense of wonder can help to connect the results from one's sensory perceptions, one's rational faculties and one's tradition in order to look at religion in a different and more complete way.

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 219.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 221.

## 1.5. The Explanation of Anomalies

The new atheists consider reality to be exclusively natural. Therefore, they do not agree to any supernatural aspects of life, such as miracles. In chapter 1 §2.2.2, I explained that as long as science cannot prove that miracles are indeed supernatural, the new atheists consider them to be natural anomalies for which the explanation has not yet been found by science. However, science cannot prevent people from believing in miracles because miracles have nothing to do with science, as Chesterton explains: ‘science is the study of the admitted laws of existence; it cannot prove a universal negative about whether those laws could ever be suspended by something admittedly above them.’<sup>32</sup>

According to Chesterton, it is actually quite “dogmatic” to deny the possibility of miracles, and certainly more dogmatic than if one does allow for miracles:

Somehow or other an extraordinary idea has arisen that the disbelievers in miracles consider them coldly and fairly, while believers in miracles accept them only in connection with some dogma. The fact is quite the other way. The believers in miracles accept them (rightly or wrongly) because they have evidence for them. The disbelievers in miracles deny them (rightly or wrongly) because they have a doctrine against them.<sup>33</sup>

When somebody claims to have been a witness to a miracle, one can believe this or not. If one does not believe this, this can either be because the witness is not to be believed or because one is not open to the possibility of miracles. This means that either the objection is purely personal or the objection is dogmatic. In the first case, one has judged anti-democratically whether a person is to be believed at all. In the second case, one holds the naturalist prejudice that miracles are never to be believed.<sup>34</sup> Chesterton looks at it as follows:

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<sup>32</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 296.

<sup>33</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 355. This claim of Chesterton is indirectly a response to David Hume’s *Of Miracles*.

<sup>34</sup> Chesterton’s claim is indirectly a response to David Hume’s *Of Miracles*, where Hume argued in paragraph 13, ‘when any one tells me, that he saw a dead man restored to life, I immediately consider with myself, whether it be more probable, that this person should either deceive or be deceived, or that the fact, which he relates, should really have happened. I weigh the one miracle against the other; and according to the superiority, which I discover, I pronounce my decision, and always reject the greater miracle. If the falsehood of his testimony would be more miraculous, than the event which he relates; then, and not till then, can he pretend to command my belief or opinion.’ DAVID HUME, *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding*, Oxford World’s Classics (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 83. Either the person is not to be believed, or the possibility of miracles is not to be believed. Hume argued in favor of the latter.

The question of whether miracles ever occur is a question of common sense and of ordinary historical imagination: not of any final physical experiment [...] I conclude that miracles do happen. I am forced to it by a conspiracy of facts: the fact that the men who encounter elves or angels are not the mystics and the morbid dreamers, but fishermen, farmers, and all men at once coarse and cautious; the fact that we all know men who testify to spiritualistic incidents but are not spiritualists; the fact that science itself admits such things more and more every day [...] But the strongest of all is the dilemma above mentioned, that these supernatural things are never denied except on the basis either of anti-democracy or of materialist dogmatism—I may say materialist mysticism.<sup>35</sup>

Looking at the criteria of common sense, one can discover three of them in this quotation. Although one's sensory perceptions cannot prove that miracles are true, they can tell that anomalies do exist. Considering them to be miracles is about the way in which we treat these anomalies. One's rational faculties cannot provide any valid reason not to believe in miracles. Since they are anomalies, they fall out of the scope of science and therefore no scientific argument can give a decisive answer. When one trusts one's tradition, one can say that these anomalies can be considered miracles. Humanity has provided so many testimonies and there is no reason not to take them seriously, not even when one has not experienced any miracles oneself.

The way in which one should really go about miracles, is not so much to make miracles into facts but rather to make facts into miracles. For this, Chesterton's important fourth criterion of common sense comes to the fore again: the trust in one's sense of wonder. One needs one's imagination to look at the world as if seeing it for the first time. According to Chesterton, 'the function of imagination is not to make strange things settled, but to make settled things strange; not so much to make wonders facts as to make facts wonders.'<sup>36</sup> It is so easy to take things for granted that one may forget how marvelous the world actually is.<sup>37</sup> The repetition and predictability of nature might give the impression that it is all natural, dead, and algorithmic. However, it is not necessarily true that the world would be less predictable and more varied if it were supernatural, alive, and personal:

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<sup>35</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 357.

<sup>36</sup> *The Defendant* (London: J.M. Dent & Sons, 1901), 84.

<sup>37</sup> NICHOLS, 66.

Now, to put the matter in a popular phrase, it might be true that the sun rises regularly because he never gets tired of rising. His routine might be due, not to a lifelessness, but to a rush of life [...] Perhaps God is strong enough to exult in monotony. It is possible that God says every morning, “Do it again” to the sun; and every evening, “Do it again” to the moon [...] The repetition in Nature may not be a mere recurrence; it may be a theatrical *encore* [...] Repetition may go on for millions of years, by mere choice, and at any instant it may stop.<sup>38</sup>

Chesterton considers a miracle to be the liberty of God.<sup>39</sup> Nature is controllable, and this is what people see in their everyday life. God does not get tired of repetition because it is so beautiful. One can also see this with one’s own eyes once one is open to it. But, at the same time, nature is also free because, sometimes, and only experienced by a few people, God takes the liberty to shake things up.

## 1.6. The Inevitability of Determinism

As I argued in chapter 2 §4.1, according to the new atheists, in the end it does not matter whether free will is real or not. They differ on their opinions in free will but, when all is said and done, it is not important whether it exists. People experience free will nevertheless, rightly or wrongly. That is why humanity has to deal with morality. However, if this is really what the new atheists think, one can wonder why Dennett and Harris devote such an amount of their research to this topic of free will and determinism. The fact that they do extensively write about it, points towards a fascination for the theme. And, since Dennett and Harris attach great value to their determinist position, it is worthwhile to discuss why their positions contradict common sense.

Dennett and Harris hold different opinions on the topic of free will. In chapter 2 §4.1, I already made the distinction between compatibilist free will and libertarian free will. Dennett is a so-called compatibilist and attempts to combine determinism with free will. Harris is a hard determinist and states that libertarian free will is an illusion. Although their positions differ in degree, they both agree that the world is determined. This is because for both of them, ontological naturalism unavoidably leads to determinism. If one holds that reality consists only of nature, and, hence, only of the physical, one cannot but eventually

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<sup>38</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 263-64.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 332. This chapter generally focuses solely on the supernatural. For the sake of completeness of the argument, I mention God here specifically. In chapter 7, the apologetic approach will include God more elaborately.

think that cause and effect are inseparable; every effect must have a physical cause. If one is receptive to the supernatural, this is not necessarily the case. Above, I have argued that ontological naturalism is not in line with common sense, even though the existence of the supernatural cannot be proven. Elaborating on this argument, one can safely accept libertarian free<sup>40</sup> will as a reasonable possibility too.

It is common sense to accept free will, even though this acceptance is an embrace of mystery, something the new atheists seem to dislike. The difference between accepting and rejecting free will is, in the end, very simple:

The Christian [or other believer] puts the contradiction into his philosophy. The Determinist puts it into his daily habits. The Christian [or other believer] states as an avowed mystery what the Determinist calls nonsense. The Determinist has the same nonsense for breakfast, dinner, tea, and supper every day of his life.<sup>41</sup>

It is more logical to include something in one's philosophy, and incorporate this in daily life, than to deny it but act as if it is nevertheless the case. Rejecting something one is confronted by every single moment goes against common sense. In Chesterton's words, this 'is not a question between mysticism and rationality. It is a question between mysticism and madness.'<sup>42</sup>

Free will is a reasonable possibility because one must trust one's sense of wonder. Chesterton's 'test of the imagination'<sup>43</sup> can explain whether free will exists or whether everything is determined. Chesterton explains the difference between the necessity of some mental relations, such as the fact that two and two make four, and the possibility of physical occurrences that only show repetitions but no unavoidable laws, such as the occasion that trees bear apples. The test of the imagination helps to distinguish between these two. One cannot imagine that two and two make anything other than four, but one can easily imagine that a tree bears candy or golden lamps instead of fruit. Physical laws are not really

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<sup>40</sup> Below, when mentioning "free will," I mean libertarian free will.

<sup>41</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Blatchford Controversies*, 383. To be fair, determinism also exists within Christianity, particularly within Lutheranism and Calvinism. This theological determinism is closely connected with the doctrine of double predestination. This doctrine is rejected by the Roman Catholic Church, since it emphasizes the importance of free will. Cf. HEINRICH DENZINGER, HELMUT HOPING, AND PETER HÜNERMANN, *Enchiridion Symbolorum Definitionum et Declarationum de Rebus Fidei et Morum*, CD-ROM edition, based on the text of the 42th impression of the printed ed. (Freiburg: Herder, 2009), 621, 85, 1567. When reading "the Christian" in this quotation, one should set the doctrine of double predestination aside, and keep the Roman Catholic point of view in mind.

<sup>42</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Blatchford Controversies*, 384.

<sup>43</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 254.

*laws* but are rather only repetitions that one cannot fully understand. The new atheists act as if these laws really do exist, but they do not. Somehow, ‘they feel that because one incomprehensible thing constantly follows another incomprehensible thing the two together somehow make up a comprehensible thing.’<sup>44</sup> According to Chesterton, ‘a law implies that we know the nature of the generalization and enactment; not merely that we have noticed some of the effects.’<sup>45</sup>

Talking about determinism and free will in this way asks for trusting one’s sense of wonder, but not only this. It also asks for trusting one’s sensory perceptions. There is no visible link between an assumed cause and effect; there is only the two separate facts. People automatically link them together, which is completely normal since everybody tries to make sense of the surrounding world. But one must not believe that one can actually *perceive* this link. It is a prediction, or even a bet, that the effect follows the cause. When one trusts one’s rational faculties, one concludes that this is, indeed, the case. Mathematical necessities are different from physical facts, and the test of the imagination makes this perfectly clear. Furthermore, tradition also testifies to this difference. If one opens a random fairy tale from any culture or time, one will find this difference: ‘all the fire of the fairy tales is derived from this [difference]. Just as we all like love tales because there is an instinct of sex, we all like astonishing tales because they touch the nerve of the ancient instinct of astonishment.’<sup>46</sup> Fairy tales are the pre-eminent example of the understanding of the difference between necessities and repetitions, and the fact that people came up with these stories testifies to the fact that humanity is aware of this difference. However, the new atheists tend to forget this due to their naturalistic understanding of the world.

## 2. Epistemological Naturalism and Common Sense

As I have argued in chapters 1 and 2, the new atheists attach great value to science and its capabilities. They say this explicitly and it becomes clear once their other philosophical positions are considered as well. In this section, I will focus on the attitude of the new atheists towards science and what this implies, and I will argue why part of this attitude goes counter to common sense.

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 255.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 256-57.

## 2.1. Methodological Naturalism

Methodological naturalism is a type of naturalism within the field of epistemology that I have discussed in chapter 2 §3.1. In short, this type of naturalism limits scientific explanations to natural explanations; the supernatural is excluded from science. It is a position that both ontological supernaturalists and naturalists can hold because it excludes God from science, not from reality.

I mention this type of naturalism only for the sake of completeness because where science is concerned, it is valid to say that God should be left out of explanations. Science can progress best if it is assumed that God does not interfere with the empirical world. If science does not understand something, it should not stop investigating and defer to supernatural explanations. If it did defer to supernatural explanations, science would cease its investigations and scientific knowledge would not advance.

In chapter 4 §2.3.2, I elaborated on Chesterton's understanding of the different roles of mythology and philosophy. Both satisfy one's need to understand one's surrounding world, but they do this in different ways. Philosophy focuses on reason and attempts to unravel, while mythology focuses on the imagination and seeks for a meaning. According to Chesterton, people need both to nourish a plausible worldview. Therefore, he compares philosophy and mythology to two separate rivers that flow next to each other (and come together only at the end in the sea of Christianity).<sup>47</sup>

One can interpret this analogy as a parallel with methodological naturalism. The river of philosophy represents science: science makes use of reason and attempts to unravel worldly secrets by natural explanations and is one way to acquire knowledge. The river of mythology represents religion: religion focuses on imagination and seeks meaning in experiences. The two rivers should not mingle, which means that science should not start using its imagination and seek for meaning. The river of philosophy should not overflow its banks but should stick to its boundaries. Science should stick to scientific methods and leave questions of meaning to religion.

As is obvious in the illustration above, I am in no way claiming that science or scientific methods are the only way to acquire knowledge. Methodological naturalism is not claiming this either. It is only claiming that the river of science should not flood but should respect its boundaries.

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<sup>47</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 243.



## 2.2. The Importance of Science

Chapters 1 and 2 made clear that many arguments of the new atheists against religion go in the following direction: believers can say X, but they do not have any evidence for this claim; as long as they cannot provide any evidence, one must consider it as not true. The new atheists attach great importance to evidence, and evidence belongs to the realm of science. Furthermore, the new atheists have great faith in the capabilities of science and in the future of science. Science is able to explain the most complicated and abstract problems and unravel many mysteries. In the near and far future, science will be able to explain much more; there is no limit.

This attitude is the most striking characteristic of epistemological naturalism. To recapitulate from chapter 2 §3.2, epistemological naturalism is the conviction that real knowledge is only scientific knowledge (or at least that scientific knowledge is the highest form of knowledge). Not all new atheists agree on this. Hitchens, most of all, does not endorse this claim, but he does agree that science is of paramount importance. Dennett acknowledges the limitations of scientific inquiry, but he still has high expectations for science. For Dawkins, scientific evidence is the only reason to acknowledge anything. Lastly, Harris believes that science is gaining ground in so far unscientific areas and is expanding its boundaries.

The new atheists have often been labeled as adherents of scientism. Epistemological naturalism and scientism are synonyms with only a different tone. “Epistemological naturalism” is more neutral, while “scientism” is used mainly by critics. Since I criticize the positions of the new atheists in this chapter, below I will use the term “scientism”. Philosopher of religion Mikael Stenmark offers the following general description of scientism:

Advocates of the doctrine of scientism believe that the boundaries of science (that is, typically the natural sciences) could and should be expanded in such a way that something that has not previously been understood as science can now become a part of science. Thus a possible synonym to scientism is *scientific expansionism*. How exactly the boundaries of science should be expanded and what more precisely is to be included within science are issues on which there is disagreement.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> MIKAEL STENMARK, “Scientism,” in *Encyclopedia of Science and Religion*, ed. J. Wentzel van Huyssteen (New York: Macmillan Reference, 2003), 783.

Related to this description, Stenmark suggests the term ‘scientific expansionist’ for adherents of scientism.<sup>49</sup> This term has the advantage of having “scientific restrictionist” as an antonym; therefore, it works well to describe the various positions one can take.

## 2.3. The New Atheists and Scientism

Scientism has many versions and gradations, and the term is multi-interpretable. I believe this ambiguity caused many critics to label the new atheists in general as scientific expansionists. However, close reading of the texts of the new atheists shows that they all have a different attitude towards science. First of all, Hitchens is not at all a scientific expansionist.<sup>50</sup> Scientism focuses mostly on the natural sciences and tends to devalue other sciences and other sources of knowledge. Hitchens, however, although he certainly sets store by empirical evidence, also attaches great value to literature.<sup>51</sup> Since he is a literary and cultural critic, this should be no surprise. According to him, literature and poetry stand alongside scientific inquiry, and knowledge gained from either of them ‘can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected.’<sup>52</sup> Moreover, Hitchens warns that science should not be regarded as the warranty against superstition and belief. History has proven that many great scientists were believers themselves, and even tried to combine scientific knowledge and their religion.<sup>53</sup> Even though scientism can take weaker and stronger forms, Hitchens could actually be regarded as a scientific restrictionist rather than as a scientific expansionist.

When it comes to scientism, Dawkins can be seen as the opposite of Hitchens. He is an adherent of existential scientism, since he seems ‘to have an almost unlimited confidence in science [...] and about what can be achieved in the name of science.’<sup>54</sup> Contrary to Hitchens, Dawkins believes that science *is* the only alternative to superstition and belief: ‘we no longer have to resort to superstition when faced with the deep problems: Is there a meaning to life? What are we for? What is man?’<sup>55</sup> Science can explain and replace religion.

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<sup>49</sup> “What is scientism? Mikael Stenmark,” YouTube video, 52:35, posted by “Areiopagi,” upload October 25<sup>th</sup> 2016, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4de\\_r9qAgg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y4de_r9qAgg), accessed on December 17<sup>th</sup> 2020. 16:55.

<sup>50</sup> My view is contrary to the view of Terry Eagleton, who (as an opponent of scientism) claims that Hitchens makes the same scientific mistake as Dawkins. EAGLETON, 6-7.

<sup>51</sup> HITCHENS, *The Portable Atheist*, xi, xvii.

<sup>52</sup> *God Is Not Great*, 340.

<sup>53</sup> *The Portable Atheist*, xxi.

<sup>54</sup> MIKAEL STENMARK, *Scientism: Science, Ethics, and Religion*, Ashgate Science and Religion Series (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), 13.

<sup>55</sup> DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene*, 1.

This version of scientism is equivalent to ontological scientism or scientific naturalism, which is ‘the view that the only reality that exists is the one science has access to.’<sup>56</sup> Science is all-determining. All questions become scientific questions, and science will be able to answer them. When this is not the case, the questions themselves are not meaningful.<sup>57</sup>

Dennett and Harris can be considered scientific expansionists, but not as strongly as Dawkins. They are both academic-internal and -external scientific expansionists. Academic-internal scientism means the following:

The view that a) all, or at least some, of the genuine, non-scientific academic disciplines can eventually be reduced to (or translated into) science proper, i.e., natural science (*academic-internal<sub>1</sub> Scientism*), and/or that b) all natural sciences can eventually be reduced to (or translated into) one particular natural science (*academic-internal<sub>2</sub> Scientism*).<sup>58</sup>

Both are also advocates of the following relatively mild and broad academic-external version of scientism: ‘the view that all or, at least, some of the essential non-academic areas of human life can be reduced to (or translated into) science.’<sup>59</sup> However, they do not necessarily meet all the requirements that Stenmark links with (this version of) scientism. Stenmark explicitly makes it clear in his book that the “sciences” with which scientism is concerned are meant in a narrow way. They are not what the German language calls the *Wissenschaften*: the whole range of different studies that are practiced in academia. They are rather the *Naturwissenschaften*, in English, the natural sciences.<sup>60</sup>

Dennett and Harris are both philosophers and cognitive scientists, with Dennett leaning more towards philosophy and Harris more towards cognitive science. Both have affinity with the natural sciences, but they also attach great value to philosophical knowledge. Philosophy is not a natural science, so it seems hard to label Dennett and Harris as strict scientific expansionists. However, by looking at their specific philosophical accomplishments and philosophical methods, one cannot avoid the conclusion that they come near to this position. The areas in which they do philosophical research are also those in which they do cognitive research (I introduced their thoughts on, e.g., free will,

<sup>56</sup> STENMARK, 8. It is striking that at page 134, Stenmark denies that existential scientism entails ontological scientism. This can be due to a varied use of the terms “existential scientism,” “ontological scientism,” “scientific naturalism” and “scientific materialism.” I believe the two versions of scientism are bound up with each other, at least in Dawkins’ case, given that in his opinion, science stretches its boundaries to the boundaries of our reality, and this reality contains our religious questions.

<sup>57</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 80.

<sup>58</sup> STENMARK, 1-2.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

evolution theory, and morality in chapter 2). By doing research in these areas, they connect philosophy to science. Their philosophical inquiries depend on their scientific research; as a result, they translate science into philosophy and thus reduce philosophy to science.

Furthermore, Dennett and Harris can both be considered adherents of rationalistic scientism, which is ‘the view that we are rationally entitled to believe only what can be scientifically justified or what is scientifically knowable.’<sup>61</sup> Neither Dennett nor Harris believes that science is or will eventually be omniscient, but they are convinced that the only things one can rationally believe must be the outcomes of scientific research. One may entertain opinions that are not the outcome of scientific research, but one cannot be rational about them; rational knowledge is always scientific. Embracing rational scientism, Dennett and Harris also support epistemic scientism, which says that ‘the only reality that we can know anything about is the one science has access to.’<sup>62</sup> Moreover, Harris can also be considered an adherent of ‘axiological scientism’ or ‘value scientism.’<sup>63</sup> He is convinced that morality can be reduced to science.<sup>64</sup> Dennett’s position on this topic is more vague. He sees morality as subordinate to science, and he sees no fact-value gap or naturalistic fallacy (which I have explained in chapter 2 §4.2). But, although Dennett does not want to underestimate sociobiology and its capabilities, neither does he provide a clear *naturalistic* scientific way to handle ethics.<sup>65</sup> Whether morality can be reduced to science or not, Dennett does not give a clear verdict. (Dawkins also qualifies for all versions of scientism that apply to Dennett and Harris since all these versions are implicit in his own scientific views.)

## 2.4. Scientism and Common Sense

By now, it must be clear that the new atheists have no shared position regarding scientism. Therefore, I believe it would be incorrect to formulate one response that is applicable to *the* scientism of the new atheist. It seems more appropriate to respond to the various versions of scientism that have been discussed above.

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 12. Here, Stenmark distinguishes two types of axiological scientism. The other type that is not worked out here values science higher than other realms of life, and depreciates these other realms. The axiological scientism here handles values themselves; STENMARK, 784.

<sup>64</sup> HARRIS, *The Moral Landscape*.

<sup>65</sup> DENNETT, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 467-510.

### 2.4.1. Existential Scientism

Existential scientism (also called ontological scientism) is the most severe version of scientism, and it implies all other versions of scientism. It sets limits not only to one's thinking, but also to reality in general. Dawkins believes that science (i.e., the natural sciences) shall, in the long run, become omniscient because the boundaries of science are the boundaries of reality. The view that reality ultimately consists of material objects only (i.e., ontological naturalism) is a view all new atheists embrace. Since reality consists of material objects only, science also deals with material objects only. Turning it round, existential scientism also means that the boundaries of reality are the boundaries of science. Claiming that reality is limited to the boundaries of science, is something only Dawkins does. He maintains that science can eventually explain reality completely and, consequently, that anything that science cannot explain does not belong to reality: explanations beyond science are not possible. This means that 'religious beliefs must satisfy the same conditions as scientific hypotheses to be [...] about something real.'<sup>66</sup> In practice, Dawkins rules out religious belief. For him, religious beliefs are either restricted to supernatural beliefs, which do not concern physical objects and, therefore, are not about anything real, or they never meet the requirements of scientific hypotheses and, therefore, can be dismissed.

The statement of existential scientism focuses on two main points: the boundaries of science are the boundaries of reality, and the boundaries of reality are the boundaries of science. For one thing, existential scientism states that reality is restricted to the domain of science. This statement is not itself scientific, since one can neither verify nor falsify this statement. There is no evidence that the boundaries of science indeed determine reality. It is like the position of logical positivism discussed in chapter 2 §3.3, which says that statements are significant if and only if they are either empirically verifiable or true by definition. This criterion does not meet its own standards, so it is not convincing. Another problem with this statement is that it is a case of circular reasoning. The claim that there does exist a realm of reality that lies beyond science is a non-scientific statement; but, since existential scientism does not attach any value to non-scientific statements, this claim would be brushed aside without any argument. Given that reality is restricted to science, what cannot be known by science is not real; therefore, claims that cannot be justified by scientific evidence do not deal with anything real and are not true. Of course, many examples could be given of people who have had experiences that are not verifiable (or falsifiable), that go against the laws of nature, or that have a supernatural touch; but none

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<sup>66</sup> STENMARK, 10.

of these examples has any value to adherents of existential scientism. Their motto could be: “no proof, no truth.” It seems like existential scientism cares more for consistency than for truth.<sup>67</sup>

Common sense looks beyond such a motto. The fourth criterion of common sense asks to look at reality with a sense of wonder, with a sense of novelty, as if one sees the world for the first time. Nobody can avoid seeing the world with a predetermined mind because everybody is influenced by one’s past, by one’s prior knowledge, and by one’s state of mind. This predetermined mind filters what one sees and helps to interpret one’s sensory perceptions and experiences. This means that for scientific expansionists, they are skeptical from the very start about apparently non-naturalistic phenomena or experiences. They are determined to see everything through scientific glasses and rule out anything that is not visible through these glasses. But common sense asks that one removes these glasses and observes everything with a fresh outlook because prejudices are fatal for an honest opinion. Facts should arouse one’s sense of wonder, and one should treat them as miracles.<sup>68</sup> Adherents of existential scientism should ask themselves the question of why the boundaries of reality must be restricted to the boundaries of science. Opponents of existential scientism have a ready answer when asked why the boundaries of reality are beyond the boundaries of science: because there are things in the world that science cannot explain. Explaining these things away is not an answer, so the answer must lie beyond science. I have already discussed the possibility of anomalies above in chapter 6 §1.5, so it suffices to say here that existential scientism explains anomalies away and claims that miracles do not exist because science cannot account for them. However, judging everything in the world by existential scientism is more dogmatic than accepting things that cannot be explained: ‘it is we Christians who accept all actual evidence—it is you rationalists [or in this case scientific expansionists] who refuse actual evidence being constrained to do so by your creed.’<sup>69</sup> Of course, science could and should try to improve itself and stretch its boundaries, but it is a fallacy to explain non-scientific things away and predict that eventually science will be omniscient.

This leads to the other statement of existential scientism, namely, that science will be omniscient. Science has unlimited potential and is able to replace anything else that attempts to provide knowledge, such as religion. In chapter 1 §2.1, I discussed Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA), a view on the relationship between science and religion that distinguishes between a domain of science and a domain of religion. Existential

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<sup>67</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 230.

<sup>68</sup> NICHOLS, 66.

<sup>69</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 355-56.

scientism rejects NOMA since this form of scientism does not allow for multiple magisteria. Science is the only magisterium, and it is all-dominating. It is so dominant that it determines reality and comprehends all of it. It can replace religions and other worldviews and give meaning to people's lives because omni-science is able to answer all questions. However, one can actually *know* that this is not true. Science cannot answer all questions. Answers to questions about meaning are not empirically verifiable; the so-called "why questions" cannot be answered by following a scientific method. Because science cannot answer these questions, existential scientism dismisses them, but this is invalid. People have these questions, and dismissing these questions means dismissing a universal part of humanity. It would be more truthful to acknowledge the existence and value of these questions and to admit that science is not able to answer them.

An example of how Dawkins endeavors to prove that science can answer all questions is his attempt to refute the "God Hypothesis". In *The God Delusion*, he dedicates multiple chapters to this theme. He is aware that he cannot *disprove* God's existence, but he states that he can give scientific verdicts on the probability of God's existence:

That you cannot prove God's nonexistence is accepted and trivial, if only in the sense that we can never absolutely prove the non-existence of anything. What matters is not whether God is disprovable (he isn't) but whether his existence is probable. That is another matter. Some undisprovable things are sensibly judged far less probable than other undisprovable things. There is no reason to regard God as immune from consideration along the spectrum of probabilities. And there is certainly no reason to suppose that, just because God can be neither proved nor disproved, his probability of existence is 50 per cent.<sup>70</sup>

Despite the fact that God's existence is not provable, Dawkins insists that the question is treated as a scientific matter:

A universe with a creative superintendent would be a very different kind of universe from one without. Why is that not a scientific matter? [...] What expertise can theologians bring to deep cosmological questions that scientists cannot? [...] Why are scientists so cravenly respectful towards the ambitions of theologians, over questions that theologians are certainly no more qualified to answer than scientists themselves?<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>70</sup> DAWKINS, *The God Delusion*, 77.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*, 78-80.

To show the superiority of science over all other enterprises that seek knowledge, Dawkins both debunks theological arguments in favor of God's existence and provides his superior scientific argument against the probability of his existence. As already discussed in chapter 1 §2.3, this is called the 'argument from improbability.' I will not completely repeat Dawkins' train of thought here but rather summarize it: 1) This world is complex. 2) The probability that something complex has come into existence by itself is statistically zero. 3) This leaves two options: either the world has been designed or the world has started as simple and become more complex over time. Dawkins is not satisfied with the designer-option since, according to him, this leads to the question how this complex designer came into existence. The cumulative alternative is a more satisfying answer, and this can be completely filled out by natural selection. God's existence is unnecessarily complicated given that there is a much more satisfying scientific answer to give.

Dawkins rejects the possible existence of God based on two principles: firstly, the existence of God does not fit the theory that complexity is statistically improbable. Ultimately, all first causes *must be* small and simple, otherwise one cannot scientifically understand the origin of things. To scientism, this sounds acceptable. To common sense, this sounds rather prejudiced and illogical. Based on all four criteria of common sense, it is illogical to reject God on the basis of statistical probability. Firstly, one's sensory perceptions do not give a reason to not believe in God. There is no evidence (as Dawkins also confirms) that God does not exist. Secondly, one's rational faculties cannot deduce from experiences that God does not exist. One can of course philosophize and then come to the conclusion that the probability is small; but, while philosophizing, one should recognize one's predetermined mind and the conclusions that follow from this mind. In this case, one's predetermined mind can say that all first causes must be small and simple in order to understand reality. However, a mind with other predeterminations might conclude otherwise. Thirdly, neither one's own sensory perceptions nor the sensory perceptions of others have ever found any proof of God's non-existence. So, one cannot build on tradition either. Fourthly, and this may be the most important criterion again, if looking at the case with a sense of wonder, one cannot conclude that God must be rejected. Dawkins' presumption that all causes must be small and simple is based on his desire for science to understand our world. The fact that science is incapable of understanding complicated facts in themselves is apparently not something to accept but something to avoid: one should not reduce everything to smaller and understandable parts at any cost. Common sense asks to look at the "God hypothesis" with a fresh view, and to not rush to conclusions. If one dismisses the premise that science *must* understand everything, one does



not have to insist that all causes must be small and simple either. Common sense does not lead to the conclusion that God does exist, only that there is no reason to deny his existence.

Secondly, Dawkins rejects the possible existence of God on the ground that God is superfluous and unnecessary. Allowing for his existence is unnecessarily complicated, and because a simpler explanation without his existence is possible, one can do without Him. This I have also already discussed in chapter 2 §2.1, and above in chapter 6 §1.1, when discussing ontological naturalism. The argument is again an application of Occam's razor, i.e., the philosophical principle that one should not multiply entities beyond necessity. Since Dawkins' scientific account of the origin and development of the world makes the existence of God superfluous, applying Occam's razor leads to the conclusion that it is better to assume that God does not exist. Simple answers conquer complicated answers. A first short and general apologetic response to this rule of logic is that Occam's razor does not apply to the question of whether God exists. Theologian John Haught, whom I already introduced in chapter 3 §1.1.1, explains:

Occam's razor, I must point out, was never intended to suppress layered explanation as such, even though this is exactly how naturalists often tend to slice up the world with it [...] William of Occam said that explanations should not be multiplied *unless they are necessary*. Sometimes multiple layers of explanation are necessary for deep understanding. So there is no justification, either in Occam's maxim or in science itself, for arbitrarily closing off the road to explanatory depth.<sup>72</sup>

Furthermore, superfluity is not a valid argument to dismiss God's existence, as I have argued in the discussion on ontological naturalism. Moreover, allowing for God's existence is not a rival of scientific knowledge; it is not a case of one dominating the other. Indeed, it is like comparing apples and oranges; the two have nothing to do with each other.<sup>73</sup>

A second apologetic response is a longer one and based on Chesterton's apologetics: existential scientism believes that the world is entirely reasonable, but human experiences testify that this is not true. The idea that explanations overrule mystery was popular also in Chesterton's time, and Chesterton was very aware of this. He said in *Orthodoxy*, 'the real trouble with this world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonable, but not

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<sup>72</sup> JOHN F. HAUGHT, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 19.

<sup>73</sup> *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*, 86-91.

quite.<sup>74</sup> In what follows in the book, Chesterton makes his case for Christianity: ‘not merely that it deduces logical truths, but that when it suddenly becomes illogical, it has found, so to speak, an illogical truth. It not only goes right about things, but it goes wrong (if one may say so) exactly where the things go wrong.’<sup>75</sup> Before diving into this truth of Christianity, which I will do in chapter 7, I will first focus on the argument that the world is not entirely reasonable and simple and, as a result, purely reasonable and simple answers are not sufficient.

The world is a complex given. One can either fight this complexity and force everything into simplicity in order to scientifically understand this given, or one can accept this complexity and look for an equally complex way to understand this given. Chesterton opts for the latter suggestion. In multiple books, he draws an analogy with a key: ‘a key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key.’<sup>76</sup> I will discuss the “key” about which Chesterton is talking specifically in chapter 7 §3.1; for now, the underlying idea is that only a complex key can fit complex circumstances, such as the world or one’s existence.<sup>77</sup> This complex key is not something one fully understands, but this is hardly surprising since the “lock of life” is also complicated. This is, according to Chesterton, ‘the whole secret of mysticism: [...] that man can understand everything by the help of what he does not understand.’<sup>78</sup> If this is accepted, one can understand the world much better and without difficulty. Chesterton experienced this himself by accepting this key: ‘I was like one who had advanced into a hostile country to take one high fortress. And when that fort had fallen the whole country surrendered and turned solid behind me.’<sup>79</sup> A parallel can be drawn to Chesterton’s explanation of the symbols O and †, which I discussed in chapter 4 §2.4. The circle stands for the perfection that existential scientism pursues. Everything must fit into the circle of science, otherwise it does not even exist. It strives for ultimate reason, ultimate science, and ultimate knowledge; but like a circle, it leads to nothing. On the other hand, the cross allows for a conflict in the middle, a paradox, a mystery that one does not understand; but once this is accepted, the cross stretches its arms infinitely in all directions. With the help of this mystery, one can understand the world and one’s existence all the better, and one can grow in knowledge of and love for the world.

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<sup>74</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 285.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*, 286.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, 287.

<sup>77</sup> FAGERBERG, 108.

<sup>78</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 231.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 283.

## 2.4.2. Axiological Scientism

Axiological scientism, meaning, in this study, the position that morality can be reduced to science, is a milder form of scientism than existential scientism. It does not say that religion can be replaced by science, but only that science stretches its boundaries to morality. In his book *The Moral Landscape*, Harris promotes a “science of morality”, by making a philosophical argument or, in his own words, ‘one could call this a “philosophical” position, but it is one that directly relates to the boundaries of science.’<sup>80</sup> Harris argues that by using scientific methods one can determine moral values. According to him, value questions are questions about human well-being, and this well-being is a scientific matter: ‘human well-being entirely depends on events in the world and on states of the human brain. Consequently, there must be scientific truths to be known about it.’<sup>81</sup> These truths are mainly neuroscientific and psychological. At this moment, this branch of science is undeveloped, but Harris foresees many sorts of moral scientific research that must be explored.<sup>82</sup> He believes that science can replace traditional ethics and define and explain morality objectively and universally.

The science of morality could be reduced to the biological origins of morality. In chapter 1 §3.3.1, I have elaborated on Dawkins’ biological view on morality. In short, morality increases human well-being, and human well-being is an advantage when it comes to reproduction. This is a full biological explanation of moral behavior. Dawkins reduces morality to biology in this way by linking altruism with the theory of evolution. He claims that, since modern biology can explain altruism and self-sacrifice evolutionarily, one does not need theology or philosophy to provide unnecessary explanations. Haught, while disagreeing with Dawkins, describes his position in the following terms: ‘if altruism, the salient example of moral conduct, turns out to be purely natural, then so also do all the other virtues.’<sup>83</sup> Here, again, Dawkins’ argument then comes down to an application of Occam’s razor: if natural and scientific explanations triumph over supernatural and non-scientific explanations, the argument for morality can better be left to science. Morality is a human invention that has genetic roots, so religious or philosophical answers to ethical dilemmas that bear no relation to science are superseded and uncalled for.

It must be clear by now that the new atheists embrace ontological naturalism. Ontological naturalism leaves one no choice but to declare that morality, too, has natural

<sup>80</sup> HARRIS, *The Moral Landscape*, 230.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 108.

<sup>83</sup> HAUGHT, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*, 147.

origins. One must bear in mind that it is this ontological naturalism that is limited to natural explanations. Following ontological naturalism, morality must be reduced to naturalism, and this precludes any supernatural elements. Axiological scientism goes one step further by stating that morality must be left to the natural sciences. Common sense, however, holds that morality can neither be completely naturalized nor be left to the natural sciences.

Harris says that morality predates religion, but this is no reason to repudiate a connection between the supernatural and morality. The supernatural stands apart from any belief in it. As Chesterton says, ‘touching this matter of the origin of religion [and morality], the truth is that those who are thus trying to explain it are trying to explain it away.’<sup>84</sup> The new atheists claim that religion “invented” the supernatural and, consequently, the morals that this supernatural entity values highly. But this claim is based on a naturalist attitude. To allow anything supernatural in their vocabulary, the new atheists must say that it is made up. Naturalists and scientific expansionists talk about the mystical feelings that religion invented as if one would talk about eating in the following manner: ‘prehistoric men had an ugly and uncouth habit of opening their mouths wide at intervals and stuffing strange substances into them.’<sup>85</sup> Chesterton argues that talk like this is ‘intended to kill the mystical nerve and deaden us to the wonder of religion; it is irrational rubbish. It pretends to find something incomprehensible in the feelings that we all comprehend.’<sup>86</sup> If this naturalist restriction is removed, one is free to hold that the supernatural comes first, and that any glance at this supernatural leads to morality and to religion. This means that one can say, just as with the origin of religions that I discussed above in chapter 6 §1.4: ‘I think anybody’s common sense will tell him that it is far more likely that this sort of mystical sentiment did exist already.’<sup>87</sup> That the new atheists deny this mystical sentiment because it is not scientifically determinable does not mean that it does not exist. Pursuing the argument, saying that morality is naturally and scientifically explainable does not at all mean that there is no supernatural element involved. A natural explanation of morality is of course illuminating and valuable. Science is capable of broadening the human mind and unraveling mysteries in unique ways. However, explaining morality only scientifically, whether biologically, neuro-scientifically, or psychologically, will not lead to a completely satisfying understanding of human ethical behavior and attitude. Referring briefly to Chesterton’s criteria of common sense, if trusting one’s rational faculties, one must say that

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<sup>84</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 183.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 180.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 179.

the supernatural or mystical sentiment that comes along is something that should not be ignored, let alone denied.

Providing a caricature of how religion tries to keep its believers firmly in line, as Dennett and Dawkins do, does not help either, nor does it do justice to morality and religion. In chapter 1 §3.2.1, I explained why the new atheists call it “immoral” to base morality on religion. Acting morally because of eternal rewards (or eternal punishments) is not praiseworthy. Furthermore, it would allow atheists to behave immorally, since they do not believe in these consequences; but, obviously, morality also applies to them. However, trusting one’s rational faculties, one must say that the explanation of morality cannot be restricted to this reasoning. Morality exists in all shapes and sizes. Trusting one’s tradition, one can go along in the thinking of others who have attempted to make this versatility of morality clear. Within tradition, morality is understood to exist in different degrees. One can grow in morality; one can mature in morality. John Haught discusses three stages: pre-conventional, conventional, and post-conventional morality.<sup>88</sup> The pre-conventional degree entails the morality that is to be rewarded or punished, as described above. This elementary morality can indeed go hand in hand with an elementary form of religion, as the new atheists like to believe. This degree of morality can be naturally explained in so far as ‘the need for gratification and the aversion to pain are surely adaptive traits without which human genes would never have been able to survive.’<sup>89</sup> The conventional degree of morality can also be explained naturally since it is a degree of morality that is based on social acceptance and longing. I have discussed this degree of morality above as well. But the last degree of morality is not naturally explainable. The post-conventional degree of morality is ‘a rarer stage of moral and religious development that completely befuddles the naturalist’s dream of providing ultimate explanation.’<sup>90</sup> This degree of morality shows an incomprehensible, unconditional, and absolute goodness. Consequences of rewards or punishments, and admission or rejection of social circumstances have become unimportant at this stage. This degree of morality is not naturally explainable because this goodness seems to be transcendent.

Most people do not develop their morality beyond a pre-conventional or conventional degree, and they may not even understand the post-conventional degree of morality: ‘what seems morally upright at the post-conventional level may be condemned as immoral by people whose ethical lives are stuck in the conventional or pre-conventional.’<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> HAUGHT, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*, 157-64.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 159.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 164.

When it comes to religion, one can see that God plays a different role at each level, and that it is therefore wrong to think that a religious morality is always determined by the judgment of God:

For pre-conventional morality God is the upholder of taboos. For conventional morality God is the sanctifier of the status quo. But for post-conventional morality God is the vaguely anticipated mystery of goodness that calls us to transcend the conventional and pre-conventional levels of morality.<sup>92</sup>

Of course, naturalists like the new atheists might counter that these exceptions do not disprove the genetic explanations that can also be provided. Ultimately, genes always provide the answers. However, here Chesterton's symbolism of O enters the discussion again. If one attempts to capture morality completely within genes, the explanation remains hollow. Haught claims that 'a theory that explains everything explains nothing.'<sup>93</sup> One cannot understand any ethical behavior if all this behavior, whether good or bad, has genetically the same explanation. It might be true, but it does not lead anywhere; it is not complete and it is not satisfactory: 'any claim to be able to explain this exacting [i.e., this post-conventional] ethic in purely naturalist terms would be to render it conditional rather than unconditional.'<sup>94</sup> By becoming genetic, morality becomes conditional; it loses its unconditional ideas of good and bad. In short, science explains morality away. But this conditionality of morality is not in line with common sense. People experience a certain un-conditionality when it comes to morality, especially when it comes to post-conventional morality.

Morality deals with absolute goodness and perfection; therefore, it transcends mere human interaction. Here, I can refer to Chesterton again. Morality can never be completely left to the natural sciences because it includes a transcendent unconditional criterion by which to measure good and evil; it has an ethical ideal. Negating this transcendence means that one 'can only point to imperfection. [One] has no perfection to point to.'<sup>95</sup> But morality cannot be fully explained without this point of perfection. Harris' attempt to develop a science of morality takes measurable human well-being as its standard, but this standard is highly conditional because it is purely biological. Consequently, no absolute morality can be developed by this science. One will understand morality much better if one

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 165.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 166.

<sup>95</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 47.

looks at it with a sense of wonder and takes into consideration that this morality can be connected to the supernatural. As argued above, one will comprehend the world better by the help of what one does not understand. If one allows morality to be beyond the boundaries of science, one will have a better understanding of it.

### 2.4.3. Rationalistic and Epistemic Scientism

The next versions of scientism that some of the new atheists embrace are rationalistic and epistemic scientism. Again, these versions are milder than the versions above, but they still have enormous consequences. Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris (whether or not implicitly) support rationalistic scientism because they think that one can only believe rationally what can be confirmed scientifically or what is understandable scientifically. Limiting science to the natural sciences, they pair empirical knowledge with rationality. From this flows that something is rational only if it is the direct result of observations or experiences. Empirical evidence apparently determines whether one can rationally believe something. Consequently, the three new atheists also support epistemic scientism that focuses on knowledge rather than on rationality. By making empirical evidence the criterion for rationality and knowledge, Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris disqualify many other “types” of rationality and knowledge. Referring to Chesterton’s criteria of common sense, these types of rationality and knowledge can still flow from one’s sensory perceptions but do so rather indirectly. Following rationalistic scientism, the knowledge of Plato, Descartes, Kant, and innumerable other philosophers, which cannot be traced back directly to one’s sensory perceptions, is apparently irrational. According to scientism, metaphysics (i.e., the branch of philosophy that goes *beyond* physics) can neither yield knowledge nor is rational because one’s rational faculties are not worth anything without direct empirical evidence. Rationalistic scientism does not allow for any rationality, let alone knowledge, that is beyond the boundaries of science; science sets the boundaries for what one can know and for rational thinking.

Rationality and knowledge are two different concepts, but the three new atheists believe that neither of the two are valid without scientific support. Common sense disagrees with this claim. As I have argued in chapter 4 §2.2.2, trust in one’s sensory perceptions is one of the criteria of common sense, and one’s sensory perceptions are the foundations of knowledge. However, this does not mean that knowledge and rationality are restricted to directly empirical knowledge and rationality. One’s rational faculties can carry beyond empirical evidence, and they provide knowledge that comes from other sources. As philosopher Ian James Kidd says, ‘much of our knowledge comes from testimony, memory,

and reflection, but classifying these as *scientific* extends that term beyond all sense.<sup>96</sup> Of course, scientific expansionists can still defend that even testimony, memory, and reflection eventually go back to empirical evidence, but this is not verifiable.

Whereas the new atheists seem to neglect these sources of rationality and knowledge, common sense does not overlook them. Actually, when considering Chesterton's four criteria, one's rational faculties and one's tradition are both involved. Memory and reflection consist of one's own thinking, and tradition includes the testimony of others. One cannot simply deny the rationality and knowledge that flow from these sources. That would be unscientific in itself since rejecting these forms of rationality and knowledge cannot be scientifically justified or verified. Here, scientism again shows similarity to logical positivism since its own criterion does not meet its own standards.

Rationalistic scientism is "closed-minded." Kidd says, that adherents 'impair open-mindedness in two ways. One is that they militate against willingness to disengage from one's default stance. Another is that they can deny sense to the idea that other stances might *have* merits to take seriously.'<sup>97</sup> In this context, Kidd also names the stance of the "Brights," among whom Dawkins and Dennett count themselves, and whom I have discussed in chapter 1 §3.3.3, as examples of such closure. These "freethinkers" do not think as freely as they believe since they do not consider the rationality of other stances. The new atheists say that they are willing to accept that they are wrong, but only if empirical evidence is provided; only this evidence is rational and provides knowledge. But allowing this is not open-minded at all:

Perhaps a scientific physicist concedes that their naturalistic picture of the world might be wrong, but would only accept physical scientific evidence to count as a legitimate challenge to that picture. Yet such evidence would be provided by epistemic practices that already presuppose a naturalistic picture of the world and so cannot enable radical criticism of its fundamentals. The constraint therefore implicitly rules out genuine critical possibilities such as engaging in metaphysical inquiry.<sup>98</sup>

Allowing others to speak only on their own conditions makes this scientific thinking restricting and closed-minded. A change of attitude can never take place under these circumstances. Before this can happen, the new atheists must allow their sense of wonder

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<sup>96</sup> IAN JAMES KIDD, "Is Scientism Epistemically Vicious?" in *Scientism: Prospects and Problems*, eds. Rik Peels, Jeroen de Ridder, and René van Woudenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2018), 154.

<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 160.



to renew their view. For now, they have lost this fourth criterion of common sense. The new atheists must value their curiosity higher than their own scientific standards if they really desire to increase their knowledge. They must be willing to leave their own “doctrines” behind, and to look critically at their own default stance as if considering it for the first time. They might then discover and admit that there are other types of rationality and knowledge besides just the scientific ones.

To gain knowledge, one must trust one’s own rational faculties. I have already discussed this in chapter 4 §2.2.2. The new atheists trust their rational faculties. Even more, they have a desire to know more. Here, again, Haught can help understand where the new atheists go wrong: ‘a consistent acceptance of scientific naturalism logically impairs the very trust that underlies my attempts to understand and know the world.’<sup>99</sup> If one says that rationality and knowledge are restricted to scientific thinking and knowledge, one must somehow already have “crossed” the limits of science to be able to pronounce upon this: ‘the limits of cognitional achievement cannot be recognized as such unless the mind has already transcended those limits in some way.’<sup>100</sup> One cannot say that science marks the boundaries of knowledge unless these “boundaries” are known and crossed. These artificial boundaries are therefore not scientific in themselves.

Furthermore, one’s thinking and desire to understand the world is not a private and objective matter. People live in a world with other people who also think and want to know more. Interaction exists with these other people, or people receive their knowledge through tradition. Everyone has a different view of reality due to one’s personal circumstances. This makes one’s knowing of the world not objective but highly subjective and interpersonal.<sup>101</sup> Knowledge is always intersubjective, which is shown by one’s trust in tradition. Therefore, knowledge cannot be restricted to science but also involves characteristically non-scientific elements. These are not worth any less but rather add more dimensions to one’s knowledge of the world.

It is unwarranted of rationalistic and epistemic scientism to say that rationality and knowledge are only real if they derive from science. People interact with reality in many ways other than only scientific ways, such as emotionally, according to their values, or in the form of narration. These typically nonscientific dimensions of the world can also be rational and epistemological, as is also recognized by Haught:

Each of us is engaged in the world through the mediation of moods or feelings, aesthetic sensitivities, intersubjective involvements and

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<sup>99</sup> HAUGHT, *Is Nature Enough? Meaning and Truth in the Age of Science*, 37.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 44-45.

narratives about where we came from and where we are going [...] Without them we would be out of touch with reality altogether, so it is wrong to view them as inevitably deviating from true knowledge.<sup>102</sup>

It can still be rational to think unscientifically or to have knowledge of reality regardless of whether it is metaphysical or based on unverifiable experiences or traditions. One's sense of wonder can help to see these different ways and broaden one's mindset to the unscientific fields of rationality and epistemology.

#### 2.4.4. Academic-internal Scientism

All versions of scientism that I have discussed above are forms of academic-external scientism, which claims that all or some non-academic areas can be reduced to or understood by science. Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris are all advocates of this form of scientism. Next to this, academic-internal scientism exists. Academic-internal scientism can contain all academia, or be restricted to the natural sciences themselves. I have already defined this above in chapter 6 §2.3. To reiterate:

The view that a) all, or at least some, of the genuine, non-scientific academic disciplines can eventually be reduced to (or translated into) science proper, i.e., natural science (*academic-internal<sub>1</sub> Scientism*), and/or that b) all natural sciences can eventually be reduced to (or translated into) one particular natural science (*academic-internal<sub>2</sub> Scientism*).<sup>103</sup>

In this study, I am mostly interested in the relationship between the natural sciences in general and other areas of life, which is why I restrict myself to the first version of academic-internal scientism. Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris are advocates of academic-internal scientism too. They all believe that certain non-scientific academic disciplines can be reduced to the natural sciences. This becomes clearly visible when considering the relationship between science and religion or, more specifically, the natural sciences and theology. I have already touched upon this briefly when discussing existential scientism, but, in fact, the three new atheists all mention the idea of Non-Overlapping Magisteria (NOMA) more extensively, something I have also discussed in chapter 1 §2.1.<sup>104</sup> To

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<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>103</sup> STENMARK, 1-2.

<sup>104</sup> Although I have also quoted Hitchens several times when discussing NOMA, his contribution was not so much scientific as it was idealistic. He would rather sweep away religion and theology altogether from the public and academic discourse than reduce religion and theology to science.

recapitulate, NOMA argues that science and religion both ask different questions; therefore, their fields should not overlap. Applying this to academic-internal scientism, NOMA handles the different domains of the natural sciences and theology. Although religion and theology are not synonyms, I find it appropriate here to talk about theology specifically instead of religion generally because Gould (who came up with the word NOMA) interchanges the words religion and theology various times in his book. Furthermore, he specifies a magisterium as follows: ‘a domain where one form of teaching holds the appropriate tools for meaningful discourse and resolution.’<sup>105</sup> Since theology is the academic field that studies and discusses religion, it seems valid to discuss the relationship between the natural sciences and theology.<sup>106</sup>

As I have explained, the new atheists are not advocates of NOMA. They believe that NOMA helps to put religion on a pedestal and protects theology from scientific verification and falsification. According to them, it would be better if theology became a scientific field of study, and to study all fields with the same methods and in the same way, and to handle the same criteria in all sciences. The new atheists do this already in many ways, which I have discussed in chapter 1 §2: by treating religion purely as a result of evolution, by explaining religious behavior scientifically, and by hypothesizing about the existence of God. Furthermore, Dawkins tries to reduce certain non-scientific academic topics into science by his hypothesis of “memes”. I have also already briefly discussed this hypothesis in chapter 1 §2.2.2. By reducing religion to nothing more but a “cultural gene,” religion becomes a scientific subject and theology becomes a scientific enterprise. Dawkins develops a theory of how religion *could* have started, how it *could* have developed, and how it *could* have survived. The theory is based on the way in which multiple non-genetic cultural things seem to have evolved, like language, fashion, and technology. Dawkins suspects that religion could have evolved in the same way. He admits that he is ‘on shaky ground,’<sup>107</sup> and that his ‘development of the theory of memes’ may be ‘speculative,’<sup>108</sup> but he is convinced that ‘the idea of God’ may have survived as a meme because of its ‘great psychological appeal,’<sup>109</sup> and that ‘the meme for blind faith [which means ‘blind trust, in the absence of evidence, even in the teeth of evidence’] secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry.’<sup>110</sup>

<sup>105</sup> GOULD, *Rocks of Ages*, 5.

<sup>106</sup> Another academic field that studies and discusses religion is religious studies, but since I am a theologian myself, I choose to discuss the relationship between the natural sciences and theology.

<sup>107</sup> DAWKINS, *The Selfish Gene*, 252.

<sup>108</sup> *Ibid.*, 259.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*, 250.

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*, 257.

Dawkins' attempt to reduce religion to a pseudo-genetic evolutionary process testifies to his scientistic mindset and to his unwillingness to accept anything outside science. Since he cannot deny the existence of religion and theology, he tries to completely naturalize them and treat them as a scientific object. Chesterton says of likeminded people, 'there are men in the modern world who would think anything and do anything rather than admit that anything could be a spiritual product.'<sup>111</sup> This is exactly what Dawkins does. He develops hypotheses to make religion and theology fit into science. The hypothesis of the memes transforms Darwinism from a scientific theory into a worldview that is no longer limited to biology, but can be extended to any field of study and any aspect of life. However, the problem with this scientific theory is that it is insufficiently grounded in evidence. As a thought experiment, it is meritorious work, but Dawkins cannot prove that he is right, something that he, of all people, would be expected to attach great value to. As Alister McGrath says, 'Dawkins talking about memes is like believers talking about God—an invisible, unverifiable postulate, which helps explain some things about experience, but ultimately lies beyond empirical investigation.'<sup>112</sup> Dawkins, who finds scientific methods and empirical evidence so important, is not able to provide any of these where his hypothesis of memes is concerned. Setting this aside, the hypothesis still does not provide any knowledge on whether the contents of the memes are "true" or not. The hypothesis that religion evolved comparably to how humanity evolved does not explain anything about the truth of this religion, the philosophy of this religion, or the value of this religion. In short, it is an attractive hypothesis but it does not discredit religion at all. It is theology that can elaborate on this truth, philosophy, and value, and can thus yield knowledge about reality that science cannot. Therefore, it is pointless to try to fit theology and religion into science.

Theology studies all of reality, just as science does. The difference is that theology studies this reality not in itself but in its relationship with God. The perspective of theology is different from the perspective of science. This implies that theology does not base its arguments purely on empirical proof but also attaches value to philosophical inquiry, writings, and mystery. One can link these sources easily with the criteria of common sense. Of course, empirical proof is important, and within theology the sensory perceptions are certainly trusted. But next to this, the trust in one's rational faculties becomes clear when studying various religious doctrines in philosophical inquiries. Building on religious writings indicates a trust in tradition since the wisdom of other philosophers, theologians, and also scientists is incorporated within theological thinking. Lastly, allowing for mystery

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<sup>111</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 133.

<sup>112</sup> MCGRATH, 128.

within reality testifies to a trust in one's sense of wonder: 'mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity [...] His [the sane man's] sight is stereoscopic, like his physical sight: he sees two different pictures at once and yet sees all the better for that.'<sup>113</sup> People are not required to understand everything, but they can understand the world with the help of what they do not and cannot understand. All these criteria are embodied in the thinking of Thomas Aquinas. In his book on Aquinas, Chesterton describes that the medieval theologian started from the idea that 'everything that is in the intellect has been in the senses.'<sup>114</sup> Aquinas trusted his sensory perceptions and took them as his starting point. He insisted that 'there *is* an *Is*', and 'upon this sharp pin-point of reality, he rears by long logical processes that have never really been successfully overthrown, the whole cosmic system of Christendom.'<sup>115</sup> By trusting his rational faculties, Aquinas contrived a complete philosophy and theology based on his sensory perceptions. However, his thinking did not completely stand on itself. Aquinas leaned on the knowledge of his master, Albertus Magnus, who, for his part, had studied the philosophy of Aristotle.<sup>116</sup> Aquinas trusted his tradition and the thinking of Albertus Magnus and Aristotle resonated with his own thinking to a high degree. At this point, the trust in his sense of wonder also becomes clear. Chesterton explains that the Roman Catholic Church had always been rather Platonist in its Logos-centered thinking: 'it was true, broadly speaking, that for some time past it had been too Platonist to be popular. It needed something like the shrewd and homely touch of Aristotle to turn it again into a religion of common sense.'<sup>117</sup> Aquinas brought about an Aristotelian revolution:

What made the Aristotelian Revolution really revolutionary was the fact that it was really religious. It is the fact [...] that the revolt was largely a revolt of the most Christian elements in Christendom. St. Thomas [...] felt subconsciously that the hold of his people was slipping on the solid Catholic doctrine and discipline, worn smooth by more than a thousand years of routine; and that the Faith needed to be shown under a new light and dealt with from another angle.<sup>118</sup>

Aquinas looked at reality and Aristotelian philosophy with a sense of wonder, as if he was seeing them both for the first time. He managed to Christianize Aristotelian philosophy

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<sup>113</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 230-31.

<sup>114</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 525.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*, 529.

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*, 455-59.

<sup>117</sup> *Ibid.*, 467.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 466-67.

and, in so doing, renew Catholic theology. His trust in his sensory perceptions, his rational faculties, his tradition, and his common sense brought about one of the richest theologies of the Roman Catholic Church.

Academic-internal scientism does not want to allow these other sources of study that are so well implemented in theology; instead, it wants all inquiry to be empirical and scientific. It aspires to be perfect, to be infinite, and ultimate. But these goals make science narrow instead of all-encompassing. I have already compared science multiple times with a circle, a never-ending but fixed figure that can never expand. It allows for no complications, no exceptions, and no discrepancies. But theology anticipates that reality is different. By allowing a mystery at its center, theology can stretch its arms, like a cross, and grow infinitely and open-mindedly. By accepting more than empiricism, theology can be broader and deeper than science. This does not mean that it is better than science. The natural sciences make great discoveries precisely by sticking to their empirical and scientific methods. But on the basis of these accomplishments, one cannot legitimately conclude that theology (and other academic disciplines) should also be reduced to science. Science can discover only a part of reality, and other academic disciplines can discover other parts.

The relationship between science and religion is, in my opinion, best described by the reconciliation model: ‘science and religion today can be combined or reconciled whilst still maintaining their respective identities and distinctive features.’<sup>119</sup> Theology and the natural sciences are two completely different attempts to gain knowledge about reality. However, I disagree with Gould’s independence model that they are completely separate with no overlap. Rather, the boundary between the two fields of study is a grey area. There is no ultimate criterion by which to judge to which “magisterium” a certain question belongs. On the contrary, there are even overlapping parts of the magisteria. The magisteria are not completely overlapping, but not completely distinct either. Theology can certainly benefit from scientific discoveries just as science can learn from theology. Ian Barbour’s scholarship on the relationship between science and religion offers just one example of how this learning can take place. When looking at history, Christian theology contributed largely to the rise of science. The fact that Christian theology desacralized nature, gave room for science to experiment and study our world. These scientific discoveries, in turn, helped theology to understand the world better.<sup>120</sup> I am not saying that the two should be integrated, but certainly they should listen to each other with an open mind. Because of the

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<sup>119</sup> MIKAEL STENMARK, “Ways of Relating Science and Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Science and Religion*, ed. Peter Harrison (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 279.

<sup>120</sup> IAN G. BARBOUR, *Religion in an Age of Science*, The Gifford Lectures 1 (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), 17-18.

different perspectives of the natural sciences and theology, they might stimulate each other's sense of wonder. Only by trusting one's sense of wonder does one become able to expand the existing boundaries of knowledge to get a more complete view of reality. Therefore, I am an advocate of a supportive view of the reconciliation model: 'science and religion today can be reconciled, not because one (or both) of them can change its content without losing its identity, but because they can actually support or confirm each other in one way or another.'<sup>121</sup> Science and theology do not necessarily contradict each other; quite the reverse, they can complement each other and broaden one's knowledge of the world. The only requirement is being receptive to the four criteria of common sense: trust in one's sensory perceptions, trust in one's rational faculties, trust in one's tradition, and, most of all, trust in one's sense of wonder. Common sense allows both theology and the natural sciences to respect each other and learn from each other, and, in cases of contradiction, to search for a solution together so that the two can be reconciled. Or, to borrow Chesterton's terminology again: philosophy (the natural sciences) and mythology (theology) are both needed to maintain a plausible worldview.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have made the first step of my apologetic approach in response to the new atheism. It was an offensive rather than a defensive form of apologetics in so far as it focused on several foundations of convictions of the new atheists that are not in line with common sense and unnecessarily lead away from theism and Christianity. I did this by criticizing the different forms of naturalism that the new atheists embrace, namely, ontological and epistemological. Within the broader context of ontological naturalism, I considered the themes of ontological naturalism in general, evolution by natural selection, the position of humanity in the evolutionary process, anomalies, religion, and determinism. Within the broader context of epistemological naturalism, I discussed both methodological naturalism and multiple versions of scientism, which included existential scientism, axiological scientism, rationalistic and epistemic scientism, and academic-internal scientism.

With the exception of methodological naturalism, all forms of naturalism and all accompanying positions I discussed run counter to common sense. I tested all positions by the four criteria of common sense, which are trust in one's sensory perceptions, one's rational faculties, one's tradition, and one's sense of wonder. Time after time, it became

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<sup>121</sup> STENMARK, "Ways of Relating Science and Religion," 283.

clear that the new atheists themselves concentrate on their sensory perceptions and neglect most other criteria. By giving due attention to the other criteria, I argued that one might come to different conclusions, showed what these conclusions may be, and elucidated how these conclusions are more in line with common sense than those of the new atheists. Most importantly, I argued that by relying on common sense, one cannot exclude the supernatural. One must rely on more than science to gain all-encompassing knowledge of the world.



# Chapter 7

## Christianity and Chestertonian Common Sense

### Introduction

The new atheists attach great value to scientific evidence but, in doing so, they devalue knowledge that has other sources and foundations. In chapter 6, I argued that it is against common sense to rely only on scientific evidence when one is trying to gain legitimate knowledge. This argument was based on four criteria of common sense. Common sense revolves around trust in one's sensory perceptions, rational faculties, tradition, and sense of wonder. By focusing so heavily on deriving their knowledge from sensory perceptions, the new atheists pursue an epistemology that runs counter to common sense. In contrast, Christianity embraces all four criteria and therefore holds a worldview that is in line with common sense.

In this chapter, I will develop the second step of my apologetic approach in response to the new atheism, which will be a defensive form of apologetics. Again, with the help of Chesterton, I will consider ways in which the worldview of Christianity satisfies all four criteria of common sense. I will do this by focusing on three important elements of Christianity: faith, intellectual heritage, and mysticism. Each time, after discussing the importance and the Christian incorporation of these elements, I will explore the Christian application of them. In the case of faith, I will dive deeper into the complementarity of reason and faith. In the case of intellectual heritage, I will discuss the importance of the Bible and Church history. In the case of mysticism, I will explain the importance of the combination of philosophy and mythology, focusing on ontology by exploring the doctrine of creation, on anthropology by exploring the doctrine of the image of God, and on ethics

by exploring the doctrine of free will.<sup>1</sup> Chesterton defends these three Catholic doctrines, and I discuss them because they can be compared to some convictions of the new atheists. In the previous chapters, I have described how the new atheists view the origin of the world, the position of humanity within the world, and their argument against free will. I have argued how these convictions are counter to common sense. In this chapter, I will discuss the Christian doctrines that oppose these views and argue how these doctrines are in line with common sense. As will become clear, the three elements overlap to some extent. As a consequence, I will touch on one element while discussing another. Nevertheless, I will attempt to make my arguments as separate as possible.

## 1. Faith and Common Sense

### 1.1. The Importance of Faith

As I argued in chapter 6, a worldview based only on reason is not plausible. Reason is limited, especially if one considers reason as valid only if it is based on scientific evidence, as some of the new atheists do. A worldview that can be summarized in a formula cannot contain all reality. In Chesterton's words, a plausible worldview 'is not a philosophy [or science] because, being a vision, it is not a pattern but a picture.'<sup>2</sup> A worldview is a vision, and a vision requires more than reason; it also requires imagination. This fits Reyburn's fifth principle of common sense, which made clear that one should look at reality as if it were a picture rather than a pattern. A vision cannot rest on philosophy only but must also rest on mythology. Therefore, a plausible worldview must be open both to philosophy and mythology.

This combination of philosophy and mythology can be captured in the word "faith". In chapter 4 §2.3, I described how Chesterton's argument shows that reason and faith are closely connected; they both satisfy the spiritual needs of humanity in the forms of philosophy and mythology. Therefore, a plausible worldview must be open both to philosophy and mythology, and, hence, must be open to faith.

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<sup>1</sup> Although free will is normally considered a metaphysical topic, here I will discuss the doctrine within the field of ethics in order to secure the unity within this work. The new atheists mention free will mainly with reference to morality, and thereby limit it to human behavior; therefore, I discussed it in chapter 2 within the field of ethics and will do this here too.

<sup>2</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 376.

A plausible worldview that accepts the combination of philosophy and mythology allows for the possibility of the supernatural.<sup>3</sup> The supernatural requires an open mind, as one can neither prove nor disprove the supernatural. The supernatural exceeds scientific knowledge but can be incorporated in one's worldview with the help of faith. Only by incorporating both reason and faith can the human mind be spiritually satisfied. Reason and faith strengthen each other. Reason is always rooted in faith because 'it is an act of faith to assert that our thoughts have any relation to reality at all.'<sup>4</sup> This is what Reyburn meant by his fourth principle of common sense, which I described in chapter 4 §2.2.2. Reason and faith are not two alternatives; they are both necessary.

Therefore, in order to obtain a plausible worldview, one must rely on both reason and faith. If faith is missing and one relies only on reason, one can neither obtain a plausible worldview nor be in line with common sense. Common sense cannot be founded only on reason; it also needs faith.

Faith plays a main role in gaining knowledge and searching for the truth. Even though faith can sometimes contradict reason, this does not mean that one can better rely only on reason. I have made clear in chapter 4 §2.4.2 that truth is sometimes inconsistent, and that truth is more important than consistency.<sup>5</sup> Including faith leads to common sense.

## 1.2. The Complementarity of Reason and Faith

Christianity combines reason and faith. As I explained in chapter 4 §2.4.2, the symbol of Christianity can be interpreted as representing this combination by the vertical and horizontal lines of the cross. Reason and faith cooperate and, together, they make it possible to transcend the limits of a worldview that is based only on reason. The cross shows a conflict where the lines of reason and faith intersect, but this intersection is also a source of infinite growth, just as the knowledge that is acquired by the complementarity of reason and faith can also grow.

Christianity combines reason and faith not only in its religious symbolism but also in its practice. By the complementarity of reason and faith, Christianity tries to capture the complex nature of the world. In terms of the criteria of common sense, Christianity trusts its sense of wonder. Reda notices that within Christianity, one can find both the 'mythopoeic (poetic) instinct and the rational instinct, and the tension between them is

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<sup>3</sup> In chapter 6 §1.1, I argued that if one does not let in the possibility of the supernatural, one contradicts common sense. Some of the new atheists do this by holding on to epistemological naturalism.

<sup>4</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 236.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 230.

resolved.<sup>6</sup> This is also concretely visible: ‘relatively speaking, it is the Gospel that has the mysticism and the Church that has the rationalism.’<sup>7</sup>

On the one hand, Christianity holds on to the importance of faith. Referring back to the importance of both philosophy and mythology, faith can be seen as the mythological element that satisfies a human’s mind. Mythology contains truth in the form of stories and images; faith does this too. The faith of Christianity is based on the stories in the Bible, so these stories play an important role in developing the Christian worldview. According to Chesterton, ‘modern thinkers have not enough imagination to make a mythology.’<sup>8</sup> Therefore, they can take their thinking anywhere they want; there is no foundation to which to return:

Those who disagree in theology must at least agree in theism. But if a man is free to be an atheist, he is free to be a polytheist; and if he is free to be a polytheist, he is free to set any god against any other god; he is free to start an entirely new god and set him against all the rest; say a god with nine noses and fifty fingers, or any other product of evolution and the advance from the simple to the complex.<sup>9</sup>

The new atheists are not likely to become polytheists, but this is not Chesterton’s point. Instead, he argues that one needs a foundation that warrants a way of thinking that is in line with common sense. Christianity has a starting point to which it sticks; it has a solid basis for further thinking. This starting point is a collection of books that contain ‘this incredible combination of contrasted ideas’<sup>10</sup> that correspond to the reality of life. Life is complex, and the faith of Christianity acknowledges that. Christianity does not start thinking out of simplicity, as so many philosophies do, including that of the new atheists. Rather, it starts thinking out of complexity, and relies on the Bible to understand it.

On the other hand, Christianity attaches great value to reason or philosophy, to use Chesterton’s analogy; the Church trusts human rational faculties. Sometimes, people like the new atheists consider Christianity to be a religion that opposes reason and science. Fagerberg asks, ‘how does it happen that the very Church called an enemy of scholarship is also accused of suffering from scholasticism?’<sup>11</sup> Scholasticism was the method of studying upon which the earliest European universities were founded; it was the basis of modern

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<sup>6</sup> REDA, 112.

<sup>7</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 322.

<sup>8</sup> *Christendom in Dublin*, 53.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 302.

<sup>11</sup> FAGERBERG, 177.

science. According to Chesterton, in the Middle Ages, it was “the world” that persecuted some scientists as wizards, and the Church that regarded them as scientists. This was ‘not really so much a question of access to the facts, as of attitude to the facts.’<sup>12</sup> The amount of knowledge in the Middle Ages was smaller than the amount of knowledge nowadays, but that does not make the attitude of the Church one of opposition against reason and science. In Fagerberg’s words:

By what anachronistic reading of history can the Church of any previous century be expected to know what the Church of the succeeding century knows? The proper question would be to examine how the Church judged science in comparison with others in its own century, not in comparison with persons in our own.<sup>13</sup>

The way in which the Church dealt with science in the past, and deals with science in the present, aims always to be rational. This rational attitude causes the Church to insist on a fruitful relationship between science and religion. In Fagerberg’s words, ‘Catholicism does not have a conflicted mind about scriptural truth and scientific truth.’<sup>14</sup>

In the medieval period, Thomas Aquinas argued that a literal interpretation of the Bible was not self-evident or necessary. Scripture should always be interpreted in light of everything else that is known. Therefore, a literal interpretation can be dismissed if it leads to a contradiction with known facts. In his book on Aquinas, Chesterton adds that the only criterion was that these known facts must be *obvious*. The fact that this was often misunderstood led to the conflict between science and religion: ‘thus, private theories about what the Bible ought to mean, and premature theories about what the world ought to mean, have met in loud and widely advertised controversy [...] and this clumsy collision of two very impatient forms of ignorance was known as the quarrel of Science and Religion.’<sup>15</sup> This, however, was not the attitude of the Church, which was receptive to multiple interpretations of Holy Scripture on the condition that *obvious* facts contradicted the literal interpretation. This does not mean that the Church accepts all scientific discoveries as definitive truths. As Chesterton put it aptly, ‘it does not, in the conventional phrase, accept the conclusions of science, for the simple reason that science has not concluded. To conclude is to shut up; and the man of science is not at all likely to shut up.’<sup>16</sup> Science is developing, and scientific theories of one age might be eliminated by scientific theories of

<sup>12</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 455.

<sup>13</sup> FAGERBERG, 177.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 124.

<sup>15</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 471.

<sup>16</sup> *Why I Am a Catholic*, 131.

another age. This is why the Church is rather reluctant to accept scientific conclusions as conclusive. It puts trust in sensory perceptions but abstains from drawing overhasty conclusions from these. Before drawing any conclusions, it also evaluates these perceptions and composes an overall picture that also takes other elements such as faith, intellectual heritage, and mysticism (which I will discuss below) into account.

This does not mean that Christianity is not based on evidence. Christians such as Chesterton attach great value to rationality and proof. According to Chesterton, the opponents of Christianity argue against Christianity on the basis of rationality and facts too, with one big difference: the facts of the Christian are right, and the facts of the opponent are wrong:

My own case for Christianity is rational; but it is not simple. It is an accumulation of varied facts, like the attitude of the ordinary agnostic. But the ordinary agnostic has got his facts all wrong. He is a non-believer for a multitude of reasons; but they are untrue reasons. He doubts because the Middle Ages were barbaric, but they weren't; because Darwinism is demonstrated, but it isn't; because miracles do not happen, but they do; because monks were lazy, but they were very industrious; because nuns are unhappy, but they are particularly cheerful; because Christian art was sad and pale, but it was picked out in peculiarly bright colours and gay with gold; because modern science is moving away from the supernatural, but it isn't, it is moving towards the supernatural with the rapidity of a railway train.<sup>17</sup>

Opponents of Christianity reject the religion on false grounds, and apologists like Chesterton attempt to show why these grounds are false. Chesterton exemplifies how Christianity relies on evidence by explaining Thomas Aquinas's way of thinking, upon which I have already dwelt multiple times. He started his theology from reality and the things he could see with his own eyes. Out of this visible reality, his theology unfolded. Aquinas is one of the most important theologians in the history of the Church, and his theology is still a foundation of the thinking of others. This shows how Christianity attaches great value to evidence in its theology. However, evidence is not everything, which is why Christianity also trusts its rational faculties, its tradition, and its sense of wonder.

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<sup>17</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 354.

## 2. Intellectual Heritage and Common Sense

### 2.1. The Importance of Intellectual Heritage

The world is a place full of knowledge. This knowledge has been gathered and saved ever since humanity has had the facilities to do so. Knowledge has been passed on in many different ways. My attention focuses on the ways of writing (or more primitively by drawing) and telling. The passing on of knowledge has helped humanity to increase knowledge because what has been discovered does not need to be discovered again. This intellectual heritage ensures that one's knowledge is rooted and can develop at the same time.

Scientists use their intellectual heritage continually. They make use of previous discoveries all the time and build their own research on these. They take advantage of the intellectual heritage that is passed on and trust this heritage without having to provide "old" evidence. The heritage contains truths and, upon these truths, new truths are founded. The new atheists also use the intellectual heritage of scientists who have led the way; knowledge in general is built on this heritage.

When one attaches value to this intellectual heritage, history becomes a living thing. History is not the past that can be forgotten; rather, it contains the human intellectual roots and ensures that humanity can grow. In Chesterton's words, this heritage is the content of 'that sort of living history which we call tradition.'<sup>18</sup> I have already spoken about tradition in chapter 4 §2.2.2; it is one of the criteria of common sense. If one relies on tradition, one is likely to practice common sense because, according to Chesterton, common sense 'often comes to us in the form of tradition.'<sup>19</sup> Tradition cannot be overrated because it preserves the truth and humanity builds its knowledge on it.<sup>20</sup> Actually, tradition does not only preserve the truth: tradition itself is built on a truth.<sup>21</sup> A truth is needed for a tradition to come into existence in the first place. Therefore, it would be counter to common sense if one did not trust tradition and rely on the heritage that the tradition contains. Trusting tradition means trusting the truthful heritage that one needs for one's own intellectual growth.

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<sup>18</sup> *The New Jerusalem*, 276.

<sup>19</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 163.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 290.

Religions also attach value to the heritage of the religious tradition. The testimony and memory of religious people provide all sorts of intellectual heritage upon which religions can build their knowledge. It is common sense to do this, to trust one's tradition and pick the fruits of its intellectual heritage, as long as this heritage is evaluated critically and is consistent with one's own thinking. Tradition has often come into existence by a consensus of the thinking of many people and is therefore very valuable. Chesterton describes it as follows:

It is obvious that tradition is only democracy extended through time. It is trusting to a consensus of common human voices rather than to some isolated or arbitrary record [...] If we attach great importance to the opinion of ordinary men in great unanimity when we are dealing with daily matters, there is no reason why we should disregard it when we are dealing with history or fable [...] Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about. All democrats object to men being disqualified by the accident of birth; tradition objects to their being disqualified by the accident of death.<sup>22</sup>

In other words, tradition contains knowledge that has been gathered in the past to which one can attach value, just as one attaches value to the knowledge that is being gathered in the present. The argument that this knowledge is outdated is not necessarily valid if the knowledge coincides with the knowledge of today. The intellectual heritage of a tradition is not a fleeting opinion or ill-considered advice; it is not just a fashion. According to Chesterton, a fashion is the opposite of a tradition.<sup>23</sup> A tradition is something that takes a long time before it is developed and is worthy of being called a tradition. It takes many people and many years before something is actually a tradition.

Tradition in this sense is also the tradition on which the present Roman Catholic Church is built. Christianity is not old-fashioned and stagnant because it attaches value to tradition. Rather, it has a broad intellectual foundation and is therefore able to withstand resistance and fashions. At the same time, tradition is always developing; thus, the Church is also still growing. Fagerberg explains that Chesterton considers the Church to be twofold when it comes to its tradition: 'he [Chesterton] presents a stable, developing Catholicism which survives because it is alive and can grow, alongside a firm, rooted Catholicism which

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<sup>22</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 250-51.

<sup>23</sup> *What's Wrong with the World*, 79.



survives because it does not move with the moods.<sup>24</sup> Chesterton looks upon the Church as both a rooted and a developing institute, firm in its tradition while also a developing institute that is receptive to the challenges of today. In chapter 4 §2.4.2, I have spoken of the unique combination of mythology, philosophy, and challenge that is the foundation of ultimate common sense. Here, this quality of challenge becomes clear. The Church does not swim with the tide but rather holds on to its tradition. Its tradition embodies the intellectual heritage that makes it possible for the Church to withstand opposition. Because the Church attaches such great value to its intellectual heritage, which has been passed on both by writing and orally, Christianity is an example of a worldview that is in alignment with common sense.

## 2.2. The Bible

The primary source of intellectual heritage that has been passed on within Christianity is the Bible. The Bible contains external revelation that is the foundation of the Christian worldview. Critics like the new atheists are often tempted to ridicule the Bible, but their criticism is mostly based on presumptions and on texts pulled out of their context. If one studies the Bible more carefully, one can see why it is such an important source of intellectual heritage to Christians.

The story in the Gospels is an extraordinary story, and different from what is so often suspected. Critics are often prejudiced and think they know the story told in the Gospels, and, as a result, they are insufficiently open-minded to read the texts carefully. Just as I explained in chapter 5 §2.1, the critics do not observe the subject from a neutral point of view. Chesterton puts it aptly:

We have all heard people say a hundred times over, for they seem never to tire of saying it, that the Jesus of the New Testament is indeed a most merciful and humane lover of humanity, but that the Church has hidden this human character in repellent dogmas and stiffened it with ecclesiastical terrors till it has taken on an inhuman character. This is, I venture to repeat, very nearly the reverse of the truth. The truth is that it is the image of Christ in the churches that is almost entirely mild and merciful. It is the image of Christ in the Gospels that is a good many other things as well [...] A man simply taking the words of the story as they stand would form quite another impression; an impression full of mystery

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<sup>24</sup> FAGERBERG, 187.

and possibly of inconsistency; but certainly not merely an impression of mildness.<sup>25</sup>

If one trusts one's sense of wonder, one will notice that the story of the Gospels is remarkable, filled with puzzles and riddles. For example, it is remarkable that the first thirty years of the life of Jesus are not documented. The story in the Gospels is unpredictable and filled with strange claims and controversies. For example, the 'figures of speech about the impossibility of threading a needle with a camel or the possibility of throwing a mountain into the sea' make it unpredictable.<sup>26</sup> The story of the Gospels is complicated, and one that nobody could expect before reading it. In the Bible, a true story is told—not scientifically true, but true in its meaning and message. Because it is not just a story but also a true story, it is more than simply mythology. Referring to what I have said above, within the story, mythology and philosophy are already combined. As Reda explains, 'the coming of Christ put an end to myths.'<sup>27</sup> Chesterton clarifies this by referring to the spiritual elements of humanity, which I already spoke of in chapter 4 §2.3:

The sanity of the world was restored and the soul of man offered salvation by something which did indeed satisfy the two warring tendencies of the past; which had never been satisfied in full and most certainly never satisfied together. It met the mythological search for romance by being a story and the philosophical search for truth by being a true story.<sup>28</sup>

The Gospels contain more than just the mythology of Christianity; they contain the mysticism that arises when mythology and philosophy are successfully united.

Focusing on the mysterious side of the Gospels results in some valuable insights. Critics often claim that the message of the Gospels is no longer valid in the world today; they object that the message is not universal. Chesterton's answer to this criticism is that the morality that is spread in the Gospels is 'not the morality of another age, but it might be of another world. In short, we can say that these ideals are impossible in themselves. Exactly what we cannot say is that they are impossible for us.'<sup>29</sup> The ethical message is rather marked by mysticism and, therefore, more difficult to understand. The views of Christ were

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<sup>25</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 319-20.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 322.

<sup>27</sup> REDA, 115.

<sup>28</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 380.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 325.

not conditioned by his time or environment.<sup>30</sup> His views were as difficult in the first century as they are for people now. Only his views have since been developed by the Church to explain them. The controversy of his ethics has not changed: ‘whatever else is true, it is emphatically not true that the ideas of Jesus of Nazareth were suitable to his time, but are no longer suitable to our time. Exactly how suitable they were to his time is perhaps suggested in the end of his story.’<sup>31</sup> The teachings in the Gospels were not tied to the age and place in which Jesus lived. Jesus referred to habits of his own time, such as slavery, but these habits were just illustrative to clarify his actual point: ‘he never made his morality dependent on the existence of the Roman Empire or even on the existence of the world. “Heaven and earth shall pass away; but my words shall not pass away.”’<sup>32</sup> Christ’s morality is an ideal that is independent: always and everywhere difficult to live up to, but not impossible.

Christ himself also was a mysterious figure. Critics have made many ‘smaller Christs’ out of the one Christ that is the central character of the Gospels. These critics have suggested that Christ never lived, either as a divine being or a human being; or they have suggested that he did live but was just a human being. Scholars have suggested that he was solely an ethical teacher, a social reformer, or a spiritual leader. Other opponents have suggested that he was a madman or nothing more than an exorcist. What strikes Chesterton, is that:

...each of these explanations in itself seems to me singularly inadequate; but taken together they do suggest something of the very mystery which they miss. There must surely have been something not only mysterious but many-sided about Christ if so many smaller Christs can be carved out of him.<sup>33</sup>

Even if one only reads the Gospel in a literary way, the teachings are so ‘solitary and solid, with the added dimension of depth or height, [that they] might tower over the flat creatures living only on a plane.’<sup>34</sup> Trusting one’s rational faculties as a criterion of common sense, one can see that the intellectual heritage of the Gospel is of a distinctive quality. This is not evidence of the divinity of Christ, but ‘it is an evidence of a probable distaste for vulgar and

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<sup>30</sup> Multiple biblical studies might disagree with this opinion, but in this study, I set this biblical criticism aside. Here, I focus on the way in which Chesterton argues how the morality that Jesus preached has always been a morality with a high standard. It has been a morality that asked a lot of the people back then, as it does now. For the sake of the argument, I will follow Chesterton’s interpretation.

<sup>31</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 326.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 327. The Scriptural quote is from Mt. 24,35.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 329.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

vainglorious claims to divinity.<sup>35</sup> Reading the teachings of the Gospels, it is unlikely that the same man who claimed to be God, or who was claimed to be God, was a madman. Furthermore, 'even if the Church had mistaken his meaning, it would still be true that no other historical tradition except the Church had ever even made the same mistake.'<sup>36</sup> However, it does seem probable to claim Christ's divinity because he did not act like a maniac: 'normally speaking, the greater a man is, the less likely he is to make the very greatest claim. Outside the unique case we are considering, the only kind of man who ever does make that kind of claim is a very small man; a secretive or self-centered monomaniac.'<sup>37</sup> The Gospels do not claim anything to assume that he was such a person; the Gospels report him as a wise man. This leaves the reader with two options: either one believes that Christ was a human being, disbelieves that he was divine, and concludes that Jesus was a madman, or one believes the divinity and humanity of Christ.<sup>38</sup> The problem with the former option is that the complexity of his teachings makes this highly improbable. Christianity opted for the latter possibility.

In the Gospels, one can see that mythology and philosophy are combined in a unique way. This union results in an acceptance of mysticism, which is needed to develop a plausible worldview (as I will argue below in chapter 7 §3). The imaginary and the historical are combined in a way that transcends one's imagination. This combination reveals the supernatural, and it does this to help reason reach the supernatural rationally. Fagerberg describes it as follows: 'revelation does not short-circuit human rationality by disclosing things reason could never believe. Revelation is a source of truths which not every person has the luxury of time to arrive at by reasonable argument.'<sup>39</sup> This means that revelation does not reveal anything that is counter to reason. Rather, it reveals truths that are hard to reach by oneself. According to Chesterton, this is also argued by Thomas Aquinas:

He does emphatically believe that men can be convinced by argument; when they reach the end of the argument. Only his common sense also told him that the argument never ends [...] and he asks how all these people are possibly to find time for the amount of reasoning that is needed

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> One might be familiar with this argument, since it is taken up and made more famous by C.S. Lewis. Cf. LEWIS, *Mere Christianity* (1952), The Complete C.S. Lewis Signature Classics (New York: Harper Collins, 2002).

<sup>39</sup> FAGERBERG, 119.

to find truth [...] [Therefore,] men must receive the highest moral truths in a miraculous manner; or most men would not receive them at all.<sup>40</sup>

This is why Christianity believes that the Bible is true. It contains truths that are available to all people and do not contradict one's rational faculties. The heritage that is passed on in the written tradition of the Bible corresponds to one's own reasoning and is therefore in line with common sense. The story of the Gospel might be one giant riddle, but with the help of reason, this riddle can be solved.

## 2.3. Church History

The riddles of the Gospels and the truths of the Bible have been studied and explained by the Church from the very beginning. The tradition of the Church contains the intellectual heritage that has been developed and grown during history. Christians attach value to this tradition because the tradition helps to understand the mysticism that is in the Bible. While the heritage of the Bible generates most of the mythology of the religion, the heritage of the tradition provides most of the philosophy of the religion. The tradition of Christianity has its foundation in the Bible, but only in the way that the Bible reveals truths that are to be understood by reason. The heritage that has come from the tradition is based on reason. According to Chesterton, Thomas Aquinas said this also about his own theology: 'It is not based on documents of faith, but on the reasons and statements of the philosophers themselves.'<sup>41</sup>

The Roman Catholic Church attaches just as much value to its tradition as to its Scripture. This means that the Bible is only one element of the faith. Ward quotes from an article by Chesterton in the *Daily News*, in which he often wrote:

Catholic Christianity believes that there is a Divine army or league upon earth called the Church; that all men should be induced to join it; that any man who joins it can save his soul by it without ever opening any of the old books of the Church at all. The Bible is only one of the institutions of Catholicism, like its rites or its priesthood; it thinks the Bible only efficient when taken as part of the Church.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 434-35.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 476.

<sup>42</sup> WARD, 249.

Thus, within Roman Catholicism, the tradition of Church history is just as important as the Bible. The Bible cannot be isolated from the rest; the intellectual heritage that comes from the tradition of the Church is too valuable to disregard. Fagerberg explains, ‘perhaps Scripture is of chief importance to the Christian religion, as the head is of chief importance to the body, but even the head is part of the body and works more efficiently when left attached.’<sup>43</sup>

The tradition of the Church has developed and passed on multiple doctrines, which together form the creed of the faith. This creed is ‘a complex thing, composed of many parts, and to grasp it in its fullness has required a considerable amount of intellectual effort over a considerable number of centuries. Thus the history of doctrine.’<sup>44</sup> To understand this complex thing better, it is helpful to make use of some images. Fagerberg refers to four images by which Chesterton argues in favor of doctrines, and which I find very helpful: a map, vitality, single-mindedness, and a key.<sup>45</sup>

Doctrines are like a map that show people the way through a maze. Throughout the history of the Church, Christians have been thinking about life. According to Chesterton:

There is no other case of one continuous intelligent institution that has been thinking about thinking for two thousand years. Its experience naturally covers nearly all experiences; and especially nearly all errors. The result is a map in which all the blind alleys and bad roads are clearly marked, all the ways that have been shown to be worthless by the best of all evidence: the evidence of those who have gone down them.<sup>46</sup>

Every conclusion has been gathered by the Church and has found its way into the creed. This is how the creed eventually covers the whole truth, and not only one truth. In Fagerberg’s words, ‘Catholic theology is a two-thousand-year-old mind which has kept intact its memory of what other speakers have said.’<sup>47</sup> Within the maze, there is plenty of space to argue, to play, and to discover, but some paths have been marked as useless to walk because of their dead ends, because of the horrors one might find, and because of the certainty that one will get lost. This roadmap is so full of wisdom and intellectual heritage that it makes sense for the Church to attach value to it.

Furthermore, if one follows the map and discovers that it leads to happiness and fulfilment, that there are no mistakes in it, and that it shows the right way, one begins to

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<sup>43</sup> FAGERBERG, 98.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 106.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 107.

<sup>46</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 129.

<sup>47</sup> FAGERBERG, 117.

trust the maker of the map. The maker of the map might be a blessing; the teaching authority of the Church might be a guide for life. For Chesterton, this is an argument to accept the creed in its entirety, and not just several doctrines from it. He compares it to believing a parent:

When your father told you, walking about the garden, that bees stung or that roses smelt sweet, you did not talk of taking the best out of his philosophy [...] No: you believed your father, because you had found him to be a living fountain of facts, a thing that really knew more than you; a thing that would tell you truth to-morrow, as well as to-day. And if this was true of your father, it was even truer of your mother; at least it was true of mine.<sup>48</sup>

So, if the maker of the map proves to be right time after time by leading its readers the right way, one may trust that this maker will do this on any front. The maker of the map, this collection of thinkers throughout the history of the Church, might also be right about the paths of the maze that have not yet been cleared.

This leads to the second image that Chesterton uses when talking about the importance of doctrines: vitality. The image of vitality both means that doctrines are vitally important and that doctrines are vital in themselves. One could wonder why one would attach value to doctrines at all. Chesterton's answer is that they are connected with the practical matters in life. Theory and practice are inseparable, and when the theory is wrong, the practice will eventually go wrong too. The doctrines of the Church are what keeps the Church alive; this is why they are vitally important. In Chesterton's words, 'dogmas are like the finest operations of surgery; separating nerve from nerve, but giving life [...] Just as the physiologist is dealing with living tissues, so the theologian is dealing with living ideas; and if he draws a line between them it is naturally a very fine line.'<sup>49</sup> Therefore, doctrines are not dull but exciting, since they determine whether the Church will continue to live or will pass away.

The doctrines are also vital in themselves. Chesterton compares them to sex because both breed. Fagerberg explains, 'as human procreation cannot come from a single individual, neither can a single and individual thought sire doctrine.'<sup>50</sup> But if multiple doctrines are complex and work well together, Chesterton describes, 'they are fruitful and

<sup>48</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 360.

<sup>49</sup> *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 303.

<sup>50</sup> FAGERBERG, 113.

multiply; and there is no end to them.<sup>51</sup> However, doctrines do more than reproduce; they are also vital in the sense that they develop as every living thing develops.<sup>52</sup> Throughout the centuries of the history of the Church, doctrines have grown and become stronger and more nuanced. According to Chesterton, ‘development is the expansion of all the possibilities and implications of a doctrine, as there is time to distinguish them and draw them out.’<sup>53</sup> Theology has developed, and theologians have added their interpretations to the doctrine. Problems that occurred over the course of time were also considered and implemented, which added to the richness of the doctrines and the creed. A result was the conviction that the doctrines reveal the truth as something complex. In Fagerberg’s words, ‘what good would a Church be that could not accommodate all the truths in the world? Not only truths we are capable of seeing, but also truths which our ancestors saw and our descendants will see, but to which we are blinded by the mood of the moment?’<sup>54</sup> This makes the intellectual heritage of the tradition of the Church so valuable, for it contains truths that have been saved and are not visible every moment; it has had a chance to breed and to develop, and is breeding and developing still.

The last image I will consider in this section is single-mindedness. To Chesterton, this is a positive quality of doctrines. It is not the same as narrow-mindedness, which he describes as a characteristic of science. In chapter 4 §2.4.1, I have argued that Chesterton used the symbol of the circle (to him a symbol of insanity) to describe science. It is perfect but narrow at the same time because it is fixed and inflexible. It contains truth but only a part of the truth. When all knowledge is reduced to scientific knowledge, as is the attempt of scientism, one is left with a rather narrow-minded worldview. Fagerberg explains that Christian doctrine, on the other hand, ‘cannot be charged with narrow-mindedness when it tries to accommodate, simultaneously, all the reality which heaven reveals and reason discovers.’<sup>55</sup> Theology is broad-minded because it tries to reconcile faith and reason. At the same time, Christianity does not see any conflict between these things. There is one all-encompassing truth, and theology stretches the arms of the Christian cross (i.e., reason and faith) as wide as is needed to embrace this complete truth. This is how the single-mindedness of Christian doctrine must be understood.

The intellectual heritage of the tradition of the Church contains all the wisdom of Christianity that has been gathered up to now. In Reda’s words, ‘it tells people what they do not know or cannot easily know [...] It is there to reveal things that cannot be grasped

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<sup>51</sup> CHESTERTON, *Where All Roads Lead*, 38.

<sup>52</sup> FAGERBERG, 114.

<sup>53</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 427.

<sup>54</sup> FAGERBERG, 19.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*, 123.



by reason alone.<sup>56</sup> It is philosophy, but it is also more than just philosophy. The Bible plays a major role in the tradition, which lifts the philosophy to a higher level. Nichols describes it as follows: ‘a universal philosophy that abstracts from concrete things in the search for general and underlying structures, on the one hand, and on the other, a mythopoetic imagination that discerns divine presence and action as the matrix of the most important concrete things.’<sup>57</sup> According to Chesterton, the result is that:

...the peculiar and solitary triumph of the Catholic faith [...] is not in merely being right when we are right, as in being cheerful or hopeful or humane. It is in having been right when we were wrong, and in the fact coming back upon us afterwards like a boomerang. One word that tells us what we do not know outweighs a thousand words that tell us what we do know.<sup>58</sup>

The Catholic tradition both affirms rational knowledge and mystical knowledge; it is based on the two pillars of philosophy and mythology. Christianity acknowledges that both are right, and both are needed to have a grip on the truth. By reconciling both, it is able to touch upon the mystical element of the truth that would otherwise remain hidden.

### 3. Mysticism and Common Sense

#### 3.1. The Importance of Mysticism

By now, Chesterton’s argument that one needs both mythology and philosophy to develop a plausible worldview should be clear. The combination of mythology and philosophy creates a possibility for mysticism. To repeat what I have said in chapter 6 §2.4.4: ‘mysticism keeps men sane. As long as you have mystery you have health; when you destroy mystery you create morbidity.’<sup>59</sup> While the symbol of the circle stands for narrowness and madness, the symbol of the cross represents mystery and health. We need this mystery to understand the world. In Chesterton’s words, ‘the whole secret of mysticism is this: that man can

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<sup>56</sup> REDA, 176.

<sup>57</sup> NICHOLS, 85.

<sup>58</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Catholic Church and Conversion*, 112.

<sup>59</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 230.

understand everything by the help of what he does not understand.’<sup>60</sup> One will not only obtain a plausible worldview if one accepts that not everything is understandable by reason, but one will also get much further if one is humble and trusts one’s sense of wonder, and acknowledges that mystery leads to truth:

It is the humble man who has the sensational sights vouchsafed to him, and this for three obvious reasons: first, that he strains his eyes more than any other men to see them; second, that he is more overwhelmed and uplifted with them when they come; third, that he records them more exactly and sincerely and with less adulteration from his more commonplace and more conceited everyday self.<sup>61</sup>

Therefore, humility is essential to look at the world with a sense of wonder, and to discover the mysticism that is hidden in the truth.

The world is complex, and a worldview should represent this complexity. Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that the worldview does not fit into a scheme or formula. The worldview must be complex in itself, and this complexity can be represented by a creed: ‘when once one believes in a creed, one is proud of its complexity, as scientists are proud of the complexity of science. It shows how rich it is in discoveries. If it is right at all, it is a compliment to say that it’s elaborately right.’<sup>62</sup> As I have already said multiple times: the complex truth is more important than consistency in order to stick to a simple truth. A plausible worldview takes multiple truths that contradict each other and includes the contradiction too. This is done by incorporating mysticism; Christianity incorporates this mysticism.

The Christian worldview includes multiple doctrines, which are put into a creed. The doctrines of the Church cannot only be illustrated by a map to a maze, vitality, and single-mindedness, but they can also be understood as a key.<sup>63</sup> The key is the fourth image that Chesterton uses when arguing in favor of doctrines: ‘a stick might fit a hole or a stone a hollow by accident. But a key and a lock are both complex. And if a key fits a lock, you know it is the right key.’<sup>64</sup> The complexity of the doctrines is a confirmation of their truth rather than a disqualification of it. In chapter 6 §2.4.1, I have described how Dawkins attempts to prove that simpler solutions to a problem are preferable to complicated solutions. I have also argued that this is often not true. In the case of doctrines that aim to

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 231.

<sup>61</sup> CHESTERTON, *Heretics*, 74.

<sup>62</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 287.

<sup>63</sup> I already touched upon the image of the key and the lock in chapter 4 §2.1.3.

<sup>64</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 287.

incorporate everything imaginable, this is certainly not true. The reason is that a simple doctrine would not correspond to the complexity of the world. As Fagerberg says, ‘only a complex key could fit a circumstance as complex as existence.’<sup>65</sup> The doctrines of the Church are just as complex as the world and, therefore, the comparison with a key and a lock is appropriate.

The key is a suitable image for the doctrines of the Church for three reasons. Firstly, ‘a key is above all things a thing with a shape. It is a thing that depends entirely upon keeping its shape.’<sup>66</sup> If its shape were to change (so if the doctrines were to change), it would become shapeless and worthless. Secondly, ‘the shape of a key is in itself a rather fantastic shape [...] It either fits the lock or it does not.’<sup>67</sup> The lock of the world can be opened only by a key that fits the lock. It does not make sense to argue about the shape of the key because it would no longer fit if its shape changed. Therefore, it is of no use to dispute the content of the creed because if this content changed, it would no longer be the answer to the complexity of the world. The creed is the collection of doctrines of the Church. If elements of this creed were changed, it would cease to fit the lock. Thirdly, this key had ‘a rather elaborate pattern.’ It needed to have an elaborate pattern because the lock it tried to open was an elaborate lock. The key must be complex to be effective. It is the goal of the key to open the lock, and since this lock is complex, the key also needs to be complex.

If it is one’s goal to understand the world, one needs the right answer. Since the world is complex, one needs a complex answer. Fagerberg illustrates, ‘we may open the world—if we have the key.’<sup>68</sup> During his life, Chesterton was looking for the right key to open the lock of the door to the world. He tried the key of the Christian creed:

...and then the strange thing began to happen. When once these two parts of the two machines had come together, one after another, all the other parts fitted and fell in with an eerie exactitude. I could hear bolt after bolt over all the machinery falling into its place with a kind of click of relief. Having got one part right, all the other parts were repeating that rectitude, as clock after clock strikes noon. Instinct after instinct was answered by doctrine after doctrine.<sup>69</sup>

One is Christian because one has found the key to the lock of the door to the world. It is a mistake to think that Christians worship this key; they have opened the door with the key

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<sup>65</sup> FAGERBERG, 108.

<sup>66</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 346-47.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 347.

<sup>68</sup> FAGERBERG, 109.

<sup>69</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 282-83.

and, because of that, they understand the truth of the world.<sup>70</sup> They value the key of the creed because they experience that the creed provides all the answers that they need.

The value of the truth of Christianity lies in the fact that Christianity ‘refuses to grow old.’<sup>71</sup> The creed does not give in to the age in which it finds itself. The creed is eternal and independent of age and environment. Fagerberg explains that the Catholic faith ‘has purposely and conscientiously sought an eternal equilibrium which will persist through the vagarious imbalances of each age.’<sup>72</sup> It does not matter in which time one lives, since the creed is independent of age. It brings together mythology and philosophy in a unique way, and touches upon the mysticism that is needed for a plausible worldview. Chesterton concludes from his own experience:

I attempt no apologetic about why the creed should be accepted. But in answer to the historical query of why it was accepted, and is accepted, I answer for millions of others in my reply; because it fits the lock; because it is like life. It is one among many stories; only it happens to be a true story. It is one among many philosophies; only it happens to be the truth.<sup>73</sup>

Christianity does not just proclaim one truth among many; it proclaims *the* truth. It is not fragmented and does not exclude elements of the world. It is all-encompassing, and it is so because of the mysticism that is part of the creed. Many other philosophies and worldviews contain truths, which explains why they are so tempting to accept. But the Christian philosophy ‘is the only theology that has not only thought, but thought of everything [...] I have only found one creed that could not be satisfied with a truth, but only with the Truth, which is made of a million such truths and yet is one.’<sup>74</sup> Therefore, it is not possible to embrace some elements of the Catholic doctrine and try to fit them into another philosophy while discrediting other elements. Nichols formulates it thus: ‘revelation as transmitted in the Catholic Church is the greatest possible truth that can be conceived. All other truths, whatever their provenance, can fit into this truth but it cannot fit into them.’<sup>75</sup> Christianity contains the whole truth, and this truth should not be disintegrated.

Christianity contains the complete truth and other worldviews do not. As a result, common sense exists within Christianity. Common sense needs mysticism: it needs this

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<sup>70</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 381.

<sup>71</sup> *Where All Roads Lead*, 29.

<sup>72</sup> FAGERBERG, 135.

<sup>73</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 380-81.

<sup>74</sup> *The Autobiography*, 327.

<sup>75</sup> NICHOLS, 192.

combination of the true story of mythology and the truth of philosophy. Christianity is a worldview that combines these two successfully and, therefore, warrants common sense. In Chesterton's words, 'Christianity [...] does declare that things are really there; or in other words that things are really things. In this Christianity is at one with common sense; but all religious history shows that this common sense perishes except where there is Christianity to preserve it.'<sup>76</sup> Truths exist everywhere, but they are 'crystallized in Christendom.'<sup>77</sup> Christians are more than willing to spread this message. They have done this for the last two thousand years and are still doing it. Christians are still messengers of the "good news," of the Gospel. Chesterton says, 'I care not if the sceptic says it is a tall story; I cannot see how so toppling a tower could stand so long without foundation. Still less can I see how it could become, as it has become, the home of man.'<sup>78</sup> The fact that the worldview of Christianity is so complex, so mystical, and so everlasting is the ultimate proof that common sense is the soul of Christianity. The Church is a truth-telling entity; it has been yesterday, and it will be tomorrow.<sup>79</sup> Because of this, eventually 'we shall end in Christianity.'<sup>80</sup>

### 3.2. The Origin of the World

When one bases one's arguments solely on reason, it is impossible to prove that the world owes its existence to God. God's existence cannot be proven, so neither can God's act of creation be proven. The only certain fact is that the world exists and we are living in it. I already touched upon the origin of the world in general in chapter 6 §1.2, but I will approach the theme in a Christian way here.

To recapitulate, it is counter to common sense to argue that the world came into existence by itself. In Chesterton's words, it is illogical that 'it is absurd for the Evolutionist to complain that it is unthinkable for an admittedly unthinkable God to make everything out of nothing, and then pretend that it is *more* thinkable that nothing should turn itself into everything.'<sup>81</sup> It is unsatisfactory to explain the existence of the world in this way. An explanation that is in line with common sense is that the world depends on God the creator. To explain this, one must rely on all four criteria of common sense.

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<sup>76</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 267.

<sup>77</sup> *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 147.

<sup>78</sup> *The Everlasting Man*, 402.

<sup>79</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 359-60.

<sup>80</sup> *Heretics*, 131.

<sup>81</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 534.

Firstly, one must trust one's sensory perceptions. When looking around, one can confirm that reality is real, and accept actuality. Looking further, Chesterton argues, 'when we come to look at the fact or facts, as we know them, we observe that they have a rather queer character; which has made many moderns grow strangely and restlessly skeptical about them.'<sup>82</sup> To make his argument, Chesterton relies on the theology of Thomas Aquinas, thereby relying on the third criterion of common sense, which is trusting his tradition. Aquinas also saw this "queer character" of reality, since one can almost never see the whole fact at once. Instead of becoming skeptical and concluding that everything is change or that in the end nothing exists at all, he concluded that one can see reality, but one cannot see reality in its full being. One can only see one state of being, but this does not mean that it does not really exist: 'ice is melted into cold water and cold water is heated into hot water; it cannot be all three at once. But this does not make water unreal or even relative; it only means that its being is limited to being one thing at a time.'<sup>83</sup> This led Aquinas to trust his rational faculties, the second criterion of common sense, and to think about the fullness of being, that ultimate thing that is everything at the same time and is unchangeable and complete: 'things change because they are not complete; but their reality can only be explained as part of something that is complete. It is God.'<sup>84</sup> In short, the world is a deficient reality in the sense that it is not all that is, and God is a perfect reality who was able to create the world because He contains everything that the world possibly can contain.

According to Aquinas, 'there must be a Creator even if there is no Day of Creation.'<sup>85</sup> The world does not look self-existent; it looks dependent on something else. One can see that reality is real but also that it looks secondary because it is not perfect. Relying on the fourth criterion of common sense and trusting one's sense of wonder, if one looks at the world, one can see that its potential is bigger than its actuality. In Chesterton's words:

That is the meaning of that basic medieval phrase; "Everything that is moving is moved by another"; which, in the clear subtlety of St. Thomas, means inexpressibly more than the mere Deistic "somebody wound up the clock" with which it is probably often confounded. Anyone who thinks deeply will see that motion has about it an essential incompleteness, which approximates to something more complete.'<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, 530.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 531.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, 533.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 533-34.

The world is unfolding its potential, but something can only unfold if it was once folded. The mysticism that reveals itself in this Christian argument for the creation of the world is that the world needs a perfect God that contains all potential and change, and is Himself changelessness. God had to create a folded world to enable it to unfold.

Nichols describes that ‘according to Chesterton, the root concept of Christian theism was that “God was a creator, as an artist is a creator.”’<sup>87</sup> Chesterton argues that Christianity brought an idea to the world that was different from what paganism taught: God is divided from the cosmos. God is a transcendent and distinct being, and these characteristics of God are crucial to Christianity. A creator is separate from his creation, as an artist is separate from his work of art.<sup>88</sup> God created the world in all its corporeality and the world is good. Obviously, evil does exist, but evil does not have its roots in the created material world.

[Catholicism embraces] the thesis that there are no bad things, but only bad uses of things [...] It is possible to have bad intentions about good things; and good things, like the world and the flesh have been twisted by a bad intention called the devil. But he cannot make *things* bad; they remain as on the first day of creation. The work of heaven alone was material; the making of a material world. The work of hell is entirely spiritual.<sup>89</sup>

This means that the world is essentially a good world. Fagerberg explains that Chesterton recognizes that the world is good and, at the same time, that it now has fallen.<sup>90</sup> Because the world is separate from its creator, the world was set free when it was created. In Chesterton’s words, ‘God had written, not so much a poem, but rather a play; a play he had planned as perfect, but which had necessarily been left to human actors and stage-managers, who had since made a great mess of it.’<sup>91</sup> It is because of humanity that the world has fallen, not because of God.

The world is good, but it is not the same as God; God is not *in* the world, as pantheism believes, but distinct from the world. One can befriend the world and nature and be very fond of them, but the world and nature are not to be worshipped. Nature should always be regarded in light of the supernatural.<sup>92</sup> Reda explains, ‘indeed, Chesterton

<sup>87</sup> NICHOLS, 67; he quotes from CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 281.

<sup>88</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 281-82.

<sup>89</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 485.

<sup>90</sup> FAGERBERG, 40-41.

<sup>91</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 282.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 280.

holds that the (material) world cannot be enjoyed by those who seek it for its own sake, but only by those who perceive it in light of the supernatural and eternal.<sup>93</sup> One should not absolutize nature, which is what happens in the worldview of the new atheists. Nature is, just as humanity, submitted to God. Francis of Assisi understood this in a unique way. Francis did not regard nature as his mother, but as his sister: ‘we can be proud of her beauty, since we have the same father; but she has no authority over us [...] To St. Francis, Nature is a sister, and even a younger sister: a little, dancing sister, to be laughed at as well as loved.’<sup>94</sup> According to Chesterton, Francis was able to recover nature in light of the supernatural and, in doing so, he could bring back the natural into Christianity.<sup>95</sup> He could reclaim nature without becoming unnatural. He could see that nature was the good creation of God, just as human beings are; therefore, nature can be enjoyed. This was Francis’ merit: ‘man has stripped from his soul the last rag of nature-worship, and can return to nature.’<sup>96</sup>

### 3.3. The Revolution of Humanity

When it comes to the position of humanity within the world, Christianity holds a view that is radically different from many other popular views but is nevertheless in agreement with common sense. To obtain a plausible worldview, it is therefore important to have a plausible view on humanity.

In chapter 6 §1.3, I have described that the new atheists hold that humanity is only one link in the chain of the history of the world. Against this evolutionist view, I have argued that it is unnatural and counter to common sense to treat humanity in a purely evolutionary way. Humanity has some extraordinary characteristics and qualities that are unique, and humanity can therefore hardly be regarded as a solely evolutionary product. The ability to create art and to practice a religion mark a revolution instead of an evolution:

Man is not merely an evolution but rather a revolution. That he has a backbone or other parts upon a similar pattern to birds and fishes is an obvious fact, whatever be the meaning of the fact [...] [But] the more we really look at man as an animal, the less he will look like one.<sup>97</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> REDA, 81.

<sup>94</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 317.

<sup>95</sup> *St. Francis of Assisi*, 70.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 45.

<sup>97</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 158-59.



Relying on the fourth criterion of common sense by trusting one's sense of wonder, one will see that human beings are not simply animals that have evolved in a particular way; one will see that human beings are a mystery, and Christianity understands this mystery in a way that is in line with common sense.

Apart from the general conclusions I have already drawn in chapter 6, Christianity reaches some more defining conclusions that are also in line with common sense. The evolutionist's view of the human creature makes two major mistakes, and both mistakes are important for the Christian view. The mistakes are about the origin of humanity and about the future of humanity. Nichols describes the mistakes in the following way: 'the denial of aboriginal placement; the flagging up of the possibility of an evolutionist eschatology: these are the errors, and they are no bagatelle because they concern, literally, the *alpha* and the *omega* of the human creature: its first beginning and its last end.'<sup>98</sup>

The Christian view on the origin of humanity differs from the evolutionist view. Evolutionism makes it seem as if it can explain the complete human creature, but Christianity holds the view that it cannot. Evolutionists, like the new atheists, reduce the human creature to a purely natural and physical creature, and they dismiss the soul. However, the soul cannot be dismissed because it is the soul that indicates the difference between humanity and other animals. Chesterton gives multiple examples of these differences, such as the reason why only people wear clothes, the fact that only they can create art, and the explanation for why religion is found only among humans. Fagerberg summarizes it as follows:

Clothing is human vesture; Christians believe it has to do with a sense of shame connected with a doctrine of sin; but all this is the life of the spirit, not simply the life of the animal [...] The drawings discovered by a young boy exploring a grotto, while primitive in style, already prove that human beings and animals differ in kind and not just in degree [...] Chesterton suggests that religion is a uniquely human activity because religion is a uniquely human capacity.<sup>99</sup>

It is the soul that makes humanity unique, and it is the soul that cannot be explained away by evolutionism and materialism.<sup>100</sup> Nichols defines the soul as 'the distinctively human

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<sup>98</sup> NICHOLS, 128.

<sup>99</sup> FAGERBERG, 90.

<sup>100</sup> In formulating his argument, Chesterton also trusted his tradition. In 1909, the Pontifical Biblical Commission of the Roman Catholic Church had issued a decree that stated that the literal historical meaning of the story of the creation as told in Genesis concerning the special creation of humanity was not to be

configuration of consciousness and activity.<sup>101</sup> Trusting his rational faculties, Chesterton reasons that ‘in a strictly scientific sense, we simply know nothing whatever about how it grew, or whether it grew, or what it is [...] Something happened; and it has all the appearance of a transaction outside of time.’<sup>102</sup> Biologically or historically, one can say nothing about the soul, but it exists nevertheless. It is something meta-physical and meta-historical.<sup>103</sup> The soul is a reality that is experienced. If one wants to say something about it instead of accepting it without understanding it, ‘if we do indeed want to know how it can conceivably have come there [...] then assuredly it is to very different things that we must go.’<sup>104</sup>

Dwelling on humanity’s ability to create art, this ability does not only indicate what the human being is *not* (i.e., just an animal), but also what he *is* in the affirmative. Human art implies that the human being is not only a creature, but also a creator. Humanity has ‘a mind that is like a mirror. It is like a mirror because it is truly a thing of reflection [...] Above all, it is like a mirror because it is the only thing of its kind [...] The mirror is the only thing that can contain them all.’<sup>105</sup> Chesterton makes a unique argument that is based on common sense by inviting the reader to trust one’s rational faculties and one’s sense of wonder. His argument requests the reader to look at humanity as if it is an entirely new species. If one accepts that humanity is a revolution rather than a product of evolution, and that the mind of humanity is unique and like a mirror, one can draw the following conclusion: ‘man is the microcosm; man is the measure of all things; man is the image of God.’<sup>106</sup> God is able to create out of nothing; human beings as the image of God are able to create out of anything: ‘in other words, while the joy of God be unlimited creation, the special joy of man is limited creation, the combination of creation with limits [...] The excitement is to get the utmost out of given conditions; the conditions will stretch, but not indefinitely.’<sup>107</sup> Hence, humanity is not equal to God but, rather God’s special creation.

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questioned. However, one could read the days of the creation, and other elements of the story, in a figurative way. Cf. DENZINGER, HOPING, AND HÜNERMANN, 3514, 16, 19. Chesterton’s work touches upon what will later be stated in the papal encyclical *Humani Generis*, promulgated by Pope Pius XII in 1950, in which the doctrinal statements of the Roman Catholic Church were more clearly defined, cf. *Ibid.*, 3896.

<sup>101</sup> NICHOLS, 128.

<sup>102</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 170.

<sup>103</sup> NICHOLS, 134.

<sup>104</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 170-71.

<sup>105</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>107</sup> CHESTERTON, *What’s Wrong with the World*, 65.

The evolutionist and Christian views on the position of humanity also differ where the future of humanity is concerned.<sup>108</sup> As I have already described in chapter 2 §2.1, Darwinism states that evolution by natural selection does not have a goal. The fact that humanity is one of its outcomes is only a result of a biological algorithm. Evolutionarily, it would make sense to argue that humanity will evolve into something else. Humanity is not the end of evolution, literally and figuratively speaking. According to Christianity, the human creature is not only the image of God in his origin; humanity is also the crowning glory of creation. With humanity, God fulfilled his creation. By arguing that humanity is a revolution rather than a product of evolution, Chesterton also emphasizes this.

It is a mystery how humanity can be so unique, so ‘absolute and alone,’<sup>109</sup> and how humanity has received and developed its unique characteristics. In embracing mysticism by trying to understand reality with the help of what is impossible to understand, Chesterton was able to formulate these answers, which meet the Christian doctrines around anthropology that have been passed on within the tradition of the Church.

### 3.4. Free Will

According to Christianity, human beings are created in the image of God and they are the crowning glory of creation. At the same time, human beings are fallen creatures that sin. This seems to be a paradox, but Christianity has managed to maintain both ideas. In Chesterton’s words, ‘in one way Man was to be haughtier than he had ever been before; in another way he was to be humbler than he had ever been before. In so far as I am Man I am the chief of creatures. In so far as I am *a man* I am the chief of sinners.’<sup>110</sup> By embracing the mysticism that surrounds the two doctrines, Christianity was able to stay positive on both beliefs: ‘one can hardly think too little of one’s self. One can hardly think too much of one’s soul.’<sup>111</sup>

One might wonder how these two paradoxical concepts are still in line with common sense. This is possible if one accepts free will. In chapter 6 §1.6, I have already argued why libertarian free will is a reasonable possibility in general, without requiring any theistic belief. It is common sense to accept free will. In order to understand the two Christian doctrines on the opposite characteristics of the human creature, one even *needs* free will. The doctrine of free will is the key to the lock of this paradox.

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<sup>108</sup> NICHOLS, 128.

<sup>109</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Everlasting Man*, 167.

<sup>110</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 298.

<sup>111</sup> *Ibid.*, 299.

Chesterton's supernatural and realistic worldview, influenced by Thomas Aquinas, warrants human free will as a consequence of the divine free will. God created the world although he did not have to do this, and he created humanity in his own image. This creation out of freedom secures free will in the human creature too. In Nichols' words, 'a world brought into existence by free divine will is a place congruent with the exercise of free human will.'<sup>112</sup> It should not come as a surprise that 'Chesterton insists on Thomas's presentation of freedom, which Aquinas had linked, via St John Damascene, to the biblical doctrine of man's imagehood of God.'<sup>113</sup> Reda also argues that Chesterton links free will with the uniqueness of the human creature: 'it is this freedom and its tremendous consequences that testify to his greatness and uniqueness.'<sup>114</sup> In his discourse on Thomas Aquinas, Chesterton describes that Aquinas investigated the question of whether human beings have free will, or whether the sense of choice is an illusion. These are important questions, and simply dismissing them because there is no scientific evidence for answers that may be provided is no excuse to avoid asking the questions.<sup>115</sup> To Chesterton, it does not make sense, and is certainly not in line with common sense, to act as if one has free will even though one actually is not free: 'the Christian, I repeat, puts the mystery into his philosophy. That mystery by its darkness enlightens all things [...] The Determinist makes the matter of the will logical and lucid: and in light of that lucidity all things are darkened, words have no meaning, actions no aim.'<sup>116</sup> As already explained in chapter 6 §2.4.4, Aquinas built his theology on the foundation of the affirmation of reality. This affirmation, together with the intellectual heritage that has been passed on in Scripture and in the tradition of the Church, leads to the conclusion that free will is real and not an illusion. Therefore, one must disagree with determinists who think that free will is an illusion:

You may say, if you like, that the bold determinist speculator is free to disbelieve in the reality of the will. But it is a much more massive and important fact that he is not free to praise, to curse, to thank, to justify, to urge, to punish, to resist temptations, to incite mobs, to make New Year resolutions, to pardon sinners, to rebuke tyrants, or even to say "thank you" for the mustard.<sup>117</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> NICHOLS, 72.

<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>114</sup> REDA, 31.

<sup>115</sup> CHESTERTON, *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 526-28.

<sup>116</sup> *The Blatchford Controversies*, 383-84.

<sup>117</sup> *Orthodoxy*, 228.

This means that free will is a presupposition of our daily life and that one undermines the reality that is experienced if one denies free will. Christian doctrine has declared that God created human beings in his own image and that, consequently, He created them with free will is in line with common sense.

God created a material world that is good by nature, so in Chesterton's words, 'there are no bad things but only bad thoughts; and especially bad intentions.'<sup>118</sup> God created human creatures with a free will because this fits them being created in the image of God, and this will is capable of producing bad thoughts and bad intentions. Free will in itself is a good thing, but at the same time, it is the origin of sin in the world. According to Fagerberg, Chesterton believes that 'sin proceeds from a will which possesses so much liberty that it must take care not to loose itself from the divine orders.'<sup>119</sup> The human will is naturally directed towards God, but also has the capability to turn towards sin. Reda explains that evil is, therefore, not a consequence of social conditions but is rather 'a mysterious rift deep down human nature; evil is not a mere disease: people *want* to commit it, but they do not want to be sick. Man falls easily but is free to make moral choices.'<sup>120</sup>

The doctrine of the Fall of humanity indicates the consequence of the bad choices the human creature made out of free will. Humanity degenerated because of wrong choices, but because human beings are able to make choices, they can also lift themselves up again. That is the beauty of free will. Chesterton explains:

The Fall is a view of life. It is not only the only enlightening, but the only encouraging view of life. It holds [...] that we have misused a good world, and not merely been entrapped into a bad one. It refers evil back to the wrong use of the will, and thus declares that it can eventually be righted by the right use of the will [...] A man who holds this view of life will find it giving light on a thousand things; on which mere evolutionary ethics have not a word to say [...] that happiness is not only a hope, but also in some strange manner a memory; and that we are all kings in exile.<sup>121</sup>

Because of the Fall, the human creature is not oneself at this moment; one is not who one is supposed to be. This explains the evil in the world. Naturally, the world is good, and evil has come into the world only because human beings used their will in the wrong way. Evil can leave the world again when human beings decide to use their will in the right way.

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<sup>118</sup> *St. Thomas Aquinas*, 485.

<sup>119</sup> FAGERBERG, 168.

<sup>120</sup> REDA, 31.

<sup>121</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 311-12.

Human beings can rise towards their original image: God. Therefore, Chesterton says that it is the only encouraging view of life. This is in line with Reyburn's third principle of common sense, as I described it in chapter 4 §2.2.2. Good should defeat evil, but it can do so only if one's worldview has a sense of good and a standard of perfection. It is hopeful that the power is in the hands of humanity itself to decide to change course and move towards its original state of being.

The Christian doctrine of original sin is a doctrine that presupposes anthropological maximalism, which means that humanity is meant to live up to a high standard that has been set by God. Fagerberg explains that Chesterton's 'anthropological maximalism takes sin itself as a sign that our natures are made for beatitude.'<sup>122</sup> Humanity can become more human by making the right choices, by using free will in the correct way: 'the doctrine of original sin precisely claims it is not natural for people to sin, so while one might not be able to teach an old dog new tricks, one can teach the old Adam new tricks, the original tricks.'<sup>123</sup> One has no notions of the perfect state of being of an animal and, therefore, one cannot command any animal to behave more like that animal. However, one can command humanity to behave more human because there is a perfect state of being of a human being; there is a standard toward which one can work.<sup>124</sup>

The purpose of human free will is to reach beatitude. To reach beatitude, humanity should not change itself by evolving into some sort of superhumanity; rather, human beings should change their choices, become their original selves, and re-learn how to use free will. Evolutionists think it is the other way around: 'it is rather as if a nurse had tried a rather bitter food for some years on a baby, and on discovering that it was not suitable, should not throw away the food and ask for a new food, but throw the baby out of the window, and ask for a new baby.'<sup>125</sup> Human beings are created as good creatures; therefore, one should not give up all hope on them as creatures and expect humanity to evolve into some sort of superhumanity. This would be the same as throwing out the baby and asking for a new one. Instead, one should learn which choices are right for humanity to climb up and regain its original status, just as the nurse should try out a new food.

For Catholics it is a fundamental dogma of the Faith that all human beings, without any exception whatever, were specially made, were shaped and pointed like shining arrows, for the end of hitting the mark of Beatitude. It is true that the shafts are feathered with free will, and

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<sup>122</sup> FAGERBERG, 29.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 30.

<sup>124</sup> CHESTERTON, *The Blatchford Controversies*, 385.

<sup>125</sup> *Heretics*, 70.

therefore throw the shadow of all the tragic possibilities of free will; and that the Church [...] does also draw attention to the darkness of that potential tragedy. But that does not make any difference to the gloriousness of the potential glory.<sup>126</sup>

Since humanity is fallen, its vision is blurred. Solely by relying on reason, one will have a hard time seeing what one should do to reach beatitude. Therefore, it is important to rely on the third criterion of common sense, which is to trust tradition, and if the heritage of this tradition is in line with one's own rational thinking, it is common sense to accept this heritage as a guiding principle. To understand what the right way is to use free will, one can look at Scripture. Scripture can explain the original way of thinking that is needed to set a standard for the right human choices or, in other words, morality. Nichols explains, 'so revelation may be needed in order to confirm which principles really are the primary principles of reason in evaluating human nature and its moral needs.'<sup>127</sup>

Not only Scripture but also the Church can explain the moral standard that is needed to reach the original state of humanity: 'appeal to the Church is required, since the Church is responsible for Gospel transmission.'<sup>128</sup> The Church did take this responsibility and articulated the dogmatic constitution *Dei Filius* at the First Vatican Council of 1869-1870. In *Dei Filius*, the Church states that God, the origin and the goal of all things, can be known by human reason. However, God has also revealed in his goodness these things in a supernatural way, that is, by revelation. God has a supernatural goal for humanity that transcends human capacities of understanding, so that this revelation is required.<sup>129</sup>

Christianity provides a moral guide by the moral standard that the Gospel has revealed. This moral standard consists of several virtues. Chesterton emphasizes that these virtues are interrelated, and that one needs a complete configuration of these virtues in order to reach beatitude. According to Nichols, 'en route to its beatitude our determinate human nature cannot flourish without doing so in and through a definite constellation of good dispositions.'<sup>130</sup> Only focusing on one virtue and ignoring the others is not going to bring one any further. Chesterton describes it as follows: 'it must not (if it is to satisfy our souls) be the mere victory of some one thing swallowing up everything else, love or pride or peace or adventure; it must be a definite picture composed of these elements in their best

<sup>126</sup> *The Thing: Why I Am a Catholic*, 150.

<sup>127</sup> NICHOLS, 163.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>129</sup> DENZINGER, HOPING, AND HÜNERMANN, 3004-05.

<sup>130</sup> NICHOLS, 165.

proportion and relation.<sup>131</sup> If one virtue were to get all the attention, it could do as much damage as vices could do. Making only one good choice would be just as bad as making wrong choices:

When a religious scheme is shattered [...] it is not merely the vices that are let loose. The vices are, indeed, let loose, and they wander and do damage. But the virtues are let loose also; and the virtues wander more wildly, and the virtues do more terrible damage. The modern world is full of the old Christian virtues gone mad. The virtues have gone mad because they have been isolated from each other and are wandering alone. Thus some scientists care for truth; and their truth is pitiless. Thus some humanitarians only care for pity; and their pity (I am sorry to say) is often untruthful.<sup>132</sup>

Therefore, if the balance of virtues becomes disrupted, one is led down the wrong way. The unity of virtues is the map that can lead one through the maze to reach beatitude.

## Conclusion

In this chapter, I have developed the second step of my apologetic approach in response to the new atheism, which is a defensive form of apologetics. I argued for the ways in which the worldview of Christianity is in line with common sense, unlike the worldview of the new atheists. To do this, I tested three important elements of Christianity by the criteria of common sense: faith, intellectual heritage, and mysticism. I explained the importance of each of these elements and made clear in which ways Christianity incorporates these elements.

The element of faith shows that it is important to base a worldview on more than reason. Christianity emphasizes the fruitful relationship of reason and faith. I was able to illustrate this by referring to some of Chesterton's apologetic ideas, and by explaining the application of the four criteria of common sense with regard to faith. The element of intellectual heritage shows that the truths that have been discovered in one's tradition are of immense value when it comes to acquiring knowledge and shaping one's worldview. Christianity integrates this in two main ways: in valuing the Bible and in valuing the history

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<sup>131</sup> CHESTERTON, *Orthodoxy*, 319.

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 233.



of the Church. The element of mysticism shows that the combination of mythology and philosophy is needed to understand the complexity of the world. Christianity combines these two spiritual elements successfully, which is expressed by the doctrines that form the Christian creed. To illustrate how the Church handles these (sometimes contradicting) doctrines, I revealed the mysticism in the doctrines of creation, of the image of God, and of free will. These doctrines belong to the respective philosophical fields of ontology, anthropology, and ethics, fields in which the new atheists are also interested.

In this chapter, I have argued that by incorporating faith, intellectual heritage, and mysticism into one's worldview, one reaches different conclusions from those of the new atheists. Christianity does this, and by trusting its sensory perceptions, rational faculties, tradition, and sense of wonder, it is in line with common sense.



## Conclusion

This study aimed to test whether the apologetics of G.K. Chesterton is still useful today. My hypothesis was that the content of Chesterton's apologetics had the potential to inspire the development of a new apologetic approach. To test this, I examined the worldview of the new atheism, a popular contemporary movement that has a highly critical view of religion. The proponents of this movement, the new atheists, have much in common with the opponents against whom Chesterton wrote. Thus, most of Chesterton's arguments may still be valid in an apologetic approach today.

Important in Chesterton's works is the concept of common sense. Chesterton defended the Christian worldview by making an appeal to common sense. Studying Chesterton's apologetics led me to expect that common sense might also be a fruitful basis for developing an apologetic approach in response to the new atheism. To determine which criteria of common sense could be guiding in this study, I relied on Chesterton's understanding of common sense in his apologetic works. The criteria that I developed became the basis of my apologetic approach. It resulted in a comparative evaluation of the worldviews of the new atheism and that of Christianity by the criteria of common sense to examine whether these worldviews are plausible or not.

In this conclusion, I intend to do two main things: firstly, I will recapitulate the outcomes of this study. Secondly, I will indicate the implications of this study in the societal context and suggest directions for future research.

## 1. Conclusions of this Study

The intentional interpretation of the works of the new atheists and G.K. Chesterton, and the rational reconstruction of the apologetics of the latter, led to a discussion between the rival worldviews of the new atheism and Christianity. In short, this discussion suggests that the worldview of the new atheism is less compatible with common sense than the rival worldview of Christianity. This outcome suggests that Christianity offers a more plausible worldview than the new atheists.

Through an intentional interpretation of the new atheism, I represented their worldview in a way that heeded the principle of charity and presented their position at its best. This interpretation showed that the new atheists argue against religion in general and Christianity in particular on different levels. I considered the new atheists' criticism of religion itself, the relationship between science and religion, and society's attitude towards religion. I also discussed the philosophical positions of the new atheists, focusing on the naturalism that is evident in their ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and ethics.

In response to the work of the new atheists, I formulated an apologetic response. Prior to this, I explored a number of approaches that Christian apologists have used against the new atheists. After evaluating these approaches by describing their advantages and disadvantages, I was able to determine the elements that would be most beneficial for the apologetic approach that I sought to develop. Firstly, a basis in classical foundationalism would be important, since this is also the ground of the philosophy of the new atheists. Secondly, making use of philosophical lines of reasoning rather than of religious arguments would go a long way towards a successful discussion. Thirdly, defending my own position in two steps could be fruitful. First focusing on supernaturalism and theism, and afterwards on Christianity, would prevent the discussion from diving into specifically Christian arguments immediately and, instead, provide philosophical arguments in favor of supernaturalism and theism first. Lastly, including universal experiences might provide a common ground on which to base the apologetic approach. This would ensure that the discussion would not become a completely rational debate, but also include the suprarational side of faith.

I also took the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics into consideration, to ensure that my study would be an answer to this call. This justified my choice for a rather philosophical defense of faith, my focus on the new atheism, and my reliance on an "old" apologist. This "old" apologist was G.K. Chesterton. Chesterton articulated several fundamental ideas and repeated them in multiple works. One of his main apologetic concepts was common sense. In an intentional interpretation, I illustrated

that this concept was a foundation of his worldview and an idea to which he returned in nearly all his writings. Common sense is available to every person, and not reserved for the elite. Common sense is reasonable but based on more than reason. In Chesterton's own words, 'the real trouble with the world of ours is not that it is an unreasonable world, nor even that it is a reasonable one. The commonest kind of trouble is that it is nearly reasonably, but not quite.'<sup>1</sup> Chesterton argued in his apologetics that reason alone does not make one reasonable. In a rational reconstruction of Chesterton's view, I crystallized four criteria of common sense, which should be heeded when evaluating a worldview:

- 1) trust in one's sensory perceptions
- 2) trust in one's rational faculties
- 3) trust in one's tradition
- 4) trust in one's sense of wonder.

I made an appeal to these four criteria of common sense as a standard by which to test the worldview of the new atheists. In my apologetic approach, I followed a different approach from that adopted in the two comprehensive overviews that I gave of the positions of the new atheists in the earlier chapters. This different approach enabled me to set the agenda for the discussion instead of letting the new atheists do so. Testing the worldview of the new atheists by the criteria of common sense resulted in an apologetic argument that took the ontological and epistemological naturalism of the new atheists as its main targets, while also addressing many other points of criticism that were more directly aimed at religion in general and at Christianity in particular.

The first part of the apologetic approach towards the new atheism that I developed was offensive rather than defensive. Testing the ontological and epistemological naturalism of the new atheists by the criteria of common sense, I argued that their worldview is incompatible with the criteria of common sense and unnecessarily distances itself from theism and Christianity. It can be concluded that the value the new atheists attach to science and evidence comes at the expense of an open mind that would allow for possibilities such as the supernatural, miracles, and free will. Their practically dogmatic Darwinism has evolved from a solely scientific theory into a worldview that extends to all aspects of life, which shuts the door to any non-Darwinian interpretations and understandings. This runs counter to common sense, especially to the fourth criterion of trust in one's sense of wonder. This fourth criterion is an essential part of common sense and would lead to a completely different worldview if it were taken seriously.

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 285.

The second part of the apologetic approach was a defensive form of apologetics. I argued that the Christian worldview is compatible with all four criteria of common sense. I focused on three elements: the complementarity of reason and faith, the importance of Bible and tradition (the intellectual heritage of Christianity), and mysticism, which comes forth from the combination of philosophy and mythology. I explained what Chesterton means by this last element by discussing three examples: God creating the universe, the emergence of humanity, and free will. It can be concluded that the Christian worldview balances the many complexities and contradictions of the world in a way that is in line with common sense by taking faith, intellectual heritage, and mysticism seriously. The Christian doctrines illustrate in which ways these elements are integrated in the Christian worldview.

This study suggests that Chesterton's apologetics is still useful in an apologetic approach today, and that his criteria of common sense are a useful framework by which a worldview can be tested. Satisfying the criteria of common sense leads to a worldview that is more plausible than a worldview that is not in line with common sense. This leads to the conclusion that the worldview of the new atheism is less compatible with common sense and is, therefore, less plausible. By contrast, the worldview of Christianity is in line with common sense and is, therefore, a more plausible worldview.

## 2. Implications and Future Directions

### 2.1. Implications of this Study

The new atheism is a movement that is not without influence on the public opinion and tends to stir up anti-religious prejudices in society. This study formulated an apologetic answer to the new atheism by testing its arguments and analyzing the plausibility of its worldview. It was an answer to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new apologetics, and a contribution to the new evangelization. Earlier attempts at a discussion between science and religion often have come to a standstill because of miscommunications and misunderstandings. However, based on the conclusions of this study, one might consider taking a similar approach as the one in this study to carry on a discussion between worldviews in a more fruitful way. Refraining from arguing *ad hominem*, and instead arguing against the strongest possible interpretation of the positions of the opponent, one can reach deep discussions with strong arguments and well-founded conclusions that actually invite the opponent to lift the discussion to a higher intellectual level. This goes

not only for Roman Catholic apologetics and the new atheism, but also for discussions between other worldviews. Thinking critically about one's worldview is important, and this study aims to be an illustration of the way one can do this.

Furthermore, the application of the criteria of common sense is not limited to the subjects on which this study focused. Common sense might also be used in other conversations in so far as it does not only apply to comprehensive subjects such as worldviews, but also to more specific topics. In fact, one can test other positions by the criteria of common sense to determine to what extent a position is plausible. This study invites others to attach value to all criteria of common sense when evaluating a position.

## 2.2. Suggestions for Future Research

This study clearly argued that the worldview of Christianity is in line with common sense, while the worldview of the new atheists is not, which resulted in the conclusion that the worldview of Christianity is more plausible than the worldview of the new atheists. However, this conclusion is limited, which I will explain below. To investigate the plausibility of worldviews further, I want to make four suggestions for future research.

Firstly, I wrote this study from a Dutch perspective. Even though this is a Western perspective, it differs from the British and American perspectives of the new atheists and most apologists discussed in this study. Future studies could focus on other national or international perspectives, to create a picture that fits more contexts.

Secondly, I did not respond to every important point of criticism of the new atheists. The apologetic approach made an appeal to a Chestertonian understanding of common sense, and not every point of new atheist criticism could be satisfactorily addressed. For example, in the apologetic approach I took, I did not touch upon the differences between extremism and moderate religion, the alleged indoctrination of children, and the danger of religious violence. I chose a more philosophical angle to discuss the positions of the new atheists, and the topics mentioned above did not fit in this approach. Future studies could address points of criticism that were not discussed in this study, and discuss the worldview of the new atheists in more detail in these respects.

Thirdly, in this study I focused solely on the worldview of the new atheism and the worldview of Christianity, in particular Roman Catholicism. Future studies could focus on other worldviews such as Islam or Judaism and test them, e.g., by the criteria of common sense. This would add a new dimension to the discussion between worldviews and be highly valuable in religious discussions.

Lastly, I chose “common sense” as central theme of my apologetic approach. I gave my own interpretation of the Chestertonian understanding of this concept and let this be the foundation to which I kept returning in the discussion with the new atheists. I believe this approach was fruitful. This study clearly illustrates to what extent the new atheist worldview and the Christian worldview are plausible based on their accordance (or not) with common sense. Nevertheless, one could still raise the question of the plausibility of both worldviews using other criteria. Therefore, future studies could explore this plausibility further in light of other criteria.

It is always recommended that arguments be evaluated critically, both one’s own arguments and the arguments of other people. This study has offered a way to do this. I believe that Chesterton’s understanding of common sense is a solid standard by which arguments can be tested because it can prevent acceptance of arguments being presented in an attractive way even though they are actually not compelling. Let us not be deceived by rhetoric or presentation but, rather, focus entirely on the content of arguments. If they can be of any help, let Chesterton’s criteria of common sense be a guide in doing this.



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## Summary

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) was an English writer who defended the Christian and Roman Catholic faith in many of his writings. His work as an apologist was important in his own day, and it has influenced a number of other thinkers since. This study investigates whether his apologetics is still valuable today. To do this, I explore its value as the basis of an apologetic response to the new atheism, a popular contemporary movement that has a highly critical view of religion. Specifically, I make an appeal to Chesterton's understanding of the concept of common sense, to which he refers across his work. Common sense, for Chesterton, is a way of thinking that calls us to see things as they are. In this study, I distinguish four criteria of common sense that can function as a helpful standard within an apologetic approach today. To compare the rival worldviews of the new atheists and Christianity and decide which is most in line with common sense, and therefore, most plausible, I test them using these criteria.

My argument proceeds in three main steps. Firstly, I discuss the worldview of the new atheists. I limit myself to the works of the four most prominent figures: Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Aiming to represent their ideas in a way that does them justice, I provide an intentional interpretation of their views while heeding the principle of charity. In practice, this means that I try to do justice to the new atheists by always providing the strongest version of their arguments. Consequently, my intentional interpretations sometimes border on rational reconstructions. This helps me to reach a higher intellectual level in my subsequent discussion with these four thinkers.

Secondly, I discuss the apologetics of Chesterton, focusing on his explicitly apologetic works. I do this by providing both an intentional interpretation and a rational reconstruction because I want both to introduce his apologetic ideas as he intended them, and to interpret his arguments in a manner that makes them useful in the discussion with the new atheists. Therefore, I consider his arguments not only in terms of his own

background, but also with reference to discussions today. My aim is to identify several relevant apologetic ideas and actualize them in our contemporary context.

Lastly, I develop an apologetic approach towards the new atheism inspired by Chesterton's apologetics. This entails entering into discussion with the new atheists and arguing against their positions in favor of positions that are in line with the Christian worldview. In this part of the study, I acknowledge that arguments have a subjective side and recognize that the prior convictions of readers affect the extent to which any apologetic appears persuasive. The prior convictions of the reader determine whether the premises of the arguments are acceptable to the reader and, thus, whether s/he can accept their conclusions. An argument must make sense to the reader; it must be valid, and its premises must be accepted in order to be acceptable as a proof to that reader. This also goes for arguments that make an appeal to common sense. I contribute to the discussion with the new atheists by bringing in Chesterton's criteria of common sense. If the new atheists consider my arguments to be valid, they have two options: they can either accept the conclusions that are favorable for Christianity, or they can reject the criteria of common sense. Since they probably do not want to accept the conclusions, they must choose the second option. And, if, as I expect, the rejection of Chestertonian common sense is unattractive to many people, my arguments will give these people a reason to reject the new atheism.

This study begins in chapter 1 with a comprehensive overview of the new atheists' view on religion. This overview focuses on the positions of the new atheists on religion in general and Christianity in particular. The new atheists declare that today religion in our society is immune to criticism and they want to alter this. They attribute the cause of this immunity to three different causes: religion itself, the relationship between science and religion, and society's attitude towards religion. Firstly, religious people are said to have an intolerant attitude because of their tradition and their truth claims. This intolerance can lead to violence. In response, the new atheists explain that tradition and religion are both human products and not infallible. As a solution, they want to encourage discussion and have faith criticized openly. Secondly, the new atheists query the way in which science is distinguished from religion because they think that this protects religion from examination. The new atheists argue that this distinction is a false one and must be avoided; science can study religion like it studies everything else. Lastly, the new atheists examine the way in which religion is protected by society. On their reading, society imagines religion to be benign. The new atheists argue that this view of religion is mistaken. They offer atheism as an alternative and explain how atheism can replace religion.

In chapter 2, I spell out the new atheists' underlying philosophical positions on ontology, anthropology, epistemology, and ethics. The new atheists have various backgrounds: Dawkins is an evolutionary biologist, Dennett a philosopher of science and mind, Harris a neuroscientist, and Hitchens a literary and cultural critic. Despite these differences, their worldviews have much in common. All new atheists are ontological naturalists. Their ontologically naturalist position is reflected in their views on anthropology, epistemology, and ethics. Their thinking on humanity has a scientific and mostly Darwinian basis. Most new atheists (except for Hitchens) are also epistemological naturalists and, when it comes to ethics, they all struggle with the notion of free will and its relationship with determinism, and they differ in their opinion on whether science can help to find a moral standard.

After presenting the positions of the new atheists, in chapter 3, I examine several current apologetic approaches towards the new atheists. Various theologians, philosophers, and other academics have already replied to the new atheists in different ways. I explore classical apologetics, reformed epistemological apologetics, apologetics grounded on religious experience, and fideist apologetics. These four apologetic approaches all have their advantages and disadvantages. The approaches of classical apologetics and apologetics grounded on religious experience fit best with the epistemological views of the new atheists. Therefore, a new apologetic approach is more likely to be fruitful if it incorporates some elements of these forms of apologetics. This means that my apologetic approach should have a basis in classical foundationalism, make use of philosophical lines of reasoning rather than religious arguments, be a defense in two steps (first supernaturalism, and then Christianity), and take universal experiences into account to include the supra-rational side of faith. In addition to the examination of these current approaches, I also give attention to the call of the Roman Catholic Church for a new evangelization and a new apologetics. Ideally, this new apologetics should meet several expectations: it should be academic, have the formerly Christian Western world as its audience, focus on the harmony between faith and reason, and learn from "old" apologists.

In chapter 4, I introduce G.K. Chesterton, the old apologist upon whom my apologetic approach is going to rely. Chesterton articulated several fundamental apologetic ideas in multiple works, and I introduce the relevant themes I will use in my apologetic approach. These include the balance between mythology and philosophy, the symbolism of the circle and the cross, and the concept of common sense. This latter concept is a foundation of Chesterton's worldview and an idea to which he returns in nearly all his writings. Common sense is available to every person; it is reasonable, but based on more than reason. Chesterton argues that reason alone does not make one reasonable. I crystallize

four criteria of common sense: trust in one's sensory perceptions, trust in one's rational faculties, trust in one's tradition, and trust in one's sense of wonder. I make an appeal to these four criteria of common sense as a standard by which to test the worldview of the new atheists and the worldview of Christianity.

In chapter 5, I respond to a major point of criticism of the new atheists to which I can respond without reference to common sense. The new atheists criticize a certain position of immunity that religion is supposed to hold in society. In response, I argue that this opinion is over-simplified. For a start, religion is much more vulnerable than the new atheists assume. In addition, while there is a certain amount of immunity in religious belief, this has more to do with the wider problem of power: all human organizations involve power relations that can discourage criticism. When the new atheists link power with religious intolerance, they ignore the tolerance that is such an important characteristic in many religious organizations. Lastly, the immunity of religion is questionable since the West is becoming more secularized and atheism and agnosticism are becoming more popular. The picture that the new atheists sketch of the immunity of religion is, therefore, inaccurate.

In chapters 6 and 7, I invoke common sense to test the worldviews of the new atheism and Christianity. In chapter 6, I argue that the new atheist forms of naturalism do not correspond to common sense. Because naturalism plays a major role in the worldview of the new atheists, testing several of their naturalist positions is useful. These positions include evolution, anomalies that are not explainable in a natural way, and determinism. Turning to the criteria of common sense shows how following common sense would lead to conclusions that are different from those of the new atheists. Also, scientism in multiple forms is not in line with common sense. Common sense shows that science plays a limited role in gaining knowledge. The new atheists concentrate on their sensory perceptions and neglect most other criteria of common sense. This comes at the expense of an open mind that would allow for possibilities such as the supernatural, miracles, and free will. By giving due attention to the other criteria of common sense, one might arrive at other conclusions, ones that are more in line with common sense and, therefore, more plausible.

In chapter 7, I argue that the Christian worldview in general, and the worldview of Roman Catholicism in particular, is compatible with common sense and satisfies all of its four criteria. I test three elements that play an important role in the Christian worldview: the complementarity of reason and faith, the importance of Bible and tradition (the intellectual heritage of Christianity), and mysticism, which comes forth from the combination of philosophy and mythology. Faith shows that it is important to base one's worldview on more than reason. Intellectual heritage shows that the truths that have been



discovered in one's tradition are very valuable when it comes to gaining knowledge and shaping one's worldview. Mysticism shows that the combination of mythology and philosophy is needed to understand the complexity of the world. The Christian worldview balances the many complexities and contradictions of the world in a way that is in line with common sense.

This study concludes that Chesterton's apologetics is still useful in an apologetic approach today, and that his criteria of common sense are a useful framework by which worldviews can be tested. Satisfying the criteria of common sense leads to a worldview that is more plausible than a worldview that is not in line with common sense. Concretely, this means that the worldview of the new atheism is less compatible with common sense and is, therefore, less plausible. By contrast, the worldview of Christianity is in line with common sense and is, therefore, a more plausible worldview.

Common sense has proven to be a fruitful standard by which to test worldviews. Therefore, in the future, one might consider taking a similar approach to carry on a discussion between worldviews in a fruitful way. Furthermore, the application of the criteria of common sense might also be used in conversations on other topics. With regard to future academic research, I have four suggestions: firstly, to examine whether common sense is also useful in other contexts besides the Dutch setting in which mine occurs, future studies could focus on other national or international perspectives. Secondly, future studies could address more points of criticism beyond the scope of those included in this study. Thirdly, other worldviews can also be tested by the criteria of common sense besides just the new atheist and the Christian worldviews. Fourthly, future studies could explore the plausibility of determining worldviews in light of criteria other than the ones used in this study, and examine whether the plausibility of worldviews can also be determined by other criteria than those of common sense.

Gilbert Keith Chesterton (1874-1936) defended the Christian and Roman Catholic faith. His apologetic work was highly regarded in his own day and has continued to inspire other thinkers ever since. This study investigates whether his apologetics is still valuable today. It explores its value as the basis of an apologetic response to the new atheism, a popular contemporary movement that is highly critical of religion. The author appeals in particular to Chesterton's understanding of common sense. For Chesterton, common sense is a way of thinking that calls us to see things as they are. Satisfying common sense leads to a worldview that is more plausible than a worldview that is not in line with common sense. This study compares the rival worldviews of the new atheism and Christianity and argues that the Christian worldview is more in line with common sense and is, therefore, more plausible.