

# Response to "Without God, Gall Is Permitted"

by David Fitzgerald

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If someone on the street said to me "You know what the problem is with you Atheists? You have no new arguments, no sympathy, and no charm" my response would be " Have you read Richard Dawkins? Or Sam Harris? Or ever even spoken to an Atheist?" Yet it's clear Sam Schulman has read them - or at least skimmed through them, if only so he can pull tricks

like reducing 9 1/2 pages of reasoned argument to 4 words carefully quote-mined for maximum shock value.

Like a smug, self-satisfied Dr Seuss ostrich with nose in the air and head in the sand, Schulman pooh-poohs legitimate criticism of religion's failures and darkest repercussions, and acts as though pointing out these shortcomings was somehow outrageous and spiteful - even dragging out the tired old chestnut used against Thomas Jefferson in 1800 that Atheists want to ban religion. He also tries to paint their arguments and frank questions as shrill and sophomoric, as if all their points had been suitably answered long ago, or were irrelevant to start with. He dismisses a whole host of concerns such as fundamentalist violence and intentional disregard for science; to him it is perfectly self-evident that apart from a few bad apples like Muslim extremists and the odd abortion-clinic bomber, the fruits of religion have been unfailingly beneficial and sensible throughout history.

These are not the only farcical notions he touts as fact with Bill O'Reillyian assuredness. He seems to think that Atheism only appeared recently, as some artifact of the Victorian age. He cites the great faith of Einstein, not realizing that Einstein - like Dawkins and Harris - openly rejected belief in a personal God. He opines that only the religiously-minded can be sympathetic to different systems of belief; an assertion proved completely ridiculous by sectarian division and conflict found in every place on earth, on every day of human history. Despite much thoughtful analysis and comparison of different faiths and doctrines, and their effects on their adherents and their neighbors, he declares that Atheists treat all religions as interchangeable. Perhaps Schulman's most insulting and nonsensical fabrications are his constant ad hominem: New Atheists are peevish, dogmatic, elitist, incurious, and above all, have no sympathy. Dawkins and Harris - along with the vast majority of unbelievers - not only have and express sympathy for religious impulses, the entire moral basis they argue so passionately for on page after page is completely based upon sympathy and driven by the need to reduce human suffering.

But Schulman blithely ignores all of this. One can hardly believe he is too stupid to simply not recognize the central focus of these books, so perhaps he does just need to go back and this time really read them. Not that he has any real interest in doing so. He is not offering a critique; he is playing party line policeman, telling the faithful "move along, nothing to see here." His disdain is no more than camouflaged defensiveness. What really troubles him is their intellectual honesty and directness puncturing his inflated self-image as a thoughtful, rational believer. It's clear what he really longs for, since he says as much: to be flattered for his intelligence despite his unintelligent beliefs. He imagines a time when Atheists knew their place: deep in the Well of Loneliness, properly contrite and agonized,

deferential and respectful to religion. But his pipe dream shares the same fatal flaw as God: neither exists.

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The original Wall Street Journal article:

### **Without God, Gall Is Permitted**

By SAM SCHULMAN

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When the very first population of atheists roamed the earth in the Victorian age -- brought to life by Lyell's "Principles of Geology," Darwin's "Origin of Species" and other blows to religious certainty -- it was the personal dimension of atheism that others found distressing. How could an atheist's oath of allegiance to the queen be trusted? It couldn't -- so an atheist was not allowed to take a seat in Parliament. How could an atheist, unconstrained by a fear of eternal punishment, be held accountable to social norms of behavior? Worse than heretical, atheism was not respectable.

In the 21st century, this no longer seems to be the case. Few acquaintances of Dr. Richard Dawkins, the world's most voluble public atheist, wonder, as they might have a hundred years ago: Can I leave my wife unchaperoned in this man's company? Indeed, the atheists are now looking to turn the tables: They want to make belief itself not simply an object of intellectual derision but a cause for personal embarrassment. A new generation of publicists for atheism has emerged to tell Americans in particular that we should be ashamed to retain a majority of religious believers, that in this way we resemble the benighted, primitive peoples of the Middle East, Africa and South America instead of the enlightened citizens of Western Europe.

Thanks in part to the actions of a few jihadists in September 2001, it is believers who stand accused, not freethinkers. Among the prominent atheists who now sermonize to the believers in their midst are Dr. Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett ("Breaking the Spell") and Sam Harris ("The End of Faith" and, more recently, "Letter to a Christian Nation"). There are others, too, like Steven Weinberg, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, Brooke Allen (whose "Moral Minority" was a celebration of the skeptical Founders) and a host of commentators appalled by the Intelligent Design movement. The transcript of a recent symposium on the perils of religious thought can be found at a science Web site called [edge.org](http://edge.org).

There are many themes to the atheist lament. A common worry is the political and social effect of religious belief. To a lot of atheists, the fate of civilization and of mankind depends on their ability to cool -- or better, simply to ban -- the fevered fancies of the God-intoxicated among us.

Naturally, the atheists focus their peevishness not on Muslim extremists (who advertise their hatred and violent intentions) but on the old-time Christian religion. ("Wisdom dwells with prudence," the Good Book teaches.) They can always haul out the abortion-clinic bomber if they need a boogeyman; and they can always argue as if all faiths are interchangeable: Persuade American Christians to give up their infantile attachment to God and maybe Muslims will too. In any case, they conclude: God is not necessary, God is impossible and God is not permissible if our society -- or even our species -- is to survive.

What is new about the new atheists? It's not their arguments. Spend as much time as you like with a pile of the recent anti-religion books, but you won't encounter a single point you didn't hear in your freshman dormitory. It's their tone that is novel. Belief, in their eyes, is not just misguided but contemptible, the product of provincial minds, the mark of people who need to be told how to think and how to vote -- both of which, the new atheists assure us, they do in lockstep with the pope and Jerry Falwell.

For them, belief in God is beyond childish, it is unsuitable for children. Today's atheists are particularly disgusted by the religious training of young people -- which Dr. Dawkins calls "a form of child abuse." He even floats the idea that the state should intervene to protect children from their parents' religious beliefs.

For the new atheists, believing in God is a form of stupidity, which sets off their own intelligence. They write as if they were the first to discover that biblical miracles are improbable, that Parson Weems was a fabulist, that religion is full of superstition. They write as if great minds had never before wrestled with the big questions of creation, moral law and the contending versions of revealed truth. They argue as if these questions are easily answered by their own blunt materialism. Most of all, they assume that no intelligent, reflective person could ever defend religion rather than dismiss it. The reviewer of Dr. Dawkins's volume in a recent New York Review of Books noted his unwillingness to take theology seriously, a starting point for any considered debate over religion.

The faith that the new atheists describe is a simple-minded parody. It is impossible to see within it what might have preoccupied great artists and thinkers like Homer, Milton, Michelangelo, Newton and Spinoza -- let alone Aquinas, Dr. Johnson, Kierkegaard, Goya, Cardinal Newman, Reinhold Niebuhr or, for that matter, Albert Einstein. But to pass over this deeper faith -- the kind that engaged the great minds of Western history -- is to diminish the loss of faith too. The new atheists are separated from the old by their shallowness.

To read the accounts of the first generation of atheists is profoundly moving. Matthew Arnold wrote of the "eternal note of sadness" sounded when the "Sea of Faith" receded from human life. In one testament after another -- George Eliot, Carlyle, Hardy, Darwin himself -- the Victorians described the sense of grief they felt when religion goes -- and the keen, often pathetic attempts to replace it by love, by art, by good works, by risk-seeking and -- fatally -- by politics.

God did not exist, they concluded, but there was no denying that this supposed truth was accompanied by a painful sense of being cut off from human fellowship as well as divine love. To counter it, religious figures developed a new kind of mission -- like that of the former unbeliever C.S. Lewis: They could speak to the feeling of longing that unbelief engenders because they understood it -- and sympathized not only with atheism's pain but with the many sensible arguments in its favor.

There is no such sympathy among the new apostles of atheism -- to find it, one has to look to believers. Anyone who has actually taught young people and listened to them knows that it is often the students who come from a trained sectarian background -- Catholic, Orthodox Jewish, Muslim, Mormon -- who are best at grasping different systems of belief and unbelief. Such students know, at least, what it feels like to have such a system, and can understand those who have very different ones. The new atheists remind me of other students from more "open-minded" homes -- rigid, indifferent, puzzled by thought and incapable of sympathy.

The new atheists fail too often simply for want of charm or skill. Twenty-first century atheism hasn't found its H.G. Wells or its George Bernard Shaw, men who flattered their audiences, excited them and persuaded them by making them feel intelligent. Here is Sam Harris, for instance, addressing those who wonder if destroying human embryos in

the process of stem cell research might be morally dicey: "Your qualms...are obscene."

The atheists say that they are addressing believers. Rationalists all, can they believe that believers would be swayed by such contumely and condescension? They seem instead to be preaching to people exactly like themselves -- a remarkably incurious elite.

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