

God's Not Scared of New Atheism

The place was Federation Square, in downtown Melbourne, Australia. Four thousand Christians were responding to the Global Atheist Convention with their own event, called Undeniable. As atheists locked horns with Christians wearing "Ask me my story" T-shirts, on stage Peter McHugh was telling his early experience of God.

"Rules and regulations," he lamented. "[God] wanted to beat you up."

By the time McHugh hit university, he was an atheist.

"I became a Marxist student politician who believed Christians were nerds," he said. "I would sit on the lawns and wait for Christians to come to me and have an argument with them."

But these Christians would stall at the same frustrating point: a place of experience.

"They'd jump across this chasm called faith and just say, 'Well, we just believe,'" McHugh said. "And I'd say, 'Come back here. Have the argument with me. Be logical.'"

But when McHugh's life got into a mess and a friend invited him to church, he went along.

"I thought I'd walked onto the set of a Blues Brothers movie," he said. "It was a crazy Pentecostal church."

When the preacher invited people to the front of the room for prayer, McHugh's head said, "I'm not going out the front," but he found himself doing just that. Bracing himself, since he saw some receiving prayer fall to the floor, he prayed to be forgiven.

The preacher was nowhere near him, yet McHugh says, "I fell

flat on my back. I cried for an hour. I had an encounter with God.”

McHugh, now pastor of the thriving Stairway Church in Melbourne, concluded from the stage, “So here, tonight, I can still tell you every reason why you should not be a Christian. I still know all those arguments. ... But those arguments mean nothing because I’ve had an experience with God.”

Targeted Atheism

That Global Atheist Convention is just one of a number of expressions of the so-called New Atheism. In reality, it is not a new *atheism* so much as a new *militancy*. It emerged as a reaction to the Muslim radicalism behind 9/11, but it condemns religion in general, including Christianity and the Jewish faith, offering science and rationalism as the substitute.

- Furthermore, it aims to eliminate religion altogether using catchy slogans like “Religion—we can find the cure” and targeting its activism toward:
- Eliminating prayers, references to God and religious symbols in public places
- Eliminating the mention of heaven, hell or creationism in education (calling such educational exposure “child abuse”)
- Promoting the teaching of evolution
- Opposing home schooling
- Offering camps and websites that teach atheism to children
- Aiding faltering clergy in their exit of the ministry

Capitalizing on the post-Christian mindset, the New Atheism’s numbers, though just above 2 percent worldwide, are increasing. The most recent American Religious Identification Survey found a rise in the number of atheists and agnostics in America between 2001 and 2008, from 0.9 percent to 1.6 percent—nearly double.

So how do we respond?

Our Main Weapon

The power of God is irresistible and the best weapon of all—as it was for McHugh and many others like him.

Militant atheist John C. Wright, a philosopher and science-fiction writer was, in his own words, a former “champion of atheism.” But after a philosophical struggle, he begrudgingly prayed a prayer to the God he didn’t believe existed. Two days later, he had a heart attack.

He writes in an account of his conversion on his website, “My wife called someone from her church, which is a denomination that practices healing through prayer. My wife read a passage from their writings, and the pain vanished.”

Following his heart surgery, he says, “I grew aware of a spiritual dimension of reality of which I had hitherto been unaware. It was like a man born blind suddenly receiving sight.”

Then came three visions, various supernatural revelations, a meeting with Jesus and, later, answered prayers and miracles. The power of God soundly turned Wright around.

But not every atheist has Christian friends tapped into God’s power. What other avenues can lead them to God?

Philosophy’s Road

New Atheists boast of their rationalism, but when brave rationalists follow the evidence, it can lead to God. In fact, while God’s power brought Wright to his knees, it was rationalism that brought him to his droll prayer.

“To my surprise and alarm,” he says, “I found that, step by step, logic drove me to conclusions no modern philosophy

shared, but only this ancient and (as I saw it then) corrupt and superstitious foolery called the church. Each time I followed the argument fearlessly where it led, it kept leading me, one remorseless rational step at a time, to a position the church had been maintaining for more than a thousand years. That haunted me.”

So he prayed, and God won.

It is worth noting the influence Christian apologist C.S. Lewis had on Wright and his slow movement toward the possibility of Christianity’s veracity. Himself once an atheist, Lewis’ simple style and brilliant grasp of the issues has influenced millions. His many best-selling books, including *Mere Christianity* and *The Problem of Pain*, are formidable tools.

Grace in the Hole

Sometimes it comes down to speech and the way it’s wielded. The tone of dialogue on atheist websites varies widely—from pleasant and gracious jousting to bitter hatred, bad language and vitriol. The latter is symptomatic of underlying problems—and a guide to effective response. In such environments, Christian grace can win the day.

One high-profile inquirer disturbed by the hostility she encountered in the New Atheism camp was the great-great-great-granddaughter of Charles Darwin, Laura Keynes. Keynes witnessed the rise of the New Atheism debate while working on her doctorate at Oxford University.

She shared in an interview, “One of the things that made me wary of ‘new atheism’ was the strange mix of angry emotion I encountered there: anger at the thought of God; anger at any restrictions on behavior; anger at thwarted will; pride in the exertion of will; pride in feeling intellectually superior; contempt for anyone who reveals human vulnerability in asking

for the grace of God.”

She became a convinced Christian.

It's in the Science

Distinguished biotechnologist Dr. Matti Leisola says he had been, without realizing it, “a typical product of the Western naturalistic educational system and ... actually hated the idea of God interfering in [his] life.”

But when Leisola became a Christian through his wife's influence, further study convinced him evolution “stood on a shaky foundation.” In an interview with *Creation* magazine, he said, “I first realized it when studying biochemistry and the weak efforts to explain the origin of life based on some rudimentary experiments.”

Nobel Prize-winner Dr. Richard Smalley, who discovered buckyballs and remained a skeptic most of his life, also became a Christian late in life partly due to his intensive study of intelligent design. A closer look at evolution riled him.

His wife wrote of this aspect of his conversion, “I remember him pacing the bedroom floor in anger, saying evolution was bad science. Rick hated bad science more than anything. He said if he conducted his research in the same way that they did he would never be respected in the scientific community.”

Oddly, one of the most significant science-influenced conversions to Christianity was that of a philosopher–professor Antony Flew. Flew was a giant in the atheist cause. One of his papers, “Theology and Falsification,” was the most widely reprinted philosophy publication of the last century.

But Flew's Achilles' heel was his commitment to a directive of Socrates: “Follow the evidence wherever it leads.” So when

science uncovered monumental complexities in DNA, which in Flew's view swamped evolution, he swapped sides. He wrote a book, *There Is a God*, reversing his old ideas and drawing howls of protest from atheists around the world.

The Conviction of Hell

Peter Hitchens is the younger brother of recently deceased Christopher Hitchens, a leading light in the New Atheism movement. In his teens, Peter also embraced atheism but eventually found himself unsettled by it, and a 500-year-old painting—*The Last Judgment* by Rogier van der Weyden—influenced his reversion.

He wrote of his experience viewing the painting in an essay for the *Daily Mail*, saying, "I gaped, my mouth actually hanging open, at the naked figures fleeing towards the pit of Hell. ... They were me, and people I knew. ... My large catalogue of misdeeds replayed themselves rapidly in my head. I had absolutely no doubt I was among the damned, if there were any damned."

Now an outspoken Christian thinker, Peter Hitchens' insights are diametrically opposed to the popular writings of his late brother.

Our Siren Call

In a recent study with college students belonging to atheist student groups on campus, the Fixed Point Foundation, led by Larry Taunton, found most college students who are atheists usually have a solid faith background. Many of their conversions to atheism were due to the weak demonstrations of faith they observed in their churches.

Such a reference brings to mind Paul's warning about the last days: "People will be ... having a form of godliness but denying its power. Have nothing to do with such people" (2 Tim. 3:2,

5, NIV)

A powerless church is not God's idea at all. God has given us two mighty weapons: truth and power. And it has always been that way. Two thousand years ago, Jesus told the Sadducees, "You are in error because you do not know the Scriptures [truth] or the power of God" (Matt. 22:29).

The New Atheism will only make inroads where these two are lacking: ignorance of the Holy Spirit and the compromise of Scripture. But where the Holy Spirit is welcome, where He is poured out with signs and wonders and miracles, and where the whole Bible is fearlessly proclaimed, the church flourishes.

It is as basic as that.

Dennis Prince was co-planter of the thriving Kingston City Church in Melbourne, Australia, and is author of several books, including *I Was Wrong: Why the World's Most Notorious Atheist Called It Quits ... and Other Trouble for the New Atheism*.

Watch Peter Hitchens, brother of the late New Atheism leader Christopher Hitchens, track his journey to God at