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— NATIONAL REVIEW

THE
ATHEISM AND ITS
DEVIL'S
SCIENTIFIC PRETENSIONS
DELUSION

David Berlinski

*the bestselling author of *A Tour of the Calculus*
and *Advent of the Algorithm**

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The Devil's Delusion

Atheism and Its Scientific Pretensions

By
David Berlinski

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To the memory of my maternal grandfather

SAMUEL GOLDFEIN

15.1.1877 Pruzani
auf den Transportlisten von 19.9.42 um 17.2.43
gestrichen
am 27.2.43 nach Dresden
am 29.3.43 nach Theresienstadt
am 18.12.43 nach Auschwitz deportiert
in Auschwitz verschollen

He must have a long spoon that must eat with the
devil.

—SHAKESPEARE, *The Comedy of Errors*

PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

I am grateful to Basic Books for bringing out the second edition of *The Devil's Delusion: Atheism and its Scientific Pretensions* and grateful to those who made it possible: Lara Heimert, Susan Ginsburg, Diana Banister, Steven Meyer, Rob Crowther and John West.

I could have no better friends.

Apart from correcting a few typographic mistakes and pruning a few superfluous sentences from the text, I have made no changes to the original edition.

PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

At the beginning of his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris writes that his fiercest and most “disturbed” critics are Christians who are “deeply, even murderously, intolerant of criticism.” It would seem that a good many of those intolerant critics have been sending Harris biblical verses supporting their intolerance. Now, I count myself among Harris’s warmest detractors. When he remarks that he has been *dumbstruck* by Christian and Moslem intellectual commitments, I believe the word has met the man. But here it is, an inconvenient fact: I am a secular Jew. My religious education did not take. I can barely remember a word of Hebrew. I cannot pray. I have spent more years than I care to remember in studying mathematics and writing about the sciences. Yet the book that follows is in some sense a defense of religious thought and sentiment. Biblical verses are the least of it.

A defense is needed because none has been forthcoming. The discussion has been ceded to men who regard religious belief with frivolous contempt. Their books have in recent years poured from every press, and although differing widely in their style, they are identical in their message: Because scientific theories are true, religious beliefs must be false. Harris has conveyed the point

reason to cherish them. They have enlarged and not diminished our sense of the sublime.

No scientific theory touches on the mysteries that the religious tradition addresses. A man asking why his days are short and full of suffering is not disposed to turn to algebraic quantum field theory for the answer. The answers that prominent scientific figures *have* offered are remarkable in their shallowness. The hypothesis that we are nothing more than cosmic accidents has been widely accepted by the scientific community. Figures as diverse as Bertrand Russell, Jacques Monod, Steven Weinberg, and Richard Dawkins have said it is so. It is an article of their faith, one advanced with the confidence of men convinced that nature has equipped them to face realities the rest of us cannot bear to contemplate. There is not the slightest reason to think this so.

While science has nothing of value to say on the great and aching questions of life, death, love, and meaning, what the religious traditions of mankind *have* said forms a coherent body of thought. The yearnings of the human soul are not in vain. There is a system of belief adequate to the complexity of experience. There is recompense for suffering. A principle beyond selfishness is at work in the cosmos. All will be well.

I do not know whether any of this is true. I am certain that the scientific community does not know that it is false.

Occupied by their own concerns, a great many men and women have a dull, hurt, angry sense of being oppressed by the sciences. They are frustrated by endless scientific boasting. They suspect that as an institution, the scientific community holds them in contempt. They feel no little distaste for those speaking in its name.

They are right to feel this way. I have written this book for them.

CHAPTER 1

No Gods Before Me

Until just yesterday, it was fashionable for scientists carefully to cast their bread upon various ecclesiastical waters. *Very* carefully. In writing about Darwin's God, the biologist Kenneth Miller affirmed that he saw no conflict whatsoever between his own Catholic faith and Darwin's theory of evolution. Francis Collins, who directed the Human Genome Project, has made a very similar case for his religious beliefs. Science and religion, Stephen Jay Gould remarked, constitute Non-Overlapping Magisteria. Science is a fine thing. Religion is a fine thing too. They are two very fine things. The great master of this tolerant spirit was Albert Einstein. What was it he said? "Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind." The lame and the blind excepted, who could object?

If scientists were unwilling to give offense to religion, perhaps from a decent sense that it was precisely their religious belief that enabled many men and women the better to endure life, they were very often equally unwilling enthusiastically to endorse its conclusions. And for the same underlying reason: *Why make trouble?* When the great Austrian logician Kurt Gödel devised an interesting version of the ontological argument, he showed it to friends and warned them

that having created an argument in favor of God's existence, he was not about to believe his own conclusions. He had merely been testing the limits of his intellectual power. It is something, after all, that every man might wish to know.

With the rise of what the *Wall Street Journal* has called "militant atheism," both the terms of debate and the climate of opinion have changed. The sunny agnosticism characteristic of men who believed that with respect to God, it could go either way, is no longer in fashion. It is regarded as rather dim.

Some of this represents nothing more than the reappearance of that perennial literary character, the village atheist, someone prepared tediously to dispute the finer points of Second Corinthians in time taken from spring planting. A little philosophy, as Francis Bacon observed, "inclineth man's mind to atheism." A *very* little philosophy is often all that is needed. In a recent BBC program entitled *A Brief History of Unbelief*, the host, Jonathan Miller, and his guest, the philosopher Colin McGinn, engaged in a veritable orgy of competitive skepticism, so much so that in the end, the viewer was left wondering whether either man believed sincerely in the existence of the other. Sam Harris's *Letter to a Christian Nation* is in this tradition, and if his book is devoid of any intellectual substance whatsoever, it is, at least, brisk, engaging, and short. To anyone having read Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, these will appear as very considerable virtues.

If rural atheism is familiar, it is also irrelevant. Religious men and women, having long accommodated the village idiot, have long accommodated the village atheist. The order of battle is now different. It has been the *scientists*—Richard Dawkins, Victor Stenger, Taner Edis, Emile Zuckerkandl, Peter Atkins, Steven Weinberg (*vasta môle superbus*)—who have undertaken a wide-ranging attack on religious belief and sentiment. Although efforts among atheists to promote fellowship by calling one another *bright* have not, it must be said, proven a great success, in all other respects, their order is thriving. Richard Dawkins, the author of *The God Delusion*, is in this respect outstanding. He is not only an intellectually fulfilled atheist, he is determined that others should be as full as he. A great many scientists are satisfied that at last someone has said out loud what so many of them have said among themselves: *Scientific and religious belief are in conflict. They cannot both be right. Let us get rid of the one that is wrong.* Where before he was tolerated, Dawkins is now admired. Should he announce that shortly he will conduct a personal invasion of Hell in order to roust various American evangelicals, ticket sales at the National Academy of Sciences would at once start vibrating.

These views are important because they invoke for their authority the power and the glory of the Western scientific tradition. The title of Victor Stenger's recent book is *God: The Failed Hypothesis—How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist.*

ganda it hardly matters. Science as an institution is unified by the lowest common denominator of belief, and that is the conviction that science is a very good thing.

Curiously enough, for all that science may be a very good thing, members of the scientific community are often dismayed to discover that, like policemen, they are not better loved. Indeed, they are widely considered self-righteous, vain, politically immature, and arrogant. This last is considered a special injustice. "Contrary to what many anti-intellectuals maintain," the biologist Massimo Pigliucci has written, science is "a much more humble enterprise than any religion or other ideology." Yet despite the *outstanding* humility of the scientific community, anti-intellectuals persist in their sullen suspicions. Scientists are hardly helped when one of their champions immerses himself in the emollient of his own enthusiasm. Thus Richard Dawkins recounts the story of his professor of zoology at Oxford, a man who had "for years ... passionately believed that the Golgi apparatus was not real." On hearing during a lecture by a visiting American that his views were in error, "he strode to the front of the hall, shook the American by the hand, and said—with passion—"My dear fellow, I wish to thank you. I have been wrong these fifteen years.'" The story, Dawkins avows, still has the power "to bring a lump to my throat."

It could not have been a very considerable lump. No similar story has ever been recounted about

Richard Dawkins. Quite the contrary. He is as responsive to criticism as a black hole in space. "It is absolutely safe to say," he has remarked, "that if you meet somebody who claims not to believe in evolution that person is ignorant, stupid or insane."

The tone is characteristic. Peter Atkins is a professor of physical chemistry at Oxford University, and he, too, is ardent in his atheism. In the course of an essay denouncing not only theology but poetry and philosophy as well, he observes favorably of himself that scientists "are at the summit of knowledge, beacons of rationality, and intellectually honest." It goes without saying, Atkins adds, that "there is no reason to suppose that science cannot deal with every aspect of existence." Science is, after all, "the apotheosis of the intellect and the consummation of the Renaissance."

These comical declarations may be abbreviated by observing that Atkins is persuaded that not only is science a very good thing, but no other thing is good at all.

Ever since the great scientific revolution was set in motion by Johannes Kepler, Galileo Galilei, and Isaac Newton, it has been a commonplace of commentary that the more that science teaches us about the natural world, the less important a role human beings play in the grand scheme of things. "Astronomical

observations continue to demonstrate," Victor Stenger affirms, "that the earth is no more significant than a single grain of sand on a vast beach." What astronomical observations may, in fact, have demonstrated is that the earth is no more *numerous* than a single grain of sand on a vast beach. *Significance* is, of course, otherwise. Nonetheless, the inference is plain: What holds for the earth holds as well for human beings. They hardly count, and scientists like Stenger are not disposed to count them at all. It is, as science writer Tom Bethell notes, "an article of our secular faith that there is nothing exceptional about human life."

The thesis that we are all nothing more than vehicles for a number of "selfish genes" has accordingly entered deeply into the simian gabble of academic life, where together with materialism and moral relativism it now seems as self-evident as the law of affirmative action. To anyone who has enjoyed the spectacle of various smarmy insects shuffling along the tenure track at Harvard or Stanford, the idea that we are all simply "survival machines" seems oddly in conflict with the correlative doctrine of the survival of the fittest. This would not be the first time that an ideological system in conflict with the facts has found it prudent to defer to itself.

And with predictably incoherent results. After comparing more than two thousand DNA samples, an American molecular geneticist, Dean Hamer, concluded that a person's capacity to believe in God is linked

to his brain chemicals. Of all things! Why not his urine? Perhaps it will not be amiss to observe that Dr. Hamer has made the same claim about homosexuality, and if he has refrained from arguing that a person's capacity to believe in molecular genetics is linked to a brain chemical, it is, no doubt, owing to a prudent sense that once *that* door is open, God knows how and when anyone will ever slam it shut again.

Neither scientific credibility nor sound good sense is at issue in *any* of these declarations. They are absurd; they are understood to be absurd; and what is more, assent is demanded just *because* they are absurd. "We take the side of science *in spite* of the patent absurdity of some of its constructs," the geneticist Richard Lewontin remarked equably in *The New York Review of Books*, "*in spite* of its failure to fulfill many of its extravagant promises of health and life, *in spite* of the tolerance of the scientific community for unsubstantiated just-so stories" (my emphasis).

Why should any discerning man or woman take the side of science, or anything else, under these circumstances? It is because, Lewontin explains, "we cannot allow a Divine Foot in the door."

If one is obliged to accept absurdities for fear of a Divine Foot, imagine what prodigies of effort would be required were the rest of the Divine Torso found wedged at the door and with some justifiable irritation demanding to be let in?

If nothing else, the attack on traditional religious thought marks the consolidation in our time of science as the single system of belief in which rational men and women might place their faith, and if not their faith, then certainly their devotion. From cosmology to biology, its narratives have become *the* narratives. They are, these narratives, immensely seductive, so much so that looking at them with innocent eyes requires a very deliberate act. And like any militant church, this one places a familiar demand before all others: Thou shalt have no other gods before me.

It is this that is new; it is this that is important.

for all its luxury and sophistication, had no more access to sophisticated clocks than the Christian world, and in the Christian West, men kept time so carelessly that even the arrival of the Easter holidays was a matter of profound uncertainty. Caliphs in Baghdad counted time by means of either a water clock or an hourglass, and yet the Koran commanded fivefold prayers each day, and it commanded the faithful to face the shrine of Kaaba in Mecca as they prayed—tasks requiring considerable mental dexterity. The Islamic calendar was based on the phases of the moon. The community preparing to celebrate the holy month of Ramadan, which marks the beginning of the lunar year, would need to spot the crescent moon just as it shed its blush in the evening sky. Before the creation of sophisticated astronomical tables, men with exceptionally sharp eyesight were sent to distant mountaintops to spot the moon's appearance; their cries then echoed down through the valleys and thence by a chain of cries back to Baghdad itself. (In France, the night of the crescent moon is still called *la nuit de doute*—the night of doubt.) By the thirteenth century, these scientific chores were assigned to professionals, the so-called *muwaqqit*. Resident in mosques, they were responsible for regulating the time of prayer. "In Islam, as in no other religion," the historian David King has remarked, "the performance of various aspects of religious ritual has been assisted by scientific procedure."

A BESTIAL INDULGENCE OF APPETITE

And now a question: Does the Koran commend the study of the natural world? And an answer: It does. "At the last Judgment," the Turkish devout Said Nursî remarked, "the ink spent by scholars is equal to the blood of martyrs." But those scholars celebrated at the last judgment were apt to be scholars of religion and so bound by the inerrancy of the Koran. "Allah turns over the night and the day," reads a well-known Koranic verse, "most surely there is a lesson in this for those who have sight" (24.44). It is hardly surprising that Moslem mathematicians and astronomers, from the late seventh to the early fifteenth century, regarded their scientific curiosity, on those occasions when they were called upon to justify it, as if their scientific pursuits comprised an exercise calculated to increase their devotion.

But of all the human emotions, curiosity is the one least subject to the general proscription against gluttony, and once engaged, even if engaged initially in the service of religion, it has a tendency to grow relentlessly, until in the end the scholar becomes curious about the nature of revelation itself. The more encompassing the scope of scholarship, the more open to doubt the scholar becomes, so that in the end only curiosity remains indisputably of value. This is true whether the object of curiosity is religion *or* science.

Writing in 1420 or 1430, the astronomer Ulugh Beg described science in a way that suggests nothing

of the martyr's blood. "Intellects are in agreement," he wrote, "and minds are in accord as to the excellence of science and the worthiness of scientists." By "science," Ulugh Beg meant observation—the power of the eye, aided by various instruments, to see. The benefits conferred by sight are very often matters of self-improvement. "Science sharpens the intellect and strengthens it; it increases sagacity, and augments perspicacity." But benefits transcend the personal. Those sciences whose principles are "indisputable and self-evident" have the merit of being "common to people of different religions," Ulugh Beg affirmed.

These sentiments are entirely modern. They might well have been expressed by a committee of the National Science Foundation. They *were* expressed by a committee of the National Science Foundation: "Science extends and enriches our lives, expands our imagination and liberates us from the bonds of ignorance and superstition." They are on display in every high school textbook.

And there is hardly any reason to suppose them true.

It is a point that did not fail to escape the notice of the most perceptive of the Arab philosophers, the *gazelle*, Abu Hamid Muhammad Al-Ghazâli. Writing with remarkable prescience about the scientists he called *naturalists*, and this in the eleventh century, Al Ghazâli was quite prepared to admit that their studies served to reveal "the wonders of creation." No one "can make a careful study of anatomy and

the wonderful uses of the members and organs [of the human body] without attaining to the necessary knowledge that there is a perfection in the order which the framer gave to the animal frame, and especially to that of man."

At once, Al Ghazâli withdraws the commendation that he has just offered. A complicated inference is set in play. The naturalists argue, he observes, that "intellectual power in man is dependent on [his] temperament." It is a point that neurophysiologists would today make by arguing that the mind (or the soul) is dependent on the brain, or even that the mind *is* the brain. From this it follows that "as the temperament is corrupted, *intellect is also corrupted and ceases to exist.*" When the brain is destroyed, so, too, the mind. Death and disease mark the end of the mind. On the naturalistic view, Al Ghazâli argues, "the soul dies and does not return to life." The globe of consciousness shrinks in each of us until it is no larger than a luminous point, and then it winks out.

But if this is a matter of fact, Al Ghazâli argues, it is a matter of profound scientific *and* moral consequence. Why should a limited and finite organ such as the human brain have the power to see into the heart of matter or mathematics? These are subjects that have nothing to do with the Darwinian business of scrabbling up the greasy pole of life. It is as if the liver, in addition to producing bile, were to demonstrate an unexpected ability to play the violin. This is a question that Darwinian biology has not yet an-

swered. By the same token, to place in doubt the survival of the soul is to “deny the future life—heaven, hell, resurrection, and judgment.” And this is to corrupt the system of justice by which life must be regulated, because “there does not remain any reward for obedience, or any punishment for sin.”

With this curb removed, Al Ghazâli predicts, men and women will give way to “a bestial indulgence of their appetites.”

As he so often does, Al Ghazâli has managed to express a very complex current of anxiety common not only in the Moslem world but in the world at large.

If it is hardly unknown, this medieval Arabic anxiety, it no longer controls the moral imagination in any secular society. It does not control *mine* and I suppose it does not control yours either. A great many men and women do suspect that scientific curiosity, if unchecked, might be a dangerous force. Like any dangerous force, scientific curiosity is dangerous because in the end it turns upon itself. The stories both of Faust and Frankenstein suggest that this is so. But a bestial indulgence of appetite? This is not a phrase, nor does it evoke an idea, that anyone in the West now finds plausible. Quite the contrary. It is *religion*, Christopher Hitchens claims, that is dangerous, because it is “the cause of dangerous sexual repression.” Short of gender insensitivity, what could be more

In this they were right.

What gives Karamazov's warning—for that is what it is—its power is just that it has become part of a most up-to-date hypothetical syllogism:

The first premise:

If God does not exist, then everything is permitted.

And the second:

If science is true, then God does not exist.

The conclusion:

If science is true, then everything is permitted.

Whereupon there is a return to a much older, vastly more somber vision of life and its constraints, one that serves to endow the phrase *bestial indulgence* with something more by way of content than popularly imagined.

In 2007, a number of scientists gathered in a conference entitled "Beyond Belief: Science, Religion, Reason, and Survival" in order to attack religious thought and congratulate one another on their fearlessness in so doing. The physicist Steven

Weinberg delivered an address. As one of the authors of the theory of electroweak unification, the work for which he was awarded a Nobel Prize, he is a figure of great stature. "Religion," he affirmed, "is an insult to human dignity. With or without it you would have good people doing good things and evil people doing evil things. *But for good people to do evil things, that takes religion*" (italics added).

In speaking thus, Weinberg was warmly applauded, not one member of his audience asking the question one might have thought pertinent: Just *who* has imposed on the suffering human race poison gas, barbed wire, high explosives, experiments in eugenics, the formula for Zyklon B, heavy artillery, pseudo-scientific justifications for mass murder, cluster bombs, attack submarines, napalm, inter continental ballistic missiles, military space platforms, and nuclear weapons?

If memory serves, it was not the Vatican.

If the facts about the twentieth century are an inconvenience for scientific atheism, suitably informed thought may always find a way to deny them. The psychologist Steven Pinker has thus introduced into the discussion the remarkable claim that "something in modernity and its cultural institutions has made us nobler."

The good news is unrelenting: “On the scale of decades, comprehensive data again paint a shockingly happy picture.”

“Some of the evidence,” Pinker goes on to say, “has been under our nose all along.” Conventional history has long shown that, in many ways, we have been getting kinder and gentler.

Cruelty as entertainment, human sacrifice to indulge superstition, slavery as a labor-saving device, conquest as the mission statement of government, genocide as a means of acquiring real estate, torture and mutilation as routine punishment, the death penalty for misdemeanors and differences of opinion, assassination as the mechanism of political succession, rape as the spoils of war, pogroms as outlets for frustration, homicide as the major form of conflict resolution—all were unexceptionable features of life for most of human history. But, today, they are rare to nonexistent in the West, far less common elsewhere than they used to be, concealed when they do occur, and widely condemned when they are brought to light.

Here is rather a more accurate assessment of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Anyone persuaded that they represent a “shockingly happy picture” should make the modest imaginative effort to discern the immense weight of human misery conveyed by these statistics: (Table 2.1)

A Shockingly Happy Picture by Excess Deaths

First World War (1914–18):	15 million
Russian Civil War (1917–22):	9 million
Soviet Union, Stalin's regime (1924–53):	20 million
Second World War (1937–45):	55 million
Chinese Civil War (1945–49):	2.5 million
regime People's Republic of China, Mao Zedong's (1949–75):	40 million
Tibet (1950 et seq.):	600,000
Congo Free State (1886–1908):	8 million
Mexico (1910–20):	1 million
Turkish massacres of Armenians (1915–23):	1.5 million
China (1917–28):	800,000
China, Nationalist era (1928–37):	3.1 million
Korean War (1950–53):	2.8 million
North Korea (1948 et seq.):	2 million
Rwanda and Burundi (1959–95):	1.35 million
Second Indochina War (1960–75):	3.5 million
Ethiopia (1962–92):	400,000
Nigeria (1966–70):	1 million
Bangladesh (1971):	1.25 million
Cambodia, Khmer Rouge (1975–78):	1.65 million
Mozambique (1975–92):	1 million
Afghanistan (1979–2001):	1.8 million
Iran–Iraq War (1980–88):	1 million
Sudan (1983 et seq.):	1.9 million
Kinshasa, Congo (1998 et seq.):	3.8 million
Philippines Insurgency (1899–1902):	220,000
Brazil (1900 et seq.):	500,000

Amazonia (1900–1912):	250,000
Portuguese colonies (1900–1925):	325,000
French colonies (1900–1940):	200,000
Japanese War (1904–5):	130,000
German East Africa (1905–7):	175,000
Libya (1911–31):	125,000
Balkan Wars (1912–13):	140,000
Greco–Turkish War (1919–22):	250,000
Spanish Civil War (1936–39):	365,000
Franco Regime (1939–75):	100,000
Abyssinian Conquest (1935–41):	400,000
Finnish War (1939–40):	150,000
Greek Civil War (1943–49):	158,000
Yugoslavia, Tito’s regime (1944–80):	200,000
First Indochina War (1945–54):	400,000
Colombia (1946–58):	200,000
India (1947):	500,000
Romania (1948–89):	150,000
Burma/Myanmar (1948 et seq.):	130,000
Algeria (1954–62):	537,000
Sudan (1955–72):	500,000
Guatemala (1960–96):	200,000
Indonesia (1965–66):	400,000
Uganda, Idi Amin’s regime (1972–79):	300,000
Vietnam, postwar Communist regime (1975 et seq.):	430,000
Angola (1975–2002):	550,000
East Timor, conquest by Indonesia (1975–99):	200,000
Lebanon (1975–90):	150,000
Cambodian Civil War (1978–91):	225,000

SS did *not* believe and what the Gestapo did *not* believe and what the NKVD did *not* believe and what the commissars, functionaries, swaggering executioners, Nazi doctors, Communist Party theoreticians, intellectuals, Brown Shirts, Black Shirts, gauleiters, and a thousand party hacks did *not* believe was that God was watching what they were doing.

And as far as we can tell, very few of those carrying out the horrors of the twentieth century worried overmuch that God was watching what they were doing either.

That is, after all, the *meaning* of a secular society.

One might think that in the dark panorama of wickedness, the Holocaust would above all other events give the scientific atheist pause. Hitler's Germany was a technologically sophisticated secular society, and Nazism itself, as party propagandists never tired of stressing, was "motivated by an ethic that prided itself on being scientific." The words are those of the historian Richard Weikart, who in his admirable treatise, *From Darwin to Hitler: Evolutionary Ethics, Eugenics, and Racism in Germany*, makes clear what anyone capable of reading the German sources already knew: A sinister current of influence ran from Darwin's theory of evolution to Hitler's policy of extermination. A generation of German biologists had read Darwin and concluded that competition between