

Religion

Apatheism Is More Damaging to Christianity Than Atheism and Antitheism

August 13, 2018 By [Paul Rowan Brian](#) and [Ben Sixsmith](#)

The greatest threat to Christianity is found not in the arguments of the atheist but in the assumptions of the apathetic. The “new apathy” is a more dangerous threat than the new atheism.



The “new atheism” fad of Richard Dawkins, Samuel Harris, Daniel Dennett, Christopher Hitchens, and dozens of other ornery antitheists created a lot of noise over the God Question, reaching its peak in the late 2000s. The loud, kaleidoscopic festival of fallacies served up by these commentators attracted a lot of media attention. Westerners had never had such a public

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and prominent debate on God's existence, and millions were seduced by superficially intriguing yet ultimately facile questions like "who created God?" and "is a prime mover not equally as plausible as a giant plate of pasta floating in space?"

Western liberals bemoaned the crimes of the religious, dreaming Lennonishly of a world without fanaticism—as if Stalin, Mao, Pol Pot and Hoxha had not amply proven that extremism can exist among the atheistic. There were religious responses, but too often they were simplistic and unconvincing, like the infamous "[crocoduck](#)." More nuanced and incisive rebuttals, such as Edward Feser's *The Last Superstition* and David Bentley Hart's *Atheist Delusions*, somehow never quite achieved the same recognition.

The questions and debates engaged in by the new atheists were often reductive, emotionalized and glib, but one does have to grant that they at least tackled the great questions of faith in their way.

For all that, the new atheism craze barely outlived the decade. Its rebellious pretensions about standing up to the evil delusions of religiosity began to seem absurd as its advocates were received not with harsh criticism and persecution but wild acclaim and a significant amount of agreement. Its supporters soon tired of tedious and repetitive debates, and they began to argue with each other about social justice and political correctness. Atheism had too little novelty to sustain media interest and too little substance to unite people for long. Now, the irate atheist is a figure of fun, lampooned as a fedora-wearing shut-in, and atheist stars like Dawkins admit that post-Christian Europe might turn out to be [much worse than Christian Europe](#).

But if the time of atheists has receded somewhat, why are fewer people in the West going to church (or any religious institution) on a weekly basis? Why is faith receding from the public square?

The New Apathy

The answer lies in the grey zone between believers and atheists. If you want to find the real wolf steering sheep away from the flock, look not to fedora-bedecked atheists, but to your average *apatheist*.

While new atheism has undoubtedly been disastrous for Christians, Jews, Muslims, and other religious communities, leading countless men and women into nonbelief, the question of God's existence was at least considered *relevant* for the new atheists. Today, however, the greatest threat to Christianity is found not in the arguments of the atheist but in the assumptions of the apathetic. The danger is not a hostile reception of belief in God but an incurious indifference to the idea.

Although humanity's concept of God or the gods has changed and progressed throughout history, as recounted in Robert Wright's book [The Evolution of God](#), human beings have always cared whether or not there is a divine power ruling over them and wanted to know the attributes and nature of that divinity. Today, increasingly, that is not the case. With roots in the practical atheism and deism of the Enlightenment, "apatheism" is embodied in French philosopher Denis Diderot's [famous remark](#) that "it is very important not to mistake hemlock for parsley, but to believe or not believe in God is not important at all."

Church attendance in America has been on a [steep decline for the past decade](#), with especially eyebrow-raising numbers among the young. A full 33 percent of twenty-one-to-twenty-nine-year-olds report that they are non-religious, and lower numbers of Catholics attended weekly Mass between 2014 to 2017 (average 39 percent) than between 2005 to 2008 (average 45 percent). Only an estimated 25 percent of American Catholics between 21 and 29 years old attend weekly Mass. Europe is even more secular, with [a majority of sixteen to twenty-nine-year-olds reporting no religious beliefs](#). As the Public Religion Research Institute notes, there has been a growing "[rise of the unaffiliated](#)" in America. Many people don't

specifically disbelieve in the supernatural or God: they just don't care and don't want to talk or think about it. In the United States, apatheism is especially prevalent among the young, where "overall, religiously unaffiliated Americans are significantly younger than religiously affiliated Americans."

The Rise of Apatheism

K. Robert Beshears of the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary [writes in "Engaging the Western Pantheon of Spiritual Indifference"](#): "I came to the realization that spiritual indifference was not simply an isolated phenomenon in the lives of a few individuals. It was permeating an entire culture." Beshears discerns a distinctive "theology" that unites the new apatheists. In his view, the three new "gods" of the West form an [unholy trinity of apatheism](#): "*inratio* (the apatheistic god of a lack of reason to believe), *incausam* (the apatheistic god of a lack of motivation to believe), and *involuntas* (the apatheistic god of a lack of will to believe)." *Inratio* holds that science and secularism give us all we need. *Incausam* counsels let somebody else worry about it, and *involuntas* mutters that religion is just too much drama, man. Worshipping only one of these gods can—and often does—lead directly to worship of the other two.

We have all met the apathetic. Their response to the question of God's existence is a shrug, a sigh, or a grin. There are two main kinds of apatheists: apathetic agnostics and apathetic atheists. Apathetic agnostics believe it is not worth debating whether or not God exists; perhaps because human beings cannot know the answer and perhaps because *if* God exists, He does not care whether one believes in Him. What's true is what you make true, as represented metaphorically by "ideas" like the devil or God, according to them. Trevor Hedberg has [defended](#) "practical apatheism" largely on the grounds that there is no reason to think there would be harmful consequences to ignoring the question. (His

philosophical defence for apathy depends, ironically, on a great deal of analysis and reflection.)

Apathetic atheists believe it is quite obvious that God does not exist, but that there is no point debating it, either because they believe that the argument has already been won or because their “live and let live” philosophy entails a mild tolerance of belief in God. Alex Nichols’s *Baffler* [essay](#) “New Atheism’s Idiot Heirs” mocks “a certain species of idiot” who is “devoted to the notion that his disbelief in God imbued him with intellectual superiority,” but it is the *manner* not the *message* he dislikes. Many apatheists have no more respect for arguments for the existence of God than do Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, or Daniel Dennett; they are simply more polite.

Cultural Christianity and the Power of “Meh”

Even when influential public figures do take religion seriously, it is far more often as a source of metaphor, tradition, poetry, and prose than as a response to the objective fact of God’s existence. (Even the so-called “Church of Satan,” spells out on its website that members don’t believe in the Biblical Satan but just mean “Satan” as a symbol of embracing self-centeredness and rejecting external authority.)

Some have justly welcomed the “cultural Christianity” of clinical psychologist-turned-motivational speaker Jordan Peterson, with his promotion of traditional values and enthusiasm for Biblical narratives. But it should be recognised that Peterson equivocates at length on the matter of God’s existence, Christ’s resurrection, and other fundamental matters. To ask the question is, for him, to miss the point. The Bible matters less for its truth claims than for its symbolic resonance and moral instruction. Much as this is a compelling secular perspective, it obviously should not be enough for Christians. The Biblical God demands belief in Christ as savior, not just a pragmatic acceptance of Christian values. We are called to worship and obey Him, not just to clean our rooms, get married, and have

kids. We do not have life for worldly so much as Heavenly ends. And, of course, if we have no belief in God, there are weaker restraints on our temptations. The substance of faith can be hollowed out, no matter how many Peterson lectures you imbibe.

In the Book of Acts (17:22-31), the Apostle Paul exhorts the “men of Athens” to come to faith in “the God who made the world and everything in it,” telling the assembled crowds that He “is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by human hands.” Paul’s starting point with these men was that they already had a religious life and respect for the divine. They simply were unsure how to direct their worship, carving inscriptions to “an unknown God.” Paul’s preaching of the Gospel was viable in the marketplace of divine ideas because there *was* a marketplace of divine ideas. If the crowd had been apatheists, Paul’s sermon would have been greeted by amusement and indifference: by “meh.”

This is the danger of apatheism: *this is the power of “meh.”*

The Christian Response

Apathetic as our culture is toward belief in God, it can still be hostile toward God affecting our political or ethical beliefs. In Britain, for example, [Tim Farron](#), the ineffectual leader of the Liberal Democrats, was not criticized for being a Christian but for not denying that he thought gay sex was sinful. Being religious is fine, so long as one’s religious values are easily aligned with our secular norms. While new atheists attacked religion at its roots, apathetic nonbelievers chop off the branches. The apatheist shirks addressing core concepts, but is fine denouncing anything that infringes on his fuzzy secular way of life.

It is, then, essential for Christians that they not grow complacent with the relative cultural calm of a slowdown of new atheism or ostensible gains in the public square, such as the [recent Supreme Court decision on *Masterpiece Cakeshop*](#). The case for God’s existence should be first and

foremost, because without that the cultural position of religion in public life will inevitably slide away. Christians and other religious individuals ought to resist the temptation to mock new atheists, and instead draw inspiration from their rhetorical efforts. By this we do not mean they should imitate their sloppy style and insulting approach but their more admirable features: an unwavering insistence on the value of truth and a willingness to enduring discomfiting discussion for the sake of the truth. Books like Edward Feser's *Five Proofs of the Existence of God* are a welcome sign of life in the debate.

Of course, belief in God need not be acquired through argument or analysis. It can be a far more emotional experience. Yet what theism has lost is intellectual respect. In *God's Funeral*, A.N. Wilson documented the slow secularization of Western cultural elites and the effects of that process on institutions, and scholarship, and art. In our post-Christian era, the intelligentsia have become increasingly arrogant, introspective, and apathetic. If the Christian faith is to thrive in the West, it will be at least as important for Christians to shake apatheists from their stupor as it will be to respond to the antitheists' scorn.

Christians should also work to challenge the apatheists' emotional complacency. This can be addressed by questioning the secular worldview and its ultimate *telos*—or lack thereof. What is the point of caring about God? Well, what is the point of living a purely material life without knowing where you stand? Even if the outcome of challenging apatheists can be atheism, courageously confronting the great questions of faith is always better than the lazy, lukewarm status quo.

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