

# Newsweek

Americans answered the atrocities of September 11, overwhelmingly, with faith. Attacked in the name of God, they turned to God for comfort; in the week after the attacks, nearly 70 percent said they were praying more than usual.

The New Naysayers; In the midst of religious revival, three scholars argue that atheism is smarter.

By Jerry Adler

2155 words

11 September 2006

Newsweek

U.S. Edition

47

English

Copyright (C) 2006 Newsweek Inc. All Rights Reserved.

Americans answered the atrocities of September 11, overwhelmingly, with faith. Attacked in the name of God, they turned to God for comfort; in the week after the attacks, nearly 70 percent said they were praying more than usual. Confronted by a hatred that seemed inexplicable, Jerry Falwell and Pat Robertson proclaimed that God was mad at America because it harbored feminists, gays and civil libertarians. Sam Harris, then a 34-year-old graduate student in neuroscience, had a different reaction. On Sept. 12, he began a book. If, he reasoned, young men were slaughtering people in the name of religion--something that had been going on since long before 2001, of course--then perhaps the problem was religion itself. The book would be called "The End of Faith," which to most Americans probably sounds like a lament. To Harris it is something to be encouraged.

This was not a message most Americans wanted to hear, before or after 9/11. Atheists "are seen as a threat to the American way of life by a large portion of the American public," according to a study by Penny Edgell, a sociologist at the University of Minnesota. In a recent NEWSWEEK Poll, Americans said they believed in God by a margin of 92 to 6--only 2 percent answered "don't know"--and only 37 percent said they'd be willing to vote for an atheist for president. (That's down from 49 percent in a 1999 Gallup poll--which also found that more Americans would vote for a homosexual than an atheist.) "The End of Faith" struggled to find a publisher, and even after Norton agreed to bring it out in 2004, Harris says there were editors who refused to come to meetings with him. But after winning the

PEN/Martha Albrand award for nonfiction, the book sold 270,000 copies. Harris's scathing "Letter to a Christian Nation" will be published this month with a press run of 150,000. Someone is listening, even if he is mostly preaching, one might say, to the unconverted.

This year also saw the publication in February of "Breaking the Spell," by the philosopher Daniel C. Dennett, which asks how and why religions became ubiquitous in human society. The obvious answer--"Because they're true"--is foreclosed, Dennett says, by the fact that they are by and large mutually incompatible. Even to study "religion as a natural phenomenon," the subtitle of Dennett's book, is to deprive it of much of its mystery and power. And next month the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins ("The Selfish Gene") weighs in with "The God Delusion," a book that extends an argument he advanced in the days after 9/11. After hearing once too often that "[t]o blame the attacks on Islam is like blaming Christianity for the fighting in Northern Ireland," Dawkins responded: Precisely. "It's time to get angry," he wrote, "and not only with Islam."

Dawkins and Harris are not writing polite demurrals to the time-honored beliefs of billions; they are not issuing pleas for tolerance or moderation, but bone-rattling attacks on what they regard as a pernicious and outdated superstition. (In the spirit of scientific evenhandedness, both would call themselves agnostic, although as Dawkins says, he's agnostic about God the same way he's agnostic about the existence of fairies.) They ask: where do people get their idea of God? From the Bible or the Qur'an. "Tell a devout Christian ... that frozen yogurt can make a man invisible," Harris writes, "and he is likely to require as much evidence as anyone else, and to be persuaded only to the extent that you give it. Tell him that the book he keeps by his bed was written by an invisible deity who will punish him with fire for eternity if he fails to accept its every incredible claim about the universe, and he seems to require no evidence whatsoever." He asks: How can anyone believe in a benevolent and omnipotent God who permits a tsunami to swallow 180,000 innocent people in a few hours? How does it advance our understanding of the universe to suppose that it was created by a supernatural being who communicates only through the one-way process of revelation?

These are not brand-new arguments, of course, and believers have well-practiced replies to them, although in some cases, such as the persistence of evil and suffering (the "theodicy" problem), the responses are still mostly works in progress. Neither author claims much success in arguing anyone out of a belief in God, but they consider it sufficient reward when they hear from people who were encouraged by their books to give voice to their private doubts. All the same, this is highly inflammatory material. Dawkins acknowledges that many readers will expect, or hope, to see him burning in hell (citing Aquinas as authority for the belief that souls in heaven will get a view of hell for their enjoyment). Harris says he has turned down requests for the rights to translate "The End of Faith" into Arabic or Urdu. "I think it would be a death sentence for any translator," he says. Harris himself--who traveled the world for a dozen years studying Eastern religions and mysticism before returning to finish his undergraduate degree at Stanford--asks that the name of his current university not be publicized.

These authors have no geopolitical strategy to advance; they're interested in the metaphysics of belief, not the politics of the First Amendment. It's the idea of putting trust in God they object to, not the motto on the nickel. This sets them apart from America's best-known atheist activist, the late Madalyn Murray O'Hair, a controversial eccentric who won a landmark lawsuit against mandatory classroom prayers in 1963 and went on to found the group now called American Atheists. When a chaplain came to her hospital room once and asked what he could do for her, she notoriously replied, "Drop dead." Dawkins, an urbane Oxfordian, would regard that as appalling manners. "I have no problem with people wishing me a Happy Christmas," he says, expressing puzzlement over the passions provoked in America by the question of how store clerks greet customers.

But if the arguments of Dawkins and Harris are familiar, they also bring to bear new scientific evidence on the issue. Evolution isn't necessarily incompatible with faith, even with evangelical Christianity. Several new books--"Evolution and Christian Faith" by the Stanford biologist Joan Roughgarden and "The Language of God" by geneticist Francis Collins--uphold both. But to skeptics like Dawkins--and to Biblical literalists on the other side--Darwin appears to rob God of credit for his crowning achievement, which is us. In particular, evolutionary psychologists believe they are closing in on one of the remaining mysteries of life, the universal "moral law" that underlies our intuitive notions of good and evil. Why do we recognize that acts such as murder are wrong? To Collins, it's evidence of God's handiwork--the very perception that led him to become a Christian.

But Dawkins attempts to show how the highest of human impulses, such as empathy, charity and pity, could have evolved by the same mechanism of natural selection that created the thumb. Biologists understand that the driving force in evolution is the survival and propagation of our genes. They may impel us to instinctive acts of goodness, Dawkins writes, even when it seems counterproductive to our own interests--say, by risking our life to save someone else. Evolutionary psychology can explain how selfless behavior might have evolved. The recipient may be a blood relation who carries some of our own genes. Or our acts may earn us future gratitude, or a reputation for bravery that makes us more desirable as mates. Of course, the essence of the moral law is that it applies even to strangers. Missionaries who devote themselves to saving the lives of Third World peasants have no reasonable expectation of being repaid in this world. But, Dawkins goes on, the impulse for generosity must have evolved while humans lived in small bands in which almost everyone was related, so that goodness became the default human aspiration. This is a rebuke not merely to believers who insist that God must be the source of all goodness--but equally to the 19th-century atheism of Nietzsche, who assumed that the death of God meant the end of conventional morality.

But Dawkins, brilliant as he is, overlooks something any storefront Baptist preacher might have told him. "If there is no God, why be good?" he asks rhetorically, and responds: "Do you really mean the only reason you try to be good is to gain God's approval and reward? That's not morality, that's just sucking up." That's clever. But millions of Christians and Muslims believe that it was precisely God who turned them away from a life of immorality. Dawkins, of course, thinks they are deluding themselves. He is correct that the social utility of religion doesn't prove anything about the existence of God. But for all his erudition, he seems not to have spent much time among ordinary Christians, who could have told him what God has meant to

them.

It is not just extremists who earn the wrath of Dawkins and Harris. Their books are attacks on religious "moderates" as well--indeed, the very idea of moderation. The West is not at war with "terrorism," Harris asserts in "The End of Faith"; it is at war with Islam, a religion whose holy book, "on almost every page ... prepares the ground for religious conflict." Christian fundamentalists, he says, have a better handle on the problem than moderates: "They know what it's like to really believe that their holy book is the word of God, and there's a paradise you can get to if you die in the right circumstances. They're not left wondering what is the 'real' cause of terrorism." As for the Bible, Harris, like the fundamentalists, prefers a literal reading. He quotes at length the passages in the Old and New Testaments dealing with how to treat slaves. Why, he asks, would anyone take moral instruction from a book that calls for stoning your children to death for disrespect, or for heresy, or for violating the Sabbath? Obviously our culture no longer believes in that, he adds, so why not agree that science has made it equally unnecessary to invoke God to explain the Sun, or the weather, or your own existence?

Even agnostic moderates get raked over--like the late Stephen Jay Gould, the evolutionary biologist who attempted to broker a truce between science and religion in his controversial 1999 book "Rocks of Ages." Gould proposed that science and religion retreat to separate realms, the former concerned with empirical questions about the way the universe works, while the latter pursues ultimate meaning and ethical precepts. But, Dawkins asks, unless the Bible is right in its historical and metaphysical claims, why should we grant it authority in the moral realm? And can science really abjure any interest in the claims of religion? Did Jesus come back from the dead, or didn't he? If so, how did God make it happen? Collins says he is satisfied with the answer that the Resurrection is a miracle, permanently beyond our understanding. That Collins can hold that belief, while simultaneously working at the very frontiers of science as the head of the Human Genome Project, is what amazes Harris.

Believers can take comfort in the fact that atheism barely amounts to a "movement." American Atheists, which fights in the courts and legislatures for the rights of nonbelievers, has about 2,500 members and a budget of less than \$1 million. On the science Web site Edge.org, the astronomer Carolyn Porco offers the subversive suggestion that science itself should attempt to supplant God in Western culture, by providing the benefits and comforts people find in religion: community, ceremony and a sense of awe. "Imagine congregations raising their voices in tribute to gravity, the force that binds us all to the Earth, and the Earth to the Sun, and the Sun to the Milky Way," she writes. Porco, who is deeply involved in the Cassini mission to Saturn, finds spiritual fulfillment in exploring the cosmos. But will that work for the rest of the world--for "the people who want to know that they're going to live forever and meet Mom and Dad in heaven? We can't offer that." If Dawkins, Dennett and Harris are right, the five-century-long competition between science and religion is sharpening. People are choosing sides. And when that happens, people get hurt.