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BELIEF & UNBELIEF (PART I)

Jack Hayford is a well known Pentecostal pastor who gained national attention as one of the keynote speakers at Promise-Keepers rallies, as well as one of the men assigned to monitor Ted Haggard, the former president of the National Association of Evangelicals, after his fall from grace. In a 2006 interview with Christianity Today.com, Hayford said that we ought to open up the Lord's Supper to unbelievers. By inviting them to participate in communion, we would be demonstrating hospitality!!! The Apostle Paul took an entirely different position on the subject (I Cor. 11:27-32). Unbelievers have no right coming to the Lord's Table because they come in unbelief. Why is belief THE determining qualification for admission to the Lord's Table? Unbelief comes in many forms. The most radical is of course, *atheism*. The Apostle (citing Isa. 53:1) asked the question, "Who has *believed* ..." One of the most obvious "signs of the times" is the rise of the *New Atheism* with its popular appeal to our thoroughly secularized society. There have always been small bands of atheists among us, some more outspoken than others (Robert Ingersoll and Madeline Murray O'Hair quickly come to mind), but we are witnessing today the growth of Atheism for the masses. The rally cry of the new Atheism, "we must throw off the shackles of religion and emancipate ourselves from theism and all the horrors it has inflicted on humanity!" has struck a responsive cord in a world where religion is increasingly seen as creating more problems than it solves. The magazine WIRED, a new high-tech glossy publication had as its cover story in its most recent issue (Nov. 2006), "The New Atheism: No Heaven. No Hell. Just Science: Inside the Crusade Against Religion." The article highlighted the efforts of leading atheists such as Richard Dawkins, evolutionary biologist and distinguished professor at the University of Oxford and the author of [The God Delusion](#); Samuel Harris a neuroscientist and author of [The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and The Future of Reason](#); and the NY Times best-seller, [Letter to a Christian Nation](#); Daniel Dennett, professor of the philosophy of Science, Tufts University and author of [Breaking The Spell: Religion as the Natural Phenomenon](#); and [Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life](#). But this article does not just focus on academic atheists. Also profiled was the comedy team of Penn & Teller. The article tells us, "A person who wants to believe in science or reason, they say, can't cling to faith of any sort. Sometimes they'll even sign autographs with 'There is no God.'" In interviews they've called religion a scam, and Teller once accosted proselytizers, trashing their leaflets and admonishing them to quit wasting their lives. A few years back, a middle-aged woman took a swing at Penn when he talked smack about her pastor after a show. 'If you want to be a performer, you need to speak from your heart,' Penn says. 'And the instant you speak from your heart, you'll find that somebody else's heart is different.' Over the years, they've included in their act heavy doses of what Teller calls pro-science, pro-skeptic banter – their current show features a few references to their lack of faith (including a quick moment in a knife-throwing gag in which Penn's fear of getting stabbed in his genitals becomes a riff on how church types lack balls). They get their jabs in elsewhere, too. In 2003, the pair aired an uproarious episode of their Showtime program *Penn & Teller: Bullshit!* That took aim at creationism and became a fan favorite on Goggle Video. The bit set the stage for a flag-waving essay on atheism that Penn taped for National Public Radio's 'This I Believe' last year – a satirical segment cleverly focused entirely on what the magician refuses to

believe" (p. 190). These new atheists are very aggressive, and are particularly hostile to Christianity. Harris declares, "I have set out to demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms." In and of themselves, these 'high brow' atheists are really not a serious threat. Oh, they will no doubt be looked to by other academic types for intellectual ammunition, but beyond that, *these* kinds of atheistic arguments can be (and have been) answered. But more potent, by far, is the way today's atheists score points by pointing to the moral failures and hypocrisy of their theistic opponents. Naturally, the recent high-profile case of Ted Haggard, pastor of a mega-church and president of the National Association of Evangelicals is gleefully highlighted in the mainstream media, and Christians everywhere are tarred and feathered, mocked and end up with a black eye. Harper's Magazine (May 2005) devoted its cover-story to "Soldiers of Christ: Inside America's Most Powerful Mega-church?," which profiled Haggard's New Life Church in Colorado Springs, Colo. Haggard's powerful political connections as well as His influential voice on social issues like abortion and homosexual marriage was emphasized. Shortly after this piece appeared, Christianity Today (Nov, 2005) had as it's lead story a photo of Haggard on the cover with the caption "A New Kind of Evangelical." How true, how so very true. The article says, "Haggard believes in territorial spirits, demonic oppression, visions, and voices from heaven" (p.41). The article goes on to tell us that, "Haggard represents a new direction and a new kind of evangelical leader. He pastors an independent, charismatic mega-church. He has no advanced degrees" (p. 43, Haggard did graduate with a B.A. from Oral Roberts University). Haggard is further described as a thorough-going optimist and as someone who is a results-driven pragmatist. Harpers Magazine likewise underscored this aspect of Haggard, who said (and this is most revealing) he learned that everything, including spirituality, can be understood as a commodity (p. 48). The acclaimed 19th century evangelist and notorious Pelagian Charles Finney, could not have said it better. In what way is Haggard's fall (and those like Jimmy Swaggart, Jim Baker, as well as the scandals surrounding the Roman Catholic church and pedophile priests) significant in the public perception that perhaps the new atheists have a point – these so-called Christians are all a bunch of phonies – and maybe belief in God is bogus too!

I. The Denial of God in Modern Atheism

1. The autonomy of the modern age as the basis for contemporary atheism. Atheism in the proper sense, which denies the transcendent and everything divine, became possible only in the modern age. It actually presupposes Christianity and to that extent it is very much a post Christian phenomenon. The emancipation of law and morality from the theological contexts that had given them their foundations meant a new situation for religion. Furthermore, once the theological underpinnings of ethics are removed, the whole framework of ethical behavior is in peril of collapsing. If religion is no longer the necessary presupposition of law and order as well as ethics and morals in society, then it inevitably becomes merely a private affair. Once the various secular spheres had been freed of their theological connections, religion comes to be seen increasingly as a matter of the interior life of the individual. It becomes a matter of subjective piety, a religion of the heart. Regrettably, the way was paved by pietism and the various revivalist movements that have come more and more the most dominant feature of today's Evangelicalism. In fact, this is the very stream of evangelicalism that Haggard is identified with.

Four types of atheism:

- (A.) Autonomy of nature and the secular spheres (culture, science, art, the economy, politics, etc.) for the understanding and functioning of which there is increasingly less need of the God-hypothesis. The more advanced a society becomes, the more dependent it becomes on science and technology to address all the issues confronting it. More and more when the difficult issues of life are

addressed, they are done so from this perspective. In other words, God loses his function in a world like this.

- (B). Autonomy of the subject, whose dignity and freedom militate against the acceptance of an omnipotent God. This concept of human freedom demands that even if 'God' is allowed to exist, the divine must recognize the sovereignty of human autonomy.
- (C). Atheism based on the question of theodicy. This is captured by Rabbi Harold S. Kushner's best-selling book of a few years back, When Bad Things Happen To Good People. Kushner's thesis was this: The belief that God is good and all-powerful has to be revisited. Kushner insists that God is good, but cannot answer the question of why bad things happen which obviously God can't control, therefore God is not all-powerful. The atheist rightly laughs at this. What kind of God is that? Sadly the group of Evangelicals that goes by the label Open-view Theists end up advocating a God who does NOT know the future and is often as surprised as everyone else when tragic events happen. Again, atheists double over in laughter at such proposals, imagine a deity that is both feeble and ignorant!
- (D). Restricted Atheism. This is actually not pure atheism, since it does allow for belief in some sort of deity or higher-power – but it categorically rejects the existence of one particular sort of theism: The God of the Bible as set forth in the teachings of Orthodox Christianity. That God, restricted atheism demands, does not exist.

In addition, there is an atheism characterized by indifference – no concern for religious questions or issues of the serious nature of life. This is *practical* as over against the *theoretical* atheism and is far more common. A brief look now at the two streams out of which modern atheism flows:

1. Atheism in the name of the autonomy of nature

This development of pantheistic systems in the Enlightenment is traced back to the Jewish philosopher Spinoza, who was said to be 'God-intoxicated,' but only because he conceived of God as comprising all reality and the essential immanence of the divine in all things. The characteristic religious philosophy of the Enlightenment was not, however, pantheism but deism. Pantheism and deism could not have the last word, for both contained a latent tendency to atheism. This has made a lasting impression on today's atheists, primarily because they operate with a 'post-modern' mind set but do so with decidedly rationalistic assumptions, i.e. strict materialism, uniformitarianism.

2. Atheism in the name of human autonomy

This in turn is rooted in the notion that all truth is a social construct. Individuals are free to define their concept of truth for themselves, as they see fit and in light of their own context and experiences. This has tremendous appeal to post-moderns. It can be traced back to the German philosopher Fredrick Nietzsche, who coined the expression, "God is dead." What Nietzsche meant by that is not that God suffers from the same kind of mortality as the rest of us, rather he was saying that God died of pity, particularly as God was described in the same kind of pietism that we referred to earlier. In other words, Nietzsche found that the type of Christianity that was so common in his day (as it is in our own) reduced God to such a level that he was a pathetic figure and like a decrepit old man, and his demise was inevitable. But an

equally tragic side effect to the death of God, as Francis Schaeffer correctly saw, is the death of man, or to be more precise the death of the meaning of life, which produces nihilism with its dreaded emptiness and hopelessness.

CONCLUSION: There have been a number of significant responses to the new atheism: Table Talk devoted an issue to the subject, as did Modern Reformation.¹ More importantly, a sizeable library has been published addressing this as well.² Mohler, in his recent book, points out eight characteristics that set the New Atheism apart from the older forms, and that frame its challenge to Christian belief.

- (1) The New Atheism is extremely aggressive and media savvy.
- (2) The New Atheism is specifically hostile to Christianity. It is the God of the Bible that they despise.
- (3) In connection with this, the New Atheism explicitly rejects with great vigor the Person of Christ, accusing Jesus of being evil for His claims.
- (4) The New Atheism grounds its claims by appealing to the conclusive finding of science. Science, they claim, has liberated the world from the very notion of God.
- (5) The New Atheism categorically refuses to tolerate the slightest notion of the divine.
- (6) The New Atheism considers all forms of theism dangerous.
- (7) The New Atheism agenda includes questioning the rights of parents to instill in their children any religious beliefs.
- (8) Finally, the New Atheism argues that religion is the worst form of tyranny and the greatest threat to human freedom.³

Now, should atheists be invited to participate in the Lord's Supper like Hayford says they should? They despise everything about the Lord's Table. This is the essence of unbelief. It raises the clenched fist of human autonomy in God's face and shouts, "Away with You!"

ENDNOTES

¹ Table Talk (March, 2008); Modern Reformation (Vol. 17, No. 2, March/April 2008).

² Among them I would recommend; R. Albert Mohler, Jr., Atheism Remix: A Christian Confronts the New Atheists (Crossway, 2008); R. C. Sproul, If There's a God, Why Are There Atheists? (Ligonier, 1997); Ravi Zacharias, The Real Face of Atheism (Baker, 2004); John Blanchard, Has Science Got Rid of God? (Evangelical Press, 2004); David Robertson, The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths (Christian Focus, 2007) and Alister and Joanna McGrath, The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine (IVP, 2007)

³ Mohler, pp. 54-63.