

THE IPOD STORY

Steve Jobs and the  
birth of an icon

DO I KNOW YOU?

Why Some People  
Can't See Faces

COOL GEAR

Best of Wired's  
Gadget Lab

PULL THE PLUG

The Dark  
Side of  
the Web

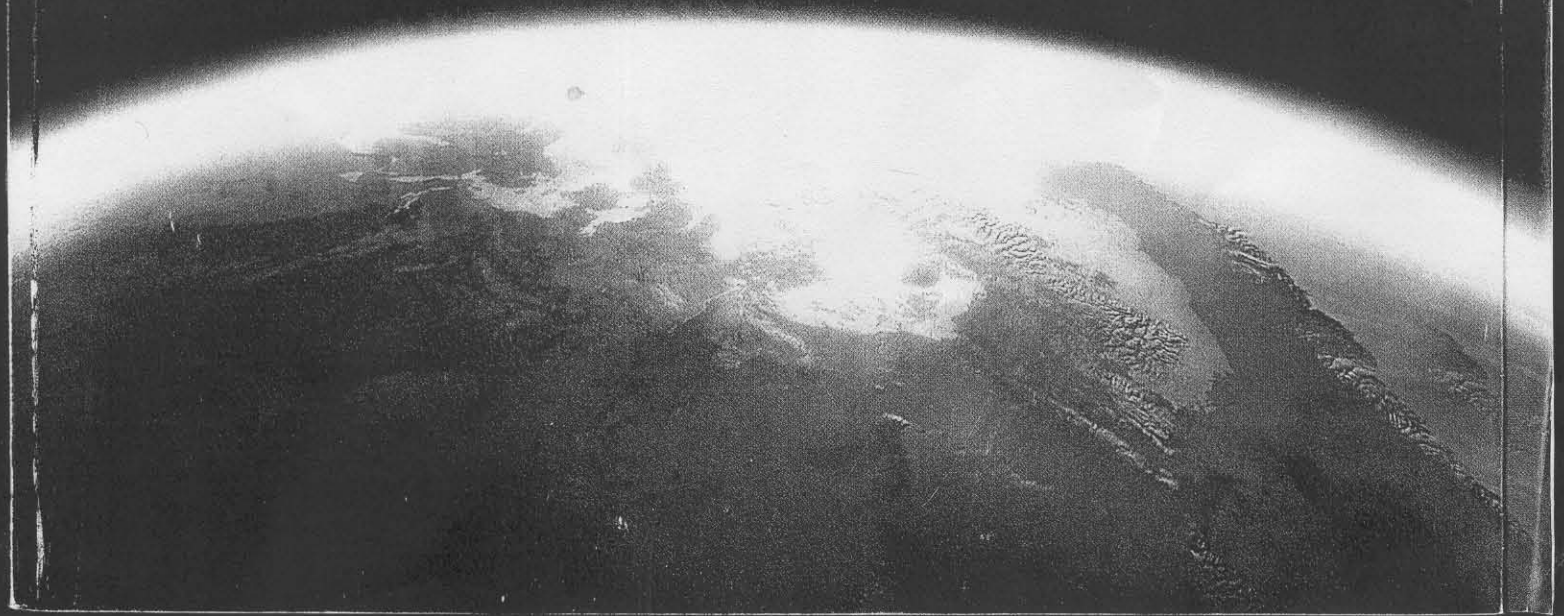
# WIRED

NOVEMBER 2006 BELIEVE IT OR NOT

## The New

**No Heaven. No Hell. Just Science.**

INSIDE THE CRUSADE AGAINST RELIGION



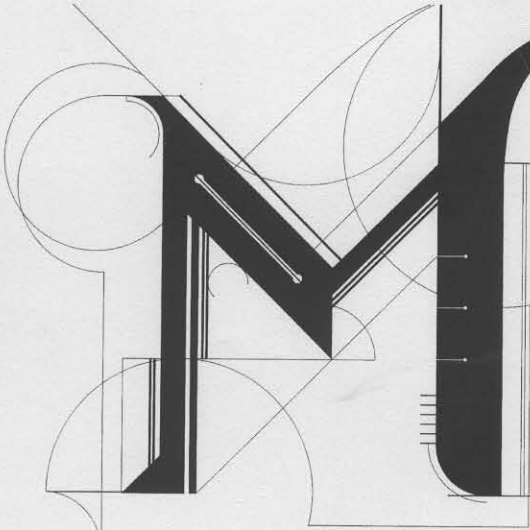
WIRED

# The Church of the Non- Believers

A band of intellectual brothers is mounting a crusade against belief in God. Are they winning converts, or merely preaching to the choir?

BY GARY WOLF | PORTRAITS BY PETER YANG





## Y FRIENDS, I MUST ASK YOU AN IMPORTANT QUESTION TODAY

Where do you stand on God? ¶ It's a question you may prefer not to be asked. But I'm afraid I have no choice. We find ourselves, this very autumn, three and a half centuries after the intellectual martyrdom of Galileo, caught up in a struggle of ultimate importance, when each one of us must make a commitment. It is time to declare our position. ¶ This is the challenge posed by the New Atheists. We are called upon: we lax agnostics, we noncommittal nonbelievers, we vague deists who would be embarrassed to defend antique absurdities like the Virgin Birth or the notion that Mary rose into heaven without dying, or any other blatant myth; we are called out, we fence-sitters, and told to help exorcise this debilitating curse: the curse of faith.

The New Atheists will not let us off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but *respect* for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking.

Three writers have sounded this call to arms. They are Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. A few months ago, I set out to talk with them. I wanted to find out what it would mean to enlist in the war against faith.

**OXFORD IS THE CAPITAL** of reason, its Jerusalem. The walls glint gold in the late afternoon, as waves or particles of light scatter off the ancient bricks. Logic Lane, a tiny road under a low, right-angled bridge, cuts sharply across to the place where Robert Boyle formulated his law on gases and Robert Hooke first used a microscope to see a living cell. A few steps away is the memorial to Percy Bysshe Shelley. Here he lies, sculpted naked in stone, behind the walls of the university that expelled him almost 200 years ago - for atheism.

Richard Dawkins, the leading light of the New Atheism movement, lives and works in a large brick house just 20 minutes away from the Shelley memorial. Dawkins, formerly a fellow at New College, is the Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science. He is 65 years old, and the book that made him famous, *The Selfish Gene*, dates from well back in the last century. The opposition it earned from rival theorizers and popularizers of Charles Darwin, such as Stephen Jay Gould, is fading into history. Gould died in 2002, and Dawkins, while acknowledging their battles, praised his influence on scientific culture. They were allies in the battle against creationism. Dawkins, however, has been far more belligerent in counter-

attack. His most recent book is called *The God Delusion*.

Dawkins' style of debate is as maddening as it is reasonable. A few months earlier, in front of an audience of graduate students from around the world, Dawkins took on a famous geneticist and a renowned neurosurgeon on the question of whether God was real. The geneticist and the neurosurgeon advanced their best theistic arguments: Human consciousness is too remarkable to have evolved; our moral sense defies the selfish imperatives of nature; the laws of science themselves display an order divine; the existence of God can never be disproved by purely empirical means.

Dawkins rejected all these claims, but the last one - that science could never disprove God - provoked him to sarcasm. "There's an infinite number of things that we can't disprove," he said. "You might say that because science can explain just about everything but not quite, it's wrong to say therefore we don't need God. It is also, I suppose, wrong to say we don't need the Flying Spaghetti Monster, unicorns, Thor, Wotan, Jupiter, or fairies at the bottom of the garden. There's an infinite number of things that some people at one time or another have believed in, and an infinite number of things that *nobody* has believed in. If there's not the slightest reason to believe in any of those things, why bother? The onus is on somebody who says, I want to believe in God, Flying Spaghetti Monster, fairies, or whatever it is. It is not up to us to disprove it."

Science, after all, is an empirical endeavor that traffics in probabilities. The probability of God, Dawkins says, while not zero, is vanishingly small. He is confident that no Flying Spaghetti Monster exists. Why should the notion of some deity that we inherited from the Bronze Age get more respectful treatment?

Dawkins has been talking this way for

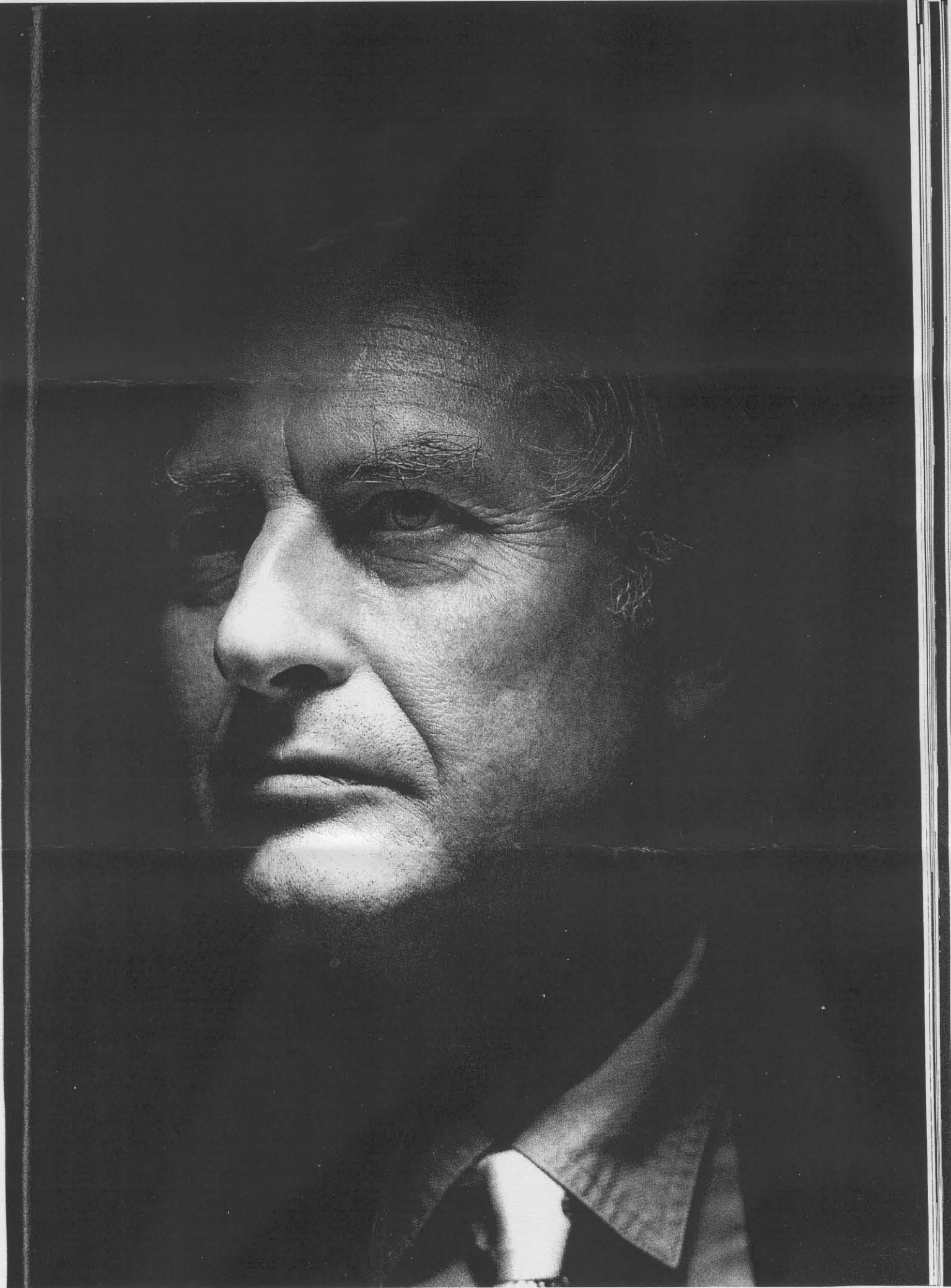
years, and his best comebacks are decade old. For instance, the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a variant of the tiny orbiting teapot used by Bertrand Russell for similar rhetorical duty back in 1952. Dawkins is perfectly aware that atheism is an ancient doctrine and that little of what he has to say is likely to change the terms of this stereotyped debate. But he continues to go at it. His true interlocutors are not the Christians he confronts directly but the wavering nonbelievers or quasi believers among his listeners - people like me, potential New Atheists who might be inspired by his example.

"I'm quite keen on the politics of persuading people of the virtues of atheism," Dawkins says, after we get settled in one of the high-ceilinged, ground-floor rooms. He asks me to keep an eye on his bike, which sits just behind him, on the other side of a window overlooking the street. "The number of nonreligious people in the US is something nearer to 30 million than 20 million," he says. "That's more than all the Jews in the world put together. I think we're in the same position the gay movement was in a few decades ago. There was a need for people to come out. The more people who came out, the more people had the courage to come out. I think that's the case with atheists. They are more numerous than anybody realizes."

Dawkins looks forward to the day when the first US politician is honest about being an atheist. "Highly intelligent people are mostly atheists," he says. "Not a single member of either house of Congress admit to being an atheist. It just doesn't add up. Either they're stupid, or they're lying. And have they got a motive for lying? Of course they've got a motive! Everybody knows that an atheist can't get elected."

### RICHARD DAWKINS

Evolutionary biologist, University of Oxford  
Latest provocation: *The God Delusion*



When atheists finally begin to gain some power, what then? Here is where Dawkins' analogy breaks down. Gay politics is strictly civil rights: Live and let live. But the atheist movement, by his lights, has no choice but to aggressively spread the good news. Evangelism is a moral imperative. Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious myths. He disagrees with tolerating them, with cooperating in their colonization of the brains of innocent tykes.

"How much do we regard children as being the property of their parents?" Dawkins asks. "It's one thing to say people should be free to believe whatever they like, but should they be free to impose their beliefs on their children? Is there something to be said for society stepping in? What about bringing up children to believe manifest falsehoods?"

Dawkins is the inventor of the concept of the meme, that is, a cultural replicator that spreads from brain to brain, like a virus. Dawkins is also a believer in democracy. He understands perfectly well that there are practical constraints on controlling the spread of bad memes. If the solution to the spread of wrong ideas and contagious superstitions is a totalitarian commissariat that would silence believers, then the cure is worse than the disease. But such constraints are no excuse for the weak-minded pretense that religious viruses are trivial, much less benign. Bad ideas foisted on children are moral wrongs. We should think harder about how to stop them.

It is exactly this trip down Logic Lane, this conscientious deduction of conclusions from premises, that makes Dawkins' proclamations a torment to his moderate allies. While frontline warriors against creationism are busy reassuring parents and legislators that teaching Darwin's theory does not undermine the possibility of religious devotion, Dawkins is openly agreeing with the most stubborn fundamentalists that evolution must lead to atheism. I tell Dawkins what he already knows: He is making life harder for his friends.

He barely shrugs. "Well, it's a cogent point, and I have to face that. My answer is that the big war is not between evolution and creationism, but between naturalism and supernaturalism. The sensible" - and here he pauses to indicate that *sensible* should be in quotes - "the 'sensible' religious people are really on the side of the fundamentalists, because they believe in supernaturalism. That puts me on the other side."



**THREE YEARS AGO**, Dawkins adopted a new word to demarcate the types of things he couldn't believe in. The word is *bright*, a noun. Coined by Sacramento, California, educators Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell to designate a person with a naturalistic worldview, *bright* was designed to be broader than the atheist movement; it is not merely God that is untenable, but superstition, credulity, and magical thinking in general. Dawkins happened to be present in the spring of 2003 when Geisert and Futrell unveiled their proposal at an atheist conference in Florida, and he subsequently issued a public call in *The Guardian* and in *Wired* urging its use. The

**SAM HARRIS**  
Neuroscientist

Latest provocation: *Letter to a Christian Nation*

monthly Brights meetup in London is among the largest. The main organizer, Glen Slade, is a 41-year-old entrepreneur who studied computer science at the University of Cambridge and management at Insead, Europe's leading business school. Slade points out that political developments in Europe and the US have created new opportunities for consciousness-raising. "The war on terror wakes people up to the fact that there is more than one religion in the world," Slade says. "I think we're at a crucial point, when we admit that

certain  
with c  
societ  
Lik  
might  
and li  
who i  
cal of  
base  
Cath  
are d  
lar o  
sexu  
says  
still  
a bil  
N  
the  
this  
ger  
ca  
an  
Or  
"A  
re  
be  
w  
bi  
n  
a  
I  
P  
z  
1



certain types of religion are incompatible with certain rights. At what point does society say, 'Hey, that's insane'?"

Like Dawkins, Slade rejects those who might once have been his allies: agnostics and liberal believers, the type of people who may go to church but who are skeptical of doctrine. "Moderates give a power base to extremists," Slade says. "A lot of Catholics use condoms, a lot of Catholics are divorced, and a lot don't have a particular opinion about whether you are homosexual. But when the Pope stands up and says, 'This is what Catholics believe,' he still gets credit for speaking for more than a billion people."

Now that people are more worried about the fatwas of Muslim clerics, Slade says, this concern could spread, become more general, and wake people up to damage caused by the Pope.

For the New Atheists, the problem is not any specific doctrine, but religion in general. Or, as Dawkins writes in *The God Delusion*, "As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it is hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama bin Laden and the suicide bombers."

The New Atheist insight is that one might start anywhere - with an intellectual argument, with a visceral rejection of Islamic or Christian fundamentalism, with political disgust - and then, by relentless and logical steps, renounce every supernatural crutch.

**I RETURN FROM OXFORD** enthusiastic for argument. I immediately begin trying out Dawkins' appeal in polite company. At dinner parties or over drinks, I ask people to declare themselves. "Who here is an atheist?" I ask.

Usually, the first response is silence, accompanied by glances all around in the hope that somebody else will speak first. Then, after a moment, somebody does, almost always a man, almost always with a defiant smile and a tone of enthusiasm. He says happily, "I am!"

But it is the next comment that is telling. Somebody turns to him and says: "You would be."

"Why?"

"Because you enjoy pissing people off."

"Well, that's true."

This type of conversation takes place not in central Ohio, where I was born, or in Utah, where I was a teenager, but on the

West Coast, among technical and scientific people, possibly the social group that is least likely among all Americans to be religious. Most of these people call themselves agnostic, but they don't harbor much suspicion that God is real. They tell me they reject atheism not out of piety but out of politeness. As one said, "Atheism is like telling somebody, 'The very thing you hinge your life on, I totally dismiss.'" This is the type of statement she would never want to make.

This is the statement the New Atheists believe must be made - loudly, clearly, and before it's too late. I continue to invite my friends for a nice, invigorating stroll down Logic Lane. For the most part, they just laugh and wave me on.

**AS I TEST OUT** the New Atheist arguments, I realize that the problem with logic is that it doesn't quicken the blood sufficiently - even my own. But if logic by itself won't do the trick, how about the threat of apocalypse? The apocalyptic argument for atheism is the province of Sam Harris, who released a book two years ago called *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*.

Harris argues that, unless we renounce faith, religious violence will soon bring civilization to an end. Between 2004 and 2006, his book sold more than a quarter million copies.

This autumn, Harris has a new book out, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. In it, he demonstrates the behavior he believes atheists should adopt when talking with Christians. "Nonbelievers like myself stand beside you," he writes, addressing his imaginary opponent, "dumbstruck by the Muslim hordes who chant death to whole nations of the living. But we stand dumbstruck by *you* as well - by your denial of tangible reality, by the suffering you create in service to your religious myths, and by your attachment to an imaginary God."

In midsummer, Harris and I overlap for a few days in Southern California, so we arrange to meet for lunch. I am not looking for more atheist arguments. I am already steeped in them. I have by now read my David Hume, my Bertrand Russell, even my Shelley. I want to talk to Harris about emotion, about politics, about his conviction that the days of civilization are numbered unless we renounce irrational belief. Given the way things are going, I want to know if he



## FACES OF THE NEW ATHEISM

### The Punk Rocker

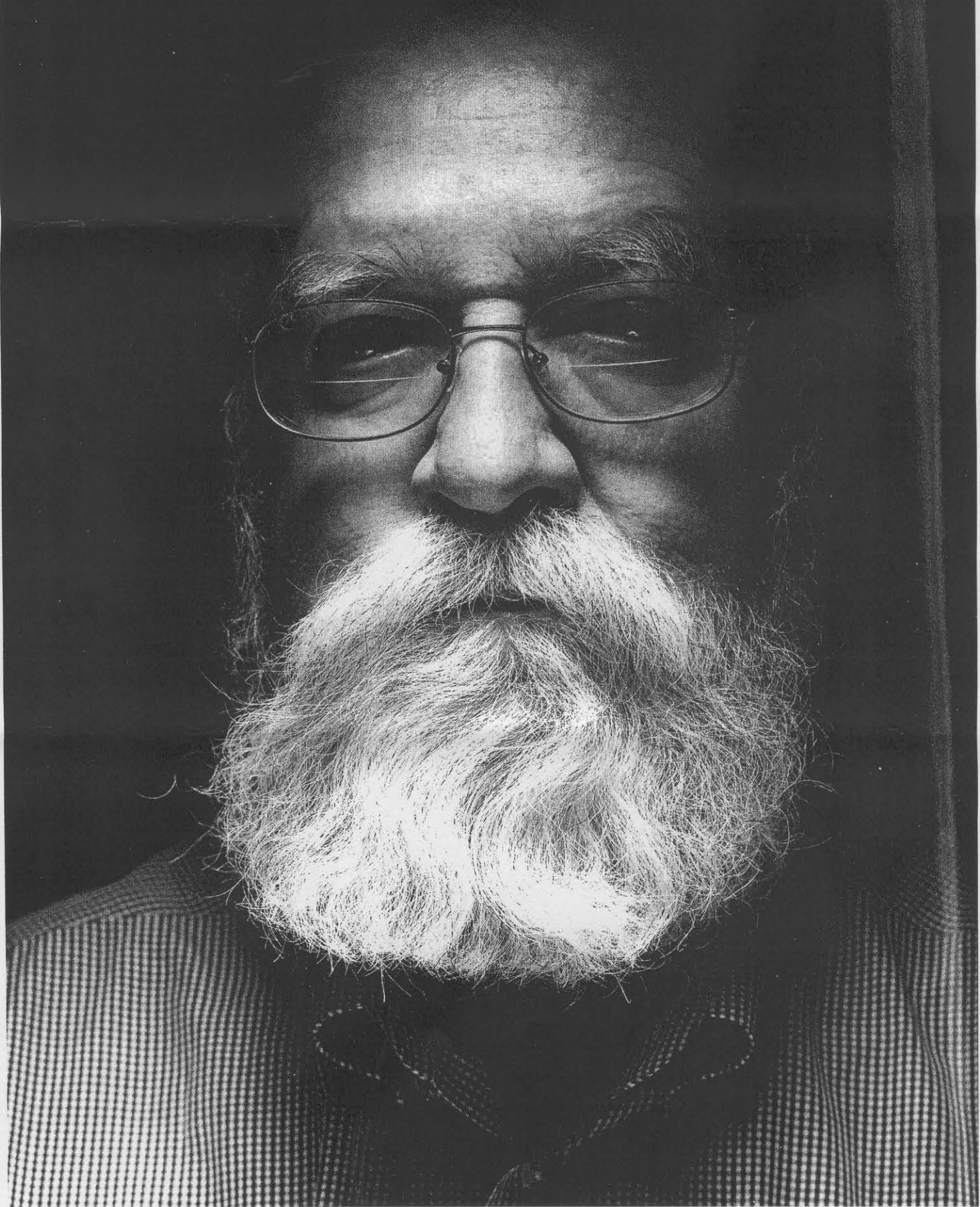
In a few hours, Greg Graffin will be singing about human suffering and redemption in front of thousands of frenzied punk rock fans at the Nokia Theater Times Square, but right now he's in the American Museum of Natural History showing his two children the first-known evolutionary diagram Charles Darwin ever drew.

It's an appropriate day for a man who has been straddling two worlds his entire adult life. In 1980, he and a couple of high school friends founded the punk band Bad Religion. Almost 20 albums later, the group has a worldwide following for its hard-driving and intelligent songs. But the singer is also a scientist. In 2003, he earned a PhD in zoology from Cornell University.

As part of his dissertation research, Graffin asked 149 prominent evolutionary biologists whether they believed in God: 130 answered no. But something surprised Graffin. Only a handful responded that they considered science and religion to be incompatible.

That tolerance frustrates Graffin. He describes himself as a naturalist, which to him means someone who holds that the natural world is all there is. "If you can believe in God, then you can believe in anything," he says. "It's a gang mentality." He's also offended by what he calls the "intellectual dishonesty" of scientists who find compatibility with religions that, in the case of Christianity at least, embrace walking on water and resurrection.

The rocker sometimes sings about his beliefs. "There's no justice / Just a cause and a cure / And a bounty of suffering / It seems we all endure / And what I'm frightened of / Is that they call it God's love." But his prose is more upbeat and nuanced. Earlier this year, he cowrote a book titled *Is Belief in God Good, Bad or Irrelevant?* composed of a yearlong email exchange with Preston Jones, a historian at the Christian John Brown University. "Naturalism teaches one of the most important things in this world," Graffin wrote. "There is only this life, so live wonderfully and meaningfully." — Steve Olson





is depressed. Is he preparing for the end?

He is not. "Look at slavery," he says. We are at a beautiful restaurant in Santa Monica, near the public lots from which Americans - nearly 80 percent of whom believe the Bible is the true word of God, if polls are correct - walk happily down to the beach in various states of undress. "People used to think," Harris says, "that slavery was morally acceptable. The most intelligent, sophisticated people used to accept that you could kidnap whole families, force them to work for you, and sell their children. That looks ridiculous to us today. We're going to look back and be amazed that we approached this asymptote of destructive capacity while allowing ourselves to be balkanized by fantasy. What seems quixotic *is* quixotic - on this side of a radical change. From the other side, you can't believe it didn't happen earlier. At some point, there is going to be enough pressure that it is just going to be too embarrassing to believe in God."

Suddenly I notice in myself a protective feeling toward Harris. Here is a man who believes that a great global change, perhaps the most important cultural change in the history of humanity, will occur out of sheer intellectual embarrassment.

We discuss what it might look like, this world without God. "There would be a religion of reason," Harris says. "We would have realized the rational means to maximize human happiness. We may all agree that we want to have a Sabbath that we take really seriously - a lot more seriously than most religious people take it. But it would be a rational decision, and it would not be just because it's in the Bible. We would be able to invoke the power of poetry and ritual and silent contemplation and all the variables of happiness so that we could exploit them. Call it prayer, but we would have prayer without bullshit."

I do call it prayer. Here is the atheist prayer: that our reason will subjugate our superstition, that our intelligence will check our illusions, that we will be able to hold at bay the evil temptation of faith.

**THAT WEEK** in Los Angeles it is very hot. Temperatures in the San Fernando Valley, where I'm staying, set a record at 119. Intermittent power outages kill the lights, and the

**DANIEL DENNETT**  
Philosopher, Tufts University  
Latest provocation: *Breaking the Spell*

region is bathed in an old-fashioned brown smog that blurs the outlines of the trees. In the evening, as it cools to 102, I decide to enter the emplacements of the adversary.

I am headed for the Angelus Temple, in Echo Park. A landmark of modern Christianity, it is one of the original churches of the surging charismatic movement. It is not the richest church, nor the most powerful, nor the most famous. But Angelus, founded by Aimee Semple McPherson in the 1920s, pioneered that combination of high production values and uplifting theology that began to purge the stain of hickdom from evangelical faith. Aside from being a historical shrine, the Angelus Temple is a case study in religious evolution. While the New Atheists are arming themselves against faith, faith itself renews its arms. Superstition, it turns out, is a moving target.



**WE'RE IN THE POSITION THE GAY MOVEMENT WAS IN A FEW DECADES AGO. WE JUST NEED PEOPLE TO COME OUT.**

In 2001, a merger with a thriving church downtown, run by the young son of a powerful pastor in Phoenix, brought renewal - not merely in the form of massive social outreach and volunteer programs, youth events, and Bible study groups, but also, as the church explains on its Web site, in the form of "new cushioned theater seats, Ferrari-red carpet, modern stainless steel fixtures, and acoustical absorbers hung decoratively from the ceiling similar to the Royal Albert Hall in England."

It is Saturday night, and I am greeted at the door by a blast of air-conditioning and a wave of sound. It looks like a rock concert. It is a rock concert. More than 500 teenagers are crowding the stage, hands uplifted, singing along. There is a 12-member band, four huge videoscreens, and a crane that allows the camera to swoop through the air, projecting images of the believers back to themselves.

"How many people are excited to give to the Lord tonight?" asks a young man who saunters up to the front. He handles his microphone naturally; he is not self-conscious. "How many people are pumped up? You have a destiny. God has a plan. But you have got to sow some seeds tonight,

or it is never going to happen." Text flashes across the overhead screens, telling the teenagers how to make out their checks.

Behind the lighting rigs and the acoustic panels, stained glass peeks out, a relic of McPherson's era. McPherson was personally wild and doctrinally flexible. She had visions and spoke in tongues, but she tried to put aside sectarian disputes. Even today, the charismatic movement is somewhat careless of doctrine. There is room for theistic evolutionists, for nonliteralists who hold that each of God's days in Genesis was the equivalent of a geological epoch, even for the notion that a check made out properly to the Lord can influence divine whim in the matter of a raise at work or a scholarship to college. Of course, evolutionary accommodation is controversial in the seminaries, and the idea of bribing God is rank heresy - no

trained theologian in any Christian tradition would endorse it. But such deviations are generously tolerated in practice. The forces at work in a living church have little to do with intellectual disputes over the meaning of the Lord's word. Having agreed that the Bible is inerrant, one is permitted to put it to use.

This use is supremely practical. Pastor Matthew Barnett, onstage, wears the uniform of America - jeans with loafers, a short-sleeved knit shirt. It's one of the costumes Kanye West wore on his Touch the Sky Tour, the same costume kids put on to go fold clothes at the mall. Like Kanye, like the kids at the mall, like millions of sober alcoholics, like Jesus, Pastor Matt - as he's called - does not traffic in proofs. Instead he tells stories. For instance, Pastor Matt used to be fat. Every night at 10 pm, it was off to an orgy of junk food at Jack in the Box. Two monster tacos, curly fries, a chocolate shake. He was programmed. He was helpless. He could not resist. "The devil is a lion seeking whom he may devour," Pastor Matt says. On the other hand, strength to resist temptation is an explicit promise from the Lord. Let us read from 1 Corinthians: *God*





FACES OF THE NEW ATHEISM

## The Illusionists

**Penn & Teller got famous** catching bullets in their teeth, eating fire, and making rabbits vanish. But now they're trying something even more ambitious: They want to make religion disappear. Never shy about their atheism (Penn's got the Nevada license plates "Atheist" and "Atheist"), the two have been raising their voices—even the oft-silent Teller—to deny the muddying line between church and state. "Atheists are saying, 'All right, we've had enough,'" Teller says.

A person who wants to believe in science or reason, they say, can't believe in 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, flashing 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 period 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 teed up 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 piff on how church types slack balls). They get their jobs 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 Google Video. The bit set the stage for a flap-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.

Magicians should be natural skeptics, says Penn, who points out that he and Teller follow in a tradition of great illusionists like Harry Houdini, who scoffed at spiritualism. After all, what's a burning bush that talks when Penn & Teller can strike a refrigerator dropped on their heads from 20 feet? —**Geoffrey Gagnon**

*is faithful, who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape, that ye may be able to bear it.*

Anybody who has ever been a teenager will recognize the relevance of Pastor Matt's sermon. These are the years of confusion, temptation, struggles with self-control. Pastor Matt openly shares with the teenagers the great humiliation he faced when trying to lose weight. The pastor is trim and handsome now. He talks intimately with the teenagers about food, about sex, about drugs. He boosts them up. He helps them cope with their shame. He tells them that they are kings anointed by God, that they simply need

to pray, and have faith, and be honest, and express their vulnerability, and work hard, and if they do these things they are guaranteed their reward.

When he calls them to the stage, hundreds go. He puts his hands on their heads, and some cry. The altar call is a moving spectacle, and even we adults, we readers of Dawkins and Harris, we practiced reasoners and sincere pilgrims on the path of nonbelief, may find something in it that makes sense. Notwithstanding the banality of the doctrine, its canned anecdotes, and its questionable fundraising, Pastor Matthew offers a gift to his flock. They sow their seeds, and he blesses them. It is a direct exchange.

**THE NEXT MORNING,** I seek to cleanse my intellectual conscience among the free-thinkers. The Center for Inquiry is also a storied landmark. True, it is not as striking as the Angelus Temple, being only a bland, low structure at the far end of Hollywood Boulevard, miles away from the tourists. But this building is the West Coast branch of one of the greatest anti-supernatural organizations in the world. My favorite thing about the Center for Inquiry is that it is affiliated with the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, founded 30 years ago by Isaac Asimov, Paul Kurtz, and Carl Sagan and dedicated to spreading misery among every species of quack.

I have become a connoisseur of atheist groups—there are scores of them, mostly local, linked into a few larger networks. There are some tensions, as is normal in the claustrophobia of powerless subcultures, but relations among the different branches of the movement are mostly friendly. Typical atheists are hardly the rabble-raising evangelists that Dawkins or Harris might like. They are an older, peaceable, quietly frustrated lot, who meet partly out of idealism and partly out of loneliness. Here in Los Angeles, every fourth Sunday at 11 am, there is a meeting of Atheists United. More than 50 people have shown up today, which is a very good turnout for atheism. Many are approaching retirement age. The speaker this morning, a younger activist named Clark Adams, encourages them with the idea that their numbers are growing. Look at *South Park*, Adams urges. Look at Howard Stern. Look at Penn & Teller. These are signs of an infidel upsurge.

Still, Adams admits some marketing concerns. Atheists are predominant among the "upper 5 percent," he says. "Where we're lagging is among the lower 95 percent."

This is a true problem, and it goes beyond the difficulty of selling your ideas among those to whom you so openly condescend. The sociologist Rodney Stark has argued that the rise and fall of religions can be understood in economic terms. Believers sacrifice time and money in exchange for both spiritual and material benefits. In other words, religion is rational, but it is governed by the rationality of trade rather than of argument. Stark's theory is academically controversial, but here, in the Sunday morning meeting of Atheists United, it seems

evolved. There are deep passages surveying theories of knowledge, glossing Kant, Schelling, and Spinoza. I discover a daunting diversity of belief, and of course I'm just beginning. I haven't even gotten started with Islam, or the Vedic texts, or Zoroastrianism. It is all admirable and stimulating and lacks only the real help anybody in my position would need: reasons to believe that specific religious ideas are true. Even the most careful theologians seem to pose the question backward, starting out with their beliefs and clinging to those fragments that science and logic cannot overturn. The most rigorous of them jettison huge portions of doctrine along the way.

If trained theologians can go this far, who am I to defend supernaturalism on their behalf? Why *not* be an atheist? I've sought aid far and wide, from Echo Park to Harvard, and finally I am almost ready to give in. Only one thing is still bothering me.

## EVEN PEOPLE WHO SUSPECT THAT THE NEW ATHEISTS MIGHT BE RIGHT ARE REPELLED BY THEIR STRIDENT TONE.

Were I to declare myself an atheist, what would this mean? Would my life have to change? Would it become my moral obligation to be uncompromising toward fence-sitting friends? That person at dinner, pissing people off with his arrogance, his disrespect, his intellectual scorn - would that be me?

Besides, do we really understand all that religion means? Would it be easy to excise it, even assuming it is false? Didn't they try a cult of reason once, in France, at the close of the 18th century, and didn't it turn out to be too ugly *even for Robespierre*?

**THE DOCTOR** for these difficulties looks like Santa Claus. His name is Daniel Dennett. He is a renowned philosopher, an atheist, and the possessor of a full white beard. I suspect he must have designed this Father Christmas look intentionally, but in fact it just evolved. "In the '60s, I looked like Rasputin," he says. Children have come up to him in airports, checking to see if he is on vacation from the North Pole. When it happens, he does not tor-

ment them with knowledge that the person they mistake him for is not real. Instead, the philosopher puts his fingers to his lips and says conspiratorially: "Shhhh."

Dennett summers on a farm in Maine. Flying in, I have a fine view of the old New England tapestry, which grows more and more rural as we move north: symmetrical fields with pale borders like the membranes of cells, barns and outbuildings like organelles, and, at the center of every thickening cluster of life, always the same vestigial structure, whose black dot of a cupola is offset by a whitish gleam. I know something of the history of the New England church, which began in fanaticism and ended in reform - from witch burning to softest Presbyterianism in a few hundred years. Now, according to the atheists, these structures serve no useful purpose, and besides, they may be conduits for disease. Perhaps it is best that

we do away with them all. But can it be done without harm?

Among the New Atheists, Dennett holds an exalted but ambiguous place. Like Dawkins and Harris, he is an evangelizing nonbeliever. He has campaigned in writing on behalf of the Brights and has written a book called *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. In it, the blasting rhetoric of Dawkins and Harris is absent, replaced by provocative, often humorous examples and thought experiments. But like the other New Atheists, Dennett gives no quarter to believers who resist subjecting their faith to scientific evaluation. In fact, he argues that neutral, scientifically informed education about every religion in the world should be mandatory in school. After all, he argues, "if you have to hoodwink - or blindfold - your children to ensure that they confirm their faith when they are adults, your faith *ought* to go extinct."

When I arrive at the farm, I find him in the midst of a difficult task. He has been asked by the President's Council on Bioethics to write an essay reflecting on

human dignity. In grappling with these issues, Dennett knows that he can't rely on faith or scripture. He will not say that life begins when an embryo is ensouled by God. He will not say that hospitals must not invite the indigent to sell their bodies for medical experiments because humans are endowed by their creator with inalienable rights. Ethical problems must be solved by reason, not arbitrary rules. And yet, on the other hand, Dennett knows that reason alone will fail.

We sit in his study, in some creaky chairs, with the deep silence of an August morning around us, and Dennett tells me that he takes very seriously the risk of overreliance on thought. He doesn't want people to lose confidence in what he calls their "default settings," by which he means the conviction that their ethical intuitions are trustworthy. These default settings give us a feeling of security, a belief that our own sacrifices will be reciprocated. "If you shatter this confidence," he says, "then you get into a deep hole. Without trust, everything goes wrong."

It interests me that, though Dennett is an atheist, he does not see faith merely as a useless vestige of our primitive nature, something we can, with effort, intellectualize away. No rational creature, he says, would be able to do without unexamined, sacred things.

"Would intelligent robots be religious?" it occurs to me to ask.

"Perhaps they would," he answers thoughtfully. "Although, if they were intelligent enough to evaluate their own programming, they would eventually question their belief in God."

Dennett is an advocate of admitting that we simply don't have good reasons for some of the things we believe. Although we must guard our defaults, we still have to admit that they may be somewhat arbitrary. "How else do we protect ourselves?" he asks. "With absolutisms? This means telling lies, and when the lies are exposed, the crash is worse. It's not that science can discover when the body is ensouled. That's nonsense. We are not going to tolerate infanticide. But we're not going to put people in jail for onanism. Instead of protecting stability with a brittle set of myths, we can defend a deep resistance to mucking with the boundaries."

This sounds to me a little like the religion of reason that Harris foresees.

"Yes, there could be a rational religion,"



obvious that the narrow reasonableness of Adams can hardly be effective with the deal on offer at the Angelus Temple.

"We're lagging among the lower 95 percent," says Adams.

"You are kings anointed by God," says Pastor Matt.

As the tide of faith rises, atheists, who have no church to buoy them, cling to one another. That a single celebrity, say, Keanu Reeves, is known to care nothing about God is counted as a victory. This parochial and moralistic self-regard begins to inspire in me a feeling of oppression. When Adams starts to recite the names of atheists who may have contributed to the television program *Mr. Show With Bob and David* between 1995 and 1998, I leave. Standing in the half-empty parking lot is a relief, though I am drenched from the heat.

**MY PILGRIMAGE** is about to become more difficult. On the one hand, it is obvious that the political prospects of the New Atheism are slight. People see a contradiction in its tone of certainty. Contemptuous of the faith of others, its proponents never doubt their own belief. They are fundamentalists. I hear this protest dozens of times. It comes up in every conversation. Even those who might side with the New Atheists are repelled by their strident tone. (The founders of the Brights, Geisert and Futrell, became grim at the mention of Sam Harris. "We don't endorse anything from him," Geisert said. We had talked for nearly three hours, and this was the only dark cloud.) The New Atheists never propose realistic solutions to the damage religion can cause. For instance, the Catholic Church opposes condom use, which makes it complicit in the spread of AIDS. But among the most powerful voices against this tragic mistake are liberals within the Church - exactly those allies the New Atheists reject. The New Atheists care mainly about correct belief. This makes them hopeless, politically.

But on the other hand, the New Atheism does not aim at success by conventional political means. It does not balance interests, it does not make compromises, it does not seek common ground. The New Atheism, outwardly at least, is a straightforward appeal to our intellect. Atheists make their stand upon the truth.

So is atheism true?

There's good evidence from research by anthropologists such as Pascal Boyer and

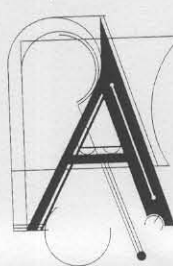
Scott Atran that a grab bag of cognitive predispositions makes us natural believers. We hear leaves rustle and we imagine that some airy being flutters up there; we see a corpse and continue to fear the judgment and influence of the person it once was. Remarkable progress has been made in understanding why faith is congenial to human nature - and of course that still says nothing about whether it is true. Harris is typically severe in his rejection of the idea that evolutionary history somehow justifies faith. There is, he writes, "nothing more natural than rape. But no one would argue that rape is good, or compatible with a civil society, because it may have had evolutionary advantages for our ancestors." Like rape, Harris says, religion may be a vestige of our primitive nature that we must simply overcome.

A variety of rebuttals to atheism have been tried over the years. Religious fundamentalists stand on their canonized texts and refuse to budge. The wisdom of this approach - strategically, at least - is evident when you see the awkward positions nonfundamentalists find themselves in. The most active defender of faith among scientists right now is Francis Collins, head of the Human Genome Project. His most recent book is called *The Language of God: A Scientist Presents Evidence for Belief*. In defiance of the title, Collins never

unscathed. Even the lowly humanities, which began the demolition job more than 200 years ago with textual criticism of the Bible, continue to make things difficult for believers through careful analysis of the historical origins of religious texts. While Collins and his fellow reconcilers can defend the notion of faith in the abstract, as soon as they get down to doctrine, the secular professors show up with their corrosive arguments. When it comes to concrete examples of exactly what we should believe, reason is a slippery slope, and at the bottom - well, at the bottom is atheism.

I spend months resisting this slide. I turn to the great Oxford professor of science and religion John Hedley Brooke, who convinces me that, contrary to myth, Darwin did not become an atheist because of evolution. Instead, his growing resistance to Christianity came from his moral criticism of 19th-century doctrine, compounded by the tragedy of his daughter's death. Darwin did *not* believe that evolution proved there was no God. This is interesting, because the story of Darwin's relationship to Christianity has figured in polemics for and against evolution for more than a century. But in the context of a real struggle with the claims of atheism, an accurate history of Darwin's loss of faith counts for little more than celebrity gossip.

From Brooke, I get pointers on the state



## AT SOME POINT, HARRIS SAYS, CLINGING TO A BELIEF IN GOD IS JUST GOING TO BE TOO EMBARRASSING.

attempts to show that science offers evidence for belief. Rather, he argues only that nothing in science *prohibits* belief. Unsolved problems in diverse fields, along with a skepticism about knowledge in general, are used to demonstrate that a deity might not be impossible. The problem with this, for defenders of faith, is that they've implicitly accepted science as the arbiter of what is real. This leaves the atheists with the upper hand.

That's because when secular investigations take the lead, sacred doctrines collapse. There's barely a field of modern research - cosmology, biology, archaeology, anthropology, psychology - in which competing religious explanations have survived

of the art in academic theology, particularly those philosophers of religion who write in depth about science, such as Willem Drees and Philip Clayton. There is a certain illicit satisfaction in this scholarly work, which to an atheist is no better than astrology. ("The entire thrust of my position is that Christian theology is a nonsubject," Dawkins has written. "Vacuous. Devoid of coherence or content.") On the contrary, I find the best of these books to be brilliant, detailed, self-assured. I learn about *kenosis*, the deliberate decision of God not to disturb the natural order. I learn about *pantheism*, which says God is both the world and more than the world, and about *emergentist theology*, which holds that a God might have



## FACES OF THE NEW ATHEISM

# The Scribe

For the past six decades, Warren Allen Smith has engaged in an unusual form of correspondence. Working from his cramped den in Manhattan's Greenwich Village, the 85-year-old sends letters to people asking if they believe in God. Many write back. Responses range from the brief—"Agnostic," scrawled on a postcard from Warren Buffett—to a lengthy exposition on morality by Walter Lippmann. The letter writing began as research for Smith's master's thesis at Columbia University. It became the basis for a 1,264-page encyclopedia of nonbelievers titled *Who's Who in Hell*, published in 2000.

Raised a Methodist, Smith was already a committed atheist by the time he landed at Omaha Beach in World War II. Most people had dog tags with a P or O under religious affiliation; Smith's tag simply read "None."

Now Smith is working on his magnum opus: a Web site called *Philosophia*, which he hopes will serve as a resource for philosophers as well as a comprehensive index of the world's most prominent atheists. A former English teacher and recording studio owner, he now spends about 10 hours a day working on the site. Smith is part aging beatnik and part college sophomore. One moment he's leafing through yellowed newspaper clippings as a pair of cats scramble across his desk; the next he's using his webcam to Skype with his technical assistant. He speaks in a gentle voice that belies his contentious work. "In a sense," he says, "I'm a missionary for nonbelievers."

Why the urgency? For one, he fears he doesn't have many years left before his memory starts to fade. But he also worries about the encroaching threat of fundamentalism, in the East as well as the West. Smith has written about 1,500 entries for *Philosophia* beyond the 10,000 he uploaded from his book. So far he has refused to open his site to outside contributors à la Wikipedia. He may need to if he wants to fulfill his ultimate vision: "More than 10 percent of the world's 8.5 billion people are unchurched and freethinkers. I just hope the software can handle them all."  
—Nicholas Thompson

Dennett says. "We could have a rational policy not even to think about certain things." He understands that this would create constant tension between prohibition and curiosity. But the borders of our sacred beliefs could be well guarded simply by acknowledging that it is pragmatic to refuse to change them.

I ask Dennett if there might not be a contradiction in his scheme. On the one hand, he aggressively confronts the faithful, attacking their sacred beliefs. On the other hand, he proposes that our inherited defaults be put outside the limits of dispute. But this would make our defaults into a religion, unimpeachable and implacable gods. And besides, are we not atheists? Sacred prohibitions are anathema to us.

Dennett replies that exceptions can be made. "Philosophers are the ones who refuse to accept the sacred values," he says. For instance, Socrates.

I find this answer supremely odd. The image of an atheist religion whose sacred objects, called defaults, are taboo for all except philosophers—this is the material of the cruelest parody. But that's not what Dennett means. In his scenario, the philosophers are not revered authorities but mental risk-takers and scouts. Their adventures invite ridicule, or worse. "Philosophers should expect to be hooted at and reviled," Dennett says. "Socrates drank the hemlock. He knew what he was doing."

With this, I begin to understand what kind of atheist I want to be. Dennett's invocation of Socrates is a reminder that there are certain actors in history who change the world by staging their own defeat. Having been raised under Christianity, we are well schooled in this tactic of belated victory. The world has reversed its judgment on Socrates, as on Jesus and the fanatical John Brown. All critics of fundamental values, even those who have no magical beliefs, will find themselves tempted to retrace this path. Dawkins' tense rhetoric of moral choice, Harris' vision of apocalypse, their contempt for liberals, the invocation of slavery—this is not the language of intellectual debate but of prophecy.

In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett writes about the personal risk inherent in attacking faith. Harris veils his academic affiliation and hometown because he fears for his physical safety. But in truth, the cultural neighborhoods where they live and

work bear little resemblance to Italy under Pope Urban VIII, or New England in the 17th century, or Saudi Arabia today. Dennett spends the academic year at Tufts University and summers with family and students in Maine. Dawkins occupies an endowed Oxford chair and walks his dog on the wide streets, alone. Harris sails forward this fall with his second well-publicized book. There have been no fatwas, no prison cells, no gallows or crosses.

Prophecy, I've come to realize, is a complex meme. When prophets provoke real trouble, bring confusion to society by sowing reverberant doubts, spark an active, opposing consensus everywhere—that is the sign they've hit a nerve. But what happens when they don't hit a nerve? There are plenty of would-be prophets in the world, vainly peddling their provocative claims. Most of them just end up lecturing to undergraduates, or leading little Christian sects, or getting into Wikipedia edit wars, or boring their friends. An unsuccessful prophet is not a martyr, but a sort of clown.

Where does this leave us, we who have been called upon to join this uncompromising war against faith? What shall we do, we potential enlistees? Myself, I've decided to refuse the call. The irony of the New Atheism—this prophetic attack on prophecy, this extremism in opposition to extremism—is too much for me.

The New Atheists have castigated fundamentalism and branded even the mildest religious liberals as enablers of a vengeful mob. Everybody who does not join them is an ally of the Taliban. But, so far, their provocation has failed to take hold. Given all the religious trauma in the world, I take this as good news. Even those of us who sympathize intellectually have good reasons to wish that the New Atheists continue to seem absurd. If we reject their polemics, if we continue to have respectful conversations even about things we find ridiculous, this doesn't necessarily mean we've lost our convictions or our sanity. It simply reflects our deepest, democratic values. Or, you might say, our bedrock faith: the faith that no matter how confident we are in our beliefs, there's always a chance we could turn out to be wrong. ■ ■ ■

Contributing editor Gary Wolf (gary@aether.com) wrote about emergency-warning technology in issue 13.12.