



TURNING THE TABLES ON ATHEISTS

Author Patrick Madrid Discusses *The Godless Delusion*

[ZENIT](#): By Karna Swanson

GRANVILLE, Ohio, MAY 12, 2011 ([Zenit.org](#)).- What would happen if Christians turned the tables on atheists and challenged them on their belief that God doesn't exist?

This is the premise of the book "[The Godless Delusion: A Catholic Challenge to Modern Atheism](#)," written by Patrick Madrid and Kenneth Hensley (Our Sunday Visitor), in which the internal contradictions of a non-belief in God, as well as the various incoherencies in the atheistic worldview, are exposed.

According to Madrid, "atheists are not accustomed to Christians subjecting atheism to a rigorous critique on its own merits. This is why our primary goal was to take a different approach by providing a philosophical critique of atheism itself."

Patrick Madrid (<http://patrickmadrid.com>) is the author or editor of 16 books, the director of the [Envoy Institute](#) of [Belmont Abbey College](#), the publisher of [Envoy Magazine](#), and host of the Thursday edition of EWTN Radio's "Open Line" broadcast (3-5 p.m. ET). In this 2-part interview with ZENIT, Madrid discusses the primary goals of writing *The Godless Delusion*, as well as the precarious foundations of the naturalistic morality of atheism.

ZENIT: As you state in your book, atheists have been around for years, but there have also been various Catholic and Protestant responses to atheism. What is unique about your approach to atheism and your understanding of atheists?

MADRID: Given that other Catholic books have already decisively refuted atheism's major arguments against God, when Kenneth Hensley and I began outlining chapters for *The Godless Delusion*, we knew it wasn't necessary for us to write the same sort of book (three superb examples of which are: "The Last

Superstition: A Refutation of the New Atheism," by Edward Feser, "Handbook of Catholic Apologetics," by Jesuit Father Ronald Tacelli and Peter Kreeft, and "Theology and Sanity," by Frank Sheed).

Atheists are accustomed to being the aggressor when engaging Christians. They attack and Christians defend. But atheists are not accustomed to having the tables turned, and to defend atheist principles. They are not accustomed to Christians subjecting atheism to a rigorous critique on its own merits.

This is why our primary goal was to take a different approach by providing a philosophical critique of atheism itself -- one that would highlight its internal contradictions and incoherencies and demonstrate what we believe to be the atheist worldview's abject inability to account for various immaterial realities we all know and experience, e.g., love, knowledge, goodness, evil, self-awareness, memory, human rights, etc.

Second, we wanted to subject atheism to a strictly rational, philosophical critique that would not rely on evidence for the existence of God found in divine revelation: Christ, Scripture, the Church, miracles, etc. Those things are, of course, rejected out of hand by atheists as wholly irrelevant and inadmissible, so we felt it would be useful for our readers to understand how to critique and refute atheism without ever having to engage in directly proving the existence of God.

At the outset of the book, we specify a premise with which all atheists would agree: Either God exists or he does not exist. There is no possibility of a third option. Thus, if it can be conclusively proven that God does not exist, then atheism is true and we should all become atheists. The corollary is equally true: If atheism itself is false, then by default, God must exist. In *The Godless Delusion*, our fundamental goal is to demonstrate that God must exist, but only indirectly, by showing that atheism is false.

ZENIT: In the chapter titled "The Death of Right and Wrong," you discuss the naturalistic worldview of atheism and note its most radical implications vis-à-vis morality. Essentially, if one is to accept that only what can be seen exists, then one must deny the existence of the basic ideas of right and wrong. But isn't the natural law written on the hearts of all? Why couldn't a naturalistic worldview also encompass a naturalistic morality?

MADRID: Yes, that's correct. Atheism's denial of the existence of God is predicated on what is known as the Naturalist world view. Naturalism posits that the only things that exist are material. Or, to say it a different way, nothing immaterial (i.e., spiritual or supernatural) can exist. In other words, only things in the natural order exist. There is no supernatural order above or beyond the natural. This helps to explain why, on the one hand, atheists disdain any talk of God, angels and souls. They reject the existence of these things since there are immaterial and therefore not part of the natural order.

And on the other hand, the naturalist foundation of atheism helps to explain why so many modern atheists tout science as the supreme means by which the question, "Does God exist?" can be answered. Most atheists confidently assume that science has either disproven the existence of God or it soon will.

But, of course, science is completely incapable of answering this question because science deals strictly with pre-given material realities in the cosmos, which can be apprehended with man's corporeal sense organs. These things are subject to observation, measurement, etc., because they are material. But God is immaterial. So are angels, demons, and human souls. These are pure spirit and, therefore, lie utterly beyond the realm of science. Philosophy, not the physical sciences, is the proper and only adequate means of proving or disproving the existence of God.

Science, for all its stupendous importance, is simply incapable of speaking to the question of God's existence. And this brings us the crux of the answer to your question: Morality is part of the "real world" we all live in, and even atheists follow moral norms out of a desire to be "good." But what possible meaning can the word "good" have in a truly atheist universe in which God does not exist?

In *The Godless Delusion*, we say that terms such as "good" and "evil" would be essentially meaningless in any absolute sense because, if God does not exist and there is no transcendent moral law revealed by God which prescribes how we should act, one cannot say that a given action is good or evil. It just is what it is. One may not like or approve of a particular action, such as murder or theft, but it would be impossible to deem it "evil" in any sense beyond one's own subjective, personal preferences. This is an example of an incoherence at work within atheism.

The atheist conviction is that human beings should be "good" for the sake of being good, as well as for the general personal and social benefits that accrue from being "good," "moral," etc. -- not because God wills that we be good.

This is where a curious lacuna inherent in the atheist moral theory comes into view. Atheist scientists, such as Richard Dawkins, concur with Charles Darwin's theory of evolution, which entails the "survival of the fittest" principle of natural selection. The strong dominate and kill off the weak. The superior naturally eliminate the inferior, etc. This principle can be readily observed in the animal kingdom, where stronger, faster, more aggressive alpha males get to mate with the females and produce offspring. Weaker, less dominant males do not.

A significant incoherence in atheist thought becomes clear when atheists insist, on the one hand, that the natural order is governed by the blind, random forces of nature, resulting in the "survival of the fittest" evolution of species and yet, on the other hand, they complain about the problem of evil, or decry violent acts of Muslim jihadism, or excoriate those who engage in "immoral" behavior, especially among those who believe in God (and most especially among Christians).

But if, as atheists claim, God does not exist and all of us are simply the byproducts of natural selection's "survival of the fittest," why shouldn't the strong among us dominate and kill off the weak? Why shouldn't we adopt an "every man for himself" attitude and get what we want from whomever we want it by whatever means we can get it? Atheism can offer no meaningful, much less plausible, answer to that question.

One of the many ironies of atheism is that atheists dismiss the Christian claim that God has revealed a transcendent moral law to all human beings (see St. Paul's discussion of this in Romans 1:19-23, 2:14-16). Of course, there is a great deal more one can say about the problem this dichotomy presents for atheists, and we examine this issue in much greater detail in *The Godless Delusion*."

ZENIT: You state that most atheists are moral people, who do believe in right and wrong. How do they justify not living out the naturalistic worldview to its logical conclusion?

MADRID: Yes, it's true that many atheists not only regard themselves to be good people, but they really do try to be good people. Many of them strive to be kind, tolerant, generous, and respectful toward others. This is because they recognize that "right" and "wrong" behavior is real and not merely theoretical.

But this recognition, as important as it is for peaceful and harmonious human interaction, is still utterly inconsistent with the atheist worldview's foundational claim that only natural, material things exist. To be consistent with this claim, they are forced to admit that "being good" is really just a matter of personal conviction or group consensus, not an ideal that God desires for all of us to strive for.

Atheists cannot justify, according to atheist principles, why they believe it is "wrong" to pollute oceans, cut down rain forests, or hack into someone's bank account and steal their life savings. If the stronger members of the human species engage in such behaviors in their pursuit of dominating the weaker members, and if there is no God and therefore no transcendent, prescriptive moral law given by God to guide us into knowing what is right and what is wrong, then on what grounds can atheists legitimately oppose such behaviors?

Doing so would be intolerant and would have the net result of the atheist forcing his morality on others -- the very thing atheists object to in the first place. (End of part 1)

Part 2:

If you want to know what happens when atheistic principles overtake a society, look no further than the totalitarian regimes of Joseph Stalin and Mao Tse-tung, says Patrick Madrid.

Madrid is the co-author, with Kenneth Hensley, of the book "[The Godless Delusion: A Catholic Challenge to Modern Atheism](#)" (Our Sunday Visitor), which exposes the internal contradictions of a non-belief in God.

According to Madrid, "the atheist claim that there is no God entails the claim that there is no absolute standard of morality," which in turn means that "what is 'right' and 'wrong' is simply what the individual or groups of individuals decide is 'right' or 'wrong.'"

He explains that in this situation, what is "good" is often what is "what is expedient, what promotes the consolidation of power and privilege, what facilitates the elimination of resistance and ideological competition (Christianity, for example)."

In this interview with ZENIT, Madrid discusses the atheism of the 20th century and today, as well as what he has learned over the years about individuals who embrace a disbelief in God.

ZENIT: You address in your book the problem of proselytism by atheists. First, why is it important for atheists to push their non-belief in God? Second, what happens to society if they succeed?

MADRID: Perhaps the most vividly convincing evidence of what happens to a society when atheist principles are put into practice on a grand scale are the repressive, totalitarian, genocidal horrors wrought by atheists during the 20th century. Avowed atheists such as Stalin and Mao systematically imposed atheist principles as state policy, and in the processes liquidated more than 100 million men, women and children.

As we discuss in *The Godless Delusion*, the atheist claim that there is no God entails the claim that there is no absolute standard of morality. And if there is no absolute standard of morality, then what is "right" and "wrong" is simply what the individual or groups of individuals decide is "right" or "wrong." In this scenario -- as countless doomed Russians, Ukrainians, Chinese, and others discovered -- what is expedient, what promotes the consolidation of power and privilege, what facilitates the elimination of resistance and ideological competition (Christianity, for example) is "good."

Among the more ominous characteristics of the early 21st century is the rise of the "new atheists," men such as Christopher Hitchens ("God is Not Great"), Richard Dawkins ("The God Delusion"), Sam Harris ("Letter to a Christian Nation"), and Greg Epstein ("Good Without God"). These new atheists are militant in their commitment to atheism, ferociously anti-religion, and quite prepared to engage in a public struggle with theists through their books, movies, DVDs, Web sites, magazines and public lectures.

What separates the new atheists from previous generations of less combative and, frankly, more intellectually formidable atheists such as Bertrand Russell, is that the new atheists are actively, relentlessly "proselytizing" for converts among Christians. And unlike the earlier, more staid, Bertrand-Russell brand of intellectual atheists, Dawkins, Hitchens, and the rest of the new atheists see their worldview as a righteous cause that must be carried forward aggressively with the goal of converting as many believers as possible so as to free the world of the evils they argue are inevitably fomented by religion and religious people.

As atheists often proclaim: "Religion Kills." They see ridding the world of religion to be a singularly worthy goal that will bring about enlightenment, happiness, and freedom from "superstition," ignorance, suspicion of science and violence perpetrated in the name of God.

Obviously, we Christians have a lot of work to do to help atheists see that even if individual Catholics are guilty of such things, the question of whether God does or does not exist is in no way predicated upon the behavior of those who believe he exists.

ZENIT: You mention in your introduction your first encounter with an atheist as an 11-year-old boy, and how you were on that occasion "thoroughly routed." What is the biggest lesson you have learned since then when discussing the existence of God with those who don't believe? And do you have any advice for the rest of us?

MADRID: One of the key things I've learned in the 40 years since that discussion with the atheist lady who lived across the street from us is that many atheists are very intelligent, even brilliant people. They place a very high value on seeking truth based on facts and evidence, rather than what they regard in Christians to be "blind faith" and superstition. Fair enough.

While I reject the atheist assumption that Christianity relies on blind faith or wallows in superstition, I do not hesitate to admit that atheists are admirable in their desire to find evidence for what they believe. But what amazes me is that many atheists will close their eyes, cover their ears, and refuse to even consider the evidences that abound for the existence of God.

How it is that so many very intelligent and clear thinking people can fall for the lie of atheism is perplexing. It is a subtle lie, and it appeals to human beings on different levels, not the least of which is the attracting notion that if there is no God, then there is no hell; and if no hell, then there are no ultimate, eternal repercussions, good or bad, for how we live out our mortal lives. Of course, atheists will complain about the problem of evil and insist that people should be "good without God." But why? If God does not exist, why be good?

ZENIT: What can Christians do in the face of aggressive attacks from the other side?

MADRID: My view is that Christians must do three things if we are to adequately meet the challenge of atheism and conclusively demonstrate to atheists that their worldview is rationally untenable and cannot account for certain fundamental realities, and that Christianity can account for them.

First, we must pray fervently for atheists and rely on God's illuminating grace as far more important than our own efforts to refute atheism. Second, we must become proficient in both understanding and explaining the many compelling reasons for believing in God, including the classical proofs for his existence, and the rationally powerful and convincing answers to the arguments atheists raise against God (see Kreeft, Tacelli, and Feser for a head start in that direction, by the way).

And third, we must understand how to critique atheist claims on their own merits. Moving beyond responding to atheist argument with proofs for God's existence, we need to show atheists why atheism itself is false. And that last part is precisely our goal in *The Godless Delusion*.