

Atheism redux: What should we do?

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [July 24, 2007](#) issue

Having written “The Uses of Infidelity” (1956), >*The Infidel: Freethought and American Religion* (1961) and *Varieties of Unbelief* (1964) back when I was on the trail of atheists and their kin, I am often asked: When are you going to comment on the media’s discovery of “the new atheism”? The term refers to writings by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel C. Dennett, Samuel Harris, Michel Onfray, Victor J. Stenger and other best-selling defenders of atheism and attackers of religion as something evil and needing to be banished.

Answer: Maybe someday. Meanwhile, here is advice to myself and anyone else who cares:

Keep cool. America has seen cycles like these before and has managed to survive.

Send cards of thanks. These authors bring up differences in an age of indifference.

Don’t sneer. Many of these authors sneer. Where does that get us? I quote William Paley: “Who can refute a sneer?”

Don’t sound triumphalist. Some say “we” have “them” outnumbered 97 to three. If true, that represents a comfort margin for believers, but what does it prove?

Converse, don’t argue. No one wins arguments—which are determined by one’s knowing the answer—about the existence or nonexistence of God, but everyone can profit from a conversation that tries to pose good questions and respond to them.

Read better books by these authors (e.g., Dawkins’s *The Selfish Gene*), from which you might learn something, as opposed to their sensational polemics on a subject they are not well versed in.

Try to find a positive review—sooner or later there has to be one!—by any atheist or radical humanist who is an expert in science, since most or all such reviewers have been embarrassed by these books and trash them as hurting their

cause.

Agree with the authors that in the name of religion horrible things have been done and are being done, but point out that that's not the whole story of religion. Criticism of religion from within is more searching and matters more.

Save your money and your time by not reading books by or attending debates between religious fundamentalists and scientific fundamentalists.

Show regret that religious communities have been ineffective at presenting positive rationales, thus leaving people hungry for clarification as well as gullible in the face of misrepresentations.

Hold up the mirror if you are a believer, and ask whether anything anyone in religion is saying or doing gives legitimate grounds for antireligion to voice itself and creates a market for books like these.

Mention downsides of antireligion in the social sphere. Some of these authors protest or redefine terms when the names of mass murderers are brought up, but most of these murderers are public about being nonreligious themselves and antireligious toward others.

Ask for a better use of energies. These writers envision a happy world once all religions have died or been killed off, but religions are not going to die any more than science in all its reaches will die and disappear. A better use of energy would be to call all parties to find more positive and creative ways for members of different religions to coexist with each other and with those represented or misrepresented as scientists.

Read a good book. For more profit, read a novel, a volume of poetry or a sacred scripture. And relax.