Celestial spaghetti and the point of its absence - Argumentation and authority in New Atheism’s recent books
TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TABLE OF CONTENTS</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 – HISTORICAL CONTEXT</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 – AUTHORITY</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.1 – TYPES OF AUTHORITY</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.2 – THE HORSEMAN’S FIELDS OF EXPERTISE</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.3 – NON-EXPERT AUTHORITIES</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.4 – CULTURAL REFERENCES</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.5 – THE ENEMY’S AUTHORITIES</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.6 – THE READER’S AUTHORITY</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.7 – PERSONAL EXPERIENCE</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.8 – CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE AND AUTHORITY IN-CROWDS</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.9 – CONCLUSION AUTHORITY</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 – ARGUMENTATION</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.1 – SOLIPSISM AND IMPROBABILITY</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.2 – REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.3 – WRITING STYLE</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.4 – PHILOSOPHICAL PROOFS</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.5 – STALIN’S ATHEISM AND THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF RELIGION</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.6 – CONCLUSION ARGUMENTATION</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
<td>71</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WORKS CITED</td>
<td>75</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

While I am not a formal expert when it comes to religion, it has for quite some time been an academic hobby of mine. When pursuing my BA and MA degrees in English literature, and my MA degree in Journalism & New Media, I have tried to push every written assignment, including three theses, in the direction of religion. What started with a mere playful fascination for theistic and atheistic arguments steadily grew to be an all-round religious absorption, well beyond the former fleeting interest. Here I owe many a heartfelt thank you to my girlfriend, Marije Verkerk, who recently received an MA degree in Religious Studies. Our many discussions about the topic taught me a lot, and since we have often written papers about related subjects, I like to think that some of her genuine expertise has also crept into my non-expert academic endeavours. Moreover, there was always intelligent and informed conversation about religion around the house. There was always a true expert to turn to when in doubt about anything during the writing of this thesis. It gave me the confidence to take on the hefty and complicated issue of the theism-atheism debate, and hopefully also the wherewithal to do so in a neutral and intellectually honest fashion. Some other Religious Studies and Theology students have also been very helpful in judging the validity of texts on Christianity, Islam, Judaism and scripture in general. They have made the task of selecting the right authorities in fields largely unknown to me a lot easier. My thesis supervisor, Richard Todd, has been very patient with the extra year it took to complete this work, and has, at humungous intervals, always been most helpful with advice and quick and to-the-point corrections and suggestions. Finally, I am very much indebted to the theistic and atheistic communities on Youtube.com who have made it relatively easy to get acquainted with good and bad arguments and refutations on both sides of the spectrum, and who have uploaded hundreds upon hundreds of hours of debates and lectures by scholars and debaters. All of this has been greatly helpful, and has often sharpened my own perception too in significant ways. For whatever my own views were before and are now, writing this thesis has been a challenge to those too. As a final note, all the best to Christopher Hitchens, the author of one of the four target books, who has recently been diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He is currently fighting for his life, undergoing heavy chemo treatment, unlikely to actually cure him. Tip to the hat, and take care!
INTRODUCTION

Mankind’s quest for ultimate answers often centres on questions of ultimate origins. Whether it be the beginning of time, the creation of life, or sources of meaning, people have for centuries turned to gods of various kinds for the answer. Gods who created the world, inspired life, and authored man. In recent centuries a small, but ever increasing, group of people have vehemently opposed this explanation. They argue that there is not only insufficient evidence to believe in such metaphysical phenomena, but often also that religion and its purportedly irrational claims are potentially dangerous. Although many have voiced similar views throughout the last century, few have done so in ways as forceful and successful as the current New Atheism movement. Its four key proponents, Richard Dawkins, Daniel C. Dennett, Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris have in recent years authored bestselling books on the subject. Works which have been welcomed enthusiastically by many atheists, but which have divided reviewers immensely. They almost invariably judged the books to be either brilliant, convincing and refreshing, or misguided, sophomoric and overly aggressive. To an extent one can imagine how preconceived notions about the divine on the part of the critics play a role here, but one should not discount the fact that some of the most vitriolic reviews were written by fellow atheists.

With such a mixed reception, the four books, Dawkins’ The God Delusion, Dennett’s Breaking the Spell, Hitchens’ God is not Great and Harris’ The End of Faith, call for a more thorough assessment, one which not only puts the books and their reviews to the test, but also seeks to explain why they were written the way they were. That is the purpose of this endeavour, and its aim is to employ three basic approaches. Firstly, it tries to provide a context. The history of atheism and its debate about the existence of gods has partly shaped today’s discussion, and might serve to explain why certain decisions were made. This is the subject of the first chapter. Similarly, it is necessary to have a closer look at contemporary religious arguments and counterarguments, as they partly define today’s debate, as will be seen throughout all three chapters. Secondly, the way in which the Horsemen¹ use various types of authority is key in understanding their works. The second chapter is dedicated to this matter as well as to placing it in its proper context, since the dialectical nature of the debate might have informed some of the horsemen’s decisions in that debate. Thirdly, the structure and validity of the employed arguments are assessed in the final chapter. Their arguments are judged using argumentation theory, as

¹ The four atheistic authors are also known as the Four Horsemen of Atheism, the name of a documentary on the four authors. It obviously refers to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse, which feature in the Book of Revelation, the final book of the Bible. As it is appealingly concise, Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris will often be referred to as the horsemen.
are their attempts to take apart the arguments of their opponents. While not strictly related to argumentation, some factual inaccuracies will also be addressed here.

As I myself have views and opinions on the matter too, the strictest possible methodological agnosticism is adhered to. No ultimate judgments are made about the possible existence of gods, and the scope of this endeavour is restricted to a discussion of the reasons behind the judgments made by others. However, for reasons to be dealt with later, it is not always possible to separate this discussion from certain scientific claims. Methodological agnosticism is not extended to cover every conflict between religion and science. The Horsemen and the people they quote are taken to be authoritative within their respective academic fields. So while the actual existence of gods is never part of the discussion, claims made within well-established scientific disciplines such as evolutionary biology, geology and cosmology are taken to trump non-scientific religious counterarguments.

While there is obviously insufficient space to assess four entire books exhaustively, the research process basically entailed reading every book and noting down anything remotely related to any of the research topics. Not a single argument or appeal to authority was omitted. After making a selection of the most important and relevant instances, the religious or apologetic dialectical counterparts were selected, either from esteemed or very popular proponents. There are no designated Horsemen of Apologetics, which unfortunately means that the selection of sources is hazier than with the atheists. However, it is sufficient to show that their arguments are indeed out there, and to illustrate the ways in which they are put forward. Furthermore, such a demonstration eliminates any distortions the Horsemen may have made in their response to these arguments. When dealing with argumentation, universal bodies of fallacies were used. In some more specific cases Van Eemeren and Grootendorst were chosen. For more philosophical approaches the Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy was selected. For the chapter on authority, categories were devised to fit this specific body of texts, and while this methodology does not necessarily reflect pre-existing categorisation in scientific literature on authority, everything does follow logically from the books at hand, and is tailor-made to suit these specific cases. By analysing each and every instance of argumentation and use of authority, it should be possible to come to a more nuanced verdict on the position of the four target books than is usually the case. Of course, this should not be generalised to good or bad, but discussed differentiated by subject and author.

---

2 Some might perceive this to be a bias, but it is simply a matter of following scientific consensus. As the existence of gods is uncertain, and their nonexistence impossible to prove, there can never be a scientific consensus. Therefore, methodological agnosticism does necessarily apply to many godly notions, but does not to phenomena within the realm of science.
1 – HISTORICAL CONTEXT

When judging almost any book, it is necessary to understand its cultural and historical context. In the case of these books on atheism this is especially true, since they not only deal with the isolated notion of a god, but also are a reaction to the people who propagate the worldview connected to it, and part of the dialectical setting of the debate between theists and atheists. Therefore, it is useful to have a closer look at the history of atheism and its debate with theists. There are a few impediments to doing this, however. Firstly, and obviously, human history is a finite regression into time, and written records stop at a certain point. Therefore, one can by definition only discuss a part of the period in which atheism has been around. It also means that its origins, if one can even talk of such a thing, are ultimately obscured. Secondly, atheists have always been a marginalised demographic, save for parts of the western world in recent centuries. Therefore, they have generally been unable to make it into the chronicles. In fact, at many points in history, one can only infer what might have happened. Thirdly, the word “atheism” has an ambivalent meaning, and the prevalent definition has differed greatly throughout history, which makes it even harder to turn it into a unified, coherent story. However, if the books of Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett are to be understood, it is necessary to get as complete a picture of the cultural-historical backdrop as one can muster.

Although one could perhaps hypothesise about a prereligious stage in our human development, this would not qualify as atheism in any meaningful sense. Perhaps it is best compared to the statement that cavemen were illiterate, while they are more aptly described as preliterate, since there is no meaningful norm of literacy to deviate from. The same goes for a hypothetical prereligious era, which should, perhaps, rather be referred to as pretheism (or pre-animism even, since animism is often seen as an older, sometimes pretheistic type of religion). Pretheism is, at any rate, at best pseudo-historical, and seems to add very little to our present discussion. But what does? Atheism, as dealt with here, is perhaps best described as a disbelief in the existence of one or more supernatural or supreme beings, in the face of the knowledge of propositions made about their existence. At least, that is more or less the definition employed in present-day discourse. The past, however, teaches us that there have been various interpretations of the term. The focus, partly due to the limited available space, will be mostly

---

3 The Renaissance playwright Christopher Marlowe, for instance, was often shunned for his atheism, whereas his beliefs were, in fact, best seen as “a species of rationalistic antinomianism, dialectic in character, and closely related to the deflection from conventional orthodoxy for which Kett was burnt at Norwich in 1589” (Jokinen).
4 For the basic outline, as well as a number of sources, I am indebted to Marije Verkerk’s BA thesis on the subject: Verkerk, Marije. “De heiden en de fundamentalist: Over polarisatie, stigmatisering en nuance in het debat tussen atheïsten en theïsten”, 2009. Supervised by Dr. W. Hofstee at the World’s Religions department, Leiden University.
on the Western world. There is a strong case to be made for atheism in some, predominantly Eastern philosophies, dating back some thousands of years. Some of those did not include deities, at least some of the time in certain branches, but to draw on them would complicate matters beyond the scope of this thesis. For present purposes a history of Western atheism will be sufficient. There is the point, which some like to make, that all atheists are by definition agnostics because no one is in a good enough epistemic position to judge about the existence of preternatural entities. But, as P.J. McGrath has pointed out, this can only lead to a world where all people are agnostic (P. J. McGrath 55). Here, the personal conviction that there is no god is a workable qualification for being an atheist.

In western Classical Antiquity, theism, as well as atheism, played roles different from the ones they play today. Greek Gods were usually connected to the earthly power of states, and the religious rituals were political affirmations as much as they were divine. Atheos was a capital offence, but that was mostly due to the fact that it was thought to be subversive behaviour. In fact, insubordination in itself was enough to be convicted of atheism, much more so than merely disbelieving in the prescribed gods. Socrates, for instance, was not executed for the crime of “not believing in the existence of the gods in whose existence the city believes,” probably meant “to worship” rather than to “acknowledge” (Tate 3). In fact, the “ actual indictment as summarized by Socrates accuses him of corrupting the youth, not believing in the gods the state believes in, and believing in other new spiritual beings” (Johnson 726), which, together, amounted to atheism. At intervals, however, religious tolerance even amounted to allowing some philosophers, without a substantial body of followers, to criticise the belief in gods (Drachmann 5). Interestingly enough, reverence was not a requirement. Since the gods themselves often displayed typically human shortcomings of character and low moral standards, they were fallible, and therefore open to criticism. It was not uncommon to be antitheist, a term which, with a slightly altered meaning, will return later on. To what extent people were actually aware of state religion as a construct to keep people under control is unknown. All we do know on the matter comes from the anonymous satire Sisyphus, a fragment of which has been handed down to us. One of its characters, Critias, suggests that religion is a trick the weak use to break the hegemony of the strong (Sutton 33). Even though this is fictional, it is a strong indication this was a pre-existing idea (Drachmann 44-5). In the second century BCE., the historian Polybius described how the Roman elite and philosophers attacked the cults surrounding the gods. He opposed this, noting how useful it is for people to be superstitious, as it made it easier to control them (Drachmann 90). This suggests there was not really a debate between theists and atheists, but rather a secular discussion of theism, especially among the elite.
During medieval times, very little mention was made of atheism. Whether this was because there was very little atheism, or because most of the writing was done by clergymen or by the nobility is impossible to determine. As happened in the Greek and Roman Empires, the focus was not on godlessness, but on deviation from the one true faith. Within Christianity such deviation was referred to as heathenism or heresy, but in the Islamic world heretics and heathens were often indicted for atheism (History). Despite the apparent lack of opposition, Thomas Aquinas felt he had to prove the existence of God, and devised his famous *quinque viae*, or *five ways*. These five arguments for God, which will be discussed in more detail later, are mainly of interest because they imply a discussion with people who are not wholly convinced of His existence. But was this really the case? Firstly, it should be noted, as Rodney Shark has pointed out, that medieval Europe was not as strictly Christian as is often thought to have been the case. Conversion to Christianity had mostly taken place among nobility, and there was a trickle-down effect, but not enough to eradicate all formerly held beliefs and superstitions. Moreover, knowledge of Scripture and of what Christianity actually entailed was sparse, even among some clergymen, and religious participation was often quite low (Stark 62). Around 1200 CE, a Prior wrote the following passage:

> There are many people who do not believe that God exists. They consider that the universe has always been as it is and is ruled by chance rather than by Providence. Many people consider only what they can see and do not believe in good or bad angels, nor do they think that the human soul lives on after the death of the body (Arnold 226).

This looks a lot like atheism as we see it today. Clearly, the Vatican’s attempts to stifle such heresy were, at least in some cases, unsuccessful. The fact that the Prior seems to know in some detail what these people believe might point in the direction of a discussion between a theist and atheists. Such accounts, however, are extremely rare, and therefore it can safely be concluded that atheism itself was extremely rare in the Middle Ages.

The ensuing Renaissance\(^5\) did not bring atheism, but reformation and humanism. The reformation was a breach in the institutional body of Christianity, but never, despite the theological uproar it caused, left the realm of religion. Humanism, unlike its modern-day secular namesake, was not irreligious at all, but merely shifted focus from God to man. Mankind was not merely granted more attention, but was also to aim at making God’s Creation more beautiful with paintings, sculptures and poetry. The resurfacing of many classical texts led to the rediscovery of great Greek and Roman thinkers,

---

\(^5\) This phenomenon did not ensue in a linear fashion, but rather as a series as similar developments taking place in different parts of Europe, over the course of several centuries. It is an historical division, and therefore necessarily a man-made construct. “Renaissance” only became the preferred term for it in the nineteenth century when the historian Jules Michelet introduced it in his 1847 book *History of France* (Kelly andSemler 2).
but this did, perhaps because of four centuries of preceding Scholasticism, not threaten Christianity. It was put in a Christian context. Atheism remained a dangerous subject. Many people were indicted with and executed for atheism, and it was widely used as a term of abuse, hinting at a lack of moral restraint (Hecht 325). In 1659, *Theophrastus Redivivus* was published, anonymously. This was a compendium of attempts, through the ages, to dismantle the various proofs of the existence of God (Hecht 325).

During the Enlightenment, atheism gradually became something one could openly profess. Earlier on in the period, however, many thinkers were accused of atheism, such as Baruch de Spinoza, David Hume and Pierre Bayle, most of whom were in fact deists (Enlightenment). In 1770, Baron d’Holbach wrote *The System of Nature*, which was critical of religion as a whole. Although he used a pseudonym, he went on to become Europe’s first openly atheistic person (Hecht 353). D’Holbach was a Parisian salon intellectual, and although his book was very radical at the time, atheism was soon literally to become *salonfähig* after the French Revolution in 1789. During the revolution, in 1793, an attempt to active “dechristianization” culminated in the so-called Cult of Reason (Fremont-Barnes 329), which firmly established the lingering perceived link between reason and atheism. At the height of Reign of Terror, which took place between 1793 and 1794, Maximilien Robespierre condemned the cult, and instated his own Cult of the Supreme Being, which instated a form of deism as the official state religion (Fremont-Barnes 237). Whatever the case may be, in prosecuting Christians, atheism for the first time got blood on its hands, as many schools of thought will at some point.

With atheism finally surfacing during the French Revolution, public discourse in the nineteenth century was full of it. Percy Bysshe Shelley was a famous exponent, as were Karl Marx and Friedrich Nietzsche. In itself causally unrelated, but important nonetheless, is Charles Darwin’s 1859 book *On the Origin of Species* (Darwin). It stated that living things were not created in their present-day forms by God, on 23 October 4004 BCE at 9 am, as Archbishop James Ussher had calculated in 1658, but had evolved over millions of years. This did not disprove the existence of God, but it did make a literalist interpretation of the creation account in the Book of Genesis very unlikely. Therefore, Darwin’s theory of evolution had immense theological implications, which is exactly why it became and has always remained such a problem for many Christians. Philip Gosse, anticipating Darwin’s book by two years, was one of the first Christians to criticise the evolutionary theory in his 1857 book *Omphalos* (Newton xi). The most famous debate in that day was the Huxley-Wilberforce debate, which took place in Oxford in 1860. Bishop Samuel Wilberforce attacked Darwin’s ideas in Oxford’s British Association, and T.H. Huxley defended them. It was not merely a discussion about evolution, but, in a way, a litmus test for science’s autonomic position towards the church (Lucas 313).
The ideas Karl Marx had put forward in his *Communist Manifesto* were put into practice on an immense scale in the twentieth century with the rise of the communist regimes. Many of them instated state atheism, and made religions punishable heterodoxy (Kowalewski 81). This by no means meant religion was ever close to being rooted out, but many people were prosecuted and even executed. Because, through communism, most of the murderous dictatorships of the twentieth century can be linked to atheism, it is a very important topic in the debates between atheists and theists, as will become apparent. Apart from communism, atheism was also an integral part of many schools of art, philosophy and social engagement, examples of which are existentialism, feminism, nihilism and logical positivism (20th century). Perhaps the most famous atheist of the first half of the twentieth century was Bertrand Russell, who published his essay *Why I am Not a Christian* in 1927, in which he took on many arguments for God, as well as pointing out what he thought to be immoral and illogical about religion (Russell). He also partook in debates with theists, such as his BBC radio debate with Fr Frederick C. Copleston, on January 28th, 1948 (Russell and Copleston). After the high noon of atheism during the 1960s, when many thought it would replace religion altogether, religion made a comeback, be it often not in its old garb of Christianity, but in the shape of paganism, modern witchcraft or other spiritual philosophies (A. McGrath 173-5). Then, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, the flame of atheism was reignited by a deluge of books, the most famous of which are the ones we are studying here, by Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett.

First, however, there is one last detour to be made: the United States, where the religious climate differs greatly from that in most parts of Europe. According to polls done by the Gallup Association, in 2008 44% of Americans believe man was created by God in his present form, as opposed to 14% believing in evolution without the assistance of God. These statistics have been quite stable since the early 1980s, when the polls started, never straying further than a few per cent (Gallup Poll1). The percentage of Americans that, according to another recent Gallup poll, describe themselves as nonbelievers is 13%, which is remarkably close to the 14% of Americans who believe in the Theory of Evolution (Gallup Poll2). These statistics are ostensibly at variance with, for instance the Dutch ones, where 42% profess to be nonreligious (CBS), and only 15% absolutely disbelieve in evolution, which is quite a high percentage when compared to similar European countries (Owen).

This discrepancy can perhaps be explained by the active antievolution campaigning by churches and conservative organisations. After WWI, William Jennings Bryan succeeded in prohibiting the teaching of evolution in fifteen states. John Scopes taught it anyway, but was acquitted after appealing to a higher court, which considered the prohibition unconstitutional on various points (Linder). In 1968,
a similar case, Epperson v. Arkansas, was ruled over by the Supreme Court. Yet again, prohibition on teaching evolution was considered unconstitutional (Justitia). After the 1975 Daniel v. Waters trial, creationism had to be stripped from all its Christian and Biblical connotations in order to be allowed to be taught (Fair). This stripped-down version of creationism was called creation science, but after the 1980 Edwards v. Aquillard trial, which ended in 1987, this too was judged to be unconstitutional (FindLaw). Therefore, the original concept of creationism had to be changed even more, and gave rise to what is today known as Intelligent Design. In the two early drafts of the 1989 school textbook, Of Pandas and People, there is a remarkable shift from the use of creation and creationist to intelligent design and design proponent. In the revised 1993 second edition, the former have almost disappeared completely (Wikimedia). Despite many attempts to rid Intelligent Design of its creationistic connotations, Judge Jones ruled the following in the 2005 Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District case:

- The proper application of both the endorsement and Lemon tests to the facts of this case makes it abundantly clear that the Board’s ID Policy violates the Establishment Clause. In making this determination, we have addressed the seminal question of whether ID is science. We have concluded that it is not, and moreover that ID cannot uncouple itself from its creationist, and thus religious, antecedents (Kit. v. Do).

The main response from design proponents after this case, and to this day, is to get schools to “teach the controversy” (Myer). This entails that the controversy between the theories of evolution and intelligent design should be explained to school children. This is presented as a reasonable golden-mean solution, while, in scientific terms, the controversy is nonexistent, hence the court ruling that intelligent design in not science.

This, in a nutshell, is the context of the four target books. Atheism, in various forms, has been prosecuted throughout most of history, and only recently been allowed a place in the public sphere. During the Enlightenment, it acquired the extra baggage of reason, and after Darwin it further acquired a strong link with the theory of evolution. In this form, the debate between theists and atheists still exists in America. On the one hand this is a legalistic debate, between secularists and design proponents. On the other hand it is a debate between authors and debaters, who reply to each other’s books, or cross swords at debates organised by universities, churches, TV programmes and festivals, and in which the four target authors also partake. Some noted opponents are William Lane Craig, Alister McGrath and Rabbi Shmuley. Some less noted ones are Kent Hovind, Ray Comfort and Lee Strobel. Given the reciprocal nature of polemics and debates, they might exert an influence on the way in which some of the arguments are presented in the target books. Another important factor appears to be
distrust among many Americans against atheism. When asked the question, in a 2007 poll, "If your party nominated a generally well-qualified person for president who happened to be an atheist would you vote for that person?", only 45% answered positively. If compared to the 94% for blacks, and 88% for women, one sees the extent of the suspicion (Intolerance). Another case in point is an item on Fox News, aired on January 24th, 2009, in which they discussed whether Barack Obama had acted offensively by mentioning nonbelievers, alongside Christians, Muslims, Jews and Hindus, during his inaugural speech (Fox News). Although the latter example is merely an extreme example, it does add to the overall picture, and this is also part of the context, and part of the world the intended audience of the target books live in. Therefore, it is important to keep this in mind while assessing these works.
2 – AUTHORITY

One way to assess the four target books is to have a closer look at their use of authority. The use of authority in itself is inevitable. Karl Popper said people perceive the world with the knowledge they already have, which he called *theory-laden observation* (SEP). Given the immensity of human knowledge, it cannot be denied that most of the things a given person knows are not acquired through personal experience or understanding, but rather through external authorities. Since philosophers of science rejected synthetic *a priori* knowledge, it is even doubtful whether the simplest instances of arithmetic, such as $1 + 1 = 2$, can be resolved without the use of authority (Leezenberg and De Vries 59). In science the soundness of a given authority is decided upon by consensus among experts, and safeguarded by anonymous peer reviews. In argumentation theory the yardstick of choice is the appeal-to-authority fallacy, which is concerned with whether the authority’s credentials actually match up with the matter at hand. Roughly, this means that Buzz Aldrin’s opinion on cell biology is not authoritative, nor is a cell biologist’s opinion on geopolitics, no matter how well-respected they may be within their own fields of knowledge. However, between the academic standard of authority and the unambiguously fallacious appeal to it lies a wide range of intermediate stages. And since the target books are, at least most of the time, non-academic, most of the authority they use should be expected to be non-academic as well. Along this range is it useful to distinguish between different categories, defined by a number of characteristics.

2.1 – TYPES OF AUTHORITY

- Firstly, there are the authorities in fields within which the authors are sufficiently expert themselves. For Dawkins, this is evolutionary biology and general understanding of science. For Dennett this is philosophy, and to a lesser extent evolutionary biology and Darwinian approaches to religion. For Hitchens this is philosophy and literature. For Harris this is philosophy and neuroscience. For present purposes, most of the authorities within these respective fields can be combined in one category, in which these four authors can be trusted to have their sources in order.

- Secondly, there is the category of authorities, which in themselves may very well be trustworthy, but of which it is doubtful whether the four target authors are able to judge their merits on an academic level. Especially within fields with unresolved ongoing debates, the
reader should be mindful of possible selective reading, or of shopping around for authorities that underline the authors' preconceived ideas.

- Thirdly, there is the category of authorities that have no academic credentials within the relevant field. This need not be problematic, as long as they are chosen for non-essential merits, such as inspiring observations or turns of phrase. The reader should be on the lookout for fallacious appeals to authority, however, which occur when an argument actually hinges on such a source.

- Fourthly, there is the category of cultural and literary references. With some possible exceptions, of which George Orwell's novel *Nineteen Eighty-Four* is perhaps an example, these are not valid when it comes to pure information. Their main purpose is, therefore, not to constitute an argument, but rather to boast a certain degree of general understanding of the world and a level of what might be termed a general cultural mindset on the part of the author. The air of learning this provides is, of course, not the only possible reason to use cultural references. Despite the ambiguity concerning their connection to the actual world, literature and other forms of art are often case studies of things that do or might occur in society. And although it is often impossible to translate this wisdom derived through Aristotelian mimesis back to academic knowledge, it may very well be deemed authoritative to some degree. Another obvious purpose of cultural and literary references is that they can often be used as universals, ideas and images that most people will instantly pick up on, much like proverbs. However, given our present focus, most attention will be paid to the implications for authority.

- Fifthly, there is an interesting tendency to make use of the authorities of the opponent, often in an opportunistic manner. These are not the universal ones discussed above, like Einstein, but rather the ones that are unequivocally on one side. This, without many exceptions, means they have something to say in support of the Horsemen's cause. Obviously, this does not make them good sources, especially since they are not taken seriously when they make statements that oppose atheistic views. Rather, it seems, it is either an attempt at weakening the credentials of the opposing camp, or a way to make a claim to the reasonableness of the middle ground of the debate, to which there is, of course, more rhetorical force than truth.

- Sixthly, there is the type of authority in the reader him- or herself. By using examples, thought experiments and mind games, the author can externalise certain types of experiential authority to the reader. This can, of course, also be described as an explanatory device, but Harris in particular employs this technique in such a way that it merits an approach from this side.
Finally, and this is the odd one out, there is authority based on personal experience on the part of the author, or on his personal involvement in matters. Although all four authors partake in this business, Hitchens clearly stands out, interlacing most of his narratives with personal anecdotes. Therefore, this part of the discussion will chiefly be dedicated to him.

However, there are two other factors that have to be taken into account when judging the above categories. The first is the historical context of the theism-atheism debate, and the second the authorities that appear to be typical of the atheists’ side of the discussion. The historical context helps to explain their choice to include quotations from certain people on certain topics, which could otherwise easily be mistaken for merely fallacious appeals to authority. As will become clear, some of these appeals are in fact responses to claims made by apologists, and which require a rebuttal. At no point does this constitute sound argumentation, but if understood as part of a dialectical feud that has, in some cases, been going on for over a century, it at least becomes clear why these atheistic authors choose to include such flawed authorities. As for the authorities which are used by most of the atheistic authors, but by none on the opposing side, this also merits closer scrutiny. Far from being discredited by the single fact that such a use of authority is only made by one side, it does seem fair to cast a critical glance at these authorities’ respective backgrounds. Moreover, it might be possible to describe these authorities in some more general terms, defining them as a group. Finally, there are some types of authorities used which are best discussed elsewhere. These are references to the various sacred texts, as well as quotations from people deemed authoritative chiefly among the religious apologists and which are generally used to attack religion. Therefore, they are best discussed at a later point.

2.2 – THE HORSEMAN’S FIELDS OF EXPERTISE
The first group, the authorities from within the authors’ own spheres of expertise, is fairly straightforward. There is no reason to suppose that there is too much wrong with them, and if there is, it is up to their fellow experts to criticise them. This thesis being a literary and argumentation-theory-based approach, it is obviously not the appropriate place to assess the validity of the first group, with the possible exception of Hitchens’ literary references. What can with some confidence be judged, however, is how these authorities are employed concerning the subjects of religion and theology. Dawkins uses his qualifications within evolutionary biology in two ways. He responds to the alleged flaws and inconsistency in the theory, something he is perfectly qualified to do. There are not many evolutionary biologists he could have deferred to, which perhaps explains why he quotes no
contemporary scientist on the topic, though there is an exceptionally wide range of articles and books to quote from. Instead, he mostly sticks to quoting the founder of the theory, Charles Darwin, and the most passionate of its early adaptors, T.H. Huxley. It was Huxley, as mentioned before, who debated Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, and also went under the nickname of Darwin’s Bulldog (Dawkins 71). This is interesting, because neither of those two men knew anything about today’s evolutionary theory. They were perfectly ignorant about carbon dating, embryonic homology and DNA, all of which are important later additions to the field. What Dawkins, in fact, appears to be doing is merely responding to creationists’ attacks on Darwin himself. In doing so, Dawkins stays within the confines of the debate as it is. Darwin is shown to have anticipated and answered the question of irreducible complexity (Dawkins 148-9), which is odd, considering the fact that Dawkins himself is much more knowledgeable on the topic. The debate is on neo-Darwinism, which Darwin himself naturally never lived to see. Yet, Dawkins apparently deemed it more important to protect Darwin as a household name. It should also be noted that Dawkins wrote several books on the topic of evolutionary theory prior to publishing The God Delusion. Still, the question remains to be answered whether his academic proficiency as a neo-Darwinist still stands once it has crossed over into religion. When seen as group behaviour, religion may very well be explicable by Darwinian means. Indeed, he speculates about the existence of a god centre (Dawkins 196-197). Still, of the people who Dawkins says have pursued this Darwinian approach, many have a broader academic background than just that. He mentions “Hinde, Shermer, Boyer, Atran, Bloom, Dennett, Keleman and others”, as authorities on the subject of religion as a Darwinian by-product of something else (Dawkins 214). However, they are respectively a zoologist, a historian of science and noted sceptic, a sociocultural anthropologist and psychologist, a linguistic and cognitive anthropologist and psychologist, a psychologist, a philosopher and fellow Horseman of Atheism and a cognitive psychologist. This raises two important questions, namely: are these good authorities, and is Dawkins qualified to judge this? Again, this is not the place to judge whether these are scientists with a relevant expertise. It is, however, safe to say that Dennett should raise suspicion, as should Shermer, which will be discussed at some later point. For different reasons, Boyer and Atran will also receive some follow-up attention.

---

6 (St. John’s College)
7 (Skeptic)
8 (Washington University)
9 (University of Michigan)
10 (Yale University)
11 (Tufts University)
12 (Boston University)
Daniel C. Dennett, despite being a trained philosopher, also mainly focuses on the evolutionary origins of religious phenomena. He can be regarded as at least some sort of an authority on the subject of Darwinism, having incorporated suggestions of Dawkins (Dennett XV), and having previously published a book on the subject, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (Tufts University1), alongside several articles (Tufts University2). Of all four target books, *Breaking the Spell* is the one with by far the most academic approach to religion. There are still many reasons to treat it as a book promoting atheism, but Dennett has clearly immersed himself in the subject matter. This does not exempt him from criticism, however. Some of his authorities are the same Dawkins uses, such as Jared Diamond, Pascal Boyer and Scott Atran (Dennett 104-105). Some others, like Rodney Stark and Roger Finke (Dennett 179) can for present purposes be deemed trustworthy. Far more interesting is Dennett’s reliance on William James, psychologist and a brother of Henry James, whose 1902 work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* is famous to this day. Although Dennett states he disagrees with James on some topics (Dennett 10), he calls him “[another] of my philosophical heroes” (Dennett 20). He refers to him a fair number of times, which, especially if one takes into account the year of its publication, should raise some suspicion in the reader. However, since Harris and Hitchens also use James, this matter is best addressed later on. For now it is enough to note that Dennett uses James in a way similar to Dawkins’ use of Darwin. James is quoted in response to present-day discussions, and also quoted in support of concepts he himself was probably unaware of. Thus, as with Dawkins and Darwin, it appears to be the case that James is used as an authority for authority’s sake, as contemporary scientists would make for much better sources. Dennett quotes James discussing religion as a “mystical germ” (Dennett 83-84), which is, to say the least, disingenuous. It has obvious genetic connotations, which appear to support Dennett’s idea as a virus of the mind (Dennett 45). However, the idea of genetics did not become widely known for over half a century after the publication of the book –through Watson and Crick’s introduction of the double helix (Watson and Crick 737). A similar thing occurs when Dennett calls James “a memeticist ahead of his time” (Dennett 186). The concept of *memes* was only introduced in 1976, in *The Selfish Gene* by Richard Dawkins (Millikan 16). Moreover, memes are a controversial theory. And while Dennett acknowledges this (Dennett 92), he still anachronistically quotes James in support of it.\textsuperscript{13}

Sam Harris is a trained philosopher and a neuroscientist, and although both fields deal with aspects of religion, it does not make him an expert by default. Philosophy is mostly used to show the incongruence between the religious and the philosophical definitions of truth and knowledge. David

\textsuperscript{13} This is not to say that it is inconceivable that James was thinking about a similar phenomenon. However, there are many social scientists who distance themselves from the concept of memes, so it is not entirely fair to claim anyone predating 1976 in support of it. This may entail academic politics.
Hume, for instance, is alluded to by using his aphoristic “extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence” (Harris 41). In an endnote, Hume is also quoted as stating that it is impossible to see causal relations and how they can only be deduced (Harris 240-1). Harris uses Hume to show the low religious standards of truth-finding as compared to science. Karl Popper is used to set the bar even higher, introducing the concept of falsifiability, which dismisses the supernatural as ultimately unknowable (Harris 66). Jean-Paul Sartre is quoted to explain the subject-object dichotomy (Harris 280). Other philosophers are used to show morality can exist without religion at its basis. Immanuel Kant’s categorical imperative is used as a naturalistic alternative to Jesus Golden Rule (Harris 186). Another example is the philosopher Peter Unger, who is quoted on the correlation between guilt and the preventability of evil (Harris 141). In other instances, Harris appears to be after usurpation of the name of the philosopher. When he mentions Spinoza’s claim that belief and perception are one, and that this appears to be borne out by recent research (Harris 61), this merely serves to mention his name, since the conductors of the more recent research should be deemed much more authoritative on the subject. Another example of this is when Harris mentions that Friedrich Nietzsche mourned Blaise Pascal’s corruption of mind (Harris 247), while it remains unclear why Nietzsche’s opinion matters here. Harris also mentions some great philosophers to disagree with. In itself, this is a commonplace technique, but usually it is directed at a small group of usual suspects, such as Pascal, C.S. Lewis and others, who are often used by apologeticists. Harris, however, disagrees with authorities which are usually revered by atheistic debaters. He cites Carl Young, among big names from different fields, as someone who claimed the war between science and religion was over. And Harris begs to differ. It becomes even more striking when he criticizes the philosopher and Nobel Prize winner Bertrand Russell on the subject of the ancient Greek School of Sceptics (Harris 282). Admittedly, this is merely a philosophical matter, and Harris does quote Russell approvingly on theology, but according to Harris Scepticism does have a spiritual dimension. Moreover, Russell is one of Harris predecessors, having published the pro-atheistic Why I Am Not a Christian, for which he is still popular among atheists.

Harris’ other formal area of expertise is that of neuroscience, in which he holds a PhD. However, he obtained this title only after writing The End of Faith (Greenberg). Thus, one needs to be careful not to reverse-engineer these academic credentials into the discussion of authority of the book. Still, as a post-doctoral student, he can safely be expected to know what he is talking about. Unlike the evolutionary approach as proposed by Dawkins and Dennett, Harris’ neuroscientific approach is more circumstantial. In notes 1 and 2 of chapter 2, for instance, Harris expounds on belief in general, without making it admissible that a belief in mundane, everyday propositions is on equal footing with religious
beliefs (Harris). Perhaps this is due to the fact that neuroscience is relatively new. Indeed, one of the main propositions of *The End of Faith* is that science in general, and neuroscience in particular, should aim at finding naturalistic explanations for ethical truths and spiritual experiences (Harris 19). In other words, at this point in time Harris’ field of research appears to be too early in its development to give satisfying answers about religious beliefs. Harris, however, has another trick up his sleeve, namely an apparently rather extensive knowledge about meditation and the spiritual practices of the East. He has studied with meditation masters in India and Nepal, and has even been the private bodyguard of the Dalai Lama for a short spell (Science Studio 2). Moreover, he quotes from texts from Eastern spiritual traditions, and has experimented with psychoactive substances, which, as we know ever since Aldous Huxley’s *The Doors of Perception*, can lead to experiences of a semi-religious nature. The trouble with these claims to authority is obvious. Whatever the merit of drug-induced “psychonautics”\(^\text{14}\) and transcendental meditation may be, it is not academic in nature. Similarly, being a former bodyguard to someone does not constitute a basis of authority in this person’s field. Even when it did, the Dalai Lama, as will become clear later on, is by no means an uncontroversial person among the other atheistic authors. Finally, Harris also quotes some of the scientists with the evolutionary approach to religion. Interestingly Scott Atran, to whom Harris also alludes (Harris 253), has criticized him for his approach to religion, and more specifically for his approach to Islam (Atran). This raises the question whether one can be regarded sufficiently expert to use an authority if one is criticized by that very same person. This question lies beyond the modest scope of the present endeavour.

Christopher Hitchens is difficult to pigeonhole when it comes to authority. His formal education was in philosophy, but he is better known as a journalist, literary critic and intellectual. In 2005, Prospect Magazine even ranked him number five in their top-100 of public intellectuals (Prospect). There are several problems with this when it comes to authority, especially to the topics discussed in his *God Is Not Great*. Being expert in literature may bring considerable knowledge with it, but it is hard to judge what extra-literary implications this has. It is best discussed later on, when literary and cultural references are touched upon. Hitchens does not appear to approach religion from a specifically philosophical angle, which is perhaps explained by the fact that he graduated several decades ago, and has since pursued completely different careers. But the most difficult aspect of Hitchens is his status of public intellectual, since it is an unquantifiable title. He can safely be assumed to know about a lot of things, and to have intelligent opinions about many topics. There are, however, no formal boundaries to his knowledge and expertise, which makes it all but impossible to assess whether he is able to judge

\(^{14}\) An introspective exploration of the self and the mind through use of psychoactive substances.
authorities on a given subject. On the basis of his education as well as his experience as a literary critic, it may be fair to presuppose some knowledge of the Holy Bible, but not necessarily as anything other than an intertextual device. His main authority on the Bible is Bart Ehrman (Hitchens 120/142), a New Testament historian popular among Hitchens’ fellow atheists. Ehrman is therefore best discussed at a later point. The same goes for Hitchens experiences as a journalist, the personal dimension of which needs a paragraph of its own. All in all, Hitchens remains very much elusive when it comes to authority, lacking a clearly defined field of expertise.

2.3 – NON-EXPERT AUTHORITIES
A third category of authorities consists of those who are well-known and revered, but not necessarily on the topic they are quoted on. This is usually through no fault of those men and women themselves, since everyone is entitled to their opinions, and free to express them. Yet academic credentials do not travel outside the borders of their fields, and thus these people should, strictly speaking, not be deemed authoritative outside of them. Moreover, since religion often deals with metaphysics, it is doubtful whether any person could confidently be claimed to be an expert at all. Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* uses many of these authorities, many of whom are scientists. Carl Sagan, who is quoted as wondering why religious people have not come to the conclusion that science is much better than religion (32-33), is a good example. The problem is that Sagan, however great he may have been as a cosmologist, is not an expert on Scripture, religion, let alone on the existence of God. A similar case from a different field is H.L. Mencken, whom Dawkins quotes as saying: “People say we need religion when what they really mean is we need police” (261). In both cases, there is a provocative turn of phrase, and this is probably the affect Dawkins was after. Yet, this becomes illegitimate once their non-expert opinions are used to support a claim. Other instances of such questionable use of authority are Steven Weinberg (283), Thomas Jefferson (51), and the inescapable Albert Einstein (241), the latter two of whom will be discussed in more detail below.

On the topic of Darwinism, Dawkins quotes Leonard Susskind, a physicist, who thought cosmology started with Darwin (143). This is even stranger, given the fact that Susskind is not a true authority on cosmology, while Dawkins is one on Darwinism. Thus, Dawkins merely weakens his own argument by quoting a physicist, probably to gain support from a famously intelligent person. Yet another variant is when Dawkins uses David Attenborough as his authority on cargo cults (234). Attenborough made a documentary about cargo cults in 1960 (IMDB1), and while he also dedicated a chapter to them in a travel book in 1981 (East Riding), Dawkins main authority is still the documentary.
De Beer 2011

Firstly, Attenborough is a zoologist, not an anthropologist. And secondly, it is a rather old source, and Dawkins disregards several decades-worth of research by preferring the cachet of the name *David Attenborough* over more up to date, yet anonymous scholarship. In fact, even by the standards of the time, Attenborough was not the best source. Dawkins says nobody knows for certain who John Frum is, the semi-mythical founder of the cult Attenborough investigated. However, even as early as 1957, Peter Wosley knew he was a native called Manehivi, and described in quite some detail who he was and what he did (Wosley 155-156). Therefore, it can clearly be shown that Dawkins’ decision to choose a public figure as an authority actually becomes an impediment to truth-finding.

Daniel Dennett does not, like Dawkins, go overboard on questionable authorities. He does quote some of the same people, but on more circumstantial matters. H.L. Mencken is quoted saying: “The only really respectable Protestants are the Fundamentalists. Unfortunately, they are also palpable idiots” (Dennett 190). On an academic level, it is scarcely relevant what Mencken thought about religion. However, Dennett seems to be mostly concerned with the way in which he phrased it. Steven Weinberg, also used by Dawkins, is also quoted: “Good people will do good things, and bad people will do bad things. But for good people to do bad things—that takes religion” (279). This constitutes a much more serious allegation than Mencken’s sardonic quip. It should come as no surprise that Dennett also quotes Thomas Jefferson (334) and Abraham Lincoln (162). As said before, these authorities require a discussion later on, which takes into account the context of the debate.

Sam Harris, as exemplified in his relation to Bertrand Russell, appears to be the odd one out. He openly disagrees with some people lauded by his fellow atheists, such as Noam Chomsky (Harris 139), Albert Einstein (15), and Descartes (174). Harris is also unique in not referring to Darwin, nor to any of the Founding Fathers. Given the key role these authorities play in the theism-atheism debate, it could be argued that Harris thus places himself outside of the debate, perhaps aiming to be seen as independent and neutral. On the other hand, he wrote *The End of Faith* before any of the other books was written, so it may also be that he merely wrote it before the standard was set. However, since the debate obviously predates Harris’ book, this seems unlikely. Still, it is worth noticing. At the very beginning, for instance, he names H.G. Wells, Albert Einstein, Carl Jung, Max Planck, Freeman Dyson and Stephen Jay Gould as examples of people who have declared the war between science and religion to be over (15). This is a common feature of the debate, especially Gould’s *non-overlapping magisteria* and Einstein’s aphoristic “Science without religion is lame, religion without science is blind”. Unlike his fellow authors, however, Harris makes no attempt at either making it seem as though these authorities were insincere, or at taking credit for taking on such major players. He merely says he disagrees with them. Then, there is the
case of William Henry Burr’s *Self-Contradictions of the Bible*, first published in 1860 (Harris 244). As with Dawkins’ use of Attenborough’s documentary, it could be argued that Harris’ use of this book is at least questionable, since it leaves almost a century-and-a-half of biblical scholarship undiscussed. However, where Dawkins’ argument is mostly weakened by the age of Attenborough’s research, in Burr’s case, it actually strengthens Harris’ argument, because it helps to show that knowledge of the purported inaccuracy of the Bible has been around for such a long time. Moreover, the canonised Bible has mostly remained static for centuries, whereas anthropology hardly if ever deals with such black-and-white cases. Thus, this approach works a lot better for Harris than it did for Dawkins.

Christopher Hitchens clearly differs from Harris. Where the latter steered clear from the Founding Fathers, Hitches wrote an entire book on Thomas Jefferson, named *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America*, which, incidentally, is also Dawkins’ authority on Jefferson. It should not come as a surprise, therefore, that *God Is Not Great* also contains many references to him, as well as to the other Founding Fathers. In that respect, Hitchens appears to be the only one, out of the four target authors, who is most immersed in American society, despite his British birth and upbringing. It is in that American context, of course, that the Founding Fathers carry the most weight as all-round authorities. A good example of this type of all-round American authority is when Hitches uses Thomas Paine, about whom he also wrote a book, as an authority on biblical history (Hitchens 104). Apart from the fact that Paine is not widely remembered for his biblical scholarship, it is also problematic that he died two full centuries before Hitchens set out to write his book. Unlike Burr’s contradictions, which have not substantially changed after the 1611 Authorized Version, biblical history has dramatically so, for instance with the discovery of the Nag Hammadi gospels in 1945. On the same level, the American Constitution, though not an actual person, is also used as an authority (Hitchens 33). The reasons behind this are obvious. Hitchens merely stomps the well-trodden battlegrounds of the atheism-theism debate, which lie mostly in America. The importance of these authorities has to do with the question of whether America was intended to be *one nation under God*, as the Pledge of Allegiance has it, at least after it was revised to say so in 1954 under Eisenhower (White House). Thus, the constitutions and its authors are probably deemed relevant by Hitchens mostly because they stand for the way America was intended to be, an idea recognised by his opponents. Therefore it greatly matters what the Founding Fathers and their constitution have to say about religion. Of course this case needs some closer scrutiny, but it is already safe to say that this is not

---

15 Albeit in different versions, such as the Catholic and the Protestant ones.
16 Hitchens officially became a United States citizen in 2007.
merely an appeal to questionable authority, as it appears to be on the surface. However, it is clear that Hitchens makes more use of this kind of authority than the other authors.

2.4 – CULTURAL REFERENCES
As to the fourth type of authority, the cultural and literary references, Richard Dawkins has more to show than one would usually expect from a biologist, although his references to Shakespeare’s *Hamlet* (408), Lord Tennyson (204), P.G. Wodehouse (209-210), Victor Hugo (349), and allusions to Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels* (354) can reasonably be expected to have been part of his secondary school curriculum. Most of them are not used in an anti-religious sense, but rather as an elegant way of expressing things. The only way in which these are really authorities is purely on the level of ethos. Dawkins appeals to a different type of ethos with his references to popular culture and more recent literature, as these convince the reader that he is still in touch and not living in an ivory tower. Their use is often strictly related to religion. John Lennon’s lyrics to *Imagine*, “Imagine there’s no countries [...] and no religion too”, are used to introduce Dawkins’ own contemplation on such a world. But at the same time, it sets off the story that in America the lyrics are sometimes changed to “And one religion too”, which he calls “effrontery” (23-24). Later on, Dawkins uses Monty Python’s movie *Life of Brian* as an example of how quickly cults can take over. But at the same time he is probably just as much after the connotations of fundamentalist Christian outrage sparked off by the movie’s 1979 release (Ebert). Sometimes, a reference to popular culture is also void of anti-religious connotations, such as Basil Fawlty from the sitcom *Fawlty Towers*, who is used as an example for people who talk to inanimate objects (213-214). Dawkins also quotes Isaac Asimov (20), Douglas Adams (42-43), Woody Allen (144), George Carlin (317) and Alfred Hitchcock (357). These quotes are critical of religion, and not taken from the books of the authors among those who are quoted. George Carlin, the comedian, is the only one whose quote comes straight from his work.

The late Douglas Adams (1952-2001), the author of *The Hitchhikers’ Guide to the Galaxy*, was a good friend of Dawkins’, and the quote is taken from a speech, in which he himself is mentioned (42-43). Despite the fact that Adams was a well-known writer, and a fellow critic of religion, Dawkins’ quote is probably best seen as a tribute to him as a friend. Then, also from popular culture, is the reference to Penn & Teller, the famous magicians’ duo. Dawkins apparently only uses the tricks of this particular duo as an example of things he cannot sniff out (155), yet they are not a random pick from the world of magic. Penn & Teller are also well-known as members of the sceptic community in America, and presenters of the TV show *Bullshit*, which debunks religious and pseudoscientific claims (Penn & Teller). With James Randi, Criss Angel and Banachek there are more conjurors who have pursued scepticism,
but still the choice for this duo should not go unnoticed. Scepticism will be dealt with in more detail once Michael Shermer has been discussed below. Penn & Teller have, moreover, also written one of the positive reviews given on the blurb of recent reissues of The God Delusion (Dawkins). Finally, returning to literature, Dawkins’ quotation from Ivan Karamazov in Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov is interesting. This central Dostoevskian tenet is to the effect that if there should be no God, nothing would be immoral, and “all should be permitted” (259-260). According to Dawkins, apologists have often used this as proof of Dostoevsky’s faith, rightly remarking, in line with literary theory, that an author’s opinions should never be deduced from the opinions of the fictional characters he has created. However, Dawkins appears to suggest quite the opposite, Dostoevsky’s disbelief, which is equally ill-construed logic. He tries to get the reader to believe that Dostoevsky is on his side in the debate, arguably for reasons inherent in the historical context of the debate, in which Ivan Karamazov’s fictional opinion has at some point begun to matter. Dawkins’ fellow atheists also quote him, so this deserves a closer look in later paragraphs.

Daniel Dennett, a philosopher with a special interest in religion and biology, may, like Dawkins, also be expected to have little to say about literature and popular culture. Yet, he also makes a lot of references to them, though not quite as many as Dawkins does. There are, again, the quotes taken from the most famous authors, like William Shakespeare (40), William Wordsworth (44) and an allusion to Keats with his fear of the unweaving of the rainbow by science (45), taken from his work Lamia (Lee and Frazer 137). Unweaving the Rainbow, interestingly, is also a book by Dawkins, but since it deals with the very topic of beauty and science, and since it is a famous quote, there need not be a link there. It could even be argued that quotations of the likes of Shakespeare, Wordsworth and Keats can almost be treated as lexical items. Like Dawkins, Dennett also quotes from Dostoevsky’s The Brothers Karamazov, but not Ivan Karamazov’s ponderings on God and morality. Instead he quotes another character from the book, the Grand Inquisitor, who states that he needs his men to believe in an afterlife to get them to go to war more easily (Dennett 284-285). At no point does Dennett mention Ivan Karamazov, but given Dawkins’ remarks, it can safely be interpreted as a response to apologists who quote Ivan approvingly. In doing so, Dennett’s point is more valid than Dawkins’, since he only uses the Grand Inquisitor to show how Dostoevsky’s characters have conflicting opinions about religion, which cannot both be ascribed to the author. In and of itself it is still an empty argument, but within the context of the debate it is at least better than Dawkins’, especially since the point is only made tacitly. Interestingly, Dennett, like Dawkins, also makes an allusion to Jonathan Swift’s Gulliver’s Travels, yet to a completely different chapter, and for completely different reasons. Where Dawkins talks about Big-Enders (Dawkins 353), with which Swift
satirised the conflict between different schools of Christianity, Dennett uses *Yahuuz* as a hypothetical creature (Dennett 328). These animals are obviously based on the *Yahoos*, the debased human-like creatures living with the superior horse-like Houyhnhnms. Dennett, indeed, portrays *Yahuuz* as debased and despicable, to show how, according to him, Muslims perceive Westerners. Some of his references to popular culture are of a similarly explanatory nature, such as Cameron Diaz, the actress, who is used as an example of why she would not be the same if her name became generic for something, analogous to the perceived tendency of believers to expand the meaning of God at will to avoid falsification (214-215). Similarly Sherlock Holmes, the most famous fictional detective of all time, is used to show that there can be facts to know about things that do not exist, with obvious implications for many characters in religious texts (211-212). Finally, Dennett names the Red Sox, the Boston baseball team, as something that can give meaning to the lives of the secular (291-292). These people, teams and characters do not inherently say something about religion, and in fact it is doubtful whether they should be seen as authorities at all. Other references to popular culture are different, though, like the actor and devout Catholic Mel Gibson, who has no qualms about informing the press that his wife, who is an Episcopalian, will surely go to hell (288-289). This is not something designed to make the religious mind look any saner or more pleasant. Finally, a quotation of Ned Flanders, the Christian neighbour of Homer Simpson in *The Simpsons*, a cartoon series, is similar, but different. Ned calls science “a big blabbermouth” which ruins everything by explaining it (12). It appears to combine Mel Gibson’s stupidity with John Keats’ sincere distress, but one very important difference is that Ned Flanders was purposefully designed to be exactly the way he was. He is a satire, and any attempt to make it seem as though he represents real Christians is disingenuous. Dennett appears to use Ned to introduce a point, and he may be after the comic effect, but in a serious book on religion it seems to be slightly out of place.

Sam Harris’ use of cultural references is virtually non-existent. There is a passing reference to James Joyce’s *Finnegans Wake*, which has little to do with the subject of the book (Harris 217). His quote from W.B. Yeats’ poem *The Second Coming*, when the “best lack all conviction”, is slightly more telling (180). Harris applies the problem of the strong lacking conviction to the problems he sees with Islam. Another ominous layer of religious forebodings is, of course, added by the title of the poem, which clearly hints at an apocalyptic scenario Harris foresees when Islamic states manage to get their hands on nuclear weaponry. All the parts of his story come together in this quote, and therefore it is very clever imagery. The only criticism could be that Harris’s is a man-induced Apocalypse, whereas Yeats’s really hinges on his esoteric belief that a supernatural intervention will occur. Apart from their obvious sparseness, it is also notable that both literary references are to artists belonging to the genre of
Modernism. This could very well be a matter of taste on the author’s part, and all further speculation is unnecessary as well as academically unsound. Finally, Harris talks about the ethnically part-Greek Cypriot British singer Cat Stevens (born Stephen Demetre Georgiou), who famously converted to Islam and has since 1979 been known as Yusuf Islam. When a fatwa was issued on Salman Rushdie after he wrote *The Satanic Verses*, Cat Stevens was among those who said that blasphemy was the problem rather than the behaviour of Iran’s ayatollahs. This, argues Harris, is evidence that Islam can even turn peace-loving hippies into murder-condoning bigots. The case of Cat Stevens is all too convenient for Harris, however, since it allows him to juxtapose one extreme stereotype with another. These are evidently nothing more than crass generalisations. This list of three cultural and literary references is fairly exhaustive, and in that sense Harris is clearly different from the others, as he was on other occasions. Education and country of birth cannot explain this away. His relatively tender age could be a reason, if there have been substantial changes in American school curricula. However, perhaps it simply does not fit in with Harris style of writing which, as we have seen, also hardly allows for authorities which are no experts on the topic. It seems that Harris, in this respect too, is an exception among the Horsemen.

Christopher Hitchens, given his reputation as a literary critic, seems to be the one to look out for when it comes to literary references. In sheer number they are not as abundant as they are in Dawkins’ book, but it needs be remembered that Hitchens’ *God is Not Great* does not span as many pages as does *The God Delusion*. As compared to the other authors, it should also be noted that he almost exclusively uses references to literature and art, and not, like Dawkins and especially Dennett, popular culture. Much of it goes along the same lines, with references and allusions to Shakespeare’s *King Lear* (40) and *Hamlet* (80/85) and George Eliot’s *Middlemarch* (3). James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (218) and Eliot’s *Adam Bede* (233) also rank among the literary classics. Most of these references are not ones that are used to support an argument, but merely for the beautiful turn of phrase, or for the cachet of the author. In a seemingly similar way, Hitchens lists Shakespeare, Homer, Milton, Tolstoy, Proust and Mozart as artists whose works exceed the quality of “any holy book” (151). However, it remains to be seen whether Hitchens uses these names only to illustrate such beauty. What he in fact does is putting these works on at least equal footing with, for instance, the Bible, which is thought to be the most authoritative book in the world by hundreds of millions, if not by billions of people. Hitchens is therefore clearly playing an authority game here, in which, by implication, art and literature are made to look very authoritative, or holy books are made to look less authoritative, depending on the metaphysical preconceptions of the reader. Hitchens also shows his knowledge of art and literature by
quoting from and alluding to a wide range of literary works, from different centuries and written in different languages. A few examples are William Golding’s novel *Lord of the Flies* (41), Friedrich Schiller’s work *Joan of Arc* (77), Saul Bellow (94), Evelyn Waugh’s novel *Brideshead Revisited* (186), Heinrich Heine (263) and an etching by Francisco Goya (198). Given Hitchens’ claim that literary works are better at solving moral questions than Holy Writ is, these should all be seen as conscientiously used authorities, of which it is to be doubted whether they can actually carry the weight they are assigned to bear.

A few cases merit a closer look. Hitchens often refers to George Orwell, which, he says “might have been [his] hero if [he] had heroes” (11), for many different reasons. Having introduced such terms as ‘thoughtcrime’ and ‘Big Brother’, Orwell has of course invented much of the terminology that comes with dictatorships and totalitarianism. Hitchens quotes him as saying that “a totalitarian state is in fact a theocracy” (232) and tells that he was inspired to write about *thoughtcrime* by the Christian school he was sent to (233). This is highly significant, since the big totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century are often used by Christian apologists who aim to show that atheism leads to mass murder and ethnic cleansing. Moreover, Orwell’s *Animal Farm* is seen as a visionary novel, predicting how such regimes would occur and work. In this novel, Hitchens says, there is “a much neglected passage” in which a raven named Moses is allowed to preach to the credulous (245), the implications of which are obvious. Hitchens also remarks that Kim Jong-Il, the leader of North Korea, must surely have read *Nineteen Eighty-Four*, since his regime so much resembles *Airstrip One* (248). Hitchens then also tells the mostly unrelated story that Muslim schoolchildren are forbidden to read *Animal Farm*, because of the central role played in it by pigs, for reasons to do with their being unclean animals. All this combined makes for an intricate web of statements and allegations, which tries to reinforce Orwell’s status as an authority on totalitarianism. Therefore, his ideas about religion appear to become authoritative when it comes to the totalitarian states of the twentieth century, such as the Third Reich, the Soviet Union, and Mao’s China. In this fashion, Hitchens tacitly tries to disprove the claim made by Christian apologists that Hitler, Stalin and Mao killed their millions in the name of atheism, by making their regimes look theocratic. The fact of the matter is, however, that almost any given historian from the last couple of decades who specialized in this subject should be deemed more authoritative than Orwell.

Another anachronistic authority construction employed by Hitchens is based on a reference to Geoffrey Chaucer. In a discussion of American evangelicals Hitchens says: “One knew, of course, that the racket of American evangelism is just that: a heartless con run by the second-string characters from

---

17 With the title “The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters”, etched between 1797 and 1799, and a part of Goya’s *Caprichos* series (Weems).
Chaucer’s *Pardoner’s Tale*” (160). Firstly, this shows Hitchens’ command of literary history, which may simply be nothing more than déformation professionnelle. Secondly, it connects evangelicals with an old text, which turns them into archetypal villains by association. It also shows that the same type of business was thought of as far back as the late medieval period, with the implication that it is, therefore, very easy to see through. At the same time, it also suggests that Chaucer is a valid authority on evangelical scams similar to present-day American ones, something he is clearly not. Again, Hitchens, as he did with Orwell, tries to increase the authority of literature to make religion look bad. In fact, a vastly superior source of authority would have been statistics, police reports and leaked memos. However, Hitchens cites no further evidence than the documentary movie *Marjoe*, in which an evangelical owned up to his fraud and let a camera crew film how he did it (160). This is strange, given the fact that there is another well-known scam available, the case of faith healer Peter Popoff in 1983, where he was revealed to use in-ear radio communication to feign prescience about people’s conditions (Moen).

Hitchens, however, prefers to use Chaucer as an authority, for the reasons explained above, which are by and large rhetorical. Then, Hitchens also quotes from Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*, just as Dawkins and Dennett did. Possible reasons for this, as well as the context, have already been discussed, but it is still noteworthy that Hitchens quotes both Ivan Karamazov (217), which Dawkins quoted, and the Grand Inquisitor (Hitchens), whom Dennett quoted. These quotes are to opposite effects, yet Hitchens quotes the latter, approvingly, as one of the mottos at the beginning of the book, while still criticizing those who quote Ivan approvingly. Like Dawkins, Hitchens himself does what he criticizes others for, only not as implicitly as Dawkins did. On a final note, Ian McEwan is quoted on people who are willingly deceived (160). In and of itself there is nothing wrong with that, but it should be remembered that McEwan is a close friend of Hitchens’ (Calderone), and that he also wrote a positive review of Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, a quote from which is printed on the cover of that book’s paperback edition (Dawkins). Moreover, Hitchens’ *God is Not Great* is dedicated to McEwan (Hitchens). Thus, McEwan should, perhaps, be treated with some extra suspicion, since he evidently belongs to the same group of like-minded people as Hitchens and Dawkins. This is, however, a minor point.

2.5 – THE ENEMY’S AUTHORITIES
A fifth type of authority discussed can be seen when people are quoted who usually support theists’ points of view, but now appear to have views in support of atheism. Dawkins employs this technique a number of times, and in different ways. Having earlier stated that theologians should not be deemed expert at anything, Dawkins quotes the theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer, who strongly opposes the God
of the Gaps approach used by many apologists (Dawkins 151). He also quotes other theologians, Spong and Holloway, who confirm his claim that the Old Testament is a highly unpleasant book (269). He also tells the story of a geologist-turned-creationist, and praises his honesty, while, of course, lamenting his ‘doublethink’, again an allusion to Orwell (321-323). Finally, he praises the beauty and literary merits of some parts of the Bible (383-385),\(^\text{18}\) whereas he mostly criticizes it for its immoral passages. Dennett argues that, as the Christian Right is bent on proving a negative relation between atheism and morality, we can safely assume that no such evidence exists, a passage also quoted by Dawkins (Dawkins 263). Of course, determination could never make up for the scientific illiteracy of which the atheistic authors are fond of accusing the Christian apologists, a strategy that renders Dennett’s authority structure invalid. He also quotes the Bible (Dennett 3), Jesus (44), while self-consciously admitting the logical inconsistency there. Harris rarely if ever uses this illogical manoeuvre, but Hitchens does. He tells how Israeli archaeologists set out to prove the validity of the stories in the Torah, but, after failing, openly admitted the stories never took place (102). Like Dennett’s appeal to the authority of alleged scientific illiterates, there is no reason to suppose that these staunchly religious archaeologists have any special authority over non-religious ones, the only inferable difference between them being determination. A final case in point is C.S. Lewis, popular among Christian apologists, whom Hitchens quotes. He shows himself to be well aware of the role Lewis plays for apologists, saying he “has recently reemerged as the most popular Christian apologist” (118). Furthermore, he tries to pre-empt criticism by saying: “I am not choosing a straw man here: Lewis is the main chosen propaganda vehicle for Christianity in our time” (119). Although it is technically still a straw-man argument, it moves within the confines of the debate, and Hitchens explicitly reveals himself to be conscious of this. At any rate, this use of authority is probably ironic, as, to some extent, are most of the appeal to this kind of authority.

2.6 – THE READER’S AUTHORITY
A sixth type of authority is the one where the source of authority is externalised to the reader through experience, typically through a mind game of sorts. In a way, this could also be seen as argumentation unrelated to authority, closely related to argumentative constructions such as The Flying Spaghetti Monster and The Celestial Teapot, which are to be discussed elsewhere. It is also related to the long lists of purportedly religious hate, violence and hypocrisy, which is used to spark fury in the reader, but for the sake of brevity this will not be discussed here. One would expect this to be the strong suit of

\(^\text{18}\) Most likely the 1611 Authorized or King James Version, since English literature owes so much to its style and turns of phrase.
philosophers, especially since the experience within the mind, in the philosophical sense of *Geist*, is deemed authoritative by Hegel, who came up with the concept of *the Objective Geist* (Hegel Wiki). And indeed this seems to be the case. Dawkins hardly uses it, and nor does Dennett, despite his being a philosophy professor. Hitchens, however, does use it a number of times, but there is only one example that really stands out. Since the style is rather crucial to its effect, it needs to be quoted fully:

I pose a hypothetical question. As a man of some fifty-seven years of age, I am discovered sucking the penis of a baby boy. I ask you to picture your own outrage and revulsion. Ah, but I have my explanation all ready. I am a mohel: an appointed circumciser and foreskin remover. My authority comes from an ancient text, which commands me to take a baby boy’s penis in my hand, cut around the prepuce, and complete the action by taking his penis in my mouth, sucking off the foreskin, and spitting out the amputated flap along with a mouthful of blood and saliva. (Hitchens 49)

Hitchens cunningly presents the story stripped of its religious background, and urges the reader to imagine the anger it would cause.\(^{19}\) Only when this level of fury is reached does Hitchens reveal it to be part of some Hasidic traditions. The reader who would usually be more likely to condone things when they are done in the name of religion is now presented with a problem. The rage and disgust are already there, and unless the religious aspect is successfully reverse-engineered into the story, and the sexual aspect out of it, the reader finds himself disgusted by religion. The reader can hardly help but wonder whether such religious practices are not deserving of more criticism than they usually get. Thus Hitchens manages to show, by means of the reader’s disgust, that certain traditions are disgusting, a sentiment Hitchens, in turn, can deem to be authoritative. To fortify this emotion, Hitchens tells the story of an actual fifty-seven-year-old mohel in New York City, who, in this fashion, gave genital herpes to a number of small boys, which led to the deaths of two of them. He goes on to tell that mayor Bloomberg (himself Jewish, though liberal) forbade the public health department to take restrictive measures, because they would infringe on people’s freedom of religion (50). Where Hitchens is, of course unduly toying with sexual implications, shorn of the circumcisional context, it is still an effective strategy. He uses the reader’s judgement as an authority.

Harris makes the most prolific use of this device, with various examples. In one example, tries to get across the unreliability of intuition, by asking the reader how thick a newspaper would be, were one able to fold in over one hundred times. After the reader has paused to consider the question, Harris reveals the answer to be: *the size of the observable universe*, unlike what he anticipates the reader to

\(^{19}\) Moreover, since Hitchens was 57 years old when writing the book, it is at first strongly implied he is actually talking about himself, rather than about the New York rabbi.
have guessed, which is about the size of a brick (183). The computational website Wolfram Alpha, given the entry “size of the observable universe divided by 2^99”\(^2\) even reveals Harris’ real answer to be a conservative estimate (Wolfram Alpha). What Harris has done, is to take the reader by the hand, and made it a verifiable fact that human intuition is severely flawed when it comes to larger numbers. Thus, Harris has turned his readers into authorities he can appeal to, which, given the fact that each reader will have a Geist, is perfectly valid. There are more comparable cases in Harris’ book, the most memorable of which are the hypothetical cases of a perfect weapon and a torture pill. The former is a tool to differentiate between good and bad in times of war, where atrocities are committed and suffered by either side, but not if there is a perfect weapon which only hits the people that are the goal of the attack (142-143). The reader, again merely through the working of his own Geist, can now observe the moral difference between George W. Bush and Osama bin Laden, by theorizing about which would kill the most people, were they to possess a perfect weapon. Thus, Harris can use the readers as authorities on the logic behind ethics. The latter, the torture pill, is a similar tool. The reader is urged to imagine that there is a pill, which paralyses those who swallow it, and inflicts the worst imaginable suffering (196-197). Again, the reader is taken by the hand by Harris, who shows that this pill meets all the requirements of war-time ethics, which, according to Harris, hinges on the visibility of suffering, rather than on suffering itself. This pill exploits the moral grey areas between the acceptance of the inevitability of collateral damage and the rejection of the idea of torture to secure intelligence that could save the lives of innocent civilians. Despite the fact that his plea is logically consistent, Harris admits he finds it an abhorrent idea, and expects the reader to feel the same, showing that logic and intuition may clash in matters of morality. Thus, Harris shows, using the authority of the reader’s own judgment, that a rational discussion and a scientific study of ethics is needed, and that such areas of knowledge should not, as is often proposed, be left to realm of metaphysics.

2.7 – PERSONAL EXPERIENCE

Thus the sixth type of authority originates from personal experience, and since it is manifestly Hitchens who uses this sixth type the most, this discussion will solely focus on him. First off, appeal to personal authority through circumstantial involvement is obviously invalid. As will become apparent, however, this is not the only way in which it is employed by Hitchens. Having been a journalist for many years,

\(^{20}\) Which means: the size of the known universe, which is divided by two with ninety-nine as its exponent to calculate the dimension of the newspaper in Harris’ example. This yields eight times the thickness of copy machine paper, which is a lot less than most newspapers.
Hitchens has been despatched to cover many of the greatest happenings in global affairs, which means he can boast a personal involvement in them. He is also friends with a number of influential and famous people, which also appears to make him a bigger player on the world scene. In some cases, this does improve his position to make judgments. Through his friendship with Salman Rushdie, for instance, he really was probably in the line of fire when he was visited by Rushdie during the days of his fatwa (Hitchens 28). The fact that he knew someone who sat on the plane that crashed into the Pentagon during the 9/11 attacks (31), also brings him closer to the event, and gives us ample reason to suppose that he is able to value the emotional impact these events brought upon the family and loved ones of those who died. A completely different matter is when he tells he has been born into an Anglican family, has had his education at a Methodist school, has married successively into the Greek Orthodox and into the Jewish community (195) and has, for a short spell and by sheer luck, been revered as an incarnation of Sai Baba (75-76/195). He claims that he “[will] be able to try and update William James’s The Varieties of Religious Experience” (195). He clearly does this with a commendable air of self-irony, but still it supposes him to be more authoritative than he in actual fact is. By his own admission, he lost his faith at the age of nine (1-2), which rules out any in-depth experience with the beliefs of all those religions, except for Anglicanism. Moreover, his involvement is often little more than anecdotal, and does not allot him any special credence in speaking on those matters. A slightly different variant also emerges from the Sai Baba story, where Hitchens is in India, shooting a documentary for the BBC. In this instance, he explicitly tries to usurp the BBC standard of objectivity in journalism here:

I adopted this sannyas mode in order to help make a documentary film for the BBC, so you may well question my objectivity if you wish, but the BBC at that time did have a standard of fairness, and my mandate was to absorb as much as I could (Hitchens 195).

Indeed, the BBC may very well have been fair, but they are not responsible for the opinions Hitchens expresses on this matters afterwards. Thus, Hitchens here tries to complement his personal involvement with an external source of objectivity, while neither of these claims to authority is truly valid.

Also worth a mention was the invitation Hitchens got from the Vatican, to plead against the beatification of Mother Teresa, on whom Hitchens had earlier published the irreverent book The Missionary Position (144-145). Hitchens can therefore literally claim to have been Devil’s Advocate, and even though it was common practice for the Roman Catholic Church to appoint such a lawyer (Catholic Encyclopedia), it still gives him the chance to assume the position of someone who singlehandedly
stands up to the mightiest religious organization in the world.\textsuperscript{21} This representation of the facts is, to say the very least, very questionable. Clearly, Hitchens’ use of personal authority here does not stand up to scrutiny.

One of Hitchens’ most memorable experience-based claims is a many-faceted construction of personal experiences, which is almost literary in its approach, and has different internal degrees of authoritative validity. It works with different layers of frame narrative, the outer shell of which is a conversation he had on a show with Dennis Prager, a well-respected and nationally syndicated religious talk show host (Townall). Prager asked him whether, at nightfall, in a strange city, he would rather have the approaching group of men to be on their way back from a prayer meeting, or not. Hitchens replied:

> Just to stay within the letter ‘B’, I have actually had this experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem and Baghdad. In each case I can say absolutely, and can give my reasons, why I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from a religious observance. (18)

Hitchens here enters the second level of the frame story, where he tells about his experiences in those cities, invariably in his capacity as a reporter. He interlaces these stories with stories, statistics, facts and factoids, which are from external sources. This last frame is not based on personal experience, and need not be discussed here, although Hitchens, by implication, does position himself in the middle of things. The first two layers of the frame narrative are, at least for present purposes, much more interesting. There are various ways in which Hitchens manipulates the image his experiences evoke in his readers. Firstly, he may very well be right in his claims about the cities starting with a $B$, and may very well be right about the mishaps caused by religious conflicts there. However, there are some problems with this way of reasoning, and there is some important background information which he leaves out. Firstly, it is extremely unlikely that Hitchens limits himself to the letter $B$ in any meaningful sense. Rather, it just so happens to be the case that many of the world’s religious conflicts occur in cities which just happen to start with that letter. It is absolutely inconceivable that he would be able to compile similar lists of cities starting with other letters. In fact, the $B$ list may prove to be almost exhaustive overall. Then there is the additional problem that Hitchens, being a reporter, is unlikely to be sent to places where nothing much happens. Therefore he has a much higher chance of finding himself in a conflict, and thus also increases his chances of finding a religious one. Outside of religious conflicts, it is to be doubted whether Hitchens would feel at all threatened by a religious crowd. This does not mean that his personal experiences,

\textsuperscript{21} In fact, Pope John Paul II abolished this practice in 1983. Only in cases of controversy was a Devil’s Advocate appointed. Mother Teresa’s beatification was such a case.
which were after all journalistic in nature, do not give him the authority to speak on such matters. The problem is rather that he misapplies his own authority by leaving out aspects of his circumstances, and by exaggerating the meaning of his B list of cities. Still, as a literary vehicle, it serves him well to introduce various related topics, and deal with a fair chunk of the religious spectrum. In that sense, there is nothing much wrong with this way of telling a story.

2.8 – CONTEXT OF THE DEBATE AND AUTHORITY IN-CROWDS
Having discussed the different types of authority employed in the four target books, there are still two follow-up parameters necessary to put them into perspective. The historical context of the theism-atheism debate was presented in an earlier chapter. From this context one can in many cases deduce why certain questionable authorities are used, rather than seemingly more reputable ones. Not only does this clarify why Dawkins finds it necessary to quote Darwin as an anachronistic authority on neo-Darwinism, it explains why evolution is part of the debate in the first place, given 150 years of controversy, and the American background, where many well-financed apologists in politics and in the public sphere are pushing creationism as well. For European readers especially it may be wise to suspend their judgment on the Four Horsemen’s books until they have fully considered this. There is the use of various thinkers and scientists, whose authority is sought because of their prominent role in the debate, rather than for their expertise on the topics they are quoted on. Many examples of this have already been discussed, the most prominent of whom are Albert Einstein, the Founding Fathers and the American Constitution they wrote. Both examples have already been discussed in some detail, so for now it is sufficient to make a few remarks. Einstein has been claimed by both sides because of two factors, namely his stature of being the greatest scientist in living memory, and the religiously ambiguous nature of some of the statements he has made. Since Einstein’s views on religion are irrelevant to answering the question of whether God exists, the question as to what they were will not be pursued here. It is sufficient to note that they matter in the debate. The Founding Fathers and the American Constitution are different, because what they said, at times, actually does matter. The Fathers drafted the first version of the American Constitution, which is by many considered to be a moral masterpiece. And as long as many people believe that the United States were founded on their

22 For examples of apologists claiming Einstein was a believer, watch the debate The Rational Response Squad had with creationism proponents Kirk Cameron and Ray Comfort (Way of the Master), or listen to how prominent apologist and philosopher William Lane Craig claims very much the same, in an interview on the The Things That Matter Most radio show (Craig, The Things That Matter Most).
principles, it is important what they thought about religion.\textsuperscript{23} Thus, although it is still far from substantive, the Founding Fathers, at least within a strictly American context, make more sense as authorities than Einstein does.

The second parameter that helps to put the types of authorities used into perspective is a brief analysis of what could perhaps be called the authority in-crowd: a group of authorities that is referred to by most or by all of the Four Horsemen. And while this, as a single fact, does nothing to diminish their academic credentials, it is reason enough to be a bit sceptical. As could be expected, since they write on the same topic, they often quote one another. If one studies their literature lists, one sees that Dawkins lists works by all three others, that Dennett only skips Hitchens, that Harris lists all three others, and that Hitchens, while he does not have a bibliography, does list all three others in his index. The fact that Dennett skips Hitchens could easily be explained by the fact that Hitchens was the last one to publish his book, which could therefore not be referred to. Apart from one another, the Horsemen also use a group of other authorities, for which there is no need or space to deal with all of them extensively. So a list and some concise remarks about some of them will have to do. Pascal Boyer, the anthropologist of religion, is quoted by all but Hitchens, and a glance over the reading list of his own book reveals that he too has quoted from works of Dawkins and Dennett (Boyer 400), but these were scientific works, which makes it difficult to judge whether he can be considered to be part of some kind of group. Scott Atran, also quoted by all but Hitchens, is less dubious, especially since he has heavily criticized Harris. Bart Ehrman, the New Testament historian, is quoted by Dawkins and Hitchens. His books deal with internal inconsistencies in the Bible, and with the scribal alterations over time, which obviously makes him more popular among atheists than among apologists. He has also participated in a long debate on the Bible with the aforementioned William Lane Craig,\textsuperscript{24} which suggests he is at least on the other side of the debate from Craig, but, again, does nothing to make him suspicious, since it is simply within the confines of his field of research. Another recurring name, Michael Shermer, is quoted by everyone except Harris. A well-known sceptic, he is the founder of The Skeptic Society, as well as editor in chief of the magazine Skeptic (Skeptic Magazine). While scepticism is far from being synonymous with atheism, some of its

\textsuperscript{23} For examples of the reciprocity of the debate on this, watch Richard Dawkins being interviewed by Fox anchor Bill O’Reilly, in which Dawkins claims they were secularists, and O’Reilly claims almost all of them refer to deity in their letters (Dawkins2), and watch the discussion between Hitchens and Ken Blackwell on Chris Matthew’s show Hardball, in which the religious beliefs of the Founding Fathers show to be indispensable in answering the question of whether America is or is not a Christian nation (Hitchens and Blackwell, Hardball).

\textsuperscript{24} The debate was on the veracity of the claim that Jesus rose from the dead (Nazam44), and took place on March 28, 2006, and was co-organised by The College of the Holy Cross (Butler). For the video of the entire debate, see Nazam44.
most prominent affiliates are non-believers, and Shermer is no exception (Shermer, Why I Am An Atheist). This also pertains to the likes of the aforementioned Pen & Teller and James Randi, and while such affiliations do not undermine one’s ability to investigate religion, the vigilant reader should check whether he is in the mainstream or the fringe of his line of research. The fact that he has written books on irrational beliefs and on debunking certain religious claims only adds to this. Steven Pinker, a well-known science-writer, is left unquoted by only Hitchens. He describes himself as an atheist (Douglas), but is not as vocal as the likes of the Horsemen or Shermer, and can safely be regarded as a mainstream scientist.

There is also a group of people that is eagerly quoted by the Horsemen, not necessarily on scientific matters, but rather because they are somehow popular among them. Ian McEwan is quoted only by Hitchens, but also wrote the laudatory review blurb on Dawkins’ paperback edition. He is an atheist (Solomon), and could, given his long-lasting acquaintance with Hitchens (Vanity Fair) and his review of Dawkins’ book, be considered to be a member of the same group of people, but a rather peripheral one. Another author, Salman Rushdie, is mentioned by all four Horsemen, a close friend of Hitchens’, and important enough for Dawkins to boast his personal involvement in the fatwa, be it only by supporting him in the press (Dawkins 44). Rushdie is something of an atheist martyr because of the fatwa issued against him for publishing The Satanic Verses, and is easily used as an example of religious hypocrisy. Besides that, however, Rushdie has become vocal on the subject of religion. He is a frequent guest on Real Time (HBO), an American talk show, hosted by Bill Maher, another vocal atheist, who has made the documentary Religulous, in which religion is mocked and criticised (IMDB2). Rushdie also gives lectures in which he propagates freedom from religion, such as the one he gave at Leiden University on June 18th 2010 (Leiden University). So Rushdie definitely qualifies as an insider in the scene. And then, briefly, some others. Douglas Adams, given his lecture quoted by Dawkins, qualifies as belonging to the so-called in-crowd. Dostoevsky does not, since he is only quoted by the Horsemen to counter something said by one of his fictional characters, Ivan Karamazov. Albert Einstein, as has become abundantly clear, plays the same role for both atheists and theists, while, in fact, he was part of neither group. Steven Weinberg is quoted by Dennett and Dawkins, but occasionally also by Hitchens in his lectures. He has the much-desired combination of outspoken atheism and a Nobel Prize, but also explicitly shows himself sympathetic with the Horsemen with his review of The God Delusion, which is reprinted in the paperback edition (Dawkins). Bertrand Russell, quoted by all four Horsemen, also carried a grudge against religion, and won a Nobel Prize, but unlike Steven Weinberg, he also wrote an atheistic book, and, as we have seen, partook in debates, many decades before the Horsemen did. He is, in many ways,
the proto-Horseman. There are more examples than this modest endeavour allows for, but these are some of the most prominent ones.

2.9 – CONCLUSION AUTHORITY

When one considers all these various kinds of authority, it becomes clear that it is something that, as a whole, defies a unified view. Rather, each different type should be allotted its own nugget of judgment. More often than not, even that made-to-measure judgment will fail to assess the use of authority, as there are also a subculture and an historical context to think about. Binary opposites such as sound and fallacious, or logos and pathos simply fail to capture the essence. Moreover, certain aspects are either too technical for an approach from this angle, or downright fallacies that belong in the chapter on argumentation. It is, however, possible to make some generalizations. Firstly, none of the books shows signs of being either worthless or excellent. All have academic backgrounds that at times overlap with religion, but none of them are truly expert in the field itself. Since this thesis is written from a non-expert vantage point as well, casting a judgment on most of the serious literature and authorities must be left to the real experts. Which is, one could argue, exactly what the Horsemen should have done, but this is not the place to pursue this line of thought. When it comes to non-expert authorities, however, it is feasible to have an informed opinion, and it is easily discernible that Dawkins and Hitchens use this type of authority very often, while Harris hardly ever uses it. The historical context explains why some of these are used and for what reasons, like Einstein, Darwin, Watson and Crick and Dostoevsky. Others are better described as members of this so-called authority in-crowd, like Douglas Adams, Salman Rushdie and H.L. Mencken. Needless to say, all these authorities are, strictly speaking, invalid. It has to be remembered, though, that these books are part of a dialectical setting, since both sides successfully use such authorities and appeals to ethos to convince readers. Therefore, both sides will also be likely to need those rhetorical devices to convince the people that were previously convinced by similar claims on the other side of the debate. So when it comes to convincing the reader, such appeals are reasonable, but when it comes to actual truth-finding they are not. Then, the appeal to personal experience, mostly used by Hitchens, is fine as a literary device. The B cities story is used in such a fashion, but overall he all too often bases actual authority on it, such as on his visit to North Korea (Hitchens 248). This is in line with Hitchens’ style, which is more based on appeals to questionable authority than the others’.
3 – ARGUMENTATION

In order to judge the argumentation, rhetoric and styles of writing that the Horsemen employ, it is, once again, helpful to have a look at the background of the debate. Some arguments are best understood as tailor-made to counter other, similar arguments from the other side. In many cases, the discussion is circumstantial at best, but this is due to the fact that the atheistic case is a negative, which can never be proven in any absolute sense. In a strict sense, there is no need to disprove it, since that would be to shift the burden of proof, which lies with the ones who claim that God does exist. Many apologists, however, maintain that it is also up to the atheists to disprove God’s existence, among which is the renowned British theologian Alister McGrath, who devotes an entire chapter to this in his book *The Dawkins Delusion*, which is his response to Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (McGrath and McGrath 13-27). Since most claims about God or gods are unfalsifiable, they cannot be disproved, but there are two ways in which the Horsemen still try to address the issue. These two techniques do not aim to disprove the divine, but rather try to make it look as improbable as possible. The first type uses examples from the real world, the other uses the *reductio ad absurdum* argument to explore the consequences of the logic behind the claim that atheists need to disprove God’s existence. Another tactic the Horsemen almost invariably use is dealing with the philosophical proofs for God, put forward throughout the centuries. The efforts of St Anselm, mentioned earlier, are examples of this, but there are many more. The responses to this are either attempts to unveil the flawed logic behind it, or *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, which lead to unlikely conclusions which the proponents of this philosophical proof, according to the Horsemen, will also have to accept if they wish to maintain the integrity of their logic.

Another type of argumentation is in itself based on a version of the *argumentam ad consequentiam* fallacy, which mainly deals with negative effects of religion. This type of argument is enforced by quotations from different scriptures, as well as from authority figures within different religions. Then, in the case of the self-proclaimed antitheist Hitchens, it even deals with why it would be a bad thing were God to exist. Thus, it deals with the undesirability of perceived existence of the divine, which can never be used as a proof against its existence. However, it is wrong to attribute this wholly to the atheists, since it can also be seen as a response to believers who point at the atrocities committed in the despotic regimes of the twentieth century and ascribe this to atheism, and who claim religion leads to moral behaviour. For present purposes it is not important which side instigated this aspect of the debate. For now it is sufficient to note that the fact that the Horsemen employ it is at least partially necessitated by the debate’s setting. Moreover, the books also criticise religion, which is, of course, a
real phenomenon with real effects, whether there is a divine being or not. Hitchens, with his antitheism, does deserve some closer scrutiny however. Two other types of argumentation are in a sense similar in nature to one another. Firstly there is the exploration of the history of various scriptures, as well as a closer study of their mutually and even internally incompatible claims. Secondly, most Horsemen deal with some of the more recent additions to the religious family, often Mormonism, Cargo Cults and Scientology. They lie within the reach of the historians, have well-documented origins, and are used as blueprints for older religions.

Since logical fallacies are not restricted to any of the abovementioned types of argumentation, it is necessary to discuss them separately. Concerned not so much with veracity as with persuasion in itself, this discussion links them to two other aspects to be discussed here: rhetoric and writing styles. Despite that fact that it transcends our present concerns, it will be necessary to discuss factual accuracy with regards to Hitchens, who raises suspicion in several ways. The rhetorical approach does not require fallacies per se, but does use techniques of persuasion that are, strictly speaking, unrelated to the subject matter. It uses tricks to evade questions, but also appeals to ethos and pathos, where sound argumentation should only appeal to logos. This partly overlaps with the types of writing styles employed, which can also be persuasive, while being void of any actual argumentation. With the Horsemen’s books, this generally amounts to mockery, mostly by the use of irony, but also by certain styles of writing, among which the use of religious vocabulary is the most common. Then, since Dawkins is often accused of vitriol and even hate, it is perhaps also interesting to investigate this claim a bit further, especially on the level of stylistics. These last features are especially important in determining whether the books of the Horsemen have enough in common to be seen as a genre.

3.1 – SOLIPSISM AND IMPROBABILITY
The first of the two types of arguments that are used to make the idea of a god seem less probable is one that comes in two forms. The first tries to lay bare the solipsistic basis of the belief that the entire universe revolves around self-important mankind. The second one aims to show how imperfect the universe is for life, which, since it so obviously applies to the Argument from Design, is dealt with later. One of Dawkins’ attempts at exposing human solipsism is by stating that there are “probably” extraterrestrial beings far superior to us, and “god-like in ways that exceed anything a theologian could possibly imagine” (Dawkins 98). The obvious ad hominem sneer at theologians aside, the possibility of such aliens is used to mark the difference between a god concept within our very limited imagination, and the almost boundless universe. Of course, the statement is almost by definition false, given the fact
that some attributes of God, such as omnipresence, omniscience and omnipotence, all exceed the physical possibilities of the universe. Moreover, it is also by definition impossible to be more godlike than an actual god, since that god defines what it means to be godlike. Still, it is clear what point Dawkins is trying to make. Hitchens makes a similar point, which also applies to the Argument from Design:

This vanity allows us to overlook the implacable fact that, of the other bodies in our own solar system alone, the rest are all either far too cold to support anything recognizable as life, or far too hot. The same, as it happens, is true of our own blue and rounded planetary home, where heat contends with cold to make large tracts of it into useless wasteland, and where we have come to learn that we live, and have always lived, on a climatic knife edge. Meanwhile, the sun is getting ready to explode and devour its dependent planets like some jealous chief or tribal deity. Some design! (Hitchens 80)

Hitchens here uses the hostility of the universe to negate the claim that it must all have come from a designer. He does something quite the opposite when he mocks the god who appeared as a burning bush by comparing it to Stephen Hawking’s “awe-inspiring” idea of the event horizon, which can theoretically be seen upon entering a black hole (Hitchens 8). While the first example pertains to the universe’s suitability for containing life, and the latter to the ability to inspire, it is still strange that Hitchens ridicules God for a creation that is far grander than the one He is generally credited for. Arguably, Hitchens is guilty of having a double standard here, since he ascribes the hostility of the universe to God, while later using the beauty of that same universe to natural causes. Of course, it is in response to two different claims, but still inconsistent when taken as a whole. Harris and Dennett, on the other hand, do not make use of this type of argumentation. Dennett does not use it at all, while Harris only points out that people believe in a “God (who, for reasons difficult to fathom, made Shakespeare a far better writer than himself)” (Harris 35).25 Harris’ argument is much more compact than those made by Dawkins and Hitchens. He takes the two widely-supported claims that Shakespeare’s work is the best ever written, and that the Bible is the infallible word of God. The logical deduction following from this is meant to invalidate the second claim, by showing that, even within the limited world of our literature, God is less impressive than his own creation. While this type of argument can be valid, these particular examples have some flaws. The burning bush and the literalists’ claim about the Bible are by many thought to be true, but can hardly be taken to cover all of Christian opinion. Moreover, god-like aliens and the event horizon are somewhat speculative, while the superiority of Shakespeare over the Bible is in many ways subjective. This does not mean that the arguments are

25 Alluding to claims that the authors of the books of the Bible were inspired by God when they wrote them.
altogether worthless, or even fundamentally flawed. It does mean, however, that some closer scrutiny is called for before being convinced by them.

3.2 – REDUCTIO AD ABSURDUM
The next type of argument is the most popular one among atheists, especially on the internet. Like the type described above, it does not aim to conclusively prove the nonexistence of God, since such an endeavour would lead to nothing, as a negative can never be disproved beyond question. Rather, it takes a claim, and turns it around; targeting those that claim God does exist, by asking them to disprove a plethora of other things. These are *reductio ad absurdum* arguments, which are used to illustrate how little weight the claim that god cannot be disproved carries. In that sense, they have a lot in common with the aforementioned thought experiments which Hitchens and Harris led the reader to conduct. Only, here there is no need to turn the reader into an authority, since the argumentation in itself is, at least potentially, valid (Eemeren and Grootendorst 32). Roughly, these arguments fall into four categories, namely: other gods that still have followers; other gods that used to have followers, but nowadays only dwell in mythology; invented divine objects or beings; and objects and events that are simply very unlikely. The first category can be retraced to Bertrand Russell’s response to Pascal’s Wager, where he says that any believer should, given the vast number of gods and religions to choose from, expect to go to Hell. Since this obviously trespasses on the grounds of later discussions, it is left to be discussed there. For now, it is enough to observe that the believer’s position of faith can rightly be paraphrased as a disbelief in all other similar positions. Indeed, it is true that most people who believe in Allah do not also believe in Shiva, and that their existence cannot be disproved either. While one should always be careful not to disregard pockets of Jews who do believe in the divinity of Jesus, and pockets of Hindus who rather see him as an avatar of Shiva, it is a position that can reasonably be maintained. The second category lacks the advantage of the credibility given by the number of followers, but it does have certain other benefits. Of course, gods like Zeus used to have followers, and therefore they cannot be discarded on those grounds. Rather, they support the view that no amount of followers says anything about the likelihood of the creed’s veracity. Either Ancient Greek religion needs to be taken seriously, or one has to accept that God ceases to exist once people stop to believe in Him. However, the most attractive attribute of these forgotten gods is that they are seen as mythological, with all the connotations of primitiveness and Western fiction. In other words, this cluster of belief shows how future generations might look at our present-day religions, once, as Harris puts it, they are “cast on the scrapheap of mythology” (16). Harris’ favourite example is Poseidon (16), and the more elaborate
Dawkins uses many more, a random pick of which is “Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan [and] the Golden Calf” (76). Hitchens and Dennett, on the other hand, hardly use this type of argument.

The third category of invented gods and divine objects is the most popular, and certain examples, most notably the *Flying Spaghetti Monster*, have become internet memes, or even a part of popular culture. The advantage of having actual followers, now or in the past, has been abandoned, but this leaves all the more room for ridicule, since the only requirement is that they cannot be disproved. Still, Dawkins is the only Horseman who makes extensive use of this. As with mythological gods, he compiles a long list of similar examples, which all underline the same point: the fact that something cannot be disproved does not constitute an argument. Before exploring Dawkins’ list, it may be wise to have a look at the concept in itself. The fact that these proposed metaphysical ideas do not have any serious subscribers can, given the discussion above, be considered a moot point, as the number of followers is, in at best at all but one instances, meaningless, and since the number of followers may change over time. The one serious objection that can be made is that the *Flying Spaghetti Monster* is beyond the shadow of a doubt a fabrication, whereas this is not the case with most gods. However, even if it is exactly known when, why and by whom the *Flying Spaghetti Monster* was invented, it still does not conclusively disprove its existence, as one could make up something that does actually exist. So while certain aspects prevent a one-on-one comparison between serious and invented gods, the way of reasoning in itself, as a *reductio ad absurdum*, is valid. In that way it does in no way disprove the existence of any god, but does show that the fact that atheists cannot disprove their existence is not in any way a valid argument for their existence. Dawkins list, of course, contains the *Flying Spaghetti Monster*, which was invented in 2005 by a graduate student named Bobby Henderson, who demanded that if the Kansas State Board of Education allowed Intelligent Design to be taught alongside the theory of evolution, that his version of Intelligent Design, based on the *Flying Spaghetti Monster*, would also be taught, since both theories were equally valid (Boxer). Even though this demand was turned down, it went on to become an internet meme, it got its own Gospel (Random House) and it acquired a group of followers, which, jocularly, call themselves *pastafarians* (Venganza). Dawkins also mentions Bertrand Russell’s *Celestial Teapot*, which has been discussed before (Dawkins 74-75). Another example cited by Dawkins is an “invisible, intangible, inaudible unicorn” (76), which has been wilfully designed in such a way that it is completely undetectable, and hence untestable, to emulate unfalsifiable claims about the existence of gods. Finally, Dawkins quotes the journalist Andrew Mueller, saying that choosing to be part of a religion is “is no more or less weird than choosing to believe that the world is rhombus-shaped, and borne through the cosmos in the pincers of two enormous green lobsters called Esmerelda and Keith”
Here the claim is no longer unfalsifiable, but all the more unlikely and ridiculous, which, strictly speaking, makes it a bad argument. It is doubtful whether it was intended to be a good one, given the fact that Dawkins had already made his point rather profusely with the earlier examples.

The fourth and last category does not, like the green lobsters Esmeralda and Keith, try to elude all the ways in which it could conceivably be put to the test. Rather, it targets other claims about religion, mostly to do with its effect on people’s behaviour and wellbeing. Firstly, however, it aims to explain why a belief in something cannot itself be taken as evidence for the thing that is believed. In this way, some of the attributes of religion, the soothing effect, the giving of meaning to one’s life, and similar effects are also extended to these hypothetical cases which lie within the realm of falsifiable propositions, and are, in some cases, even remotely possible. Despite the fact that the rhetorical convenience of unfalsifiability is thereby abandoned, these arguments can still be considered reductio ad absurdum. These arguments do not hinge on whether a proposition can be proven wrong, but on whether some of the properties coincide with those of religion.\textsuperscript{26} Sam Harris is the Horseman who uses this line of reasoning the most, so the concept is best illustrated with examples from his book. Firstly, he transposes some of God’s attributes onto a person, the actress Nicole Kidman, and describes what might hypothetically follow from this:

I feel a certain, rather thrilling “conviction” that Nicole Kidman is in love with me. As we have never met, my feeling is my only evidence of her infatuation. I reason thusly: my feelings suggest that Nicole and I must have a special, even metaphysical, connection – otherwise, how could I have this feeling in the first place? I decide to set up camp outside her house to make the necessary introductions; clearly, this sort of faith is tricky business. (Harris 64)

There are some problems with this quotation. The fact that this claim is obviously falsifiable has been discussed already, but in this case it results in an extra difficulty. The obvious psychiatric implications might still carry some slight weight, but the fact that it results in the stalking of a celebrity is completely beside the point. Since God cannot actually be stalked, the comparison has from hereon become a reductio ad absurdum of a god which has an actual home address which one can visit: so this example can be seen as partially fallacious. Since Harris has included something in his metaphor that is not part of what the faithful believe in, it could arguably be seen as an associative straw man argument.

The same could be said about the abovementioned psychiatric implications, but Harris has anticipated this criticism, and has come with another example on the topic:

\textsuperscript{26} These are often also the aspects of religion that do not hinge on the actual existence of its central god figures, but rather on the effects they have on people, and the strong convictions people have about them, wholly apart from actual evidence. In that sense, this is a potentially valid reductio ad absurdum.
We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call them “religious”; otherwise, they are likely to be called “mad”, “psychotic” or “delusional”. Most people of faith are perfectly sane, of course, even those who commit atrocities on account of their beliefs. But what is the difference between a man who believes God will reward him with seventy-two virgins if he kills a score of Jewish teenagers, and one who believes that creatures from Alpha Centauri are beaming him messages of world peace through his hair dryer? There is a difference to be sure, but it is not one that places religious faith in a flattering light. (Harris 72)

Harris has shifted to an example that is not as readily tested as Nicole Kidman’s amorous feelings, and has explicitly stated that religious people are not mad. Still, by picking a violent religious example, and a peaceful example of a delusion, he has, through contrast, only made the negative implications stronger. A better example, with a better explanation, follows shortly after:

Clearly there is sanity in numbers. And yet, it is merely an accident of history that it is considered normal in our society to believe that the Creator of the universe can hear your thoughts, while it is demonstrative of mental illness to believe that he is communicating with you by having the rain tap in Morse code on your bedroom window. And so, while religious people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are. (Harris 72)

Here, Harris’ point is made much more clearly, that any religious creed, as long as it is idiosyncratic, would likely have been part of a mental disease, and that the sanity lies in the number of followers, since it does not require clinical madness to believe what many believe. While this may very well be true, Harris has repeatedly made a link between religion and madness, while he also openly discards this notion, which is rather devious. Then, it may have been fair to address the possibility that there is a god, which is indeed communicating with only one person through Morse code, which would mean that this person is not mad, while still deemed to be. This would in fact have supported Harris’ case, although the presence of Morse code is, of course, testable, unlike supernatural eavesdropping in one’s thoughts.

A final example of this type of argument is fully testable, but also addresses different phenomena than the ones described above. It aims to test whether the fact that a belief is pleasing or soothing can be used as a reason for belief in it, or as evidence for the validity of such a belief. It is also a response to Pascal’s Wager, which will be touched upon later, but given the nature of this example, it is better dealt with here. Pascal’s claimed that it is demonstrably better to believe in God, whether he turns out to exist or not. Harris, however, states that it is impossible to believe on demand, and he tries to prove this with another reductio ad absurdum:

The fact that I would feel good if there were a God does not give me the slightest reason to believe that one exists. This is easily seen when we swap the existence
of God for some other consoling proposition. Let’s say that I want to believe that there is a diamond buried somewhere in my yard that is the size of a refrigerator. It is true that it would feel uncommonly good to believe this. But do I have any reason to believe that there is actually a diamond in my yard that is thousands of times larger than any yet discovered? No. Here we see why Pascal’s Wager, Kierkegaard’s leap of faith and other epistemological ponzi schemes won’t do. (Harris 62-63)

When it comes for the lack of reasons to believe in a proposition, this reductio ad absurdum is sound, and it is probably also true that in most cases, belief in something is not a matter of choice, but a matter of persuasion. Indeed, such a diamond would only have to be hypothetical for belief in it to be beneficial for its adherent, yet, because of the obvious testability of the assertion, it cannot be compared to belief in a God, since such a belief cannot be challenged with positive evidence, as is the case with the diamond. For its specific purpose, however, this example is valid. Then, finally, there is one instance of this type of argumentation found in Dennett’s book which is also worth mentioning. Like Harris, he takes a famous actress, in this case Cameron Diaz, to illustrate three different points. He takes the hypothetical case where the reader helps somebody without telling him, only to find out that this person attributes this goodness to Cameron Diaz, who obviously represents God here. One can think of people who underwent surgery, but still give the credit for their survival to God. Dennett goes on to describe how this person, once told it was actually the reader who helped him, starts to call the reader Cameron Diaz, and that all his friends would grow accustomed to the name as generic for all that led to joy (Dennett 214). The three points Dennett is trying to make here are that it is strange that people credit God for things done by man, that it is also strange to extend one’s definition of God once the actual source of goodness is unveiled, and finally that such shifting definitions of God only means that the term ceases to be meaningful. In itself the example appears valid, but it is worth noting that the image that is evoked acquires most of its vividness from the social awkwardness. The question is whether social awkwardness also applies to God, if He does really exist. So, a part of the persuasive force of the image might come from an unsound analogy, but in purely logical terms, this reductio ad absurdum is acceptable.

3.3 – WRITING STYLE
The use of language is not necessarily related to argumentation, but it does have rhetorical force. The style of writing employed by the Horsemen also seems to influence the way in which they are often seen, namely: as very angry. This is a recurring criticism in the reviews of the Horsemen’s books, and a
common remark about the New Atheism movement. While there is a fair share of sarcasm in the books, some of it even borderline vitriolic, the amount of obvious anger is quite limited. The opening lines of the second chapter of Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* might have fuelled this stereotype, however. In the *Preface to the Paperback Edition*, he already calls this “the passage most often quoted as ‘strident’ or shrill”, while he maintains it was intended to be funny, trying to emulate the style of Evelyn Waugh (Dawkins 17). Evelyn Waugh is, indeed, mentioned shortly after, to establish the link (Dawkins 51). He has read this passage at lectures a number of times, and it is often referred to elsewhere:

> The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully. (Dawkins 51)

Given the fact that the god described above is, important and holy to many people, it is no surprise that this passage is not universally thought of as funny. In fact, it is not difficult to see how many people could be angered by this. Still, Dawkins himself indicates it is sarcastic, and the fact that it is a string of obscure, Latinate words seems to preclude its being written from real anger. Moreover, anger is usually expressed by short sentences, while this may be the longest sentence in New Atheism’s entire oeuvre. Whether it is rhetorically effective is an entirely different matter.

Harris and Hitchens have nothing quite comparable to Dawkins’ Waughian rant, but the strong sarcasm and irreverence are also present in their books. Some instances of this are to be found elsewhere in this thesis, so a short list of examples should suffice. Hitchens’ style of writing is littered with archaic, Scripture-based and mock-profound turns of phrase, but since instances of this are to be found wherever he is quoted, we will focus on two minor details, which are still typical of his style. Firstly, he persists in writing *God*, which is usually capitalised for the mere reason that it is a proper name of the Christian god, as *god*. This is a subtle act of irreverence which appears to be in line with his antitheistic views, whereas his fellow Horsemen stick to spelling conventions, and use a capital *g* throughout. Another recurring aspect is his use of the word *mammal*, or *mammalian* which he uses to describe a fair number of people. He does this to tacitly underline a number of different points. He does it to underpin mankind’s mental limitations when he talks about “the mammalian equipment of the human cerebral cortex” (Hitchens 10). Later Hitchens uses it to mock how the North-Korean government spent billions on spreading stories that Kim Il Sung and Kim Jong Il were incarnations of the same person, when he talks about “the leader of ludicrous mammal Kim Il Sung and his pathetic mammal son”
(Hitchens 248). He uses the juxtaposition of god-like and animal-like. Hitchens also mocks the air of divinity surrounding the authors of the Bible, remarking how “we are not bound by any of it because it was put together by crude, uncultured human mammals” (Hitchens 102). Given the Christian connotations, Hitchens might also be attacking creationism, which states humans are unique creations, which defy classification as mammalian. Hitchens levels a similar attack on the prophet Muhammed, when he talks about “this mammal’s betrothal to a nine-year-old girl” (Hitchens 135). It goes without saying that Hitchens’ classification is, in itself, correct, but has extensive, and no doubt welcome, connotations. Both mammal and god are typical of Hitchens’ style, as none of his fellow Horsemen do anything similar.

Sam Harris’ sarcastic style is easily exemplified with a few quotations. When discussing modern religions, he says their doctrines are just as untenable as those of ancient religions that were “cast upon the scrap heap of mythology millennia ago” (Harris 16). Harris introduces clever imagery, in which the cyclical nature of the rise and fall of religions is expressed very concisely. It might invoke images of religion as a car, which, while still perfectly functional, will inevitably end up on a scrap heap. Later, he captures the difference between belief in unproved religious propositions and idiosyncratic ones in one sentence, when he says: “Clearly there is sanity in numbers” (Harris 72), which has been dealt with earlier. In a similar vein, though with less overtly steeped in imagery, is Harris’ remark about the old Epicurian riddle. 27 He says “Those who claim to have surmounted it, by recourse to notions of free will and other inconsistencies, have merely heaped bad philosophy onto bad ethics” (Harris 173). These are snappy, catchy and strong descriptions, which are typical of Harris’ style of writing. They are also quite sarcastic.

3.4 – PHILOSOPHICAL PROOFS
Another endeavour the Horsemen embark on consists of debunking the philosophical proofs for God that have been proposed since Aristotle’s first cause. Dennett distances himself from the discussion, but phrases it in such a way that it is immediately apparent what his actual opinion on the matter is:

Many of us brights 28 have devoted considerable time and energy at some point in our lives to looking at the arguments for and against the existence of God, and

---

27 “Is God willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is not omnipotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Then whence cometh evil? Is he neither able nor willing? Then why call him God?”, by the Greek philosopher Epicurus, who lived 341-270 BCE. In short: A world with evil precludes a god that is both omnibenevolent and omnipotent.

28 A term used for atheists, which is meant to bypass the negative connotations of the term atheist, aimed to emulate what the term gay did for homosexuals. It is not widely used.
many brights continue to pursue these issues, hacking away vigorously at the arguments of the believers as if they were trying to refute a rival scientific theory. But not I. I decided some time ago that diminishing returns had set in on the arguments about God’s existence, and I doubt that any breakthroughs are in the offing, from either side. Besides, many deeply religious people insist that all those arguments—on both sides—simply miss the whole point of religion, and their demonstrated lack of interest in the arguments persuades me of their sincerity. (Dennett 27)

The “hacking away vigorously” is a strong clue as to Dennett’s own views. Besides this, he also fails to adhere to his own convictions, because he does deal with a couple of those arguments, albeit over 200 pages later (Dennett 241-243). While it is by all means allowed to argue against such arguments, Dennett misleadingly implies that he stands aloof from the discussion, and also lays claim to a degree of non-partisanship which, given his hardly neutral turn of phrase, he does not fully deserve.

The arguments themselves, as said, are all philosophical, none make use of empirical data, which means, once again, that the Horsemen cannot disprove them, but can only make them seem less convincing. This can be done by criticising the structure, or by yet again resorting to the reductio ad absurdum approach. According to Dawkins, the “GIGO principle (Garbage In, Garbage Out) is applicable here” (Dawkins 133), as he puts it rather strongly, but the question is whether the Horsemen succeed in exposing this perceived flaw. The arguments are discussed one by one, after which some extra attention is paid to the further endeavours of Dawkins, who deals with a great deal more of them than the others. Harris does not enter into the debate at all.

- **The Cosmological Argument** argues that everything has a cause for its existence, and that therefore there needs to be an uncaused first cause, to explain how the chain reaction of cause and effect came into existence. Some people call this first cause God. The counterargument that Dawkins puts forward is that God would need a cause as well, and that cause too, which means that God leads to an “infinite regress” of explanations. Moreover, argues Dawkins, even

29 In the words of one of the most prominent apologetic debaters and authors, the philosopher William Lane Craig, the contingency version of this argument goes as follows:

“The cosmological argument comes in a variety of forms. Here’s a simple version of the famous version from contingency:
1. Everything that exists has an explanation of its existence, either in the necessity of its own nature or in an external cause.
2. If the universe has an explanation of its existence, that explanation is God.
3. The universe exists.
4. Therefore, the universe has an explanation of its existence (from 1, 3).
5. Therefore, the explanation of the universe’s existence is God (from 2, 4).
Now this is a logically airtight argument. That is to say, if the premises are true, then the conclusion is unavoidable.” (Craig, Five Arguments for God 2)
if the argument were to be accepted, it would only prove a featureless deistic god, not the Christian God with all His specific features (Dawkins 100-101). The infinite regress leads Hitchens to conclude that William of Ockham, who came up with the concept of Occam’s Razor, unknowingly invalidated this argument, because the infinite regress means that God is a more roundabout way of explaining things than no God (Hitchens 265). Dennett merely states what others have said on the matter, namely that since quantum theory, we know that not everything has a cause, and that if the property of being “uncaused” can be ascribed to one thing, it can also be extended to others, which means it makes at least equal sense to say that the universe caused itself (Dennett 242). Of course, not all of these arguments are equally valid. Dawkins in particular has been criticised for his idea of infinite regress, mostly to the effect that he has disregarded a lot of theological literature published on the matter. Of course, this criticism only works when theologians have actually made substantial progress in these published works. On the basis of the apologist William Lane Craig’s recent work Five Arguments for God, this does not appear to be the case (Craig 1-10). A more serious flaw is that Dawkins claims an uncaused cause would need a cause, which is a contradiction in terms. Since there is no scientific way of arriving at the position that God is uncaused, Dennett’s argument appears to be better, since it does not reject the notion of “uncausedness” outright, but rather observes that it could also be a property of something we know exists beyond any serious doubt, namely the universe itself. Dawkins’ claim that the Cosmological Argument could at best explain a featureless deistic god does appear to be watertight, but while this outcome is unsatisfying for theists, it is also unsatisfying for atheists such as Dawkins.

- The Ontological Argument is an a priori argument based on intuition, first proposed by St. Anselm. It states that if one imagines the greatest conceivable being, it could not be the greatest conceivable unless it actually existed, which proves his existence (SEP2). Dawkins and Dennett

---

30 The idea put forward by William of Ockham (c. 1285–1349) which states that an explanation which does not use unnecessary or unknown elements, when such an explanation is confronted with an explanation that is in other respect equal in its explanatory power. Ironically, apologist William Lane Craig uses the concept of Occam’s Razor to prove that God is a better explanation than an infinite regress (Craig, Five Arguments for God 8).

31 For an example of this, watch Michael Ruse, fellow atheist and main witness against creation science in the McLean v. Arkansas trial (Ruse), yet an adversary of Dawkins in many ways. See (PublicChristianity) for the video.

32 This argument is long, dense, and difficult, too much so to be discussed at length here. For a more in-depth discussion of it, see (SEP2).

For a contemporary apologist’s turn of phrase, one can, once again, turn to William Lane Craig, who elucidates Alvin Plantinga’s version of the Ontological Argument as follows:

“1. It is possible that a maximally great being exists.
both turn to refutation through *reductio ad absurdum*, because this is the easiest and the breeziest way of exposing the flaw of this dense and difficult argument. Dawkins replaces the property of *greatness* with something else:

> You might as well say, people vary in smelliness but we can make the comparison only by reference to a perfect maximum of conceivable smelliness. Therefore there must exist a pre-eminently peerless stinker, and we call him God. (Dawkins 102)

Dennett chooses not to use an offensive example such as *smelliness*, and even leaves out the whole notion of God:

> Could you use the same argument scheme to prove the existence of the most perfect ice-cream sundae conceivable—since if it didn’t exist there would be a more perfect conceivable one: namely, one that did exist? (Dennett 241)

Neither of these examples proves the Ontological Argument wrong, but they do show what people who use it to prove God also have to accept. In a similar vein, Dawkins quotes the Australian philosopher Douglas Gasking, who says the creation of the universe would be the greatest accomplishment, and that the less powerful God was, the greater the accomplishment, and that it could only be the ultimate accomplishment imaginable if God could create the universe without existing. Hitchens does not himself respond to the argument, but merely mentions the fact that Immanuel Kant debunked it, which indeed appears to be the case (SEP2).

- **The Argument from Design** in its simplest form asserts that many things in the world look designed, often to such an extent that the existence of a designer appears to be inescapable, especially in the case of organisms (SEP3). Interestingly enough, this argument stirs up a much bigger debate than the other two, while there is ample empirical evidence for why things look designed, through evolutionary biology, whereas similar data about the origins of the universe are still lacking. Probably, evolution itself is one of the reasons why argumentation from design is so popular, and it is no coincidence that the theory of Intelligent Design is based on a version of this argument. Dennett, Dawkins and Hitchens explain some aspects of evolution, clear up some common misconceptions about it, and since the Theory of Evolution is such a well-

---

2. If it is possible that a maximally great being exists, then a maximally great being exists in some possible world.
3. If a maximally great being exists in some possible world, then it exists in every possible world.
4. If a maximally great being exists in every possible world, then it exists in the actual world.
5. If a maximally great being exists in the actual world, then a maximally great being exists.
6. Therefore, a maximally great being exists.” (Craig, Five Arguments for God 25)
established one, there is no need to discuss it any further.\textsuperscript{33} Two examples do deserve some extra attention, however. The first is an often recurring quotation from the British astronomer Fred Hoyle, who compared evolution as an unguided principle to a tornado which, by sheer chance, built a Jumbo 747 when passing through a junkyard (Hoyle 19). The second is the so-called \textit{watchmaker analogy}, and was thought up by William Paley in 1802, predating Darwin’s chief work by over half a century (SEP3). It states that when a primitive man was to find a watch on the beach, he could easily tell it was designed, even if he had never seen anything similar. Dawkins, as was to be expected, gives a brief rundown on how evolution works. In the case of Hoyle’s Boeing analogy, he stresses that this example is based on pure chance, while evolution works because of a long chain of small random events channelled by the non-random process of natural selection (Dawkins 141). As to Paley’s argument, Dawkins only relates how Darwin himself fell for it when he was younger, and personally disproved it with his Darwinism (Dawkins 103), which, while probably true, is very much lacking in the argumentation department. Dawkins probably aimed to cash in on the fact that the argument was debunked such a long time ago, but in the process forgets to explain why it was, and how. Hitchens takes on Hoyle’s argument in a way rather different from Dawkins’. After pointing out some problems with the analogy from an evolutionary standpoint, he goes on to explain how planes, too, have evolved through many different types, with small improvements added left and right (Hitchens 86-87). Indeed, complex manmade objects usually have less complex predecessors, and while by far the greatest number mutations will not have been random, the analogy does work, because it is only the mutations that work that are incorporated in future products. The analogy is by no means perfect (and unnecessary to begin with), but Hitchens apparently savours the irony. The Argument from Fine-Tuning, next, which is also one of the Arguments from Design, argues that the conditions in the universe that allow life to form are so unlikely that it cannot have come about by chance.\textsuperscript{34} Hitchens’ response to this has been quoted already, where he stressed how poorly the universe is fine-tuned, if it indeed is or was, and interlacing his plea with the mantra “some design” (Hitchens 80). Dawkins uses the \textit{Anthropic Principle}, which states that conscious

\textsuperscript{33} For examples of opponents of evolutionary biology, however, one can turn to the various books, articles, television appearances and lectures by a number of people, among whom are: William Dembski, Ken Ham, Michael Behe, Kent Hovind, Ray Comfort and Rabbi Shmuley Boteach, or to the 2008 movie \textit{Expelled: No Intelligence Allowed}, which is shot and edited in the style of Michael Moore’s \textit{Fahrenheit 9/11}.

\textsuperscript{34} William Lane Craig explains that “during the last forty years or so, scientists have discovered that the existence of intelligent life depends upon a complex and delicate balance of initial conditions given in the Big Bang itself. This is known as the fine-tuning of the universe” (Craig, Five Arguments for God 13).
life by definition occurs in a universe where conscious life is possible, and by definition views things from a place in the universe where it is possible (Dawkins 162). Although this does not answer the improbability claims made by fine-tuning proponents, it does address the issue of perceived purpose. Not only is it ultimately irrelevant where life arose in the universe, but also whether it arose at all. Conscious life is only relevant to conscious life, and not to the universe itself, which has no consciousness of its own. So while the extreme improbability of life-allowing initial conditions of the universe is hardly touched upon, it is shown to be irrelevant to any purpose other than our own. While this does clarify the matter somewhat, Dawkins refrains from tackling the Fine-Tuning Argument as a whole.35 Dennett merely quotes his earlier book *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, which does nothing more than claim that the present state of the universe could just as well be the result of mindless, random processes, which, while true, does not address the improbability of this very outcome at all (Dennett 243-4).

- **Other Theories** are mostly cited by Dawkins, some of which are serious, some of which appear selected only to be ridiculed. The serious ones are *The Argument from Beauty* (110), *The Argument from Personal Experience* (112), *The Argument from Scripture* (117), *The Argument from Admired Religious Scientists* (123), *Pascal’s Wager* (130) and *The Bayesian Arguments* (132). Of course, the other Horsemen have also discussed these arguments, but Dawkins’ list seems most complete and suitable to use as the backbone of this discussion. Finally, Dawkins list of *Ridiculous Arguments* (109-10) deserves a mention.

- **The Argument from Beauty**, as presented by Dawkins, states that God must exist, because of a work of art that is deemed to be sublime. Dawkins, rightly, points out that these works are demonstrably manmade, and he compares it to *The Argument from Design*, in which people simply cannot imagine something came about without divine interference. The other Horsemen appear to treat this as a given, and refrain from discussing it. Harris’ earlier remark about a “God (who, for reasons difficult to fathom, made Shakespeare a far better writer than himself)” (35), seems to reflect this.

---

35 Dawkins here fails to point out that it is, at present, unknown whether these conditions are indeed variable, and if they are, whether all conditions are equally likely. Moreover, Dawkins does not address the issue of *Carbon Chauvinism*, which states that the idea that all possible life needs be carbon-based, which, while it is the only known possibility, is still only an assumption. These are all points that could have been employed to lower the improbability put forwards by fine-tuning proponents.
• **The Argument from Personal Experience** states that the fact that people experience God proves His existence.\(^{36}\) Dawkins notes that our experience is a flawed representation of reality, with our brains running on “first-class simulation software”, which tries to resemble reality as closely as possible, but is constructed nonetheless (113). He mentions a number of optical illusions which discredit the human experience as a reliable source of data (113-4). He also mentions George W. Bush’s claim that God told him to invade Iraq, while not disclosing to him that the weapons of mass destruction were not actually there (112). Less detrimental, but perhaps statistically stronger, is his story about seventy thousand pilgrims who, in 1917, saw the Sun come down over the multitude (116-7). Here, the personal experience of tens of thousands of people can be dismissed out of hand, for very obvious reasons to do with very straightforward facts about our solar system. For Harris, one can go back to his claim that “sanity is in numbers” (72), in which he already discussed how peculiar experiences are only taken seriously when they occur in the proper, religious context. A lot of this discussion is merely a reiteration of points discussed earlier, which boil down to the fact that claims that claims which are made about many different gods, cannot be dismissed in favour of one specific god without any empirical basis for doing so. This is a logical fallacy named *special pleading*, which is to arbitrarily apply a certain rule in one case, while not doing so in similar other ones.\(^{37}\) Dennett discusses some explanations from cognitive and evolutionary psychology, which are beyond the scope of our present endeavour.\(^{38}\)

• **The Argument from Scripture**, which aims to prove God’s existence through sacred texts,\(^{39}\) is discussed on various levels, which can be divided into three types. Firstly, there is the level of the actual stories in these documents, some of which can be singled out for irrelevance, impossibility, factual inaccuracy, internal self-contradiction, cruelty and immorality. Secondly, there is the relationship between the different sacred texts, which make similar, but ultimately

---

\(^{36}\) This argument is supported by the aforementioned apologist William Lane Craig, who defended it in numerous debates, and also in (100huntley).

\(^{37}\) Harris, elsewhere than in *The End of Faith*, raises a similar point to Dawkins’ moving Sun in a lecture on *The Aspen Festival of Ideas* in 2007. He tells how Sathya Sai Baba, an Indian guru, claims to perform miracles, and has millions of eye witnesses to back up his claim. Yet Christians who claim personal experiences of their own God are not impressed by this. In fact, it barely makes it into the news at all. This leads Harris to conclude that personal experience only counts when it backs up the claim of the proponent. This could also be argued to be a case of *special pleading*. The lecture can be seen on (Aspen Festival of Ideas).

\(^{38}\) Terms like *common sense* and *Hyperactive Agency Detecting Device* are some rather well-established explanations for human experiences surrounding religion.

\(^{39}\) William Lane Craig also uses this argument. His various arguments to back up his proposition that the Gospels prove the divinity of Jesus can be heard in his debate with Bart Ehrman (Nazam44). The apologist Lee Strobel has also made this case, in his book *A Case for Christ*, and in various lectures, an example of which can be found in (Strobel).
irreconcilable claims. Thirdly, there is the discussion about the reliability and the historicity of the texts, mostly approached through biblical history and textual criticism. Part of this has already been discussed in the chapter on authority. What remains is best discussed in a paragraph of its own, later on.

- **The Argument from Admired Religious Scientist**, in the words of Dawkins, comes down to the following statement: “Newton was religious. Who are you to set yourself up as superior to Newton, Galileo, Kepler, etc. etc. etc.? If God was good enough for the likes of them, just who do you think you are?” Dawkins explains how, long ago, it was more or less impermissible to be an atheist, and how, in the last century, nonreligious scientists in England and the United States have vastly outnumbered their religious counterparts, of which he also lists some notable examples (Dawkins 123-30). While it is understandable why Dawkins enters into this discussion, it is still one based on an appeal to authority fallacy. This means that all his responses are necessarily fallacious too, at least on the topic of God’s existence. Of course, Dawkins is addressing those who fell for these kinds of arguments, and it is doubtful whether these people could have been convinced without this authority argument. Still, it is evident that he has chosen persuasion over sound reasoning, which is something one might criticise him for. After all, the religious convictions of the great minds of the past are a moot point.

- **Pascal’s Wager**, put forward by the eponymous 17th century French mathematician, physician, theologian and apologist Blaise Pascal, basically presents matter of belief and non-belief as a cost-benefit analysis. A life spent in worship will cost only one lifetime, and yield either nothing or an eternity of pleasure in Heaven, depending on the existence or non-existence of God. A life spent without worship, on the other hand, will yield a lifetime of earthly pleasures, and cost either nothing or an eternity of being tortured in Hell, again depending on whether God does or does not exist. Thus, following this line of reasoning, the cost of a life committed to the Lord is relatively low compared to the possibly infinite benefit (SEP4).\(^\text{40}\) Dawkins is quick to point out that one cannot simply believe in something on command (130). Harris makes a similar point, explaining one cannot believe something unless one actually thinks it is actually part of reality, which, in turn, might require evidence (63), which is why a promise of salvation as a carrot on a stick, simply will not do. In other words, a distinction is made between the wish to believe and the actual possibility, and requirements of belief. Hitchens, who calls it the “ultimate

\(^{40}\) Apologists hardly ever use this argument openly as such, but the logic behind it abounds in street-witnessing tactics (Philosophical apologetics).
degeneration of all this into a mere bargain” (211), says he, if confronted with his “Maker” after death, would simply be honest, and say: “Imponderable Sir, I presume from some if not all of your many reputations that you might prefer honest and convinced unbelief to the hypocritical and self-interested affectation of faith or the smoking tributes of bloody altars” (211-2). Dawkins also refers to one of Bertrand Russell’s answers, in which he observed that the wager, as put forward by Pascal, was incomplete, as it did not include the thousands of different gods one could believe in (131). This shifts the balance of the wager into a different direction, as there are not one, but an infinite number of possible gods to choose from. This means that the chance of ending up in Hell, if there is indeed such a place, is statistically almost indistinguishable between belief and non-belief. These arguments against Pascal’s Wager are, of course, not all equally valid. The first, claiming one cannot believe on command, is probably true in all but a few cases, except for those who are capable of heroic acts of self-indoctrination. For most people, however, this argument is probably valid. The second argument, as put forward by Hitchens, is hardly an argument at all. It can either be interpreted as an assumption that God would perhaps value honesty, or as an attempt to call him on his hypocrisy. Neither of these two possibilities properly addresses the question at hand, however laudable and honest one may deem such a take on things to be. The third argument, which points at the sheer multitude of different gods, is the strongest, as it utterly invalidates the wager’s core premise. It exposes how it makes the false assumption that there is the binary of God-or-no-God. The implied fifty-fifty odds are replaced by more nuanced ones. Of course, one cannot reliably put numbers on an unknown element, but if whatever chance there is a god has to be shared with all possible gods, or even with all known gods, chances of picking the right god never amount to anything remotely substantial. Therefore, Pascal’s Wager, taking the many different gods into account, shows that giving up one’s earthly pleasures during life yields nothing more than a negligible chance of salvation.

- The Bayesian Argument is only touched upon by Dawkins. The argument states that the probability of God’s existence can be calculated with Thomas Bayes’ well-known theorem, which allows us to infer approximate probabilities from different factors, even if these factors have unknown or partly-known properties. Apologists have used this theorem to calculate the probability of God’s existence ever since Richard Price wrote the introduction to Bayes’ 1763 essay (Price). Dawkins, however, takes a more recent example, namely Stephen Unwin’s 2003

\[41\] An example of this can be found in (A simple example of Bayes theorem)
book *The Probability of God*. Unwin starts off with a fifty-fifty-probability onset, and adjusts the probability to six consecutive arguments: *there is a sense of goodness, people do evil things, nature does evil things, there might be minor miracles, there might be major miracles and people have religious experiences* (Dawkins 133-4).\(^42\) After taking these six steps, he ends up with a probability of 67%, which, according to Dawkins, he is unsatisfied with, “so he takes the bizarre step of boosting it to 95 per cent by an emergency injection of ‘faith’” (Dawkins 134). This is rather disingenuous on Dawkins’ part, as Unwin explicitly stated this was only his personal belief (Unwin 190).\(^43\) So Dawkins makes a *straw man argument*, which is, of course, a fallacy, as it is an argument aimed, not at the real claim, but at a misrepresentation of this claim. The real claim, a 67% probability, is also addressed, and here Dawkins does not resort to fallacious reasoning. Firstly, he criticises Unwin’s use of subjective, personal judgements:

\begin{quote}
But of course that final estimate can only be as good as the original numbers fed in. These are usually subjectively judged, with all the doubts that inevitably flow from that. The GIGO principle (Garbage In, Garbage Out) is applicable here. (Dawkins 133)
\end{quote}

This is an important point, as the same calculation, but then based on Dawkins’ own judgements rather than Unwin’s, is unlikely to have resulted in such a high probability. In other words, the outcome of the calculation is necessarily as subjective as the judgements it is based on. Dawkins also criticises Unwin’s selection of contributing factors, sometimes dismissing them, sometimes stating he would interpret it to be exactly the other way round (Dawkins 134-6). He fails to criticise the fifty-fifty onset, while, as we have seen, he did do this when he discussed Pascal’s Wager. So, Dawkins’ discussion is somewhat lacking in the thoroughness department. A simple reiteration of his earlier point would have been sufficient. As a result Dawkins’ discussion of the Bayesian argument is considerably flawed. It is flawed in that it uses an obvious and inexcusable *straw man*, and fails to get into some very important aspects of the points put forward by Unwin. This is especially noteworthy, as “Unwin's quixotic attempt to put a number on the probability” was qualified as “quite agreeably funny” by Dawkins (132). Finally, it is doubtful

\(^42\) A brief synopsis of Unwin’s factors and calculations is to be found on Unwin’s website (www.stephenunwin.com).

\(^43\) Also note how the 67% is mentioned in his own synopsis, while the 95% is not (www.stephenunwin.com). An article in *The Guardian* also made a distinction between Unwin’s personal conviction, and the outcome of his calculation (Maclean, Bolsover and Curt).
whether this type of argument is really widespread in present-day apologetics.\footnote{The only example I can think of is Lee Strobel, who has mentioned this very book in his speeches (Strobel).} Dawkins himself recognises this point:

> I hesitated before including this argument, which is both weaker and less hallowed by antiquity than others. Unwin's book, however, received considerable journalistic attention when it was published in 2003, and it does give the opportunity to bring some explanatory threads together. (Dawkins 132)

So, even if it got some attention in the press, it is still hardly an excuse to discuss it as a serious argument. Moreover, the attention was mostly due to the fact that reviewers deemed it to be a creative attempt to explain Bayesian statistics. Even the vocal sceptic and atheist Michael Shermer, who was discussed earlier on, wrote a relatively positive review, while, obviously, disagreeing with Unwin's data input (Shermer, "God's number is up"). So Dawkins had probably best left this argument undiscussed, as it does not represent a widely-held view. It is not obscure enough to render it into a straw man as a whole, but it is hard to see what it adds to the overall God discussion.

- **Ridiculous Arguments**, finally, are put forward by Dawkins. He quotes from a list, as compiled by a website,\footnote{"www.godlessgeeks.com" (Dawkins 109)} from which he has taken an, apparently, random chunk:

36 **Argument from Incomplete Devastation**: A plane crashed killing 143 passengers and crew. But one child survived with only third-degree burns. Therefore God exists.

37 **Argument from Possible Worlds**: If things had been different, then things would be different. That would be bad. Therefore God exists.

38 **Argument from Sheer Will**: I do believe in God! I do believe in God! I do I do I do. I do believe in God! Therefore God exists.

39 **Argument from Non-belief**: The majority of the world's population are non-believers in Christianity. This is just what Satan intended. Therefore God exists.

40 **Argument from Post-Death Experience**: Person X died an atheist. He now realizes his mistake. Therefore God exists.

41 **Argument from Emotional Blackmail**: God loves you. How could you be so heartless as not to believe in him? Therefore God exists.

(Dawkins 109-10)

The problem with these quotes is the very fact that they are selected because they are ridiculous. These are straw-man arguments, which, because none are attributed to any serious apologist, do not belong in the discussion. In his defence, Dawkins does not treat them as
important arguments, and he is transparent as to where he found them. Still, it is at best a distortion of his opponents’ intellectual worth, and therefore necessarily fallacious.

When judging the way in which the Horsemen have tackled these arguments for God, one has to conclude that, overall, they have done a passable job. The most widely-used arguments are dealt with quite thoroughly, even though Dawkins becomes rather cavalier when discussing the infinite regress in the Cosmological Argument. Hitchens can at times be accused of using an argumentum ad consequentiam, a fallacious appeal to consequences. Dennett could be called a hypocrite for affecting not to address these arguments at all, while nevertheless still doing so later on. With some imagination, this could be seen as a very elaborate paralepsis.\textsuperscript{46} Harris’ use of reductio ad absurdum is, in itself, mostly valid, but he has a habit of adding little nuances, which, while not undermining his arguments, invoke negative connotations, which are a slight distraction. And at times Dawkins tends to miss the mark when discussing the arguments from the ‘other’ category, sometimes by seeming inattentive, sometimes by selecting arguments that are potential straw men. However, most arguments are dissected quite carefully and effectively, and most of the logic appears to be sound. It is just not perfect.

3.5 – STALIN’S ATHEISM AND THE NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF RELIGION
The final section of this chapter will deal with the way in which the Horsemen employ real or perceived negative aspects of religion. This type of argument is very popular, but also very diffuse. Still, it can, for present purposes, be boiled down to two broad varieties. Firstly, there are negative phenomena and occurrences in the real world which can, arguably be ascribed to religion. This also includes a battle over whether some of history’s villains were religious or not, and whether it matters. Secondly, there are instances of violence and general immorality in the scriptures of the Abrahamic religions. Although it is not necessarily a detrimental feature, the internal contradictions, signs of scientific ignorance and contradictions between the different texts are swept into the same hopper. Another attack is levelled on these founding documents from the perspective of textual criticism, and biblical history. Thirdly, some brief remarks need to be made about Hitchens, who is the only one of the Horsemen who does not only call himself an atheist, but also an antitheist.

The discussions between believers and non-believers often include a trench war on whether certain conflicts and humanitarian atrocities were caused by religion, or whether certain key figures were religious, and whether this was a deciding factor. Of course, atheists often point at the crusades

\textsuperscript{46} The “rhetorical device of emphasizing a thing by omitting it or mentioning it only cursorily” (TalkTalk).
and the Inquisition, while it is not difficult to find apologists who blame all of the terror caused by the totalitarian regimes of the twentieth century on atheism.\(^{47}\) So in order to understand fully why the Horsemen utilise such arguments, it is necessary to appreciate the fact that it is, in part, dialectical in nature. This does, at no point, mean that one should slacken his vigilance when assessing the soundness of the argumentation itself. It does, however, help to explain this phenomenon.

The most commonly used examples of religious violence are, of course, the crusades and the Inquisition, complemented by the more recent addition of Islamic terrorism. While many authorities urge us to consider the nonreligious forces behind these atrocities as well, the statement that they were religion-related is unlikely to raise many eyebrows. Still, Harris, Dawkins and Hitchens feel the need to defend this proposition. Hitchens puts it rather awkwardly: “The nineteen suicide murderers of New York and Washington and Pennsylvania were beyond any doubt the most sincere believers on those planes” (32). This is strange, since it limits his claim to those on the plane, and does not fully substantiate the extent of this perlocutionary speech act,\(^{48}\) which is obviously much broader than just these passengers. On another case of terrorism, Dawkins quotes his fellow Horseman, when he writes: “Sam Harris quotes a failed suicide bomber who said what drove him to kill Israelis was ‘the love of martyrdom ... I didn’t want revenge for anything. I just wanted to be a martyr’” (Dawkins 344). Dawkins quotes from another interview with a failed Palestinian terrorist, which is more or less to the same effect (344-5). Dawkins also quotes Harris on Osama bin Laden’s motivations for 9/11, when he says:

> ...it has been patiently articulated by bin Laden himself. [...] men like bin Laden actually believe what they say they believe. They believe in the literal truth of the Koran. Why did nineteen well-educated middle-class men trade their lives in this world for the privilege of killing thousands of neighbours? Because they believed that they would go straight to paradise for doing so. (Dawkins 343)

Again, Dawkins and Harris let the perpetrator himself speak out, supporting their claims. There are some problems with this, however. The idea that the terrorists themselves know, better than experts, why they do what they do, is a slightly bizarre one. It could also be argued that it is overly inductionist to

\(^{47}\) The examples are countless, but for a recent one, turn to the statement issued by the Catholic League in America during Pope Benedict XVI’s visit to the UK, in which it states that “Atheists must apologize for Hitler” (Catholic League). For another example, see the abovementioned discussion between Richard Dawkins and Bill O’Reilly (Dawkins2).

\(^{48}\) A term from Speech-Act Theory, pertaining to what is actually meant and probably understood, not to what is technically uttered (Alston 34).
cover the whole topic of suicide bombing, citing, in fact, no more than three terrorists, which is a rather small test population to say the least.\footnote{While this is not the place to delve into theological matters, it is noteworthy that a renowned professor in religious studies, Reza Aslan, opposes the view that Al-Qaeda are inspired by a literalist approach to their scriptures. In a lecture he delivered at the Leiden University, hosted by Eutopia, he said they are not Qur’anic scholars, but rather engineers and mechanics who do not know too much about the Qur’an. Rather, Aslan claims, they have a nihilistic cosmic world view, in which religion is the only meaningful identity marker. Having defeated one world power in the eighties, they then decided to go after the other: the USA. This type of religion defies all state boundaries, and since they want nothing short of world dominion, they cannot be negotiated with (Aslan). It is not the aim of this thesis to decide who is right, but it goes to show that Harris’ claim is very much open to discussion.}

Harris makes more explicit the role played by metaphysical beliefs by stating:

As I have said, people of faith tend to argue that it is not faith itself but man’s baser nature that inspires such violence. But I take it to be self-evident that ordinary people cannot be moved to burn genial old scholars alive for blaspheming the Koran, or celebrate the violent deaths of their children, unless they believe some improbable things about the nature of the universe. (Harris 31)

In short, according to Harris, a belief in the metaphysical can vindicate unspeakable suffering in this world, and this idea is also important when nonreligious terrorism is discussed.

Harris and Hitchens also spend some time dealing with suicide bombings that were, purportedly, secular in nature. The two examples they deal with are terrorist acts by the Tamil Tigers, and the Japanese kamikaze missions in World War II. For the sake of brevity, we will only focus on the former. The Tamils are, as Hitchens points out, Hindus. This is in itself, of course, a moot point. It is not about whether terrorists are religious, but rather about whether their ulterior motives are. Harris fails to recognise this distinction when he says that:

While the motivations of the Tigers are not explicitly religious, they are Hindus who undoubtedly believe many improbable things about the nature of life and death. The cult of martyr worship that they have nurtured for decades has many of the features of religiosity that one would expect in people who give their lives so easily for a cause. Secular Westerners often underestimate the degree to which certain cultures, steeped as they are in otherworldliness, look upon death with less alarm than seems strictly rational. […] Hindus, even those whose preoccupations appear to be basically secular, often harbor potent religious beliefs. (229, note 2)

Where Harris appears to concede half a point when he calls their motivations “not explicitly religious”, he actually does not. And where his explanation appears to support his claims, it really does not. He merely makes a case for how religious beliefs about an afterlife might, in some cases, be a prerequisite for suicide bombing. While this is a serious issue, it is not, as Harris implies, a religious motivation.
Moreover, Harris’ claim about Hindus with basically secular preoccupations, which turn out to have potent beliefs, is really based on a false dichotomy. Hindus, by definition, harbour religious beliefs, and that does not make them fundamentally unsecular. Nor does it mean that their beliefs inform their actions. Again, Harris has only explained how a religious belief in the hereafter might be a precondition for suicide bombing. Finally, his remark about looking upon death with less fear than seems strictly rational is very much a Western bias. Who is to say whether fear of death is supposed to be the rational default? Even if one disbelieves in life after death, it does not logically follow that it should inspire fear. Perhaps Harris means that it is irrational to expect to live on after dying, but that is something that needs additional specification. As an unsupported statement this claim about what is rational or not is flawed. So all in all, it can safely be argued that Harris’ claim that the Tamil suicide attacks are not secular is more than his arguments can back up. In fact, the Tamil attacks were almost explicitly nationalistic in nature, as they were about national identities and nation states. As for Hitchens, he simply points out that there is such a thing as a murderous Buddhist or Hindu, after which he mentions some religious leaders that were involved (199). This does not address the core of the matter, as it fails to take into account the motivations. There might very well be something to the claim that religious beliefs, alleviating the fear of death, are an important factor, but this does not mean that it is necessarily the main factor, nor should such a factor be conflated with the underlying motivations. Dawkins, as a final note, does seem to take the other motivations into account, if only implicitly while discussing Islamic terrorists:

Unlike their Palestinian counterparts, or their kamikaze counterparts in Japan, or their Tamil Tiger counterparts in Sri Lanka, these human bombs had no expectation that their bereaved families would be lionized, looked after or supported on martyrs' pensions. (Dawkins 342)

While not pursuing the matter any further, Dawkins does accept the fact that some of the problems posed by self-inflicted death can be taken away by worldly things, like the fact that one can rest assured that one’s family will be taken care of.

Apart from groups of people, some individuals have also led to debates among atheists and believers, the most prominent of which are the leaders of the 20th century totalitarian states: Adolf Hitler, Mao Tse Tung, Pol Pot and Josef Stalin. All of those leaders have millions, if not tens of millions of deaths to their names, numbers unprecedented in history. Religious debaters often claim that they were
not only atheists, but also committed their crimes because of, or even in the name of atheism.\textsuperscript{50} Additionally, Hitler’s notion of Social Darwinism is often included in these arguments as well, in attacks on the perceived two-headed monster of atheism and evolution. None of the Horsemen respond to the claims made about Pol Pot, or to those made about Mao Tse Tung, except for Harris, who calls communism “little more than a political religion” (78). In one way this is cheap, as both communism and religions are ideologies. Most political ideologies lack the framework of metaphysical beliefs that partly define (if somewhat diffusely) what a religion is. On the other hand, there is indeed a Theory of Political Religion, which was put forward by the German political scientist Hans Maier in 1995 (Librarything). It does, indeed, more or less mean what Harris describes (Political Religion). He does refer to two texts in an endnote (242, note 36), but he does not specify that a political religion is not in fact a religion. In that sense, his statement could be argued to be somewhat misleading. By failing to explain what he means by “political religion”, many readers may take it to mean more than is warranted.

Josef Stalin is a more popular topic of discussion, being mentioned by all Horsemen but Dennett. Harris’ take on Stalin is already covered by the same broad brush with which he painted Mao Tse Tung. There is a very interesting distinction between Dawkins and Hitchens in the way they deal with Stalin. Dawkins accepts he is an atheist, but stresses that he did not do what he did because he was one (309). Hitchens, however, turns the whole claim around, by trying to point out why the Soviet horrors were actually caused by religion (230-7). Dawkins argument is all but a mirror image of the discussion about Harris’ claim about Tamil Hindus: as long as there is no reason to suppose that religious beliefs have actually informed a given deed, they are as moot a point as any.

Hitchens’ position on Stalin deserves much closer scrutiny. Firstly, he says that even if atheism did indeed kill millions through Stalin, because of the crusades and religious wars, it would be “to split the difference” (230). Numerically, this is easily revealed to be nonsense, as Stalin’s regime, by any count, had a much higher death toll than any of the crusades.\textsuperscript{51} Hitchens then goes on to argue that totalitarian leaders were treated like gods. In fact, he goes even further, and says:

\begin{quote}
Whether we examine the oriental monarchies of China or India or Persia, or the empires of the Aztec or the Incas, or the medieval courts of Spain and Russia and
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{50} Instances of this are countless. For a few examples, see (Dawkins2) and Rabbi Shmuley Boteach in many of his debates, such as (92ndStreetY). An earlier example that also applies here is (Catholic League).

\textsuperscript{51} Exact numbers are hard to ascertain, since it is unclear whether all executions were recorded and whether all famine victims should be attributed to Stalin’s economical and agricultural mismanagement. And so on. Most estimates I found were between four and ten million deaths. The estimates for the crusades range from one to two million victims, during a period of almost two centuries, while Stalin’s reign lasted little over three decades. The difference cannot be split here. It also fails to address the death toll of other communist regimes.
France, it is almost unvaryingly that we find that these dictators were also gods, or the heads of churches. (231)

Strictly speaking, he may very well be right. To many it will, however, suggest things that are untrue. There are two different groups in his examples: the Western ones, which were head of the church, and the non-Western, some of which officially had the status of a god. By lumping them together like this, it is strongly suggested that European leaders were also seen as actual gods. Moreover, by picking Russia and France, both of which had immensely cruel non-religious regimes after that, inattentive readers might think he is writing about those, especially since this part of the book is about Stalin’s totalitarianism. Whether intentional or not, Hitchens’ description is unnecessarily foggy and unspecific, which might lead to erroneous assumptions on the part of the reader. Another problem is that he is now stretching the usual meaning of the word god to something that is almost antithetical to the one used throughout the book. If Hitchens switches definitions to such an extent, it demands an explanation.

A similar instance of a statement that is in itself almost true, but has implications way beyond its factual merits is when Hitchens talks about two Roman Catholic dogmas. He remarks on how the dogma of the Immaculate Conception only became a dogma in 1852, while the Assumption only became a dogma in 1951 (Hitchens 117). Hitchens appears to be writing from memory here, as he is slightly off on the dates, which ought to have been 1950 (Flinn and Melton 267) and 1854 (Pius IX). While these are minor mistakes, which are mostly harmless and should at best raise some suspicion about other things he may have misremembered, there is a bigger issue here. The point Hitchens is trying to make is that such famous dogmas are, in fact, recent additions to Roman Catholic theology. The Encyclopedia of World Religions, however, states on The Assumption that “this belief was evident from the very early days of the church”, long before it was dogmatically codified (Schadé). This exposes Hitchens to be either disingenuous or insufficiently knowledgeable on the subject to make a contribution worth taking seriously, neither of which is quite permissible in a book like this.

Finally, Hitchens leaves out obvious facts when he deals with fascism, which theistic debaters often single out as atheistically motivated. While this statement is never sufficiently backed with evidence, Hitchens also misses the mark while trying to prove the opposite, that the Roman Catholic Church was very much involved in it. As an aside he mentions that European fascism was openly endorsed by “Catholic intellectuals” like T.S. Eliot. In this case, it is inexcusable to leave Ezra Pound unmentioned. A fellow poet, and friend of Eliot’s, he was not only openly atheistic, but also by far the

---

52 This dogma states that the Virgin Mary was born without sin, which is quite unique within Roman Catholic theology where everyone is necessarily born in sin.
53 This dogma states that the Virgin Mary bodily ascended into the Heavens, and did not technically die.
most fervent supporter of fascist ideology. Being an admirer of Benito Mussolini, he even went as far as moving to Italy, where he met him in person, and made pro-Mussolini radio shows for years (Redman 258), which afterwards merely led to his asylum confinement in the United States of America, only because he was “found unfit to stand trial on the charge of treason” (259). While this is not sufficient reason to link atheism to fascism, it does limit Hitchens’ playing field while trying to prove the opposite. If he accepts Eliot’s ideological views as proof for the link between Roman Catholicism and fascism, he needs to accept Pound as proof for an even stronger link with atheism. Failing to address this matter, he arguably becomes guilty of tacit special pleading, which is a logical fallacy.

3.6 – CONCLUSION ARGUMENTATION
Taking all of the above into consideration, there is a wide array of argumentation to comment on, which mostly consists of rebuttals of philosophical proofs for the existence of God. All in all, these arguments are properly dissected, but Dawkins, while covering by far the most of them, does tend to be unnecessarily careless, and could have omitted a number of ridiculous cases that hardly anyone puts forward. But in the end the Horsemen do manage to show where the philosophical arguments fail. The weapon of choice is mostly the *reductio ad absurdum* construction, which, while often mistakenly thought to be a fallacy, is in actual fact not an argument, but a strategy to test the validity of other arguments by using its parameters to check whether they have ridiculous implications. This often leads to deliberately far-out claims which are internally identical to the ones put forward by theistic debaters and intellectuals. Harris in particular at times struggles to keep the parameters valid because he tries to make the theistic claims look as ridiculous as possible. This strategy is not sufficient to disqualify his points altogether, but he could have been more meticulous is structuring his instances of *reductio ad absurdum*. Dennett, while being much more careful, can still be blamed for pretending to stay out of the discussion. An area where most of the Horsemen struggle is where they try to establish a link between religion and war. In the case of Harris, he attributes violent acts to people’s religious views, and while they might often have been a prerequisite condition, he fails to prove that they provided the actual motive. Hitchens goes even further, and tries to reattribute almost every disgrace often blamed on atheism to religion, while it would have sufficed to show why they do not necessarily follow from atheism. Here, he often makes the same mistake theistic debaters make, by taking the mere fact that religion and violence coincide, without establishing a proper link. Moreover, he tends to ignore similar cases on the atheistic side, which in turn often leads him into factual inaccuracies. Thus, he fights theistic fallacies with atheistic ones, and this is hardly helpful, especially since merely pointing out the
flaws in the theistic argument would have done the trick just as well. So all in all, the Horsemen successfully manage to take apart the arguments of the opponents, but they often fail individually.
CONCLUSION

The four books written by Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett and Sam Harris are in many ways straitjacketed by the debate at large. Many of their apparent faults can therefore be attributed to that. This is especially obvious when it comes to the use of authorities. *The Brothers Karamazov*, Albert Einstein, Thomas Jefferson and the like are indeed an unlikely bunch to defend statements concerning religion, but seen in the light of the cultural and historical context of the debate, it is easy to see why they are included. At this point, it very much depends on whether one thinks these books ultimately ought to be accurate or effective. Accuracy should compel the authors not to mention these authorities at all, while effectiveness forces them to counter as many claims as possible about doubtful authorities put forward by their theistic opponents, as they might have convinced certain people through them. The golden mean appears to be to explain briefly why these sources fail as authorities, and to leave it at that. When dealing with *The Brothers Karamazov*, Dawkins does just that, while Hitchens actively fights back, putting himself in the undesirable position where he is himself arguing from a work of fiction. Then again, Dawkins also spends too much time on this. In other cases, like the Founding Fathers and Albert Einstein, the same applies. Dawkins bends over backwards to explain how Einstein was never as religious as he is claimed to be, which in the end merely means he has wasted precious ink on a non-authority when it comes to religion. Evolutionary biology seems to be the same story, but since this does actually, unlike Dostoevsky, have serious implications for the world view of many religious people, it is different. However, especially Dawkins could have been a lot more concise on the matter.

When it comes to argumentation, the Horsemen mostly rely on the *reductio ad absurdum* construction. This is mostly born out of necessity, as the arguments for the existence of God are mostly unfalsifiable. This means that the only point that can be made concerns His improbability rather than his actual non-existence, and the *reductio ad absurdum* is a playful and potentially very effective way of showing this. Here, the sarcasm is piled on with obvious relish, making the pseudo-gods like the Flying Spaghetti Monster and the Celestial Teapot as ridiculous as possible. While this is surely entertaining, a little more deconstruction of the concept might have been helpful. Explaining what a *reductio ad absurdum* actually is, is probably more likely to get through to believers than their being mocked. Dawkins’ ill-concealed delight in finding the most ridiculous pseudo-god is probably especially counterproductive at best.
In the end, the main problem of these books might very well be the fact that it is totally unclear what their target audience is. In terms of persuasion, the books are too belligerent to be likely to lead to a substantial amount of apostasies. On the other hand, this sarcasm is what makes it attractive to many atheistic readers, and since they buy most of the Horsemen’s books, they need to be catered for. However, the upshot of this is a rather schizophrenic type of book, which is at the same time preaching to the converted, while scaring away those who need to stay to be convinced. Dennett complicates the matter even further by combining this with, what is essentially, an honest enquiry into the origins and nature of religions. While sarcasm is no mean selling point amongst atheists, and does not need to be detrimental on a purely factual level, the problem is that it tends to render the books’ factual merits ineffective. In that sense, the Horsemen have done a very poor job. On the other hand, where they have done a better job at convincing people by dealing with the likes of the Founding Fathers, Stalin and Ivan Karamazov, their stories have no factual merits whatsoever, at least when it comes to the existence of gods, or to the effects of religion. There is a very thin line between effectiveness and veracity the Horsemen need to tread, and a lot of the playing field has been predetermined by the history of the debate. But all in all, the vicious sarcasm and use of questionable authorities may very well be the things that make the books worse in terms of contents and less convincing to those who still need convincing.

Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, Christopher Hitchens’ *God is not Great*, Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* and Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith* are in many respects moderately solid books. Between them, most points are addressed more or less properly, but individually there are some differences. Harris tends to stay away from most of the questionable authorities inherent to the debate, but is a bit shaky when it comes to *reductiones ad absurdum* and falls short when trying to link religion to war and violence. Dawkins covers the widest variety of arguments for gods, and is the best authority when it comes to disproving creationists’ arguments, but he does unforgivably misrepresent Unwin’s claims about the probability of God’s existence, and rather confusingly claims God could not be the unmoved mover as there would be nothing to move him, which is exactly the point of being unmoved. Dennett has written a very interesting and readable book on the origins of religion (containing by far the best science in the Horsemen’s books), but interlaced it with attacks on the subject matter. The two messages hardly go hand in hand, and diminish each other’s thrust by occurring on the same pages. Perhaps Dennett had been better advised to have written two separate books. Hitchens falls far behind when it comes to argumentation, and to getting his facts straight. He is more of a storyteller than the others, and appears to play a debating game rather than to solely pursue the truth. This is in line with remarks he has made in the documentary *The Four Horsemen*, saying that he would not want religion to
disappear because he likes the debate too much (Dawkins, Harris and Dennett). It also fits in with his voicing his intentions, at the start of debates, of living up to the subtitle of his book: How *Religion Poisons Everything*. Apparently, his game is to give every theistic argument a 180 degree spin, and direct it right back at his opponents, whether it strictly makes sense or does not. This surely makes for entertaining stories and debates, but not necessarily for exquisite reasoning.

Of course, there is more to bind the Horsemen’s books together than there is to separate them. If one wishes to speak of a genre, there is ample reason to do so. The objective is to expose religion as wrong and detrimental. The style is sarcasm-driven. The use of authority is often determined by those inherent to the debate they are part of, and many authorities appear in more than one of the books. In other words: they tap into the same set of resources. They are all works of non-fiction. They are all mostly written for the American market. They were all published within five years from one another. The authors belong to the same school of thought. So it follows quite naturally that these books can be said to belong to the same genre, perhaps even constitute one, alongside similar works of fellow New Atheists.

Future research could aim to be even more exhaustive than this thesis, as these books are extraordinarily dense with claims and statements, every single one of which could be true or false. A more in-depth analysis could be made of the intended target audience, both in terms of the theism-atheism divide and concerning geography. This could help in determining not only to what extent certain extra-argumentative intrusions are understandable, but also whether the established balance between argumentation and ridicule is really as detrimental to the cause of these books as is claimed here. While the present thesis is not entirely unbased, given its limited space, a more intuition-based reflection was deemed appropriate. This does not of course make a further inquiry into the matter at all superfluous. Of course, I have largely limited myself to context, use of authority and argumentation. Other approaches, such as purely philosophical ones, ones departing from theology, religious studies or any other relevant branch of science could shed new light on the matter. And of course, anyone is invited to question my standards of methodological agnosticism. My purpose has never been to fortify my own beliefs, but if they have unduly influenced my research and interpretations, criticism is more than welcome.
WORKS CITED


Atheism in the Age of the Enlightenment. 6 March 2010 <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Atheism_in_the_Age_of_the_Enlightenment>.


Craig, William Lane. The Things That Matter Most Rick Davis and Lael Arrington. 10 June 07.


Dennett, Daniel C. Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon. 2006.


Pius IX, Pope. Ineffabilis Deus. Vatican City, 8 December 1854.


Shermer, Michael. “"God's number is up".” Scientific American July 2004.


St. John's College. Master and Fellows of St John's College. 14 June 2010 <http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/contact/fellows/>.


Tate, J. “Greek for 'Atheism'.” The Classical Review February 1936: 3-5.


Wikimedia. “Replacement of "creationism" with "intelligent design".” Wikimedia. 8 March 2010 <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/16/Pandas_text_analysis.png>.


Yale University. Department of Psychology. 14 June 2010 <http://www.yale.edu/psychology/FacInfo/Bloom.html>.