



Richard Dawkins is one of the New Atheists who are fulfilling the traditional role of prophets.

longer ignore scriptural passages – from Genesis to Revelation – that portray God as brutal, cruel, vindictive and genocidal.

Since that summer in Colorado, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens have all produced best-selling, controversial books, and I have read them all. It took several years for my initial discomfort to grow into gratitude for the New Atheists, as I had to make a huge shift in my thinking.

All religions offer maps of what's real, what's important, and practices to help adherents come into right relationship with reality. Of course, how reality impinges on the human adventure (and vice versa) today is radically different from how it showed up for our ancestors hundreds and thousands of years ago. Yes, there are still terrifying floods and storms, but now individual actions amplified by sheer numbers and technological prowess have ramped up the power of elemental forces, leaving multitudes even more vulnerable than in days of yore.

And there are altogether new catastrophes on the horizon: the spectre of cascading financial and economic chaos; the possibility that human rage festering in a small group of people anywhere in the world might access weapons of mass destruction; or the storm of information meltdown if solar upheaval, space trash or our own psychotic tendencies wreak havoc with satellite communications.

What this means is that the wisdom of antiquity – in all its forms and drawn from all regions of the world – could not possibly be up to the task of serving us now. Ancient, unchanged scriptural stories and doctrinal declarations are inadequate guidance for modern challenges. To restrict the real-world relevance of our religious traditions to what could be known and communicated millennia ago makes no more sense than consulting a first-century text on dental care when you need a root canal.

In a way, the New Atheists have come

Thank God for the New Atheists

BY THE REVEREND MICHAEL DOWD

Religious people of all backgrounds and orientations need to heed what atheists such as Richard Dawkins are saying if they want their beliefs to remain relevant to modern society.

Since April 2002, my wife and I have lived entirely on the road. We've addressed more than 1000 groups across North America, teaching and preaching the epic of evolution as our common creation story. Last year, on the day I learned I had cancer, I pondered: "If I have only one message left to communicate, what would it be?" The answer was: "Show Christians how the New Atheists are God's prophets". One year

later, with cancer in remission, this is still my core message.

My first encounter with the New Atheists came in the summer of 2004. A man who had heard me speak in Colorado Springs gave me a cassette tape by Michael Earl. Listening to *Bible Stories Your Parents Never Taught You* was a painful experience. I did not want to hear what Earl was saying, yet I couldn't deny the truth of his commentary. I could not

to our rescue. They are shouting at us to collectively awaken to the dangers of revering texts and doctrines on no sounder basis than tradition and authority. Because the New Atheists put their faith, their confidence, in an evidentially formed and continuously tested view of the world, these critics of religion are well positioned to see what's real and what's important today. It is thus time for religious people to listen to the New Atheists – and to listen as if they were speaking with God's voice because in my view they are!

Darwin didn't kill God. To the contrary, he and Alfred Russel Wallace offered the first glimpse of the real Creator behind and beyond the world's myriad mythic portrayals of the divine.

Joseph Campbell, Huston Smith, Paul Tillich, Rudolf Bultmann and other 20th century scholars of mythology and world religions remind us that we cannot understand religion and religious differences if we don't understand how the human mind instinctually personifies reality. Recall the movie *Cast Away* with Tom Hanks, in which the personified soccer ball, Wilson, was the only thing that kept Hanks' isolated character relatively sane.

Evidence from a wide range of disciplines, from cognitive neuroscience to anthropology to cross-cultural studies of the world's myths and religions, all support the claim that God is a personification, not a person, and that we instinctually forget this. Furthermore, there is no counter-evidence. This fact alone makes sense of the hundreds of competing stories around the world as to what God supposedly said or did.

"God" is a mythical name for Reality in all its sublime fullness. Any so-called God that is imagined as less than this is unworthy of our devotion and deserves to be mocked, as the New Atheists so readily do.

Poseidon was not the god of the oceans, as if some supernatural entity separate from water was looking down

from on high or rising from the deep. Poseidon was the personification of the incomprehensibly powerful and capricious seas!

Sol was not the spirit of the sun, as if there were a separation between the two. Sol was a sacred name for that seemingly eternal, life-giving source of heat and light, and occasionally a life-taking source in times of desperate drought. By saying "Sol," "Helios" or some other proper name, our ancestors experienced that reality as a "Thou" to be related to.

Today most of us have a starkly different subjective experience. We look up and say "the sun" and think of "it" in a depersonalised way: not as the God "Helios" but as the generator of elemental helium through stellar nucleosynthesis.

Whenever any story or any scriptural passage claims that "God said this" or "God did that", what follows is always an interpretation of what some person or group of people thought or felt or sensed or wished Reality was saying or doing, and almost always as justification after the fact or to make a theological point. Such subjectively meaningful claims are never objective, measurable truth.

In other words, had CNN or ABC News been there to record the moment of "divine revelation" there would have been nothing miraculous to report on the evening news – nothing other than what was coming out of someone's mouth, or pen, or whatever folks wrote with back then. If we fail to grasp this, not only will we trivialise the divine but, more tragically still, we will miss what Reality, or God, is up to today.

From supernovas to plate tectonics to brain scans, science has given us belief-busting revelations about how we got here and why we are the way we are. Ours is a time of space telescopes, electron microscopes, supercomputers and the internet. It is also a time of smart bombs, collapsing economies and exploding oil platforms. This is not a time for parsing

the lessons given to a few goatherds, tent-makers and camel drivers.

We must take seriously scientists' prophetic warnings about issues such as climate change and the overall health of our world and life on Earth. Like everything else under the sun, religions will either evolve or go extinct. "Getting right with God" means coming into right relationship with our planet and all its gloriously diverse species and cultures.

By speaking boldly on behalf about the nature of reality, and in condemning superstitious, otherworldly religiosity, the New Atheists are, paradoxically, fulfilling the traditional role of prophets. Historically, religious prophets were those on the leading edge – those who issued a warning that typically went something like: "Align with reality or perish".

In this way the prophets facilitate cultural evolution. To use religious language, they do God's work.

My central point is that few things are more important at this time in history than for religious people of all backgrounds and orientations to heed what the New Atheists are saying. I thank God for the New Atheists not because I want everyone to be like them or think like them, or because I consider them perfect vessels of divine wisdom. Rather, I am grateful because of how they are prodding religion and humanity to mature, and because of how they are goading religious people (like me) to get real about God.

I foresee a time when religious leaders get their guidance and inspiration from humanity's common creation story and teach and preach the discoveries of science as God's word. When that day comes, our faith traditions will thrive and many of us will look back and exclaim: "Thank God for the New Atheists!"

Rev. Michael Dowd is the author of *Thank God for Evolution: How the Marriage of Science and Religion Will Transform Your Life and Our World* (2009, Plume), which has been endorsed by six Nobel Prize-winning scientists and other science luminaries, as well as religious leaders across the spectrum. See <http://ThankGodforEvolution.com>