For those of you who are not familiar with Dr. Andy Bannister, you should be. Whether you’re an atheist or Christian or anything else, his wit and sense of humour alone are worth the banter—even if you don’t come to agree with his intensely straightforward logical reasoning and sharp comedic jabs to lighten the mood. I’ve seen him debate live as well as give lectures, all of which have been tremendously lively, enjoyable, educational and challenging—all the while retaining his own peculiar style of British quip and quirkiness. I’d say that reading this book feels like apologetics written in the style of Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy.

This article will briefly review his book (which I got personally signed... fanboy squeal!), The Atheist Who Didn’t Exist or it’s alternative title: The Dreadful Consequences of Bad Arguments. If that title and subtitle doesn’t give it away, this book is filled with light-hearted and hilarious one-liners mixed in between solidly researched and well thought out apologetic arguments. It’s one of the only books where I’ll highly recommend to the people that the footnotes are a must read! (Much of his quips and one liners are stuck in the footnotes—so don’t miss them.) Here’s an example of the not-so-hidden gems in the footnotes: “I have often travelled to the Nordic countries and being blond-haired and blue-eyed am sometimes mistaken for a Swede. At least when sitting down. Once I stand up and my full height of five foot eight is revealed, the illusion is quickly dispelled. Then I announce that I’m a Bonsai Viking.” (p.31) In addition to his wit and humour, brownie points must be given to Dr. Bannister for his apt usage of delightful vocabulary such as “apoplectic anger” as early in as page 16, which is sure to give even the staunchest sesquipedalian reader...

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joyful warm fuzzies. Dr. Bannister probably also has a well worn out thesaurus as he seems to love alliterations—some of which are impressive and rightly deserve ample kudos thrown in his general direction.

A little bit more about Dr. Bannister from RZIM’s website:

"Dr. Andy Bannister is the Director and Lead Apologist for RZIM Canada. He speaks and teaches regularly throughout Canada, the US, Europe, and the wider world. From churches to universities, business forums to TV and radio, Andy regularly addresses both Christian audiences and those of all faiths and none on issues relating to faith, culture, politics, and society. With a background in youth ministry before studying theology and philosophy (focusing especially on Islam), Andy was previously based in Oxford, where he worked with churches and organizations across the denominational spectrum. Andy holds a PhD in Islamic studies, a topic on which he has taught extensively. He has spoken and taught at universities across Canada, the US, the UK, and farther afield on both Islam and philosophy and is an Adjunct Research Fellow at the Centre for the Study of Islam and Other Faiths at Melbourne School of Theology."

About the book

Throughout the book Dr. Bannister focuses on dismantling many of the commonly posited bad arguments by the New Atheists against Christianity and religion or God in general. He states, “The failure of God to roll over and die on cue has led to the denial, disappointment, and anger that can be seen underpinning much of today’s more popular form of atheism.” (p. 16) For those unfamiliar with it, the band of so-called New Atheists, of whom the likes of Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens seem to form a sort of four horsemen of atheism, are a modern uprising of a form of atheism which is growingly antagonistic and sometimes even hostile to religion and Christianity in general. Their rhetoric is often sharp, hyperbolic and pointed at rustling conservative feathers or amassing more liberal followers in their emotionally charged tweetable statements. However, for all the fanfare and hype which follows these New Atheist bloggers, authors and leaders—much of their arguments by sound bite (p. 21) fall flat under more thoughtful and critical analysis. However, it would seem that the popular culture these days remains blissfully ambiguous to its shortcomings. In our first-world postmodern culture, many of the younger generation of teenagers to young working professionals have gladly embraced this New Atheist mentality, seeing it as offering freedom from the perceived antiquated restraints of oppressive and backward primitive religions which our modern society has outgrown.

1 http://rzim.org/bio/andy-bannister
Dr. Bannister’s book provides a witty response to these arguments which are often just accepted as truisms and breaks them down in a way that is disarming to the critical sceptic but also easy to follow and enjoyable to read. He starts off most of the chapters with a humorous (and I think fictitious – though who knows really?) illustration from his own life that introduces the chapter’s main focus. Some examples of what to expect are best illustrated in their titles which include: The Loch Ness Monster’s Moushtache, Humpty Dumpty and the Vegan, The Peculiar Case of the Postmodern Penguin and The Panini Poisoner of Pimlico. After his introductory comical story, he follows up by skillfully tracking through the logical consequences of the bad argument, he shows the inconsistency of the worldview, its inadequacy to explain and the better offer of the Christian worldview in addressing these issues.

Addressing the issues

One such argument he addresses early on is that which has become a popular slogan propagated by Richard Dawkins and his book The God Delusion (to which Alister McGrath’s book The Dawkins Delusion is a great response) that says, “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.” It’s been plastered on the side of buses in London and other parts of the globe and tweeted worldwide. Francis Spufford said, “The only things in the world that are designed to elicit enjoyment and only enjoyment are products, and your life is not a product...” (quoted on p. 19) Bannister continues,

“if the atheist bus slogan is right and there is no God, there’s nobody out there who is ultimately going to help with any pulling. You’re alone in a universe that cares as little about you (and your enjoyment) as it does about the fate of the amoeba... Life favours the winners; some get the breaks, and others get the sticky end of the stick. Still others make millions selling books on atheism, enough for a lifetime of lattes. Enjoy your life? Nice work if you can get it.” (p. 20)

The bus slogan illustrates how dangerous it is when we try to reduce complex arguments to sound bites and lose nuance or depth. It’d be like saying that since Hitler, Stalin and Saddam Hussein had mustaches, then mustaches are evil! (p. 21) And although I’d love my Asian genetic incapability of facial hair growth to grant me automatic sainthood—I think it is clear how bad this line of logic (or lack thereof) is. Nietzsche said to reject God by all means, but then you will have to find new foundations for explaining why one particular creature, which is the product of blind forces of time and chance, should have particular inalienable rights whereas amoebae, cockroaches and eggplants do not (p. 39).
Bannister goes on to show how atheism really is a belief system: they attend conferences, groups, seminars, buy the latest books by their gurus, have creeds, accuse those who don’t believe with them of ‘heresy’ and even are starting ‘churches!’ (p. 43) But beyond being a belief system, it is ironically a ‘religion’ of sorts. Stephen Prothero from Boston University comments, “Atheism is a religion of sorts, or can be. Many atheists are quite religious, holding their views about God with the conviction of zealots and evangelizing with verve... It stands at the centre of their lives, defining who they are, how they think, and with whom they associate. The question of God is never far from their minds.” (quoted on p. 45) Everyone has faith (although many of the New Atheists want to mis-define what is meant by ‘faith’ as belief without evidence), being religious is a part of being human. Hitchens rightly said, “That which can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence.” (p. 46) This is so for many New Atheist assertions, and Bannister does a great job of pointing these out. “When one believes something deeply, passionately, energetically, one has a tendency simply to grab hold of any arguments that appear to support you, however desperate.” (p. 80)

The heart of the matter

The truth of the matter though is that many who lead the New Atheist movement have an agenda, though they will often be quick to try to point that out for religious leaders as well. However, as Bannister points out from atheists like Aldous Huxley and Thomas Nagel, their philosophy of meaninglessness was driven by a desire to escape a certain political and moral system. They object to morality because it interferes with their sexual freedom and objected to political and economic systems because they found it unjust (ironic seeing how hard it is to establish objective moral values and measurements of justice from a purely naturalistic framework). They deny the world had any meaning in order to confute those they opposed and justify themselves in their political and erotic revolt (from quote by Huxley on p. 90-91). Nagel’s quote is most revealing,

“I want atheism to be true and am made uneasy by the fact that some of the most intelligent and well-informed people I know are religious believers. It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.” (quoted on p. 91)

Such frank candor reveals the real heart of the issue behind much atheists, it is a heart which is in willful rebellion to even the thought of God. It is a presupposition and framework which is hostile to the implications of Christian theism. What is interesting is that this is exactly the framework which the Bible reveals to us about unbelievers who suppress the truth in unrighteousness (Romans 1) or are set at enmity with God (Rom. 8:7;
5:10, Col. 1:21; Eph. 2:1-3, 4:18). It is thus this presupposition and disposition which we must address with unbelievers—something which Bannister does well. Even though he may not overtly be classified as a ‘presuppositional apologist’ to the likes of a Van Til or Bahnsen, he does point out the failures of such a worldview which presupposes much of what it asserts as true. So, though I myself lean more towards a presuppositional rather than evidential approach to Christian apologetics, I find Dr. Bannister’s approach very appealing and consistent with a reformed approach to apologetics.

We cannot approach God on our own terms if He really is the God of the Bible, not the concocted ‘big guy upstairs’ which many seem to believe in. As Bonhoeffer pointed out, if we determine where to find God ourselves, we will always find a god that corresponds to ourselves in some way and obliges with us (p.94-95). But at the heart of Christianity is not an idea we have invented, projected, created or even that we choose God as a god in our own making which looks suspiciously like us. Bannister comments, “Instead, if God is really real, then we have to approach him on his own terms. I’ve sometimes wondered, when push comes to shoving religion off the cliff, if this is the chief problem with God for some atheists: he simply refuses to be domesticated.” (p. 95) If Christianity is true, God offers us transforming forgiveness, joy and everlasting peace at the cost of our own autonomy and pride—but this is the great struggle for those who want to cling so desperately to their own rebellion.

Knocking down truisms and false clichéd statements

Bannister also tackles some of the oft cited ‘statistics’ that New Atheists like to quote and tweet such as that religions have been the cause of more wars and violence in history. Though it is true that some religions have caused some wars and violence, is this actually true as a blanket statement? The Encyclopedia of Wars documents in massive volumes some 1,763 wars over the course of history and only 123 are categorized as “religious”—which amounts to less than 7% in over 10,000 years of history! (cited on p. 106) Tackling moral relativity, Bannister recounts how he deals with those who sincerely believe that we subjectively decide what is good and bad. He simply leans over an steals something from them and waits for them to protest, responding, “But I thought you said ‘good’ and ‘evil’ were just questions of personal preference. Well, my preference is that I’m smitten with your mittens.” (p. 148) Dr. Bannister also tackles the myth of progress pointed to by New Atheists, that society has been progressing since shaking off the antiquated shackles of religion. But progress implies a direction, a purpose to which we are getting closer. “So then, to where is society morally progressing: what’s the destination? How will we know we’ve arrived: will there be a sign and a teashop? If not, then what’s the Magical Moral Standard enabling us to look at our culture today and say this is better than it was back then,
if society itself determines what "good" means?" (p. 150) The only solution to all of this is if there is a transcendent source of goodness that is bigger than, above and beyond us.

Probably one of Bannister’s most pointed points of pontification he produces prolifically in prose primarily perpetrated poignantly is that of the problem of purposelessness posed to atheism. Kind of like my unnecessary use of alliteration in the previous sentence. Many atheists have acknowledged this, such as Bertrand Russell who called the foundation as that of unyielding despair—put that on a coffee cup! Viktor Frankl commented,

“For too long we have been dreaming a dream from which we are now waking up: the dream that if we just improve the socioeconomic situation of people, everything will be okay, people will become happy. The truth is that as the struggle for survival has subsided, the question has emerged: survival for what? Ever more people today have the means to live, but no meaning to live for.” (quoted on p. 182)

When taken to its logical end, atheism offers no real hope—especially for those born into oppressive or underprivileged circumstances. Survival of the fittest offers no comfort, only blind pitiless indifference to those whom nature has not seen it fit to grace with the means of survival. However, even for those who have benefitted from the cosmic roll of the dice, what greater purpose beyond the hedonism of this life can there be offered? What if the pleasures of this world cannot ultimately satisfy the deepest desires of the soul which supposedly doesn’t exist if all we have is the natural? Why do we yearn for more? What if those yearnings are supposed to point somewhere, to something transcendent? This was CS Lewis’ argument in Mere Christianity that, “if I find in myself desires which nothing in this world can satisfy, the only logical explanation is that I was made for another world.” However, if atheism is true, there is no meaning to which those desires connect. But even more disheartening is that by merely having them at all makes us fundamentally irrational, poor, mad and deluded creatures since we seek for something to satisfy desires which cannot be found in the natural world (p. 185).

Concluding thoughts

Dr. Bannister’s book does a great job at pointing out the failures of the presuppositions which people approach the question of God and religion. Often when someone proclames that they believe in reason not religion—that reason is King—what is actually meant is that they my reason is on the throne (p. 206). However, something which becomes very clear, especially from scripture, is that there is no neutral ground. We all live by faith and must put our trust in something—chapter 10 does a great job of outlining this fact. The last chapter (11), outlines the centrality of Jesus and the Cross in history. Jesus
and the Cross of Christ confront us, stopping us in our tracks of rebellion against what we may hope is not there—but it forces us to a decision in one way or the other. Bannister leaves the question poignantly at the end of his book, “Deep down, I have a hunch that we all know, really, that the deceits we need worry most about are not those allegedly littering the pages of history or even theology, but the lies – the softly spoken, intricately woven half truths – we tell ourselves about ourselves.” (p. 232)

I cannot recommend this book highly enough! I obviously have not fully represented Dr. Bannister’s arguments here, since I’d like to leave some reason for you to buy the book! But, I hopefully have titillated your curiosity enough to seek further inquiry. Whether you’re an agnostic, atheist, Christian or other religion, I think all will find it very thought provoking, interesting and enjoyable read which may just poke you in some sore spots in a much needed way. This is a great introductory book to apologetics if you’ve never really delved into the topic before, or for even the seasoned apologist it would make a great addition to your library! Dr. Bannister has obviously put a lot of thought and research into this book, and it is very well written, a delight to read, fresh and much needed for our time!

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