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12 September 2018 | by [John Cornwell \(/author/324/john-cornwell\)](#)

The New Theism

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Richard Dawkins

Science and religion

Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett: they called themselves the Four Horsemen of Atheism. Staunch allies against God, they proclaimed themselves champions of Reason and Science. A common denominator was the slogan “religion poisons everything.”

The so-called New Atheism movement began in 2004 with the publication of *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* by Sam Harris, an American neuroscientist and it culminated in 2007 with the late Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great*. In between came *The God Delusion* by evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins and *Breaking the Spell* by the philosopher Daniel Dennett. A decade on from the high point of the Four Horsemen’s fame and notoriety, it is an apt point to review the long-term impact of the New Atheism.

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A profound weakness on the part of all four was immediately evident. Three at least of the Horsemen could speak with confidence on science, but all were astonishingly ignorant about their perceived target – theology. As Terry Eagleton wrote in a scalding review in the *London Review of Books*, from which Dawkins never quite recovered: “Imagine someone holding forth on biology whose only knowledge of the subject is the *Book of British Birds*, and you have a rough idea of what it feels like to read Richard Dawkins on theology.”

Another glaring weakness was a lack of rigorous historical analysis of the roots of violence. They signally failed to take into account the social and political components of instances of alleged “religious” violence.

Their arguments were mainly based on the power of scientific reductionism: the idea that science explains everything. The Horsemen were radical reductionists, a standpoint shared with many eminent fellow scientists, including the late Stephen Hawking, whose *A Brief History of Time*, published in 1988, sold an astonishing 10 million copies.

Hawking described the physicists’ quest for a theory of everything, a single equation that would explain the origins of the universe. He did not argue for atheism but concluded the book with the ironic quip that the discovery of the final explanatory equation would enable us “to see into the mind of God”.

Procedural reductionism in science seeks to understand phenomena by examining their smallest component parts and operations. It has served science and technology triumphantly well since the beginning of the nineteenth century. But radical reductionism is a generalised philosophy that reduces all explanations to deterministic, immutable properties of matter-energy. The philosopher of science Mary Midgley calls it “Reductive Megalomania”.

Radical reductionism of a kind preached by T.H. Huxley in the nineteenth century never managed to dominate in the twentieth. Over the course of the past half-century, and despite the Four Horsemen, Reductionist Megalomania has been in retreat. Discoveries of new phenomena at successive levels in matter, living organisms and mind-brain relationships have led instead to a dynamic, emergent, relational view of nature. There is a new emphasis on holism (reductionism’s opposite); an appreciation of nature’s complex combinations of structure and openness, law and chance, order and chaos, determinism and probabilities.

Taking soundings over the past decade across the high seas of science and the philosophy of science, there have been significant signs of increasingly open approaches to what science can tell us, and cannot tell us. An important moment occurred in 2002, when, after his reading of the mathematician Kurt Gödel's Incompleteness Theorem, first formulated in 1930, Hawking conceded that the search for a reductionist theory of everything was in vain: "Some people will be very disappointed if there is not an ultimate theory that can be formulated as a finite number of principles. I used to belong to that camp, but I have changed my mind. I'm now glad that our search for understanding will never come to an end, and that we will always have the challenge of new discovery. Without it, we would stagnate." Gödel had shown, as Hawking put it: "We are not angels, who view the universe from outside. Instead, we and our models are both part of the universe we are describing."

Another important moment came in 2011 when Martin Rees, the Astronomer Royal and former president of the Royal Society, accepted the Templeton Award for religion and science.

In his 2003 book *Our Cosmic Habitat* Rees wrote: "The pre-eminent mystery is why anything should exist at all. What breathes life into the equations of physics, and actualises them in a real cosmos? Such questions lie beyond science, however: they are the province of philosophers and theologians."

Refusal to accept radical reductionism hardly proves the existence of God, nor alone offers a defence of religion. Yet, openness to speculative theories about Life and the Universe have helped to revive interest in the ideas of Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, the French Jesuit and palaeontologist, who developed a theory that runs counter to the extreme Darwinian view that evolution demonstrates an absence of purpose in nature.

Two notable, well-received books, Denis Noble's *The Music of Life* and John Hands' *Cosmosapiens*, offer holistic alternatives to Dawkins' influential "selfish gene" reductionism. Noble, describing the many levels and dimensions of purpose in nature, argues that far from genes being the purpose of organisms, they should be seen as the prisoners of the organism. John Hands writes of "psychic energy" in life and nature, echoing the purposeful "conscious" universe that Teilhard had proposed.

More sober, yet powerful in their soundly-based scientific and philosophical discussion, are the two scientists and a philosopher who have jointly written, *It Keeps Me Seeking*, published by Oxford University Press this week.

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Andrew Briggs, Andrew Steane and Hans Halvorson make for a suitable Triumvirate to outpace the Four Horsemen. Briggs is a professor of nanomaterials, Steane a professor of physics, both at Oxford; Halvorson is a professor of the philosophy of science at Princeton. Their book deserves attention for the comprehensive nature of its thoughts on science and religion, the account it gives of their three-way discussions, and the inclusion of personal, confessional passages.

The triumvirate's purpose is not apologetics, nor do they deal with the New Atheism head on. They state, more in sorrow than in anger, that it is an injustice to assume that those who acknowledge God are "compromised in intellect". From the outset, they insist on their distance from radical reductionism: "Science is about how to discover the structure of the physical world of which we are a part, not a means to reduce ourselves and our fellow human beings to mere objects of scrutiny." Human beings, they write, "have permission" to approach God as someone to be known, not someone to be proved, adding that "when we approach God, it is with the whole of our personhood".

Their approach to God is Christ-centred, but in discussions of the Godhead they tend to the apophatic, while reflecting on the way in which the mysteries of science provide metaphorical reflections. Quantum physics, for example, reveals a trinitarian sense of phenomena of distinctness within inseparability. And yet, their preference is for metaphors that reflect loving relationships between human beings.

The three co-authors present, as scientists and as theologians, arguments that have often been deployed to support a theistic position: the existence of the "fine-tuned" universe, Intelligent Design and other "God of the Gaps" arguments. They gently knock them down, one by one. Quoting the late Charles Coulson, the theoretical chemist, they write: "When we come to the scientifically unknown, our correct policy is not to rejoice because we have found God, it is to become better scientists."

While endorsing Darwinian evolution, they combat the view that evolution is a source for philosophical questions. Their position on morality is close to that of the analytic philosophy of the late Elizabeth Anscombe, and they cite Gerard Manley Hopkins in poetic support. Justice, they say, is not "abstract answers to abstract questions" – something going on in one's head – but what one does.

Working through the traditional debates of science and religion, they come to focus on miracles, and the greatest miracle of all, the Resurrection. Given their Christo-centric treatment of God, it is no surprise that they are influenced by Tom Wright, the scripture scholar. Hence they do not dodge the central place of faith – but a faith ^{Top}

backed by history up to a point. Their central shared image is of the natural world, the world to be discovered by science, as a house. It is a house with windows, and we are invited to throw open those windows. Faith is a crucial dimension of the decision to look out beyond the house.

Beautifully written, with careful use of language, and an evidently sure grasp of theology as well as their chosen academic disciplines, *It Keeps Me Seeking* marks a powerful, readable, and informed response to the Four Horsemen, a decade on.

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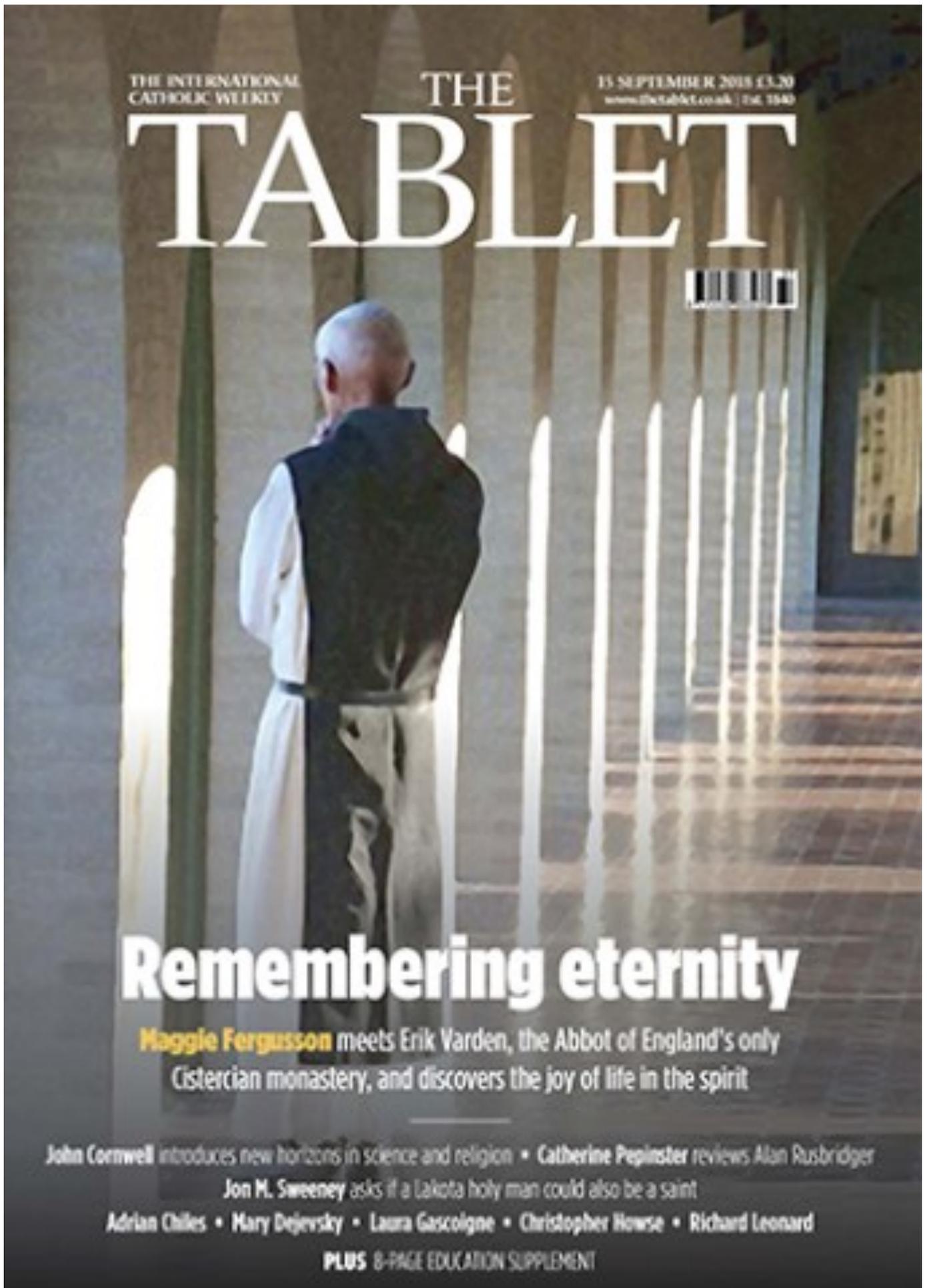


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