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It wasn't so long ago that most people thought the day of religion was just about over--that modern advancements in science and technology would push it into the same pile of obsolescence as astrology, fortune-telling, and other superstition.

We were wrong. The proportion of Americans describing themselves as evangelical has (by one study<sup>1</sup>) increased by one third since 1976. Worldwide, there are about 75% more Christians than there were in 1970.<sup>2</sup> Islam and other religions are also growing, and it goes without saying that religion's influence on world events is huge.

Three authors have recently called for a quick and complete end to this--all of it. Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris are not just your ordinary live-and-let-live agnostics. Dawkins says that, contrary to complaints about some church scandals, the "real child abuse" is to teach religion to your children.<sup>3</sup> His book *The God Delusion* has been on the New York Times Bestseller List for 6 weeks. Harris's stridently atheistic *Letter to a Christian Nation* has been on the list 5 weeks, and Dennett's book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* showed up briefly on the list last February.

Dawkins and Harris say that all religion is evil --the "Root of All Evil," according to the title of Dawkins's British TV miniseries this year.<sup>4</sup> Dennett is perhaps a bit friendlier about it--he simply says that all religion is just so much nonsense.

With influential works like these on the landscape, it may be that Christians are heading into a challenge such as we have never faced in the West. The really significant confrontation today is not in surface matters, such as the name "Christmas" being pushed out of the "holiday season" (though this certainly indicates a direction our culture is taking). The major challenge is in the realm of ideas--debates at the academic and intellectual level--which influence everything from our children's education to what shows up in the media and in entertainment. Christian university professors I've met have told of job-related perse-

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<sup>1</sup> Princeton Religion Research Report, <http://www.wheaton.edu/isac/Gallup-Bar-graph.html>

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.gordonconwell.edu/ockenga/globalchristianity/resources.php>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.richarddawkins.net/article,118,Religionrsquos-Real-Child-Abuse,Richard-Dawkins>

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/collective/A8221358>

cution: denial of tenure,<sup>5</sup> loss of research opportunities, muzzling of opinions, and other career difficulties. They are on the vanguard of the intellectual debate, and they experience the challenge firsthand.

I am not suggesting, as some have, that most Christians in America are facing serious persecution. It is possible, though, that we are entering into a new kind of world, such as we have not faced in this country before now—one in which Christian beliefs are actively and widely stigmatized. To some extent, in popular media, we have already entered this new world. These three books' success is one indication of that.

If that is the case, then what? If there is indeed any truth to our Christian beliefs, we can be sure that God is bigger than this. Even “fiery trials” should not surprise us, as though something strange were happening to us (1 Peter 4:12). In terms of our familiar experience, yes, this is a strange thing; but in light of God's work with the church throughout history, it is yet very mild. We can still “rejoice and be glad” at the way God's glory is revealed (1 Peter 4:13).

So we can maintain a buoyant hope and optimism no matter what happens. God can take the heat--and by His grace, so can we! Our concern need not be for the future of the Christian faith, but for the future of the people we love and care about.

For their sake, some of us need to enter the heart of the fray. A Christian professor recently wondered if she should leave her teaching position for something more ministry-related. I told her it seemed to me there's probably no more strategic position than the one she's in right now!

Many of the rest of us could probably stand to explore more, understand the challenges more, be more prepared to give an answer for the hope within us, with gentleness and respect (1 Peter 3:15-16).

We have sufficient answers. The one academic field that may seem most distant and arcane to many of us is philosophy. In fact, in the long run (over many years), philosophers seem to be the ones who drive the way the rest of the world thinks. Their influence, seemingly distant from people like you and me, is actually massive. And in this important field, unlike many others, Christians comprise one quarter to one third of the academic leadership.<sup>6</sup> In other fields, too, the Christian faith has always stood the test, and will continue to do so.

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<sup>5</sup> Several encounters at a conference of Christian university professors last June (<http://www.twotasks.com/>), where I personally heard from a number of professors who described challenges they were currently facing. I was asked not to identify any Christian professor on my blog except with their permission, because of the difficulties it could pose them in their departments to be so identified. See also news reports at:

<http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=2715>,  
<http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=3083>,  
<http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=2796>,  
<http://www.discovery.org/scripts/viewDB/index.php?command=view&id=2783>,  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis\\_J.\\_Beckwith](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Francis_J._Beckwith) with updated at  
[http://www.evolutionnews.org/2006/09/welcome\\_news\\_as\\_scholar\\_franci.html](http://www.evolutionnews.org/2006/09/welcome_news_as_scholar_franci.html)

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.philoonline.org/library/smith\\_4\\_2.htm](http://www.philoonline.org/library/smith_4_2.htm)