

New Atheism and the Politicization of Disbelief

Written by Marcus Schulzke

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MARCUS SCHULZKE, JUN 10 2014

The Politics of Religion

Religion has a paradoxical status in contemporary liberal democracies – a status that reflects a deep uncertainty about whether religion should be politicized and whether it can be politicized without undermining political inclusiveness. Religion is often treated as a private matter, both in the sense of being outside of politics and in the sense of being hidden from public view. Some governments are constitutionally barred from establishing a state religion. Others may have an official religion, but without coercing citizens to adhere to it or suppressing alternative religious traditions. In either case, most democracies strive to maintain a fairly neutral position on religious matters in the interest of tolerance and inclusiveness. The informal norms of liberal democratic societies tend to reflect the same desire for neutrality. Religious convictions are generally treated as personal matters that are not open to debate. It may be considered rude to even inquire into a person's religious views in casual settings because those views are regarded as being intensely personal.

However, a paradox emerges when one looks beyond governments' formal commitments to religious neutrality and the social norms that treat religion as a personal matter to see the myriad ways in which religion enters into political contention when it is linked to other issues. Although religion may appear to be a private matter, it becomes public and deeply political when it influences citizens' views on contentious issues like the legality of abortion, the inclusion of birth control in healthcare financing, gay rights, the teaching of evolution in public schools, global warming, and stem cell research. Debates over each of these issues, and many others, are heavily influenced by religious views, as religious doctrines and institutions provide guidance on how adherents should judge these political issues. The religious dimensions of political disputes become especially clear when the opposing sides that form in response to contentious issues roughly correspond to sectarian divisions or divisions between theists and secularists.

New atheism is, above all else, an attempt to politicize atheism in an effort to counter the influence of theism on issues of political significance (Schulzke 2013b, 2013a). New atheists seek to become involved in political debates that are shaped by religious beliefs to expose and contest the influence of faith. They are especially concerned with political contests that develop when religion conflicts with scientific consensus. This has led new atheists to become central figures in disputes such as whether evolution should be taught in American public schools and whether the British government should fund faith schools, among many others.

New atheism's political concerns often have a global character, which makes new atheism important for international relations. New atheists oppose the influence of faith on foreign policy decisions, they call attention to religion's influence on political violence, and they are outspoken critics of religiously motivated restrictions on civil liberties. At the same time, new atheists strive to demonstrate the superiority of political life based on secular values. They show that specific political crises, such as global warming or the spread of HIV/AIDS, can be more effectively managed if appeals to faith are omitted from policymaking and decisions are made based on scientific evidence. On a more fundamental level, new atheists challenge all vestiges of faith-based thinking. They seek to promote an alternative vision of political and social life, in which justification for policies is based on the kind of empirical study of the world that is epitomized by the natural sciences.

The label 'new' in 'new atheism' comes from the movement's effort to politicize atheism. New atheism defines itself

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against traditional atheism's perceived quietude and tacit acceptance of religion. Whereas traditional atheists may avoid publicly challenging religious doctrine or may think that religion and science can coexist without coming into conflict, new atheists think that religion and science are irreconcilable and that they are engaged in a zero-sum contest for influence over public policy. This helps to explain why new atheism is so controversial. It defines itself against, and is open to attacks from, not only theists, but also other atheists who think that atheism should remain depoliticized.

Challenging Faith

New atheism's prominence is largely due to the work of some of the movement's leading figures. Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Daniel Dennett, and Sam Harris are probably the most well-known and influential proponents of new atheism. The first three rose to prominence for their work in other areas, Dawkins as an evolutionary biologist, Hitchens as a journalist and political commentator, and Dennett as a philosopher. They gave shape to new atheism as their critiques of religion expanded beyond disciplinary concerns to become critiques of religion's influence on public life in general. New atheism also has a number of other influential proponents from various backgrounds including the physicist Victor Stenger, philosophers A.C. Grayling and Michel Onfray, and the former Christian preacher Dan Barker.

As a diverse movement that incorporates commentators from a range of perspectives, new atheism is difficult to characterize in absolute terms. Each of the major public intellectuals of new atheism advance their own distinctive arguments against religion in the language of their own fields of research. However, new atheists do share some unifying characteristics in addition to their desire to politicize atheism. The most important of these, from an international relations standpoint, are the rejection of faith as a guiding principle in political life and the methods that new atheists employ to contest the power of faith. The former pertains to new atheists' intellectual contribution, the latter to new atheists' strategies for contesting religion's political influence.

New atheists often frame their opposition to religion in terms of a science vs. faith binary, with science understood broadly as an effort to know the world using empirical methods and faith defined as "belief without evidence" (Dawkins 2006: 232). They maintain that belief should always be based on evidence, and that faith is inherently dangerous because it is not open to disconfirmation. New atheists' most striking examples of faith's destructiveness come from instances in which faith is used to promote or justify political violence. Harris' book *The End of Faith* devotes a great deal of attention to showing that faith inspires Islamic terrorism and that forms of secular faith color our judgments of international politics. Hitchens likewise sees faith as a harmful force, and argues that this is evident from the many places torn apart by religious conflict: "Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad," to name only those places beginning with the letter "B" (2007: 18). He goes on to provide a number of other examples of instances in which faith has had a high human cost. These include the continued practice of female genital mutilation as a religious ritual, the Catholic Church's opposition to condoms, and the Islamic opposition to the polio vaccine. Dawkins makes a similar point, as he argues that:

From Kosovo to Palestine, from Iraq to Sudan, from Ulster to the Indian sub-continent, look carefully at any region of the world where you find intractable enmity and violence between rival groups today. I cannot guarantee that you'll find religions as the dominant labels for in-group and out-groups. But it's a good bet. (Dawkins 2006: 294-295)

Faith therefore turns out to be a fundamentally destructive force because it can be used to motivate and excuse anything, regardless of the human costs.

When new atheists criticize faith, they not only intend to challenge the faith that serves as a rationale for religious extremism, but also faith in its more mundane forms. Even when it is not implicated in political violence, faith may nevertheless serve as the foundation for bad policies and as a rationale for exempting those policies from criticism. Stenger criticizes politicians' practice of shielding themselves and their decisions behind religious doctrines that most commentators are afraid to challenge. As he puts it, "By claiming divine authority, politicians are able to promote policies of dubious value that the public might otherwise find unacceptable" (Stenger 2007: 246). Stenger and other new atheists urge us to reject these appeals to faith and to not allow them to put any beliefs beyond contestation.

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Among new atheism's most radical claims is that religious moderates provide a cover for religious extremists by legitimizing faith and making it appear to be a justifiable alternative to rational deliberation based on empirical evidence. Moderates make religious faith appear to be an attractive, and even noble, attachment to higher ideals. In doing so, they perpetuate religious institutions and irrational ways of thinking that become the basis for religious extremism. As Dawkins says, "The teachings of 'moderate' religion, though not extremist in themselves, are an open invitation to extremism" because "religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others" (2006: 346). Similarly, Harris argues that "religious *moderates* are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the *context* in which scriptural *literalism* and religious violence *can never be adequately opposed*" (2005: 45). New atheists therefore seek to show that faith is not only harmful when it is expressed violently, but that it is fundamentally inimical to democratic politics.

Acting Politically

The other salient characteristic that unifies new atheism's diverse array of proponents is their method of politicizing atheism. New atheists are often criticized for being aggressive, dogmatic, and intolerant because of their outspokenness (Wilde 2010; Kitcher 2011). However, as I have argued elsewhere, these criticisms are largely undeserved (Schulzke 2013b). New atheists generally display a very strong commitment to contesting religion in ways that are consistent with liberal democratic values. Because new atheists think that reason and evidence, rather than faith, should guide our decisions, most of their efforts to persuade audiences of the dangers of religious faith take the form of rational appeals to reject religion because of theological contradictions and the pervasiveness of religious violence.

Each of the leading figures in the new atheist movement has published one or more best-selling books on atheism, in addition to many articles on atheism, religion, and the destructiveness of faith. These attempt to convince readers of the merits of atheism by calling attention to the inconsistencies of religious doctrines and offering case studies of the harmful influence of faith. Many new atheists have also produced or starred in documentaries about religion and its societal costs. Dawkins' documentaries, *The Root of All Evil?*, *The Enemies of Reason*, and *Faith School Menace?*, are prime examples of these. Finally, new atheists have participated in many debates with influential theologians, political leaders, and public intellectuals. Among new atheists' opponents in their hundreds of debate appearances were Tony Blair, John Lennox, Alister McGrath, Rick Warren, Chris Hedges, Dinesh D'Souza, and Al Sharpton. By debating these opponents, new atheists have shown a willingness to take on some of the most competent defenders of religion and to do so in ways that are widely accessible to audiences.

Despite the prominence of the public intellectuals who are usually identified as new atheism's leaders, new atheism is an open movement that is sustained by an international network of activists operating independently or as part of formal organizations. Steven Kettell says of new atheism that, "its proponents are organisationally arranged in a loosely connected, non-hierarchical and decentralised fashion, with no formal representative body... and frequently operate within the existing nexus of groups set up to promote broader nonreligious causes and ideals" (2013: 67). These activists employ many different nonviolent strategies for challenging religion. They post anti-religious advertisements in public places, organize protests and counter-protests, and are involved in campaigns to resist the influence of religious interest groups on public policy decisions. These efforts are evidence that new atheism is not solely an elite phenomenon, but rather a transnational effort that relies on activists at multiple levels.

The strategies employed by new atheism's public intellectuals and by activists operating independently or as part of new atheist organizations reflect a strong commitment to challenging religion's influence within the confines of democratic political institutions. Most of these strategies are efforts to persuade audiences of religion's harmfulness through reasoned arguments that draw heavily on scientific research. It is, after all, reason and belief based on evidence that new atheists think should prevail over faith. The frequent debates in which new atheists and supporters of religion appear together are particularly important for setting the tone for new atheists' activism. By engaging in ardent yet restrained dialogue over sensitive topics, new atheists and their opponents set a high standard for reasonable public discourse. The new atheist movement therefore serves as an example of how a transnational social movement can take on extremely controversial issues without compromising its own values or the values of the democratic political institutions.

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Conclusion

As this brief overview has shown, new atheism is an important phenomenon for the study of politics and for international relations in particular. New atheism represents an unprecedented effort to challenge the political influence of religion and to politicize atheism. It is an effort to recognize the inevitable political character of religious belief while also attempting to secularize politics by demonstrating faith's irrationality. New atheists' insistence that faith is responsible for a broad range of domestic and international political problems, especially those relating to violence and the oppression of marginalized groups, provides a theory that accounts for the costs of religion's influence on politics. Moreover, new atheism offers a case study of how an international social movement can sustain a unified core message while also adapting to speak directly to local political disputes that are affected by religion. This social movement likewise illustrates how activists can take on extremely contentious issues that are of fundamental importance to contemporary political life, such as the value of faith and the place of religion in public life, without acting in ways that conflict with democratic values.

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