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New Atheism: The Politics of Unbelief

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STEVEN KETTELL, JUN 18 2014

Since the middle of the previous decade, the dramatic and high-profile rise to prominence of the 'new atheism' has kept issues of religion at the forefront of public debate. Popularly associated with a group of best-selling authors (typically Harris, 2004; Dennett, 2006; Dawkins, 2006; and Hitchens, 2007), new atheism mounts an open and direct challenge to religious belief, aiming instead to promote the virtues of reason, rationality, and science.

In this, new atheism represents a self-conscious, distinctly activist, and avowedly political phenomena. Yet this political dimension of new atheism has been overlooked by scholars (see, for exceptions, Kettell, 2013; McAnulla, 2012; and Schulzke, 2013). This brief article provides an overview of this gap in our intellectual understanding by outlining some of the key themes around the politics of new atheism in terms of its organisational structure, objectives, and strategies.

The rise of new atheism

Somewhat ironically (and not unlike Fred Hoyle's pejorative use of the phrase 'Big Bang'), the term 'new atheism' was initially coined by its critics (beginning with Wolf, 2006) as a means of attempting to delegitimise and undermine atheist arguments. Questions about the true novelty of new atheism remain contentious (it is never satisfactorily explained what, exactly, is 'new' about it, nor what 'old atheism' is supposed to have been), but at its core lies an enthusiastic willingness to be openly and assertively critical of religious beliefs and doctrines. For new atheism, religion is understood in a propositional sense; as making testable truth claims about the nature of the world that, from a scientific viewpoint, are found sorely wanting. Religious claims, necessarily based on subjective impressions, allegedly 'revealed' authority and scriptural dogma, are not only considered to be false, but are also thought to be irrational and dangerous, fomenting exclusionary and divisive in-group mentalities leading to prejudice, discrimination, harm, and violence.

New atheism therefore adopts a critical posture towards *all* forms of religion, including its ostensibly 'moderate' as well as its 'fundamentalist' varieties. This typically sets it apart from other atheist, secular, and humanist (ASH) approaches, many of which have a more accommodating attitude to religion and argue that the confrontational approach taken by new atheism is divisive, polarising, and ultimately counterproductive (e.g. Stedman, 2011). Proponents of new atheism, on the other hand, assert that a confrontational approach remains necessary as a means of attracting attention and promoting social change. As Lee (2012) puts it: 'No broad social movement has ever achieved its objectives by sitting back and waiting for everyone else to come around'.

Identifying who the new atheists are with any sort of precision, however, is often a difficult task. Research into atheism is generally limited (Lee and Bullivant, 2010), and studies of atheist values and opinions have not (yet) sought to identify any particular sub-set of atheists as being specifically 'new atheist'. Indeed, while research indicates that atheists (at least in the U.S.) tend to share some common demographic features – they are more likely to be male, younger, single, to have higher than average levels of income and education, and to subscribe to progressive, liberal values and campaigns than people identifying as 'religious' (Hunsberger and Altmeyer, 2006) – they are also likely to subscribe to a number of identity markers, such as 'humanist', 'freethinker', 'skeptic', 'secularist', and so on, at any one time.

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The organisational structure of new atheism is similarly pluralistic, with no predominant group and with no formal leadership or tangible set of governing arrangements. New atheists operate within a disparate number of groups set up to promote a range of ASH ideas and causes (such as the American Humanist Association, American Atheists, the Council for Secular Humanism, and so on), and while much of their activities remain geographically centred on Britain and the United States (and especially on the latter), there are signs of its popularity growing in other countries as well (e.g. Zenk, 2012). Another key feature of new atheism's organisational dynamic is its decentralised, on-line character. Many of the most important activities, groups, spokespeople, and opinion formers involved in new atheism operate predominantly (if not entirely) on the internet, including websites such as Project Reason, the Richard Dawkins Foundation, and Atheist Nexus, and blogs such as Pharangyula (penned by PZ Myers), Butterflies and Wheels (by Ophelia Benson), and Why Evolution is True (by Jerry Coyne).

The emergence of new atheism has been underpinned by a variety of causal factors. Key themes here include the growing political influence of religion (in areas such as education, health, and welfare provision), the dangers of religious beliefs (the most high-profile example of which remains the 9/11 terrorist attacks), and transformations in mass communication (the principal factor here being the rise of the Internet, which has provided a means by which curious or sympathetic individuals can get together and share ideas freely) (Cimino and Smith, 2011).

Another important factor has been the salience and use of identity politics. This emphasises the culture and values of discrete social groups, and denotes a shift to the micro-politics of the personal realm with a greater focus on the terrain of culture as a key site of social and political struggle (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Against this backdrop, new atheists have been particularly active in trying to establish a sense of 'atheist' identity and to promote atheism as a distinct social movement – a self-conscious attempt to cultivate a sense of group membership and belonging in the face of hostile socio-cultural currents, marginalisation, and discrimination (Cimino and Smith, 2007, 2011). According to a study by Cragun et al (2012), for instance, more than two fifths (41%) of self-identifying atheists in the U.S. had experienced some form of discrimination during the last five years, compared to just 19% of people identifying as having 'no-religion'.

Aims and campaigns

The political dynamics of new atheism are manifest in a variety of interconnected campaign efforts, objectives, and strategies. One of the main aims here is to reduce the influence of religion in the public sphere, opposing religious involvement in areas such as health and education, as well as religious exemptions from equalities legislation (the legalisation of same-sex marriage being the latest high-profile case in point). Notable campaign efforts also include court cases (mostly, but not entirely, limited to the U.S.) to keep state buildings, land, and offices free from religious symbols and ceremonies; offending activities here include the placing of nativity scenes in public parks, displaying prayer banners in public schools, and retaining the motto 'In God we Trust' on the American currency.

Efforts such as these, however, are limited by the relatively small size of atheist, secular, and humanist groups, and by the limited resources at their disposal, compared to those available to religious lobby groups. These disparities have led to a growing awareness of the need for ASH groups to adopt similar discursive and organisational methods to those employed by religious organisations in order to try and close this gap. Recommendations here include the adoption of emotive narratives highlighting the dangers of religious privilege, as well as institutional reforms such as the establishment of a stronger lobbying presence, a more focused media message, and improved grassroots activism (see Faircloth, 2012).

A second core objective of new atheism is to promote atheist ideas – to undermine religion in the private as well as the public sphere, and to displace religion to the margins of social and political life. Efforts here include promotional, educational, and outreach work; the publication of books, articles, and magazines about atheism and the problems of religious belief; participation in public talks and debates (many of which are freely available to view online); the production of media programmes (such as the Atheist Experience); the promotion of resources and events designed to highlight relevant issues (such as International Blasphemy Rights Day); and the use of advertisements on billboards and public transport to attract attention and openly challenge religious ideas. A high-profile bus campaign launched in London in 2009, with the slogan 'There's Probably No God, Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life',

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has since inspired similar campaigns in cities around the world.

Another area of principal concern for new atheists involves improving the civil rights and social status of atheists themselves. The goal here is to secure mainstream acceptance for atheist viewpoints and to counter the stigma and discrimination that many atheists still face. Clear and overt parallels are often drawn with the civil rights, feminist, and gay and lesbian movements, from which strategic lessons and inspiration are sought. Campaign efforts also include the use of billboard advertisements designed to portray atheists in a positive light, as well as public drives (such as the 'We Are Atheism' and 'Out' campaigns) to show that atheism is far more common than many people might think.

Issues of community building and group cohesion are central new atheist objectives as well. Noteworthy examples of this include events such as the Atheist Film Festival and Rock Beyond Belief, organisations such as Camp Quest, and a lively conference and convention circuit (such as Scepticon, The Amazing Meeting, and the annual conventions of non-religious organisations) designed to bring like-minded people together.

Divisions and schisms

The pluralised and fragmented character of new atheism is also reflected in a number of internal tensions, central to which are substantial concerns around issues of identity and diversity.

The first of these engages the extent to which new atheists should actively and explicitly describe themselves as such, or whether the adoption of an alternative label would be more politically expedient. Harris (2007), for example, has argued that the continued use of the term 'atheism' has contributed to its marginalisation as little more than a 'cranky sub-culture', and has instead called for the rejection of all labels, arguing that victory cannot be achieved until the very notion of god is irrelevant and atheism itself has become 'scarcely intelligible as a concept'.

Others, however, argue that labels remain politically useful tools, providing a means of bringing people together and forming 'rallying cries for the tiny, scattered bubbles of rationality drifting in the sea of superstition and ignorance' (Myers, 2007). To this end, the use of alternative descriptors has also been floated as a way of avoiding the negative connotations associated with 'atheism'. One (failed) suggestion has been to adopt the term 'Brights' as a way of denoting a naturalist, rather than a supernatural, worldview. Other alternatives include the recently devised 'Atheism Plus', and 'Gnu atheism' (a play on the GNU free software movement). Atheist symbols and imagery, such as the flying spaghetti monster and variants on the letter 'A', are also popular.

Debates around diversity are more fractious. Ethnic minorities are notably under-represented within the atheist demographic – the numbers of Latinos and African Americans actively identifying as atheist in the U.S. remain particularly small, and the gender composition of the movement also provides cause for considerable concern. Debates about the best way to address these problems (especially sharp in the case of misogyny and sexism) remain heated and on-going, amidst complaints from some that new atheism has become something of a white, middle class, elite, male club (e.g. Bekiempis, 2011).

These concerns have recently led to the development of a new identity marker within the atheism movement, known as 'Atheism Plus'. This argues that new atheism has had its day and that atheism now needs to self-consciously align itself with the promotion of progressive political values, social justice, and a more affirming ethical vision. As McCreight (2012) puts it, Atheism Plus constitutes a 'third wave' of atheism, 'a wave that cares about how religion affects everyone and that applies skepticism to everything, including social issues like sexism, racism, politics, poverty, and crime'.

Despite receiving an enthusiastic welcome from many, the success of Atheism Plus has been mixed. Critics maintain that attempts to create a splinter movement within the broader ASH umbrella are unnecessarily divisive and risk diverting resources from other, more productive activities.

Conclusion

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The overall success of new atheism has been mixed. On the one hand, various high-profile campaigns (such as the on-going attempt to remove religious phraseology from the national currency) have yet to succeed, the influence of religion in core issues of public policy remains substantial, and the numbers of people subscribing to religious beliefs, though falling, remains high (at least in the U.S.). The influence of new atheism beyond the Western world also remains, for the most part, vanishingly small.

On the other hand, however, there is no doubt that the emergence of new atheism has increased the visibility of ASH groups and issues, and there are positive signs that public acceptance of atheism in the United States is growing (Flynn, 2010). The numbers of people willing to self-identify as 'atheist', though still low, is continuing to increase (rising from 1-5% in the U.S. since 2005) (WIN-Gallup International, 2012), and legal battles to enforce the constitutional separation of church and state continue to be won on a regular basis.

Obviously, the extent to which broad social changes such as these can be attributable to a single factor such as new atheism remains dubious, but it would be equally strange, given the extent to which new atheism has dominated public discourse on the issue, if it had played no role in this respect at all. The internal diversity of new atheism may also have an influence here. Paradoxically, perhaps, while this diversity precludes new atheism from acting in a cohesive manner and provides fertile ground for internal splits and divisions, the absence of a consistent or uniform approach also provides a high degree of flexibility, enabling new atheists to respond dynamically as and when issues of concern arise.

All of which goes to demonstrate that new atheism remains politically active in a number of different ways. To understand it properly, its political dimension must be taken into account.

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