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‘Atheist Fundamentalists’? Characterising New Atheist Non-Belief

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STUART MCANULLA, JUL 2 2014

On occasion, academic book titles appear to tempt fate. Alistair McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (2004) argued that, following the fall of the Berlin Wall, atheism had ceased to be a credible intellectual force. Atheism had enjoyed a Golden Age following the French Revolution, challenging the corruption and failures of established Christian Churches, and gaining ground through the diverse philosophies of scholars such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, and Friedrich Nietzsche. However, McGrath argued that twentieth century experiences of atheistic political movements, notably Soviet Communism, had undermined Godless worldviews to the extent that they would be unlikely to be influential in the future. However, in the same year, the philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris published his best-selling *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, which featured highly polemical attacks on both Islam and Christianity. Within three years, commentators were remarking upon the emergence of 'new atheism' following the publication of several other popular anti-religious books, including Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) and Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* (2007). Atheism was undoubtedly 'back' in public discussion, but in what form?

If there is one thing that both the advocates and critics of new atheism agree upon, it is that there is little that is intellectually new about new atheism. New atheists highlight the purported lack of empirical evidence available to support common religious beliefs. They emphasise the theme that religion is *man-made*, and focus upon what they view as the problematic morality espoused in the Holy Books. However, these familiar lines of argument do not make new atheism distinctive. Rather, it is the unrelenting willingness of these authors to satirise, ridicule, and condemn monotheistic religion which sets them apart from many other forms of atheism. Harris addresses his Christian readers thus:

Nonbelievers like myself stand beside you, dumbstruck by the Muslim hordes who chant death to whole nations of the living. But we stand dumbstruck by *you* as well – by your denial of tangible reality, by the suffering you create in service to your religious myths and by your attachment to an imaginary God. (2007: 73)

The new atheism is highly political (McAnulla, 2012, 2014; Kettell, 2013; Schultze, 2014). New atheist authors evince deep confidence that the world would be a better place without the Abrahamic faiths, and are thus politically motivated to limit, if not ultimately eliminate, their influence in public life.

Many authors suggest that new atheism not only offers hard-line opposition to religion, but should in fact be considered a form of 'atheist fundamentalism' (Markham, 2010; McGrath and McGrath, 2007; Stahl, 2010). Some suggest that the alleged intolerance, dogmatism, and dangerous self-certainty of the new atheists mirrors that of religious fundamentalists (Armstrong, 2009). Indeed, a number of other atheists have echoed such comments. The philosopher Michael Ruse argues that 'atheistic fundamentalism' not only unfairly blames religion for war and other problems, but that the crudity of the arguments made by Dawkins *et al.* actually harms the credibility of atheism more generally (2009). A common fear of opponents of new atheism is they are throwing yet another form of uncompromising belief into the global political mix at a time when sensitivity to religious identity is a much required resource. But is the term 'atheist fundamentalism' ultimately a useful way of describing the stances of such authors?

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First of all, it is worth noting that the new atheists are somewhat more ambivalent about self-describing themselves as 'atheist' than one might assume. Many commentators were surprised when Dawkins, during a debate with Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, described himself as something of an 'agnostic' concerning the existence of God (Shapiro, 2012). Yet Dawkins' position was fully consistent with his argument in the *The God Delusion* that whilst the lack of evidence makes it probable there is no God, it is not impossible that one could still exist (2006). Harris dislikes the term 'atheist', and authors such as Daniel Dennett have argued in favour of describing people without theistic belief by using the more positive term 'Bright'. The new atheists generally do not offer atheism in its 'strongest' possible forms, i.e. a certain belief that there is no God, or the belief that one can prove there is no God. Instead, they are atheist in the weaker, but much more common, form, i.e. they have *absence of belief* in God.

Fundamentalists are often characterised as basing their beliefs on one or more Holy texts which they treat as the inerrant word of God. Yet fundamentalists need not always rely on a particular text, but may base their approach on a set of ideas drawn from specific traditions. In either case, the key propositions are treated as absolute and inviolable truths. Some critics of the new atheists suggest that they are guilty of 'scientism', which is usually understood as the belief that the methods of the natural science are the only legitimate means of discovering knowledge about the world (Stahl, 2010; Haught, 2008: 30). Consequently, the use such of such scientific methods should be extended to other fields, including study of the social world, such as philosophy, metaphysics, religion, theology, and the humanities. This is considered to itself be a form of fundamentalism which dogmatically celebrates a chosen approach to science and denigrates all other ways of gaining knowledge (McGrath and McGrath, 2007: xi). McGrath and McGrath argue Dawkins endorses a scientism which believes 'Science is the only reliable tool that we possess to understand the world. It has no limits. We may not know something now – but we will in the future. It is just a matter of time' (*ibid.* 35). Stahl argues that, like religious fundamentalists, the new atheists suffer from a 'cartesian anxiety', fearing that chaos may emerge if a solid foundation for knowledge is not found (Stahl, 2010: 99).

There are contexts in which Dawkins appears to regard religion as little more than a phrase used to signify those areas of reality which science has not yet been able to explain (Paulson, 2006). Indeed, within new atheism more generally, religion is often portrayed as a 'failed science' – an attempt to explain the causal workings of the universe which has since been shown to be incorrect and inferior to the methods of natural science. Numerous critics suggest this view misunderstands the origins of religion and the ongoing human search for meaning, which continues largely independently of the work of science.

However, Daniel Dennett suggests 'scientism' is a 'straw-man' construction since few, if any, scientists do believe there are no limits to the scope of natural science (2009). There is no doubt that all new atheists are committed to forms of *naturalism*, in that they believe that, in the absence of evidence to the contrary, 'nature' is all that can be assumed to exist and assumptions about the supernatural should play no part of scientific enquiry. But the new atheists do not deny (indeed they frequently affirm) that what is meaningful in life is often better understood through literature, culture, and art. For example, Hitchens argues that great literature provides excellent cues for human morality (2007). Dawkins has usually endorsed the common view that science can be of limited use when it comes to arguments over what constitutes moral behavior (2006). Thus, even if the new atheist view of religion is reductionist, it is possible to defend them against the charge of scientism. Admittedly, the *precise* limits to the scope of scientific enquiry are left rather unclear in the work of authors like Dawkins, who at times appears to suggest science will 'solve' most remaining mysteries about the universe, yet at others seems to accept this may never be possible. Fern Elsdon-Baker argues, 'Dawkins takes on an almost positivistic stance when it comes to the history of science... based on the steady accumulation of "truths" with the occasional correction of past mistakes' (2009). Here the view is that new atheists are too ready to believe that natural science uncovers timeless, objective truths about the nature of reality. Whilst influential authors within the philosophy of science have emphasised the social and historical contexts of science, and indeed the concept-dependence of the 'paradigms' of scientific knowledge (Kuhn, 1996; Feyerabend, 2010), Dawkins is criticized for clinging out to an outdated belief in falsification. In any case, it should be noted that even if Dawkins is interpreted as endorsing a positivistic approach to science, the method of falsification does at least provide a means through which previously held beliefs about the nature of reality could be overturned, based upon obtaining further evidence. However questionable a view of science this may be, it is still involves a measure of open-mindedness about core beliefs which the religious fundamentalist could not typically accept.

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The new atheism offers a brand of anti-religious politics which self-consciously seeks to provoke strong reactions. In this way, they hope to shift public discussion in directions where the perceived privileges of religion are called into question. However, it should be noted that they are not agitating in favour either of the strongest possible versions of atheism, or indeed a worldview which necessarily denigrates non-scientific knowledge. We can expect the new atheists to continue to be dubbed as 'atheist fundamentalists' in political argument, but it is not clear that the term is analytically useful or descriptively appropriate.

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