

More visible but limited in its popularity

Atheism (and atheists) in Finland

This paper argues that atheism has become more visible in Finland, but it is a relatively unpopular identity position. The relatively low popularity of atheism is partly explained by the connection between Lutheranism and Finnishness. In public discourse atheism has been historically connected to communism and the Soviet Union (and, therefore, anti-Finnishness). However, atheism has slowly changed from being the other of Finnishness to one alternative identity among many, although it has not become extremely popular. Recently, with the rise of the so-called 'New Atheism', atheism has become more visible in Finnish society and this development has led to a polarised debate between defenders and critics of religion. Despite being a study on locality, the aim is to develop a methodological approach that can be applied to other contexts.

Introduction

In an influential article, entitled 'Atheism: Contemporary Numbers and Patterns', Phil Zuckerman (2007) estimates that Finland is seventh on the list of most atheist countries in the world. According to surveys examined in his article, there are approximately 28–60 per cent of 'atheists/agnostics/those who do not believe in a personal God' in Finland. How is it possible to make sense of such a variety in percentage? The numbers start to make more sense when we make a distinction between atheism and other non-religious positions and also study beliefs, behaviour, membership and identification both separately and together. This reveals that even though the Finns are fairly non-religious according to certain criteria, atheism is relatively unpopular in Finland.¹ However,

1 By atheism I refer primarily to identity, but it will be shown that explicit atheism is relatively unpopular even when the concept is used in a more analytical sense.

atheism has become more visible in the public sphere, especially in the media. Some suggestions will be offered as to why this is the case. This will be done by using different kinds of data, both quantitative (surveys) and qualitative (mainly media outputs).

This paper proceeds as follows. First, surveys about Finnish religiosity and atheism will be examined in order to chart the modes and locations of Finnish non-religiosity. This section is based on a fairly detailed exploration of surveys, including an examination of the popularity of religious beliefs, religious behaviour, membership and identification in Finland. It demonstrates that atheism is relatively unpopular in Finland, despite the low level of religious activity. In order to examine why this is the case, public discourses on atheism will then be examined. This part of the paper is based on the analysis of media material from the end of the Second World War to the present day. If the previous section has revealed that despite the relatively high level of non-religiosity in the country, people are not keen on identifying themselves as atheists, the one following will take the form of an exploration as to why that might be the case. The main argument in this section is that historically atheism has not been considered to be part of what it is to be a proper Finn. Even though atheism has been established later as a possible alternative among other identities, it is not fully accepted if it is connected to an explicitly anti-religious standpoint. The final section will explore the implementation of the so-called 'New Atheism' in Finland. As New Atheism is known for provocative statements connected to public campaigning and consciousness-raising, its implementation to some extent marks a new phase in the Finnish discourse on atheism. A recent debate on New Atheism has made atheism more visible, but it will be suggested that this increased visibility is not the same as increased popularity.

Methodologically this paper attempts to demonstrate how important it is to use a variety of methodologies and different kinds of data if we want to achieve a proper understanding of atheism in a specific location. While the results received from surveys are important, a plausible interpretation of why the numbers are as they are requires study of other kinds of materials. Hence, if non-religion ‘can only be specified within a given social and cultural context’ (Campbell 1971: 29), then it is necessary to examine the nature of atheism and non-religion in a more detailed manner. This is how the idea of Finland as the seventh most atheist country in the world is made intelligible and also challenged.

Atheism and non-religiosity in Finland according to surveys

Beliefs

The study of beliefs is common in measuring religiosity or the lack of it. If the options are yes or no, approximately 17–26 per cent of Finns do not believe in God, but with only two options, the numbers of ‘don’t know’ and ‘no answer’ increase (WVS 1996, 2000; ISSP 2008). According to surveys with more options, approximately 30–45 per cent believe in a Christian God or as ‘the church teaches’, while 22–30 per cent believe something different. There are 6–11 per cent who deny the existence of God, while 4–5 per cent doubt the existence of God. 13–18 per cent are undecided. Thus, altogether 25–33 per cent are not convinced of the existence of some kind of God, but approximately 10 per cent are explicitly atheists. (Fig. 1.)

A more recent survey from 2008 reveals that 11.1 per cent do not believe in God and almost 40 per cent can be classified as non-believers, agnostics and those who doubt. Still, 46.4 per cent say they believe

in God. (ISSP 2008.) By using beliefs as criteria, atheism is not a default position of the Finns and there has not been a substantial increase in disbelief in recent years.

Belief in God is quite an abstract question, which is why it is useful to focus on more detailed and concrete questions too. The results in this case show that negative answers increase drastically: according to surveys from 1996 and 2000, more than third do not believe in heaven and life after death, more than half do not believe in hell and approximately 50 per cent do not believe in the existence of the devil. (WVS 1996, 2000.) According to a survey from 2008, more than 40 per cent do not believe in heaven and life after death, but the percentage is not fully comparable to earlier ones as the alternatives in the questions were different (ISSP 2008).

The level of disbelief increases even more in relation to claims that are distant from Christian teachings and doctrines (such as belief in witchcraft, UFOs, astrology, horoscopes, Tarot) (see GE 1995; CM 1999, 2004). This is not surprising, but it shows that disbelief in Christian teachings and doctrines is not replaced by non-Christian supernatural beliefs. The more abstract and established the Christian belief, the more it has support. The hierarchy of religious beliefs among the Finns from popular to less popular is as follows:

- Abstract Christian beliefs (6–26 % say they do not believe, while 25–40 % lack explicit belief)
- Concrete Christian beliefs (30–45 % do not believe)
- Concrete, popular/folk Christian beliefs (40–60 % do not believe)
- Concrete, popular/folk non-Christian beliefs (65–85 % do not believe)

Figure 1. Belief in the existence of God: ‘Do you believe in the existence of God?’ (GE 1999, 2003; CM 2002, 2004).

| | 1999 (%) | 2002 (%) | 2003 (%) | 2004 (%) |
|--|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| I believe in the God of Christianity | 45.2 | 31.7 | 36.9 | 40.1 |
| I believe in God, but in a different way than the church teaches | 28.3 | 27.2 | 29.4 | 22.4 |
| I do not know whether I believe in God or not | 13.1 | 18.7 | 13.8 | 18.8 |
| I doubt the existence of God | 5.4 | 4.6 | 5.1 | 4.4 |
| I do not believe in the existence of God | 6.1 | 9.8 | 10.1 | 9.6 |
| No answer, do not want to say | 1.8 | 8.0 | 4.8 | 4.6 |

By examining many surveys it becomes obvious that there is a great deal of variety in answers in different years and that the change is by no means unilinear. Furthermore, the available options have an impact on the results. Therefore, these results are indicative rather than conclusive. However, they show that the level of explicit atheistic belief is fairly low, whereas the level of a lack of explicit religious belief is relatively high. This suggests that in terms of beliefs the Finns are neither very religious nor explicitly atheistic.

Practice (behaviour) – collective and private

Beliefs are not the only variable to be measured. It is possible that people do not believe, but still participate in religious activities (and vice versa). Therefore, belief is not to be taken as the only, or even the primary criterion for measuring religiosity; it is one dimension among others.

Typically church attendance has been used for measuring religious behaviour. In Finland – as in many other countries – people go to church during rites of passage (weddings, funerals, baptism) and calendar rites (mainly Easter and Christmas). Beyond these, approximately 70 per cent attend the service a maximum of once a year and 45–50 per cent say they never or rarely do it (WVS 1996, 2000, 2005; CM 2002, 2004). However, 21 per cent say they attend the church at Easter or Christmas (WVS 2000). When asked about other church-related activities, such as small-group gatherings, concerts, camps and trips, more than 85 per cent attend rarely or not at all (GE 1995, 1999, 2003). On the basis of these results it can be argued that Finnish people are very passive – and perhaps indifferent – when it comes to collective religious practices.

The frequency of praying has been a typical criterion for measuring private religious behaviour. Approximately 30–40 per cent of Finns pray either very rarely or not at all and praying is rare for half of the population. However, the other half says they pray actively (35%) or casually (15%). Of other private practices, uses of religious media as well as Bible-reading have been researched. Approximately 45–60 per cent of Finns either rarely or never follow religious television, radio or newspapers and slightly over 60 per cent say they either rarely or never read the Bible. (WVS 1996, 2000; GE 1995, 1999, 2003.) If rites of passage are excluded, private religious behaviour is more popular than collective practice, but the overall tendency is clear: Finnish people are passive also in private religious behaviour, despite the relative popularity of praying.

Membership

In addition to beliefs and practices, formal membership of the churches should be taken as one criterion. This does not apply to all countries, but if membership is not examined in Finland as a separate category (so as not to be mixed with identification), it is difficult to understand religion, non-religion and atheism in Finnish society.

Membership of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church has declined in Finland. In 1970, 95 per cent of Finns were members; in 1980, the percentage was 90 per cent, in 1990, 88 per cent, in 2000, 85 per cent and in 2010 less than 80 per cent (77.2% at the end of 2011)². The decline has not been followed by an extensive increase in membership of other religious associations. By now there are more than a million people (out of 5.4 m) who are not members of any religious association. They are not non-religious by all standards. For instance, 40 per cent of them claim to be religious and only 11 per cent of them are atheists by identification (Ketola *et al.* 2007: 53–4). However, the trend is clear: by using membership as a criterion, Finland has become more non-religious.

Despite the decline in membership, Finnish people have a positive attitude towards the dominant church institutions, both the Evangelical-Lutheran Church of Finland and the Orthodox Church of Finland. Only 5 per cent have a negative attitude. Even though Finnish people's attitudes tend to be positive, they are less inclined to think that the churches have solutions to problems related to morality, family, social issues and 'spiritual' issues.³ People have some trust in the church institutions: only 6–9 per cent show total distrust and 29–36 per cent do not trust much, but 43–50 per cent trust pretty much and 11–13 per cent very much. (WVS 1996, 2000, 2005.)

When membership and participation are examined simultaneously it is possible to say that Finnish people are 'belonging without practising'. Despite the declining membership, many Finnish people are still happy to be part of the Lutheran Church and pay taxes while not using any services. However, many people appreciate that the services are there if they feel the need to use them. Perhaps more import-

2 <http://evl.fi/EVLUutiset.nsf/Documents/F9015267D433F41EC225799500443630?OpenDocument&lang=FI> (accessed on 5.2.2012).

3 The percentage of those whose answer is negative to the question of whether the Churches have solutions is 49.3 (morality), 46.1 (family), 60 (social issues) and 27.1 (spiritual issues).

antly, services are there for others. Of course there are many stated reasons for being a member of the Lutheran Church – and only one of them is directly related to religious beliefs. The most important ones are the maintenance of cemeteries, rites of passage and domestic social work. The Church is also seen as maintaining Finnish traditions (of which it is a part). The opportunity to have a church wedding is important, as well as that of being a Church-recognised godparent, but the ability of the Church to support belief in God and a chance to participate in congregational activities are not significant factors according to surveys. (GE 1995, 1999, 2003; CM 1999, 2004.) In order to understand the Finnish context, it is important to emphasise that membership is a way to be available for others and to be part of Finnish society (with which the Lutheran Church is intertwined both in actual practice and in the people’s imaginations). The surveys offer some evidence for this interpretation, but there is also anecdotal evidence of people who stress the importance of this aspect, especially in cases where people join the Lutheran Church because friends or relatives have asked them to be Church-recognised godparents for their children. Even the short letter the Lutheran Church sends to those who resign their membership contains a reminder that non-members are not able to become Church-recognised godparents.⁴ Together the stated reasons for being a member show that Church membership is still an important means of being part of an imagined Finnish community for many. Therefore, atheistic beliefs and a lack of religious behaviour do not lead to the resignation of membership in any direct manner.

4 Here we see an obvious connection to what Grace Davie (2007) has called ‘vicarious religion’, but there is no space here to deal with it properly. My suggestion would be that it is not that some people (such as pastors) believe for others, but that ordinary people think that the Church institution is important for others and therefore they are willing to support its existence by maintaining membership. By being willing to support it, people also make themselves available for others. My guess is that if people would be content with non-religious weddings, funerals, name-giving and godparenting, it would be the end of the Lutheran Church in Finland as we know it.

Figure 2. Finnish religious identity: ‘Do you consider yourself as religious person, non-religious or atheist?’ (WVS 1996, 2000, 2005.)

| | 1996 (%) | 2000 (%) | 2005 (%) |
|------------------------|----------|----------|----------|
| Religious person | 54.0 | 59.7 | 58.1 |
| Not a religious person | 37.5 | 30.4 | 36.0 |
| Convinced atheist | 2.9 | 2.9 | 3.2 |
| I don’t know / (n/a) | 5.6 | 6.9 | 3.2 |

Identification

Even though Finland has become more non-religious in many respects, this does not automatically mean that it has become more atheistic. The suggestion here is that atheism should not be analysed only as a lack of theistic beliefs, a lack of participation in religious practices and a lack of formal membership in religious associations. It is also crucial to focus on atheism as an identity tag and separate it from other non-religious positions.

According to the surveys explored here, the popularity of atheism as an identity tag has been quite steady. Even if earlier surveys from 1981 and 1990 are taken into account, the results do not change: approximately three per cent of Finns identify themselves as atheists whereas almost 40 per cent of them consider themselves to be non-religious (‘not a religious person’) (fig. 2). The results change only when ‘not a religious person’ is not offered as an alternative. However, even then the number of atheists has been limited: it has varied from 3.8 per cent (GE 1995) to 5 per cent (CM 2007) to 12 per cent (CM 2004).

When the popularity of atheism as an identity is compared to other Northern European Protestant countries, it becomes clear that atheism is less popular in Finland. Sweden has 17 per cent atheists, the Netherlands has 7 per cent and Germany 5 per cent. The Finnish percentage (3 %) is closer to Catholic countries (such as Mexico, Chile and Italy) and Orthodox Cyprus, but below the average (7 %) of all the countries that were included in the World Values Survey in 2005. According to this survey, it is only in Guatemala, Columbia, Poland and Romania (all 1 %) where it is more exceptional to identify as atheist (Ketola *et al.* 2007: 55). Furthermore, 21 per cent of Finnish people have a negative attitude towards atheists. The percentage is exceptionally high if compared to other North European (fairly secularised) countries (Sweden 5 %, Denmark 7 %, Netherlands 8 %, Belgium 10 %; Ketola 2011: 69). If the detailed

study of various survey questions complicates the notion of Finland as possibly the seventh most atheistic country in the world, the comparison of identification challenges it directly.

Profile of Finnish atheists

According to surveys, the self-identified Finnish atheists are most likely male, young, urban, single, leftist, value-liberal, and not always totally non-religious. Let us look at each variable separately. (WVS 1996, 2000, 2005.)

1. *Male.* There are more men among atheists. Three different surveys give consistently similar results: only 30 per cent of self-avowed Finnish atheists are women.
2. *Young.* A Finnish atheist is most likely aged between 18 and 34. There are fewest atheists among those who were born before the 1960s.
3. *Urban.* A Finnish atheist is most likely to live in a city with more than 100,000 inhabitants, or in the southern part of Finland, but not in the countryside or the north.
4. *Single.* A Finnish atheist is more likely to be single than married, but this is related to the young age of atheists. However, atheists value the institution of marriage positively, but not as much as religious or other non-religious people.
5. *Leftist.* A Finnish atheist is most likely to vote for the Left Alliance. The Green Alliance and Social Democrats are almost as popular. It is easier to say who atheists do not vote for: the Centre Party (value-conservative, popular outside urban areas) and Christian Democrats (value-conservative and Evangelical Christian). The National Coalition Party (right-wing but mainly value-liberal) divides atheists: in one year it was fairly popular among atheists, but also the party an atheist 'would never vote for'.
6. *Value-liberal.* A Finnish atheist accepts gay marriage and pre-marital sexual relations more often than very religious people. An atheist is more likely to accept abortion, euthanasia and homosexuality than religious people, even though there are also atheists who strongly oppose homosexuality.
7. *Not always totally non-religious.* Unsurprisingly, the majority of atheists are non-religious by most criteria. However, a Finnish atheist may believe in some kind of God, spirit or life force, or reincarnation. Therefore, being an atheist means primarily that s/he does not support Christian monothe-

ism. A Finnish atheist is sometimes a member of the Evangelical-Lutheran Church.⁵

The survey results are not clear enough to say anything definitive about education and income. The level of education is slightly above average and atheists are to be found in all income categories. Their income is not below that of religious people, but their class-identity is lower middle-class or working class – meaning that it is typical for Finnish atheists to identify with a lower class than their income would suggest. However, these observations are suggestive rather than conclusive. What is important here is that when the variables are compared to other countries, it is possible to see how the profile is quite similar to other European countries and North America.⁶ Therefore, there are elements in atheism that are not limited to local contexts.

Atheism in Finnish public discourse

The surveys show that Finnish people are fairly non-religious but not atheistic. As already suggested, this relatively low popularity of atheism is partly explained by the connection between Lutheranism and Finnishness: being Lutheran is still a significant part of being Finnish for many. This connection – and its relation to atheism – can be further explored by analysing the public discourse on atheism in Finland from the end of the Second World War to the present day. The analysis of the most influential and widespread Finnish newspaper, *Helsingin Sanomat*, will demonstrate that atheism has been historically associated with anti-Finnishness and although that association is changing, it is still one reason for the relative unpopularity of atheism.⁷

- 5 According to 2005 WVS, 13.5 per cent of atheists believed in a spirit or a life force and according to 2000 WVS 13.3 per cent believed in reincarnation. In 2005 18.9 per cent had practised 'meditation or other methods of spiritual growth'. In the same survey, altogether 45.9 per cent of convinced atheists said they were members of the Lutheran Church, whereas 82.4 per cent of non-religious people ('not a religious person') were members of religious associations.
- 6 See Cragun 2009, Voas 2009, Zuckerman 2009.
- 7 The sample material covers all editorials and readers' letters from every second year from 1946–88 and every year since 1990.

From atheism as 'other' to atheism as 'an alternative'

According to the newspaper material examined here, atheism is not a visible concept in public discourse before the 1960s and the 1970s.⁸ At the end of the 1960s atheism was seen mainly as a foreign phenomenon, associated with the communist systems of the Soviet Union and China, and therefore atheists were seen as foreign others.

In the 1970s the atheism as a term started to figure more in public discourse. It did not refer only to foreign developments in communist countries, but became a domestic issue and the term was used as an identity tag. It was connected mainly to two positions: Marxist dialectical materialism and Darwinism.

Dialectical materialism was more philosophy-driven than Darwinism, which referred to natural science, but representatives of both schools of thought were imagining themselves as defenders of the truth in the face of false religious propositions. However, during the early part of the 1970s the dominant voice in the discourse on atheism came from religious people. Atheism was criticised, especially when writings focused on the Soviet Union and 'atheist' often meant (a Finnish or Russian) 'communist' in public discourse. Atheists relying on 'scientific positivism' were classified into two groups: those who accepted the current 'system' (i.e. the role of Christianity in society and its institutions) and those who wanted to destabilise it. The voice of the latter was not loud in early 1970s. Atheists were still seen as other, albeit a domestic other.

It was not until 1978 that the debate really took off. In the first part of that decade the discussion had been moderate and often focused on the context of schools and the privileged role of Lutherans in that area. However in 1978, over a three-month period, *Helsingin Sanomat* received 266 letters dealing with atheism. It published more than 70 of them. Atheists framed the debate around the binary opposition of religion and science; Christians suggested ways to synthesise religion and science. Atheists suggested that religion is false; others saw atheists as dubious people who deny the 'absolute truth' in moral issues.

In the early 1980s some atheists complained that they were being discriminated against in a predominantly Lutheran society, but the next peak in

published letters was in 1988. Then the newspaper received 140 letters and published 28. This time the debate was about evolution. More than 14,000 people signed a petition letter that was initiated by the Pentecostals and directed against the teaching of the theory of evolution in schools. The major standpoints in the debate are familiar even today: there were outspoken Darwinist atheists, creationists who opposed evolution and mainstream Lutherans who tried to find a compromise between religious beliefs and scientific knowledge.

In the early 1990s most atheistic letters focused on improving the situation of non-religious people in society and its institutions. This has continued to the present day, but what has changed is that the discourse on diversity has gained more ground. In this discourse atheists are in a better position to make claims about their rights and their supposedly marginalised situation. While the rights of non-religious people have been taken more into account than in many institutions previously, the idea of a fully secular state promoted by active atheists has not emerged.

As this historical sketch shows, atheism has been connected to communism and Darwinism in public discourse. While the first connection has been understood as an anti-Finnish position, the latter has been accepted in a form that does not oppose all religiosity and does not take overtly aggressive forms. Historically, atheism has transformed from the position of the 'other' to one alternative among many in a slightly more diverse Finland. As an alternative it is more variant than deviant, especially in urban areas. However, whenever there are atheistic statements and campaigns against religious people, many non-religious and otherwise religiously indifferent people tend to go against atheists, as they are seen to be needlessly provocative in relation to Finno-Lutheran traditions and its cultural heritage.

Towards a normalisation of atheism

Even though the understanding of atheism has changed from being the other of Lutheran Finnishness to being a possible alternative, it has not become a completely normalised position. This can be demonstrated by examining public discourse on religion and atheism in connection with Finnish Presidents.

In the USA the political careers of publicly atheist politicians seem to stop before the top. For example, according to a Gallup Poll taken in 2006, 84 per cent of the Americans thought that the USA is not ready to elect an atheist for President (Keysar 2007: 33). A Gallup Poll from 1999 reveals that only 49 per cent

8 Surely there have been critics of religion and the Lutheran Church throughout the examined period, but atheism was not a concept used in public debates in the 1940s and 1950s.

said they could vote for an atheist for President. In comparison, 90 per cent answered that they could vote black, female or Jew and 59 per cent said they could vote homosexual. (Edgell *et al.* 2006: 215.)

In the UK politicians have more opportunities to state their atheism in public without jeopardising their political careers. It was only a slight exaggeration when Rachel Sylvester (2008) wrote in *The Times* that it is easier for an atheist politician to come out of the closet than for a believer to confess his/her religiosity. Many top politicians have said that they are not believers. When the current Deputy Prime Minister and the leader of Liberal-Democratic party, Nick Clegg, said in an interview in 2007 that he does not believe in God, it did not mark the end of his political career and it did not ruin the support of the party he leads. However, after the interview he stated that he is married to a Catholic woman and is committed to bringing his children up as Catholics, moreover that he respects religious people and has an open attitude towards religious issues. (BBC News 2007, see also Bullivant 2010 and Bagg & Voas 2010.) The case shows that while it is not necessary to be a believer, it is important to have a positive, 'open' and 'respectful' attitude towards religions and religious people, combined with the approval of separation of religion and politics. The Prime Minister David Cameron is an example of a top politician's ideal attitude: he considers himself as a religious person, but says that his faith is like a magical radio channel which changes from quiet to a bit louder and quiet again, depending on the situation (quiet in public 'political' issues, louder in personal and moral issues).

Finland is a different case, but here I want to highlight the similarities between Finland and the UK. In both countries the ideal attitude is the same: religious rhetoric and justification are not at all desirable in everyday politics, but moderate religiosity is associated with honesty, morality, tradition and community. Furthermore, expressing a negative attitude towards the dominant churches would not be a wise strategic move. At the same time both countries see themselves as fairly secular. However, it is difficult for an explicit atheist to be elected as the President of Finland.

After the Second World War there have been many debates in which the religiosity of the President has been an issue, but none of the Presidents have identified themselves as atheists. For instance, Urho Kaleva Kekkonen, who was the Finnish President from 1956 to 1982, had a strategic approach and a fairly distant attitude to the Lutheran Church in pub-

lic, but his private religiosity was not questioned (Niiranen 2000: 46). His follower, Mauno Koivisto, called himself a 'Protestant Christian' and was the son of an ecumenical Adventist, but his public policy towards the Lutheran Church and religious matters was not very different from that of his predecessor. (Koivisto 1998; Räisänen 2006: 203–11.) In 1994 when Martti Ahtisaari beat Elisabeth Rehn in the second round of the election, the question of the candidates' religiosity was seen as important. In an entertainment programme on television, which gathered almost two million viewers, Ahtisaari's answer to the question concerning belief in God was more affirmative than Rehn's. If this really was a crucial issue, it tells us that the positive attitude towards religious (mainly Lutheran) matters is seen as a virtue in the nation's leader. At least the issue was debated in newspapers afterwards and Rehn attempted to change tack, and revised her comments saying that she believed deeply in God.

Tarja Halonen became the President of Finland after Ahtisaari in 2000. The discourse on religion related to her exemplifies the continuation of old preferences and the emergence of new opportunities. She has not only been the first female President of Finland, but also the first who is not a member of the Lutheran Church. However, her non-religiosity and the fact that she was not married (although in a relationship) during her campaign prompted a lively debate. This debate is an example of the importance of traditional values. For instance, Bishop Jorma Laulaja expressed his view that Halonen should be married. He saw her non-marriage as a public statement and added that he also felt uneasy about the fact that she was not a member of the Lutheran Church. *Helsingin Sanomat* published similar views expressed by lay people, who saw the position of the President as a role model for others. The debate did not continue for long, because Halonen got married after she was elected as President.

Despite the fact that Halonen is not a church member, she has not been anti-religious, nor has she acted as a spokesperson for atheists. In her public statements she maintains that the position of the Lutheran Church in Finnish society is justified and she also connects the Church to traditional Finnishness. Furthermore, she has been fairly active in supporting political initiatives which have a positive attitude toward religious diversity. Moreover, before her presidency she was chair of the Finnish Settlement Movement, which is based on Christian values. Halonen's case demonstrates that Lutheran-

ism is connected to Finnishness. It is expected that the leader of the nation does not diverge too much from the ideal.⁹ The case also shows that the connection has somewhat loosened, as it has been possible to become the President of Finland without being a member of the Lutheran Church. However, it is more difficult if the candidate is explicitly atheist and anti-religious. This demonstrates that while Finland is a rather non-religious country in many ways, it would be implausible to argue that atheism is a fully normalised position – at least if it is combined with anti-religious approach.¹⁰

The implementation of 'New Atheism' in Finland

The longitudinal examination of public discourse revealed changes in Finnish 'atheism'. It is not problematic to be an atheist if it is based on the premise of 'live and let others live', but whenever atheism is seen as militant, provocative or something that challenges the existing role of the Lutheran Church in society and the existence of Christian-based traditions in schools or other public institutions, the response is negative. This is the background for understanding the implementation of 'New Atheism' in Finland: some people see their message relating to the USA only, but those who campaign actively for the rights of non-religious people and want to diminish the role of religion in public institutions have welcomed the

9 The presidential campaign of early 2012 does not make a difference to the analysis offered here. The current President, Sauli Niinistö, is not known to be very religious, but he is a member of the Lutheran Church and he co-operates with church leaders in some institutions (Kirkon diakoniarahasto and the Tukikummit foundation). His rival in the second round was Pekka Haavisto, who is openly homosexual and not a member of any religious association. Even though the religiosity of the candidates was not as significant a topic as sexual orientation in the media debates during the election, it was common to hear people referring to the religious difference between the candidates, at least in the more conservative and religious areas of Finland.

10 This conclusion, based on the analysis of public discourse shows, in accordance with survey information on attitudes towards atheists, that the attitude is negative rather than positive, but predominantly neutral. According to ISSP 2008, 13 per cent of Finns have 'very negative' attitude towards atheists, 5 per cent have 'very positive' attitude and altogether 60.3 do not have a clear opinion (a combined percentage of those who answered 'neither positive nor negative' and 'do not know').

Figure 3. Number of articles referring to atheism in *Helsingin Sanomat* 1990–2011.

| | Atheism | Atheist | New Atheism / New Atheist |
|------|---------|---------|------------------------------|
| 2011 | 6 | 28 | 3 / - |
| 2010 | 23 | 70 | 14 / 7 |
| 2009 | 23 | 63 | 2 / 4 |
| 2008 | 20 | 48 | - / 1 |
| 2007 | 13 | 51 | - |
| 2006 | 11 | 31 | - |
| 2005 | 19 | 35 | - |
| 2004 | 5 | 44 | - |
| 2003 | 6 | 19 | - |
| 2002 | 4 | 25 | - |
| 2001 | 8 | 16 | - |
| 2000 | 9 | 29 | - |
| 1999 | 11 | 19 | - |
| 1998 | 13 | 23 | - |
| 1997 | 18 | 32 | - |
| 1996 | 15 | 25 | - |
| 1995 | 11 | 20 | - |
| 1994 | 13 | 23 | - |
| 1993 | 9 | 23 | - |
| 1992 | 8 | 26 | - |
| 1991 | 11 | 24 | - |
| 1990 | 22 | 51 | - |

criticism of religion put forward by the New Atheists. Therefore, the implementation of New Atheism marks to some extent a new phase in Finland as it has encouraged people to be more critical of religion publicly and to argue for the moral and intellectual superiority of atheism more loudly than before.

The public debate concerning atheism has become more visible in recent years. That is to say, at least, references to 'atheism' and 'atheist' have increased in *Helsingin Sanomat* (fig. 3). The peak in 1990 is explained by the decline of the communist bloc in Eastern Europe. Between 1991 and 2003 there were fewer hits per year on average than from 2004 onwards. During past couple of years the debate has become more lively and it has revolved around Dawkins and others, but the term 'New Atheism' was not estab-

lished as part of Finnish public discourse until 2008.

Four key bestsellers by the so-called New Atheists were published in the Finnish language between 2007 and 2008. Only some of the responses have been translated, and the translated ones are primarily defences of Christianity.¹¹ The translated responses are discussed relatively little in public, partly because they have not been published by major publishers, but rather more or less religious ones. The agenda of the Finnish publisher of three New Atheist bestsellers, Terra Cognita, is to popularise natural science (and promote it over 'social constructionism', 'post-modern relativism' and religion).¹²

The international discourse on religion and atheism is organised around two camps: on the one side there are the New Atheists and others who anchor themselves in the natural sciences, arguing that religion is wrong in its claims to truth and also harmful; on the other side there are educated, mostly male, liberal theologians who argue that at least Christianity has been and still is a force for good and has an intellectually defensible position. This is the case in Finland as well. The loudest critics of religion are all relying on the natural sciences and the theory of evolution, while short responses have been written by fairly liberal Lutheran, male, Bishops such as Eero Huovinen (2008) and Mikko Heikka (2008) who are pro-science and pro-Christianity at the same time.¹³

11 *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett and *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris were translated in 2007 and *God is Not Great* by Christopher Hitchens was published in Finnish language in 2008. Victor Stenger's *The New Atheism* has not been translated in Finnish. At least the following book-length responses have been translated; *Dawkins' Delusion* by Alistair McGrath and Joanna Collicut McGrath, *Atheist Delusions* by David Bentley Hart, *The Dawkins Letters* by David Robertson. The *God Delusion* and *Breaking the Spell* were reviewed in *Helsingin Sanomat* after the original publication in English and again after the publication of translations. Harris and Hitchens were reviewed after the release of the Finnish editions. Stenger's book has not been reviewed. I shall focus on the Finnish media debate, publications and campaigns, but it should be noted that many Finnish people follow the English language discussion directly.

12 The Finnish publisher of Hitchens' *God is Not Great* is Otava. It is one of the major publishing houses with titles in all genres from fiction to non-fiction.

13 Some books have been published by more conservative voices – such as the theologian Timo Eskola (2009) and professor of psychology Markku Ojanen (2011) – but their accounts have not received as ex-

The discussion of New Atheism became a properly public issue after Bishop Huovinen's short article. Some responses were printed with less publicity, but the first really visible defence of New Atheism was written by a scholar of religion, Matti Kamppinen, whose article was published in *Helsingin Sanomat* in March 2009. It was part of the 'Sunday Debate' series in which articles receive 200 comments, on average, on the newspaper's website. Kamppinen's article gathered more than 1,000 comments. Even though the focus of the topic shifted further from the original article in the responses, the number of comments tells its own story about the interest in religion/atheism debate.¹⁴

The implementation of the concept of New Atheism in Finland has taken place in these widespread, high-quality publications, but it has been partly a continuation of an earlier debate between religion and science. Even before the discourse on New Atheism, popular discussion books, where one voice represents Lutheran religion and the other the natural sciences, have been published. Bishop Juha Pihkala and professor of astronomy Esko Valtaoja debated for and against religion in 2004 (Pihkala & Valtaoja 2004). The equally popular sequel was published in 2010, including comments on and references to 'New Atheism' (Pihkala & Valtaoja 2010). A year later another book containing a discussion within a similar frame was published. This time Jaakko Heinimäki, a

tensive and positive coverage in the media as the ones by the theological elite. For example, when Bishop Huovinen published his defence of Christianity against New Atheism in a respected semi-academic journal, it was considered as news in many daily newspapers, but Eskola's and Ojanen's publisher is a minor one, known to be supportive of conservative Lutheranism. There are some voices that support the views of radical theology (Nevanlinna & Relander 2011), but as they are not dominating the discussion, I will leave them unexplored here.

14 A year later a doctoral student, Ilse Paakkinen (2010) published in the same newspaper an article that prompted a lively debate. She argued that the substance of New Atheism is limited to a criticism of religion and hence it does not offer anything constructive for people who reject religion. Her argument was not unlike that of those who represent the discourse of the theological elite, but she received plenty of critical feedback in the discussion forum, perhaps partly because of her gender, relatively young age, position as 'only' a PhD candidate, but also because she was described as being a member of the centre of excellence at the University of Helsinki which in the popular imagination represents scientific rationality.



Religion versus the natural sciences: the Lutheran Bishop Juha Pihkala and professor of astronomy Esko Valtaoja receiving an award for their book. Photo by Laura Oja.



Religion versus the natural sciences: Lutheran Pastor Jaako Heinimäki and the ex-chair of The Union of Freethinkers Jussi K. Niemelä promoting their book.

well-known public figure and liberal Lutheran Pastor represented a theologically refined position and the ex-chair of the Union of Freethinkers of Finland, Jussi K. Niemelä, represented the position which is critical of religion and opposes it on the basis of the theory of evolution, scientific rationality and human rights (Heinimäki & Niemelä 2011). In all the examples given above, the debate is framed as a struggle between natural science and religion.

Finnish public intellectuals have been selective in their support of the so-called New Atheists. None of the key spokespersons have identified themselves as such. Furthermore, some arguments have been dubbed as nonsense. However, at the same time they use many ideas popularised by Dawkins and others. One of the most popular and best-known critics of religion is a professor of cosmology, Kari Enqvist, whose key message is that there is essentially nothing that natural science leaves unexplained (Enqvist 1998). Therefore, there is no place for religion (as it is understood by him as a rival for scientific knowledge). He claims to be non-religious and totally indifferent rather than an atheist, but his continuing criticism of religion proves otherwise. He does not agree with Dawkins and others on everything, but he makes use of their analyses. For instance, by following Dawkins and Dennett he writes about religion as a virus of the mind that makes people act in a strange manner and he also refers to religion as a meme. (Enqvist 2009.)¹⁵

15 One of the key differences between Enqvist and the so-called New Atheists is that he does not see disenchantment as a significant problem. He does not emphasise the beauty and wonders of nature as a source for achieving re-enchantment in a godless world, as

The aforementioned critic of religion Esko Valtaoja confessed (jokingly, I suppose) that he was 'almost considering' joining the Lutheran Church after reading Hitchens, but at the same time he believes, along with Dawkins, that religions are fairly dangerous and that scientific, social and moral progress obtained with the help of science is a fact (Pihkala & Valtaoja 2010: 21, 238, 255–64). Ex-chair Jussi K. Niemelä, has promoted New Atheism more than anyone else in Finland and judged the forms of atheism that are not explicitly anchored in the natural sciences, but recently he has also argued, against the New Atheists, that moderate liberal religiosity is an ally for atheists rather than simply an object of criticism (Niemelä 2011: 72; Heinimäki & Niemelä 2011).

Recently Ilkka Pyysiäinen, a scholar of religion, published a pamphlet *God Does Not Exist!* in Finnish. Even though his book is not in any direct way dependent on the arguments of the New Atheists, it has been interpreted in the media as being part of the same phenomenon. Pyysiäinen is very critical of Harris and fairly critical towards some ideas of Dawkins, but he shares with them at least two important views: he frames the debate as being between science and religion and he argues for the superiority of natural science over cultural research (Pyysiäinen 2011, see also Pyysiäinen 2007).

Despite this combination of denial and affirmation, Finnish critics follow Dawkins and others in

most so-called New Atheists do. Many atheists use the pictures taken by the Hubble telescope as examples of the wonders of nature and the scientific approach to the world, but Enqvist, while speaking for the natural sciences, sounds more laconic (and Finnish, perhaps) when he confesses that looking at the pictures gets boring after a while. (Enqvist 2009: 179.)

Logo of the YLE radio show
God Does Not Exist!, hosted
by Tarja Koivumäki.

anchoring their argument on the same natural scientific basis and frame their narrative as a struggle between science and religion. Furthermore, they all share a hostile view of ‘postmodernism’, ‘social constructionism’ and ‘cultural relativism’.

In addition to the published writings by critics and defenders of religion there are other examples of the increased visibility of atheism. Atheism has been picked up by the public broadcasting company, YLE, too. There have been television programmes in which the aforementioned public intellectuals (especially Valtaoja and Enqvist) have talked critically of (unscientific and ‘irrational’) religious views in order to highlight the superiority of natural science and ‘rationality’.¹⁶ On the YLE radio station a talk programme called *God Does Not Exist!* ran from November 2010 to January 2011 and a typical show included guests with views for and against religion. The host, Tarja Koivumäki, was openly anti-religious in her introductions to the programme’s particular themes. The programme was unusually anti-religious and pro-atheist in comparison to YLE’s traditional approach. There have also been anti-religious columns on YLE radio (for example, ‘The Anatomy of Religion’ by Kirsi Virtanen, broadcast on 21st September 2011).¹⁷ The radio shows were inspired by the New Atheists. There were direct references to them and most of the themes discussed were the ones addressed in bestselling books associated with them. For instance, one of the key points by Kirsi Virtanen was to suggest that children should not be given religious labels – an idea taken from *The God Delusion* and from the *Don’t Label Me* billboard campaign sup-

16 For example, *God Does Not Exist!* was part of a television series led by Tuomas Enbuske in 2008 and *Five Views of Cosmology* was broadcasted in 2008 (repeated in 2011). The former replayed some of the arguments presented by the New Atheists.

17 The radio column is available in Finnish at http://www.yle.fi/radio1/asia/kirsi_virtanen/ (accessed on 28.10.2011).



ported by Dawkins in 2009.¹⁸ There have never been such direct public attacks on religion by more than one person working at YLE. While these are examples of the new visibility of atheism in Finnish public discourse, they might also indicate the popularity of atheism. However, there is not enough evidence for the popularity of explicit atheism among ordinary people. Furthermore, initiatives put forward by atheists have had little support in changing the role of the Lutheran Church in public institutions. Finnish people find debates on religion and science fascinating, but that has not made them identify as atheists or come out in public as supporters of atheist causes.

The visibility of atheism and criticism of religion has also increased in the activities of registered associations. The Union of Freethinkers in Finland have copied international campaigns and received publicity. For instance, the atheist bus advertisement campaign that took place in Britain in January 2009 was also enacted in Finland in the same year. The following campaign was more provocative. In 2010 freethinkers organised an event where they swapped Bibles (and any kind of religious literature) for pornographic papers. The intended message was to point out that sexuality, repressed by some religious agents, is a positive thing. It is not surprising that some religious people felt offended and organised a counter-campaign where a Christian bookstore exchanged pornographic magazines for Bibles, but what is more important is that many non-religious people felt that this sort of provocation did not have any substance. Partly because the campaigns were seen as mediated provocations and publicity stunts, they had lit-

18 <http://www.humanism.org.uk/billboards> (accessed on 28.10.2011).

have a connection with secularisation or desecularisation as such. The increase in visibility can happen within an accelerating secularisation, but it can also arise within desecularisation. In locations where expressions of religiosity or atheism are not suppressed by a coercive state apparatus, the visibility of one is likely to increase the visibility of the other. However, it is important for understanding this visibility to ascertain whether it happens within a context of secularisation or desecularisation. Northern Europe has become more secular according to traditional yardsticks such as the prevalence of religious beliefs, behaviour (especially church attendance), numbers of membership and appropriated identities, but globally – including Northern Europe – religion has become more visible. Furthermore, the normative place of religion in the earlier phase of modernity was the private, non-political sphere, whereas recently ‘religion has come adrift of its former points of anchorage’ (Beckford 1989: 170) and public uses of ‘religion’ have changed (Beckford 2003: 232). As a consequence, we are witnessing the new visibility and awareness of religion (Hoelzl & Ward 2008: 2) and the new visibility of atheism at the same time.

There are mass media events which have had a huge impact on the current situation, but there are also slower but no less significant processes, such as the development of electronic media technologies, liberalisation of media economies, increasing religious diversity through transnational migration (Herbert 2012) and the ‘disembedding’ of traditions established in the early phase of modernity. Anthony Giddens (1994, Giddens & Pierson 1998) has argued that in principle none of the traditions, religious or otherwise, can rely on their established roles in society; they have to justify their position at the level of public discourse. If his view is largely correct, it helps us understand the mutual visibility of atheism and religion at a time of the de-regulation (and re-regulation) of religion. In Finland one of the traditional bonds in need of re-justification is the connection between ‘Finnishness’ and the Lutheran Church in times of increased (religious and non-religious) diversity. Highlighting the situation that requires discursive justification from all positions is not the only possible framework for interpreting the main observation made here – that atheism is relatively unpopular in Finland, but its visibility has increased – but it is the one I find most convincing. ■



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