

Radical atheism and religious power

New atheist politics

The increased visibility of assertive forms of atheism has provoked much public debate. This article argues that new atheism primarily seeks to contest what it considers to be the unjustifiably powerful role of religion through a multi-faceted challenge to religious beliefs, practices and institutions. Influential theories of power are drawn upon to unpack the character of new atheist positions. It is proposed that new atheism seeks to challenge four perceived 'dimensions' of religious power, in particular (i) religion's role in public decision-making; (ii) the ability of religious groups to shape policy agendas; (iii) the power of religion to create preferences that run counter to an individual's true interests and, (iv) the role of religion in constituting forms of subjectivity more generally. Focussing particularly on the role of atheism in the UK, the paper also considers the implications such thinking has had on atheist practice and activism. The paper also considers how defenders of religion have reacted to the challenges posed by new atheism. It is argued that religious groups and authors have largely focussed on defending the role of religious faith and the significance of God in people's lives, rather than explicitly defending what new atheists consider to be the unfair institutional privilege accorded to some religious organisations.

Introduction

The recent death of the controversial journalist and author, Christopher Hitchens, has been widely lamented. Hitchens had become a celebrated public intellectual and devoted 'contrarian', who made a reputation in part by being willing to challenge the reputations of public figures such as Bill Clinton, Henry Kissinger and Mother Theresa. In his later years Hitchens became most famous for his willingness to take on 'God' as he became a leading figure

within the 'New Atheist' movement. Even Hitchens' own terminal illness would become (as he himself described it) 'an Event' as it provoked public debate concerning how atheists may approach the assumed finality of physical death. In many ways Hitchens might be taken to have personified the uncompromising attitude of new atheists towards religion, which he argued arises 'from the bawling, fearful infancy of our species' (2007: 64). New atheism is best known as a literary and media phenomenon, being particularly associated with the publication of a range of bestselling books in the UK, US and elsewhere (e.g. Dawkins 2006, Harris 2004, Dennett 2006, Harris 2008, Hitchens 2007, Loftus 2008, Barker 2008, Stenger 2008, 2009, Onfray 2008). It has attracted attention due to its forceful challenges to religious doctrines and beliefs and its use of provocative argument and rhetoric to question the value of religions, particularly Christianity and Islam. Some have welcomed new atheism as a timely questioning of religious power in response to a putative 'desecularisation' of world politics. On the other hand, new atheism has also drawn fierce criticism from defenders of religious faith, who not only doubt the intellectual strength of new atheism, but also criticise what they consider to be unjustifiably excessive rhetoric that could harm public debate. The article will argue that what is perhaps most distinctive about new atheism is its *political* character. It is proposed that the roots of new atheism lie in political grievances concerning what are perceived to be unjustifiably privileged roles for religion in both public and private life. Although there has been much discussion of the aggressive character of new atheism, and considerable effort devoted to highlighting what critics perceive as its errors or omissions (Amarasingam 2010), less time has been spent examining the *particular* ways it challenges re-

ligious power and legitimacy. This paper seeks to articulate the multi-faceted ways in which new atheism challenges religious authority through making use of relevant theories of power.¹

Characterising new atheism—core arguments

The term ‘new atheism’ appears to have been first publicly used in 2006 in an edition of the US magazine *Wired*. The cover-feature article discussed the publication of a spate of books arguing against religion, focussing on the work of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett (Wolff 2006). Since this time the term has been used more widely to include other authors, including that of the physicist Victor Stenger, the French philosopher Michel Onfray and the work of two former evangelical Christians, Dan Barker and John Loftus. New atheism is also taken now to refer to a range of prominent individuals, including many journalists and atheist networks of activists. This first section of this paper attempts to set out the broad assumptions and stances of new atheism. In so doing, it should be acknowledged that this involves conflating the views of a range of different authors who each have their own emphases and subject specialisms. The aim is to set out basic propositions to which most if not all of those authors identified as ‘new atheist’ tend to adhere to:

1. *There is probably no God.* In 2009 the so-called ‘atheist bus campaign’ was launched in the UK by the comedian Arianne Sherine and Richard Dawkins. The campaign was intended to counter the Christian adverts sometimes placed on London buses by evangelical organisations. The chosen campaign slogan – ‘There is Probably No God: Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life’ – attracted attention, particularly through the inclusion of the word ‘probably’ which surprised some commentators given the strong conviction of new atheists that belief in God is misplaced. Yet this is indeed the position of almost all new atheist authors, who justify their lack of belief in God based on an apparent lack of scientific evidence that one might exist. They argue that there is no good evidential basis to indicate existence of the kind of

1 I am grateful to the attendees of the conference ‘The New Visibility of Atheism in Europe’ (held at the Donner Institute, University of Turku, Finland, 18–20 January 2012) for helpful comments on an earlier version of this paper. Particular thanks are owed to Teemu Taira.

all-powerful, all-loving God that is often assumed to exist within monotheistic religions. This position concedes that it is *possible* that data suggestive of the existence of God could be gathered in future.² For Dawkins, the existence of God has ‘very low probability’, but not zero probability (2006: 50–1). The subtleties of this stance have tended to be lost in heated debates concerning new atheism. However, they have occasionally been highlighted when new atheists have sought to rebut critics who argue that they offer a ‘reverse fundamentalism’ which replaces religious certainties with a new set of immovable beliefs.

2. *Advances in science, textual analysis, archaeology and other disciplines provide overwhelming evidence against monotheism.* New atheists tend to argue that very strong arguments for atheism have existed for centuries. They argue that developments in science mean it is now possible to explain most phenomena through natural causes. Famously, Darwin’s theory of evolution provides an explanation of the origins of humans which is naturalistic and need not invoke reference to an act of creation by God. In addition, it is argued that archaeological evidence casts major doubt upon the historical veracity of events described in the Holy Books. For example, the alleged failure of Israeli archaeologists to find physical remnants to back-up the story of Exodus (despite having every religious and political incentive to do so) is taken to cast doubt upon founding claims within the Abrahamic religions (Hitchens 2007: 102). Furthermore, analysis of religious texts generates doubts as to the authorship of the Holy Books themselves, and at times the narratives contradict other historical bodies of evidence.³ For new atheists the cumulative effect of developments across different disciplines in recent decades serves to further undermine not just the historical claims of religious believers, but to further displace religion as a way of explaining the natural world.

- 2 This might be considered a formal concession that God could exist, rather than a serious one. However, it should be noted that a well-known advocate of atheism, the philosopher Anthony Flew, did appear to alter his position to one of belief in a deistic God, based upon his readings of scientific evidence (2007).
- 3 Some critics suggest that, like some Christian and Islamic fundamentalists, new atheists engage in an excessively literal reading of the Holy texts. This would sit at odds with more allegorical or metaphorical readings.

3. *Both fundamentalist and moderate strands of religion are potentially dangerous.* New atheists devote considerable attention to attacking what they view as extreme forms of religion, notably those strains which are used to legitimise terrorism, violence and the oppression of women. Theories of creationism or intelligent design are subject to intense critique and ridicule. However, the new atheists do concede that many, if not most, religious believers will also be opposed to these perspectives. Yet a controversial argument within new atheism is that *moderate* versions of religion may, in some part at least, be culpable for the existence of extreme versions. The key reason for this is that moderate religions are taken to *legitimise* implausible beliefs. Indeed it is taken as a *general* social norm not to directly question someone's religious belief. The difficulty with this position, new atheists argue, is that it then weakens our ability to challenge highly dangerous religious beliefs. The belief that by killing apostates you will be rewarded in heaven may be a far more distasteful and hazardous belief to hold than belief in the virgin birth of Jesus. Yet it is not, for many atheists at least, any less plausible a claim. Thus for new atheists the difficulty with moderate religion is that it establishes the convention of leaving religious beliefs unquestioned, thereby increasing the probability that extreme religious views will similarly not be sufficiently challenged. Dawkins (2006) comments that if the defenders of apartheid in South Africa had been more astute they would have sought to have given racial separation a religious justification. If they had, it is suggested that the cause of anti-apartheid campaigners could have been yet harder due to a greater reluctance to challenge religious as opposed to political views.

4. *The morality of the Holy Books is highly questionable.* New atheists are aware that the social respect which is often accorded to religion comes from perceptions that the main religions generally provide commendable moral guidance. Thus even many non-believers may assume that the Judeo-Christian religions are good sources of ethics, even if they reject the associated metaphysical claims. This is a perspective new atheists wish to undermine, through attacking religion where it is often perceived to be strongest. A common tactic of new atheists is to recount stories or select quotations from the Bible or Koran which may have less admirable moral dimensions. Hitchens, for example, questions the ethical worth of the story of Abraham, where God asks him to kill his own son. Harris provides page upon page of quotations from

the Koran which he argues serve as pretty clear ground to legitimise violence against non-Muslims (2004: 117–23). The new atheists do not claim that there are no good moral injunctions within the Holy Books. However, they question whether the laudable elements of religious beliefs are necessarily original moral innovation as opposed to just reflecting the kinds of decent moral codes that generally appear where civilisations emerge. Thus the new atheists argue that the Holy Books should not be privileged as sources of morality, and that great literature, poetry or philosophy will often provide better moral principles than that found in Leviticus or Deuteronomy.

Reception-history

Impressive book sales for new atheist authors have been complimented by high-profile media coverage and discussions of their arguments. Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris and Dennett became dubbed the 'four horsemen' of radical atheism as they featured regularly not just in the media but in public debates against defenders of religion. Their contributions have inspired extensive YouTube 'wars' with ongoing video exchanges between atheists and (particularly) Christian advocates. The hard-line stances of new atheists have in some ways been a gift for newspaper columnists and media editors who could be sure that the discussion of radical atheism would provoke the passionate interest of sections of the public. However, many commentators (including some well-known atheists) have balked at what they considered to be new atheism's excessive rhetoric (e.g. Armstrong 2009, McGrath & McGrath 2007, Eagleton 2009). Unsurprisingly, theologians and philosophers of religion tend to take a disdainful attitude to what they often consider to be crass, and at times ignorant, arguments (e.g. Hart 2009, Haught 2007, Cottingham 2009). A large number of books seeking to counter new atheist arguments have been published, mainly by pro-Christian writers (e.g. Hahn & Wiker 2008, Ganssle 2009, Williams 2009, Day 2008). Many of their opponents suggest that new atheists have constructed 'straw man' versions of religion and/or focussed on fundamentalist belief-sets and unfairly presented these as in some way representing the 'essential' features of religion more generally. Such critics also often argue that new atheists appear to treat religion wholly as the endorsement of a set of metaphysical claims rather than acknowledge the wider social and cultural role of Christianity, Islam and Judaism. This reduction of religion to sets of

beliefs convinces many of new atheism's opponents that its advocates often lack even a basic appreciation of the way religion actually informs millions of lives. In addition, the new atheists' highly literal reading of sections of the Holy Books are taken as evidence of these scholars' lack of understanding of varying modes of biblical interpretation. However, both new atheists *and* their most vocal antagonists have sometimes been subject to critique by authors who are frustrated with the name-calling and aggressive arguments made in both directions (Humphrys 2007). For example, Tina Beattie (2007) detects a large degree of 'testosterone driven' posturing in debates concerning new atheism in which the agenda of the protagonists appears primarily to be to boost egos and point-score.⁴

The literature taking issue with new atheism tends to focus upon the perceived weaknesses of its arguments against God and their misunderstanding of religious traditions more generally. Such critics tend not to deal with the more political implications of new atheism, save in a couple of important respects. New atheists tend to underscore tendencies within some monotheistic traditions towards (for example) homophobia and the oppression of women, drawing attention to how unacceptable people will ordinarily find such attitudes in Western secular societies and elsewhere. Defenders of faith tend to grant the problematic nature of these particular strands of thought, but point to wider traditions which dovetail much more readily with secular and liberal values. Also, some critics of new atheism argue that widespread 'Godlessness' may not have the benign outcomes which Dawkins *et al.* suppose, but rather may open the door to the kinds of crimes against humanity which occurred in officially atheist and communist regimes. The idea that moves away from religion will produce liberating social and political effects (as tends to be assumed by new atheists) is disputed by commentators who fear that in a fully atheist society there may be fewer constraints upon the worst features of human nature. The political philosopher John Gray (himself non-religious) argues that new atheism itself is an unconscious product of late Christianity, inheriting both the humanist values emerging from the Christian faith, but also is a distorted version of its belief in 'salvation in history' (2009). In-

4 Following his refusal to agree to debate with him in October 2011, the Christian evangelical apologist William Lane Craig criticised Richard Dawkins for 'unmanly' behaviour.

stead of belief in people being saved through the Resurrection of Jesus, Gray suggests new atheists believe that through science and technology humanity can be continually improved. Gray argues this is folly, since not only is religion an ineradicable tendency within humans; he argues that the totalitarian horrors of the twentieth century provided ample evidence of what happens in circum-

stances where religion is repressed and 'progress' is championed instead. The links between atheism and communism (and even Nazism, see below) have become an area of intense contention between the new atheists and their critics, with the former arguing that the atheism of a leader like Stalin was incidental to the wide horror of his regime, rather than causal. However, Peter Hitchens (the Christian brother of the late new atheist, Christopher) claims to find chilling echoes of the rhetoric used by Bolsheviks when suppressing the Church within the language of the current new atheism (2010: 129).

Whilst the historical impact of atheism is contested within these debates, critics of new atheism tend not to respond directly to the more immediate political concerns of the new atheists. Issues such as the perceived discrimination against atheists in schools admissions policies, or the privileged status for religious representatives within institutions or policy-making processes tend not to be particularly discussed. The implied position appears to be that if the new atheists can be shown to be fundamentally wrong in their appraisal of the role of religion in society, then this will in turn undermine the more specific arguments made by new atheists on practical issues. At the same time, academic studies of new atheism tend to focus on the scientific, sociological and theological arguments surrounding it rather than the political dimensions (though these are sometimes mentioned in passing).



'Tina Beattie has criticised both new atheists and many of their opponents for engaging in 'testosterone-driven' posturing.

New atheism?

Atheism itself has a long and complex history. The task of tracing the history of atheism is complicated by the fact that it is often difficult to distinguish atheism (absence of belief in God) with dissent from the established religious authorities of the day. Also, when discussing public figures or intellectuals who were hostile to religion, it is sometimes a matter of debate regarding whether they were atheists as opposed to deists (McGrath & 2004). Certainly some of the atheism which emerged in eighteenth-century France had a strongly political dimension, as it was directed in opposition to the power of the dominant Catholic Church. The later strands of atheism that developed through Marxism and Communism viewed religion as (in part at least) an instrument of ruling-class domination which should be politically opposed. However, intellectually, the atheism of the eighteenth/nineteenth/twentieth centuries was dominated by Enlightenment thought and the development of the natural and social sciences. Many key thinkers viewed religion as being rooted in traditions of superstition which were ignorant of the material bases of natural phenomena. The general assumption was that religions would, and certainly should, fade away over time and be replaced by scientific understanding and secular approaches to political organisation. For much of the time atheism in the West was

a position which was most directly influential in sections of academia. Many political activists (particularly on the Left) may have been atheists, but this was arguably of little direct significance in their activities and they would often work alongside people of faith.

How then does one explain the rise and popularity of radical forms of atheism in the early twenty-first century? An obvious stimulus to the new atheism was the attack on the United States on 9/11, which is cited directly by Harris, Dawkins and Hitchens as a key factor in emboldening them to challenge religion more directly. For such authors there could be no clearer example of the dangers of allowing irrational and extremist beliefs to flourish than that provided by the suicidal mission of nineteen men in the attacks on New York and Washington in 2001. Both the influence of the Christian Right on American politics under George W. Bush, as well as high levels of support for anti-scientific creationist beliefs in the US were factors which further alarmed atheists. More generally the global failure of religion to decline in the manner forecasted by many earlier intellectual groups engendered a sense amongst non-believers that they could not simply sit back and hope that the 'forces of history' would sweep religion away. Even so, the sheer popularity of new atheist texts took most commentators by surprise. It appeared that new atheist messages were giving voice to social and political



In discussion: The so-called 'four horsemen' of the new atheism; Christopher Hitchens (far left), Daniel Dennett (middle left), Richard Dawkins (middle right) and Sam Harris (far right).

concerns which had, to some degree, been hitherto under-represented.

Thus, one of the most distinctive aspects of new atheism is indeed its political character. It is a perspective which is not content to leave atheism as a passive set of private beliefs. New atheism is determined that what it considers the unfair institutional, political and social advantages held by religious groups should be challenged. In many ways it is the taken-for-grantedness surrounding the position of religion in society and the polity which it believes must be questioned. The remainder of this paper attempts to provide a characterisation of the politics of new atheism.

Challenging religious power

Confronting the issue of how new atheists challenge religious power requires using concepts of 'power' itself. Often enough, contemporary theorists speak of power as containing three, or even four 'dimensions'. These positions follow in the tradition of Stephen Lukes's 1974 classic text *Power: A Radical View*. Following Robert Dahl, Lukes originally defined power as 'the ability of A to get B to do something B would not otherwise do'. Lukes argued that power could be found in the three dimensions of *decision-making*, *agenda-setting* and *preference-shaping*. Power can be expressed in decision-making contexts where one set of interests or opinions can prevail over the interests or views of others. However, power can also be exercised through influencing what is, or is not, *decided about* in the first place. Through agenda-setting, some groups may have their interests privileged within institutional processes (just as other interests may be excluded). Lukes describes his proposed third dimension of power as the most 'insidious' since it involves the ability of groups to manipulate or mislead others into adopting beliefs which run counter to their true interests:

is it not the supreme exercise of power to get another or others to have the desires you want them to have – that is, to secure their compliance by controlling their thoughts and desires? ... [I]s it not the supreme and most insidious exercise of power to prevent people, to whatever degree, from having grievances by shaping their perceptions, cognitions and preferences in such a way that they accept their role in the existing order of things, either because they can see or imagine no alternative to it, or because they see

it as natural and unchangeable, or because they value it as divinely ordained and beneficial? (Lukes 1974: 23–4.)

This concept of three-dimensional power has proved controversial as it suggests individuals or groups can be manipulated to the extent that they will actually adopt preferences that will suit the interests of others (Haaugard 2002). It also raises the difficult question of how one might identify a group's 'real' or 'true' interest in the first place (Bradshaw 1994, Hay 2002). However, it will be suggested below that new atheists do indeed identify what they consider to be power relations in which religious ideas are used to prejudice the interests of individuals or groups.

Much of the literature on power engages critically with Lukes's perspective and it is now widely accepted that whilst his three-dimensional view is plausible and empirically applicable, it nonetheless adopts a narrow view of power (Morris 2002, Clegg 1979). Lukes is considered to deal largely with relations of *domination*, to the exclusion of other types of power, including wider processes of social construction. Peter Digeser (1992) suggests that limitations of Lukes's three-dimensional view can be addressed if the theory is combined with the kind of conceptualisation of power developed by Michel Foucault. Indeed Digeser suggests we could regard Foucault as in effect providing a fourth dimension of power.⁵ Foucault suggests that rather than viewing agents being something given which are *acted upon* by power, we should view agents as themselves being *produced* by power (Hoy 1986). Attention is thus focused on how agents, or subjects, are shaped by institutional or social norms and practices. So, rather than treating groups or individuals as having given or fixed interests, a Foucauldian perspective seeks to trace the ways in which subjectivities are constructed through innumerable social, political and institutional practices. This allows for an investigation of the ways in which power can produce negative and/or positive

5 It could be argued that the Foucault's and Lukes's positions ought not to be combined in this way due to what are the arguably different epistemological/ontological assumptions that guide the respective authors. For instance, it might be argued that Foucault's perspective would not permit interests to be treated as 'givens' in the way they arguably are in Lukes's work. In any case, the purpose of this article is not to assess such theories as such but rather to use them as heuristic in teasing out the character of new atheist stances.

effects and does not necessarily imply that power relations will be determined by the intended actions of individuals or groups. The discussion below will utilize this 'fourth dimension' to help articulate the new atheist approach to religion.

a. *Decision-making.* A central claim of new atheism is that religion enjoys an unjustifiably privileged place within public life. In the UK context, it is the central role of the Church of England in the British constitution which accords the Anglican faith special status in British society. In this regard new atheists throw their weight behind wider groups of secular campaigners (such as the National Secular Society) in arguing for a separation of Church and State. New atheists argue that the Church of England's constitutional status is now anachronistic in a highly secular society, within which support for Christianity has been in steep decline. One example is the enduring presence of Anglican bishops in the House of Lords, which ensures that the Church of England has representation and voice within the legislature. Campaigners suggest that if and when 'stage two' of reform of the House of Lords is ever reached, then the Anglican bishops must be removed in the name of greater democracy. The possibility of having an all-elected second chamber is currently being considered in parliamentary committee alongside proposals which would see the number of bishops reduced from twenty-six to twelve.⁶ The Church of England is keen that bishops be retained as a way of (amongst other things) recognising the special nature of the church-state relationship in the UK. A further possibility is that representatives of other faith groups could also take up appointed places in the reformed House of Lords. This would reduce the Church of England's privilege over other large faith organisations. Yet it would maintain the principle that new atheists object to, which is that religious groups should be accorded special influence within secular decision-making. However, the attitude of new atheists towards the House of Lords reform is only part of a wider political agenda which is to see that matters of religious faith be considered exclusively *private* concerns. In other words, religion should not impinge directly upon political processes, which ought, it is argued, to be purely secular. The British state should, therefore, not give religious

6 However, this reduction could actually *increase* the proportion of bishops in a reformed second chamber as overall numbers of bishops may decrease significantly from over 800 down to 400 or even 300.

groups power in legislative decision-making, still less should it preferentially incorporate the views of one particular faith. It is of course accepted that individuals with religious beliefs will participate fully in the polity, but it is contended that when such individuals make arguments for particular decisions these must be presented in secular terms.

The Church of England has responded to this kind of argument, indeed the 2011 church report 'Challenges for the New Quinquennium' (Challenges 2011) argued that vindicating the positive role of the church in Britain was 'partly about taking on the new atheism'. More generally, it was argued that the Church must resist those who wish to treat religion as a 'social problem' and attempts to treat faith as something which should not impact on the public realm. The Church is committed to ensuring that it has 'a special place within the constitution and continues to have a special contribution to make to the life of the nation'.

b. *Agenda-setting.* New atheists are concerned about the ability of religious groups to influence the political agenda, and worry that this can lead to excessive attention being devoted to topics which may not of themselves be of priority to the general public. For instance, in the UK a concern of new atheists and secular campaigning groups has been the efforts by recent governments to extend the use of faith schools; that is to say schools which are administered by particular religious groups rather than local authorities. It is alleged that the Church of England is seeking to extend its influence over school education in part due to its declining influence in other aspects of social life. New atheists also fear that the segregation of young children at a young age by religious grouping is likely to exacerbate social tensions that exist in British society. Faced with the general acceptance of the idea that parents ought to be able to choose faith schools for children if they so wish (and indeed the popularity of faith schools with many parents, often including non-religious families) radical atheists often ask that the *systemic* effect of such individuals choices should be examined. Furthermore, the cumulative effect of establishing ever greater numbers of faith schools, which usually preferentially admit pupils from parents of particular faiths, is to discriminate against pupils of parents without a religious faith. For example, children of atheist parents may find themselves disadvantaged when applying for schools places if they happen to live in areas where several of the available schools are faith schools.

There is also the allegation that this situation fosters and encourages insincerity and dishonesty within the school system where thousands of parents will affect to have a religious persuasion they do not in fact have, or may even have their children baptised, merely in order to help secure their child a place at a particular state-funded school. These are the kinds of issue over which there is arguably social 'irritability' that is rarely reflected within party-political debate in the UK and which atheist campaigners thus have the opportunity to articulate. The perception is that the elites of both political parties and religious groups have had a mutual interest in forwarding faith-based agendas (which do not necessarily equate with the wider public interest). Indeed, under both New Labour's 'third way' and the Conservatives' 'Big Society' governments have continued to look for ways to use the civic resources supplied by religious organisations in delivering policy. This trend has alarmed atheists who fear that non-religious public sector workers may face discrimination as services become transferred to faith organisations who can obtain exemptions from aspects of equalities legislation in their appointment practices. It has also raised fears that faith-based organisations may exploit their position as service providers to proselytise.

It is notable that within the many responses to new atheism there are few direct replies to this kind of criticism. Certainly there have been many strong defences of faith schools which argue that the social goods produced by such schools (e.g. discipline; strong moral values; an embedded sense of community) outweigh disadvantages, and that this is also evidenced in the strong academic performance of children at these schools. The relative disadvantage of non-religious (or other religious) affiliation faced by parents seeking places at good schools for their children is rarely addressed, save rather indirectly in the championing of 'choice' for parents. The attitude of government has generally been that regulation of service provision should be sufficient to ensure that secular interests are not jeopardised by involving religious groups in delivering public policy. Faith groups themselves tend to stress their religious commitment to the general social good, not just to members of their Church. The dominant attitude appears to be that radical atheists and secularists have a doggedly unsympathetic view of organised religion which distorts their view of issues such as faith schools and places them at odds with wider public opinion.

c. *Preference-shaping.* As new atheists believe that there is no 'after-life', they argue the most significant thing about religion is the power it wields in the here-and-now. A particular concern is the way in which they believe religious myths are propagated in ways which in effect accord power and privilege to some actors over others. A clear example is in the education of children. In acknowledging that children of a young age are likely to absorb and believe much of what adults relay to them, new atheists are concerned about the way religion is taught in public schools. Hitchens (2007) and Dawkins (2006) have courted controversy in arguing that the religious indoctrination of children can actually be a form of 'child abuse'. They argue that children can be introduced to sets of belief about the world which may be deeply frightening to them and may subsequently affect their abilities as adults to approach the world in a rational way. For example, they question whether it is reasonable to encourage a child to behave in certain ways by invoking the belief that if they do not they risk an eternity of torture in hell when they die. Richard Dawkins has expressed concern that within some Muslim schools in particular creationist theories about the origins of humanity are being taught in preference to theories of evolution. New atheists, along with many others also express concern about the authority conferred on religious figures through the teaching of religion. They argue that the scandals concerning widespread paedophilia in the Catholic Church arose in part because of the fear children would have in speaking out against their abusers in a context where those figures held huge public respect.

In this area again the critics of new atheism will often insist that they offer an unfair or inaccurate picture of the way religious ideas are actually taught. Defenders of faith often take particular exception to the idea that religious ideas are taught to children as a kind of 'power play' to confer institutional authority rather than as an authentic attempt to guide children in ways to help them cope with the experiences of life and develop their moral intuitions. Most religious believers accept theories of evolution and it is argued new atheists greatly exaggerate the exceptions to this general rule. It is argued that Dawkins's and Hitchens's crude portrayals of notions of hell say more about their own theological ignorance than about what is actually taught to children in schools. Again, it is not only representatives of religious groups who will defend the role of religious values in society. Most recently the UK Prime Minister, David Cameron called for people to stand up and defend

and promote Christian values (2011). In response to what he called 'a slow motion moral collapse' in the UK (signalled by the summer riots in 2011) he called for the championing of the Christian values of 'responsibility, hard work, charity, compassion, humility, self-sacrifice, love, pride in working for the common good and honouring the social obligations we have to one another, to our families and our communities'. In the past Cameron has said that his own Anglican faith 'comes and goes' and some interpreted his speech as political pandering to Christian interests. However, on another reading his speech has been taken as an example of the common attitude that whether or not one personally believes in God, one should still recognise the force and desirability of Christian values. More cynically, some new atheists perceive such examples as instances of the political leaders using religious values as tools for guiding or disciplining the 'masses', whom they fear may otherwise slip further into feral behaviour.

d. *The 'fourth' face of power.* Foucault's discussions of power draw attention to the ways in which power is not just something imposed or embraced by subjects, but also constitutive of subjects themselves. Thus whilst we discuss the power of 'A over B', we also need to consider how power relations have 'produced' A and B. Foucault draws our attention to the ways behaviour is formally and informally regulated by institutions, codes of conduct or broader discourses such as those surrounding gender. New atheists highlight some of the kinds of 'micro-practices' through which religion regulates behaviour, some of which, they argue, have effects which are injurious to religious subjects. New atheists reference the ways in which many religious practices appear to accord women a second-class status, and which in effect disempower and marginalise the female gender. The forced wearing of burkas or veils is a topical example, yet the wider picture is one in which the male leaders of some religious groups seek to perpetuate a patriarchal social order, which can lead to forced marriages and, in the extreme, the 'honour' killing of women.

The role of the Catholic Church came under scrutiny in late 2010 following controversy surrounding Pope Benedict's state visit to the UK. Points of contention included the question of whether British taxpayers (only a minority of whom are Roman Catholic) should be expected to pay for the trip. More generally the issue was raised of whether it was correct to accord the Pope the honour of a state visit in the context of child abuse scandals within the Church. New atheists



UK Prime Minister David Cameron provoked controversy when in December 2011 he called for the promotion of Christian values.

again raised the question of why a religious organisation should be given 'special' status—asking whether a political party, business or trade union would not suffer far greater criticism if child abuse cases had occurred in their institutions. Dawkins and Hitchens even raised the question of whether the Pope could be arrested upon his UK visit following allegations that he knew of child abuse cases but did not report them to the relevant authorities (*Telegraph* 2010). Indeed the Pope's visit did provoke a large-scale protest demonstration in London and media coverage prior to the Pope's arrival did give considerable airtime to critics of the Vatican. Such fierce opposition did not go unnoticed by senior Catholic figures. On the eve of the Pope's arrival his aide Cardinal Kasper pulled out of the trip after comparing the UK to a developing country. He also alleged that Britain was in the grip of 'an aggressive new atheism' which led to discrimination against Christians. British atheists were further antagonised by Pope Benedict's first speech in the UK in which he appeared to blame the crimes of the Nazis on 'atheist extremism'. The Pope was directly trying to give warning of what he thought may happen if God and religion are pushed out of public life, arguing that this could lead 'ultimately to a truncated vision of man and of society and thus a reductive vision of the person and his destiny' (Ratzinger 2010). Considerable media debate followed on the long-standing question of whether Hitler and the Nazis were atheists or Christians and whether Godlessness and/or Christian anti-semitism were key factors in explaining the Holocaust (Dawkins 2010). The Pope also attacked 'aggressive secularism' which he argued fostered lack of tolerance towards religious groups.

Thus far this paper has focused on new atheism's criticism of religions' allegedly privileged role in the public sphere. The political attack of new atheism on religion develops with attempts to challenge religion in the private sphere. Whilst many atheists wish to see religion marginalised in the public sphere, they are often content to leave individuals to exercise faith in their private lives. New atheists fully concur that religious people have full rights to practise religion privately and hold religious beliefs. However, they believe that in order to reduce the harms religion can produce it is also legitimate to discourage religious belief, or at least to question it, in private contexts. Here new atheists perceive the need to challenge the micro-practices, social conventions and informal 'rules' which they believe can work to the benefit of religion. In this regard they have sought to learn lessons from the approaches of both feminists and gay rights campaigners.⁷

Feminists argued that the difficulties women experienced in their daily lives (such as domestic violence) were often self-understood as 'personal' issues, which were rooted either in their own personality or the contingent nature of relationships they were in. Feminists perceived it as important that women should become aware of the widespread, perhaps systematic nature of problems afflicting women. This could potentially be achieved through processes of 'consciousness-raising' (Sarachild 1978). Through discussion and campaigning women could come to perceive their own experience as part of a wider picture of sex discrimination that was perpetuated through dominant cultural attitudes and political institutions. One example concerned the use of language, and the argument that everyday expressions

7 Alas there is insufficient space here to detail the tactics influenced by gay rights campaigners. However two are of importance, (i) the tactic of 'outing'—encouraging gay people/atheists to publicly declare their identity and thus help make these identities more socially accepted; (ii) the tactic of claiming terms (e.g. the phrase 'gay' in order to give them a positive identity). Dawkins and Dennett support campaigns for atheists to self-identify themselves as 'Brights', on the basis that this term can help give atheists a more positive, up-beat image.



Richard Dawkins addresses a crowd attending the 'Protest the Pope' march in London, Saturday 18th September 2010.

could be 'gendered' in ways which, often unwittingly, might reinforce stereotypes concerning the appropriate roles for men and women, for example terms such as 'chairman'.

New atheists have taken lessons from feminist consciousness-raising about language.⁸ For example, Dawkins suggests that the special status accorded to religious beliefs is reflected in some common language use (2006: 338). For example, a child who has parents who are Roman Catholic in their religious beliefs, and who is sent to a Catholic school at age six, is often referred to as a 'Catholic child'. Yet Dawkins asks in what sense it is legitimate to label a six-year-old child a 'Catholic', when at this stage of their life the child can have grasped little of Catholic theology, let alone reflected on how far they wish to endorse it. He points out that we would be unlikely to label the child of Marxist parents as a 'Marxist child'. Sam Harris makes a potentially more far-reaching argument concerning our attitudes to everyday discussions about religious belief. Harris (2004) calls for 'new rules of conversation' which discard the social convention that it is off-limits to challenge someone's religious beliefs. He suggests that there are few if any other areas of popular discourse in which such 'rules' apply. For instance, if an individual expresses views on geography, science, or politics which others disagree with, they are likely to be challenged on these. Harris challenges what he sees as a culture of political correctness surrounding religious faith, which means that the beliefs and practices of religion are not subject to the same process of rational scrutiny that ap-

8 For a rare and helpful discussion of new atheism as a form of identity politics see Taira 2012, forthcoming.

ply to most other areas of life. It also runs the risk of offering similar protection to the views of religious extremists whose views it is in everybody's interest to challenge. Yet even leaving aside such cases, new atheists argue it is unfair to treat religious beliefs as being in a special category. After all, they argue, secular beliefs, such as political ideologies of humanist philosophies may be just as precious, important and even 'sacred' to some individuals as religious beliefs are to others. Yet when discussing others' religious beliefs it is commonly expected that we should respect those beliefs, no matter how implausible we might personally find them. Instead Harris calls for a 'conversational intolerance' towards beliefs (of whatever kind) which seem to confound our own sense of what is reasonable. Far from this being disrespectful to the religious believer, it is actually respectful in as much as it is treating them as reasoning adults who should be willing to defend or discuss their beliefs. New atheists suggest that the lack of such 'conversational intolerance' helps explain why, for example, so many people appear to accept creationist accounts of the origins of humankind.

Conclusion

The analysis above suggests that new atheism's challenge to religious power is multi-faceted and (in principle at least) far-reaching. When emphasising the political aspects of radical atheism, it is perhaps important to highlight the extent to which the approach and style of new atheists is self-consciously chosen as a political means of advancing their cause. For example, in interview Dawkins has admitted that some of his rhetoric (e.g. labelling religious believers as 'faith-heads') is 'mischievous' and 'pushes the envelope' (Dennett 2004). However, this use of words is defended as 'a point of political tactics' (Dawkins 2011). Similarly, Hitchens and Harris have defended their own militant language against religion as (in part) a means of raising the profile of anti-religious arguments and placing these on the public agenda in a way which could probably not be achieved by more 'moderate' methods. One reading of the new atheism is to understand it as a social/political movement in its early stages, during which it is not uncommon for activists to believe that the only way they can begin to seriously advance their cause is by making provocative gestures that test the boundaries of normal conventions of public debate. In other words, new atheists may believe that an atheist approach which is finely nuanced and contains many caveats, footnotes

and qualifications is likely to be politically ineffective. Thus they make attacks on religion that are simplified and at times deliberately crude or rude. If this interpretation is correct, the new atheists may be vulnerable to the criticism that they make use of scientific authority to present what are knowingly tactical arguments. However, the calculation is that whilst their style may bring much criticism and derision, it may ultimately change debates on religion in similar ways to that which radical feminist and gay rights activists managed to alter the discussion of gender and sexuality. Enduring being labelled as 'strident' and 'shrill' might be seen a rite of passage in this regard. Certainly the critics of new atheism have successfully persuaded many that this kind of radical anti-religious approach risks damaging the positive social effects that religion can produce. More generally it has been argued that new atheism misrepresents or misleads people in its presentation of religion. However, the critics tend not to respond so much to new atheism as a political phenomenon, but rather seek to knock down its attacks on 'God' or its alleged caricatures of religious traditions. There are markedly fewer attempts to understand new atheism as in part expressing political resentments which concern institutionalised roles for religion. In turn, this means that responses to new atheism can be less robust than they might be. New atheism criticises the influence and power of religion in diverse ways, yet responses from religious advocates usually dwell only upon aspects of these challenges. Similarly religious scholars and theologians have a tendency to assess new atheism as if their arguments were being presented for review in an academic journal rather than for popular consumption. This might well be considered a legitimate response since new atheists sometimes make use of their academic authority when presenting their arguments. New atheists are often admonished for presenting an intellectually unsatisfying version of atheism which compares less well to the rigour of some atheist philosophers of the past. This observation may not be unjustifiable, yet it arguably misses some of the intention of new atheism. Evaluating new atheism purely by the standards of academic convention may prove no more productive than a political theorist who, say, assesses David Cameron's theory of 'the Big Society' against the academic standards of esteemed right-wing philosophers such as Michael Oakeshott or Fredrich Von Hayek. The 'Big Society' may lack a rigorous philosophical grounding, yet like the new atheism, it is designed with a purposive political agenda in mind rather than making major

new additions to scholarly debate. The debate between new atheists and religious advocates is often understood as an irredeemably hostile and ultimately rather sterile one. Yet if new atheism is understood in more political terms, comparisons with developments in gender relations would suggest that these conflicts and dialogues can actually produce tangible long-term benefits. ■



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