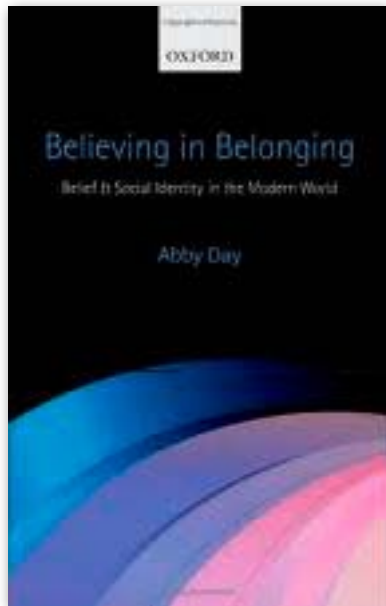


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Mainstream belief and the importance of belonging

Abby Day: *Believing in Belonging. Belief & Social Identity in the Modern World*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011. 230 pp.



IN *BELIEVING IN BELONGING* Abby Day examines how religious identities are formed as social belongings. The title of the book is a response to Grace Davie's (1990) expression 'believing without belonging'. Davie claimed that this phrase characterises the British relationship between personal faith and religious affiliation since the post-war period. Day (pp. 22–3, 26) criticises Davie for using Christian vocabulary when she describes people as 'unchurched'. The term is a negative form, which suggests that these people are passive. How should we instead describe people who identify themselves as Christian, but sometimes claim that they do not believe in anything?

Since the 1990s several sociologists of religion have re-formulated Davie's theory in different ways. In 1993, as a response to Davie, Anders Bäckström described re-

ligiosity in Sweden with the phrase 'believing in belonging': what the Swedes in fact believe in is belonging (Bäckström 1993). Davie (2007: 25) admits that her expression was not particularly suitable as a way of describing belief in the Nordic countries. That said, I find Davie's (2007) more recent concept of 'vicarious religion' more descriptive of many people's approach to the national churches in the Nordic region.

Are these sociologists of religion just playing with words, or is there something substantial behind these expressions? The use of short phrases as theories about the relationship between religious belief, behaviour, identity and affiliation may lead to oversimplifications. This relationship is also very much culture-bound. However, the purpose of Day's book is not to produce yet another version of Davie's theory, but to analyse what people mean by belief, and how belief is related to the other big 'Bs' of religion: belonging and behaviour.

The book is divided into three sections. The first section deals with the methodology and theoretical background of the work. In Chapter One Day studies how the term 'belief' has been employed in both anthropology and sociology. She presents a genealogy of belief, beginning with the classical sociologists Émile Durkheim and Max Weber and ending with contemporary sociologists of religion, for example, Grace Davie, Steve Bruce and Jay Demerath. She concludes that anthropological scholars have 'tended to deconstruct and problematise belief, whereas the sociological tradition leaves it virtually untouched' (p. 27). In Chapter Two Day describes how her research journey began in northern England. She experienced some methodological challenges, from which she developed the methodological framework of her interview study.

In the second section, which consists of five chapters, Day presents the results of her empirical research on mainstream religious belief. In the third section, which consists of three chapters, Day draws theoretical conclusions based on her fieldwork.

A particularly interesting aspect of this book is its methodology. Instead of using survey data Day did in-depth interviews with 68 people in northern England. In her semi-structured interviews Day tried to avoid asking leading questions or using religious vocabulary. When mentioning the words 'belief' or 'believe' she let the interviewees decide for themselves what they read into these words. Instead of asking questions such as: 'Do you believe in God?' or 'Do you think homosexuality is wrong?' she used an open question as a conversation opener: 'What do you believe in?' The question often resulted in a self-reflexive dialogue, not only about religious or holistic beliefs, but also about the informants' beliefs about belonging to a family or other social relationships. Day continued with other questions about morality, meaning, transcendence and self-identification. She asked the informants to elaborate their answers, in order to be able to capture their conceptual frameworks and vocabulary. For instance, she asked why they had described themselves as Christian. She also tried to avoid selecting respondents based on their interest in religion. Instead she selected them from three different age groups from a wide cross-section of society.

What is belief, according to Day? She writes that "'belief" can be relocated from the individual to the social and from the transcendent to the mundane' (p. 6). What does this mean? Belief can either be understood as an individually-based search for meaning, or as something which is collectively

and culturally based. For example, Day concludes that Davie's 'believing without belonging' theory rests on an individualized idea of belief. Day prefers to put emphasis on the social aspects of belief. In her book she also describes belief as something which is 'performed' rather than 'pre-formed'. Belief is performed through rituals of belonging. Belief is emotive, embodied and situated. These are some typical features of mainstream belief in contemporary Europe and North America, according to the study.

Day confirms many things that we already knew. For example, the ways in which belief is performed differs between generations. In Day's study, young people often emphasise the importance of growing and becoming more tolerant. Young people are less likely than people over 50 to identify themselves with Christian denominations. Many of the informants were, in Day's words, 'functionally godless' or 'ontologically anthropocentric'. However, everyone's beliefs do not change – for some people they remain constant. Day brings about the more surprising aspects of the book by questioning many of the categories that are often taken for granted in surveys, and through a discussion of the fact that surveys do not deliver neutral results. However, the cross-cultural comparisons in the discussion of the empirical results are sometimes a bit confusing. In my opinion Day does not make an adequate distinction between northern England, other European countries and North America.

I find the book highly interesting – in particular its methodology and its empirically-based conclusions. It is an important contribution to the current debates within the sociology of religion concerning religious beliefs and changes in the relationship between the religious and secular aspects of Euro-

pean and American societies. It is also an easily approachable book, which can be read by anyone who is interested in research on belief, either from the point of view of sociology, anthropology or religious studies.

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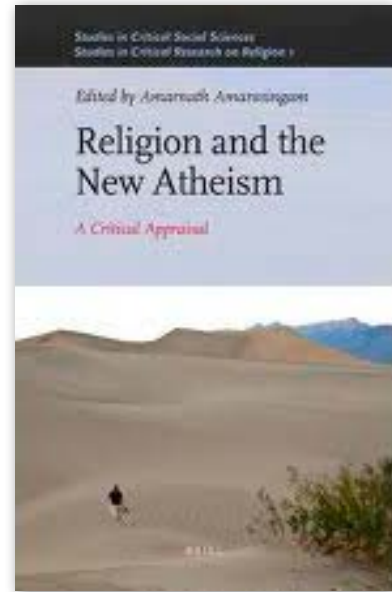


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New Atheism critically analysed from a multi-disciplinary point of view

Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal. Ed. Amarnath Amarasingam. Boston: Leiden, 2010. 253 pp.



IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY religion and atheism have been major subjects of public discussion in the Western countries. Reasons for this are various, but the phenomenon called 'new atheism' is surely one of them. In their best-selling books and media appearances new atheists such as the neuroscientist Sam Harris, biologist Richard Dawkins, the deceased journalist Christopher Hitchens and the physicist Victor J. Stenger have done their best to convince people that the monotheistic religions especially are delusional and responsible for much of the damage done in the world.

However, the concept of the 'new atheism' is somewhat limited as a description of this recent critique of religion. 'Atheism' is usually defined as the absence of belief that any deities exist, but New Atheism includes much more than just that –

it is comprehensive, epistemological, moral and sociological critique of religion – although atheism is undoubtedly its starting point.

Correspondingly, the new atheists' harsh criticism of religion has evoked a strong resistance. Besides theologians and religious people, many atheists and non-religious people have also joined forces with the opponents of new atheism. Overall the subject of new atheism – like religion itself – seems to be highly emotive and it easily tends to divide people into defensive and opposing camps. These kinds of bipolarity trigger media interest and therefore neutral voices are often missing in the public discussion.

Despite the increasing amount of public debate on the issue there has been a lack of scientific research into new atheism. *Religion and New Atheism* edited by Amarnath Amarasingam is an attempt to fill that gap and raise the discourse on religion and atheism to a new level. The book includes twelve evenly written articles from scholars from a wide range of disciplines. The title is a bit misleading because only a few of the authors approach new atheism from a religious or theological point of view. But this is precisely the main point of recommendation for this book. Besides, 1), religion, New Atheism is examined in terms of 2), science, 3), sociology and 4), philosophy and ethics. This many-sidedness guarantees that *Religion and the New Atheism* contains new information and observations as well as raising new questions. The book is divided into these four main parts, giving it a distinct structure.

According to Amarasingam the purpose of the book is not to 'be a traditional response to the new atheism' (p. 3) but 'to engage new atheist literature and place it in the context of larger scholarly discourses and debates' (p. 2). However, as the subtitle *A Critical Appraisal* suggests, many of

the authors – among whom some have religious backgrounds – have clearly taken a firm stand against New Atheism. In this sense *Religion and the New Atheism* grievously resembles a typical response, along the lines of dozens that have been written during recent years, mostly by Christian scholars. However, its criticism is generally more extensively contextualised than is usual in this genre.

In short, in the first part, 'Religion and the New Atheism', Robert L. Platzner introduces the idea that within Judaism there has been a secular counter-tradition ever since the time of Spinoza and that therefore Judaism is far from practising a blind faith, as the new atheists contend. Jeffrey W. Robbins and Christopher D. Rodkey argue that new atheism is a necessary counterpart of evangelical Christianity, but also that they both encourage endless conflict without progress, which radical Christian theology avoids. Rory Dickson criticises Sam Harris's view of Islam and after historical, doctrinal, and social analyses he comes to the conclusion that 'Harris suffers from a profound unfamiliarity with the traditions, beliefs, and culture of its followers' (p. 53).

In part two, 'Science and the New Atheism', Steve Fuller proposes, in his mainly historical analysis, that atheism 'has done precious little for science' (pp. 75–6) and that 'human life cannot be fully explained by Darwinian terms' (p. 76). This is the typical borderline between naturalists and theists: the former usually think that nature is all that exists and can in principle be explained by science; the latter think that behind nature and beyond science there is an intellectual supernatural agent(s). Over the last two decades a cognitive science of religion has arisen to explain in natural (mostly evolutionary) terms why people believe in supernatural

agents and new atheists, to some extent, use these explanations for their own purposes. In the chapter on 'Cognitive Science and the New Atheism', William Sims Bainbridge gives a broad explanation of the basis of cognitive science, but unfortunately does not say much about its connection to the New Atheism.

Many of the core claims of the new atheists – such as; that a) there are no supernatural beings and everything can basically be explained by natural reasons and science, and b) that religion is harmful because it is intellectually and morally backward and creates hostility and wars between people – are old ones, even in the Western world. These claims can be found for example in Baron d'Holbach's and his collaborator's *The System of Nature* (1770). It was one of the first avowedly atheistic printed books which – just like the new atheists' books – was aimed at destroying supernaturalism and its social ramifications. Since then these claims have come up once in a while, but until the present time, atheistic books have never been bestsellers. Thus the big question is: why have these old claims appeared so forcefully right now, albeit in a slightly more modern form and why have they gained such popularity?

The third section of this volume, 'Sociology and the New Atheism', deals with these sorts of questions. William A. Stahl argues that fundamentalism and the new atheism share structural and epistemological parallels and both 'are screams of rage against those that do not conform to their one-dimensional thought' (p. 108). In the chapter 'The New Atheism and Sociology: Why Here? Why Now? What Next?' Stephen Bullivant offers a wide, fresh, and unbiased perspective on the causes and effects of the new atheism and in my opinion, it is one of the most fruitful contributions

to this book. Michael Ian Borer asserts that in many ways the new atheists resemble the first phase of secularization theory, a belief that modernity would (and should) lead to a religionless society. Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith argue that the evangelical approach of new atheism has opened up a space for American freethinkers, but this same space is occupied by their antagonists.

In my view, echoing that of Bullivant, two key social factors behind the New Atheism are undeniable: the Islamist terrorist attacks and American Creationism (as well as the Intelligent Design – ID – movement). The latter has notable social and political influence in America. This partly explains why new atheism is originally specifically an American phenomenon and why new atheists (mainly Stenger and Dawkins) try philosophically and scientifically to debunk classical philosophical arguments for the existence of God. In this sense, the new atheists are in an ontological battle against fundamentalists about what the world is made up of. This probably explains why they are mostly natural scientists (or scholars strongly influenced by natural sciences). On the other hand, religion has received more injurious publicity over the last few decades. Events such as 9/11 or the Catholic Church paedophile scandals are easy targets for the new atheists to say: ‘Look what believing in ancient gods and religious doctrines can lead to.’ As a sequel to the ontological battle, highlighting the negative influences of religion is an essential part of the moral and social battle of new atheists against religious people about whether believing in supernatural is beneficial to humanity.

The fourth part, ‘Philosophy, Ethics and New Atheism’, is largely related to the moral battle mentioned above. Gregory R. Peter-

son states that new atheists’ claims about faulty religious moralities falls apart because out-group compassion is broadly a distinguishing value of the world’s religions. Jeff Nall adduces that the new atheists’ claim that religious indoctrination harms children is problematic because the moral qualities which both Christian and atheist parenting approaches are committed to instilling in their children are virtually identical. Ryan C. Falcioni argues that the biggest philosophical mistake of the new atheists is to treat religious teachings – such as the existence of God – as scientific hypotheses, although in real life, for most believers, religion is applied to the business of learning about life and morality rather than of science.

One thing lacking in *Religion and the New Atheism* is a discussion of the fact that some new atheists do not totally reject religion. For instance in *The End of Faith* (2004) Sam Harris introduces Buddhist meditation as a tool for personal transformation and liberation from the illusion of the self. Likewise, Victor Stenger speaks in *The New Atheism* (2009) about oriental religious teachings and practices by which one can turn away from the ego-centredness and achieve peace of mind. They both admit that religions have an important message – one’s experience of the world can be radically transformed – but have spoiled it by the addition of false, supernatural doctrines. Unfortunately critics of new atheism rarely catch this more spiritual side of the phenomenon, although that really could raise the discourse to a new level.

Overall, *Religion and the New Atheism* shows that new atheism is a significant factor in present-day religious discourse, whether one likes it or not, and it needs further study. This book is one of the first attempts to contextualise new atheism more broadly and it does it

successfully. Hence, it is definitely recommended reading to everyone who is interested in this wrongly named and incompletely understood phenomenon.

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