

## Atheist spirituality

### A follow on from New Atheism?

Books about well-being, self-improvement, life management and spirituality have been popular for many years. It is not news to anybody that such topics sell. However, books on atheism have never become bestsellers until the early years of the twenty-first century. Now the so-called New Atheist books have altogether sold millions. It may sound surprising, but atheism sells. It may have been the idea of a publishers' marketing department to put the two selling points together, but in recent years a number of books about atheist spirituality, spiritual atheism and atheist self-help have been published. That has been one aspect of the increased visibility of atheism and spirituality in public discourse.

Atheist discourse which is combined with 'spirituality' might be called 'post-secular' as it does not fit easily into the neat binary classification between religious and non-religious secular. Whether we choose to use the term or not, this is something that will be reflected on later in this chapter. At this point it is enough to say that there is a large area of the current atheist discourse which is not easy to map neatly onto the binary opposition between religion and the non-religious secular. Therefore, I shall examine this hybrid area in atheist discourse in relation to three aspects: monotheism, spirituality and meditation. I shall argue that atheist discourse situates itself against monotheism, but that some spokespersons combine atheism with spirituality and meditation. This works as an example of a wider and recent trend in society where a blurring of the earlier normative boundaries between religion and non-religion has become fairly common, not necessarily in terms of beliefs, but of practices. Even though there is a long tradition of non-theistic and atheistic readings of Buddhism, for example, they have rarely been combined with an explicit criticism of monotheistic traditions and atheist consciousness-raising.

This chapter proceeds as follows. First I shall describe and analyse the ways in which spirituality is dealt with in the recent atheist bestsellers. Then I shall focus on less well known books which could be labelled as books about

atheist spirituality. After that I shall summarise my understanding of the approaches to aforementioned aspects in the atheist discourse. Finally, I shall end my presentation with two general conclusions, one analytical and the other critical.

### **Uneasiness about spirituality in New Atheism**

The backbone of the so-called New Atheist discourse consists of five key authors and their books, which were published between 2004 and 2009. There are many differences and disagreements among these, and therefore placing a selection of heterogeneous authors under one term is not fully accurate, but there are similarities to be noted. One of the obvious similarities in their message is that they are all arguing against monotheism from the perspectives of natural science and scientific rationality. They consider religion to be based on wrong and harmful propositional beliefs (i.e. religious statements are understood to be false knowledge-claims about the world). Their main targets are Christian creationists and Islamic fundamentalists, but their negative evaluation is extended to all religious institutions and moderate religiosity. Furthermore, they have praised each other and four of them have participated in recorded round-table discussions in September 2007 which ran under the title ‘The Four Horsemen’. Regarding spirituality, the New Atheists are divided into two camps.

*The God Delusion* by the British evolutionary biologist and popular science author Richard Dawkins was published in 2006. It was an instant best-seller that ridiculed religious beliefs. There is no spirituality or meditation in the index of the book. *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* by the journalist Christopher Hitchens, who grew up in Britain and later emigrated to the United States, was published in 2007. There is no spirituality or meditation in the index of this bestseller either. Both Dawkins and Hitchens are explicitly anti-religious, but they mostly deal with monotheistic traditions and their understanding of religion is rooted in the Abrahamic religions (Christianity, Judaism, Islam). Still, it is safe to assume that they are not particularly sympathetic towards non-theistic spirituality or meditation. In his book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, published in 2006, the Darwinian philosopher Daniel Dennett, who works in the United States, writes about spirituality, but only in order to analyse why ‘spirituality’ has a

positive association for many. He is not advocating it.<sup>1</sup> Meditation is not a word found in the index of his book.

These three well-known atheists who have not expressed any sympathy towards spirituality are now excluded from what I explore here. However, Sam Harris, whose bestseller, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, was published in 2004 when the author was doing his PhD in neuroscience in the United States, differs from Dawkins, Hitchens and Dennett when it comes to ‘spirituality’. Since then Harris has published two more books—*Letter to a Christian Nation* (2007) and *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (2010), based on his PhD, in 2010, but from the point of view of spirituality *The End of Faith* is the most important of these.

Harris is known for his positive approach to spirituality and eastern thought, even though he does not accept any supernatural elements. It is also known that after college he travelled in India and Nepal and studied with Hindu and Buddhist teachers (Miller 2010). What he means by spiritual (and mystical) are rare, significant and personally transformative experiences. These are, according to him, worth seeking, and the results of what he calls spiritual practices are ‘genuinely desirable’, but at the same time he emphasises that spirituality is ‘deeply rational’ and ‘universal’; something that binds people together, whereas religious irrationality separates people. (Harris 2006: 40, 45.)

Even though the word meditation is not in the index of *The End of Faith*, there actually is a subheading with that name, just after subheading ‘The Wisdom of the East’. Harris suggests that the West is standing on the shoulder of dwarfs as opposed to the spiritual giants of the east, such as the Buddha, Nagarjuna and others (p. 215), and continues to write positively about meditation. The aim of meditation, according to Harris, is to get rid of the duality of subject and object, to get rid of the self and its identification with thoughts in order to ‘recognize the condition in which thoughts themselves arise’ (p. 217). The end result should then be a positive one, whereas religious practices

1 Dennett suggests that materialism as a philosophical standpoint is confused with the meaning of materialism in everyday language, in which it refers to senseless, uncaring and empty consumerism and hedonism. Therefore, if one wants to differentiate him/herself from a ‘materialist’ in the everyday sense, it is best to be ‘spiritual’, which is associated with moral goodness and other positive attributes. (Dennett 2007: 302–7.) I agree with Dennett, but here it is more important that as a self-identified materialist Dennett is not interested in evaluating whether spirituality or the practices related to it are good or bad things.

are seen as having a negative impact, simply because they are irrational, according to Harris (p. 221).<sup>2</sup>

An emeritus professor of physics and astronomy, Victor J. Stenger, who considers himself as the fifth horseman, published a book called *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* in 2009. Stenger, who made a career as a scientist in the United States and who has also become a well-known critic of religion, judges monotheistic religions as being incapable of accounting for the suffering of the world. He goes on to claim that Christianity and Islam are the most popular religions in the world, because they ‘appeal to our most selfish instincts with the promise of eternal life’, reinforcing the negative attitude towards Abrahamic religions. However, he continues that Buddhist and other eastern teachings are still applicable today. Then he nods to Harris, maintaining that they both think that the practices of the eastern traditions, including meditation, have the same positive force, even when they are stripped of any supernatural baggage. (Stenger 2009: 15–16.) Stenger (p. 222) says that he has never seriously practised meditation, but he clearly deems it as a positive practice. He thinks Zen might be difficult for a beginner and therefore it might be better to start with Transcendental Meditation or Yoga, but Stenger also warns about the spiritual and mystical baggage that may come with them. Finally, he suggests that we need a fully materialistic method of meditation.

This positive approach to spirituality and meditation has received an ambiguous response among fellow-atheists. For instance, the journalist and atheist Johann Hari (2005) who regularly contributes to the English newspaper *The Independent* criticised Harris in an otherwise positive review for advocating spirituality and giving up a rational atheist case. According to Hari the book

takes another strange turn. Having savaged the idea of religion for over a hundred pages, Harris suddenly announces that he wants to craft an atheist brand of “spirituality”. He praises “the great philosopher mystics of the East” including the Buddha – and says that “spiritual experience is clearly a natural propensity of the human mind.” At this point – as somebody

2 The emphasis on spirituality and eastern traditions is further evidenced in the following detail: the German translation of *The End of Faith* was published by the spirituality / new age publishing house *Spuren*, arguably because of the author’s interest in Buddhism and spirituality. I would like to thank Thomas Zenk for pointing this out.

who feels no hunger for a “spiritual” dimension to my life at all – I began to choke. (Hari 2005.)

Hari continues that Harris ‘flirts with the idea that we can connect with non-material realms (at one point, he eccentrically claims there is evidence for “psychic phenomena”) – which hardly seems to be a rational atheist case’ (Hari 2005). What seems to be at stake in the issue of spirituality in atheist discourse is rationality itself, which in addition to the natural sciences, is the foundation so-called New Atheists believe they stand on. Harris and Stenger, who support spirituality and meditation, emphasise their rational nature, while others see spirituality as verging on the supposed non-rationality of monotheistic religions.

### Versions of atheist spirituality

After the publication of the New Atheist bestsellers there has been a new twist in the current (predominantly Anglophone) atheist discourse. I will explore three examples of recently published books which can be understood as following on from the so-called New Atheist publications. These are books written by Steve Antinoff, André Comte-Sponville and Eric Maisel. Even though they do not comment much on the new atheists, they have obviously landed onto a market which is already filled with atheist books which have been focusing on criticising religion instead of telling like-minded people how they could or should live. The idea that these books are to some extent follow on from the new atheist bestsellers becomes clear by having a look at the blurbs and praises for these books:

Continuing where writers such as Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris left off. . . (Back cover of Antinoff).

A book that takes the current atheist/believer debate to a much higher level (Thomas Cathcart & Daniel Klein of Comte-Sponville).

. . . Maisel does what none of the New Atheists have succeeded in doing: elaborating what atheists *do* believe (Hemant Mehta).

. . . more witty than Hitchens, more polished and articulate than Harris, and more informative and entertaining than Dawkins. . . (David Mills of Maisel).

... a giant leap beyond where the New Atheist authors have gone before (Donna Druchnas of Maisel).

On the one hand it is obvious to regard these books as following on from New Atheism, because that is how they are located in the current discourse. They are trying to answer the questions that remain unanswered by the New Atheist bestsellers in which the main focus was criticism rather than constructions of a positive, atheistic standpoint. On the other hand, the ideas presented in these books are not completely absent in the books written by Harris and Stenger, as has become clear. I shall now turn to these follow ons and I shall describe their views briefly.

My first example is a book by Steve Antinoff. *Spiritual Atheism* was published in 2009 and its author has studied and practiced Zen Buddhism and meditation extensively. Antinoff's spirituality is mainly a Zen Buddhist approach on how to live a happy and satisfying life, with reminders that this is an atheist standpoint. He even argues that Zen is one of the historical manifestations of spiritual atheism.

Antinoff suggests that a need for the spiritual remains in atheism and proposes meditation as a main tool for the evasion of I. He writes that 'the appeal of eastern thought is the prospect of the realization of the infinite, of oneself as infinite, without recourse to God' (2009: 67). According to Antinoff, our experience of ourselves and our world leaves us ultimately disappointed. This feeling is intolerable, but because there is no god, different solutions must be sought (p. 9). In his words, it does not matter whether you are an atheist, you will still have an ineradicable spiritual longing (p. 19), and the aim of the book is to help you in coping with that. The approach is focused on the individual, not society, and therefore it is also understandable that of all the eastern traditions he leaves Confucianism aside as uninteresting. Extensive quotes from Zen masters, combined with suggestions for meditation practices are the main advice given by the author, who is convinced that mundane human experiences, such as sexual love, artistic creativity and social vocations will fail to satisfy us. Therefore, Antinoff suggests, we need spirituality and meditation in order to satisfy our atheistic condition. However, the author has very little to say about atheism beyond his note that there is no god. Hence it is hard to imagine any other reasons than marketing ones for putting the word 'atheism' in the title, but as such it challenges the neat distinction between the religious and non-religious secular.

The second example is a book by André Comte-Sponville, a well-known French philosopher. *L'Esprit de l'athéisme: Introduction à une spiritualité sans*

*Dieu* was published in French language in 2006 and translated into English in the following year. It is available with two different titles, *The Little Book on Atheist Spirituality* and *The Book of Atheist Spirituality*.

The author argues that 'spirituality' is far too important to be left to fundamentalists and that it remains the task of atheists to reinvent spirituality. It is something that is situated between fanaticism and nihilism. (Comte-Sponville 2007: x.) His definitions are highly abstract, formulated in ways such as 'spirituality is life of a spirit', a capacity to act, immaterial substance that thinks, loves, remembers, contemplates, mocks and jokes (p. 135). Generally Comte-Sponville presents himself as a defender of the Enlightenment, freedom, humanity and tolerance. He sees spirituality and mysticism as being concomitant with this framework and opposed to religious beliefs. He goes on to describe atheist spirituality as a godless standpoint, which brings with it experiences of an oceanic feeling; mystery, plenitude, serenity, the unity of life and the 'immanensity' of nature (as opposed to its transcendence). In addition to references to the western philosophical tradition, he glances at Taoist writings and Krishnamurti, but, contrary to Antinoff, he is not keen on highlighting these resources and he does not write extensively on meditation. Meditation is a fairly positive practice, but it refers more to general contemplation and silent thinking than any specific technique (p. 143).

Comte-Sponville thinks that organised religion, even a monotheistic one, can be a useful resource for an individual. He means that the need for rituals at key moments of life persists, and because non-religious rituals have not developed satisfactorily enough, he sees no problem in participating in Christian rituals if that is part of the tradition in marking important passages of life and binding people together. However, these are practices which do not include an acceptance of religious beliefs. Furthermore, he would like to see emotionally satisfying non-religious rituals developing in the future and replacing the religious ones. (Comte-Sponville 2007: 7–11.) The use of 'spirituality' in this discourse has a vague connection to eastern traditions, but it is also a term that helps him to differentiate his position from nihilism and meaninglessness. Furthermore, it works here in arguing that you can be both an atheist and a sensitive person at the same time, that to be an atheist does not mean living life with zero intensity. However, it is difficult not to draw the conclusion that the function of putting two catch-words in the title—atheism and spirituality—is to make it a more tempting choice in the bookshop. Even so it is an example of a discourse which challenges the meaning system that is based on a strict distinction between religion and non-religious secular.

The third example is a book by Eric Maisel. *The Atheist's Way: Living Well without Gods* was published in 2009 and its author is a psychotherapist and a creativity coach who works in the United States. Maisel is convinced that religions—including Paganism, Astrology and I Ching—interfere with people's ability to live well. He even thinks that religions may pose a threat to the survival of the human species, although this is simply assumed and not argued on the basis of evidence.

Maisel differs from Antinoff and Comte-Sponville in his approach to the use of the term 'spirituality'. He suggests that keeping the word 'spirituality' in the atheist vocabulary is a grave mistake. He suspects that many atheists want to use the term to describe their oceanic feelings, or sense of something mystical. Maisel supports practices such as meditation, but maintains that there is nothing spiritual in it—meditation is just an ordinary human activity (2009: 155). Maisel thinks that the search for special experiences may be important, but they should not be elevated above the experience of having a cheese sandwich with your daughter (and this is where Maisel differs from Harris). Meditation, climbing the mountain and having a cup of tea can all be part of meaning-making.

Instead of spirituality Maisel writes about 'passionate *meaning-making*' and a construction of meaning as an atheist. He wants people to 'replace superstitions with natural beauty' and assures us that 'each life can have meaning'. The prototypical examples of meaning-making are poetry, painting and music. This search for meaning is also visible in blurbs and compliments by other authors (all printed in the book):

. . .how do you bravely face the world as it is and create meaning for yourself. . . (John Allen Poulos).

. . .we don't find meaning – we make meaning (Dan Barker).

. . .The Atheist's Way offers a meaningful approach to life. . . (Phil Zuckerman).

. . .provides a foundation for making meaning and living purposefully. . . (Donna Druchnas).

Maisel's book focuses on individual well-being. It is a guidebook for a happy and meaningful life, given that you are already living a middle-class life in which you have succeeded in having a good share of scarce resources and you



can afford the luxury of making meaning by enjoying and exploring poetry, painting and music. Furthermore, it is tempting to raise the question: why it is so important to put the word atheism in the title and define his approach as the atheist's way? Why is it not just like all the other books in which the main question is how to live a meaningful life? To some extent it is like any other book. It seems to me that the main reason for putting atheism in the title is the recognition that there is a market for books about atheism. Furthermore, he tries to construct atheism as 'a complete worldview' and tradition. This is surprising as the so-called atheistic tradition is built on random references to heterogeneous thinkers. In addition, it is unclear why there is a need for a complete worldview if atheist meaning-making is 'private, personal, individual and subjective'? Maisel goes on to say that 'every argument for the objectivity of meaning is merely someone's attempt to elevate her subjective experience and her opinions above yours and mine' (2009: 50). However, soon after that he contradicts this by stating an objective example of failed meaning-making: 'How can you smoke two packs of cigarettes a day and also claim to be making meaning? . . . You can't – and you know it.' (Maisel 2009: 73.) Here my intention is not to deconstruct Maisel's or anyone else's project, but examples like this underline the fact that Maisel is giving more direct suggestions than Antinoff or Comte-Sponville. Furthermore, he contrasts meaning-making to religious traditions and therefore appears more anti-religious than the others.

Because Maisel discredits the term spirituality it is not fair to describe his approach as being fully part of the 'atheist spirituality' discourse. However, there is a common area: in addition to having 'atheism' in their titles and being opposed to a belief in God, these are all self-help books which have fairly positive attitudes towards the meditation practices which have arisen from traditions that people tend to classify as religious. Furthermore, Maisel's aims are mainly the same as Antinoff's and Comte-Sponville's. Namely, he wants to show how atheists can pursue happiness and a satisfying life without believing in God.

### **Atheist spirituality versus monotheism**

One of the main aspects characterising atheist spirituality is that the use of the word 'atheism' is an attempt to differentiate itself from monotheistic religions, but not always from spirituality or meditation practices. The following figure shows the area of atheist spirituality by plus signs (+) which indicate a positive

	Monotheism	Spirituality	Meditation
Dawkins	–	–	–
Hitchens	–	–	–
Dennett	–	–	–
Harris	–	+	+
Stenger	–	+	+
Antinoff	–	+	+
Comte-Sponville	–	+	(+)
Maisel	–	–	(+)

**Monotheism, spirituality and meditation in contemporary atheist discourse**

approach to selected variables, whereas minus (–) indicates either a negative or an indifferent attitude.

Antinoff's approach is a clearest example of atheist spirituality, but Harris and Stenger also share his approach, although I would imagine that Harris and Stenger would not want to be associated or grouped with Antinoff. Furthermore, Comte-Sponville and Maisel share this position to some extent: Comte-Sponville is arguing for spirituality while Maisel drops the word. However, both have slightly positive attitude towards meditation. There are other examples not mentioned earlier in this chapter. For instance, the British atheist and popular science author Susan Blackmore, who has been a defender of the meme theory of Dawkins and Dennett, is well-known for her interest in Zen and meditation practices, even though she explicitly denies being a Buddhist.<sup>3</sup> In addition, one of the best-known public intellectuals representing scientific rationality and critical attitudes towards religions in Finland, Esko Valtaoja, who is Professor of Astronomy at the University of Turku, has stated that even though he is not Buddhist, Zen Buddhism speaks of existence and its meaning in a language he understands (Pihkala & Valtaoja 2010: 241). What is more, surveys confirm the wider extent of this position, also showing that atheist spirituality follows on from New Atheism from the perspective of public discourse and the book publishing industry, but not in people's everyday beliefs and practices. More precisely, being a self-identified atheist does not mean that you do not have any beliefs that might be labelled religious or spiritual. For instance, a significant proportion of self-identified

3 See her personal website: <http://www.susanblackmore.co.uk/Zen/intro.htm> (accessed on 2 June 2011).

atheists in Finland believe in spirit or a life force and reincarnation (13.5% and 13.3% respectively according to 2005 and 2000 World Values Surveys)<sup>4</sup>. In other words, avowed atheists distinguish themselves from monotheistic religions (especially Christianity), but a considerable minority hold beliefs that are associated with a variety of eastern traditions. These patterns are not limited to Finland; there is also evidence from other European countries and North America. In the United States 21 per cent of atheists claim to believe in God or a universal spirit (Micklethwait & Wooldridge 2009: 133). On the scale from 0 to 8 (0 meaning not at all and 8 meaning very much), 1.6 of avowed atheists who are active in Humanist groups in the United States are spiritual (and religious 0.81) (Pasquale 2007: 53), suggesting that some atheist/Humanist activists even consider themselves to be 'spiritual'.<sup>5</sup> There is also evidence that belief in God has increased in France among young people who declare themselves to be convinced atheists (Caron 2007: 120). Taken together, these examples suggest that the boundaries between religion and non-religion, religion and atheism, spirituality and atheism are porous, even though popular atheists are unanimous in criticising the propositional beliefs of monotheistic religious traditions.

### Conclusions: analytical and critical

By examining popular atheist books I have shown that spirituality and meditation is seen as an important part of atheism by many. Even when the word 'spirituality' is not supported, as in the case of Maisel, meditation practices are defended. I draw two main conclusions from this. One is analytical and the other is critical.

First of all, the uses of spirituality in atheist writings are examples of blurring the discursive boundaries of what is typically classified as religious and as secular (non-religious). It is not unusual for our times, when the normative place of religion in society is gradually changing and when there is a widen-

4 WVS material is available in the Finnish Social Science Data Archive (FSD<sub>2118</sub>: World Values Survey 2005, Finland; FSD<sub>0154</sub>: World Values Survey 2000, Finland).

5 Even though Frank Pasquale himself assumes that their 'spirituality' is immanent and non-religious, other evidence from the same north western area gives good reasons to doubt his opinion (O'Connell Killen 2007: 74–6). Some of Pasquale's interviewees are perfect examples of the kind of atheistic spirituality I am addressing here, as they are vehemently 'atheist' and 'anti-religious' with regard to supernatural ideas and beliefs, but participate in Buddhist group meditation (Pasquale 2007: 55).

ing gap between religious beliefs and practices. In other words, the norm that religion should be a matter of private and non-political beliefs which take visible form mainly in worship practices is gradually changing as some people use religious services, or participate in practices while explicitly denying the doctrines and belief-systems related to them. This, however, does not necessarily indicate that the beliefs and practices are somehow incoherent, or that people's beliefs and practices should form a coherent whole, but it has been a dominant assumption in deciding what counts as 'religion' (most obvious in legal definitions of religion). It simply means that people can meditate and participate in rituals for pragmatic reasons without buying into the theological doctrines attached to them. Therefore, the follow on from the New Atheism in contemporary public discourse is an atheism that comes very close to certain religious practices, even though it remains atheist in most stated beliefs. Atheist spirituality is an emerging discourse. It has not replaced the popularity of the New Atheists and the books I have introduced have not been as successful as the bestselling ones written by Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens. However, it is a discourse that has emerged in public after the rise of New Atheism. It is hard not to think that authors and publishers ride on the success of the New Atheists by putting 'atheism' in the titles of their publications because it sells at the moment. A book about spirituality or meaning-making without reference to atheism would be part of saturated market of books about self-help and well-being, but 'atheist spirituality' gets the attention of those who are interested in the recently increased visibility of atheism in the media, while making the boundary between religious and non-religious less clear at the same time.

Is this 'atheist spirituality', then, an example of 'post-secular'? I have some reservations on the usefulness of the term. The main one relates to its normative uses, which are sometimes mixed with empirical descriptions of the changes in society. It is fairly often used by scholars who explicitly or implicitly argue that the post-secular is a good thing, especially if it refers to an increasing presence of religion in the public life and the challenge from a 'religious' standpoint to 'secular' politics. So far I have not found an example of a scholar who is saying that 'there is something like a post-secular society, but it is an unfortunate development'. Those who oppose that development argue that there is no such thing as a post-secular society (or condition)—only a secular society. Rather than taking 'post-secular' as an unproblematic analytical category, it is good to be cautious and keep in mind the ideological baggage that was already evident in the early uses of secular and secularisation in public discourse.

There are at least three less problematic uses of the term ‘post-secular.’ First would be a case when it refers to a situation when the normative distinction between private-religious and the public-secular has been questioned—for example when a government integrates religious communities into political decision-making and practices. The integration of religious communities into British politics is a useful example. During Tony Blair’s Labour government religious communities were conceptualised as ‘partners’ in politics rather than insisting on the distinction between private faith and public politics (Beckford 2010). This integration of religious communities has continued in the coalition government’s idea of ‘the Big Society’ in which the activities that have previously been understood as being the province of the state have been delegated to religious communities and other civil associations, who are assumed to take care of such tasks for a lower price, thus making it possible for the government to make cuts in public spending. A second, less problematic usage would be to understand ‘post’ not as ‘after’ but as querying (cf. post-colonialism and poststructuralism). Then post-secular would refer to querying and challenging the legacy of the secular and it would not be a descriptive term for what comes after the secular period of modernity. A third possible use would be a case when it becomes difficult to classify groups and their practices if the available options are religious and secular. Then ‘post-secular’ could mean simply the situation where boundaries between religion and the (non-religious) secular have become porous.

It may be possible to call this blurring of the discursive boundaries ‘post-secular’, but I still find it more comfortable to follow the vocabulary I used in my book *Notkea uskonto* (Liquid religion, Taira 2006). The main argument in the book was that after the classification system of what Zygmunt Bauman calls solid modernity—including a normative distinction between religion and politics, religion and the secular, private and public and so on—the boundaries are becoming more difficult to keep up and justify, and that this ‘liquefaction’ is manifest in people distancing themselves from doctrinal religious beliefs while at the same time being interested in religious or spiritual practices. In addition to my study, the term ‘liquid religion’ has been used recently by Bryan S. Turner (2011: ix) when describing the blossoming of a post-institutional, hybrid and post-orthodox spirituality. A similar argument is to be found in the works of other scholars. For example, Ulrich Beck (2010: 68) has argued that in what he calls second modernity (equivalent of Bauman’s liquid modernity), the boundaries between religion and non-religion are becoming blurred and porous, leading from the logic of either/or to the more ambiguous model of both/and. If modernity in its solid phase had a

'dream of order' (Bauman 1991) with the separation of differentiated spheres, such as religion and non-religion, private and public, religion and politics, the boundaries between culture, economy, science, politics and religion are collapsing and leading towards 'de-differentiation' (Lash 1990: 11). This does not mean the disappearance of boundaries—and in many ways the boundaries are the focal points of struggles, as in the case of New Atheism—but that it has become very difficult to maintain the 'dream of order'.

If the New Atheists have attempted to put the boundaries back into their usual places, that is to say, to make a strict separation between scientific rationality and religion by using narrow conceptions of scientific rationality and religion, then the spiritual atheists make a move that liquefies the boundaries and blurs them again. It is typical that this happens by insisting on atheism when it comes to beliefs, but accepting practices which arise from 'religious' and 'spiritual' traditions and are not considered to be fully secular, irreligious or atheistic.

Secondly, the uses of spirituality in atheist writings continue the trend whereby atheism is separated from revolutionary thinking and critical analyses of society. Sources of atheist spirituality are not based on the critical studies of the 'academic Left', that is to say critical theory, continental philosophy, Marxism and cultural theory. In atheist spirituality the key sources are eastern wisdom, Zen, even some Christian theologians (especially Paul Tillich) and existential psychotherapy. This indifferent, or in some cases negative, approach to critical cultural theory holds true also for the New Atheists as their key sources are a theory of evolution, the natural sciences and Anglo-American analytical philosophy.<sup>6</sup> Atheist spirituality—at least in the examples examined here—is leaning on an individualistic approach to well-being, rather than on exploring and addressing social injustices. This emphasis reveals that the intended reader belongs to the middle-class and is eager to improve its own quality of life with a modicum of meditation and other spiritual practices without drifting away from an otherwise non-religious lifestyle and set of beliefs. This critical note has been pointed out in the analysis of the discourse on capitalist spirituality by Jeremy R. Carrette and Richard King (2005; see also Taira 2009), for instance, and here my conclusion is that when

6 A good example is Richard Dawkins (2007: 388) who refers to ideas represented by scholars such as Michel Foucault, Roland Barthes and Julia Kristeva as 'haute francophonism'. This is part of the New Atheist rhetoric where 'irrational scholars'—sometimes labelled imprecisely as 'postmodern relativists' and 'social constructionists'—are lumped together with 'irrational believers' in order to highlight their own rationality and the superiority of natural science over cultural theory.

‘atheism’ is combined with spirituality, it makes no difference in changing the emphasis from decontextualised individual well-being towards critical analyses of social structures, the organisation of society and socially more burning issues of exploitation, inequality and injustice. Whether focusing on these issues rather than decontextualising the individual from society would help individuals more in the long run is not a question addressed in the books on atheist spirituality examined here (or in the New Atheist bestsellers).

Despite the criticism directed at religious institutions, the current discourse on atheism, whether it be the New Atheism or a spiritual form, is about accepting the status quo in other respects. This means that despite the increased visibility of atheism in public life, the discourse on atheism has become fairly narrow in its sources, references and political standpoints. Therefore, it is reasonable to ask, where are atheists who would insist on a revolution, or on social justice, or even on a slight improvement of the situation of those who are not so well-off? Where is there an atheism which offers us an analysis of the structural and systemic problems of society, rather than insisting on narrow and often superficial criticisms of monotheistic religions? If someone says that it is not the primary aim of atheists to analyse the whole of society, then my advice would be to go back to Nietzsche, Marx, Sartre and their followers, who were atheists, but whose atheism was strongly intertwined with a radical social criticism and whose analyses were never limited to religion only.

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