



## New Atheism and the Criticism of Islam: From Transnational Discourses to Local Implementation?

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### Abstract

One of the ideas in the debates concerning anti-Islamic activities is that atheists, especially prominent celebrity atheists – commonly known as ‘New Atheists’ – have provided support and justification for anti-Islamic attitudes and activities. Given that Sam Harris, one of the so-called New Atheists, stated that he started writing his first book, *The End of Faith* (2004), immediately after the 9/11 attacks, criticism of Islam is expected to be prevalent among some atheists. The more interesting questions, however, concern what kind of criticism there is, how to make sense of its reasons and motivations, whether it dominates the New Atheist agenda (as some argue), and whether the criticism has been somehow influential in various localities. In examining New Atheist publications and their possible presence at the local level, particularly in Finland, this article suggests that an exceptionally pronounced anti-Islamic approach applies mainly to Harris rather than to New Atheism as a whole. Instead, several other significant aspects come into play, highlighted by other New Atheists, and this is largely true of local atheist activism too. Thus, while a weak link between New Atheists and anti-Islamic activities can be made because of their promotion of strong criticism of religion, New Atheism is not the key to understanding such activities, at least in the Finnish context.

Keywords: *atheism, criticism, Islam, Islamophobia, New Atheism*

References to freedom of speech are ubiquitous among those who defend various provocative anti-Islamic activities. Similarly, freedom of speech is one of the explicitly advertised key values among high-profile atheists who speak critically of religion. In the twenty-first century New Atheists have been the main representatives of the latter position, and the idea that there is a strong connection between anti-Islamic activities and New Atheists is sometimes made in the media and in scholarship, as evidenced later in this

article. However, this article suggests that although New Atheists are very critical of Islam, the connection between anti-Islamic activities and New Atheism is relatively weak or at least indirect, and even weaker between anti-Islamic activities and local atheist activism.

Given that Sam Harris, one of the New Atheists, stated that he started writing his first book, *The End of Faith* (2004), immediately after the 9/11 attacks, criticism of Islam is expected to be prevalent in what came to be called New Atheism. Rather than asking whether New Atheists criticize Islam, the more relevant questions concern the kind of criticism there is, how to make sense of its reasons and motivations, whether, as some argue (see e.g. Edis 2015; Emilsen 2012; Khalil 2018), it is the royal road to understanding New Atheism, and whether the criticism has influenced local practice.<sup>1</sup> The main question animating the first part of the examination is whether the criticism of Islam is simply an example of the general New Atheist critique (i.e. one among others), or whether it is a special case (i.e. its special target)? The second part of the article takes the reading from transnational New Atheist discourses to local practices, especially in Finland, and asks whether the criticism has been integrated into grassroots atheism. This part evaluates the implementation of New Atheism in Finland to argue that the link between atheist activism and criticism of Islam is weak, despite the fact that an explicit admiration of freedom of speech unites them.

As the term New Atheism is contentious, it should be noted it was coined by the journalist Gary Wolf, who named Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett as New Atheists in an interview with the *Wired* magazine in 2006. Christopher Hitchens was later included among atheism's 'four horsemen'. Some scholars have questioned whether there is any coherence in the term 'New Atheism' (e.g. Zenk 2013), and I do not assume that people labelled as such agree on everything and have no major differences. 'New Atheism' is a journalistic term used to group different thinkers, but the discourse on 'New Atheism' has been lively, and there has also been empirically verifiable cooperation between the four key thinkers to whom the term is typically attached. I therefore have no major objection to using the terms 'New Atheism' and 'New Atheists' as a short-cut in discussing the four key authors.

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<sup>1</sup> Edis writes that 'the negative perception of Islam among the New Atheists [...] goes beyond their distaste for those conservative forms of Christianity that most affect the lives of most English-speaking atheists' (Edis 2015, 176). Khalil is slightly more reserved in suggesting that the 'New Atheist authors [...] reserve some of their strongest criticism of religion for Islam in particular' (Khalil 2018, 167). These are not necessarily and obviously wrong claims, but they may give the impression that Islam is a special case for all New Atheists equally, and that the New Atheists devote a lot of time and space to writing about Islam.

### **Bestsellers and their authors: Islam in New Atheist publications**

Of all four New Atheist bestsellers, Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* is by far the most alarmed about the Islamic threat to rational thinking and the 'modern world'. Islam is the main target throughout his first book, and the longest chapter is 'The Problem with Islam' (chapter 4, 45 pages). He describes Islam as violent, suggesting that 'we are at war with Islam' (Harris 2004, 109) and offering selected quotations from the Qur'an to show how Muslims believe and behave. His second book, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2007, 85), describes Muslims as 'utterly deranged' and claims that the idea of Islam as a peaceful religion hijacked by extremists is a fantasy, suggesting that violent Islam is the real Islam, supported by (his reading of) the Qur'an. Even his third book, *The Moral Landscape* (2010), which focuses on how science might be able to constitute the basis for morality (i.e. that we could get from *is* to *ought*), contains an imaginary scenario about a Muslim suicide bomber (Harris 2010, 63). In his treatment of spirituality, *Waking Up*, Harris argues that Islam supports violence more than other religions (Harris 2014, 20), and that Sufi mystics are not representative of true Islam (Harris 2014, 22). His dialogue with Muslim activist Maajid Nawaz repeats many ideas concerning the 'problem of Islam' already present in his first book (Harris and Nawaz 2015). Harris denies the accusation of Islamophobia by responding that he condemns Islamic doctrines rather than all Muslims, adding that 'bad acts of the *worst* individuals [...] are the best examples of the [Islamic] doctrine in practice' (quoted in Khalil 2018, 103), but Harris also embraces the existence of moderate Islam in the dialogue more than he previously has (see Sheedy 2022, 90–91).

Richard Dawkins, the most famous twenty-first century atheist, has written critically of religion for decades, but *The God Delusion*, published in 2006, was his first full-length book about religion. Its writing was inspired by 9/11, based on his view that the time was now ripe for a more full-blown attack on religion, including Islam. It plays a minor role in the book, however. Regarding religion, Dawkins has always been primarily interested in claims concerning the existence of God, gods, and other supernatural beings, and the 'work' such beings are said to do in the world. The main focus has been on Christianity, perhaps partly related to his own biography – Dawkins was brought up as a Christian, and he went to Christian schools and was confirmed in the Church of England (Dawkins 2019a, 10). In light of previous scholarship on Islam and New Atheism, it may come as a surprise that the most sustained treatment of Islam in *The God Delusion* takes only four pages and deals with Jyllands-Posten and the case of the Muhammad cartoon

crisis (Dawkins 2006, 46–49). The focus has not changed in *Outgrowing God*, published in 2019. It refers to Islam (and Judaism) occasionally, but the major part of the criticism targets Christianity, and the Bible in particular. Islam is not a major exception in Dawkins's main books about religion. Khalil has to dig up Dawkins's 2013 tweets to find statements about Islam being 'the greatest force for evil in the world today' (Khalil 2018, 160).

Yet it is possible to find occasions in Dawkins's books in which Islam emerges as worse than Buddhism, for example. For Dawkins 'Islam is analogous to a carnivorous gene complex, Buddhism to a herbivorous one' (Dawkins 2006, 232–233), hinting that the latter is more tolerant of members of other religions (or people without a religion). Moreover, Dawkins, like Harris, has been accused of Islamophobia. Again, like Harris, he denies this by suggesting on Twitter that he is phobic about FGM, whipping women for being raped, honour killing, and so on, adding that 'Muslims are [the] main victims of the above' (quoted in Lofton 2022, 445).

Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell* (2007) is more moderate in tone than other New Atheist bestsellers. The Oxford theologian Alister McGrath even suggests that '*Breaking the Spell* is a well-argued, thoughtful, and interesting work, which shows no signs of the rambling and ranting I fear I find, for example, in Dawkins's *The God Delusion*' (Dennett and McGrath 2008, 28). Although McGrath's view is contestable – after all, Dennett's style is hyperbolic, as I have suggested elsewhere (Taira 2014, 67–71) – Dennett's approach differs somewhat from that of his colleagues. The criticism focuses primarily on Christianity and the alleged protection of religion from natural scientific analysis. Islam is not highlighted, at least not explicitly, but there are some occasions when Islam is at the problematic end of the continuum within religions:

Sharks and dolphins look very much alike and behave in many similar ways, but they are not the same sort of thing at all. Perhaps, once we understand the whole field better, we will see that Buddhism and Islam, for all their similarities, deserve to be considered two entirely different species of cultural phenomenon (Dennett 2007, 8).

Without even beginning to examine the severe problems in comparing two separate entities such as 'Islam' and 'Buddhism' or to deconstruct the stereotype of Buddhism as peaceful ('dolphin') (Jerryson and Juergensmeyer 2010), it is obvious that these are rhetorical constructions with little scholarly value. They do testify to the negative evaluation of Islam, but this is not the same as making Islam the main target of New Atheist criticism. A

similar judgement holds when Dennett compares Islam with Judaism and Christianity regarding tolerance, as he writes that 'Islam stands alone in its inability to renounce this barbaric doctrine [of regarding apostasy as capital offense] convincingly' (Dennett 2007, 289).

The late Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) published multiple essays against religion in his lifetime. In one of his essay collections, *Love, Poverty, and War*, he writes about 'fascism with an Islamic face' (Hitchens 2004, 411–420) when reacting to 9/11. His attitude towards Islam does not differ significantly in other publications written in and for a different context, but it is not the case that Islam received special treatment compared with Christianity in his main book about religion, *God Is Not Great* (Hitchens 2007), written quickly after books by Harris, Dawkins, and Dennett started to sell well. It is true, however, that Islam may have been particularly problematic for him, especially because he was a good friend of Salman Rushdie and followed his situation closely after the publication of *The Satanic Verses*. There are only a couple of pages about Rushdie in *God Is Not Great*, but Hitchens dedicated a full chapter to their friendship in his memoirs (Hitchens 2011, 261–280). Such an experience makes the negative judgement of Islam unsurprising (although one can challenge whether the generalization of his animosity from some Muslims to Islam is fair), but there is more to it than this. Commentators have suggested that Hitchens's bigotry against Islam 'arose from the need to supply an analysis for Islamist attacks on the United States that did not include actual US foreign policy as part of the explanation' (Seymour 2012, 69). This insight highlights that Islamophobia as an alternative explanation leaves unexamined the change in Hitchens, who abandoned his earlier socialist conviction and began to support conservative and Republican policies in the United States while moving personally closer to the centre of power (e.g. from being a critic of Desert Storm to a signed-up member of the Committee for the Liberation of Iraq in 2002).

Several other authors have had close relations with the four famous ones, and some have made especially negative comments about Islam. For example, the late Victor J. Stenger (1935–2014), an American particle physicist who wrote extensively about religion, named himself the fifth New Atheist in his 2009 book *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*. His comments regarding 9/11 testify to his negative and simplistic attitude towards Islam – he claims that 'Islam flew those planes into those buildings' (Stenger 2009, 241) – but Islam is not singled out as a special case. Other traditions, movements, and belief-systems deemed religious are equally dubious and dangerous in his defence of science.

There are still others such as the British novelist Martin Amis (1949–2023), who socialized with Hitchens, and to whom Hitchens dedicated his essay collection *Love, Poverty, and War*. He wrote soon after 9/11 that ‘since it is no longer permissible to disparage any single faith or creed, let us start disparaging all of them’ (Amis 2002), thus hinting that criticizing all religions was a smokescreen for lambasting Islam. Ayaan Hirsi Ali (b. 1969), a Somali-born woman, who was known at least in the Netherlands for her political career based on criticism of the Dutch state overlooking the abuse of Muslim women and girls, also became world-famous after writing books critical of Islam – *The Caged Virgin* (2006) in particular – and the script for an anti-Islamic short film, *Submission* (2004), before moving to the United States soon afterwards.<sup>2</sup>

What this brief survey should make clear is that the attitude of New Atheists towards Islam is certainly negative. Yet I suggest that commentators examining this topic tend to ignore the significance of other targets of criticism and overemphasize Harris, who is clearly the most vocal critic of Islam among the four main New Atheists. Khalil (2018), for example, dedicates more than 55 pages to Harris and Ayaan Hirsi Ali and ten pages to Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens combined (both Dennett and Hitchens are covered in three pages). To demonstrate how the most famous New Atheists think in real-time conversation about the possible exceptionality of Islam, the example of the Four Horsemen roundtable is useful.

#### *The Four Horsemen roundtable*

The Four Horsemen roundtable, consisting of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens, took place in Washington DC in September 2007 as part of the annual conference of the Atheist Alliance International, and it was the only occasion all four held a face-to-face discussion. There was another less famous roundtable at the Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne in 2012 (Dawkins 2019b, 2), but Hitchens had already died. Ayaan Hirsi Ali participated in it with Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris; she had originally planned to join the original Four Horsemen roundtable but had been unable to do so.

Watching and listening – or reading (Dawkins et al. 2019) – the roundtable discussion provides a great opportunity to see the Horsemen’s somewhat

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<sup>2</sup> Edis notes that Ayaan Hirsi Ali ‘cannot be described as an activist for atheism per se’ (Edis 2015, 182). I agree with this view because Hirsi Ali’s opinions and personal narrative differ somewhat from those of the ‘four horsemen’, but network analysis suggest her close relationship with them.

different approaches to Islam. In this discussion it is Harris who emerges as most interested in highlighting Islam as a special case. It is therefore probably unsurprising to read him saying that ‘treating Richard, Dan, Christopher and me as a four-headed atheist has always elided significant differences of emphasis and opinion’ (Harris 2019, 36). At the original roundtable he confesses to using words like ‘spiritual’ and ‘mystical’ to describe extraordinary or self-transcending experiences (Harris, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 48–49) and later specifying Islam’s and modernity’s incompatibility – he does not say the same about other religions – before the possible exceptionality of Islam is explicitly brought up by him:

Do you feel there’s any burden we have, as critics of religion, to be even-handed in our criticism of religion, or is it fair to notice that there’s a spectrum of religious ideas and commitments and Islam is on one end of it and the Amish and the Jains and others are on another end, and there are real differences here that we have to take seriously (Harris, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 120–121).

Dennett misunderstands the point, responding briefly by suggesting that the ‘network-balancing trick’ is unnecessary because critics focus on the negative aspects. Dawkins clarifies that ‘Sam’s asking about whether we should be even-handed in criticizing the different religions’. Hitchens states the question is about ‘whether all religions are equally bad’, to which Dawkins responds, ‘Yes, whether Islam is worse than Christianity’. Harris then illustrates how Islam is worse, arguing that the ‘mayhem that’s going on under the aegis of Islam just cannot be compared to the fact that we have two people a decade who kill abortionists’.

After a polite approving gesture Dawkins begs to differ, or at least he prefers another perspective that does not make Islam exceptional:

Well, I’m sure that’s right. On the other hand, my concern is actually not so much with the evils of religion as with whether it’s true. [...] And I really care about the bogus belief. And so, although I also care about the evils of religion, I am prepared to be evenhanded, because they all make this claim, it seems to me, equally (Dawkins et al. 2019, 123).

Hitchens joins Dawkins by responding that ‘I would never give up the claim that all religions are equally false’ (Hitchens, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 123). Based on this conversation, Islam is seen as more dangerous than other

religions in this historical period but equal among others in proposing erroneous beliefs about the world.

Soon the conversation focuses on minor disagreements and clarifications between Harris and Hitchens, and Hitchens suggests that over space and time, the danger of Islam evens out. He then emphasizes that all religions are 'equally rotten, false, dishonest, corrupt, humourless and dangerous, in the last analysis' (Hitchens, in Dawkins et al. 2019, 126).

*World politics, human rights, and Islam's perceived problem with women*

I have argued so far that New Atheists are not identical in how they relate to Islam – Harris singles out Islam; others do not, though the obvious historical context of 9/11 matters here. The next step is to identify the main issues in the criticism of Islam before I argue that the understanding of the New Atheism agenda is lacking if it is seen as reducible to Islam or even to religion, though I do not deny that the criticism of Islam is particularly vitriolic and based on questionable interpretations.

One of the main problems with Islam from the perspective of the New Atheists is its role, presence, and visibility in world politics. All four are concerned about this, but Harris is the most discussed among the commentators. Although it is by no means incomprehensible that people have found some doctrines and practices preached in the name of Islam highly problematic and even threatening, the main problem, in my view, is that Harris gets the analysis wrong. Scott Atran (2011), among others, has listed key issues Harris gets wrong from the scholarly perspective. These include a lack of data, ignorance of empirical research, imaginary examples, and idiosyncratic interpretations of certain examples. Harris has been further criticized for confusing correlation and causation and selecting evidence that supports his views (rather than evaluating all the available evidence). One of the points repeated most often is that the reasons for suicide bombings have rarely been religious, and that, contrary to Harris's assumption, there is not a long history of suicide bombing in the Sunni tradition. Harris also tends to think that when we know what the Qur'an says, we know how (real) Muslims think and behave, thus favouring scriptural literalism in his approach – a position not supported by scholars of religion, who study the actual behaviour of religious people (Taira 2014, 48–58; see also Dickson 2010). As his views are academically untenable, Harris can therefore be accused of a tendentious attitude towards Islam that is already present in the opening pages of his first book, in which he presents an imagined



scenario of a suicide bomber and asks, 'Why is it so easy, then, so trivially easy – you-could-almost-bet-your-life-on-it easy – to guess the young man's religion?' (Harris 2004, 12).

Harris, and Hitchens up to a point, support Samuel Huntington's clash of civilizations thesis, turning it into a crude version in which 'Muslims hate the West' (Harris 2004, 31). Instead of attempting to refute this interpretation of the thesis, as others have several times (Dickson 2010; Hedges 2008), it is more relevant to note that it is in line with the general political positioning of some New Atheists. Both Harris and Hitchens are known for their right-wing neoconservative sympathies with United States foreign policy in the early years of the twenty-first century; Hirsi Ali has been affiliated with the centre-right/conservative policy institute the American Enterprise Institute; and anti-Islamic atheist writer Ibn Warraq briefly belonged to the neoconservative think tank the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (Edis 2015, 186). Dawkins and Dennett have been more reserved in this respect.

A second and related problem concerns human rights and individual liberty, often evident in atheists' perception of Islam's problem with women. This topic is relatively evenly shared among the New Atheists. None has shown much sympathy for the defenders of veils, for example. Muslim women are seen primarily as victims of Islamic patriarchy, whatever individual Muslim women say themselves. Islam can thus be said to be a specific case for the New Atheists, although criticism is not limited to Islam. As Edis notes, 'To atheists, Islam comes across as a particularly virulent form of monotheist patriarchy' (Edis 2015, 182).

The defence of human rights and individual rights is one thing, but the superficially feminist agenda is another, picked up by some commentators, including myself, in earlier publications. In 2012 I argued that 'the New Atheists have been eager to defend (Muslim) women's rights mainly when it has supported their own moral and epistemological superiority', and that 'their rhetorical attempts to save dark-skinned women from their men counts as an example of [...] the cultural imperialist exploitation of feminism' (Taira 2012a, 109). In other words, when New Atheists have defended feminism or women's rights, it has gone hand in hand with criticizing Islam; there are very few examples of such defences that are not simultaneously combined with a negative evaluation of Islam (or other religious traditions). More recently, Kathryn Lofton (2022, 443–444) has pointed out that in their defence of women's human rights Dawkins and other celebrity atheists have also been a source of transphobic rhetoric and have thus contributed to an anti-trans position in addition to their alleged Islamophobia in the name of

women's human rights. As she notes, "'Women' have long been a subject of moral concern for freethinkers' (Lofton 2022, 444).<sup>3</sup>

In both aspects, world politics and women's rights, Islam has been constructed as the enemy in a way that essentializes Islam. It is common for New Atheists to posit true and authentic Islam, its essence, as somehow separate from our values. The true Islam for them is the violent one, the one that does not support women's rights, and 'moderates' contribute to the situation by asking us to tolerate and respect unfounded (religious) beliefs.<sup>4</sup>

### **The relevance of the 'third culture'**

New Atheism's explicit agenda is the defence of science and morality (whatever they mean) by promoting a society in which scientific and moral progress (whatever they mean) can take place. Although Islam is constructed as one of the enemies in this agenda, and possibly *the* enemy in Harris's thinking, the critique is extended to everything that is seen as promoting the relativity of Truth. Three tweets by Dawkins from one day (22 March 2013) highlight this tendency:

The question is not 'Does it [religion] give people a sense of belonging?' Nor 'Has it inspired great art and music?' But 'Is it TRUE?'

The question is not 'Is it [religion] good for the fabric of society?' Nor 'Does it give people a sense of purpose in life?' But 'Is it TRUE?'

Religious belief: the question is not 'Does it make people good or bad?' Nor 'Does it comfort people or frighten them?' But 'Is it TRUE?'

These tweets underline Dawkins's perspective, previously mentioned in the exploration of the Four Horsemen roundtable. Everything Dawkins considers anti-science and not conforming to the Truth is in his list of enemies. Both he and Dennett represent a new intellectual type and activ-

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<sup>3</sup> There are many others who have analysed in detail the difficult relationship between the New Atheists and feminism (Beattie 2007; Brandt 2019; Stinson et al. 2013; Trzebiatowska 2018) and those who analyse more generally the idea that Muslim women need saving by the West (Abu-Lughod 2013).

<sup>4</sup> As Aaron Hughes notes, however, essentializing is not far from the commentators who emphasize that 'true Islam' is something other than the distorted militant hijacking of Islam that is practically 'synonymous with feminism, ecology, gender equality, LGBTQ2S rights, and the like' (Hughes 2021, 13).

ity in which scientists – or philosophers speaking on behalf of the natural sciences and Truth – speak directly to the lay public. The development of a new kind of intellectual is known as a suggested solution to the dilemma of ‘two cultures’. In the late 1950s British chemist and novelist C. P. Snow (2001) lamented the existence of (and gap between) two academic cultures: the traditional humanist-literary culture and the scientific. Those who were called intellectuals were found in the humanist-literary culture. They spoke directly to the masses, whereas members of the natural sciences communicated to larger audiences through traditional intellectuals. One solution to this dilemma has been the development of a new kind of science intellectual who avoids the middleman and writes for the general public using a popular approach and often discusses social issues (morality, politics, and religion), despite being educated in the natural sciences. Called the third culture (Brockman 1995), this solution to the dilemma of two cultures is accompanied by a criticism of humanist-literary intellectuals for their alleged dismissal of science. Indeed, Brockman’s *The Third Culture* (1995) included contributions by Dawkins and Dennett. With his PhD in cognitive neuroscience Harris can be read as part of the same wave of thinking, alongside physicist Victor Stenger, whereas Hitchens places his bets on literature as the way to a new Enlightenment.

Religion (including but not limited to Islam for the public intellectual of the third culture) is just one of the enemies. Another significant enemy is alternative or complementary medicine. The list extends as far as to certain academic positions that are rightly or wrongly named postmodernism, feminism, postcolonialism, poststructuralism, postmarxism, and critical theory (Western Marxism of the Frankfurt school) – often condensed into the meaningless catchphrase ‘postmodern relativism’. These represent the contemporary humanist-literary culture for the other side. I have previously detected negative expressions of contemporary humanist-literary culture in the publications of New Atheists (Taira 2016, 292), demonstrating how similar discourses have been influential in local contexts of atheist activism, especially in Finland (Taira 2012b; 2014). The point here is that the New Atheist critique has more targets than Islam, including positions that are (more or less) atheist.

### **The question of alt-right and social media controversies**

Thus far most of what I have covered could have been said of the early phases of New Atheism. In the last ten years or so, however, there have been some

developments that need to be taken into account to evaluate the overall relationship between atheism and criticism of Islam, especially because the possible relationship between atheism and right-wing anti-Islamic thinking has become a prominent topic of discussion.

Accusations of Islamophobia have increased due to the online presence of atheism, including of figures like Harris and Dawkins. Perhaps the main reasons are the rise of the alt-right (and 'alt-lite', the right that is insufficiently extreme for the alt-right) and the fact that they have occasionally been associated with atheism, especially in the United States. This has been an issue atheists themselves have discussed. As the Polite Conversations podcast host says:

I can't tell you how many people write to me and say that they cringe at the term atheist [...] because of the types of representatives that we have out there that are joining hands with members of the alt-right (quoted in Sheedy 2022, 79).

The alleged turn towards the alt-right or alt-lite has somewhat accentuated the anti-Islamic dimension of online public atheism. The Twitter presence of Harris and Dawkins may have played a role in this development. For example, Dawkins's Islam-critical tweets have been publicly discussed in the mainstream media. They are not the worst examples one can find in the far corners of the internet, but when delivered by such a high-profile celebrity atheist, they may well be inspirational to other activists. Atheists have also contributed somewhat to other issues that divide groups in the contemporary culture wars – trans rights is one of the examples, as Dawkins has been perceived as transphobic by other high-profile atheists (Mehta 2023). Harris left Twitter in 2022 but continues his social media presence on YouTube. Dawkins still uses Twitter (now X) at the time of writing.

Some alt-right or alt-lite people are atheists (Nagle 2017, 109–112; Sheedy 2022, 79–99; Stedman 2018) and may even be inspired by more famous atheists, but atheist activists are divided on the issue, as many continue to defend 'multiculturalism' against Islamophobia (Blankholm 2022, 99; Amarasingam and Brewster 2016). Like other nonreligious people, atheists as a whole are relatively liberal and left of centre, even in the United States (Burge 2021). American atheists have a more negative attitude towards Evangelical Christians, Mormons, and even Catholics than Muslims (Pew Research Center 2017). Furthermore, as in other respects, 'online atheism', or the atheism that is most visible online, does not resemble atheism in general

(Gervais 2022). Although the American alt-right is a politically prominent example of an anti-Islamic attitude, atheism plays a moderate role in the alt-right, and alt-right thinking does not represent atheism in general, even if it is true that some atheist activists lean towards the alt-right.

### **Long-term impact and grassroots effects**

About fifteen years after the peak of 'New Atheism' it can be asked whether it has had a long-term impact, and what its grassroots effects are in local contexts. The first question has been dealt with in previous scholarship, and the evaluation may appear somewhat contradictory. Some have suggested that the impact is minimal (Kaufman 2019); others see it as strongly tied to an 'atheist awakening' (Cimino and Smith 2014). The difference can be explained by the fact that the first considers philosophy, and the second considers atheist mobilization in the United States. I have situated myself somewhere in the middle, noting that New Atheism has provided a narrative frame for 'the rise of the nones', played a role in articulating atheism to the natural sciences and evolution (and away from communism, Marxism, existentialism and the like), and made atheism more visible in the public sphere (Taira 2012b; 2016).

Because of the lack of substantial case studies of multiple localities, it is perhaps too early to answer these questions.<sup>5</sup> I can only provide some views concerning Finland. The main New Atheist books were translated to Finnish soon after their publication. Only Hitchens was published by a major publisher (Otava); the three others were published by a small publisher (Terra Cognita) that focuses on popularizing the natural sciences in line with the idea of the 'third culture'. The translations increased atheism's visibility, although New Atheism had been discussed earlier. This situation vitalized the Union of Freethinkers – the most important association representing atheist activism in Finland: with the Humanist Alliance they organized the atheist bus advertisement campaign in 2009 (Taira 2017). This was also when Islam became a slightly more prominent topic among critics of religion, largely in a general manner rather than in a focused local context. Having spoken frequently with Finnish organized atheists in the last ten years (mainly members of the Union of Freethinkers in Finland and

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<sup>5</sup> A study of Canadian secular groups based on Google Trends data and surveys suggests that the New Atheists preach to the choir rather than to unchurched believers or nominal affiliates (Dilmaghani 2020), but I am unaware of any substantial Nordic studies on the influence and/or implementation of New Atheism.

the Humanist Alliance), my view is that although the New Atheists have been somewhat inspirational to Finnish atheists (see also Kontala 2016, 108), they have reservations about New Atheist ideas, which, especially those related to Islam, have very little tangible significance for their agenda. Islam is criticized among the activists much more than, say, thirty years ago, but their tangible actions focus strongly on the privileged role of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Finnish society. Nevertheless, in the twenty-first century there have also been younger atheist activists whose background is in Muslim-majority countries, but their numbers are small, and their input to the local atheist agenda in Finland has been limited. So far the presence of ex-Muslims in Finnish public has been paltry.

An interesting case clarifying the possible connection between atheism and an anti-Islamic attitude is the statement by the Chief Secretary of the Union of Freethinkers of Finland, Esa Ylikoski. He wrote a lengthy Facebook post commenting on the Qur'an burnings at the end of January 2023, when the public discussion was ongoing.<sup>6</sup> The main part of the post referred to the 2010 campaign of swapping the Bible and other religious publications for pornographic magazines. Ylikoski opposed this campaign even then, but it went ahead under the leadership of Jussi K. Niemelä, whose mission was to implement a New Atheist approach in Finland. Ylikoski had supported the famous bus campaign but disapproved of this more provocative event. Writing thirteen years later, he emphasized that the religious books they received, including the Qur'an, were not burned even then – they were donated to the University of Helsinki – and by implication, that Finnish Freethinkers were not now in favour of burning the Qur'an.

This statement was significant because it calls attention to how the change in leadership may change atheists' strategies. In this case Ylikoski emphasizes the need to avoid provocative and attention-seeking campaigns and to focus on ensuring that the rights of nonreligious people are not violated in society, especially in education (kindergartens and schools) and other public institutions (healthcare, the army, and so on). This is fully in line with

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<sup>6</sup> While several other Nordic countries have experienced multiple burnings of the Qur'an in recent years, there are no high-profile publicly discussed local cases in Finland. The Qur'an burnings in other Nordic countries were not major news items until there was a local angle to the issue. Finland submitted its NATO application in 18 May 2022. Turkey's decision to postpone the ratification of the application coincided with Qur'an burnings in Sweden, and it was understood that such activities in Finland might weaken the Turkish government's interest in ratifying the application. According to Yle News, police had information about the plans to burn the Qur'an in demonstrations against joining NATO, but they contacted the organizers and informed them that it was illegal in Finland (Yle News 2023).

the recent preliminary statement by the Nordic humanist organizations opposing the Qur'an burnings and blasphemy laws at the same time.<sup>7</sup> This is also a shift compared with previous strategies under the leadership of Jussi K. Niemelä, not because there is any novelty in the attempt to speak for nonreligious people but because publicity stunts and interest in New Atheism characterized the short period of Niemelä's leadership, which ended in 2011. Although many views are aired on social media, the current situation suggests there is little interest in Qur'an burnings or other provocations among Finnish organized atheists. As it stands, although atheist activists in Finland do not speak highly of Islam, they have more important issues to consider than Qur'an burning. For the same reason there is little visible interest in New Atheism in Finnish Freethinkers' current activities.

Although the most celebrated contemporary atheists are widely recognized, and their presence and visibility gives further confidence to activists in multiple local settings (even enlivening the scene for a moment), their long-term impact is not obvious. This view may apply better to countries such as Finland (and perhaps other Nordic countries), where New Atheism is seen as too 'American' in style and detached from local concerns and issues, but it demonstrates the importance of examining the implementation of widely circulating ideas and discourses in local contexts. It is clear, however, that global discourses travel fast. The views of celebrity atheists are known, and when they contain strong criticism of Islam, they are circulated in multiple localities and can easily be taken up when it suits local actors' motivations and aims. Therefore, although I maintain that in the Finnish context Islam has not become a special case, this does not guarantee that this will be the case in the future.

## Conclusion

It is unquestionable that Islam has been heavily criticized by the four New Atheists. No one denies it. However, the New Atheist attack on all religions is not simply 'a cover for criticising not only militant Islam but Islam itself' (Emilsen 2012, 528). Such interpretations limit our understanding of New Atheism, which is why this article has argued that the New Atheists are not

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<sup>7</sup> The preliminary statement was drafted by the Danish humanists (Humanistisk Samfund), and it was shared on the Facebook page of the Finnish humanists (Suomen Humanistiliitto) (3 September 2023). The statement called for the abandonment of the Finnish blasphemy law and opposed all plans to implement such a law in Denmark. It also suggested that 'Quran burning is deeply reprehensible'.

identical in directing their criticism towards Islam, and that their overall mission cannot be reduced to what Muslims allegedly think and do. Although New Atheists generally see Islam as the most harmful religion in this historical period, their criticism also pays attention to truth claims and thus does not single out Islam. One of the additional and significant reasons religion (not just Islam) is the enemy of New Atheists concerns how certain public intellectuals and natural scientists construct their defence of science. That construction is based not only on targeting Islam and Christianity (and occasionally religions of lesser significance from the New Atheists' perspective), but it includes alternative/complementary medicine, alternative spiritualities, and even some established academic approaches, as New Atheists regard them as promoting anti-scientific views. The New Atheist agenda is therefore more far-reaching in its intent than an Islam-focused critique – though this does not make it any less problematic.

I have also suggested that the grassroots effect of New Atheist criticism has been moderate, at least when examined from the Finnish perspective. In the long term it is difficult to anticipate the role criticism of Islam will play in atheist activism in different locations, but thus far it has not been directly derived from New Atheism, and even less from Harris's particularly virulent interpretation. As the Finnish example testifies, a change in leadership may alter the strategies and even some aims of local organizations. In the Finnish context this has meant that the more explicit New Atheist phase ended around 2011, and criticism of Islam and other attention-seeking provocations have since been even less significant for atheist organizations. Qur'an-burning spectacles have therefore not taken place, and atheist organizations have opposed them publicly while defending freedom of speech and arguing against blasphemy laws. The fact that the burning of the Qur'an was not considered relevant by the dominant atheist organization demonstrates that criticism of Islam is not a priority in current atheist activism in Finland. But if the change in leadership can alter the strategies so quickly, it is perfectly possible that in these times, when transnational discourses move quickly and can easily be taken up by local activists, the next phase or turn will see an increase in criticism of Islam and Muslims.

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