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Divided we stand:
The politics of the atheist movement in the United States

Abstract

The United States is one of the most religious countries in the Western world. Yet a notable feature of the past decade has been the growth of a self-conscious, politically active atheist movement. Academic analysis of this topic, however, remains limited. This paper addresses this lacuna by examining the political dimension of the U.S atheist movement across a number of themes, including its organisational structure and composition, as well as its goals, strategies and direction. Deploying insights drawn from Social Movement Theory, it shows that the development of the movement has been shaped by a number of factors that have facilitated growth, but which have also led to a series of internal tensions and schisms that could threaten its ability to exert political influence.

Introduction

The highly religious character of U.S politics and society renders it something of an outlier among Western liberal democratic nations. A notable feature of the past decade, however, has been the growth of a self-conscious and avowedly active atheist movement, with distinct political goals, ambitions and strategies. Though levels of self-identified atheism are small, and though publicly avowed atheism in national political life remains practically non-existent, the numbers and their activities are both growing. According to a recent study by WIN-Gallup international, the proportion of people in the U.S actively self-identifying as an atheist (rather than just subscribing to a broader category of 'non-belief'), has increased from 1% to 5% of the adult population since 2005.

Academic research into atheism, though, remains limited and existing studies are relatively few in number. Notable issues of interest have centred on atheism's historical development (e.g. Hyman; Jacoby; Thrower), its sociological qualities (e.g. Cimino and Smith "Secular Humanism"; Zuckerman; Bullivant), its philosophical aspects (e.g. Martin), its connection to various psychological and cognitive properties (for instance, Caldwell-Harris; Hunsberger and Altmeyer),

its relationship to processes of secularism (e.g. Cliteur), as well as themes around ethics and morality (for example, Grayling). Beyond the scholarly realm are works engaging with the subject of atheism from more activist positions. Typical aims here have been to promote atheism itself (e.g. Dawkins), or to highlight its inadequacies in comparison to theologically framed worldviews (e.g. McGrath). More recently, the focus of such critical attention has centred on the activities of a specific sub-section within atheism, known as the *'New Atheism'* (for example, Amarasingham).

Although much of this research has helped to advance understanding of the dynamics and processes of atheism, significant problems remain. One of these is that the political dimension of atheism has been largely overlooked. The following analysis aims to address this lacuna by examining the politics of the atheist movement in the United States. The broad conceptual framework for this analysis draws on the central sights of resource mobilisation derived from Social Movement Theory.

A social movement is typically understood as an informal network based around a set of shared beliefs or collective identity, that is capable of mobilising around conflictual issues in relation to clearly defined opponents (Della Porta and Diani). Although Social Movement Theory embraces a range of perspectives (typically clustering around economic, political and constructivist-based accounts), its proponents highlight a constellation of factors and resources that are essential to the effectiveness of a social movement. These include the ability to mobilise assets (such as money, manpower and favourable media coverage), relations to political structures (such as the state and party systems), as well as cultural variables (for instance, legitimacy) and issues around identity formation (said to be necessary to sustain group motivation and cohesion) (for overviews see e.g. van Stekelenburg and Klandermans; Jasper; Crossley; Della Porta et al; Della Porta and Diani).

Social Movement Theory has traditionally been applied to post-modern trajectories of protest, such as the peace, environment, gay rights and feminist movements, but general theorising in recent years has begun to widen the approach from a concern about particular combinations of resources and opportunities, and towards the inclusion of more context-specific considerations. These include

micro-foundational issues such as the mobilisation of grievance, as well as explorations of the mutual links between economic, political and ideational factors, such as the relationships between organisational structures, methods of operation and the processes by which collective identity is formed and sustained (e.g. see Jasper; Pollett and Jasper).

These latter concerns make the core insights of Social Movement Theory particularly apposite to an analysis of the U.S atheist movement. The internal structure of this movement is characterised by an absence of central control, and by a diverse plurality of groups and organisations. This eclecticism is reflected in its political aims and methods, which embrace a variety of issues and campaigns, as well as internal debates and divisions over the identity, composition and overall direction of the movement. These issues are deeply interrelated, and arise to a large extent from the indeterminate nature of 'atheism' itself. As a sub-set of wider 'non-religious' classifications and categories of thought, 'atheism' contains a multiplicity of meanings and is compatible with a wide array of political viewpoints and identity markers. In terms of its political influence, this diversity is both positive as well as negative: limiting the movement's ability to act in a cohesive fashion, but providing a range of access points for potential members, as well as enabling it to respond flexibly to issues as they arise.

The following analysis is structured in four distinct sections. The first examines the organisational composition and structure of the U.S atheist movement. The second explores some of the key campaign issues and causes with which atheists are involved. The third section details some of the key sites of division that currently exist within the atheist movement. Finally, a concluding discussion considers the extent to which the movement is likely to achieve its political aims.

Composition and structure

The organisational structure of the atheist movement is characterised by plurality and eclecticism. Based around no predominant group, and possessing no formal leadership or tangible set of

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governing arrangements, this assumes a non-hierarchical and decentralised form that operates within a number of organisations set up to promote a range of atheist, secularist and humanist (collectively referred to here as 'ASH') ideas and causes. Notable organisations include: the American Humanist Association (established in 1941), American Atheists (formed in 1963), the Freedom From Religion Foundation (1978), the Council for Secular Humanism (1980), the Atheist Alliance of America (1991), the Center for Inquiry (1991), the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (1998), the Secular Student Alliance (2000), the Secular Coalition for America (2002) and the United Coalition of Reason (2009).

As the present time little is known about the specific composition of such groups, and the reasons why individuals become actively involved in the atheism movement are also still being debated (e.g. LeDrew). Research suggests that a majority of atheists positively engage in efforts to promote atheism in some form (Silver),[1] but it appears that only a small percentage become involved in formal organisations of this kind. Research also indicates that atheists actively participating in formal non-religious organisation tend to belong to a number of different groups at any one time (Hunsberger and Altmeyer).

Since the turn of the millennium the development of atheist activism in the United States has been shaped by a number of factors. Prominent issues here have centred on a perceived threat to American secularism by heightened religious influence in social and political affairs (notably from the Christian Right), accompanied by anxieties about the dangers of religious belief, ranging from individual cases of harm to violent conflict and terrorism. A related factor, too, has been the low social status of atheism in the U.S. A study by Cragun et al found that more than two fifths (41%) of self-identifying atheists had experienced discrimination over the last five years, compared to just 19% of people identifying as having ′no-religion′.

Another key factor underpinning the development of the atheist movement has been the transformation in global media and communications since the 1980s. Particularly influential here

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[1] A study by Silver (2013) found that more than three quarters of self-identified atheists fell into categories that were classed as being involved in some form of activism. For more details see http://www.atheismresearch.com/

has been the dramatic rise in the ubiquity of the internet. This has facilitated the free exchange of information and ideas, and has provided a means by which hitherto isolated individuals can draw together (Cimino and Smith, "New Atheism"). Indeed, one of the central features of the atheist movement is its online character. Most ASH organisations have a strong online presence, and many of the most important activities, groups, spokespeople and opinion formers within the atheist movement operate predominantly, if not entirely, via the internet. Noteworthy examples include organisations such as the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, forums such as Atheist Nexus, and popular atheist blogs such as Pharangyula (penned by PZ Myers), Butterflies and Wheels (by Ophelia Benson) and Why Evolution is True (by Jerry Coyne).

Public interest and awareness of atheism has also been greatly stimulated by a series of best-selling books that have been published on the subject during the course of the last decade. The most notable of these include Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is not Great*). Drawing on the cultural and intellectual authority of the academy (particularly the natural sciences), these publications proved to be instrumental in provoking public and media debate, and in attracting a wider, popular audience for atheist views. While much attention has centred on authors promoting a more confrontational style (typically known as the 'New Atheism'), others, such as Jennifer Hecht (*Doubt: A History*) and Susan Jacoby (*Freethinkers*) have also helped to raise the profile of atheist issues.

A final theme shaping the atheist movement has been the cultural salience of issues relating to identity. Emerging with the growth of new social movements from the 1970s, the promotion of identity politics puts the main emphasis on individual groups, their lifestyles, culture and values. This involves a shift to the micro-politics of the personal realm, and to a greater focus on the terrain of culture as a key site of contestation and struggle (Polletta and Jasper). In this respect, the formation of an avowedly 'atheist' movement represents a self-conscious turn towards the politics of

identity; an attempt to cultivate a sense of group membership and belonging in the face of hostile socio-cultural currents (see e.g. Cimino and Smith, ″Secular Humanism″, ″New Atheism″; LeDrew, Smith).

The identity structure of the atheist movement, however, is also a fractured one. Much of this is due to the indeterminacy of 'atheism' itself, which coheres to a variety of political and philosophical positions. Comprising a subset (estimated by Cragun et al to be around 10%) of a broader ′non-religious′ population, atheism co-exists alongside, and frequently overlaps with, a wide range of identity markers; such as 'agnostic', 'humanist', 'freethinker', 'skeptic′, ′secularist′ and so on. It is not uncommon for atheists to ascribe to multiple identities (such as ′humanist′ or ′freethinker′) at any one time, and variation within the specific category of ′atheism′ is also evident. Issues of difference include the extent to which atheism is regarded as an absence of belief or as a positive belief in itself concerning the (non-)existence of deities, as well as the degree to which atheism constitutes an active part of a self-declared identity or remains a private affair (on these points see e.g. Grayling, Martin). Moreover, although atheists tend to share some common demographic features (atheists are more likely to be male, younger, single, and to have higher than average levels of income and education), and although most (but by no means all) tend to subscribe to progressive, liberal values and campaigns (Hunsberger and Altmeyer; Cragun et al), the absence of any prescriptive formula allows atheism to accommodate a plurality of different positions.

Aims and campaigns

The political dynamics of the atheist movement are manifest in a variety of distinct but interconnected campaign efforts, objectives and strategies. In broad terms, these can be divided into four main categories: reducing the influence of religion in the public sphere; criticising religious

belief and promoting atheism; improving civil rights and social status; and community building and group cohesion.

The first of these objectives focuses on the constitutional separation of church and state, and the role of religious beliefs and organisations in a range of public policy areas, including social service provision, healthcare, education and civil rights. In addition to this, politically active atheism also opposes taxpayer funding and/or exemptions for religious organisations and engages in efforts, pursued through the courts, to keep state buildings, land and offices free from religious symbols and ceremonies. Notable campaigns here have included opposition to the placing of nativity scenes in public parks, the exhibition of prayer banners in public schools, displays of the Ten Commandments around courthouses, and calls for a 'Day of Prayer' by federally elected officials. Prominent too have been attempts to remove the phrase 'Under God' from the pledge of allegiance and 'In God we Trust' from the American currency.

The ability of ASH organisations to pursue these objectives, however, is constrained by their relatively small size, and by the relatively limited resources at their disposal compared to those that are available to religious groups. Faced with such material disparities, senior figures within the atheist movement have emphasised the need to adopt similar discursive and organisational methods to those employed by religious groups in order to try and close this gap. This has centred on directing attention away from arcane, parochial and technical debates, and towards more emotive narratives highlighting the dangers of religious privileges, as well as institutional reforms, such as establishing a greater lobbying presence, a stronger media message and improved grassroots activism, to secure a more effective projection of political power (e.g. see Faircloth).

The second main objective of the atheist movement is to promote the benefits of atheism; to undermine religion in the private as well as the public sphere, and, if not to eradicate religion altogether, then to displace it as much as possible to the margins of social and political life. Among the principal methods deployed to this end include promotional, educational and outreach work, the publication of books, articles and magazines about atheism and the problems of religious belief,

participation in public talks and debates (many of which are freely available online), the production of media programmes, the promotion of resources and events designed to highlight relevant issues (such as International Blasphemy Rights Day), and the use of high-profile advertisements on billboards and public transport to attract attention and openly challenge religious ideas.

Accompanying this, the third aim of the atheist movement is to ensure legal and civic equality. This centres on issues of discrimination faced by atheists and on the low levels of public esteem in which atheism continues to be held. In this, direct comparisons are made to earlier drives for social change, such as the civil rights movement, as well as the struggles for gay and women′s liberation.

Though not all atheists are convinced by the analogy, many contend that real issues around discrimination do exist and need to be effectively countered. In line with this, another strategic thrust has sought to raise the visibility of atheism with a view to changing adverse public perceptions and of gaining mainstream acceptance. Key to this is the belief that the true size of the atheist (and ʻnon-religious′) constituency is far greater than is typically imagined, and that public recognition of the actual numbers involved will increase familiarity and undermine negative stereotypes.

Evidence suggests that this may be a valid claim. Recent studies indicate that secularization in the U.S is set to increase and that younger Americans are more likely to be non-religious than members of older cohorts (Pew Research Center). The proportion of people with no religious affiliation (known colloquially as the ʻnones′) has now reached record levels, having grown from 15.3% in 2007 to just under a fifth (19.6%) of the adult population in 2012 (Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, *Nones*). While atheists will certainly form but a small part of this expanding category, the rise of the nones is nonetheless indicative of more favourable trends towards normalising ʻnon-religious′ worldviews.

Numerous campaign efforts are directed towards promoting these objectives. Amongst these include billboard advertisements designed to mainstream atheism and show atheists in a positive light, and public drives to demonstrate numbers, such as the 'We Are Atheism' and 'Out' campaigns, which, drawing on the experience of the gay movement, encourage atheists to publicly *'come out'*

and identify themselves as such. In March 2012 a non-religious *'Reason Rally'* attracted more than

10,000 people to Washington and gained high-profile exposure in the mainstream media across the U.S, further helping to raise the visibility of non-religious viewpoints.

The final objective of the atheist movement, and another component of the drive to gain greater political influence, has been to try and establish a greater sense of atheist identity and community. Although these are not universally accepted aims, a principal goal here has been to try and provide a support network of resources and assistance to fellow as well as potential atheists. Noteworthy examples in this endeavour, beyond the engagement of online spaces, include the work of social action groups such as Non-Believers Giving Aid, the Foundation Beyond Belief and Atheists Helping the Homeless, community gatherings such as the Atheist Film Festival (which started in 2008) and Rock Beyond Belief (beginning in 2012), organisations such as Camp Quest (established in 1996) which provides residential summer camps for children of non-religious parents, and the organisation of a range of local, national and international conferences, conventions and meetings (such as Skepticon, The Amazing Meeting and the annual conventions of ASH organisations themselves).

Divisions and schisms

While the various factors underpinning the development of the atheist movement have facilitated its expansion, they have also generated a number of internal tensions and schisms over its goals, strategies and direction. The non-prescriptive character of atheism, and the prevalence of online activities, have facilitated a plurality of political and philosophical positions, while the emphasis on

identity politics and the drive towards the establishment of an atheist community has invoked processes of boundary drawing as a means of establishing group cohesion (see Cimino and Smith, "Secular Humanism", "New Atheism"). The resulting fractures can be seen most prominently in debates around the identity and 'branding' of the atheist movement, about the most effective means of engaging with religious beliefs, and on issues of ethnic, racial and gender diversity.

The first of these debates centres on efforts to forge a distinctly atheist identity. The question as to what, if anything, might comprise a collective 'atheist' identity remains a contentious one, and much of this remains a work in progress. Atheists themselves are still very much engaged in defining and negotiating the boundaries, meanings and understandings of the term (Smith), and although to some extent this is a reflection of common interests, bonds, self-conceptions and experiences, the process of identity formation is also being shaped and driven by strategic concerns. In this, the construction of an atheist identity, including the affirming and appropriation of certain values, practices, symbols and imagery (such as the atheist fish, the flying spaghetti monster, or artistic variants on the letter 'A') are at the same time part of an attempt to frame the aims and purposes of the movement in response to the perceived challenges and obstacles with which it is faced.

A key issue here is whether atheists should actively describe themselves as 'atheists', or whether the adoption of an alternative descriptor would be more politically expedient. For some, the favoured approach is to abandon the idea of labels altogether. Sam Harris ("Problem"), for example, claims that continuing to use the label 'atheism', along with the cultural baggage it has accrued, has allowed atheists to be presented in a negative light and has been 'a mistake of some consequence'.

This view, however, is not widely accepted. Indeed, for some, the very idea of surrendering the term 'atheism' at a time when religious ideas remain so pervasive and atheists continue to face discrimination is anathema. PZ Myers, for instance, claims that labels remain politically useful tools

for binding groups together, and that 'being able to recognize our essential unity as a community is essential', since: ʹA fractured group of hermits and misfits can not change the worldʹ (ʺCommunityʺ, also see Carrier). Others, though, support the use of alternative descriptors as a way of avoiding the negative connotations commonly associated with atheism. One example of this is the term ʹBrightsʹ, coined by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell as part of an online drive to promote greater acceptance of a naturalist (though not an exclusively atheist) worldview. Although this particular term has not attracted huge support within the movement (despite initial efforts to promote it from high profile atheists such as Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett), alternatives such as ʹNew Atheism' and the recently devised 'Atheism+', have established greater prominence.

These disputes over identity and the use of labels also reflect more fundamental strategic frictions within the movement over the best way for atheists to present themselves and approach religious beliefs. A major fault-line here centres on a divide between proponents of a combative approach (ʹconfrontationalismʹ) and those favouring a more conciliatory stance (ʹaccommodationismʹ). This divide traverses a number of core themes; including the compatibility of science and religion, the degree to which religious beliefs are held to be harmful, and the tone and manner in which religious claims and practices should be addressed. Advocates of an accommodationist position contend that science and religion are not mutually exclusive, that religion contains many positive aspects and that a hostile, confrontational approach is divisive, alienating, antithetical to public engagement and ultimately counterproductive. As such, accommodationists argue in favour of promoting greater inclusivity, and for fostering alliances with progressive and moderate religious groups on issues of common concern, such as tackling fundamentalism, promoting secular government, defending religious liberty and supporting science education. According to Paul Kurtz, founder of the Center for Inquiry, the use of confrontational tactics by the 'new atheists' may have raised the visibility of

the atheist movement, but fervent attacks on religion are ʻa strategic blunderʹ given the need to establish a broad-based appeal.

Such claims are brusquely dismissed by supporters of confrontationalism. In response, they argue that there is no evidence to show that confrontational methods are counterproductive, nor that accommodationism is more effective, and that accommodationists fail to explain exactly where areas of compromise and shared values with religion might exist. In effect, they claim, accommodationism amounts to little more than passive acquiescence in religious privilege (e.g. Benson). As PZ Myers observes, while accommodationism is 'fine in a political and diplomatic sense', there remain 'core issues' on which no compromise is possible; namely, that religious claims are 'fundamentally antagonistic to science' (ʺDebateʺ).

On this basis, confrontationalists emphasise the necessity of challenging religious ideas and privilege as robustly as possible, and, indeed, claim that such tactics have proven to be effective in promoting social change. As Adam Lee remarks: ʺNo broad social movement has ever achieved its objectives by sitting back and waiting for everyone else to come around'. Additionally, advocates of a more combative strategy also maintain that having a number of different approaches within the atheist movement is likely to enhance its prospects for success, and that the presence of more militant forms of activism may even increase the effectiveness of an accommodationist position by enabling it to appear more moderate, and therefore, by comparison, more acceptable to mainstream public opinion. As Greta Christina (ʺGood Copʺ) explains: 'since the multi-pronged approach to activism is so much more effective than any one prong alone, it seems patently absurd to insist that everyone else in the movement should be working the exact same prong that weʹre workingʹ.

Another fault line within the atheist movement, and one that has become increasingly prominent during the past two years (as well as standing in stark contrast to its high levels of plurality in other areas), concerns the extent of its racial, ethnic and gender diversity. The former of these issues

centres on the high concentration of atheism amongst members of the white population, and on the notable under-representation of ethnic minorities (e.g. Hutchinson, "Slaves"). Surveys of the Latin American community, for example, show that the proportion identifying with no religion has increased from 4% to 12% between 1990 and 2008, but the numbers actively engaging with the atheist movement remain extremely small (e.g. Kosmin et al). A similar area of concern is the disproportionately small number of self-identifying atheists from the African-American community. According to research from the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (*Nones*), African Americans are the most religiously committed racial group in the U.S, and the least likely to self-identify as being atheist. More than four-fifths (88%) claim to believe in God with absolute certainty, compared to 71% of the total U.S population, and less than 0.5% profess to calling themselves an atheist.

Explanations for these discrepancies have focused on the central role of Christianity in the culture and identity of ethnic minorities. The historical role of the church as a site of community action and resistance to slavery within the black community, as well as the long-standing association between atheism and a predominantly white, Western intelligentsia, is, for many, considered to be so extensive that the very idea of black atheists is a non sequitur. As Jamila Bey pithily observes: 'identity as an African-American is assumed to carry with it an impenetrable religious component'.

Similar explanations are also offered for the low prevalence of atheism among Latin Americans, given their traditionally close attachment to the Catholic church (e.g. Dias 2013).

Accordingly, many argue that more attention needs to be given to non-white atheist authors and campaigners, and that more focus needs to be directed towards dealing with issues of race and ethnicity, including more intensive outreach to under-represented groups in order to ascertain what steps can usefully be taken to facilitate their greater involvement (e.g. Hutchinson, "Scholarship").

Campaigns and activities conducted by groups such as Black Atheists of America and African Americans for Humanism, including community service programmes in lower income areas and

billboard advertisements designed to promote atheist, secular and humanist ideas to a black audience, are directed to achieving this goal. Organisations designed to promote and support atheism among other ethnic groups, however, remain comparatively thin on the ground.

Concerns about the lack of racial and ethnic diversity within the atheist movement have been accompanied by parallel anxieties around its gender composition. These have been thrust to the forefront of internal debates by the increasing prominence of feminist atheist activists, by a series of on-going and controversial incidents around the proliferation of misogynistic and abusive comments on atheist websites and forums, and by allegations of sexual harassment at atheist gatherings (the most high profile of which centred on the so-called ′Elevatorgate′ affair involving the prominent atheist blogger and activist, Rebecca Watson). Other issues, such as the comparatively low numbers of female attendees and speakers at conferences, and the absence of women from influential lists of atheists, have been notable too (e.g. Vjack, ″Sexism″; Watson, ″TAM″).

These issues have provoked intense discussion about the scale and the extent of sexism and misogyny within the atheist movement, as well as the best means of addressing it. In similar fashion to concerns about ethnic and racial under-representation, feminist activists claim that the movement has thus far been insufficiently attentive to women′s issues, and that much of this is due to the fact that it remains dominated, especially at the senior levels, by middle class men from the academy. This state of affairs, they claim, is not merely unjust but is also politically detrimental, alienating potential supporters and creating a popular impression that atheism remains, in the words of Victoria Bekiempis, little more than 'a contentious, showboating boys' club′. As such, many argue that much more needs to be done to raise the visibility and awareness of women′s issues, to increase the numbers of women actively participating in conferences, and to change attitudes concerning the

equal status of female authors and activists in relation to their male counterparts (e.g. McCreight, ″Dawkins″).

Not all, however, are convinced by these assertions, and disputes about the existence and the extent of a sexism problem have led to a number of high-profile and personal spats between leading figures within the movement. Those rejecting the claim that a serious problem exists argue that the gender composition of the atheist movement is no more disproportionate than that found in any other area of life, that assertions of widespread misogyny are overblown, and that the real problem has less to do with the under-representation of women and more to do with certain activists attempting to pursue a self-serving feminist agenda for their own ends. The response from Richard Dawkins to the Elevatorgate affair, for example, was that Watson should ′grow up, or at least grow a thicker skin′ (Watson, ″Privilege″). An open letter to the movement from the writer, Paula Kirby, followed a similar line, berating those making accusations of sexism for promoting a victim mentality that was ultimately detrimental to the goal of attracting more women to atheism.

These debates around diversity have recently led to the development of a new identity marker within the atheism movement, known as ′Atheism+′. Catalysing from an initial series of blog posts by Jen McCreight, but rapidly gaining wider popularity among many activists, this contends that many of the problems faced by the atheist movement are due to its domination by old(er), middle class, privileged white males, and argues that what is needed to address this is to self-consciously align the promotion of atheism with progressive political values and to explicitly reject those engaging in sexist or racist behaviours. In this way, Atheism+ aims to provide an inclusive umbrella term for bringing the positive aspects of atheism, secularism and humanism together in support of social justice, diversity and a more affirming ethical vision. As McCreight (″Infiltrated″) put it, Atheism+ constitutes a ′third wave′ of atheism, supplanting the first and second waves of traditional

thinkers and confrontational new atheists, to create 'a wave that cares about how religion affects everyone and that applies skepticism to everything, including social issues like sexism, racism, politics, poverty, and crime'.

Despite receiving an enthusiastic welcome from many, Atheism+ has also been subject to vociferous criticism. Prominent objections raised by its opponents include that those promoting Atheism+ are being unnecessarily divisive and elitist, and that the effort risks diverting resources from other, more productive activities (e.g. Lindsay; Vjack, "Atheism Plus"). Such claims, though, are firmly rejected by those sympathetic to the broader aims of Atheism+, who maintain that anxieties about fuelling division are groundless given that the atheist movement is already divided. Even so, at the present time Atheism+ remains something of a novelty within the broader atheist movement, and its impact and future direction are uncertain.

Conclusion

One of the central characteristics of Social Movement Theory is an emphasis on the diverse nature of resources (e.g. political, economic, cultural and psychological) that are drawn on and deployed by social movements in the attempt to achieve their objectives. While scholars working within the parameters of Social Movement Theory differ in their views about the various forms and combinations of resources that are most likely to be effective in any given set of circumstances, the central notion of resource mobilisation, in directing attention towards issues of organisational dynamics and capabilities, is nevertheless a useful lens through which to consider the emergent and developing features of a self-conscious and politically active atheist movement in the United States. The dynamics of the U.S atheist movement have been shaped by a number of factors. These include the mobilisation of grievances over the influence of religion in the public sphere and the low social status of atheism, cultural resources relating to the authority of science, the indeterminate character

of ʹatheismʹ itself, the transformative impact of the internet and the salience of identity politics as a

means of promoting difference and group cohesion. These variables have impacted upon the atheist

movement in a number of ways: facilitating the rapid growth of politically active atheism during the

first decade of the twenty-first century, but also contributing to a series of internal divisions within

the movement around issues relating to goals, strategies and direction. These can be seen most

notably in debates over the formation of a collective ʹatheistʹ identity, in disputes over the

effectiveness of confrontationalism and accommodationism, and in concerns about the movementʹs

ethnic, racial and gender profile.

These divisions highlight a number of important points concerning the ability of the atheist

movement to achieve its goals. One is that the high levels of variation in the composition and

structure of the movement, along with the absence of any mechanisms for central control or co-

ordination, are likely to preclude it from acting in a cohesive and unified manner. As a subset of a

broader 'non-religious' social and ideational category, atheism remains politically amorphous and is

able to accommodate a range of views, perspectives and identity markers. Accordingly, politically

active atheists are often involved in a plurality of 'non-religious' organisations, engage in a

multiplicity of campaign issues and utilise a variety of strategies in an attempt to achieve their

objectives. At the same time, this non-prescriptive character also imposes a number of constraints.

Internal diversity curtails efforts to promote a sense of collective atheist identity and community (at

least in the singular), and provides fertile ground for the continuation of tensions and divisions over

the methods, aims and direction of the movement overall.

What, then, does this mean for the likely future of the U.S atheist movement in terms of it being

able to achieve its political ambitions? Attempting to isolate and measure key factors in social

change is of course a complex undertaking, and one that is made all the more hazardous in this

instance by the various problems that are involved in identifying the parameters and composition of

ʹatheismʹ itself. Moreover, even where social, cultural and political developments can in this case be

observed – for example in relation to policy issues, or to trends and attitudes around (non)-religious

beliefs – establishing any clear and definitive causal links to the atheism movement itself remains

intrinsically difficult.

Bearing these caveats in mind, the impact of the U.S. atheism movement would thus far appear to

have been mixed. Despite numerous legal achievements in enforcing the constitutional separation

between church and state, renewed attempts to remove references to 'God' from the U.S currency

and pledge of allegiance have faltered, signs of a clear breakthrough in political representation at

the national level remain virtually imperceptible, and atheist organisations continue to be dwarfed

by their religious counterparts in terms of the resources and memberships on which they are able to

draw. The persistence of internal schisms and regular outbreaks of in-fighting within the atheist

movement also ensures that much energy is effectively wasted on parochial concerns, and further

undermines attempts to establish a genuine sense of group cohesion.

That said, tangible indications of improvement are also evident. Although more work needs to be

done before the kind of critical mass that many believe is needed for mainstream acceptance is

reached, signs of continued growth and on-going secularisation are notable. Alongside this, while

the movement′s fractious and eclectic dynamics can have negative effects, its fissiparous nature also

remains a potential source of some considerable strength. The absence of a consistent or uniform

approach furnishes the movement with a high degree of flexibility and dynamism, enabling the

formation of loose and adaptive alliances in response to any specific issues of concern that may

arise, providing multiple sites of access and points of entry to atheist groups and ideas, and

numerous ways of getting its message across to a variety of audiences.

The causal dynamics at work here may also prove to be mutually reinforcing. On the one hand, the

increasing growth of people identifying themselves as having no religion may act as a spur to

political engagement, encouraging atheists to press forward with their endeavours. On the other, the

efforts and increased visibility of the atheist movement may itself contribute to the growing

numbers of the non-religious. Indeed, while the extent of any such influences are impossible to discern with precision, it would seem implausible to imagine that the efforts of the atheist movement have been wholly without return. This being the case, it seems highly unlikely, given the advances that have been made during the course of the last decade, that further shifts will not be forthcoming, or that they will fail to produce a potential breakthrough in political influence at some future point.

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