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What's really new about New Atheism?

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ABSTRACT The rise of new atheism has attracted significant attention but its novelty is often assumed rather than explained. By exploring the origins of new atheism and drawing comparisons to earlier atheist forms, this article argues that new atheism contains aspects that are genuinely new. The most notable of these features are its expansive political activities and its hybrid combination of Enlightenment-based rationality with postmodern themes and concerns.

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Introduction

Since its emergence during the middle of the previous decade the "new atheism" has attracted a great deal of media and scholarly attention. But one central question has yet to be satisfactorily addressed—namely what, if anything, is genuinely new about "new atheism"? Critics of new atheism maintain that it offers nothing more than a repackaging of age-old philosophical arguments combined with an intolerant, dogmatic and aggressively anti-religious rhetoric (for example, Beattie, 2008; Haught, 2008; Lennox, 2011), and many new atheists themselves contend that they are merely following in the well-worn footsteps of unbelievers from earlier times (for example, Grayling, 2011; Cline, 2015). However, while a number of continuities with historical varieties of atheism are readily apparent, new atheism is nevertheless unique in several important respects. Its intellectual composition provides a qualitatively distinct blend of modern and postmodern elements, and its political aims and strategies are more extensive than those from earlier forms.

What is new atheism?

New atheism is a predominantly Anglo-American phenomenon (though concentrated primarily in the United States) and is typically centred on the works of a number of high profile authors, colloquially known as the "Four Horsemen"—Dawkins (2006), Dennett (2006), Harris (2004) and Hitchens (2007). Despite the novelty of the "new atheist" label, disentangling new atheism from the wider non-religious population is no easy task. Atheists often subscribe to a number of overlapping identity markers (such as: "agnostic", "humanist", "freethinker", "skeptic", "secularist" and so on), and there is no consensus on what "new atheism" actually is. Nevertheless, a number of key themes emerge with regularity. For example, new atheism is based on a naturalist worldview and places a strong emphasis on the use of reason, rationality and science as the best (or the only) means of understanding reality. Religious beliefs and doctrines are treated propositionally, as making truth claims about the nature of reality, and are subsequently rejected on the grounds that there is insufficient evidence to support them. New atheism further maintains that religion is not simply wrong, but irrational, pathological and uniquely dangerous. By promoting beliefs and behaviours that emphasize cosmically ordained rules, sanctions and ways of life, religion is believed to foster divisive tribal mentalities, creating prejudice, discrimination and violence. On this basis, new atheists take an avowedly critical posture towards all forms of religion, attacking ostensibly moderate and mainstream religious views, as well as its fundamentalist extremes.

Another problem with trying to analyse new atheism involves the origins of the term itself. The descriptor was first used by the journalist Wolf (2006) in an article for *Wired* magazine (entitled "The Church of the Non-Believers") that sought to portray the stance taken towards religion by atheist writers such as Richard Dawkins as dogmatic, intolerant and needlessly aggressive. The construction and subsequent popularisation of the label "new atheism", then, did not stem from a disinterested attempt at classifying a new form of non-religious thought, but was part of a politically motivated campaign to discredit and delegitimise the views of leading atheist advocates. The principal strategy here was to define a particular group of atheists as being "new", so that they could then be denounced for having nothing genuinely new to offer.

The growth in the popularity of new atheism during the first decade of the twenty-first century was driven by a combination of factors. The first of these was the growing social and political influence of religion. While many commentators expected religion to decline as processes of secularization developed, the so-called "return of religion" during the latter decades of the twentieth century (Berger, 1999; also see Hjelm, 2015)—highlighted most notably in the Iranian (Islamic) Revolution and the rise of the "Christian Right" in the United States—created a sense of anxiety that events were not adhering to this pattern. Unease about the renewed assertiveness of religion was heightened by a growing awareness of the negative effects of religious beliefs and organizations. This was vividly highlighted by the terrorist attacks of 9/11 (as well as by the continuation of religiously inspired terrorism in many parts of the world) and by the high levels of prejudice, marginalization and mistrust experienced by many atheists in the United States. A survey by Hunsberger and Altmeyer (2006) found that 53% of members of atheist clubs in the United States had experienced problems in their personal relationships as a direct result of their non-religious worldview. Research by Cragun *et al.* (2012) found that 41% of self-identifying atheists had endured some form of discrimination during the last 5 years.

Another key factor behind the emergence of new atheism was the revolution in global media and communications from the 1980s, particularly the dramatic rise of the Internet. This gave atheist activists a means of promoting critiques of religion and exchanging thoughts without geographical constraints, and has been critical in shaping their organizational structure (Cimino and Smith, 2011; Kettell, 2013). While public awareness of new atheism was connected largely to its success as a publishing phenomenon, many of the most important new atheist groups and opinion formers operate predominantly (if not exclusively) online. Noteworthy examples include: the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, forums and spaces such as Atheist Nexus, Think Atheist and Atheist Republic, as well as popular atheist blogs such as "Pharangyula" (written by PZ Myers), "The Orbit" (by Greta Christina) and "Why Evolution is True" (by Jerry Coyne).

Continuity and change

While new atheism has attracted substantial public attention in recent years, atheism itself is far from new. The origins of atheism are usually traced back to Ancient Greece—the etymology of the term "atheism" derives from the Greek word "atheos", meaning "godless" or "without gods" (Bremmer, 2007)—and there are strong elements of continuity between "new atheism" and older varieties of atheist thought. Many of the philosophical arguments and critiques of religion that are deployed by new atheists—such as the incomprehensibility of scripture, the problems of religious immorality and violence, and the contradictions between religious claims and scientific knowledge—all resonate with views that have, at various times, been espoused by atheists writing in other historical eras. Similarities can also be found in the use of combative rhetoric. While new atheism is often derided for its blunt and uncompromising rejection of religious views, it is not hard to find parallels in earlier atheist writings. d'Holbach (1772), for example, wrote that "[r]eligion has ever filled the mind of man with darkness", Rose (1861) claimed that religion was sustained by "an interested and corrupt priesthood who fatten the credulity of the public", and Russell (1927) described Christianity as "the principal enemy of moral progress in the world" (on the same theme also see Hook, 1943).

Running alongside these similarities, however, are several features of new atheism that can be described as genuinely new. One of the key distinctions between "new" and "old" varieties of atheism concerns the nature of their political activism. Atheism in the ancient world did not assume an overtly political character, and while the emergence of "modern" atheism during the Middle Ages was accompanied by resistance to religious oppression (a classic illustration of which being the French Revolution of 1789), the growth of new atheism has been linked to wider and more expansive political goals.

The core political aims of new atheism are centred on upholding the separation of church and state, criticizing religion (and

promoting atheism), and campaigning to ensure legal and civic equality for atheists. One of the central goals here is to normalize non-religious beliefs, to change adverse public perceptions and secure mainstream acceptance of atheist views. Among the key strategies that have been adopted to promote these ends include the use of billboard advertisements (beginning with a bus campaign launched in London in 2009, carrying the slogan: "There's probably no god. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life"), campaigns to encourage atheists to "come out" and identify themselves to raise public visibility, and high-profile public displays of group activity and cohesion (such as the Reason Rallies of 2012 and 2016).

Another key goal of new atheism has been to build a sense of community and group cohesion. Examples of this include community gatherings (such as the Atheist Film Festival and Camp Quest), the promotion of conferences, conventions and meetings (such as Skepticon or The Amazing Meeting), as well a self-conscious attempt to construct a deeper sense of atheist identity and transform atheism-in-general into a wider social movement. While the core features and parameters of atheist identity remain something of a work in progress, the emphasis on identity issues has involved the deliberate appropriation of the "new atheist" label from its critics (in much the same way that the term "gay" was appropriated by campaigners for homosexual rights), aligned with the use of explicitly atheist symbols such as the atheist fish (a play on the Darwin fish used by Christians), the flying spaghetti monster (the symbol of the satirical church of Pastafarianism) or artistic variants on the scarlet letter "A".

These latter aspects of atheist politics draw direct parallels with campaigns from other social movements (such as the civil rights and feminist campaigns) and have been shaped by the intellectual landscape in which new atheism itself has emerged. One of the central developments of the post-war period was the influence of postmodernism and the rejection of universal and totalising frameworks of knowledge, leading to a politicization of the cultural sphere and the promotion of new forms of identity politics based around issues such as gender, race, sexuality and the environment (Bernstein, 2005). One of the genuine novelties of new atheism, then, is the way in which it has developed within, and drawn upon, the currents of a new intellectual landscape to blend together a hybrid mix of philosophical elements. New atheism seeks to advance a distinctly modernist agenda based on a reassertion of the Enlightenment-based principles of reason and rationality (precisely the kind of metanarrative that postmodernists railed against), but does so by utilizing distinctly postmodern concerns and strategies based on issues of culture and identity.

At the same time, these identity concerns have led to a number of tensions and schisms within the wider atheism movement. In some respects these tensions echo divisions from earlier historical junctures. One of the key fault lines within the British secularist movement during the nineteenth century, for example, involved factional in-fighting around the leading figures of George Holyoke and Charles Bradlaugh, central to which was a dispute over whether non-religious activism should openly confront religious authority (the approach favoured by Bradlaugh) or adopt more accommodating political strategies (preferred by Holyoake) (for example, McGee, 1948).

The main divisions within the contemporary atheist movement, however, are based around wider political themes. Critical fault lines centre on the lack of diversity within new atheism in terms of its gender, racial and ethnic composition, with concerns that it remains dominated by middle/upper-class white males. On-going debates around these issues raise wider questions about the general direction of the atheist movement, with many arguing that it cannot be fully effective and achieve its political ambitions without first becoming a more inclusive and welcoming place.

Concluding remarks

The question of what, if anything, is genuinely "new" about new atheism is one that has yet to be properly addressed. Critics of new atheism, as well as many new atheists themselves, contend that in philosophical terms it differs little from earlier historical forms of atheist thought. But while continuities with earlier varieties of atheism are apparent, new atheism is also unique in a number of important ways. The expansive political activities of new atheism, in particular its hybrid mix of Enlightenment-based rationality with postmodern themes of identity and culture, signal a clear departure from the unbelievers of years gone by.

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Additional information

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