

## Faithless: The politics of new atheism

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*ABSTRACT: The emergence of 'new atheism' during the course of the last decade helped fuel an upsurge of interest in issues around religion. But scholarly analysis of new atheism, particularly its political dimensions, remains embryonic. This paper addresses this lacuna by examining the politics of new atheism across a variety of themes related to politics. These include the causal factors underpinning its emergence and development, its organisational structure and composition, the political strategies pursued by its proponents, and the various internal tensions and conflicts that these dynamics have produced.*

KEYWORDS: NEW ATHEISM, RELIGION, POLITICS, STRATEGIES, SCHISMS

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## Introduction

The early years of the twenty-first century thrust issues around religion to the forefront of public and political debate. One of the defining features of this was the emergence of a more activist form of atheism, known as the 'new atheism', which sought to openly challenge and criticise religious beliefs and to promote the virtues of reason, rationality and science. Fueled by a series of best-selling publications, and accompanied by high levels of media interest, new atheism soon became something of a cultural phenomenon. By the summer of 2007, Tom Flynn, Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism, could declare that, "A movement was aborning, or at least being written about with feverish energy" (Flynn, 2010).

Scholarly research into new atheism, though, remains embryonic. The vast majority of works on the topic to date have been directed at a popular audience, and have been largely crude and superficial in content, typically attempting to defend certain theological positions rather than examine the dynamics of new atheism itself (e.g. McGrath, 2004; Beattie, 2007; Haught, 2008; Eagleton, 2010). Serious academic analyses have been more useful, but also problematic in various ways. First, there are a relatively small number of such studies, a shortcoming that reflects a more general lack of research into atheism and non-religion. As Lee and Bullivant (2010: 26) observe, the study of atheism remains "a long-term, collective blind spot in research". Analyses of new atheism have also centred on a comparatively limited number of areas. Principally, these have focused on its historical context (e.g. Hyman, 2010, LeDrew, 2012), its sociological qualities (e.g. Bullivant, 2008; Cimino & Smith, 2007, 2011), its philosophical properties (e.g. Kitcher, 2012) and the psychological characteristics of its adherents (e.g. Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006; Baker & Robbins, 2012).

One area that has been peculiarly absent from studies of new atheism, however, has been its political dimension). The point is exemplified by a recently edited volume on new atheism, purporting to offer a rounded examination of the topic, which includes work from "the fields of religious studies, sociology of religion, sociology of science, philosophy, and theology" (Amarasingham, 2010:2), but contains nothing in the way of political analysis. Studies addressing this lacuna have recently started to emerge, with work examining various, specific aspects within new atheism. For instance, some notable and useful recent articles examine the influence of radical atheism and power in the British political context; Taira (2012) examines the use of identity politics within new atheism; and Schulzke (2013) has analysed the ideological dimension of new atheist thought, exploring its links to broader liberal values.

Research in this area, however, remains limited. The broader dynamics of new atheism, including its political aims, organisation and strategies, particularly beyond the small number of high-profile authors who are typically taken to represent new atheism as a whole, remain largely unexplored. This omission is especially disconcerting since political activism is one of the hallmarks of new atheism itself. Comparing the huge discrepancies in the power and resources being commanded by atheism and religion in the United States, for example, Richard Dawkins (2007), probably the most well-known of all new atheists, makes the point abundantly clear, "[O]ur struggle", he says, "is not so much an intellectual struggle, as a political one: What are we going to do about it?"

The purpose of this paper is to establish a baseline for further research into the political dimensions of new atheism by providing a broad overview of new atheism's most salient political features, focusing, in particular, on the organisational, strategic and public policy dimensions of new atheism. It begins by discussing some of the main ideational features of new atheism, and by considering some of the causal factors that have underpinned its emergence and development. The paper then examines the

organisational structure and composition of new atheism, centering, in particular, on its central groups and leadership figures, and on the use of identity politics in its political aims and strategies. The key fault lines and tensions around new atheism and other elements within the broader atheist, secular and humanist population, are also explored, considering the extent to which new atheism can be said to have been thus far successful in its goals.

### Terms and conditions

Defining the parameters of new atheism is no easy task. Studies into the demographics of the 'nonreligious' typically make no distinction between different forms of atheism in a fashion that would allow a category of 'new atheists' to be easily identified. Some, such as Cragun et al. (2012), have attempted to disaggregate various sub-streams of thought within atheism, but 'new atheism' remains elusive. Fine-grained distinctions are also frequently absent amongst atheists themselves. Not all of those who might subscribe to the ethos of new atheism choose to identify themselves in this way, and the broader atheist, secular and humanist populations (subsumed here under the collective noun of the 'nonreligious') contain a number of overlapping identity markers and labels, such as 'agnostic', 'humanist', 'freethinker', 'skeptic', 'secularist' and so on. Although the links between them are by no means determinative or reciprocal, it is not uncommon for 'new atheists' to ascribe to multiple identities and to simultaneously associate with other descriptors. Two of the most well-known new atheists, Richard Dawkins and AC Grayling, are also Vice Presidents of the British Humanist Association. Another, Daniel Dennett (2003), has publicly declared his support for using the term 'Brights' to denote people with a naturalistic worldview.

This diversity is reflected in the lack of any commonly agreed upon definition for what new atheism actually is. Its main progenitors, and its central ideas, are perhaps most closely associated with a series of best-selling books by four main authors, known colloquially as the 'Four Horsemen', during the middle of the previous decade: Sam Harris (*The End of Faith*, 2004), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell*, 2006), Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (*God is Not Great*, 2007). Other proponents, such as Victor Stenger (2009) and AC Grayling (2013), have also written in support of new atheist ideas, as have numerous activists and commentators.

Several aspects of these texts are worthy of note. First, they endorse a strong commitment to a naturalist worldview, and to the virtues of reason, rationality and science as the best means of understanding reality. Tied to this is a view of religion as propositional, as a set of truth claims about the nature of reality that is to be treated as a scientific hypothesis and duly weighed against the available evidence. As such, new atheists maintain that since no evidence of this kind that can withstand scrutiny has ever been produced, the claims made by religion must therefore be rejected as false. Moreover, since religious beliefs and doctrines are necessarily founded on subjective experiences or revealed authority rather than scientific evidence, they are also considered to be not just wrong, but irrational, pathological and uniquely dangerous in that they foster exclusionary and divisive in-group mentalities that lead to prejudice, discrimination and violence. As Dawkins (2004:158) explains, while religion might not be the only motivation for violence, it provides "the principal label, and the most dangerous one, by which a 'they' as opposed to a 'we' can be identified....It is not an exaggeration to say that religion is the most inflammatory enemy-labelling device in history".

On this basis, new atheism adopts an avowedly critical posture towards religion. Claiming that religious views have enjoyed a cosseted and excessively privileged status for far too long, and that they should be accorded no more respect or special treatment than any other viewpoint or opinion,

proponents of new atheism call for religious beliefs to be exposed to scrutiny wherever they are found in precisely the same way that one might critique politics, literature or art. Though recognising that not all religious views are equally noxious, this stance is nonetheless applied to all forms of religious beliefs. As well as attacking its more extreme varieties, ostensibly 'moderate' religious views are also challenged on the grounds that, while they may not necessarily be dangerous in and of themselves, they provide succour for more fundamentalist positions and help to sustain the cultural legitimacy of belief in unobservable, supernatural forces. As Greta Christina ([2012:loc.1045](#)) writes, "moderate and progressive religion still encourages the basic idea of faith; the idea that it's acceptable, and even virtuous, to believe in things you have no good reason to think are true".

New atheism also involves claims about religion and morality. Here, new atheists assert that religion is not needed for moral behaviour, and is in many cases itself deeply immoral, not least due to its negative social and personal consequences. New atheists also tend to favour naturalistic explanations for moral behaviour, grounded in the evolutionary merits of altruism and co-operation, and emphasise the ethical value of human life without religion, as a fleeting moment of existence made all the more valuable precisely by the absence of an afterlife. Social scientific research showing that countries with the highest levels of morality (measurable by levels of social disorder, inequality, civil rights, happiness and so on) also tend to be the least religious (and vice versa) are commonly emphasised too (e.g. [Zuckerman, 2010](#)).

In political terms, these core elements of new atheism prescribe no particular viewpoint in and of themselves. As PZ Myers ([2011](#)) notes, when it comes to "the diversity of political views within the New Atheists - we're a madly disorganized mob, united only by our dislike of the god-thing". That said, research conducted in the United States suggests that the general atheist population does share a number of common demographic and psychological qualities that are likely to be politically influential. Compared to religious believers, for example, atheists are more likely to be younger, male and single, to have higher than average levels of income and education, to be less authoritarian, less dogmatic, less prejudiced, less conformist and more tolerant and open-minded on religious issues. Atheists are also more likely to be politically independent (not affiliated to any particular party) and to support progressive, liberal values and political campaigns. Right-wing atheism, though not unknown, is comparatively rare (see [Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006](#); [Cragun et al., 2012](#)). Evidence also shows that atheism is linked to distinct sociocultural, economic and political conditions. One of the defining features is its geographical distribution. While estimates put the number of atheists worldwide at just under a billion people (around 13% of the human population according to [WIN-Gallup International, 2012](#)), levels of naturally developing or 'organic' atheism (as opposed to state-led atheism of the kind found in Communist countries such as China) are especially predominant in advanced post-industrial societies, most notably in Western Europe, Australia, Japan, Canada and South Korea (see [Zuckerman, 2007](#), Table 3.1).

As a sub-section of atheism in general, the preponderance of new atheism also appears to be correlated to certain social conditions. In particular, although evidence indicates that new atheist ideas are gaining popularity in a number of countries (e.g. [Zenk, 2012](#)), it remains, to a large extent, an Anglo-American phenomenon, and, primarily, a U.S. one. At first blush, this might be considered somewhat anomalous. After all, levels of atheism in the United States remain relatively low compared to other advanced post-industrial nations. Most studies put the figure at less than 3%, and publicly avowed atheism in national political life is practically non-existent ([Cragun et al., 2012](#); [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2012](#)).

Yet the explanation, perhaps paradoxically, may owe much to the preponderance of religion in

the United States, and to the fact that, as Zuckerman (2012) notes, politically active atheism is more likely to emerge in situations where there is a perceived conflict with religion. Research illustrating the extent of discrimination experienced by atheists makes the point. A study conducted at the University of Minnesota, for example, found that atheists were America's "most distrusted minority", being thought less likely to share common American values (54%) than other minorities, such as Muslims (64%), immigrants (70%) and homosexuals (80%) (Edgell, Gerteis, & Hartmann, 2006). Other studies have revealed similar findings. Research by Cragun et al. (2012) 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'.

### **The rise of 'new atheism'**

The origins of new atheism are complex and involve multiple, interacting forces. Some of these, such as processes of secularisation, are long-term effects. Other causes, such as the terrorist attacks of 9/11, are more immediate, even visceral. Insofar as they help to account for the main developments in the emergence new atheism, these causal influences can be distilled into several key variables that are common to both the U.S and Britain: 1) concerns about the growing political influence of religion as well as the dangers of religious beliefs; 2) transformations in mass communication; 3) cultural forces around the preeminent social authority of science; and 4) the salience of identity politics.

The first of these factors concerns the growing political influence of religion, and involves a tension between declining levels of support for organised religion and the increasing political influence of religious groups. Although secularisation has been noticeably stronger in Britain, with a progressive fall in measurable religiosity throughout the post-war period, decline is evident in the United States as well. A steady rise in the proportion of the religiously unaffiliated, known colloquially as the 'nones', since the 1990s is indicative of the general trend (Pew Research Center, 2010). At the same time, both countries have also experienced a rising influence of religion in the public sphere since the turn of the century. In the U.S this has centered on the role of the Christian Right, especially under the administration of George W. Bush. In Britain, issues of multiculturalism and faith schools have been particularly prominent. In this context, new atheism can be said to represent something of a defensive rear-guard action, an attempt to push back against the encroaching forces of faith, and a response to a world that, as Aronson (2008) observes, "no longer seems to be going our way".

A third factor centres on the apparent dangers of religious belief. This includes a variety of circumstances, from the influence of religion in individual cases of harm and abuse, to its role in violent conflict. An obvious influence here has been the impact of Islamic terrorism, highlighted in its most graphic form by the attacks of 9/11 and their aftershocks in Madrid and London. Writing in the immediate aftermath of the attacks, Dawkins (2004:161) declared that it was now time to break the "absurd taboo" surrounding religious criticism and that, "Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and speak out". "Things are different after September 11th", he said, "Let's stop being so damned respectful!"

If concerns about the growing influence and danger of religion helped to create the space for new atheist ideas to emerge, a critical factor behind their popular dissemination has been the transformation in global media and communications since the 1980s. The dramatic rise in the ubiquity of the Internet has been particularly influential. By facilitating the free exchange of information, and by providing a means by which hitherto isolated individuals can draw together, the Internet has been especially instrumental in the U.S, "creating a new space for atheists to come out, speak out and "meet up"

in a still largely religious society” ([Cimino & Smith 2011](#):28). Indeed, while best-selling publications have been critical for raising awareness of new atheism, one of the central features of its development has been its online character. Many of the most important activities, groups, spokespeople and opinion formers involved in new atheism operate predominantly, if not entirely, on the Internet. Noteworthy examples include organisations such as Project Reason and the Richard Dawkins Foundation, prominent (if not exclusively new atheist) forums and community spaces, such as Atheist Nexus and Think Atheist, and popular new atheist blogs, such as Pharangyula (penned by PZ Myers), Butterflies and Wheels (by Ophelia Benson) and Why Evolution is True (by Jerry Coyne).

The character and development of new atheism has also been shaped by the authority of science and the academy (especially pertinent in advanced technological societies such as the U.S and Britain), which has elevated the status of new atheist advocates and their arguments, many of which attack religion from an avowedly scientific perspective. Another has been the cultural salience of issues relating to identity. Emerging with the new social movements from the 1970s and 1980s, and from the decline of traditional, universalising political projects aimed at bringing about large-scale social transformation via institutional means, the promotion of identity politics instead emphasizes individual groups, as well as 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 social and political struggle ([Bernstein, 2005](#)).

Contestation around issues of identity politics can even be seen in the genesis of the term 'new atheism' itself. This was initially devised and propagated by opponents of atheism as a means of attempting to delegitimise atheist ideas, deriving initially from a [2006](#) article for *Wired* magazine by Gary Wolf, entitled 'The Church of the Non-Believers', and followed shortly afterwards by an article by Simon Hooper ([2006](#)) for CNN.com entitled, 'The Rise of the New Atheists'. From thence the term began to proliferate more widely. The critical line against new atheism is based on a number of common tropes. These include complaints that its proponents are overly polemical, aggressive, rude and intolerant, have a superficial conception of religious belief and, ironically (given that the assertion of a 'new' atheism came from its opponents), offer little originality in terms of philosophical and intellectual argument. It is also regularly claimed that new atheism is an exclusivist preserve of a Western, white, male, intellectual elite, comprising a fundamentalist, ideologically right-wing worldview with imperialist, if not racist, undertones. Comparisons to totalitarian regimes, notably Fascism and Communism, are frequent too, with this being seen as indicative of the moral vacuum at the heart of atheism and its inability to offer any positive values of its own beyond excoriating religion (for examples see [Eagleton, 2006](#); [Beattie, 2007](#); [Berkowitz, 2007](#); [Berlinerblau, 2010](#), [Hart, 2010](#)).<sup>2</sup>

Such claims, unsurprisingly, are strongly rejected by supporters of new atheism as little more than a collection of straw men and caricatures. Indeed, though many have come to accept the term 'new atheism' as a shorthand practical descriptor for a more radically critical approach, the whole notion of a qualitatively unique and distinct form of atheism is nonetheless considered to be erroneous. AC Grayling highlights the absurdity of the claim, remarking, “how can we be new if the arguments are old?” ([Aitkenhead, 2011](#)). In any event, for many, the novelty of 'new' atheism is not to be found in the details of its intellectual arguments, but in the extent to which atheists are now willing to openly criticise religion, and the degree to which such an approach has found wider public resonance. As Tom Flynn ([2010](#)) observes, “There’s nothing new about the new atheism”, beyond the fact that atheist arguments have now found mainstream publishing success and exposure “to millions who would never

2 It may, of course, be thought somewhat ironic in this respect that those for whom new atheism is most anathema appear to want to spend the most time attacking it.

otherwise pick up an atheist book”.

These causal underpinnings have shaped some of the core political aspects of new atheism in a variety of ways. Concerns about the growing and negative social influence of religion, for instance, have been central to the high levels of hostility with which religion is usually regarded, the rise of the Internet has had a significant impact in enabling a decentralised organisational structure and in facilitating the spread of new atheist ideas, while an emphasis on identity politics has underpinned many of the promotional campaigns undertaken by new atheists, as well as key strategic debates, splits and divisions within new atheism itself. These issues, and their implications, are explored in the following sections.

## Groups and campaigns

New atheism is politically engaged in a variety of ways. One of the most notable involves on-going efforts to reduce the influence of religion in the public sphere. In this, new atheists are active from a number of vantage points. Expanding far beyond the typical vision of new atheism as limited to the confines of the Four Horsemen, its proponents are organisationally arranged in a loosely connected, non-hierarchical and decentralised fashion, with no formal representative body (and, indeed, with many eschewing formal involvement altogether), and frequently operate within the existing nexus of groups set up to promote broader nonreligious causes and ideals.<sup>3</sup> In the United States a wide range of national-level bodies have been established for this purpose. They include American Atheists, the Center for Inquiry, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, the Secular Coalition for America, the American Humanist Association, the Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers and the Council for Secular Humanism. A National Atheist Party, aiming to influence electoral politics directly, was established in March 2011. By way of contrast, in Britain there are just two main national organisations: the British Humanist Association and the National Secular Society. Other groups, such as Atheist UK, Center For Inquiry UK and the National Federation of Atheist, Humanist and Secular Student Societies, remain peripheral.

These organisations are actively involved in a number of common campaign issues. One of the principal themes is their opposition to religious influence over public policy. Key areas include social service provision, such as the faith-based initiatives of George W. Bush, or the Big Society agenda of the British Coalition government; healthcare, including support for assisted dying and opposition to restrictions on reproductive rights and scientific research, such as that involving the use of embryonic stem cells; education, largely centring on the issue of creationism in the U.S, and on faith schools and compulsory worship in Britain; and civil rights, involving religious exemptions from equalities legislation, and discrimination on issues such as housing, employment and same-sex marriage.

Prominent, too, have been vigorous efforts to ensure or maintain a secular public sphere. In the United States this has centred on campaigns, pursued through the courts, to keep state buildings, land and offices free from religious symbols and ceremonies. Notable campaigns have included opposition to nativity scenes in public parks, prayer banners in public schools, displays of the Ten Commandments

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3 Studies into the membership of atheist, secular and humanist groups have revealed a varied composition, from doughty, long-serving campaigners to 'activists who may be more open to an avowedly 'new atheist' posture. The kind of viewpoint taken varies from issue to issue ([Hunsberger & Altemeyer, 2006](#); [Catto & Eccles, 2013](#)). A recent study conducted in the United States developed a classification scheme for atheists with six types: Intellectual Atheist/Agnostic (37.6%); Activist (23%); Anti-Theist (14.8%); Ritual Atheist/Agnostic (12.5%); Seeker-Agnostic (7.6%); and Non-Theist (4.4%). Of these types, the first three, comprising a total of 75.4% of atheists interviewed, were actively involved in promoting atheism in some way. For more details see <http://www.atheismresearch.com/>.

around courthouses and calls for a 'Day of Prayer' by federally elected officials. On-going attempts to remove the phrase 'under God' from the Pledge of Allegiance and 'In God we Trust' from the American currency have also been contentious, as has a legal bid from American Atheists opposing the display of a cross-shaped section of rubble found in the wreckage of 9/11 in the partially state-funded National September 11 Memorial and Museum. In Britain the primary (and long-standing) campaigns have centred on disestablishment of the Church of England and the removal of its Bishops' automatic right to seats in the upper legislature (the House of Lords). The use of the courts to affect change has been largely absent as a political strategy, but there are signs that this might be changing. A recent and high profile case by the National Secular Society opposed to the inclusion of prayers as a formal part of local council meetings provoked controversy following a court decision in its favour. Although the British government quickly took measures to circumvent the ruling, many councils have since altered their procedures amidst legal uncertainty over the issue.

The ability of nonreligious organisations to pursue and promote such campaigns is restricted by their comparatively small size and by the limited resources at their disposal, especially compared to those available to religious groups. In Britain, although exact figures are not available, the National Secular Society is estimated to have a membership of 7-10,000, while the British Humanist Association claims to have over 28,000 members and supporters (figures for paid members are not stated).<sup>4</sup> In contrast (and again, exact figures are difficult to establish), Britain's largest religious institution, the Church of England, claims that around a million people attend its services every week.

More detailed figures can be extrapolated for U.S organisations by analysing financial returns, which provide a breakdown of income and expenditure activities. Figures for the 2010 calendar year, the last available year for which comparative figures were available at the time of writing, show that the central organisation for the promotion of explicitly atheist causes in the U.S, American Atheists, received a gross income of \$577,895, and had an estimated paid membership of around 2,000. The largest of all the nonreligious organisations in the United States, the Freedom From Religion Foundation, had an income of \$2,234,307 with an estimated membership of around 18,000. The largest annual income was accrued by the Council for Secular Humanism, which received total gross revenues of \$2,313,634. In contrast, the Christian-based Alpha course ('Alpha USA') received an annual income of \$6,965,725, the Family Christian Association of America obtained \$8,966,672, and the American Bible Society received the enormous sum of \$67,293,170.<sup>5</sup> Research from the U.S has also revealed there to be more than 200 religious organisations involved in national-level lobbying, with a grand total of \$350 million a year being dedicated to this purpose ([Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2011](#)).

## Identity politics

The political activities of new atheism extend beyond the formal, public sphere. In this, two aspects are of particular importance. The first of these involves challenging religion in the private sphere; the second focuses on issues of civil rights and group belonging. Together, they denote the utilisation of identity politics in an attempt to drive cultural change, invoking a much broader conception of the 'political' beyond that associated with public policy issues, and opening up the goals and ambitions of atheism to a politicisation of personal space (e.g., [Berkowitz, 2007](#); [Cimino & Smith, 2011](#)). Both of these aspects are found more strongly in the U.S than elsewhere.

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4 Details of British membership figures are derived from personal information given anonymously to the author.

5 Details of U.S membership figures are estimated using figures for membership dues based on the cost of a standard paid membership package. Copies of these financial returns can be obtained through [www.guidestar.org](http://www.guidestar.org).



A central feature of identity politics is its emphasis on groups. Groups help connect perceptions about the self to the wider social context, facilitating a sense of belonging and meaning as well as establishing norms for appropriate beliefs and behaviours. In this way groups provide a focal point for the promotion of shared interests based around common themes, issues and concerns ([Brewer, 2001](#)). Sustaining group identity and cohesion requires constant attention by group members, both to monitor the boundary between the group and wider society, as well as to police instances of deviance within the group itself ([Vignoles & Moncaster, 2007](#)). These processes often lead to in- and out-group mentalities, especially in situations involving uncertainty and/or where a threat to the group and its interests is thought to exist ([Ysseldyk, Matheson, and Anisman, 2010](#)). The successful projection of identity politics requires a strong sense of group commitment, clear identity markers and a collective sense of relative deprivation, all of which are needed to sustain a necessary degree of group motivation ([Reicher, Spears, and Haslam, 2010](#)).

A central goal in the use of identity politics by new atheists has been to promote new atheist ideas and undermine religious belief; if not to eradicate it altogether (although for many this remains desirable), then to certainly push it as far to the margins as possible. As AC Grayling ([2007](#)) explains: “No doubt the conflict will be long and bloody...But eventually, one hopes, those who persist in wanting to have an invisible friend, who continue believing in fairies at the bottom of the garden, will do so in private, where such proclivities belong along with wearing the opposite sex’s underwear”. Alongside this, a related goal in the U.S context has been to raise the visibility of atheism with a view to countering adverse public perceptions and gaining mainstream acceptance. Key to this is the belief that the true size of the atheist (and nonreligious) constituency is far greater than is typically imagined, and that, drawing on the experiences of the gay rights movement, revealing the actual numbers will increase familiarity and undermine negative stereotypes. Among the principal methods being directed to the achievement of these aims include the 'We Are Atheism' and 'Out' campaigns, which encourage atheists to publicly identify themselves as such. A recent 'Reason Rally', which attracted up to 20,000 people to Washington, had a similar goal (and a campaign in Britain calling on irreligious people to select 'no religion' in the last census had much the same objective). Other efforts include promotional, educational and outreach work by nonreligious organisations, the publication of books, articles and magazines about atheism and the problems of religious belief, participation in public talks, debates and documentaries (many of which are available for public view online through channels such as YouTube) and the production of media programmes such as 'The Atheist Experience' and Freethought radio. New atheists have also sought to attract attention and challenge religious ideas through promoting resources and events designed to highlight relevant issues around non-religion, such as International Blasphemy Rights Day and the use of advertisements on billboards and public transport. In 2009 a high-profile bus campaign launched in London with the slogan, “There's Probably No God, Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life”, inspired similar campaigns in cities around the world. The tactic has since become widely used but remains controversial. Many atheist adverts have been defaced, and several companies have refused to carry them, leading to legal challenges.

Moreover, new atheism has self-consciously adopted a discourse rooted in a language of group rights and demands for equal treatment. This has been fuelled, to a large degree, by a desire to establish a sense of explicitly 'atheist' identity, and, although the goal is not universally accepted (e.g. [Grothe & Dacey, 2004](#); [Namazie, 2007](#)), to develop a greater notion of group membership, community and belonging (see e.g. [Aronson, 2008](#); [Cimino & Smith, 2007;2011](#)). As PZ Myers ([2008](#)) notes, “If this New Atheist movement...is to increase its ability to influence the culture, being able to recognize our essential unity as a community is essential”. “A fractured group of hermits and misfits”, he warns, “can

not change the world”.

A key facet of this has been to try and construct a support network of resources and assistance to fellow and potential atheists. As Greta Christina ([2012](#):loc.39) writes: “atheists need to do more than just pry people out of religion...We need to develop secular and atheist communities, to replace the ones people often lose when they let go of their religion”. Noteworthy examples here include the work of social action groups such as Non-Believers Giving Aid, the Foundation Beyond Belief and Atheists Helping the Homeless, community events such as the Atheist Film Festival and Rock Beyond Belief and organisations such as Camp Quest, which provides residential summer camps for children of nonreligious parents. A range of local, national and international conferences, conventions and meetings (such as Skepticon, The Amazing Meeting and the annual conventions of nonreligious organisations), also help to bring like-minded people together.

### **Divisions and schisms**

While the use of identity politics has been beneficial in establishing a broader atheist community, it has also created a number of tensions and conflicts, both between new atheists and other nonreligious sub-groups as well as within new atheism itself. These range from personal spats between individual activists, including criticisms of Sam Harris for his support of security profiling in airports, disputes over the line-up of speakers for the Reason Rally and the expulsion of bloggers (notably Paul Mason, aka 'Thunderf00t') from the prominent Freethought blogs network, to more serious rifts over key principles, aims and strategies.

### **brand awareness**

One of the central issues here is the question of branding, namely, whether new atheists should actively describe themselves as such, or whether the adoption of an alternative label would be more politically expedient. Sam Harris ([2007](#)), for example, has argued that the continued use of the term 'atheism', as defined purely by its relationship to religion, has been “a mistake of some consequence” that has contributed to the marginalisation of atheism as little more than a “cranky sub-culture”. Instead, Harris argues for the rejection of all labels, maintaining that “there is no reason for us to fight in well-ordered ranks, like the red coats of Atheism”, and that victory will only be achieved when the very notion of god is no longer taken seriously and atheism becomes “scarcely intelligible as a concept”. Not all, however, agree with this position. Indeed, for some, the very idea of surrendering the term 'atheism' at a time when religious ideas remain so pervasive is anathema. According to PZ Myers ([2007a](#)), any adoption of a new label would merely lead to the supplicant being treated “with the same contemptuous sneer”, and that, in any case, labels remain politically useful tools, providing “rallying cries for the tiny, scattered bubbles of rationality drifting in the sea of superstition and ignorance”. Still others have supported the use of alternative descriptors as a way of avoiding the negative connotations associated with atheism. 'Brights', for example, was coined by Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell ([2004](#)), and was initially promoted by both Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett as part of an online drive to achieve greater acceptance of a naturalist (though not an exclusively atheist) worldview. Other alternatives, such as the recently devised 'Atheism+', and 'Gnu atheism' (a play on the GNU free software movement), have also been taken up. The deliberate adoption of atheist symbols and imagery, such as the atheist fish, the flying spaghetti monster and variants on the letter 'A', has proven to be popular as well.

### accommodate or confront?

Another fault line between nonreligious sub-groups concerns the zero tolerance approach taken by new atheists towards religious beliefs. This is considered by many within the broader nonreligious community to be divisive, polarising and ultimately counterproductive, driving religious believers further into their trenches and alienating potential supporters. Accordingly, many favour a more accommodating approach, maintaining that forging alliances with moderate religious groups on issues of common concern, such as tackling fundamentalism, promoting secular government and supporting science education, is likely to be more politically fruitful. Paul Kurtz, founder of the Council for Secular Humanism and the Center for Inquiry, for example, claims that confrontational tactics may have raised the visibility of new atheism, but its fervent attacks on religion have been “a strategic blunder” given the need to appeal “to a wider base of support” (Kurtz, 2011; Nisbet, 2007). In the same vein, the interfaith activist, Chris Stedman (2010, 2011), claims that denigrating religious beliefs “condemns us to permanent minority status”. Alain de Botton (2012), too, has called for a new wave of atheism, incorporating what he considers to be the more positive and useful elements of religion (such as its use of ritual and architecture) to supplant the overly negative approach taken by new atheists.

Such claims, however, are brusquely dismissed by new atheists themselves, who argue that a confrontational approach remains necessary to attract attention and promote social change, and that accommodation amounts to little more than passive acquiescence in religious privilege. As PZ Myers (2007b) claims, “The path we’ve taken in the past, the cautious avoidance of the scarlet letter of atheism, has not worked”. Similarly, Adam Lee (2012) notes that, “No broad social movement has ever achieved its objectives by sitting back and waiting for everyone else to come around”. Many new atheists add that, in any case, tackling religious belief with a plurality of approaches is itself beneficial, since this expands the intellectual weaponry in the nonreligious arsenal, and that confrontational tactics can even assist those advocating a more moderate approach by enabling them to appear more reasonable, and therefore more acceptable to mainstream public opinion (an effect known as the Overton window).<sup>6</sup> Describing the benefits of a ‘good cop, bad cop’ routine, Greta Christina (2007) writes that, “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 we’re working”.

### diversity issues

While questions of tactics have brought new atheism into conflict with the broader nonreligious community, there are tensions within new atheism as well. Central to this are questions, becoming increasingly prominent during the past 18 months, about issues around diversity. General agreement on the need to combat the notable under-representation of ethnic minorities within the secular movement (African Americans, for instance, are the least likely racial group in the U.S to self-identify as being atheist; see [Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, 2008](#)) has been accompanied by more fractious discussions around gender equality. A series of controversial incidents involving sexist and misogynistic comments on atheist websites and forums, claims of sexual harassment at atheist gatherings and concerns about a lack of female representation at conferences have put matters firmly at the forefront of

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<sup>6</sup> The theory was conceived by Joseph Overton, and sets out the way in which the range of policies that are considered to be politically acceptable by the general public changes over time. For a discussion of its use in the Freethought movement, see Croft (2012).

internal debate.<sup>7</sup> The omission of female authors from lists of prominent atheists, most notable in the typical framing of new atheism around the Four Horsemen and the concomitant neglect of works by Jennifer Michael Hecht (*Doubt: A History*, 2004) and Susan Jacoby (*Freethinkers*, 2004) – the former of which appeared before the book that is usually attributed with kick-starting the new atheist movement (Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*) – has added to the sense that the style of new atheism remains gendered towards the promotion of masculine values of confrontation and aggressive posturing.<sup>8</sup> These issues have led many feminist activists to claim that the atheist movement in general, and new atheism in particular, remains dominated by a white, middle class male elite (e.g. [McCreight, 2011](#); [Myers, 2011](#); [Watson, 2012](#)). According to Victoria Bekiempis (2011), the popular impression is that it amounts to little more than “a contentious, showboating boys' club”.

Divisions around this issue are prominent and emotive. While feminists contend that much more needs to be done to address these problems, others claim that any gender bias within atheism is no more disproportionate than in any other area of life, and that assertions of widespread misogyny are overblown. Illustrating the point, writer, Paula Kirby (2012) wrote an open letter to the movement, berating those making accusations of sexism for being 'Feminazis', and accusing them of promoting a victim mentality that was ultimately bad for attracting women to the atheist movement.

Internal divisions have recently intensified following the development of a new identity marker known as 'Atheism+'. Catalysing from an initial series of blog posts by Jen McCreight, but rapidly gaining wider popularity, Atheism+ presents itself as a new 'new atheism', and contends that many of the problems faced by the atheist movement are due to its domination by old, middle class, privileged white males. Accordingly, Atheism+ calls for greater practical action to align atheism to progressive political causes and 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 (2012) puts it,

*The 'first wave' of atheism were the traditional philosophers, freethinkers, and academics. Then came the second wave of 'New Atheists' like Dawkins and Hitchens, whose trademark was their unabashed public criticism of religion. Now it's time for a third wave....that cares about how religion affects everyone and that applies skepticism to everything, including social issues like sexism, racism, politics, poverty, and crime.*

The reaction to Atheism+ has been mixed. Though many have greeted the idea warmly including high-profile new atheists such as Greta Christina, Richard Carrier, Ophelia Benson and PZ Myers, others have been harshly critical. Prominent objections include claims that the goals of Atheism+ are unnecessarily divisive and elitist, and that the whole notion itself is undifferentiated from secular humanism. Ron Lindsay (2012), President of the Center for Inquiry, for instance, points out that secular groups already campaign for progressive issues, and warns that the attempt to establish a new form of atheist identity could have a “potentially divisive impact”. More provocatively, Al Stefanelli

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7 One incident above all else, the so-called 'Elevatorgate' affair, involving complaints about inappropriate propositioning at a conference by the high-profile atheist blogger and activist, Rebecca Watson, has come to symbolise this particular issue; not least for the response it elicited from Richard Dawkins, who declared that Watson should 'grow up, or at least grow a thicker skin' ([Watson, 2011](#))

8 Although the titles by Hecht and Jacoby are not expressly 'new atheist' in their orientation (their contents focus on skepticism and freethought rather than atheism in particular), they were nevertheless influential in helping to raise public awareness about atheist issues.

(2012) accuses those behind Atheism+ of promoting “a climate of exceptionalism and an air of superiority...bordering on hubris and arrogance”. The full implications of Atheism+ remain to be seen.

**A tipping point?**

For some (mostly critics), the impact of the 'new' atheism has clearly been limited. Wendy Kaminer (2011), for instance, contends that while new atheism “has increased the visibility of secularists and humanists, it has not increased their clout”. Chris Stedman (2010) similarly asserts that while new atheism might have dominated public discourse on non-religiosity it has failed to achieve mainstream acceptability for atheist beliefs. Equally dismissive, David Hart (2010) regards new atheism as a mere piece of cultural ephemera, little more than a 'passing fad' and no more weighty than 'light entertainment'. It is, he says, “one of those occasional and inexplicable marketing vogues that inevitably go the way of pet rocks, disco, prime-time soaps, and *The Bridges of Madison County*”.

Others, though, point to more positive signs. According to the atheist blogger, Hemant Mehta (2011), new atheism has now made it increasingly acceptable to come out publicly as an atheist in the U.S, a point echoed by Tom Flynn (2010), who claims that “atheists and other nonbelievers are poised for huge growth in public acceptance” and that “the dark age of public revulsion towards atheists is soon to end”. Richard Dawkins (2012) agrees, asserting that the growth of atheism is rapidly approaching 'a tipping point', “We are approaching that critical mass”, he states, “where the number of people who have come out has become so great that suddenly everybody will realize, 'I can come out, too’”.

Measuring the impact and the effectiveness of new atheism, though, is fraught with difficulty. Isolating key factors and influences in social change is a complicated exercise, and one made all the more burdensome in this instance by the various problems involved in identifying the parameters and composition of new atheism itself. Even where social, cultural and political developments might be observed, such as those associated with policy issues or trends and attitudes around (non)-religious beliefs, establishing definitive causal influence to anything that could reasonably be described as 'new atheist' remains a torturously complex process. Nonetheless, signs of success do appear to be evident. One area that is most notable here concerns the on-going decline of religiosity, and the progressive trend in the proportion of people identifying as nonreligious, in both Britain and the United States. In the former, where atheism is already far less socially contentious, the numbers of people describing themselves as having 'no religion' (of which atheists form a sub-set) increased from 39.8% in 2005, the point at which new atheism began to take off, to a peak of 50.9% in 2009 (see Table 1). Although this subsequently fell back to 46.1% in 2011, the broader long-term trend appears to be in an upward direction.

*Table 1: Proportion of respondents (%) identifying as having 'no religion'.*

2000	2001	2002	2003	2004	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
39.8	41.5	41.3	43.4	43.6	39.8	46	45.9	43.3	50.9	50.3	46.1

Source: British Attitudes Survey.

In the U.S, the rate of expansion (if not the overall percentages) is more impressive still. According to research by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (2012), the number of religiously

unaffiliated in the United States 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. The number of people willing to explicitly describe themselves as atheist has risen. According to a study by WIN-Gallup international (2012), the proportion of self-identifying atheists in the U.S has increased from 1% to 5%, since 2005, while the number describing themselves as religious has fallen from 73% to 60%. At the same time, the low social status of atheism in the United States also shows signs of improving. According to a recent poll by Gallup, the proportion of people willing to vote for an atheist as President, though still lower than for other minority groups, has now surpassed half (54%) of the voting population for the first time since the question was asked in the 1950s (Winston, 2012).

For all the problems involved in analysing social change, it would seem implausible, not least given the timing of events, to suggest that these shifts were entirely unrelated to the emergence of new atheism. Yet if new atheism has helped drive the growth and social standing of non-religion, its impact on public policy has been more adulterated. Despite numerous legal achievements in enforcing the constitutional separation between church and state in the U.S, efforts to remove religious phraseology from the national currency and pledge of allegiance have not succeeded, and signs of a clear political breakthrough at the national level remain hard to discern. nonreligious organisations also remain dwarfed by their religious counterparts in terms of membership size and resources, and the persistence of internal schisms and in-fighting within and around new atheism may undermine attempts to establish a genuine sense of community and deter potential supporters. In Britain, too, the picture is an ambivalent one. On the one hand, organised religion remains in decline, court cases alleging religious discrimination in public life have repeatedly failed, new atheist issues and debates continue to command media attention, and governments of all political persuasions have passed legislation deemed by many religious groups to be contrary to religious freedoms (most recently, and notably, in the case of same-sex marriage). On the other hand, Britain retains an established church (replete with seats in the upper House of its legislature), nonreligious groups remain relatively small in size, and recent governments have also implemented policies designed to promote a greater role for faith in the public realm, most obviously in the continued funding of faith schools, and in plans, currently being pursued under the Coalition government's Big Society agenda, to facilitate the greater involvement of religious organisations in the provision of public services.

The qualified success of new atheism at this point, then, needs to be set in this broader context. The social and cultural influence of religion remains deeply entrenched, even if its position has been unsettled, and many obstacles and challenges lie ahead. Success at the level of public policy, in particular, remains patchy, and legal victories, though noteworthy, remain few. That said, with the numbers of the nonreligious increasing, and with support for organised religion continuing to decline, the future prospects for the broader atheist, secular and humanist community appear healthy.

## Conclusion

Debates about religion in the twenty-first century have been fundamentally shaped by the emergence of new atheism. Attracting global attention, though centred primarily on the United States and (albeit less so) Britain, new atheism is harshly critical of all forms of religious belief and has sought to openly challenge and undermine religious influence in both public and private spheres. Academic research into this subject, however, remains embryonic, and all the more so where its political dimension is concerned. This study has sought to address this lacuna by exploring a number of key political issues that underpin the emergence and development of new atheism, and has explored from a political

perspective its organisational structure, main objectives and strategies, internal dynamics and tensions, and the extent to which it has thus far managed to achieve its goals.

Though new atheism is difficult to pin down with precision, a number of themes are apparent. New atheism is politically diverse, organisationally decentred and contains no consensus or uniformity of opinion on core strategic issues. Debates around branding, the promotion of an atheist identity, relations with other atheist, secular and humanist groups, as well as problems around a lack of internal diversity, persist. The dynamics of these issues, and the way in which they unfold, will shape the way in which new atheism develops. In directing attention to these themes, this paper has also sought to highlight the need for more research in this area. New atheism remains intrinsically political. To understand it, scholars must pay more attention to its political dimension.

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