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## **Secular fundamentalists? Characterising the new atheist approach to secularism, religion and politics**

*The 'new atheism' has become an established cultural reference point in Britain. The anti-religious texts of authors such as Richard Dawkins have fuelled much media discussion concerning the public role of religion in the UK and elsewhere. The new atheism has also become politically controversial, with a government minister recently criticising 'secular fundamentalism' for threatening religious identity and seeking to remove religion from public life altogether. Many commentators have argued that new atheism effectively mirrors the features of religious fundamentalism, evincing an intolerant and absolutist worldview that may damage social and political relations. This article seeks to examine the extent to which new atheism possesses features that echo those of the religious fundamentalist. It is contended that while the new atheists display strong anti-religious convictions, they generally do not adopt stances of absolute certainty. New atheists promote uncompromising arguments for depriving religion of institutional and political privileges, yet maintain liberal tolerance for the practice of religion itself. It is suggested that whilst new atheists ought not to be considered secular fundamentalists, they do proselytise for radical secularism and atheism in a way which could be considered 'evangelical' in certain respects.*

### **Introduction**

The relationship between religion and politics remains a controversial one. Though many indicators suggest Britain continues to become a more secular society (Religion in England and Wales 2011), during the last decade matters of religious belief and identity have been prominent in public discussion. The terrorist attacks in North America in September 11th, 2001 and in London in July 7th, 2005 have raised the issue of how to confront religious fundamentalism. There is also ongoing debate on how to demarcate the boundaries between the religious and the secular. For instance, the use of sharia law to settle legal disputes has provoked controversy concerning the issue of legitimate authority in Britain (MacEoin and Green: 2009). In addition, courts cases brought by Christian plaintiffs have raised questions as to how far appeals to religious conscience can permit exemptions from secular norms (Morris, 2010). At the same time religious identity in the UK has been subject to ongoing transformation, notably with a sharp decline in the number of people identifying as Christian between 2001 and 2011 (a fall from 72% of the population, to 59%). Over the same period, the number of people declaring themselves to have 'no religion' increased from 15% to 25% (Religion in England and Wales, 2011). Thus whilst the role of religion has become more prominent in public discussion, traditional forms of religion in the Britain have continued to decline. It is within this context that the emergence of 'new atheism' has significance. Associated most commonly with the work of Richard Dawkins (biologist), Christopher Hitchens (journalist), Daniel Dennett (philosopher) and Sam Harris (neuroscientist), 'new atheism' has become renowned in many parts of the world, but is primarily an Anglo-American phenomenon (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007; Harris 2004, 2008; Dennett 2006, see

also Stenger 2008; 2009 Loftus, 2008 and Barker, 2008). The best-selling book published by these authors can be seen as both a symptom and cause of a cultural trend which as manifested itself in provocative criticisms of religion, in particular, forms of Christianity and Islam. In Britain, key figures often associated with the new atheism include not just academics such as Dawkins and the philosopher, A.C. Grayling (2011), but political journalists such as Polly Toynbee and Nick Cohen, and even novelists such as Phillip Pullman, Ian McEwan, Martin Amis<sup>1</sup> and Salman Rushdie (Beattie, 2007; Bradley and Tate, 2010). The controversial anti-religious stances of the new atheists have become a topic of media discussion within many television programmes, newspaper articles and public debates concerning the role of religion in British society. Media coverage of issues of religion, secularism and atheism have increased when compared to the 1980s, with a growth in hostile discussion of both Islam and fundamentalist Christianity (Taira, Knott and Poole, 2010). The impact of new atheism in Britain has taken many people by surprise, given the cultural tendency for many British people to be resistant to both strong versions of religious belief or unbelief (Bullivant, 2010: 114) It is widely accepted that there is little that is intellectually new about new atheism, but its character derives from the refreshed willingness of some atheists to publicly attack religion. There is no universally agreed definition of new atheism, but a number of scholars who have examined the phenomena regard it as a cultural movement:

‘that is critical of "religion" and "theism", promotes radical secularism and takes a view which is particularly informed by contemporary science (especially genetics and cognitive science) and scientism’ (Lee, 2012).

Thus it can be argued that the ‘newness’ of new atheism derives in part from its political character. Rather than being content to advocate atheism purely at an academic or intellectual level, the emphasis is on popularising anti-religious sentiment in order to support efforts to challenge the institutional and social power of religion. In the UK this generates a direct set of political stances on issues such as the state-church relationship, faith schools and freedom-of-speech. New atheist authors have diverging emphases and sometimes contrasting opinions.<sup>2</sup> However assumptions which are common to most new atheist positions include:

- 1) There is probably no God – New atheists believe there is no good evidence or reason to believe a deity exists, though they generally accept there remains a small possibility that one could (Dawkins 2007: 51).
- 2) Developments in science, literary criticism, archaeology and other disciplines now provide overwhelming evidence against the claims of monotheistic religion. Consequently, non-believers should not feel obliged to passively

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<sup>1</sup> Though he is strongly anti-religious and sometimes described as a new atheist, Amis has also expressed some reservations about ‘atheism’ as a perspective (Amis, 2001).

<sup>2</sup> The term was first publicly used in the US magazine *Wired*, to encapsulate the ideas of the best-selling polemics of Dawkins, Harris and Dennett (Wolf 2006). The term was then picked up by numerous other commentators and applied to other later anti-religious, pro-atheist publications. Leading atheists have tended to accept and use the label themselves, despite occasional misgivings.

accept the social, political and institutional privileges commonly conferred on religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism.

- 3) The morality expressed within the Holy Books is often questionable and even dangerous (Dawkins, 2006: 235-262). Secular literature can often provide better moral guidance (Hitchens, 2007: 151). We should not accord automatic respect for religious beliefs that lack convincing foundations (Stenger 2009:46).
- 4) Even 'moderate' forms of religion can be problematic in that they may help legitimise belief in supernatural claims, which can be used by others for ill-effect (e.g. terrorism, suicide bombing) (Dennett, 2006: 285) (Harris, 2004: 13). We should not allow established social customs or political correctness divert us from the needs to challenge such beliefs.
- 5) Institutional religion can confer unquestioned authority upon people who may then misuse it (e.g. cases of child abuse; genital mutilation; indoctrination) (Hitchens 2007: 223) (Dawkins, 2006: 217-220).

Innumerable critics have suggested that the arguments of new atheists betray misunderstandings of the Abrahamic religions and indeed how religious texts tend to be interpreted (e.g. Haught 2008; Marshall, 2007; Hedges 2008; Cottingham, 2009; Day, 2008; Hart, 2009; Hitchens 2010; Williams, 2009; Eagleton, 2009; Falconi, 2010; Hahn and Walker, 2008; Ganssle, 2009). They have also been criticised for appearing to treat religion largely as a set of propositions rather than a socially-embedded set of practices. However, the challenge of new atheism has been taken seriously by religious groups concerned that it may generate intolerance for the work of churches in public life. A Church of England report (2011) Challenges for the New Quinquennium emphasised the need to 'take on' the new atheism in order to defend the role of Anglican faith. Cardinal Kasper, senior aide to Pope Benedict, expressed the fear that Britain was in the grip of 'a new and aggressive atheism' (BBC News, 15/10/10). Whilst this seemed an exaggerated claim, the Pope's concern about anti-religious sentiment in the Britain was underscored during his state visit in 2010 when he attacked 'aggressive secularism' and warned of the damage which 'atheist extremism' had caused in 20<sup>th</sup> century Europe (Ratzinger, 2010).

Indeed a number of commentators, including some atheists, have suggested that in its unflinching criticism of religion, new atheism actually resembles the intolerant, uncompromising features of religious fundamentalist groups (Ruse, 2009). When calling for faith and religion to play a bigger role in public life, Baroness Warsi (then chair of the Conservative Party) denounced forces of 'militant secularisation' (Warsi, 2012) and the stances of 'secular fundamentalists' (Squires, 2012). She clearly had Dawkins and new atheism in mind (if not exclusively so) when she criticised those who wished to see religion 'sidelined, marginalised and downgraded in the public sphere' (Warsi, 2012). A number of prominent academic commentators have also described new atheism as a kind of 'secular fundamentalism', notably the sociologist

of religion, Grace Davie (2012) and the historian of religion, Karen Armstrong (2009). These authors consider new atheism to be a product of a contemporary culture in which the role of religion is in flux and the extremes of both religious fundamentalism and hard-line secularism can serve to reinforce one another.

The aim of this article is not to conduct a normative evaluation of the new atheism or to take any stance in favour of, or in opposition to, its arguments. Rather the goal is to examine to what extent the label of 'secular fundamentalism' is a useful one through which to understand the new atheism, with particular reference to issues in British politics. The discussion initially seeks to place new atheism within the broader history of secularism in Britain<sup>3</sup>. Analysis then proceeds by first outlining what kinds of characteristics are commonly used to categorise religious beliefs as 'fundamentalist'. Having identified such features, the article then examines the positions and arguments of new atheism, seeking to establish to what extent it may possess fundamentalist elements. It is suggested that though a reasoned case can be made that new atheists share features with forms of fundamentalism, the term 'secular fundamentalist' is ultimately an inappropriate label. Whilst new atheists offer highly contestable views of both science and religion, they tend to deal in strong conviction and strategically divisive polemic rather than absolutes. It is argued that there are certain traits within new atheism that can plausibly be described as 'evangelical', but that new atheists do not so much offer secular certainties as seek to deny religion a special status.

### **Context – Secularism and atheism in the UK**

There is a long history of dissent against religion and its traditional roles in Britain. However prior to the 19<sup>th</sup> century anti-religious writings were largely discussed in particular intellectual circles rather than debated more widely. Efforts to popularise texts which were critical of Christianity were usually met with hostility and often legal action using blasphemy laws. The original British publisher of Thomas Paine's anti-Biblical tract the Age of Reason (1796) was jailed. It was only twenty years later that Paine's arguments were widely disseminated through the activity of the leading religious sceptic, Richard Carlisle. Carlisle had also spent time in jail for publishing criticism of Christian doctrine, but used his martyrdom to encourage the creation of 'Zetetic' societies which were amongst the first groups dedicated to non-religious 'free-thought' in Britain (Royle, 1976: 16-17). The socialist thinker and activist, Robert Owen also articulated strong opposition to religion which he said had made man into 'a weak imbecile animal, a furious bigot and a fanatic, or a miserable hypocrite' (Owen, speech delivered August 14, 1817, quoted in Russell, 2001). Attacks on institutional religion and Christian texts came from thinkers variously describing themselves as deists, atheists, agnostics, or free-thinkers. George Jacob

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<sup>3</sup> The article emphasises the implications of new atheism within a British context. However, it should be recognised that new atheism is significant not just in Anglo-America but parts of Europe and elsewhere (Armarasingam, 2010).

Holyoake is credited with coining the term 'secularism' to refer to the belief that matters of religion and matters of politics should be kept separate. Whilst some religious sceptics believed they ought to actively oppose religion, others suggested secularists ought to project an indifferent stance which only insists that the state should be neutral on religious matters. Holyoake debated this issue with the other prominent sceptic of the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century Charles Bradlaugh, who was more inclined to advocate outright atheism. In a debate between these two leading secularists Holyoake argued 'The world will never have time to stand still to listen to secular propositions (he argued) if you have to settle the atheistic first' (Berman, 1988: 213). Through his energy and charismatic leadership skills, Bradlaugh united most different parts of the British secular movement in 1866 with the creation of the National Secular Society (NSS). Despite expressing hostility to belief in the supernatural, the organisation's goals aimed not at promoting atheism but disestablishing the Church of England and removing institutional privileges for religion. Thus secularism was often presented as an approach which not only offered religious sceptics freedom from religion, but also provided the range of different religious groups protection from fears of domination by an Anglican State. Sociologically, the British secularist movement consisted largely of working class members and attacks on religious institutional privilege were tied to the goals of ending tackling poverty, ending social inequalities and extending the franchise. In this regard scepticism about Christian notions of life-after-death were used to underscore the need to ensure decent living conditions for everyone during their earthly life (McGee, 1948). Bradlaugh went on to become elected as a Liberal MP in 1880 but refused to take the religious oath of allegiance. After numerous Tory-led efforts to block him, he finally took his seat in the House of Commons in 1886 and it was agreed that atheists (and other religious groups) could instead choose to 'affirm' allegiance to Parliament. The secularist movement was regularly denounced by religious authorities and the Society for the Prevention of Vice (founded by William Wilberforce) made many often successful efforts to prosecute secular activists and publishers. However, over time Bradlaugh's principled stances won widespread political respect and he appears to have played a role in altering attitudes towards atheism (Berman, 1988). The secularist movement became of more marginal significance in the twentieth century after the emergence of modern party politics which arguably did much to 'desacrilize' political argument in most of Britain (Green, 201: 44). The philosopher Bertrand Russell provoked controversy with his apparent embrace of atheism, but much atheist writing in the first half of the twentieth century was not widely discussed outside of academia. In 1955 atheist and anti-religious views became widely discussed following the BBC's airing of two radio programmes by the hitherto unknown psychologist, Margaret Knight. Knight used the programmes to argue that children should be taught morals based on humanist principles rather through Christian scripture. Historian Callum Brown suggests that despite the outrage and villification heaped on Knight, her views divided public opinion and even helped normalise secularist and atheist views (2012: 346, 367). However, the secularist movement continued to remain relatively marginal in British politics

(Gilbert, 1980:56), with the torch being mainly carried forward by organisations with a few thousand members, notably the NSS<sup>4</sup> and the British Humanist Association (known as the Ethical Union until 1963). The NSS has recently been accused of 'aggressive secularism' by Government minister Eric Pickles, following one of their members winning a court case to prevent Christian prayers from being part of the agenda of Bideford council meetings (Pickles, 2012). The British Humanist Association focuses on the promotion of humanism rather than atheism<sup>5</sup>, and campaigns to end collective worship in schools and to remove state funding for faith schools. Focussed pro-atheist campaigning has been limited<sup>6</sup>.

One reason for this is that within the UK, being non-religious or atheist has become a relatively uncontroversial form of identity. It is widely accepted that the decline of traditional religion in the UK owes much less to the campaigns of secularists than it does to long-term trends of secularisation. Profound social and economic changes, such as industrialisation, bureaucratisation and urbanisation have transformed societies in ways which have led to organised religion playing less of a role in people's lives (Warner, 2010: 7-14). The rituals and teachings of Protestantism have faded in relevance in British life and the decline of the Anglican Church indicates the disengagement many people feel towards traditional religion (Green, 2010). Scholars disagree on just how long-term and linear such a decline has been, but few dispute that Britain has become a less Christian country in the post-war period (Brown 2009). In this context alternative religious identities, agnosticism and atheism have quickly become much more socially acceptable. Recently two of three leaders of the main political parties in Britain declared themselves to be atheist (Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg) with very little comment. It should be emphasised that neither leader challenges the public role of religion. Similarly, many atheists, agnostics, or other non-believers often express varying degrees of respect or admiration for religion, or even continue to share certain Christian beliefs (Spencer and Weldin, 2012).

However, a concern of 'new atheist' authors is that the generally passive stance of atheists, agnostics and other non-believers has tended to reinforce the idea that religion continues to have a special character that should not be too closely questioned. Thus they argue religion is allowed to continue to have an influence in society that may be larger than its underlying support merits. Yet the new atheists, like many campaigning radical secularists before them, are criticised for promoting hostility to the role of religion which is not matched in wider public opinion. Some suggest that the new atheists articulate radical secular ideas at a time when both

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<sup>4</sup> There have been disagreements within the NSS about how far they should simply concern themselves with defending their version of secularism, against the extent to which they should openly attack religious faith and belief in God. However, the current leadership of the organisation have consciously sought to avoid being labelled as an atheist lobby group (though some critics argue this is what they effectively are (West, 2009)) and have put some distance between themselves and the new atheism (Sanderson, 2012).

<sup>5</sup> The organisation has lent its support to promoting atheism in particular ways e.g. supporting a fundraising campaign to send copies of Alon Shaha's Young Atheist Handbook to every school in England.

<sup>6</sup> Although small groups do exist e.g. 'Atheism UK', established in 2009.

traditional religious narratives and secularist narratives of progress have become less influential (Davie, 2012). It is argued that secular ideologies such as socialism, social democracy and even neo-liberalism have become discredited and this has undermined belief in the idea of steady social and political progress in a secular society (Davie, 2007: 196). Meanwhile liberal secular societies such as the UK have arguably struggled to accommodate conservative religious groups in their midst. In this more 'postmodern' context, a mix of religious, secular and atheist identities coexist without any obvious trend to suggest religion will fade into irrelevance in the way some theorists of secularisation had tended to assume. It is with such a view in mind that Davie (2012) characterises new atheism as a reaction to the threat to secularism posed by the re-emergence of religion in the public sphere. This raises the question of whether, like religious fundamentalists, the new atheists are seeking to hold on to and rework old certainties in a time of change.

### **Characterising Fundamentalism**

The labelling of groups as 'fundamentalist' can provoke controversy as fundamentalism is often understood in contrast to 'moderate, or 'tolerant' forms of belief. However, although the term is frequently used pejoratively, scholars often use the phrase with more analytical purposes in mind. The term 'fundamentalism' is thus applied dispassionately as a means to create typologies, or to discover 'family likenesses' between particular sorts of religious tradition<sup>7</sup>. For such scholars the term is used where belief-systems are considered to evince characteristics that are taken to be common to 'fundamentalist' mind-sets.

It is by no means universally accepted that the term 'fundamentalism' is especially useful, even for characterising certain religious groupings. For instance it is clear that some 'fundamentalist' groups seek political power and influence, whilst others actively seek to eschew it. However, as Bruce and other scholars contend, there are arguably sufficient common features across different groups to justify use of the term (2008: 12). Almond, Appleby and Sivan define fundamentalism as a:

Discernible pattern of religious militance by which self-styled 'true believers' attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the boundaries of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviours (2003: 17)

The extensive work carried out by the 'Chicago Project' represents perhaps the most influential body of work on the understanding of fundamentalism (Marty and Appleby (eds) 1993; 1994; 1995; 1996; 2004; Almond, Appleby and Sivan, 2003). The discussion below makes use of the characteristics such authors identify as regularly

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<sup>7</sup> Indeed, scholars of religious movements have sometimes been at pains to highlight that labelling a religion 'fundamentalist' need not entail any negative judgment on that belief system, just as categorising a religion as 'non-fundamentalist' need not imply a more positive view of the religion. Similarly some critics of 'atheist fundamentalism' have sought to make clear that the term is not used pejoratively (Markham, 2010: 7)).



common to varieties of fundamentalist belief. Groups need not possess all of these features to be considered fundamentalist, but would be expected to hold a number of them:

- **Reactivity and Selectivity** – fundamentalism involves a response to the marginalisation of a religion, caused by forces of modernisation and secularisation. There may be a reaction to particular consequences (e.g. appearance of alternative belief-sets or ideologies such as nationalism), and thus may have a defensive character (Almond, Appleby and Sivan, 2003: 93, 94). At the same time, fundamentalism does not merely defend a tradition but selects and reshapes aspects of the tradition in ways that clearly distinguish it from other groups making claims to the tradition. For example, US Protestant fundamentalists (the first to acquire the fundamentalist label) reacted to the perceived threat of secularisation to their tradition, but then selectively reworked the Protestant tradition to emphasise their claim to be the champions of the true faith.
- **Absolutism and Inerrancy** – fundamentalists often believe that one or more Holy texts convey the inerrant word of God. Particular texts or traditions are considered to provide inviolable truths. Certain ‘fundamentals’ are treated as non-negotiable and fundamentalists may ‘reify and preserve’ the absolutist character of the tradition (ibid. 96). Intolerance is not an inevitable feature of fundamentalism. However the absolutist mindset and ‘purity’ of such beliefs mean that it is a ‘strong tendency’ amongst fundamentalist groups (ibid.17).
- **Moral Manicheanism** – fundamentalists tend to divide reality into ‘good’ and ‘evil’. A dualistic worldview is offered in which the fundamentalist attempts to hold on to ‘purity’ or at least gain protection from the contaminated wider world (ibid. 93). This means not just opposing the secular world but also firmly distancing oneself from those religious groups who have contaminated themselves through compromise with secularism. For example, fundamentalist Shi’ite Muslims would view secularised Shi’ite Muslims as sinful.
- **Millennialism and Messianism** – fundamentalists often believe history will culminate in ‘eternal justice’. A Messiah or some kind of saviour will emerge to redeem the world from its troubles and give victory to the believer (ibid. 96, 97). For example, some Protestant traditions argue Christ will return to earth to vanquish evil and begin a thousand year reign.

Yet can these same categories be used to assess whether a group should be considered as 'secular fundamentalist'? (Davie 2007: 195)<sup>8</sup>. It might well be objected that the features above were forged in analysing religious groups and that secular fundamentalism, if it exists, would have a different sort of criteria. However, to date, those who have described the new atheists in this way have appealed to the kinds of characteristics outlined above. Indeed critics such as Armstrong (2009a) and Davie (2012) seek to emphasise that new atheism mirrors religious fundamentalism in rather direct ways. Hence this paper seeks to assess how far such comparisons are valid.

### **Reactive and selective**

Is new atheism reacting against a perceived threat to secularism? Davie (2012) suggests that new atheism is reactive in that it provides an aggressive response to the apparent re-emergence of religion in the public sphere. Many people had assumed that modern societies would continue becoming increasingly secular, with the role of religion in people's lives becoming yet more limited. However, the growing role of Islam has challenged the idea that Europe is becoming straightforwardly more secular and Christian groups have made various efforts to maintain, or in respects increase, their role in public life. Davie considers new atheism to be a reaction to these trends which seeks to both maintain the secular status quo and to find ways of further embedding or spreading the secularist ideas.

The question of what led to the emergence and popularity of new atheism has vexed numerous commentators. However, there are certainly 'reactive' aspects to the phenomenon. A.C. Grayling suggests 9/11 changed the nature of the debate on religion on both sides, making non-believers more likely to openly advocate atheism (Grayling, 2009). Both Harris and Dawkins cited the influence of the 'Christian Right' under the presidency of George W. Bush as motivations for their books. The profound concern of Dennett, Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens to prevent creationist or intelligent design theories being taught in schools might be taken as further evidence for Davie's view that new atheism is primarily a reaction to challenges to the secular status quo.

However, it is also the case that Hitchens and Dawkins had long track records of publicly espousing atheism prior to 9/11. Hitchens said that in a sense he had been writing his atheist book 'all my life' and Dawkins has said he was talked-out of writing an atheist book by his publisher in the 1990s. In this sense it can be argued that rather than being reactive defenders of a secular settlement, the new atheists seek

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<sup>8</sup> In addition to the five ideological characteristics of fundamentalism listed here, Almond, Appleby and Sivan list four organisational characteristics. However, those who argue new atheism is a form of fundamentalism do so with regard to its professed beliefs. There are no specifically new atheist organisations. There are certainly networks of atheists with varying degrees of identification with new atheism, and the 'hierarchies' and relations within these are worthy of study.

to challenge a status quo which continues to offer institutional privileges to forms of religion.

But does new atheism provide a selective reshaping of the secular tradition? To the extent that secularist ideas have been influential, new atheists argue they have not been fully realised either in the structures of the British state or in many persisting social conventions in the UK. Thus they are reacting not just to the appearance of phenomena such as radical Islamism but also to a perceived ingrained conservatism regarding the role of religion in society. For example, concerns about the privileged role of Anglican Bishops within the UK legislature are long-standing, rather than newly emergent. For new atheists, unlike some other campaigning secularists, it is not sufficient just to separate between religion and state, or to prevent religion having a special place in the public sphere. New atheists have larger ambitions in that they hope to 'convert' people towards atheism and seek to overturn the common convention that people's religious beliefs should not be challenged in conversation (see below). In this respect new atheism goes beyond concern with the public sphere in articulating a politics which has implications for dealings in the 'private' sphere too (McAnulla 2012; Taira 2012). However, it is questionable whether this emphasis represents a 'fundamentalist' selective reformulation of secularist ideas. As is discussed above, there has long existed a tension within the radical secularist movement concerning the extent to which it should promote anti-religious argument as against a stance of indifference towards religion. In respects the new atheism expresses a refreshed version of the former strand. Certainly new atheists have roundly criticised strands of atheist/secular thinking which are believed to be too 'accommodationist' i.e. too willing to celebrate the role of religion or unwilling to oppose the institutional advantages it may have (Lansburg, 2010). To the extent that new atheists scrutinise other secular perspectives for evidence of slippage from the secular cause, parallels with religious fundamentalism might be drawn. Yet new atheists appear content to work within or alongside groups who are committed to a secular state and politics, even if this sometimes involves working with those who are more neutral or more sympathetic to religion as a social practice<sup>9</sup>. For example the NSS recently worked alongside the Christian Institute to lobby for a change to the section 5 of the 1986 Public Order Act, with the aim of protecting people who criticise religion. This alliance had success (to the annoyance of some other mainstream religious lobby groups) when an amendment was passed in the House of Lords to prevent individuals from being prosecuted for merely using 'insulting' words (rather than threatening or abusive words which would still remain illegal) (Booth, 2013). Thus whilst the approach of the new atheists alienates some potential allies it arguably does not distance itself from other groups in quite the way which religious fundamentalists separate themselves from 'contaminated' versions of religion.

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<sup>9</sup> Dawkins and Grayling are both vice-presidents of the British Humanist Association and Polly Toynbee is a former President. The former are also both honorary associates of the National Secular Society, as was the late Christopher Hitchens.

## **Absolutism and Inerrancy**

However, should new atheists own attitudes to secularism and religion be considered a form of absolutism? Baroness Warsi has argued that those who promote 'militant secularisation' want no place for religion in public life (2012). Eric Pickles (Communities and Local Government Secretary) has claimed that 'aggressive secularism' has 'marginalised faith groups in this country (Pickles, 2012). In this view, groups such as the new atheists are approaching the issue of religion with a rigid assumption that religion should be confined to personal and private life. Indeed there is no doubt that new atheists are determined that religion should be entirely separate from the structures of the British state. However, it is not clear that new atheists wish to see religious groups banished from the public sphere. Rather they are insistent that religious groups ought not to have a privileged place in public life, either through public funding or preferential constitutional arrangement. A.C. Grayling argues that religions should be recognised as civil organisations like trade unions or the *Women's Institute* (Grayling 2009). In this way their influence could be proportional to the inherent strength of their organisation. However Warsi fears that 'secular fundamentalists' lack tolerance for religion and are 'denying people the right to a religious identity'. Karen Armstrong suggests new atheists reject Enlightenment forms of toleration in a manner which she considers both 'new and surely extremist' (Armstrong, 2009a: 292). She points to Dawkins argument that even moderate religions should not be accorded automatic respect.

The opposition of new atheists, and many other secularists, to the state-visit of Pope Benedict to the UK in served to highlight tensions on such points. Critics argued that those campaigning against the visit were displaying intolerance towards the religious identity of millions of British Roman Catholics for whom the event was of special value. However, opponents of the visit argued that the state ought to be neutral on religious affairs and hence should not sponsor or finance the trip. It was maintained that this stance did not evince intolerance towards Roman Catholics, since the Pope would be perfectly entitled to visit Britain independently. However, the visit provoked further arguments given the salience of the issue of child-abuse within the Catholic Church. Indeed several months prior to the visit Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens announced that they had asked human rights lawyers to investigate the possibility that the Pope could be arrested during his visit, following allegations of having covered-up cases of sexual abuse of children (Edwards, 2010). Dawkins also spoke at the 'Protest-the-Pope' rally during the visit in which campaigners expressed opposition to the stance of the Pope on issues such contraception in developing countries and gay rights. However critics argued that some of the themes of the protest (for example, T-shirts emblazoned with 'Pope – Nope' slogans) were reminiscent of the anti-papal sentiment through which anti-Catholicism used to be expressed in Britain (Reidy, 2010). Dawkins pronounced thus:

Should Ratzinger, then, be welcomed as the head of a church? By all means, if individual Catholics wish to overlook his many transgressions and lay out the red carpet for his designer red shoes, let them do so. But don't ask the rest of us to pay....Benedict's predecessor, John Paul II, was respected by some as a saintly man. But nobody could call Benedict XVI saintly and keep a straight face. Whatever this leering old fixer may be, he is not saintly. Is he intellectual? Scholarly? That is often claimed, although it is far from clear what there is in theology to be scholarly about. Surely nothing to respect. (Dawkins, 2010)

Here there may be a need to distinguish carefully between respect and tolerance. Lack of respect for a body of beliefs, or a set of practices, does not necessarily entail intolerance towards it. Tolerance may well include tolerating that for which one has little or no personal respect for. It could be argued that in this sense tolerance is precisely what new atheism does offer religion. New atheists reserve the right to withhold respect for religion and to strongly criticise and condemn religion where they consider appropriate. Yet, if little else, the new atheists at least offer religion tolerance in that they will do nothing to prevent people freely practising religion<sup>10</sup>.

What is often blurred in these debates is the important distinction between the arguments of new atheists and their acceptance of rights of their opponents to reject their views. Here it is possibly not the formal position of new atheists which concerns people, but rather the rhetoric they use concerning religion's role in public life. For example, a Christian might argue that although new atheists theoretically uphold the rights of religious people to enjoy their religion, the hostile tone of figures such as Dawkins still mitigates against people feeling comfortable about affirming a religious identity in public. Indeed Armstrong suggests that 'when we treat religion as something to be derided, dismissed, or destroyed, we risk amplifying its worst faults' (2009b: 55).

Much depends on the extent to which polarising or strongly-worded rhetoric is deemed desirable or legitimate in public debate. The history of religious violence and sectarianism in Europe has created powerful impulses to try to avoid sharp inter-religious rhetoric and to seek to underscore religious consensus where possible. Following large-scale immigration and transformations in social identity, the appearance of a 'multi-faith' Britain has created further incentives for political elites to make different religious groups feel welcomed and valued. Moreover, key strands in liberal political thought stress the need to build consensus and mitigate conflict. However, as Edyvane contends, it is not self-evident that conflicts of belief, or conflicts of interest, are necessarily socially or politically harmful (Edyvane, 2010). Many influential social and political metaphors assume that conflict mitigates against

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<sup>10</sup> Hitchens writes: 'Antigone spoke for humanity in her revulsion against desecration. I leave it to the faithful to burn each other's churches and mosques and synagogues, which they can always be relied upon to do. When I go to the mosque, I take off my shoes. When I go to the synagogue, I cover my head.' (2007:11)

a successfully flourishing community. These metaphors can be traced back to the work of Plato who argued that conflict in society could be thought of as akin to a disease which we should do our best not to let progress (ibid. 78, 79). However, a rival tradition of political thought suggests conflict is actually required for a healthy public life. Drawing from the work of Heraclitus, it has been argued that conflict is not necessarily destructive, but can be constructive and energising. Irreconcilable tensions may lead groups to dislike one another but can also generate a sense of belonging through the dialogues that opposed groups engage in and through the processes used to manage hostilities (ibid. 84-87). The social and political divisions that arose during the Pope's visit to the UK could be viewed as a regrettable episode involving polarised and hostile rhetoric. However, it is noticeable that both 'sides' of the argument seemed to draw some degree of satisfaction from the exchanges. The protestors gained considerable publicity for their arguments on key issues, whilst many Roman Catholics were delighted by a visit which proved a success despite many concerns beforehand.

This discussion does not seek to adjudicate between these traditions of political thought, but rather to highlight that matters are not settled on such questions, either theoretically or empirically. Thus when evaluating how 'fundamentalist' is the new atheism it is worth highlighting that the conflict-generating stances of new atheism by themselves should not necessarily be assumed to be harmful features of the perspective. Critics suggest they may sometimes misuse their public platform with unnecessarily provocative rhetoric, but they do not seek to deny others (religious or not) a similar platform.

### **Moral Manicheanism**

Religious fundamentalists are prone to view the world in 'black' and 'white' terms. Believing that they have maintained, or recovered, the essential truths of a religion they advocate a set of beliefs that often inspire absolute judgements concerning the rights or wrongs of actions and a 'them' and 'us' mentality. Davie argues this is an area in which the new atheism 'takes on characteristics of those it opposes' (2012: 6.) Similarly Armstrong suggests new atheists view their enemies 'as the epitome of evil' (Armstrong, 2009a: 293)

Indeed new atheist discourse does tend to establish sharp 'either/or' boundaries through which to understand the atheist-theist debate. Religions are all taken to surrender the mind to beliefs in the supernatural. In this sense at least, all are taken to be opposed to the use of reason. 'Faith' Dawkins argues 'is evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument' (Dawkins, 2006: 308). Little consideration is given to alternative definitions of religion which place more emphasis on practices and experience rather than belief. Chris Hedges suggests new atheists, like religious fundamentalists, are guilty of 'externalising evil' – as if the potential to do wrong were the special preserve of people with opinions we don't like (Hedges, 2008: 87, 154). However, the new atheists are concerned that social and

political conventions continue to make it unjustifiably difficult to criticise religion. Martin Amis writes:

Since it is no longer permissible to disparage any single faith or creed, let us start disparaging all of them. To be clear: an ideology is a belief system with an inadequate basis in reality; a religion is a belief system with no basis in reality whatever. Religious belief is without reason and without dignity, and its record is near-universally dreadful. It is straightforward - and never mind, for now, about plagues and famines: if God existed, and if He cared for humankind, He would never have given us religion (Amis, 2001).

New atheists concern about the potential effect of organised religion on children has animated their opposition state-funded faith schools in Britain. In this respect they have challenged the positions of both the New Labour and Coalition governments that have endorsed successive moves to create more faith schools since 1997. Whilst serving as President of the BHA (2007-2011) Polly Toynbee promoted campaigns to highlight alleged negative impacts of faith schools, including: increased social segregation; more admission selection based on social class: and more religious control of school's curricula (Toynbee 2008). Despite government claims that faith schools can help generate a sense of community, new atheists have been keen the point to areas such as Northern Ireland where the separation of Protestant and Catholic pupils has arguably reinforced social division. The establishment of a wider mix of faith schools has been condemned by Nick Cohen for encouraging 'separation with Muslim schools for the Brown pupils and Christian schools for the white ones' (Cohen 2005). Richard Dawkins has vehemently opposed efforts to teach creationist beliefs (which he described as 'alien rubbish') in Muslim schools (Allenye, 2011). He was prominent within the 'Teach Evolution, not Creationism' campaign led by the BHA in 2011 which successfully lobbied government to tighten rules to ensure both that evolution is taught in publicly-funded schools and that creationism should not be taught in science classes (Burns, 2012). More generally the new atheists have been concerned that too much religious influence over what is taught in schools may lead to children being brainwashed with certain religious beliefs or without appropriate instruction in particular areas e.g. sex education.

Of course there are many groups, including many people of faith, who are sceptical toward or even opposed to aspects of current policies on faith schools. However opponents of new atheism highlight what they see as excessive or inflammatory rhetoric, which some believe reflects ignorance or even bigotry from the new atheists themselves (Lean, 2013). However, as divisive as new atheist perspectives often are, it is important not to caricature them. Though they are often accused of treating religions as wholly bad enterprises, their perspectives do contain some qualifications. For example, Dawkins admits to having little objection to most practices that occur within Church of England faith schools (Allenye, 2011). It is also clear that at least some of the new atheists do find practices to admire in some religions. For example, Harris praises the emphasis on non-violence within Jainism

and has some sympathy for Buddhism (Harris, 2004: 217). Dawkins, Hitchens and Dennett have celebrated certain outstanding contributions of Christianity to Western culture such as the King James Bible (Dawkins, 2012b; Hitchens, 2011) and religious art and architecture (Dennett, 2006: 252). Thus whilst the new atheists scarcely take a generous approach to highlighting the virtues of religions, neither do they issue a blanket dismissal of all its cultural products.

Yet if new atheists emphasise the social harm caused by religion (albeit with occasional caveats) it is worth asking to what extent they believe social goods are a likely product of an atheistic worldview. In fact they make no claims that atheism will necessarily produce better moral, ethical or political behaviour. It is recognised that just as religious leaders can at times be socially progressive, so atheistic leaders, such as Josef Stalin, can be catastrophically totalitarian and murderous. In this regard there is no Manichean calculus in play. Atheism is taken to mean simply absence of belief in God, and thus of itself offers no positive content that would automatically lead a person to lead a morally-upstanding life. The aim here is primarily to counter the claim of some religious apologists that without the existence of a God to objectively ground moral standards, people are likely to slip into moral relativism and damaging behaviours (Hart, 2009, 14-15; Marshall, 2007: 206; ). The posture of new atheists on moral questions thus often a rather defensive one, seeking to affirm that usually atheists can and do live moral lives and participate in activities such as volunteer work and charitable giving (Harris, 2008a: 46).

### **Millennialism and Messianism**

Religious fundamentalists trade not just upon their opposition to modernity and secularism, but usually also upon a religious promise of a better future. The messianic aspect of fundamentalism is significant as it holds out the hope that human failures and social misery can be redeemed if individuals choose to adopt the true faith. Do new atheists offer a comparable secular version of messianism?

One can certainly identify apocalyptic elements in new atheist thought. Both Harris and Hitchens stress the possibility of social catastrophe arising from types of religious belief, notably the rise of Islamism and the possibility that anti-Western radicals may obtain access to weapons of mass destruction. Harris argues that religion raises the stakes of human conflict 'much higher than tribalism, racism or politics ever can' because it is the only form of thinking that casts differences between people in terms of eternal reward or punishment (Harris, 2008: 80). However, such fears are tied to some measure of optimism that once the dangers of dogmatic religion are clearly recognised, some deliverance from strife can be realised. In this sense the new atheism is universalist – freedom from religion is assumed to be appropriate regardless of particular cultural contexts. Dawkins asks us to imagine "a world with no religion ... no suicide bombers, no 9/11 no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews



as 'Christ-killers,' no Northern Ireland 'troubles,' no 'honour killings,' no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money (Dawkins, 2006: 23-24). Thus although the new atheists do not promise a non-religious utopia there does appear to be a confidence that a key factor which causes or exacerbates human conflict can be removed with the disappearance of religion. However, critics take such statements as clear evidence of the new atheist tendency to hugely overstate the centrality of religious beliefs themselves within such human conflicts. This reductionist view of the cause of wars and violence is also taken to downplay the prominent role of secular (and sometimes atheistic) worldviews in disastrous conflict (Dickson, 2010: 44; Beattie, 2007: 79).

The political philosopher, John Gray, argues the new atheist view of conflict is symptomatic of its wider embrace of secular myths of 'progress'. Gray contends new atheists, like many liberal humanists and secularists, believe that humanity is gradually progressing through both the development of technology and moral improvement (2008). He suggests this belief rests on the illusion that the human animal is capable of such 'progress' and that people now, or in the future, can actually be morally superior to those who have lived in the past. Thus Gray is suggesting that although new atheists have dispensed with religious myths, they have replaced this with a myth of secular progress, belief in which requires a faith just as profound as that which they would condemn in the religious believer. But do new atheists indeed have such a 'faith'? Richard Dawkins expresses belief that there is a 'moral zeitgeist' that is subject to ongoing development which shapes a wide consensus on what we consider to be right and wrong (Dawkins, 2007: 206). Hence everyday views on issues such as opposing anti-semitism and favouring women's rights are now much more progressive than just a few decades ago. He argues 'the shift is in a recognizably consistent direction, which most of us would judge as improvement' (ibid. 268). Dawkins argues there may be temporary setbacks but that over a longer timescale the 'progressive trend is unmistakable and it will continue' (ibid. 271). Dawkins notably declines from identifying decisive sources of the trend, but is mainly concerned with demonstrating religion is not the cause. Harris also expresses belief in historical progress, suggesting that in a few hundred years people may look back on the role of religion in our societies with a similar sense of curiosity to that we may adopt when looking back at the salience of ideas about witchcraft in Western societies. However, Hitchens appears less tied to such a 'progressive' view of the future of humanity. At moments his polemic resembles some of the grim realism of John Gray's philosophy in that it stresses that humans are flawed mammal creatures from whom one can expect a large degree of delusion and folly. He does hold out hope that through a 'new Enlightenment' a better future can be won but argues 'only the most naïve utopian can believe this new humane civilisation will develop, like some dream of 'progress', in a straight line (Hitchens, 2007: 283).

The new atheism vision for the future cannot compete with the transcendent visions of many religious fundamentalists. Gray is broadly correct in identifying a new atheist

belief in human progress, though these writers stress upon the potential for such progress to be stifled and at times reversed means their secular 'faith' appears a rather more doubt-stricken and qualified one than that of the religious fundamentalist who is certain (or affects certainty that) religious prophecy will be realised. Nonetheless there is an 'evangelical' dimension to the new atheist approach in seeking to persuade people that an atheistic worldview can be fulfilling and even full of wonder. Dawkins' most recent books on evolution and science titled *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009) and *The Magic of Reality* (2012a) in part seek to demonstrate that great personal satisfaction, fascination and inspiration can be drawn from coming to understand the natural world. Hitchens argues that scientific products such as photos from the Hubble telescope, the beauty of the double helix and the physics of Stephen Hawking provide 'more than enough marvel and mystery for any mammal to be getting along with' (2007: 9). Dawkins' website documents stories of 'deconversion' in which people come to reject their religious heritage and often experience a new sense of freedom, either from the clutches of institutional religious power, or from the perceived oppressive mental habits that formed during their religious upbringing<sup>11</sup>.

### **Conclusion: Are the new atheists 'crazy'?**

Steve Bruce notes that the phenomenon of religious fundamentalism is sometimes 'explained' less with reference to the ideas of fundamentalist movements but more with reference to the perceived psychology or personalities of the members of fundamentalist groups (2008: 116, 117). Yet Bruce suggests it may be a mistake to infer irrationality on the part of those who have attitudes we find unpalatable (2008: 119). The beliefs and actions of fundamentalists are taken to rationally follow from the prior assumptions they make i.e. they are logical in their own terms.

The new atheists themselves have sometimes been the subject of ad hominem criticism in which people explain their perceived extreme anti-religious views with reference to character failings such as anger; irrationality; ignorance or bloody-mindedness. Dawkins has been compared to a 'dribbling loony on the top of a bus' after he criticised the Catholic Church for being 'the greatest force for evil in the world' (Thompson, 2012). Fellow atheist, Alain De Botton, has reportedly sought to explain Dawkins' aggression towards religion as 'a sort of psychological collapse in him, a collapse in those resources of maturity that would keep someone on an even keel (quoted in Appleyard, 2012). However, it can be argued that the sharp rhetoric of the new atheists does not arise so much from the eccentricities or character flaws of its leading figures, but is in part a politically-conscious strategy of capitalising on the media's search for dramatic division and sensational headlines. Dawkins explicitly advocates a feminist-inspired commitment to 'consciousness-raising'

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<sup>11</sup> <http://old.richarddawkins.net/letters/good>

regarding embedded religious privilege (Dawkins, 2006: 115)<sup>12</sup>. In criticising religion in a manner many find insensitive, new atheists may be understood to using a form of direct political action: i.e. flouting the very conventions they seek to see overturned. The extensive media coverage gained by the new atheists suggests that they have had success in this regard at least. None of this means that the new atheist approach is necessarily justified, admirable or ultimately helpful to the public reputation of atheism or secularism. Opponents have sometimes contended that it has only been able to demand such attention from adopting a hugely crude, headline-grabbing and intellectually shallow approach to religion (Hart, 2009). However, whatever the flaws of new atheism are, the arguments of new atheists appear rational in their own terms. Rather than being based on a purely unreflective hatred, the approach appears shaped partly by cost/benefit analysis of the consequences of religion. With a focus on the monotheistic religions, new atheism finds and interprets the overall impact of these to score most heavily in the 'cost' column. Their analysis may be flawed, but the politics and approach that they adopt are a logical consequence of such an assessment.

It can be tempting to view new atheism as a secular mimic of religious fundamentalism, particularly as both 'sides' of this equation often seek to gain from the clashes generated between them. However, efforts to characterise new atheism as a form of secular fundamentalism risk becoming rather procrustean. Religious fundamentalism usually involves a selective reshaping of a religious tradition. However, there is little that is particularly new or radically reformulated in the arguments new atheists make for secularism and atheism. Their efforts have given a new prominence to anti-religious sentiment, but such attitudes have a much longer history within sections of radical British secularism. In their social and political views, new atheists offer strong conviction rather than text-based certainties. New atheists privilege science as a means of gaining knowledge of the natural world, but recognise degrees of fallibility to that knowledge in a manner which the religious fundamentalist could not concede with regard to their interpretation of a religious tradition<sup>13</sup>. Whilst the religious fundamentalist attacks secular lifestyles in the sure belief that these are inherently immoral, the new atheists' polemics against religion are in part driven by political tactics and conscious exaggeration for effect (Dawkins, 2011)<sup>14</sup>. New atheists adopt a polarising rhetoric underpinned by views which rest

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<sup>12</sup> This comparison has not impressed all commentators. Elsdon-Baker writes: 'making a Freudian association between strident atheism and women's rights is no more valid than the activities of cigarette companies in the 1920s who hired models to smoke on suffragette marches in order to plant in people's minds the idea that smoking was a badge of independent womanhood' (2009: 151). Feminist theologian, Tina Beattie has suggested that the approach of new atheists embodies a traditionally masculine 'testosterone-driven' desire to confront and point-score (2007) .

<sup>13</sup> New atheists are sometimes criticised for adopting a narrowly positivist view of scientific progress which embraces notions of falsification (Elsdon-Baker, 2009). Even so, the principle of falsification leaves any apparent empirical regularity, or discovered 'law' open to possible later refutation based on empirical evidence

<sup>14</sup> At points key figures such as Dawkins have expressed doubts about the wisdom of strength of their criticisms against institutions often viewed as largely benign or relatively harmless, such as the Church of England (Dawkins, 2012c).

on sharp (and highly contestable) definitions of 'faith' and 'reason'. Critics plausibly argue that the new atheists give far too much explanatory power to religious belief when trying to account for world conflicts and political violence (Beattie, 2007: 79). New atheists retort that theists (and some secularists) often underestimate the extent to which religious people will be supportive of violence through genuine belief in religious propositions (Harris, 2008). But here the argument is really one about the degree to which forms of religious belief socially harmful, rather than an argument about absolutes. New atheists lack the absolute certainties of belief that motivate religious fundamentalists, or even Christian evangelicals. However, in respects they can resemble the latter group in an exoteric sense. Despite being unable to offer timeless truths they do believe there is 'good news' to share in the form of alternative naturalistic worldviews. They cannot confer people with a set of indisputable moral principles, but they do believe that winning people away from religion is likely to reduce sources of moral harm. In this sense, critics contend new atheists are making bigger claims to knowledge than their commitment to scientific evidence should allow them to make.

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