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Review Essay

Atheism as a Political Project

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Religion and politics is a vibrant field of research, while *atheism* and politics has yet to really find its footing. Scholarship on atheism (the New Atheism in particular), the atheist movement, and general "non-religion" is dominated by sociologists who focus on questions of identity and beliefs about religion and science. Aside from two major works that treat atheism as a social movement—Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith's *Atheist Awakening* (Oxford University Press, 2014) and my own *The Evolution of Atheism* (Oxford University Press, 2015)—there is still precious little work on the political dimensions of atheism. This is very unfortunate given that organized atheism is very clearly framed by a set of ideologies, movements, and counter-movements, and its political essence is what is most interesting and significant about the phenomenon. Interview-based studies that explore how and why people became atheists, their views about the relationship between religion and science, how they find a sense of community through joining atheist groups, and so on, are starting to produce diminishing returns.

Finally, two new monographs that explore the political nature of organized atheism have appeared: Meagher's history of atheist activism in *Atheists in American Politics*, and McAnulla, Kettle, and Schulzke's *The Politics of New Atheism*, which focuses on the contemporary "New Atheism" movement, broadly defined (too broadly, in fact). Both books are from political scientists, which is welcome in a subject area that is heavily dominated by qualitative interview-based sociological research that tends to neglect politics and rarely employs social movement theory (aside from references to identity construction). The results, however, are mixed, both in terms of originality and the strength of the analysis. Nevertheless, scholars will benefit from the empirical richness of both works and in particular their focus on the contemporary political mobilization of atheists, a subject that is clearly relevant to political scientists, whose perspective is sorely needed within this interdisciplinary sub-field.

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While both books deal with the politics of atheism, they approach it from very different angles and are quite distinct in their focus. Meagher treats atheism as a social movement, splitting the book into two parts, one taking an historical perspective, and one dealing with the present day. Both are grounded in a "crime model" of political mobilization, which is outlined quite briefly in the introduction and then mostly forgotten, so the theoretical dimension is slight. But as an empirical study of atheist activism in America it is a worthwhile contribution to the literature, and will be useful to scholars working in this area, though they may find a significant overlap with other similar works in this sub-field.

The first part is a solid if somewhat familiar recounting of the history of atheist activism in America that echoes Susan Jacoby's *Freethinkers: A History of American Secularism*, and Leigh Schmidt's more recent *Village Atheists: How American's Unbelievers Made Their Way in a Godly Nation*. The three chapters reflect a division of atheist activism into three historical phases: the "Golden Age" of the late-nineteenth to early-twentieth centuries (characterized most prominently by Robert Ingersoll); the proliferation of freethought and rationalist associations in the 1940s and 1950s; and the emergence of more organized political activism in the 1960s and 1970s, focusing on Madalyn Murray O'Hair and the origins of American Atheists.

The second part jumps ahead to deal with contemporary activism inspired by the new atheism, reflecting the fact that in between periods when O'Hair and Richard Dawkins garnered a lot of media attention and mobilized activists, organized atheism went through a somewhat dormant phase. This part makes more novel contributions to the field. A chapter on the development of a discourse to counter the association of atheism with "godless communism" introduces this interesting topic but deals with it swiftly, and focuses in the end on atheists' adoption of the "closeted" discourse of the gay rights movement to define their identity more positively and position themselves to make demands for rights and protections from discrimination. Another chapter examines the growth of (mostly online) networks of activist groups, and the eventual breakdown of these networks due to internal disputes regarding the goals of the movement that culminated in a split between more hardline atheists in the vein of Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens, and an emerging "social justice" branch seeking an intersectional approach to activism, led mostly by feminists. The end of the story is that the hardliners won, and many feminists and social justice advocates have been literally driven out of the movement through harassment (online and off), or

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have simply lost interest after finding that many of their fellow atheists are much more conservative than they had imagined. Meagher's treatment of these events is accurate and informative, if somewhat brief, and serves as a useful introduction to the different political ideologies and value systems at work within organized atheism that have both driven and limited its growth and effectiveness at various points.

Some of the same internal tensions are covered by McAnulla, Kettell, and Schulzke, though their book is very much about atheism in the present day, centering on "new atheism"—a literary and cultural phenomenon that drew on post-9/11 anxieties to advance an aggressive critique of religion, which was presented as the antithesis of enlightened, scientific civilization. In a sense, this book has come too late, as "new atheism" was a term applied to four specific authors—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett—responsible for initiating a wave of public debate about religion and its place in modern society. Of those four, only Harris is still highly visible in the public sphere, and his focus has shifted from religion to the culture wars and debates about "free speech" (Harris is a member of a group of public intellectuals—and one stand-up comic—laughably termed the "intellectual dark web" in an infamous 2018 New York Times profile). Dawkins retreated from the public stage (most conspicuously by turning down the volume on Twitter) after a stroke in 2016. After a brief intervention in the atheism/religion debates with his book *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett returned to his more typical work in the philosophy of science and epistemology. Hitchens died of cancer in 2011, and in hindsight, his passing could be said to have marked the end of the phenomenon of the new atheism. But these thinkers and their books left a mark on western culture, and drove a period of unprecedented growth and interest in formal atheist organizations and informal online atheist cultures.

McAnulla, Kettell, and Schulzke have attempted to highlight the significance of the new atheists' contribution, not only to organized atheism, but also to the public's understanding of religion, and to scholarly theories of religion and its relationship to society. The result is an approving summary of the new atheism's critique of religion and a peculiar attempt to defend the movement from critics—indeed, the authors note at the outset that "academic scholarship on new atheism to date has been highly unsympathetic" (p. 2), forecasting their own sympathetic take. The authors also note that, in contrast with most studies of new atheism by scholars in religious studies or the sociology of religion, they "approach the study of new atheism without any personal religious or theistic commitments" (p.2).

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There are at least two problems with this statement. The first is the assumption of a religious commitment among scholarly critics of new atheism, which in my view is not the case at all (I am one such critic and I'm an atheist) with the exception of the many works written by theologians. In fact, my feeling is that most sociologists who study atheism are themselves non-religious, which is precisely why they were drawn to it in the first place (again, this is true for me, for one example). The second is the authors' claim that they have no religious or theistic commitments, since their support for new atheism indicates that they do indeed have a religious commitment. Their commitments on these issues are clear throughout the book in their defense of new atheist thinkers, who, they suggest, are "often misrepresented within the heated public debates concerning their positions" (p. 3).

The most serious problem with the book is its definition of its subject matter. Early in the introduction, the authors note their objection to my use of the label "secular fundamentalism" to describe new atheism—which I argue is grounded in an highly ideological and politicized brand of scientism—because new atheists themselves emphasize the fallibility of scientific knowledge (i.e. how can they be fundamentalists if they don't believe in unalterable doctrines?). But my use of the term fundamentalism refers less to certain facts that they believe to be true or false, and more to their general epistemology and claims about the limits of scientific knowledge, along with a utopian program for social transformation that follows from these beliefs (my definition here is based on Shmuel Eisenstadt's work in *Fundamentalism, Sectarianism, and Revolution*). While certain scientific facts or theories may be falsified, then, they are fundamentalists in the sense that they believe that science and science alone is equipped to explain everything—not just nature, but social life, economics, even morality—and that science is driving an inexorable progression toward an advanced state of civilization (in other words, the world is getting better and better all the time, despite outward appearances). McAnulla et al. counter that the charge of scientism is an over-generalization that does not apply to the movement as a whole, and this is true, but my claim is not that it applies to the secular or atheist movement as a whole, but specifically to the New Atheism, which is just one ideological current with the broader movement. These authors use the term "new atheism" to refer to the secular movement broadly conceived, and this is a misnomer, as many individuals and groups within this movement outright reject the new atheism and its approach.

The failure to parse the different ideologies within organized secularism and to recognize new atheism as but one (though the dominant one) is a

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flaw that undermines many of the book's major premises. For example, the authors describe the blogger Greta Christina as a new atheist, even though she has been fiercely critical of major figures associated with that movement (notably Dawkins and Harris), and her atheist activism is centered around concerns with how religion interferes with or limits social justice, rather than scientific authority. If Christina is a new atheist then virtually anyone who expresses criticism of religion is also a new atheist. For the term to have any analytical validity it has to refer to something more specific, namely, an ideology constituted primarily by scientism and an Enlightenment-style belief in social progress. It is easy to refute critics of new atheism for not recognizing its ideologically diverse nature if you define all atheists as "new" atheists.

The authors argue that "LeDrew sometimes forces atheist thinkers into one "box" or another" (p. 5), namely with reference to the charge of scientism. This could appear to be a valid criticism if one accepts their definition of who and what new atheism is, since, in that definition, new atheism is a diverse movement that involves many distinct worldviews and modes of argumentation. But that definition is so expansive as to be almost meaningless, and what they call "new atheism" is really a network of groups and movements that intersect but also conflict with each other in various ways, including their ideas about movement goals and strategies, and also the underlying political and ethical beliefs that give rise to these tensions and different visions of what the movement is (if it should be considered a movement at all, which is by no means a consensus view). They also argue that "a core part of new atheism since its emergence has been its "identity politics" and an apparent commitment to humanistic social justice" (p. 5). This also illustrates the problem of a too-expansive definition of new atheism. It is true that there are elements with the secular movement that are motivated by a concern for social justice, but there are others, including the faction that aligns with the new atheism mode of discourse and action, that are fiercely opposed to the very idea of social justice (one of the peculiar quirks of the secular movement in America is a libertarian streak). What kind of "humanistic social justice" motivates arguments against social welfare programs, or encourages militaristic aggression against entire countries filled with innocent people, simply because they belong to a certain religious faith?

The book's later chapters drift from more or less objective analyses of new atheist ideas and responses to them from other scholars and writers, to an outright promotion of new atheism as a significant contribution to

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knowledge on religion, politics, and morality. The strange chapter on "New atheism and religious violence" is essentially a study of religiously-inspired violence and terrorism that draws on new atheists as experts, claiming that the new atheists "develop compelling theoretical accounts of how religion and violence are connected" (p. 131). It is surprising that a group of reputable scholars would find much real value in the new atheism as a critical approach to religion, politics, or just about anything else. These are works of polemicists whose understanding of the topics they claim authority to speak to is rudimentary at best, and at worst, brazenly ideological, selective in its representation of the facts, and hostile to forms of knowledge that they consider a challenge to the authority of the natural sciences—most obviously the social sciences, which they despise because of its presumed association with postmodernism and relativism. McAnulla, Kettle, and Schulzke, then, are working hard to defend an epistemology that would render their own work illegitimate. At times the authors seem to be treating the works of the new atheists as legitimate scholarship rather than the products of a reactionary subculture. Of the four major New Atheist thinkers, only Dawkins and Dennett are actual scholars, and only Dennett was working (at least in part) within his domain of expertise—philosophy of science—while Dawkins' writings on religion are clearly the product of an intelligent man who is out of his depth and blinded by devotion to his pet theory of natural selection, which he believes explains just about everything. Given the ideological nature of their critique, which is grounded in the universal explanatory power of the principle of natural selection to deal with questions and problems that have nothing to do with biology, it is very curious that the authors would claim that the objective of new atheism is to "remove threats to moral autonomy without creating an alternative secular ideology that would encourage similar blind devotion" (p. 113). In fact, Dawkins and Dennett do advance an alternative secular ideology, with a path to social and moral progress clearly sketched out: submission to the political and cultural authority of science, and less obviously but no less significantly, acceptance of the legitimacy of neoliberal capitalism.

The chapter on "New atheism and morality" essentially involves defending new atheist thinkers from their critics, which at times slips over into fawning over them. For instance, this statement: "New atheists" openness to debate about norms and their defense of free speech as a means of interrogating moral controversies reflects a profound respect for ordinary people and a common-sense approach to resolving ethical

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controversies" (p. 126). The view that new atheists are open to debate about norms could only be held by someone who has never witnessed new atheists in debate. There is, in fact, no openness at all, only the dogmatic assertion that anything that is not empirically verified by the scientific method is worthless, and that all cultures of the Earth must fall in line with western values. The claim of respect for ordinary people is also highly suspect given that new atheists devote so much effort to calling ordinary people stupid and ignorant, and demanding that they submit to the authority of science (and scientists like themselves). Are we to understand that mocking the most deeply held values and beliefs of billions of people, many of them among the world's poor and oppressed, represents a "profound respect" for them? Rather than being respectful of "ordinary people", this is an elitist position that implies that ordinary (religious) people are gullible dupes who have failed to exhibit the necessary reasoning powers to arrive at atheism and an "enlightened" morality.

One of the authors' more peculiar arguments is that new atheists are not seeking to advance an alternative morality to counter religious ones, but that they simply want to encourage "moral autonomy," which means limiting religious influence. New atheists—notably Richard Dawkins—have argued that raising children in a religious community and belief system is a form of child abuse, because it imposes a false reality and corrupt morality on them, limiting their capacity for independent critical thought. This is one element of the totalitarian nature of new atheist ideology, which would impose a secular-scientific epistemology and morality in place of religion. McAnulla et al. counter that Dawkins' goal "is not to develop an ideology that could replace religion or that would in some way limit individual autonomy…[but] to prevent religion from interfering with the development of morally autonomous children" (p. 116). But why is religion singled out here? Children in many western societies are "indoctrinated" into many knowledge and value systems: capitalism, liberalism, and scientism, to name a few. In schools they are educated in math, science, and technology, but can complete their education without even a basic understanding of the mechanics of representative democracy. There is no such thing as socialization or education that is "neutral," and Dawkins' desire for children to be taught that science is the only possible basis of knowledge is far from it.

There are many similarly problematic claims in the book that are based on the authors' argument that new atheism does not promote any particular ideology, but rather, an openness to argument and evidence. This is an idiosyncratic reading of new atheism, which is widely recognized as an

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effort to advance an intellectual and political agenda grounded in a belief in the superiority of western civilization and the unquestionable primacy of scientific theories and methods in virtually any realm of inquiry. The secular movement's major claim, which is implicitly endorsed by McAnulla et al. in their defense of the new atheism movement, is that the world would be better off without religion. This claim is being put to the test at the moment. The current situation of anomie and polarization is not the fault of religion, but could be understood as a consequence of the "death of God", as social ties that were cemented in religious communities and rituals break down. Perhaps religion is not the best basis for promoting social solidarity, but nothing yet has come to take its place, and the result is a world characterized both by increasingly crass individualism, and a return to more primitive forms of tribalism, most obviously race. There is no good reason to believe that a decline in religious belief will be accompanied by positive social progress. In fact, there is, at the moment, more reason to believe the reverse, given what has happened in global politics in the years marked by the rise of the religious "nones." New atheism is certainly not a progressive force, as its real purpose is to defend the status quo of power, authority, and wealth inequality in liberal capitalist societies by drawing on pseudo-scientific Darwinistic ideas as legitimation. The dawning realization of this fact is the reason that many young people have lost interest in the movement, which they believed would represent progressive secular values, but instead simply offers secular justifications for modernity's characteristic forms of inequality rather than religious ones.

But this is not true of all atheists and secularists. Meagher highlights some of the more pragmatic dimensions of grass-roots secular activism, as opposed to the ideological efforts of celebrity new atheists to transform global culture. Atheists have devoted considerable effort to erasing the stigma associated with the term, protecting atheists from discrimination, and keeping the wall separating church and state intact (the latter project is the most difficult and least successful, aside from some symbolic victories like having plaques listing the 10 Commandments removed from courtrooms). Meagher's book is a better source for scholars interested in the politics of organized atheists in America. McAnulla et al. will find admirers among supporters of the project of new atheism, but in terms of its contribution to understanding the dynamics of organized atheism, it serves to muddy the waters more than clear them by lumping diverse groups of non-believers under the umbrella category of "new atheism."

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One issue with both books is that their object of study has evolved so quickly that some of the analysis is already out of date. Organized atheism in America, and the west in general, has rapidly disintegrated in the past few years. All of the major organizations are still around and meetings are still regularly held, but interest has waned significantly. This fact is best represented by the low turnout at the 2016 Reason Rally, which attracted far fewer people than the first event in 2012, a telling sign of a movement that experienced a brief but ultimately unsustainable spike in activity and participation. The atheist movement today has faded and morphed into a more general rationalist movement that is decidedly antagonistic toward progressive liberalism, with issues of social justice left to a few niche organizations and conferences, while much of the movement carries on with its preoccupation with a narrow range of pet issues, such as the "crisis" concerning free speech and overreaching political correctness. Both books also cover ground that is by now well-worn, though Meagher does devote some attention to historical aspects of the atheist movement that have not been explored in detail, and McAnulla et al. do at least provide an atypical analysis of new atheism.

Neither book speculates a great deal about the future of the movement, or recognizes that the "new atheism" that brought it to the public's attention over a decade ago is now an historical phenomenon rather than a contemporary one. Many younger activists, in particular, are drifting to other movements and channeling their energy in other directions after becoming disillusioned with the prospect of a unified atheist movement accomplishing anything of real significance given the dogmatic and conservative character of its dominant ideological force. Whether this is a lasting movement or a temporary response to the political culture of the post-9/11 period is a key question facing scholars invested in this field, though the most fertile ground for further research is atheism in non-western contexts, where activists sometimes are faced not only with a hostile dominant culture, but existential threats (the brutal murder of members of an atheist blogging network in Bangladesh is a prominent example). In the western context the issue is whether the centrist, status quo liberalism advanced by the new atheism will sustain the movement in a climate of increasing political polarization and a move to the Left among many of the younger people who breathed life into organized atheism in the early years of this century.

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