

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy
of Traditions and Cultures 21

Christopher R. Cotter
Philip Andrew Quadrio
Jonathan Tuckett *Editors*

New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates

 Springer

Sophia Studies in Cross-cultural Philosophy of Traditions and Cultures

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Foreword

For several years now, I have harboured the fancy that one could write an illuminating religious history of a country through the lens of its religiously themed surprise bestsellers. By these, I mean those rare books, the runaway sales of which take everyone, not least their authors and publishers, completely by surprise. Bishop John Robinson's *Honest to God* (1963) in Britain or Harvey Cox's *The Secular City* (1965) in America—each a million seller, despite addressing what one might think were rather niche, and drily abstract, topics—would be textbook examples here.

In order to count for my purposes, such books must be 'breakout hits' that reach far beyond the explicit or implicit intended readership: lots of Catholics buying a book by the Pope, to give a paradigmatic example, isn't what I have in mind here (even if, say, vastly more Catholics than usual buy the book in question). Rather, I'm talking about those volumes that spark the mainstream media's attention in a serious way or that, in recent years, are accompanied by a genuine, sustained social media 'buzz'. Even people who have not read them will have an opinion, and often a strong one, about what their authors have to say—or, rather, about what they are commonly thought to be saying. Furthermore, such books tend to be so successful that they soon create a kind of mini-industry of other books, many directly referencing or responding to the original positively or negatively or else—as, for example, with cognate works written or published before our *Ur*-bestseller—being 'bracketed along' with it in some other way (e.g. in bookshop displays, media discussions, canny PR exercises, and so on).

Where, how, why, and when such sensations appear are tricky questions indeed. Certainly, the books and authors themselves—and, increasingly, their publishers and media strategists—must have something, indeed a great deal, to do with it. But no one can really be so naive as seriously to think that that is the whole, or even necessarily the greater part, of the story. As Bishop Robinson, commenting with evident bemusement on the success of *Honest to God*, perceptively puts it:

It is a safe assumption that a best-seller tells one more about the state of the market than the quality of the product. Why, suddenly, does a particular match cause an explosion? What is there about the tinder that accounts for the flash-point? The answer, of course, is partly a mystery. Otherwise it could be predicted and arranged. But in retrospect there will be seen

to be both particular occasions and fundamental causes. One is still too far near the centre of the explosion to assess these in perspective. [...] The book appears to have touched a nerve, which no one could quite have predicted. (Robinson; in Edwards 1963, 233, 242)

Surely, Robinson is correct here in saying that a bestseller tells one a great deal about ‘the state of the market’. Furthermore, the state of the market for books on religious themes ought presumably to tell us at least something about the socioreligious state of the culture in which they sell (or, as usually happens, fail to sell). *What* such symptoms tell us, and how we are to interpret them, is of course no easy task. At the very least, however, such books must surely connect with some of the real issues of their time—things people are genuinely interested or worried or excited about, even if it takes such a book to make them realise that they are—and they must do so in a provocative, indeed controversial, way. A book that says exactly what everyone already takes for granted will not trouble the bestsellers’ lists. But by the same coin, neither will a book that says what nobody thinks or what nobody can imagine themselves or others thinking.

For reasons that I have outlined slightly more fully elsewhere (see Bullivant 2010), such a wide-ranging and nuanced perspective, attentive to both intellectual and sociocultural factors, is essential for getting a proper sense of the New Atheism: a phenomenon which, howsoever one chooses to draw one’s precise definitions,¹ centres around a remarkable example (or perhaps several examples)² of the kind of ‘religiously themed surprise bestseller’ I have been describing.

In fact, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006) is about as perfect an example of the genre as one could imagine. By the time Dawkins came to write *Brief Candle in the Dark*, the second volume of his memoirs published in late 2015 (173), he was able to report: ‘*The God Delusion* has sold more than three million copies so far, well over two million in English, the remainder in thirty-five other languages, including sales of a quarter of a million in German’. Even for a consistently bestselling author such as Dawkins, such figures are astonishing. Indeed, he quotes the reminiscences of his editor at Transworld Publishers, concerning the phenomenal interest the book engendered from the moment of its publication:

We could barely keep the book in print as the publicity it provoked spread, more and more people started to read it and the reviews came thick and fast, almost all hugely complimentary. [...] Something exceptional was taking place. It wasn’t just the sales that were exceptional, it was the fact that the book had struck a vital chord with the public. I think it is no exaggeration to say that it started a whole new debate, certainly for this generation, about religion and its place in society and became a game changer. (Sally Gaminara; quoted in Dawkins 2015, 173)

¹Incidentally, the contributors to this volume fully vindicate their editors’ insistence on the legitimacy of doing this in different ways, to different ends.

²The case could certainly be made that, say, Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith* (2004) fits the bill in its own right, at least in the United States. And of course, Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (2006) and Christopher Hitchens’ *God is Not Great* (2007) were themselves major publishing successes by significant authors. That said, I do not think it controversial to regard *The God Delusion* as the pre-eminent example of New Atheism and as having, to a significant degree, carried the others along with it.

Like Robison, Dawkins himself appeals to something being ‘in the sociocultural air’ in order to explain the reception of not just his book but those of the other so-called Four Horsemen as well:

Although it isn’t really [philosophically] very new, as a journalistic coining, ‘New Atheism’ has its place because I think something really did happen in our culture between *The End of Faith* in 2004 and *God is Not Great* in 2007. [...] Our books do seem to have hit the proverbial nerve, in a way that many excellent books that preceded them did not [...] Was it something in the atmosphere of the first decade of this century: wings of a *Zeitgeist* hovering in the air waiting for an updraft from the next four books that came along? (2015, 174–175)

Given all this, it should come as no surprise to find that I am so seriously impressed by *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates* and, accordingly, am delighted to have invited to provide this brief foreword (on which, more below). For the New Atheism, whichever precise way one is defining this term, only makes sense—and only ever *did* make sense—when understood as implying something beyond the books and their authors. It is, as your able editors explain much more satisfactorily in just a few pages’ time, indeed both a sociocultural *and* intellectual phenomenon, bound up with a diverse number of other sociocultural *and* intellectual phenomena—and different ones, no doubt, in different countries. Certainly, the New Atheism is ‘about’ a certain set of philosophical and political *ideas*, expressed in a certain way and with a certain tone. But it is also ‘about’ adverts on the sides of buses, parodic internet subcultures, and much else besides.

It is strange, then, that—with, I think, just one notable and early exception (Amarasingam 2010)—there have been no serious, multidisciplinary, cross-cultural attempts to give a proper account of (a) what exactly was (and to a significant degree, still is) going on in the socioreligious cultures in so wide an array of countries, beginning around a decade ago, and (b) what exactly it was about the New Atheism that ignited, seemingly so suddenly, those cultures in the precise ways that it did (and to a significant degree, still does). Until now, that is. I have no hesitation in saying that this volume, drawing on the insights of philosophers, religious studies scholars, sociologists, anthropologists, and literary critics, presents the best-rounded account of the New Atheism that has yet been published. It is a credit to the editors, to Springer, and to all who have contributed to it.

The longer the foreword, the longer the delay in actually reading the book itself. And if your interest was sufficiently piqued by the book’s title to pick it up in the first place, then—trust me on this—you really do not want to wait before embarking on its substance. I have, however, one last thing to say. In their Acknowledgements, Chris Cotter, Philip Quadrio, and Jonathan Tuckett generously thank me for providing this, in their words, ‘helpfully kudos-enhancing foreword’. While this is perhaps the usual way of forewording, it is categorically not so in this case, quite the opposite. To paraphrase *Punch*’s famous comment on John Henry Newman being awarded a Cardinal’s hat by Pope Leo XIII: ‘Tis the good and great book that would honour the foreword, not the foreword that would honour the book.

Stephen Bullivant

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Christopher R. Cotter, Philip Andrew Quadrio, and Jonathan Tuckett

Whether understood in a narrow sense as the popular works of a small number of (white male) authors, or as a larger more diffuse movement, over the past decade or so scholars, journalists, and activists from all ‘sides’ in the atheism versus theism debate, have noted the emergence of a particular form of atheism frequently dubbed ‘New Atheism’. Exactly what this New Atheism is, or who ought to count as a New Atheist, is not an issue that we sought to set out, or determine, in any strict sense at the beginning of the project, rather we have left such considerations as matters best determined by our contributors; our reasoning on this point is something we will return to shortly.

The present collection has been brought together to provide a scholarly yet accessible consideration of the place and impact of ‘New Atheism’ in the contemporary world. It draws together leading thinkers from social science, studies in religion and philosophy, all of which are fields vital for understanding the impact of a predominantly intellectual movement¹ on social life and on public discourse. The aim here is to see what the contributors have to say about the discourse and intellectual offerings of this movement, and to engage this on their own terms, through their own disciplinary orientations and from their own regional perspective. Our

¹Although, as shall be evidenced from the chapters that follow—Lee’s in particular—the ‘New Atheism’ can be understood as having impacts far beyond the (‘merely’) intellectual.

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primary goal was simply to shed an informed and scholarly, yet critical light on ‘New Atheism’ from diverse perspectives, allowing contributors to approach the topic in the manner that they saw fit. As such we present not only diversity in terms of disciplines, but also diversity in regard to religious/irreligious commitment with contributions from atheists, theists and more agnostic orientations. Further, recognising that the appearance of this ‘New Atheism’ varies from different geographical perspectives, we have contributions from the United Kingdom, Germany and Australia, many of which focus beyond these national contexts. The persistent reader will find that certain usual suspects, or the ‘four horsemen’ as they are better known (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens) are time and again at focus throughout the volume. Their global reach is hard to deny, but at the same time we should not then equate ‘New Atheism’ with them solely. In this regard we are quite proud to have contributions that focus on lesser known names like Michel Onfray and Ayaan Hirsi Ali, and others still that focus on no one in particular. In bringing such diverse views together our over-riding concern has been to provide an overview of the social and intellectual significance of the debate and the intellectual or argumentative limitations with the various positions that define ‘New Atheism’. Additionally, we hope to give the reader a sense for what might be missing, absent or un-thought in: the discussions that have revolved around New Atheism; within New Atheism itself; and within the reader’s own thinking about these domains.

Here it is important to say a few words about the ‘critical’ nature of our project. As Jonathan Tuckett will make clear at the end of this volume, the term ‘critical’ is perhaps just as contestable as ‘New Atheism’. Not every offering in this volume is a ‘critique’—some supply important explorations rather than ‘critiques’—yet there is a sense in which all could be considered ‘critical’. Being critical is, in a certain sense, simply part of healthy intellectual life, critical engagement with ideas being simply part of the way scholarship and thought moves forward. We dismantle ideas, dissect arguments and concepts, consider their limitations, their intellectual and social significance, and place them in their historical, social, political and cultural contexts. Through this process, thought moves from obscurity to clarity, from limited perspectives to more informed ones. However, to have said any more than this truism when inviting contributors may well have prejudiced the approaches to ‘New Atheism’ taken in their chapters. As much as we left the definition of ‘New Atheism’ in the hands of our contributors, so too we left the means of ‘being critical’ in them as well. In so doing our modest aim has been an ‘intellectual emancipation’ of sorts. We hope the critical engagements we have gathered here lay the ground for further thought, opening up new avenues by which to engage with a phenomenon that is still in process.

In this introduction, we present a brief overview of the academic literature on ‘New Atheism’ to date, before providing a summary of the contents of the volume. Particularly given the ever-developing nature of the field, we do not claim this overview to be comprehensive, but encourage interested readers to consult the referenced sources, as well as the chapters that follow and their extensive bibliographies. It is our hope that the diversity of perspectives presented below, and throughout the

volume, will provide a much-needed fresh look at a contentious phenomenon and encourage the cooperation and dialogue which has predominantly been lacking in relevant contemporary debates.

1.1 New Atheism

There is simply no programme or manifesto of ‘New Atheism’ and there is no all-embracing organization, in which all, or even most, of the so-labelled persons are united. (Zenk 2013, 255)

As the above quotation from Thomas Zenk suggests, there is little by way of unifying foundation to New Atheism; as a cultural phenomenon, or perhaps cultural movement, it seems more defined by its plurality than by a programme or institutional relation. This helps to highlight the reason why we have not sought to begin with any tight definition of the phenomenon we consider. Given the plurality of the discourse we engage and the fact that contributions and discussions around New Atheism—from insiders and outsiders, critics and caretakers—are on-going and will continue to develop, there seems little point in pursuing any tight definition. New Atheism might be defined in terms of central figures (say, ‘the Four Horsemen’), or it might be defined in terms of ideas (say, a commitment to some combination of ‘atheism’ and ‘scientism’), or it might be defined in terms of its discursive tone (say, an ‘evangelical’ or ‘proselytising’ one). For the purposes of this volume, however, we have left the issue open; allowing the various contributors to determine the relevant range of phenomena, figures and ideas to address. This could be seen as a process of feeling-out a historically live phenomenon, one whose future is open, one whose boundaries, if such exist, might shift and change over time. Indeed this very volume might, in some small and partial way, contribute to this process of shifting, reshaping and recalibration. Saying what New Atheism is today might certainly be a useful task, just as defining ‘home computing’ might have been a useful task in the 1970s, but it is also possible that such a definition will quickly lose relevance as new figures, new ideas, new books, new arguments, new debates and new events emerge on the discursive horizon.

Despite our reticence to impose hard limits upon the subject at hand, a growing body of literature has sprung up in recent years which can be associated with the ‘New Atheist’ identifier. Much of that literature, however, does not seek so much to engage New Atheism as an object of enquiry, rather, it either contributes to or expands upon New Atheist discourse, or it is aimed at responding to or argumentatively engaging the positions taken by a variety of New Atheist authors. There is a considerable body of literature surrounding New Atheism that essentially constitutes polemic, for example Philipse (2004), Harris (2006, 2007), Dawkins (2007), Dennett (2007), Onfray (2007), Stenger (2008, 2009), Hitchens (2008), Hirsi Ali (2008a, b), Sherine (2009), Graffin and Olson (2010), and Minchin (2014). Such works are less about treating New Atheism as a cultural phenomenon amongst others than about throwing down the gauntlet. This is, of course, of some interest to us

as it seems simply to be a part of New Atheist discourse itself. Here we have left our contributors free to engage such thinkers as they find them relevant.

On the other side there is the counter-polemic: some of these are written by scholars and theologians (McGrath and McGrath 2007; Hahn and Wiker 2008; Haught 2008; Lennox 2011), some are more journalistic (Hedges 2008; Werleman 2015), some are more directly religious counter-polemics (Marshall 2007; Mohler 2008).² Perhaps (and unsurprisingly) the most vocal among these counter-polemics are the theologians.³ Again, often these works do not so much situate New Atheism as an object of enquiry but simply take up the gauntlet thrown down by it. Insofar as this is the case, and insofar as they are not concerned to situate New Atheism as a cultural phenomenon to examine and evaluate in a more-or-less impartial way, these texts are of less concern to this volume. But again, of course, we have not sought to prevent our contributors drawing on this material where they find it relevant, and indeed it constitutes a further body of discourse on 'New Atheism' that is ripe for critical analysis. Our purpose (as editors) has not been to encourage the demise of New Atheism, nor has it been to seek its promotion either. Rather, our intention has been to take the New Atheists, whoever they may be, on their own terms. Of course, depending on theoretical or academic orientation, these terms might be pretty poor ones. But still, we are less interested in what others have said about New Atheism and more in saying something new about New Atheism.

Our intentions share a greater deal in common with those approaches to New Atheism that treat it more as a phenomenon to engage with theoretically. In this regard there are a range of useful texts the interested reader might pursue, each of which has defined 'New Atheism' in their own way(s). The most concise and accessible general introductions are to be found in Amarasingam (2010a), Cotter (2011), and Zenk (2013). As should be clear from the above quotation, Zenk's treatment of 'New Atheism' is more discursive than stipulative, focusing not only upon the work of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens, but also upon problems inherent in the term, important topoi which characterize public discourse on 'New Atheism', and some of the differences between the 'new' and the 'old'. He concludes that the term 'New Atheism' has several conceptual weaknesses, in that it lies in the realm of 'discursive politics' rather than having a clear definition, it 'differs from the self-identification of those labelled as such', and it carries negative connotations in public discourse 'that cannot be subtracted from the label' (Zenk 2013, 257–258). Both Cotter and Amarasingam restrict their understandings of the term to the work of the 'Four Horsemen', with Cotter (2011, 80) preferring the phrase 'contemporary Anglophone atheism', due to the aforementioned lack of definitional clarity. Amarasingam's early edited volume *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal* (2010b) is worth considering as a companion piece to the present volume, and is certainly the only other scholarly collection to the editors' knowledge to

²The writings of other atheists who have a distinctly 'anti-New Atheism' thrust could also be included here, such as Alain de Botton's *Religion for Atheists* (2012).

³Notable examples include Tina Beattie's *The New Atheists* (2007), Alister McGrath's *The Twilight of Atheism* (2005) and David Fergusson's *Faith and Its Critics* (2009).

consider ‘New Atheism’ specifically and exclusively. However, as its title suggests, this book is concerned with the points of contact and conflict between New Atheism and ‘Religion’, and although it contains a significant amount of useful material on New Atheism, its focus is on comparing and contrasting, on examining a clash of cultures, rather than providing the in-depth engagement contained within the chapters that follow.

We also recommend that readers consult a number of edited volumes that have emerged in recent years on ‘atheism’ more broadly. Michael Martin’s *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (2007) is useful, in that it emerged almost concurrently with the discourse on ‘New Atheism’, and indeed even contains a chapter written by Daniel Dennett. That being said, although containing a wide range of disciplinary perspectives, and acting as an excellent reference text, Martin’s volume does not engage explicitly with ‘New Atheism’ so much as a generic and quite loosely defined ‘atheism’. Phil Zuckerman’s two-volume *Atheism and Secularity* (2010a, b) is a fairly comprehensive collection of chapters of varying quality, which cover an impressively broad range of cultural and geographic contexts, and focus on a number of important issues—such as gender, sexuality, parenting, and legal cases⁴—which had been markedly absent in considerations of ‘atheism’ at the time of publication. Although undoubtedly buoyed by the rise of ‘New Atheism’, the contributions to these volumes rarely make mention of it, but can be considered useful companion pieces to the historical context within which it has arguably arisen. Bullivant and Ruse’s *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (2013) is an impressive and weighty volume considering ‘atheism’ across seven sections: ‘definitions and debates’, ‘history of (western) atheism’, ‘worldviews and systems’, ‘atheism and the natural sciences’, ‘atheism and the social sciences’, ‘global expressions’ and ‘atheism and the arts’. While the only chapter to explicitly tackle ‘New Atheism’ has already been highlighted above (Zenk 2013), we would again encourage readers whose interest is piqued by the more focused attention contained in this present volume to explore the 46 chapters they have brought together. Finally, Beaman and Tomlins’ recent *Atheist Identities: Spaces and Social Contexts* (2015) contains much to be commended, including chapters that explicitly engage with ‘New Atheism’ from Stephen LeDrew (2015), William Stahl (2015), and Ryan Cragun (2015), with Cragun taking a particularly novel approach using data from social surveys to address the question ‘Who are the New Atheists?’, suggesting that ‘some-where on the order of 13 to 16 million Americans’ exhibit ‘New Atheist’ characteristics (2015, 210).

Casting one’s net a little wider, one will find New Atheism considered in relation to science (Fuller 2010; McGrath 2013), theology (Falconi 2010; Feser 2013), sociology (Bullivant 2010), politics (McAnulla 2012; Kettell 2013; Plessentin 2012) and morality (Dueck 2011; Schulzke 2013). It has been modelled as a dialectic with

⁴Since then, there have been a number of landmark publications in these areas, including Christel Manning’s *Losing Our Religion: How Unaffiliated Parents Are Raising Their Children* (2015), Tiina Mahlamäki’s ‘Religion and atheism from a gender perspective’ (2012), and Lori Beaman’s ‘Freedom of and Freedom from Religion: Atheist Involvement in Legal Cases’ (2015).

Protestant Fundamentalism (Fraser 2015; Hyman 2012; Nall 2008), as a form of ‘identity politics’ (Taira 2012a), and as ‘hyper-real irreligion’ (Nixon 2012). And studies have begun to focus upon New Atheism and commercialization (Hubble 2014; Johnstone-Louis 2012), New Atheism in media discourse (Knott et al. 2013), and even on the ‘New Atheist novel’ (Bradley and Tate 2010; Wally 2012). And this is but a snapshot of the growing body of scholarship to which this volume turns its attention.

As a final thought, we should not, of course, be tempted to construct New Atheism as a purely Anglophone phenomenon—although thanks to the prevalence of the ‘Four Horsemen’ there is this tendency. Our volume has attempted to address this (below), but the reader may also consider Stahl’s (2015) work situating New Atheism within non-Anglophone ‘religious contexts’. Although many of these studies do not explicitly focus on ‘New Atheism’, and despite pertinent issues surrounding the translation of terminology, readers would do well to engage with regional studies on Europe (Taira and Illman 2012; Lee 2013; Borowick et al. 2013), North America (Altemeyer 2010; Cragun et al. 2013), Scandinavia (Zuckerman 2010c, 2012; Lüchau 2010) and the Islamic/Arab world (Eller 2010; Schielke 2013), and more specific studies, such as those on Germany (Zenk 2012), Finland (Taira 2012b), India (Quack 2012, 2013), Japan (Roemer 2010; Whyllly 2013), Ghana (Yirenkyi and Takyi 2010), and China (Liang 2010).

With this brief and sweeping overview in mind, we now turn to the contents of the present volume, in the certainty that we have a monumental task ahead of us, and the hope that we have sufficiently whetted the reader’s appetite for what is to come.

1.2 Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates

The first chapter in this volume is written by the philosopher Graham Oppy (Monash University, Australia), and provides a rich introduction to the phenomenon under consideration, placing ‘New Atheism’ in historical context. He argues that while much of what the New Atheists say seems to repeat what has gone before (a charge frequently articulated by their most prominent critics), there are some elements to their arguments that are indeed ‘new’. Oppy then considers New Atheism in a contemporary global field of discourse, and offers some useful commentary on areas in which their ‘worldview’ seems to be gaining ground, before concluding with some important cautionary remarks on the ‘perils of prediction’ that are highly relevant for the chapters that follow.

The next two chapters, from Christopher R. Cotter (Lancaster University, UK) and Ian James Kidd (Nottingham University, UK) present in-depth analyses of some of the most prominent ‘New Atheist’ texts. Given the popularity of these texts both within and outside the atheistic milieu, the near-canonical status that they have achieved, and the potential effects of their rhetoric upon the beliefs and practices of a variety of social actors, such analyses are of immense importance to a volume of this nature. Cotter’s ‘New Atheism, Open-Mindedness, and Critical Thinking’

considers the veracity of claims to critical thinking in New Atheist engagements with ‘religion’, via an engagement with related literature on ‘open-mindedness’. After delineating the concepts of ‘open-mindedness’ and ‘critical thinking’, and demonstrating the New Atheists’ valorization of critical thinking, Cotter discusses open-mindedness as a constituent part of critical thinking, and builds an argument to conclude that the New Atheists are not open-minded, and that therefore they are not critical thinkers (in the context of their most popular considerations of ‘religion’). Kidd’s chapter on ‘Epistemic Vices in Public Debate’ broadens this analysis through the lens of virtue epistemology, taking some of the most prominent ‘vice charges’ made against the New Atheists—that they are arrogant, dogmatic, closed-minded, and so on—and offering a framework for articulating and assessing these charges. After a detailed examination of two specific vices—arrogance and dogmatism—Kidd concludes that vice charges are far more complex than critics appreciate, and that although critics can perhaps say that certain New Atheists may well be vulnerable to certain charges of epistemic vice; much more work needs to be done before one can charge New Atheists with vices in a fair and robust way.

At this point, readers might be forgiven for thinking that our focus is purely upon the written word: far from it. In ‘Vehicles of New Atheism’, Lois Lee (University College London, UK) shifts attention to an illuminating analysis of the material culture of New Atheism and related atheist cultural movements, centred on the ‘Atheist Bus Campaign’ as a case study. Her analysis demonstrates that beyond the intellectual and activist elements of such a campaign, its materiality has shaped its impact and set its course in sometimes unexpected directions. Lee forcefully argues that an investigation of the impact and legacy of New Atheism must look not only to its intellectual content but also to the social and cultural vehicles of that content and to *their* movement through time and space.

Taking up this theme of *public* impact, Philip Quadrio (University of Sydney, Australia) argues in ‘Collateral Damage’ that the New Atheists are operating as ‘public intellectuals’ contributing to public (rather than academic) discourse, and that their work is bound up in a culture war about the status of religion (and science) in Western culture. Quadrio develops an account of the moral role of the scholar in this chapter, suggesting that the scope for the cultural warfare of New Atheists has a moral limit defined positively by its informational role and negatively by the duty not to misinform. The charge he lays against the most prominent contributors to New Atheism is that part of their legacy to public discourse is not merely a vociferous engagement with religion, but a considerable degree of clouding, distorting and misinforming. Quadrio then illustrates this through an examination of aspects of the work of Dawkins and Harris.

The following three chapters, from Tamas Pataki (University of Melbourne, Australia), Garry W. Trompf (University of Sydney, Australia), and Anja Finger (University of Aberdeen, UK), shift discussion to conspicuously absent elements in existing considerations of New Atheism:

First of all, Pataki focuses upon the naturalistic explanations for the evolution of religion, and of the factors that continue to sustain it, that are present in many New Atheistic texts. Pataki argues that although some of the evolved cognitive

mechanisms invoked therein probably do play a part in the evolution of religious tendencies and the appeal of religion, they are insignificant compared to psychosocial factors, especially the influence of the interactions between child and parental caretakers, which New Atheists seem to almost completely ignore. In not understanding the deeper, emotional motivations to religion, he argues that the New Atheists largely misunderstand religion, concluding provocatively that this misunderstanding amounts to a collusion with 'the religious'.

Trompf's chapter turns attention to often-neglected non-Anglophone expressions of 'New Atheism', presenting a 'philosophical estimate' of Michel Onfray's 'Popular Atheological *Manifesto*'. In Trompf's reckoning, Onfray's atheism is a particularly French 'New Atheism', born from a desire to take the French Enlightenment and the French revolutionary impetus to their logical conclusions and makes a supreme virtue out of good sense, rationality and intelligence. Trompf's analysis addresses the argumentative backing and relative weight of Onfray's case against religion and contextualizes it against his whole philosophical opus, concluding that Onfray subscribes 'too obviously to an inadequate macrohistorical framework' and plays 'most loosely with history.'

Finger addresses another absent element in the 'New Atheism' of popular imagination, asking 'What gender is New Atheism?' Finger's chapter takes a sociological and discursive look at both what New Atheism has to say about gender and how it is itself performing gender, via a consideration of the place of Ayaan Hirsi Ali in the movement. She concludes, among other things, that New Atheism's attitude to feminism is problematic at best, and that it is primarily associated with individuals who perform heteronormative intellectual masculinity, appropriating gendered accounts of feminine experience to illustrate the 'truth' of their masculine New Atheist discourse.

The final two chapters in the volume, from Björn Mastiaux (University of Düsseldorf, Germany) and Ethan G. Quillen (University of Edinburgh, UK), present fascinating analyses of some (unintended?) consequences of New Atheism.

In 'New Atheism and the German Secularist Movement', Mastiaux assesses the bearing that New Atheism may have had on the country's atheist and secularist scene. Mastiaux contextualizes the German secularist movement at the time of the appearance of New Atheism, introducing several of its organizations, their histories, strategies, and differences. He argues that whilst the movement had built up some organizational strength of its own, it profited from the political or discursive opportunity that New Atheism afforded it. He concludes that 'some of its representatives were able to seize the discursive opportunity afforded by New Atheism and in that way acquire standing in parts of the media, which allowed them to capture further political opportunities and noticeably comment on events pertaining to religion that were perceived as scandals', particularly a perceived lack of church-state separation in Germany.

Quillen's chapter turns attention to various parody religions that have emerged in the wake of New Atheism, and a particular discursive thread that he dubs 'the argument from fictionalization'. Beginning with an important scene-setting section on 'Discourse Analysis and the Study of Atheism', Quillen presents instances of the

argument from fictionalization in the work of Bertrand Russell, Carl Sagan, Julian Baggini, Richard Dawkins and others, before showing how it has shaped the doctrine of certain contemporary parody religions such as The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, The Temple of the Invisible Pink Unicorn, and the Church of Bacon. In this manner, Quillen contributes to the discussions throughout this volume on the ‘meaning’ of New Atheism, and offers an insight into how certain linguistic influences have come to structure the means with which aspects of that New Atheism have been shaped.

The volume concludes with a reflective epilogue from Jonathan Tuckett (Independent Scholar, UK) who, as a philosopher of social science placed on the boundary between the social-scientific and philosophical contributions to this collection, asks ‘Who are we and what are we doing when it comes to New Atheism?’ Here Tuckett considers the contributions to the volume in the light of historical debates concerning the acceptable norms and activities of philosophers and social scientists, including ever-raging controversies over whether the scholar of ‘religion’ should act as a ‘critic’ or ‘caretaker’ (McCutcheon 2001). He reflectively concludes that when it comes to the consideration of New Atheism perhaps the first task is not identifying who are to be considered New Atheists, but determining the sort of engagement the philosopher or social scientist might have with them (whoever they might be).

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Chapter 2

Whither *New Atheism*?

Graham Oppy

Abstract Demographic data shows that atheistic worldviews have been gaining ‘market share’ in the West for the past 250 years. That demographic data has never stopped religious apologists from arguing that atheistic worldviews are in terminal decline. (The writings of Alister McGrath and Gary Bouma provide a couple of contemporary examples.) Nonetheless, it would be rash to assume that this upward trend will continue in the West, let alone that it will be followed in all other parts of the globe. The worldviews of ‘new atheists’ are much the same as the worldviews of ‘old atheists’: what all atheists have in common is merely that they reject theistic beliefs. For the past 250 years, atheists have differed from one another in their willingness to engage in public defence of their atheism, and in the extent to which they are willing to ‘grind the gears’ of their theistic interlocutors. The current crop of ‘new atheists’ have much in common with previous generations of atheists who revelled in public sparring with theists; and the irritation expressed by previous generations of theists when confronted with the writing of, say, Thomas Paine or Chapman Cohen, is very much like the irritation that current theistic apologists express when confronted with the writings of, say Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris. While predicting the future is clearly a mug’s game, there is no reason to think that the worldview of the ‘new atheists’ will go away any time soon; and nor is there any reason to suppose that at some not to distant date in the future, there will not be any ‘provocative’ atheists.

Keywords Atheism • New Atheism • Richard Dawkins • Alister McGrath • Thomas Paine • Irreligion

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