

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## What's 'New' about the New Atheism?

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1

At first sight the New Atheism might seem little more than a movement demanding equal rights and responsibilities for atheists, like the Civil Rights movement of the 1960s or the more recent movement for gay rights. But journalist Gary Wolf, though clearly sympathetic to the agenda of the New Atheism, points out that the analogy with such pressure groups is seriously flawed.



Gay politics is strictly civil rights: Live and let live. But the atheist movement, by [Dawkins'] lights, has no choice but to aggressively spread the good news. Evangelism is a moral imperative. Dawkins does not merely disagree with religious myths. He disagrees with tolerating them.<sup>1</sup>

Wolf's analysis casts light on why so many moderate atheists seem to find the New Atheism something of an embarrassment. It paints them as judgemental, dogmatic and fanatical, aggressively seeking to expand their cultural space rather than encourage an ethos of mutual toleration. The American Civil Rights movement did not ridicule whites or demand they be excluded from public office: it campaigned for equal acceptance for all.

We'll return to this point shortly, but it may first be useful to examine how the 'New' Atheism differs from 'older' forms.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers'. *Wired*, November 2006:  
<[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism_pr.html)>

<sup>2</sup> For recent examples of this diversity, all published after the appearance of the New Atheism, see Steve Antinoff, *Spiritual Atheism*. Berkeley, CA: Counterpoint Press, 2010; André Comte-Sponville, *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*. New York: Viking, 2009; J. Angelo Corlett, *The Errors of Atheism*. London: Continuum, 2010.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## *The New Atheism as anti-theism*

Atheism comes in different forms. We are probably all familiar with the atheism that entails neither hostility towards God nor even an active belief that God does not exist. This 'apathetic atheism' or 'atheism of indifference' is probably more accurately described as a form of agnosticism. There's a world of difference between 'not believing that God exists' and 'believing that God does not exist'.

2

Then there's the atheism whose followers, having given serious consideration to the issues, *do* actively believe that God does not exist. While apathetic atheism offers (and needs to offer) little or no rational justification for its position, what I think is best called 'committed' atheism (though others prefer 'sceptical' or 'positive') represents a definite stance, based on certain quite explicit arguments and concerns. Sociological research suggests that there are probably fewer committed atheists than apathetic ones.

Committed atheists hold to a surprisingly wide range of positions. Some reject God but decline to place their faith in anything else (such as human reason, scientific progress or non-theistic spiritualities). Others maintain that rejection of God leads to an unacceptable spiritual aridity, and therefore supplement this deficiency through an appeal to non-theistic Eastern mysticisms or spiritualities. Others insist that rejection of God does not entail abandoning the notion of transcendence, and believe that it is meaningful to continue to speak of transcendent ideas such as 'goodness'.

Neither apathetic atheism nor committed atheism is *necessarily* or *characteristically* anti-theistic. Adherents of these forms generally see them as positive movements and often display a deep concern for ethics and spirituality. They think that those who believe in God are wrong but have no particular animosity against them or their ideas. Having little hostility towards religious belief or practice, they're often happy to engage in constructive dialogue and debate with those who do believe in God. (An excellent example is the recent informed and stimulating discussion between two leading Italian thinkers, the atheist Umberto Eco and Cardinal Carlo Maria Martini.<sup>3</sup>)

The New Atheism is different. It's defined not so much by being white, male and middle class—though it is worth noting that its four leading representatives are all Anglo-Saxon Protestant males from remarkably similar backgrounds of privilege and power<sup>4</sup>—as by

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<sup>3</sup> Carlo Maria Martini and Umberto Eco, *Belief or Nonbelief?*. New York: Arcade Publications, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> The classic study of this remains E. Digby Baltzell, *The Protestant Establishment: Aristocracy and Caste in America*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987. For feminist perspectives on the maleness of leading New Atheists see Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason and the War on Religion*. London: Darton, Longman & Todd, 2007. As has often been pointed out, there are surprisingly few African-American atheists.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

its anti-theism—an intense anger against religion, which is held to poison everything. Christopher Hitchens puts it with a commendable concision: 'I am not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist.'<sup>5</sup> This anti-theism is equally evident in the writings of the other 'Four Horsemen'. But surely this leads to the group defining itself by what it's against rather than what it's for?

If so, would it be fair to conclude that the New Atheism is dependent on its enemies for its core identity? Greg Epstein, the humanist chaplain to Harvard University, certainly thinks so.

While atheism is the lack of belief in any god, anti-theism means actively seeking out the worst aspects of faith in god and portraying them as representative of all religion. Anti-theism seeks to shame and embarrass people away from religion, browbeating them about the stupidity of belief in a bellicose god.<sup>6</sup>

Epstein suggests that it might be a good idea if anti-theists were to focus on doing some good things themselves rather than repetitively lampooning religion by discriminatory stereotyping.

Epstein's criticism of the New Atheism resonates with the concerns of many humanists and atheists who are shocked by its extremism and overstatement and alarmed at its ridicule of saints as villains and fools. Christopher Hitchens recently slammed Mother Teresa, declaring her 'a fanatic and a fundamentalist and a fraud', arguing that 'millions of people are much worse off because of her life, and it's a shame there is no hell for your bitch to go to'. It was a foolish move, and Hitchens later generously apologized for it.<sup>7</sup> (One of Hitchens' former colleagues drolly commented: 'My sympathies were with Mother Teresa. If you were sitting in rags in a gutter in Calcutta, who would be more likely to give you a bowl of soup?'<sup>8</sup>)

The New Atheists, like other committed atheists, believe that there is no God. Yet whereas other atheists see this as their *primary* belief and focus, the New Atheism makes it *secondary* to its all-out, undiluted and unqualified opposition to any form of religious belief and practice. There's actually little evidence that 'religion', considered generically, is as weird or as dangerous as the New Atheism would have us believe, but that's not the

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<sup>5</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian*. New York: Basic Books, 2001, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Greg M. Epstein, 'Less Anti-theism, More Humanism'. *Washington Post*, 1 October 2007.

<sup>7</sup> Christopher Hitchens in dialogue with Dennis Miller, 30 October 2009. For Hitchens' apology see [http://current.com/shows/upstream/91393992\\_atheist-christopher-hitchens-apologizes-for-mother-teresa-insult.htm](http://current.com/shows/upstream/91393992_atheist-christopher-hitchens-apologizes-for-mother-teresa-insult.htm). For his earlier critique see Christopher Hitchens, *The Missionary Position: Mother Teresa in Theory and Practice*. London: Verso, 1995.

<sup>8</sup> From Ian Parker's profile of Christopher Hitchens, 'He knew he was right'. *New Yorker*, 16 October 2006.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

point. This way of thinking has a deep appeal to some religiously alienated individuals because it offers them at least the semblance of intellectual depth and moral principle.

On several occasions I've been earnestly told by New Atheist foot soldiers that I have no business being a professor in a leading British university. After all, they inform me, I believe in God and am therefore stupid, evil and mentally instable. I ought to be locked up for the public good. When I'm openly abused in this way, I find my most vociferous defenders are moderate atheists—often academics—who are sickened by such mindless hostility and alarmed at the damage it's inflicting on the public image of atheism. Polite society and academic culture make a proper distinction between people and their ideas, believing that it's possible to debate ideas without debasing the people who hold them. But the New Atheism seems to be out to ridicule both.

## *The wider New Atheism: the online communities*

In Chapter 1 I pointed out that the New Atheism cannot be defined or described simply in terms of the canonical writings of the 'Four Horsemen'. It's generated a global community of individuals who find these authors authoritative and inspirational guides to the rational and scientific world-view they believe holds the key to the future of the human race. The web communities and blogs that have come into being provide what the sociologist Peter Berger calls 'plausibility structures' for the New Atheism—above all, a sense of shared identity and solidarity, especially in the face of perceived external and internal threats.

I've been studying these websites and virtual communities since late 2004, and find they give a fascinating insight into how New Atheist ideas are understood and received at a broader level. Every student of theology will be aware of the massive gap between academic theory and religious belief and practice. A similar fissure exists within the New Atheism, which offers rich pickings for academic sociologists in the future. The popular expressions of the movement often differ significantly, both in terms of intellectual content and degree of fanaticism, from the core ideas of its leaders. These blogs and online communities seem to me to be the heartbeat of the New Atheism and should be given full weight by both its critics and supporters.

As we'll see later in this chapter, the New Atheism has a surprisingly small footprint in terms of physical meetings and communities (the contrast with Christian churches being particularly obvious and significant at this point). Yet the online presence of the movement is much greater. By February 2010 the forum hosted by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science—which seems to exist to promote Richard Dawkins

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

and atheism in that order<sup>9</sup>—had attracted 85,000 members globally and achieved the status of being the world's largest atheist online community.

As might be expected, these online atheist forums are characterized by a gut aversion to religion, which is regularly condemned as irrational and immoral. Even allowing that the anonymity of blogging can encourage a ferocity of expression untamed by normal social conventions and restraints, the stridency displayed by these militant atheists often seems bizarre to outsiders, whether religious or not. Religion, it is declared, is like Nazism, and needs to be eliminated, not understood. Respecting religion is like admiring Hitler—morally unacceptable and strategically inept. While those who are outside the New Atheist bubble will probably think this is simply paranoid nonsense, many of its bloggers are convinced that religion is out to get them. A pre-emptive strike is necessary. The best form of defence is attack. Kill them before they kill you.

5

## *New Atheist anxieties*

Yet I've noticed recently that all is not well within these virtual communities. They had an upbeat feel in the heady days of 2006 and 2007 when the New Atheism seemed to be like a bright new sun dawning on the world. But not now. Is a 'crisis of faith' beginning to emerge?

A small example may illustrate one of the crystallizing points of concern. The large sales-figures of the published writings of the 'Four Horsemen' were seen by many secularist commentators as a sure-fire indication that atheism was displacing religion in the public domain. These figures marked a cultural watershed. Or did they? Certainly Dawkins' *The God Delusion* became a bestseller, shifting nearly a million copies in North America.<sup>10</sup> But Rick Warren's Christian devotional, *The Purpose Driven Life*, is reliably reported as having sold nearly 30 million copies in the same sales area since its publication in 2002. If its flagship book could muster only around 3 per cent of the sales of a religious bestseller such as Warren's (which attracted considerably less media attention), what does that say about the numerical strength and cultural influence of the New Atheism?

In fact a survey of religious beliefs in the USA undertaken at Baylor University in late-2007<sup>11</sup>—after the peak in interest in the New Atheism following the publication of its core manifestos—revealed that only 4 per cent of Americans explicitly define themselves as

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<sup>9</sup> <<http://richarddawkins.net/>>

<sup>10</sup> Figures as of May 2010.

<sup>11</sup> This survey was based on 1,648 adults chosen randomly from across the USA, designed by the Baylor Institute for Studies of Religion and conducted by the Gallup organization. For details see Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe: New Findings from the Baylor Surveys of Religion*. Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2008.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

atheists. The comparative sales of Dawkins and Warren thus fairly accurately reflect the relative sizes of the religious and atheist communities in the USA.

Interestingly, 11 per cent of the national sample reported that they had 'no religion'. Atheist websites tend to put a spin on this figure, making out it refers to people who do not believe in God and so is therefore indicative of the growing influence of atheism. But while 4 per cent of the American population do indeed self-define as atheists according to this survey, the remaining 7 per cent appear to be merely 'unchurched' rather than 'irreligious'.<sup>12</sup> American church planters have long realized that there are many Americans with religious inclinations and interests who have simply not connected up with the institution of the Church.<sup>13</sup>

The failure of the core writings of the New Atheism to achieve big sales has been the topic of much anxiety on atheist blogs. Why does Warren's book sell so many more copies than Dawkins'? New Atheist bloggers would rather ridicule Warren than reflect on his significance, as this revealing, but perhaps not particularly wise comment makes clear: 'Richard Dawkins has one advantage over Rick Warren. All of his books were purchased by people who can read. And actually read books.'<sup>14</sup> Such remarks seem to reinforce the growing public perception that the New Atheism has become arrogant and increasingly disconnected from the real world.

The big concern, which began to emerge in 2007 as reviewers tried to work out the possible long-term significance of the movement, was that the New Atheism might turn out to be a fad—a short-lived cultural phenomenon. What exactly was new about it? What insights and facts did it introduce to existing debates? Bruce DeSilva of Associated Press seemed to capture the consensus on this matter. Commenting on *God Is Not Great* he remarked: 'Hitchens has nothing new to say, although it must be acknowledged that he says it exceptionally well.'<sup>15</sup> The New Atheism certainly had a novelty value—but this lay in the intensity of its ridicule of religion, not the substance of its criticisms.

Other doubts about the orthodoxy of the New Atheism regularly emerge on some atheist websites. Sam Harris' ruthless portrayal of religion as intrinsically and monolithically evil is seen as especially troubling. Is it really that straightforward? Can you persuade ordinary people to believe such stuff? Anxiety about this point bubbles up on several

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<sup>12</sup> For example, the majority of Americans who claim to be 'irreligious' pray, with a large minority (32 per cent) praying 'often'.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Alvin L. Reid, *Radically Unchurched: Who They Are and How to Reach Them*. Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2002; Thom S. Rainer, *The Unchurched Next Door*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2003.

<sup>14</sup> <<http://friendlyatheist.com/2010/02/03/how-many-copies-of-the-god-delusion-have-been-sold/>>

<sup>15</sup> Bruce DeSilva, 'Pundit Christopher Hitchens picks a fight in book, "God is Not Great" '. *Rutland Herald* [Vermont], 25 April 2007.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

websites open to more critical reflection, those on which intrepid souls dare to challenge the prevailing tub-thumping. Dark talk about the exaggeration of evidence is becoming increasingly common.

But the most intense anger on these forums is directed against atheists who are seen to be accommodating towards people of faith or who otherwise seem to betray the high ideals and core dogmas of the New Atheism. These are the traitors, the collaborators, the quislings who contaminate the movement, infecting it with a moderation that hinders its elimination of religion.

To illustrate this point, let us consider the reaction on New Atheist blogs to a representative of the older, more reflective form of atheism—the mild-mannered British writer Julian Baggini (born 1968), author of the eminently readable *Very Short Introduction to Atheism*.<sup>16</sup> I had the pleasure of debating issues of faith with him some years ago, and found him intelligent and respectful—the sort of person who could give atheism a good name. That’s what makes the events of 2009 so intriguing.

## *The interesting case of Julian Baggini*

Early in that year, Baggini published an article in the Norwegian humanist magazine *Fri Tanke* (Free Thought).<sup>17</sup> The magazine helpfully reproduced the original English version on its website, with a headline—not chosen by Baggini himself—that was like a red rag to a bull: ‘The New Atheist Movement is Destructive.’<sup>18</sup> The response within the New Atheist online community was immediate and aggressive, apparently based more on the title than the substance of the article. Baggini later reflected ruefully on the reaction to his piece. ‘I have been burned as a heretic by many of the commenters at [RichardDawkins.net](http://RichardDawkins.net), who call me variously a flea, a fool and a pompous air bag.’<sup>19</sup> They called him quite a few other things as well, but they can’t be published here.

So what did Baggini actually say? What outrageous statements elicited such a furious reaction? As a seasoned observer of certain New Atheist websites, I’ve learned their ground rules: the degree of ridicule heaped upon a given viewpoint is a measure of the degree of threat it poses to the core beliefs of the online community. With a certain dreary inevitability, the movement’s bloggers assume that anyone who dares to criticize the New Atheism automatically exposes themselves as irrational, anti-scientific and a secret

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<sup>16</sup> Julian Baggini, *A Very Short Introduction to Atheism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. This was published before the phenomenon of the New Atheism emerged.

<sup>17</sup> Julian Baggini, ‘Nyateismen virker mot sin hensikt’. *Fri Tanke* 2009/1 (March 2009), pp. 42–3.

<sup>18</sup> For the English text of this article see

<[http://www.fritanke.no/ENGLISH/2009/The\\_new\\_atheist\\_movement\\_is\\_destructive/](http://www.fritanke.no/ENGLISH/2009/The_new_atheist_movement_is_destructive/)>

<sup>19</sup> <<http://julianbaggini.blogspot.com/2009/03/new-atheist-movement-is-destructive.html>>

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

supporter of religion—in a word, a traitor. Yet Baggini had merely made two points that most outside observers of the New Atheism regard as representing significant and valid criticisms of the movement.

First, he pointed out that the New Atheism is characterized more by its attacks on religion than by its own positive beliefs—as, for example, in Dawkins' unqualified assertion that 'there is a logical path from religious faith to evil deeds.' For Baggini, this simply reinforces the myth that 'an atheist without a bishop to bash is like a fish without water'. In fact, he argues, it is worse than that. It just reinforces the widespread suspicion that many atheists 'need an enemy to give them their identity'. A trawl of leading atheist websites amply confirms Baggini's fears. Many New Atheist foot soldiers see themselves as engaged in a crusade to rid the world of religion. This holy war is their reason for living, the centre of their existence.

Second, Baggini complained that the New Atheism arrogantly claims to have a monopoly on reason. 'With its talk of "spells" and "delusions", it gives the impression that only through stupidity or crass disregard for reason could anyone be anything other than an atheist.'<sup>20</sup> It's essential to recognize the limits of reason, Baggini argued, and to accept that reason and evidence play a significant role in religious belief.<sup>21</sup> Dawkins' crude definition of faith as a 'cop-out' or an 'excuse to evade the need to think and evaluate evidence' was simply 'arrogant, and attributes to reason a power it does not have'.

Shouldn't the New Atheists be a little more sceptical about reason, Baggini wondered? Dawkins and others simply reinforce the unhelpful stereotype that atheists are 'men who look only to science for answers, are dismissive of religion and over-confident in their own rightness'. The New Atheism is characterized by a dogmatism that permits neither doubt nor respect for disagreement.

Now this may be heresy to some in the New Atheism but it is the mainstream response from many of those who are philosophically and scientifically informed—something to which we'll return later. Baggini is simply telling things the way they are. The reaction he received is hardly commensurate with a community that claims to cherish reason and evidence—even when they subvert its own beliefs.

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<sup>20</sup> Baggini here alludes to the titles of two of the canonical works of the New Atheism, discussed in Chapter 1: Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam, 2006 and Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking Penguin, 2006.

<sup>21</sup> A similar approach is found in Graham R. Oppy, *Arguing About Gods*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Oppy's point is that while neither atheism nor theism are rationally compelling, they're both nevertheless rational.



# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

## *The strange story of the Dawkins Forum*

The defensive-aggressiveness within the New Atheist community is perhaps seen at its clearest and most destructive in a recent ferocious controversy over the shutdown of the 'Dawkins Forum'. By early 2010 this section of the website of the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science was firmly established as the leading atheist virtual community. Then many of its members found that they were locked out, unable to post comments.

The shutdown began on 23 February 2010, when a decision was made to close the existing forum section of the website to allow for greater editorial control. It remains unclear precisely who was behind this decision, but the announcement took activists by surprise and caused immediate fury. Peter Harrison, one of its moderators, was shocked to learn that his role had been terminated. The news that the 'world's busiest atheist forum' was being shut down, he fulminated, was a matter of 'lies, censorship and cowardice'.<sup>22</sup> He and others had been viciously betrayed by their colleagues at [RichardDawkins.net](http://RichardDawkins.net).

Other members were not slow to express their outrage, many using scatological and hate-charged language that simply cannot be repeated here. Bloggers swamped other freethinking sites on the web with an extraordinary outpouring of resentment, anger, bile and scarcely concealed contempt for those seen to be responsible for this decision—including Josh Timonen, who managed the website, and Richard Dawkins himself.

Dawkins, then on a lecture tour of Australasia, was clearly taken aback by this unexpected turn of events. He responded on 24 February in a hastily written posting, entitled 'Outrage', that criticized the 'ludicrously hyperbolic animosity' that the decision had provoked. He expressed the sadness that any 'greatly liked and respected person' (does he mean himself?) would experience if they found themselves 'subjected to personal vilification on an unprecedented scale, from anonymous commentators'.<sup>23</sup> Dawkins was clearly distressed at being called a 'suppurating rat's rectum'—to mention only one of the choice descriptions alleged to be used by the rebellious members of this suppressed oasis of rationality and science.

Let us be clear: Dawkins was clearly treated unfairly by his many New Atheist critics. A Nietzschean 'herd mentality' displaced any pretence at valuing cool and clinical judgements of reason, and he was its unfortunate target. He has my total sympathy. As Baggini rightly pointed out, many New Atheist fanatics derive their identity from

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<sup>22</sup> <<http://realityismyreligion.wordpress.com/2010/02/23/locked-entry-will-open-soon/>>

<sup>23</sup> This posting has since been removed from the Dawkins website. It can be accessed, along with other views on this incident, from sites such as <<http://heathen-hub.com/blog.php?b=254>>

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

identifying and vilifying their enemies. In this remarkable turnabout, Dawkins came to be seen as such an enemy. The ranks of the godless faithful closed against him.

Many atheist bloggers despaired of the impact that the closing of the forum would have on the public reputation of the New Atheism. How long, one of them wondered, before this was used as evidence that atheists cannot form healthy communities, or became an anti-Dawkins talking point in 'good without god' debates?<sup>24</sup> In fact the suppression of the forum—though an obvious embarrassment for the New Atheism, not least because it deflated some of the more pompous overstatements of its communal virtues—was not the real problem. The big concern was the very public nature of this civil war, which drew aside a curtain and allowed outsiders to peer inside the citadel. They did not much like what they saw. Instead of being treated to a 'Feast of reason and flow of the soul' (Alexander Pope) they found prejudice, a profound lack of intellectual ability or inquisitiveness and an instinctive contempt for those who disagreed with the New Atheism.

Again, let us be clear that Dawkins was absolutely right to call time on some of the contributors to his forum, particularly those whose sick comments suggested that they might be social psychopaths or otherwise mentally disturbed. I'm not easily shocked, but in the past I've found myself disturbed by the simplistic sloganeering, venomous contempt, rhetorical violence and sheer hate directed by some of these bloggers against religion. Nobody does nasty as well as New Atheist websites. As Dawkins himself noted, this unpleasant characteristic was doubtless encouraged by the lack of accountability ensured by anonymous postings.<sup>25</sup> Yet isn't such irrational hatred what the New Atheists want us to believe is characteristic only of *religion*?

But the story doesn't end there. Dawkins dedicated his 2009 book, *The Greatest Show on Earth*, to his young disciple, Josh Timonen, who ran the Dawkins website. In October 2010, Dawkins filed a lawsuit against this same Timonen, alleging that he'd defrauded Dawkins of hundreds of thousands of dollars raised by marketing atheist merchandise and Dawkins memorabilia through the website.<sup>26</sup> Modestly describing himself as 'the world's best known and most respected atheist' (a judgement that very few atheists I know would affirm), Dawkins demanded \$950,000 in damages. Timonen responded by

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<sup>24</sup> See, for example, the comments at <<http://realityismyreligion.wordpress.com/2010/02/23/locked-entry-will-open-soon/#comment-89>>

<sup>25</sup> For some of the issues relating to anonymity on the web see Judith S. Donath, 'Identity and Deception in the Virtual Community', in Marc A. Smith and Peter Kollock (eds), *Communities in Cyberspace*. London: Routledge, 1999, pp. 29–59.

<sup>26</sup> <<http://www.courthousenews.com/2010/10/22/31283.htm>>. For comment see <<http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/an-ungodly-row-at-the-dawkins-foundation-2115632.html>>

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

speaking of his 'ultimate betrayal' and a 'baseless vendetta' against him.<sup>27</sup> This very public scandal does nothing to help the public image of the New Atheism. We're used to hearing about financial scandals in religious organizations, but this one was meant to be above that sort of thing.

No wonder that so many now think the New Atheism is looking more and more like another New Religious Movement. However, to use the categories of the sociology of religion, it behaves like a sect rather than a church. It has its boundaries, which are rigorously policed and enforced within the community. It has its own infallible texts and demands that its leading figures be treated with a respect and reverence that it conspicuously fails to apply to everyone else.

I, along with others, prefer to regard it more like a form of celebrity culture.<sup>28</sup> Certainly, a fixation on celebrity would explain why the New Atheism is so obsessed with the sales figures of its core texts and so irritated by those who criticize Dawkins and his colleagues. (To include the name of any of the 'Four Horsemen' in a title—as I did with *The Dawkins Delusion?*—is regarded as unspeakably arrogant by New Atheist devotees. How dare anyone name-drop such an intergalactically significant individual? Obviously they hope to be sprinkled with some stardust as a result!) Worried atheists outside the New Atheist bubble are alarmed that personality cults are overtaking this new movement and that followers are being encouraged simply to echo the views and actions of their gurus. (The secularist group called 'Freethinkers', which is 'guided by reason and logic', has on sale a T-shirt printed with advice on how to tackle life's great ethical questions. Just ask: 'What would Dawkins do?')<sup>29</sup> The following comment reflects one concerned atheist's alarm at the uncritical adulation meted out to the 'Four Horsemen' by some New Atheist websites.

As much as I tend to agree with the neo-atheists philosophically, I worry a bit about the quasi-evangelical fervor of many of their 'followers.' Old tendencies die hard (if at all), and I think many of those who've abandoned monotheistic religions for atheism are still inclined to treat their intellectual heroes like cult figures. I suppose this could be the inevitable first stage of any transformation of values, but the herd instinct in action always sends a shiver down my spine.<sup>30</sup>

When *The Independent*—widely regarded as the most secularist British newspaper—voted Dawkins one of the smuggest people in Britain in 2009, one atheist blogger responded

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<sup>27</sup> <<http://joshtimonen.com/post/1387207318/the-ultimate-betrayal>>

<sup>28</sup> See Graeme Turner, *Understanding Celebrity*. London: Sage, 2004.

<sup>29</sup> <[http://www.zazzle.co.uk/what\\_would\\_dawkins\\_do\\_tshirt-235812038105228356](http://www.zazzle.co.uk/what_would_dawkins_do_tshirt-235812038105228356)>. The slogan is a parody of a popular Christian armband, 'What would Jesus do?'

<sup>30</sup> <<http://smashingtelly.com/2008/06/19/the-four-horsemen-dennett-dawkins-harris-hitchens/>>

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

with obvious exasperation at the implied critique of his infallibility: 'Richard Dawkins is not even vaguely (*sic*) smug—he is just RIGHT. He is also highly intelligent.'<sup>31</sup>

There's an important motif embedded in this statement. New Atheists are clever. They're smart enough to break free from the delusions and false assurances of religion. In short: they're 'Bright'—with a capital 'B'. This brings us to another important development in the New Atheist world.

## *The invention of the 'Bright'*

Realizing that the term 'atheist' was unspeakably dull and loaded with unhelpful and generally negative associations, two Californian educationalists—Paul Geisert and Mynga Futrell—invented the term 'Brights' to designate those with naturalistic world-views. Just as 'gays' was adopted as a more upbeat way to designate homosexuals, 'Brights' was coined as a positive term for atheists and their fellow-travellers.

Geisert and Futrell launched their rebranding campaign at an atheist conference in Florida in spring 2003. It gained immediate support from Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, both of whom promoted its agendas in leading British and American liberal-leaning newspapers.<sup>32</sup> Dawkins' advocacy in the UK proved especially successful, and many in the media believed that a new force was emerging in Western culture—'The future looks Bright.'

Let us explore this fascinating development a little further. When commenting in 2006 on the rise of the Brights in the UK, journalist Gary Wolf noted that the Brights meetup—this term is used in preference to 'meeting'—in London was one of the largest and best-organized nationwide.<sup>33</sup> Thanks to its excellent website, the topics and dates of these meetups, some of which were held jointly with London Atheists, are available in the public domain.<sup>34</sup> Table 1 sets out this basic information from the first meetup of September 2003 to the most recent.

The meetings were originally held monthly and attracted a slightly fluctuating attendance, which firmed up during 2006 and the first few months of 2007. This period overlapped roughly with the publication of the two most high-profile works of the New

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<sup>31</sup> <<http://news.independentminds.livejournal.com/3760686.html>>. Viewed and archived 21 June 2010. This page has since been deleted.

<sup>32</sup> Daniel C. Dennett, 'The Bright Stuff'. *New York Times*, 12 July 2003; Richard Dawkins, 'The Future looks Bright'. *The Guardian*, 21 June 2003.

<sup>33</sup> Gary Wolf, 'The Church of the Non-Believers'. *Wired*, 2006.  
<[http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism\\_pr.html](http://www.wired.com/wired/archive/14.11/atheism_pr.html)>

<sup>34</sup> <[http://www.meetup.com/London-Brights/calendar/past\\_list/](http://www.meetup.com/London-Brights/calendar/past_list/)>

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

Atheism: Dawkins' *The God Delusion* (2006) and Hitchens' *God Is Not Great* (2007). (Neither Harris nor Dennett really attracted much attention in the UK.) The site helpfully provides full details of each meeting, including estimates of attendance, occasionally with photographs allowing the number of attendees to be confirmed.

**Table 1 London Brights Meetups, 2003–10**

<i>Date</i>	<i>Attendance</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Attendance</i>	<i>Date</i>	<i>Attendance</i>
Sep 2003	13	Jan 2005	15	May 2006	4
Oct 2003	Cancelled	Feb 2005	20	Jun 2006	7
Nov 2003	17	Mar 2005	19	Jul 2006	30
Dec 2003	17	Apr 2005	19	Sep 2006	33
Jan 2004	Cancelled	May 2005	15	Sep 2006	24
Feb 2004	Cancelled	Jun 2005	16	Oct 2006	25
Mar 2004	22	Jul 2005	20	Nov 2006	31
Apr 2004	18	Aug 2005	11	Dec 2006	27
May 2004	Cancelled	Sep 2005	12	Mar 2007	20
Jun 2004	15	Oct 2005	29	Mar 2007	10
July 2004	14	Nov 2005	Cancelled	Apr 2007	18
Aug 2004	12	Jan 2006	20	Sep 2007	13
Sep 2004	4	Feb 2006	20	Mar 2008	12
Oct 2004	5	Mar 2006	17	Jul 2008	21
Nov 2004	14	Apr 2006	20	Jul 2009	10
Dec 2004	8	May 2006	6	2010	-

The December 2006 'Yuletide Celebration' social event was clearly much appreciated, whereas only four people responded to the following invitation in May 2006 to watch *The*

## Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

*Da Vinci Code* together: 'You know you want to see the film. So why not see it with a bunch of friendly brights and atheists?' Who would want to miss out on that?

From the second half of 2007, the meetups became increasingly infrequent. Whereas ten meetings took place in 2005, there were only two meetups arranged for 2008 and only one for 2009. Nothing at all happened in 2010. At the time of writing (October 2010), the next meetup has yet to be announced. This might be due to organizational difficulties. Then again, it might point to a more fundamental loss of interest and commitment, reflecting the waning of the novelty value of 'Bright' ideas.

Yet the feature of Table 1 most likely to attract readers' attention is the number of people attending the meetups. Wolf's 2006 comment about the London events being the 'largest' might suggest Bright audiences in the hundreds, possibly even the thousands, rivalling those of some of the capital city's most lively churches. Yet the maximum attendance in that year—which also turned out to be the biggest in the meetup's history—was at a speaker meeting, co-hosted by London Atheists and filmed by Channel 4, to discuss 'Brights in the United Kingdom'. How many attended? Thirty-three—even with the possibility of appearing on national television!<sup>35</sup>

If this group of Brights is one of the largest, what does that say about the rest of them? Any church that garnered such meagre attendances on such an infrequent basis would have been closed down years ago. Perhaps the future isn't quite as Bright as Dawkins had imagined. Or possibly these figures simply remind us that the real strength of the New Atheism lies in its web-based communities. New Atheists tend to be members of online associations of solitary anonymous web-browsers rather than of physical societies shaped by face to face encounters and relationships, where all are known by their real names.

But the fact remains that the term Bright just has not caught on, and it's not very difficult to figure out why. When launching the movement in the *New York Times* back in 2003, Daniel Dennett insisted that telling people that he was 'a Bright' was 'not a boast but a proud avowal of an inquisitive world view'. Well that's not how anyone else saw it. The opposite of 'bright' is 'dim', a mildly offensive word that translates as 'stupid'. By choosing to use the label 'bright', atheists were widely seen to be claiming to be smarter than everyone else, reinforcing the emerging perception that this form of atheism was elitist and self-important.

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<sup>35</sup> The London Atheists, who occasionally held joint meetups with the London Brights, continue to function. Their website points to ongoing attendance of 12–20 at their recent meetups, somewhat lower than the highs of 2006–7. See <<http://www.meetup.com/London-Atheists/>>

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

As John Allen Paulos, an academic who comments for the American ABC network, remarked, 'I don't think a degree in public relations is needed to expect that many people will construe the term as smug, ridiculous, and arrogant.'<sup>36</sup> Even one of the leading New Atheists was repulsed: Christopher Hitchens openly criticized Dawkins and Dennett for their 'cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called "Brights"'.<sup>37</sup> I'm with Hitchens on this one. You're bright because of the quality of your reasoning, not its outcomes.

The choice of the term has thus turned out to be something of a public-relations disaster. How could so many of the New Atheism's leading representatives fail to see that the label would backfire so spectacularly? Or that the use of it would create the kind of mindset that Dawkins and Dennett had declared to be one of the cardinal sins of religion?

Let me explain. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins strongly expresses the view that the teachings of Jesus of Nazareth encourage the formation of 'in-groups' and 'out-groups'.<sup>38</sup> The evidence for this is not robust. Christian readers of this section of the book found the absence of any reference to the Parable of the Good Samaritan—directed specifically *against* hostility towards out-groups—somewhat puzzling. At any rate, Dawkins is clear on what the problem is, even if his attempt to implicate Jesus in its genesis is decidedly flaky: 'Religion is a label of in-group/out-group enmity and vendetta, not necessarily worse than other labels such as skin colour, language, or preferred football team, but often available when other labels are not.'<sup>39</sup>

But what about the Bright? Dawkins and Dennett paint the Brights as the in-group and religionists as the out-group. How does that avoid social division and antagonism? It is just another 'label of in-group/out-group enmity'—a continuation, rather than a solution, of the problem.

## *Moving on*

We've looked briefly at some of the leading features of the New Atheism, most notably its defining hostility towards religion. But what of the ideas that underlie this hostility? In the chapters that follow we'll consider three major themes that have become definitive of the movement: its critique of religious violence (Chapter 3); and its appeals to reason

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<sup>36</sup> Chris Mooney, 'Not too "bright": Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett are smart guys, but their campaign to rename religious unbelievers "Brights" could use some rethinking'. *Skeptical Inquirer*, March–April 2004.

<sup>37</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve, 2007, p. 5.

<sup>38</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 257.

<sup>39</sup> Dawkins, *God Delusion*, p. 259.

# Lion and Lamb Apologetics'

(Chapter 4) and to science (Chapter 5) as the foundations of rational beliefs.<sup>40</sup> [Editor's

**Note:** *Why God Won't Go Away—Engaging with the New Atheism* by Alister McGrath is available at Amazon at <https://www.amazon.com/Why-God-Wont-Go-Away/>]

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<sup>40</sup> McGrath, A. (2011). *Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism* (pp. 23–39). SPCK.