

The New Atheism rocks

Russell Blackford

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The New Atheism deserves our cheers. This is not a time for hyper-scrupulous misgivings about how robustly religion should be criticised, even leaving aside the relative mildness that the New Atheists actually display. Books like *The God Delusion* and *God is Not Great* should give confidence to anyone who embraces secularism and deplores the political influence of religion. These books will convince at least some intellectual opponents, or play a role in doing so, expose the population to the idea (doubtless shocking for some) that there are alternatives to theism, and provide a rallying point for opposition to religious influences on public policy.

The conspicuous efforts of *Delusion's* Richard Dawkins and others encouraged me to examine my situation within the cultural circumstances of the new century.

We have witnessed a flood of books, aimed at the popular market, issuing robust challenges to theistic religious belief. The most prominent, perhaps, are by Dawkins (2006), and *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, by Christopher Hitchens (2007). Then there are *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, by Sam Harris (2006); *The Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*, by Michel Onfray (English translation from the original French, 2007); *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, by Daniel Dennett (2006); *Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness*, by AC Grayling (2007); *The Caged Virgin: An Emancipation Proclamation for Women and Islam* (English language edition 2005), and *Infidel*, by Ayaan Hirsi Ali (English language edition 2007); and *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, by Victor Stenger (2007). Home-grown in Australia, we have Tamas Pataki's *Against Religion* (2007).

The titles show that the authors mean business: The expression 'New Atheism' has been applied to this body of work, particu-

larly the contributions of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens.

Church and State

Atheists and others who are sceptical about the pretensions of religions have good reasons to support a separation of church and state.

Such a separation cannot be made as sharply as we'd like, and it is under attack from a number of quarters. In those circumstances, robust, popular critiques of religion are defensible, desirable, even necessary.

Although there may be no fully-agreed rationale for the idea of a separation of church and state, it appears to me that the idea can be supported from a wide range of religious and irreligious viewpoints. What seems necessary is acceptance of all the following ideas, even if for different reasons:

1. **The practical intractability of religious (and anti-religious) claims.** We have no prospect of reaching consensus on religious claims any time in the foreseeable future. (For simplicity's sake, the expression 'religious claims' includes anti-religious ones as well, e.g. the claim that God does not exist or that God does not interfere with the natural order of the world. It also covers moral claims that are made from some specifically religious or anti-religious viewpoint.) While there is some truth as to whether or not the deity described in orthodox Abrahamic theologies exists — I don't consider the question meaningless — there is no prospect in sight of settling it once and for all. The same applies to the truth of specific doctrines, such as the triune nature of God, the transubstantiation of the Eucharist, and the arcane requirements of natural law as interpreted by the Vatican. In actual practice, such questions have long defied attempts at rational resolution.

2. **The divisiveness of religious claims.** When attempts are made to impose religious claims coercively, using the power of the

state, this leads to division and conflict. The imperative for social peace requires that such claims be relegated to an area of personal belief.

3. The independence of secular goals.

There are many widely-agreed goals that the state can pursue independent of its attitude, one way or the other, to religious claims. These secular goals include peace and security, economic productivity and efficiency, social coordination, the alleviation of suffering and poverty, and so on. While the priorities for pursuing such goals differ among political parties, segments of the community, and individual citizens, and while there may be wrangling and fierce disagreement about the means to be employed, liberal democracies thrive on that kind of controversy. The point is that the goals themselves (or many of them) are widely accepted, and they can be pursued by the state without commitment to any particular religious claims.

4. Individualism in personal salvation.

Here, the idea is that spiritual salvation or its equivalent (which may simply be the secular concept of defining and pursuing your own happiness, or your own plan of life) can be achieved by individuals, independently of whether their beliefs are shared throughout society. If I am an evangelical Christian, for example, I can accept that my salvation is possible even if I live among pagans or atheists. This idea supports a negative right to be free of religious persecution by the state, but not a positive right to have my religion, or its associated standards of sin and righteousness, imposed on anyone else by means of the state's coercive powers.

Somebody who accepts all four points will conclude that attempts to enforce contentious religious claims are likely to have highly undesirable consequences (this follows from 1 and 2). They will also conclude (from 3 and 4) that it is not necessary—at least for some important purposes—to attempt to do so. Those important purposes include both public order and individual salvation (or whatever occupies a similar place in any system of beliefs and values). Anyone who reaches this point in thinking is likely to accept the appropriateness of state action in pursuit of a program based on secular goals, such as peace and security, social coordination, and so on. At the same time, such a person is likely to join in a collective renunciation of state action to enforce religious claims (including intractable moral claims associated with religion or irreligion).

It should be added that some people might be disappointed if they conclude that not all goals that they hold dear can be pursued appropriately by means of the coercive power of the state. For example, an evangelical Christian may be disappointed that the state's power cannot safely be used to spread the doctrine of spiritual salvation through faith in Jesus Christ. If, however, this person takes all four points seriously, he or she may be content to leave the state to pursue a relatively restricted program of secular goals, while pursuing a goal of spreading the gospel in other ways, such as by preaching, witnessing, or by personal example. The upshot is that people with a wide variety of views about intractable religious claims may all be able, from their varied viewpoints, to accept a fundamental political compromise in which political and other goals are separated, and the religious beliefs and practices of citizens are essentially removed from the sphere of political control.

If this compromise is successful, the state will refrain from persecuting people with unpopular views on matters of religion and morality, so long as their activities conform to secular goals that have wide support. Even then, the state may be solicitous towards individuals whose deepest, most cherished beliefs give them reasons to conduct themselves in unpopular ways that conflict with the secular goals pursued by the state. The idea here is that people should not suffer disadvantage from their religious beliefs if it can reasonably be avoided. While some religious practices may be inconsistent with widely-agreed secular goals, the kinds of considerations I've raised give the state reason to bend rules when it can, though not where it has a compelling interest based on something like public safety. How compelling, though, is 'compelling'? Unfortunately, that will have to be a matter of circumstance and degree.

In short, people with many views on matters of religion and morality can share in a (small-l) liberal compromise that involves a separation of church and state and a high degree of official tolerance of varied world views and associated practices. Those of us who join in this compromise routinely urge the state to confine itself to a secular program based on values such as peace and security, social coordination, etc. At the same time, we urge it to refrain from persecuting anyone on the basis of religion or lack of religion, and to refrain from attempts to suppress any particular worldview that is held by some of its citizens. Our hope is that the state will not

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base its program of legislation and expenditure on controversial and intractable claims (including the claim that any particular religion is true, or that it is false).

Importantly, most atheists and other sceptics about religious claims are likely to find reasons, within their views of the world, to support such a political compromise. We may be content for the state to pursue secular goals and leave us in peace to live our own lives in our own ways. However, like religious believers, we may still have good reason to advance other goals by means that don't involve the state's coercive power.

If the liberal political compromise that I've described is widely accepted, the state will be reluctant to embrace any set of religious beliefs, or anti-religious beliefs, or contentious moral beliefs that are heavily dependent on either. Likewise, it will be reluctant to interfere with religious practices, or with doubt and denial of religion. Thus, no one will be persecuted for having the 'wrong' ideas, and everyone will have the opportunity to pursue salvation, *motsa* or nirvana, material prosperity, family happiness, creative excellence—or whatever else she finds important—in her own way. Citizens are to have the autonomy of defining this for themselves. There is a wall between religious claims and the power of the state.

Unfortunately, the structure of the wall is shaky. There are limits to the separation of church and state, and there are also challenges to the idea.

It is unclear exactly which issues are walled off when we separate church and state. Indeed, this is itself an issue that becomes contested within any society that gives some sort of recognition to a church-state separation. It is one thing to agree that the state should pass no laws supporting or opposing the doctrine of transubstantiation, or that of the triune Christian godhead. Likewise, many of us can agree that the state should not endorse (or oppose) an anti-religious claim, such as the claim that believers' lives are worthless because they are based on something similar to a delusion. What, however, about a practice such as abortion?

While the Catholic Church claims not to seek the enforcement of any specifically religious doctrines, or religious teachings about morals, by means of the state's coercive powers, this seems dubious. After all, the Church is actively engaged in the political arena in opposing abortion, stem cell research, therapeutic cloning, and various other practices that fall outside the boundaries of moral acceptability delineated in its

formal teachings. Church leaders argue, for example, that abortion is the destruction of a human being, that this is morally wrong irrespective of the stage of development of the embryo or foetus, and that the truth of the matter is available without relying on divine revelation. Attempts to enshrine such ideas in law are rationalised as campaigns to protect vulnerable human beings, rather than as attempts to bend the might of the state to an imposition of Catholic dogma (or some of its aspects). The interpretation of the church-state boundary becomes, itself, a matter of public debate.

More fundamentally, should all political actions with pro-religious, or indeed anti-religious, motivations be considered beyond the pale of acceptance? Strictly speaking, the four points above may not necessitate a sharp or strict separation of the two. Although that may be desirable, these points really only necessitate the tolerance, or political accommodation, of a diverse range of viewpoints on intractable religious issues. Certainly, the points I've listed give many people, including religious believers, good reasons to welcome a political environment in which the state no longer employs fire and the sword (or modern equivalents such as police and prisons) to suppress certain religious viewpoints. They may not, however, give everyone sufficiently good reasons to support the total removal of state bias towards one religious viewpoint or another (a bias expressed, for example, in official statements or in funding decisions). Indeed, countries such as the UK, with its formally-established church, might be considered sufficiently tolerant, or accommodating, to meet the most urgent political imperatives that can be deduced from my four points.

Thus, those of us who favour a stricter, and sharper, separation of church and state may have to find other arguments. It might, for example, be argued that blatant official bias towards certain religious claims will foster resentments and fail to be a stable solution to the problems I've canvassed. On the other hand, some jurisdictions might well muddle through with a degree of official bias that is accepted by their citizens and doesn't lead to any truly draconian acts. In some places and times, this could be a stable solution.

While many parties involved in social debate give lip service to such ideas as a separation of church and state, or at least the accommodation of rival claims about religion and morality, others may not even go that far.

All four points above are open to attack, especially by intolerant religious groups. The

opposite attitude to an acceptance of 1 and 2 is that evil can be defeated. Some groups may come to think that there is the prospect of a clear social and political outcome. Those religious believers who imagine that divine revelation has commanded them to action may seek victory for their faith, no matter how great the odds against it, rather than its participation in social peace. If this is their attitude, the victory they foresee may be a swift and glorious one, guaranteed by their deity. Not for them the duller prospect of gradual and peaceful intellectual victory, to whatever extent this may be possible in a discussion and debate about ideas over many generations.

Moreover, some religious groups may not accept the distinction between collective secular goals, appropriate for pursuit by governments, and the goal of individual salvation. Many adherents of Islam do not accept such a distinction at all; they conceive of Islam as a total system of belief and conduct that requires comprehensive submission to the will of Allah and the teachings of the prophet. For these believers, Islam encompasses political requirements as well as the individual's private conduct and relationship to Allah. To whatever extent Islam is understood in this way by its adherents, it appears incompatible with modern, liberal society. At least some strains of Islam are fundamentally illiberal.

But I have no wish to demonise Islam in particular. Christians, too, are sometimes unable to distinguish between the political realm and that of personal belief and conduct. Most dramatically, there has been a political mobilisation of evangelical Christians in the United States in recent years. This includes influential Dominionists and Reconstructionists who openly campaign for a theocratic regime to enforce Christian beliefs and morals. Many American Christians do not go so far, but they appear sympathetic to the encroachment of a soft theocracy — the gradual creation of a brave new America that will tolerate unbelievers only grudgingly, without welcoming their viewpoint or allowing them to act in ways that are deemed contrary to God's law.

If my analysis to this point is correct, the four points I have raised give reasons for a separation of church and state, or at least for official accommodation of a wide range of views about religious (and related) issues. I emphasise, however, that even if a sharp separation of church and state can be maintained, that is no reason for anyone to abandon goals such as promoting or criticising

religion by means that do not involve the use of state power. Thus, it is possible to endorse the separation of church and state while actively evangelising for your religious beliefs or while actively developing critiques of rival religious beliefs — or while criticising all such beliefs. Nothing I have stated so far is a reason for atheists and sceptics to camouflage or soften their views. Atheists and sceptics may still hope for—and seek to create—a social ethos that is increasingly sceptical about the authority of religious institutions and leaders. Like religious believers, we have no reason to give up all our ambitions: we have compelling reasons to abjure the use of fire and the sword to suppress religion, but we can still make peaceful attempts to persuade others away from it.

Atheists and other sceptics can advocate a separation of church and state, have no intention of using the state's power to suppress religion, yet also hope that religion will eventually wither away. We may acknowledge that religion will persist for the foreseeable future, yet also see this persistence as a barrier to rational convergence on moral views and sensible social policy. We may see good reason not to make any attempt to suppress religion by coercive means, while also seeing the need to participate aggressively in the marketplace of ideas in order to express our scepticism about its creeds and concepts, and to keep our own views alive as practical options for later generations.

It's true that atheists and sceptics have less reason to be aggressive in arguing publicly for our views if we find ourselves in an environment where religion wields little political influence. In those circumstances, there is simply less urgency about speaking up. Those, however, are not the circumstances that we face. Ideas of a separation of church and state, and of the liberal accommodation of sceptical views, are under attack. Perhaps this is a backlash against past successes in secularising the processes of policy formulation, but that changes nothing. Backlash or not, successful, as yet or otherwise, the attack goes on, with new evidence each day about the ambitions of Dominionists, threats to reproductive rights, and attempts to teach religious narratives of divine creation to school students as an alternative to well-corroborated science.

It is increasingly clear that the authority of religious institutions and their leaders needs to be challenged robustly and tenaciously in the sphere of public debate. It is not sufficient that polite, abstract criticisms

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be published in learned journals: the reasons for scepticism need to be brought to the public vocally and untiringly, and in a way that will engage its attention. Doing this, while also defending the sharpest possible separation of church and state, can be a consistent and principled approach. In short, there is now an urgency for secular intellectuals to speak up, and we should be grateful that heavyweights such as Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, and Onfray are doing so, joined by relative newcomers, such as Sam Harris. We don't have to agree with every point made by all of them to see that the New Atheism is a totally positive development.

If I'm correct so far, then there is a compelling need to subject religion and its claims to searching, and public, sceptical scrutiny. Nothing less is adequate. Those of us who are sceptical need to dispute the false prestige enjoyed by belief systems with little of intellectual substance to recommend them; we need to challenge the credibility that is lightly ascribed to every stray pontiff, priest, presbyter, or pulpiter. It is not sufficient to put modern-day Lockean or Jeffersonian arguments for keeping religion and political power separate — important though it is to keep those arguments alive. It would be better if the attractiveness and influence of religion were downgraded. If that can't be achieved, we can hope that organised religion will morph into something very different from the supernaturalist and authoritarian institution that it has been in the past. This supports the need for critiques of religion — critiques that are sufficiently entertaining and non-technical to engage the reading public, and sufficiently substantial and robust to drive the point home.

The New Atheism and its critics

Accordingly, I cheer for Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens, and the rest. They are performing a valuable service. It might be argued that they are wrong because religion (some particular form of it, presumably) is actually correct. That, however, cannot be demonstrated, and I suggest that all such claims be put to one side. A more telling criticism might be that religion has its good side as well as its darker side — after all, much charitable work is done by humble people who have devoted their lives to God. No doubt that's true, though the citizens of irreligious Scandinavian countries manage to contribute more than most to the amelioration of global misery. Religion may provide an outlet for some individuals to engage in lives that look

like self-sacrifice to the rest of us, but I doubt that secular societies, such as those of Northern Europe, are less compassionate than others, or less capable of taking practical action to improve the world. Of course, if religious believers spent all their time helping the poor — rather than opposing science, blocking medical research, and preaching miserable attitudes to sex — there would be less to complain about.

Perhaps the most common criticism of New Atheism, often coming from other atheists, is that Dawkins, Hitchens, Dennett, Harris, Onfray, and so on, are just too strident or nasty, too condescending or smug. This, it is claimed, is discourteous to opponents, as well as being potentially counter-productive if it pushes some moderate religious believers into the camp of creationists, gay bashers, and anti-abortion fanatics. By and large, I think this criticism is misplaced. First, it is not as if Dawkins or any of the others seek to impose their views on others in the sense of asking for the state to suppress religious belief. Dawkins and company are not the ones who reach for police, pistols, and prisons to enforce their views. They are not that scary. The most that can be said against them is that they are insufficiently gentle in their attempts at debate and persuasion.

But how gentle should they have to be? Of course, they could have written completely anodyne books with titles to match. Imagine a world where those books were written and published, rather than the ones we have actually seen and read (surely this would be a world where the New Atheism never really took off):

I hope the point is made: some rhetorical panache is helpful to engage and hold the public's interest. But once interest is engaged, shouldn't the arguments be fair? Shouldn't the tone be civil? In fact, we can find a wide spectrum of tones among the voices of the New Atheists. Hitchens and Onfray are forthright and provocative, Dawkins far less so. Daniel Dennett bends over backwards to be courteous. But let's not have a double standard here. Even Hitchens and Onfray are mild in comparison to the writings of many others who are involved in public debate over issues that rouse their indignation. Compare their books with Leon Kass, denouncing human cloning, or Catharine MacKinnon, denouncing pornography, or with the speeches and writings of any political figure, great or small, denouncing an opponent's policy platform. Compare them, indeed, with the words of anybody with a

degree of passion, when she perceives certain things as social evils. Even the most tigerish of the New Atheists are pussycats in their rhetoric, compared to many others.

As for Dawkins, readers of *The God Delusion* should be struck at how good-humoured, careful, and fair it is. There is an element of satire, and indeed the book is often laugh-out-loud funny, but it is so much better natured than almost anything on any other subject of social importance that it is most noteworthy for its mildness (exceeded only by that of Dennett). Satire and humour have a role to play in getting any message across, and sometimes there is nothing better to be done than to show the absurdity of an opposing position. All positions are defensible if their proponents are prepared to bite every bullet and perform every required feat of intellectual gymnastics — but some really should be an embarrassment to those who attempt to defend them. It is important that somebody challenge the taboo against responding to absurd religious viewpoints with satire and laughter, as happens when anything else is debated. Allowing for that, I confess that I did find about half a dozen sharply-worded sentences that made me wince in *The God Delusion's* three or four hundred pages — but that was all. What I mainly found was page after page of carefully reasoned, meticulously fair prose.

Of course, the title is provocative, and Dawkins makes no bones about the fact that he considers belief in God to be a serious, persistent error. He has an uncomfortable truth to promote, and I see no point in his pretending otherwise. By calling his book *The God Delusion*, he succinctly communicates the essentials of that truth: theistic religious belief does indeed have much in common with delusory beliefs of all kinds. That does not entail that theistic believers are mentally deranged — it takes no derangement to believe something you have been taught as a child and/or find accepted (perhaps without question) by most of the people around you, however lacking in objective evidence the belief may be. People who have what are otherwise bizarre

beliefs may be perfectly rational in other ways, if their beliefs were formed and maintained in those circumstances. But we already know that. The point that needs up-front emphasis is not the way in which religious belief differs from psychiatric phenomena. It is more important, at this moment in history, to emphasise the similarities.

Will the tone of these books — often passionate, sometimes sharp, very often comic — merely alienate believers, making it less likely that they can be weaned off religion? I doubt it. The books make telling points, communicated in effective ways. They will undoubtedly win over at least some theistic believers — most likely those who have doubts anyway, or who are too attracted by the worldview of science to retreat to totally different premises in religion's defence. Further, these books have put atheistic views on the social and intellectual map, as legitimate views to be weighed and explored by anyone who cares about the truth of things. Furthermore, under present circumstances, the body of work that constitutes the New Atheism would be useful even if it were only preaching to the choir of existing atheists and sceptics. It can give confidence that such views have high-profile, respected proponents. The New Atheists provide a much-needed rallying point.

The criticism that the New Atheism is too negative, offering no positive moral or political message, strikes me as back to front. What has been lacking in recent decades is not a body of accessible literature that explores moral and political issues from a secular viewpoint — the work of Peter Singer comes to mind, but there is actually a vast array of such material. The trouble is that such writings, although valuable, simply assume that theistic viewpoints are irrelevant, without ever arguing for this disorienting idea. What was needed was a respectable body of work that engages with the educated public (not just philosophers or theologians) on the threshold issue of whether religion has authority at all. Dawkins and the others have begun to fill the gap. ▲

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Russell Blackford is a Melbourne-based writer, philosopher, and literary critic who teaches part-time at Monash University while completing a PhD thesis in the School of Philosophy and Bioethics. He is a Fellow of the Institute for Ethics and Emerging Technologies. His website is <http://www.russellblackford.com>