

A Research Project at the Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion of the Freie Universität Berlin, Germany

The scientific study of religion (German: *Religionswissenschaft*) is an academic discipline which – unlike theology – takes a neutral position (from outside any particular religious viewpoint) towards its subjects of research. In this vein, our research project shall be examining recent tendencies in atheistic criticism of religion.

The most prominent of the (so-called) "New Atheists" are Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens. Basing their arguments on naturalistic and scientific world views, they oppose the majority of religious beliefs and, furthermore, seek to put their ideas into political practice.

We aim to take a closer look at the theoretical and political foundations, causes, and goals of the "New Atheism" as well as at the vivid reactions of its critics. This also requires an examination of the broad media coverage of the "New Atheism". We will compare the historical situations of the "New Atheism" in Germany and the United States using qualitative research, in the hope of gaining greater insights into the relations between what is called "the return of religion" and the return of the criticism of religion. These two phenomena may shed light on both the aggressive stance the "New Atheists" have taken in the public arena, as well as the heated debates on the "New Atheism".

Criticism of Religion and Atheism

The history of religion has almost always been accompanied by the criticism of religion – that appears in most cases as either an inter- or intra-religious criticism. Both forms of criticism do not extend beyond the borders of religious viewpoints, so that criticism of religion does not necessarily imply a fundamental rejection of religion at all.

The atheistic criticism of religion, however, possesses another quality. Atheism – the Ancient Greek adjective *átheos* means 'godless' – is the negation of the existence of God or the gods. It is widely discussed in the academic world at which specific point in history an explicitly atheistic criticism of religion arose. According to some, atheism is a rather late and isolated product of the 17th century Enlightenment; others suggest that atheism already can be found in Ancient Greek philosophy.

Nevertheless, there is an overall agreement that thinkers as Lamettrie, Diderot, Helvétius, and especially Baron d'Holbach (*Christianity Unveiled*, 1761; *The System of Nature*, 1770) backed an explicit atheistic criticism of religion. We can see a tradition of atheistic criticism of religion stretching into the present times through Auguste Comte, Ludwig Feuerbach, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Bertrand Russell.

The "New Atheism"

The term "New Atheism" was introduced by American journalist Gary Wolf in his article *The Church of Non-Believers* (Nov. 2006). He coined the term to describe the enormous success of then-best-sellers – *The God Delusion* by the British zoologist Richard Dawkins, *The End of Faith* by Sam Harris, and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* by Daniel Dennett – that openly criticize most forms of religion. Since his article, the term has been widely used both in the media coverage as well as in the academic and religious debate for recent tendencies of criticism of religion. In the meantime, this term is applied by others on Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*), too. All four – Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett – have met to discuss their opposition towards religion and religious faith in a film called *The Four Horsemen* – a title by which they refer to the Book of Revelation to describe themselves. In addition to their passionate public appearance, the so-called "New Atheists" have begun to found organizations in order to make a contribution to societal decision-making processes. In 2006 Dawkins launched the *Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science*, followed by Sam Harris' *The Reason Project* in 2008; Michael Schmidt-Salomon is the chairman of the German *Giordano Bruno Stiftung* (founded in 2004). The term "New Atheism" does not only appear in the English-speaking world but is also used in German speaking areas. Authors such as Michael Schmidt-Salomon, with his *Manifest des evolutionären Humanismus* (transl.: *Manifesto of*

Evolutionary Humanism) and his almost banned atheistic children's book *Wo bitte geht's zu Gott?, fragte das kleine Ferkel* (transl.: *How Do I Get to God?, asked the Little Piglet*), and Robert Misik, with his book *Gott behüte! Warum wir die Religion aus der Politik raushalten müssen* (transl.: *Heaven Forbid! Why We Have to Keep Religion out of Politics*), are categorized as "New Atheists" as well. Even though these authors are regularly labeled as "New Atheists", it has to be stated that the term "New Atheism" is remarkably under-defined: The phenomenon remains fuzzy, especially when it comes to the assumed differences between an "old" or "classical" atheism and the "New Atheism".

Media phenomenon "New Atheism"

The critical positions towards religion of the "New Atheists" have received an impressive public attention. Their presence in the media not only refers to their books as such but includes wide news coverage of their activities and appearances. Every significant American and German newspaper and magazine has interviewed them or dedicated their ideas an article or more. Among others this includes "God vs. Science" in *Time Magazine* (Nov. 13, 2006), "'Gott ist an allem schuld!' – Der Kreuzzug der neuen Atheisten" (transl.: "'It is all God's Fault!' – The Crusade of the New Atheists") in the German magazine *Der Spiegel* (May 26, 2007), or "Warum es keinen Gott gibt: Die provokanten Thesen des Wissenschaftlers und Bestsellerautors Richard Dawkins" (transl. "Why There Is No God – The provocative Theses of Scientist and Bestseller Author Richard Dawkins") in *Stern* (Sept. 27, 2007). Major

television networks have also picked up on the subject. In contrast to the atheism of the Enlightenment era – which was primarily a discourse among intellectuals – the "New Atheism" can be regarded as a media phenomenon with a widespread impact.

Research Gaps

Despite the popular current attention the subject has received in mainstream media and public discourse, hardly any academic research in *Religionswissenschaft* has been done on the "New Atheism", certainly not compared to the extensive examination of the Enlightenment atheism.

To fill these research gaps and to test the hypothesis of a dependency between the "Return of religion" and the return of the criticism of religion is the objective of the DFG-funded research project of the Institute for the Scientific Study of Religion at the Freie Universität Berlin.

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The "Return of Religion" and the Return of the Criticism of Religion

The "New Atheism" in Recent German and American Culture

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