THE NEW ATHEISM AND SOCIOLOGY: WHY HERE? WHY NOW? WHAT NEXT?

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INTRODUCTION

In November 2004, the British theologian Alister McGrath published a book bearing what must, in retrospect, be deemed an ill-chosen title: *The Twilight of Atheism*. In it he argued that atheism (understood in the narrow sense of “a principled and informed decision to reject belief in God”), which until recently constituted “a vast and diverse empire embracing many kingdoms,” has fallen into political, intellectual, and social abeyance (McGrath 2004, xi–xii). McGrath was not alone in this understanding. Also in 2004, Cardinal Poupard (2004, 12), then President of the Vatican’s Pontifical Council for Culture, affirmed:

The Church today is confronted more by indifference and practical unbelief than with atheism. Atheism is in recline throughout the world, but indifference and unbelief develop in cultural milieus marked by secularism. It is no longer a question of a public affirmation of atheism, with the exception of a few countries, but of a diffuse presence, almost omnipresent, in the culture.

That same year, Sam Harris’s book *The End of Faith* became a surprise bestseller. Other, similarly-atheistic and similarly-bestselling volumes swiftly followed: Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (2006); Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006); Harris’s follow-up *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2007); and Hitchens’ *God is Not Great* (2007), to name only the more famous. The most successful among these, Dawkins’ book, first appeared in September 2006. Less than two years later, in August 2008, it had already sold over two million copies worldwide (Christine De Blase, assistant to Richard Dawkins, personal communication with author, 20 August 2008). In addition, all four authors—along with, naturally, the ideas which they so eloquently advocate—have received a great deal of popular and media attention.

This recent, unprecedented upsurge of interest in atheism has caught many people (and not only theologians and cardinals) unawares. The situation is, moreover, doubly surprising, for the new atheists have not
only achieved remarkable successes in atheistic ‘consciousness raising,’ which is striking in itself, but they have principally done so in both Britain and the United States. As we shall see, whatever the two countries’ other similarities, their socio-religious cultures are famously contrasting. Whether it is the United States or Britain (often grouped along with several other western European countries) that should be regarded as the ‘exceptional’ case has been keenly debated by sociologists on both sides of the Atlantic (Davie 2002, 27–53; Bruce 1996, 129–30; Greeley 2004, 197–214). In any case, the genuinely Anglo-American nature both of the authors themselves—Harris and Dennett are American; Dawkins and Hitchens are both British (although Hitchens gained U.S. citizenship in 2007)—and of their popular and media triumphs, itself requires careful explanation.

This mention of socio-religious contexts is of fundamental importance, since in this chapter the new atheism will be treated primarily as a social, rather than as an intellectual, phenomenon. From a sociological point of view, the most interesting aspect of the new atheism is not its ideas (however novel, cogent or well-expressed these may or may not be), but the reception of those ideas. A great many books and pamphlets have been published during the past two hundred years in Europe and America, lambasting religion and advocating atheism. Prior to The End of Faith, however, none of these have sold in great numbers. Of course, the intrinsic qualities of these new books, in terms of both style and substance, are important considerations. But these alone cannot explain their vast sales. The God Delusion, for example, is a brilliantly written, entertaining read. Dawkins is, furthermore, a well-respected, famous and popular writer; he could, in all likelihood, achieve respectable sales with a book on any subject. But the fact that his book on atheism sold fully twice as many copies in twenty-three months than The Selfish Gene—his first, and hitherto most successful book—managed in thirty years (Chadarevian 2007, 31), suggests that there is much more to it. This suspicion is reinforced by the realization that in other western European countries, wholly independently of their Anglo-American counterparts, homegrown atheist authors have also been enjoying conspicuous successes (Onfray [2005] 2007; Scola and Flores d’Arcais 2008). This implies that the new atheism’s startling successes are explained, at least in part, in light of wider social and cultural trends in the contemporary west.

This chapter will proceed in three sections. Firstly, the general socio-religious situations of the USA and Britain will be sketched, as the