THE NEW ATHEISM AND THE EMPOWERMENT OF AMERICAN FREETHINKERS

Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith

I may naively have thought that the book had a good chance of converting devout religious people to atheism. I’m not sure that’s realistic; what does seem to be happening—and Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris report the same thing—is an enormous upsurge in people who are already sort of atheists, or people who at least aren’t very religious…having their consciousness raised to the point that they realize ‘actually I am an atheist and apparently a lot of other people are too, and I never realized it’ – Richard Dawkins commenting on the popularity of The God Delusion.1

It has long been recognized that American society is more religious than most European societies. As such, it is important to consider what space is available for atheism and other forms of irreligion. In this chapter we will address how the ‘new atheism’ has created new space for ‘freethinkers,’ though such an opening carries its own tensions and ambiguities about the future of secularism in the United States.

If religion acts as a norm and a ‘natural’ standard by which all deviations are judged abnormal and deviant, perhaps we might be justified in asking if “American civil religion has served as a functional equivalent to an established national church” (Mennell 2007, 291). We don’t think it would be overstating the case to say that the space for atheism in America has been largely limited historically. This is not to say that atheism has not had space; but the space has been and continues to be cramped, particularly as many atheist leaders’ and activists’ long-held dream of a progressively secular American society has failed to materialize.

Atheists have lacked “the ready-made structures of history, narrative, and tradition that would enable the easy passage” from the periphery to the centre (Thoburn 2003, 19). ‘Coming out,’ then, has not been simply a matter of expressing oneself as an atheist along a well-worn route.

---

1 This quote, which is slightly modified by the authors for ease of reading, is from the December 7, 2007 Point of Inquiry podcast “Science and the New Atheism” (Dawkins 2007e).
legitimate route. It has involved emerging from invisibility to claim a personal and social identity that has carried a fair degree of stigma. We believe this stigma is likely weakening, since even before the emergence of the new atheism, there has been a growth of organizations and activism galvanizing freethinkers to make a place for themselves in American society (Cimino and Smith 2007).

That the appearance of the new atheism signals a further weakening of the ‘atheist taboo’ in American society is especially evident to atheists. The phenomenon of the new atheism is hailed as a harbinger of advancing secularism. However, as we will seek to argue in this chapter, the situation is far more complex than one of secularism versus religion. The new atheist books and the responses, debates, and criticisms they have generated creates a new space where atheists are empowered and mobilized through their interaction and contention with each other and with their antagonists.

A Sociology of the New Atheism

Media in the form of books, magazines, websites, blogs, and online forums plays an important role in the social phenomenon of new atheism. In highlighting the role of media, we will be focusing on both the content and the medium. An analysis of articles devoted to new atheism in two magazines, coupled with responses from a sample of self-identified atheists on new atheism, will allow us to see how ‘freethinkers’ (a term we use throughout this chapter to include self-designated atheists and secular humanists) themselves are interpreting and evaluating the new atheism. The medium is understood here as “a type of setting or environment that has relatively fixed characteristics that influence communication in a particular manner—regardless of the choice of content elements and regardless of the particular manipulation of production variables” (Meyrowitz 2000, 432–433). Examining both the content and medium surrounding how the new atheism is received will allow us to examine questions concerning how the media are reshaping relationships among atheists themselves as well as altering the symbolic boundaries between atheists and theists.

---

2 In spite of the 2003 national survey studied by Edgell et al. (2006) that shows stigma against atheists and atheism is still very much alive and well in America.