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New Atheism and its Intellectual Foundations: An Analytical Study of the Polemics of Harris, Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens

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Abstract

This article explores the ideas behind “New Atheism,” a movement that became well known in the early twenty first century. The study focuses on the main arguments and beliefs of the movement's four key figures, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens, known as the “Four Horsemen.” By examining their important works and personal backgrounds, the article shows their reliance on scientific naturalism, evolutionary biology and a direct criticism of religious beliefs, especially Islam. Furthermore, the study includes a critical analysis at how new this movement is, referencing scholars like John F. Haught and William E. Kaufman. The findings suggest that, although New Atheism has energized the discussion on secularism with unmatched intensity and media attention, its intellectual claims are mostly rehashed versions of traditional atheistic ideas rather than new philosophical insights.

Keywords: *New Atheism, Modern Critics of Religion, Religion and New Atheism, New Atheist.*

1. Introduction

The term “New Atheism” emerged in Western intellectual discussions in the early 2000s. Its arrival revived the public debate about religion. New Atheism mainly involves four prominent atheist writers, though many other scholars and thinkers have since joined the movement against religions worldwide.

The term “New Atheism” was first used in 2006 when Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris framed their ideas as part of a single trend. That year, an article titled “The New Naysayers” marked the initial use of the word “new” in this context.¹

Also in that year, journalist “Gary Wolf” first used the term “New Atheism” in one of his articles. In this article, Wolf described the views of “Sam Harris (1967)”, “Richard Dawkins (1941)”, “Daniel Dennett (1942-2024)” and “Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011)”. He noted their bold and active approach to atheism and coined the term “New Atheism” to describe their stance.²

The New Atheists have been quite effective in promoting atheism as an alternative to religion. They bypassed traditional philosophical arguments for atheism, opting instead for scientific reasoning, especially from physics and evolutionary biology.³

Mohammad Hassan Khalil indicates that the New Atheism movement began with best-selling book by Sam Harris’s “The End of Faith (2004)”. This was followed by a series of popular books and films from other New Atheists, including Dawkins, Dennett and

Hitchens. Their works have influenced many people and communities worldwide.⁴ According to Thomas Zenk, public discussions have described the New Atheism movement as a scientific and naturalistic criticism of religion. It is seen as an alternative ideology to replace religion and as a campaign against faith.⁵

William Emilson explains that the rise of New Atheism in the early twenty first century is mostly associated with four key figures: “Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens”.⁶

Harris is often regarded as the founding author and public voice of the movement. His book “The End of Faith” published in 2004 came after 9/11. In it, he criticized all religions especially Islam portraying it as a religion of terror and violence.

The second most influential figure is “Richard Dawkins”. “The God Delusion (2006)” his best-selling book, became a key part of the movement. Dawkins a professor of biology at Oxford University, engages in debates with religious scholars and leads global campaigns against religious belief.

The third leading thinker is philosopher “Daniel C. Dennett”. He published his important work “Breaking the Spell in 2007”.

“Christopher Hitchens” is also prominent figure. He wrote “God Is Not Great (2007)”. This movement is notable for its aggressive tone and strong criticism of all religious beliefs. The introduction and details arguments of these personalities are discussed below:

2. Sam Harris (1967)

Samuel Benjamin Harris is an American author, neuroscientist, podcast host and philosopher. He was born in Los Angeles, California, on April 9, 1967. His father Berkeley Harris, known for his roles in films and as a television writer. His mother Susan Harris also is a producer, she has created many successful TV series. His father came from a religious background, while his mother is also Jewish. After his parents divorced when he was two years old, Harris was raised by his mother. He later said that his upbringing was completely secular, religion rarely came up at home, but he was not specifically raised as an atheist.⁷

2.1 Educational Journey and Spiritual Exploration

Harris started his educational journey in English at Stanford University. However, after an experience with MDMA⁸, he became deeply interested in philosophical and spiritual questions. Believing that spiritual insight might be gained without drugs, he left Stanford during his second year. Then he spent a lot of time in Nepal and India, where he studied meditation under Buddhist and Hindu teachers, including “Dilgo Khyentse (1910-1991)”.⁹

2.2 Academic Achievements

For a short time in the early 1990s, he also served as a volunteer security guard for the Dalai Lama. After spending eleven years abroad, Harris returned to Stanford in 1997 and completed his “B.A. in philosophy” in 2000. Later he earned a Ph.D. in cognitive neuroscience from the University of California, Los Angeles. His doctoral research, conducted through functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), examined the neural basis of belief, disbelief and uncertainty. His dissertation, titled “The Moral Landscape: How Science Could Determine Human Values”, was supervised by Mark S. Cohen.¹⁰

2.3 Philosophical Arguments and Literary Contributions

In his work Harris argues that we can determine moral values through scientific inquiry.

This makes it unnecessary to depend on religion for moral guidance. He believes that religion is a poor source of morality, while science offers a more reliable option.

2.4 Key Publications

In 2011, Harris published “Lying”. In this book, he claims that people can live more ethical lives by choosing to tell the truth in situations where lying is common. He focuses on “white lies,” which many tell to keep others comfortable or happy. Harris argues that eliminating all forms of lying can lead to a more honest and morally better life.

His 2014 book, “Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality without Religion”, explores the scientific possibilities of achieving spiritual experience without relying on religious teachings or practices.

2.5 Criticism of Religion

In “The End of Faith”, Harris notes that his public debates about the dangers of religion began as a direct response to the 9/11 attacks by Muslim terrorists.

Harris argues that all forms of religious belief are irrational, dangerous and ultimately harmful to individuals and societies. He believes that religious faith lacks a real intellectual foundation and should not influence public life. Harris defines faith as belief in historical and metaphysical claims without sufficient evidence. He dismisses sacred texts, spiritual experiences and religious authority as valid reasons to believe in God.¹¹

2.6 Rejection of Religious Belief and Authority

In his view, religious leaders, including the Pope, hold beliefs that cannot be confirmed and depend solely on ancient texts created with unreliable evidence. Harris also insists that essential religious beliefs like divine revelation, miracles and the existence of God, cannot be supported by any empirical evidence. He claims that religious followers hold beliefs that cannot be questioned or disproven by any changes in the world or human experience. Harris argues that religion promotes intellectual inflexibility, hinders rational thinking and has led to violence, oppression and moral decline throughout history.

2.7 Science vs Scriptural Morality

He concludes that scientific reasoning instead of religion should shape moral values. He believes that a non-religious, reason-based spirituality is the only valid option for human progress.¹² Sam Harris raises more objections to religion that reflect his broader criticism of religious moral and intellectual frameworks. He argues that religious moral systems depend on scriptural laws that promote harsh, restrictive and unrealistic ethical standards. He cites examples such as capital punishment for adultery, the condemnation of homosexuality and severe penalties for disobedience to parents. He claims that these teachings create artificial and distorted moralities.¹³

2.8 Societal Impact and Scientific Spirituality

Harris also believes that religion obstructs efforts to address major modern health crises, particularly HIV and AIDS. He notes that it discourages preventive measures like using condoms.¹⁴ Furthermore, he highlights the problem of evil. He questioning how an all-powerful and benevolent God could allow devastating natural disasters, including events like Hurricane Katrina, which he urges undermine traditional religious claims about divine goodness.¹⁵

2.9 Foundation of Rational Ethics

Harris additionally argues that religion does not provide reliable moral guidance or

contribute meaningfully to social order. He insists that science can better determine moral truths and can offer a stronger foundation for ethical decision making in the today's world. He also asserts that genuine spiritual experience is possible without religious belief. He points to psychological and neuroscientific methods like meditation as the basis for a rational, non-religious form of spirituality.¹⁶

In short Sam Harris's criticism of religion is based on scientific materialism, rationalism and a modern understanding of ethics. He sees religious belief as unscientific, lacking evidence and harmful to human well-being. Harris argues that religion does not provide reliable moral guidance and actually gets in the way of social progress and public health. His writings consistently claim that we can have morality, spirituality and human flourishing without religion and that science provides a more reliable foundation for these areas. Ultimately, Harris's work is a key part of this movement, pushing for the replacement of religious beliefs with scientific reasoning as the main basis for modern life.

3. Richard Dawkins (1941)

"Clinton Richard Dawkins" was born on 26 March 1941 during British colonial rule in Nairobi, Kenya. He removed "Clinton" from his name later. He belongs to a landed gentry's family from Oxfordshire. His mother's name is Mary Vyvyan (1916–2019) and father Clinton John Dawkins (1915–2010), was an agricultural civil servant in the British Colonial Service in Nyasaland (Malawi). During the Second World War Clinton John Dawkins served in the "King's African Rifles", then 1949 his family returned to England when he was eight years old. Dawkins spent the rest of his childhood Over Norton Park in Oxfordshire.¹⁷

3.1 Education

After returning to England, Dawkins attended "Chafyn Grove School" in Wiltshire. He studied at "Oundle School in Northamptonshire" from 1954 to 1959. He first read "Bertrand Russell's" book "Why I Am Not a Christian".¹⁸ He later studied zoology at "Balliol College", Oxford and graduated in 1962 under the supervision of Nobel Prize winner "Nikolaas Tinbergen (1907-1988)", earning a second-class degree.

3.2 Doctoral Research and Professional Career

He continued his research as a doctoral student under Tinbergen's supervision and earned his "D.Phil. (Doctor of Philosophy)" degree in 1966.¹⁹

He then worked for another year as Tinbergen's research assistant. His early academic research focused on theoretical models of animal decision making, which reflected Tinbergen's ground breaking work on instinct, learning and behavioural choice.²⁰

Dawkins is faculty member at the University of Oxford and one of the most well-known supporters of "Charles Darwin's" theory of evolution. He is often seen as a key figure in the New Atheism movement and is frequently called its main "prophet." His influence spans the globe, evident in his large readership and broad following. His book, "The God Delusion", became a bestseller in both Europe and the United States. This success further established him as a central voice in modern atheistic thought.

3.3 Scientific Criticism of Religion

Dawkins criticise religion from many angles. He argues that religious belief is not defensible, scientifically wrong and socially damaging. He defines faith as a delusion and claims that the existence of God is just a scientific hypothesis with no real evidence

to support it.²¹ He believes that life's complexity does not need a divine creator. He says Darwinian natural selection offers a much better explanation for biological diversity, human origins and the appearance of design in nature.²² He consistently rejects creationism and intelligent design as pseudoscience²³. He argues these views fall apart when looked at alongside fossil records, embryological development, molecular genetics, geological patterns and evolutionary biology.²⁴

3.4 Moral and Social Criticism

Dawkins also criticises the moral teaching of religion. He believes they promote outdated and harmful ethics. He claims that major historical cruelties from the Crusades to 9/11 stem from religious faith. He thinks exposing children to religion is a form of psychological abuse because it trains them to accept irrational beliefs without evidence.²⁵ He argues that religion hinders scientific progress and that we can better define moral values through scientific inquiry not divine revelation.²⁶

3.5 Rationalism and Reality

In examining religious knowledge, Dawkins uses naturalistic and logical reasoning to challenge traditional arguments for God's existence, showing that they fail when tested scientifically.²⁷ By explaining natural events like the universe's age, geological disasters such as tsunamis, the evolution of plants and animals, and the rise of the first humans using purely scientific methods. He concludes that religion is an unnecessary and incorrect way to explain reality.²⁸

In short Dawkins approaches religion from a scientific and natural perspective. For him, religious belief is not reliable or sustainable. Dawkins argues that Darwinian evolution explains the diversity and complexity of life well enough, making the idea of a divine creator unnecessary. His criticism goes beyond metaphysical issues to moral and social concerns. He believes that religion supports outdated ethics, hinders scientific progress and adds to global conflict. In his writings, Dawkins presents science as the only reliable way to understand reality and shape human morals. His arguments, while often strong and controversial are a key part of the New Atheism movement and have greatly impacted modern discussions on religion, secularism and scientific reasoning.

4. Daniel Dennett (1942-2024)

"Daniel Clement Dennett" was born on March 28, 1942, in Boston, Massachusetts. His early childhood spent in Lebanon. His father "Daniel Clement Dennett Jr. (1910–1947)" has a "PhD in Islamic Studies" from Harvard University. During the Second World War he worked for the Office of "Strategic Services" as a covert counter intelligence agent. He working undercover at the "American Embassy in Beirut" as a "cultural attach". His mother's name is "Ruth Marjorie (1903–1971)".²⁹

4.1 Academic Career and Influences

Dennett graduated in 1959 from "Phillips Exeter Academy" and "attended Wesleyan University" for a short time. Letter he transferred to "Harvard University" where in 1963 he earned his "BA in philosophy". At Harvard, he studied under the well-known philosopher "Willard Van Orman Quine". Quine's book, "From a Logical Point of View", greatly influenced Dennett's decision to study there. Dennett later noted that he transferred to Harvard because he believed Quine had made some mistakes in his work and felt the need, "as only a freshman could," to talk to him about those corrections.³⁰

4.2 Doctoral Research and Cognitive Science

Dennett got his “D.Phil. in philosophy” in 1965 from the “University of Oxford” under the supervision of “Gilbert Ryle” as a member of “Hertford College”.³¹ His doctoral thesis titled “The Mind and the Brain: Introspective Description in the Light of Neurological Findings; Intentionality” showed his early interest in the overlap between philosophy and cognitive science.³² He was died at the age of 82 on April 19, 2024.

4.3 Religion as a Natural Phenomenon

Dennett views religion as a natural phenomenon that should be studied like any other biological or social aspect of human life. He believes that religious beliefs should not be shielded by cultural taboos that stop open, scientific, and critical analysis.³³

According to Dennett, there has been a long standing, unspoken agreement in academic and scientific circles to avoid closely examining religion. This avoidance happens because people often respond emotionally to criticisms of their beliefs. He calls this protective barrier the “spell” that must be broken for us to understand religion objectively.³⁴

4.4 Defining Religion and Rejection of the Supernatural

Dennett defines religion as a social system where participants believe in one or more supernatural agents whose approval is sought. He argues that a religion without a God or gods is like a vertebrate without a backbone. He claims there is no credible scientific evidence for the existence of such supernatural beings. He insists that we should explain religion using natural, psychological and evolutionary mechanisms instead of relying on divine revelation or metaphysical claims.³⁵

4.5 Criticism of Religious Education

Dennett also criticizes religious education, especially systems that discourage questioning and critical thinking among children. He argues that some forms of religious schooling hinder intellectual growth and limit young learners' minds. Instead of forcing these institutions to change, he suggests creating alternative educational environments that encourage open inquiry, offer better academic opportunities and provide real competition for students.³⁶

In short Dennett’s position shows a specific approach in New Atheism that insists on looking at religion only through scientific and natural inquiry. His critical challenges the long-standing protection that religious belief has had against thorough investigation. By questioning both the basis of faith and the systems that support it, Dennett offers a detailed natural account of religion.

5. Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011)

“Christopher Eric Hitchens” was born in Portsmouth, Hampshire, on April 13, 1949. He was the son of “Commander Eric Ernest Hitchens (1909–1987)” and “Yvonne Jean Hitchens (1921–1973)”, who served in the Royal Navy during the Second World War. As he grew older, he learned that his mother was Jewish and he began to identify himself as Jewish. Due to his father’s naval career, the family moved around, living in various British military locations and overseas, including Malta.³⁷

5.1 Education and Intellectual Influences

Hitchens received his early education at “Mount House School” in Devon and later at “The Leys School” in Cambridge. In 1967, he joined “Balliol College”, Oxford. There, he studied philosophy, politics and economics. He graduating in 1970. During his early

years, he was strongly influenced by the works of “Richard Llewellyn (1906-1983)”, “Arthur Koestler (1905-1983)”, “Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821-1881)”, “R. H. Tawney (1880-1962)”, and “George Orwell (1903-1950)”.³⁸

5.2 Career in Journalism and Political Activism

He started his career in political journalism in the late 1960s because he opposed the Vietnam War, nuclear weapons, racism and corporate power.³⁹ His early political involvement included being a member of the Labour Party and later connecting with the International Socialists. This reflected his growing interest in Trotskyist and anti-Stalinist ideas. Inspired by journalist “James Cameron (1911-1985)”, Hitchens pursued a lifelong career in journalism and political commentary.⁴⁰ He was died at the age of 62 on December 15, 2011.

5.3 Criticism of Religion and Metaphysics

Christopher Hitchens offers a clear criticism of the fundamental concepts of religion and its impact on human societies. His main argument is that religion is not based on any divine or universal truth. Instead, it is a human creation shaped by fear, ignorance and the need to maintain power structures. He claims that the metaphysical basis of religion does not hold up to standards of truth and logical inquiry. He points out that there has always been conflict between faith and reason. He also rejects the idea that religion is a trustworthy source of morality, arguing that throughout history, religious teachings have often led to oppression, exploitation and harmful beliefs about human superiority.⁴¹

5.4 Impact on Science, Health and Society

Furthermore, Hitchens emphasizes the negative effects of religion on health and scientific advancement. He explains how religious beliefs have blocked medical research and modern treatments. He believes that the true aim of religion has always been to limit human freedom, hide the truth and slow social progress. Hitchens also argues that the world’s major religions often borrow ideas from each other and that no religion has a unique truth that makes it better than the others. He portrays religion as a system that promotes war, division and exploitation. He argues that a society free from the influence of religion would be more advanced, peaceful and logical.⁴²

5.5 Legacy and the Broader New Atheist Movement

These fours established the intellectual basis for modern scientific atheism. The New Atheists introduced scientific explanations of the universe and promoted a science based moral framework that aimed to remove religion from all areas of human life.

In addition to these key figures, many other writers and activists including Lawrence M. Krauss (1954), Polly Toynbee (1946), Philip Pullman (1946), Martin Amis (1949-2023), Jerry Coyne (1949), P. Z. Myers (1957), Victor J. Stenger (1935-2014), Bill Maher (1956), Robert L. Park (1931-2020), Steven Weinberg (1933-2021), Ian McEwan (1948), Peter Sloterdijk (1947), A. C. Grayling (1949), Michael Schmidt Salomon (1967), Piergiorgio Odifreddi (1950), Michel Onfray (1959) and ex-Muslim atheists such as Salman Rushdie (1947), Ayaan Hirsi Ali (1969) and Ibn Warraq (1947) have also played a role in supporting the New Atheist movement.

6. Conclusion and Analysis

New Atheism emerged in the early twenty first century as a strong intellectual movement that sparked global debate on religion. Its leading figures based their

criticism of religion on science, evolutionary theory and scientific materialism. They portrayed religion, especially Islam, as irrational, unscientific and harmful to society. Though the movement claims to be bold and innovative, John F. Haught and William E. Kaufman argue that its key points are not new. They reflect older atheist arguments that has been repackaged with a sharper and more confrontational tone.

6.1 Rejection of Religious Pluralism and Tolerance

New Atheism rejects not only religious extremism but also moderate beliefs, religious tolerance, sacred texts and theology. It argues that all forms of faith lead to fanaticism. Its demand for the complete removal of religion from both public and private life rests on a strong belief in scientific naturalism.

6.2 The Specific Focus on Islam

William W. Emilson argues that what's "new" about the New Atheists isn't just their aggression or popularity, nor their scientific approach to religion. Instead, it is their criticism of both militant Islamism and Islam as a whole, framed as a broader criticism of religion. He believes this movement has fuelled hostility toward Islam and increased tensions between Muslims and non-Muslims. He concludes that the New Atheism campaign aims to weaken Islam and incite hatred between Muslims and other communities.⁴³ Two main ideas run through New Atheist writings. First, they argue that belief in God is irrational in a scientific age. Second, they claim that religion is dangerous, harmful and fundamentally evil.⁴⁴

6.3 Criticism the Novelty of New Atheism

John F. Haught writes, under the heading "How New Is the New Atheism"? That the movement called "New Atheism" seems bold and modern but its ideas are not as new as its supporters claim. After 9/11, writers such as Harris, Dawkins, Dennett and Hitchens presented religious faith especially belief in God as the main source of human suffering, violence and global conflict. For them, faith is simply belief without evidence. They argue that this lack of evidence leads to ignorance, intolerance and extremism. Haught explains that these writers reshape the Buddha's Four Noble Truths into their own version, people suffer because faith exists, faith is the cause of suffering, ending suffering requires removing faith and the way to achieve this is through scientific reasoning. New Atheism rejects not only religious extremism but also moderate religion, religious tolerance, sacred texts and theology. It claims that all these open the door to fanaticism. It promotes scientific naturalism as the only valid worldview and insists that progress in human life depends on removing religious belief from both private and public life. However, Haught argues this approach is too simple and shares the same rigid thinking found in religious fundamentalism. He sees New Atheism depends on scientism, which he considers a form of unrecognized faith. In the end, he concludes that despite its strong language and confidence, there is little that is genuinely new in New Atheism.⁴⁵

6.4 Intensity over Originality

William E. Kaufman argues that the main aspect of New Atheism is not the originality of its arguments but the intensity and confrontational tone with which those arguments are presented. He notes that Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens express their atheism with an uncommon level of force. This is evident in the challenging questions they raise about God, religion and the reasoning abilities of believers. Kaufman claims

that these thinkers all agree that belief in God is a delusion, that religion is inherently harmful, corrupts, poisons human life and that religious believers are less intelligent than non-believers. He also states that the New Atheists strengthen their criticism by linking religion to terrorism and arguing that religious beliefs promote primitive and superstitious thinking. For Kaufman, this aggressive approach, rather than the content of their arguments, defines the true novelty of New Atheism and has significantly intensified the current global discussion about God.⁴⁶

In short when looking at the ideology of New Atheism, the thoughts of Harris, Dennett and Christopher Hitchens are key arguments. The New Atheists rely on scientific, historical, moral and philosophical reasoning to argue against the existence of God and to challenge the credibility of religions, especially Islam. They argue that religions do not offer sufficient guidance for moral values or for creating a fair society. From their perspective, science is the only reliable alternative to religion. It provides a clearer understanding of morality and helps free societies from superstition, extremism and terrorism.

Overall, the analysis suggests that the real change in New Atheism lies in its aggressive style and intensity rather than in the originality of its arguments. While it has succeeded in bringing the questions of God and religion back into global discussion with new energy, its intellectual claims remain neither new nor particularly strong.

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