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# **The Politics of NEW ATHEISM**

**An examination of the aims, impact and validity  
of the movement within a British Context**

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# Introduction

## Why New Atheism? Why Now?

### Why New Atheism?

As Daniel Dennett wrote in his work *'Breaking the Spell'* when talking about religion, somehow the stakes always seem to be higher. Perhaps this is why debates surrounding religion, especially when they enter the public arena, have a tendency to become polemical. One of the unfortunate traits of polemics is that they often succeed in generating more heat than light. Since the emergence of New Atheism there has been very little academic analysis of the movement, certainly there is very little in the form of engagement from either a political or cultural standpoint. And if one takes the view that New Atheism is inherently political (and that's what makes it new) then this becomes a very obvious gap to fill. Hence I chose to undertake this research project under the auspices of a political studies department instead of the perhaps more obvious home of a religious studies department.

In the 6 years since I began this research project, New Atheism has come and gone from the bestsellers lists in WH Smiths and Waterstones, making this the ideal time to make a full analysis of the movement and its impact. New Atheism has taken a subject previously believed to be the province of the 'academic' section in bookshops and placed it into the bestseller lists. Hitherto rather dry, dusty looking academic eccentrics like Dennett and Richard Dawkins have become television and internet celebrities. New Atheism is political in its aims and has had a very visible cultural impact; this is why a political and cultural studies thesis should examine it. Although on the surface there would seem little need to add another book-length project to the bulging book shelves on the resurgence of the 'God debate', when one reads most of them, there is very little impartiality. Contributors such as Alister McGrath and John Lennox do not stand outside New Atheism, they 'engage' with New Atheism on a very combative level, making them part of the movement. This then is the very essence of the 'more heat than light' approach. Theologians have engaged with and indeed criticised the atheism in New Atheism. However this is tantamount to reviewing a book when you've only read the prologue (a phrase I shall come back to later). It is for political scientists and cultural historians to engage and analyse the impact of this movement, for it seeks to politicise and influence our minds and our culture; and there has been very little such engagement, certainly on this scale so far, and particularly in relation to Britain.

And this brings me onto the second aim of this research project. I did not simply want to look at New Atheism in and of itself; to do so would make this thesis little more than an elaborate literature review. There is urgency in New Atheism, an insistence that there are problems at the heart of our society, problems which if not dealt with promptly will have negative impacts for all of us. I wanted to find out if those claims were true in Britain. New Atheism is not a British movement. It's most famous exponent is from Britain but there is very little in New Atheism which claims to be exclusive to any geographical region. New Atheism is rarely specific in geography when highlighting the problems of religion, Britain seldom features centre stage. Is this because the problems are simply not relevant here, or is it that Britain isn't quite as 'obvious' a target as the Bible Belt of America or

the Middle East? Is it true, as some critics of the movement affirm, that New Atheism only picks easy targets like Osama Bin Laden and George W. Bush and uses them to stereotype the rest?

This project therefore seeks to answer three questions:

1: *What is New Atheism and precisely what impact has it had in Britain?*

2: *To what extent do its claims about the pernicious influence of religion in public life, reflect religion in Britain?*

## How?

The opening chapter of this thesis will undertake an extensive critical review of the main texts, on both sides of the debate. One of the issues when dealing with such polemics is that the people and texts in question often become the victims of journalistic selective quotation. Many commentators think they know what is in *'The God Delusion'*, think they know what New Atheism stands for, remember *something* of what Christopher Hitchens has said, but often there are blatant errors, misquotations, omissions, and very selective arguments. Sometimes these are quite accidental, an understandable and unavoidable reality of a debate which is played out in a mass media dominated world which thrives on cheap, easily digestible sound-bites. Sometimes, those mistakes are deliberate; a cynical reality in a debate where impartiality is rare and everyone seemingly has an opinion or axe to grind; even more reason for a detached, scholarly analysis of the movement. We will look at the political nature of New Atheism and see how it compares to those already writing in the field; is it saying different things, or is it saying the same thing; if it isn't saying anything new why is it so visible? We will look at the relationship between the exact nature, aims and strategies of New Atheism, and existing political philosophers such as John Rawls.

Chapters two and three will tackle specific claims made by New Atheism (namely that religion is privileged, religion is militant, and claims surrounding multiculturalism) and examine the reality or validity of those claims within a purely British context. This research will be historical as well as contemporary, the reasons for which are that we are looking to see if any precedents are being set, any patterns which can be drawn, any conclusions we can read; let us not forget that this debate is not a new one. We can only examine the impact New Atheism may or may not be having on religion in Britain if we have a full understanding of, at the very least, *recent* history.

Chapter Two will essentially be looking at the establishment (the established Church and government). Contemporary analysis of the Coalition's attempts to 'do God' will be compared to previous governments and in particular, previous Prime Ministers. The role of religion in political discourse is crucial as one of the most revealing things one has to bear in mind when looking at politics and politicians is the disparity between what is said and what is actually done. Is the Coalition really 'doing God' in a way hitherto unseen? Such statements are precisely what tends to attract the criticism of New Atheism. My research methodology here involved reading many interviews, profiles, biographies and autobiographies of many high-ranking individuals (Thatcher and Blair for example) and then investigating to what extent their words translated into governmental policies. As an exercise in historical research into politics and religion, this alone proved worthwhile and interesting as major figures such as Churchill, Attlee and others appeared to be no more

religious than those politicians of the 21<sup>th</sup> century in their *actions* if not their actual words. All of this is compared with an examination of the extent of political militancy present in the established church. The mere fact that Britain has an established Church, let alone allows Bishops to sit and vote in the House of Lords is enough to offend secularists, and New Atheists in particular. Again, a look at recent History, combined with case studies with which the Church of England has involved itself was my approach here. The purpose of this chapter, related back to the New Atheist claim that religion is privileged is not to dispute such claims (the existence of an established Church and the existence of Bishops in the House of Lords is indisputable evidence of privilege), but to see if such privilege actually *matters* in terms of the extent to which it actually affects public policy.

Chapter Three will look at the fringe; pressure groups, examining what they are, who they are, what they want and how successful their methods have been. We will also look at blasphemy cases in this chapter and their relation to pressure groups. The purpose here is to see how far the fringes of religion can be separated from the establishment. How far apart are they in terms of their absolutism and political activism? What kind of debates and discussions do they get involved in? How effective are these pressure groups?

One final note regarding the meaning of the word 'religion' used in this thesis. When we use the word religion, we are meaning the use of organised religion. An original outline of the thesis included a considerable discussion on Islam within a modern British context and indeed, many of the claims made in this thesis (such as the essentialist notions of faiths used by various pressure groups) are equally applicable to both Christian and non-Christian groups. However, for the most part, this thesis will be looking exclusively at the application of 'Christianity' in modern British life and politics.

The purpose of the above is to draw together the claims made by New Atheism and reach a conclusion as to whether they are valid within Britain or not. This will be the purpose of our conclusion. We will hopefully be able to assert what New Atheism is actually about and assess what impact (if any) it has actually had; both in British politics and in British culture generally.

# Chapter One

## Political Atheism

New Atheism is *not principally about atheism*. To interpret this movement simply as a reaction against religious belief is to take far too literal an approach. This is the mistake many critics of the movement have made. And this is why perceived engagement with it has been largely ineffectual. Of course the main players in the New Atheist debate have to shoulder some of the blame for this misconception. Richard Dawkins clearly stated at the opening of *'The God Delusion'* that he wanted theists who read it to be atheists when they put it down. (1) And all four 'horsemen of the apocalypse' as they've been called (Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett) have readily allowed themselves to be drawn into debates, lectures and panel sessions where the main topic of conversation has centred purely on questions of God's existence. But whilst atheism undeniably forms the philosophical starting point from which all four of these writers began, disbelief in and of itself has not been the driving force. New Atheism is principally about religion and its impact on *politics*.

Its trigger was the rise of Islamic terrorism in the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, spearheaded by 9/11. Following similar attacks in Spain and Britain and shortly after Oxford Theologian Alister McGrath published his optimistically titled *'The Twilight of Atheism'* Richard Dawkins published *'The God Delusion'* and suddenly atheism became bestseller material. It has largely been a reactive movement; a well-articulated reflection of the concerns with the apparent growth in religious influence, both as a crucial element in fermenting terrorism and in the influence, via the Christian Right, within American politics. The war on terror which dominated the decade had leaders on both sides that were open about their religious affiliations. George W. Bush's Christianity and Osama Bin Laden's Islam became important elements in the propaganda war in a way hitherto unseen. And the inclusion within this mix, of the most overtly pious British Prime Minister for decades did little to soothe concerns. This is the important point. Though a rejection of the God hypothesis is undoubtedly the world view of New Atheists, such truth claims are *not* the prime motivator behind this new movement. This movement juxtaposes the God hypothesis with the real world of the public and political arena, it condemns the way theists use millennia-old doctrine to influence the policy of now, it highlights how people with enormous power and influence talk about divine entities, they look at how people are still willing to kill and are being killed on unprecedented scales because of their beliefs : they look at all of this and conclude *isn't it about time we had a frank, honest and open debate about this?*

It is an undeniable fact that the historical institutionalization of religious belief has left it with peculiar, abstract and obscurely random privileges within society. New Atheism has succeeded due to the fact that it articulates existing concerns. Though it would be wrong to suggest that everyone who buys a copy of *'The God Delusion'* is an atheist convert, the movement cannot and must not be ignored in any credible analysis of the conflict between religion and politics. The fact that the movement has not only prompted a debate, but also, as evidenced above seen the admittance of atheism into aspects of public discourse by important politicians and scientists, and also into popular



culture is unquestionably proof of its success in successfully transmitting its concerns. In a 2007 article published in the Guardian A.C Grayling said 'I think 9/11 has changed the nature of the debate tremendously. A decade ago people wouldn't say I'm a Christian at a dinner party, you would no more speak about your religious belief than your sex life...but after 9/11 we no longer think people should be treated differently or given exemptions from certain laws because they believe something. Secularists are now saying 'Ok, believe in what you like, believe in fairies at the bottom of the garden if you want to but don't force your beliefs on us or our children and don't expect preferential treatment. To allow religious organizations more privileges and influence than a political party or trade union for example is to distort public debate. People are waking up to the fact it is anomalous.' (2)

It is not disbelief but the advancement of creationism into the science classroom that has prompted Dawkins to write *'The God Delusion'*. It is the perceived influence of Islam behind 9/11 that has prompted the likes of Christopher Hitchens and Sam Harris to write their works. Of course, such concerns are not exclusive to atheists. Indeed one of the common criticisms of New Atheism is that it fails to distinguish between the so called 'moderate' and 'fundamentalist' branches of religion. In a 2007 lecture at Swansea University entitled *'How Dawkins Gets it Wrong'*, Rowan Williams concluded that 'you don't deal with bad religion by getting rid of religion. You deal with bad religion by replacing it with good religion.' (3) The claim that New Atheism simply wants to 'get rid of religion' is one that should not go unchallenged however.

We will start by examining the main authors and their specific political concerns in some detail.

## Richard Dawkins

*'It is said that Alfred Hitchcock, the great cinematic specialist in the art of frightening people was once driving through Switzerland when he suddenly pointed out of the car window and said that is the most frightening sight I have ever seen. It was a priest in conversation with a little boy, his hand on the boy's shoulder. Hitchcock leaned out of the car window and shouted run little boy, run for your life.'*(4)

*'As long as we accept the principle that religious faith must be respected simply because it is religious faith, it's hard to withhold respect from the faith of Osama Bin Laden and the suicide bombers.'*(5)

*'Absolutism is far from dead. Indeed it rules the minds of a great number of people in the world today, most dangerously so in the Muslim world and in the incipient American theocracy. Such absolutism nearly always results from very strong religious faith and it constitutes a major reason for suggesting that religion can be a force for evil in the world.'*(6)

In *'The God Delusion'* Dawkins highlights two particular concerns regarding the influence of religion in public life; absolutism and misinformation. It was absolutism, in the form of 9/11 which was the trigger for *'The God Delusion'* as Dawkins outlined in a later interview 'my last vestige of 'hands off religion' respect disappeared in the smoke and choking dust of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, followed by the National Day of Prayer when prelates and pastors did their tremulous Martin Luther King impersonations and urged people of mutually incompatible faiths to hold hands, united in their

homage to the very force that caused the problem in the first place.’ (7) He quoted a Glasgow Herald Journalist Muriel Gray who, in the aftermath of 7/7 wrote ‘everyone is being blamed from the obvious villainous duo of George W. Bush and Tony Blair to the inaction of the Muslim communities. But it has never been clearer that there is only one place to lay the blame and it has ever been thus. The cause of all this misery, mayhem and violence and terror and ignorance is of course religion itself and if it seems ludicrous to have to state such an obvious reality, the fact is that the government and the media are doing a pretty good job of pretending that it isn’t so.’ (8)

Dawkins also highlights the issues surrounding absolutist versions of morality. Dawkins disputes this, claiming that human beings do not need religion for morality. Dawkins wittily offers the example that theists who claim that their religion prevents them from stealing, raping, murdering are immediately declaring themselves to be morally inferior to atheists (who do not on the whole, rape, steal or murder any more than theists) because atheists are able to adhere to the same moral code without doing it out of fear of retribution in the afterlife. Dawkins talks of a ‘moral zeitgeist’; which is constantly changing and made up of cultural, political and social developments within a given culture, rather than a fixed set of codes, (something John Stuart Mill referred to as ‘dead dogma’)(9) some of which (like rape and murder) will remain constant, whilst others will not. The development of the British state’s attitude towards Capital Punishment is an example of the existence of this ‘changing zeitgeist’. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century it was possible to be executed for such crimes as pick-pocketing, however in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was decided that minor crimes did not merit such punishment and the death penalty would be reserved for only the most serious offences. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century it was decided to commute Capital Punishment altogether and no crime, irrespective of its severity, deserved state-execution in Britain.

But the most potent victims of absolutist claims have traditionally been homosexuals. New Atheism disputes such absolutism on the grounds that such religious groups are merely picking and choosing depending on their own personal point of view, for example it is the passages in Leviticus which are often used to condemn homosexuality whilst passages within the same chapter demanding the death penalty for adultery tend to be ignored.

However, the pre-eminent concern for Richard Dawkins is that of misinformation, particularly that which affects the education of children on a subject which is indelibly linked both to his profession (a biologist) and his main interest (evolution). Dawkins spends much of *‘The God Delusion’* talking about the unfortunate impact of religion on children, highlighting statistics which show the vast majority of believers simply grow up believing the religion of their parents thereby leading to the perpetuation of religion as a ‘meme’. He also strongly objects to the labelling of children as ‘Catholic Child’ or ‘Muslim Child’ when he claims it should be a ‘child of Catholic parents’ etc. He feels that the inculcation into children of such theories like original sin is tantamount to child abuse. But it is in the area of education where Dawkins’ concerns really lie, and in particular in the area of evolutionary biology to which he himself, has dedicated his career. His first major work published in the 1970’s dealt, as with all of his subsequent works with the subject of evolution as first hypothesized by Charles Darwin. An ardent follower of Darwin, Dawkins set out his theory of natural selection in *‘The Selfish Gene’*. This was a seminal work within the field, a continuation and in many ways a completion of Darwin’s theory, for only with the then current knowledge of genetics could Dawkins convincingly set out the theory of ‘natural selection’. He quotes figures which show that in Britain only 48% of people believe God had no part in evolution whilst in America the figure is

14%. (10) To Dawkins, this is all part of a wider issue where established scientific theories are bracketed alongside (or even dismissed by comparison) with nonsense theories like astrology as he outlined in his 2007 documentary *'The Enemies of Reason'*. There are numerous examples of this kind of thing in America (from where theories like Intelligent Design originate and indeed proliferate) but he also cites the British example of Emmanuel College, Gateshead, one of Tony Blair's new academies where, sponsored by the Christian fundamentalist Sir Peter Vardy, creationism is encroaching into the science classroom. (11)

Both of Dawkins' subsequent books have been on this subject. His 2008 work *'The Greatest Show on Earth'* sets out the evidence for evolution as opposed to (as he himself admitted) simply assuming that it was true when writing his previous works. And then in 2011 Dawkins bought out his long-promised children's book entitled *'The Magic of Reality'*. This work sets out to explore, in more accessible language a way of looking at the world that questions received wisdom and urges the need to demand evidence in support of any answers. He writes 'miracles, magic and myths-they can be fun and everybody likes a good story and I hope you enjoyed the myths which I began most of my chapters. But even more I hope that in every chapter you enjoyed the science that came after the myths'. He elaborates 'we should always be open minded but the only good reason to believe that something exists as if there is real evidence that it does.' (12) Dawkins uses the logic of a scientist to make relevant points 'there are things that not even the best scientists of today can explain but that doesn't mean we should block off all investigating by resorting to phoney explanations invoking magic or the supernatural which don't actually explain at all. Just imagine how a medieval man would have reacted if he had seen a jet plane, a laptop computer, a mobile telephone or a satnav device.' (13)

## Christopher Hitchens

*'Religion forces nice people to do unkind things and also makes intelligent people say stupid things.'* (14)

*'Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, religion no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a worldview to prevent the emergence of rivals it can now only impede and retard or try to turn back the measurable advances we have made'* (15)

*'There still remain 4 irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression and that it is ultimately grounded in wishful thinking'* (16)

In his 2011 autobiography Christopher Hitchens, a personal friend of Salman Rushdie described the moment he heard of the Fatwa. 'When the Washington Post telephoned me at home on Valentine's Day 1989 to ask my opinion about the Ayahtollah Khomeini's fatwa, I felt at once that here was something that completely committed me. It was, if I can phrase it like this a matter of everything I hated versus everything I loved. In the hate column, dictatorship, religion, stupidity, demagoguery, censorship, bullying and intimidation. In the love column, literature, irony, humanity, the individual and the defence of free expression.' (17) Hitchens, an English journalist who gained American

Citizenship, had a colourful history as a political activist and social commentator. In his university years, Hitchens was a Communist but later abandoned such sympathies. Hitchens' opinion of religion (and indeed his motivation for writing his major anti-religious work) was summed up in the subtitle to his work 'God is Not Great' which was 'How Religion Poisons Everything'. As a journalist, Hitchens reached his conclusion after having spent a life-long career visiting and reporting on some of the world's most troubled conflicts. Far more than any other of the New Atheist authors, Hitchens is explicitly concerned with the perceived pernicious influence of religion into public life. It's interesting to contrast 'The God Delusion' with 'God is Not Great' in this respect. Dawkins starts off discussing why, as a scientist he believes the God Hypothesis to be untrue and then develops the argument to discuss how, not only is it untrue but it has harmful impacts on public life. Hitchens does the opposite and only reaches his atheistic arguments towards the latter end of the book.

He begins with this opening gambit 'a week before the events of September 11<sup>th</sup> 2001, I was on a panel with Dennis Prager...he challenged me in public to answer what he called a straight yes or no question and I happily agreed. Very well he said I was to imagine myself in a strange city as the evening was coming on. Toward me I was to imagine that I saw a large group of men approaching. Now-would I feel safer or less safe if I was to learn that they were just coming from a prayer meeting? As the reader will see, this is not a question to which a yes/no answer can be given. But I was able to answer it as if it were not hypothetical. Just to stay within the letter B, I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case I can say absolutely and can give my reasons why I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dusk were coming from religious observance.' (18) And he does-in minute and sometimes excruciating detail. Far more than any other of the New Atheist authors, Hitchens approaches this question from a *political* perspective; describing how religion has complicated and influenced in a negative way many and most major conflicts. It was Christopher Hitchens who in 2010 debated with Tony Blair on the question 'Is Religion a force for good in the world?' A vote was taken before and after the debate.

**Before**

For: 25%

Against: 55%

Undecided: 20%

**After**

For: 32%

Against: 68%(18)

Hitchens convinced twice as many of the undecided to side with him than as did Tony Blair.

Hitchens also makes the case of how dangerous religious sexual repression can be (due to an absolutist approach to morality) and in the case of children, often amounts to child abuse. Dawkins considers the mere labelling of children as a 'catholic child,' 'a Muslim child' and so on, to be tantamount to child abuse. However Hitchens thinks 'sexual innocence, which can be charming in the young if it is not needlessly protracted, is positively corrosive and repulsive in the mature adult. Again, how shall we reckon the harm done by dirty old men and hysterical spinsters, appointed as clerical guardians to supervise the innocent in orphanages and schools.' (19) As well as literal child

abuse, Hitchens qualifies the point by describing the purely religious requirement for circumcision (both male and female) to be an unnecessary mutilation of an innocent 'it is hard to imagine anything more grotesque than the mutilation of infant genitalia...it is permitted in New York in 2006! If religion and its arrogance were not involved, no healthy society would permit this primitive amputation, or allow any surgery to be practiced on the genitalia without the full and informed consent of the person concerned'.(20) Hitchens' point of sexual repression can of course easily be extended to the taboos related to homosexuality within many religious societies.

He describes religion as 'combining the maximum servility with the maximum solipsism'(20) a description which leads into the inevitable argument often used by religious apologists, which is that despite atheist examples of the Crusades and the Inquisition to demonstrate the negative impact of religion in politics, is it not the case that the 20<sup>th</sup> century showed that the worst form of crimes are committed under secular totalitarianism? This is what we will simply refer to as the 'Hitler and Stalin' argument'. Dawkins flippantly dismisses this ('you may as well say that (*Hitler and Stalin*) did it because they both had moustaches') (22)

As an ex-communist himself, Hitchens deals with it in a somewhat more detail. Hitchens has actually described himself not as an atheist but as an *anti-theist*. This is because he not only disputes the idea of God, but actually *dislikes* it. He claims that the mere concept of a celestial dictator is, in essence, a totalitarian one. Those who bring up the 'Hitler and Stalin' argument choose to ignore the similarities between the objectification of a God and the objectification of a man, something demonstrated under both the Nazi and Stalinist regimes. The worst excesses committed by both of these regimes, the expulsion or execution of those who did not conform, the enforced removal of individuality in accordance with 'approved behaviour' and the objectification of a leader whom everyone and everything sought to please, were all iconographical modes of behaviour borrowed not from atheism but from religious fundamentalism. Hitchens quotes George Orwell who said 'a totalitarian state is in effect a theocracy and its ruling cast, in order to keep its position has to be seen as infallible'. (23)

Although Lenin and Trotsky were atheists, by the time the worst excesses of the Communist regime were being exacted, both of them, together with (arguably) most Communist ideology had died with them. Stalin was more than ready to side with the Russian Orthodox Church when required, notably during the Second World War. And although a renewed attack on religion was instigated under Khrushchev, such campaigns were not sustained. Hitchens also points to many other 'inconvenient' historical details which proponents of 'the Hitler and Stalin argument' choose to ignore, that of Catholic (and papal) support of fascism in its early stages, particularly with Mussolini, and that 25% of the SS were openly practicing Catholics. In conclusion we can actually see what Dawkins meant by his remark regarding moustaches. Atheism was largely irrelevant to the rise of fascism and Stalinism.

# Sam Harris

*'Belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life.'*(24)

*'Religion, by lending meaning to human life, permits communities to cohere. Historically this is true and on this score, Religion is to be credited. But its effect on the modern world—a world already united, at least potentially by economic, environmental, political and epidemiological necessity—religious ideology is dangerously retrograde.'*(25)

*'The only reason anyone is moderate in matters of faith these days is that he has assimilated some of the fruits of the last two thousand years of human thought (democratic politics, scientific advancements, concern for human rights etc. ). The doors leading out of scriptural literalism do not open from the inside.'*(26)

A philosophy graduate from Stanford University, Sam Harris's *'The End of Faith'* was in fact the first of the new-atheist works to emerge. Published in 2004, a mere 3 years after 9/11 Harris concentrates mainly (though not exclusively) on Islam. Although Dawkins' makes it clear that when referring to 'God' he is referring to 'anything and everything supernatural',<sup>(27)</sup> he adds a disclaimer to say that unless otherwise stated he will be referencing the Christian God since that is the one with which he is most familiar. It is to Sam Harris therefore, that we must turn to look in detail at how Islam has been perceived by New Atheism.

The facts behind 9/11 and 7/7 have already discounted the oft-quoted accusation that such fundamentalists are seeking revenge for personal deprivation, since many of the 9/11 hijackers were highly educated, and the 7/7 bombers were all of British-born background with, in one case at least, a responsible teaching post. Harris points out such arguments emerge from religious moderates as much as they do fundamentalists, and claims that religious moderation is in itself a problem. Where else does fundamentalism begin but with failed moderation? He claims that arguments from religious moderates tend (either consciously or unconsciously) merely to deflect the attention from the real problem, which is the ideas behind religion itself. Harris' thesis highlights and seeks to discredit three main reasons often used by moderates to defend Islam. \*

*1, Islam has been at the centre of many success stories in terms of human development.*

Harris concedes the truth of this noting 'Islam has had its moments, Muslim scholars invented algebra, translated the writings of Plato and Aristotle, and made important contributions to a variety of nascent sciences at a time when European Christians were luxuriating in the most abysmal ignorance.'<sup>(28)</sup> However Harris ventures that this argument would however, only hold if one takes the questionable stance that the 'positives' in religion excuse the 'negatives'.

*2, Issues relating to Political Islam do not necessarily stem from Islamic theology.*

Harris quotes Kenneth Pollack's review of a similar book to his own in terms of its criticism of Islamic theology '(the author) has still not grappled with the deeper questions for his readers. He has still not offered his explanation for why the Islamic middle East stagnated, why it's efforts at reform failed, why it is notably failing to become integrated into the global economy in a meaningful way and why these failures have produced not a renewed determination to succeed but an anger and frustration with the West so pervasive and vitriolic that it has bred murderous, suicidal terrorism.'<sup>(29)</sup>

Harris maintains that such comments are missing the point and the so-called 'deeper questions' are in fact those of theology and religious faith and indoctrination, the result of which are have led to many of the already identified political issues with Islamic states.

*3, Religious fundamentalists are only a minority and do not speak for Islam.*

Harris quotes Muslim scholar Fared Zachariah 'the truth is that little is to be gained by searching the Quran for clues to Islam's true nature...the trouble with thundering declarations about Islam's nature is that Islam, like any religion is not what books make it but what people make it. Forget the rantings of fundamentalists who are a minority'.<sup>(30)</sup> Harris points out that this is an argument often advanced by Islamic moderates, however unlike many other religions Islam is unique in the sense that it exists without a central authoritative figure (a Pope for example) who can give an official/authorised interpretation of texts. Secondly, it is difficult to simply 'forget' fundamentalists when the real threat of Islamic terrorism exists within our daily lives. Harris' insists that the only way to combat such terrorism is to tackle it at its root, the texts themselves, something which each of the oft-quoted three arguments above, often prevent us from so doing. To prove his point, Harris identifies no less than 60 verses within the Koran which seek to specifically incite or glorify violence, indicating in his mind quite conclusively that as far as Islam is concerned, it is not a question of a 'misinterpretation' over a line or two. <sup>(31)</sup>

## Daniel Dennett

*'It is high time that we subjected religion as a global phenomenon to the most intense, multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. It affects not just our social, political and economic conflicts but the very meanings we find in our lives. For many people, probably a majority of the people on earth. It is imperative that we learn as much as we can about it'*<sup>(32)</sup>

*'The problem is that there are good spells and then there are bad spells'*<sup>(33)</sup>

*'Allegiance to the principles of a free and democratic society only so long as they support the interests of your religion is a start but we can ask for more.'*<sup>(34)</sup>

In terms of tone Daniel Dennett appears to be the more moderate of the four atheist authors. Although the implications behind Dennett's work (and some of his conclusions) echo those of his fellows listed above, it's his attempt to broaden the debate by examining *the debate itself* which really sets Dennett apart. Dennett clarifies his position as 'I am not suggesting that science should try to do what religion does but it should study, scientifically, what religion does'. <sup>(35)</sup> He suggests that religion, like any other phenomenon should be placed on the examination table, pointing out that religious apologists should, if what they say is true, have nothing to worry about. However, if there are problems, surely it would be better to identify them sooner rather than later. Dawkins et al are happy to complete that examination for us before they even open their first chapter, Dennett has a more subtle approach. For example, in attempting to demonstrate the level of sensitivity the impact of atheist propositions may have upon religious feelings, he uses music as a metaphor. 'Might music be bad for you? It is not that I don't sympathise with the distaste of those who resist my proposal...imagine how you would feel if you were to read in the science section of the New York

Times that new research conducted at Cambridge University showed that music, long viewed as one of the unalloyed treasures of human culture, is actually bad for your health, a major risk factor for Alzheimer's and heart disease, a mood distorter that impairs judgement in subtle but clearly deleterious ways, a significant contributor to aggressive tendencies, xenophobia and weakness of will.' (36) Dennett develops the comparison in terms of the response 'aside from the utter disbelief with which I would greet a report of such findings, I can detect in my imagined reactions a visceral defensive surge, along the lines of "so much for Cambridge what do they know about Music" and "I don't care if it is true, anybody who tries to take away my music had better be prepared for a fight because a life without music isn't worth living"' . (37)

Dennett's imagined anticipated response mirrors of course, the predicted response to '*Breaking the Spell*'. I mentioned above that as well as contributing to the debate, Dennett examines and criticises the nature of the debate itself. Whilst he admits that the nature of religion tends to lead to bias on both sides ('there has often been an unfortunate pattern in the work that has been done, people who want to study religion usually have an axe to grind, they either want to defend their favourite religion from critics or want to demonstrate the irrationality...of religion...in the study of religion, the stakes have often been seen to be higher')(38)he claims that the influence of postmodernism can sometimes prevent the debate from even taking place 'one of the few serious differences between the natural sciences and the humanities is that within the humanities all too many thinkers have decided that the postmodernists are right; it's all just stories and all truth is relative.' (39) Dennett goes on to illustrate that this stubborn insistence that there is 'no truth' has so frustrated thinkers that strident, ridicule ridden polemics are sometimes the only way to proceed. Instead of fighting their way through arguing over the nature of the argument, people will just poke fun at their target.

Although these four authors have been the most high-profile of the New Atheists (to the extent that collectively they have been referred to as the 'four horsemen of the apocalypse') the movement is certainly not confined to them. Other authors have contributed and collectively, they have continued to highlight and emphasise the inherent politicisation of the movement. We shall look at a further four such players here. Two of them are, like Dawkins, scientists whose main contribution to the debate has been to defend the perceived encroachment of religious ideas into science, notably involving the theory of evolution.

The first of these is PZ Myers who, like Dawkins is a Biologist. In 2013 Myers published a book entitled '*The Happy Atheist*' in which he collected together many of his essays written for his blog over the preceding years. Dawkins makes reference to Myers' Pharyngula Blog, in '*The God Delusion*'. Although the detail of Myers writings, like Dawkins are essentially about defending the scientific method against perceived metaphysics, (again) like Dawkins, Myers couches his concerns in a more politically broader context. The introduction to his book reads '(Myers) also highlights how the persistence of Stone Age superstitions can have dark consequences, interfering with our politics, slowing our scientific progress and limiting freedom in our culture.' And later, in an admittedly tongue in cheek way Myers uses humour to highlight the potential problems. 'Imagine you are a foot soldier in a paramilitary group whose purpose is to remake the America as a Christian Theocracy and establish a worldly vision of the dominance of Christ over all aspects of life...you are on a mission both a religious mission and a military mission to convert or kill Catholics, Jews, Muslims, Buddhists, gays and anyone who advocates the separation of Church and state.' (40)



Myers is American and is clearly writing from the perspective of someone living under the 'tyranny' of the Bush years, similar to American Physicist Victor Stenger. The emphasis on the criticism of religious encroachment into the *scientific* sphere instead of the broader *political* sphere is clear in the title of Stenger's three books published during the high point of the New Atheist movement. In 2008 he published '*God: The Failed Hypothesis, How Science shows that God Does Not Exist*'. In 2010 he published '*The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*', and finally in 2012 he bought out '*God: The Folly of Faith, the incompatibility of Science and Reason*'.

Taken together, Myers and Stenger are clearly in tandem with Dawkins in the sense that they have been prompted to enter the debate due to the perceived 'threat' against their disciplines of Physics and Biology by religion. Again however, like Myers and Dawkins, Stenger sees this as part of a much broader battle within the public and political sphere. In a 2012 article written for Philosophy Now, Stenger outlined what he deemed as 'New' in the New Atheism. He stated that the message of New Atheism was to take a far less accommodating attitude towards religion including moderate religion. Stenger wrote that if religion was able to restrict its activities to the home, church, synagogue or Mosque then atheists would have no reason to complain. And in a clear statement of political concern, Stenger concluded 'the position of the New Atheists is that faith is the force behind both the malevolent deeds of extremist religious groups and the irrational acts of many political leaders. To act on the basis of faith can often be to act in conflict with reason. We New Atheists claim that to do so is dangerous to society.' (41) The use of the collective 'we' in Stenger's last sentence and indeed his appropriation of the collective term of New Atheists confirms that such authors are aware that they are not working alone, they are working, separately, but at the same time collectively as a movement with many similar concerns. Dawkins, Stenger and Myers are the scientific triumvirate, spearheading the campaign (as they would see it) against the encroachment of religion into science, but all three place their concerns within a much broader political context. Religion has is always interpreted as being in opposition with science, but such negative implications are simply indicative of a much wider negative impact within society as a whole.

If Dawkins, Stenger and Myers make up the scientific triumvirate of New Atheism, the philosophical equivalent is completed (together with Dennet and Harris) by AC Grayling, the only other English 'New Atheist' alongside Dawkins. In his 2009 book '*To Set Prometheus Free*' Grayling wrote that 'the success of Richard Dawkins' '*The God Delusion*' has raised the stakes between those who think religion is an important part of life, and those who see it as a hindrance to progress and truth'. (42) Grayling's distinction between 'truth' and 'progress' is telling, in political terms. It could be argued that much of the debate surrounding New Atheism has been centred around 'truth' claims, in terms of its science and metaphysics. It might also be argued (and indeed has been by the movement's critics) that the political concerns of New Atheism are either simply a smoke-screen for concerns surrounding truth claims encroaching into the science classroom, or just a step too far in terms of credible arguments. However, Grayling indicates 'progress' as an issue and his use of the word can only really be interpreted in political and/or social terms. He made his point more explicitly political in his 2013 work '*The God Argument*'. Grayling wrote 'Humanists would of course acknowledge that there can be moral concerns about adultery, drugs, tax dodging and teenage crime, the topics that seem to take up most of the oxygen of moral debate. But they are going to insist that there are even more serious moral problems in our world, and they include violations of human rights, war and civil war, genocide, the arms trade, poverty...these problems involve horrors and sufferings that no human beings should experience...set against these problems, the parochial

and reactionary concerns over sex and drugs, hostility to gays, misguided campaigns about the teaching of biological evolution in schools and other matters can appear trivial'. (43) Grayling is certainly not the only New Atheist to make the claim that religious interference into the public sphere tends to highlight comparatively unimportant campaigns, Hitchens does the same, however Grayling makes the point more obvious. Although he does not make the specific claim about Politics, Politics is undoubtedly what Grayling is referring to. If one takes the view that Politics is there to resolve issues then his claim is that religion effectively corrupts or even hijacks debates within the public realm, distracting attention away from the 'real' problems in the world. Put another way, why spend so much time talking about gay marriage when there are wars happening? Does it really matter that much? Clearly to those parties concerned, the answer would be yes, however this claim again emphasises the inherent interest of this movement in politics and the impact religion has upon it.

Finally we turn to another American, a prominent Atheist speaker and blogger Greta Christina who in 2012 published a book entitled '*Why are you Atheists so Angry: 99 things which piss off the Godless*'. Her work, accompanied by a lecture tour engaged with the accusation that many have levelled at the New Atheist movement, that it is principally an 'angry' movement, the criticism being that such an 'emotional' impetus will produce negative and an ill thought-through approach. This claim was made to Dawkins by his most prolific critic Alister McGrath. In a 2006 conversation between Dawkins and McGrath published in 'The God Delusion, the Uncut Interviews', McGrath asked:

*McGrath: one of the things I've noticed is that in your writings we have what we might call a double critique of religion, the sort of intellectual critique in your view that religions do not have adequate evidential foundations but alongside that I occasionally detect flashes of anger, that this is something that is bad, that is evil, the world would be a better place if things were to change and so I suppose my question really is this, why the anger, what is it that really makes you cross about the way religious people think and behave?*

*Dawkins: I think two possible answers to that, one would be the relating to the evidential point first...the second, we've touched upon, I think that faith, unsupported by evidence is a lethal weapon, it doesn't have to be of course but it can be, it's a weapon because possibly unscrupulous people can get hold of young men and use them as weapons, human bombs and the only reason that they can be deployed as human bombs is that they have been bought up from childhood upwards to believe implicitly without question to believe whatever the religion is, the particular details don't matter, the point is that they do believe that it is the will of God that they should detonate themselves and blow up a bus load of people,. Or a skyscraper in New York. I don't think that any kind of reasoned argument would do that to people and so I believe that religion and religious faith is an enormously powerful psychological weapon, it isn't always used for the bad of course but the fact that it can be used for the bad leads me to want to cut it off at the roots and at the very least stop the inculcation into children the idea that there is something virtuous in faith...*

Christina makes similar claims in her works and talks, about the many 'reasons' to be angry with religion, and indeed many of the reasons are political. As an American she offers examples such as the fact that it was not until 1961 that atheists were allowed to serve as jurors, that judges are still today denying child custody to atheists and that school boards are having to spend time fighting lengthy and costly creationists/intelligent design battles in order to be able to teach evolution in

their schools. However, the most revealing part of Christina's work is the comparison between the New Atheism and other movements for 'social change'.

To Christina, the New Atheist movement is indeed an advocate for social change and thus describes a process that can only happen politically. In relation to her discussion on the 'anger' of New Atheists, she claims that similar movements such as the Civil Rights movement, the feminist movement, gay rights movements, labour movements etc, none of which would have been able to happen without the 'anger' against perceived injustices, the need to rights wrongs and the urgent requirement to change something within the status quo. Such parallels are certainly comparable to Dawkins' use of the phrase 'consciousness raising' in relation to the labelling of children (he too indicates his use of consciousness raising be seen in comparison to feminist and gay rights movements). Dawkins also refers to 'raising consciousness', in terms of empowering people to enable them to accept that being an atheist is a realistic and acceptable alternative to 'the norm'. 'I suspect, well I am sure that there are lots of people out there who have been bought up in some religion or other, are unhappy in it, don't believe it or are worried about the evils done in its name, people who feel vague yearnings to leave their parents religion and wish they could but just don't realize that leaving is an option. If you are one of them, this book is for you. It is intended to raise consciousness-raise consciousness that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration.'<sup>(44)</sup>

Dennet hopes such consciousness raising will be aided and abetted by the new media. 'We have mastered the technology for creating doubt in the mass media (are you sure your breath is sweet?, are you getting enough iron?, what has your insurance company done for you lately?) and now we can think about applying it gently but firmly to topics that have heretofore been off limits, let the honest religions thrive because their members are getting what they want as informed choosers.' Harris backs this up, concluding 'my goal in writing this book has been to close the door to a certain style of irrationality...books that embrace the narrowest spectrum of political, moral, scientific and spiritual understanding...are still dogmatically thrust upon us as the final word on matters of the greatest significance.'

And all of these aspirations can be drawn together in Hitchens' conclusion to '*God is not Great*' which calls for a 'renewed Enlightenment'. Hitchens states 'this Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors on the heroic breakthrough of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person...the pursuit of unfettered scientific enquiry and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means will revolutionise our concepts of research and development...all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.'

To return to Greta Christina for the last word on this, she states that those critics of the movement who take issue with the 'anger' in the movement and indeed would take a 'less heat more light' approach would only 'dis-empower' the New Atheists. She closed one of her lectures with the following two quotations.

'The Supreme task is to unite people so that their anger becomes a transforming force'  
Martin Luther King Jnr

'Our anger controlled can be channelled to change the world'  
Mahatma Ghandi.

## The Aims & Impact of New Atheism

Before we try and ascertain the impact of New Atheism, it is necessary to define what the New Atheists mean by 'religion'. The critical targets of New Atheism are the three great Monotheisms; Christianity, Judaism and Islam. To understand New Atheism there is a distinction to be made between the terms 'religion' and 'spiritualism'.

In 2004, just prior to the emergence of the movement, Oxford Theologian Alister McGrath published his book *'The Twilight of Atheism.'* This was obviously somewhat ironic given that the publication preceded, by little more than a year the emergence of atheism as best seller material. In a subsequent interview, McGrath claimed that the book wasn't necessarily meant to indicate that atheism was being superseded by a resurgence in belief in conventional religion such as the three monotheisms listed above, but was instead meant to indicate an increase in 'spiritualism', particularly amongst younger people, the demographic traditionally moving away from 'religion'. McGrath has continued to press this point in his ripostes to Dawkins. In his book *'Why Religion Won't Go Away'*, McGrath contends that religion is often used as a loose term to describe the kind of Abrahamic religions described above, and offers the example that when in seminars he would ask what one thing religions need to exist, the 'inevitable' answer of 'a God' was the first definition he would dismiss. This is in direct contrast to New Atheism.

Dennett describes a religion without a God as an invertebrate without a backbone. Dawkins specifically states in the opening of 'The God Delusion' that he is attacking 'all Gods, and everything supernatural'. In talking about so-called 'Einsteinian religion Dawkins concludes that 'the metaphorical or pantheistic God of the physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle wreaking, thought reading, sin punishing, prayer answering God of the Bible, of Priests, mullahs and rabbis and of ordinary language.' This puts one in mind of Stephen Hawking's final line in *'A Brief History of Time'*, 'for only then will we know the mind of God'. This metaphorical and indeed spiritual approach to 'something beyond' the realm of current understanding and knowing has nothing to do with the kind of religion which is attacked by New Atheism. Philosophical questions and musings about 'is this is all there is' and 'there must be something else' has no province within the pages of New Atheism. Philosopher Charles Taylor recently published *'A Secular Age'* in which he took issue with the assumption that the world was becoming 'more secular' and that secularism was some kind of natural outcome and progression of modernity. However, the opinions and evidence offered, like McGrath seem to be 'spiritual'. He states 'Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief...The secular age is schizophrenic, or better, deeply cross-pressured...The disciplined, disengaged secular world is challenged by a return to the body in Pentecostalism. There is a "profound interpenetration of eros and the spiritual life...in our religious lives we are responding to a transcendent reality...Our seeking for "fullness" is our response to it...But in the secular "waste land"... young people will begin again to explore beyond the boundaries. (45)

This kind of thinking is irrelevant to the concerns of New Atheism which is only concerned with 'religion' which is 'specific'. It is primarily concerned with belief systems which follow rules, rules which are laid down in ancient texts, passed down through generations and which are detailed and specific in terms of their origins and aims. The only reason that the three monotheisms are mentioned more than the likes of Hinduism and Buddhism is that collectively they make up the majority of the worlds' populations and for the most part are the religions which, according to the New Atheists are the most problematically high profile in terms of being politically active.

Having now established what New Atheism means by religion, let us turn to the question of what specifically New Atheism would like to do with it. We can only assess its impact if we have good idea of its actual aims. I have already outlined New Atheism as a 'political movement' and we have talked of 'raising consciousness', but what is the ultimate aspiration of this movement? It would be fair to say that New Atheism is more successful at highlighting what it perceives to be the problem more than it is at suggesting possible solutions? The obvious question to ask is, does New Atheism wish to destroy religion? Does it want it gone tomorrow? To a certain extent this conclusion could be argued and that has led some to refer to the movement as atheist fundamentalism. Dawkins clearly states at the outset of the God Delusion that he wants theists who read it to be atheists when they put it down. AC Grayling published his own 'Secular Bible' and Sam Harris called his book 'The End of Faith'. However, Dawkins quickly admitted that his stated aim above was unrealistic. Religion is here to stay. Christianity, Islam and Judaism are not going anywhere soon. And so to help us decide what 'solutions' are best advocated by New Atheism it is best to look at the 'problems' that they highlight.

#### Problem Number One

*Religion makes truth claims which lack empirical, testable, evidential foundations. But remembering that New Atheism is 'political' this problem is illustrated and repeatedly highlighted through the encroachment of such ideas into education and public consciousness, notably of course Evolution. Predictably this is the main issue of the three NA scientists, Dawkins, Myers and Stenger. As such the expectation of religion and religious arguments into public and in particular political discourse is, according to NA politically risible.*

#### Problem Number Two

*Religion is essentially monolithic and inhibits progression, encouraging its adherents not only to believe in untruths (related to problem one) but also to act, according to those beliefs in overtly conservative, and in some cases dangerous, ways. Such examples range from attitudes to women or homosexuals, and terrorism.*

New Atheism has principally concerned itself with arguing the above with the ultimate aim (often unstated, as I said above New Atheism's solutions are sometimes less obvious than its problems) of reducing to the absolute minimum the involvement of religion into public and political life. Dawkins et al would undoubtedly seek to 'privatise' religion to the point where it is kept out of the public and political sphere.

It's necessary here to digress and see if any parallels can be drawn between these aims and existing debates by political philosophers active within the field. The approach of political philosopher John Rawls was somewhat in sympathy. Rawls was a Harvard professor of philosophy

and produced several important works within the field. In 1971 he published '*A Theory of Justice*' and then in 1993 '*Political Liberalism*'. The development between these two works is described thus '(A Theory of Justice) argued that a well ordered society is possible, one that is stable and relatively homogenous in its basic moral beliefs, yet in a modern democratic society, a multitude of incompatible and irreconcilable doctrines-religious, philosophical, and moral-coexist within the framework of democratic institutions. Recognising this as a permanent condition of democracy Rawls asks how a stable and just society of free and equal citizens can live in concord when divided by reasonable but incompatible doctrines. His answer is based on a re-conception of a well ordered society. It is no longer regarded as a society united in its basic moral beliefs but instead in its political conception of justice. Justice as fairness is now presented as an example of such a political conception.' (46)

The development in Rawls' thinking was probably inspired by the emergence in the intervening decades of the rise of identity politics. The growth of immigration and subsequent increase in multicultural voices spearheaded by intellectual movements such as post colonialism, feminism, gay rights and so on, which inevitably produced societies that seemed distinctly less homogenous in 1993 than they had been in 1971. In an attempt to create an overall framework which could encapsulate all such differing world views Rawls developed the idea of Public Reason and within it, he isolated religions as Comprehensive Doctrines. Rawls's definition and subsequent separation of Comprehensive Doctrines from politics plays against a popular perception of the role of politics within society as a whole. Because of the role politics plays in debating and deciding changes to legislation, it is often inferred that politics must also be concerned with reflecting and influencing questions of morality. Rawls actually proposes a much narrower view of the political system. He describes the roles of his political conception as applying only to the very 'basic structure of a society, its institutions, constitutional essentials, matters of basic justice and property and so on. It covers the rights to vote, the political virtues and the good of public life, but it doesn't intend to cover anything else. I try to show how a political conception can be seen as self-standing, as being able to fit, as a part, into many different comprehensive doctrines.' (47)

To Rawls religions are *Comprehensive Doctrines* specifying that 'reasonable people' will affirm 'reasonable doctrines'. As such a concept is entirely in keeping with the NA problem two against the essentially monolithic nature of religion. Rawls points out that the existence and toleration of such comprehensive doctrines within a given political constitution does not equate to a constitutional acceptance of or agreement with such doctrines, it is merely the basis of Public Reason that reasonable people who assume reasonable doctrines will be allowed to exist within a framework of 'justice as fairness'; otherwise we would have a political system that is exclusive, arbitrary and majoritarian. It would be 'unreasonable' to use political power to repress comprehensive doctrines that are reasonable. He defines such doctrines as having three main characteristics:

*1, they are an exercise in theoretical reason which seek to cover everything, the morality of life, the meaning of life and the purpose behind everything its adherents do and think.*

*2, they seek to fuse the theoretical with the practical, reason is a basis for action*

*3, although not necessarily monolithic, they can and have been slow to change and may resist any attempted adaption (48)*

Rawls states that in order for the idea of Public Reason to be maintained, adherents of comprehensive doctrines must ensure that they are able to give *public* reasons for their requests or protests, 'any comprehensive doctrine can be introduced into any political argument at any time but I argue that people who do this should also present what they believe are public reasons for their argument so their opinion is no longer just that of one particular group but an opinion that all members of a society might reasonably agree to...what's important is that people give the kinds of reasons that can be understood and appraised from their comprehensive doctrines...people can make arguments from the Bible if they want to but I want them to see that they should give arguments that all reasonable citizens might agree to.' (49) Rawls's statements here are a rejection of absolutism. For example, it would be insufficient for a Christian pressure group to condemn any suggested increase for Gay Rights (civil partnerships for example) on the basis that their particular comprehensive doctrine specifies this, they must also give public reasons for their protests, anything else would go against the principles of Justice as Fairness and Public Reason; to acquiesce to such demands would make the political infrastructure unstable by favouring one particular doctrine.

In a 1998 interview Rawls was accused of making a 'veiled argument for secularism', something he denied and it's easy to see why. (50) Secularism or perhaps more specifically, atheism, could also be described as a comprehensive doctrine (like Marxism). Does this mean that the Rawlsian idea of public reason essentially 'privatizes' religion? In his work *'Culture & Equality'* Brian Barry highlights the fact that Rawlsian theory's confinement of religion via its definition of comprehensive doctrines is not an aspiration for secularism, but neutrality. He states 'there must be some other sense in which liberals claim that they can offer a neutral ground on which people of all cultures can meet and coexist. The answer is that the way in which liberalism is neutral is that it is fair.' (51) Barry admits that the obvious objection to this is that there will be some doctrines that assign their adherents far more prominent roles than that which can merely be observed 'in private' but to this end, he points out that the proposed concept can actually amount to pluralisation as much as privatization. He states 'neutrality is then a coherent notion that defines the terms of equal treatment for different religions. It is compatible with neutrality, however, that religions should be publicly recognized; the only constraint is, again, that they should be treated equally.' (52) The parallels between Rawls and New Atheism are quite clear. To Rawls, religious reasons used within the public sphere must be supported by other reasons, which is entirely in keeping with New Atheist claims that religion is essentially trying to encroach and proliferate its own ideas and doctrines through politics whenever it can. Hitchens states that he would be happy to leave religion alone if it was capable of leaving him alone, however he claims 'this, religion is ultimately incapable of doing'.

Objections to the Rawlsian thesis were articulated by German sociologist and philosopher Jurgen Habermas in his 2011 work *'The Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy'*. Habermas claims that the Rawlsian approach of insisting on public reasoning is concerned with 'neutrality of aim rather than neutrality of effort'. This is the view put forward by academics Tariq Modood and Bhiku Parekh, two prominent British commentators on multicultural politics, claiming that religions form such an important part of the lives of many of its adherents, so therefore to expect them to think beyond and outside of it every-time they want to make a political enquiry or demand is unrealistic and repressive. Rawls denied that he was making a 'veiled argument for secularism' claiming that secularism or in particular atheism could in and of itself be seen as just as much a 'comprehensive doctrine' as any religion. Although this is true, it is easy to see that if the debate taking place within the public sphere is itself about religion, then the lack of religious reasons is undoubtedly going to be

easier for the secularists-or atheists. Habermas further distances himself from the New Atheist stance by stating that when arguing within the public sphere secularists must not,

- 1, take the view that religious views are irrational or untrue
- 2, Must factor in that religion is always going to be a constant factor in political life
- 3, Must not question the rights of believers to couch their demands within religious language.

The first point is particularly interesting as it could potentially explain where NA has gone wrong in many of the public debates in which it has become involved. The reason I say 'gone wrong' is because (as we shall discover later in this chapter) so much of the debates caused by the arrival of New Atheism have drifted off the political intentions motivating it and often find themselves simply talking about truth claims. This is the prime mistake that much of the perceived engagement with New Atheism has made, by the likes of McGrath and Lennox. They have completely misunderstood the political intentions behind New Atheism and have simply engaged with the movement on the basis of its atheism, which is tantamount, as stated earlier, to writing a book review when you've only read the prologue.

Points two and three are incompatible with New Atheism as they are largely what the movement is protesting against. Habermas elaborates his position as 'an agnostic but non-reductionist form of post-metaphysical thinking. It refrains on the one hand from passing judgement on religious truth while insisting (in a non-polemical fashion) on making a strict demarcation between faith and knowledge. On the other hand it rejects a scientistically truncated conception of reason and the exclusion of religious doctrines from the genealogy of reason.' Habermas description of a 'scientistically truncated conception of reason' places him in direct opposition to the New Atheist scientists. For the likes of Stenger and Dawkins, the lack of a scientific approach to reason and by extension to politics is precisely the kind of thing they are protesting against. According to Habermas, to dismiss religious ideas from the debate on the basis that they are not based on scientific, testable, empirical foundations is questionable.

And so although the suggestion that Dawkins et al could potentially be arguing a Rawlsian stance, may seem initially odd, it is workable. If one takes the view that New Atheism wishes to simply destroy religion then they are incompatible. However if we take the view that the aim of New Atheism is to reduce to an absolute minimum religious involvement within the public and political sphere then a compatibility with the Rawlsian theory of 'public reason' is feasible. The comparison between New Atheist descriptions of monolithic monotheisms and Rawlsian Comprehensive Doctrines are very similar, and it is the insistence that religious groups think beyond their doctrines to what will benefit or affect the wider public, when arguing for something, which is precisely what much of New Atheism is protesting against.

## **Fighting for Secularism?**

To better understand the political nature of New Atheism, it is worth comparing its political aspirations with those of the existing politically motivated causes within Britain, namely the National



Secular Society and the British Humanist Association. The two British New Atheists, Richard Dawkins and AC Grayling are honorary members of both associations and both of them have been involved in providing speeches and articles, indicating that they are active supporters.

The National Secular society has the slogan 'challenging religious privilege' and states that in its eyes, secularism has two fundamental principles.

- 1: Strict separation of the state from religious institutions
- 2: People of different religions and beliefs are equal before the law. (53)

Its current secretary (as of 2013) is also quoted on the main website as saying 'modern society requires and deserves a truly secular state by which I do not mean state atheism but state neutrality in all matters pertaining to religion, the recognition that faith is personal and no business of the state.'

The word privilege is best examined with the examples given by the NSS as subjects they wish to tackle

- 1: Special tax exemptions
- 2: Preaching religion in state schools
- 3: Inserting religious values in common law
- 4: Allowing unelected religious leaders as legislators.

The site also quotes Barack Obama as saying 'democracy demands that the religiously motivated must translate their concerns into universal rather than religious-specific values. Their proposals must be subject to argument and reason and should not be accorded any undue automatic respect.'

The Obama quote encapsulates the Rawlsian view that religious people should put forward public reasons for their requirements, particularly within the political arena. Overall, the approach of the NSS is one of recommending the effective privatisation of religion. It refuses to recognise religious arguments and actively condemns them, and with the inclusion of the Obama quote ensures that their approach to secularism is a Rawlsian one instead of either Taylor or Habermas. We can illustrate this further by looking at the campaigns in which they involve themselves, but firstly, let us compare the above to the other like-minded British institution, the British Humanist Association.

The BHA states their aim to be 'we work on behalf of non-religious people who seek to live ethical lives on the basis of reason and humanity. We promote Humanism, a secular state, and equal treatment of everyone regardless of religion or belief.' It would be a fair conclusion to draw that the BHA have rather wider aims than the NSS or at least encapsulate their political ends in a more broader framework. 'Secular' is their approach to religion and politics. It also clearly states that it is non-religious. (54)

To bring us back to Haberman's point, that the Rawlsian approach would require more from the theists than the atheists, it is difficult to see how a 'moderate' theist, potentially concerned about the influence of their (or other) religion into public and political life could or would gravitate towards either the NSS or the BHA. This is also a common factor with New Atheism. Although some of the New Atheists, notably Dawkins and Harris make specific charges against moderate theism,

(that it is a breeding ground for fundamentalism or that it does too little to speak out against such fundamentalist elements) it is not, in theory necessary to be an atheist to support the political aims of New Atheism. Many Christians, Muslims and other religions are just as concerned about fundamental and absolutist elements who happen to share the same Holy Book but they would hardly gravitate towards the NSS, BHA or New Atheism when it is quite unequivocal (even if somewhat unaware) that the message they provide is that only Humanists/atheists are in some ways best placed to do it. The implicit message given is that Humanism is simply an atheist's approach to life, and secularism is an atheists approach to politics.

The aims and indeed the success of New Atheism can be illuminated by examining the campaigns with which both secular societies have become involved. Campaigns which the BHA have been involved include 'Equality and Human Rights', 'Equal Marriage', 'Animal Welfare' and 'Assisted Dying'. In terms of tackling privilege they also list the Bishops in the House of Lords, Faith Schools and Pseudoscience as topics against which they campaign. Virtually all of these campaigns are supported by the National Secular Society too, their top two aims are 'Religion and Schools' and 'Equality and Human Rights'. These two demonstrate a commonality of aim, commonality of approach and reasons for the appeal of New Atheism.

To varying degrees, despite openly advocating a rigorous scientific approach, New Atheism has taken the 'emotional' approach. It has done this in two ways, by using 'Children' and the word 'Equality'. Whether one is a cynic or not, the use of children in appeals can usually bring attention and sympathy even if not success. One has only to look at how distressed children are often used in various hard-hitting ways in NSPCC advertisements, also the way charities like Comic Relief use images of children to provoke sympathy and hopefully, donation-giving. Richard Dawkins has been at the forefront of this campaign when in the God Delusion, he specifically referred to the indoctrination of children by religious belief as 'child abuse'. Naturally this has flowed over into his campaign with regards the teaching of scientific theories in the classrooms; although creationism and ID may (at least in America) still be rife in the lecture hall, his attention on 'schools' has drawn particular attention (some critical, some sympathetic).

The approach is similar in the way the word 'equality' is used. The broadly libertarian attitudes developed in the west in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century have generally been the foundation for consensus politics which has predominated for the most part in Britain and Western European in particular. There are more liberal attitudes towards women, other races and gays. And most of these achievements have come about as a result of campaigns which have been fought under the banner of the word 'equality'. To a large section of the population, the word 'equality' appeals, makes sense and is an honourable cause to fight for. It's good to speak out against inequality, a mode of thought particularly appealing to young people, who often use such campaigns as a way of rebelling against older, more establishment outlooks. This is not to imply any pseudo psychology or indeed to doubt the motives of such people, but leading campaigns against sexist, racist, homophobic orthodoxies have been fundamental in the development of so-called 'Western', 'permissive' values.

New Atheists have claimed that religion is one of the last bastions where 'inequality' has been allowed to remain, to take a homophobic or sexist stance on the basis that religion has hitherto been the one exception, the one place campaigns for equality flounder by simply steering clear of. However, once overcoming two significant factors (that of being religion into the conversation in the

first place, and secondly by making the conversation accessible-more for which later) then the debate can freely use words like 'equality' as a banner under which to fight. By fusing the fight against religion with the fight for 'equality' and the fight for 'children' New Atheism, as demonstrated by the approach of the existing secular institutions have found a way to attract attention and appeal to a very broad fan base.

This has been used as a stick with which to attack secularism. The current founding member of the NSS Terry Sanderson is homosexual, and his partner John Porteous-Wood was behind a recent court case regarding the privilege of religious institutions not to charge those using a car-park whilst attending church. Greta Christina is a lesbian also. None of this is to belittle or to question their motives (although critics of New Atheism have certainly used such examples to show how New Atheism either misrepresents religion or at least concentrates on the negative aspects), however it does illustrate the way New Atheists and their supporters such as the NSS and the BHA view religion and in particular religion and politics. They see it as a regressive force, as potentially enforcing regressive policies on others unless their privileges are revoked and curbed accordingly. They look at the many and numerous examples of homophobia and sexism within theological theory and practice, and are either unable or unwilling to look beyond it, and even those that do, conclude that any positives within religion do not justify the negatives.

## **Strategy One:** **Bringing Religion into the Conversation**

The pioneering step beyond which New Atheists have gone (and hence enabling the movement to acquire the word 'New') is one of criticism and also, as shall later see, the tone of such criticism. New Atheism does not simply deny the existence of God, it actively promotes a world view that belief in such an entity is regressive; regressive for the person and regressive for wider society. For its aim to succeed (that of reducing to the absolute minimum, the influence of monolithic comprehensive doctrines in public and political life) this is the point which it must communicate. This is why to a certain extent, the movement has not necessarily helped itself helpful by allowing much of the public discourse to be sidetracked into debates surrounding God's existence. To a certain extent, such debates *may* help the cause in the sense that persuasion of God's non-existence could help sway doubters onto the side of the atheists, however this is still arguably a moot point since one doesn't have to take an atheist stance to be concerned with the influence of certain kinds of religion.

Dawkins outlines the issue at the outset of the God Delusion. He quotes a Cambridge lecture given by Douglas Adams, 'religion...has certain ideas at the heart if it which we call sacred or holy or whatever. What it means is 'here is an idea or a notion that you're not allowed to say anything bad about; you're just not. Why not?- because you're not! If somebody votes for a party that you don't agree with, you're free to argue about it as much as you like, everybody will have an argument but nobody feels aggrieved by it. If somebody thinks taxes should go up or down you are free to have an argument about it. But on the other hand if somebody says "I mustn't move a light switch on a Saturday" you say "I respect that." Why should it be that's perfectly legitimate to support the Labour party or the Conservative party...this model of economic verses that, Macintosh instead of Windows-but to have an opinion about how the universe began, about who created the Universe...no that's

Holy...we are used to not challenging religious ideas...everybody gets absolutely frantic about it because you're not allowed to say these things. Yet when you look at it rationally there is no reason why those ideas shouldn't be as open to debate as any other, except that we have agreed somehow between us that they shouldn't be.' (58)

Further evidence that New Atheism sees itself as a political movement is illustrated by when Dawkins urges people to regard talking about religion and the religious in the same way as we regard talking about politics and the politicians, he sees no difference between the sincerely held beliefs of Socialists (or Marxists) and the sincerely held beliefs of Christians. (60) Amnon Reichmann in his essay '*Criminalising religiously offensive satire, free speech and Human Rights*' writes 'it is far from clear that religion should indeed receive special treatment. Beliefs as strongly held as religion-such as ideological commitments-may also class.' (61) To this extent the burden would be placed on the religious adherents demanding respect as to why their belief system should warrant more respect than a Conservative Peer of 30 years standing who is lampooned in today's edition of 'Private Eye'.

One of the fundamental claims of New Atheism is that religion has hitherto possessed a kind of 'forcefield' of protection around itself, enabling it to be vulnerable to attack; it is impossible to criticise something that cannot be talked about. To treat and debate religion as though it were a 'political' concept should not necessarily be a problem. In a chapter entitled 'Undeserved Respect' Dawkins writes 'I am not in favour of offending or hurting anyone just for the sake of it. But I am intrigued and mystified by the disproportionate privileging of religion in our otherwise secular societies. All politicians must get used to disrespectful cartoons of their faces and nobody riots in their defence. What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect?' It is after all, the politicisation of religious belief which is the main target of New Atheism. However the fact that New Atheism criticises and indeed *satirises* religion in essentially and comparatively robust *political* terms (as opposed to the niceties of theology and philosophy) has provoked much critical reaction; mostly from religious apologists but also some fellow atheists. This is a fundamental misunderstanding of the movement. The question to be asked of such critics is; are criticisms of tone provoked by the specifics of what is said by New Atheism, or is it the fact that the subject is being criticised at all? If the answer is the latter, then the accusation is meaningless as such an approach misses the point of why New Atheism exists. If it is the former, then indeed an examination of 'tone' in New Atheism is required.

To take the latter option first, it is not true (certainly in a British sense, and here we must begin to make distinctions between Britain and other parts of the worlds, as this thesis is ultimately an examination of the movement within a British context) to say that criticism of religion was not present in the public arena prior to New Atheism. Bertrand Russell's 1957 polemic '*Why I am not a Christian*' clearly stated at the outset 'The question of the truth of religion is one thing, but the question of its usefulness is another. I am as firmly convinced that religions do harm as I am that they are untrue'. And in 1974, American Author George H Smith published '*Atheism: The Case Against God*' in which he stated at the outset 'It is not my purpose to convert people to atheism... (but to) demonstrate that the belief in God is irrational to the point of absurdity. If a person wishes to continue believing in a god, that is his prerogative, but he can no longer excuse his belief in the name of reason and moral necessity.' There is an interesting contrast between Smith's statement about not wishing to 'convert' people and Dawkins's opening that he wanted theists who read it to be atheists when they put it down. Both books are essentially making the same argument, however

one has a real, unequivocal intention to spread and convert in a way that Smith's doesn't. In a way Smith's point of view is representative of the de-facto atheist position prior to New Atheism which was essentially a gentlemanly agreement to disagree-agreeably. This of course is what New Atheism does not do, cannot do if it is to succeed in its intention of politicizing religion and religious arguments. In doing so, tone, if not language has sometimes appeared intemperate and this has led to accusations that New Atheism is 'rude'.

There is very little in the original publications of New Atheism that could be described as rude or bad language. Virtually all of the authors (notably Dawkins, Grayling and Dennett) include disclaimers regarding their desire to avoid 'deliberately' offending readers. Daniel Dennett admitted in interviews that the 'hurt feelings card' is a criticism that dogs his work, irrespective of any disclaimer about not wishing to deliberately offend anyone. (56 )It is the mere fact that the subject is being handled at all, irrespective of how it is handled, which is ultimately the problem. Dawkins makes a similar disclaimer at the outset of *'The God Delusion'*. (57)

Subsequent public discussions and debates are a different matter and typical examples of rudeness (which is a very subjective word) could possibly include the following:

Harris: Jesus was just a Hippie who got crucified

Dawkins: Well I read the book of Mormon recently and what struck me was that it is such an obvious fake, it's a nineteenth century book written in 16<sup>th</sup> century English...it's not beautiful, it's a work charlantanry.

Brandon Flowers: To call this man a charlatan, I take offence to it

Dawkins: He was a convicted con-man

Hitchens: Religion forces nice people to do unkind things and also makes intelligent people say stupid things. Handed a small baby for the first time is it your first reaction to think-beautiful, almost perfect. Now please hand me the sharp stone for its genitalia that I may do the work of the Lord.

All of the above examples use the tactic of exposing and interpreting hitherto respectable beliefs through the combative, gladiatorial, somewhat condescending language of everyday debate and discussion, typical within the political sphere. Harris' description of Jesus as a 'hippie' makes some people gasp with outrage because we are not used to Christ being described in this way. And although the word 'hippie' is obviously being employed here in a pejorative sense, there is nothing essentially unusual about the description of an eccentric, somewhat bohemian, personage who campaigns against 'the establishment' being described in this way. With the religious respectability stripped away and analysed in robust, realistic terms, the use of the word hippie is easily understandable from an atheist perspective. Similar to Dawkins who confronted pop singer Brandon Flowers on his mormonism whilst appearing together within him on a talk show. There were gasps from the audience when Dawkins accused John Smith of being a charlatan, but again, he provides evidence and facts for his opinion, evidence that the book is written in faux-olde English and that the writer had a track record of being a charlatan. Brandon Flowers' immediate reaction to this was to state that he'd taken offence and the audience seemed to agree with him. Again, both were rather emotive reactions to a subject being treated in a way they were simply not used to. However, the view Dawkins would no doubt take would be that if they were talking about anything else within the

public sphere, then commentators, columnists, and public intellectuals would all be saying the same thing and such comments would pass without gasps of horror and remarks about 'offence'.

Hitchens uses the tactic that much of New Atheism does which is to juxtapose the reality of religious acts with the comparative bizarreness of such actions outside the religious sphere. Remove the automatic wall of respect and one is left with a (to some) refreshing or (to others) offensive comment. Virtually all of the perceived 'rudeness' of New Atheism falls into the above category and can only be deemed 'rude' if one believes that such topics should be treated with reverence. New Atheism cannot and would not exist if concurred. Therefore to criticise it on that basis is futile. That is not to say that New Atheism musn't perhaps take a certain amount of blame for the way its supporters have interpreted its writings. This is particularly evident in the new media, which although it has been very useful to New Atheism in disseminating its ideas, has also to shoulder some of the blame for the perceived rudeness. Phrases such as 'owned', 'bitchslapped' and variations thereof proliferate on descriptions of YouTube videos and internet forums (Richard Dawkins had to close down his discussion forum on the Richard Dawkins Foundation for just such a reason). This is simply testament to the strong feelings provoked by the debate. However, New Atheism at least enables the debate to take place-and more importantly in a way that is accessible, which brings us onto the next point.

## **Strategy Two:** **Making the conversation Accessible**

One of the crucial factors in the proliferation of New Atheism has been its relative accessibility. Though it hasn't necessarily eschewed disciplines like philosophy and theology (the usual areas where questions of religion are tackled) it has refused to be confined to them (again illustrative of the fact that *atheism* is not its prime motivator). Its critics have used this as a stick with which to beat it. However, Christopher Hitchens certainly engages with theology in some detail and Dawkins, in a disclaimer to the paperback edition of *'The God Delusion'* wrote 'unlike Stephen Hawking (who accepted advice that every formula he published would halve his sales), I would happily have foregone bestseldom if there had been the slightest hope of Duns Scotus illuminating my central question of whether God exists. The vast majority of theological writings simply assume that he does, and go on from there. For my purposes, I need consider only those theologians who take seriously the possibility that God does not exist and argue that he does. This I think Chapter 3 achieves.' (55)

Dawkins point has merit. Unlike the majority of academic disciplines, (with the exception of some of the arts) a detailed knowledge of the subject is largely irrelevant and unnecessary to the majority of its practitioners. Does a Christian need to understand academic theology to call themselves a good Christian? Does a Muslim need to be an Islamic Studies student before they can call themselves a good Muslim? It is highly probable that the vast majority of church goers have no idea of, as Dawkins puts it 'the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus' and therefore for theologians to respond to New Atheism by stating that 'if only Dawkins looked at *this* theory or *that* philosopher' is only to serve to pull the debate back into the ivory towers from which, with New

Atheism's help, it has so recently escaped. To such critics, such an approach renders New Atheism academically worthless. Such a response indicates a failure to understand the reason for the movement's success and has ultimately only lead to ineffectual attempts to engage with it.

It is not so much the *dismissal* of Theology which has prompted such outrage but more the *attitude* towards it which Dawkins, in particular espouses. He quotes P Z Myers who wrote

*'I have considered the impudent accusations of Mr Dawkins with exasperation at his lack of serious scholarship. He has apparently not read the detailed discourses of Count Rodrigo of Seville on the exquisite and exotic leathers of the Emperor's boots, nor does he give a moment's consideration to Bellini's masterwork On the Luminescence of the Emperor's Feathered Hat. We have entire schools dedicated to writing learned treatises on the beauty of the Emperor's raiment and every major new paper runs a section dedicated to imperial fashion...Dawkins arrogantly ignores all these deep philosophical ponderings to crudely accuse the Emperor of nudity...until Dawkins has trained in the shops of Paris and Milan, until he has learned to tell the difference between a ruffled flounce and a puffy pantaloon, we should all pretend he has not spoken out against the Emperor's taste. His training in biology may give him the ability to recognize dangling genitalia when he sees it, but has not taught him the proper appreciation of Imaginary Fabrics.'*(56)

Dawkins brings to the debate, the logical approach of a scientist and to a certain extent, the dismissal of theology as an academic discipline is perfectly understandable and harks back to the modernist Logical Positivist movement of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. British Philosopher A. J Ayer became the most prolific proponent of this movement, tackling religion in his 1936 essay 'The Elimination of Metaphysics' published in 'Language, Truth & Logic'. In it he wrote 'for a person x to know a proposition p, it is both necessary and sufficient for p to be true.' Ayer is saying is that it is insufficient for x to simply believe that p is true without use of what he calls sense-data, or in other words that any proclamation must be empirically verified, as it is only by means of sense data that a statement concerning the material universe can be verified.' (57)

However, a common theistic position is that God is not necessarily part of the 'material universe'. Ayer claimed such theistic assertions were philosophically meaningless because 'God must be taken on trust since it cannot be proved, but it may also be an assertion that God is the object of a purely mystical intuition and cannot be defined in terms which are intelligible to the reason...if a mystic admits that the object of vision is something which cannot be described (in other words is outside the material universe) then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it.'(58) Ayer elaborated 'the fact that the mystic cannot reveal what he knows or even himself devise an empirical test to validate his 'knowledge' shows that his state of mystical intuition is not a genuinely cognitive state...he merely gives us indirect information about the condition of his own mind.' (59)And Ayer concluded 'the theist may believe that his experiences are cognitive experiences but, unless he can formulate his 'knowledge' in propositions that are empirically verifiable we may be sure that he is deceiving himself.'(60)And therein lays the origins of '*The God Delusion*'.

By the mid to late 20<sup>th</sup> Century the modernist movement of Logical Positivism had fallen out of favour with the onset of post-modernism and cultural relativism. Dawkins rejects this ('something's either true or it isn't')(61)and, a few years before he produced 'The God Delusion' wrote an essay entitled 'Postmodernism Disrobed' in which he declared 'suppose you are an intellectual impostor with nothing to say but with strong ambitions to succeed in academic life, collect a coterie of reverent disciples and have students around the world anoint your pages with respectful yellow

highlighter. What kind of literary style would you cultivate? Not a lucid one, surely, for clarity would expose your lack of content. The chances are that you would produce something like the following we can clearly see that there is no bi-univocal correspondence between linear signifying links or archi-writing, depending on the author and this multi-referential, multi-dimensional machinic catalysis. The symmetry of scale, the transversality, the pathetic non discursive character of their expansion: all these dimensions remove us from the logic of the excluded middle and reinforce us in our dismissal of the ontological binarism we criticized previously' (62)

Dawkins was quoting Felix Guattari, one of the many fashionable French 'intellectuals' outed by Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont in their book 'Intellectual Impostures' published in 2002. This discussion is not meant to demonstrate that Dawkins is correct; or write off, for the purposes of this thesis, the entire postmodernism movement, but what it does provide is an insight into way New Atheists think and provide some indication as to why the movement has caught on in terms of articulating wider concerns. Dawkins sees such apparent obfuscation as rife within much of Theology. Take, for example, the definition of God. At the outset of 'The God Delusion', Dawkins clearly sets out the concept of God he is attacking, 'this is as good a moment as any to forestall an inevitable retort to the book 'The God that Dawkins doesn't believe in is a God that I don't believe in either. I don't believe in an in the sky with a long white beard'. That old man is an irrelevant distraction and his beard is as tedious as it is long. Indeed the distraction is worse than irrelevant. Its very silliness is calculated to distract attention from the fact that what the speaker really believes is not a whole lot less silly. I know you don't believe in an old bearded man sitting on a cloud...I am not attacking any particular version of God or Gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural.' (63)

In his 2011 response '*Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with the New Atheism*', Alister McGrath wrote 'given the importance of the notion of religion to New Atheist writers it is clearly essential to have a workable definition. If you are going to criticize something you need to be able to say what it is. So what does Daniel Dennett say? He declares 'a religion with no God or God's is like a vertebrate without a back bone. I have to say that if I were leading a high-school discussion about the nature of religion this would certainly be the first definition we'd consider. It would also certainly be the first we'd have to reject.' (64) Now although one could make the case that a 'God' is not essential to a religion, it would be quite ludicrous to suggest that the majority of people who consider themselves religious don't consider there to be a God of some sort at the core of their belief. So whilst McGrath may dismiss this claim, it's relevance to the majority of theist believers is questionable. It should also be noted that McGrath offers no alternative definition of God. Karen Armstrong's 2009 publication 'The Case for God' is another case in point. Armstrong attacks the new atheism on the grounds that, 'like any form of atheism it is parasitically dependant on the form of theism it seeks to eliminate'. (65) Again, like McGrath, although she dismisses Dawkins definition of God, Armstrong cannot suggest an alternative. These examples typify why New Atheism has proved itself far more successful in the proliferation of its ideas than most theological writings on the same subject. Dawkins outlines what he is attacking. But neither Armstrong or McGrath can define what they are defending.

Armstrong states that within religion 'something indefinable happens' (66) and 'this something remains opaque' (67) and 'we can never know the ineffable ousia of God, but can only glimpse its traces of energeia.' (68) To reiterate Ayer's point 'if a mystic admits that the object of vision is



something which cannot be described (in other words is outside the material universe) then he must also admit that he is bound to talk nonsense when he describes it.' Armstrong claims that 'we are talking too much about God these days' (69) but then goes on to lament how so-called fundamentalist atheism is a rejection of 'tolerance' which she claims is a core enlightenment value. But then she goes on to say that 'today, when science itself is becoming less determinate, it is perhaps time to return to a theology that asserts less and is more open to silence and unknowing.' (70) I would suggest that it would be very difficult to find a less 'enlightenment-like' statement as this. Surely it is a core enlightenment value to converse and gather knowledge rather than simply accept 'mysticism' at face value.

And so whilst Dawkins may not necessarily be theologically trained, his background as a scientist does allow him to bring alternative traits to the debate, most notably and effectively, a cold, ruthless, logic.

Before we leave questions of God's existence behind, I'll just give two specific examples. Firstly, in a 2007 lecture at Liberty University, Dawkins was asked by a student the simple question 'what if you're wrong?' His reply, greeted with cheers was as follows:

'Well, what if I'm wrong? Anybody could be wrong, we could all be wrong about the flying spaghetti monster or the pink unicorn or the flying teapot? You happen to have been bought up, I presume in the Christian faith, you know what it's like not to believe in a particular faith because you're not a Muslim, you're not a Hindu? Why aren't you a Hindu? Because you happen to have been bought up in America and not in India. If you'd been bought up in India you'd be a Hindu, if you'd been bought up in Denmark at the time of the Vikings, you'd be believing in Wotan and Thor. If you'd been bought up in classical Greece you'd be believing in Zeus, if you'd been bought up in Central Africa you'd be believing in the great Juju up the mountain. There's no particular reason to pick on the Judeo-Christian God in which by the sheerest accident you happen to have been bought up and ask me the question if I'm wrong. What if you're wrong about the great Juju at the bottom of the sea?' (71)

Secondly, in a theory entitled 'God of the Gaps' Dawkins highlights the absurdity of using God as a default explanation for anything and everything that we can't presently explain.(72) Take the formation of the eye or the creation of the universe for example, typical theist arguments are to demand disbelievers provide them with an explanation, 'if there's no God-how did it happen'? And because no explanation can immediately be proffered (either because the disbeliever is not scientifically trained or because science itself does not at present have an answer) the automatic assumption is that this proves there is a God. To a scientist (and this is the benefit of having a scientist tackling this question) this is like saying that conclusion B must be true because we have disproved conclusion A. But what about conclusion B, we haven't actually provided any proof for conclusion B! This is clear logic. This works. This is accessible. This is the reason Dawkins has caught on. Such theistic arguments may not be being advanced in the lecture theatres and seminar rooms frequented by the likes of Alister McGrath and John Lennox, but to anyone who has faced these objections in conversations, such cold, clear logical replies work and provide eminently effective ammunition.

To the critics of New Atheism, such insubstantial theistic arguments are dismissed as New Atheism's straw man. Most believers don't think like this they claim. But have the likes of Lennox

and McGrath ever actually engaged with anyone on this subject outside of the lecture theatre and the seminar room? The vast majority of these discussions (like the vast majority of believers) do not take place in such situations. They take place in the café, the pub, the office, around the dinner table, on the train journey with colleagues, or perhaps even in church itself. The inability (or refusal?) of New Atheism's critics to recognize this provides a certain vindication of Dawkins's decision to dismiss large sections of their disciplines. It indicates the worst kind of academia, an intellectual snobbery divorced from reality where academics talk only to other academics.

The formal replies to New Atheism also demonstrate a fundamental misunderstanding of the movement's prime motivation, that of the concern with the pernicious influence of religion in public and political life. The most notable respondents have been Oxford Mathematician John Lennox and Oxford Theologian Alister McGrath. Both of them have published works attacking the movement. Both of them have gone on lecture tours (both have visited Swansea University during my time working on this thesis). In his work *'Gunning for God: Why the New Atheists are Missing the Target'* (a somewhat ironic title) Lennox admits that 'most of us have no hesitation in agreeing with the New Atheists that there are problems, major problems with aspects of religion...the New Atheists are quite right in drawing our attention to this kind of thing, especially in societies that are in danger of having public discourse paralysed by political correctness'. (73) Lennox also concedes that 'I am sympathetic to the atheists desire not to have children labelled and to allow them to choose for themselves.' (74) However, Lennox goes on to say 'at the intellectual level, their arguments never were really new...the new thing about them is their tone and their emphasis.' (75) He then goes on to respond to New Atheism with chapters with titles like 'Can we be good without God? Are Miracles Pure Fantasy? and Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?'

McGrath makes the same mistake. Alister McGrath has published three books on Dawkins (*'Dawkins God'*, *'The Dawkins Delusion'* and *'Why God Won't Go Away: Engaging with New Atheism'*) to such an extent that Dawkins has accused him of making his career on attacking one man, an accusation that perhaps has an element of truth in it. In 2004 his work *'The Twilight of Atheism'*, with hindsight a rather ironic title given that it appeared just before atheism became bestseller material. When questioned by Dawkins on what he meant by the 'twilight of atheism' McGrath has subsequently admitted that the title was meant to allude to the perceived rise in 'spiritualism'. (76)

McGrath, like Lennox acknowledges the pernicious side of religion. In *'The Dawkins Delusion'* he agrees with Dawkins' concerns regarding the influence of creationism into science and anti-evolutionary Intelligent Design courses within the school curriculum. He is in agreement with Dawkins regarding the religious indoctrination of children (McGrath himself was an atheist as a teenager and became a Christian later in life), he is also in agreement with Dawkins that it is right to expose and challenge religious violence, and he is also in agreement with the God of the Gaps theory, stating that this is merely a hangover of 19<sup>th</sup> century theology and that Christian faith should aspire to take an 'overall view'. (77) In his follow up *'Why God won't Go Away'* he wrote 'I completely agree with Dawkins on two points, first that some disgraceful episodes took place and second that some of them were caused by religion' (78) and later 'I completely agree with Harris when he declares that religion can be a problem...let us agree that there are indeed some real problems about religion in the modern world and that we all need to work out what to do about them. That is why so many leading Christians talk to atheists.' (79) In this work McGrath claims that there three main concerns put forward by New Atheism, that of violence, rationality and proof. In the case of violence he claims

'as someone who grew up in Northern Ireland I know only too well how religion can generate violence. But it is not alone in this.'<sup>(80)</sup> McGrath's works, particularly 'The Dawkins Delusion', frequently 'get personal' in their attacks on Dawkins. There is an insult on nearly every page, albeit couched in eloquent prose. To list but a few examples, 'dogmas and distortions', 'rambling pastiche', 'poorly structured', 'crass generalizations ruin the discussion', 'increasingly tedious', 'hopelessly muddled', 'unwise and indefensible judgements', 'bizarre credal statements', 'contrived and unpersuasive', 'peculiar vision', 'childishly naïve', 'nauseatingly condescending', 'ludicrous inaccuracy', 'melancholy', 'it's quite difficult to follow its basic arguments'.

The fact that they are often used without qualification indicates McGrath is either unwilling or unable to engage with specific arguments. His main rebuttal to Dawkins work appears to be (as highlighted by Lennox) that of tone. McGrath's other objection to Dawkins' thesis (aside from its tone, which, as demonstrated above is hypocritical to say the least) appears to be less to do with religious influence within public life but more to do with Dawkins' refusal to engage with detailed theological criticism.

Whilst New Atheism is undoubtedly a reactionary movement (inspired by 9/11), the responses by the likes of Lennox and McGrath are equally reactionary. As already stated at the outset of this chapter there is nothing new about the atheism in new atheism. It simply recycles 2,000 year old arguments (albeit with the benefit of a logical mind like Dawkins) and so to therefore engage and indeed dismiss New Atheism on the basis of its atheism is an utterly fruitless exercise. It is tantamount to reviewing A book when you've only read the prologue. The only benefit such critics are bringing to this debate (and it is a very poor one) is to enable concerned theists to sleep soundly in the knowledge that someone, somewhere is standing up to Dawkins. However, I believe the fact that such critics actually agree with the points raised by New Atheists regarding the pernicious influence of aspects of religion (but then go on to engage only with the atheist prologue-indicating an obvious failure to take a holistic view and appreciate the historical and cultural context from which these works have emerged) makes the likes of Dawkins and Hitchens far more progressive than those of their critics. In fact I would say that the contributions of Lennox and McGrath are retrogressive.

The fact that this debate has been made populist by bringing religion down from its pedestal, thereby making this most universal of questions accessible to those who wouldn't normally go within a mile of an academic book is something to be applauded, not dismissed. Such dismissal hints at hubris. All those academics toiling away for years in their philosophy and religious studies departments contributing the odd article here, the occasional paper there and along comes a writer from a completely different discipline (a scientist!) and writes a book that in terms of reach, impact, influence and sales wipes the floor with the lot of them. Secondly, engaging with the atheism whilst failing to appreciate the wider historical and cultural concerns which have prompted the movement (and indeed making slight but begrudging acknowledgements of such important points), renders the likes of McGrath in particular open to the accusation of (a phrase of Dawkins') intellectual high treason.

In the final analysis, New Atheism must be seen in terms of its historical and cultural context. Dawkins may have seemed naive when he said he wanted theists who read 'The God Delusion' to be atheists when they put it down, but to conclude (as McGrath does) that now 'The God Delusion' has

dropped off the bestseller lists whilst belief in God is still here, that New Atheism has 'come and gone' is far more naïve.<sup>(85)</sup> At least New Atheism is highlighting a problem. True, it isn't always as lucid as it could be. It does generalize. It isn't specific enough. It doesn't suggest any clear solutions. But it does highlight concerns hitherto largely ignored. What is McGrath's contribution? Arguably the likes of Jon Lennox and Alister McGrath and even Rowan Williams are best placed to attack creationism and the twisting of religious belief into ideology or the using of it as a shield for prejudice. I'd suggest that if Alister McGrath, an intelligent well-placed theologian, instead of picking away at the atheism in new atheism, instead wrote a book attacking Creationism, and took that on a lecture tour of the American Bible Belt or the Middle East, he would not only help Christianity far more but would, in one effective stroke neuter Richard Dawkins.

However, to break this taboo we need to raise consciousness (as Dawkins puts it) in two particular areas. Firstly, criticism of a belief does not equate to criticism of the believer, and secondly that reticence of engaging and criticising belief systems, even if they apply to minorities *is* allowed and there is nothing legislative to prevent it. We are talking about overcoming political correctness. And in relation to Islam, there is a sign of hope. In early 2011 the unelected Cabinet Minister Sadiq Khan (who declared that the Coalition government 'does do God')<sup>(81)</sup> lamented that Islamophobia had now passed the 'dinner table test.' In a speech given at Lancaster University she said 'it's not a big leap of imagination to predict where the talk of moderate Muslims leads, in the factory they've just hired a Muslim worker, the boss says to his employees not to worry, he's only fairly Muslim...in the school, the kids says the family next door are Muslim but they're not too bad and in the road as a woman walks past wearing a Burka, the passers-by think, that woman's either oppressed or is making a political statement.'

What Baroness Warsi fails to appreciate is that such distinctions already exist for Christianity. The term 'bible-basher' (though perhaps not suitable for the kind of dinner parties described) has been circulating in popular discourse for a long time, often used to describe someone who is perceived as over-zealous in their religious practice. This has rarely been used to mean Christianophobia or any kind of prejudice on the part of the speaker. If people at Baroness Warsi's dinner parties are indeed starting to dissect and criticise Islam this is only removing such faiths from the politically correct pedestals on which they have been protected for so long and placing them alongside both Christianity and other belief systems such as political/philosophical beliefs which is precisely the kind of thing New Atheism is arguing for. The breaking down of the taboo of political correctness, via the 'dinner table test' is also compatible with Christopher Hitchens request for a 'renewed Enlightenment'. He writes 'this Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors on the heroic breakthrough of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person. The study of literature and poetry both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific enquiry and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease and the sexual life and tyranny can now at last be attempted on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse. And all this and more, is for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.'

## Success through Visibility

Political campaigns and appeals to the masses, can only succeed if they are visible. We have looked at New Atheism's strategies of talking about the subject in hitherto accessible ways and the success of such an approach is readily apparent when we look at the proliferation of the debate into the public psyche. Let us start with the basics: book sales. In a 2012 article prompted by the Fifty Shades of Grey publishing phenomenon, the Guardian published a list of the 100 bestselling books in Britain. *The God Delusion* was at number 80 with over 816,000 copies sold (it amounts to 2,000,000 worldwide). Of the 79 books which beat it, only 20 were non-fiction. None of them were in the same category and consisted mainly of celebrity biographies and celebrity cook books; subjects included Jamie Oliver, Nigella Lawson, Dawn French, Bill Bryson, Peter Kay and Russell Brand. Now of course, this does not necessarily indicate that everyone who bought *The God Delusion* is somehow an atheist convert, however it does indicate the success of the book, and the distinct lack of any other similar themed book on the list is telling. At the time of writing (early 2013-7 years since *The God Delusion* was first published) *The God Delusion* ranks at 287 on the Amazon UK rankings. Hitchens' *God is Not Great* (published in 2007) in 2013 is ranking at 1,011 whilst on the other side of the debate, McGrath's *Dawkins Delusion* comes in at number 30,165 and his *Why God Won't Go Away* is at 44,123. Lennox's *Gunning for God* appears to be doing better, placed at number 13,436. Clearly we can conclude that the atheist side of the debate is selling more than the theist replies. (83)

One of the reasons for this success is no doubt due to the new media, internet and twitter. A crucial part in the success of *The God Delusion* has been the willingness of its author to make prolific appearances within the media; chat shows, debates and news broadcasts. Virtually all of the New Atheists are people who appear comfortable in front of the camera and are more than capable of defending their written work orally. This is perhaps something that cannot be said of everyone, many writers, many academics prefer to work alone, let the work do the talking and are either unwilling or incapable of meeting critics head on, regularly and with particularly media-savvy language and approaches. Despite the fact that very little of New Atheism (with the honourable exception of Harris) has been written by young men, it has emerged at a time when if one is to communicate effectively, one has to be comfortable with the *means* of communication. This takes two forms, not only on a personal level, but also on an awareness level of new media. All of the New Atheists are (or *were* in the case of the late Christopher Hitchens) on twitter and have websites dedicated to them. Richard Dawkins set up the Richard Dawkins Foundation for reason and science (RDFRS for short) and has a debating forum attached.

Not everyone considers this a positive move for politics and protest. Matthew Flinders in his 2012 work *Defending Politics* wrote about what he called the 'myth of Digital Democracy' and stated that 'far from fostering democratic values or active citizenship, cyberspace has emerged not as a public arena dedicated to the common good but as a fragmented landscape of shrill and sectional demands.' (84) Flinders point refutes the idea of some that the ability to 'contribute' via forums does not necessarily mean that 'more' people are contributing thereby enabling and aiding the democratic voices but merely enables a small but vocal section of the community to gravitate towards like-minded groups and individuals. Flinders states 'traffic to political websites is not only sparse with about one tenth of 1 per cent of all web traffic but is also highly concentrated in a small number of very popular sites that generally reinforce rather than challenge existing opinions'. The

upshot of this is that such websites (such as the RDFS) will really only be preaching to the converted as generally speaking, only people who take the Dawkins view of religion would visit that site anyway. Even if one accepts this pessimistic view of the ability of new media to disseminate information, what it does indicate is that people will gravitate towards things that they feel strongly about. Prior to the emergence of Richard Dawkins, where would internet-savvy atheists have gone? Possibly the website for the National Secular Society, however, what the NSS lacks and what New Atheism provides are 'celebrities'.

It is hard to imagine a more polarising and indeed more passionate subject than religion. The abundance of video clips featuring new atheists in discussion/debate/argument on YouTube (which stretches into the hundreds) are testament to that, as are the numerous comments that accompany them. Typical titles include 'Bill O'Reilly owned by Richard Dawkins', 'Richard Dawkins tears Muslim woman a new hole', 'Fox News broadcaster scared by Richard Dawkins', and there are certainly plenty which offer the opposite point of view of New Atheists are apparently 'owned' in debates by the likes of William Lane Craig (a religious apologist). There are also plenty of fake and 'doctored' videos purporting to show either one side or the other definitively 'winning' the argument. This passionate and polarising confrontational approach on what is arguably the most polarising and passionate subject is still only possible if the New Atheists were willing to 'put themselves out there' as it were. And it is this willingness to be prolific in their public appearances, combined with a media savvy ability and personality to 'carry it off' and perform on cue which has led to the New Atheists (in Britain this is mainly confined to Dawkins) becoming celebrities.

In Britain, scientists are not usually famous and those that are; have generally been so not necessarily because of what they have written or said in interviews but because what they have fronted their own television shows, typical examples are Patrick Moore and Brian Cox. Although Dawkins has fronted TV documentaries of his work they have not (unlike the likes of Moore and Cox) been shown on the main channels, relegated to late night slots on Channel 4. It is rare for a scientist to become famous simply because of their published work and subsequent appearances on a few chat shows. Dawkins first became famous within the scientific, academic field in 1976 when he published *'The Selfish Gene'* and yet it was arguably not until 30 years later when *'The God Delusion'* emerged that he became famous beyond the academic sphere, famous enough to be comfortably referred to as a celebrity. Evidence that Dawkins can be referred to as a celebrity is to be found not necessarily in his published works and comparatively more esteemed appearances but in his transition into what we call popular culture.

In the last few years, Richard Dawkins has made appearances as himself in *The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *Doctor Who*. His appearance in the latter drew comment from the *Telegraph* which said 'Russell T Davies is the creator of galaxies, saviour of Saturday Night Telly and the most influential gay man in Britain, but he can still shriek like a star struck fan-boy when it comes to Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist and best-selling author of *'The God Delusion'* will appear as a guest star in the new series of *Dr Who* and Davies said "people were falling at his feet, we've had Kylie Minogue and David Tennant on that set but it was Dawkins people were worshipping". As a fervent believer in Dawkins, Davies believes he has bought atheism out of the closet.' (85)

The aforementioned confrontation with Brandon Flowers came when Dawkins was invited to appear on a Norwegian chat show where the other guests included another popular musician (Bjorn

Ulvaeus of ABBA) and media personality Ulrika Johnson. The inclusion within this very 'celebrity' oriented mix of an Oxford academic is further evidence that Dawkins has crossed the line from being simply a well known public commentator and thinker, to being a fully fledged celebrity whose book is up there on the best seller lists with the likes of Peter Kay, Jamie Oliver and Paul O'Grady. This proliferation and subsequent adoption of ideas within popular culture is further illustrated by how atheism has become 'cool' of late.

In a 2010 public conversation between the then Archbishop of Canterbury Rowan Williams, and comedian Frank Skinner, the comic broached the subject of New Atheism. He said,

Skinner: On the comedy circuit now it's incredibly cool to be an atheist. I was in Edinburgh recently and I saw several comedians shows and even if they were nothing to do with religion they would make a 3 or 4 minute slot where they would say 'oh by the way, I'm an atheist' to make sure they'd ticked the box of cool comic...the coolness of atheism is very much in evidence. The church seems to be just letting it get cooler and letting it dominate more and more. 'The God Delusion' sold what, a million copies? I meet more people now who categorically align themselves with science and atheism and the new atheists and that movement. Should you be doing anything about it?

Archbishop: Quite a few people have been doing things about it in some ways. The problem is that it becomes a bit of a vicious circle. Atheism is cool so books about atheism are cool and they get a high profile. Books saying 'actually this, this and this are wrong in Richard Dawkins' don't get the same publicity because atheism is the new cool thing. (86)

Skinner's point regarding the proliferation of the ideas and indeed the 'tone' atheist criticism has merit. All of the following jokes have been made by British stand-up comedians in the last few years.

*'Religion's just what we thought before we understood what mental illness was. 'A bush talked to me', brilliant, what did it say? What did the bush say? Let's live our lives by what the bush said you stupid fuckin cunts.'*

(Frankie Boyle)(87)

*'No children were abused in the making of this show and no Islamic cartoons were used-for those of you who can't take a fuckin joke (cheers). That's it for me, religion's fuckin finished. That's it, it's fuckin over lads, it's fucking OVER! You've had a couple of thousand years, you've fucked it, it's over. Take your reformation, your Vatican and fuckin Mecca and fuck off!*

(Billy Connolly) (88)

*'As a kid I had an imaginary friend and I like to think he went everywhere with me and that I could talk to him and he could hear me and that he could grant me wishes and stuff. And then I grew up and I stopped going to church.'*

(Jimmy Carr) (89)

*'I'm not worried about dying because I'm an atheist. Now I know that this is a Christian country and I stand up for your right to be religious but please know that you're wrong (cheers). Please know that you are living in a fantasy land and that after you die nothing happens. Stop being a fuckin child'*

(Jim Jefferies)(90)

*'The trouble about rumour is if it's written down someone will believe it. You can have the most far-fetched, made up, impossible, illogical bollocks and if it's in print, someone will believe it. Just look at the Bible!'*

*(Ricky Gervais)(91)*

*'I've said this before. I'm not a religious man, I don't believe in God. But still Catholic! Because I'm not a man for text and for holding to text really strictly with laws and rules and regulations and the Bible thing in particular. For God's sake. We've moved on! If you're a religious person then fine but at least in this part of the world we don't take it literally, you know like there is in America you know 'Genesis is a historical fact' and you're going for God's sake Genesis which is a load of fairy stories to get the kids to go to bed. Stop taking it literally, it's only the Bible, it's not gospel'*

*(Dara O'Briain)(92)*

And with comedy comes satire as the following confirms:

*'In the last few years I have started to believe in God, creationism and intelligent design and the reason that I have started to believe in God, creationism and intelligent design is because of Professor Richard Dawkins, because when I look at something as complex, as intricate and as beautiful as Professor Richard Dawkins I don't think that that could have just have evolved by chance. Professor Richard Dawkins was put there by God to test us-like fossils- and facts.'*

*(Stewart Lee) (93)*

Several high profile comedians such as Jimmy Carr and Ricky Gervais have come out in their public support of Richard Dawkins and on that aforementioned Norwegian chat-show, Ulrika Johnson came on and immediately said to Dawkins 'my son is such a fan of yours'. Alternatively some have criticised Dawkins such as David Mitchell.

Supporters and indeed 'talkers' of Richard Dawkins are certainly not confined to 'low-brow' popular culture. When he bought out his book 'Magic of Reality', Dawkins gave an interview to Jeremy Paxman on Newsnight in which Paxman, largely agreed with Dawkins about the 'hogwash' taught by religions to children. Such was the unequivocal nature of his agreement with Dawkins that Paxman and Newsnight found themselves on the receiving end of a complaint from a viewer regarding the BBC's apparent partiality during the broadcast item.

Beyond Dawkins (although tied in with Russell T Davies' point of him bringing atheism out of the closet) it is also interesting to note that since the emergence of New Atheism other prominent scientists have 'come out' regarding their refutation of certain aspects of religion, after arguably low-key or vague statements made previously. In 2008 David Attenborough finally confirmed that he did not believe in God, although he has subsequently retracted this and confirmed his position as agnostic. Whilst arguably the most famous scientist on the planet, Stephen Hawking, having previously only alluded to questions of God's existence in his famous work 'A Brief History of Time', has now in his 2010 work 'The Grand Design' finally dismissed the idea of a universal creator. Hawking debunks creationist and Intelligent Design theories as myths concluding that 'it is not necessary to invoke God to light the blue touch paper and set the universe going'. (94)

Religion is often the subject of the Sunday Morning talk show 'The Big Questions' on which Richard Dawkins has guested, whilst the 2009 Intelligence Squared debate featured Christopher Hitchens and Stephen Fry (another comedian and public intellectual whose views are very much in



tandem with New Atheism) debating with an Archbishop from Nigeria and Anne Widdecombe in the debate 'Is the Catholic Church a force for Good in the world?'. Not forgetting it was Christopher Hitchens who was chosen to debate Tony Blair regarding the question 'Is Religion a Force for Good in the world?'. Although I have concentrated on British appearances here, the same can be said for Hitchens and Harris in relation to America regarding their prolific public appearances (in the case of Hitchens he, like Dawkins has appeared in Britain both on Question Time and been interviewed by Paxman, notably just prior to his death).

Another reason for the effectiveness of New Atheism in Britain, in terms of its visibility, is the ineffectiveness of what could or should be seen as its main opponent; the Archbishop of Canterbury. The Primate during the emergence and ascendancy of New Atheism was Rowan Williams, Archbishop from 2002-2012. The public and civic duties associated with the role of the spiritual leader of the Anglican Church, should provide the ideal platform for engagement with any public debate surrounding religion. On the surface, Rowan Williams has done just that, participating in two public debates with Richard Dawkins. A clue as to the effectiveness of New Atheism and by extension the *ineffectiveness of Rowan Williams* as an opponent was given in a Guardian write up following the most recent debate at the beginning of 2013.

Sam Jones' headline states that Dawkins is the 'fall guy' in the debate but concludes that he may have a career in stand up comedy. During the debate Dawkins had referred to God, in terms of his miracles as a 'knob twiddler', a remark calculated to cause much laughter at the double entendre employed. It had the desired effect and by all accounts received the biggest laugh and round of applause on the night. And despite losing the vote at the end, it was this remark that stood out as the most memorable moment of the encounter as shown by Sam Jones' concluding paragraph. He wrote 'Dawkins may have gone on to rail against religion as "a cop-out; a betrayal of the intellect; a betrayal of all that's best about what makes us human", and proclaimed it time to consign its "obscurantist interference with the search for truth" to history. He may ultimately have lost the debate by 324 votes to 136. But no matter: a career in stand-up could yet beckon for the 21st century's Savonarola, who very nearly had his audience at "knob-twiddler". However, what Jones fails to appreciate is the fact that Dawkins use of this double entendre indicates an ability to communicate and make an impact with an audience at an identifiably populist level. This approach is undoubtedly open to criticism of 'dumbing down' and of appealing to the 'lowest common-denominator'. The fact remains however, that if one is to communicate to the masses at large, instead of mere academics, then there is something to be said for making remarks that make an impact and are memorable. And although there is no evidence that Rowan Williams considers New Atheism to be 'dumbed down' or appealing to the 'lowest common denominator' he was never really the candidate to engage New Atheism on that level.

Before he became the Archbishop of Canterbury, Williams was an academic. After stepping down, he returned to academia. Williams' record in office, together with his published writings and speeches reveal a man who was in many ways the person who could never take on New Atheism at its own game. We have already discussed the populist and generally anti-traditionally academic approaches New Atheism has taken. Rowan Williams was the complete opposite. Williams' approach was often so intensely thoughtful and academic that it was difficult for those not versed in obscurantist theological discourse, to understand what precisely his position was. Take this 2008

interview with the Guardian on his opinion of teaching of creationism in schools for example, when asked if it should be taught Williams said,

Williams: I think that if creationism is presented as a stark alternative theory alongside other theories I think there's...there's just been a jar of categories, it's not what it's about that it...it reinforces the sense that...

Interviewer: So it shouldn't be taught?

Williams: I don't think it should actually no and that's different from saying...it's different from discussing, teaching about what creationism means.

The fact that the interviewer needs to interrupt him when he's already three lines into his answer indicates both an impatience on the part of the interviewer for clarification and an inability of Williams' to give a clear straight answer to a straight question. Irrespective of one's opinions on these methods, the fact remains that Williams' long, thoughtful, drawn out answers do not easily translate into our media savvy sound-bites.

And nowhere was this better illustrated than in the 2007 furore surrounding Williams' comments regarding Sharia Law. Certain aspects of the media reported that he'd claimed Islamic Sharia Law should be adopted in Britain as a parallel legal system, and in the immediate wake of 7/7 such sentiments were deemed distinctly undesirable. Of course, Williams was not in fact advocating this and became the victim of selective quotation, however this was partly caused by the fact that his public speech was again, very far from clear as to what precisely he was actually saying. When Williams announced that he was stepping down in 2012, there were mixed responses. Many moderate voices spoke out in support. Tellingly however, there were many critics from both ends of the political spectrum. Prominent liberal and gay rights campaigner Peter Tatchell criticised Williams for backtracking on his pre-appointment liberal views on homosexuality. However Evangelicals accused him of moving the Church into too liberal a direction. The voices in support of Williams highlighted the fact that he had kept the Church together, avoiding a split some saw as inevitable between the liberals and the traditionalists. And although this could be said to be an achievement, a more critical response to this would be that he achieved it, only by taking no specific firm position, resulting in no particular group being really satisfied.

Williams himself summed up the dilemma in his post-resignation publication of public speeches '*Faith in the Public Square*' 'every Archbishop faces the expectation that he will be some kind of commentator on the public issues of the day. He is doomed to fail in the eyes of most people. If he restricts himself to reflections heavily based on the Bible or tradition what he says will be greeted as platitudinous or irrelevant. If he ventures into more obviously secular territory he will be told that he has no particular expertise in sociology or economics or international affairs. References to popular culture prompt disapproving noises about dumbing down, anything that looks like close academic analysis is of course incomprehensible and self-indulgent elitism.' When one compares the rise of the visibility of Atheism in Britain during Williams' tenure, I'd conclude that Williams was better at clarifying the problem than he was at dealing with it.

The New Atheist torch in America is generally held by CBS Talkshow host and comedian Bill Maher who regularly had Dawkins and Hitchens as guests. Maher actually made a 2009 film called

'Religulous', an expose of the extremes of Religion, both in America and in the Middle East. Maher's recruitment of Borat and Bruno director Larry Charles was perhaps evidence of the satirical approach adopted and it spared no expense at poking fun at the nature of belief and the acts that some people commit and the things people say in the name of their religion.

In conclusion then, I will say that whilst none of the above necessarily confirms the validity of either side's argument, nor does it indicate conclusively that one side is winning the argument, it does prove beyond reasonable doubt that New Atheism has succeeded in making itself visible. Dawkins specifically stated in a recent interview that he was not necessarily concerned with the influence of religion within wider society, only in what was true or not. How true this is, is debatable, however one cannot deny that 'The God Delusion' (in Britain) and other New Atheists works have started a debate which others have and will take forward. The proliferation of this debate, via the New Media into popular culture bodes well for the New Atheists if they want to try and reach 'young minds and affect behaviour in any positive, political way.

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## Chapter.2

# The Validity of New Atheism

## Religion is too privileged?

Having started by looking at the complaints and aims of New Atheism in broad terms, we shall now look at specific claims, and examine their validity within a British context. We shall start in this chapter, by looking at the accusation that religion is 'privileged' in terms of the establishment. Specifically we will be looking at the following three questions in both a modern and historical context.

1: How politically militant is the established Church of England?

2: How influential is religion in determining public policy?

3: Is it true that religion is 'above' the law?

There is general agreement amongst the British New Atheists that the Church of England has historically been small cause for concern, i.e not very politically militant or evangelical in its aims and ideals, at least by contrast. Dawkins refers to 'still holding it in some regard, at least by comparison with the opposition'. From subsequent statements, we can infer that his comparisons were Catholicism and Islam. Since the onset of New Atheism's popularity, Dawkins has debated on several occasions with Rowan Williams, debates which as one reviewer put it, were almost too friendly and mild-mannered in their general approach. Williams has happily agreed to be interviewed by Dawkins on several occasions for his documentaries and although both fundamentally disagree as to the merits of religion in public life, each have spoken of their respect for their counterpart.

AC Grayling, in his *'The God Argument'* mentions the 1996 motion passed by the General Synod regarding traditional views of Hell. Grayling states that the Synod agreed traditional images of Hell were 'outmoded' and Hell should in fact be seen as simply the absence of God, explaining that sinners were to face swift annihilation rather than eternal suffering. Hitchens, in typically robust form, describes the Church of England as a 'pathetic, bleating sheep' but still adds that 'as the descendent of a church that has long enjoyed state subsidy and an intrinsic relationship with hereditary monarchy' to justify the criticism of its very existence.

However Dawkins raises concerns about a sea-change in the way the Church of England behaves when he quotes an Anglican Vicar Giles Fraser 'the establishment of the Church of England took God out of religion, but there are risks in a more vigorous approach...there was a time when the country vicar was a staple of the English dramatis personae. This tea-drinking, gentle eccentric represented a type of religion that didn't make non-religious people uncomfortable.' Dawkins finishes by further quoting Fraser's conclusion which laments a more recent trend in the Church of England to take

religion seriously again 'the worry is that we may release the genie of English religious fanaticism from the establishment box in which it has been dormant for centuries.' The links which must be drawn here are that the types of religion described by Fraser, traditional throughout Britain, represent a non-militant, non-political type; the reduction of religion to social work.

The same concerns have been expressed about the increased visibility of religion within the upper echelons of British politics. When a minister of the 2010 Coalition declared that the government 'did do God', the likes of Dawkins were quick to dismiss the said claimant (Baroness Saida Warsi) as a minister without portfolio and the claim to have insubstantial evidence. British New Atheists such as Dawkins and Grayling leapt on the 2011 census results, indicating a decrease in Christianity and a concurrent rise in atheism, as proof that such claims were out of step with the way the British people think. And ministers who have openly supported religious visibility within public life (such as Eric Pickles who championed the right for councils to say prayers before meetings) have acquired the wrath of Dawkins et al for supporting a cause which they claim is 'out of step' with public opinion and further proof of the unfair privileging of religion within public and political life.

In a 2012 public exchange of letters with Will Hutton of the Observer, Dawkins outlines his case quite specifically in terms of secularism rather than atheism. Dawkins' claims that New Atheism's opponents often dismiss his views on the basis that he is a militant atheist who wishes to impose illiberal, fundamentalist atheism upon the population at large. He instead maintains that what he desires is political secularism which is 'neutral' to religion, as opposed to banning it from public life. He states that 'secularism is categorically not saying that the religious may not speak out publicly or have a say in public life. It is about saying that religion alone should not confer a privileged say in public life, or greater influence on it. It really is as simple as that. Surely any true liberal must agree?'

It is to this claim, with emphasis on the word 'privilege' that this chapter will now turn. To what extent is religious privilege influential in terms of its historical legacy (i.e, the Church of England) and the British Government. We shall examine these from both a historical and contemporary perspective. Firstly, the Church of England.

## **Does the Church of England have a history of political militancy?**

Political militancy does not come naturally to Anglicanism. Perhaps this is only natural in a branch of Christianity which flourished during the Enlightenment and which still today represents the most progressive and liberal branch of that faith. When its leaders have strayed into the world of politics and public discourse, they have generally adopted the approach of the aforementioned Christian socialism. Though never allied to any political party, Anglican interests have usually adopted the more left-leaning approaches of 'fairness' and 'justice'. However, in a time of dwindling membership and increasing secularism, such interventions have often been spasmodic, unfocussed and in some instances seemingly reluctant.

Medhurst and Moyser, in their book length study '*Church & Politics in a Secular Age*' investigated the issues surrounding the political militancy of the Church of England at length. They begin by Church of England, despite diminished social significance, retains degrees of organisation and levels of support that might be the envy of all other voluntary associations in English society. It has a multi-million pound income, a small but highly qualified bureaucracy, substantial publishing and journalistic interests and a weekly captive audience.' (1) This is true and demonstrates that the Church of England could potentially exercise significant influence over public debate if it so desired. However, potential reasons why this has not happened frequently are outlined when they go on to say 'important questions arise concerning priorities. First there is the matter of which audience the church at any given moment should address. In particular there is the question of whether to give priority to addressing church members or to commanding wider audiences. Secondly there is the question of the priority to be accorded respectively to lobbying power-holders and to mobilizing public opinion. Thirdly there is the matter of deciding for whom church leaders can presume to speak. Finally there is the question of the extent to which the institution should go it alone or should coalesce with others sharing similar goals.' (2) Medhurst & Moyser go on to state that the absence of any coherent *political* theology within Anglicanism means that church involvement in the political domain moves only sporadically forward, influenced as it is by uncoordinated initiatives rather than any clear long-term strategies. The approach a somewhat pragmatic and reactive kind; a response to political matters which arise when they arise.

This pragmatic as opposed to proscriptive approach demonstrates an almost fatal lack of priority with its own doctrine and dogma and could potentially be the reason why the Church of England has seen (in comparison with Catholicism and Islam) the most significant fall in membership. For as religion contracts, the more militant elements are highlighted and attracted and there is arguably little to make such elements feel at home within the Church of England. Medhurst Moyser's work, published in 1988, came at a time when the Church of England was being seen to take a more active role in politics due to the controversial '*Faith in the City*' document commissioned by the then Archbishop of Canterbury Robert Runcie which criticized the Thatcher government's economic policies. They point out the incongruity of such interventions 'frequent political interventions by bishops or other clergy might be viewed as an anachronistic form of clericalism' (89) and traditionally 'their pronouncements it is suggested should perhaps go beyond vague general principles but stop short of detailed policy recommendations.' (3)

Medhurst & Moyser clearly welcomed the-then new approach of the Church of England but highlight the impotence of taking a position without resorting to policy recommendations, for example whilst it is clear that the church desires full employment it is difficult to specify ways of improving the situation without resorting to policy suggestions. They state 'delicate political judgements have to be made concerning the appropriate balance to be struck between the Church's commitment to encourage those in authority and its obligation to criticise them. The generally stated preference of church leaders for positive recommendations rather than negative denunciations does not provide an escape from the dilemma, support for one line of action will implicitly be an attack on others.' (4)

Three years prior to this report George Moyer had consolidated his thesis that the Church of England was distinctly apolitical in a piece of comprehensive research designed to specifically test how levels of religiosity affected political activism. Taking his lead from the 1979 Barnes & Kaase research which had concluded that 'church attendance and participation in the spiritual life of the



community is in some sense an alternative, even exclusive activity compared with political participation'(92) Moyser attempted to test this theory within an exclusively British context ( the Barnes & Kaase study had been Europe-wide). He came up with several different levels of political activity, developing in severity:

- 1: Voting in general elections**
- 2: Canvassing for a party**
- 3: Contacting one's MP**
- 4: Attending a protest meeting**
- 5: Using physical force against opponents**

Moyser initially identified that a least 60% of the Church of England were inert (in the sense that they didn't attend church and had no real political interest either) and found that whilst some groups, such as Baptists were far more active, their small numbers of adherents rendered any likely political impact negligible. Of the members of the Church of England who were participatory (both in religion and politics) he found that the British adult population generally demonstrated low levels of political activism: outside of voting or signing petitions, never more than a fifth (usually less under a tenth) claimed to have engaged in anything more than this over the previous five year period. Moyser did note a trend that the 'the general effect of progressively stronger levels of religious adherence is to increase or stimulate political participation. The effect is not large but it is clear, relatively linear and statistically significant.' (4)This is an important point, clearly indicating that the stronger the belief the more likely this is to spill over into politics; and it is also likely that this spilling over will be demonstrated by higher levels of religiosity. However, although Moyser holds this relationship up as a contradiction to the Barnes & Kaase conclusions; the fact that such levels are relatively small does not necessarily indicate a disparity in findings, merely proof that such people are very much a minority. The relationship between Anglicanism and political protest (or even *interest*) is still tenuous at best. Moyser concedes that 'Britain's political agenda is one in which explicitly religious interests or issues are nowadays largely missing' and further isolates those who would require a more direct relationship between religion and politics as 'to some, those of a Conservative political and theological persuasion (these findings) may be a cause for satisfaction...but for those who wish to see religion staking out a more radical ground and who seek a new relevance for such institutions in society it must at the very least give them pause for thought about the magnitude of the task that lies ahead.'(5)

As it happens, the *Faith in the City* document did not herald a new era of political militancy for the Church of England but merely continued the institution's post-war tradition of sporadic intervention in times of social and economic strife which tended, though not exclusively, to take the form of Christian socialism and by extension condemnation of Tory economic policies. This is a tradition dating back to William Temple, Bishop of York from 1929-1942 and Archbishop of Canterbury from 1942-1944. Temple, along with other contemporary thinkers such as TS Elliot and John Baillie was one of the major advocates of the new Welfare State and in particular proclaimed the Beveridge report as 'an attempt to embody the whole spirit of the Christian ethic in an act of Parliament.' (6)Temple recognized that the country was becoming increasingly secular and if the Church of England was to maintain any real relevance then its traditional role of public moralizer was not sufficient. His biographer John Kent claims 'the priesthood were accustomed to a kind of public moralizing about drink, gambling and sexual behaviour for example which had no drastic political

consequences, they were less enthusiastic about what seemed to them direct political commitment' and thus Temple believed that 'the state church could do what no other social institution could do, it could bind the English people together in a common faith in shared values.' (7) Note the use of the word 'values' instead of 'morals' a crucial difference, couched in the Christian ethic as opposed to dogmatic scriptural adherence. The emphasis was on 'common values' rather than a 'common theological dogma'. Temple published his thoughts in his work '*Christianity and the Social Order*' and the 6 main recommendations were as follows:

*1: Every child should find itself a member of a family housed with decency and dignity so that it may grow up as a member of that basic community in a happy fellowship unspoilt by underfeeding or overcrowding, by dirty and drab surroundings*

*2: Every citizen should have assured liberty in the forms of freedom of worship, speech, assembly and of association for special purposes*

*3: Every citizen should have sufficient daily leisure with 2 days rest in 7, annual holidays with pay to enable him to enjoy a full personal life with such interests and activities*

*4: Every citizen should be secure in possessing such income as will enable him to maintain a home and bring up children*

*5: Every child should have the opportunity of an education till years of maturity*

*6: Every citizen should have a voice in the conduct of the business or industry which is carried on by means of his labour. (8)*

The above points read like the ideal socialist manifesto and are worth quoting in full because of what they *do not* say. They display a complete lack of any religiosity. Though there is no doubt that Temple believed that the roots of the ethics he espoused here lay within the Bible, the lack of any need to make specific reference to those roots demonstrates a particularly progressive and open-minded approach; open minded in the sense that he makes no claims for Biblical exclusivity on such noble aspirations and enlightened in the sense that such a manifesto was indeed startlingly similar to the subsequent Welfare state provision which is still with us today, and indeed is often held up as a symbol of the civility and sophistication of Britain. And again, no mention of 'morality'. The aforementioned 1985 *Faith in the City* publication continued and echoed this trend. Commissioned by Archbishop Robert Runcie during the Thatcher government, it emerged four years after the Brixton riots and the notorious Scarman report at the height of the pain caused by the Tory government's monetarist policies which had led to a steep rise in unemployment and deprivation. The commission opened its report with the following disclaimer 'what sort of aid? It is here that we enter an inescapable theological debate. The question at issue is whether the acknowledged Christian duty to remember the poor should be confined to personal charity, service and evangelism directed toward individuals or whether it can legitimately take the form of social and political action aimed at altering the circumstances which appear to cause poverty and distress. We shall argue that these are false alternatives, a Christian is committed to a form of action which embraces both.' (9) The commission admitted that 'we have little tradition of initiating conflict or coping with it creatively, we are not at home in the tough, secular milieu of social and political activism.'

The report detailed various individual's investigations into many urban areas around Britain and began its conclusion 'the 1970 Church & State publication stated that the church should concern itself first and indeed second with the poor and needy, whether in spirit or body. We echo these words. The church cannot supplant the market or the state.' (10) The report then made 23 recommendations of which the following were typical:

*1: Greater priority for the outer estates is called for within urban policy initiatives*

*2: The concept of partnership in the urban priority areas should be developed by central and local government to promote greater consultation with and participation by local people at neighbourhood level*

*3: The present level of child benefit should be increased as an effective means of assisting, without stigma, families in poverty*

*4: The housing act should be extended to cover all who are homeless. Homeless people should be offered a choice of accommodation*

*5: Ethnic records should be kept and monitored by public housing authorities as a step towards eliminating direct and indirect discrimination in housing allocation.*

The pattern from the Temple recommendations is repeated here in the sense that there is a complete lack of religiosity, the roots of which are clearly related to a Socialist ethic and would, if read in isolation be difficult to identify as the recommendations of a religious group. At the time of writing (2011) a newly elected Tory led coalition is inflicting swingeing spending cuts on the public sector and the Church of England is continuing its tradition of condemning it. Current Archbishop Rowan Williams has recently signed a letter, along with many other important members of the faith because the Church has a 'moral obligation to speak up for those who have no voice' concerned that the government is pushing through 'radical policies for which no one voted.' (11) Recent proclamations from primates have also attempted to impress the need for modernity in religion. George Carey (Archbishop between 1991-2002) incurred some criticism when he criticized the lack of development in Islamic scholarship over the last 500 years, stating that this had led Muslims to have a 'strong resistance to modernity.'

And in a Swansea University lecture given in response to the attacks by New Atheism, Rowan Williams concluded 'you don't deal with bad religion by getting rid of religion, you deal with bad religion by replacing it with good religion.' Both men have claimed their support for homosexuals, civil partnerships and attacked the teaching of creationism. The high profile issues currently concerning the Church of England are indeed ones of introspection, in terms of how issues relating to woman and homosexuals directly affect *them*.

## **Is the Church of England 'privileged' enough to affect public policy?**

The oft-quoted example of the undue privilege of the Church of England, certainly when it comes to Politics, is the right of the 26 most senior Bishops to sit and vote in the House of Lords. Recent developments in the Church of England, notably the condemnation of the General Synod voting not

to allow the ordination of women bishops has led to renewed examination of the role of the Church of England and possible dis-establishment. Firstly, the fact that the Church of England can openly discriminate in such a way indicates clear and obvious privilege. The organisation is exempt from the Equalities Act outlawing work-place discrimination; this allows them to discriminate against both women and homosexuals in the name of their religion. However, what we are primarily concerned with here is the extent to which such attitudes are used to influence the public and political sphere. To what extent do the Bishops in the House of Lords transmit those religious attitudes into the wider community in terms of their influence over the enacting of legislation? Does it actually matter that bishops are in the House of Lords?

Clearly, there is an issue of principle, but applies no more to the Bishops than the rest of the unelected House of Lords. The upper chamber is as symbolically wrong as having a hereditary monarch as the head of state. A 2012 *New Statesman* article, building on research carried out in a 2007b paper from the University College of London entitled 'why does the Government get defeated in the House of Lords' suggested that the presence of the Bishops was large irrelevant'. It pointed out the mathematical context of having 26 Bishops in a chamber made up of 760 seats. The report concluded

'The Bishops' impact... is limited by the fact that they are a small group, and that like the Crossbenchers they vote relatively little, and do not vote as a cohesive block. Most of the time, there is only one bishop at each vote (they actually have a formal rota, apparently), and their mean turnout is just 3.2 per cent. As in, four-fifths of a person. Only ten times in six years were there votes with more than five bishops attending (only 66 times with more than one): The largest turnouts were 11 votes on the balloting of grammar schools in 2000 (when nine Bishops supported the government and two opposed), on the Civil Partnerships Bill in 2004 (eight supporting, two opposed), and on the Learning and Skills Bill in 2000 with respect to sex education guidelines to replace Section 28.19. So there aren't many bishops in the lords, and they rarely turn up. Which is why it's not a surprise that, over 806 divisions and six years, only three times did the bishops make a difference. Twice, the government was defeated by one vote when the sole bishop voted against it, and once the government was defeated by one vote when three bishops voted against it: When it comes to the simple legislative arithmetic, it is largely irrelevant whether we have bishops in the lords. A dodgy batch of mussels in the House of Lords' restaurant would probably have a greater material effect on the outcome of divisions that the lords spiritual do.' (12)

The article concludes by noting that 'there are, of course, benefits for the bishops which are harder to quantify. Being peers gives them the ability to lobby others more effectively; and there were almost certainly times when the *threat* of defeat may have caused the government to change its legislative program pre-emptively. Nonetheless, those fighting to remove Bishops from the Lords are doing the right thing by focusing on matters of principle, such as equality and secularity. When it comes to substance, there really isn't a whole lot to object to.

The issue of Bishops in the House of Lords emerged again in 2013 when a bill was passed to allow Gay Marriage. The Church of England was against the bill and had campaigned quite openly against it. However, unlike historical examples of bills related to Homosexuality (such as the lowering of the Age of Consent; something we will look at later) it was not scuppered when it arrived in the House of Lords. The bill was passed with considerable support by 390 votes to 148. However

this did not mean that the Bishops voted for it, rather they abstained or did not turn up instead. There were reports in the press in the days following the vote and apparent surprise at the ease with which it made its way through the Lords, that the Bishops had been warned to stay away from the bill; abstain rather than vote against. The reason for this, according to the reports was that the Church feared a possible backlash if the clearly quite popular bill (in terms of Commons support) were seen to be being prevented by the House of Lords and the Bishops in particular, a backlash which, when taken in conjunction with the widely reported disappointment with the General Synod from preventing the ordination of women bishops, might cause many difficult questions to be asked about the role of the Church in times of increasing secularism. Although the Church denied these reports that Bishops were 'advised to stay away' from the vote, upon its success, the institution soon made clear it would no longer try to prevent the Bill being enacted but instead try to ensure an 'improved' version of it would become law.

This stands in stark contrast to historical examples of how such issues, particularly related to homosexuality have been dealt with in their passage through the House of Lords. Let us look at one historical example, the lowering of the age of consent. The major campaigner was Conservative peer Baroness Janet Young. When she died, Tim Montgomerie of the Conservative Christian fellowship said 'Baroness Young led a life of great service to Christian causes. She defended marriage and the family against an onslaught of damaging legislation in recent years. Unlike many of today's politicians and church leaders, she refused to accept that the breakdown of the family was inevitable...if only more Christians followed her example the country would perhaps not face the same difficulties that it does'. An opposing view was put forward by Labour MP Roy Hattersley, speaking in the Guardian he said 'although the Baroness Young of whom I write was always anxious to emphasise the support she received from Muslims, her attitude towards morality was identical to the one that motivated the 3<sup>rd</sup> Crusade. She had no doubt about what was right. And she was determined to impose her principles on people who neither share her faith or her views. No doubt in other contexts she regarded herself as a Libertarian. But her behaviour is in absolute conflict with the philosophy of John Stuart Mill.' (13) Baroness Young had long been a member of a Christian pressure group 'Family & Youth Concern' (now rebranded Family Educational Trust) and on the subject of essentialism it's interesting to note Tim Montgomerie's bemoaning of the lack of similarly motivated Christians such as Baroness Young, i.e. she did not speak for all Christians, simply those allied with her views and her pressure group. However, she got results. From her influential position in the Lords she achieved two significant victories, firstly regarding the repeal of section 28, secondly regarding the equalizing of the age of consent. Section 28 was a piece of legislation produced during Margaret Thatcher's final term in office which forbade local councils from 'promoting' homosexuality. No prosecutions were ever brought under this act during its 13 years on the statute books and the concern from gay rights campaigners was that the vague definition of what 'promotion' actually was could lead to significant and damaging self-censorship from councils and educational authorities, damaging in the sense that teachers and councillors would be frightened of discussing the subject even if broached by the pupils themselves. The Age of Consent was merely the attempt to equalize the legal age for consenting homosexuals in line with that of heterosexuals. On both occasions, The House of Commons voted in favour of the motions (to repeal section 28 and to reduce the age of consent to 16). On both occasions, the motions were rejected by the House of Lords after a rigorous campaign led by Baroness Young. In the case of the age of consent, a temporary measure was agreed to reduce it to 18. Once Labour came to power, another rejection by

the House of Lords led them to invoke the Parliament Act, something only done on three occasions since 1949 in order to get the legislation through. As a result the age of consent was equalized and section 28 was repealed. Baroness Young had ultimately failed but was successful on several previous occasions from preventing legislation going through by her faith-led campaigning.

How was Baroness Young able to obtain such support? Was the House of Lords full of fundamentalist Christians? It was probably because Baroness Young and Christians like her had adopted the Rawlsian approach of 'public reasons'. Rarely in the debate were the objections placed within a specific religious context. When it came to the issue of reducing the age of consent, objections were put in terms of the health risks involved, 'homosexual practices carry great health risks' said one peer, and another 'there are strong moral and health objections'. These were presumably a reference to AIDS which in the late 80's and early 90s had been almost exclusively associated (by certain sections of the Media at least) with homosexuals. Another objection was that lowering the age would make 16 year old boys vulnerable to predatory older men. This made no sense whatsoever when compared to the (presumably) similar issues for 16 year old girls! Debates around the repeal of section 28 had the term 'family values' used as though any discussion of homosexuality or even the 'image' of homosexual life would threaten the fabric of British family life. This tactic of employing the 'pretence' of public reasoning did not go unnoticed however. Christie Davis best summed it up in his book *'The Strange Death of Moral Britain'*. 'the lengths to which those employing the new vocabulary of 'family values' were prepared to go to attack homosexuality indicate that the old concerns about social and religious boundaries had gone underground and become the love of order that dare not speak its name. For the orderly, section 28 had been a symbolic victory over what they still thought of as the sins of the cities and perversions denounced by St. Paul. It was no longer possible in a by now moribund moral Britain to run a campaign against homosexuality on the basis of an appeal to a single agreed and accepted nation and Christian tradition, the defence of which had been at the core of the taboos against homosexuality. Those who were hostile to homosexuality by virtue of their religious convictions knew that they had no chance of succeeding in a counter-attack on the sons and daughters of Gomorrah in a secular society with an exiguous moral majority and so they took up the cause of 'family values'.'<sup>(14)</sup>

It is probably via such tactics that Baroness Young exacted support from fellow Peers (indeed it was largely under the banner of the 'protection of vulnerable children' that section 28 originally emerged). The use of public reasons can be an indicator of a lack of faith that 'faith' itself (i.e. appealing to the Christian majority) will lend sufficient weight or indeed support to their case as outlined in the following chapter.

It is no doubt cases such as the above that have led those who dislike the idea of religious privilege to attack the idea of Bishops in the House of Lords. However, as the more recent cases show, combined with the UCL study, such power and influence has diminished to the point of irrelevance. There is a stark contrast between the militancy of the Church of England bishops and peers twenty years ago with the more inward looking and self-serving attitude of the Church of England nowadays. It indicates a power shift. It indicates a change in approach. Twenty years ago, the religious influence in the House of Lords would have fought and in some cases succeeded on imposing its own views. A Telegraph article on the Church of England's attitude after the successful passing of the same-sex marriage bill through the Lords simply claimed that the institution recognised 'it is the will of Parliament that same sex couples "should" be allowed to marry'.

Let us now look at how the Church of England deals specifically with two typical issues cited in New Atheism as reasons for attacking religion, homosexuality and the teaching of evolution.

## **1: Homosexuality**

The Church of England has an official website which states ‘as a member of the Anglican Communion, the Church of England also respects the teachings of resolutions 1:10 on Human sexuality of the 1998 Lambeth Conference which expresses the declared mind of the Anglican community as a whole’. The Anglican Church holds ten-yearly gatherings and discussed the subject of homosexuality in detail at its 1998 conference held in Lambeth. The following resolutions are those to whom anyone interested in ‘official’ policy of the Church of England is directed.

1: While rejecting homosexuality as incompatible with scripture, calls on all people to minister pastorally and sensitively to all irrespective of sexual orientation and to condemn irrational fear of homosexuality

2: Cannot advise the legitimacy or blessing of same-sex unions

3: We have prayed, studied and discussed these issues and we are unable to reach a common mind on the scriptural, theological, historical and scientific questions which are raised (134)

It also quotes the relevant biblical passages.

Leviticus 18:22 *‘Do not lie with a man as one lies with a woman; that is detestable’*

Corinthians 6:9:10 *‘Do you not know that the wicked will not inherit the kingdom of God’ Do not be deceived, neither the sexually immoral nor idolaters nor adulterers nor male prostitutes nor homosexual offenders nor thieves nor the greedy nor drunkards will inherit the Kingdom of God’*

The source of those quotes is not given but a quick check in the King James Bible reveals that the word homosexual is absent and the word *effeminate* used instead. The then current Archbishop of Canterbury, Rowan Williams, known for his more liberal views on the subject has stated in the past that what the Bible is actually condemning in this passage is ‘promiscuity’ rather than merely the act of being a homosexual. Such quotations indicate a very clear message. Irrespective of how ‘contested’ the subject may be (the substitution of the word homosexual for effeminate and the Archbishops’ own theory are guaranteed enough to keep theologians busy as to the true meanings of the passages), official policy states that homosexuality is incompatible with scripture. Though the statement is clearly qualified with calls for ‘sensitivity’ and they admit they are not all of one mind, the message is equivocal. And the only justification offered is ‘incompatible with scripture’. Upon enactment of the Civil Partnerships Act in 2004, the Church of England published the following official response. ‘the present objective as far as the Church of England is concerned, is to ensure that the regulations that the Government intends to make under the amended provisions of the Civil Partnership Act continue to provide unfettered freedom for each religious tradition to resolve these matters in accordance with its own convictions and its own internal procedures of governance.’

However, leading church leaders were in support of the recommendations. The then Archbishop of Canterbury Dr. Geoffrey Fisher spoke out in favour for it, and a Roman Catholic Spokesman said ‘the law is only acceptable of the fact that the community should not in general, pry

into a citizen's private deeds-even when they are misdeeds'. (15) And specific religious objections were hardly mentioned at all in the debate in which homosexuality itself was almost exclusively referred to as 'that odious crime'. (16) However, Wolfenden is significant in this debate in that it defined a way of approaching the subject of morals in politics. In its opening disclaimer it said 'we clearly recognize that the laws of any society must be acceptable to the general moral sense of the community if they are to be respected and enforced. But we are not charged to enter into matters of private moral conduct except in so far as they directly affect the public good'. (17) This idea of the political infrastructure free from the role of moral proscriber echoes Rawls.. The report later developed this point 'there appears to be no unquestioned definition of what constitutes a crime. To define it as an act which is punished by the state does not answer the question 'what acts ought to be punished by the state... It's function as we see it is to preserve public order and decency, to protect the citizen from what is offensive or injurious and to provide sufficient safeguards against exploitation and corruption of others...it is not in our view, the function of the law to intervene in the private lives of citizens or to seek to enforce any particular pattern of behaviour.' In making these claims, the Wolfenden report outlined a way of thinking which completely rejected the imposition of religious dogma, which is very much concerned with private morals. The position was made clear in an academic debate following the publication of the report by law-lord Patrick Devlin and Professor Hart. Speaking against the report, Devlin stated 'there is disintegration when no common morality is observed...society is justified in taking the same steps to preserve its moral code as it does to preserve its judgement' (18)to which Hart, warning of the dangers of populism said 'why should the conventional morality of a few members of the population be forced on everyone else'. And in 1965 the position on the legislation of morality was further clarified by Lord Arran, the peer who supported the bill through the House of Lords. He said 'as a general proposition, it will be universally accepted that the law is not concerned with private morals or with ethical sanctions...public statues should avoid the attempt to legislate morality and concern themselves only with sexual acts that offend public decency or disrupt order'.(19)

The issue has still not gone away. Provisos built into the 2004 Civil Partnership Act specified that there could be no religious readings at any homosexual civil ceremony and also stated that no such ceremony could take place on religious grounds. (20)The consultation document published by the government prior to enacting the new legislation revealed that of the 19 statements of interest submitted by public interest groups, four were religious and three of them were against the act. The sole religious organisation that was in favour was, unsurprisingly the Lesbian and Gay Church association. The three pressure groups who spoke against were the Christian Institute, Christian Voice and the Catholic Bishop Alliance, all of whom could be said to be on the fundamentalist side of their faith, further proof that pressure groups and members of pressure groups like Baroness Young can exercise significant legislative control and influence over parliamentary and indeed public opinion, something we will examine in detail in the following chapter.

## **2: Creationism**

Religious opposition to evolution does not come from mainstream Christianity. The Anglican Church (along with at least the last two Archbishops' Rowan Williams and George Carey) has asserted its acceptance of evolution in opposition to creationism. The Church of England has in fact had a long



history of inclusiveness when it comes to Darwin's theory, generally taking the view that God doesn't simply 'make the world' but 'makes the world make itself'. For many sceptics, particularly Richard Dawkins, this position is nothing more than a sleight of hand on the part of the faithful and a way of wriggling out of hard questions. It is also the case that certain atheists, again notably Richard Dawkins have taken the view that evolution 'disproves' God. This isn't really a sustainable position although Dawkins explains his reasoning in his 'God of the Gaps' theory, i.e. the development of living things via natural selection provides yet another role for which we don't need God, a pattern that will undoubtedly continue as science progresses and human knowledge expands. In 2010 the General Synod voted 241 to 2 votes in favour of a motion to accept the theory of evolution and openly oppose any attempt to teach creationism or intelligent design within the science classroom. They stated that the Bible should not be treated as a 'scientific textbook' and to do so would only 'weaken the Christian voice'.

## **Does religion have too much influence in politics?**

Religion in British political parties (notably the Labour and the Conservative party) has tended to manifest itself in two ways, each exclusive to either party. The Tory party has often been subject to so-called right-wing Christian morality (similar to the so-called Christian Right in America), typified by less tolerant attitudes to subjects like abortion and homosexuality, although unlike America, rarely couched in biblical terms, but instead introduced under the guise of phrases like 'family values'. In the Labour party, religion has manifested itself in the form of so-called Christian Socialism. We shall look at examples of both.

Because of the influence and high profile of the so-called 'Christian Right' (particularly in America), the idea of right-wing politics being couched in some form of Christian-inspired moral framework has mistakenly perpetuated itself. Political theorists and philosophers have generally acknowledged the fact that Conservative politics and thought has generally eschewed such rigid, comprehensive disciplines. Gillian Peel in her work on conservatism has said 'traditionally, Tories have distrusted the application of abstract Doctrines to politics and have preferred instead to follow dictates of common sense and experience...this is not to say that there have been no thinkers whom the Tories have generally admired, it is merely to suggest that within the Conservative Party, because there is no ideological orthodoxy and no equivalent of Karl Marx, there is no tradition of articulating and developing general ideas as opposed to concrete and specific policy proposals...politics is primarily about the solution of problems which actually manifest themselves, not about the construction of an egalitarian heaven on earth.' (20)

Of course this is not to ignore the context from which such Conservatism emerged and Harriet Jones in '*Conservatives & British Society*' admits 'Christian democracy emerged on the continent in response to the urgent need to find a consensual basis for stable politics in a capitalist framework.' (21) Jones seems to be suggesting that the fusion of Conservative politics and the Christian religion was and is very much a marriage of convenience and not mutually exclusive or indeed essential in the case of either party. Alan Finlayson in his essay on Conservatism in '*Contemporary Political Thought*' appears to concur when he claims that one of the common facets of Conservatives is 'strong religious affiliations and a particular attachment to the role of Christian morality in the

shaping of society...but the ways in which these concepts are related to each other by Conservatives are highly variable.' (22) He goes on to say that Conservatives will 'treat certain core concepts in flexible and even highly fluid manner' whilst concluding that Conservatism is not so much about a 'political philosophy as a philosophy of Politics'. (23) And so whilst this marriage of convenience, could if viewed cynically be seen as a manipulative and insincere method of gaining support and power at whatever cost, might also be viewed merely as the politics of pragmatism, but nevertheless couched within a broad awareness and appreciation of the historical context. In their 1994 work '*True Blues*' which examined voting trends and behaviour of Conservative Party members, Paul Unity and Jeremy Purchase noted that 'religious Conservatives tend to be more progressive than non-religious conservatives, anti-traditionalist in a general sense but rather traditional in a moral sense, thus they are less inclined to support the death penalty but more inclined to support restrictions on abortion.' (24)

This kind of Conservatism can be seen as a filtration of the ideas of 19<sup>th</sup> century French political philosopher Alexis de Tocqueville. Tocqueville postulated that religion was a vital factor in the spread and protection of any form of democracy, acting, as he saw it, as a binding, social, moralizing restraint. Summarising Tocqueville's writings in his 1996 work on the philosopher, Pierre Manent wrote 'religion is to democracy as the bridle is to the horse. It serves to guide and moderate...when religion is destroyed in a people, doubt seizes the highest realms of intelligence and half paralyzes all others. Each becomes accustomed to having only confused and changing notions on the matters that most interest his fellow man and himself. The opinions he has are poorly defended or abandoned.' (25) Manent goes on to quote Tocqueville as stating 'to fulfil their task in a moral and dignified manner, men need knowledge or opinion of the whole that include them and what lies beyond. The immense majority of men cannot form such an opinion out of the resources of their own reason. They must therefore receive it on the basis of authority, as a religious dogma. What is more, if we keep in mind that the citizens of democracies have very dangerous instincts that lead them to isolate themselves from one another and to pursue material pleasures with an immoderate love we could conclude that religion which steers the heart of man in an opposite direction, is even more necessary to them than to other men. Such are the arguments from the general utility of religion and its particular necessity from democratic societies.' (26)

Tocqueville makes a notable distinction between religion as a social utility and slavish adherence to dogma. Manent writes 'in the Tocqueville analysis, the social utility of religion is largely independent of its intrinsic truths society has nothing to fear or hope from an afterlife and what is most important is not so much that all citizens profess the true religion but that they profess a religion.' (27) Philosopher Roger Scruton has expanded on this view by suggesting that much of the attempt to exclude religion from public life is based on the Enlightenment view of religion, something Scruton disputes. 'The Enlightenment view of religion is profoundly wrong. Belief and doctrine are a part of religion certainly, but so too are custom, ceremony, ritual, membership, sacrifice, the division between sacred and profane and the visceral hostility to sacrilege. By allowing religious freedom we do nothing to create a public world in which religious communities can feel truly at home. Moreover it is naïve to think that every kind of religious community can be governed by a secular jurisdiction. The idea of such a jurisdiction is a construct of Roman law, inherited by Christianity and crystallised by the Enlightenment. Secular jurisdiction has no authority in Islamic thinking and Western societies earn no favours in Muslim eyes by extending to Muslims the protection of a godless rule of law.' (28) It is this line of thought that tends to become clearly manifest

in the writings of tabloid commentators and certain Conservatives, no better demonstrated than in the policies of Thatcherism.

A year before becoming Prime Minister, Thatcher gave a speech in a church hall and said 'freedom will destroy itself if it is not exercised within some sort of moral framework, some body of shared beliefs, some spiritual heritage transmitted through the church, the family and the schools. There are two very general and seemingly conflicting ideas about society which come down to us from the New Testament. There is that great Christian Doctrine that we are all members of another, expressed in the concept of the church on earth as the Body of Christ...that is one of the great Christian truths which has influenced our political thought, we are all responsible moral beings with a choice between good and evil, beings who are infinitely precious in the eyes of their creator.'

(29) And indeed Thatcher would go on, during her decade in power to enforce so-called 'traditional family values' in a way that (as she admitted in her second autobiography) was directly influenced by her religion.(30) To that extent, the fusion of right-wing Politics with a Christian moral framework was well demonstrated. However, this was also a woman who championed rampant individualism via aggressive economic policies such as monetarism and said that there was 'no such thing as society.'  
(31) These were hardly values which could be said to be traditionally Christian and indeed, during her time in office, her government was openly criticized by the Church of England on several occasions; the then Archbishop of Canterbury Dr Runcie spoke out about the Falklands conflict, the '*Faith in the City*' document was published condemning the actions of government-inspired market forces, and in 1990 the General Synod voted overwhelmingly in favour of condemning the party's pit closures policy. (32)

To this extent Margaret Thatcher is a good example of the marriage of convenience between the Conservative Party and Christianity. One sometimes influences the other. One sometimes condemns the other. Neither is *essential* to the other. The 1994 '*True Blue*' research conducted a poll of party member's religious affiliations. They interviewed 2435 party members and 70% were Protestant, 7% nonconformist, 7% Catholic and 11% Atheist and another 7% Christian with no denomination specified. (33) Though this is proof that the majority of party members are Christian, the numbers are not significantly different to the religious numbers in the country as a whole at the time and so cannot be used to prove that to be a Conservative is to be a Christian or vice versa.

Public rhetoric from notable MP's, particularly leaders and prime ministers can also be a revealing factor. To take just a few examples we can see a traditional and notably consistent lack of religiosity in public pronouncements, irrespective of private beliefs (already we can see the public reasoning of Rawls in evidence). Thatcher is a prime example because here was someone whose faith, similar to Mary Whitehouse, clearly informed her policies (as demonstrated in the church speech above) but she rarely if ever couched her concerns within a specifically religious context when it came to public speaking in a mainstream arena. Like many Christians, she preferred to put forward 'public reasons', not necessarily in any kind of covert way but possibly because to her, her faith and her convictions were so intermingled. For example, in the first volume of her autobiography '*The Downing Street Years*' religion, both in terms of her own personal beliefs and her government policy barely warrants a mention. What she does say however is 'all the evidence statistical and anecdotal, pointed to the breakdown of families as the starting point for a range of social ills...decent and responsible behaviour...our attempts to rethink welfare policy along these lines met a number of objections. Others were rooted in the attitude that it was not for the state to

make moral distinctions in its social policy...by the time I left office my advisors and I were assembling a package of means to strengthen the traditional family whose disintegration was the common source of so much suffering but government can only provide a framework...the wider influences of the media, schools and above all the churches are more powerful than anything the government can do.' (34)

Thatcher expresses dismay at the 60's reforms, notably towards the divorce laws and how it would be 'difficult' to go back on them but nevertheless encourages a re-evaluation of such policies. Her belief in the traditional family and its values would also explain her government's implementation of the controversial Section 28 which forbade local councils from 'promoting' homosexuality. Her mention that 'churches' are and should be a major influence leaves no doubt however as to the origin of her own morality and belief system. She doesn't state her policies are for the good of her religion but are based on the unspoken assumption that her religion is for the public good. Thatcher did elaborate on her faith and its influence on her policies in her second autobiography '*The Path to Power*.' 'I find it difficult to imagine that anything other than Christianity is likely to resupply most people in the west with the virtues to remoralise society...and that I have always resisted the argument that a Christian has to be a Conservative. I have never lost my conviction that this is a deep and providential harmony between the kind of political economy I favour and the insights of Christianity.' (35)

As unequivocal as this statement was, the point to remember is that she did not speak in such terms in her public speeches. This is not to indicate that she was in any way 'hiding' or 'ashamed' of her beliefs, simply that she found it impossible to divorce her belief in religious doctrine and faith from her belief that this was for the public good. There is no denying however that Thatcher, as a wily politician, was aware of the lessening numbers of religious people in Britain and knew that to appeal to a wider public, based solely on the loyalty to a rapidly diminishing faith group would not sufficiently convince. The fact that she was able to appeal to large numbers of the electorate and enact pieces of legislation like section 28 does however indicate that this policy of couching her religious convictions in 'public reasons' was a success. This doesn't appear to have been picked up by many biographers though. Eric Evans in '*Thatcher and Thatcherism*' states 'Thatcher had no difficulty identifying what she was against, state interference with individual freedom, state initiatives that encourage an ethos of dependency, woolly conservatism, high levels of taxation.' (36) Clearly, Thatcher *was* for state interference with individual freedom, but only when it came to matters of morality. Richard Vinen in '*Thatcher's Britain*' says 'Thatcher's government's periodic spats with the church were concerned entirely with matters of social and economic policy...these were matters that concerned only a handful of eccentric parliamentarians and there was no particular Tory approach to them.' (37) Both of these assessments fail to demonstrate an awareness of the *origin* of this conviction politicians' convictions and the success she had in implicitly using those convictions to enact policy. On a final note, the atheistic aspect of Communism seems to have been a particular bone of contention for Thatcher, in a preface to a series of essays '*Christianity and Conservatism*' she said, on the subject of the fall of communism in Czechoslovakia 'what a glorious vision the new President expressed, after the long night of totalitarian secular tyranny it was the Christian faith which kept alight the flickering flame of hope in those societies.' (38)

Her successor John Major had almost the opposite approach in that he privately held few strong religious convictions but was (mistakenly) suspected of trying to promote religious type morality in

his policies, specifically in the notorious 1993 'Back to Basics' campaign. In his autobiography, Major (who doesn't mention religion at all in his book) explained 'The phrase was hijacked as being a public statement about personal morality. I did not forget its real meaning 'back to basics' came from my innermost personal beliefs. It set out to confront and overturn a range of ideas that had led to policy-in crime, health, schools, social work-down blind alleys. Professional wisdom had become divorced from public sentiment and from reality. I wanted to bring back politics on a human scale.'<sup>(39)</sup>He talks about crime on council estates and 'the infamous 60's did have something to teach Britain about tolerance, about understanding and about the conditions in which crime breeds. The 90's I believed had something to teach about personal responsibilities and individual values. These were my beliefs and that is why I was content that approach to these matters should be called 'back to basics.'<sup>(40)</sup>

This lack of public religiosity on the part of Conservative occupiers of 10 Downing Street was not a modern phenomenon? Perhaps the famous predecessor of that address, Winston Churchill also kept religion out of his public rhetoric. An inspection of five biographies of the great man reveals that his religious beliefs are sufficiently insignificant to warrant complete absence of discussion in three of them (by John Charmley,<sup>(41)</sup> Martin Gilbert<sup>(42)</sup> and Robert Blake & WM. Roger Louis<sup>(43)</sup>). The other two indicate that his belief was largely irrelevant to him. Clive Ponting states 'it was in India that Churchill lost what little religious faith he ever had. He told his Mother later 'I do not accept the Christian or any other form of religious belief' and he developed a particularly dislike of Catholicism and Christian ministries. His own beliefs were clear 'I expect annihilation at death'. In public he felt it polite to go through the conventional rituals of the Anglican Church though he tried to avoid such occasions as much as possible. Cynically he supported the role of the church in providing a socially conservative doctrine for the masses and in helping to provide social cohesion'.<sup>(44)</sup> Keith Robbins elaborates on Churchill's pragmatic attitude to the church and its relationship with the state 'he gave little sign of wrestling with the God of the Christians or of taking seriously what the Church of England thought a church might be. He continued to believe that the young benefited from a religious teaching provided that it was un-sectarian. In schools, the Bible and hymns were sufficient. This religious instruction should not be placed in the hands of any sect, the Church of England included for each was partisan. It should be in the hands of secular instructors appointed by government. More generally, he took the common sense view that if a church was established then naturally it was for the government to insist on effective control, 'who pays the piper calls the tune' as he put it.'<sup>(45)</sup>

Dawkins would no doubt draw conclusions from a letter Churchill wrote home as a child after attending a lecture from a visiting biologist 'there was a lecture about how butterflies protect themselves by their colouring, a nasty tasting butterfly has got colouring to warn the bird not to eat it. A succulent juicy tasting butterfly protects himself by making himself look like his usual branch or leaf. But this takes them millions of years to do and in the meanwhile the more backward ones get eaten and die out. That is why the survivors are marked and coloured as they are.'<sup>(46)</sup>Perhaps surprisingly (given the apparently more Church-going era of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century) his private non-belief seems to have filtered through into his public rhetoric. A long-term outspoken critic of bolshevism and communism (remembering that it was Churchill who coined the phrase 'iron curtain') there was never a specific mention of the atheism in communism in his criticisms and unlike Thatcher, he failed ever to draw the conclusion that this aspect was of the least importance in

eastern Europe's dominant ideological movement, and the evils that it was purported to be carrying out.

And talk of public rhetoric must also mention his war-time speeches; perhaps the most famous of any public rhetoric in modern history, and in all of those stirring, patriotic words God only merits a single mention. At the very end of the 'we will fight them on the beaches' speech given following the disaster at Dunkirk, Churchill closes with 'carrying on the struggle which, in God's good time, the new world with all its power and might steps forth to the rescue and liberation of the old.' (47) This contrasts with the King's speech given a year previously on the first Christmas of the war which ends with a biblical quote and then 'may that Almighty hand guide and uphold us all.' (48) And so again, in British political rhetoric, including those made by our most famous orators in their most famous political speeches, speeches made in our most notorious, desperate and 'finest hour', God, the Bible and religion had no part to play whatsoever.

The Christian Socialism espoused by many members, past and present, of the Labour party may give the impression that religion has played a greater part in the formation and implementation of the Labour party than that of the Conservative party. This isn't the case. Like the Conservative party, the Labour party, in its ideological thinking has absorbed and used Christian thinking as and when it has needed to but it has played no real, consistent part in its strategy. It's probably true to say that religiosity has played a greater part in the lives of the party's great thinkers but in most cases, politics has invariably got in the way. Geoffrey Foot in his work *'The Labour Party's Political Thought'* admitted that 'trade union politics...constituted the fundamental labour tenets of the Labour Party. They are flexible and loose enough to be capable of absorbing and modifying ideologies as diverse as militant syndicalism and Christian communitarianism'. (49) There is also the significant point of socialism's links with Marxism, an ideology which had atheism as one its main tenets.

Although no work of significance has made the link between socialism's rejection of Marxism and the influence of Christianity it's notable that that values espoused by Christian socialists (equality, fairness, individual freedom, freedom of conscience and the rejection of autocracy and rigid doctrine) are often cited by Labour thinkers in their rejection of Marxism. Tony Benn described himself as a 'Christian whose political commitment owes much more to the teachings of Jesus Christ - without the mysteries within which they are presented - than to the writings of Marx whose analysis seems to lack an understanding of the deeper needs of mankind.' (50) Aneurin Bevan said 'it is from the unencumbered minds of ordinary people that vigorous ideas will emerge...it will reconcile the needs of an ordered economic life with the fullest effluences of personal liberty without an ordered economic life the individual frustrates himself in a morass of fears and insecurities, without personal liberty an ordered economic life is like a plant that never flowers'. (51)

Foot claimed Bevan believed 'on the issue of how socialism should use and distribute the power once gained he dismissed orthodox communist philosophy, adding that the purpose of getting power was to be able to give it away'. (52) Foot, despite never demonstrating overt religiosity did have an interest in religion as a student and when asked about future intentions once said 'I don't want to enter politics, I am more interested in the church.' (53) Foot's intellectual hero Aneurin Bevan claimed 'I am not a communist. I am a social democrat. I believe that it is possible for a modern, intelligent community to organize the economic life rationally...and it is not necessary to resort to

dictatorship in order to do it. I believe that is possible. That is why I am a socialist. If I did not believe that, I would be a communist.’<sup>(54)</sup> Bevan’s words reveal the apparent irrelevancy of religion to socialism, freely admitting that if it were not for the totalitarian aspects of an atheist ideology he would have no compunction in siding with it. This is not to claim that Bevan was an atheist but it does indicate his belief in the ability for democratic, socialist principles to operate outside of an exclusively Christian framework.

Christian socialism has tended to manifest itself in two forms in the thinking of the Labour party’s main players. Firstly there are those who, whilst often acknowledging the links between socialism and Christian principles (even sometimes admitting that they arrived at their socialism through or because of their Christian upbringing) are still able to move forward and interpret those principles within an exclusively political framework. They are, if you will, able to ‘cut the apron strings’, and use Those principles *divorced* from religiosity. Most of the party’s big thinkers such as those mentioned above (and leaders such as Attlee and Wilson) have tended down this route.

As the premier who oversaw the formation of the modern welfare state, Clement Attlee would no doubt be a welcome addition to the pantheon of ‘religious’ or ‘Christian’ socialists. However, the link, though acknowledged by him was ultimately deemed unnecessary. Attlee appears to have lost his faith quite early on, partly due to the tedious religiosity of religious practice. Trevor Burridge’s biography claims ‘the bible was always regarded as inspired and good works were reckoned an integral part of Christian duty, Clem’s career can also be traced to the Attlee’s family’s concern with doing the right thing but with him the impulse was focused and strengthened by a reaction against the formal manifestations of religion...it was the foundation of the non-dogmatic and tolerant approach to socialism. The national British tendency to heresy and dissent he was to maintain prevented the formation of a rigid socialist orthodoxy.’<sup>(55)</sup> Burridge seems to indicate that it was Attlee’s separation of the altruistic nature in socialism from its religious roots, (i.e. one can still be good and do good works but without taking the dogma along) that was in a way the formation of modern socialism. This point is no doubt debatable but the claim was also made by Attlee’s official biographer Kenneth Harris. When talking about the Attlee family’s pious origins he says ‘Only Clem seems to have had difficulty in adjusting himself to the Anglican ambience which pervaded 18 Pontisdale Road. In his childhood it was not so much the Christianity but the Church services that put him off...he had no wish to disturb his parents and to other people he assured his opinion did not matter, so characteristically-and thenceforth he did not give God or the life everlasting very much thought.’<sup>(656)</sup> Harris recounted a conversation he had with Attlee when he pressed him on his religious views,

*Harris: Was it Christianity that took you into politics?*

*Attlee: Social conscience I would say, inherited it. My parents were very much that way*

*Harris: But your parents were actually professing Christians weren’t they?*

*Attlee: And my brothers and sisters. I’m one of those people who are incapable of religious feeling*

*Harris: Do you mean you have no feeling about Christianity or that you have no feeling about God, Christ or life after death?*

*Attlee: Believe in the ethics of Christianity, can’t believe in the mumbo-jumbo*

*Harris: Would you say you were agnostic?*

*Attlee: I don’t know*

*Harris: Is there an afterlife do you think?*

Harold Wilson's origins echoed the pious Attlee background of emerging frustration with ritual and religiosity in favour of Christian Socialism and its influence to do 'good works. His biographer Philip Ziegler says 'his religion was more that of the social worker than the mystic, in his early 20's he took part in a debate in the correspondence columns of the Christian World arguing vigorously that the church was insufficiently pre-occupied with evils such as poverty and unemployment.' (58)

Prior to becoming Prime Minister in 1963, Wilson said in an interview 'I have religious beliefs yes and they have very much affected my political views.' (60) He never elaborated on this and it's possible he may, like Attlee have simply been referring to so-called Christian socialism.

On winning the election the following year Wilson ordered a blessing to be made at the parliamentary chapel, however Blair biographer Antony Seldon notes that 'after 64, once his government got mixed up in real world politics, one heard little subsequently of Wilson's actions being inspired by God'. (61) Added to that was the claim made years later by Wilson's wife Mary that 'religion was part of his tradition, he never questioned it but he did not think much about wider religious questions. When he did, he simply believed that people should translate Christianity into good works.' (71a) And so although Wilson may have seemed like a prototype Blair, he eventually went the way of Attlee in that whilst undeniably interpreting socialism in terms of Christian ethics he ultimately found the bond an unnecessary one

The second form of Christian socialism in the Labour party is typified by those who see the link between Christian principles and socialism as *essential*. Early Labour thinkers such as Philip Schofield and Stafford Cripps produced pamphlets on the subject, however the major influence on the recent re-emergence of Christian socialism was R.H. Tawney, a big influence on John Smith who in turn was an influence on Tony Blair.

Referring to one of the most important thinkers of the 1930's Labour Party R. H Tawney, Smith wrote 'His Christian faith was the foundation of his approach...we, like Tawney see our Christian faith as leading towards democratic socialist convictions.' (63) Upon becoming leader of the Labour Party in 1992 John Smith, a practicing member of the Church of Scotland oversaw (and wrote the concluding essay) a party pamphlet entitled '*Reclaiming the Ground*'. In his essay John Smith sought to define his and New Labour's ethical principles in overtly religious terms, using them to contrast with and thereby criticise the Tory party. He talked about Tawney and said 'he did not claim-nor should any Christian-that only Christianity could provide the moral framework for an ethical approach to politics. Our own experience tells us that an ethical approach to life and politics can be held as firmly by people of other faiths and by those who hold no religious conviction.' (64) He went on to add 'we should never feel inhibited in stressing the moral basis of our approach...what is more I believe the tide of opinion is beginning to flow towards a recognition of the value of society and away from the nihilistic individualism of so much of modern conservatism.' (65)

The re-emergence of Christian socialism as a tool to contrast against perceived far-right policies is really the only explanation which can be offered for its resurgence. In a country which not only had rapidly decreasing levels of faith but also a long and impressive history of great leaders like Churchill and Attlee who rejected overt religiosity, there can really be no other reasoning behind the attempt to link faith and politics in this way at this time. Smith went on to say 'the flaws in the free-market



doctrines of the radical Right are becoming more widely appreciated and more easily exposed than ever before.’ (66) His early death and succession of his protégé Tony Blair saw this thinking carried over into the last years of opposition.

A trained lawyer who once considered entering the Priesthood, Blair rose to prominence under Smith and like him, was often keen to fuse perceived socialist values with religious ones, often to provide a contrast with the Conservative party, ‘we are trying to establish in the public mind the coincidence between the values of democratic socialism and those of Christianity...there’s a desire in the Labour party to rediscover its ethical values, the ethical code that most of us really believe gave birth to the Labour party.’ (67) In a foreword to Smith’s book of essays Blair said ‘Christianity is a very tough religion...it places a duty, an imperative on us to reach our better self and to care about creating a better community to live in.’ (68) His biographer Anthony Seldon agreed that ‘Blair allied Christian virtues with Labour politics, the Christian stress on community as opposed to the narrow view of self-interest represented by Conservatism.’ (69) Notably, most of these proclamations were made prior to becoming Prime Minister. His influential press secretary Alister Campbell warned him against speaking so piously in public thereafter and although Blair seems to have taken this advice one could still occasionally detect a pseudo-religious style. His 1997 conference speech included ‘let’s build a new and young country that can lay aside the old prejudices where your child in distress is my child, your parent’s illness is my parent’s, your friend unemployed or homeless is my friend, your neighbour, my neighbour.’ (70)

But why did Campbell, who famously declared to Vanity Fair in 1993 ‘*We Don’t Do God*’ take this view and warn Blair against speaking in this way. Campbell’s diaries reveal ‘I could see nothing but trouble in talking about (God). British people are not like Americans who seem to want their politicians banging the Bible the whole time. They hated it, I was sure of that. The ones who didn’t believe didn’t want to hear it and the ones who did felt the politicians who went on about it were doing it for the wrong reasons.’ (71) Campbell goes on to recount an incident in 1996 when Blair ignored his advice and gave an interview in which he talked at length and in detail about his religious influences. The result, described by Campbell was ‘The Sunday telegraph was splashing on the row engendered by Tony’s piece on God. I felt fully vindicated...they were trying to spin this as Blair allying himself to God. When you looked at the words he didn’t say that but he said enough to let them do the story and get Tories piling in saying he was using his faith for politics and saying you couldn’t be a Tory and a Christian. This was the permanent risk with UK politicians talking about God.’ (72) Campbell concludes with an entry the following day ‘Gordon Brown called and we agreed God was a disaster area.’ (73) In 1997 Private Eye began a ‘Vicar of St-Albion’ column, mocking Blair’s attempt to fuse faith with politics, and comedian and impressionist Rory Bremner began imitating Blair’s preachy hand-wringing style of presentation.

On the one hand, since Blair won three successive elections one could argue that such overt religiosity can’t have done him much harm. However, it is true to say that he did tone it down after the 1997 election although it never went away (when asked about the calamitous fall out of the Iraq war Blair confessed to being ready to ‘meet his maker’ (74) and answer for the decisions he’d taken). Considering the satirical ridicule of Blair’s faith, Campbell’s concerns would seem to be well founded and Seldon makes another interesting point when he says ‘Campbell’s atheism was not the sole reason for his antipathy, as a confessing Christian, Blair did not fit with the image of the ‘normal’ family that was being carved out for him.’ (75) Seldon’s crucial point here is it by the end of the 20<sup>th</sup>

century overt religiosity was *no longer considered normal* in Britain. The statistics and trends at the beginning of this chapter bear this out. Atheism was rising. Christian Belief was falling, and the percentage of those who did believe but didn't practice was plummeting.

Increased religious belief was only occurring in the new, multicultural faith groups, to which the Blairs (and the vast majority of the British population) did not belong. Seldon notes that 'the conclusion that newspapers which had once scorned those who pronounced themselves atheists, now treated Christians as deviants'. (76) Though the word 'deviant' is probably a little strong, there is no doubt that the overt piety expressed by Blair (irrespective of his position) was simply not judged 'normal', not only in terms of contemporary British attitudes, but also in terms of the traditions of British political rhetoric; a tradition stretching back to the likes of Attlee and Churchill.

The experiences of Blair's New Labour illustrate the problems bringing religion into political rhetoric. In these days of an increasingly large, mass media, where the dissemination of any speech is filtered innumerable times and in innumerable ways, the appeal to one particular group isn't practical. And that is to say nothing about the potential satirical attacks emanating from the introduction of meta-physical concepts into politics.

And what of the Coalition government under David Cameron and Nick Clegg? There appears to be a distinct disparity between what they say and what their actions indicate. On the surface David Cameron and the Tories appear to be far more open in talking positively about religion than their Labour party predecessors. In a direct contradiction to Campbell's phrase 'We Don't Do God' which summed up the later Blair and Brown era's approach to religion, phrases like 'We Do God' or 'We Do Do God' have been reported in the press, associated with a new approach from the new government. In pre and post 2010 election interviews Cameron has been reported as a Christian and is open to talking about his faith. However, when one examines the precise nature of Cameron's words and beliefs we can easily see the familiar pattern of belief in faith as social work, rather than doctrinal and evangelical. Perhaps as a Tory 'traditionalist' (and recognising that this may perhaps be something of a stereotype) Cameron is also insistent that we remember the role Christianity has played in our country's heritage, but again this is generally painted in very broad, rather vague terms. In a 2009 interview with the London Evening Standard Cameron stated that the teachings of Jesus were a good way of 'seeing us through' and provided such examples as 'love thy neighbour' and do unto others as you would have done by you' as typical examples'. By contrast he admitted that his faith 'grows hotter and colder by moments', admitted that he did not drop to his knees and pray and that his faith was not 'always the rock that it perhaps it should be'. He completed the interview by admitting that it was possible to live a positive and altruistic life without God. In response to this interview the Times correspondent described Mr Cameron as doing God in a 'fuzzy, sort of Anglican way' whilst the Spectator concluded that Cameron's words were like 'an attempt to have it both ways, I'm a believer but just a gentle agnostic one' concluding that Cameron was 'determined to seem pro-God but not in a way that will cost him votes'. (87)

Cameron made a key-note speech in December 2011, timed to co-incide with the 400<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the publication of the King James Bible in which he re-iterated his views on religion. Although the speech was seized upon by both sides of the debate, his views were again somewhat vague and where specific, he once more seemed to be interpreting adherence of Christian faith as social work. Firstly he opened by describing himself as a 'committed' but only 'vaguely practising

Christian' leaving considerable ambiguity as to what exactly that meant. He elaborated by insisting that the Bible had given Britain a set of values and morals which made the country what it was today, but qualified the point by insisting that no one party should claim a 'hotline' to God and later elaborated and explained the use of 'values and morals' with only one example; tolerance.

Needless to say the reaction to this speech was varied and predictable. The NSS condemned it as irrelevant, pointing out the disparity of a Prime Minister affirming strong links between religion and society at a time when statistics showed belief to be diminishing. Religious reaction was supported, both the Catholic Tablet, the Church of England and the Muslim Council of Britain reacted favourably. However it was former Tory MP Michael Portillo's reaction which was perhaps the most telling. He stated that 'if any Prime Minister up to and including Edward Heath and Margaret Thatcher had not said this was a Christian Country people would have been absolutely amazed. We all know the classic cases of political correctness that you are not allowed to mention Christmas and cards that you send out at this time of the year must not mention Christmas and things like this. I mean absolute nonsense. So, as though my Jewish friends would not send out new year's cards at the time of their new year. Quite extraordinary.' (89) Portillo's reading of Cameron's affirmation of Britain as a Christian Country seems to indicate that it was more to do with getting rid of absurd PC stories about making Christianity invisible, rather than the first step of reaffirming the 'correct' place of religion in society in any evangelical way. Though some would no doubt still argue that that may still have been what was intended, Portillo's reading does at least give some explanation to the apparent contradiction between Cameron's affirmation of the importance of Christianity to Britain and his own rather half-hearted statements about how his faith actually informs his actions.

Perhaps the most notorious statements issued by the Coalition government regarding faith have actually come from elsewhere. Baroness Saidi Warsi, minister without Portfolio. It was in September of 2010, months after winning the election, that Warsi made the statements which have been condensed into the phrase 'we do God', something not actually said specifically. In a speech given to religious leaders in Oxford Warsi said the last government was 'profoundly wrong' because to seem to view religion as a 'rather quaint relic of or pre-industrial history'. Warsi seemed to blame so-called fundamentalist secularism when she blamed the last government for encouraging; a new kind of intellectual who dines out on free flowing media and sustains a vocabulary of secularist intolerance...the fact is that our world is more religious than ever...and in Britain faith is very much alive and kicking.' (90) It is difficult to imagine a vocabulary of secularist intolerance which does not include perceptions of Dawkins and the apparent fundamentalism of New Atheism. We have already looked at examples of how New Atheism has made the debate mainstream. It is by contrast difficult to see where precisely Warsi's evidence is for claiming that 'our world is more religious than ever'. In terms of figures, in Britain, this statement is incorrect and would be proved conclusively so upon the publication of the census results the following year (something we will discuss in detail later). If faith is alive and kicking it could be seen as the defiant, reactionary twitches of a belief system on its last legs, kicking against the oncoming tide of secularist/atheist support. Warsi concluded 'if anyone suggests that this government does not understand, does not appreciate, does not defend people of faith, dare I even say does not 'do God', then I hope my schedule this week will go some way to banishing that myth.'

Warsi has continued to make similar statements in the ensuing years in government, however let us now have a look at the actions of the Coalition government, as opposed to their words. There are two case studies to take into account, both involving opposition to religion. The first was the 2012 case involving Bideford Town Council and their insistence that members attend prayers before meetings. The NSS supported one of the councillors when he took the council to court claiming that it should not be a legal requirement to attend prayers before council meetings. The NSS won the case, much to the dismay of some religious pressure groups such as the Christian Institute (more of them in the next chapter) who used the case to re-emphasise the impression that faith in general and Christianity in particular was somehow under attack. However the case also confirmed that it was not necessarily a breach of Human Rights that the council should force people to attend meetings and the situation was ultimately resolved by leaving it to the discretion of individual councils and councillors as a matter of conscience. The government made no official statements about it, although Cabinet Minister Eric Pickles disagreed. Pickles' criticisms of the so-called persecution of Christians, alongside Warsi's (and to some extent Cameron's) were used in headlines to give the impression that the government was somehow pro-religion. This was true, but only in the sense that they were against any rampant secularism and overt discrimination against theists. And whether the removal of an obligatory requirement for councillors to attend morning prayers constituted rampant discrimination against believers was very much a matter of opinion in the media.

However the most telling example of what the Coalition government really thinks about religion was revealed in the legislation surrounding Gay Marriage. When looking at this stance, in particular related to the Church of England, I must reiterate one of the distinctions of this thesis. We are not concerned here with internal fights and disagreements. It goes without saying that religion and the Church of England in particular is riven with disagreements as to the role of women and homosexuals within their own internal systems. And New Atheism has certainly used such examples to justify its accusation of such institutions as inherently prejudiced. What this thesis is concerned with however is the extent such 'prejudice' is felt in the wider, political and public arena via the eternal evangelisation of such movements; in short what the Church of England thinks about Gay Bishops is irrelevant here, how they may try and influence gay rights for you and me is something else.

Cameron was elected as leader of the Conservative Party in 2005 on a platform to modernise the party. The years since Major's embarrassing defeat in 1997 had seen the party languishing in the opinion polls as it went through a succession of leaders all trying and failing to make the party electable again. One of the most obvious ways to dispel the wider impression of the party as being backward looking and right-wing was to appeal to new hitherto 'unwelcome' minorities such as non-whites and homosexuals. And support for a gay-marriage bill was an ideal example. Cameron was on record even before his election as leader as supporting gay rights and when, after the 2010 election he pledged to introduce a bill legalising gay-marriage, he faced severe opposition not only from grass roots Conservatives but also from religious groups, ranging from the fringe to the establishment. The Church of England was not in favour of gay marriage and when the proposals were announced, the institution made the following statement;

*The Church of England cannot support the proposal to enable —all couples, regardless of their gender, to have a civil marriage ceremony .Such a move would alter the intrinsic nature of marriage*

*as the union of a man and a woman, as enshrined in human institutions throughout history. Marriage benefits society in many ways, not only by promoting mutuality and fidelity, but also by acknowledging an underlying biological complementarity which, for many, includes the possibility of procreation.*

*We have supported various legal changes in recent years to remove unjustified discrimination and create greater legal rights for same sex couples and we welcome that fact that previous legal and material inequities between heterosexual and same-sex partnerships have now been satisfactorily addressed. To change the nature of marriage for everyone will be divisive and deliver no obvious legal gains given the rights already conferred by civil partnerships. We also believe that imposing for essentially ideological reasons a new meaning on a term as familiar and fundamental as marriage would be deeply unwise. (91)*

Even Rowan Williams, himself a supporter of gay rights in general and previously critical of the way the Church had handled the issue of gay Bishops criticised the consultation process surrounding the Bill. Cameron's response was as follows 'I passionately believe that all institutions need to wake up to the case for equality and the Church shouldn't be locking people who are gay...from being full members of that Church, because many people with deeply held Christian views are also gay. And just as the Conservative Party as an institution made a mistake in locking people out so I think the Churches can be in danger of doing the same thing.' (92)

In the face of a tremendous amount of opposition, even from within his own party Cameron proceeded with the bill and it passed successfully through both the Commons and the Lords and is now law. What the above demonstrates is that Cameron's 'Christian Country' does not mean a country where religion makes the decisions. Cameron's Coalition can and will stand up and contradict religious preferences when required. It could be cynically argued that Cameron's stance was a question of vote winning, and not necessarily simply the 'pink' vote. At the time, the Coalition government was having to enact far reaching, deep and hurtful economic cuts and the gay marriage bill was seen an important flagship policy which flew in the face of the Tory party's reputation of the nasty part; in short it wasn't just about cuts, cuts and more cuts. It was an important sign for Cameron to illustrate the fact that the Conservative party had changed-and he was determined to enact it even if it meant ignoring deep, wide-ranging religious dissent. This, if anything, is proof that the Coalition's interpretation of a Christian country is far from some kind of call to mobilisation or evangelisation. And then there's the matter of the fact that both other party leaders Ed Miliband and Nick Clegg have both openly declared themselves to be atheists.

## **Is religion privileged by being above the law?**

Having shown that the established religion in Britain is not, on the whole concerned with enforced evangelisation, and having isolated so-called militant religion to unreasonably absolutist pressure groups, we will now look at how these misconceptions have spilled over into how religion is dealt with on a legislative basis in the UK. As with the last chapter, we will demonstrate that at the heart of nearly every high profile protestation is one of the pressure groups we have looked at already. This chapter will take a look at two distinct issues, firstly the extent of what we mean by the phrase 'freedom of religion' and how this is practically implemented, and secondly how freedom of speech

issues have impacted on belief systems. As with the last section, this is largely about dispelling misconceptions regarding the perceived extent of these problems.

British citizens have the right to freedom of religion. However, there are misconceptions arising from this freedom which have often led to members of faith making unreasonable demands, and those with little knowledge of the subject making mistaken assumptions as to the extent to which this freedom can be exercised. There are three problems or 'assumptions' to tackle; that of existing special exemptions within British law, the myth of parallel legal systems which gives rise to doubts that we are all 'subject to one law', and finally the extent to which 'freedom of religion' can be used as an excuse to demand special treatment or 'opt out' of something.

Firstly the matter of existing exemptions. One of the reasons put forward by the Muslim Council of Britain when campaigning for the Religious Hatred Act in 2006 was that in doing so, would only be extending to Muslims the power and treatment currently afforded to Jews and Sikhs. (4) This was not the case. Such test cases in British legal history which pertained to these groups had been settled and decided on matters of *race* rather than religion. In the case of Sikhs, it is certainly true that in the past there have been high profile exemptions afforded to them but such cases were settled prior to reaching the legal system. The most notable case was that of a bus driver Sohan Singh Jolly who, in 1969, threatened to burn himself to death if he were not granted permission to grow his beard and wear his turban at work. The Wolverhampton bus company involved eventually caved in and changed its regulations. (93) Mr Jolly commented 'I am a moderate and religious man and would never have taken the extreme step of threatening my life if they had not refused to listen to reason.' (94) It is difficult to equate Mr Jolly's claims of moderation with a threat to burn himself to death, and his position was notably not shared by all Sikhs. Dr Ayujila, a member of the Supreme Council of Sikhs said at the time 'we are going to wage relentless war on the idea that individuals can take this sort of action, muddling the whole community and very likely lead to a worsening of community harmony in Britain.' (95) The one legal exemption afforded to Sikhs on the basis of their religion was made in 1976 when an amendment was added to 1972 Road Traffic Act, enabling them to absent themselves from wearing crash helmets on motorcycles in order that they could wear turbans instead. (96) Despite the fact that one could argue that such an exemption was an unfortunate precedent in allowing someone to 'opt out' of something which was a legal requirement for any other British citizen, it is undeniably a precedent which only serves to place Sikhs at a *disadvantage* (in terms of safety) rather than an *advantage* over anyone else. However, it was a 1982 high profile test case which reached the House of Lords which served to set Sikhs apart from other groups. In the case of a boy who had been sent home by his school for flouting school uniform policy, when according to his family he was only wearing what they considered to be traditional Sikh clothing. (97) It was decided by the upper House that this was indeed a case of discrimination, but on the basis of *race*. In summing up, Lord Lawrence aimed to set out what he believed were essential characteristics in determining that Sikhism was more a race than simply a belief system. He claimed that such groups should prove:

*1, a long-shared history of which the group is conscious as distinguishing it from other groups and their memory of it which keeps it alive*

*2, a cultural tradition of its own including family and social customs and mannerisms, often but not necessarily associated with religious observance. (98)*

This test case has been cited on several other occasions for other groups claiming the same treatment. In 1989 the court of appeal decided that Gypsies could also be classed as a race. (99) However an attempt by Rastafarians to define themselves as a race in another 1989 test case failed on the basis that their history stretched back only about 60 years. (100) A similar case, with a similar ruling had occurred several years previously in 1980 in relation to Judaism. In the case of Seide vs Gilette, a charge of discrimination was successfully dealt with under the race relations legislation on the basis that 'the industrial tribunal had correctly concluded that what happened in the present case was not because the appellant was of the Jewish faith but because he was a member of the Jewish race or of Jewish ethnic origin.' (101) The findings concluded that 'both sides accept and the tribunal accepted that Jewish could mean that one was a member of a race or a particular ethnic origin as well as being a member of a particular religious faith.' (102) To conclude then, such exemptions enshrined in British legislation have generally been specified on matters outside of religion and the very few which are (such as Sikh helmets and the issue Jehovah's Witnesses have with blood transfusions) only serve to effect *themselves* and actually only act to their disadvantage.

The second myth to dispel surrounding the extent to which 'freedom of religion' is practised is that of supposed parallel legal systems. The furore which surrounded Dr Rowan Williams (mistakenly reported) (103) suggestions that Britain adopt elements of Sharia Law served to illustrate how such an unpopular idea this would be by the population at large, even from some within the Islamic community. What he was actually referring to was that Sharia could be to British Muslims in the long term what the Beth Din is to British Jews. (104) Jews have a long tradition in Britain of using religious mediation services in civil matters and this was a point used by elements of the Muslim community when defending the notion of adopting Sharia Law.

Three crucial elements of the Beth Din are as follows:

- 1: *They only deal with civil disputes*
- 2: *They can only act if both sides agree to their involvement*
- 3 *Both parties must be Jewish (105)*

The important thing to bear in mind before making the assumption that this equates to a 'parallel legal system' is that such parties act only as mediators. There is no 'alternative law', such legislation that is discussed and dispensed is that of the current British legal system and the involvement of the Beth Din is simply that of a 'third party', almost (though perhaps not the most flattering of metaphors), a kind of sophisticated 'appropriate adult'.

Thanks to the passing of the 1996 Arbitration Act which allowed third parties to mediate in Commercial and Civil cases, the creation of Sharia Law Courts by Muslims has *already been adopted* and as of 2009 there were (according to a report by the think tank Civitas) up to 85 such courts sitting in Britain. (106) Although it has been claimed that the adoption of such courts is in line with the comparatively controversy-free Beth Din model, the existence of these Sharia courts has not been controversy-free. As at the time of writing, a private members bill is going through the House of Lords, tabled by Baroness Cox which seeks to restrict the powers of such courts. Baroness Cox has claimed that many of these courts are, in accordance with traditional Islamic teachings, discriminating against women. (107) The fact that women in Islamic marriages are often controlled

and influenced by their husbands is also a factor which has been used to question whether the participation in such Sharia courts is really 'voluntary.' Claims made in the CIVITAS report indicated far-reaching discrimination within these courts; a claim disputed by former head of the MCB Inyat Bunglawa. (108) Government attempts to investigate and verify (or not) these accusations in the first half of 2011 came to nothing when it was claimed that there was insufficient evidence to reach any conclusion either way. It was inferred that the reason for this dearth of information was the lack of co-operation from Muslims and their Sharia courts. (109) One of the claims made by the CIVITAS report was that these Sharia courts have been going above and beyond their remit. Despite the fact that the report offers little evidence of this, this was indeed found to be the case in Canada where, after passing a similar Arbitration Act in 1991, Ontario eventually elected to scrap it after finding such courts were going above and beyond their remit. In removing the legislation in 2006, the Canadian government declared that from now on it would be 'one law for everyone'.(110)

Finally, and most importantly, let us dispel the misconception that 'freedom of religion' is an unqualified right. Freedom of religion has been interpreted by absolutist elements as being an unqualified right which needs no justification and before which everyone, whether they be employer, colleague or fellow citizen must bend. This is not the case. Freedom of religion means simply the freedom to practice the religion of your choice but when practicing it within the public sphere and in particular *where other people are involved or may be affected* there are clearly defined boundaries.

Peter Jones in his essay '*Bearing the consequences of Belief*' (111) examines a case of alleged unfair dismissal concerning a Muslim teacher Mr Ahmad who was dismissed from his post after repeatedly absenting himself on Friday afternoons to attend prayers at Mosque. After refusing the offer of a part-time position, Mr Ahmad was eventually dismissed and took his case to an employment tribunal, the Court of Appeal and finally to the European Court of Human Rights. His appeal was rejected each and every time. Mr Ahmad was, in effect, insisting that society bear the consequences of his belief (meaning the school had to work around his absenteeism on Friday afternoons) whereas Jones' concludes that the burden of belief is very much with the believer, to expect otherwise is patently unreasonable as people who do not share that particular comprehensive doctrine are expected to bear real consequences as a result.

Jones does highlight a problem with this as belief could in fact be said to emerge via socialization rather than critical choice, a point particularly relevant to religion, since, according to most statistics, most religious people follow the religion of their parents and/or the majority religion of the country in which they live. This is an argument often used to attack religion, most recently by the New Atheism which is particularly outspoken about the religious indoctrination of children. However the argument that 'belief is socialization' does not exclude it from being in essence 'privatized' since it firstly, fails to take into account the fact that such specific socialization can and often is preventable or reversible (the proliferation of information via the internet and other mass media in modern societies plays an increasingly large role in this) and secondly, it doesn't engage with the Rawlsian response that beliefs, irrespective of how they occurred, are multitude.(24)

The Labour Government shored up and clarified existing legislation in 2003 and its worth looking at how this was reported by the Muslim Council of Britain, as their report, dispensed to Muslims, makes very clear what can and cannot be expected by the term 'freedom of religion.' Their



report takes the form of a series of FAQs and they cover virtually all of the high profile test cases of recent years (and also help explain why virtually all such cases have failed as we shall see). Whilst reminding Muslims of their rights the report states 'Muslim employees are also urged to consider legitimate needs of their employers and not to make unreasonable demands...trivial demands and over-litigation may also lead to employer disaffection and relocation.' Some of the points are as follows:

Q1: Am I allowed to take time off to celebrate Eid and other religious ceremonies?

*A: Your employers are not obliged to grant time off for religious ceremonies but all such requests must be sympathetically considered. It must be reasonably and practically possible for employees to be allowed to leave. Refusal; to grant such leave may only be classed as discriminatory if it is not justified by legitimate business needs.*

Q 2: Am I allowed to take time off for prayers?

*A: Your employers are not allowed to provide you with time off but must be reasonably justified in this denial.*

Q3: Does my employer have to provide a prayer room?

*A: Your employers are not obliged to provide prayer rooms.*

Q4: What if I am asked to work alongside someone like a homosexual whose lifestyle I do not agree with?

*A: Whilst some religious communities may have strong views concerning an individual's sexual orientation, this should not affect their working relationship with colleagues.(112)*

The general point to be made about questions one to three is in line with case of Mr Ahmad, in that freedom of religion must be practiced in relation to its consequences on other people. Where it is reasonable and practically possible, employers will be sympathetic to staff's religious needs but if it's not practically possible (particularly with small businesses with small numbers of employees or a dress code that exists for health and safety reasons) they are *not obliged* to. British legislation is clear that demands by people of faith to respect religious observance must be balanced with the needs and requirements of others affected, to expect otherwise would be unreasonable as it would be *religion without responsibility*. Question four is also significant in highlighting that when in the public sphere, religion cannot be used as an excuse for discrimination or prejudice.

Virtually all of the high profile cases which have been reported over the last few years have resulted in failure for those expecting exemption on the basis of their religion. We have already looked at the specifics of the Nadia Eweida case involving British airways and the wearing of the crucifix, however it is worth noting the findings of the tribunal involved which stated that 'they had heard evidence from a number of practicing Christians...none gave evidence that they consider visible display of the cross to be a requirement of the Christian faith, on the contrary, leaders of the Christian fellowship stated that *it is the way of the cross not the wearing of it that should determine our behaviour.*'(26)The tribunal also noted that Miss Eweida's behaviour displayed a 'readiness to make a serious accusation without thought of the implications...her insensitivity towards colleagues, her lack of empathy for those without a religious focus in their lives and her incomprehension of the conflicting demands which professional management seeks to address on a near daily basis.'(113)

The British Airways case was followed by a further two instances involving the wearing of the crucifix in the workplace. In 2009 Helen Slatter a nurse at Gloucestershire Royal Hospital was asked to remove the dangling crucifix during her shifts because it was deemed a safety hazard since she was working with mentally ill patients and it could possibly have been grabbed by one of them. Miss Slatter refused and found herself on a disciplinary. As in the case of British Airways, the disciplinary panel found that not only was Miss Slatter's opinion out of step with other colleagues but also *other Christians* in the organization. They concluded 'we are supportive of our employees' religious beliefs and indeed the vast majority of staff feel able to work within the policies of the organization without compromising those important beliefs.' (114) However Miss Slatter stated 'I'm not a bible basher but now I have to choose between my job and my faith.' (115)

And in 2010, in a similar case, involving a nurse at a Mental Health institution, the claimant also said 'I'm being forced to choose between my job and her faith.' (116) This was Nurse Shirley Chaplin who eventually left her job (as did Helen Slatter) after the tribunal involved found that 'it was not a requirement of the Christian faith to wear a crucifix.' (117) The Trust involved had asked Miss Chaplin to wear the crucifix in her uniform but she had responded that she felt this was asking her to 'hide' her faith. As in the British Airways case, both of these women displayed inflexible attitudes towards their faith (they were prepared to risk their jobs) which equates with absolutism. Nadia Eweida was quoted as saying that 'the uniform works around religion, around God first, company second.' (118) Whilst this is understandable to the extent that a person's faith is bound to be more important to them than allegiance to a place of work, the fact that they were not prepared to compromise when alternatives were offered and indeed in the latter two cases, their own safety may have been compromised, demonstrate unreasonable, absolutist attitudes. As the tribunal found in all cases, such views were countered by many Christians, making it less a matter of faith, but more a case of dealing with fundamentalist attitudes.

There is also the matter of the extent to which those working within the public arena can be allowed to opt out of responsibilities and requirements. Again, two high profile cases demonstrate that faith cannot be used as an 'opt out' clause and is a qualified right. Firstly, there was the case of Lillian Ladelle, a registrar working for Islington Council who, in 2009 refused to conduct Civil Partnership ceremonies because she claimed such unions would 'break with her Christian faith.' (33) The tribunal involved concluded that the 'claimants stance was inconsistent with the non-discriminatory objectives which the council thought it important to espouse both to their staff and the wider community.' (119) The case eventually reached the High Court and in dismissing the case Lord Neuberger said 'it appears to me that, however much sympathy one may have with someone such as Ms Ladelle...the legislature has decided that the requirements of a modern liberal democracy such as the United Kingdom included outlawing discrimination in the provision of goods, facilities and services on grounds of sexual orientation.' (120)

Then there was the Bed & Breakfast controversy in which a gay couple were turned away by the owners, Peter & Hazel Bull on the basis that they did not let their rooms to unmarried couples, including gay men. This case also ended up in court which found in favour of the gay couple, on the basis that they had suffered direct discrimination. (121) After hearing the verdict, one of the men involved, Martyn Bull made the statement that '(the owners) have argued that their religious beliefs should be reason enough to allow them to discriminate, today's judgement dismisses these arguments, it is illegal because it treats marriages and civil partnerships, the legal status of marriage

differently on the judgement has argued, just because a person's belief are religious beliefs that does not grant them an opt out of the law.' (122) In the aftermath of this judgement, Chris Grayling MP, then Shadow Home Secretary stated that 'I think we need to allow people to have their own consciences...we must be sensitive to the genuinely held principles of faith groups in the country.' (123) Grayling's comment raises two points.

Firstly, is it practical or indeed desirable to allow people to 'have their own consciences' when to comes to obeying the law? As Stonewall pointed out, if that is the case, what is the difference between people putting up 'no blacks' or 'no Irish' signs also? (124) to which the answer from such groups would no doubt be faith, which brings us to the second point, that of essentialism again. Grayling makes the point that this is a matter of faith groups. It isn't. Christians are not a homogenized group who all think the same and indeed as we have seen, official Anglican and Catholic doctrine unequivocally *forbids* discriminating on the basis of sexuality. This is not an issue for 'Christians', this is an issue for absolutists. There is no significant, theologically-wide conflict here between faith and democracy, but political liberalism and the unreasonable absolutist.

The fact that such misconceptions continue to arise is demonstrated by two traits which are present in nearly all of the above such cases, emblematic of the so-called problematic cocktail. Firstly, the religious claimant is usually sponsored and represented by fundamentalist groups. The Christian Institute funded legal fees for Nadia Eweida and Lillian Ladelle and often acted as the spokesperson for the claimant, invariably using essentialist notions of their faith group to paint a distorted picture of 'faith under attack.' (125) And secondly, this point is often all too readily taken up by certain sections of the media, particularly right wing newspapers such as the right leaning press (41) for reasons we have already examined in the last chapter.

The question as whether such exemptions can be expected for religious based institutions who deal with the public (as opposed to purely internal affairs, Gay Bishops for example) has also proved, so far to be quite unequivocal. This was illustrated in the protests of the Catholic adoption agency Catholic Care. In the light of the 2007 equality act, it was deemed no longer permissible for institutions who deal in the public arena to discriminate on the basis of sexual orientation and this included religious-based organizations. As a result of this many Catholic adoption agencies, concerned at having to face the prospect of placing children with gay foster parents, had to either close or remove their Catholic ethos. Most of them have so-far achieved this quite successfully. Catholic Children's Rescue Society in Salford closed and reformed under another name. (42) Nottingham Catholic Children's Society changed its name to Faith in Families. (126) Catholic Children's Society of Arundel and Brighton changed its name to Cabrini Children's Society. (127) Terry Connor, director of Cabrini stated that 'we felt cutting formal links was in the best interests of the children we serve...non-compliance with legislation or use of supposed loopholes to bypass it would mark us out as discriminatory and to risk closure of our adoption service would damage many children and families'. (128)

However, clearly taking the view that their Catholic ethos was more important, Catholic Care challenged the ruling and have so far lost three times. (129) At the time of writing there are appealing again to the Upper Tribunal and the verdict has yet to be given. Turning them down, the panel decided that 'the charity did not demonstrate that its donors would stop supporting if it allowed same-sex couples to use its adoption service.' (130) Catholic Care's case had been they if they closed,

children would suffer, however as demonstrated above by several other agencies, there isn't necessarily the case.

Islam has also been at the centre of several such cases and the absolutist elements have been unsuccessful. Two such examples were as follows. In 2007 Aisha Azmi, a Leeds teaching assistant took Kirklees Council to court because she was asked to either remove her face veil during classes or be moved to other duties. The school made the request on the basis that children in the class would be less likely to identify with someone whose face was nearly entirely covered and their education may suffer as a result. The court found in favour of the school concluding that 'the rights of local children to the best quality education possible' outweighed 'Mrs Azmi's desire to express her cultural beliefs by wearing a veil in class'. (131) This reflects the Ahmad case cited by Peter Jones in that Aisha Azmi expected to be able to practice her religion irrespective of the perceived impact on others. Then there was Shabena Begum, a schoolgirl who took her school to the high court because they forbade her from wearing the full hijab at school. Again this was simplistically reported as the 'headscarf row' (132) but predictably there was much more to it than that. The school had made provisions within the school uniform for Muslim girls and all but Shabena had found them workable. Indeed Shabena Begum had been happy to adhere to the uniform policy initially and it only became an issue when, according to later reports, her parents died and she came under influence from her brother who was a member of a radical Islamic group Hizbut-Tahir. (133) The Law Lords found in favour of the school concluding that though 'a person's right to hold a particular belief was absolute, that person's right to manifest a particular belief was qualified.' (134) In both of these cases, the same problematic cocktail is present. Firstly, the involvement of absolutist views, the opinion that 'belief' is more important than responsibility to others, i.e. children who may be affected and the authorities of a school. Secondly, the fact that there appeared to be just as many Muslims against these cases as were for them. In the case of Aisha Azmi, Muslim parents at the school had expressed agreement with the school's policy that they did not think a teaching assistant wearing a face veil would be of benefit to their child. Even an Islamic MP ultimately urged Ms Azmi not to appeal the decision on the basis that 'there was insufficient public support for it.' And then many reports of these incidents were selective with the facts, potentially leading to a misconception that this was Islam vs. Britain again.

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# Chapter.3

## The Validity of New Atheism

### Religion is militant?

Having now shown that the extent of religious privilege as far as the establishment is concerned, is not a source of major concern within Britain, let us now look at pressure groups. Before we start let us briefly return to the academic debate as the positions cited herein will need clarifying.

The main objections to the argument for Rawlsian Public Reason are two-fold, firstly that it underestimates (and thereby becomes impractical) the extent of religious militancy, and secondly that it does an injustice to those seeking recognition.

To take these in turn let us deal with the extent of current religious militancy. It can often seem that not a week goes by without a news story hitting the headlines, crucifixes in the workplace, controversy over Gay Adoptions, Muslim face veils, etc. Many academics have concluded that religious militancy is experiencing a revival. Jürgen Habermas has claimed 'religious conflicts are squeezing their way also into the international arena,' (1) whilst Nicholas Deakin claims 'the revived significance of religion at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century throughout Europe poses important issues about the role of religious bodies, their beliefs and their relations with the state.' (2) If this is happening, from where is this militancy coming? Certainly not, as we have seen, the established churches. This is the first misconception to be dispelled. What the situation is like outside of Britain is beyond the scope of this but in this country at least, the mistaken impression that religion is somehow 'on the march' has been caused by what I will call the *problematic cocktail* of 'loud' pressure groups combined with media misreporting of them as mainstream. We shall look at specific examples later.

Secondly, the accusation that the Rawlsian demand for Public Reason is somehow illiberal to those seeking recognition. This highlights two particular features of these groups. Firstly, such groups often use *essentialist* notions of their faith, and secondly they often make absolutist and therefore *unreasonable* demands. Bhikhu Parekh, an opponent to the Rawlsian idea of Public Reason uses a blatantly essentialist notion of faith groups in his book '*Rethinking Multiculturalism*.' He writes 'religious people generally seek wholeness in their lives and do not think it possible or desirable to separate their private and political concerns.' (3) Parekh's generalizations render his analysis weak, and if one wanted to be cynical could be interpreted in absolutist terms. He overstates his case by saying that 'more citizens are best placed to talk about religion than economics' and that 'people think in religious terms' and that 'even scientists are now turning to religion'. (4) On the subject that, that some religious followers would inherently find the privatization of their beliefs difficult, due to the required 'public' behaviour of some doctrines is also tackled by



Parekh but again, his conclusions and recommendations are questionable. Firstly, he continually refers to 'the secularist' and 'the secularist thesis'. (5) This works on the mistaken assumption that *secularism* rather than *neutrality* is the prime motivation behind the idea of Public Reason, he makes no allowances to the notion that such an approach benefits *religion*; in the sense that none are privileged at the expense of others. He identifies how religious people have participated in anti-slavery, anti-colonial, temperance, anti-capitalist, anti-communist and other movements, as if such motivations were exclusive to those of faith. He states that religion 'has much to contribute...it stresses the quality of inner life and urges human beings to examine the kind of persons they have become. It insists too on certain fundamental values and demands that should not be compromised at least not without compelling reasons...it also serves the vital function of affirming an important value, nagging our consciences, requiring us to reflect publically and critically on our moral practices.' (6) Again, the implicit assumption is that only through religion can we do all of the above. All Parekh is advocating here is nothing more than the outdated and long-discredited theist argument that only through religion, can we be good and fulfilled citizens. Indeed he says that 'modern social and political life often tends to encourage a quasi-utilitarian attitude to morality'. (7) He stops short of specifying that it is to scripture that we must turn to obtain 'true' as opposed to 'quasi' morality but this is undeniably the implication. But again, what if 'they' (the adherents of particular Comprehensive Doctrines) will simply not allow their doctrines to be 'sidelined' in a way that does not allow them to flourish? To Rawls the answer is a pragmatic one 'what's the alternative, how are you going to get along in a constitutional regime with all these other comprehensive doctrines...how are they going to get on together?... one way which has been the usual way historically is to fight it out as in France in the sixteenth century, that's a possibility but how do you avoid that...what I should do is turn around and say, what's the better suggestion what is your solution and I can't see any other solution.' (8)

The key to dealing with religious absolutism will be to tackle this concept of essentialism. We will deal with the problem of the 'they' who object by questioning the concept of the 'they' as a homogenous whole at all. For some reason minority groups are often allowed to portray themselves unchallenged like this, in a way that majority groups are not. The moment the BNP start talking about 'the British' or 'white' such definitions are seized upon and deconstructed in a way that identifies them as contentious and disputable. Often however, the same interrogation is not true of minority and/or religious groups which is difficult to understand, as ultimately numbers are relative. Whether one is part of a minority culture of 2 million or a majority culture of 20 million, unless one is dealing with a group of automatons then differences will always arise. Such differences are extremely marked within religion which is not surprising considering the importance 'interpretation' is to doctrine. There are Christians who oppose homosexuality; there are Christians who do not. There are Muslim women who wear Burkas, there are Muslim women who do not. And so when we are told that Christians do not want 'Jerry Springer-The Opera' screened because they will find it offensive, instead of immediately allowing the question to effectively side-track us into the 'faith verses free speech' argument (which is still a valid argument that needs to be had) we must first ask ourselves what is the meaning behind the use of the word 'Christian' in this context, i.e., what *kind* of Christian is raising this objection? What kind of Christian would be offended by this? When pressure groups make statements referring to 'Muslims', we need to question the concept of 'Muslim', again we need to identify for whom precisely these organizations speak, for what *kind* of Muslim do these organizations speak? Whose views do they represent and how representative are

those views of the group (Muslims) as a whole? If, by disputing the idea of such groups as homogenous wholes, we can deconstruct them, and therefore isolate from where precisely the objections are coming, and more specifically *from whom*, we will, I suspect be will often identify such objections as absolutist and therefore *unreasonable*. If we can identify the '*they*' who would object as being only the virulent fundamentalist branch of the '*they*', then Rawls' framework becomes workable. All it requires is for us to identify any objections as being from the part of '*they*' who are 'unreasonable', unreasonable in the sense that they are not prepared to work within the existing political system, and insist on placing their own comprehensive doctrines before the 'public good' in a way that others of their group do not.

This anti-essentialism is not without its critics. In his essay '*Anti-Essentialism, Multiculturalism and the recognition of religious groups*' Tariq Modood refers to this idea as 'manifestly absurd' (9) and attempts to deconstruct and discredit it. He urges us not to be 'brow-beaten into accepting anti-essentialism' (10) and offers as evidence the results of a 1994 empirical study into the experiences of long-term migrants within Britain, in which he himself was part of the survey team. He opens with a disclaimer which immediately (for the purposes of this argument) renders it useless. He says 'we did not explicitly explore ways in which members of the minorities had adopted, modified or contributed to elements of ways of life of other groups.' (11) To then proceed to try and build an essentialist argument (which he does) is highly problematic. Modood insists that 'these identities do not necessarily compete with a sense of Britishness...the majority of respondents had no difficulty with the idea of hyphenated or multiple identities' (12) and later 'the ethnic identities of the second generation may have a weaker component but it would be misleading to portray them as weak because of this.' (13) One possible reason for Modood's questionable conclusions may be due to his insistence on interpreting (like Parekh) 'multiculturalism' only in radically secular terms. His summary states that 'there is a theoretical incompatibility between multiculturalism and radical secularism' but adds that 'moderate secularism offers the bases for institutional compromises.' (14) The issue here is that Modood offers no clear definition of 'radical' or 'moderate' and in particular his vague reference to 'institutional compromises' fails to specify which particular institutions would have to compromise, the religion to accommodate the state, or the state to accommodate the religion. Andrea Baumeister in her book '*Liberalism and the Politics of Difference*' raises some of the most oft-quoted challenges to the Rawlsian analysis, how best to deal with the 'unreasonable' elements. She attempts to highlight an apparent flaw in Rawls's theory by stating 'Rawls nonetheless believes that even such non-liberal minorities would accept the precepts of political liberalism'. (15) This is incorrect. Rawls clearly states that his theories of political liberalism are not aimed at such unreasonable elements and admits that his framework would be unworkable if such elements were included, hence the need for containment, initially through privatization. Even Parekh also admits that 'we should not ignore (religions) pernicious influences rightly highlighted by the secularists. It is often absolutist, self-righteous, arrogant, dogmatic and impatient of compromise. It arouses powerful and sometimes irrational impulses and can easily destabilize society, cause political havoc and create a veritable hell on earth'. (16) Parekh's proposed solution to these issues however is to encourage a *greater involvement* of religion within public life in terms of greater resources. But again, this is interpreted only in pro-religious terms. He says 'the state could give resources to synagogues, churches, mosques and so on to undertake philanthropic and welfare activities such as providing day-care for children, care for the elderly, homes for the homeless and to help in setting up public conservation projects and neighbourhood associations', (17) I refer to this as 'pro-religious'

because again, such claims seem to work on the assumption that religion is somehow best placed to carry out such good work, as if non-religious organisations of this kind do not exist. These arguments, like those which indicate religion is best placed to provide morality are amongst the most obvious targets for New Atheism.

To clarify in *'Political Liberalism'* Rawls admitted 'that there are doctrines that reject one or more democratic freedoms is itself a permanent fact of life, or seems so. This gives us the practical task of containing them-like war and disease-so that they do not overturn political justice.'<sup>(18)</sup> Concepts such as free speech and human rights are intrinsic to a tolerant and liberal democracy and are often perceived as absolute. However, if the framework of political liberalism is to survive with such undemocratic elements in existence, then such assumptions cannot be taken for granted. Rawls indicates that there is a distinction to be drawn between speech that is merely 'offensive' and speech which indicates a 'clear and present danger'. On the subject of the former he writes 'if there is time to expose through discussion the falsehoods and fallacies to avert the evil by the process of education, the remedy to be applied is more speech, not enforced silence.'<sup>(19)</sup> This is certainly true in modern Britain. Political Parties such as the BNP are grossly offensive to many people but they are allowed to exist within the existing political system and even broadcast their views on the major broadcasting channels providing that they do not represent an immediate threat. The same is true of religious groups, many of which will make potentially offensive assertions relating to issues such as the role of women (particularly within the church) or homosexuality but they are not prevented from doing so. Such views are allowed within the usual discourse of political and democratic exchange, to be debated, discussed and even ridiculed. And the same is true of pressure groups. I am not advocating that such pressure groups should be prevented from putting their case; simply that their views need to be accurately contextualised as essentialist, often absolutist and very far from mainstream; factors which are all too often fudged in media reporting.

In his essay *'The rights of Unreasonable Citizens'* Jonathan Quong specifies 'that the containment of unreasonable doctrines can thus be defined in the following way: any policy whose primary intention is to undermine or restrict the spread of ideas that reject the fundamental tenets of liberal democracy that is 1, that political society should be a fair system of social cooperation for mutual benefit, 2, that citizens are free and equal and 3, the fact of reasonable pluralism.'<sup>(20)</sup> Whilst examining a case concerning the restriction of a parents' choice for religious education, Quong reveals a common objection raised whenever the suppression of an apparent unreasonable Comprehensive Doctrine is advocated, and that is that it's possible for a person to be philosophically unreasonable but still politically reasonable.

Whilst this is theoretically possible, in practical terms such a position would only be workable if the advocate was willing to abandon their philosophical and doctrinal position within the public sphere. However it is an unwillingness/inability to do this which places them in conflict with the political system and thus defines them as unreasonable. Again, it is important to make a distinction here between a position which is unreasonable in terms of offensiveness and unreasonable in terms of danger. A Muslim who makes claims about Political Islam or Sharia Law according to doctrine is not necessarily someone who needs to be suppressed, but to advocate the spread of Islamic values by threat or force would require containment. Quong states 'a justification of containment can be grounded on the fundamental moral importance of normative stability in a liberal deliberative democracy. Normative stability requires liberal democracy to generate its own support in a suitable

way by addressing each citizen's reason, as explained within its own framework. This, according to Rawls is what it means to achieve stability for the right reasons-to gain allegiance of actual citizens it is crucial for a just constitutional regime to generate its own support in order to avoid decay and decline...it is therefore essential that doctrines which deny the freedom and equality of persons not become so prevalent that they threaten to undermine the essentials of a liberal democratic regime.' (21)

## The British Disease

Wyn Grant in his 2000 study of *'Pressure Groups & British Politics'* indicates that the rise of pressure groups counter-balances two inherent weaknesses in democracy, the first being that democracy does not work for all people and that pressure groups offer chances for minorities and disadvantaged groups to argue their case. (22) This goes to the heart of the problem about democracy which is that it is a majoritarian form of government which nevertheless aspires, in its defensible forms, to protect minority rights. A second weakness is that electioneering encourages a short-term perspective on issues. Grant acknowledged that the view one takes of pressure groups is substantially influenced by the view one takes of democracy. It is pluralist interpretations of democracy that have given a particularly central and generally benevolent role to pressure groups. To that extent at least, one cannot rule that pressure group activity is by definition un-Rawlsian.

However, there are disadvantages in allowing such groups to exercise undue influence because as Grant admits if pressure groups are allowed too much influence, then there would be a risk for democracy. He goes on to report the findings of a study carried out by Aberdeen University in 1998 which indicated that the kinds of people who join pressure groups were overwhelmingly middle-class and highly educated. In principle this contradicts the theory that such pressure groups provide outlets for the disenfranchised and thereby 'plug' the holes produced by the imperfect majoritarian approach afforded by liberal democracies. Grant elaborates the point 'this group of highly educated joiners may have values that diverge quite substantially from those of the population at large and yet be able to influence the political decision making process in a significant way through their campaigning activities so that popular opinion and government decisions increasingly diverge. That in turn could lead to a further decline in confidence in the institutions of government.' (23) Though admitting that this is the most pessimistic approach to pressure groups, the point provides a sober note of caution, which as we shall find is justified in looking at religious pressure groups.

Other commentators have gone further in their lament of the rise of pressure groups as part of the political process. Sociologist Mancur Olson lays the blame for Britain's post war economic decline at the door of such groups. 'Britain began to fall behind in relative growth rates in the last decade of the nineteenth century and this problem has become especially noticeable since world war two. Most other explanations of Britain's relatively slow growth in recent times do not imply a temporal pattern that is consistent with Britain's historical experience with dramatically different relative growth rates but the theory afforded here with its emphasis on the gradual accumulation of distribution co-activities' (24) and elaborates the point 'Britain has precisely the powerful network of specialized organizations that the argument developed here would lead us to expect in a country

with a record of security and military stability...in short with age British society has acquired so many strong organizations and collusions that it suffers from an institutional sclerosis that shows its adaption to changing circumstances and changing technologies'. (25)

Olson qualifies this point by stating that in any one given factory there could be many different trade unions, none of which dominate and refers to this as the 'gradual emergence of the British disease.' (26) This point has been taken up by British economist Sam Brittan who claimed that in Britain 'democracy has degenerated into an unprincipled auction to satisfy rival organized groups who can never in the long term be appeased because their demands are mutually incompatible.' (27) The question to be asked is, is the group acting within the public interest (by this we mean something that will not disadvantage any other group or curb the rights of other citizens) in the sense that they are often public reasons? This could certainly be said to be the case in many environmental groups for example or animal welfare groups (if one takes the view that animals are included within the public interest!) but the history of religious pressure groups (and this is in no way meant to suggest that such behavioural features are exclusive to religious groups) indicate a capability to fuse their demands with the *pretence* of 'public interest' to such an extent that can be very effective and has, in the past achieved real results. These have mostly manifested themselves in the attempt to enforce perceived moral standards on a wider population with no doubt the best of intentions but all too often unfortunately influenced by absolutist views.

Another feature of such groups is that they will often take an essentialist approach and assume they speak for all their group. And even when *they* don't, this can sometimes be an unintentional assumption of the shorthand, sound-bite media controlled way in which such groups get their point across. Jeremy Richardson in his work '*Interest Group Behaviour in Britain*' points out that one of the reasons that makes Britain particularly susceptible to the influence of such groups is it's comparatively centralized government and media (notably the BBC) in terms of being, respectively London-centric and all-encompassing. He states 'a two minute slot on the main TV news at Nine in the evening can soon create the impression if not the reality of a strong 'public opinion' to which policy makers have to respond. Once given media attention, an issue will then attract the parliamentary scavengers who will then run with the issue by applying parliamentary pressure...as the issue rolls forward it will attract more and more groups, in an extending issue network of interests.' (28)

However, Grant's study at least demonstrates little evidence to suggest that the emergence and proliferation of such groups are principally to do with religion. Of the top 17 pressure groups named in a 1998 study (rated by membership numbers and income) only one of them was religious; the SPUC and they were at number seventeen. (29) The study also cited further research carried out 4 years previously which compared pressure group membership to political party affiliation. The top three groups to which Labour members belonged were Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth and Amnesty International. Of the Tory party the top two (the only ones listed) were the World Wide Fund for Nature and the National Trust.(30) Grant's work illustrates many credible reasons for the rise in the number of pressure groups, notably the inability for large institutions (the cited example is of course political parties but 'institutions' could easily be organised religion) to effectively balance (for certain members of the population) single issues with an all-encompassing, pluralistic approach. To that extent the retreat of religious fundamentalists into

smaller like-minded groups as organized religion adapts to changing societal attitudes and leaves them behind, is a perfectly logical, if unfortunate progression.

Religious pressure groups can be identified by a set of shared characteristics that, though not essential, are quite common. I have identified 6 such traits:

- 1: They will often have a figurehead who is charismatic, or at the very least is comfortable with the press and usually acts as the spokesperson. Quite often, this figurehead will not only be the driving force but will to all intents and purposes (as far as the media is concerned) be the group.*
- 2: They will usually take an absolutist version of their faith. The usual subjects such as evolution and homosexuality are often problematic for them.*
- 3: They will usually take an essentialist version of their faith, proclaiming that 'Christians want...' or 'Muslims are offended...' a notion often unchallenged by press reporting, the 'problematic cocktail' to which I referred earlier.*
- 4: They are easily offended, often being the first to proclaim hurt and demand censorship*
- 5: They are usually financially self-supporting. This would lead me to conjecture that a significant number of their membership is financially secure, educated and mainly middle class.*
- 6: They usually take a particular interest in the relation of their faith to politics and will quite often be politically active but only to further their own religious purposes.*

Now let us look at some examples, starting firstly with arguably the *original* religious pressure group.

## Whitehouse

The Mary Whitehouse case is crucial to this thesis because it illustrates that such group's can and have shown themselves capable of exercising real political influence over others.

Mary Whitehouse's approach when dealing with mainstream media was very similar to Thatcher's. Similar in that though her opinions and views were undoubtedly and unashamedly formed through her religion, she often couched her concerns and criticisms in more wide-reaching terms. The Whitehouse group (known latterly as the NVALA: The National Viewers and listeners Association) are the archetypal example of a religious group who generally eschewed religiosity in favour of phrases such as 'family values', 'moral righteousness,' 'health concerns', 'common sense', 'protection of children' and such. As such Whitehouse was able to tap into and fuse contemporary concern that many members of middle England had with the so-called permissive society with her own moral values, values formed out of a right-ring Christian morality, quite divorced from contemporary Christian orthodoxy, a fact rarely taken into account during discussions and assessments of her impact. For although most commentators are able to penetrate the implicit religiosity in her arguments, few go beyond the lazy assumption that this was anything other than a knee-jerk reaction by the desperately contracting Christianity of the 1960's onwards. The fact is that Mary Whitehouse's Christianity was very far from orthodox, it was in fact an evangelical puritanism directly inspired by a group known as Moral-Rearmament.

Moral Rearmament was a group formed in the 1930's by an American Evangelical minister known as Frank Buchman (1878-1961). Buchman achieved a notoriety for apparently saying 'Thank God for Hitler' in an interview. (31) Buchman formed MRA in 1938 with four main aims 'Absolute Honesty, Absolute Purity, Absolute Unselfishness & Absolute Love'. (32) It was a religiously inspired political action group which infiltrated Britain with Buchman eventually basing himself in Oxford. Whitehouse became a regular member of a local MRA group and actually met her husband Ernest at one such meeting. Although she made no mention of the MRA in her written work she was later quoted as saying 'without the MRA's ideals I cannot see that I would have been interested in starting this campaign.' (33) The MRA's activities centred on political activism and attempted to assert the power of God in all aspects of public and political life. Buchman's famous quote regarding Hitler was as a result of his several (ultimately unsuccessful) attempts to meet with the Fuhrer during visits to Berlin in the years before the outbreak of war. One thing that Buchman particularly admired about Hitler was his 'defence' of the west against communism. Buchman said in the interview 'I thank Heaven for a man like Adolf Hitler who built a front line of defence against the anti-Christ of communism...of course I don't condone everything the Nazi's do... anti-Semitism" Bad of course but think what it would mean to the world if Hitler surrendered to the control of God.' (34) It was because of this phrase that led to the misquote of him saying 'thank God for Hitler'. However, what he did admit to was a liking for Hitler's fascist style. He elaborated later 'I have been much criticized because I said a God controlled dictator could change the position in a country over-night. That doesn't mean in any sense when I made that statement that I identify myself with and approve of that dictator.' (35) Buchman clearly disapproved of Hitler's views but *not* his dictatorial style.

In his biography of Buchman, Pete Howarth describes the meeting between a 'wayward' girl called Joanna Riffe and Buchman. 'Buchman asked to see me. I walked into his room and before I even sat down in the chair he started talking to me. For 20 minutes he blazed at me with the facts of how I had been living. He said you are the girl, the diagnosis is that you are sex mad, the cure is Jesus Christ. Jesus just exalts, suits, saves and satisfies us sinners. Then he said it again. By the time he had finished I knew that my life would never be the same again. It is useless to tell a rebel to be good. It takes a passion to cure a passion. Frank Buchman lived a quality of life that brought a cure.' (36) Buchman's style seems to have been that of an evangelical minister and to all intents and purposes he would have been happy for a dictator in the Hitler mould to wield such power to 'enforce' Christ on people in just such a way. In this sense, it would seem that liberal commentators who often accused Whitehouse of being a fascist may have had a point. Certainly her own style and pronouncements seem very much in this mould, right up to her abhorrence of communism, no doubt due to its atheist component. It was probably this that meant her attacks were mainly (though not exclusively) towards the BBC whom she suspected of having a leftist agenda. She once said that it was inconceivable that communists hadn't perpetrated the BBC at some level. She started her clean up TV campaign in January of 1964 and declared her fight against 'the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt...promiscuity, infidelity and drinking' (37) wanting instead to 'encourage and sustain faith in God and bring him back to the hearts of our family and national life.' (38) Their first manifesto declared:

*1: We men and woman of Britain believe in a Christian way of life*

*2: We want it for our children and our country*

3: We deplore present day attempts to belittle and destroy it and in particular we object to the propaganda of disbelief, doubt and dirt that the BBC pours into millions of homes through the TV screen

4: Crime, violence, illegitimacy and venereal disease are steadily increasing, yet the BBC employs people whose ideas and advice pander to the lowest in human nature and accompany this with a stream of suggestive and erotic plays which present promiscuity, infidelity and drinking as normal and inevitable

5: We call upon the BBC for a radical change of policy and demand programmes which build a character instead of destroying it, which encourage and sustain faith in God and bring him back to the heart of family and national life.<sup>(39)</sup>

Two points to note. Firstly, there is an explicit assumption that they spoke not only for all Christians but for everyone in Britain. Secondly, the rhetorical style, with its constant references to religiosity is very much the style of the American evangelical, very much the style of Frank Buchman. It was a style which undeniably appealed to many people.

There were probably three reasons for this. Firstly, tastes were changing and there was bound to be a backlash of some sort by those whose tastes were perhaps not changing 'with the times' as it were and who found that irrespective of religious affiliations, some things on TV just went too far. And although this period co-incided with the decline in church attendance, as we've established this did not necessarily mean a decline in belief and there were undoubtedly many pious religious people who did see offence and blasphemy in the plays of Dennis Potter and such like. But it is a mistake to assume that such people made up either the majority of the population or indeed the majority of Christians. Secondly, the content of much of 60's and 70's TV was not only much more violent and aggressive than that which came before. Hard-edged cop shows like *The Sweeney* and *The Professionals* combined with various *Play for Today's* such as *Cathy Come Home*, *The Spongers* and *Brimstone & Treacle* (and perhaps even certain elements of soaps such as *Coronation Street*?) tackled realism in a way hitherto unseen on the TV screen in people's front rooms. Finally, the publicity generated by the vociferous criticism of her may have played a part in helping to publicise her views and Whitehouse herself. 'Respectable' publications like *The Guardian* and *The Spectator* regular queued up to lampoon her whilst critics and comics satirized her in an attempt to expose her fascist and 'loony' religious ideals resulting in plenty of free publicity for her and her groups.

However to come back to the point about the questionable orthodoxy of Whitehouse's Christianity. During the time of her activity (mid 60's to mid-80's) there were three Archbishops' of Canterbury. None of them openly endorsed her. However none of them openly condemned her either. This is a similar problem highlighted during the discussion of New Atheism in that the Church of England has failed to sufficiently disassociate itself from fringe elements and unfortunately allowed the myth to be perpetuated both by Whitehouse supporters and critics that her Christianity was mainstream.

Robert Runcie (Archbishop between 1980-1991) once said that he admired her indefatigable work,<sup>(40)</sup> however this was far from a ringing endorsement and he certainly never openly joined any of her crusades. In fact, as was the pattern, his own priorities, as the representative of the Church of England, were often elsewhere from Whitehouse's. For example in the early 80's when Whitehouse was stirring up a moral panic concerning the sex and violence in videos, Runcie was editing and



publicising *'Faith in the City'*, an open attack on the far-right monetarist policies of the Thatcher government, something which bought him and indeed the established church into direct conflict with the likes of Norman Tebbit. It's an interesting and marked contrast that while the evangelical Whitehouse was concerning herself with the age-old problem for absolutists, that of sex; the orthodoxy were focussed on dealing with the pain of unemployment and disillusionment of contemporary British society. Runcie's predecessor Donald Coggan (Archbishop between 1974-1980) actually turned down Whitehouse's invitation to speak on behalf of the church when she bought a blasphemy prosecution against Gay News. Coggan declared 'we're not in favour of piety, but influencing society in a positive and very helpful way.'<sup>(41)</sup>

And Coggan's predecessor Michael Ramsey's (Archbishop between 1961-1974) approach to his role was outlined in a 2004 lecture by Rowan Williams (and remembering that Ramsey openly endorsed the findings of the Wolfenden report which recommended the decriminalisation of homosexuality). Williams said 'Ramsey's method crucially reminds us that we are in trouble if we start thinking that ordained ministry is an idea developed by us to make things run more smoothly. It is about getting away from a view of the church that is very seductive and very damaging and very popular. His is the view that Christianity is essentially a lot of people who have something in common called Christian faith and get together to share it with each other and communicate it to other people 'outside'. It looks a harmless enough view at first, but it is a good way from what the New Testament encourages us to think about the church, which is that the church is first of all a kind of space cleared by God through Jesus in which people may become what God made them to be and that what we have to do about the church is not first to organize it as a society but to inhabit to enter, the place occupied by Christ who is himself the climate and atmosphere of a renewed universe. Forget this and you're stuck with a faith that depends heavily on what individuals decide and on what goes on inside your head.'<sup>(42)</sup> The worldview of Christianity that Williams and Ramsey are condemning here is precisely the view that Buckman and Whitehouse espoused and undoubtedly illustrates a conflict between the orthodoxy and Whitehouse. That this was never pursued by the Church of England at the time is, I believe to the institution's ultimate detriment because the myth perpetuates to this day, often admittedly by lazy journalism, that the Whitehouse case was very much a conflict between liberalism and Christian faith when it was in fact nothing of the kind. Rather a conflict between liberalism and absolutism.

Most analyses of Mary Whitehouse tend to concentrate on her railings against television and the BBC in particular, however her most effective campaign, effective in that it led to prohibitive legislation was the moral panic her group caused surrounding Video Nasties. The Video Nasties phenomenon arose out of a combination of two factors. Firstly, the horror genre was going through one of its periodic updates, the 70's had seen the Dracula & Frankenstein of Hammer give way to more graphic fare, mainly from America; films such as *The Exorcist*, *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* and *Driller Killer*. This movement coincided with the emergence of the domestic video player in which for the first time, people could watch such graphic films in the comfort of their own home. Many video shops and rental outlets appeared and by 1982 it was estimated that over half of UK homes now owned a video. At this point, the publishing of videos, like books was unregulated. There was no classification system and theoretically anyone of any age could buy and watch any film. When the distributors of *Cannibal Holocaust* were preparing to release their film onto the market they sent a copy of it to Mary Whitehouse, hoping that she would publicly condemn the film and thus provide the video with free publicity. It worked. Whitehouse and her NVALA group seized

on the apparent 'depraved' nature of this movie and began issuing letters of complaint to distributors and MP's alike. Their tactic was to claim 'protection of children', a phrase which would be taken up by various sections of the Media, notably the Daily Mail. Before long, the phrase Video Nasty was in circulation and Tabloid headlines ran thus:

*'Rape of children's minds'*

*'The Video Nasty killer'*

*'Cruel movies fan hacks 4 to death'*

*'Sick videos made my son a rapist'*

*'Experts link street riots and child abuse to diet of filth fed to our young'*

*'Nightmare killing after video nasty'*

*'Videos turned man into monster'*

*'Ban Video sadism now'*

*'These films can have a terrible effect on young minds-DOCTOR'*

*'Extravaganza of violence, capable of corrupting those who watch it'*

*'Pony maniac strikes again-A Police spokesman at Margate said the maniac could be affected by video nasties or a New Moon'*<sup>(43)</sup>

As a result of the Whitehouse campaign, the director of public prosecutions took up the baton and attempted to see if violence, in addition to sex could be prosecuted under the obscene publications act. A list of potentially offensive titles was compiled and video outlets suddenly found themselves targeted in police raids, and distributors hauled before the courts. However, although there were initially successful prosecutions and one person was even sent prison, these trials subsequently fell out of repute due to the inconsistent nature of the verdicts with different juries making different decisions on the same movie. And when the distributor of *The Evil Dead* challenged and won one such test case, the effectiveness of the DPP to deal with this issue was challenged.<sup>(45)</sup>

It was then, in 1983 that Mary Whitehouse stepped up her campaign. She met with Martin Bright MP and urged him to propose a Private Member's bill to ban these videos completely. And it was her and her supporters conduct, language and treatment of the research 'evidence' during this subsequent campaign which reveals the dangerous, fascistic intentions behind this apparent zeal to 'protect children'. In terms of conduct, Martin Barker, a contemporary lecturer at Bristol Polytechnic and one of the few intellectuals who spoke out against this campaign recalls being harangued by Whitehouse and her supporters during several talk shows 'my memory of those TV programs is how rude and impolite our opponents were...they went on all the time and I just remember thinking, you're so *rude* and yet you're supposed to represent good, well-mannered English middle-class behaviour'.<sup>(46)</sup> Derek Malcom, Guardian critic recalls being persuaded to speak in defence of '*Nightmare in a Damaged Brain*' during one of the test cases and after saying that the movie was 'well-executed', the Judge burst out 'well executed?, well executed?, the Nuremberg rallies were *well executed*.'<sup>(47)</sup> In terms of language, the following exchange was made during the parliamentary debate 'those who trade in this filth are in the same class as peddlers of heroin and cocaine, they are murderers who destroy the physical and mental health of young people and they are bringing such people to degradation and premature death.'<sup>(48)</sup>

This is the language of religious absolutism, and as was the pattern, it was couched in the desire to 'protect children'. Martin Bright said 'I've always been keen on protecting young people'<sup>(49)</sup> and later 'research is being done and it will show that it effects young people and dogs'.<sup>(50)</sup> Quite what he meant by dogs has never been properly verified but Bright's phrase reveals something important

about this group's attitudes towards research. He said 'research is being done and it will show', (51) indicating though the research was not yet complete he already knew what the conclusions were going to be. Whitehouse claimed at one point 'there you see all this research but not only research but common sense.' (52) Clearly Whitehouse's opinion of common sense held equal, perhaps more weight to her than the research itself. But what of the research itself? Whitehouse and her supporters, with the help of Martin Bright held a fringe meeting at the Tory party conference that year in which they showed a compilation of all the most graphic moments from the most controversial movies on the list and naturally, a string of violent scenes all shown together out of context provoked a strong, negative reaction from those who watched it (although Bright admitted that around the corridors of Westminster the next day, it seemed a badge of honour amongst MP's who seemed quite proud that they'd managed to sit through the Video Nasties!)(52a) the result was the convening of the Parliamentary Group Video Enquiry.

However, despite calling themselves this they were not a parliamentary group. Their membership did consist of a couple of MP's and they held their meetings on parliamentary premises but they were not directly commissioned by the government and had no official legitimacy, but calling themselves the Parliamentary group gave the impression that they did. The group was led by Dr Clifford Hill, a religious man and friend of Whitehouse, and they also engaged a Methodist minister called Bryan Brown. Brown later told Martin Barker that he was nervous of the group's intentions because they seemed to be at cross purposes. On the one hand the group wanted to gather empirical evidence, to establish just how many children had access to Video Nasties, how easy it was for them to get hold of them, what their reactions were and so on and so forth. On the other hand, the group wanted to essay the opinions of interested parties, police, psychologists, religious leaders. What made Brown uneasy was that he felt there was an inherent mismatch between the two approaches. When he eventually challenged Clifford Hill about this, Hill's response was to fire Brown and destroy most of the empirical evidence so far gathered. (53)

And on the day before the parliamentary debate was due to start Hill's group published their final research findings which claimed that over 40% of children under eleven had access to video nasties or who claimed to have seen a video nasty.(54) Naturally this figure was picked up and repeated by the press and cited again and again during the parliamentary debate. Bryan Brown later gave the evidence to Martin Baker (fortunately Brown had kept back-up copies of the research Hill had destroyed) and it transpired that the figure of 40% was entirely bogus. At the time of publication the group had only received 47 replies to their questionnaire from children. Of the 47, three admitted to having seen a Video Nasty, between them they admitted to having seen 17 of the films on the list. The research group simply divided 47 by 17 and produced a figure of 40%. (55) Dr Guy Cumberbatch of Aston University questioned the figure at the time and attempted to conduct similar research to test the claims. He found that two thirds of the children he spoke to actually admitted to having seen films that didn't exist. His research list mixed false titles with accurate ones and he found that such dishonesty among children was because having seen a Video Nasty was, like the MP's after Bright's screening, a badge of honour! (56) Cumberbatch's findings were too late to prevent the enacting of the Video Recordings Act as Barker admitted 'though the research was entirely bogus, it was sufficient to get that thing un-argued through the house' (57) and on the Whitehouse group themselves he says 'they didn't care. They wanted to win the argument and get a flexi-panic law into the public domain, with that behind them, they no longer cared because the police now had open-ended powers to do a whole range of things to keep their views visible.' (58)

*Whose views visible?* The winter 1984 newsletter of NVALA revealed 'we have been immensely encouraged by the word coming back to us from the House of Commons that a flood of letters has been received by MP's from their constituents about the need for an efficient Video Recordings Bill. However at a recent meeting of about 250 Christians, Mrs Whitehouse asked how many of them had actually written to their MP's. To her amazement only 6 of those obviously greatly concerned people had actually gone to that amount of trouble.' (59) The Video Recordings act became law and Videos came under the regulation of the BBFC which changed its name accordingly from the British Board of Film Censorship to the British Board of Film Classification. Geoffrey Roberts on QC said 'free speech in this county has been very dependent on juries, it was a jury that acquitted Lady Chatterley and so forth so what we got of course, what the Thatcher government did was to abolish the jury and in the case of videos you have to go to this video board, these censors, but there is no jury, so we became a country where sex and violence were regulated.' (60) The controversy is still echoed occasionally when violent acts occur, notably the murder of toddler James Bulger. (61)

Most films initially defined as Video Nasties remained banned outright for approximately 10-15 years after this, by which time tastes had changed. And although it wouldn't be fair to lay the blame for this on Christianity or indeed religion in general (having established that the Whitehouse 'version' of Christianity was far from orthodox) it undoubtedly reminds us of Rawls' definitions of Comprehensive Doctrines that 'Although not necessarily monolithic, they can and have been slow to change and may resist any attempted adaptation.' (see last chapter)

The Video Nasty case exemplifies how the reluctance of certain religious people to accept changes in taste can have far-reaching effects on society as a whole. The last word goes to Martin Barker. Barker had originally entered the debate because of the similarities he saw with the inflammatory language used to describe Video Nasties, with that used to describe the horror comics of the 1950's in an article he was researching (and remembering that as far as films are concerned, the now tame and camp Hammer Horrors were treated with disgust by many when they first appeared in the late 50's). Barker said 'the most interesting thing for me is how little historical memory we have. The next time there's a panic we won't remember just how stupid the last one was and how people get away with things and that to me is the most important lesson about this campaign, the evangelical got away with murder, they got away with fraud, they got away with deceiving people, they now laugh it off and the fact that almost all these films are available in the public domain they don't care because they move on, because what they want to do is to dominate the present and they don't care about history. Critical voices have to care about history, we have to care about the way in which things got controlled in the past because that's when the damage gets done and if we don't keep that historical memory then we'll allow them to do it again next time.' (62) The point to be made is that irrespective of opinions about the actual effect of video (or game) violence on young people, the tactics of deception, essentialism and veiled Public Reasoning to hide absolutism employed by the religious pressure group involved are what needs to be remembered from the Video Nasties case.

The Whitehouse group still exists today. Following the death of Mary Whitehouse, the organisation rebranded itself Media watch-UK. The group has a comparatively lower profile than it had during the lifetime of its famous founding figurehead, although this is certainly not for want of trying. They still declare their mission statements as 'campaigning for family values in the media', 'working to champion your rights which should not be over-ridden in the quest for ratings and profit'

and 'we are the only independent voice campaigning for better standards across the media'. (63) Such statements beg the questions, what does family values mean, whose rights are they claiming are being over-ridden, and what is meant by better standards? The answers are quite simply the increasingly archaic standards of an increasingly small amount of religious absolutists determined to impose their views and opinions on the media output which affects everyone—they are clearly still in the business of censorship. And they are still acting under the emotive label of 'protection of children'. Their three main pre-occupations are sex (notably pornography), violence and swearing on television.

The Media watch website lists two annual reports for 2007 and 2008<sup>(64)</sup> and they ably demonstrate the increasing erosion of support for the group and its views. As an independent body, the group are entirely dependent on donations and membership fees for funding and the financial position outlined is not a healthy one. The 2007 report details the need for the recruitment of a promotions officer who subsequently found the groups treasury unable to afford the following, the £93 fee required to display a poster in the London Underground for 2 weeks was deemed prohibitive, so was an attempt at advertising on Stagecoach coaches. The group applied for lottery funding and was declined. During that financial year over 400 previous subscriptions from the previous year remained unpaid. The report admitted that there was 'a degree of apathy towards being active participants in the Media watch campaign' and that it would appear that the evangelical side of the churches is where support is most likely to come from'. The last statement is revealing in the sense that it highlights that not only is support likely to be from religious sources, but more particularly from evangelicals. It also noted that attendance at the annual general meeting was 'disappointing'.

The 2008 report suggests investing £3,000 in advertising to attract new membership in 'carefully selected Christian publications.' *Why carefully selected* Christian publications? Possibly because their positions on their matters of concern would not necessarily chime with every Christian but only 'carefully selected' kinds of Christian. This was the year of 'Sachsgate' where the BBC was criticised for allowing two of its high profile presenters to leave a lewd message on an actor's answer-phone. Media watch's response demonstrates that, as with their founder Mary Whitehouse, they still believed that their views were representative of some kind of silent majority. 'This incident caused many people to complain to the BBC but we felt it was the tip of an ice-berg of much wider discontent viewers felt generally about poor standards on TV.' (65) And the basis of their views and concerns was still clear when the promotions director stated 'I have been able to develop an all-day educational conference aimed at 6<sup>th</sup> form students. The interactive content has been developed in conjunction with the RE department of a Kent secondary school.' (66) Why an RE department? Surely an IT or indeed a media studies department would seem the most natural place for seeking help with designing interactive content?

Typical recent targets for attack by Media watch include, predictably, the homosexual content of *Emmerdale* (deemed 'unfit' for consumption by children at 7pm) (67) and violent computer games. Time and again, 'protection of children' is the cited reason for protest. Perhaps more revealingly, compiled under the heading 'Praising the Good' (68) the site lists a series of programmes it approves of. This list in full consists of *Grand Designs*, *Wild China*, *Strictly Come Dancing*, *Riverside Cottage*, *Maestro*, *Cranford*, *Life in Cold Blood*, *Andrew Marr's History of Modern Britain*, *Wainwright Walks*, *In the Land of Northern Lights*. And so whilst on the one hand, this list consists of

programmes clearly free of offence and able to be viewed by children safely, it also on the on the hand demonstrates a complete emasculation of the potential for British television and in particular.

## Contemporary Case Studies

The misconceptions surrounding the religious revival can be more clearly illustrated by looking at other contemporary groups. Behind virtually all of the high profile cases of apparent conflict between 'religion' and British secularism, lies a pressure group with an absolutist approach to their faith, as we shall demonstrate both here and in the following chapter looking specifically at the legal implications of such militancy.

Here I propose to begin by examining three such groups. They are often characterised by the usual traits of essentialism and absolutism.

### SPUC

The Society for the Protection of Unborn Children was an anti-abortion movement formed in the late 60's in the wake of permissive legislation legalizing abortion. Their success in terms of affecting legislation has been limited at best with successive defeats in their attempts to repeal abortion laws. They managed to campaign successfully in 1990 for the time limit allowed for abortion to be lowered from 28 weeks to 24 weeks. However a further motion in 2008, to further decrease the legal time limit to 22 or 20 weeks was defeated. And with current polls (the most notable being the 2004 Times/Populus

poll) showing that 75% of British people think abortion should remain legal, they are clearly out of step with the public mood at large. (69) These days, their mission statement reads that they are a 'leader in the educational and political battle against abortion, human embryo experimentation and euthanasia.' (70) Their mission statement clearly states that they are a non-religious group although they acknowledge the existence of the SPUC Evangelicals, a branch formed in the early 1990's. (71) However, a recent blogger pointed out the disparity between the claim and the reality. 'Back in the day, the branch of SPUC I joined did two things. We shoogled collecting tins and one quiet lady prepared letter writing materials on matters of the day...funds went mostly to SPUC Glasgow. They produced leaflets, trained people to give one off presentations in schools. I always assumed this was rather the point of the SPUC. A few people giving over time to doing the legwork that most people don't have the time, facilities or abilities to do, producing stuff people could actually use. The *Love your Unborn Neighbour* book produced by SPUC evangelicals was something I was happy to pass onto a girl from my college. Now I get news digests in which the first item advertises a talk by a Catholic apologist and most of the rest are about sex education and assorted legislation to do with men who like to engage with sexual activity with other men. And the SPUC director Blog varies this with insider comment on Catholic affairs...but while most people who work for or support the SPUC will hold these positions, it's tempting to ask is this the work for which SPUC was founded?' (72)

In 1999, it was reported that 7 members of the SPUC executive committee had resigned due to 'a more conservative approach which could alienate Protestant, Muslim and Atheist support.' (73)The group was said to 'disillusioned with the leadership of the SPUC director John Smeaton and believe that the SPUC is distancing itself from parliament to form a closer alliance with the Catholic Church.' (74)Director John Smeaton (still the society's head today) was deemed by this group (which included Ann Widdecombe) as 'politically arrogant, contemptuous of them and dragging them off into right-wing Vatican politics.' (75)Despite this the group expressed that they still 'unconditionally supported the SPUC's aims and objectives'.(76)

And so despite the disclaimers of being a non-religious group, the actual activities of the SPUC are indistinguishable from absolutist Christianity of a particularly Catholic kind. It may reasonably be suggested that many moderate or non-religious people who oppose abortion would perhaps advocate contraception instead. The SPUC are not only against abortion, they are anti-contraception too. Their site and educational materials detail the problems with the pill (indicating in detail all the possible unpleasant side-effects, also pointing out that it doesn't prevent STD's) and also with condom usage. (77) Clearly the SPUC are not only anti-abortion, they are anti-sex, particularly outside marriage. Their educational materials indicate the statistics which show that the majority of women who have abortions are either in no long-term relationship or in 'common law' relationships. (78)To the SPUC, pro-life goes hand in hand with pro-marriage. And needless to say and predictably enough this means disapproval for homosexuality. In February 2010 John Smeaton advocated that all Catholic dioceses should cease subscription of the Catholic weekly magazine 'The Tablet' for suggesting that the Catholic Church could 'move' on its doctrine of homosexuality. Smeaton claimed 'why is homosexuality (and sexual ethics generally) important specifically for the pro-life movement? The late Pope John Paul II taught that it is an illusion to think we can build a true culture of human life if we do not offer adolescents and young adults an authentic education in sexuality and in love and the whole of life accordingly to their true meaning and in their close interconnection.' (79) It is interesting to conjecture as to how many of those contributing to the SPUC movement would also see the 'obvious link between anti-abortion and anti-homosexuality but there is one clear conclusion here. To the management of the SPUC, the issues with which it is concerned are indelibly fused with religious dogma and (if the rejection of 'The Tablet's suggestion is taken into account) absolutist at that. This fundamentalist tone is present in the tactic, shared with many pressure groups, of using semantics. They were responsible for rebranding their position from anti-abortion to pro-life. Not only does this take their case from a negative to a positive but it is also far more difficult (arguably) to take an *anti-life* position! Their statements often take on a more aggressively inflammatory and indeed *absolutist* bent in terms of their imagery. They proclaim they have an 'obligation to defend those with no means to defend themselves', (80) their role is the 'defence of the defenceless', (81)their mission is to fight our 'culture of death' (82)and following one council's decision to give out morning after pills following phone conversations one Christmas, the SPUC declared that this was the 'gift of death' for Christmas.(83)

They recently undertook a campaign against one London council which was advocating suggesting that sex education be taught to primary school children. Under the inflammatory banner 'Safe at School' the SPUC declared that children of only 7 years old could be taught about subjects such as masturbation and shown cartoon images of two people having intercourse. (84)Whilst this wasn't entirely untrue, it was revealed that such images were actually for the older age group and were in fact only one part of a longer video to which parents would be alerted beforehand, and

allowed to withdraw their children from if they wished. (85) However, these concerns demonstrate two usual obsessions typical of the religious fundamentalist, sex and education. That a great deal of the SPUC's time is spent on 'educating' people (such as warning girls of the 'dangers' of the pill) is quite disturbing given the propaganda they're advocating. To Christopher Hitchens, this would be symptomatic of 'dangerous sexual repression' (86) and is particularly underhand in that it comes in the guise of a 'non-religious' group which no doubt has many non-Catholic (or even non-religious) supporters who simply disapprove of abortion.

## **Christian Institute**

The Christian Institute is a movement, formed in the early 1990's. They are Christian fundamentalists, whose motives are political and, like the Whitehouse group they have demonstrated a willingness to deceive and manipulate in order to propagate their views and protect their faith. This is not a group which adheres to a Rawlsian approach to political liberalism. And though there is no indication of so-called 'clear and present danger' they also demonstrate the problematic nature of 'meeting speech with more speech' when it comes to absolutists. They simply can't be argued with because of the nature of their beliefs. Their mission statement proclaims 'the bible is without error not only when it speaks of salvation, its own origins, values and religious matters but it is also without error when it speaks of history and the cosmos. Christians must therefore submit to its supreme authority, both individually and incorporating in every matter of belief and conduct.' (87)

Their aims are unashamedly evangelistic and politically so at that. They exist 'for the furtherance and promotion of the Christian religion in Britain and advancement of education.' (88) It elaborates 'while it is not the role of a state to coerce individual citizens to adhere to particular beliefs, the state can never be neutral as regards values. Christians are to work for the state to adopt Christian values and to implement godly laws...in promoting Christians faith the Christian Institute seeks to affirm the universal Lordship of Christ and the challenge secular humanism, theological liberalism, universalism and other ideologies.' (89) The essentialist approach demonstrated here is typical, as with Whitehouse there is a clear and explicit assumption that they speak for all Christians. There is also no denying the absolutist tone in phrases like 'Godly laws' and the mention of 'values'. Typically, as with most absolutists, there appears to be a pre-occupation with sex. 'Christians must continue to argue for marriage. We also have to be firm that all sex outside marriage is wrong. This means that fornication, adultery and homosexual practice are wrong. Jesus said to the woman, caught in adultery *Go and Sin no more.*' (90)

The Institute's website has a helpful section which lists all current MP's and has against each name a full list of their votes on various subjects. Each vote is accompanied by either a green tick (meaning that the MP's vote on that subject was morally right) or a red cross (to indicate that the MP's vote was morally wrong). A typical example lists Diane Abbott who, out of 35 votes has 25 crosses. The subjects on which her vote was 'morally wrong' include things like supporting the scrapping of section 28, supporting the 'no fault' divorce, supporting the abolishment of the blasphemy law and voting to reclassify Cannabis to a class c (from class b). Those MP's who have more ticks than crosses are, predictably those with more typically conservative views on such matters. (91)



The Christian Institute's success generally lies more with manipulating opinion rather than actually influencing policy. They have on various occasions (usually something to do with homosexuality) mounted various campaigns to amend/block permissive legislation but have usually been defeated. However, referring back to Jeremy Richardson's point that pressure groups are generally made up of educated and influential individuals (which many of the Christian Institute's membership appears to be) who use the centralized form of government and media in Britain to affect opinion and give false impressions, they have been behind the propagation of two high profile cases. Firstly they were behind the promotion of two cases of apparent 'discrimination' towards Christians, both of which made the headlines and both of which had various inconvenient facts suppressed in the Institute's reporting's.

In 2008 Nadia Eweida was sacked by British Airways for apparently wearing a crucifix to work. Though she was reinstated on appeal, BA took the case to a European Tribunal and she was subsequently dismissed again. Due to the efforts of the Christian Institute, this case achieved much attention from the media and the story was couched (by publications such as the Telegraph and the Daily Mail) as further proof of the inerrant ludicrousness of Political Correctness and another example of aggressive secularism and the rampant de-Christianization of Britain. (92) Such was the high profile nature of the case, the woman concerned received messages of support from such luminaries as Tony Blair and the Archbishop of Canterbury, and BA received an inordinate amount of bad publicity as a result. (93) However, once the case was eventually thrown out by the European Tribunal, BA published the full findings which revealed a rather different story to that peddled by the Institute (which had paid for an American lawyer for Nadia Eweida). It appeared that the Crucifix incident was the culmination of a series of conflicts centring on the employee concerned.

Firstly it was revealed that she had annoyed colleagues by 'either giving them religious materials unsolicited or speaking to colleagues in a judgemental or censorious manner which reflected her beliefs, one striking example was a report from a gay man that the claimant had told him that it was not too late to be redeemed.' There had also been a dispute over working on Christmas Day. Nadia Eweida had refused to work on that day, stating that it was BA's duty to defer to her beliefs as a Christian. This was despite the fact that she had signed a contract agreeing to the rota system which clearly stipulated that she must be required to work 24 hours a day, 365 days of the year, subject to rota agreements. And she was never actually told not to wear the Crucifix, simply to conceal it under her blouse as it contradicted company policy on the wearing of jewellery. Overall the tribunal found that she 'generally lacked empathy for the perspective of others-her own overwhelming commitment to her faith led her at times to be both naïve and uncompromising in her dealings with those who did not share her faith.' (94)

The second case which became high profile in its apparent demonstration of the anti-Christian sentiment in Britain (again due to the Christian Institute's report which was economical with the facts) (95) was the 2009 case of a Primary School teacher in Essex who was told off because her infant daughter was found talking about Jesus in class. Again, the likes of Daily Mail leapt upon this as a politically correct disgrace and offence to all good Christians. (96) However, as it was later revealed, the reason the girl had been told not to talk about Jesus was because she had upset other children in the class by telling them that if they didn't believe in Jesus they were going to go to hell (97) (something which is perfectly in keeping with the thinking's of the Christian Institute!), and is clearly a product of religious brain-washing (a perfect example of what Dawkins would refer to as

child abuse) which is presumably why the mother of the child was spoken to. As with BA, the school temporarily became the subject of much negative publicity until all the facts emerged when the Headmaster received many messages of support, including from parents at the school who quite naturally were appalled at the thought that their child could be on the receiving end of such frightening condemnations by fellow pupils. The Headmaster subsequently revealed that many of the messages of support received were from Christians.<sup>(98)</sup>

What these two cases highlight is political protectionism on the part of the Christian Institute. They hope, paradoxically, that by propagating the myth that their faith is under attack (either by other faiths or secularists) they will shore up their own position within society by recruiting support via sympathy from Christians at large. However, as the previous case study shows, the Christian Institute does not speak for all Christians. Both Nadia Eweida and the Landscore teacher were clearly fundamentalist evangelicals but somehow managed, via the pressure groups manipulation of the media information, to present themselves as mainstream representatives of a 'faith under attack.'

## **Evangelical Alliance**

The Evangelical Alliance is a collective of many member churches (over 3000 at the last count)<sup>(99)</sup> which are based, though not exclusively, in Britain. Over the last few years, they've had an annual turnover of over 2 million pounds, nearly 50% of which comes from private member donations, <sup>(100)</sup>indicating (as stated above) that such pressure groups exist largely because of people with the financial means to create and perpetuate them, one could call it financially enabled faith (similar to the American Evangelical movement). Although the Alliance describes itself as having many political objectives, most of its work outlined in its recent annual reports tended to be in the areas of charity work. <sup>(101)</sup>However, they did recently(2010) conduct a large-scale survey of British evangelicals which revealed much about the beliefs and attitudes of the kind of people associated with these groups. Of the 17,000 surveys sent out to evangelical churches and festivals, notable results were as follows:

- 94% believed that the Bible was the literal word of God
- 88% said that faith was the most important thing in their life
- 70% said that women should be eligible for all roles
- 63% believed homosexuality was always wrong
- 86% said they voted in the last general elections
- 74% said they watched/listened/read the news on a regular basis<sup>(102)</sup>

At a glance one can conclude that the majority of evangelicals are biblical literalists whose faith is a major influence in their decision making, and who are generally well informed about public affairs and generally practice their right to vote. It is simple to infer that from this, how this group could potentially impact on public policy and decision making and indeed how important, potentially a platform such groups could be when it comes to political electioneering.

Also interesting to note was the fact that over 1000 of the survey respondents described themselves as non-evangelical and the Evangelical Alliance compiled their results separately in order to provide a quite insightful contrast.

Faith is the most important thing in my life

88% evangelicals agreed

54% non-evangelicals agreed

Faith is the key factor in all decision making

85% evangelicals agreed

51% non-evangelicals agreed

The Bible has supreme authority

88% evangelicals agreed

43% non-evangelicals agreed

I often read the Bible on my own

54% evangelicals agreed

26% non-evangelicals agreed

It's a Christian duty to actively engage in evangelism

71% evangelicals agreed

26% non-evangelicals agreed

Sex outside marriage is wrong

71% evangelicals agreed

26% non-evangelicals agreed

Assisted suicide is wrong

50% evangelicals agreed

21% non-evangelicals agreed (103)

The results are obvious. Evangelicals are far more absolutist and conservative in their views and do not represent either their faith in general or in numbers (if the overall figures of religious adherence in Britain are to be believed). And compared with the population at large, they are disproportionately more inclined to translate their views into political action.

As an organization, the Evangelical Alliance have predictably, shown themselves to be creationists and anti-homosexual. In a response to a call for the banning of the teaching of creationism from school science lessons one EA spokesman said 'I am baffled by the statement issued by this eminent group. Education at all levels involved the careful analysis of a variety of ideas and viewpoints. To insist on the validity of one theory alone to the detriment of all others exemplifies intolerance...Christians hold different views when it comes to the origins of the universe. Although believing passionately in the creative activity of a loving God, Christians hold a range of scientific opinions in relation to how the universe has taken shape.'<sup>(104)</sup>No doubt Dawkins would have something to say about whether evolution is a 'theory' or not. And on the subject of homosexuality in 2002 the EA insisted that one of its member groups 'The Courage Trust' withdrew from its organization for advocating a pro-gay stance. The EA response was 'we call upon evangelical congregations to welcome and accept sexuality active homosexual people but to do so in the expectation that they will come in due course to see the need to change their lifestyle in accordance with biblical revelation and orthodox Church teaching.'<sup>(105)</sup> In short, gays are welcome but only if

they desire to go straight. If not, get out! The EA use of the word 'orthodox' should not go unchallenged either as we shall see later.

And in similar tactics used by the Christian Institute, the EA have engineered high profile cases into a 'society vs. faith' stance. The BBC report of the gay couple who were turned away from a bed and breakfast run by a Christians read as follows 'the Evangelical Alliance for example points out that rights clash, why should the rights of the gay couple overrule the rights of Christian hoteliers who honestly believe that homosexuality is wrong. One person's justice is another person's prejudice.'

(106)

This unqualified report demonstrates a disappointing inability on behalf of even the mainstream media to differentiate fundamentalism from moderation. This is a two way problem. Such groups clearly take essentialist approaches but the inaccurate reporting of these cases clearly only act to perpetuate the myth that such groups speak for their faith, needlessly elevating the argument to a status that it does not merit. British Society is not at war with Christianity. And if we take the Rawlsian approach and highlight the fundamentalist and unreasonable nature behind these groups (and in particular how their views contrast with mainstream religion) then the misconception that this conflict between society and faith is at the centre rather than the fringe will be dispelled and easily contained. However, when apportioning fault and responsibility for this imagined conflict, there is a third culprit.

The forces of moderation rarely, if ever contradict such groups. Indeed, in the case of the BA employee, the Archbishop of Canterbury openly supported her. There are two possible reasons for this lack of engagement. Institutional religion is either unwilling or unable to contradict its fundamentalist branches. Neither option affords it any honourable credit. Its unwillingness could be because it is shoring up its own position within British society by letting these groups 'do the dirty work' for it by pushing the controversies that it really doesn't want to get its hands dirty with. And the question of its inability is contentious. If the likes of Rowan Williams and well-placed, intelligent theologians like Alister McGrath can make high profile attacks on the likes of Richard Dawkins, then there is no conceivable reason why they cannot make similar attacks on the likes of creationists. Could it be that as far as the likes of Williams and McGrath are concerned it is simply easier and more comfortable to attack atheists than it is to attack other Christians, and thereby tackle the faults within their own belief systems?

## **Who are the British creationists?**

So is the insistence that the 'truth' of evolution be taught in science, relevant to this thesis? One could make an argument (although not a very sound one) that teaching impressionable youngsters untruths (either by disputing the evidence for evolution, or simply stating that it isn't true because it contradicts religious texts) will indeed affect their ability to be fully functioning members of society. However, the reason this is not a very sound argument is that assuming that someone who doesn't know the theory of evolution will not be able to 'function' in society is contrary to the facts. Many creationists are otherwise intelligent people. It's similar to saying that unless one knows the correct historical fact about why and how the Battle of Trafalgar occurred, one cannot function in modern

society. With respect to the passion of Richard Dawkins, the question as to how or why we got here is, to many irrelevant to how they live their daily lives. A more sound argument would be to insist that in the public education system, funded by public money, we, as citizens have a right to insist that the truth on any subject (if it be known) be what is taught and any attempts to influence or hijack the known truth by comprehensive doctrines be resisted. There's a potential gap for tedious relativism to creep in at this point and ask the question 'what is truth'. I would dismiss this on the basis that the evidence for evolution is there if people want to look for it (anyone who disputes this should read Richard Dawkins *'The Greatest Show on Earth'* (107)), and to still question 'what is true' would be the equivalent to questioning whether the 'truth' of the date and outcome of the Battle of Trafalgar be taught in History lessons.

We have already looked at how the establishment in Britain (Church of England) has accepted evolution, and similar unequivocal sentiments have been expressed by Catholics. Given this branch of Christianity's high profile opposition to things like abortion and contraception, it may be surprising to know that the current Vatican policy (dating back to Pope Pious X in 1909) has been the acceptance of evolution as fact. (108)The current Catechism (159-Faith & Science) reads 'Science can never conflict with faith because things in the world and the things of faith derive from the same God...it is not only a question of knowing when and how the universe arose physically, or when man appeared but rather of discovering the meaning of such things.' (109)Current Pope Benedict XVI has described the conflict between creationism and evolution as 'absurd' (110)and in 2009 oversaw a conference to mark the 150<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Darwin's *'Origin of Species'*. The conference was used to re-iterate the Catholic stance that there was no conflict between evolutionary theory and the Catholic theology. It even singled out intelligent design for particular criticism, 'intelligent design isn't science even though it pretends to be. If you want to teach it in schools, intelligent design should be taught when religion or cultural history is taught, not science.' (111)This is not a sudden modernization of Catholic teachings. Previous Pope John Paul II said 'there is no conflict between evolution and the doctrine of faith...today more than half a century from Darwin some new findings lead us towards recognition of evolution as more than a hypothesis.'(112)

However, with Islam the position is not so simple. As before, the main concern, as pointed out by New Atheism (notably Harris) is the lack of a central authority.(113) The Muslim Council of Britain has never stated its position on this subject. In 2009 a problem erupted at Leyton Mosque when its vice chairman Dr Usama Hasan, a Physics lecturer at Middlesex University (who also had links with the progressive Quilliam foundation) tackled the subject of evolution and its acceptance within Islam. He said 'Professor Dawkins recently said most Muslims were creationists and their children were taught that the theory of evolution is wrong which causes a huge problem in schools. He is largely correct. The Christian world where Darwin first proposed his thesis has had a century and a half to come to terms with the theory of evolution, it has only begun to be taught rather recently in the Muslim world where faith and religious practice is still relatively strong...one problem is that many Muslims retain the simple picture that God created Adam from Clay...this is a children's Madrasa-level understanding and Muslims really have to move on as adults and intellectuals.' (156)InyatBungalawaya, chairman of Muslims4uk agreed claiming that within the Muslim world there was 'widespread ignorance among Muslims communities-many traditional Imams are grounded in ancient books in Arabic but have little grounding in science. I find it staggering how they can be so strongly opposed to evolution without reading about it.' (114)To relate this back to the issue of education, Dr Has an wasn't simply talking about matters of private beliefs but the problem that

science teachers had been recorded as having when it came to trying to teach evolution to Muslim children in their classes. Despite the vocal support from Inyat Bungalawa, the Mosque was picketed by groups of Muslims protesting about Dr Hasan's comments. He even received death threats. (115)The Muslim Council of Britain published a disclaimer utterly condemning the violence but tellingly, making no comment on the debate in question. (159) The protests seem to have begun via the IslamicAwakening.com website, the author of which Abuz Zubair issued the following statement 'Usama Hasan's previously expressed views on evolution contradict orthodox Islamic beliefs and whilst they might be acceptable on the pages of *The Guardian*, they are not appropriate for one who leads the congregational prayers for Muslims.' (116)Orthodox is the key word here. Christianity in both its Anglican and Catholic forms has, certainly in Britain accepted evolution as 'orthodox'. Islam has not. Admittedly, there is no proof that the proclamation from Islam Awakening.com is representative of 'orthodox Islam' but again this begs the question what is 'orthodox Islam'? When Dawkins made a high profile attack on Muslim faith schools in particular the MCB stated that it was 'unreasonable to expect schools not to teach fundamental theories of faith'. (117) Sheikh Ibrahim Mogra also said 'faith schools are by and large established to enforce religious teachings of our lives and the theory of creationism is one of the cornerstones of faith. To expect faith schools not to teach this kind of religious teaching is unreasonable.' (118)Islam would again appear to be more of a problem than Christianity on this issue. But despite the orthodox messages from the Synod and the Vatican, the question to ask is to what extent are Dawkins's concerns about the influence of creationism into science classes actually true within the context of the *British* state system? I have already stated in the outset of this thesis my reasons for not looking at faith schools in detail but here I propose a very brief examination of the influence of creationism into the state sector.

There is no denying that a creationist movement exists in the UK. It tends to take two forms; *overt* creationism which tends to be open about itself and its aims. Then there is *covert* creationism, acting under the label of Intelligent Design. We shall look at examples of both.

CMI (Creation Ministries International) is an overt Creationist movement, originally formed in America and Australia but with a current branch based in the UK also. All of its board of directors are members of faith (many are ordained ministers). (119)It regularly produces magazines and pamphlets for people of all ages and backgrounds. It was recently name-checked by the British Humanist association as one of the main propagators of Creationist material in state schools. (120)The CMI response was that it only attends schools to which it is invited and rarely if ever actually speaks in science lessons (165)(remember we are not concerned with religious education but the encroachment of religious ideas into science lessons). There is little evidence to suggest otherwise and in many ways the obvious, openly evangelical nature of its publications are so very obvious that its long-term influence into the mainstream is highly unlikely. It produces educational packs for children and the following passage is an example of its reasoning 'the idea that human beings and chimps have close to 100% similarity in their DNA is often asserted from studies using crude techniques, and based on a small fraction of the genetic code lead to claims of 97%-99% similarity. However in 2005 decoding of the chimp DNA gene was announced as a more accurate 96% or less. Most importantly similarity is not evidence for common ancestry (evolution) but rather for a common designer (creation). Think about the original Porsche and the Volkswagen 'Beetle' cars. They both had air-cooled, flat, horizontally opposed 4 cylinder engines in the rear, independent rear suspension, two doors, trunk in the front and many other similarities. Why do these two very different cars have so many similarities? Because they have the same designer!' (121)It states evolution is not proper science

because it is unobservable. And yet the CMI evidently believe in the dinosaurs judging by their mention in other CMI works and yet *they* are only observable in terms of bones and fragments left behind-in precisely the same way that the evidence for evolution has been gathered. (122)It makes references to flood geology (Noah's flood of course)(123) and juxtaposes its questions for kids like 'What about Carbon Dating' and 'what about continental drift' with questions like 'why did bad things come about' and 'who was Cain's wife'. (124)Arguably this very overt and obvious form of creationism, with its techniques and constant religious references throughout their publications render the CMI quite harmless in terms of their potential threat and influence upon the state-maintained science curriculum because it is so easily identifiable and discredited.

The more covert form of Creationism is exemplified by the UK based organization Truth in Science. Generally organizations like this have tended to act under the label of intelligent design but even this label is now being eschewed by creationist organizations. The label was exposed and discredited in a high profile 2006 US test case which ruled that intelligent design was simply creationism by another name. Judge John Jones ruled that 'we find the secular purposes claimed by the board amount to a pretext for the board's real purpose which was to promote religion'. (170)Truth in Science as an organization openly denies that it advocates the teaching of creationism. So what is its motive? It described itself as 'an organization promoting good science education in the UK' (171)and finishes its disclaimer by saying 'Truth in Science' promotes the critical examination of Darwinism in schools'. (125)So it is immediately obvious that its primary concern *is* evolutionary theory. Its FAQ page attempts to deal with the question of why so many ministers and members of faith make up its board. Its answer is 'theories of origins have profound moral, social, ethical and cultural implications. Students should therefore be exposed to differences of opinion and allowed to consider the arguments for themselves.' (126) This is a common tactic used by advocates of intelligent design, compiled to sound reasonable and play specifically to the liberal gallery. 'Teach the controversy', give people 'all shades of opinion'. With this tactic, it is relatively easy to dismiss people like Dawkins who insist evolution be the only theory taught actually sound 'unreasonable' and even 'fundamentalist' in tone by comparison. Their website claims 'you have only to read recent additions of academic and popular science journals to realize that there is a battle raging over this very issue...nevertheless schools are reluctant to teach this controversy' (127) and later 'we consider it is time for students to be exposed to the fact that there is a modern controversy over Darwin's theory of evolution and that this has considerable social, spiritual, moral and ethical implications'. (128)The disclaimer offers no links to these articles and further reveals its true motivations by appearing to assume that the alternative to Darwin's theory is 'spiritual' one. There is little or no evidence to suggest that there is a controversy within the scientific community regarding evolution, even less to suggest that the only alternative is a spiritual one. The controversy is merely one of those who believe it and those who don't because it contradicts their faith.

Truth in Science came in for some notoriety in 2006 when they issued educational packs to all state school heads of science. The packs offered comprehensive breakdowns on how to dispute evolutionary theory, complete with detailed lesson plans. In one of them, entitled 'How Science works: Irreducible Complexity', it asks students to consider the question 'How did life get here-by design or by chance?' This demonstrates one of the most common misrepresentations of Darwinian theory-evolutionary theory is not based on 'chance' but on 'natural selection'. It asks students to write 150 words summarizing the argument for both sides and it is difficult to come to any other conclusion (given the motivations of the organization) that such a mistake is a deliberate attempt to



skew the argument in favour of design. (129) Other lesson plans are designed to discredit Darwin's evidence in more detail. In one pack it quotes from the BBC GCSE bite size revision website 'whilst studying wildlife on the Galapagos Islands Darwin noticed that the Galapagos finches showed wide variations, e.g. in beak size and shape—from island to island. Darwin deduced that these differences made the finches better adapted to take advantage of the food in their particular local environment...in each locality the finch population had somehow developed beaks which were suitable for that particular environment'. (130) The Truth in Science pack goes on to say 'the BBC is mistaken in what it says here, when he was on the Galapagos Islands Darwin did not notice that different islands had different finches. Neither did he realize that the finches were closely related despite their differences in beak sizes.' (131)

The pack then goes on to repeat what the BBC said but in a slightly different way and actually admits in its conclusion that 'the Galapagos finches are not as important to Darwin as is often claimed but they are a good example of micro-evolution. They show us that finches can vary in their morphology and that natural selection has a role in this. This study does not give evidence for macro-evolution and does not prove that natural selection and random mutation could produce the living world as we know it from single-celled ancestors.' (132) This is all designed not necessarily to discredit Darwin and evolution outright but to sow seeds of doubt in a calculating and manipulative way. The journal *'Science, Just Science'* reviewed these packs when they were sent out and concluded 'the arguments are presented in the style of an educational film and are generally presented among needlessly lengthy scientific descriptions and impressive visuals which help to make creationist arguments sound reasonable to anyone without scientific training in the relevant disciplines. Anyone familiar with creationism will recognize their standard tactics including appeals to emotion, arguments from ignorance, misdirection and occasionally blatant falsehoods'. (133) Though there is little evidence to suggest that Truth in Science has had any real success in terms of its specific pamphlets and efforts, there is evidence to suggest that there is cause for concern.

In 2002, Richard Dawkins exposed the head of Emmanuelle College's science department, Stephen Layfield as a creationist. Layfield had claimed in a lecture published on the school's website that he was using some of his Intelligent Design material in science lessons. Dawkins sent an open letter to the then Prime Minister Tony Blair, signed by several prominent scientists protesting about the fact. Blair refused to accept the criticisms of the school and instead pointed out the school's good exam results. Emmanuelle College was one of the Labour governments academies, a scheme initiated under Blair in which more and more schools were freed up from Local Education Authority control. This meant more freedom over the implementation of the national curriculum and to Dawkins, the encroachment of religious views into science lessons in Emmanuelle College was a prime example of how this approach could backfire.

In 2001 an Ofstead inspection had praised the school as 'very effective' and had 'good teaching' (134) and did not accede to Dawkins' demands for a re-inspection. It did send a letter to the college asking for reassurances that the claims were unfounded and received the following response 'our science department staff hold a wide variety of personal opinions on these matters, ranging from atheistic evolution to 6-day creation'. (135) Satisfied with the response, Ofsted refused to agree to another inspection prompting Dawkins to state 'it is a matter of public record that the head of science at Emmanuelle, Steven Layfield is a young earth creationist who believes that the universe is only a few thousand years old, contradicting not just biology but physics, geology, geography,



cosmology and archaeology too. When I raised this preposterous fact with Sir Peter Vardy (of Ofsted) he said that whilst he is entitled to absolutely his own personal view, he is not teaching this in the college's science lessons, so that's alright then. But if the head of classics went on record as believing that Tennyson was the author of the Iliad should we be reassured if he promised to keep his private beliefs to himself and not mention them in class? On the contrary, we would agree that anybody capable of having such screwy beliefs is not qualified to teach classics.'<sup>(136)</sup>

In 2006 an Ipsos Mori poll carried out on behalf of the BBC's Horizon programme (in response to the US test case) questioned 2000 people on their opinions of the origin of life. 48% said they believed we had evolved, 22% supported creationism, 17% believed in intelligent design and the rest didn't know.<sup>(184)</sup>The poll came as a surprise to Andrew Cohen, producer of Horizon who said 'I think this poll represents our first introduction to the British public's views on this issue. Most people would have expected the public to go for evolutionary theory but it seems there are lots of people who appear to believe in an alternative theory of life's origins'.<sup>(137)</sup>Revealingly, the poll also demonstrated an apparent inability for many to recognise that Creationism and Intelligent Design were the same. Cohen concluded 'this really says something about the role of science education in this country and begs the question how we are teaching evolutionary theory.'<sup>(138)</sup>Little appeared to have changed when another poll of 2060 people was carried out in 2009 for the Rescue Darwin campaign. 50% said they thought evolution was either definitely or probably true. 22% said they believed in creationism or intelligent design whilst the remainder (28%) said they didn't know.<sup>(139)</sup>There is no doubt that if the 'don't knows' were convinced to accept evolution, then the polls would unequivocally be in evolution's favour. To that extent Cohen would appear to be right in terms of this being a matter of effective education.

The acceptance of evolution within the state system does not appear to be an issue. Successive governments have stood by the insistence that 'creationism should not be taught as a valid scientific theory'.<sup>(140)</sup>In a 2005 statement on the subject, the national curriculum claimed 'all maintained schools, including those set up by faith organizations are required to teach the national curriculum. Academies are required through their funding agreements broadly to follow the national curriculum and the national system of assessing it. CTC's are required to follow a broad and balanced curriculum with an emphasis on science and technology...they are not required to follow the national curriculum although most do.'<sup>(141)</sup>And on the subject of science in particular it was stated 'at Key stage 4 pupils study the fossil record as evidence for evolution and how variation and selection may lead to evolution or extinction. Schools do teach how scientific controversies can arise from their interpretation of empirical evidence.'<sup>(142)</sup>Revision guides freely available from schools and on the high street confirm evolution as a mandatory topic (remembering that science itself is mandatory to GCSE level) and that although the guides generally acknowledge that some 'dispute' the idea of evolution ('particularly some religious groups') they all give clear evidence (Peppered Moths, Galapagos finches, the idea of bacterial immunity, fossil records) to support the theory. Several of them actually state that it is no longer really a 'hypothesis' or 'theory' but is generally regarded as scientific fact. In none of them do they state that the 'controversy' from religious groups equates to a real challenge to evolution, and neither creationism nor intelligent design warrant a mention.<sup>(143)</sup>

Naturally concern from new atheists such as Richard Dawkins tends to be focused towards schools which have a specific faith ethos. An incentive from the new coalition government has led to

the creation of 'free schools'. Of the 323 groups which applied to set up in the first year, 115 of them were from faith groups. (144) These free schools will not be required to teach the national curriculum, merely a 'broad and balanced' curriculum, similar in that respect to the Labour government's academies. They will not even need to employ qualified teachers. However, as with other maintained schools (these free schools may be free from control from the Local Education Authority but they are still partly state-maintained and are not private' schools by any means) they will be subject to regular Ofsted inspections and all pupils will work towards the same standard end examinations. And considering questions on evolution frequently appear on examination papers it is extremely unlikely that children at these schools won't be taught about the subject in some shape or form. However, this is something to be examined in the future.

To conclude, the Emmanuelle College incident is proof that Dawkins's concerns are genuine. The question is the *extent* to which this problem has proliferated into the system. Any examination of the potential impact of free schools will have to wait for a while, as of writing only 43 of them have opened, and only from September 2011. Arguably though, the experience will be similar to the current crop of faith schools and academies. With both the state and Christian orthodoxy unequivocally against creationism and ID, a serious challenge to evolution is unlikely. This is not to say that the potential doesn't exist for individuals to attempt to incrementally introduce doubt into the minds of their children, as the Emmanuelle example proves. To this extent New Atheism is quite right to expose and challenge this issue in a high profile way. And we can do this with the knowledge that to do so is not to challenge 'religion', this is not faith vs. science, it is not Christianity vs. secularism. This is established scientific fact vs. literal, fundamentalist, fringe religion and *must* be exposed as such, not only to prevent the inculcation of young, impressionable minds with untruths but also to avoid the impression that religion itself is under attack. This, like many of the above points is yet another misconception to dispel.

## **Tabloid Christianity**

The misconception that unreasonable Christians and Christian pressure groups speak for their religion can only be perpetuated if there are those willing and able to perpetuate it. This is the second ingredient in the problematic cocktail. The notable right-leaning newspapers such as the Daily Mail and Daily Express and to a lesser extent the Telegraph have traditionally fulfilled this function. This is not to suggest that there is some grand conspiracy between the editors of such publications and the likes of the Christian Institute, though given what we have already discussed regarding the characteristics of the Christian Right there are no doubt many common elements and individuals. The situation is more a convenient and mutually beneficial meeting of ideologies. Given the general anti-immigration and anti-European stance of these publications it would be a fair assumption to suggest that 'promotion' of the perception of Christianity under attack, is related strictly to an anti-other sentiment. Islam does not fare well in these publications. And Rowan Williams, in his Swansea University lecture attacking Dawkins stated that many of those who identify themselves as Christian do so simply in an attempt to mean

However, the writings of the opinion-makers in the form of the regular columnists of these publications such as Melanie Phillips and Simon Heffer would seem to suggest a far deeper level of Christian adherence. Martin Conboy, in his 2006 study of British Tabloids '*Tabloid Britain*' writes 'examples from the Daily Mail can indicate the ways in which the language of the tabloids can be used to propose a radical stance on certain issues of the day in paper usually identified with social and political conservative positions...presented in ways which appeal beyond the text of the paper to a wider community of identification with campaigns to protect the way things are or used to be and which are such an important part of the idiom of the paper...it can use its dominant discourse to provide the sort of radical conservative campaigning which is also a part of the tabloid spectrum and one which can claim an authenticity as the voice of a frustrated lower middle class sensibility which is a characteristic of Conservative Britain.'<sup>(154)</sup>Conboy's references to the tabloids efforts to 'protect' and the 'way we were' can be seen as based in the Tocqueville analysis that societies need religion, though not necessarily dogma, to bind them successfully together. This is the essence of Tabloid Christianity. Let us look at two specific commentators.

### **1: Melanie Phillips**

A journalist, author and prolific commentator on political and social affairs, Phillips recently published a book entitled '*The World Turned Upside Down*' in which she lamented the apparent marginalisation of Christianity. The work is in effect a book length study of her thinking which has permeated most of her Tabloid contributions on the subject. To take just a few examples:

*'to some of us, it has long seemed obvious that this is intimately related to the breakdown of religious belief. It is the morality embedded in the Bible that expressly requires us to put the interests of others first. If we really want to stop Britain's terrifying drift into brutalization where a widow is robbed of her husband's ashes and the young become strangers to remorse or reason, we surely must accept that the moral vacuum into which we are staring is one that Britain's bedrock faith must once again fill.'*

Daily Mail, November 2011 in response to that summer's riots<sup>(155)</sup>

*'Britain has an established church, the monarch undertakes to be defender of the faith', the country's literature, history, institutions and attitudes are steeped in Christianity and most people still identify themselves as Christian. The judges assertion must be seen instead as an attempt to exclude Christianity from the public sphere, for although they claim that they seek to uphold the equal rights of all creeds in a diverse society, they are actually denying the rights of Christians to live in accordance with one of the most fundamental doctrines of their faith.'*

Daily Mail, May 2011, in response to a Christian couple refused the right to foster due to their disapproval of homosexuality.<sup>(156)</sup>

*'he's ignorant, cruel and un-Christian but don't expect the spineless church to banish Bishop Pete, for those who despair that the church of England has progressed beyond satire, along comes a bishop to ram the point home. Instead of providing a bulwark against the secular onslaught upon the Judeo-Christian values which form the bedrock of society, the church has been in the forefront of appeasing ideologues of every stripe who are intent upon destroying family, morality and nation.'*

Daily Mail, November 2010 in response to a Bishop who claimed the marriage between Prince William and Kate Middleton wouldn't last 7 years.<sup>(157)</sup>

Three important elements to note in these articles are firstly that Phillips is using the Tocqueville analysis that problems in society, particularly the breakdown of law and order are directly related to the marginalization of religion and Christianity in particular. This is merely an extension of the argument refuted by New Atheism that we need religion to be good and that knowledge of the bible makes us behave better. Secondly, in the second article Phillips is using an essentialist notion of religion, assuming that disapproval of homosexuality is somehow intrinsic to religion and that all Christians would think the same. And thirdly, the final article indicates that the Christianity Phillips espouses is *not* the establishment, indeed she is particularly scathing of the Church of England, simply because it won't say, condemn and act in the way Phillips thinks Christians should behave. These patterns of behaviour, the essentialist notions, condemnation of the establishment as too soft and thereby weak are mirrored by the absolutist groups we have looked at. To this extent the fusion of the Tabloid Christianity of Melanie Phillips with the likes of the Christian Institute is perfectly understandable and probably inevitable.

## **2: Simon Heffer**

Simon Heffer is another prolific author and journalist and has contributed many articles to both tabloid and broadsheet publications. He is also, perhaps surprisingly, an atheist. Two notable articles are as follows.

### ***'STOP APOLOGISING FOR BEING CHRISTIAN***

*I rejoice wholeheartedly that I live in a Christian culture...our oldest schools and universities have intrinsic links with the Anglican Church. Our very system of justice is implicitly Christian. Our history is Christian since the dawn of the seventh century. More to the point, it is by the will of the majority in our democracy that all this remains so...the modern left exercises a militant anti-Christian not so much because of a cultural cringe in the face of immigrant minorities but because of its general wish to dismantle history. Once you have erased Christianity, you have erased much of the past 1400 years. Modernisation in all its political forms is about the tabula rasa and there are few ways of creating one of those so effective as the destruction of the traditional faith.'*

Daily Telegraph, 2005<sup>(158)</sup>

*'The church should have prevented itself from being depicted as a staunch opponent of the so-called government cuts for these reductions in public spending are both economically necessary and, in some cases, essential to end the demoralizing effects of welfarism as thousands on benefits are kept in a cycle of poverty and idleness, this is the key area where the church should take a clear stand. I have never been one of those atheists such as Dawkins and Hitchens who are affronted by religion. I have always been attached to the values of Christianity and wish I could believe.'*

Daily Mail, December 2011 on Church criticism of Government spending cuts.<sup>(159)</sup>

Whilst the first article reflects the Tocqueville analysis, the second displays the fusion (talked about earlier during our discussion of religion in the Conservative party) of Christianity with traditional right-wing values. Both demonstrate the traits Conboy highlighted of a kind of nostalgia for the past and the belief that Christianity must be protected. It is this trait which has often led in recent years with the rise of militant voices in other religions of a perception that Christianity is under attack. And

so when British airways employee Nadia Eweida is suspended from work for wearing a crucifix, the likes of the Daily Mail illustrate the story with a photograph of an apparently harmless looking middle-aged woman holding up a beautiful, gold crucifix. And when a Christian couple refuse the admittance of a homosexual couple to their bed and breakfast, the photograph displays another harmless looking couple with haggard, concerned faces, portrayed, like Nadia Eweida as victims of an unjust system. And so although Tabloid Christianity is more about the perpetuation of the belief that Christianity is essential to the 'British tradition' rather than strict absolutist morality, the aims of such publications combined with the likes of the Christian Institute's tactics provide the essence of the problematic cocktail which, once dispelled should banish the misconception that religion is somehow becoming more militant and problematic for the Rawlsian approach.

## Who is offended?

In 1985 the Law Commission produced a report which recommended the repeal of the Blasphemy Law on the grounds that it was increasingly obsolete in terms of its use and potentially discriminatory (in the context of Britain's increasingly multicultural makeup) in only applying to Christianity. The report identified four main reasons put forward in support of the existing legislation. They were protection of religion and religious beliefs, protection of society, protection of individual feelings, and protection of public order. (159) In light of the eventual amendment to the Public Order act to prevent incitement to religious hatred, we can see that all but the last of the four reasons were ultimately judged irrelevant. To deal with those objections in turn, it is difficult to imagine in today's increasingly fractured and in some ways secularized society how protection of religion could be criminalized (despite efforts from certain groups during the debate concerning the incitement to religious hatred act), the idea that a blasphemy law is required to 'protect' society is based on an outdated concept linking religion with morality whilst protection of individual feelings is too subjective a concept to legislate for, especially in light of Douglas Adams' point above that there is no rational reason why religion should be singled out for protection in this way.

The repeal of the Blasphemy Law was due in part to the fact that provisions for 'protection of religion' had been made in the 2006 amendment to the 1986 Public Order Act which included incitement to religious hatred. The amendment read thus 'a person who uses threatening words or behaviour or displays any written material which is threatening, is guilty of an offence if he intends thereby to stir up religious hatred.' (160) In the debate leading up to the enacting of this legislation the distinction was again made between insulting the belief and insulting the believer. Muslim groups such as the MCB claimed that they wanted the legislation passed to bring them into line with Jews and Sikhs whose beliefs they claimed were already recognized as indistinguishable from their race within British law (161) (though this isn't the case as we have seen). This attempt to link 'Muslim' as a race indistinguishable from Islam as a belief would have indeed resulted in potential prosecutions for those like Harris and Hitchens. But again, Rowan Atkinson outlined the need to distinguish between the two. 'I question also the ease with which the existing race hatred legislation is going to be extended simply by scoring out the words 'racial hatred' and the insertion of 'racial and religious hatred' as if race and religion are very similar notions when it is clear to most people that race and religion are fundamentally different concepts requiring completely different treatment

under the law. To criticize people for their race is manifestly irrational but to criticize their religion, that is a right, that is a freedom, the freedom to criticize ideas-any ideas, even if they are sincerely held beliefs is one of the fundamental freedoms of society and a law which attempts to say you can criticize or ridicule ideas as long as they are not religious ideas is a very peculiar law indeed.'

(69) Similar sentiments were expressed by the head of campaign group Liberty Shami Chakrabti who said 'this offense is capable of catching attacks on ideas as well as people. At best this is an empty sop to a community sorely let down by government, at worst it is a dangerous new blasphemy law out of step with our best traditions...criminalising even the most unpalatable illiberal and offensive speech should be approached with grave concern in a democracy, free speech is far more precious than protection from being offended.' (162) Such amendments were also felt to be necessary to in effect stop religions from attacking each other as Stephen Green of 'Christian Voice' said that he would use the legislation to prosecute any shop selling the Koran due to its insults to Jews and Christians contained within! (163) Fortunately, thanks to the campaign, (and against the wishes of the MCB) the following amendment was enacted:

*'Nothing in this part shall be read or given effect in a way which prohibits or restricts discussion, criticism or expressions of antipathy, dislike, ridicule, insult, or abuse of particular religions or the beliefs or practices of their adherents, or of any belief system or the beliefs of its adherents, or proselytizing or urging adherents of a different religion or belief system to cease practicing their religion or belief system.'* (164)

In 2009, parliament revealed that there had been only one case brought before the courts but no prosecution followed. (165) However in 2010 there was one prosecution (to the horror of the National Secular Society who proclaimed that this was proof that the act was simply the blasphemy law through the back door). However, there were enough mitigating circumstances to demonstrate that the offender had gone out of his way to leave rude and deliberately provocative material in the prayer room of Liverpool's John Lennon airport. (166) It remains to be seen whether more prosecutions will follow.

The problems arising from the misconception that religion is somehow ultra-sensitive can be tackled on two fronts, *firstly* the recognition of that problematic cocktail once again and *secondly*, the social taboos of criticising minority groups.

## **That Cocktail Again**

Firstly, that problematic cocktail of lazy reporting of 'loud' pressure groups who use essentialist notions of their faith to push absolutist and censorious views. There is plenty of evidence to suggest that British Christianity has demonstrated very broad shoulders both before and *after* the 2006 act. Though I have disputed earlier in this thesis, the conclusions some social commentators have made about the decline of religion in the post-war era (notably the 60's), particularly the belief that 'belief' dropped off somewhere around about then; one thing the 60's *can* lay claim to was the rise of satire in relation to religion. However, here too there is reason to doubt that this was entirely due to a sudden change in the religiosity of the British character. The broadcasting act of 1963 (consolidated

in the ITA television act the following year) enabled the BBC to take further control over its broadcasting standards by removing hitherto held restrictions on a number of topics, of which religion was only one. A long-established prohibition on jokes about religion, royalty, political institutions and sex were removed in one sweep. (167)

The implicit assumption made by many social commentators to be challenged, is that the rise in satire enabled and assisted the decline in British religiosity. However, religion's bracketing with the usual establishment elements such as the royal family indicate that the hitherto off-limits nature of the questioning of religion owed far more to the British deference to authority and politeness than to an assumed widespread pre-60's belief in metaphysics and the supernatural. Despite this, there is no denying that the rise in satire, transmitted on a large-scale through the television set would have helped challenge assumptions and preconceptions about religion and faith-based practices.

In his work Callum Brown thinks 'even the God-slot developed away from purely devotional religion. ABC television ran a programme on the ITV network called 'Looking for an Answer' chaired by Robert Bee which attracted 500 letters a week on religious themes from which a selection were put to invited leading churchmen. Far from being all conservative, the contributors often turned up controversial answers-intellectual theologians who seemed to question Christian truths like the Virgin birth. Television was showing the British people how to reject religion.' (168) In terms of looking specifically satirical pieces, again there is evidence to dispute that this began in the 60's. A trend evident in post-war cinema often displayed clerics and churchmen as doddering, largely ineffectual comic buffoons. However satire in the television medium, notably 'That Was the Week That Was' took attacks on religion to an entirely new level. The following was a typical example.

*'We tested the Roman Catholic Church...what do you put into it? Belief in the infallibility of Giovanni BastitaMontini, now known as Paul the Sixth...we must stress here that the idea that the head (or Pope as he is called) claims infallibility in all matters is a fallacy. The Pope cannot tell you which television set is best...he can only tell you which television programme you cannot watch...Jesus Christ has already undertaken personal responsibility for the consumer's misdemeanours. This gives extra support. And the confessional mechanism is standard. It operates as an added safety-factor to correct running mistakes making salvation almost fool proof.'* (169)

Naturally, exchanges like this would have provoked some complaints. However, in a society undergoing fundamental change in the way previously sacred established institutions were being treated this is perhaps only natural. Only very occasionally between then and now have such complaints ever become so serious as to lead to confrontation and debates over free speech and the state of religion within British society.

We shall now look at three such incidents. The fundamental question to ask of each these three cases is 'who' is protesting? The issue here, as discussed elsewhere is the mistaken assumption on the part of both those protesting and the media reporting the protests is that the group speak for Christians as a whole which as we shall see, they resolutely did not.

The first case is Mary Whitehouse's successful prosecution against Gay News for blasphemy in 1977. The previous successful prosecution had been in 1921 leading to widespread belief that the law had become obsolete. (170) Whitehouse proved this wasn't the case and the following 1950

definition of blasphemy was referred to in the case which followed. 'Every publication is said to be blasphemous which contains any contemptuous, reviling, scurrilous or ludicrous matter relating to God, Jesus Christ or the Bible or the formulations of the Church of England as by law established. It is not blasphemous to speak or publish opinions hostile to the Christian religion or to deny the existence of God if the publication is couched in decent and temperate language. The test to be applied is as the manner in which the doctrines are advocated and not as to the substance of the doctrines themselves. Everyone who publishes any blasphemous document is guilty of the offence of publishing a blasphemous libel. Everyone who speaks blasphemous words is guilty of the offence of blasphemy.' (171) This definition explains why satire such as that used in '*That Was The Week That Was*' could pass with comparative ease whilst the poem published in *Gay News* could not. The following two verses of the poem in question were probably the ones which caused most offence.

*'For the last time  
I laid my lips around the tip  
Of that great cock, the instrument  
Of our salvation, our eternal joy  
The Shaft still throbbed, anointed  
With death's final ejaculation'*(172)

Even by today's standards, the reference to fellatio during the crucifixion is likely to arouse disquiet but judged by the above 1950 definition of blasphemy, there is little surprise that the publisher was found guilty. However, this was not a question of Christianity vs. free speech. Despite her attempts, Whitehouse did not receive support from the established churches. She wrote to then Archbishop of Canterbury Donald Coggan and said,

'I understand that there is some anxiety lest the church is seen to be associated with a case which is lost on a technical point...but may I please say that if the case were lost on such a point at least the world will see that the church leaders were ready to defend its Lord and only the case would be lost. If there is no voice from the church and the case is lost...John Mortimer who is defending will be able to say Dear me, what is all the fuss about, evidently this is not really blasphemous or surely the leaders of the church would have something to say.'(173)

To which Coggan responded that he was,

'...puzzled by your letter. Cardinal Basil Hume and I refused to come forward as witnesses in the *Gay News* trial only after most careful thought. We are not suggesting that (to use a phrase in your letter) there should be no voice from the church or that you would find yourself alone, what we are suggesting is that a jury of 12 persons who may in the main, or perhaps all be non-believers is far more likely to be influenced by an ordinary person who testifies that the poem satisfies the definition of blasphemy and would doubtless offend a wide cross section of society than by professional church leaders like ourselves.' (174)

This exchange, outlined by Michael Tracey and David Morris in their book '*Whitehouse*' displays a possible wiliness on the part of the Archbishop, with the authors suggesting that Coggan's position could be read in one of two ways. On the one hand, he doesn't specifically disagree with Whitehouse's stance, indicating that he was in effect letting Whitehouse do the churches' dirty work



when it came to controversial issues. On the other hand however, one could implicitly read a certain reluctance into the reply, particularly his reference on relying on the offence of a 'wide cross-section of society' rather than simply Christians. Coggan was clearly taking a holistic as opposed to an absolutist view of his faith. One thing is clear; the last successful prosecution for blasphemy in the UK was not bought or supported by the established churches but by an absolutist pressure group which took the opportunity to suppress permissive attitudes by using of an archaic but far from obsolete law. And again, as we have seen before, this group was not short of funds from interested parties. Tracey and Morris describe how 'she assumed, quite literally, as she had throughout her years of campaigning that God will provide and the money certainly did appear and always does mainly because Whitehouse has an important, social base within the community. It is not a majority base but it is a substantial one, and it is willing to pay up.'

(83) Her supporters, like the adherents of many pressure groups were people of means. She described in one letter of thanks to one such supporter how 'you will be pleased to know that the Attorney who is advising us in this matter is a deeply committed Christian who has himself prayed and asked for guidance as to whether he should take the assignment. Our solicitor is also a committed Christian.' (175) However, the campaign in the defence (though it may have lost in the courts) had support too and all fees and costs were cleared out of fund of over £26,000 which was raised in support, £500 of which was donated by the Monty Python team; which brings us onto the next case.(176)

The controversy surrounding the 1979 Monty Python film '*Life of Brian*' needs to be understood in the light of the Gay News prosecution. A substantial amount of the concern surrounding the release and content of this film was caused simply because it occurred in the light of the shock aroused by the sudden successful resurrection of the blasphemy law. However, in retrospect it is easy to see that the Pythons had little to worry about, even judging by the above 1950 definition of blasphemy. The film is a satire on organized religion and Jesus himself is glimpsed only briefly at the very beginning of the film speaking the Sermon on the Mount. The following exchanges are typical:

*Bryan: You've got it all wrong, you don't need to follow me, you don't need to follow anybody, you've got*

*to think for yourselves, you're all individuals*

*Crowd: Yes, we're all individuals!*

*Bryan: You're all different*

*Crowd: Yes, we're all different!*

*Bryan: You've got to work it out for yourselves*

*Crowd: Yes, we've got to work it out for ourselves!*

*Bryan: Exactly!*

*Crowd: Tell us Lord!*

*Bryan: No, that's the point don't let anyone tell you what to do.(177)*

The above satirical exchanges could not by any standards be described as scurrilous or licentious in the way that the Gay News poem could be and despite the opening set during the Sermon on the Mount and the closing set-piece with the crucified Bryan singing 'Always Look on the Bright Side of

Life', no specific biblical figures are included. However this did not prevent Whitehouse and her Festival of Light organization protesting about the film. This started even before the film had been shot as the original producer, EMI dropped out when its chairman pulled the plug on the project claiming that 'I am not going to have people think I'm making fun of Jesus Christ.' (179) It was only when ex-Beatle George Harrison stepped in that the film was able to obtain the necessary finance to be made. (89) The Festival of Light's next move was to write to the BBFC in an effort to get the film refused a certificate. 'I need not remind you of the wider implications of scurrilous abuse of God, Christ or the Bible' read the letter in a clear attempt at scare tactics. (180)

The BBFC passed the film uncut. The Festival of Light then took to writing to specific local councils in an attempt to prevent the film being shown. They achieved a certain amount of success with many local councils refusing to show the film. One such council was Harrogate and in a contemporary television interview, the following exchange displayed the absurdity of the situation:

*Interviewer: Councillor Hitchen, why have you banned the Life of Bryan?*

*Councillor: Because from what we've heard about it, we think that it's going to be an extremely offensive film on religious grounds.*

*Interviewer: Now you've not actually seen the film have you?*

*Councillor: No we haven't*

*Interviewer: What reports have you had of it? Where have those reports come from?*

*Councillor: The reports have come from the Festival of Light*

*Interviewer: What do you know about the Festival of light?*

*Councillor: Nothing. (181)*

Unlike the Gay News case it can't be maintained here that no senior church leaders had issues with this film. (92) However, the fact that, with the passage of time, the film has endured, regularly coming high on lists of people's favourite comedy film (including people of faith like Tony Blair and former Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey) (182) indicates that any such contemporary controversy was largely to do with changing public tastes but was undeniably fuelled and stoked by a fundamentalist pressure group. One is again reminded of Rawls definitions of Comprehensive Doctrines in terms of their reluctance to adapt.

The third and final example we shall look at involved '*Jerry Springer-The Opera*'. Despite winning critical acclaim and a total of fifteen awards (including winning the Best Musical in the Olivier Awards, Evening Standard Awards, Critics Circle Awards and What's on Stage Awards) (183) this was again reported in terms of the outrage it had accorded Christians. In reality, the protests (many of which were sparsely attended) were organised by two fundamentalist Christian groups, *Christian Voice* and the *Christian Institute*. (184) The issue came to a head when the BBC broadcast a performance of the opera, the transmission of which led to 47,000 complaints *before* the broadcast and were largely as a result of letter campaigns organized by the aforementioned groups with Media watch joining the fight too, mirroring the situation with '*Life of Brian*' where uninformed complaints and self-censorship were largely fuelled by self-serving groups using hyperbole and exaggeration. (185) A typical example was when Stephen Green of Christian Voice claimed after its transmission that 'the damage that must have done to impressionable young people is incalculable.' (186) As usual with such groups, their hyperbole was hardly reflective of the facts.

During the second act of the Opera, a dead Jerry Springer goes to hell and officiates over a version of his show which sees a confrontational stand-off between Jesus and the Devil. The main point of contention seems to have been the moment when Jesus refers to himself as being a 'little bit gay' but aside from that, there is certainly nothing scurrilous about the *action* although there are innumerable swear words. (187) An attempt to bring another private prosecution for blasphemy (by *Christian voice*) failed (188) and three years later the blasphemy law was dead. *Christian Voice* published the private addresses and telephone numbers of many BBC employees on its website which led to 'a number of BBC staff and their families received a large number of abusive and unpleasant calls' to which Stephen Green responded by saying 'we totally abhor stuff like that, it does no credit to the case of Christ. But I was a bit naive in thinking perhaps our website would only be visited by Christians.' (189) The naive assumption here is that those behind the threats and abuse could not possibly have been Christian.

However such cases are few and far between and, as demonstrated are generally stoked up and inflamed by special interest groups, helped by misreporting by the media. All they have to do with the phrase 'Christian Group' is drop the word group and add an 's' to Christian and the about religion vs. free speech: deflecting attention from the real issue which is mischief making by absolutist groups. As far as British Christianity is concerned, we can generally conclude that there is no problem here, even after the introduction of the Religious Hatred Act. Throughout the 1980's God featured as a character on Spitting Image (dressed in the stereotypical white garb and flowing white beard) regularly acknowledging any crisis with a song which began:

*'Oops, sorry, I cocked it up again  
Even God Almighty has an off day now and then.'* (190)

In a fundamental misunderstanding of this, the main criticism of this New Atheism has been that it's too strident! (55) The typical response from atheists to this charge is that the mere act of criticizing religion is 'strident' for many and the only real difference with the new movement is its insistence on ignoring the hurt feelings argument. If it didn't, the movement wouldn't be able to exist

This approach is further evidence that New Atheism is essentially concerned with the public rather than the private role of religion, for when religious ideas are advanced into the public and in particular the *political* arena when they may affect others, then there is no reason why those ideas shouldn't be subject to the same scrutiny as any other, whether such ideas be social, cultural or economic. Sam Harris points out that Islam in particular seems peculiarly vulnerable in this respect. Harris maintains that religion and Islam in particular is, in effect, the elephant in the room 'when a Muslim suicide bomber obliterates himself...the role that faith played in his actions is invariably discounted. His motives must have been political, economic or entirely personal. Without faith, desperate people would still do terrible things. Faith itself is always, and everywhere, exonerated.'

Eric Barendt in his essay '*Incitement to and Glorification of Terrorism*' makes reference to Mill's Harm principle indicating that such a law would require unworkable and impractical judgements to be made about indeterminable matters such as the depth at which a belief was held.' (191) I'd argue that this would be particularly problematic in Britain where demonstrable levels of faith cannot, in the vast majority of the population, even stretch to so much as a weekly church attendance.

Dawkins has obviously alluded to breaking social taboos rather than a legislative issues, although the publication of *'The God Delusion'* in 2006 co-incided with the controversial Religious Hatred Act, which must surely have had an influence on Dawkins though he doesn't refer to it specifically. There is little evidence to suggest that studied and academic criticism of British Christianity is in any way an issue. Though the blasphemy law was still on the statute books until 2008 it hadn't been used since 1977 and even the then Archbishop of Canterbury George Carey was calling for its abolition. It's certainly true that New Atheism has been attacked for its intemperate by the cited examples of Lennox and, McGrath but there has been no serious issues surrounding either its publication, distribution or potential prosecution throughout the UK. The issue surrounding religion and free speech is more to do with 'politeness' which is why I maintain that in Britain in particular, such a taboo if it exists is more an issue of social etiquette rather than a 'respect' for the religion in particular. And I will also maintain that this social etiquette is more to do with aspects of multiculturalism since, as I shall demonstrate this appears to affect other religions more than (established) Christianity. What we are talking about here quite simply, is satire, jokes and laughing at something, this is the *offence* to which we refer. It is perhaps no co-incidence that the high profile campaign against the introduction of the Religious Hatred Act was led by several comedians, of which the most outspoken was Rowan Atkinson. In his speech he said 'what I find extraordinary is that the Government is so wedded to the notion that nobody other than the most rabid fascists could possibly fall foul of this legislation, that the consultation process didn't include anyone from the creative community. Many organizations were consulted in the drafting of this legislation, religious organisations, civil liberties groups, law-enforcement people but not one writer, not one journalist, not one television producer, theatrical producer, no actor, no comedian, basically nobody whose work could be affected.' This is a particularly pertinent observation. Virtually all of the controversies that have prompted debates over freedom of speech vs. freedom of religion have been creative endeavours, a poem, an opera, a film, cartoons. There has been no threatened action over *'The God Delusion'* but certain Christians have threatened action over the depiction of a gay Jesus in a nappy in *'Jerry Springer-The Opera'*. The severely critical, detailed dissections of the Koran by Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens are as nothing in terms of reaction compared to-a cartoon!

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# Conclusion

## The Legacy of New Atheism

New Atheism's greatest legacy is that it has created a body of work which is accessible. And because it is accessible it has become successful. It has taken probably the most vexed, intriguing and controversial question in all humanity, the existence of a creator and made the debate inclusive. The interest in New Atheist literature is matched by the interest in the authors themselves. At the time of writing in Autumn 2013, Richard Dawkins has just published the first volume of autobiography '*An Appetite for Wonder*' and it has entered the bestseller lists on the first week of release. It is extremely unlikely that there would be such an audience for such a work were it not for '*The God Delusion*', let alone a biography in two volumes! And when Christopher Hitchens died in late 2012, his death made national news. Prior to '*God is Not Great*' Hitchens was a well known journalist and public intellectual but certainly not the scale he achieved later in life. His polemics against Mother Theresa, Henry Kissinger and Bill Clinton were all republished in new editions following his major success in 2007, responding to the need to make his previous writings available to a new audience. Hitchens too had an autobiography published, '*Hitch 22*'. It was during the publication of this that he was diagnosed with Cancer, yet he remained in the public eye for the final 18 months of his life. He appeared increasingly frail in his debates, continued to be unshakeable in his beliefs, and recorded in excruciating detail the dying process in his final book '*Mortality*'.

2012 could be seen as a watershed moment for New Atheism. The death of Christopher Hitchens marked the first passing of one of the movement's major authors. The death of a public intellectual, as in the death of an artist, is a time of evaluation. Many platitudes were expressed in obituaries, ranging from comrades in arms such as Dawkins to opponents such as Tony Blair. However the year also marked the publication of an entire book devoted to critiquing Hitchens' work. Richard Seymour's '*Unhitched: The Trial of Christopher Hitchens*' took Hitchens to task on his shifting and apparently inconsistent world-views, ranging from his changing political stances (from socialist to Bush-supporting Capitalist) to his 'Theophobia'. The point here is not what is said, but the fact that a book was published entirely devoted to Hitchens at all, which, like Dawkins' two-volume autobiography would almost certainly not have been published on the scale it has been prior to both men becoming involved in the God debate. Focus is beginning to shift from New Atheism onto the New Atheists themselves. There is yet to be a full analysis of the movement itself (this thesis aside) however that surely cannot be far off.

The second reason why 2012 was a watershed moment for New Atheism came towards the end of the year when the 2011 census results were published. The results showed a sharp decrease in the number of people associating themselves with a religion. Christianity dropped from 71.7% to 59.3%. And those expressing no religion rose from 14.8% to 25.1%. Over a quarter of the population now professed to have no religion at all. The Richard Dawkins foundation consequently sponsored surveys into the church-going habits and beliefs of those who still professed to be Christians and found that less than 1 in 10 of those who identified themselves as Christian had actually attended church on a regular basis and most of those polled did not believe their faith influenced their politics.

But the question is to what extent has New Atheism played a part? Should we see this as a direct result of New Atheism and its success through visibility and accessibility, as outlined in the opening chapter, or are we seeing here a natural pattern that would have happened either way. I believe it is a mixture of both but I'd tend to weight the evidence towards New Atheism. Most social historians of post-war Britain (such as Callum Brown and Dominic Sandbrook) have tracked and noted the decline in formal religious belief from the 1950's onwards. However the decline over the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is particularly marked. And when one places such decline in the context of the book-sales of New Atheism, the visibility of New Atheist authors in our mass media, and the fact that so many theists have felt the need to combat it (would the likes of McGrath, Lennox and Rowan Williams really have published books, made speeches and gone on so many lecture tours if they felt New Atheism wasn't having much of an impact?), one can see a clear cause and effect. Of course there is a certain amount of speculation involved. Evidence suggests that religious belief was declining and there is very little to suggest that that decline would have halted in the last decade. However for Atheism to rise by over 10% is a marked increase which, if the trend continues, will see religion virtually extinguished from Britain in approximately 70 years time. Is this prospect likely? It doesn't sound likely? I find it difficult to imagine less than 10% of the population professing a religion in less than a century from now.

New Atheism in its original form, has pretty much run its course. All of the major works have now vanished from the bestseller lists and are starting to appear in university libraries and becoming the focus of university theses. One of the movement's main players has now died, and others such as Dawkins and Dennett are not young and will not be with us for very much longer. It is safe to say that New Atheism, in its original form, with its original burst of energy and visibility was very much a product of the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century-and that can only be seen as a major factor for the *sharp* decline in religious belief in the same decade. The ongoing dialogue between New Atheism and the various defenders of the faith who have entered the debate (Armstrong, McGrath and so on) is being won by the forerunners rather than those who have come after. It is of course possible that the tide may turn but the statistics simply are not in their favour. Opinion polls carried out over the last 10 years, outlined in chapter one, indicate a clear desire on the part of the majority of the British people for politics to be kept out of religion, even by some theists. And this is another important point to make. If New Atheism is about politics, then being an atheist is not a requirement for those who support its arguments. We have already looked at in Chapter one, at examples where the movement's most consistent and vociferous critics have actually admitted that New Atheism raises legitimate concerns. New Atheism has successfully communicated those concerns. Clear and accessible articulation is a key to effective communication and this goal appears to have been attained. Why else would far more people know the names of Dawkins and Hitchens rather than Bertrand Russell and John Rawls when they are effectively saying many similar things?

Which brings me onto the second aim of this thesis, are the claims made by New Atheism valid to Britain? They may be 'persuading' Britain statistically about the general concerns regarding religion, but is it actually relevant to Britain and is it making any difference at all here? On the one hand there is a History of religion generally being divorced from political discourse. Our examinations of various political leaders and parties indicated that religion has rarely been at the forefront of policy making and the religion of politicians tends to go one of two ways; either they mouthe platitudes in a somewhat cynical attempt to appeal to what they think the public requires of a leader (Attlee and Churchill for example), or they keep a relatively low profile of their private

beliefs (Thatcher and Blair for example) in a desire to avoid the impression of 'doing God'. On the other hand there is the matter of the fact that two of the current party leaders have now openly declared their atheism. This is unprecedented and again, has emerged in the wake of New Atheism. So perhaps New Atheism has had a direct influence on our political leaders after all. Rather like the statistical drop off in religious belief, this unusual move by such high ranking and high profile figures has occurred in the decade following New Atheism's prominence. Then there is the 'other' part of the establishment we looked at, the Church of England. We concluded that political militancy and evangelisation of the Church of England is not natural to its leaders, irrespective of occasional brushes and conflicts with politicians. Recent political activism within the Church of England has tended to be concerned with internal matters, women and Gay Bishops for example. The last few years have seen a change-and they have lost. Politicians, namely in the same-sex marriage case, have stood up to the Church of England and essentially disregarded its protestations. Of course, politicians such as David Cameron have campaigned on the platform of 'equality' or it may simply have been that politicians looked at the statistics of those who a, profess a religion and b, go to Church and decided that the odds were against them, that the support wasn't there. New Atheism (Dawkins in particular) does level accusations that moderation within the Church of England fosters fundamentalism. There is little evidence for this. The establishment could certainly be accused of not doing enough to combat fundamentalism when it arises, it would be an idea for example for a prominent member of the Church of England to debate a creationist for example. However the general pattern, established in Chapter three, is that fundamentalists and literalists will tend to separate themselves from the establishment and more moderate bodies, usually accusing them of not holding true to their beliefs.

Chapter Three is where we can see the validity, if not the effect of New Atheism. The various pressure groups we looked at confirmed that issues concerning New Atheism such as absolutist and repressive attitudes towards homosexuality and the literalist approaches towards the teaching of creationism are indeed in existence within Britain. It is true to say that these are fringes. These are not representative of mainstream religion, but issues discussed in the academic side of the debate (if not by New Atheism) such as groups which use an essentialist approach, are clearly in evidence and need to be highlighted.

To conclude, let me draw these two questions together, that of the impact of New Atheism and that of its validity within Britain. There is no denying that it has had an impact for reasons already stated. New Atheism has become equally big in America too. However, the difference between Britain and America is that there is no comparable statistical evidence that 'belief' is dropping away at the moment. But then America has always had higher levels of belief than Britain. It has always had, despite the constitution, religion heavily within political discourse. Britain is very different. Which of course leaves the obvious claim that the statistical decline in Britain may have happened anyway, and New Atheism may in fact have been *irrelevant* here. One can easily rebut this by looking at Chapter Three. The concerns of New Atheism are valid here and the only dispute could be that New Atheism generalises and doesn't specify that problems are located to fringes rather than the establishment. However, I'd suggest something more wide-reaching in terms of impact. Richard Dawkins has noted that in America 'admitting you are an atheist is comparable to the coming out' of gay and lesbians, such is the stigma attached to atheism in America. I'd suggest something similar has hitherto been equally true in Britain. However the stigma is not the same as being seen as 'untouchable' or morally reprehensible' in the way some have viewed gay people upon

coming out; the stigma is the taboo of breaking barriers of politeness. As AC Grayling noted in Chapter one, admitting you are an atheist in conversation is tantamount to challenging or dismissing the faith of the person you are with and that is simply bad form. It is difficult to think of any prominent flag-waving atheist prior to the emergence of Richard Dawkins. But now Britain has an atheist champion; an Oxford professor, well-spoken, polite, erudite, educated and generally well-respected. He simply doesn't believe in God-and he isn't afraid to say so. And so Britons now have an example, it's easier to now say 'I don't really believe in God, I agree with Richard Dawkins'. It is coming out of the closet in a way, just a closet of 'politeness' rather than that of 'stigma'. Basically it's OK to say you are an atheist. "It's not rude, it's not impolite and there are quite a few of them around today such as...by the way have you read *'The God Delusion'*?... and so the conversation goes...

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