

How Did New Atheism Fail So Miserably?

Posted on October 24, 2017 by Scott Alexander



The Baffler publishes [a long article](#) against “idiot” New Atheists. It’s interesting only in the context of so many [similar articles](#), and an inability to imagine the opposite opinion showing up in an equally fashionable publication. New Atheism has lost its battle for the cultural high ground. r/atheism will shamble on as some sort of undead abomination, chanting “BRAAAAAIIINSSSS... are what fundies don’t have” as the living run away shrieking. But everyone else has long since passed them by.

The New Atheists accomplished the seemingly impossible task of alienating a society that agreed with them about everything. The Baffler-journalists of the world don’t believe in God. They don’t disagree that religion contributes to homophobia, transphobia, and the election of some awful politicians – and these issues have only grown more visible in the decade or so since New Atheism’s apogee. And yet in the bubble where nobody believes in God and everyone worries full-time about sexual minorities and Trump, you get less grief for being a Catholic than a Dawkins fan. When Trump wins an election on the back of evangelicals, and the alt-right is shouting “DEUS VULT” and demanding “throne and altar conservatism”, the *real* scandal is rumors that some New Atheist might be

reading /pol/. How did the New Atheists become so loathed so quickly?

The second article presents a theory:

It has something to do with a litany of grievances against the believoisie so rote that it might well (or ironically) be styled a catechism. These New Atheists and their many fellow travelers all share an unpleasant obsessive tic: they mouth some obvious banality—there is no God, the holy books were all written by human beings—and then act as if it is some kind of profound insight. This repetition-compulsion seems to be baked right into their dogma.

It compares New Atheists to Kierkegaard's lunatic:

Soren Kierkegaard, the great enemy of all pedants, offers a story that might shed considerable light. In his Concluding Unscientific Postscript, he describes a psychiatric patient who escapes from the asylum, climbing out a window and running through the gardens to rejoin the world at large. But the madman worries: out in the world, if anyone discovers that he is insane, he will instantly be sent back. So he has to watch what he says, and make sure none of it betrays his inner imbalance—in short, as the not-altogether unmad Danish genius put it, to “convince everyone by the objective truth of what he says that all is in order as far as his sanity is concerned.” Finding a skittle-bowl on the ground and pop-

ping it in his pocket, he has an ingenious idea: who could possibly deny that the world is round? So he goes into town and starts endlessly repeating that fact, proffering it over and over again as he wanders about with his small furious paces, the skittle-bowl in his coat clanking, in strict conformity with Newton's laws, against what Kierkegaard euphemistically refers to as his "a-." Of course, the poor insistent soul is then sent right back to the asylum [...]

Kierkegaard's villagers saw someone maniacally repeating that the world is round and correctly sent him back to the asylum. We watched [Neil de Grasse] Tyson doing exactly the same thing, and instead of hiding him away from society where nobody would have to hear such pointless nonsense, thousands cheer him on for fighting for truth and objectivity against the forces of backwardness. We do the same when Richard Dawkins valiantly fights for the theory of evolution against the last hopeless stragglers of the creationist movement, with their dinky fiberglass dinosaurs munching leaves in a museum-piece Garden of Eden. We do it when Sam Harris prides deep into the human brain and announces that there's no little vacuole there containing a soul.

So the problem with New Atheism was that its whole shtick was repeating obviously true things that everyone already knew? But about 80% of Americans identify as religious, 63% claim to be "absolutely certain" that there is a God, and 46% think the world was literally created in seven days. This is a surprising number of people disagreeing with a thing that everybody already knows.

I could be misreading the article. The article could be wrong. But I don't think so. This is *my* intuitive feeling of what was wrong with New Atheism as well. It wasn't that they were wrong. Just that they were right in a loud, boring, and pointless way.

A charitable reading: New Atheists weren't reaching their intellectual opponents. They were coming into educated urban liberal spaces, saying things that educated urban liberals already believed, and demanding social credit for it. Even though 46% of America is creationist, zero percent of my hundred-or-so friends are. If New Atheists were preaching evolution in social circles like mine, they were wasting their time.

This seems like an accurate criticism of New Atheism, one that earns them all the condescension they have since received. But the New Atheist still ought to feel betrayed. Why isn't this an equally correct criticism of *everything else* ?

While the atheists were going around saying there was no God, the environmentalists were going around saying climate change was real. The feminists were going around saying sexism was bad. And the Democrats were going around saying Donald Trump was an awful person. All of these statements might be controversial *some-where*, but meet basically zero resistance in educated urban liberal spaces. All get repeated day-in and day-out by groups of people who make entire careers out of repeating them. And all get said in the same condescending way, a sort of society-wide plague of Voxsplaining.

This is 90% of popular intellectual culture these days: progressives regurgitating progressivism to other progressives for nothing but the warm glow of being told “Yup, that was some good progressivism there”. Conservatives make fun of this incessantly, and they are right to do so. But for some reason, in the case of New Atheism and *only* in the case of New Atheism, Progressivism itself suddenly turned and said “Hey, you’re just repeating our own platitudes back to us!” And New Atheism, caught flat-footed, mouth open wide: “But... but... we thought we were supposed to... we thought...”.

Think of one of those corrupt kleptocracies where the dictator takes bribes, all his ministers take bribes, all their assistants take bribes, the anti-corruption task force takes bribes, etc. Then one day some shmuck manages to get on the dictator’s bad side and – bam – the secret police nab him for taking bribes. The look on his face the moment before the firing squad shoots – that’s how I imagine New Atheists feeling too.

So who’s the dictator in this analogy? And what did New Atheism do to get on their bad side?

Maybe New Atheism failed to make the case that it was socially important. All these movements have a mix of factual claims and social calls to action – climate change activism combines “we should accept the scientifically true fact that the climate is changing” with “we should worry about climate change causing famines, hurricanes, etc”, just as atheism combines “we should accept the scientifically true fact that God does not exist” with “we should worry

about religion's promotion of terrorism, homophobia, et cetera". But the climate change people seem better at sounding like they care about the people involved, compared to atheists usually sounding more concerned with Truth For Its Own Sake and bringing in the other stuff as a justification.

Or maybe the New Atheists just didn't know how to stay relevant. Trump resistance always has new tweets to keep its attention. Social justice always has a new sexist celebrity to be angry about. Sure, a few New Atheists tried to keep up with the latest secretly-gay televangelist, but most of them kept going about intricacies of the kalam argument that had been done to death by 1400 AD. This is just an example – maybe there are other asymmetries that are more important?

Maybe the New Atheists accidentally got on board just before a nascent [Grey Tribe/Blue Tribe split](#) and tried to get Blue Tribe credibility by sending Grey Tribe signals. At some point there was a cultural fissure between Acela Corridor thinkfluencers with humanities degrees and Silicon Valley bloggers with STEM degrees, and the former got a head start on hating the latter while the latter still thought everybody was on the same anti-Republican side.

And the cynic in me wonders whether New Atheism wasn't pointless and obvious *enough*. There are more church-goers in educated liberal circles than Trump supporters, climate deniers, or self-identified racists. Maybe that made the "repeat platitudes to people who already believe them" game a little less fun, caused some friction – "You're talking about my dear grandmother!"

I don't know. The whole problem is so strange. For a brief second, modern culture looked at New Atheism, saw itself, and said "Huh, this is really stupid and annoying". Then it cast New Atheism into the outer darkness while totally failing to generalize that experience to anything else. Why would it do that? Could it happen again? *Please* can it happen again? *Pretty please?*