

There's a group of contemporary writers who have been identified as "New Atheists." The appellation originally came from outside the group, and mostly from theists of various stripes. It caught on, over initial objections from those identified as belonging to the group (who have mostly withdrawn their objections and embraced, or at least accepted, the name). It's since been picked up by "accommodationists" to identify what they perceive as a "hard line" anti-religion stance of the New Atheist group, and also their "tone." It raises the question of what, exactly, is "new" about the "New Atheists." I think I have it sorted out some.

I perceive two main points that distinguish "New Atheists" from "old atheists" or "garden variety atheists." I'm not sure which is more important. One is that the New Atheists are more science-based than previous atheists were. The other is that New Atheists are getting more attention, and different attention, than previous atheists did (and perhaps they are being taken more seriously, which implies that they are a bigger threat to theists, or perceived as such).

About the former: The "big four" New Atheists are Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins is a real scientist of the first rank (or was before he retired). Harris is a (minor -- meaning mostly young) scientist. Dennett is a philosopher, but a philosopher of science who is respected by scientists for learning about the science he writes about. Hitchens is an essayist and not a scientist. Underneath the "big four" are some important, but second-tier figures, including P.Z. Myers (biologist), Victor Stenger (physicist), Steven Pinker (psychologist), and Jerry Coyne (biologist). I can with a stretch add Stephen Weinberg (physicist) and Ophelia Benson (philosopher) to this list (with the stretch being that these two while well-respected and pretty influential just don't have the audiences that the others do).

Scientists are over-represented in the field, compared to atheists of previous times. Historically, atheists were philosophers, most of whom had no science training, did not work in (philosophy of) science, and who presented their arguments without incorporating scientific findings or methodologies. (There were exceptions, of course, but really nothing like the science orientation of the New Atheists considered as a cohort.) By emphasizing science and its methodologies, the New Atheists require their readers to confront actual knowledge claims (and actual epistemological questions beyond technical philosophical ones). They are taking scientific truths/facts and applying the implications of these to what were formerly just philosophical questions. They are also taking scientific methodologies and applying them to what were formerly just theological inquiries. This has proven to be powerful stuff.

An aside: One thing the New Atheists are doing that is new is expanding the science-based discussions beyond evolution/creationism. The New Atheists are instrumental in the evolution/creationism battles, to be sure. But they regularly and routinely make the point that what they are really challenging is supernaturalism per se. This results in fewer "safe havens" for religious believers. (It's not just the fundamentalists any more. The New Atheists are challenging "liberal" theists, and also scientists who they perceive as shying away from obvious implications of their disciplines.)

Another aside: It seems curious that there are no historians in either the first or second ranks of the New Atheists, and in fact very few historians associated with the New Atheists at all. To me, one of the major developments in theology in my lifetime has been the "debunking" of lots of theological tenets by historical revisionism.

A third aside: I don't quite know if I think the New Atheist books are "better" than the atheism books of a generation ago or more. I think they are more accessible, but I'm not sure about why. (A larger number of people are reading Dawkins and Harris than read Russell or Hume.) One contributing factor is surely the internet, but I don't know how to assess the impact of that on this.

A second distinction of the New Atheists is, I think, that they have been unusually successful in getting their messages out. Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens have written "best sellers" on the subject, meaning that their books on the subject have been purchased (and perhaps even read) by "civilians" in large numbers. (It's really one book apiece, by the way.) The rest have audiences that seem unusually large for this subject, in historical comparison to older writers about atheism. The subject itself seems to have become mainstream, meaning that dealing with New Atheists and their arguments has become a greater part of the "popular" culture than atheists or their arguments had been historically. For example, mainstream preachers are addressing the New Atheists from their pulpits. (I recognize that there is a "cause and effect" question here -- whether the popularity of the New Atheists has provoked the popular discussions or vice versa. I think the former, but I don't really think it's all that relevant.) Related to this is that the New Atheists seem "louder" than atheists were historically. There's also a backlash against them that I don't believe occurred previously. I've read most of the New Atheist literature, and while it's often powerfully argued it is seldom strident or nasty. But if you read their critics, you'd get the opposite impression. Many theists, including lots of theists associated with churches, think of the New Atheists as "attacking"

religious beliefs in a way I perceive as different from previously. (I suspect one reason for this is that the New Atheist arguments are powerful, and one reason for that is their incorporation of science and scientific methodologies. I'm speculating about this, but it seems to me that there is an inevitable difference between atheist arguments that are purely "rational" and those that incorporate "empiricism.") Simply put, the New Atheists are being taken more seriously than atheists used to be.