THE NEW ATHEISM: GLOBAL ANSWERS TO GLOBAL QUESTIONS?

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ABSTRACT
This paper briefly outlines the main proponents of the New Atheism debate, sometimes called the Oxford God Debate, and the respondents to this movement, whom I have labelled the New Apologists. The main focus of the paper is the deconstruction of the categories used by both the New Atheists and the New Apologists in an attempt to demonstrate the lack of width of the debate. The cultural and philosophical assumptions and preconditions of the New Atheists are challenged by referencing Eastern philosophical traditions (specifically the Hindu Advaita tradition), New Religions (specifically the International Raelian Movement) and issues concerning Non-Realism. The paper is neither a defence nor an attack upon the New Atheism, but a rallying call for the debate to be widened beyond the current Abrahamic limits of discussion.

Keywords: New Atheism, Oxford God Debate, New Apologists, New Religious Movements.

Introduction
This paper sets out to examine the collection of writings and media that has become known as the New Atheism, along with respondents to this movement, who I will label the New Apologists. My method will not be to examine the minutiae of each publication, but to try to understand the context, assumptions and cultural baggage demonstrated by each proponent in their chosen approach to, and understanding of the debate in question. My overall aim is to outline what I believe to be the key shortcomings in their approach to understanding the human religious condition – this will apply equally to the New Apologists, of whom I will be asking questions concerning their validity as representatives of a wide cultural understanding of religion. It is important to note that this paper is not written as a contribution to the New Atheist texts, nor is it aimed at supporting the approaches taken by the New Apologists – it is written with a large degree of scepticism concerning the effectiveness of either side’s approach to this socially important issue, and a key aim of the paper is to seek a wider arena for dialogue than that which is currently taking place.

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The Limitations of the New Atheists and the New Apologists

The New Atheists is a label applied to a group of scholars, journalists and social commentators who have, in recent years, tackled the subject of religion’s function, both at social and individual levels. Whilst the media is keen to place all exponents of this area within the blanket term New Atheism, several different approaches are taken – Richard Dawkins, for example, bases his primary objection to Religion in his own field of Evolutionary Biology and Memetics, whilst Christopher Hitchens argues from a socio-political viewpoint, more in-tune with his background as a journalist and essayist.

The core texts of, for want of a better description, the New Atheist canon, include, but are not limited to, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, 1 Sam Harris’ *Letter to A Christian Nation*, 2 Christopher Hitchens’ *God Is Not Great* 3 and A.C. Grayling’s *Against All Gods*. 4 There are of course other texts by these authors, in addition to further important works such as Daniel C. Dennet’s *Breaking the Spell*. 5 However I will concentrate on the first three texts here mentioned due to their massive sales and influence within the UK, and also Grayling’s work here mentioned due to its emphasis on accessibility and a defence of the New Atheist position, in counter-response to the writings of the New Apologists.

Richard Dawkins, currently Professorial Fellow of New College, Oxford, and previously the Charles Simonyi Professor for the Public Understanding of Science, published *The God Delusion* in 2006, shortly after the broadcasting of his Channel 4 television series *The Root of All Evil?*, which has set out his viewpoint that religious belief was irrational and socially divisive. A book concerning religion always seemed to be on Dawkins’ agenda, and his best-selling works *River Out of Eden* 7 and *A Devil’s Chaplain* 8 prepared the ground for the debate that was to follow. Primarily concerned with the deconstruction of religion as an intellectually viable position, Dawkins approaches the issue in two ways; firstly, suggesting that religious faith is a product of large-scale social misconception and, secondly, that a belief in God is philosophically and morally untenable. The aim of these approaches is then

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5 Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell* (London: Allen Lane, 2006)
6 Channel 4 Television, in 2 parts – first broadcast January 2006
made clear in Dawkins’ description of examples of morally unjustifiable acts towards children, homosexuals and women, in the name of superstitious beliefs. To achieve his aim, Dawkins argues that Darwinian evolutionary theory has replaced any requirement for God, that Atheism is the proof of a healthy and intellectual mind, and that belief in God is a demonstration of a mental illness – indeed, Dawkins takes the title for his book from Robert Pirsig’s Pulitzer Prize-nominated novel Lila, in which religion is repeatedly described as a delusion.9

Christopher Hitchens is the British-born, American-based, writer of God Is Not Great, which focuses specifically upon the social and political undesirability of religious systems, as opposed to the mixture of social and philosophical deconstructions attempted by Dawkins.10 The book concentrates two-fold upon the political damage done in the name of religion, and also the irrationality behind social customs that have emerged from religions – indeed, an entire chapter is given the heading A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham.11 Much of Hitchens’ focus is aimed at a discussion of the violence and political nature of religious extremists and the argument that religious teachings are not as moral as their exponents would have us believe, and that scriptures, doctrines and covenants are based on falsehoods.12

Sam Harris, a current doctoral candidate in neuroscience at the University of California, Los Angeles, and a graduate in philosophy from Stanford University, is the author of Letter to a Christian Nation: A Challenge to Faith. Written as a rejoinder to criticisms of his previous work The End of Faith,13 the Letter is written unapologetically in a style intended for those Americans who “believe that … the Bible is the inspired word of God and that only those who accept the divinity of Jesus Christ will experience salvation after death.”14 It is important to note, however, that Harris believes that his conclusions and opinions are relevant for “people of all faiths”.15 Harris’ main thesis is the connection between religion and extremism, often engendered in so called ’moderate’ believers who Harris believes are responsible for allowing the extremist elements to exist at all.16

10 Chapters five and six of Hitchen’s work do look at metaphysical claims of religions, but Hitchens simply uses the religious reversion to the metaphysical as a reason to separate religious claims from modern, scientific claims about knowledge – no specific philosophical arguments are entered into in detail.
11 Hitchens, op cit, pp. 37-41.
12 See for example, ibid, pp. 109ff.
14 Harris, Letter, pg. Xii.
15 Ibid., pg. Xi.
16 Ibid., pg. Xiii.
Finally, in this introductory section, we turn to A.C. Grayling, Professor of Philosophy at Birkbeck College, University of London and author of *Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness*. Grayling stands apart from the other New Atheist authors in this study, as a specialist in philosophy rather than an academic in another subject area, such as Dawkins, or a social commentator such as Hitchens. In this respect, we will be using Grayling’s work to position the debate and dialogue between the New Atheists and New Apologists in what I believe to be a suitable categorical framework, although more of this later. Grayling is not without his limitations, though, as we shall outline below.

And so, having briefly outlined the key exponents of New Atheism, I wish to offer up my primary, and simple objection to their approach to the debate, and I would like to do this by quoting Richard Dawkins:

“There are fairies, there are unicorns, hobgoblins – we can’t disprove any of those, but we don’t believe in them any more than nowadays we believe in Thor, Amun Ra or Aphrodite. We are all atheists about most of the gods that societies have ever believed in. Some of us just go one god further.”

Put simply, the determination of the New Atheists to go that “one God further” is both their largest fascination, and their biggest weakness. The implicit Western cultural colonialism and the explicit concentration upon Abrahamic faith systems have rendered the New Atheists stagnant when approaching key aspects of the human religious condition – the New Atheists are simply not asking wide enough questions to make their contribution relevant to a Global understanding of religion

Let us take Richard Dawkins as an example – in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins constantly presumes a belief in God as the source of religion; he does not see fit to separate the concepts at all. This is wholly inadequate. Harris, in turn, writes his *Letter* exclusively to right-wing Christians, but even when he covers non-Abrahamic traditions in *The End of Faith* (invariably Hinduism and Buddhism, as if there were only five religions in the world), we find that statements are always given in relation to an Abrahamic faith (often Islam) and no insight is offered into Eastern philosophies at all.

Like Harris, Hitchens does spend a very little time discussing Eastern religions, but his treatment of this subject does not include any philosophical analysis, but rather exists to warn the Western reader away from any romantic notions of the goodness of these religions – indeed, he even titles this section *There Is No “Eastern” Solution*. His treatment of this subject is largely limited to anecdotal evidences regarding dishonest or showman-like Indian gurus, an
accusation it would seem eminently feasible in charging toward people in diverse professions, including Hitchen’s own of journalism. Again, the lack of any coherent attempt to comprehend the philosophical or cultural understanding of religion outside of the author’s own view is telling. In this respect, Hitchens is guilty of undertaking an exercise in spiritual tourism, where snapshots are taken of the subject matter with no attempt to acquire a depth of understanding.

Even Grayling, the most eloquent and coherent of the New Atheists, lets slip his unwillingness to see beyond his limited understanding of the human religious condition, in an example of a cavalier dismissal of a major branch of unorthodox Christian theology of the past 30 years – namely non-realism – when he dismisses Don Cupitt21 as a “current celebrity cleric” who “go[es] so far as to claim … that God does not have to exist to be believed in.”22 Such pejorative dismissal does not give Grayling any credit, especially when we consider, as we will in our subsequent section, that there are distinct links between Grayling’s definition of supernaturalism, and definitions I will offer regarding non-realism and non-dualism.

It is however, also apparent that the New Apologists, who form such a crucial role in the understanding of the dialogical writings of the New Atheists, share many of these limitations.

In the New Apologist response to the New Atheism, two scholars stand out with the highest of profiles – Keith Ward and Alistair McGrath.

Keith Ward, Emeritus Regus Professor of Divinity at Oxford University, is the author of Is Religion Dangerous?, written in response to Dawkins’ The Root of All Evil? programmes, and Why There Almost Certainly Is A God, written in direct response to Dawkins’ The God Delusion, and indeed basing its title on a deliberate misquotation from a chapter in Dawkins’ book. In a previous time of theological challenges to Christianity, Ward also published Holding Fast to God in response to Don Cupitt’s Taking Leave of God demonstrating his desire to defend orthodox Christian faith. Ward’s trump card is that he holds sway as a philosopher first and as a theologian (a discipline Dawkins states simply doesn’t exist) second. Indeed, he wrote his reply to Cupitt whilst F.D. Maurice Professor of Philosophy at King’s College, London. With this in mind, he meets Dawkins head on in an arena of philosophical debate in which some commentators have noted that Dawkins

21 Grayling does not mention Cupitt by name, but we may be confident that he is the intended target as the founder of the Non-Realist movement.
22 Grayling, op cit, pg. 62
24 Ward, Why There Almost Certainly Is a God (London: Lion Hudson, 2008)
25 Ibid., pg. 10.
26 Ward, Holding Fast To God: A Reply to Don Cupitt (London: SPCK, 1982)
28 Ward, Why There Almost Certainly Is a God, pg. 7.
loses his usual analytical and academic thoroughness. My concern with Ward’s treatment of this subject lies not, therefore, in his skilful application of philosophical and scientific modes of thought – he eloquently raises issues such as quantum mechanics as a useful arena for debate – but in his separation of religion from social and political problems. During a public lecture given at Trinity University College, Ward was asked by a member of the audience how he regarded religion’s role in historical tragedies such as the Crusades and other Medieval wars. His reply was to state that such events were political events and, as such, were not to be understood in the realm of the religious. I have to say, this surprised me, sat as I was amongst the audience. Such a view of religion, as if it somehow existed in a dogmatic vacuum, struck me as untenable when the concept is understood within other cultures. My first thought was of M.K. Gandhi, who famously stated that “Those who say religion has nothing to do with politics do not know what religion is.” Gandhi, of course, was a Hindu, a thought system that reverts to Sanskrit as its authoritative language – a language which famously doesn’t have a word for our Western concept of religion; the closest that is often incorrectly suggested is Dharma, which is often unsatisfactorily translated into English as ‘duty’. Crucially, this universal term does not distinguish between personal, devotional, ritual, social or cosmic duty as they are all inextricably linked in Hindu philosophy and cosmology.

Alistair McGrath is Professor of Historical Theology at Oxford University, and a former atheist with a PhD in Molecular Biophysics. Much currency is made of this in his writings, including The Dawkins Delusion, as he sees his and Dawkins journeys as academically similar, with different conclusions reached. McGrath’s style is to deconstruct step-by-step Dawkins approach to the dismissal of religion, both on scientific and theological grounds. Much of McGrath’s arguments are based upon criticism of a lack of coherency in Dawkins’ arguments, and his view that Dawkins makes many unsubstantiated and unscientific statements as if they were fact. He also makes the important

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31 I am paraphrasing from memory the events of the evening, although Prof. Ward’s separation of politics and religion in his given answer was quite clear.
33 This is the view of many scholars, but see, for example, Ludo Rocher ‘The Dharmasastras’ in Flood (ed.) The Blackwell Companion to Hinduism (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003) pg. 102.
34 The very fact that Dawkins, McGrath and Ward have all taught at Oxford together, albeit in different colleges and departments, has led some commentators to label the current debate ‘The Oxford God Debate’.
35 McGrath & Collicutt McGrath The Dawkins Delusion: Atheist Fundamentalism and the denial of the divine (London; SPCK, 2007)
36 For examples see ibid., pg. 24 & 41
point that Dawkins does not discuss non-theism, however this line of argument and criticism then disappears entirely from McGrath’s work, as it continues its single purpose of defending a Christian world-view without reference to the contributions of other faith systems.37

In addition to Ward and McGrath, I wish to mention two other New Apologists, who represent different approaches to the debate. Firstly, Tina Beattie, Professor of Catholic Studies at Roehampton University, approaches the debate in *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason & The War on Religion,*38 with a refreshingly wide understanding of the positionality of key exponents, eloquently arguing for a widening of our understanding of the reasons behind the current debate by “situating it in a wider social and historical context”.39 There are, however two major limitations to Beattie’s explorations; firstly, even though she does mention non-theism as a legitimate response to the New Atheist linking of religion and belief in God, this is justified in a purely Christian context, with examples given of British Christians who do not believe in God, but who feel compelled to be a part of the Anglican flock, due to “loyalty to the tribe”.40 Secondly, whilst Beattie aims to widen the debate, she does this by exploring the historical context of the Atheism issue, which I believe only acts to solidify the Western understanding of atheism, supernaturalism and religion – indeed, whilst it is true that the debate has been primarily Western in origin, development and context, it is also true that this occurred during a period of history when dialogue between world-views was inescapably restricted by the cultural assumptions of colonialism.41 Whilst it is therefore necessary to understand the context in which this debate has grown, I would suggest that it is vital that the dialogue is now, in our post-colonial understanding of the world, widened to benefit from Global understandings of religiosity.

The final New Apologist that I would like to mention is David Robertson, author of *The Dawkins Letters: Challenging Atheist Myths.*42 Unlike Beattie, Ward and McGrath, Robertson does not hold an academic position, but is a pastor of the Free Church of Scotland. This is made clear by his approach to the subject, which is, understandably for a practicing minister, the most defensive and dogmatic example here mentioned. Whilst one should, of course,

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37 Ibid. pg. 36.
39 Ibid. pg. 2
40 Ibid., pg. 50.
41 This is particularly apparent during British philosophical and theological understandings of Hinduism during the C18th and C19th centuries. I am indebted to Dr. Gregory A. Barker for also bringing to my attention numerous examples of this limitation of dialogue between Christianity and Buddhism. See Barker & Gregg (Eds.) *Jesus Beyond Christianity: The Classic Texts* (Oxford: OUP, forthcoming).
expect a priest of a faith system to uphold the views of their own church, what I find striking about Robertson is his lack of engagement with human-wide issues of religiosity – examples include a gross misunderstanding of the concept of *Karma* and a section on the absurdity of seeing man as God, despite the fact that this is a central tenet of Mormonism, some Hindu groups, and also the 5 Percenters, an American Islamic New Religious Movement. Of course, it would be unrealistic to expect every priest of each denomination within a given faith system to be fully versed in the religious practices of others, but this serves as a useful example for the simple reason that Robertson is not alone. There are a large number of publications written by conservative Christians, particularly from North America, which have joined the debate. It is, of course, perfectly legitimate for them to do so, but it further demonstrates the limited response to the limited questions that are being asked within a debate that is being played out amongst the New Atheists and New Apologists of the West.

**The Problem of Categories – Language and Positionality**

Having briefly outlined the central issue of a lack of breadth and scope in the New Atheism debate, understanding that each side is, to a greater of lesser extent, liable to such a charge, I now wish to turn to the problem of the language and categories used by the proponents of each side of the debate. I do this in the hope that further constructive critiques may be made of our key exponents, and also, that our next section, which gives three brief case studies to further demonstrate failures of the current debate, may be seen in the light of appropriately understood terms.

The first, and perhaps most obvious contested term, is that of atheist itself. Used consistently by authors on each side of the debate, the term is very infrequently discussed or defined. I would argue this is because of the variations apparent in the meaning of the word, even if we limit our enquiry to Western understanding. Tracing the meaning of the word to its Greek origin, Michael Martin differentiates between negative and positive atheism, the former being “someone without a belief in God [who] need not be someone who believes that God does not exist” and the latter meaning “an atheist is not simply one who holds no belief in the existence of a God or gods but is one who believes that there is no God or gods.” These understandings necessarily link their definitions to a translation of ‘atheist’ as ‘without God’ – a phrase fully compatible with the Athenian State Religion understanding of paying recognition to the Gods – *nomisdeon tous theos* – rather than ‘believing’ in them

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43 Ibid. pg. 50
44 I am indebted to Richard Cawley of Cardiff University for introducing me to the theology of the 5 Percenters movement.
in a modern, Western sense. In recognition of this specific cultural and religious inheritance, Martin argues that “if applied cautiously outside its clearest historical context, the concept of atheism can be illuminating for contemporary Western readers.” Crucially for our current study, Martin also states that “in the modern Western context ‘atheism’ has meant different things depending on changing conceptions of God.” I would support this view of a malleable understanding of the concept, and suggest that it is appropriate to open the exploration of this term, fully conscious of its cultural and linguistic provenance, to a wider conception of deity, religion and human experience. To this end, one of our case studies is purposefully chosen as a distinct and proudly atheistic religion.

Before moving on to my chosen case studies, I wish to address two further qualifications regarding the language used by both the New Atheists and the New Apologists.

Firstly, I wish to comment upon the use of the term ‘non-believer’, taking objection to the implicit value-judgements implied in its usage. Used extensively by Beattie in particular, it seems to me that more neutral terms must be used if this debate is to be widened. To classify someone as an unbeliever assumes that the person in question stands in opposition to a given set of values and beliefs that may be foreign to the majority of humankind, for example a person of deep religious inclination who happens to belong to a faith tradition other than our own. The term may be applied, of course, within individual faith systems as well, when there are schisms, denominational differences and doctrinal disagreements. Surely this therefore renders the phrase particularly unhelpful in any attempt to look at distinct human religious traditions objectively? A second objection to this phrase is a simple response to its use by some of the New Apologists (and religious believers in general) by referencing the argument used in Bertrand Russell’s Teapot analogy, referred to in our earlier video by Richard Dawkins. Whilst the socio-religious and philosophical construction of Russell’s argument regarding the possibility of belief in any given celestial or heavenly being may be challenged on many grounds, I regard the truism of his argument to stand strongly – namely that the burden of proof must always lie with the proponent of an idea, not the opponent. This is particularly important when considering the use of negative descriptions (such as ‘non-believer’) which firmly root judgements, opinions and arguments in a very specific world-view, or understanding of religion or deity, in counter-relation to the ‘non-believer’ in question.

The final category definition that I would like to examine is ‘naturalist’ and ‘supernaturalist’. Grayling comments on these terms as his preferred replacements for ‘atheist’ and ‘theist’ as follows: “As it happens, no atheist should call himself or herself one. The term already sells a pass to theists,

46 Ibid., pg. 1
because it invites debate on their ground. A more appropriate term is ‘naturalist’, denoting one who takes it that the universe is a natural realm, governed by nature’s laws. This properly implies that there is nothing supernatural in the universe – no fairies or goblins, angels, demons, gods or goddesses. Such might as well call themselves ‘a-fairyists’ or ‘a-goblinists’ as ‘atheists’; it would be every bit as meaningful or meaningless to do so. [...] By the same token, therefore, people with theistic beliefs should be called supernaturalists, and it can be left to them to attempt to refute the findings of physics, chemistry and the biological sciences in an effort to justify their alternative claim that the universe was created, and is run, by supernatural beings.\footnote{Grayling, op cit, pp. 28-29.}

I have quoted this section at some length for two reasons. Firstly, it demonstrates Grayling’s link between theism and religion – at no point does he consider a religious counterpoint to his ‘naturalist’ stance that is not in itself ‘supernaturalist’;\footnote{This is particularly apparent in statements made on ibid., pg. 27.} and secondly, as this leads directly to our first case study – a brief survey of Hindu \textit{advaita} which is aimed at questioning the validity of the separation of Grayling’s categorisation of ‘naturalist’ within a wider view of the human approach to religion.

\textbf{The Challenge of Non-Dualism}

Formulated and codified in the teachings of Shankara, the great C8th century philosopher from Kerala, India, and popularised in the C19th and C20th by luminaries such as Vivekananda and Radhakrishnan, non-dualism, or more properly, \textit{advaita} (literally, ‘not two’) is a Hindu philosophical understanding of reality. Reverting to, but not governed by, interpretations of the teachings in the Upanishads, \textit{advaita} argues for an underlying unity to the apparent diversity experienced by normal human comprehension of the world.

The key to \textit{advaita} is the relationship between \textit{Brahman} and \textit{Atman} – and herein lies a popular misconception regarding the system. \textit{Atman} is often translated into English as ‘soul’ and \textit{Brahman} is often translated as ‘God’ or ‘Divine reality’ – these are, however, misleading understandings of the terms. More properly, I would argue that \textit{Atman} and \textit{Brahman} should be understood as the micro- and macro-scales of reality, one related to the individual consciousness (\textit{Atman}) and one related to the cosmic or universal (\textit{Brahman}) at the superficial level and with no difference seen as a pure \textit{advaitic} level. This understanding requires no element of divinity, or theism in its world view. True \textit{advaita}, by definition, must strip away all layers of doctrine, creed, dogma, ritual, practice and divinity. As Vivekananda has stated: \textit{“prayers, ceremonials, prayers, ceremonials...”}
and all other forms of worship are simply kindergartens of meditation".\textsuperscript{49} Human conceptions of deity, incarnations and indeed our very understanding of the world itself are seen as false by pure \textit{advaita} – often linked with the concept of \textit{maya}, literally meaning ‘not that’ and often incorrectly translated as ‘illusion’, which is a term used in \textit{advaita} writings to explain why humans do not see the unity of the cosmos normally.

\textit{Maya} is not, however, a physical veil, but a metaphorical explanation for human frailty and the requirement for transient gods, scriptures and rituals. \textit{Brahman} is not a physical reality – indeed, the upper reaches of \textit{advaita} philosophy differentiate between \textit{Brahman saguna} (\textit{Brahman} with qualities) and \textit{Brahman nirguna} (\textit{Brahman} without qualities) – it is an encompassing term intended to explain the very universe itself.

Within this pure form of \textit{advaita}, this explanation of the universe is undertaken in a very ‘non-supernaturalist’ understanding of the world. In such a worldview, there is no reversion to intermediary deities, belief in angels, or the infallibility (or even moral authority) of scripture or doctrine – such standpoints are utterly incompatible with \textit{advaita}. In his work \textit{The Dawkins Delusion}, McGrath links a Christian conception of deity with the scientific community’s work towards a Theory of Everything\textsuperscript{50} – however, it seems to me that his argument encounters difficulties when he compares a naturalist (scientific) and supernaturalist (classical theism) worldview, thus immediately opening himself up to criticisms under Grayling’s model of categorisation. I would like to suggest, however, that our current example of \textit{advaita} as a worldview challenges the New Atheist critique of religion more fully, as it challenges the very categories within which the proponents formulate their arguments.

Crucially, this category realignment sets \textit{advaita} apart from the types of Hinduism that are mentioned (almost in passing) by Harris\textsuperscript{51} and Hitchens\textsuperscript{52}, which are invariably movements centred upon issues of theistic or political hegemony. The ability to remove these contentious issues and to discover that their still remains a distinct and ‘religious’ worldview would surely be something of an education for the New Atheists.

I should like to bring in one further example from Vivekananda, the primary exponent of \textit{advaita} within the last 150 years, which again challenges the New Atheists on their own grounds – and that is on the issue of kindness. In \textit{Against All Gods}, A.C. Grayling argues for a humanistic framework of morality\textsuperscript{53} and Richard Dawkins has argued frequently – most recently in

\textsuperscript{50} McGrath, op cit, pg. 9.
\textsuperscript{51} Harris, \textit{End of Faith}, op cit, pg. 229
\textsuperscript{52} Hitchens, op cit, pg. 59
\textsuperscript{53} Grayling, op cit, pp. 59-64.
television interviews regarding the Atheist Bus Campaign – that ‘being good for goodness sake’ is more moral than being good within a theistic framework of reward, punishment. Dawkins, of course, over-simplifies the argument, as it is insulting to people of religious faith to suggest that they are incapable of performing good deeds without reversion to their own salvific state of being in either this life or the next. However, what I think is true is that any action performed by the religious individual in question will be conditioned by their comprehension of deity and the accepted standard morality of their given faith system. For Grayling and Dawkins, this suggests a lack of individual agency to the acts of kindness in question.

Within Vivekananda’s understanding of a pure advaitic framework, however, there is no reversion to a deity from whom we have received moral guidance. There is no understanding of a state-of-being in an afterlife – such notions are dismissed as lower stages of spirituality compared with the higher advaitic ideal. In his work on *Karma-Yoga*, Vivekananda argues that complete non-attachment to the fruits of work is the highest moral ideal – there is no link to the teachings of any Prophet, nor any commandment from a Deity, nor any hope of reward in a given eschatological framework; his argument, sounding astonishingly similar to Graylings, is for people to be ‘good for goodness sake.’

We must, of course, be careful. It is not a part of my argument to suggest that advaita is a scientific world-view – it is not. It was formulated prior to the scientific age of human discovery. However, my main aim in this example is to demonstrate the ways in which our understanding of religion, when looked at from a wider perspective than the current debate allows, begin to challenge and critique the cultural assumptions and precise categories in which the New Atheist writers approach their very narrow view of the human religious condition.

**The Challenge of the New Religions**

My second brief case study in which I wish to challenge the assumption of the New Atheist writers is the area of the New Religions or, as they are sometime called, New Religious Movements, and my chosen example is the International Raelian Movement.

Founded by Claude Vorilhon, now known as the Prophet Rael, the Raelian Movement is centred on Vorilhon’s encounter with extra-territorial beings in a remote area of France in 1973. During the course of his encounter with the beings Vorilhon was taught the true interpretation of the Genesis

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creation myths. The beings were the *Elohim*, referred to in Genesis and meaning ‘those who come from the sky’.\(^{56}\) Crucially, the *Elohim* are seen as the creators of humanity (and indeed all life on earth), which was undertaken as a genetic-engineering experiment that was forbidden on the Elohim’s own planet. This therefore separates the Raelian Movement from traditional Judaeo-Christian cosmology; which Rael argues has mistaken the plural and physical *Elohim* for a single and supernatural deity - *Yahweh*.\(^{57}\) The name *Yahweh* in Raelian cosmology is understood to be the name of the leader of the *Elohim* council, rather than a supernatural deity. The Raelian Movement cite numerous passages in Genesis to support their argument, including the belief that the *Elohim* created humans in their likeness (Genesis 1:26) and that they also cross fertilised with their human creations (Genesis 6:1 and 6:4).

The central tenet of Raelian belief is therefore positive atheism in a Greco-Western religious understanding of the term – there are no supernatural beings called Gods, we have simply mistaken physical beings for miracle and magic workers due to their enormously advanced scientific knowledge compared to the humanity to whom they spoke in the bronze age. This is our first key issue – the Prophet Rael is proud to be an atheist; indeed, he responds to Luke 12:10 and Mark 3:29, the passages which state that blaspheming against the Holy Spirit is an unforgivable offence, by taking what has become known as the Blasphemy Challenge.\(^{58}\) The Blasphemy Challenge was a website set up after the release of Brian Flemming’s documentary film *The God That Wasn’t There*,\(^{59}\) and upon which people post videos of themselves stating their atheism and publicly denying the existence of the Holy Spirit in defiance of the New Testament teachings. Not only Rael, but his senior Bishop and chosen successor, Dr. Bridgette Boisselier have made such videos to make public declarations denying the existence of a supernatural realm.

Our second key issue, regarding a Raelian response to the New Atheists, concerns the charge of religion and religious indoctrination as a form of child abuse, an argument used extensively by both Dawkins\(^ {60}\) and Hitchens.\(^ {61}\) Put simply, the Raelian movement does not fit into the model of religious indoctrination and dominance over the young that Dawkins and Hitchens accuse major religious traditions of so doing. Whilst one could argue to support or criticise the inherent moral good of such actions, it is undeniable that

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\(^{56}\) All translations and stances replicated in this section are reflective of the International Raelian Movement’s position and view.

\(^{57}\) Crucially, for the Raelians, the name *Elohim* is plural – the singular would be *Eloha*, but this name is not found in the Genesis text.

\(^{58}\) www.blasphemychallenge.com

\(^{59}\) Brian Flemming (Dir.) *The God That Wasn’t There*, (Beyond Belief Media Productions, 2005). For more information see www.thegodmovie.com

\(^{60}\) See Dawkins, op cit, pg. 349ff.

\(^{61}\) Hitchens, op cit, pp. 217-228.
mainstream religious traditions include major rites of passage that are often, and sometimes exclusively, carried out on behalf of children at an age before they have attained intellectual maturity – baptism, confirmation, bar mitzvah, annaprasana and punsayana\textsuperscript{62} are examples of these.

The Raelian teachings, however, expressly forbid such practices, as stated in the Prophet Rael’s work \textit{The Keys To The Opening Of An Individual}: “Never impose any religion on a child. One must neither baptize, nor circumcise, nor force upon the child any act which he/she has not accepted. One must therefore wait until the child has reached an age to understand and to choose, and then if a religion interests him/her let him/her freely adhere to it.”\textsuperscript{63}

It seems apparent to me that neither Hitchens nor Dawkins has ever taken the time to investigate the writings of the Raelian religion on this issue.\textsuperscript{64}

Our third key issue in this section refers to the Raelian attitudes towards diverse sexualities and providers of sexual service industries. The human sexual condition is central to Raelian mythology,\textsuperscript{65} which includes accounts of Vorilhon’s sexual encounters with beings on the home planet of the \textit{Elohim}. Sexuality is seen as a natural expression of humanity and, although tabloid stories of free-love and cultic orgies are certainly overstated, it is the case that many Raelians express themselves sexually through bisexuality and non-monogamous relationships. There are, of course, many heterosexual and homosexual Raelians who conduct monogamous relationships that seem not to differ from wider, non-Raelian society.\textsuperscript{66}

Such attitudes have led the Raelian Movement to actively promote membership to prostitutes and people that work in associated sexually-orientated industries, such as exotic dancers – a non-judgmental recruitment campaign that has led to large numbers of Korean and South Asian sex-workers joining the movement. The Raelian liberal attitude to sexuality and sexual freedom has also led to direct confrontation with the established Churches, including the organised distribution of condoms to High School students in the Catholic dominated suburbs of Montreal, in 1992.\textsuperscript{67}

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{62} This is a particularly interesting rite of passage, as it is a ceremony carried out within Hinduism on behalf of an unborn child, at around the fourth month of pregnancy, in which the child, by definition, cannot have any authority or individual agency.
\item \textsuperscript{63} Source: \url{www.rael.org/int/english/philosophy/key/body_keys.html} quoted in Chryssides & Wilkins (eds.) \textit{A Reader in New Religious Movements} (London: Continuum, 2006) pg. 169.
\item \textsuperscript{64} It can only be imagined what the writers would make of the Raelians, almost certain to be labelled a ‘wacky cult’ by Dawkins or Hitchens.
\item \textsuperscript{65} The word is here used, not to imply a value-judgement on the veracity of such stories, but to highlight that the story has cosmic significance for the originating individual or community.
\item \textsuperscript{66} See Palmer, op cit, pp. 134-156.
\item \textsuperscript{67} Palmer, op cit, pg. 68.
\end{itemize}
It is, of course, possible to find people from within many faith systems who would subscribe to a liberal view of the broad spectrum of human sexuality – famous Christian supporters of such a stance would include Archbishop Desmond Tutu. However, and this is the New Atheist’s principle objection to the treatment of homosexuals in religious traditions, Tutu and those sharing his viewpoint are acting in contradiction of traditional interpretations of scripture, and their stance is often disassociated with the historical and cultural actions and attitudes of their religions. This means, therefore, that they often find themselves isolated as liberal minorities as opposed to a conservative majority. For the Raelian religion, this is not an issue. There is no central moral code that forbids homosexual and bisexual expressions of sexuality, there is no history of sexual oppression, and there is no supernatural deity who will judge our sexual conduct.

Of course, this outline of Raelian views does not in anyway legitimate their intrinsic value or verifiability as appropriate human responses to sexuality, but they serve as an important counterpoint to the standard response of many of the New Apologists. David Robertson, in The Dawkins Letters, is a case in point, where he argues against an acceptance of homosexuality on the grounds of scripture, equating it with paedophilia and bestiality. This is, of course, the response pre-empted and expected by the New Atheists and adds to the circular nature of the Atheist-Apologist debate. The Raelians, whether one agrees with their stance or not, at least offer a fresh approach to the subject from a religious viewpoint.

**The Challenge of Humanistic Faiths**

Our third and final area to be included in our discussion is that of the humanistic, or secular religious movements. This section will not form a case study, due to the number of movements involved and the time constraints of the current paper, but I aim to address a key issue concerning this area.

I have already noted how Dawkins in particular, and to a lesser extent Hitchens, limit their understanding of religion to very particular theistic, or supernaturalistic form of tradition. We have seen how this is limited when approaching some Hindu forms of thought, and also when examining the contributions of a New Religion. However, there are also a number of

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68 See, for example, Hitchens, op cit, pp. 34-35 & 48-52 and Dawkins, op cit, pp. 45-46 & 326-329.
69 It is true to say, however, that the Raelian Religion is not without the concept of judgement – for after we die it is believed that a select few will be chosen for ‘re-embodiment’ to continue living in genetically engineered bodies to rule with the Elohim Council. The criteria for this is, however, based not on moral conduct, but on intellectual prowess and an individual’s contribution to society.
70 Robertson, op cit, pg. 38.
movements within Christianity, Judaism and Islam, traditionally theistic religions, which have removed such concepts from their religious systems, and that seek to engage in what Grayling would describe as naturalistic dialogue.

Examples of this include the Humanistic Judaism movement which was formed in 1960s America,\(^\text{71}\) the Secular Muslim group within the Center for Inquiry,\(^\text{72}\) and, perhaps most famously, the Sea of Faith Movement of Christian Non-Realism established in the UK in the 1980s in response to the writings of Don Cupitt.

As controversial as these stances are for the adherents of the ‘mainstream’ religions to which these movements align themselves, it is a fact of human religiosity that these groups of faithful adherents to their own understanding of reality represent an important contribution in the debate on the human religious tradition. It is to be expected that a conservative Christian Apologist would not seek to defend the views of Don Cupitt. It is also understandable as to why a non-specialist such as Dawkins or Hitchens should not explore such diverse concepts of religion. Neither case, however, is acceptable, if we are to seek an understanding of global responses to the human religious condition. Brushing aside those with whom we have doctrinal differences, or ignoring those who do not fit into our neatly constructed box of what does or does not constitute a religion, is imply not good enough if we are to widen the current investigation.

**New Atheists and New Apologists – Dialogue or Silence?**

In conclusion, I would like to clarify several points made in this paper. Most importantly, I see the current debate regarding New Atheism, the responses from the New Apologists and the counter responses by the New Atheists, as representing too small a cross-section of the human approach to religion to be a truly valuable exercise.

Understandings of religion, conceptions of deity, and the lack of conceptual clarity concerning categories of world-view, have been explored in relation to non-traditional and non-Western examples of religiosity.

This paper is based upon on-going research, and there is no doubt that further examples could be included, and that deeper enquiry should be undertaken to offer the opportunity of responses from both the New Atheists and the New Apologists – this is my primary aim and hope for the outcome of this research.

There is, of course, a large question mark over whether this is even a possibility. The current debate over religion and belief in God demonstrates, in my mind, the publication of viewpoints concentrated primarily on their

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\(^{71}\) See [www.iishj.org](http://www.iishj.org)

\(^{72}\) See [www.centerforinquiry.net/isis](http://www.centerforinquiry.net/isis)
differences, rather than any hope of opportunity for dialogue. This seems strange to me. If Dawkins believes that people with religious faith are deluded, or suffering from some form of mental illness, then surely it is his duty as a moral humanist to enter into dialogue with that person and seek a common ground that may aid their wellbeing. Similarly, for conservative Apologists such as Robertson, surely there is a responsibility for dialogue with those with whom we do not agree, not just on one’s own terms, but under mutually agreeable middle-ground, so as to be able to perform his understood task of sharing the light of the knowledge of God.

It seems to me unlikely that either of these possibilities will happen in a hurry, primarily for one reason. In an observation that I have labelled the Law of Inverse Dialogue, it is apparent from the writings of both Atheists and Apologists that examples are always chosen from the negative extreme of your opponent’s viewpoint. For example, when Dawkins states that no good has ever come of religion (a statement that Terry Eagleton notes is "as a priori improbable as it is empirically false") he has obviously never met anyone who works night shifts as a volunteer in homeless shelters run by inner-city Churches, or the countless volunteers who collect money envelopes door-to-door every year for Christian Aid Week. Likewise, when Robertson equates liberal atheist views of homosexuality with bestiality and paedophilia, it is clear he is laying the blame for the existence of such notions at the door of the ungodly.

This is clearly unhelpful, and I argue that we need to seek a wider debate, based upon diverse positions regarding morality, religion, spirituality and worldview.

There are many areas of investigation that I would like to see debated within the current dialogue. What is the Jain understanding, and suggested solution, for the tendency towards violence within extremist elements of major faiths? What common ground can be found between naturalists, in Graylings understanding of the term, and advaitic Hindus? What contribution to the debate can be made by the exponents of the New Religions? What social, political and cultural benefits can secular, humanistic and non-realist understandings of religion bring to our communities?

We are, however, left asking one simple question – does the current debate surrounding Atheism and Religious Belief adequately address a Global view of these fundamentally important human issues. My simple answer is no. A debate which seeks little common ground, which does not address non-theistic concepts of religion, which does not address philosophical non-realism, which does not address the issues of the New Religions, and which limits its questions and answers almost entirely within an Abrahamic straight-jacket, cannot, and

\[73\] Eagleton, op. cit.
should not, be seen as an adequate exploration of the challenges of understanding the Global human religious condition.

ÖZET

Yeni Ateizm: Küresel Sorulara Küresel Cevaplar?

Bu makalede bazen Oxford Tanrı Tartışması olarak da adlandırılan Yeni Ateizm tartışmalarını ve Yeni Apolojistler olarak adlandırduğum bu iddialara verilen cevapların temel unsurları ifade edilecektir. Bu makeleenin amacı Yeni Ateistler ve Yeni Apolojistlerin kullandığı kategorilerin yapıbozumuunda tartışmaların derinlik eksikliğini gösteme çabası olacaktır. Yeni ateistlerin kültürel ve felsefi varsayımları ve öngörüleri Doğu felsefi gelenekler (özellikle Hindu Advaita geleneği), Yeni Dini Hareketler (özellikle Ralein Hareketi) ve non-Realizm’i ilgilendiren konular tarafından meydan okunmaktadır. Bu makale Yeni Ateizmi ne savunma ne de savurma değil aslında İbrahimi geleneğin sınırları ötesinde tartışmayı genişletme çabasını gösterecektir.

Anahtar kelimeler: Yeni Ateizm, Oxford Tanrı Tartışması, Yeni Apolojistler, Yeni Dini Hareketler.