THE NEW ATHEISM DEBATE IN THE UNITED KINGDOM

Stephen E. GREGG*

ABSTRACT

This paper aims to highlight the contemporary relevance and importance of the debate surrounding religion in the United Kingdom today. After briefly outlining the key exponents of the New Atheist stance, the paper explores social, political and popular emanations of the New Atheist debate. The first section highlights the importance of the Atheist Bus Campaign, which has seen the highest-profile media coverage of religion for many years in the UK. The second section examines the use (and non-use) of religious messages within UK politics, and the third section highlights two contemporary manifestations of Atheism and popular culture in the UK – comedy and fashion. The purpose of the paper is to demonstrate, through diverse social and political examples, the current importance and high profile nature of religion in contemporary Britain.

Keywords: Atheism, New Atheist Debate, Atheist Bus Campaign.

This paper sets out to survey the current high-profile debate concerning Atheism and Religion in Public Life in the United Kingdom by discussing three key areas – the academic origin of the debate, the importance of the UK media and the role of popular culture. I will also very briefly discuss examples of political interaction with the debate.

1. The New Atheists – A Brief Overview

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.

* Trinity University College, United Kingdom.
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, 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*⁶ and *A Devil's Chaplain* 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 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.⁸

Fascinatingly, in our current context, it was in Turkey that he *God Delusion* faced its sternest opposition within Europe, with litigation launched in 2007

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⁵ Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell* (London: Allen Lane, 2006)
aimed at confiscating copies of the publication and banning further imprints. The case was defeated, after the publisher Erol Karaaslan was tried in an Istanbul court on suspicion of incitement to racial hatred, under the Turkish Law known commonly as Article 31, in April 2008.

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. 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. 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.

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, 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.” It is important to note, however, that Harris believes that his conclusions and opinions are relevant for “people of all faiths”. 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.

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9 http://richarddawkins.net/article,1975,The-God-Delusion-in-Turkey,Turkish-Daily-News (21/05/09)
10 http://www.theregister.co.uk/2007/11/28/dawkins_turkey/ (21/05/09)
12 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.
13 Hitchens, op cit, pp. 37-41.
14 See for example, Ibid, pp. 109ff.
16 Harris, Letter, pg. Xii.
17 Ibid., pg. Xi.
18 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, I find it useful to reference Grayling’s work to position the debate and dialogue from a New Atheist viewpoint, of which more in a moment, but first it may be helpful to very briefly outline classical understandings of Atheism.

Used consistently by journalists, academics and social commentators on each side of the current debate, the term Atheism 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 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.”

Grayling, however, objects to the very use of the term in the current debate in the UK, arguing for a newly defined categorical framework, which suggests the use of the terms naturalist and supernaturalist. Grayling thus 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, 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

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19 Grayling, *Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness* (London: Oberon, 2002007)
21 Ibid., pg. 1
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."  

In this very brief introduction, I have attempted to outline some of the background to the current debate in the UK, and now want to turn to specific examples of how this debate has moved from the academic lecture-theatre to mainstream media, politics and popular culture.

2. The New Atheist Use of Media

One of the most important channels for the propagation of New Atheism within the UK is the television programs of Richard Dawkins, which sit within a recent group of anti-religious documentaries commissioned by major UK broadcasters, some more academic than others. The first of this group was Jonathon Miller’s 2004 series a Brief History of Disbelief, broadcast by the BBC. In his three-part series, Miller investigates the phenomena of Atheism throughout Western Europe’s cultural inheritance from Classical Athens, through the reforms of the Christian Churches in the late Middle Ages, to the modern post-Darwinian era. The documentary proved so successful that a spin-off series of 6 episodes was created using previously unused footage primarily gathered for Miller’s original broadcasts. Also broadcast in 2004, this series, called The Atheism Tapes profiied five well known atheists (and one Christian theologian) in a series of interviews conducted by Miller. The subjects included Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett and Arthur Miller.

In 2006, the style and focus of the interaction of New Atheism and the media changed when the mainstream, but alternative, Channel 4 commissioned Richard Dawkins to make The Root of All Evil? A two part documentary, The Root of All Evil? concentrated upon the social ill-effects of religion and the dangers inherent in the extreme elements of Western and Abrahamic faiths. As I have noted in a previous paper, the focus Dawkins is exclusively Abrahamic, and he is also often focused solely upon extremist elements of religions, which are often not recognised, or certainly condoned, by the vast majority of adherents of the traditions in question. It is interesting to note, however, that Dawkins objected to the title of the programme, arguing that stating anything was the root of all evil was unreasonable. The producers compromised by placing a question mark at the end of the title.

22 Grayling, op cit, pp. 28-29.
23 http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/atheism.shtml
24 http://www.bbc.co.uk/bbcfour/documentaries/features/atheism-tapes.shtml
25 Denys Turner
27 http://www.pointofinquiry.org/richard_dawkins_the_root_of_all_evil (21/05/09)
The advertising for *The Root of All Evil?* was deliberately provocative, including the use of images of the Twin Towers being hit by the airliners on 9/11, an image that at the time of broadcast was effectively censored in North America.28

Dawkins followed *The Root of All Evil?* with a new series, also on Channel 4, called *The Enemies of Reason*. Aimed at a wider survey of spirituality and faith, rather than on any particular religious tradition. Dawkins’ case studies include Faith Healers who claim to restore our lost Atlantean DNA helixes, Dowsers, Astrologers (who have a larger following in the UK than any one religious tradition, according to weekly observance or adherence)29 and alternative (that is, non-scientifically proven) medicine practitioners.

Markedly, the approach taken by Dawkins and his producers in making their point is one of popular, or even populist engagement. At this point in the New Atheism’s engagement with the media, we see Atheism promoted as a cultural, perhaps even, a popular, norm. For example, when criticising astrology (on the scientifically provable argument that the earth’s rotational axis has shifted through 23 degrees since Ptolemy first formulated his zodiacal system 1,800 years ago), Dawkins uses a ‘vox pop’ style of interviewing after giving every interviewee the same horoscope, regardless of their date of birth. Quite clearly, the aim of the exercise is to prove the randomness and irrationality of belief in a system such as astrology - in fact, although not mentioned by Dawkins, the exercise is a simple replication of the 1948 experiments of psychologist Bertram R. Forer, who demonstrated that individuals will give high accuracy ratings to descriptions of their personality that are supposedly written specifically for them, but which are in fact vague enough to apply to a very wide range of people.30

Crucially, however, the editors of the program have been sure to include suitable candidates for their expected caricatures of British society; firstly, those who scoff at the astrology reading and claim that it is nonsense, are invariably well dressed, well spoken, middle-class individuals. Interviewees who seemed interested or excited in their horoscope where invariably typical of alternative, apart-from-the-mainstream caricatures, usually signified by their choice of clothing, hairstyle or style of speech. The message here, therefore, is that Atheism is central, Atheism is appropriate, and Atheism is respectable – a clear, although unreferenced, link back to Dawkins’ use of Russell’s Teapot Atheism argument in *The Root of All Evil?*, not from a philosophical stance, but

28 http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/14769404/ (22/05/09)
29 25% of the UK population check their horoscope every week (*The Enemies of Reason – Episode 1*)
in arguing for the truism that the burden of proof lays on the believer, and not the Atheist.

This fascinating placement of belief in the supernatural, which statistically still represents the majority of adults in the UK,\(^{31}\) as the anti-mainstream section of society fits perfectly with Dawkins’ thesis that those with religious faith are deluded, or even mentally ill, and therefore going against what Dawkins’ understands to be the mainstream acceptance of scientific empiricism. Now, Dawkins may be losing a statistical battle regarding belief in the supernatural, but he clearly continues his thesis, first expounded in *The God Delusion* that science and religion are mutually exclusive,\(^{32}\) by further increasing the public perception of this duality, when a group of dowsers\(^{33}\) are filmed being subjected to a double-blind test to find hidden objects. So far, so impartial. However, in an aesthetically delightful act of juxtaposition, the entire scene if filmed on the green of a large, but unnamed, Christian church. The inference is unmistakable; although none of the participating dowsers is introduced as Christian,\(^{34}\) and although dowsing societies and texts are not linked in any way to Christianity, Dawkins and his producers are making a clear link between superstitious activity and organised religion.

Perhaps the best known example of Atheism in the media in the UK in recent years is the Atheist Bus Campaign. Based on a blog by Ariance Sherine in the middle of 2008, the campaign was a direct response to evangelical Christian advertising on London underground trains, which offered the following message: “*When the son of man comes, will he find faith on the earth? (Luke 18:8)*”. The advertisements then give a web address, which contains the following warning for anyone who does not “*accept the word of Jesus on the cross*”: “You will be condemned to everlasting separation from God and then you spend all eternity in torment in hell. Jesus spoke about this as a lake of fire which was prepared for the devil and all his angels (Mt. 25:41)*”.\(^{35}\)

Finding the advertisement and associated website utterly offensive, the Atheist

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31 http://www.statistics.gov.uk/census2001/profiles/commentaries/ethnicity.asp#religion (21/05/09)
32 Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, op cit, pp. 77-99
33 Dowsing is an ancient pseudo-science/art which claims to be able to locate physical items or spiritual energies through the medium of rods, pendulums or natural objects such as pieces of wood. Closely associated with other esoteric beliefs such as Lay-Lines, classic texts for Dowsers include: Graves *Dowsing Techniques and Applications* (Portsmouth: Turnstone Books, 1976) and Watkins *The Old Straight Track* (London: Abacus, 1970 [1925]). Modern science attributes the movements of dowsing instruments to microscopic, subconscious movements labelled the Ideomotor Effect. See Brown, op cit, pp. 43-51. The term Ideomotor was first used in an investigation of Clairvoyance in 1852 by William B. Carpenter – for the original article, see http://www.sgipt.org/medppp/psymot/carp1852.htm (22/05/09)
34 One dowser speaks of ‘God’, but no religious affiliation is made clear.
35 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/jun/20/transport.religion (21/05/09)
Sherine mused in her blog whether or not it would be possible for a few Atheists to club together to pay for some counter-adverts in London. Little did she realise what she had started.

The campaign originally intended to raise £5,500, so as to put advertising banners on 30 London buses for 4 weeks. After support from Richard Dawkins, who matched the original £5,500, the campaign took off, with Dawkins noting that: “This campaign to put alternative slogans on London buses will make people think – and thinking is anathema to religion.” Largely supported (although not financially) by the centre-left newspaper the Guardian, the campaign eventually raised over £153,000, including £83,000 in a two-day period, which was a fund-raising record for justgiving.com, the largest charity administration website in the UK. The money was used to pay for Atheist advertising on over 800 buses in 27 cities throughout the UK. The campaign has since grown internationally, and there are now adverts running in Germany, Finland, the Netherlands, Canada, Switzerland, Croatia, Italy, Spain, Australia and the USA.

The wording of the advert is very interesting for our current discussion; the exact text: “There’s probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life”, was chosen as a direct response to very strict advertising laws within the UK, administreed by the Advertising Standards Agency. The relevant laws ban any advertising which is deemed to be unprovable or lacking in empirical or statistical evidence. The Atheist campaign therefore used the word ‘probably’, in much the same vein as the famous Carlsberg beer adverts, to avoid this problem. Fascinatingly, the (largely Christian) response to the bus campaign, to which we will now turn, did not follow these legal guideline, but more of this in a moment. The supernaturalist response to the Atheist Bus campaign was two-fold: individual protests and organised counter movements.

One individual, although high profile, response was the actions of Ron Heather, a 62 year old bus driver from Southampton. A committed evangelical Christian, in January of this year he refused to drive a bus which carried the

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36 http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2008/oct/22/religion-atheist-dawkins-god (21/05/09)
37 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/21/religion-advertising (21/05/09)
38 Ibid
39 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/23/atheist-bus-campaign-ariane-sherine (21/05/09)
40 http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/bus-locations/ (21/05/09)
41 http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/a-quick-international-round-up/ (21/05/09)
42 http://www.asa.org.uk/asa/codes/cap_code/Codelist.htm?code_id=19#expanded (22/05/09)
43 Specifically, points 3.1, 3.2, 5.1, 8.1, 9.1 and 11.1 of the code — see http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2008/oct/23/atheist-bus-campaign-ariane-sherine (22/05/09)
The New Atheism Debate in the United Kingdom (Birleşik Krallıkta Yeni Ateizm Tartışmaları)

Atheist advert. Although the drama of his walk-out from work was played out in a delightfully British manner - Heather had described his employers, First Bus', support as being “very good” and First Bus had also stated “Mr Heather accepts though that he may need to drive one of these buses if no other vehicle is available for him” - the story nevertheless was featured in all the major daily newspapers and television news programmes for the 16th of January.

Finally in this section, we turn to the codified and organised responses to the Bus Campaign, although it is interesting at this point to clarify that none of the major UK churches was involved. Indeed, the Methodist Church thanked the campaign for encouraging a “continued interest in God” and the Church of England stated: “We would defend the right of any group representing a religious or philosophical position to be able to promote that view through appropriate channels.” We find, therefore, that organised campaigns have almost exclusively been organised by fringe or minority Churches or organisations within the UK. Examples include the Christian Party, The Russian Orthodox Church and The Trinitarian Bible Society. Fascinatingly, the religious responses to the Atheist campaign were not constrained by the same advertising boundaries. The Christian Party slogan – “There definitely is a God. So join the Christian party and enjoy your life” was deemed by the Advertising Standards Agency to be a political opinion, and thus exempt from evidential backing – this ruling was made on 11th March of this year, despite the advertisement attracting the fourth largest number of complaints in the history of the ASA. Religious advertising is also exempt from ASA standards of evidence, meaning, of course, that here is an unlevel playing field in any competition between Supernaturalist and Naturalist campaigns. Tim Bleakley, marketing director of CBS Outdoor, a London-based advertising agency, insists that the Atheist campaign had to use the word ‘probably’ as there is a “grey area,” concerning an argument against God. A.C. Grayling has commented on this problem thus:

“There is something delicious about the thought of a functionary in an advertising agency doing ontology by arbitrating on the question of which fictional characters need a grey area of uncertainty around discussion of their

44 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/16/atheism-christian-advertisements-buses (22/05/09)
46 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/06/atheist-bus-campaign-nationwide (22/05/09)
47 http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/uk/7813812.stm (22/05/09)
48 http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/11/god-advert-christian-complaints (22/05/09)
49 http://www.christianparty.org.uk/cmsparty/ (22/05/09)
50 http://www.guardian.co.uk/media/2009/mar/11/god-advert-christian-complaints (22/05/09)
51 http://www.guardian.co.uk/commentisfree/2009/jan/07/atheist-bus-atheism (22/05/09)
existence – Little Red Riding Hood? Rumpelstiltskin? Santa? Betty Boop? ...Well: let us for a moment take the advertising standards code seriously. Parity requires that in all the many advertisements promoting religious belief on the buses and underground trains, "allegedly" be inserted into claims and statements that imply the existence of supernatural agencies. Now that the gauntlet has been thrown down on "probably" for the atheist buses, let us demand that "allegedly" appear in all advertisements promoting the opposite view."  

The Atheist Bus Campaign continues to grow around the world, and a second wave of advertisements is due to appear within the UK in the later half of 2009.  

3. Politics and Atheism

Very briefly, I would now like to turn to two issues from political life which demonstrate the importance and contemporary relevance of the religious debate in UK life.

The first example I want to mention is the implicit importance of religion to the debate over abortion within the UK. The middle one of three bills in an eight-month period in 2006–2007, Conservative MP Ann Winterton’s Termination of Pregnancy (Counselling and Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill, sought to introduce compulsory counselling and a week-long ‘cooling off’ period for women seeking abortions in the UK.  

The bill was defeated by 182 votes to 102, and similar defeats were inflicted upon an October 2006 Bill attempting to reduce the time limit on abortion, and also on a March 2007 Bill which sought to ensure parents of girls under the age of 16 who had abortions gained the right to be informed of the procedure. The crucial aspect, however, is that the abortion issue, concerning which so much relevant debate has occurred recently in Parliament, is one of the very few issues within UK politics where Members of Parliament are allowed to vote according to religious or moral conscience, as opposed to the specific instructions of their own Party – technically known as a ‘free vote’ in Westminster. This status of vote within Parliament therefore opens up the possibility of dialogue with religiously orientated groups and the distinct probability of their implicit involvement. Specific examples of this include the UK Life League, Pro Life Alliance,
Precious Life Scotland\textsuperscript{60} and the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland, whose most senior Cardinal Keith O’Brien has equated the abortion rate in Scotland as equivalent to “two Dunblane massacres a day”.\textsuperscript{61}

Secondly, the issue of explicitly mixing politics and religion has been of relevance in the UK recently, through three specific examples – Nick Clegg, the British National Party and Tony Blair.

Firstly, Nick Clegg, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, Britain’s third largest political party broke with decades of tradition by stating his atheism in an interview with BBC Radio 5 Live on 18\textsuperscript{th} December 2007.\textsuperscript{62} Clegg’s statement attracted a deluge of political and social commentary, as it was so opposed to the normal stance of politicians who have traditionally not wanted to offend any religious groups – indeed, it is also rare for a person to rise to the top of British politics without reference to some faith system or other: the two previous leaders of the Liberal Democrats, Sir Menzies Campbell and Charles Kennedy were a Scottish Presbyterian and a Catholic, respectively; David Cameron, leader of the Conservatives is an irregular Church attendee, his predecessor William Hague has previously addressed evangelical Christian political rallies; and the current Prime Minister, gordon Brown makes much currency of his frugal upbringing by his Church of Scotland Minister father.\textsuperscript{63}

Secondly, I also want to highlight the use of religion by extreme elements of the UK political system. In March 2009, the far-right anti-immigration British Nationalist Party unveiled a new advertising billboard for the run up to the European Parliament and Local Government elections to be held in the UK in June of this year. Quoting John 15:20, the advert asks the question “What would Jesus do?” relating biblical comments on persecution to the supposed plight of white Christians in the UK.\textsuperscript{64}

The leader of the BNP, Nick Griffin, has defended the campaign thus:

“What has become of the Christian church in this country? Instead of inclusively ‘embracing all’ which the church claims is its basis, certain groups within that body have banned people from their ranks simply because of their membership in the British National Party. “Surely if God calls a man to his service, no church has the right to contradict HIS holy will! For many years, the

\textsuperscript{60} http://212.58.226.17:8080/1/bi/scotland/465058.stm (22/05/09)
\textsuperscript{61} http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/scotland/6706743.stm (22/05/09) The quotation refers to the mass-murder of sixteen primary school children and one adult on 13\textsuperscript{th} March 1996 in Dunblane, Scotland. Opponents of O’Brien have criticised his use of inflammatory language and inappropriate reference to the Dunblane tragedy.
\textsuperscript{62} http://news.bbc.co.uk/player/nol/newsid_7150000/newsid_7151500/7151538.stm?bw=bb&mp=wn&asb=1&news=1&bbcws=1 (22/05/09)
\textsuperscript{63} http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/comment/faith/article3074541.ece (22/05/09)
\textsuperscript{64} http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/newstopics/religion/5077988/BNP-uses-Jesus-in-advertising-campaign.html (22/05/09)
churches in this country scrupulously avoided being politically biased. Nowadays however we see a small number of clerics and bishops openly preaching hatred towards the BNP. Church leaders actively shun the word of God on issues like sodomy, abortion and social justice. With this in mind I invite you to preview our European election billboard aimed at attracting even more Christian voters. Jesus was viewed as a revolutionary figure, hated and hounded to death, not by 'evil men' but by the corrupt hypocrites who ran the church. Has nothing changed in two thousand years?\(^{65}\)

The campaign has, of course, been roundly condemned by all major UK Churches, who have sought to realign biblical understandings of persecution and hospitality to foreigners through a series of press statements.\(^{66}\) Interestingly for our current discussion, internet for a used by Atheists have been quick to highlight this story, arguing for the links between theism and racial or ethnic intolerance.\(^{67}\)

Finally in this section I wish to briefly mention a comment made by Tony Blair after his resignation as Prime Minister and his public declaration of his conversion to the Catholic Faith. Interviewed by the BBC’s World Service in November 2007, Blair outlined the importance of the role that his Christian faith played in his political life, but famously stated that he had not spoken publicly regarding the links between policy decisions and religious beliefs because if you “talk about in our [political] system, then frankly people do think you’re a nutter”\(^{68}\). As a statement summarising the tensions between religious faith and public life in the UK, it is hard to be more succinct than this.

4. Atheism in Popular Culture

Finally in this paper, I wish to outline two ways in which the Atheism debate has entered popular culture – through mainstream UK comedy, and also through satirical or subversive slogans that are advertised in major UK newspapers and magazines.\(^{69}\)

Firstly, with reference to comedy, in much the same way that the 1980s saw the rise of ‘alternative’ comedians, led by Ben Elton and Harry Enfield, play such a major role in the critiquing of the capitalist system of Margaret Thatcher’s Conservative government, so I believe we are experiencing a new wave of comedy largely centred upon a critique of established religion and supernaturalist beliefs. Foremost in this movement are comedians and public

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\(^{65}\) http://richarddawkins.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=77281 (22/05/09)
\(^{66}\) http://www.ekklesia.co.uk/node/9108 (22/05/09)
\(^{67}\) http://richarddawkins.net/forum/viewtopic.php?f=17&t=77281 (22/05/09)
\(^{68}\) http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LMmaNHVc3RM Originally broadcast on BBC World (America) 25\(^{th}\) November 2007
\(^{69}\) For example, redmolotiv.com are permanent advertisers in the UK’s best selling satirical magazine, Private Eye.
atheists such as Eddie Izzard,\textsuperscript{70} Stephen Fry,\textsuperscript{71} Marcus Brigstocke,\textsuperscript{72} Dara O’Briain,\textsuperscript{73} Ricky Gervais\textsuperscript{74} and Stewart Lee.\textsuperscript{75}

All of the comedians mentioned base large amounts of material, either written or performance-based, on the subject of religion. Gervais is a particularly interesting case, as he challenged the Archbishop of Canterbury to an impromptu defence of his views on BBC Radio Five Live\textsuperscript{76} when they were consecutive interviewees, leading to an exceptionally eloquent conversation linking to religion and popular culture, including their opposing views of the role of religion in \textit{The Simpsons}.

Whilst all of these comic acts provide hundreds of wonderful sound-bite quotations, I want to quote Dara O’Briain in particular, as an example of the peculiarly British understanding of Atheism, and its influence upon social life and culture in the UK. Originally from Ireland, O’Briain now works predominantly in London, and is famous for stating that: “\textit{I’m staunchly atheist, I simply don’t believe in God. But I’m still Catholic, of course.}”\textsuperscript{77} The inter-play between negative relational concepts of identity, between religious or philosophical standpoints, and community or ethnic standpoints cannot be underplayed in the UK, particularly with regard to Catholic-Protestant tensions, and it is perhaps not surprising that we find specific examples of this identity-formation within morally ‘safe-arena’ of satirical comedy.

The last example I wish to look at today is a less serious topic; the use of satirical slogans on clothing, and their use of religion and popular culture. Pioneered by T14 Clothing, trading as remolotov.com, it is very easy to buy anti-religious, openly atheistic, or simply humorous slogans questioning religion and belief in God. Examples include quotations from famous Atheists such as Douglas Adams, author of the Hitchiker’s Guide to the Galaxy,\textsuperscript{78} and Emmeline Pankhurst, famous doubter and exponent of women’s rights.\textsuperscript{79}

Much is made by the satirists of the clash between science and religion – the basis of much New Atheist writing – and specific examples of this include a corruption of the traditional Christian Fish symbol to show a belief in

\begin{footnotes}
\item[70] See, for example, \textit{Glorious} (Universal, 1997) and \textit{Dress to Kill} (Universal, 1998)
\item[71] http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2005/jun/05/religion.hayfestival2005 (22/05/09)
\item[72] http://www.celebatheists.com/?title=Marcus_Brigstocke (22/05/09)
\item[73] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB&hl=en-GB&v=NHqOG8p0Lkc (22/05/09)
\item[74] http://www.rickygervais.com/bestlife.php (22/05/09)
\item[75] http://homepage.ntlworld.com/david.patrick/stewcome.html (22/05/09)
\item[76] http://www.bbc.co.uk/fivellive/videos/mayo.shtml (22/05/09)
\item[77] http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GB&hl=en-GB&v=NHqOG8p0Lkc (22/05/09)
\item[78] http://www.redmolotov.com/search/index.php?search=douglas+adams (22/05/09)
\item[79] http://www.redmolotov.com/catalogue/tshirts/religious-tshirts/emmelinepankhurst.html (22/05/09)
\end{footnotes}
Darwinian evolution, a design based upon Russell’s Teapot, and a particularly ironic design which states that “Richard Dawkins is God”.

It is, of course, highly likely that the atheist slogans used on the clothing are not a specific response to the New Atheism as an isolated cultural battleground, but are part of a wider counter-culture movement embodied in satirical protest – indeed, this may be summised from the links between the current Capitalist financial crisis and the best-selling design on redmolotov.com at the time that I wrote this paper – a picture of Karl Marx with the simple slogan “I told you this would happen.”

Whilst I am at no point suggesting that such examples as comedy or satirical slogans on clothing are definitive indicators of the statistical growth of Atheism in the UK, I do find it fascinating that a debate concerning religion has so gripped the UK public’s imagination. Perhaps this is an example of the eclectic religious and philosophical inheritance of the UK, and the inconsistencies that are created by the not altogether happy marriage of Church and State in modern Britain.

5. Conclusion

The New Atheism has reinvigorated religious debate in the UK from theistic, atheistic, supernaturalist, naturalist, secular, humanistic and agnostic points of view. For that reason, whatever side of the debate we sit on as individuals, we should all welcome the rise in profile of the debate concerning apparently incompatible world-views and ideologies. I will leave the last word in this paper to Ariene Sherine, founder of the Atheist Bus Campaign who said upon the launch of the first bus: “This is a great day for freedom of speech in Britain. I am very glad that we live in a country where people have the freedom to believe in whatever they want.”

80 http://www.redmolotov.com/catalogue/tshirts/religious-tshirts/darwinfish.html (22/05/09)
81 http://www.redmolotov.com/catalogue/tshirts/religious-tshirts/russells-teapot-tshirt.html (22/05/09)
82 http://www.redmolotov.com/catalogue/tshirts/religious-tshirts/dawkinsisgod.html (22/05/09)
83 http://www.redmolotov.com/catalogue/tshirts/religious-tshirts/all/karl-marx-tshirt.html (22/05/09)
84 http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/jan/06/religion-atheist-bus-campaign-national (22/05/09)
ÖZET
Birleşik Krallıkta Yeni Ateizm Tartışmaları
Bu yazı günümüz İngilteresinde (Birleşik Krallık) dine yönelik tartışmaların çağdaş ilişkisini ve önemini vurgulamayı amaçlamaktadır. Yeni Ateist duruşun ana temelleri kısaca açıklanıktan sonra, Yeni Ateist tartışmaların sosyal, siyasal ve popüler yansımaları ortaya konmuştur. Birinci kısımda İngiltere'de uzun yıllardan beri ilk defa din hakkında önde gelen medyannın ilgisini çeken Ateist Otobüs Kampanyası'nın önemi ele almaktadır. İkinci kısımda İngiltere siyasetinde dini mesajların kullanılıp kullanılmadığını; üçüncü kısımda İngiltere'deki Ateizm ve popüler kültürün iki çağdaş manifestosunu (komedi ve moda) incelemektedir. Bu makalenin amacı günümüz Britanyası'ında dinin yükselen profilini ve şu anki önemi çeşitli sosyal ve siyasal örneklerle göstermek olmuştur.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Ateizm, Yeni Ateist Tartışma, Ateist Otobüs Kampanyası.