



**TOMASZ SIECZKOWSKI**  
UNIwersytet Łódzki

## **NEW ATHEISM AND SECULARISM**

### **1 Introduction**

The antagonism between the sacred and the secular is nothing new. For many centuries the competition between the church and the state was driven by the ultimate goal of winning the basic loyalty of the governed i.e. the flock. In the 1960's and 1970's it seemed that the conflict was resolved and secular ways of political practices took over for good. Since its beginning in the aftermath of 1648 Westphalia peace treaty secularism most often has been realized by political means even when passed off as a massive communal movement as it happened in the Leninist and Stalinist Soviet Union. In the Western states in turn secularism was well established governmental policy, with religions privatized and out of scope of both academia and politic transformations. And it would probably stay this way for some time longer if it hadn't been for terrorist attacks in New York (2001), Madrid (2004) and London (2005). Those raised new and public reflections on the nature of institutionalized religions as well as created opportunities for renown authors to wage a war which a couple of years before seemed to had been won and forgotten.

Most often the beginning of the so called new atheism<sup>1</sup> is attributed to the notorious Sam Harris' book *The End of Reason* (2004) written in the aftermath of 11/09 attacks. Soon after a plethora of interesting and massively influential books were published, Richard Dawkins' *God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell. Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), Christopher Hitchens' *god Is*

---

<sup>1</sup> The term new atheism was supposedly coined by Gary Wolf in *Wired* piece „The Church of Non-Believers” (November 2006).

*not Great* (2007) and Victor Stenger's *God. A Failed Hypothesis* (2007). These were by no means the only ones<sup>2</sup>, but definitely they were read most widely, commented on most vociferously, and sold in most impressive numbers. Many major television companies broadcasted debates about the ills of religion in prime time and with public recognition. The most famous – and entailing an actual voting – between late Christopher Hitchens and former Prime Minister of Great Britain Tony Blair was rather unfortunately titled “Is Religion a Force of Good in the World?”<sup>3</sup>. Hitchens’ sense of irony (he compared God to “a kind of divine North Korea”) helped him win the 2700 crowd, which after the debate voted 2 to 1 in favor of Hitchens’ positive answer to the eponymous question<sup>4</sup>. Media presence combined with casual eloquence and accessible writing brought about an enormous and almost unprecedented success. Authors otherwise so diverse<sup>5</sup> unanimously put atheism in the center of public debate once again.

New atheism is not only a tenet in modern liberal humanism, as Terry Eagleton claims (Eagleton, 2009), but rather a wholesale quasi-philosophical worldview, engaging axiological views on science, metaphysics, society and morality. In comparison, secularism is, or, as we will see, should be, a limited socio-political stance concerned chiefly with the realities of public and political spaces. From that follows, that although new atheists share some of the presumptions of secularists they are nevertheless far from being *pure* secularists being rather a lot *more* than that. Whether this added value is something that can be dangerous to secular democracies in the long run is the question I’ll try to answer in this paper. But first I’d like to take a quick look at the phenomenon of new atheists’ popularity and major components of their worldview.

---

<sup>2</sup> Among other influential authors associated with new atheism there are A. C. Grayling, Michel Onfray, Dan Barker and Michael Shermer.

<sup>3</sup> The debate took place in Toronto in November 2010. The full debate can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ddsz9XBhrYA>.

<sup>4</sup> BBC organized and broadcasted similar debate, but restricted to Catholic Church, starring Hitchens and Stephen Fry versus Archbishop John Onaiyekan and MP Ann Widdecombe. The results of the poll after the debate were similar to the Toronto one.

<sup>5</sup> Dawkins is a biologist, Dennett a cognitivist and a philosopher, Hitchens was mainly a journalist and historian, and late Stenger was a physicist. Among lesser new atheists we also find many different – mostly academic – professions.

## 2 New Atheism and Its Popularity

Although New Atheism is not a school of thought and not even a proper social movement<sup>6</sup> and its authors differ in many, sometimes important ways, we can distinguish many ideas they share. Those are the fundamentals of new atheism as an informal group of thinkers and/or ideologues. I'll try to concentrate on those of them, which are most relevant to the paper's main topic, i.e. relation between the New Atheism and secular democracy. Among those serving my purpose and distinguishing the New Atheists from 'regular' atheism one can definitely find<sup>7</sup>:

**Radical enmity towards all religions.** The New Atheists are not particularly anti-Catholic or even anti-Islamic<sup>8</sup>, but rather wholesale anti-religious. Moreover, their zero tolerance policy towards religion includes all of its forms: from radical and fundamental to peaceful and moderate, being what Gutowski called "antidistinctionist" (2012, p. 10). As Sam Harris put it in what was to become the inaugural book of new atheism, 'religious moderates are, in large part, responsible for the religious conflict in our world, because their beliefs provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed' (Harris, 2004, s. 45). The problem with the religious moderates is that they help to provide legitimacy to the extremists. Being harmless themselves they give religion a good name and lend credence to religious myths that are the core of their worldview, making it hard if not impossible to eradicate religious views from people's lives. This is the reason for the new atheists, chiefly Harris and Dawkins, to target all forms of religious belief, as they think – erroneously – that putting the religiously moderate in the shade is the necessary condition for eradicating the religious extremism.

The above point is closely connected with the **conviction about essential harmfulness of religions**. The New Atheists are proponents of a rationalistic, scientific worldview that leaves no space for the irrationality of religions. Rationalism is taught at schools as an effective

---

<sup>6</sup> It is a movement which is publicly very vociferous although informal and at least so far unorganized in any significant way.

<sup>7</sup> For a more comprehensive list see: (Sieczkowski 2012) and (Gutowski 2012)

<sup>8</sup> Though serious accusations of islamophobia were thrown particularly at Dawkins.

practical worldview, and although it doesn't exhaust other possible stances towards the world (for instance ethical or esthetical, both of which new atheists cherish) it clearly contradicts the religious imagery of the impossible and the miraculous. This is the reason why the latter is harmful to students, while, say, literature is not. Science, religions and arts offer different sets of values (which is fine), but among them only science and religion offer the truth as well. And the truths of these two domains cannot be reconciled. That's why Dawkins calls religious schooling 'a scandal' and demands wholly secular education with Bible and other holy books taught as a part of literature class and literature class only (Dawkins, 2006, 340-344). Moreover, religions all over the world are responsible for most of military and violent conflicts. Eradication of (at least institutionalized) religious belief is perceived as a chance for creating a free and peaceful global society.

**Practicism.** New atheism is not a school of thought. It's rather an informal social movement, very active and noticeable in public. Neoatheists eagerly participate in many public events. Public spaces, which the neoatheistic war is waged for, are the very ground on which battles take place. Dawkins along with Elisabeth Cornwell initiated the famous public awareness project called the Out Campaign (inspired by similar actions organized by gay rights movements) and endorsed Atheist Bus Campaign created by Ariane Sherine in 2009 (with buses running around London with the slogan "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life" written on them). Dawkins was also (along with other new atheist, A. C. Grayling) the vice-president of the British Humanist Organization.

**Scientific rationalism and dogmatism.** The New Atheists (many of whom are practicing scientists) are as close to postmodern or constructivist approaches to science as they are to religious extremists. They are endorsing an old-school, strictly rationalistic and empiricist, Enlightenment-derived vision of science and rationality. That in turn implies that they are what we call ontological naturalists: they believe, that there exist natural beings and processes "out there" and their ontological status is unquestionable, as opposed to beings postulated by religions and theologies. Only science can offer satisfactory explanations of the world and ones which override those proposed by other worldviews. They argue that such attitude by no means implies dogmatism, as they are ready to abandon any given set of beliefs in light

of new empirical data. To properly call them dogmatic (which, taking the connotations of the word into account, would be very hurtful), one must distinguish dogmatism as an inflexible set of beliefs about the world based on revealed truths (religions) and methodological dogmatism theories based on empirical data and reasoning (science).

Although as scientists the new atheists are methodologically very strict, as advocates of aggressive secularism they become **methodically very eclectic**. They employ a variety of approaches, styles and arguments (they exploit scientific and popular science books, philosophical enquiries, autobiographies and biographies, historical considerations, open letters, newspaper articles, broadcasted debates, web sites, radio programs, publications, demonstrations and happenings), among others.

This perceived omnipresence is in turn making them **unprecedentedly popular** in modern popular culture. The style of their main works – accessible, anecdotal, ironic, seemingly effortless – makes the new atheists easy to read. Millions of copies of their books have been sold across the world over last decade, and although their personal popularity seems to be diminishing, their impact is now stronger than ever. Using the terrorist attacks from New York, Madrid and London as a starting point of their ongoing debate, Dawkins, Harris and Hitchens managed to put atheism in the center of public discussion once again. As time passes – it's been 10 years from the publication of Harris' *The End of Faith* – the religious issues are becoming more and more present in public sphere and administrative decisions. 15 years ago it seemed that discussions of the place of religions in the public sphere were things of the past. Now it seems that – partly because of the neoatheistic crusade – we have to rethink the very basis and function of modern secular governments.

### 3 Secularism as a Basis of Modern Democracy

There are of course many notions of secularism and secularization which often have slightly but sometimes diametrically different meanings as, for instance, the economic notion of transferring the property of the church to the laymen in post-reformation Europe

(Taylor, 2011, 32)<sup>9</sup>. Secular modernity may also mean the separation of religion from the public life, the decline of religious practices and beliefs, the belief in the universality of scientific explanations, the belief that the values are inherently human, that there are no transcendent meanings or afterlife, and so on (Taylor, 2011a, 49; Calhoun, 2011, 86). As we consider the impact of the new atheism on the public and political spheres, we must take into the account the notion of secularism in the context of the public and political spaces. More specifically, the set of rules which modern democratic governments must adopt. There are many, sometimes conflicting conceptions of a democratic secular state, from John Rawls and Richard Rorty to Jürgen Habermas and Martha Nussbaum. In this paper, however, I intend to draw on Charles Taylor, and I do it for two basic reasons: a. his ongoing emphasis on the freedom of religion instead of just freedom from religion, which adds a completely new dimension compared to the statements of other philosophers (such as Rorty's radical privatization of religion); and b. the enormous recognition and popularity of his work, which in the world of academia can match or even top the mass popularity of the New Atheists in the wider cultural circles.

The notion of secularism<sup>10</sup> and the practice of secularism are dependent on two things: the separation of the public and the private, and the notion and practice of neutrality. Both are problematic. The separation of the public and the private (the secular and the religious) is itself, as Charles Taylor points out (Taylor 2007), a religious distinction. The public, Augustine's *civitas terrana*, is the space of the political, the temporal, the secular. The private, however, mediated – though unnecessary – through churches, is transcendent, eternal, and sacred. This distinction has carried on through ages, and is in itself the basis of modern liberal democracy<sup>11</sup>.

---

<sup>9</sup> For an introductory review of different meanings of secularism and secularization see (Calhoun, etc., 2011, 9-14).

<sup>10</sup> I set aside the interesting distinction made by José Casanova (between the secular, secularization, and secularism) (Casanova 2011) as not fitting my purposes. Instead I agree with Taylor and Maclure, that secularism can be understood in a twofold way: political and social (more of it later).

<sup>11</sup> Although it is not as one-dimensional as one may think. As Maclure and Taylor rightly point out (2011, 36-37) there is a confusion between two meanings of "public",

Not all Western democracies are secular states *de iure*, and even less of them are secular *de facto*. Nevertheless secularism became the main thread of Western political thinking after the French Revolution, and even though it was built on philosophical works of Enlightenment and pre-Enlightenment thinkers such as Hume, Locke, Voltaire or Bayle, it drew on, as Taylor showed, the same distinction made at the beginning of *Christianitas*.

It is necessary, Maclure and Taylor (2011) argue, to get back to Rawls. His idea of “reasonable pluralism”, itself being one of the strongest statements of modern political liberalism, basically rests on the same distinction. The source of this concept is the recognition “of the limits of rationality, its inability to decide the questions of the ultimate meaning of existence and the nature of human fulfillment in a decisive way” (Maclure and Taylor, 2011a, 10). So, according to Rawls (and Taylor), the political is not ubiquitous and must leave a space for other considerations, be them philosophical, ideological or religious. This in turn complicates the role the states and the laws are to play in lives of societies. Taylor and Maclure are of opinion that if we take the Rawlsian idea of reasonable pluralism seriously, we must admit that the fundamental position the states must adopt is one of neutrality<sup>12</sup> towards different conceptions of good (Maclure and Taylor, 2011, 13). This fair treatment of citizens which bears the name of neutrality of the state is the foundation of any secular political system. Secular doesn’t mean aggressively atheistic, but rather ideologically truly neutral, with the limits drawn by the inalienable human dignity. Thence we infer that no state should be ideological in any way, be that pro- or antireligious, as long as the doctrines do not contradict the set of basic and fundamental rights of every citizen, such as human dignity.

If that’s true, why do we have to deal with aggressively secular states being the exact negative of theocratic regimes? The answer brings us back to the very concepts of secularism and secularization (the former being a doctrine, the latter – a process). Taylor and Maclure

---

first designating the state or the government, the second – the public sphere, emergence of which in the 18<sup>th</sup> century was accurately described by Habermas (1989).  
<sup>12</sup> ‘What Jürgen (Habermas) calls “secular” I’ll call “neutral”. That’s how I see it’, said Taylor in his recent discussion with Habermas (Butler etc., 2011, 67).

remind us that we must not confuse political secularization (French *laïcisation*) and social secularization (French *sécularisation*):

‘Although that distinction must be qualified in several ways, we may say that political secularization is the process by which the state affirms its independence from religion, whereas one of the components of social secularization is an erosion of the influence of religion in social practices and in the conduct of individual lives’ (Maclure and Taylor, 2011, 16).

Neutrality of the democratic state means that the political government is not interested in fostering or weakening citizens’ beliefs and conceptions of good. Citizens as moral agents are autonomous and this autonomy grants them rights to choose freely from possible ethical, philosophical or religious notions and ways of life. State’s interference would be then a violation of democratic *sine qua non* and thus should be avoided. ‘The state must seek to become politically secular but without promoting social secularization’ (Maclure and Taylor, 2011, 15-16).

Promoting social secularization by fostering this or other secular conception of good is thus harmful to democracy itself because it violates the fundamental autonomy of the citizens as moral subjects and moral agents. Thus neutrality doesn’t imply aggressive secularization in the public sphere, but rather political secularization stems from the neutrality of the state among other principles:

‘Secularism is a political mode of governance based on two major principles – equality of respect and freedom of conscience – and on two operative modes – separation of church and the state and the neutrality of the state towards religions and toward secular philosophical movements.’ (Maclure and Taylor, 2011, 22-23)

There is no reason to deny that in mature secular democracies the neutrality of the state towards world-views must go hand in hand with the separation of church and the state. But the latter is rather ambiguous and as Charles Taylor rightly points out can be read and construed in two diametrically different manners. Firstly, we can conceive the secular order as a fetishization of an institutional principle. The political principle of separation of church and the state would then be unalienable and prior to any empirical circumstances and

considerations. No matter what are the claims of ethnic or religious minorities concerning their cultural, religious or ideological well-being, the state cannot grant them based on the first rule of separation. In this manner we are freed from our (ethical) obligation to reconsider the consensuses of the comprehensive doctrines. It is an easy solution, but shallow and discriminatory one. On the other hand, we can understand the principles of secularism in different manner. In words of Charles Taylor, “we think that secularism (or *laïcité*) has to do with the relation of the state and religion; whereas in fact it has to do with the (correct) response of the democratic state to diversity” (Taylor, 2011b, 36). This entails the radical redefinition of the direction of workings of secularism: no more are we to draw solutions from the institutional practices of the democratic law, but we should rather start at the level of different communities and then look for the applicable and consensual solutions making specific laws concerning the claims of those communities.

According to Taylor this approach seems to be a necessity in the realities of modern liberal democracies which must deal with the pertinent issues of multiculturalism and globalization. Modern day liberal democracies are no longer the nation-states forged by the unity of the language, culture and religion. The unity of modern political entities lies in the democratic rule of law, but the law itself is susceptible to constant – though mostly minor – changes as an effect of religious, ethnic, ideological and cultural diversity which the modern model of community entails. It implies the need to give the voice back to the component communities, religious or otherwise. Secularism would then mean – I think that this is the consequence of Taylor’s conceptual reconfigurations – the active care of the state for the diverse world-view communities. The frailer the communities, the stronger the care, be the communities in question religious, philosophical or ethical.

For Taylor, then, the very term secularism demands redefinition and further careful conceptual analyses<sup>13</sup>. It cannot be ‘bulwarks against religion’ (Butler, etc., 2011, 56) but a system of governance attempting to secure the three basic goals of democratic states (liberty, equality,

---

<sup>13</sup> It would be interesting to see if Taylor’s rather blurred understanding of secularism(s) can be grasped in one, philosophical and conceptual framework, but that is a question for a different paper.

fraternity – as Taylor’s neat analogy to French Revolutionary trinity suggests (Butler, etc., 2011, 34-35)). Freedom is a freedom of and from religion alike, equality is the respect every citizen deserves in spite of their religious or philosophical alignment, and fraternity is a fostered spirit of cooperation and harmony between the adherents of different worldviews. True democracy is not governed by religious views, but should be (also) a place of religions.

#### **4 So, Is the New Atheism a Force of Good in the World?**

It is clear that reasonable pluralism can be maintained only in the conditions of a secular state as defined above, and at first glance it seems that new atheists endanger the very idea of it. Without mentioning new atheists, Charles Taylor sums up his comprehensive masterpiece *A Secular Age* as follows:

‘So religious faith can be dangerous. Opening to transcendence is fraught with peril. But this is particularly so if we respond to these perils by premature closure, drawing an unambiguous boundary between the pure and the impure through the polarization of conflict, even war. The religious believers are capable of this, history amply attests. But atheists can as well, once they open themselves to strong ideals, such as republic of equals, a world order of perpetual peace, or communism. We find the same self-assurance of purity through aggressive attack on “axes of evil”, among the believers and atheists alike. Idolatry breeds violence.’  
(Taylor, 2007, 769)

Even if their comments lack subtlety the New Atheists are undoubtedly right about many dangers of religion. In countries openly or covertly theocratic the matter of our moral and political obligation seems to be simple, validating the message of the new atheists’ movement. If modern democratic secularism, as proposed by Taylor, is to be treated – as it should be – as one of the greatest achievements of humanity, voices against worldly power of celestial authorities should be amplified and publicized as much as it is possible in the given geopolitical context. The indignation of the religiously righteous should in this case, as Hitchens and Dawkins claim, be dismissed.

There is, however, a different issue with the so-called 'West'. In many Western democracies *de iure* secularism doesn't imply *de facto* actions of governments and institutionalized religions, as is the case in Poland, Malta or the United States. In those cases the voice of the new atheists is important and should be carefully heard to protect societies against the violence and the unpredictability of religious fanaticisms and against the impact that based on the predefined concept of human nature religious ways of life can have on the lives of those who do not share their views. It is especially important in places where nonbelievers are the minority and must conform with practical and political consequences of worldviews completely alien to them<sup>14</sup>.

But then we have a third setting: mature liberal and democratic states securing all necessary rights to minorities and providing for the secular, ideology-free public space. As Taylor rightly pointed out, such democracies are based on a subtle, perishable, fluid consensus, as democracy always is a process rather than fully fledged and stable political system. This consensus, as we've seen, is based on tolerance, equality and freedom of conscience or, in other words, on reasonable pluralism. It lasts as long as various factions are ready to debate and to reach consensus. Demographic instabilities and immigration are raising new and pertinent questions concerning the status of personal freedom, communal beliefs and the systems of value. Those cannot be brought up and discussed in a radical secularist environment suggested by the neoathaeistic writers (social secularization, in Taylor's terms) as more often than not that would rather be a paternalistic far cry from a real dialogue. Whatever one's opinion about the subject, religion still plays a very important part in the lives of many citizens and the fluctuations in demographic and ethnic structures of Western democracies are only going to intensify it. This is the context of today's world. The choice is twofold: either we adopt the paternalistic aggressive stance of the new atheists and make those who find themselves religious do things against their conscience, or we try to reach a consensus, time and time again if needed, because that is the true nature of the secular democracy.

Despite all the advantages of neoatheistic thinking mentioned in the second paragraph, New Atheism promotes a stance endangering the

---

<sup>14</sup> Which happens often if democracy is understood literally – and erroneously – as a rule of majority against minority.

subtle and tender consensus which the secular state is rested on. As I have written above, truly secular democracy or republic can be maintained only if it is irreligious (i.e. indifferent to all religions and their dogmatic claims), not antireligious. Neoatheistic position is agonistic to say the least. It promotes antagonism not only towards religious fundamentalism, but also to what we may call religious moderation. As we have seen, Sam Harris wrote that a moderate religion was as dangerous as a fundamental one. Richard Dawkins has the same view. This stance is easy to understand, even may be true as far as history of religions is concerned, but in light of what Taylor or Habermas see as secularism it has to be dismissed as essentially antidemocratic and politically anti-secular.

The voice of the New Atheists is then the voice of aggressive secularism with the aim of creating the political conditions of possibility for the truly antireligious model of the state. In the light of what has been said on the subject, it is rather a regressive form of secularism. As we have seen, the policies of secularism as proposed by Taylor validate the needs of the diverse communities and request the institutional arrangements to work towards satisfying those needs if only they don't endanger the broader consensus on which the liberal state rests on. Among those needs there are claims for active participation in the social and political life, voiced by various religious groups and individuals. As far as those claims are moderate (concerning for instance the freedom of clothing) it is hard to justify the denying of those requests<sup>15</sup>.

What is even more important, while appealing to partly justified antireligious stereotypes, neoatheistic writers are considerably misinterpreting the modernity. The radical atheism was well-founded when the state realities had been subservient to one national or universal church. Modern multicultural democracies are a mosaic of religious and cultural beliefs. Paradoxically enough, while fighting the religiousness, the New Atheists are the proponents of the return to the monoculture molded in the shape of a theocracy, equipped with the fixed horizon of values. They are ready to pay every price for it – the sacrifice quite easy one to make considering the fact, that the price

---

<sup>15</sup> See for instance the remarks on the wearing of the hijab by Muslim women in France in (Taylor, 2011b, 41-42).

would be paid by the believers forced to dispose of their religious identities.

Another problem with the New Atheism arises from the aggressive language its authors use. I do not doubt the nobleness of their intentions and share their ideal of peaceful community free from the religious violence, but the aggressive atheism itself contributes to the escalation of the symbolic violence and in doing that puts the ideal of consensus behind, forcing the imagery of a struggle if not outright combat. As Lawrence Wilde rightly puts it, “the confrontational tone of aggressive atheism runs the risk of saying to religious minorities that their cherished religious identities are not respected, with potentially serious consequences” (Wilde, 2010, 267). The words of neoatheistic writers, amplified by the commercial success of their books and the plethora of media appearances, are well enough heard not only by the secular public opinion, but by the religious people themselves as well. This promoting of aggressive antireligious stance goes on in the context of degradation of the Western public discourse. Stimulated by the various, more and more popular right-wing political factions it needs calming down and not being escalated by yet another discursive violence. The aggressive language of the New Atheists unites them with the political forces from which they would rather keep the safe distance. Promoting their claims for the secular and irreligious state, the authors associated with the movement should bear that in mind.

This attack on the religious pluralism as the correlate of the mature secularism (in Taylor’s terms) calls into question the stance of the aggressive atheism. Pluralism is the correlate of cultural diversity for which there is no reasonable alternative. Benching of the religious beliefs or even relegating them in their every form from the mosaic of the modern public sphere means forgetting the fact, that, whether we want it or not, the vast majority of cultural beliefs making this mosaic has its own religious roots.

Among the goods the New Atheists are trying to produce are the ideals of public freedom and social cooperation, or at least peaceful coexistence of the citizens with diverse cultural backgrounds. But identifying the religion as “the root of all evil” (the title of Dawkins’ documentary programme for Channel Four) they are revealing the unjustifiable lack of judgment. Hoping for the eradication of all religious beliefs as a means to creating a better society is a belief in itself, and a

simplistic one for that matter. The good of harmonious society cannot be achieved by depriving people of their religious freedom and stimulating conflict in inevitably religiously diverse societies. The positive programme of the New Atheism is then a (potentially) dangerous (see Wilde, 2010, 267) failure on the level of social and political arrangements of modern democracies as well as on the level of individual freedoms of their citizens.

\*\*\*

Having said that, we must note that there seems to be a consensus between the radically secular (New Atheists) and far more sophisticated, postsecular thinkers as to the relegated place of religion in modern democracies. Jürgen Habermas famously stated in the aftermath of 11.09 attacks: 'Religious consciousness must, first, come to terms with cognitive dissonance of encountering other denominations and religions. It must, second, adapt to the authority of the sciences which hold the societal monopoly of secular knowledge. It must, last, agree to the premises of a constitutional state grounded in a profane morality' (Habermas 2003, 104). 'Religiously unmusical' (Max Weber's phrase) Richard Rorty was even more straightforward in his critique of political claims of institutionalized religions. He promoted what he called 'anticlericalism' which is 'is a political view, not an epistemological or metaphysical one. It is the view that ecclesiastical institutions, despite all the good they do—despite all the comfort they provide to those in need or in despair—are dangerous to the health of democratic societies' (Rorty, 2005, 33). He went on to state that religions by discouraging dialogue are viewed by contemporary secularists like himself as 'politically dangerous' because democratic communities are void without a rational conversation (Rorty 2005: 33).

In a quite neoatheistic manner, both more conciliatory Habermas and slightly more radical Rorty, through demanding privatization of all religious beliefs and invalidating all absolutist modes of justification, reach for the impossible. They demand for an average religious person, who holds his/hers beliefs dear, to consider them important and fundamental in their intimate life, but regard them as virtually non-existent when it comes to social and political participation of any kind. Richard Dawkins in his well-known lecture given in Dublin some time ago maintained in a similar albeit slightly more radical vein that religion-infused schooling of children, even if done by their parents,

should be banned altogether, as it was in a way even worse than sexual molestation<sup>16</sup>. Believers then would rightly feel ‘anti-religiously’ oppressed even in the private spaces of their own families, not to mention the public spaces of various kinds.

It is relatively easy to notice that this project is both impossible and dangerous and only enhances the ongoing cultural and ideological crisis. As such discrepancy in beliefs inescapably happens in the context of our social roles (we are someone else in our private and public lives, say, as a husband and a teacher) it is not possible to maintain it on a regular basis if the core values determining our beliefs about the world are concerned. The division between the public and the private, as fine a construct as it is, only appears to be discrepant when viewed from theoretical perspective of social and political sciences. For the religiously musical it is too often perceived as a form of subjugation. Returning to fair and just democratic policy must then be based on the realization of the inevitable overlapping of religious values and public realities and conflict between them. Simple subduing the first to the latter is perhaps laudable as a theoretical stance, but highly unrealistic<sup>17</sup>.

---

<sup>16</sup>He restated this view in famous and frequently criticized chapter of *The God Delusion* (“Childhood, Abuse and Religion”). Dawkins claims that ‘as horrible as sexual abuse was, the damage (inflicted by priests systematically molesting children in Ireland) was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place’ (Dawkins, 2006, 317).

<sup>17</sup>As it happens even in the political sphere itself. Dismissed in the spring of 2013 Polish Minister of Justice, known for his conservative affiliation, commenting on his dismissal said ‘There will never be any master above my conscience’, meaning that there is no political agenda more important than (supposedly) revealed truth of one’s conscience. Incidentally, the same man serves now as the Minister of Science and Higher Education.

## REFERENCES

- Butler, Judith, Jürgen Habermas, Charles Taylor, and Cornel West (2011). *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Calhoun, C., M. Juergensmeyer, J. VanAntwerpen (eds.) (2011). *Rethinking Secularism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Calhoun, Craig (2011). *Secularism, Citizenship, and the Public Sphere*. In: *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Calhoun et al. 2011, 75-91.
- Casanova, José (2011). *The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms*. In: *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Calhoun et al. 2011, 54-74.
- Dawkins, Richard (2006). *The God Delusion*. London: Bantam Press.
- Eagleton, Terry (2009). *Reason, Faith and Revolution. Reflections on the God debate*. New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Gutowski, Piotr (2012). *Czym jest „nowy ateizm”*. In: *Nauki przyrodnicze a nowy ateizm*, (ed.) Marek Słomka. Lublin: Wydawnictwo KUL, 7-45.
- Maclure, Jocelyn, and Charles Taylor (2011). *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (1989). *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press.
- Habermas, Jürgen (2003). *The Future of Human Nature*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Harris, Sam (2004). *The End of Faith. Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W. W. Norton & Co.
- Rorty, Richard, and Gianni Vattimo (2005). *The Future of Religion*. Edited by Santiago Zabala. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Sieczkowski, Tomasz (2012). *Nowy Ateizm i jego wróg*. „Hybris” 19 (2012), [www.magazynhybris.com](http://www.magazynhybris.com), 33-57 (accessed 21 March 2013).
- Taylor, Charles (2007). *A Secular Age*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press.
- Taylor, Charles (2011a). *Western Secularity*. In *Rethinking Secularism*, eds. Calhoun et al. 2011, 31-53.

- Taylor, Charles (2011b). *Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism* In. Judith Butler et al, *The Power of Religion in the Public Sphere*, New York.
- Wilde, Lawrence (2010). *The Antinomies of Aggressive Atheism*. "Contemporary Political Theory" 9, 266-283.

## ABSTRACT

### NEW ATHEISM AND SECULARISM

The paper attempts to analyze the theoretical conditions of the possible conflict between the New Atheism and modern secular liberal democracies. After short presentation of a few main components of neoatheistic thinking I concentrate on the notion of secularism as proposed by Charles Taylor. I conclude that by identifying the religion as "the root of all evil" the New Atheists are revealing the unjustifiable lack of judgment, as their aggressive antireligious stance generates rather crises and conflicts than social harmony.

**KEYWORDS:** New Atheism, Dawkins, Taylor, religion, public sphere, democracy, atheism.

### NOWY ATEIZM A SEKULARYZM

**ABSTRAKT:** Artykuł jest próbą analizy teoretycznych warunków możliwego konfliktu między nowym ateizmem a współczesnymi liberalnymi, świeckimi demokracjami. Po krótkiej prezentacji kilku głównych składników myślenia neoateistycznego koncentruję się na pojęciu sekularyzmu w wersji zaproponowanej przez Charlesa Taylora. Dochodzę do wniosku, że nowi ateści, utożsamiając religię ze „źródłem wszelkiego zła”, wykazują się brakiem rozwagi, ponieważ ich agresywna, antyreligijna postawa generuje raczej kryzysy i konflikty niż społeczną harmonię.

**SŁOWA KLUCZOWE:** nowy ateizm, Dawkins, Taylor, religia, sfera publiczna, demokracja, ateizm.