

# Reassessing the New Atheism

In March, atheists from across the country gathered on the National Mall, claiming their event, the Reason Rally, was the largest secular gathering in world history. Organized by 20 of the leading secular institutions, it was dubbed as the national coming out of the atheist movement in America, yet only 10,000 to 20,000 people (estimates vary) attended the event, less than the weekly turnout at many mega-churches. There appears to be a disconnect between the representation of atheism as a major force in American society and the inability of secularists to marshal large, sympathetic crowds.

The Reason Rally was organized by proponents of the New Atheism, a radical group that dismisses religion in forceful and rash terms, and includes Richard Dawkins and the late Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins' remarks at the rally typify this approach: "Mock them, ridicule them in public. Don't fall for the convention that we're all too polite to talk about religion. Religion makes specific claims about the universe which need to be substantiated and challenged."

The rally, therefore, was geared toward a particular type of atheist, which only constitutes a small percentage of Americans. Only 1.6 percent of the population calls themselves atheists, but a much larger percentage of Americans are religiously unaffiliated (14.5 percent), a group that really does not care about religion. The organizers of the rally desperately wanted this large apathetic, unaffiliated group to join their movement, but as typically happens with people who are indifferent, they were no-shows.

I believe that the role of the leaders of the New Atheism in the modern crisis of faith needs to be revalued, and subsequently reduced. They are the loudest atheists, cause theists the most frustration, and generate the largest response, but their influence is limited. I assume a few of your friends do not go to church on Sunday, but I would speculate that it is because they are watching football or going shopping, not attending a Darwinist meeting. It's hard to get excited about nothing.

One of the best signs of God's existence is that humans are geared toward the divine. Across different societies and civilizations, humans have created religious

institutions to answer the same fundamental questions; the answers, of course, are very diverse. Every individual is drawn to religion by a force deep within their nature, but how does this innate desire for God correspond to the rising number of people who are unconcerned about religion?

Human nature has not changed, rather the way God and religion is viewed has fundamentally shifted. That is to say, secular versions of religion have been created to replace historical religions based on God, and thus, atheism is not rising because of the rejection of religion, but due to the creation of new, secular religions, cultural systems that have the same function as traditional religions but a different end.

These secular religions have elements of worship, intricate rituals and calendars, holy texts, and a complex set of symbols. Two weeks ago, I wrote about politics as a religion, and in the future I will make similar arguments for sports, mass media, consumerism, and environmentalism as new religions. As society secularized the divine, it divinized the secular. It had to be this way, for humanity was made for the divine.

I hate to oversimplify, but I would summarize the rise of secularism as follows. Humans are naturally drawn to religion, but our sensual impulses pull us in an opposite direction. Modern society created “rational and scientific” arguments, such as those in the New Atheism, to numb our consciences and to remove guilt for doing something that we know is wrong. We then use secular religions – sports, politics, materialism – to partially fulfill our desire for the divine, resulting in a population that is not radically atheist, but uninterested toward traditional religions, yet deeply restless and unsatisfied.

Ironically, the New Atheism has a profound religious nature, the Reason Rally resembling a tent revival meeting, followers having complete faith in anything Dawkins writes, and Hitchens becoming the new patron saint of the movement. One of oddest quotes about the Reason Rally reads: “Somewhere out there, Christopher Hitchens is very, very happy,” implying that the deceased atheistic intellectual was enjoying the afterlife, something he wholly argued against during his life. It speaks to the profound pull of an eternal way of thinking, even in those most opposed to it.

As previously mentioned, it is impossible to get excited about nothing. The New

Atheism is not about destroying religion, but creating a new one, focused on worshiping self over God. I would not worry about calls announcing the end of religion, but I would be concerned about facing the challenges posed by new ones.