

## Reason and Racism in the New Atheist Movement - Be Scofield on January 26th, 2012 |

<http://www.tikkun.org/tikkudaily/2012/01/26/reason-and-racism-in-the-new-atheist-movement/>



Perhaps one of the most widespread claims by the New Atheists is that religion is harmful. For Richard Dawkins it is a virus that spreads and infects the mind and is comparable to child abuse. For the late Christopher Hitchens religion “poisons everything” and is a “menace to society.” Greta Christina claims that the belief in supernatural entities makes people “more vulnerable to oppression, fraud and abuse.” Sam Harris likens religion to mental illness. One could go on and on with examples like these.

Given that the New Atheists ground their arguments in science, reason and logic it behooves us to hold these conclusions to very high standards when analyzing them. It goes without saying that truth or knowledge claims should be supported by data, cross-cultural research and empirical evidence whenever possible. This should be measurable and certain principles of reasoning should be employed. Claims of this nature should also be scrutinized amongst a community of experts to try and reach a consensus before drawing conclusions. Unfortunately, the New Atheists fail tremendously in this regard.

The idea that religion is “harmful” or “poisonous” should of course be a *hypothesis first and a conclusion second*. For whatever reason, these twenty-first century super-heroes of science seem to skip over this important step. There are of course anthropologists, sociologists, scholars of religion and mythology, historians, psychologists and philosophers who have been studying religion for very long periods now. They’ve used peer-reviewed journals, scholarly book publishers, case studies and other academic forums to present their ideas and receive critical feedback. Yet, there have been no scientific findings concluding that religion is poisonous, that belief in supernatural entities leads to harm or that it infects people like a virus. These types of claims are limited to a chosen few.

Case and point: How can any of these New Atheists claim that the Dinka religious tradition of Africa is harmful? They’ve probably never heard of it, let alone conducted any sort of anthropological or sociological studies to determine the degree of harmfulness it poses to its members or others. Dawkins claims “I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I

have studied the evidence." I'd love to see the data and research he's gathered to reach such sweeping conclusions about religion. Has he investigated the Japanese religion Tenrikyo? The Korean tradition Wonbulgyo? Have any of these atheists been to Iraq or Iran to interview any Mandeans? Do these atheists 'know' in some scientific way that the traditional mythological beliefs of the Inuit of the polar regions were harmful or led to more harm? Are Native American religious traditions really child abuse?

The website Adherents.com currently lists that there are 4,300 different faith groups worldwide. Wouldn't information need to be gathered from each of them before reaching scientific conclusions about whether or not the entire category of religion is harmful or poisonous? Furthermore, what kinds of research questions would need to be asked? What sort of variables would be involved? Are there measures that could be agreed upon by a community of researchers to analyze what makes a particular religion harmful? Helpful? Would the researchers be all white, middle/upper class men like those that have predominantly defined new atheism? Or would diverse voices from around the globe and located in various social locations be included? Given the widespread findings due to the varieties of religious expressions how would you summarize them into one neat conclusion? The simple answer is that you can't. These atheists' knee jerk conclusions are laughable and an insult to all of the legitimate efforts that qualified researchers and scholars have undertaken. In short, there is nothing scientific about them.

Greta Christina claims that with the belief in supernatural entities "the capacity for religion to do harm gets cranked up to an alarmingly high level - because there is no reality check." This is a hypothesis that needs to be tested with some sort of measurable evidence and scholarly insight. Has Christina looked at how religion is expressed in cultures throughout the world, both indigenous and not and found data that supports her assertion? Is she in relation to anthropologists and scholars who have reached similar conclusions? Or is she simply an armchair atheist relying on anecdotal examples rather than evidence? What is the relationship between belief in supernatural entities and violence? It's an incredibly complex question that Christina attempts to answer in a single blog post. None of her claims are backed up science or evidence for that matter.

Christina also states, "If people believe they'll be rewarded with infinite bliss in the afterlife...people will let themselves be martyrs to their faith, to an appalling degree." First of all, one could easily point out that there were many "martyrs" for Stalinism. Second, Christina's claim is another hypothesis. But this one seems disproved on even the most cursory examining of the facts. What percentage of the billions of people on this earth who believe in an after life become "martyrs for their faith?" How many Inuit martyrs were there? The population of people who kill themselves in the name of God is very small when compared to those who don't. Plus if you look at actual scientific research done on the subject such as *Dying to Win: The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism* by University of Chicago professor Robert Pape you'd learn "The data show that there is little connection between suicide terrorism and Islamic fundamentalism, or any one of the world's religions. ... Rather, what nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have in common is a specific secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland." Furthermore, "The world's leading practitioners of suicide terrorism are the Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka-a secular, Marxist-Leninist group drawn from Hindu families."

## Racism In the New Atheist Movement

When Greta Christina says that religious people should be actively converted to atheism or Dawkins likens religion to a virus that infects the mind they are effectively saying “we know what’s best for you.” This is the crux of the problem with the New Atheists. *They’ve identified belief in God or religion as the single most oppressive factor in people’s lives and feel justified in liberating people from it because they have “reason” on their side.* However, as Reinhold Niebuhr warned, reason is always tainted with the prejudices of the privileged groups in society. He called this the historicity of reason. Thus, the way the New Atheists understand the designation “harmful” or “poisonous” is largely shaped by what they view as most harmful *from their own social location.*

In her book [Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars](#) author and atheist Sikivu Hutchinson describes the heart of the problem with the New Atheists:

New Atheist discourse purports to be “beyond” all that meddling stuff. After all, science has been cleaned up to redress the atrocities of the past. The “bad” racist eugenicist science and scientists of back in the day have been purged. Religionists of all stripes are merely obstacles to achieving greater enlightenment in the generic name of science and reason. Race and gender hierarchies within the scientific establishment are immaterial when it comes to determining the overall thrust and urgency of the New Atheism. Non-believers who argue for a more nuanced approach to or progressive understanding of the political, social, and cultural appeal of religion are toady apologists. Religious bigotry and discrimination are deemed the greatest threat to “civilized” Western societies. As delineated by many white non-believers the New Atheism preserves and reproduces the status quo of white supremacy in its arrogant insularity. In this universe, oppressed minorities are more imperiled by their own investment in organized religion than white supremacy. Liberation is not a matter of fighting against white racism, sexism and classism but of throwing off the shackles of superstition.

If you are in a privileged position, as many of the white New Atheists are you may think that it’s easy to just give up your religion. But this of course ignores the complexities of how religion operates in the lives of people everyday. For African Americans, Christianity and Islam have played a central role in the process of humanization – both in the eyes of the dominant culture and in building up the community, personal identity and psychological resilience to resist white supremacy, slavery and segregation. “Reason” as articulated by the new atheists makes no room for marginalized populations need to resist these forms of oppression, nor recognizes the important role that religion has played in this process. Rather, the simplistic labels of harmful, poisonous or virus are carelessly used to discredit it.

The queer identified Metropolitan Community Church (MCCSF) in San Francisco played a central role during the AIDS crisis of the 1980’s. Their website describes it as such:

It is impossible to overstate the impact of HIV/AIDS on the life of MCCSF during those years when there were no effective treatments for HIV. During the peak of the crisis, it was not uncommon for there to be three or four funerals on each day of the weekend, and growth in church membership could barely keep pace with the rate of deaths. And yet, even in the midst of this virtually unbearable period, the church persevered, with fellow members supporting one

another during the most painful times, and the church served on the vanguard of advocacy efforts for people living with HIV/AIDS.

I don't think that belief in God or religion was the thing these people needed to be liberated from.

As citizens of the U.S. we of course live on occupied land. Over the course of hundreds of years we systematically wiped out Native American cultures that were indigenous to the area. The arrogance of "we know what's best for them" dominated. Their religious and cultural traditions were prohibited. It was the height of cultural imperialism. Of course Native Americans are extremely marginalized and face numerous pressing social issues today. Rest assured, their oppression has nothing to do with their beliefs in God or their traditional religious practices and ceremonies. Unfortunately, when Greta Christina says we'd be better off without religion and insists that we convert believers to atheism she is reproducing cultural imperialism against Native Americans. *She knows best because she has reason on her side.*

Furthermore, home foreclosures, poverty, homelessness, oppression, inadequate mental health and social services, poor health care and violence plague America. Whether we like it or not, religious organizations are often the first to provide the much needed spiritual, material and social services to this sick society. As much as the new atheists would like to pontificate about religion in a context free environment, there is no such thing. As long as these social ills go unaddressed religious organizations will continue to play central roles in combating them. The broad and sweeping attacks against "religion" by the New Atheists do little to advance any sort of helpful conversation about what communities or people really need. They also don't adequately interpret the positive role that religion plays in these issues.

If many of the New Atheists want to hold to an absolutist position that religion is harmful (despite not being based on any scientific evidence) then they inherently sweep into their critique Native Americans, the gay men who benefited so immensely from MCCSF during the Aids crisis and the Dinka tradition of Africa. Any benefit that the Nation of Islam or the Black Church had for African Americans is negated by the insistence upon religion or belief in God as the single most oppressive issue. If they make qualifications and recognize that yes, there is something wrong with waving a finger at Native Americans and scolding them for their childish ways, then they must abandon generalized sweeping notions like "religion is harmful." They can't have it both ways. Either they lecture every culture in the world about their religious traditions (after all you've discovered the TRUTH) and as a result reproduce cultural imperialism or make room for a more complex analysis.

Many of these New Atheists claim that holding onto the belief in supernatural entities is absurd or irrational. However, there is nothing more absurd than whiteness, class oppression and patriarchy. Resisting these absurdities means a more nuanced approach to religion - one that recognizes the positive role it can play in undermining such systems of domination. *Ultimately, it means relying upon relationships more than reason.*

UPDATE:

I wanted to comment on an important point. As someone who has experienced white, male, heterosexual and class privilege I'm most likely far more privileged than Greta Christina. This privilege is assigned to me by the dominant society whether I like it or not. As a white American I'm no less capable of reproducing racism or cultural Imperialism than Christina is. My article is not meant as an attack or a "gotcha." I don't address these sorts of issues like that – rather I try to uncover ways that we all might be reproducing forms of oppression. Despite my best intentions I unwillingly think and say things that are racist, sexist and that may reproduce cultural Imperialism. Thus, by me highlighting how some of the effects of the New Atheists or Christina's ideas/actions may reproduce this, I'm not saying that I'm better, more holy, or less racist. I'm fully implicated in this process as well. People like Tim Wise have written entire books about their white privilege, I could do that as well. But here I'm talking about a few specific areas related to religion, atheism and oppression.

I chose to highlight a few of Christina's statements because she has publicly advocated converting believers into atheists as well as written passionate and sweeping claims about why she believes religion is harmful and wrong (the subject of my article). When I hear someone advocating the conversion of believers into atheism without any sort of qualifications or context it concerns me. Because I do think of African Americans in the 50's and 60's in the Nation of Islam and the Black Church. I do think of Native Americans. I think of queer people who find strength and solace in religious communities. I'm concerned that this statement can be viewed as a sort of panacea and is made without any real relationships to the people or communities that could be affected by it. I'm concerned that people will see this and believe that throwing off superstition is the most pressing issue, when I think it is a non-issue when compared with whiteness or class oppression. Again, I simply don't see why believing in the afterlife is such an urgent issue to liberate people from. Yes, many religious expressions have reproduced sexism, racism and bigotry. But this is not because they believe in God or heaven (one can believe in those without having to be bigoted). It's because the religions reflect the larger institutional forces of oppression. Dr. King and Malcolm X believed in God but also fought staunchly against white supremacy. Again, I simply don't see how liberating Dr. King from his theism takes precedent over ending whiteness or is even an issue.

I do know that Christina has written lists of atheists of color and is perhaps one of the more concerned people when it comes to these issues. But she still makes sweeping denunciations of religion and publicly advocates converting believers from their beliefs. What is the context here? What sort of relationships are formed before doing this?

I simply wish that a fraction of the energy that goes into attacking people's personal beliefs about heaven were to go into educating or writing about the larger social forces of oppression that also shape a believers life. Imagine if much of the passion and fire that characterizes much of the New Atheist community could be directed towards the racial, class and patriarchal oppression that believers experience rather than their beliefs about God or heaven. Of course, as atheists are marginalized in a Christian and hegemonic culture there is a need to resist this persecution. As I've [said before](#) I think those who are affiliated with religion have a direct responsibility to aid in ending this misguided attack upon atheism.

UPDATE II:

In 2009 an article appeared on Alternet.org under Greta Christina's name titled "[Why I want to Turn Religious People in to Atheists.](#)" In this update I had previously said that this title was evidence that she publicly advocated turning religious people into atheists. She wrote to me saying that this was not her title as Alternet often chooses titles on their own. I will take her on her word here. The title was eventually changed to "Atheism and Diversity: Is it Wrong for Atheists to Convert Believers?" But it doesn't really matter because she states early in the article, "But a good number of atheists are, in fact, trying to convince religious believers to become atheists. I'm one of them." She didn't coin the title but it most certainly accurately reflects her written sentiments: converting religious believers to atheism.

*Be Scofield is founder of [www.godblessthewholeworld.org](http://www.godblessthewholeworld.org) and Dr. King scholar. He writes for Tikkun Magazine and Alternet.org and is an anti-racist educator. He is a leading voice on issues of progressive religion and atheism. He is studying to be an interfaith minister at the Graduate Theological Union in Berkeley, where he recently taught a graduate course called "Dr. King and Empire: How MLK Jr. Resisted War, Capitalism and Christian Fundamentalism."*

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## **A Response to Frederick Sparks over "Reason and Racism in New Atheism" - Be Scofield on February 1st, 2012**

<http://www.tikkun.org/tikkundaily/2012/02/01/a-response-to-frederick-sparks-over-reason-and-racism-in-new-atheism/>

Frederick Sparks over at Black Skeptics penned a response to my article "Reason and Racism in the New Atheist Movement." Here are a few of my comments on his analysis. His words are in bold.

**Yet if he bothered to read the rest of the book besides the passages criticizing new atheism, he'd see that Hutchinson hardly argues for walling off god belief and African-American religious institutions from criticism.**

I've never stated or even suggested that African American religion or religion at large should be walled off or shielded from criticism. What I *am* saying is that religion is incredibly complex and shouldn't be reduced and dismissed with statements like it "poisons everything" or that it is "child abuse." In order to resist this totalistic stance I highlighted some ways in which religion has played a positive role in the African American experience. Religion has been used for vast amounts of things - both transformative and destructive and thus we should avoid simplistic dismissals of it (or naive totalistic embraces of it). That's it. Following Spark's logic, because I've written about the positive role that the Catholic Church and Catholic social teaching has played in Dorothy Day's life I must believe the Catholic church should be walled off and shielded from being criticized about the child sex abuse scandal. I simply don't understand this kind of logic.

If religion poisons everything then examples like these must be negated: slaves meeting in secret behind bushes and in caves to hold religious worship which were sometimes done in whisper, the slave identification with the Biblical theme of exodus as early as the 19th century, the importance of spirituals and ring shouts in resisting defeat, Nat turner's religion, the

significance of the religious community of Denmark Vesey in Charleston, SC, the way that itinerant ministry allowed for African American women preachers like Isabella Bomefree aka Sojourner Truth to carve out a space in society (God and Religion were central to her resistance and to the Van Wageners – the Dutch Reformed couple who helped secure her freedom), the diversity of African American religious expressions in Islam, Moors Science Temple, Judaism, Catholics and spiritualists, the role Howard Thurman played in influencing a generation of leaders, the impact of Pauli Murray, Womanist theology...etc. I could go on and on.

There are contradictions within these movements as well. George Wilson, the person who turned in Denmark Vesey and spoiled what could have been the largest rebellion in the U.S. was also a slave but believed, like his master, that God was nonviolent and wouldn't support it. There was of course sexism, classism and other forms of oppression found within these African American religious experiences as there are within all institutions. The maroons of Jamaica who had escaped the plantations to form their own communities owned slaves themselves as did many of the maroon societies. One of the most famous leaders, Queen Nanny also relied upon spirit visions and religious practices to resist colonialism. Do we discount the heroic efforts of the maroon legacy because they held slaves or used some religious practices? No, of course not. The point is that social and religious reality is extremely complex and filled with contradictions. We should be very careful not to dismiss an entire category like "religion" merely because there are negative things associated with it. Obviously Christianity was used both to support slavery and to resist it.

And yes, I have read Sikivu Hutchinson's entire book and I always highly recommend it whenever I can.

**In referring to Dr King and the civil rights movement, Scofield also falls into the trap of "the Civil Rights Movement, Brought To You By Black Church" ...a bit of historical revisionism that ignores, as professor Anthony Pinn points out, the secular philosophical influences, and that King himself complained that most the black churches were not involved and were not supportive.**

Here Sparks is claiming that if you merely refer to the positive influences that religion played in the life of King and the Civil Rights movement you are making the historical claim that the Civil Rights Movement was entirely a Black Church phenomenon and it deserves all the credit. These are two entirely separate issues: I'm merely mentioning that yes, the Church played a significant role in the Civil Rights movement. This is not a statement about what I believe to be the origins, causes and reasons for the birth of the modern Civil Rights movement. This is of course a complex subject which can be debated. Me pointing this positive expression of religion out doesn't mean that I have a monolithic view of the Black Church or that it was always supportive of King's work, or that there weren't important secular leaders in the movement. It simply means what I said it does: *African American religion (of all forms) played a significant role in resisting slavery, segregation and Jim Crow.* Myopic and simplistic dismissals of religion as "poisonous," "harmful" or a "virus" discount these realities.

King himself was a huge critic of the Church:

Since this is the case, we must admit that the church is far from Christ. What has happened is this: the church, while flowing through the stream of history has picked up the evils of little tributaries, and these tributaries have been so powerful that they have been able to overwhelm the mainstream. This is the tragedy of the church, for it has confused the vices of the church with the virtues of Christ. The church has been nothing but the slave of society; whenever the mores call for evil practices, society runs to the church to get its sanction.

I'm o.k. with the challenges, contradictions and questions that King's position as an ordained Baptist minister raises. He was obviously able to avoid totalizing statements like "religion is poisonous" despite understanding the degree to which it has been used to support the evils of society.

Furthermore, one of King's biggest opponents during the Chicago campaign was the Black Church. One example is Rev. Joseph Jackson who was a fervent public critic of King.

As a bit of an interesting side note, last semester I taught a graduate course called "Dr. King and Empire: How MLK Jr. Resisted War, Capitalism and Christian Fundamentalism." The first part of the course I explored King's religious, educational and philosophical influences. Readers might like this article I wrote, "[King's God: The Unknown Faith of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.](#)" In it I show how King actually rejected the literal interpretations of the divinity, virgin birth and resurrection of Jesus, thought the Bible was a myth and didn't believe in a literal heaven/hell...etc. King and Coretta went to Unitarian churches (before Unitarianism and Universalism merged in 1961) in Boston and King had aspired to the Unitarian tradition before he realized that he couldn't play as significant of a role in African American life and movements in a Northern liberal denomination. The point is that King was trained in historical and Biblical criticism and he himself was critical of traditional theology in addition to the Church. I think it's wise to allow these sorts of contradictions to exist without simplistically reducing them into a neat narrative. (I've also recently published a lengthy article called "[Dr. King on Black Power, White Supremacy and a Revolutionized State.](#)" I point out how King became more radical in his views on white people.)

One can also look at the tensions between the work of Charles H. Long and James Cone. Long, who was influential in supporting Cone to publish *A Black Theology of Liberation* in 1970 disagreed with the entire premise of the book but felt it was important to release. Cone is one of the most influential Black theologians and Long (*Significations: Signs, Symbols and Images in the Interpretation of Religion*) is widely respected as one of the most significant figures in African American religious studies. For Long, Jesus is not black as Cone insists – but rather theology in and of itself is a product of Constantine's Empire. But Long recognizes the significance of having a book that flips white Christianity on it's head and subverts the paradigm. See this video of [James Cone speaking about white supremacy and white Christianity](#).

*If you simply dismiss religion as "poisonous" or "harmful" then there is no real place for an analysis of the important work Cone has done within Christianity. I don't see the predominant thrust of New Atheism drawing significant or meaningful differences between James Cone and Jerry Falwell. Rather, they all get dismissed under "religion is poisonous" or "harmful."*

When he speaks approvingly of the work of the Metro Community Church with respect to AIDS, he misses the other side of the coin, in which the [black church virtually ignored the AIDS crisis unfolding in its own choir pews](#). African Americans are most likely to believe in literal interpretations of the Bible; this phenomenon buttresses homophobic and sexist dynamics within the black religious community. The beliefs are therefore not separate from the social justice issues, they are part and parcel, and challenging them is most definitely relevant.

Sparks sets an unrealistic standard: every time someone “speaks approvingly” of someone or something and fails to mention all the numerous things that the person doesn’t agree with they are guilty.

Yes, Christianity in it’s variety of expressions has been used to perpetuate injustice, colonialism, homophobia, sexism...etc. I’ve never denied this or said that religion or any institutions should be walled off from these critiques. Again, I’m pushing back against the claims that religion is *only these awful things* as many of the New Atheists reduce them to with totalistic statements. For some reason Sparks continually falsely equates mentioning how religion has played a positive role in society *with believing that religion should be immune from criticism*. I’m arguing precisely the opposite: that religion has had both positive and negative effects in cultures and societies around the world. No one is saying that “Religion is Perfect” but much of the predominant thrust of the New Atheism is saying that “Religion is poisonous.”

And finally, as I’ve said before literal belief in a supernatural God is no indicator of one’s inclination of being sexist or racist. There are vast amounts of people on this planet who believe in numerous forms of God and embrace various forms of theology. You can always find people that share similar understandings of the divine but have radically different social, political and cultural beliefs. Throughout the world belief in God, even in the Christian God does not guarantee any particular social belief. Again, religion is used to both resist and reinforce the worst injustices in society. People can share the same theology but differ radically in political orientation globally. Attacking the idea of heaven or God does nothing to change one’s political persuasion.

I’m of course all for humanistic and non-religious efforts in the black community at resisting social evils and challenging the ways in which the Church reproduces them. I’m merely saying that any effort whether done by black people or white people should avoid simplistic dismissals of the positive roles that those religious traditions are playing. Until there is a massive change away from religion being a primary method that people find support, meaning and social capital then we should be careful not to dismiss religion en mass.

**UPDATE:** In a short [piece](#) Greta Christina says “I especially liked how Sparks eviscerated Scofield’s out-of-context quoting of Sikivu Hutchinson’s Moral Combat, revealing that Scofield either didn’t read the rest of the book or didn’t digest its conclusions — since its conclusions are exactly the opposite of the one Scofield comes to.” Again, here’s what Hutchinson says in her book, “**As delineated by many white non-believers the New Atheism preserves and reproduces the status quo of white supremacy in its arrogant insularity.**” This was the conclusion and thesis of my article. I didn’t take her out of context one bit. If Christina thinks

that my arguments are the “exact opposite” of the rest of Hutchinson’s book then she must believe that Hutchinson discounts her own statements in the rest of her own book as well.