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## New Atheism and the Ethics of New Millennium

Noor Ahmad Pitafi\*  
Nur Suriya Mohd Nor\*\*

### Abstract

This article reviews the phenomenon of New Atheism and its connection to the sociocultural changes of the twenty first century as well as influences brought by the advent of the information age, especially on the millennial generations. The study argues that the New Atheism was a movement that became part of a world-wide social engineering project referred to by some as the second renaissance. The modern renaissance has identifiable markers similar to the European colonization missions around the world in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Although, at the heart of this project is an explicit rejection of a supernatural entity, embedded within it is a tacit rejection of belief in all things in favor of a more empirical approach seated in evidence-based outcomes especially in the area of ethics. The paper argues that the culmination of this project, that is, negation of belief in God or a God-like entity proposed by New Atheism is no longer limited to atheism but has now become a general disposition of indifference to the metaphysical realm. The research further argues that a proposition to eliminate belief from the human ethos entails eliminating the faculty of belief itself which is much more destructive to social and ethical foundations of humanity and its area of influence is far greater than just religion. This study is a library-based research and it employs qualitative analysis. Methodology used is based on descriptive, comparative, evaluative and critical analysis from Islamic and Western perspectives.

**Keywords:** New Atheism, Renaissance, Colonialism, Ethics, Millennium

### Introduction

New Atheism rose to celebrity at the turn of the twenty first century as a socio-literary movement. But it was its political stance against religion that made it a phenomenon in the academic and philosophical circles especially among the millennial generation. Commentators agree in no uncertain terms that New Atheism's remit consisted of capitalizing on the

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anti-Islam sentiment in the post nine eleven worlds.<sup>1</sup> However, looking back at the sum of events that have transpired since, it seems to be a fragment of a much larger transformative agenda. Meanwhile the New Atheism as a movement has somewhat dwindled since its heady days,<sup>2</sup> this constitutive assumption can be indispensable to understanding what would otherwise be seen as a set of unintelligible outcomes. For example, commentators contend that New Atheism argued for a Godless society both in ideology and sacrament but never offered its customers anything tangible to replace God with. Secondly, that New Atheism rooted its set of premises on the scientific expedience and excellence of reason, but in turn became the very force of fundamentalist dogma that it aspired to counter. Finally, that New Atheism fashioned a politico-ethical model of the society that was far too idealistic and probably far too simplistic for the real world.<sup>3</sup> In the greater scheme of things, these criticisms sound more like apologies rather than explanations for New Atheism's tactical failure in the wake of reasons that prevailed over it.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, even though it may seem like a strategy that lost momentum in little over a decade, New Atheism did succeed in its remit only if it is understood through a larger paradigmatic equation that encapsulates it.

Moreover, this new paradigm should be understood by the layers of encapsulation that it contains from a sociocultural perspective. Hence, rather than addressing New Atheism's apparently haphazard thesis, as indicated through the three criticisms above, should be accredited as its operational model because it was never meant to have cohesive and consistent positions. The criticisms offered above can only be acknowledged when they are assumed limited to much smaller remit of implanting the seed of suspicion in the believing mind rather than demolishing theological structures. In fact, not only did New Atheism not attempt to challenge the theological underpinning of religion, it never had the capacity to offer an alternative model, let alone an ethical or sociological one. If anything, New Atheism's activism helped

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Four Horsemen Review - Whatever Happened to "New Atheism"?', *The Guardian*, 31 January 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2019/jan/31/four-horsemen-review-what-happened-to-new-atheism-dawkins-hitchens>.

<sup>2</sup> Ed West, 'What Really Happened to the New Atheists', Blog, *The Post* (blog), 4 November 2019, <https://unherd.com/thepost/what-really-happened-to-the-new-atheists/>.

<sup>3</sup> Whitley Kaufman, 'New Atheism and Its Critics', *Philosophy Compass* 14, no. 1 (1 January 2019): e12560.

<sup>4</sup> Andrew Johnson, 'An Apology for the "New Atheism"', *International Journal for Philosophy of Religion* 73, no. 1 (February 2013): 5–28, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11153-012-9350-9>.

permeate generic belief-lessness among the masses in a way that even surpassed its own projections. In other words, New Atheist propensity to attack belief in God has produced a rather surprising and unexpected outcome. Recently, modern generations are rather atheist or not they tend to reject belief in God or a supernatural entity for and for that matter, they reject the belief in belief. It entails that faculty of belief itself has been ontologically fractured in an entire generation. It is argued that New Atheism is not alone in this project as it has been able to benefit from elements that transpired in tandem. If New Atheism is the payload of post-digital anti-theist stance, then the internet and the social media are its delivery vehicle. It remains to be seen exactly how this relationship dovetails with the modern colonial ambition with a caveat that this relationship cannot be understood based on the conventional definition of colonialism.

### **Colonialism in the Age of Enlightenment**

In order to understand the claim of New Atheism, it is necessary to look at its context, of which the European Renaissance plays an important role, specifically the Enlightenment. The Enlightenment is generally understood as an intellectual and philosophical movement that materialized in the wake of the Protestant Reformation.<sup>1</sup> The Enlightenment can be further understood as a transitional phase that propelled the European continent into the era of scientific literacy, industrialization, and modernity. There is consensus that Enlightenment posed a challenge to religious orthodoxy and it paved the way for increased latitude toward scientific method, moral liberty, and significance of reason. Consequently, it triggered an ideological movement followed by a series of socio-political revolutions in Europe which not only transformed the society of the time, but its repercussions are felt even today as the information and the technology-driven world continues to evolve in the present age. Concurrent to what transpired on the European plains during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, while its nations contested the Catholic order, their missionaries were engaged in numerous evangelical incentives around the world operating in tandem with their colonial projects. The late eighteenth century eventually saw the beginning of several emancipation movements emerging from the European colonies seeking independence from their occupiers.

These movements lasted well into the mid-twentieth century until the

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<sup>1</sup> The Editors of Encyclopaedia Britannica, 'Ninety-Five Theses; Work by Luther', in *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 17 January 2022, <https://www.britannica.com/event/Ninety-five-Theses>.

Second World War. Given that the colonization project was made up of ideologies and stances from common European ancestry, certain themes can be found across the multitude of their excursions. What is even more remarkable is that in the post Enlightenment period leading up to the twentieth century, the size and scope of the evangelical enterprise amplified many-fold while the size and scope of the church were rapidly vanishing within the European milieu succumbing to the triumph of rational and inquiry. Thus, while the Europeans shunned religion in favor of rational thought, their cohorts continued to package and preach it to their colonial subjects as the ultimate formula for progress. Even more intriguing, the sales pitch on both sides shared a common kinship in idiomatic terms, such as the use of terms like rationality, progress, liberty, and happiness. Brian Stanley et al have rejected the notion of “isolated dissenting voices” behind the missionary projects of colonialists in his work titled *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment*. Stanley stresses that the ideas that shaped the missionary strategy were entirely originated from the “intellectual contours” of Enlightenment. Moreover, colonial missionaries considered the need for education on rationality and reason a necessary precursor for conversion to Christianity.<sup>1</sup>

Looking inwards the Enlightenment experience may have felt very different for the European Christians from the one endured by the populace who encountered European merchant navies on their shores. The tactical dichotomy of this phenomenon is less important rather it underlines the point that in the long run, the strategy of selling Western religion to relatively less-developed nations worked out well. Proselytizing Christianity to a rather wide spectrum of exotic peoples, while maintaining a level of coherent messaging, accomplished the intended goal. The result was the proliferation of socially cohesive subcultures, catholic or protestant, within the colonial territories in what constitutes a significant population of Christians outside the Occident. One study claims that by 1980, the majority of the Christian population lived outside Europe and North America.<sup>2</sup> Exactly how two supposedly competing theories of life, that is, rationalism and religion were engineered to formulate a singular message and passed on to recipient societies around the world, carries an important lesson in understanding yet another export emerging from the West, i.e., the New Atheism.

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<sup>1</sup> Brian Stanley, *Christian Missions and the Enlightenment* (New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 128.

<sup>2</sup> Gina A. Zurlo, Todd M. Johnson, and Peter F. Crossing, ‘World Christianity and Mission 2020: Ongoing Shift to the Global South’, *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 44, no. 1 (January 2020): 8–19.



The European Renaissance has been an ongoing journey in the trans-Atlantic setting with nuances developing over time. However, when chronicled under the lens of continental philosophy, certain aspects of this journey become committed to historical blind spots. For instance, the cross-Atlantic partnership stays its focus on synthesizing its rationale from the ancient Greek proverb and its various connotations while steering clear of issues in race, religion,<sup>1</sup> and the style of expression. To elaborate, key authorship of continental philosophy emerges from an overwhelming majority of white male philosophers of western European descent with their roots in Judeo-Christian tradition and Roman-Germanic families of languages. However, when the canvas of inquiry is stretched out to its geopolitical edges, integrating the geography and the literature as it was carved out by the European explorers, it becomes evident that the narrative of the colonial era contains notable similarities to the one offered by New Atheism in the present day.

New Atheism's sociocultural position seems quite convincingly a continuation of colonial message born out of the age of Enlightenment. New Atheist opinion laminated in sophisticated abhorrence towards the Orient surfaces, from time to time, to underline its chronic backwardness and nostalgia of a once golden age, while appearing a little tenacious and impatient to civilize it for its good. Richard Dawkins's tweet that "*All the world's Muslims have fewer Nobel Prizes than Trinity College, Cambridge. They did great things in the Middle Ages, though*" jolted up a social media storm.<sup>2</sup> Neil DeGrasse Tyson, director of the New York Hayden Planetarium and an extremely popular astrophysicist, has been observed, on occasion, offering rather dignified indignation to Muslims linking their lack of scientific achievement to religious conviction. He has gone as far as connecting the lack of creativity among Muslims to Imam Ghazali's strict admonition to the dialecticians of his day.<sup>3</sup>

In general terms, the history of colonial missionaries and now the contemporary messaging of New Atheism provide a primary justification for its connection to Enlightenment. This connection can be understood and argued on at least three different levels, i.e., race, religion, and rhetoric. When juxtaposed, the three levels appear to form a conceptual frame that is

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<sup>1</sup> Christianity often gets a mention so that its ideological and ethical stances are always underlined with prevalence as well as reverence towards in close vicinity to the criticism that it garners.

<sup>2</sup> Nesrine Malik, 'Richard Dawkins' Tweets on Islam Are as Rational as the Rants of an Extremist Muslim Cleric.', *The Guardian*, 8 August 2013, sec. Opinion.

<sup>3</sup> Muhammad Usman, 'Al-Ghazali: A Corridor of Hope for Living Theological Paradigm', *Iqbal Review* 60, no. 2 (2019): 33.

remarkably like the European colonial ambition. For instance, New Atheism places its primary focus on Islam which is the religion of predominantly non-white ethnicities around the world. Moreover, these ethnicities, with a few exceptions, happen to have had been occupied by European colonialists, some even up to half a century ago. Even when this is set aside as a coincidental outcome of colonization of the Orient, given that colonization affected Muslims and non-Muslims alike, there remains the question of religion still unanswered. It should be stressed here that the European religion in its Romanised form is a tacit connector of perspectives within the industrialization of Europe, i.e., when religion is viewed through the so-called *civilization* of colonial subjects or *Christianisation* of African slaves following the trans-Atlantic slave trade. Enlightenment or colonialism, it is evident from the historical account that Europeans considered their religion as part and parcel of both ventures rather than something counter to them.<sup>1</sup> Finally, the delivery vehicle of European languages and their rhetorical payload, sprinkled with proportioned embroidery of Biblical motifs sown therein is crucial in appreciating the cultural infrastructure of European occupiers in their claimed territories. Kwesi Kwaa Prah, in his article *The Burden of English in Africa: From Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism*, writes:

In Eric Ashby's well-known text *African Universities and Western Tradition*, he observes that; "one of the symptoms of British cultural nationalism has been an invincible confidence in the efficacy of British education, not only for home consumption but for export; not only for Englishmen but for Indians, Africans, Malayans and – for that matter – Americans. It was Macaulay who wanted to create in India, a class of persons Indian in blood and color, but English in tastes, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." For a time, the Indian intellectuals were his strongest ally in this endeavor. English was deemed more significant than Sanskrit; Shakespeare more relevant than the Mahabharata or the teaching of Buddha.<sup>2</sup>

Thus, the colonialization of Africa, the Middle East, South-East Asia as well as Americas hinged on the prominence of language in those colonies as a lifeline, one that not only facilitated a platform of subjugation

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<sup>1</sup> J. D. Fage, *A History of Africa*, 1st American ed, The History of Human Society (New York: Knopf: Random House, 1978), p. 326.

<sup>2</sup> Kwesi Kwaa Prah, 'The Burden of English in Africa: From Colonialism to Neo-Colonialism', *TESL-EJ (Teaching English as a Second or Foreign Language–Electronic Journal)* 6, no. 1 (2002).

but also symbolized both prestige and privilege. The element of English deserves special attention here as, in the post-renaissance world, the wave of cultural expression emerging from English not only as a language but as a doctrinal scaffolding is an essential tool for exporting *avant-garde* concepts for which no alternative expression is available on the receiving side. In the present day, one such example is the *new woke* lingo.<sup>1</sup>

The terminology adopted by the various narratives in staging and onboarding the pre-eminence of so-called rational view over a religious one guarantees direct access to the undiscerning young intellect who are hungry for a cliché rich campaign embellished with urban colloquialism cutting through their locally imposed societal levies against foreign influence, such as the syndication of three finger salute in Myanmar protests.<sup>2</sup> Popular culture provides ample contribution to creating a direct channel with the youth around the world. Superimposition of popular symbolic expression on the local mindset is a powerful mechanism to instill ideologies that will otherwise take decades to accomplish. Cultural overlapping is now recognized by anthropologists having acknowledged that languages around the world have now absorbed a significant portion of vocabulary from English as a permanent cognitive fixture, i.e., terms in English for which an indigenous equivalent is rare or non-existent. A typical European may disagree though. Sebastian Conrad from the University of Berlin stresses in *Enlightenment in Global History*, that its conventional definition must be viewed in a more flexible and malleable manner. He relates, “Enlightenment, in other words, has a history—and this history matters; it is not an entity, a ‘thing’ that was invented and then disseminated. We must move beyond a preoccupation with definitions that make the meaning of Enlightenment immutable.”<sup>3</sup> Conrad may be inferring that a sentimental value of Enlightenment, although having originated from European lands, must be treated as a shared concern for the entire humanity as it gears up for the pinnacle of its evolution. Elsewhere, the futility of moral equivalence between progress and Western imperialism provides a glaringly embossed instance of colonial legacy. Immanuel Kant who is known as the most quoted philosopher from the age of Enlightenment called it “*a man’s*

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<sup>1</sup> Urban Dictionary, ‘It’s like New Coke, Which Wasn’t Coke at All.’, in *New Woke* (Urban Dictionary, 1 July 2017), <https://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=New+Woke>.

<sup>2</sup> Caleb Quinley, ‘Three-Finger Salute: Hunger Games Symbol Adopted by Myanmar Protesters’, *The Guardian*, 8 February 2021, sec. News, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/feb/08/three-finger-salute-hunger-games-symbol-adopted-by-myanmars-protesters>.

<sup>3</sup> Sebastian Conrad, ‘Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique’, *The American Historical Review* 117, no. 4 (2012): xxii–1027.

*emancipation from his self-imposed immaturity.*” In his renowned essay *An Answer to the Question: What is Enlightenment?* written in 1784, he wrote, “...because religious incompetence is not only the most harmful but also the most degrading of all. However, the manner of thinking of the head of a state who favors religious enlightenment goes further.”<sup>1</sup>

It seems that Kant had a political not a theological disagreement with religion, unlike his co-thinkers as his work demonstrates it imbibed in his theory of Categorical Imperative. It is often ignored, however, that Kant, just like his contemporaries, had an implicit qualification attached to the definition of “emancipation of man” in terms of what constituted a man or even humanity. Lesser known is the fact that Kant crafted his color-coded racial taxonomy that allocated a hierarchical order or standing to each skin colour. According to this taxonomy, Europeans were white, Asians were yellow, Africans were black and Native Americans were red. Kant applied a great deal of attention to appropriation of race and the potential of genealogy. In his rubric, some races were incapable of moral maturity and best suited to service and slavery, while others “lacked passion”.<sup>2</sup> Kant’s rubric placed white skin as a privileged endowment. Broeck quotes Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze in her article *When Light Becomes White: Reading Enlightenment through Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing*: “Enlightenment philosophy was instrumental in codifying and institutionalizing both the scientific and popular European perception of humanity. The numerous writings on race by Hume, Kant, and Hegel played a strong role in articulating Europe’s sense not only of its culture but also racial superiority.”<sup>3</sup> Evidently, the incentive of Enlightenment was a seminal theme for European intellectuals who considered themselves self-appointed leaders of humanity. Finn portrays this imagery as envisaged by Paul in his letters: “One is movement from darkness into light: ‘For the same God who said, ‘Out of darkness let light shine’ [Gn 1:3], has caused this light to shine within us, to give the light of revelation--the revelation of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ’ (2 Cor 4:6)...Conditioned by Greco-Roman world in which philosophers and mystery religions held out the promise of enlightenment, and prompted by Paul, other early Christians were persuaded to call baptism “enlightenment”:

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<sup>1</sup> James Schmidt, ‘The Question of Enlightenment: Kant, Mendelssohn, and the Mittwochsgesellschaft’, *Journal of the History of Ideas* 50, no. 2 (1989): 269–91.

<sup>2</sup> Emmanuel C. Eze, *Achieving Our Humanity: The Idea of a Postracial Future* (NY: Routledge, 2001), pp. 97–98.

<sup>3</sup> Sabine Broeck, ‘When Light Becomes White: Reading Enlightenment through Jamaica Kincaid’s Writing’, *Callaloo* 25, no. 3 (2002): 13.

to baptize (bptizein) was to enlighten (photizein), for baptism was the hinge upon which conversion turned.”<sup>1</sup>

### **New Atheism and the Nature of Belief**

Up until recently, atheism’s general sphere of criticism had remained limited to the Judeo-Christian tradition however its modern manifestation seems to be much more interested in Islam.<sup>2</sup> Theologically Islam offers a much simpler and clear-cut story. There are no anthropomorphic cardinalities, no original sins, no crucifixions, and no vicarious atonements. Consequently, tools of criticism developed and sharpened on Christianity fail to deliver when they are applied to Islamic concepts. This is probably why engaging Islam on ontological or epistemological grounds is much more challenging than on the methodological ones. New Atheism’s newly coined terminology is consistent with this understanding as it wants to do away with combatting the definition of belief rather a more salient strategy is to anatomically eliminate it altogether. The coinage of the New Atheist identity is predicated on the “lack of belief in gods.” This is demonstrated by Dennett, for instance who calls faith “belief in belief.” Similarly, the website *American Atheists* is categorical in stating that rather than denying the existence of God, it prefers to deny the existence of the belief itself because “Atheism is not a disbelief in gods or a denial of gods; it is a lack of belief in gods.” New Atheists generally argue that atheism is neither a belief system nor a state of uncertainty rather it is an open and clear position that undercuts the premise of God not by denying it rather by not recognizing it in the first place. According to this position, even the dictionary definition of atheism remains incorrect as “there is no God.” Instead, they maintain that a lack of belief is a general predisposition rather than an active opposition to an existing creed even if it may seem so. Likewise, the New Atheism emphasizes that a lack of belief does not necessarily mean a lack of objective rather the objective as an axiological anchor is merely located in the evidence that is served by empirical method rather than in the unverifiable intuition or top-down prescription.

The fixation to predicate a conscious recognition of any existence on verifiable knowledge is precarious at best in a fundamental sense. Ontologically, the concept of God is not new and certainly not traceable to

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas M. Finn, *From Death to Rebirth: Ritual and Conversion in Antiquity* (New York ; Mahwah, N.J: Paulist Press, 1997), p. 25.

<sup>2</sup> Hamid Dabashi, ‘The Resurrection of “New Atheism”’, *Al Jazeera English United States*, 4 May 2019, sec. Opinion, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/resurrection-atheism-190503132921871.html>.

definitive origin, the frame of perception that a normal human being employs discernibly contains recognition of a type of existence that is not self-evident. Human understanding of the material world and sense perception is not primarily driven by scientific or rational tools nor does it require advanced levels of intelligence or scholarship, or even group thinking. In fact, for a better part of human history, except for the last few centuries, the question of empirical evidence never occupied the centre space. Dan Barker, a Christian priest turned atheist inadvertently recognizes this necessity for baseline intellect to suffice in its support for the desired outcome. Barker underlines his notion of basic rational intellect as a given which can help discern between what is beneficial and what is harmful. In his book *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists*, Barker writes, "If it is necessary to have a degree in theology before making an informed decision, then millions of Christians will have to be ushered out of the church."<sup>1</sup> It should be noted that Barker uses credence to a basic rational faculty in support of atheism, not against it. His position assumes that it should not take a high level of education or background in history to understand the premise of no God, or to put in another way, the fact that there is no God is a matter of common sense. From a historical point of view, and in the view of the three monotheistic religions, this is an exact counter-interpretation of basic human intellect. For example, the Qur'anic approach heavily capitalizes on a basic rational faculty which is independent of academic disciplines to an underlying longing of the human psyche to seek a simplified notion of one God. Hence, Barker turns the definition of basic human intellect on its head to oppose what has remained its principal pathway towards realizing harm or benefit throughout history. Barker further claims that the majority of world religions depend on their followers to concede to a minimum level of information, often an appeal to emotion or benefit, to forego the requisite evidence for a supernatural phenomenon that is otherwise beyond the remit of five senses. Nevertheless, it is an argument that can be put forth to a theist as well as an atheist, except that Barker wants to demand evidence from religion to earn credibility in the eyes of a discerning skeptic who believes that human intellect has never been sufficient to independently corroborate a claim of supernatural providence or authority. Or, that a supernatural claim would not be able to withstand the stringent demands put forth by science.

Epistemologically, the issue of evidence is not entirely new. Historically, prophets as the bearers of evidence in the form of miracles had

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<sup>1</sup> Dan Barker, *Godless: How an Evangelical Preacher Became One of America's Leading Atheists* (Berkeley, Calif: Ulysses Press, 2008), p. 94.

to demonstrate their credibility by predicating their claims on personal abilities or characteristics that commoners could not imagine possible for themselves. Nonetheless, the evidence meant exactly the opposite of what scientific evidence amounts to in the modern era. The historical account of prophets according to the religious texts (as well as mythology) repeatedly catalogues the occurrence of miracles not only as a response to public skepticism but something that was demanded as well as expected by the skeptics for them to distinguish the prophets from the general public. Prophets, by definition, had to be established in their societies as truthful operators so that their miracles would be distinguished from optical deception. The extension of trust from the common public had a direct correlation with their trustworthiness. Not only that, the level of candor and honesty in their character was itself found to be unparalleled and miraculous. Then, the miracles themselves had to be not just defiantly incredible but staggeringly awe-striking in both form and function. This extreme defiance of the laws of the natural world was intelligible by the public even if they could not have known the laws of physics in their scientific understanding. Barker's definition of rationale points to such qualification of human intellect to decipher a miracle in an empirical sense such that a miracle can be reproducible in a laboratory environment. This is a common grievance emanating from the various conversations taking place among the skeptics of the twenty-first century, and it resonates in opposition to a cross-section of religions, that an absence of staggering and awe-striking miracle has led to the growth of non-belief and it has undermined the confidence of believers in the face of an increasingly louder claim that all miracles are essentially extensions of natural order presented in a unique set of circumstances and made to look incredible through lack of scientific or philosophical acquaintance.

Barker's allusion to human intellect does not fully adhere to its scientific acumen but it does root it in the utility of scientific knowledge. Most if not all atheists themselves have doctoral degrees in material sciences or they are educated in higher learning institutions. New Atheists are candid in their admission that such levels of higher learning are necessary to become a fully rational human being. This outcome presents one among a multitude of deliberations posited by New Atheism however it also opens the door to understanding atheist methodology in the context of the scientific thinking that has preoccupied the human psyche in the contemporary sense. That is, to process the evidence at hand, one must possess certain foundational skills beyond basic human intellect so that they can be employed in practicing scientific rigor. Barker describes this process as below:

But scientific confidence is not faith-it is a tentative acceptance of the truth of a hypothesis that has been repeatedly tested, and it is subject to being overturned in the light of the new evidence. The data and methods of testing are publicized, peer reviewed and open to any of us for examination. This is nothing at all like religious faith, which makes a leap from possibility to fact. Or, often, from impossibility to fact.<sup>1</sup>

Barker's view of establishing the truth is incidentally dependent on either being a scientific authority or knowing one, which, given the proliferation of scientific knowledge and in the case of material sciences alone, requires knowledge and acumen of insuperable magnitude spanning hundreds of disciplines and thousands of scientific journals. Short of this, lay people must rely on a scientist to interpret the data for them. This analytical dependence is not limited to scientifically illiterate either. Because the core of atheist methodology resides in the presumption that science (or to be more accurate the scientist) be made the ultimate adjudicator for the existence of a metaphysical reality, it would, in turn, necessitate scientific cooperation of cross-disciplinary nature but still a minuscule proportion of humanity consisting of qualified scientists will be in charge of interpreting scientific data, therefore taking on the mantle of guidance and leadership for the rest of the humanity.

### **New Atheism and the New Digital Religion**

In the twenty first century, the world has witnessed stratification of the digital socio-sphere which begins at the core level of the internet. The internet has brought a step-change in the social landscape of humanity followed by the information and social media revolution. Interestingly enough, the social media platforms coincided with the first publications of New Atheist authors.<sup>2</sup> Then, the pervasiveness and the ubiquity of the Western culture around the world were superimposed by its digital footprint. On surface, calling the internet a movement or a religion may be overkill however, on a deeper level, it has demonstrated the sum of all indicators that can and have driven social revolutions in history as it continues to act as a platform for social change. This invisible religion defines ethical outlines in virtually every aspect of life. Kwet describes it as “an insidious new phenomenon, digital colonialism, casts a shadow on the Global South. This structural form of domination is exercised

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<sup>1</sup> Barker, p. 103.

<sup>2</sup> ‘The Four Horsemen Review - Whatever Happened to “New Atheism”?’



through the centralized ownership and control of the three core pillars of the digital ecosystem: software, hardware, and network connectivity, which vests the United States with immense political, economic, and social power.”<sup>1</sup> The mention of social media is particularly poignant as it is widely discussed in the blogosphere that it shows signs of a religion, granted that the engagement with social platforms can be recognized as significant as ritual practice.<sup>2</sup> The digital life has its own ethos, its own language, culture and values. So much so that the digital platforms are aiming towards alternative and existentialist realism of their own. The latest example is the rebranding of Facebook to Meta and their *Metaverse* offering which is a full featured virtual reality experience.<sup>3</sup>

Like the myriad of social trends that have emerged from the internet, it is within this layered bubble that New Atheism has thrived. New Atheism has, so far, not only been able to capitalize on the newfound digital kinship between people around the world, it has promoted its own set of subcultures amongst which some carry in their propensities an adherence to anti-theist narrative while others showcase a subterranean brand of generic godlessness. Either way, it is a way of life, no different than any other religion. Scott Alexander calls this phenomenon as the “Blue Tribe” referring to the progressive liberal party base who have become new face of secular humanism along with a tranche of fresh slogans including the gender, identity and racial positions. The Liberal crowd is not new though and it preceded New Atheism when modern atheism used to be rooted in the twentieth century intelligentsia. Personalities of this era continue to wield influence on the public psyche.<sup>4</sup> They attract an exclusive mention here because they have managed to gain global recognition and they continue to drive the agenda in academic debate. However, none of these personalities have been known to mobilize a grassroots movement. New Atheism on the other hand enjoys a very well-coordinated platform.<sup>5</sup> Atheists are also technologically savvy,

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<sup>1</sup> Michael Kwet, ‘Digital Colonialism: US Empire and the New Imperialism in the Global South’, *Race & Class* 60, no. 4 (April 2019): 3–26, <https://doi.org/10.1177/0306396818823172>.

<sup>2</sup> Miles Godfrey, ‘Social Media: The New Religion?’, *Stuff* (blog), 19 October 2012, <https://www.stuff.co.nz/technology/7834071/Social-media-the-new-religion>.

<sup>3</sup> See Facebook announcement at <https://about.fb.com/news/2021/10/facebook-company-is-now-meta/>

<sup>4</sup> Prominent atheist figures of the twentieth century are Antony Flew, John Dewey, Jacques Derrida, Richard Rorty, A. C. Grayling, Jean Paul Sartre, Bertrand Russel, and Peter Singer to name a few.

<sup>5</sup> See websites such as [americanhumanist.org](http://americanhumanist.org), [thehumanist.com](http://thehumanist.com), and [secularhumanism.org](http://secularhumanism.org)

university-educated, and they often hail from affluent backgrounds.<sup>1</sup> Apart from the key authorship that has led the charge thus far the grassroots population of New Atheism is almost entirely made up of millennials. They do not necessarily represent a single organization nor do they represent those millennials who may be silent atheists.<sup>2</sup>

Pew Research indicates that “overall, 35% of adult Millennials (Americans born between 1981 and 1996) are religiously unaffiliated” concluding that dissociation with a religious belief is a growing trend among them.<sup>3</sup> Though, it does not affirm that all young atheists are activists, nor does it indicate that lack of religious affiliation means lack of belief in a supernatural entity.<sup>4</sup> However, when it does reflect a lack of belief, it usually means general neglect towards the concept of a divine Creator, which may be a passive yet defining characteristic of millennials. The millennials do not recognize or even care to understand geographies or political borders beyond that which is enforced on the ground. Their worldview has been shaped by the digital relativism and virtual kinship that they share. Religion can still weigh in on their ethos, but only as far as pragmatic necessities of tradition demand it.

The sociocultural digitalization of the millennial generations and the ones who follow offer a case in point on what has happened to belief in the last two decades. Belief and faith are concepts that naturally embed within them element of trust and often times, delay of outcome or gratification. According to Laura Michaelson et al., “willingness to delay gratification depends on social trust.”<sup>5</sup> This statement embeds within it an essential truth that trust is an elemental part of human life, not a choice. However, what the digital age has done is to permeate a perception that trust is unnecessary. That desired outcomes need not require delay or hardship to achieve. In the digital world, trust and its verification are no longer two distinct points separated by

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<sup>1</sup> Pew Research Team, “‘Nones’ on the Rise: One-in-Five Adults Have No Religious Affiliation”, Demographics, The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life (Pew Research Center, 9 October 2012), 35, <https://www.pewresearch.org>.

<sup>2</sup> Pew Research, ‘Nine-in-Ten Black “Nones” Believe in God, but Fewer Pray or Attend Services’, *Fact Tank*, 17 March 2021, <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2021/03/17/nine-in-ten-black-nones-believe-in-god-but-fewer-pray-or-attend-services/>.

<sup>3</sup> Lipka, Michael, ‘Millennials Increasingly Are Driving Growth of “Nones”’. (Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Center, 12 May 2015), <https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/05/12/>.

<sup>4</sup> Atheists who are labelled as the “Nones” are identified with no religious affiliation with the value of “None” under the religious identity section in employment and applications or survey questionnaires.

<sup>5</sup> Laura Michaelson et al., ‘Delaying Gratification Depends on Social Trust’, *Frontiers in Psychology* 4 (2013), <https://doi.org/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00355>.

space or time. They are instantaneously one and the same. To lead this analogy slightly further on, hacking this system of perpetually emergent truth is not trivial. For the most part and for the most people, modern social media platforms have been built such that there is no logistic impedance to converting one's thoughts or actions into digital payload. If it is on the mind, then it can be on the net almost instantaneously. This characteristic configuration of impulse is what is shaping the ethics of new millennium.

As deeply reflective beings, we as humans are not only letting the digital experience shape our actions, but we are also letting its binary choreography seep into the underlying perception. In the binary world, everything can be switched on or off. However, life's little challenges, be they discomforts or calamities, cannot be calibrated to such disposition. What should be kept from among the life's experiences in the proverbial inbox or be committed to the recycle bin is far from being a lucid choice. It is needless to say that although one's digital life is a custom-designed experience fine-tuned to granularity, the real life is anything but. It is no wonder then that the generations often raised on the digital nutrition become bemused and frustrated when the tried and tested practices of "forget", "delete", "unpin", "unsubscribe" or even "undo" don't work in real life. They struggle to understand that life has a tendency to implant "cookies" in their psyche which are there to stay and that they can never be removed. There is no restart or reset button in real life. Every single step in life inherently carries the combined burden of all the previous steps in its wake and remains there as a contextual shadow whether one likes it or not. The browsing history of one's passage through life gets longer every day where the subconscious inhabits hyperlinks to defunct and deserted locations which don't lead anywhere except a harsh awakening of "page not found" error.

The proclivity for instant payoff is now evident after two decades of information revolution. The oft prolific digital euphoria of the new millennium has now ceded to always-on technological bondage imbibing a sense of synchronous consciousness attuned with the one's mobile device. After one quarter of a century in its digital journey, humanity has once again become a hunter and gatherer, but this time, of information. Within the information space, belief is a not a very valuable commodity. Information is readily accessible in this evidence rich space. Everything is recorded, logged, tracked, audited and retained. There is no longer a need for belief, faith or trust in human transactions because they can be verified, ratified and credit-checked in real-time. Why then, according to the modern thought, would there be a need for belief in someone or something that is not interested in joining this new socio-digital paradigm.

The millennial consciousness channels its awareness through this tributary and wishes to imagine transcendent existence only through the patronage of this circuit. The patronage of information ecosystems is already taking shape in various formats and accepted by humanity at large as well. In a way, this patronage is the novel transcendence offered by the digital outlets equipped with the artificial intelligence programs. In 2018, the Guardian reported that searches made and recorded on Google's search engine were becoming increasingly philosophical and relating to "unanswerable" questions. Julian Baggini writes, "Google, it seems, has taken on the jobs of oracle, soothsayer, sleuth, psychotherapist and priest. But although it might seem omnipotent, its ability to meet our deepest needs is clearly limited. Our desire for it to do so reveals much about us."<sup>1</sup> Technically, it is only natural that the think-ethic imbued into the masses through much proselytized no-God society has been unable to alleviate a seminal instinct to refer to the benevolent genius on the other side waiting to take calls from deeply scarred creatures. Alex Watson from the Aberdeen Press writes, "We project our emotions onto things that aren't human – animals, inanimate objects and algorithms. It might be in our nature to ask the internet life's big conundrums, but we can't forget that the supposed solutions were provided by some other fallible person, not by an omniscient individual."<sup>2</sup> In other words, internet users continue to ask Google for answers despite knowing that the combined human knowledge is unfit to answer their questions. This is precisely the predicament of the New Atheism's demand to kill belief and rationalize one's way out of life's unanswerable questions.

In either case, that is, through trials and tribulations, whether a sentient human being refers to God or Google is a dilemma that keeps getting regurgitated through the vessel of trust on the near side of which is a human being with fragile rationalism while on the other side is someone or something unseen, sagacious and mysterious ready to dispense providence to the supplications of the needy. No matter how much one tries to placate the rationalism surrounding the expression of trust, it sounds more and more convoluted with each attempt. Philosopher

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<sup>1</sup> Julian Baggini, "Do People like Me?" Why We Ask Google Unanswerable Questions', *The Guardian*, 14 November 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/technology/shortcuts/2018/nov/14/do-people-like-me-why-we-ask-google-unanswerable-questions>.

<sup>2</sup> Alex Watson, 'Why Do We Ask Google Questions We Know It Can't Possibly Answer?', *Press and Journal: Evening Press*, 24 August 2021, <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/opinion/columnists/3415078/why-ask-google-questions-cant-answer-alex-watson-opinion/>.

Thomas Nagel is famously known to have said, “It isn’t just that I don’t believe in God and, naturally, hope that I’m right in my belief. It’s that I hope there is no God! I don’t want there to be a God; I don’t want the universe to be like that.”<sup>1</sup> Although this is a quite different position than the “lack of belief in gods,” Nagel’s honesty is commendable that at least he extends the courtesy of trust to the unseen even when he wishes for that which is unseen to not exist. The challenge here is that New Atheism fails to grant faith, belief and trust the vertebral role that they play in human life. Therefore, conceptually it is impossible to sever the link trust has with the metaphysical and still expect it to function in a metaphysical way. This is because trust is metaphysical and meta-temporal. It transcends that which is here and now.

### **Conclusion**

Traditionally, colonialism is known to be “a practice or policy of control by one people or power over other people or areas often by establishing colonies and generally with the aim of economic dominance.”<sup>2</sup> In the post-information age however, the term does not apply since the newfound sense of freedom and national sovereignty has made it difficult to articulate colonization at group level. Subsequently, the only option is to concede a hypothetical construct in which a sovereign individual takes part voluntarily.

In order to do that the individual sovereignty must first grant the self a higher preference than what it grants to the group. The promotion of individual sovereignty over the group sovereignty has meant that now potentially each sovereign individual can be colonized one person at a time. This is where New Atheism draws its mission which is to dilute any suggestion that would be contributive to congealing a group identity among like-minded individuals. Historically and even presently, metaphysical and religious denominators are the most effective forms of constructing group identities because they demand a level of sacrifice at an individual level in order to provide strength to the group. In fact, on a political level, this has never been a hypothetical construction although in the West recession of individual freedoms has been speeding up ever faster in the last two decades. The difference is that the West has imposed sacrifice of personal sovereignty in favor of national security and public health incentives while criticizing it on religious grounds. Ultimately, the individual sovereignty is

<sup>1</sup> Anthony Walsh, *Answering the New Atheists: How Science Points to God and to the Benefits of Christianity* (Wilmington, DE: Vernon Press, 2018), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Walter Rodney et al., *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa*, New edition (Brooklyn: Verso, 2018).

a momentary win because in the face of calamities and natural disasters individuals must come together to form a group. Nevertheless, the manifesto of individual sovereignty continues to indoctrinate freedom to choose one's own set of values producing ideological diversity that holds no viable standard of management from a colonial perspective.

To elaborate, there is no viable precedent available that provides a map to colonize a sovereign individual since that would stand as the logical antithesis to independence of thought and action. Consequently, the only possible way to accomplish this goal is to train the individual to colonize oneself. New Atheism or any other anti-religious ideology would have to choose between intellect and intuition among the possible candidates to work with. The secular school of thought has undoubtedly chosen reason and intellect as its candidate of choice. Naturally, this is an extraordinary outcome yet necessary for understanding the New Atheist phenomenon for the simple reason that one cannot attack one's capacity to believe in God without incurring some collateral damage. Belief in God acts as an anchor to all other beliefs. If a society succeeds in prevailing intellect at the cost of belief in God, they may end up dismantling all justification to use trust and faith as a viable tool to forming ethical models. This is no longer a theoretical position as technology is being used to systematically decommission belief and trust in human transactions.

Social media websites are glaring examples of this practice as they are witnessed transform their platforms into channels of content moderation through their fact-checking policies so that trust is no longer needed in consuming content. Belief is not only a personal conviction, historically it has remained the strongest and most effective platform of cultural and ethical cohesion. Belief does not guarantee accuracy of its object which reinforces the need even more for a vetting process. This is why Islamic belief exists despite being the most criticized and vetted belief in the history of religion. Islam has stood the test of time. It is the only religion and philosophy that has been able to integrate seen and unseen, known and unknown. On the other hand, when New Atheism argues that it lacks belief in God or gods, it cannot not be a viable position since there is no logical basis of lacking belief in anything without first relying on the faculty of belief to extend the premise that provides it the underlying substrate to exist. This is also consistent with the popularity of social media platforms and the internet in general when they are used to promote a systematic extrication belief from human psyche and make it unfit for ethical situations.

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