

## The New Atheism: An Interview with Mitchell Cohen

By Mitchell Cohen

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There has been fierce debate over the past several decades about the role of religion in American politics. From the late 1970s and on, religious conservatives played an increasingly vociferous public role and were important in pushing the country to the right--much to the chagrin of both secular and religious liberals. Now there seems to be a shift in mood. A number of prominent authors and scientists have published books in the past year that advocate a "New Atheism." The books, which include Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion*, and Christopher Hitchens's *God is Not Great*, have sparked considerable public controversy across the political spectrum. Dissent co-editor Mitchell Cohen weighs in on the phenomenon in a recent interview with the left-wing Berlin weekly *Jungleworld*.<sup>[1]</sup> Cohen is professor of political science at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York. His article on the current state of French politics ("France: Red Rose, Blue Grip") appears in the *Dissent*'s Fall 2007 issue.

**Question:** Atheism seems to sell in the United States. There are "New Atheist" best sellers. At the same time, "New Atheists" claim to be repressed by widespread American religious sensibilities. Why is atheism having such resonance?

**Mitchell Cohen:** Best sellers have contexts. The context today is a reaction against politicized and intolerant religious fundamentalists who have acted aggressively to impose their views of the world on American politics and public life for several decades. A strong intellectual challenge to them has been long overdue.

At the same time, I think we should avoid talking about "best-sellers" and about the relation between religion and politics in the U.S. in a simplistic way. Two decades ago Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* was a best seller even though it is pretty incomprehensible if you lack familiarity with Heidegger, Deconstructionism and Leo Strauss. The context? Thousands probably purchased this conservative tome because they heard about the "culture wars" and that universities were full of professors teaching subversive ideas. But another book, the Bible, also sold pretty well back then (and now) and I suspect is read more than Bloom.

The U.S. is, and has always has been, a country in which religions thrived, partly due to traditions of tolerance and an acceptance of pluralism fostered by the separation of religion and state. It goes back to the earliest phases of American history. This doesn't mean there hasn't been prejudice (for example, against Catholics in the nineteenth century). And racial prejudice and persecution constitute a whole other, vicious matter, the greatest disgrace of American history. Nonetheless, the U.S. was the first country whose constitution barred state support for a national church, and that has had a long-term

impact. I rarely quote George Washington, but it seems to me that he had the right idea when he wrote, in a letter to the Jews of Rhode Island in 1790, that American citizens ought all to “possess alike liberty of conscience and immunities of citizenship,” that one should not speak solely of “toleration...as if it was by the indulgence of one class of people that another enjoyed” basic rights. The government, he went on, ought to give “to bigotry no sanction, to persecution no assistance,” and to require only that those who “live under its protection, should demean themselves as good citizens.” Thomas Jefferson wrote in his Notes on the State of Virginia that “it does me no injury for my neighbor to say that there are twenty gods or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.”

Generally speaking, freedom of conscience and the absence of persecution helped to facilitate the pursuit of religious beliefs in non-threatening ways. There have been religious revival movements throughout all of American history, often at times or in the aftermath of big changes. Their legacies are mixed, to say the least. Sometimes they furthered a message of democratic populism; often they promoted nativism and ignorance. My point is that the politics of religion in the U.S. is multidimensional. The Ku Klux Klan burned crosses in the name of white Christianity. It represented American history at its ugliest. But the civil rights movement, which was perhaps our most glorious and important moral moment, was significantly religious in its leadership and mobilized out of black churches. And, of course, its greatest leader was Reverend Martin Luther King Jr.

But since the late 1970s there have been great pressures to weaken the constitutional separation of religion and state, and intolerance has come with these efforts. These developments correspond to the rising influence of the religious right. President George Bush’s invocations of the deity are not a new phenomenon (read speeches of American presidents throughout the last two and a half centuries), although many politicians have also done so just for the political advantage. Most people think Bush’s religiosity is sincere and I see no reason to doubt that—just the consequences of politicized religion. Well, I do more than just doubt the consequences.

No one took Nixon’s religiosity too seriously. It was Jimmy Carter, a conservative Democrat who began to re-inject religious sanctimony in more recent times. But it worked to Reagan’s advantage and the Republicans successfully mobilized right-wingers and many Evangelicals into their ranks (American evangelicals are in fact diverse). Reagan gave them an honored place under his political tent in the 1980s. This required many public gestures to them on his part and lots of moral support. The neoconservatives also played a role. Back in the mid-1990s I heard one of their leading figures, Midge Decter, declare that the major problem of intolerance in America was “liberal” intolerance of fundamentalists.

Politically, a new situation arose under the current Bush administration partly because Republicans controlled all three branches of government after the elections of 2000 (and until this past year). Recall the absurd situation when a Republican dominated Congress was called back into session, prodded by the religious right, to debate whether or not life support systems should be maintained on a brain-dead woman in Florida. I think a good many people were appalled at this. Rightly so and not least since these same Republicans usually insisted on “keeping big government out of our lives.” A key aspect of American political change in recent decades was the growth of mobilized right-wing religious activism

within the Republican Party along with a decline of unions which were key mobilizing forces within the Democratic Party. A dramatic reversal of that development would be salutary.

So there has been, generally speaking, a strong injection of religiosity into the American public sphere, especially but not just under the Bush administration. It has chipped away at what Thomas Jefferson once called the wall of separation between religion and state. There have been struggles over education in some states because of religious activists who want “creation science” taught rather than Darwin. Polls show an unusual number of Americans actually believe in some ideas like that, although I have yet to hear anyone in the Bush administration suggest that “Biblical science” —say, the principles of physics implied by Joshua’s successful command of the sun to stand still in the Bible—should be the basis of a missile defense system. (And I will admit that the Bush administration itself raises interesting questions about the idea of evolution). An additional important and worrisome dimension that needs to be noted is the impact of Bush’s appointments to the Supreme Court, which has become very conservative. The status of abortion rights, long a target of religious conservatives, is in question.

As I said, the “New Atheism” responds to this religious mobilization and its baneful effects on politics, culture and political life. Recall the fundamentalist preachers who declared on television two days after 9/11 that those terrible attacks were really God’s punishment of the U.S. for its sinners. The late Reverend Jerry Falwell, a stalwart of the “conservative revolution” from the Reagan era and on (and a frequent guest on TV talk shows), declared that Americans “probably got what we deserved.” He added that “I really believe that the pagans and the abortionists and the feminists and the gays and the lesbians...the ACLU, the People for the American Way” were responsible because “all of them have tried to secularize America—I point the finger in their face and say, ‘You made this happen.’” Reverend Pat Robertson, another political holy man, concurred. Robertson and Falwell hemmed and hawed when they were attacked for these remarks and it is safe to say that most Americans, including the overwhelming majority of religious Americans, were undoubtedly disgusted by them. It’s hard to imagine Bin Laden disagreeing with Robertson and Falwell on this. And, I am sad to say, the mental structure that produces such statements has a lot in common with a part of the extreme left, those who insist that no matter what happens in the world, the U.S. is somehow, “in the final analysis,” liable and everyone else its victim—and so 9/11 was really the fault of the U.S. Just remove a word like ‘pagan’ from Falwell’s statement and replace it with ‘imperialists.’

The reassertion of religion is usually, although not always, a conservatizing tool. Fortunately, there has now been a political shift against the right in the U.S. It is not a radical move left. Still, after years in retreat, secular intellectuals are reasserting themselves. This is very much to the good. Part of it is due to Iraq. Many Americans are wondering and worrying a lot these days. Bush’s ratings are very low and this is a president identified strongly with religiosity and who used messianic motifs—vigorously—to justify a war that has gone very wrong.

But again it is a multifaceted situation. I suspect that many more people have seen Mel Gibson’s film *The Passion of the Christ* than have thought about Oxford professor Richard Dawkins’s argument against “intelligent design” as proof of the existence of a god. Dawkins’s book, *The God Delusion* has been a best seller in the U.S. and he was on the cover of *Time*. Journalist Christopher Hitchens’s book *God is not*

Great has provoked considerable irritation and controversy. Perhaps the angry reactions against authors like these (the two are actually British in origins) and the rush by some to dismiss them indicate a certain success on their part in forcing people to think afresh about the efforts to privilege religion in public life. Fresh thinking is a positive thing. Still, I would urge some caution when speaking of “New Atheists” as if they were a school. There are differences among them. I would also point out that religious liberals are not free of sanctimony.

**Question:** Is the debate on “the New Atheism” important for left-wing intellectuals in the U.S.?

**M.C:** I think this debate raises some poignant challenges to the left both in the U.S. and around the world. (The new religious aggressiveness is not just an American phenomenon). The left everywhere ought to be identified with both tolerance (this has not always been so) and with critical intelligence—the latter often means challenging religious precepts, ambitions and institutionalized power. The hard thing is to balance the tolerance and the criticism, to insist on pluralism but not to allow religion to privilege itself in the public realm. The left should always want people to think for themselves, but this cannot mean “you must be secular like me” since it also should not mean “you must be religious like me.”

Religion is a fairly broad category and leftists need to make distinctions among different types of religious behavior and religious commitments just as they would insist that “there are leftists and there are leftists.” After all, there are “leftists” who want a freer, more egalitarian world and there are Stalinists (or people who are still trapped within Stalinist mental structures, even if only implicitly). And there are religious leftists and liberals who are allies and comrades of secular leftists. While I am thoroughly secular, I know many religious people who are fine, thoughtful people—and I know many secularists who have been able to justify in left-wing language either mass murder, terror or religious fanaticism. These things are “objectively” anti-imperialist, you know, especially when they come from the Mideast. I have heard people—Americans and Europeans—throw fits about Bush’s religiosity all while they always “understand” Hezbollah or Hamas.

Here we come to another side to this story. Responses by liberals and the left to religious aggressiveness have sometimes been timid and sometimes self-deceptive. The left has always had a problem with the modern liberal state for social and economic reasons. But that liberal state did not come about simply because of “the rise of the bourgeoisie,” as an old, reductionist mantra had it. It also arose, especially in Europe, because of religious civil wars that finally exhausted murderous, God-crazed combatants; a political space and order, a domain of adjudication, was needed above organized holy warriors.

Of course, I am oversimplifying processes that took different paths in different countries over considerable time and didn’t all turn out the same way. Still, we cannot say often enough today that the modern liberal state was an act against civil wars created by societies dominated by religion; it is only as the domination of the public realm by religion ends that open, liberal, and social democratic (or socialist, if you prefer) societies become possible. When religious movements are triumphalist, when they believe that they can assert themselves inexorably in the public realm, liberal and social democratic values are

jeopardized. (Those of us who identify with the left want liberal states to be social-democratized—but that is another matter and one that is very complicated and multidimensional in our globalizing era.)

In my view, a secular state needs a humanist basis. Yes, that means that I think secular humanist culture should be privileged in liberal democracy (or in what I would prefer, social democracy) but not religion. The reason is that it can encompass religious lives, whereas religious culture cannot do the same for secularism and atheism. Humanism, with its Renaissance origins (among thinkers who were mostly religious in some way), fostered pluralism by legitimizing multiple authorities, leading people to evaluate for themselves, to see varied points of view, not just to accept a last word from one authority[2] These are prerequisites of citizenship in a free, pluralistic society – a society that assumes its members are grown-ups and can make choices about different options in life—secular, religious, or some mix—and then also can legitimately change their minds.

But pluralism, radicalized, can also create a sense that nothing unites or even links people; that linkage is essential for citizens in a democratic society. I think that this problem of fragmentation can be offset by an amended version of what John Rawls, the American philosopher, called “public reason.” Democratic debate must finally address “citizens as citizens.” I think citizens must be able to express arguments on the basis of their own particularities—whether political, cultural, religious—but there must be a point at which they translate their deliberations and claims into a common political language. (Rawls thought to separate public reason and secular reason, but I would demur on that).

It seems to me that aggressive efforts at some form of religious domination of the public realm in the U.S. and elsewhere undermine the possibilities of common political language. Let me make this stronger. If I express my secular humanist ideas publicly, if I try to persuade fellow citizens of them, I must be open to criticism—fierce criticism, down to the basics, up to the dots on the i’s of my ideas, every word and sentiment. I can survive those criticisms. I may even change my ideas. After all, the different bases of my ideas may be wrong, in whole or part. But what happens when religious-political claims are open to the same challenge? If a Muslim friend, on the basis of his profound religious convictions, makes an argument for a law that is to govern me, shall I challenge his belief in Muhammad’s prophetic role? Anyone who knows some history knows it is likely to lead to religious wars. The alternative is to ask him (or her) to secularize the principles of argument.

But left-wing illiberalism has also been a catastrophe—both in economic and cultural matters—and it betrays what has always been best in left-wing thinking. I say this as a person of the left. We shouldn’t forget that parts of the left have acted just like religious fanatics.

Think of Leninists (and, of course, Stalinists) with an infallible doctrine (“the science of society”), organized like a church, purging now and then, persecuting non-believers (whether social democratic or Christian or whatever). I don’t see a whole lot of difference between the mind-set of left-wing sects who believe that the whole world would be set aright if everyone could just grasp properly the entirety of their theories, just put them exactly in place, and the statement in early July by the Pope that Orthodox and Protestant Christianity are not “true” forms of Christianity. Years ago I wrote a book on Lucien Goldmann, the remarkable Romanian-French Marxist humanist who advocated a liberal – rather than an

orthodox -- socialism back in the 1950s and 1960s, arguing also that the left should be heir to the best ideas of liberalism like tolerance, respect for the individual and equality before the law. His chef d'oeuvre, a book entitled *The Hidden God*, examined the world-views of Pascal and Racine in the context of religious, economic and political change. When I read his description of the sects within Jansenism, the Augustinian movement in seventeenth century France, I remember being struck by the comparison with Bolshevik sects of the 1920s (but also some left-wing groupuscules—Maoist, Trotskyist, etc.—that I came across in the U.S. in the late 1960s and early 1970s).

Left-wing illiberalism is not just a matter of some left-over believers of old style Marxist orthodoxies. It also animates important segments of the post-modern left. A prime example of this is Antonio Negri who tells us (together with Michael Hardt, his co-author of *Empire*) that there is a liberating global “multitude” whose “body” can “configure itself as a telos.” This quasi-religious language—please, save us from it!—is really a post-modern reinvention of tiers-mondisme, a failed left-wing doctrine that provided illusions but not much help for the difficult, painful problems of the Third World. It is no wonder that Negri describes Khomeini’s victory in Iran as “the first postmodernist revolution.” Negri’s works have been best sellers on US campuses. Notably, this has been after some two decades in which right-wing religiosity inserted itself so forcefully into the American scene—and at a time when secular, liberal, and social democratic intellectuals were relatively weak (actually, they still are). Negri also needs to be demystified. The American left needs stronger unions that are appropriate to today’s social and economic life—not imaginary multitudes substituting for older Marxist notions of the working class. The same goes globally.

If someone tells you that Islamic extremists are part of a “liberating” multitude because they are against imperialism, remind them that some folks in an earlier generation of leftists were quite able to be anti-imperialist and also to be against the Stalin-Hitler pact. They didn’t need hundreds of pages of theoretical delirium to figure it out. And remember that there were leftists whose theoretical hallucinations led them to imagine that the Second World War was little more than a reprise of conflicts among imperialists. I say that despite the fact that I think it is a mistake to make today’s Islamic extremists simply a function of totalitarianism, as if they are the same sort of phenomenon as Hitler or Stalin. They certainly are totalitarian in many ways, but I question the use of “totalitarianism” as a master-category. It’s too easy.

Nonetheless, I am struck at how parts of the extreme left apologize for Islamic extremism in ways reminiscent of how an earlier generation found ways to apologize for Stalinism. The objects excused are different but the patterns of apologetics are sadly similar. It shows that there really is something I once called ‘the left that doesn’t learn.’ But there are others—liberals and conservatives—who haven’t learned either, or who suffer memory lapse when it comes to all the persecutions and religious wars in the fabric of Western history and seem to forget the historical importance of the domestication of religion within a liberal democratic framework. There has been excessive indulgence of aggressive political religiosity, whether it is the self-righteous Christian right in the U.S., belligerent political Islamism in the Mideast and beyond, or the fanatical religious nationalism of the Israeli settler movements.

**Question:** What do you think about the neglect by most of the New Atheists of efforts by Jewish, Christian, and other religious philosophies to address important questions of political theory?

**M.C.:** John Dewey, the American pragmatist (a liberal with very different methods from those of Rawls) was right when he said “metaphysics has had its day and if the truths Hegel saw cannot be stated as direct practical truths, they are not true.” I’d make pretty much the same point about the use of religious philosophies in contemporary political debate. If Jewish, Christian, and other religious philosophies develop good ideas about politics and ethics—certainly they have at times—those ideas ought to be translatable today into secular terms and argued.

Catholicism has a long, distinguished tradition of discussing “Just War” and there are many powerful ideas in it, but their persuasiveness in contemporary democratic debate cannot rest on views of the Trinity. Jewish philosophers have many valuable things to say about social justice, but their persuasiveness cannot depend on whether or not Moses received Ten Commandments on Mount Sinai. Islam has eminent traditions of legal thought, but their values for a democratic society today cannot rest on the belief that Muhammad was a prophet. They must be presented in terms that are debatable by a non-Muslim.

**Question:** Do you think that belief in naturalism and/or evolutionism on the part of the New Atheists is just a replacement for belief in god?

**M.C.:** No. The question presumes that scientific research is the epistemological equivalent of religious belief. The starting point of any scientist is that he or she can be proven wrong.

**Question:** Isn't the pro-Darwin propaganda of the New Atheists really a step back? Doesn't it lose sight of the fact that a critique of the idea of the survival of the fittest is also a critique of a brutal society?

**M.C.:** No to the first question. Not necessarily to the second. There is a phenomenon called “Social Darwinism” and it has a long, unpleasant history. If I recall correctly, Herbert Spencer coined the phrase “survival of the fittest.” Darwin’s mind may have been influenced by what he saw before him in the brutal world of nineteenth century capitalism, especially in Britain—whose thinking is not shaped by the world they live in? —but that isn’t an argument for or against his contentions in *The Origin of Species*, let alone the basis for judgments about how he makes them or the evidence amassed by contemporary evolutionary biologists. Darwin’s work—and theirs—is not ‘propaganda.’ Its main purpose is not a moral critique or embrace of the idea of “survival of the fittest,” but an attempt to explain evolutionary processes in nature. We are part of nature so we are part of those processes. One can try to draw different types of moral or political conclusions from evolution, but that has been the source of philosophical debate for a very long time. In contemporary public debates, the chief objection to Darwin comes from people who must somehow, in some way prove Biblical veracity. No matter how much

evidence is amassed they will twist and turn until they arrive where they want to be. I think issues of 'moral evolution' must be approached in very complicated and spectacle ways. Any intelligent person must grant that the twentieth century raises pretty tough questions about anything we'd call 'humanity's moral evolution' – but no less about 'intelligent design,' let alone a morally informed intelligent design.

A fellow named Marx wanted to dedicate volume two of a treatise entitled Capital to Darwin. One of the great problems of Marxism—actually, less so in Marx himself than in the thinking of many of his followers—was the easy, wobbly assimilation of 'science' into a teleological social and historical theory. It is much more useful, perhaps, to remember the distinction between necessity and freedom and leave the teleology out. Old fashioned Marxists used to imagine philosophically that freedom would evolve naturally, out of historical necessity, and virtually everyone knows now how naïve and simplistic that was. It also implied that you didn't really have to do anything to become free—an anomalous notion. But just as politics doesn't simply follow economic development, so politics, economics and history don't simply correspond to or follow natural developments.

The left has had some pretty bad moments when it comes to the idea of science. Remember how Stalin wanted to abolish genetics because it conflicted with his 'scientific' theory? This was no prelude to human liberation, but it certainly reminds me of "Creation science." No matter what the evidence, you twist and turn until you prove your original point or aim—or insight or belief—right.

In any event, if we ask if Darwin's work justifies a ruthless market society or the ruthless application of "market principles", it seems to me that the answer is: of course not. The fact that genetic inheritance makes some people more and some people less prone to certain diseases doesn't justify abandoning scientific research into their cures – or even just their treatments (I am a social democrat). We are born into pre-existing political, social, and economic worlds, and while there was no decision by humanity to descend "from some pre-existing form," to borrow Darwin's words, that should hardly prevent us from making sure that every citizen is as fit as possible, that is, have good health insurance.

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**Footnotes:**

- 1.) Due to space limitations it won't appear in German.
- 2.) Some of these arguments and formulations were presented before in a different context in Mitchell Cohen, "Auto-Emancipation and Anti-Semitism (Homage to Bernard-Lazare)," Jewish Social Studies, Fall 2003.