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Editorial: The new visibility of atheism in Europe

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The new visibility of atheism in Europe

The current issue of *Approaching Religion*, which opens the second volume of this e-journal, consists of papers, reviews and reflections originating from a roundtable seminar held at the Donner Institute in January 2012. Under the topic ‘The New Visibility of Atheism in Europe’, some twenty scholars engaged in research on contemporary religiosity and atheism gathered for a three-day seminar debating topical questions and themes related to the academic study of atheism within the several fields of research. In addition to a broad disciplinary background, the participants also represented a varied palette of academic positions, ranging from students to emeriti professors from several European countries – including, for example, Finland, Sweden, Denmark, the UK and Germany – as well as the USA. Taken together, this diversity catered for a dynamic and multifaceted debate, the result of which is presented in this issue.

Why do we claim that the visibility of atheism has increased in Europe? Certainly, before the twenty first century atheist publications have never been such bestsellers as have the so-called ‘New Atheist’ books of today (represented for example by Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens). While the recent popularity shows connections to the cultural background of the US, atheism has arguably become much more visible in contemporary Europe. How, then, did atheism become such a hotly debated issue in twenty-first century Europe – a continent that was supposed to be steadily on its way towards an ever more secular and religiously indifferent society just a couple of decades ago? Is atheism located within the public sphere; is it a phenomenon of media and sales-figures only, or does it extend to the whole society, including its policies and institutions?

Atheism has changed historically and become

more visible in the contemporary European public sphere(s). Furthermore, atheism today is an issue of public policy: civil associations – such as freethinkers, humanists and secularists – are organising campaigns and making claims for improving the situation of atheists and other non-religious people all over Europe. In addition, atheism has become a question of identification up to a point that some people want to convert non-religious people to self-identifying atheists. Much of the current visibility relates to the so-called New Atheism, but does it also mean that other kinds of atheisms – or ways of speaking about atheism – have vanished from the public sphere?

The aspects of globalisation are salient in the visibility of atheism due to the international market success of the bestsellers mentioned above, virtual communities, websites and YouTube. However, the implementation of atheism varies from country to country, even though some public campaigns have been replicated in many countries.

This augmented visibility may or may not overlap with an actual increase in non-religious and/or atheist beliefs and identities, as well as with the decline of religious beliefs, attendance and affiliation. With the help of qualitative and quantitative approaches this issue also examines the ‘big picture’ of European religiosity and atheism. The contributions recognise the significance of the phenomenon labelled ‘New Atheism’, but the overall focus is by no means limited to this. Some of the contributions examine New Atheism explicitly, while others pay more attention to local attitudes and more general changes in religion and non-religion in society.

We believe that such broad investigations are necessary in order to grasp the analytical depths of the transformation of religion and non-religion in European societies today. In order to understand current

trends it is necessary to examine in which conditions atheism is most likely to flourish, and whether these conditions are best explained by local contexts, sociological variables or cognitive structures – and, furthermore, how these explanations are compatible with each other, if at all.

So far, several studies on contemporary atheism have focussed on the Anglophone areas. Whilst English-speaking countries are also explored in this issue, the contributions cover a broader geographical area, including countries such as Finland, Germany, Russia, Denmark, Sweden and Britain. Thus, we hope to offer a platform for comparative discussions and further research. As mentioned above, the issue is also interdisciplinary and multidisciplinary in its approach. Contributions cover perspectives from sociology, religious studies, theology, philosophy, history, gender studies and politics.

The opening article, written by Grace Davie, presents factors to take into account if the European situation regarding religiosity and non-religiosity is to be understood. By arguing against studying religion, non-religion and atheism in a socio-cultural vacuum it provides an apt starting point for other articles in this section. Phil Zuckerman, compares and contrasts irreligious attitudes in Scandinavia and in the US through the application of a sociological approach to a vast body of empirical research material. Teemu Taira's contribution analyses the debate on atheism in Finland, posing the question as to whether the documented increase in visibility can be said to correspond to an increase in the popularity of atheism as a self-definition among irreligious Finns today. Thomas Zenk, on his part, presents the contemporary debate on '*Neuer Atheismus*' in Germany, mainly based on an analysis of recent campaigns, book projects and media coverage of the theme. This is followed by Teuvo Laitila's presentation of the special case of atheism in Russia, focussing on the reactions of the Russian Orthodox Church towards the new visibility of atheism in Russian society.

In Tiina Mahlamäki's article, contemporary atheism is analysed from a conceptual perspective, focusing especially on gendered aspects of the phenomenon. Gavin Hyman continues this conceptual discussion by juxtaposing different contemporary approaches – mainly Žižek and Dawkins – to the understanding of atheism and the return of religion in political philosophy. Mattias Martinson, on his part, applies Nietzsche's philosophical framework to analyse the development of atheism in Sweden. The question of power rises to the fore in Stuart McAnulla's

examination of recent political debates on atheism in the UK. In the final article of this section, Stephen Bullivant challenges the contemporary secularisation thesis and its claim about an increasing indifference to religious matters by highlighting recent events in the UK related to religion and atheism, above all the visit of Pope Benedict XVI to the country in 2010.

The final section of the issue consists of two book reviews written by Lise Kanckos and Mikko Sillfors, evaluating newly published volumes relating to the conference theme.

As previously announced, *AR* has been included in the indexing database DOAJ (Directory of Open Access Journals), gathering qualitative academic e-journals in its database. Furthermore, *AR* has now also initiated co-operation with the internationally leading scientific database EBSCO, whose indexing database is available at more than 90 per cent of the world's university libraries. Starting from this autumn, the articles published in *AR* will be available in full-text in their index Academic Search Complete. We are grateful for this recognition and the opportunity it brings to make our journal more accessible to a worldwide academic audience. This positive response encourages us to continue our work with publishing critical and innovative thematic issues relating to contemporary issues within the research on religion. ■

TEEMU TAIRA & RUTH ILLMAN
Editors

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