

BOOK REVIEW

Review of *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism & Community in America*

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Academics concerned with nonreligion will be familiar with the history of the field: although Colin Campbell's book, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion*, was published in 1971, nonreligion (including atheism) subsequently became a topic for theological, philosophical, and historical research, and has only relatively recently (in the early 2000s) resurfaced as a topic for sociological consideration. Cimino and Smith were amongst the first academics to take up the sociological study of nonreligion. Based on over a decade of sociological inquiry, *Atheist Awakening* presents a picture of atheism in the contemporary United States.

As their title indicates, Cimino and Smith suggest that there has been an "awakening" amongst atheists. They argue that the increased visibility of atheism over the last ten years is due only in small part to an increase in the proportion of nonreligious people. Rather, nonreligious people have been "mobilised", or encouraged think of their atheism as an important aspect of their identity (p. 2–3). Approaching atheism as a social movement, *Atheist Awakening* is largely concerned with the formation of collective atheist identities in the US.

Cimino and Smith observe that atheists in America portray themselves as a subculture, standing in contrast to, and resisting, the perceived norm of religiosity in the US (p. 10). The authors identify two techniques deployed in the construction of this collective identity: the use of identity politics, and the use of minority discourses (p. 10). Using identity politics, atheists appropriate arguments from the civil rights and gay rights movements. Perhaps the most obvious example is the use of the phrase "coming out", borrowed from the gay rights movement, to describe the process of disclosing one's atheism. By "minority discourses", Cimino and Smith refer to the tendency of atheists in the US to emphasise that they are few in number.

The collective atheist identity described by Cimino and Smith is a response to the wider socio-political context in which it forms. The authors point out that American atheists position themselves in opposition to evangelical Protestants (p. 33). Atheists might, for example, attempt to debunk literalist readings of the Bible, held by some evangelical Protestants. Whether or not these efforts

succeed in convincing others, they nevertheless enhance public awareness of atheism. This exemplifies a recurring theme in the book: the idea that non-believers and believers exist in symbiotic relationships, such that the behaviour and activities of one group form a resource for the other.

Perhaps wary of painting an overly homogenous picture of the atheist movement, much of Cimino and Smith's fourth chapter is concerned with describing internal differences within the atheist movement. Some individuals and groups support greater ritualisation, others disagree; some are only concerned with the influence of religion in the public sphere, others find religion in the private sphere equally problematic. The chapter reads as an attempt to acknowledge this diversity of opinion, peppered with cautionary remarks that hint of the authors' wish to avoid exaggerating these internal differences. Both authors and readers might find Luther Gerlach's SPIN model of social movements useful to understand intra-movement dynamics. According to Gerlach, social movements are *segmented and polycentric*: they are composed of different groups, with different visions and different leadership. They are also *integrated networks*: the segments interact through structural, personal, and ideological ties, and segments can unite if necessary (Gerlach, 1987, p. 115).

Pointing out that "...the world's largest atheist community...is just a click away..." (p. 85), Cimino and Smith devote most of their third chapter to the role of the Internet in the "awakening". Although many of their respondents spoke about the Internet, Cimino and Smith arguably overstate the role of the Internet in new atheist movements. Readers might do well to remember that the Internet is now part of the wider social context in which all groups (religious or otherwise) operate, and is not necessarily a distinguishing feature of the atheist movement.

Given their emphasis on the formation of community and collective identity, it is surprising that Cimino and Smith engage only briefly with the academic literature on *imagined communities* (cf. Anderson, 1983). Although they focus the US, there are indications, both in their own work and in the work of others, of a transatlantic circulation of ideas concerning atheism and secularism (cf. Catto & Eccles, 2013). This suggests that atheists from far flung geographical locations might come to believe that they share aspects of their identity, despite never meeting in person. Remembering that Cimino and Smith

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emphasise a localised and symbiotic relationship between believers and nonbelievers, we might expect atheist movements to vary, taking different forms as they respond to local religious and political landscape. In addition to the more obvious barriers of language and access to communication technologies, local variation in understandings of atheism and secularism could prevent a challenge to the formation of cross-cultural imagined communities forming around atheism. Whether imagined communities can develop in the light of such differences, and how they might reconcile such differences, could be a fruitful direction for future research concerning non religion.

Atheist Awakening is a timely contribution to the field of non-religious studies, and it does point out a direction for future research. The questions arising from each chapter (is the Internet any more important for atheists than for other groups? Do atheist movements take different forms in different societies?) highlight the need for a comparative perspective. Relatively few studies of nonreligion are yet to undertake this comparative task. Although Cimino and Smith have chosen present atheism

as a social movement, comparing the “atheist awakening” to the civil rights and gay rights movements, this is only one of many possible angles from which to view atheism. Comparisons with the extensive literature on New Religious Movements (or, indeed, religion more generally) might also be fruitful.

Competing Interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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How to cite this article: Sissons, K 2016 Review of *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism & Community in America*. *Secularism and Nonreligion*, 5: 1, pp. 1–2, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5334/snr.62>

Published: 04 January 2016

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