New Atheism: Constructing a New Nonbelieving Identity

Canton Winer
Fordham University

Since the height of the Cold War, atheists have been one of the United States’ least-trusted groups. Exclusionary attitudes toward atheists are strong, often outpacing prejudices held against Muslims, possibly America’s next least trusted religious identity. Polling shows that Americans were more likely to say they would not vote for an atheist than any other group.

Widespread distrust of and intolerance toward atheists is a commonly-accepted prejudice in much of American public life. Some have blamed this bias on factors including a simple lack of critical mass of nonbelievers, the United States’ supposed “Christian” foundations, or even laws explicitly biased against those without religion. Upon examination, a likelier explanation rests on the nonexistence of an identity-based atheist movement in the United States. This absence, however, may soon be filled by “New Atheism,” a nascent social movement defined by a more aggressive stance toward defending atheism and secularism, paving the way toward a new, more widely-accepted nonbelieving identity.
in popular rhetoric in the mid-20th century. Because Christianity and Communism were seen as irreconcilable, and because the notion of the United States as a fundamentally Christian nation gained traction, it was not much of a stretch to label atheists (as well as Communists) as un-American, placing nonbelievers outside the popular definition of American citizenship.

Collective resistance to Communism was closely intertwined with resistance against atheists, laying the groundwork for an aggressive anti-secular push from the Religious Right beginning in the latter half of the 20th century. Nationalism and evangelical Christianity became inseparable, and powerful public figures like Reverend Billy Graham were eager to capitalize on this blend of patriotism and religiosity. “It is a battle to the death — either Communism must die, or Christianity must die, because it is actually a battle between Christ and anti-Christ,” Graham wrote in 1954 [13]. Not only were Christianity and Communism at battle, but Christianity — according to Graham and other evangelicals — was the key to victory over the Soviet Union. “There is only one antidote for the poisonous venom of Sovietism, and that is the truth of the gospel of Christ,” he wrote [13]. “The greatest and most effective weapon against Communism today is to be born again Christian.” These strong, atheophobic exhortations came from the mainstream as well as the fringes. Frederick Brown Harris, Chaplain of the Senate from 1942-1947 and 1949-1969, wrote in 1954 about “the hideous face of atheistic world Communism... the most monstrous mass of organized evil, that history has known” [14].

It can be argued that the need for a strong, atheist identity movement did not exist until the anti-Communist, anti-atheist hysteria of the 1950s. Yet this hysteria precluded the formation of such a movement. With Christianity a de facto prerequisite for patriotic citizenship, raising the very argument of accepting nonbelievers could easily earn advocates of the nonreligious the labels of “godless Communist,” “un-American,” and even “enemy of the State.” Once the Religious Right had the chance to drive the course of public discourse on religion in the United States, it had little incentive to ease the reins.

The animosity toward atheists that was constructed in the 1950s may explain the current dearth of nonbelievers serving openly on Capitol Hill. The lack of openly-atheist lawmakers is likely not due to the fact that nonbelievers simply do not run for office, but instead a result to public distrust of atheists, forcing atheists considering a run for office to either conceal their beliefs or give up running at all. In fact, it is reasonable to assume that Congress contains closeted atheists who remain nonbelievers privately, but demur publicly for the sake of remaining politically viable.

The reason for this hidden disbelief is clear: Atheists are one of the least trusted groups in America, and are less likely to be accepted — both publicly and privately — than most other ethnic, religious, and other minority groups [17]. Exclusionary attitudes toward atheists often outpace prejudices held against Muslims, possibly America’s next least trusted group. It is no surprise, then, that publicly identifying as an atheist is politically toxic; a 2012 Gallup poll revealed that Americans were more likely to say they would not vote for an atheist than any other group [18]. Forty-three percent said they would not vote for an atheist, followed by 40% who said they would not vote for a Muslim and 30% who said they would not vote for a gay or lesbian candidate.

Although political office is hardly the only path toward national prominence, the general public’s animosity toward atheism has undoubtedly contributed to the lack of a coherent, cohesive, and powerful national voice from within American atheism. As a result, the Religious Right has enjoyed relatively unchallenged dominance in the forging of atheist identity. As with all identities, atheist identity is constructed both by insiders and outsiders. In other words, atheist identity is formed both by believers and nonbelievers. Atheist identity formation, however, has been somewhat stunted due to the lack of significant atheist organizations (in term of membership, funding, and political clout) in the United States. The vast majority of atheists do not belong to any organized atheist group [17]. Most atheists also do not attend meetings with other atheists, though there are “atheist churches” sprouting up around the country [20]. As such, atheist identity formation within the atheist community has largely taken place on an individual basis. With little organized opposition from atheists, the Religious Right has had relatively free reign on the construction of atheist identity in the U.S. The Religious Right — with powerful institutions like Moral Majority, Christian Coalition of America, The Fellowship, and others — was able to dominate conversations on disbelief since no equally powerful atheist groups existed to counter them. Figures of the Religious Right like Pat Robertson, James Dobson, and Jerry Falwell went unmatched from atheists, essentially giving the Religious Right unrivaled freedom to construct atheism without the consent or input of atheists themselves.

This negative construction of atheist identity has compounded the fact that being an atheist marks an individual as an outsider in the United States. Atheists are a fringe group in the country not because of their numbers (or lack thereof), but because of significant discomfit with atheists among the general public [21]. It is worth noting that only 1.7% of Americans identify as Jewish, but 4% identify as atheist or agnostic, and yet Jews are widely (though certainly not universally) accepted around the country and are actually overrepresented in the public sphere compared to the population at large [22]. Atheists are seen as the “Other” in America, and many Americans believe atheists to be “immoral” [17]. They are also often seen as an affront to the “Judeo-Christian tradition” which supposedly defines the United States [17]. Following this line of thinking, many Americans think that atheists are “un-American.” Atheism, in this view, runs...
counter to the very fabric of the nation, making atheist identity — as Erving Goffman [23] would call it — a “spoiled identity.”

As a result, a great deal of constructing atheist identity in the United States has revolved around combating and managing a stigmatized identity [24].

Many atheists, however, choose to manage their identity by concealing it. Because atheists are not a visible minority (i.e. nothing “gives away” atheist identity), they are not forced to confront these issues as other groups — including blacks, Italians, and to some extent LGBT people, and others — have historically done. As a result, many nonbelievers may simply find it more convenient to conceal, or be reserved about, their beliefs. Particularly in the case of atheists in politics, these individuals will only face prejudice if they out themselves, so there is actually an incentive to keep their atheism private. The issue is self-reinforcing. Atheists will only be accepted if they out themselves, but if they out themselves, they won’t be accepted.

The challenge of “outing” oneself as atheist is heightened by the reality that, like many advocates for marginalized groups, atheist advocates also face the challenge of being perceived as aggressive and pushy when publicly defending their beliefs. Many religious Americans perceive public atheist sentiment as an assault on their own beliefs — if not an outright attack on the founding principles of the country — and react very negatively to public professions of atheism. As David Niose [4] highlights, atheists who vocally express their views on religion commonly receive the label “militant,” yet Christians who even more aggressively espouse their religious beliefs rarely receive this same distinction, instead earning the label “evangelical” or “devout.” As a result, many atheists simply lie low, “often identifying by default with a religion they don’t believe and don’t practice” [4].

Together, these factors have stifled the creation of a coherent, vocal, and national atheist movement in the United States. “We are where gays were at the time of Stonewall,” Lori Lipman Brown, director of the Secular Coalition of America (a lobbying group based in Washington), said in an interview with The New York Times in 2008 [24]. “And the thing we have in common with gays back then is that day to day you’re hidden,” Brown said. “If you make the decision to come out, you’re treated very badly.” Many individuals simply remain “closeted” in their atheist identity because of the social repercussions that accompany publicly declaring oneself an atheist.

The relative scarcity of strong atheist support groups may reveal another reason why electing atheists to public office is so difficult in the United States: atheism remains a dormant political cause. Atheist lobbying groups pale both in number and in clout when compared to religious groups. Additionally, the atheist constituency is difficult to activate simply because atheists are hard to locate. Unlike blacks, Hispanics, gays and lesbians, atheists “do not reside visibly in certain neighborhoods” [24]. Atheists also do not come together collectively to worship, adding to the challenge of locating them.

Possibly the most significant obstacle to atheist collective action, however, is that atheists do not have — or at least have not yet found — anything to coalesce around. The atheist identity is largely composed of things that the group does not believe, not what they do believe. There is currently no banner for American atheists to march under. Interestingly, the issue that is probably most pressing for atheists in the United States is probably confronting stigmatization of nonbelievers and challenging political and social discrimination. As I said, however, many atheists choose to deal with this stigmatization by concealing their disbelief instead of by confronting anti-atheist beliefs.

In addition to the problem perpetuated by closeted atheists, many atheists “maintain a diplomatic silence” about their beliefs because “they don’t want to offend our friends and neighbors” [25]. While this might seem like a private issue, Daniel Dennett [25] (a major figure in New Atheism) argues that “the price is political impotence.” Private silence amounts to public silence, and many “[p]oliticians don’t think they even have to pay us lip service, and leaders who wouldn’t be caught dead making religious and ethnic slurs don’t hesitate to disparage the ‘godless’ among us” [25]. In fact, many politicians see atheist-bashing as a “low-risk vote-getter,” largely since most atheists maintain pursed lips when religion appears in conversation. Simply identifying oneself as atheist and breaking the silence, Dennett argues, will lead to greater political power for the atheist community.

All of this being said, the 21st century holds a fair amount of promise for American atheists. In the past, atheists have largely advanced the cause for equality through the judiciary. Social equality, however, cannot be achieved by way of the gavel.

Instead, the nonbelieving community requires a coherent identity-based social movement, and there are several factors which indicate that the nonbelieving community may finally be ready to begin forming this movement.

In many ways, the struggle for atheist rights is comparable to the struggle for lesbian and gay rights. While the courts certainly played a role in the gay and lesbian rights movement’s success, that movement has been primarily waged as an identity movement, not through a series of legal briefs. Because of significant social pressure to keep one’s atheism private, many atheists do not “come out of the closet,” even to their families. Gays and lesbians (though they still have not achieved full social and legal equality in the United States) were largely in a similar position of self-imposed silence mere decades ago. Public opinion shifted, slowly but surely, as more lesbian and gay individuals “outed” themselves.

Americans began to realize that they knew people who were gay or lesbian in their workplace, in their circles of friends, and in their homes. Self-enforced silence gradually gave way to gay pride, advancing the cause for equality in a way that court cases simply cannot.

Identity is the source of the successes of the lesbian and gay rights movement. By moving the conversation from the closet to the public square, lesbians and gays reframed what it means to identify as lesbian or gay. Instead of attempting to conform to the norm, gays and lesbians proclaimed their “Gay Pride,” and demanded that American society evolve to incorporate their
identity, not the other way around.

No such “Atheist Pride” movement exists. Similar to gays and lesbians, nonbelieving Americans can hide their identity — there is no physical marker of one’s minority status as an atheist, so it is unlike being black, Hispanic, or female. In fact, atheist identity is even easier to hide than gay and lesbian identity. Closeted lesbian and gay individuals must either conceal their romantic involvements or suppress their sexual feelings; closeted atheists merely keep their mouths shut during certain kinds of conversations, even failing to regularly attend church does not necessarily mark an individual as an atheist.

Some may note that atheist organizations have existed in the United States since the early 20th century, including the American Humanist Association (AHA); American Atheists; and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, to name a few. This is true, but these organizations have lacked the membership and the power to be a significant player in national politics. Furthermore, these organizations had not, for the most part, been identity-oriented. For example, the AHA — the oldest, and possibly the most prominent organization of nonbelievers in the United States — had focused more on what David Niose calls “general progressive issues, such as a reproductive rights, peace, church-state separation, and human rights” [4]. In fact, when Herb Silverman founded the Secular Coalition for American (SCA) in an effort to create a coalition of various groups that could grow into an identity-oriented movement, the AHA initially refused to join, as they found the SCA’s approach potentially too brazen [4]. Even relatively powerful groups which fought against the anti-atheist efforts of the Religious Right, such as the People for the American Way (PFAW) and the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), have been quick to emphasize any religious connections, a tacit acknowledgement that secular causes lack legitimacy without religious support, and hardly a resounding cry for atheist pride [4].

Beginning in the 21st century, however, a group of “New Atheists” may be sowing the seeds of a true atheist identity movement. Niose [4] credits the 2000 election of George W. Bush as nonbelievers’ “wake-up call.” Many nonbelievers, Niose claims, were incensed by Bush’s religion-laced public statements, his conservative stances on social issues, and the generous access fundamentalist religious leaders had to the White House under his administration. The attacks on September 11th, 2001 can also be seen as a tipping point for American atheism. After the attacks, the country’s atheists became much more vocal. Many nonbelievers were frustrated by “God is on our side” rhetoric in the face of an attack that they felt was fueled by the same logic — surely the suicide bombers also thought God was on their side. David Silverman, president of American Atheists, says that the September 11 attacks inspired many formerly closeted atheists to speak out. “Most people know atheists now,” he says [26]. “They knew them before, but didn’t know they were atheists.”

New Atheism is possibly the most important outgrowth of the Bush era for American atheists. The origins of the term “New Atheism” are unclear; Sam Harris’ 2004 book, The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason, is often cited as the official “beginning” of New Atheism, though the term appears to have been coined by Wired magazine in 2006 (Pharyngula Wiki n.d.). “New Atheism” was at first used mostly as a pejorative used by theists to describe vocal atheists, intending to dismiss these outspoken nonbelievers as an irrational, ill-conceived fad (Pharyngula Wiki n.d.). Those who were described using the term were at first resistant to it, and while some continue resist it, many have since embraced the New Atheist label (Pharyngula Wiki n.d.).

The New Atheists brought a new, much more outspoken approach to public discourse on atheism. Rather than taking the soft, diplomatic approach historically employed by the AHA and other organizations, which were quick to emphasize ties with the religious community and advocated on broader, less controversial issues, the New Atheists forcefully criticized religion and belief in God not only as erroneous, but also as socially harmful. For example, even the title of Christopher Hitchens’ best-selling 2007 book, God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything, makes his distaste for religion quite clear, and Hitchens calls religion “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism, tribalism, and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children” [27]. Richard Dawkins wrote in his 2006 bestseller The God Delusion that, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomanic, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully” [28].

New Atheism, it should be noted, is somewhat amorphous and hard to define. New Atheists may have brought a sense of pride to some members of the nonbelieving community, but they
have not brought unity. Atheists remain divided on their reception of New Atheism, some finding the approach refreshing and liberating, others put off by its “shriek” or “angry” approach [29].

Certainly, the critics of New Atheism have a point. The gay and lesbian rights movement did not, after all, find success through blunt criticism of the group oppressing them, though prominent adversarial gay rights activists (like Larry Kramer) did exist. Gays and lesbians did not criticize straight communities as harmful to society, but instead simply said “we are here.”

Furthermore, New Atheism’s forceful denunciation of religion reinforce the “militant atheist” trope which many American atheists are so careful to avoid. Still, this criticism may be missing the point. While the arguments of the New Atheists are unlikely to convince the devout, the devout are not New Atheists’ target audience. The New Atheists are not trying to convert the religious. They are attempting to activate the religious nones, agnostics, and other “soft” atheists into taking action and actively staking their claim in American identity and nonbeliever identity. They are laying the groundwork for an identity-oriented movement.

New Atheism also reorients the relationship between theist and atheist communities. Atheists have historically operated largely from a defensive stance. Instead of responding to attacks, acting essentially in a permanent state of damage control — as American atheism has done in the past — New Atheism attacks religion. New Atheism brings a proactive energy to the community that places religious communities on a newfound offense. No longer merely managing a damaged identity, the New Atheists have gone on the offensive, challenging the very prima facie status that the Religious Right worked so hard to construct and uphold. Until the rise of New Atheism, atheist identity in the United States was largely defined by a tacit acceptance of atheism’s inferiority to religion. Instead of rejecting the premise of challenges placed against them, American atheists often responded to them. If someone calls you stupid, and your response is “I’m not stupid,” then we are still talking about stupid. New Atheism does not merely respond to the criticisms of atheism; it reframes the conversation and asks religion to justify itself instead.

In a sense, perhaps New Atheism is nonbelieving America’s Stonewall. While New Atheism is not a singular, defining event as Stonewall was, it may have mobilized the atheist community in a similar (though less potent) way. The violent, spontaneous protests that erupted following a police raid on the Stonewall Inn on June 28, 1969 were the result of New York City’s gay community proclaiming that enough was enough. Rejecting the assimilationist, non-confrontational approach of early homophile groups, the Stonewall demonstrations launched a confrontational, identity-oriented Gay Liberation movement. The atheistic books and rhetoric of New Atheism may be the momentary “violent” outburst that American atheists need. It seems unlikely that the path to wider public acceptance of America’s nonbelievers will be paved in fiery, anti-theistic prose, but New Atheism may be the burst of flame that ignites a steadier, prolonged, and mature atheist identity movement in the United States. Stonewall gave rise to the Gay Liberation, which in turn gave rise to a gay and lesbian civil rights movement. This movement realized that violent outbursts in the style of Stonewall would not bring sustainable change, but the gay and lesbian rights movement would not have existed without those same outbursts which it sought to avoid. New Atheism may play a similar role in stimulating a movement of its own.

Even under the assumption that New Atheism has laid the groundwork for an identity-oriented atheist movement, there are still several key unresolved issues that may impede the formation of this movement. Perhaps the most important is that atheism remains poorly defined. Even atheists themselves have widely differing views on what it means to identify as an atheist. In the strictest sense, an atheist is someone who believes that God does not exist. Yet, Pew Research found that “14% of those who call themselves atheists also say they believe in God or a universal spirit” [30]. A number of self-identifying atheists also identify as Catholic, Jewish, or some other religious identity (so-called “cultural Catholics” and “Secular Jews,” for example). Conversely, a large number of Americans who say they do not believe in God or a universal spirit do not identify as atheist. Seven percent of respondents said that they do not believe in God or a universal spirit, yet only 2.4% said they were atheists [30]. Additionally, many atheists are uncomfortable critiquing religion, while others bluntly criticize “superstitious” belief systems. Twelve percent of agnostics and atheists, for example, told Pew Research in a 2014 poll that they felt religious influence was decreasing, and they thought that was a bad thing [31]. Building a coalition among such a wide-range of identity and objective daunts, and no clear resolution to these issues is currently apparent.

The Internet may be a tool for atheism to overcome several of the obstacles it faces. Most notably, the Internet allows individuals to discuss their beliefs in a space that many find far more welcoming than the physical spaces of the workplace, home, and town hall. As noted by Peter M. Rinaldo, the Internet allows atheists to communicate and express their views without having to identify themselves [36]. Moreover, it also allows atheists to digitally congregate without paying dues or otherwise joining a national organization. This is a double-edged sword for American atheists. On one edge, it allows atheists to form virtual communities without the risk of social retribution, as atheists can operate anonymously online. It also allows communities that feel neglected in “mainstream” atheist discourse, such as women, to congregate in digital communities to make their voices heard. On the other edge, the Internet creates less of a need — or at least an immediately apparent one — for a strong, national atheist organization, thereby prolonging the social conditions which make the anonymity of the Internet appealing.

All of this goes to show that while American atheists have made significant strides in moving toward wider social acceptance, there is still a long way to go. Atheists remain fractured and disorganized, and internal struggles over identity and strategy are far from resolved. New Atheism may have broken the silence...
and given life to a new national discussion on atheism, but it hardly presented a blueprint for the way forward. New Atheism brought candor, but not coherence. Without the formation of a strong, identity-oriented social movement, American atheists look destined for continued political impotence and public distrust.

REFERENCES


ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author thanks Dr. Micki McGee and Dr. Leonard Casutto for their guidance and mentorship. This research was financially supported by a Fordham University Undergraduate Research Grant.

ADDITIONAL I

Christianity was framed not only as under attack from “Godless Communism,” but also as the strongest weapon in the American arsenal against it. On February 9, 1950, Senator Joseph McCarthy (R-Wisconsin) made this message clear in a Lincoln’s birthday address to the Women’s Republican Club of Wheeling, West Virginia:

Today we are engaged in a final, all-out battle between communist atheism and Christianity. The modern champions of communism have selected this as the time. And, ladies and gentlemen, the chips are down — they are truly down [11].

While most political rhetoric was not as fiery as McCarthy’s, the public widely supported him. A January 1954 Gallup poll placed McCarthy’s favorable rating at 46% and his unfavorable rating at 36%, giving him a net favorable of +10 [12]. Though his favorable ratings would drop irreparably into the negatives by the spring of that year, McCarthy’s wide favorability in public polling earlier that year signaled, implicitly if not also explicitly, a widespread acceptance of the Senator’s atheist bashing.

ADDITIONAL II

While the Communist label is not thrown around as carelessly today as in the 1950s, the Religious Right was keen to capitalize on the distrust of atheism and secularity (i.e. the separation of government and religion), and the anti-atheist sentiment which frothed in the 1950s continued throughout the 20th century and...
into the 21st century. In 1980, the so-called “Moral Majority” (a prominent conservative Christian group headed by Jerry Falwell) helped to carry Ronald Reagan to victory over incumbent President Jimmy Carter. In 1987, Vice President George H. W. Bush told reporters, “No, I don’t know that atheists should be regarded as citizens, nor should they be regarded as patriotic. This is one nation under God” [15]. The statement was made one week after he announced his candidacy for the Republican presidential nomination, and though the entire Chicago political press corps was present, only Robert Sherman of American Atheist Press apparently found the comment newsworthy. His son George W. Bush was elevated to the White House 13 years later after running on an explicitly evangelical platform. Even today, controversies over civic displays of nativity scenes, comments made by reality TV stars, and other seemingly insignificant contestations continue to evoke Christian Nation sentiment.

**ADDENDUM III**

In addition to the development of these attitudinal and rhetorical hostilities, it bears mentioning that there has been some codification of prejudice against atheists in the United States, and there are some laws that directly discriminate against atheists. For example, atheists are explicitly banned from serving in higher office in some states, and seven states even have such bans written in their state constitutions [16]. The North Carolina State Constitution, for example, states that:

The following persons shall be disqualified for office:
First, any person who shall deny the being of Almighty God. (North Carolina State Constitution, Article VI, Sec. 8)

That seven states have language resembling the above in their state constitutions is undoubtedly an indication of prejudice toward and distrust of atheists in the United States. Perhaps even more telling, however, is that these ordinances are often unnoticed, unchallenged, and uncontroversial. It is extremely difficult to find reputable publications that discuss this issue; a simple Google search reveals that no major American news outlets have published articles about these laws.

**ADDENDUM IV**

Former Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) demonstrates this reality quite clearly. Frank, who served openly as a gay man in Congress, announced his nonbeliever status only after retiring from office. His example is particularly telling, as he came from a fairly liberal district, yet felt more comfortable coming out publicly as an openly-gay man than as a nonbeliever. (It should be noted that Frank, who is of Jewish descent, has said that he was reluctant to “explicitly disavow any religiosity [while in Congress for fear that] it could get distorted into an effort to distance myself from being Jewish — and I thought that was wrong, given that there is anti-Jewish prejudice” [19]. This argument is somewhat suspect, given that Frank came out as atheist shortly after leaving office. Frank remained a person of Jewish heritage; the only thing that changed was his status as an elected official.)

**ADDENDUM V**

See McCollum v. Board of Education Dist. 71, which found religious instruction in public schools unconstitutional; Torcaso v. Watkins, which found unconstitutional the requirement that applicants for public office must swear that they believed in the existence of God; Engel v. Vitale, which found school-sponsored prayer unconstitutional; Allegheny County v. ACLU, which found a nativity scene displayed inside a government building unconstitutional; and many others.

**ADDENDUM VI**

It should be noted, however, that this is not universally true. Certainly, the life-and-death issues of funding for HIV/AIDS research also changed the stakes and brought many people out of the closet and into the streets. For many in the gay community, the issue was survival, not just pride, and rhetoric sometimes became bitter and urgent in the climate of the AIDS crisis.

**ADDENDUM VII**

American atheism also faces a gender problem. An overwhelming 67% of self-declared atheists in the United States are male [30]. The prominent figures in New Atheism are all male, and many of them have come under intense fire from feminist circles, who claim that Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, etc. hold misogynist attitudes [32]. Furthermore, their self-presentation is stereotypically masculine in its aggression, which some critics feel may be driving women away from New Atheism [33]. Journalist Sarah McKenzie [34] suggests that atheism’s gender problem may be more structural, claiming that girls may actually be socialized to keep their distance from the atheist label. “After all, girls are taught to be sensitive and emotional, to not cause trouble or be particularly forthright with their opinions,” McKenzie wrote [34]. “Women who dare to be aggressive or outspoken are often labelled as hysterical harpies, not worthy of being listened to and impossible to take seriously. We should hardly be surprised that some women might be reluctant to come out as atheists.” Some critics allege that when women attempt to discuss their perceptions of sexism within the atheist community, they are met with hostility. “For the past several years, Twitter, Facebook, Reddit, and online forums have become hostile places for women who identify as feminists or express concern about widely circulated tales of sexism in the movement,” Mark Oppenheimer wrote [35]. New Atheist figures like Richard Dawkins, Oppenheimer continued, have “alienated many women — and men — by belittling accusations of sexism in the movement.” Oppenheimer blames this problem, in part, on American atheism’s “roots in very male subcultures.” Women (such as Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who founded the nonprofit group American Atheists in 1963) were certainly involved, but they were exceptions, not the rule. Until the “boys club” in American atheism takes this problem seriously, charges of sexism within the nascent movement will distract from the movement’s overall cause.
CANTON WINER

Canton Winer graduated in 2015 from Fordham University, where he majored in Sociology and American Studies. Originally from Florida, Canton is currently teaching SAT, ACT, and SSAT test prep in Shanghai. Upon leaving China, he intends to pursue a PhD in Sociology.