

## A(she)ism:

### The State of Feminism in the Non-religious Narrative

Throughout history and in practically every nation, women have been forced to adhere to certain cultural rules and boundaries. The battle for women's equality has been a long one, and much of it has been in direct opposition with prominent religious teachings. In modern times, the internet has played a major factor in bringing movements such as feminism together, and in connecting people across multiple cultures and belief systems. Sometimes these beliefs are actually quite the antithesis, as in the case of atheist discourse communities. This essay explores the intersectionality of feminist women who are also non-religious, and the specific struggles they face not only through religion-based misogyny, but also surprisingly often in non-religious communities. Adopting a feminist framework, this essay will discuss how the internet has played a role in atheism's viral success, as well as how the negative impact some of its most toxic qualities force non-religious women to strike out on their own. To begin, it is important to understand the basic reasoning behind why feminism is difficult to make compatible with religion.

The role of women in most religions is that of the subservient caretaker. Women are expected to perform as "vessels" for men, following the instructions of their husbands and serving to fulfill men's purpose. For example, in *The Bible*, Ephesians 5:22-24 states,

"Wives, obey your husbands as you obey the Lord. The husband is the head of the wife, just as Christ is the head of the church people. The church is his body and he saved it. Wives should obey their husbands in everything, just

as the church people obey Christ” (*World English Version*, Eph. 5:22-24)

Instructions for the place of women in Christianity (that is, obviously below men in authority) are clearly expressed here. In this same passage, the only instructions for men are that they must love their wives. *The Qur’an*, the sacred text of Islam, also holds strong rules about the place of women, as is evidenced by verse 34 of the fourth chapter whose title translates to “The Women.” The passage states:

“Men are in charge of women by right of what Allah has given one over the other... so righteous women are devoutly obedient... but those wives from whom you fear arrogance – first advise them; then if they persist, forsake them in bed; and finally, strike them.” (*Sahih International Translation*, 4.34.)

Historically, religion has played a great role in politics. At times when people have doubted political leaders, religion has often been a reliable means of upholding cultural beliefs, ethics, and morals. The historical oppression of women, then, can be largely attributed to those religious codes which dictated their inferiority. Many religious traditions “have the same problem of casting men as people and women as appendages. That runs so contrary to what seems obvious to me, that women are people just as much as men” (Marcotte). A modern woman who seeks to define her own purpose in the world may see issues with these religious teachings dictating her role as man’s helpmeet. This is one reason many feminists find rationality in identifying as atheist or agnostic, a growing group of non-believers that otherwise fall under the umbrella term of “the nones.”

Atheist communities should, in theory, have no logical basis for discrimination against women. In atheism, “there is no rational reason that [autonomy] should only be extended to men,

because again, there's no higher power assigning one gender the role of leaders and the other of servants. Thus, women are equal to men, and as a matter of human decency, should have the same right to self-determination" (Marcotte). According to a 2014 study by Pew Research Center, 68% of American atheists are male, and 77% are white (Lipka). This brings us to the question, why are such a great majority of atheists male, when women account for approximately half the population? Within the atheist community, most discrimination can be traced to ideas of social Darwinism. Charles Darwin, author of *On the Origin of the Species*, pioneered the theory of natural selection and evolution. Some people attempt to adopt and twist his findings to justify their own political agendas, believing that women and minorities have certain biological limitations which place them below Caucasian males in social status. When taken to extremes, social Darwinism can take a sinister edge, such as the way in which the Nazi Party advocated for eugenics and forced sterilization of minority groups. While this essay is focused on women, racial minorities are another group that is often excluded from atheist discourse. Those intending to use Darwinism to establish social hierarchies formulate their rankings on certain "biological predispositions" rather than any God-given right, and this is what makes the atheist community particularly susceptible to such ideas. As one might expect, many social issues can arise when attempting to rank people based on their biological traits. Social Darwinism has brewed a hostile environment for women and minority groups even today. Many online communities use knowledge pertained from Darwin's books as fuel in the fight against women's rights, claiming that his research justifies women as the more "irrational," "emotional," and "picky" sex. These groups participate in "a type of social Darwinism that objectifies women just because they're women. For these men, misogyny is not based in religion at all, but in biology" (Bianco). Bianco's statement powerfully summarizes the root source of sexism in atheist communities.

Examples of online groups who may similarly subscribe to this use of Social Darwinism include the Alt-Right and the “Involuntary Celibate” movements. While many toxic online communities pose a threat to women and minority groups, it is perhaps the Involuntary Celibate movement that is the most concerning when it comes to women’s issues. Involuntary Celibate’s, or “In-cels,” as they often refer to themselves, are an online discourse community of men that centers itself entirely around the belief that they are sexually rejected not because of flaws within themselves, but because women are selfish, shallow, and only interested in pursuing “alpha-male” type men, referred to as “Chads.” In short, these men feel that sexual interaction with women ought to be their right, and that they are being unjustly treated when women refuse them. Some sects of the In-cel movement may even go so far as to suggest that men have an inherent right to use their superior body strength to force their sexual desires upon women. Members of the In-cel and Alt-Right movements often align themselves with atheist beliefs, creating a bad name for atheists as a whole. These members typically disguise themselves under the title of New Atheism.

On the surface, New Atheism appears to be a somewhat ordinary group comprised of atheists who are more motivated than the “everyday atheist” to spread their beliefs. These are the atheist activists often seen going out of their way to make comments on social media, videos, and news stories. New Atheists believe firmly in spreading the “gospel” of science, so to speak. New Atheists are sometimes referred to as “anti-theists,” rather than simply atheists because of their motivation to work actively against religious movements. In studies performed on anti-theists, they scored the highest on scales of anger and dogmatism when compared to other non-believing groups (Chituc). Like other online socio-political groups, members of the New Atheist movement often take to forums such as Reddit and 4Chan, where they can commune with other atheists, discuss, and validate their opinions. Sometimes these forums consequently support their

members in harmful endeavors. Hatred towards women and minority groups runs rampant throughout many online discussion boards. In a recent study, the toxicity of Reddit forums was determined by a computer algorithm which scanned user-submitted posts and comments for evidence of sexist, racist, and homophobic language, among other things. The study found that “Reddit’s atheism forum, perhaps the largest community of anti-theists on the internet, is the third most toxic group on Reddit” (Chituc). The internet, it seems, while largely responsible for the growth of atheism in recent years, is also much to blame for the more extremist views among atheists, particularly regarding women.

On the internet, a huge forefront of the atheist community is “YouTube atheism.” YouTube atheism features such content creators as The Atheist Experience, Amazing Atheist, Thunderf00t, Jaclyn Glenn, DarkMatter2525 and others. YouTube hosts some of the most boisterous atheist voices, and often serves as an excellent platform for those who are just starting out in the atheist community to learn from and connect with others. While most atheist content on YouTube remains relatively harmless, “Some of the most popular viral videos include “How Feminism Destroyed New Atheism” by Thunderf00t, and “Rape, Feminism, and The Amazing Atheist” by Amazing Atheist” (Kesvani). Essentially, these videos and others of the same nature declare feminism a cancer. For example, at the beginning of Amazing Atheist’s video, T.J. shows some messages he had created while in an internet feud with feminists. The messages are nearly all of an explicit nature and threaten his opponent with rape and bodily harm. In the same video T.J. makes jokes about rape, and insultingly provides dictionary definitions of the meaning of a “joke,” even going so far as to suggest that one of the reasons he’s allowed to joke about it is because he, “like many women,” has a rape fantasy. Despite this, he insists: “Women and girls who actually watch my content know damn well I am not a misogynist, and certainly not an avowed one” (Amazing Atheist). The dilemma of videos like these is that their popularity leads

many people to believe that the views expressed within them are views common of all atheists. These popular content-creators at the forefront of a growing movement have a heavy weight of responsibility on their shoulders, and it is grossly abused when they use their power to degrade half of the earth's population. Not all atheist Youtubers behave in such a way. Some, like Jaclyn Glen, "have warned that certain sections of the online sceptic community could be isolating some of its most vulnerable members" (Kesvani). For women who may be exploring the idea of atheism because religion does not grant them the autonomy they desire, these anti-feminist videos are hugely discouraging. Unfortunately, this kind of attitude towards women in the atheist community is all too common, and not just online.

Some of the major figureheads of New Atheism, often called the "Four Horsemen", including Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, do little to improve the inclusiveness of atheism towards women and minorities. The reasons for which women are ostracized lie purely in outdated stereotypes and prejudices. When asked why atheism seemed to appeal more to men than women, Sam Harris replied that the atheist movement "doesn't obviously have this nurturing, coherence-building, extra estrogen vibe that you would want by default if you wanted to attract as many women as men" (Bianco). Essentially, these men feel that women require religion because it appeals more to their delicate sensibilities and inherent nurturing nature. Richard Dawkins controversially declared in his 2011 letter entitled *Dear Muslima* that women from Western countries shouldn't speak up about sexual harassment when women in Islamic countries suffer more injustice (Lee). While these men have since apologized for some of their offensive statements, the effects are irreversible. Even within a community that should have no reason to exclude them, women are treated as weaker people, rather than fellow non-believers and comrades. At atheist conventions, many women have reported sexual harassment from their peers, and receive various punishments when

they don't fit their expected feminine molds. The shared experience of atheist women follows that "at the grassroots level, women who speak up against harassment or sexism in the movement have been the target of disgusting attacks online... if a recipient becomes angry or upset, that just proves she was weak and crazy to begin with" (Pollit). Essentially, "Women are excluded from the atheist movement because its leaders seem to believe women are not "rational" creatures" (Bianco). There seems to exist a cycle wherein women attempt to join the conversation, are mistreated and disrespected, try to speak out against sexism, and are labelled as "crazy" and "cancerous" to the movement. Some atheist men fear that feminists are too preoccupied with their own agendas to serve as acceptable faces for the movement. For all of these reasons, atheist women are not permitted to fully exist in either identity. When among male atheists, their femaleness is all too apparent, and yet to be categorized merely as women ignores a large portion of that which makes their lives unique: their beliefs. As powerfully summarized by Marta Trzebiatowska:

On rare occasions when female atheists appear in the media, they are invariably feminist activists. This is hardly a problem but unfortunately it leads to a conflation of feminist activism and atheism, which in turn makes the 'everyday' female atheists invisible. It also encourages stereotyping of the most simplistic sort whereby the feminist stance becomes the primary focus while the atheism is treated as an add-on. But the two do not necessarily go together, and the women may not see them as equally central to their lives. (Trzebiatowska)

Non-religious women are therefore left in a sort of limbo between worlds. In one direction, there are religions with inherent rules that place constraints on the behavior of women, and in the other

direction the atheist community at large rejects those women who seem “too feminist.” In other words, “why would women join a movement led by sexists and populated by trolls?” (Pollit). The answer is, ultimately, they won’t.

As strong women have often done in the past, they will make new paths where the established paths don’t suit them. While atheism is quickly becoming the fastest-growing religion-related discourse group on the internet, “it is likely that the growing concerns over racism and sexism in the community might force it to splinter into more identitarian factions” (Kesvani). Particularly in America’s current political climate, issues of equal pay and reproductive rights are at the forefront of women’s minds. In the battle for reproductive rights, it is almost entirely a matter of religious beliefs which determines a person’s stance because there is no scientific evidence for restricting a woman’s right to access abortions. Many feminists feel that “supporting the growing atheist movement would benefit reproductive rights in the long run” (Marcotte). In a movement that has been predominated by one specific group of people, i.e. Caucasian males, atheist women know they are not the only ones searching to form communities with other non-religious folks. LGBTQ+ people and people of many races also feel excluded from the non-religious narrative. The age of the internet provides “the perfect time to put our best godless foot forward—to connect with other progressive movements, and to put out the welcome mat for all those millions of new-made unbelievers. And that means looking in the mirror in order to broaden a movement that has historically been white, male, middle-class and culturally rather narrow” (Pollit). Feminists are just one of the many marginalized groups of society, but the atheist community does not have to become yet another space where women’s voices go unheard, and atheist women are more than willing to blaze their own trail if necessary.

### Works Cited

Amazing Atheist. Kirk, Thomas James "T.J." III. "Rape, Feminism, and The Amazing Atheist."  
*Youtube*. 29 July, 2014. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6ys-  
OkITOA&has\\_verified=1](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K6ys-OkITOA&has_verified=1)

Bianco, Marcie. "Brazen Sexism is Pushing Women Out of America's Atheism Movement."

*Quartz*. 12 Feb., 2016. <https://qz.com/613270/brazen-sexism-is-pushing-women-out-of-americas-atheism-movement/>

Chituc, Vlad. "Vindicating Chris Stedman." *Patheos*. 24 March, 2015.

<https://www.patheos.com/blogs/nonprophetstatus/2015/03/24/vindicating-chris-stedman-reddits-atheism-forum-is-the-third-most-toxic-on-the-site/>

Kesvani, Hussein. "A Reminder: Internet Atheists Fucking Suck." *Vice*. 14 June., 2017.

[https://www.vice.com/en\\_ca/article/a3z4mk/a-reminder-internet-atheists-fucking-suck](https://www.vice.com/en_ca/article/a3z4mk/a-reminder-internet-atheists-fucking-suck)

Lee, Adam. "Richard Dawkins Has Lost It." *The Guardian*. 18 Sept. 2014.

<https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2014/sep/18/richard-dawkins-sexist-atheists-bad-name>

Lipka, Michael. "10 Facts About Atheists." *Pew Research Center*. 1 June, 2016.

<https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/10-facts-about-atheists/>

Marcotte, Amanda. "Atheism's Shocking Woman Problem." *Salon*. 3 Oct., 2014.

[https://www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new\\_atheisms\\_troubling\\_misogyny\\_the\\_pompous\\_sexism\\_of\\_richard\\_dawkins\\_and\\_sam\\_harris\\_partner/](https://www.salon.com/2014/10/03/new_atheisms_troubling_misogyny_the_pompous_sexism_of_richard_dawkins_and_sam_harris_partner/)

Pollit, Katha. "Atheists Show Their Sexist Side." *The Nation*. 24 Sept., 2014.

<https://www.thenation.com/article/atheists-show-their-sexist-side/>

*The Bible*. World English Version. Online.

<https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Ephesians+5&version=WE>

*The Qur'an*. Sahih International Translation. Online.

<http://corpus.quran.com/translation.jsp?chapter=4&verse=34>

Trzebiatowska, Marta. "Atheism and Feminism." *Oxford University Press Blog*. 24 Sept., 2014.

<https://blog.oup.com/2014/09/atheism-feminism/>