

## Chapter 12

# Who Are the “New Atheists”?

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As with any social movement, the definitive origins of the latest wave of atheist activism are difficult to discern. Scholars (Cimino and Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012) have suggested that this latest rise to prominence for atheists was formally launched with the publication of Sam Harris’ book, *The End of Faith*, in 2004. That book was closely followed by several additional books, including Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* (2006) and Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell* (2007). As is typically the case with social movements, the books were not the beginning of the movement, but were an autocatalytic manifestation of a burgeoning movement both in the US and internationally.

While there is a long history of atheist and freethought activism in the US (Jacoby 2005), some of the most prominent activist groups are fairly recent in origin. American Atheists, for instance, was organized in 1963 as an advocacy group for atheist civil liberties. It was created as a result of the *Abington School District v. Schempp* (a.k.a. *Murray v. Curlett*, 1963) Supreme Court case in which public school Bible reading was found to be unconstitutional. The group has, since then, provided a point of contact for the American public with atheists in the US. While one of the oldest freethought activist groups in the US, American Atheists is not currently the largest. The largest freethought group in the US today is the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF), which was started in 1978 in Wisconsin by a mother and daughter, Anne Nicol Gaylor and Annie Laurie Gaylor. The organization began as a relatively small effort, but now counts close to 20,000 members among its ranks. The Foundation began publication of a newsletter early in its history, and launched a weekly radio show and podcast in 2006, just as the latest wave of atheist activism was taking off.

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There are, of course, many other freethought publications and organizations in the US and internationally. But of primary interest in this chapter is a subgroup that developed out of the most recent wave of open atheist activism: New Atheists. The label appears to have been coined by Gary Wolf in “The Church of the Non-Believers” which appeared in *Wired* magazine (2006). While there has been a fair amount of debate as to whether or not the label “New Atheists” is appropriate for this movement (Flynn 2010), the label appears to have stuck and a growing number of people are self-identifying as members of the movement (Stenger 2009).

One of the few books written by a New Atheist that appears to be somewhat self-reflexive about the movement, *The New Atheism*, by Victor J. Stenger (2009), offers some suggestions as to what New Atheists believe. He describes New Atheists as rejecting all elements of supernatural belief (e.g., god, heaven, hell, reincarnation, etc.). He also argues that New Atheists put their trust in science. Finally, he suggests that New Atheists are critical of religion, though whether this staunch criticism extends to all manifestations of religion is not entirely clear; some would say yes (Hitchens 2009; Stenger 2009) while others are less universal in their critique (Harris 2004; Dennett 2007).

If Stenger’s book is at least a somewhat accurate manifesto of New Atheism then it can be used to provide a basic outline for New Atheist characteristics. Drawing upon those characteristics—rejection of the supernatural, reliance on science, criticism of religion—should make it possible, given sufficient numbers of atheists, to discern what percentage of atheists in the US exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. This question may seem a little odd to some readers as they may wonder why I do not just assume that all individuals in the US who assert that they are atheists also exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. Prior research suggests that a certain percentage of people who either self-identify as atheist or report not believing in a god exhibit some religious or spiritual characteristics (Cragun et al. 2012; Kosmin et al. 2009; Sherkat 2008; Baker and Smith 2009a, b; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012). For instance, Cragun et al. (2012) found that 9 % of people who report their religion as “atheist” later identify as believing in a personal god, and another 5 % believe in a higher power or force. Likewise, Cragun et al. (2013) found that atheists in North America are somewhat diverse, with a variety of attitudes toward political and social issues. In other words, not all atheists exhibit the distinctly irreligious characteristics of New Atheists. Those atheists who do not exhibit the characteristics of the New Atheists, whom I will refer to in this chapter as “other atheists,” report not believing in god, but may not reject all notions of the supernatural (e.g., belief in an afterlife) and may not be as strident in their criticism of religion as are the New Atheists. They may also be less confident in the ability of science to provide meaningful answers to existential questions. While the primary aim of this chapter is to examine the characteristics of New Atheists, I will also provide data on these other atheists by way of comparison. Both groups are understudied and warrant further investigation.

If sufficient numbers of individuals exhibiting the characteristics of New Atheists can be isolated from other atheists and non-religious individuals, it may be of interest to examine some of their other characteristics as well. How do New Atheists

compare to other non-religious people when it comes to things like age, sex, race, geographic distribution, marital status, income, education, and political views? Disentangling New Atheists from other atheists and other non-religious individuals so that I can describe their basic characteristics is the primary focus of this chapter. I conclude with some thoughts on how these characteristics may influence the future of the New Atheist movement.

## 12.1 Finding the New Atheists

As noted above, characteristics of New Atheists have been proposed by members of the movement (Stenger 2009; Myers 2009). These authors suggest three primary characteristics for New Atheists. First, New Atheists are obviously atheists in the sense that they do not believe in a god. Whether or not they are positive or negative atheists (Smith 1980; Bullivant 2008; Lee 2012b; Cliteur 2009)—i.e., they deny the existence of a god or simply lack a belief in a god, respectively—appears to be less important than simply not believing. Beyond just not believing in a god, New Atheists are described as not believing in any other supernatural phenomena, like ghosts, angels, spirits, demons, karma, heaven, hell, or anything else that lies outside the domain of the natural world.

The second characteristic that is claimed of New Atheists is that they have, as a result of rejecting religion and the supernatural, turned to science for answers. Where science and some religions may conflict, New Atheists will side with science. One obvious area where New Atheists will side with science will be evolution. New Atheists should be unequivocal in their acceptance of evolution.

Third, New Atheists are characterized by a critical attitude toward religion. The extent of this critical attitude is not entirely clear, as members of the New Atheist movement seem to be at least semi-tolerant of some more liberal forms of religion (Myers 2009) or may not criticize all aspects of religion (Harris 2004), while others are disparaging of all religion, spirituality, and supernatural belief (Stenger 2009; Hitchens 2009). Regardless of the degree, New Atheists will generally exhibit a critical attitude toward religion.

Assuming these three characteristics are accurate descriptions of New Atheists, the next question is: Is there a nationally representative dataset that contains questions tapping into each of these three dimensions of New Atheism that also contains sufficient numbers of atheists to allow for distinctions among atheists? There is really just one such dataset that is publicly available: the Pew US Religious Landscape Survey.

The US Religious Landscape Survey (USRLS) has a large sample of atheists, 1,643, most of whom (1,374) answered questions in each of these domains (described below). Additionally, the data were collected in 2007, just as the recent wave of atheist activism was growing in popularity. Of note, the dataset includes weights in order for it to represent the US population.

The questions that captured the three dimensions of the New Atheists were fairly straightforward. The USRSLs asked about belief in an afterlife, “Do you believe in life after death,” with “yes” and “no” as response options. The USRSLs asked about evolution by requesting that participants report their level of agreement with the following statement, “Evolution is the best explanation for the origins of human life on earth.” Participants could choose between “completely agree,” “mostly agree,” “mostly disagree,” or “completely disagree.” Finally, participants were asked about their views toward scripture, “Which comes closest to your view of your religion’s scripture (if no religion, they were asked about the Bible)?” The USRSLs provides just two options: (1) it is the word of god, and (2) it is a book written by men and is not the word of god. Participants could choose “other,” though very few did.

With these variables, it is possible, using a two-step cluster analysis, to isolate those with the characteristics of New Atheists from other atheists. A two-step cluster analysis is appropriate in this situation given that the variables employed are nominal (indicate categories that cannot be ranked) or ordinal (ranked categories). Additionally, the number of clusters can be specified in a two-step cluster analysis. The cluster analysis was only performed on individuals who reported not believing in god on the belief in god question. I did not run the algorithm on all those who reported their religion as being atheist (see Cragun et al. (2012) for more information on this distinction). Also, since I was only interested in separating out New Atheists from other atheists, I specified two clusters. The resulting clusters are depicted in Fig. 12.1.

The cluster analysis classified close to 80 % of atheists in the US as exhibiting the characteristics of New Atheists. Since the latest Pew data (The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012) suggest that the percentage of atheist Americans is close to 7 % of the population, that would mean roughly 5.2 % of the US population exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. That is close to 16 million people.

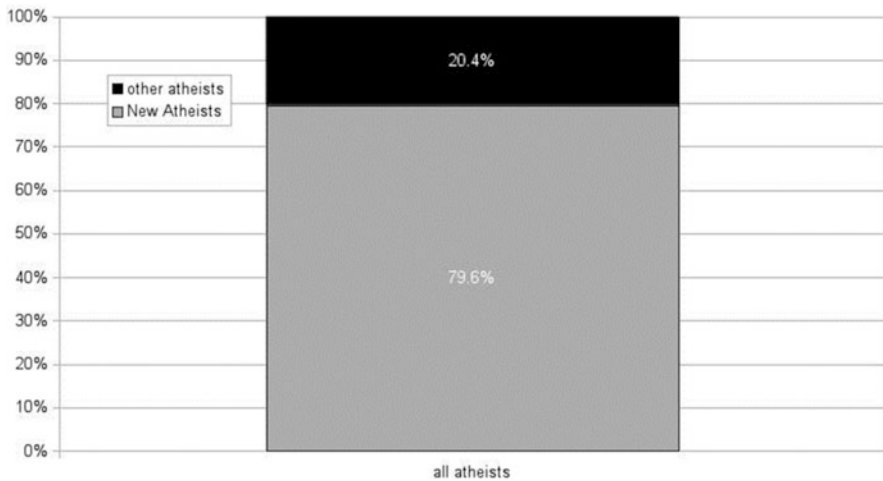


Fig. 12.1 Division of all those reporting no belief in god into New Atheists and other atheists

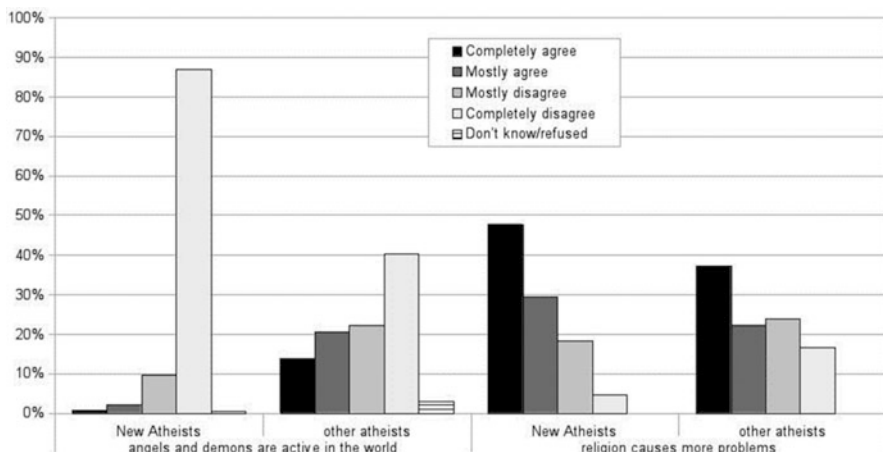


Fig. 12.2 Views of New Atheist cluster and other atheist cluster on additional items

To be clear, it is unlikely that all those who exhibit these characteristics consider themselves to be or identify as “New Atheists”; in this chapter I am simply asserting that close to 80 % of atheists in the US exhibit the characteristics that members of the New Atheist movement argue are the values and beliefs held by their movement. Self-identification as “New Atheist” is likely a sizable percentage lower than these numbers indicate.

In the interest of verifying the accuracy of the cluster analysis, I ran a few additional analyses to see how well the clusters reflect distinctions among atheists and whether the three clustering variables are sufficient to accurately isolate those who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. Figure 12.2 presents the results of two of the analyses, examining the views of the two clusters from the USURLS on whether or not they believe angels and demons are active in the world today and whether or not religion causes more problems than it solves.

The clusters are not quite as clean as I would have hoped. On the first question, about the activity of angels and demons in the world, the clustering pretty accurately reflects the distinction. Almost 90 % of those in the New Atheist cluster report completely disagreeing; another 10 % report mostly disagreeing. However, on the second question, just under 50 % of those in the New Atheist cluster strongly agree that religion causes more problems than it solves, with another 30 % just agreeing. These numbers are higher than those in the other atheist cluster, but not as high as I would have thought. I ran two additional analyses (not shown) that also supported the clustering. When asked whether or not they believe in hell, 100 % of the individuals in the New Atheist cluster reported that they do not. However, about 3–4 % of individuals in the New Atheist cluster report fairly frequent religious service attendance (once or twice a month or more); almost 90 % report seldom or never attending religious services. Just 63 % of individuals in the other atheist cluster report seldom or never attending religious services; 21 % report attending relatively frequently. While not perfect, the cluster analysis seems to have fairly

accurately isolated individuals who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists from other atheists. I may be over-estimating the percentage of individuals who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists in the US, possibly by as much as 10 %. This would suggest that New Atheists account for 70 % to 80 % of atheists in the US and somewhere between 4.9 % and 5.2 % of the US population (or roughly 13–16 million people).

Finally, before I begin describing the demographics of those who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists, I think it will be prudent if I change my wording slightly. While problematic because not all of these people will identify as “New Atheists,” throughout the rest of this chapter I will refer to the people in the New Atheist cluster as “New Atheists,” only so I do not have to continue describing them as “those who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists.”

## 12.2 Demographics of the New Atheists

### 12.2.1 Age

It has long been known that atheists in the US are younger than theists (Vetter and Green 1932; Sherkat 2008; Kosmin et al. 2009; Baker and Smith 2009b). However, prior research has not isolated New Atheists from other atheists. In other words, the age distribution of New Atheists is unknown. With the New Atheists isolated from other atheists in the USURLS, I can now turn to an examination of their age distribution. Figure 12.3 contrasts New Atheists just with other atheists and examines the percentages of these groups in roughly 10-year age brackets (i.e., 18–29, 30–39 ... 80+).

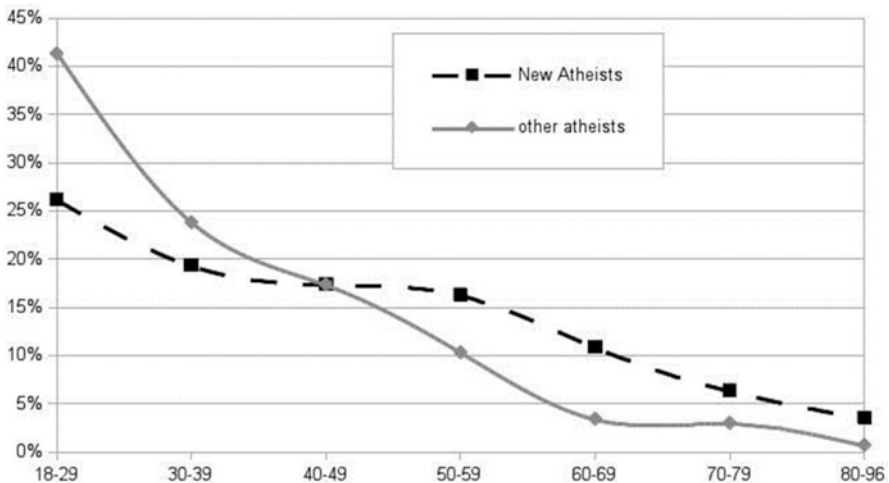
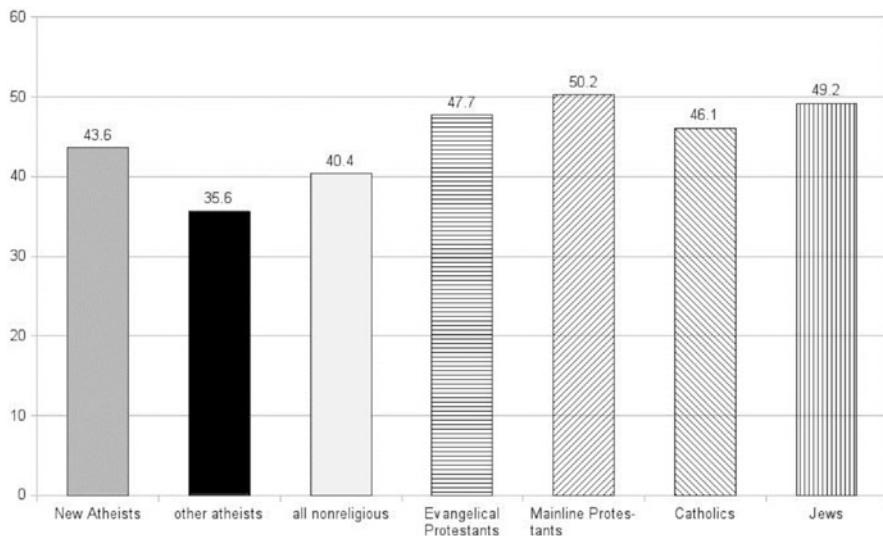


Fig. 12.3 New Atheists’ and other atheists’ age distribution



**Fig. 12.4** Average ages of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

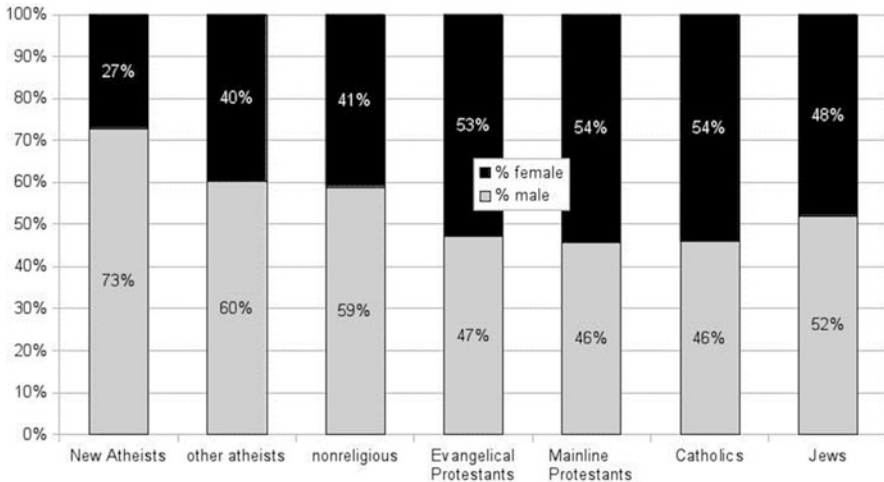
The differences are notable. New Atheists exhibit a slightly older age distribution. Just over 25 % of New Atheists are in the 18–29 year age group while almost 40 % of other atheists are. While there is no way of determining, based on the USURLS, whether other atheists eventually begin to exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists, that does seem to be a possibility based on Fig. 12.3, though clearly not all other atheists do so. However, by age 60, there are very few other atheists; most elderly atheists in the US exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists.

How do these two atheist groups compare with other religious groups and the broad category of the non-religious in age (i.e., those who report no religious affiliation)? Figure 12.4 illustrates this.

Other atheists are the youngest group, on average, by almost 5 years. The non-religious are the second youngest, followed by New Atheists. If what the scientific literature suggests about the importance of age distributions for the growth of religions (Miller et al. 2001; McKinney and Hoge 1983; Roozen 2009) holds for the non-religious and atheists, it is likely that these groups will continue to grow in the future.

### 12.2.2 Sex

Like age, there has long been a clear and discernible relationship between religiosity and sex. Women in the US are significantly and substantially more religious than are men (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012; Sherkat 2008; Baker and Smith 2009b). This disparity is even more pronounced among New Atheists, as is shown in Fig. 12.5.



**Fig. 12.5** Sex distribution of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

New Atheists are the most gender imbalanced of any of the comparison groups; 73 % of New Atheists are male. Other atheists and the non-religious are closer to a 60 %/40 % distribution between men and women. Other religious groups in the US have a higher percentage of women than men, though Jews appear to be a slight exception to that general finding. It may be the case that the nearly three to one gender imbalance among New Atheists is responsible for what appears to be a culture of misogyny in atheist groups, in some atheist writings, and at some atheist meetings. This has recently resulted in a fracturing among New Atheists (the first atheist “sect”), with a splinter called “Atheist+” (the second atheist “sect”) that is advocating for greater attention to issues of misogyny and tolerance in the atheist movement (Christina 2012; Lee 2012a).

### 12.2.3 Race

The racial makeup of the non-religious has been changing over the last 20 years, as more racial and ethnic minorities (i.e., Blacks, Native Americans, Asian Americans, and Hispanics) have begun to leave religion (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012). However, the same does not hold for New Atheists. Figure 12.6 provides a breakdown of the racial makeup of New Atheists along with several other comparison groups.

Ninety percent of New Atheists are white. They do not appear to be a particularly diverse group. Other atheists, on the other hand, do appear to be more diverse, with just 77 % of them being white, a percentage very similar to that of the non-religious.



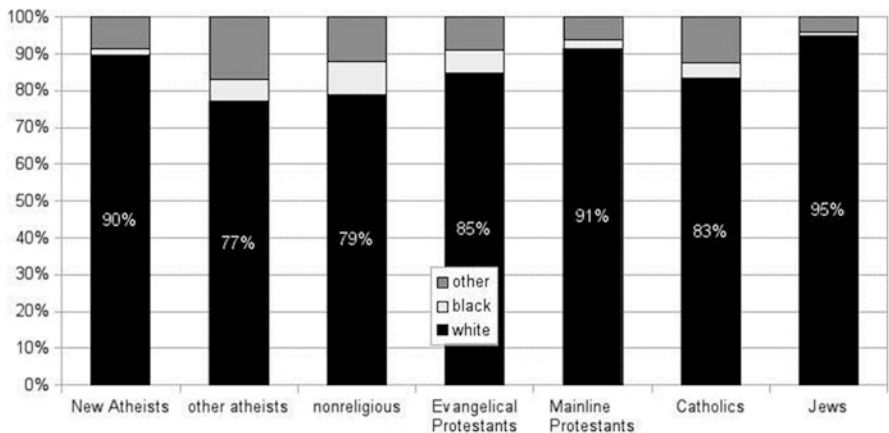


Fig. 12.6 Racial distribution of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

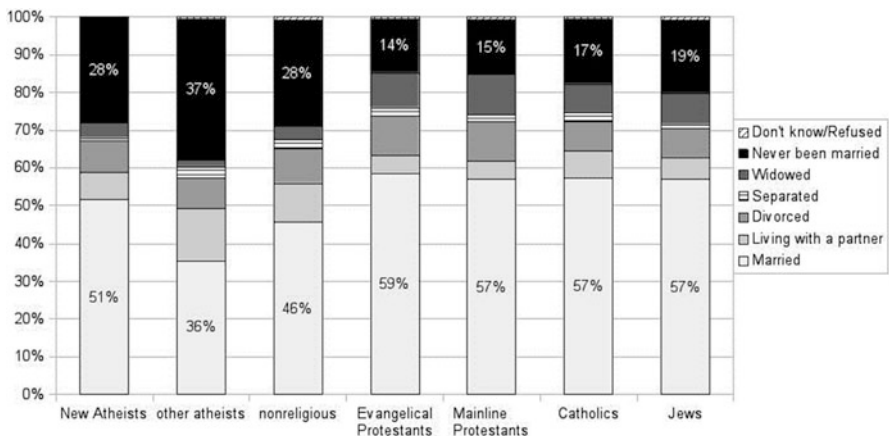


Fig. 12.7 Marital status of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

### 12.2.4 Marital Status

Atheists and the non-religious have long been known to be less likely to be married and more likely to be cohabiting or never married (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012; Baker and Smith 2009b). One study did note that some of these differences disappear when age is controlled (Kosmin et al. 2009), given the lower average age for the non-religious and atheists. Figure 12.7 shows the marital status distribution for New Atheists and several comparison groups.

The three non-religious groups are the least likely to be married and the most likely to be single. They are also the most likely to be living with a partner. A tell-tale sign of the influence of the lower ages of the other atheists and the non-religious is the lower percentages of widowed individuals, percentages that are much higher for the four religious groups included in Fig. 12.7. New Atheists are more similar to Jews than the other two non-religious groups, but they still exhibit a substantial difference in marital relations. At the end of this chapter, I examine marital status and age simultaneously to discern their effect on being both an atheist and a New Atheist.

### 12.2.5 Political Views

Prior research has also illustrated that the non-religious are particularly liberal and progressive in their political views (Kosmin et al. 2009; The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life 2012; Baker and Smith 2009a). Figures 12.8 and 12.9 illustrate this by examining two political elements: political party identification (Fig. 12.8) and ideological orientation (Fig. 12.9).

All three non-religious groups are particularly likely to be independents and Democrats, and are very unlikely to identify as Republican. They are, in fact, less likely to identify as Republican than every other group included, even Jews, who are widely known for their liberal proclivities in the US (Kosmin and Keysar 2006). New Atheists are the least likely to identify as Republican and 45 % identify as Independents. Political ideology is similar, as shown in Fig. 12.9.

New Atheists are the most liberal of any group included in the figure, followed by other atheists, the non-religious, and Jews. 19 % of New Atheists identify as very liberal, compared to just 8 % of Jews.

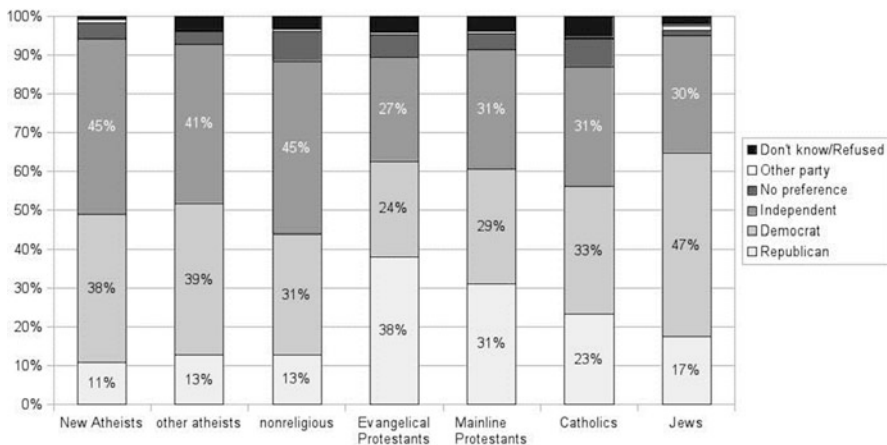


Fig. 12.8 Political party preferences of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

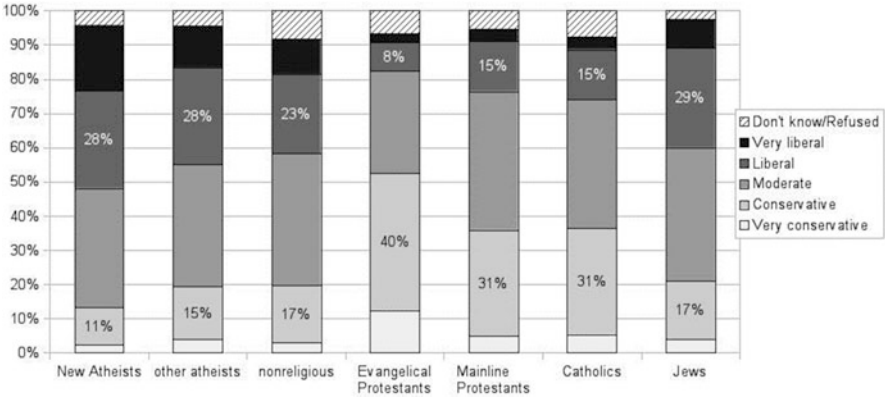


Fig. 12.9 Political ideology of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

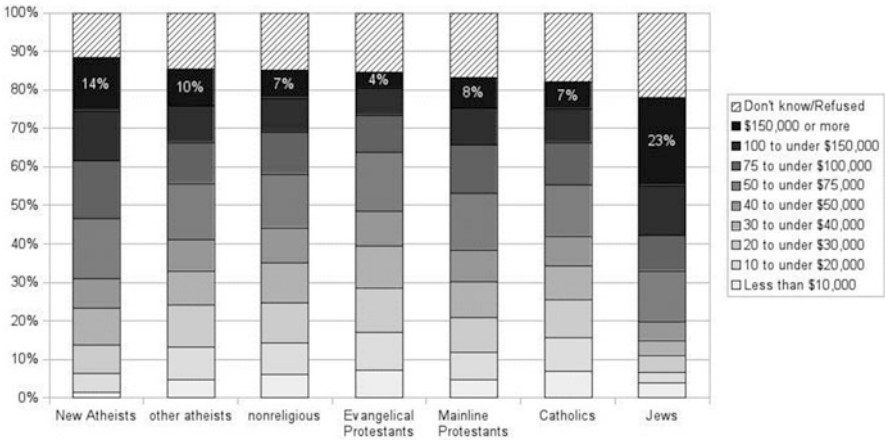


Fig. 12.10 Income of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

### 12.2.6 Income

As is commonly the case with surveys, a large percentage of each (non)religious group refused to answer the question about income. However, with the data that are available, it appears that New Atheists are second only to Jews in their income, as shown in Fig. 12.10.

New Atheists do, in fact, stand out from other atheists and the non-religious in their level of affluence. They have the smallest percentage of respondents in the lowest income group—just 1 % report incomes under \$10,000. New Atheists have the same percentage in the second highest income category as Jews—13 %, but are outpaced by Jews in the highest income category, where 23 % of Jews make more

than \$150,000 per year; 14 % of New Atheists do. Other atheists also have rather high incomes. The non-religious are about as affluent as are Catholics, on average. Evangelical Protestants, in line with prior research, have among the lowest incomes (Keister 2008).

### 12.2.7 Education

Helping to explain the disparities in income are statistics on educational attainment. Recent research has found that the disparities in educational attainment between the non-religious and the rest of the population have been declining (Kosmin and Keysar 2006; Kosmin et al. 2009), but isolating out New Atheists tells a very different story. Figure 12.11 illustrates that New Atheists have higher educational attainment than all but Jews.

The most highly educated religious group is Jews with 34 % having post-graduate degrees, followed by New Atheists with 27 %. That is more than double the educational attainment of other atheists and the non-religious, and almost twice that of Mainline Protestants. Other atheists have lower educational attainment than do New Atheists, but this is, in part, due to their lower average ages. Even so, New Atheists are highly educated.

### 12.2.8 Predictors of New Atheism

Having outlined the basic demographics of New Atheists in the previous sections, in this section I use that information to determine which of these demographic factors

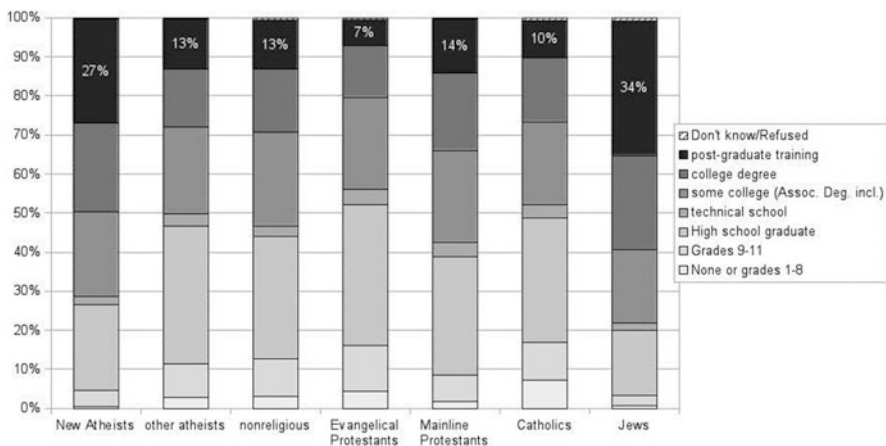


Fig. 12.11 Educational attainment of New Atheists and other (non)religious groups

**Table 12.1** Binary logistic regression results predicting atheists vs. theists

|   | B      | S.E.  | Wald    | Sig. | Exp(B)     |
|---|--------|-------|---------|------|------------|
| Age   | −0.006 | 0.001 | 19.921  | .000 | 0.994      |
| Sex   | 0.967  | 0.041 | 556.565 | .000 | 2.629      |
| Race (comparison group is other/mixed)      |        |       | 274.669 | .000 |            |
| White                                       | 0.637  | 0.100 | 40.656  | .000 | 1.890      |
| Black                                       | −1.049 | 0.146 | 51.553  | .000 | 0.350      |
| Asian                                       | 0.860  | 0.130 | 44.012  | .000 | 2.364      |
| Marital (comparison group is never married) |        |       | 140.839 | .000 |            |
| Married                                     | −0.570 | 0.050 | 128.519 | .000 | 0.565      |
| Cohabiting                                  | −0.172 | 0.071 | 5.933   | .015 | 0.842      |
| Divorced                                    | −0.278 | 0.078 | 12.853  | .000 | 0.757      |
| Separated                                   | −0.554 | 0.150 | 13.613  | .000 | 0.575      |
| Widowed                                     | −0.323 | 0.119 | 7.296   | .007 | 0.724      |
| Party (comparison group is other party)     |        |       | 149.610 | .000 |            |
| Republican                                  | −0.926 | 0.220 | 17.707  | .000 | 0.396      |
| Democrat                                    | −0.347 | 0.216 | 2.589   | .108 | 0.707      |
| Independent                                 | −0.201 | 0.215 | 0.875   | .350 | 0.818      |
| No preference                               | −0.377 | 0.234 | 2.598   | .107 | 0.686      |
| Political ideology                          | 0.642  | 0.021 | 922.526 | .000 | 1.899      |
| Education                                   | 0.189  | 0.013 | 216.182 | .000 | 1.208      |
| Income                                      | 0.093  | 0.010 | 95.589  | .000 | 1.098      |
| Constant                                    | −6.367 | 0.256 | 616.149 | .000 | 0.002      |
| −2 Log likelihood                           |        |       |         |      | 22,485.217 |
| Cox and Snell R Square                      |        |       |         |      | 0.055      |
| Nagelkerke R Square                         |        |       |         |      | 0.166      |

is the best predictor of both atheists versus theists and of those atheists who exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists. To do this, I employ logistic regression, which is an analytic technique that allows for the determination of the influence of multiple independent variables on a dichotomous dependent variable simultaneously. I ran two analyses, the first examining which demographic variables predict atheism, generally (Table 12.1) and the second examining which demographic variables predict New Atheism (Table 12.2).

The independent variables are the various demographic variables outlined above. Age, political ideology, income, and education are treated as interval variables, even though political ideology, income, and education are technically interval-like ordinal variables. Sex, race, marital status, and political party are all entered into the equation as nominal variables. For sex, the comparison group is female. For race, the comparison group is “other/mixed race.” For marital status, the comparison group is “never married.” And for political party, the comparison group is “other party.”

For those unfamiliar with logistic regression, there are two primary coefficients in the table of interest. The first are the numbers in the column headed by Exp(B). These are referred to as “odds ratios” and they indicate the relative influence of

**Table 12.2** Binary logistic regression results predicting New Atheists vs. other atheists

|   | B      | S.E.  | Wald   | Sig. | Exp(B)    |
|---|--------|-------|--------|------|-----------|
| Age   | 0.023  | 0.004 | 34.645 | .000 | 1.023     |
| Sex   | 0.747  | 0.110 | 45.864 | .000 | 2.110     |
| Race (comparison group is other/mixed)      |        |       | 49.660 | .000 |           |
| White                                       | 0.711  | 0.243 | 8.585  | .003 | 2.036     |
| Black                                       | −0.046 | 0.374 | 0.015  | .901 | 0.955     |
| Asian                                       | −0.487 | 0.304 | 2.567  | .109 | 0.614     |
| Marital (comparison group is never married) |        |       | 18.704 | .002 |           |
| Married                                     | 0.180  | 0.134 | 1.824  | .177 | 1.198     |
| Cohabiting                                  | −0.342 | 0.168 | 4.172  | .041 | 0.710     |
| Divorced                                    | 0.169  | 0.216 | 0.613  | .434 | 1.184     |
| Separated                                   | −1.038 | 0.374 | 7.717  | .005 | 0.354     |
| Widowed                                     | 0.332  | 0.385 | 0.744  | .388 | 1.394     |
| Political ideology                          | 0.242  | 0.051 | 22.800 | .000 | 1.274     |
| Education                                   | 0.259  | 0.035 | 55.542 | .000 | 1.296     |
| Income                                      | 0.026  | 0.025 | 1.123  | .289 | 1.027     |
| Constant                                    | −2.855 | 0.355 | 64.685 | .000 | 0.058     |
| −2 Log likelihood                           |        |       |        |      | 2,550.027 |
| Cox and Snell R Square                      |        |       |        |      | 0.106     |
| Nagelkerke R Square                         |        |       |        |      | 0.167     |

each of the independent variables—while controlling for all the other variables in the analysis—on changing the odds of someone identifying as an atheist relative to a theist (Table 12.1) or a New Atheist relative to other atheists (Table 12.2). If the number is 1.0, that means that variable does not increase or decrease the odds. Numbers below 1.0 indicate that variable reduces the odds and numbers over 1.0 indicate that variable increases the odds. This is a relatively straightforward interpretation with interval-like variables. For instance, in Table 12.1, the odds of identifying as an atheist go down with age ( $\text{Exp}(B) = .994$ ,  $p < .001$ ), with every additional year reducing the odds a little bit more, whereas the odds of identifying as an atheist go up with education ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.208$ ,  $p < .001$ ). However, three of the variables included in the equation—race, marital status, and party identification—are nominal variables. Due to the equations used to calculate logistic regression, one of the groups from each of those variables has to be left out of the equation. The interpretation then becomes more complex. The category that is left out of the equation becomes the reference category or comparison group, and the categories that are included in the equation are relative to the comparison group. Thus, the influence of race on the odds of someone not believing in a god versus believing in a god or higher power in Table 12.1 are relative to the racial group “other/mixed,” which is not included. In other words, whites are significantly more likely to not believe in a god or higher power relative to those of other/mixed racial identities ( $\text{Exp}(B) = 1.890$ ,  $p < .001$ ). The second column of primary interest is the column headed with “Sig.,” which indicates whether the relationship between that specific

independent variable and the dependent variable is statistically significant, or unlikely to be due to chance. Values below .05 are typically considered significant.

Table 12.1 indicates that age is a significant predictor of being an atheist versus a theist. Older Americans are significantly more likely to believe in a god. The strongest predictor of atheism is gender—males are 2.63 times as likely to not believe in a god as are females. Whites and Asians are significantly more likely to not believe in a god relative to those of other/mixed races; blacks are significantly less likely. Relative to those who have never married, all of the other marital status groups are significantly more likely to believe in a god. Relative to those who belong to another party, only Republicans are significantly less likely to be atheists. The more liberal your political ideology, the less likely you are to believe in a god or higher power. And both higher income and higher education significantly reduce the odds of believing in a god or higher power. Despite the many significant independent variables, the amount of variation explained is quite low (Nagelkerke  $R^2 = .166$ ).

Table 12.2 examines the variables that influence the odds of exhibiting the characteristics of a New Atheist as compared with those atheists who do not exhibit such characteristics—i.e., other atheists. Age significantly increases the odds of being a New Atheist, as does being male, which is, once again, the strongest predictor of New Atheism (increasing the odds 2.11 times). Relative to those of other/mixed races, only whites are significantly more likely to identify as New Atheists. Only separated individuals have significantly lower odds of being New Atheists relative to those who have never married. Political party identification was not included in this regression due to issues of multi-collinearity, but political ideology exhibits the pattern one might expect—as political ideology grows more liberal the odds of being a New Atheist increase. Higher educational attainment is also a significant predictor of New Atheism, but income is not.

## 12.3 Conclusion

The recent wave of atheist activism starting around 2004 has resulted in a new subgroup within the broader atheist community. Some atheists now identify as “New Atheists.” According to members of this group, New Atheists are described as having three core characteristics: a rejection of the supernatural, reliance on science instead of faith, and a critical attitude toward religion. To date, a limited amount of research, all of which has been qualitative in orientation, has examined some aspects of the New Atheist movement (Cimino and Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012). But no research has attempted to quantify the New Atheists, either by trying to capture their percentage of the American population or describe their demographics. In this chapter, I attempted to do just that, drawing upon the one dataset, the US Religious Landscape Survey, which contains sufficient numbers of atheists and the questions necessary to distinguish between atheists.

The majority of atheists in the US, as determined by reporting not believing in a god or higher power, exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists—somewhere

between 70 % and 80 %. This suggests somewhere on the order of 13 to 16 million Americans exhibit the characteristics of New Atheists outlined above. Not all of those individuals will identify as New Atheists, but they share the beliefs and values of New Atheists.

These individuals, whom I refer to as New Atheists for parsimony in describing them, are younger than the average members of most other religious groups, but are older than other atheists and the non-religious in general. New Atheists are very likely to be male; in fact, gender is the strongest predictor of identifying as both an atheist and a New Atheist. New Atheists are particularly likely to be white and never married. Politically, New Atheists are likely to identify as independents, but they are more liberal than any other (non)religious group in the US, including Jews. New Atheists are quite wealthy and very well-educated.

There is a substantial body of research on religious vitality that discusses the ideal characteristics of congregations that portend future growth. Congregations with many young, affluent, highly educated, male members are particularly likely to grow (Miller et al. 2001; McKinney and Hoge 1983; Roozen 2009). It remains to be seen whether these characteristics will lead to growth for the non-religious and atheists, but it seems likely given that the fastest growing “religious” group in the US today is the non-religious. New Atheists already outnumber Jews and Mormons, combined. How large they will grow remains to be seen, but the future for New Atheism looks bright.

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