

US Election 2012:

# Religion, Tolerance & Respect

In the UK I often hear sneering jibes about Americans, mocking them for being “geographically challenged” (stupid), junk-food eating (obese... and stupid) and junk TV-watching, Bible-reading gun freaks. This pernicious view seldom accounts for the world’s foremost creative culture, or the US’s scientific research, innovation and engineering. It is just snotty shorthand for the notion that humans, in general, are a silly species, greedy, lazy and untrustworthy with the planet.

This view is not restricted to Europe. It is popular on the US coasts and has often been invoked to explain “why so many stupid people voted for GW Bush”, and why someone they despised (and kept calling “stupid”) could possibly win a second presidential term.

Mockery has its place, but today we have a culture that retreats from real discussions and hard arguments, into the apparently safer, more comfortable arena of lifestyle vindication. ‘Lifestyles’ are now the defining aspects of our identities. Subscribing to the principles of a mass political party has been replaced by “personal choices” – whether you eat organic food, recycle, drive a Prius or an SUV, own a gun or go to church. The legacy of the ‘Culture Wars’ remains with us, but in an emptied-out superficial version, like a teenager who tries to define herself by their fashion statements.

Ironically, those that admonish those of faith haven’t realized what Professor Steven Prothero spells out in his book *Religious Illiteracy*: in spite of the 58% of Americans who pray regularly and 40% who attend church

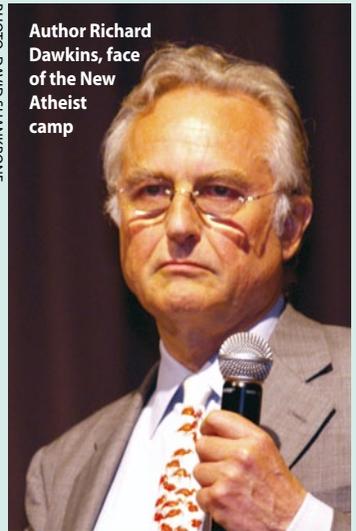
## What has 2008’s sense of “hope,” “change” and possibility been replaced with? asks Alan Miller

weekly, very few are deeply familiar with scripture: most Americans cannot name more than four Commandments. Richard Dawkins, author of *The God Delusion*, and others within the so-called New Atheist camp, would make the point that they are all the more stupid for following such “hocus pocus”. These ‘New Atheists’ seem to be outraged that people have the audacity to believe in something beyond themselves, in an age where that has become unacceptable. It is striking too that in the recent historical past, Atheism would generally not have been argued so vociferously in itself but would have been part of a wider perspective on life – often part of a social movement, such as Liberalism and Socialism.

With the broader political projects in tatters, the New Atheists mount their campaign on negatives – that they are not religious. Hardly inspiring stuff. Further though, Sam Harris in *The End of Faith* provides a fascinating insight into an increasingly common intolerant view when he tells us that he hopes to “show that the very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God – is one of the principal forces driving us towards the abyss.”

The values of the Enlightenment, particularly tolerance, get jettisoned and replaced with an intolerant outlook. Tolerance, I should point out is not the same as respect, which, we

PHOTO: DAVID SHANKBONE



Author Richard Dawkins, face of the New Atheist camp

are increasingly badgered by authorities, we must have for other cultures. Those who are serious about freedom and autonomy would do far better to continue the Enlightenment and the Founding Fathers’ ideal of tolerance – but that is not the same as having to respect ideas or customs that we think are backward or superstitious.

A recent report from The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life<sup>1</sup> demonstrated that one-fifth of the US public – and a third of adults under 30 – are religiously unaffiliated. This decline in religious affiliation reflects a consolidation of what Robert Putnam wrote about in *Bowling Alone*, where he explained how Americans are increasingly disconnected and isolated. Robert Fuller argued in his

<sup>1</sup> www.pewforum.org/unaffiliated/nones-on-the-rise.aspx

book *Spiritual But Not Religious* that the spiritual category has a long history dating back to the colonies, but it fails to consider what is new and changing within the post-Cold War world and how authority, large institutions and organizations and big projects are increasingly viewed with suspicion. Further, the retreat from mainstream political parties has underlined this trend with little alternative being put forward. This news has been much discussed, especially as the 'New Millennials' are a key demographic for the upcoming presidential election and the 'nones,' those of no religious affiliation, are now so significant.

The run up to the US presidential election has been so very different from 2008. All of the sense of "hope" and "change" and "possibility" has been replaced by, well, not much. As I pointed out at the time in *The American*, generalities like "hope" did little to explain a clear set of objectives, principles and goals. Many projected onto Barack Obama views that they hoped (or prayed) that he had. There was a sense, especially among young people, that something could change. Unfortunately the "yes we can" quickly became "yes I can" and the potential that was engaged was as speedily turned off.

In the first round of presidential debates we saw the increasing inability of politicians to even engage one another with ideas. It is one thing to make sermon-like speeches, quite another to be in the cut and thrust of arguing out ideas. As we progress down the road of No Big Ideas (or NoBI for short), it was glaringly obvious that President Obama found it galling that he should be accountable and responsible to some set of principles or ideas. Many have asked why the President did not simply



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Did many project onto Barack Obama views that they hoped (or prayed) that he had?

call Governor Romney a liar<sup>2</sup>. While confusing<sup>3</sup>, what seems to be the far larger problem is a sense of possibility that ordinary Americans can do something positive to change the circumstances they find themselves in.

What we have in store for us is platitudes and a back and forth bean-counting exercise, particularly as the President came off badly in the first debate. However, the central problem we all face in the US and internationally is why we think that humans are the big problem. Every debate is informed by an overwhelming anxiety about human action. Even in America, where ambition is wedded to the national consciousness, we continually remind ourselves about how untrustworthy, greedy, avaricious and destructive we are. This needs to change.

At the heart of problems in America and the 'West' is wealth creation. As soon as we get on to that subject, an array of concerns arise about development, investment, innovation and infrastructure. The idea of unfettered development is seen as a recipe for environmental and existential doom. Everyone recognizes that we need rigorous changes, yet there's a reticence when it comes to ambitious plans – and disbelief that we can rely on ordinary people to make that

change a reality.

So we are back to where we started – an underlying view that humans are untrustworthy and even dangerous. The view of human agency needs to be addressed and discussed and intellectually fought over if we are really to solve the complex problems we face today.

In the run up to the election, I have been speaking at a number of events, as part of the Battle of Ideas International Satellite Festival, which continues in November with debates in New York, across Europe and India ([www.battleofideas.org.uk](http://www.battleofideas.org.uk)) to thrash out a range of tricky issues – without name calling and relying on branding people "stupid" for want of having any compelling arguments. ★

**Alan Miller is Director of The New York Salon, whose next event, Can we still have faith in the Academy?, is at The New School, NYC, on November 13 ([www.nysalong.org](http://www.nysalong.org)). Alan is also co-founder of London's Old Truman Brewery media center and was on London's Art Board, and a Partner at The Vibe Bar ([www.vibebar.com](http://www.vibebar.com)).**

<sup>2</sup> [www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/08/mitt-romney-liar-obama-campaign\\_n\\_1949732.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/08/mitt-romney-liar-obama-campaign_n_1949732.html)

<sup>3</sup> [www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544\\_162-57515033-503544/fact-checking-romneys-47-percent-comment/](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-503544_162-57515033-503544/fact-checking-romneys-47-percent-comment/)