

The Tony Sobrado Interview with Richard Carrier on Atheism Plus (6 March 2013)

Transcription by Rachel Hawkes [@RachelHawkes] of the Tony Sobrado [@TonySobrado] podcast interview with Richard Carrier on Atheism Plus [original audio at tonysobrado.com/2013/03/06/interview-with-richard-carrier-on-atheism-plus]. Anyone who has an A+Scribe account [a-plus-scribe.com] has our permission to include this there (in any format). This transcript may also be freely distributed as long as all these credits are retained. But it may not be sold for profit or included in any book without the express permission of Sobrado, Carrier, and Hawkes.

Tony Sobrado (TS)
Richard Carrier (RC)

TS: [00:00:00] Richard Carrier is an author, a prominent blogger and a public speaker within the atheist community. He has a PhD in Greek and Roman Intellectual Thought from Colombia University.

[00:00:12] Richard, in my article entitled ‘What is Atheism+ and do we need it?’ for The Huffington Post, I essentially presented an argument that said that some of the principles behind Atheism+ such as sexual, social and racial equality were addressed by other mainstream political ideologies. I was therefore asking the question, in what context could Atheism+ be different and offer something that other ideologies do not. That was one aspect of the article. The other aspect of it the article asked in what sense could Atheism+ become a political movement. That is, how could Atheism+ offer something to the political world in terms of economic or foreign policy? Now in terms of my first issue, what can Atheism + offer that other ideologies do not; this has been a contentious issue and you took up some issues with this. So firstly I’d like to get your thoughts on what Atheism+ is for you and others in the sceptic community; and what problems you had with my article.

RC: [00:01:22] Right, ah, yeah. Basically I’ll just explain a few things that I think will put it in perspective as to where I’m coming from on this. First of all, atheism is a social movement. We have national conferences, we have local meet ups, we have lectures, we have national and international organisations. So, it is a movement and it has the goal of making more and better atheists and giving them resources and a comfortable social environment, which is another main goal.

Second, to make more atheists, I think we as a social movement need to appeal to more women and minorities – including groups in other countries, for examples atheists and potential atheists in Ghana or India (which are the two regions that I’ve worked with in my past), and even among white males

for example. We need to appeal to a wider demographic than those who just want to talk about God all the time. Far more people, of all demographics I find, want to talk about how atheists, as atheists, would solve social problems or make a difference in the world. Or, who want atheists, as atheists, to question other things like claims being made in the political or moral domain, and not just talk about creationism or theology all of the time.

And third, this means we need to talk about more of those other issues in our conferences, and meet ups and periodicals - and to an extent, that's actually happening. That's part of the impact we've been having even before we gave a name to what we were doing. We had already been influencing conferences, and periodicals and meet ups to do this kind of thing, and we are seeing more and more interesting topics being discussed and debated in these venues.

To me, it's about talking about how atheists, as atheists, have a perspective and how we might solve social problems, or make a difference in the world or what information we need to come to decisions on that. Even if we're not going to talk about what we should do, we could at least have, for example, when an economist comes and says, "these are the kind of things you need to know" for example, and "these are the kind of things we want to see" at meet up groups (cause often times they have speakers that talk about subjects), things we want to see talked about in conferences, in our periodicals and so on. Also, other issues that interest women and minorities who are atheists or potential atheists – again, including minorities in other countries like Indians and Ghanaians and so on. This includes hearing sceptical and informed talks about the facts in economics, or prison reform or the treatment of women and other issues that matter to people.

So basically this is so atheists aren't bored out of the movement by constant God talk, or driven out (more pressingly of late) by actual sexism or persistent disinterest in what matters to minorities. I think this kind of actually rose as a reaction to Atheism+, I didn't expect it to occur, I thought that everyone would be onboard with opposing sexism in the movement and things like that. I didn't think that would become an issue, but it *has* become an issue and I'm not the one driving that. The Atheism+ movement didn't drive that, that was a reaction to Atheism+ saying that there's sexism and one of the biggest responses is, "no there isn't!" and so we have to keep documenting it, and that kind of debate occurs.

[00:04:32] Also for example, the black atheism movement in America exists. They have organisations, there are groups and so on. Yet, it's almost wholly disconnected from the white atheism movement because they care about different things and they have different issues. Yet, I see there's no reason why we should not care about those things too, I mean other than our not caring about what affects black atheists. In other words, our not caring about black atheists. Which to me is a covertly racist attitude, I mean it's rather hard to defend. In any event, it can't grow the movement because it's

excluding a major demographic. I think we should be working and co-operating more with the black atheism movement and helping them grow their movement as well.

I think this also includes actually *doing* things for example, such as making our websites and events more accessible to the disabled. And maybe actually getting involved in issues that matter to most actual atheists, for example the education disparity between white and black communities. Since access to good education is the most important factor there is in making more atheists.. I mean think about it. So it makes no sense for the atheism movement as a whole to be disinterested in this or to do nothing about it. There are many other issues I could make the same point on.

[00:05:43] Above all, like I mentioned before, we have a problem with atheists, now even more so, invading our spaces online and to a lesser extent in the physical world and pretending to speak for us, yet who are engaging in sexist and misogynistic behaviour. I mean, really ruthless and undesirable behaviour. Or they're otherwise *angrily* telling us what we can't or shouldn't be talking about. That makes it harder for me to distinguish what I call 'arsehole atheism' from the kind of atheism that I represent and the kind of atheists that I want the company of and that I want there to be more of. It used to be that the label atheist did that. There was occasion where I thought if someone identified as an atheist I knew I could probably get along with them and that they would be good company. But now that we have this cohort of arseholes, who are treating people horribly, and sandbag everything we try to do and who really totally suck as company. I need some way to tell those people apart from those that I want to work with and Atheism+ is sort of one way to do that. It's not sufficient in itself, because I know plenty of well meaning people who just don't like the label, even if they're totally on board with what it labels so... that's a separate matter altogether.

But understood in these terms, your article seems kind of out of touch with what Atheism+ is and what its advocates have been actually calling for. For example, we aren't actually asking atheists to adopt a progressive political agenda. We are asking atheists to start talking about what we as atheists think might be the right path politically and morally. To have honest and rational debates about it, rather than sticking our heads in the sand rather than pretending these opinions and disputes don't exist among us.

To give you a specific example, in America we have the Libertarian Party. Libertarians often are at odds with progressives in the atheist movement, but really Libertarians should care about social justice every bit as much as progressives do, right? They only differ in what they think will solve the problem, but that's a claim to fact and as such it can be verified or critiqued on logic and evidence. So we want to hear these debates out, we no longer want to pretend they don't exist. And indeed our pretending they don't exist, I see, is precisely what is driving away a lot of potential supporting members. I've had numerous conversations with people who said they'd

come to our meetings and donate to our organisations if we talked about things that matter, rather than just talking about God all the time. Because they became atheists partly to avoid talking about God all the time – my wife is one of these people.

So I saw your article as being wrong about the demographic reality of atheism and our objectives in terms of growing atheism as a movement. I think Atheism+ (or something like it, whatever it's called, is needed to grow the movement. I think we've reached pretty much market saturation with the old atheist model. We now need to start appealing to people who care about things other than just God talk, but who are also atheists, therefore we can socialise and network and grow as a social movement together, in that sense. I also think your article's conclusion is wrong about the connection between atheism as a movement and political and moral decision making in general. For me, for atheists to not care about the political decisions our countries make is to divorce atheism from citizenship and moral responsibility which is the last thing we should want to do to atheism as a movement. We should really care about those things, we should be talking about those things.

It kind of seemed like you contradicted yourself on that point. When you were arguing that we should not be doing this, but at the same time you then argued that prominent new atheists like Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens have already been doing it so we don't need to renew any effort to make it happen. But to me, I mean, which is it? Should we not be calling for more social and moral commitment and concern and conversation from our community, or do we not need to because atheists as a movement are already fully embracing social and moral commitment and concern, and already talking about those things? So, we can start with that question, but I'm sure you have others to ask me besides... but that's basically the one main reply I have to your article.

TS: [00:09:45] Sure, sure. To a certain extent with the Atheist+ movement in terms of what I was saying was that I don't necessarily agree that is needed as an external political movement but I do agree with the basics of the old movement, say the *four horsemen of atheism*, which essentially deals with the philosophical questions of atheism which can be loosely attached to secular humanism but is not identical with. That can become a social movement in itself. Now any kind of social movement can have discrepancies and social inequalities in it, and I can understand that the old established, traditional platform of atheism that has survived for the last hundred years plus predominantly is, and has been run by, educated white men.

I see that, and I appreciate that you want to transcend that atheist movement and push it in different directions. So for example we're all atheists but why is it that we don't specifically cater for minority atheists, female atheists, feminist atheists, multi-ethnic atheists such as black atheists, atheists from Catholic countries in parts of the Mediterranean and

South America. These countries still have a Catholic strong-hold and it's good to get atheism into those corners and obviously encourage more atheists to come on board. Now, what I was saying essentially was I don't particularly see (and this is one aspect that I disagree with you on), I don't particularly see how an atheist viewpoint, or a sceptical thinking viewpoint, or a general critical thinking viewpoint can be, in itself, specifically applied to political policy and current affairs. And I'll just give you some examples of this from other areas. So, what would an atheist opinion be on the type of welfare distribution that's required in society? I don't know how an atheist stance would impact on that particularly.

I know in America it's slightly different where the question of God and politics is not a subtle one at all and it's obviously quite fractured. In Europe and the UK, no one really cares about anyone's religious views. Our politicians in this country don't state whether they are theists or atheists, and no one seems to be bothered about that. In America for example, very few practicing scientists are theists. In Europe it's also different as many practicing scientists are theists. So for example, in America Francis Collins, the Human Genome Project, he is a Christian yet that doesn't at all impact his research in science – as you can see by the legacy of his work.

So, I don't particularly see how being an atheist, and whether we liaise with or invite economists, political scientists or sociologists to have these conversations with, I don't see specifically how this atheist attitude, whether it's a philosophical or political movement can actually bring any kind of differences to the political spectrum. I appreciate that it obviously can change specific aspects internally within the movement. I completely agree that there are certain overhauls that are needed such as bringing women to the front stage, bringing racial minorities to the front stage within the atheist movement itself. But I don't see how atheism can have a particular political voice when it comes to policy.

RC: [00:13:25] Right, well I think first of all we need to disengage the idea that we need a policy platform for example. That's not even the issue. The issue is that there are problems that we do care about, and we as atheists as a social movement want to discuss them more. We also have a perspective that is different from Christians. Talk about Collins not letting his religiosity affect science, I find it very unlikely that he doesn't let his religiosity affect his political and moral beliefs.

So for me, from my perspective, atheists differ from other theists and religionists who aren't specifically theists, in that we don't think morality or political decisions don't come from on high. We are not trying to figure out the mind or will of an imaginary being, we're not relying on scriptures, we don't believe in dogmas or anything like that. We think everything can be questioned and everything should be evidence based – and that's something that is distinctive of atheism. It's relevant because we are... the movement grown and is really huge, certainly in America but also in other countries. I mean I've spoken to atheist meet up groups and atheist

organisations in England as well, so the movement does exist there and in Germany and other places like the Philippines and so on. It hasn't grown to be the Humanist movement for example.

The Humanist movement exists, but it hasn't grown in the way that the atheist movement has – and maybe that's a contingency of history. But the reality is the large numbers, the large successful organisations, the large conferences and so on are attached to the identity label of atheism. So that's the movement that exists, that's the movement we have to work with. Possibly, if you can imagine an alternative parallel universe where it became the new Humanism rather than the new atheism, and that sparked the huge social movement then we'd be talking about maybe Humanism Plus or something like that. [00:15:15 illegible – or another ism?] ... we're dropping the ball on these things. So if you think, that atheism is sort of a historical contingency. It's just that atheism has become the identity label that we have rallied around, not just in this country but outside this country as well. So, I think that's what we're working with.

To me, it's not a question of trying to work out some sort of manifesto as the Humanists did (there is a Humanist manifesto, that's sort of an assigned list of things that they stand for). To me, it's more a question of that we are rational people, we're not beholden to any religion. So we are actually in a better position than most people to actually have rational, reasonable, fact based, evidence based, research and debates about these things, about political decisions and so on. So, the question is, I think, that atheism as a movement should care about for example, economic disparity and then that should lead us to actually research and talk about it more. Not so much as simply saying, "atheism says you should do *this* about it," its more a question of, "what should we do about it? Let's find out, let's apply rational, evidence based attitude towards [00:16:21 illegible], to these questions. That's the thing where I think atheism as a movement has something to contribute that religion does not. I think that's the reality that we are looking at right now.

TS: [00:16:33] OK Richard. In terms of 'the facts speak for themselves' (which they do), so if we're talking about social inequalities and economic disparities, we can have economic and statistical models which show us correlations and particular aspects of causation which for example, would be people from *this* kind of socio-economic background would tend to attend *these* universities or end up in *these* kinds of employment roles. For example, this week there was an article in The London Times that 80% of top professionals in the UK attended a private school which is obviously a fact that speaks for itself. We're both sceptical, we both rely on facts and critical thinking and the facts do speak for themselves. But even with that, because the facts speak for themselves we don't need atheism underneath this as an additional argument to further advocate this position. So if we're talking about how in the UK 80% of professionals go to private schools I could come up with arguments about how we can fix that that do not require atheism.

RC: [00:17:55] Oh, sure. Sure.

TS: [00:17:56] So, is that.... [RC starts to speak] Go ahead, go ahead.

RC: [00:17:59] Through science as well. I mean, one thing that was very, sort of, a standard aspect of the atheist movement in terms of conferences and meet up topics and that, is talking about science. But science isn't atheism dependent, you don't base it on atheism. I think the same thing is true for like political solutions, I think if we... I mean, our advantage is that we're not beholden to religious dogmas, or Gods, or those kind of religious intuitions about what the right thing to do is, or scriptures or anything like that is that it allows us to focus just on evidence and reason.

So we can package a solution, or maybe a set of alternatives (it doesn't even have to be one single solution, but a set of alternatives) and we say, "this is the evidence and reasoning behind each of these. Let's propose that." And we can propose that to the wider society, we don't need to say, "you should follow these policy ideas because they're undergirded by atheism" because they wouldn't be. It's just that the atheist community was well positioned and actually desired to find a way to do this, to actually contribute to the conversation as a movement, as an identity group.

So, rather than for example, leaving it all to Christians ('it's always the Christians coming up with the ideas'), and then those ideas are always associated with the Christians. I think one example is hospitals. I mean I don't see any immediate prospect of an atheist hospital specifically, but Christians will say, "Well Christians have all of these charity hospitals." In reality they don't, they're for profit [laughs], but besides that... they will use the hospitals as evidence of the goodness of Christians and then say, "where are all the atheist hospitals?" And then we have to go out point out, "there are plenty of secular hospitals that aren't taking a religious position." Now, I don't see any need for an atheist specific hospital, I know there are some atheists that have called for it but not within the Atheist Plus movement.

But what I'm seeing, the parallel is just the idea of our ability – as a recognised group, the people looking on us as atheists, who identify as atheists – what are we contributing to the society in general? Do we have a perspective? We might have a variety of perspectives, the same way Christians do. Christians don't all agree, there's liberal Christians and conservative Christians and that's fine, and we can have liberal atheists and conservative atheists and in fact we would like to give those two groups more of a voice so people can see, "yeah, there's liberal atheists, there's conservative atheists, these are their perspectives." We want to make this more visible. I think that's more of the question of Atheism+. Related to that is also a willingness to criticise each other, the willingness to have liberal atheists and conservative atheists have a debate. Rather than having a debate about whether God exists, let's have a Libertarian debate a progressive atheist so we can clear away all this pandering to religion and

God and stuff and say, “well this is within the atheist community let’s have that debate. Let’s see what happens.” We’re just interested in seeing that happen, and I know that there’s a lot of people who would be a lot more involved in our movement if we were doing things like that.

TS: [00:20:55] OK, thanks Richard. I still can’t help but notice a tension in some of the points you’re making. So, essentially you agree with me that social facts can speak for themselves and we don’t need an atheistic platform underlying these critical principles, which you say on the one hand. Yet on the other hand you’re saying if there isn’t an atheist identity there, it’s somehow left to the Christians. That’s not necessarily the case.

RC: [00:21:19] Well, that’s just an example. But, yes. We are a member of society, we are a group that’s present in society, we are an identity movement. In the same way that Christians can market themselves as being contributors to society, we as atheists can market as atheists being contributors to society. In other words, if we want to be recognised as a group along with Jews, and Christians, and Hindus and everybody else in society...

TS: [00:21:46] ... claim religious status for ourselves?

RC: [00:21:48] Yeah. I don’t... It’s...

TS: [00:21:50] ... it’s a joke.

RC: [00:21:52] Yeah I don’t think necessarily do that in a legal sense, but certainly the point being is that we shouldn’t be marketing ourselves as amoral or disinterested in morality and politics for example. We should be showing that we are interested in these things, and especially should be doing this because we of all people are better positioned to do this.

You’re talking about ‘the facts speak for themselves’ for example, ‘we don’t need to undergird it with atheism’ but you have to understand, that that’s implied atheism. Because if the facts speak for themselves, you’re excluding theism, you’re excluding god talk, you’re excluding scriptural basis and that’s basically what atheists do. So, if you’re going to make the case, I think it’s only atheists that aren’t going to throw in god premises, that aren’t going to throw in scriptural premises in what they call ‘the facts’ that are supposed to speak for themselves. Religious people will put those religious ‘facts’ in there and use those as part of the facts that are supposed to solve the problems of the world. We of course as atheists obviously don’t do that.

So I think that’s why we do have a unique perspective, and we can communicate to the public that unique perspective. And we can even make the point that you are: you know what, as long as you take away the religious premises the facts that are left over speak for themselves, and we can actually prove that they work. We’ve done this with science - we don’t

need religious premises to make science and technology work. Let's do the same thing in politics and morality and social morality and so on.

TS: [00:23:16] Ok, yes, very interesting points. Thanks for that Richard. If I can recap some of that. Essentially, you're still arguing that we need atheism as a form of identifying social and political movement, in the sense that we've got a Christian, a Muslim and a Jewish perspective so let's have an atheist perspective. Which then kind of goes back to my initial argument, which is in what respect can you make atheism a political movement and what is it that atheism can offer the political domain, when we talk about facts, that we can't do through other channels?

One of the arguments seems to be that we rely on critical thinking and the facts only, we don't use scripture for example. We've already discussed this, so this is fine, but this leads to my next point. How much of this do you think is actually dependent on a national or cultural context? Now, I know there's an Atheism+ movement, a minor one but still one here in the UK (which I know you're aware of) and in other parts of Europe but one aspect of it hits me because only in America for example would..... (and this is obviously a gross generalisation), but on the European continent no one would ever try to legislate any type of policy based on a scripture that they read. You would basically just get laughed at. I know in the States it's a different issue. Obviously stem cell research and abortion has been largely pedalled by right wing, Christian orthodoxy. I just wanted to get your perspective on some of this.

On the European continent you can't pull out a book and say, "it says it here, so it's the law," you'd just get laughed at. Now, you're really stressing to me, and I know part of the Atheism+ movement is that we use critical thinking and facts and we don't rely on scripture. So, is this a particular kind of American Atheism that's in the face of right wing Christianity? Because as a European atheist, I have a luxury of not having too many opposing extremist views in terms of the mainstream political arena. As where in America, it's a different story and you have got..... I mean creationism is in the public domain, whether it's laughed at or supported, it's still in the public domain. So, I just wanted to get your opinion on how much you think this is a reaction to right wing Christianity in America?

RC: [00:25:45] I don't think so so much. I mean obviously most of my experience is America and Canada, and that's you know, four or five hundred million people. Also, other countries that aren't in the Western sphere, for example I've had a lot of contact and interaction with the Philippines, there's an atheist movement there, and in [00:26:06 illegible] Africa. Much less so, I have much less contact with what's going in China but then again, that's one of the more oppressive governments. However, in England you have blasphemy laws. I mean, why do you still have those? Right? There are still issues there that can be addressed.

TS: [00:26:24] Sure, sure.

RC: [00:26:25] But it's not so much the issue of citing scripture, I mean in fact even that's becoming much less popular in the political sphere. And there are big issues with that in certain parts of this country as well, like the South for example. I mean, the issue is not so much citing scripture, but believing how you'd make the political decisions and how you'd decide what is moral and what is immoral, which is more of a social effect rather than just legislation (cause that's also an issue, how people behave in society), those decisions are being made based on what people think God wants. They might be getting to the point where they are relying less on scripture to figure that out, but they are still basing it on the idea that they have to figure out what God wants. Or, they have to base it on religious tradition.

The Catholic attempts to, for example, outlaw abortion in Ireland and recently in opposition to Gay marriage in France. So these issues do exist, whether they're citing scripture or not isn't as important as the fact that they're starting with premises that are religious in nature, and that atheists don't do. So I think even in Europe there's a need for this, but I don't know to what extent. Maybe Europe has got itself more sorted out.

Certainly we have much bigger issues in America, and they are even far greater in places like the Philippines and pretty much everywhere else on the planet besides Europe... right? So, I don't think we should make too much of an issue of the disparity of how far ahead socially Europe is than the rest of the world, there's still the rest of the world we have to deal with. For me, that's the context I'm working in. And also the context of the internet which is often kind of nebulous as far as nationality.

TS: [00:28:09] Mmm. Ok, ok. Umm, Richard can you still hear me?

RC: [00:28:13] Yes, absolutely.

TS: [00:28:14] Ok, great. Interesting points you made there about homosexual marriage. But just because someone is for or against homosexual marriage, I don't think that's necessarily dependent on whether one believes in any kind of religion or any underlying theistic principles. For example, I *personally* don't see anything wrong with homosexual marriage but many old Conservatives in this country do. We basically had a big controversy over this two weeks ago, I know people that are old Conservatives that are actually themselves atheists (and this is going to be a funny contradiction, but this is just the argument I make), that are against homosexual marriage not because of religion but because of social convention. They still don't think it should be a cultural norm. Now, that obviously is still discriminatory but their argument isn't a religious argument it's a historical and cultural argument.

RC: [00:29:20] Exactly, that then becomes a different kind of thing that we're talking about. Let's take an analogy, where you have Christians who were promoting Jim Crow laws in the US back in the fifties, who were really

prominent defenders of racism. And you had other Christians speaking out, as Christians, against them and basically having that debate amongst them... and ultimately, we know who won that debate (although there's still a certain underpinning of Christian based racism today). But, we can do the same thing as atheists. We can say, "look, we've got these atheists who are making these social arguments against gay marriage."

I've had, for example, I've personally engaged in debates on the legality and morality of abortion with fellow atheists in a formal context. Those are the kind of debates that we should be having, and that we want to have. So we need to acknowledge that there are those differences and then let's talk about them, and let's work them out and let's see if they do rationally hold up... if one side has the evidence for it or not, or the reason or not. So, I think when we are talking about that case, where we have atheists against each other on political and moral issues, let's talk about that. Let's deal with that. In the same way that the Christian's would and should do the same thing, and throughout history have done. So I think we need to be doing the same thing, and that's kind of what Atheism+ is talking about - is doing those kinds of things and having those kind of debates.

I think still, you'd mentioned earlier other political movements and how do they differ. I think atheists as a movement and obviously, we've talked about the no religious premises part of it, but another part of it is that atheists are far more in touch (usually), and far more interested in (usually) studying things like philosophy and logic. You can pick any other social movement, any political movement, usually they're not obsessed with philosophy and logical fallacies and understanding the structure of rationality. Atheism as a movement is pretty unique in not only having that attitude, but more importantly spreading it throughout the entire movement. So, for example you have car mechanics who read philosophy and [00:31:22 illegible] logical fallacies. That is common in the atheist movement, it's much less common in any religious movement or political or social movement. I think that's another thing that we can contribute... and that we *are* contributing.

TS: [00:31:36] OK Richard, one thing on that. There's obviously going to be a strong correlation between atheism, free thought and critical thinking and I completely agree that atheists are more likely to take an interest, if not study, logic and philosophy. But on the other side of the argument, there are high-end theists, as well, who are extremely well versed and educated in theology, philosophy and logic so it works both sides. Now, generally across a spectrum there are going to be more atheists who are interested in philosophy and logic but on the other side of the argument, theists (even though they are in the minority) there's going to be a few at the high-end that are well versed in philosophy and theology. Obviously people like William Lane Craig, Robert Spitzer ... these people are not your every day theists and they're very good at logical and philosophical arguments. That's a separate issue that I don't want to get on an adjacent track with but I'm

just showing that. I kind of agree with your argument but I'm also showing you a potential difference. One thing, I don't think...

RC: [00:32:41 illegible]

TS: [00:32:42] Sorry Richard, go ahead.

RC: [00:32:43] Yeah, that's true. But notice the difference. They aren't pushing that as something that all Christians should do, they aren't pushing that as something that should be taught in the churches. That you should all be interested in logic, you should all be studying this stuff, where as atheists do. Atheists are very big on pushing that and communicating that to the public – to *their* public, their own particular constituency – and saying, we should all embrace and study these things and be good at them. And that's something that for example Christians aren't doing. They might have their high powered apologists, but their preachers aren't preaching this stuff from the pulpit. Where as we are, we talk about it at our meet ups and conferences all the time. So, that's again the kind of difference that I'm talking about.

TS: [00:33:21] Yeah sure, I agree with that, that we're more likely to push education of all kinds in more boundaries across the spectrum. But at the same time I think people whether they're educated or not, I mean, there are sort of every day arguments that stack up in the favour of atheism.

For example we don't have to necessarily encourage logic, rational thinking and philosophy. People use these mental tools every day, in parts of every day existence and so that's where ironically for the theists and other people that still perpetuate religious dogma, is where the rational argument continuously stacks up against them whether they can do anything about it or not. So once your rational in every day thinking, like which most people are – it's how you manage finances, it's how you turn up to places on time, it's how you keep order and control in your life – the more you see that certain religious arguments do not make any logical and rational sense. It's an old argument but it's an argument in favour of atheism.

But I will say that we do encourage education across the board more than any other kind of social movement. What I think we've established now is that we're not really going to agree to a certain extent on the benefits of atheism as a political movement. As you know, I am still quite in favour of saying that there isn't necessarily anything that atheism as a political movement can offer that would impact policy on economic distribution, sexual and racial equality... so on that respect I still have some issues with a) what the purposes of atheism is as a political movement and how much it can achieve.

So I will still, to a certain extent, stick to the arguments I made in the Huffington Post article. But since then, since you've elaborated on some of your counter arguments further, I do agree with you on the aspect of the other form of Atheism+, which is that before we even get to a large stream

political movement, as an identity, that we bring atheism and political debate into our own groups. And that's where I completely agree with you in terms of, let's bring these conversations into our own circle instead of going out there and just saying, "we don't believe in God, here's rational logic." Let's look at ourselves as a group inside and bring these debates in. So that is, as you're saying, one aspect of Atheism+ - which you've actually articulated very well and I completely agree with you. Instead of just going forward and going, "There is no God. What can God do to economic policy..." Let's just turn around and look at ourselves and go, "Well what do we think of this issue? What do we think of this issue? How can we debate and bring this in further?" So, in that respect I think that's a very good cause and one aspect in which you could see atheism being political, if only as an internal political movement.

Now I'm going to give you a chance to espouse on this sexual inequality and or harassment. What you said earlier about what I said in the article regarding how some of the traditional enthusiasts for atheism had already deliberated on how they, just because of atheism, espouse equality, the equality of mankind, justice and wellbeing for all and I had certain thinkers such as Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins to a certain extent, although his (Dawkins) whole argument is pro naturalism, pro naturalism, pro naturalism is his argument. He doesn't really have a lot to do with social and philosophical values.

Now, one aspect of say someone like Christopher Hitchens' writings, he always espoused how atheism is natural for social and human equality. With this in mind, what is it about this movement that has made some of the Atheism+ advocates that you're in touch with, what is it that's come to light (you don't have to name any specific names or any arguments), but where have you seen these traces of sexual and racial discrimination come about in the atheist movement? Because that's one aspect that does interest me.

RC: [00:37:41] Oh right. Umm..

TS: [00:37:43] The nitty gritty of it Richard. Yep.

RC: [00:37:45] Part of it... obviously, some of it is unintentional I suspect, but nonetheless real. And that's pointed out in the fact that we have this disconnect between the white atheist movement and the black atheist movement in the US, I mean that's one example of it. And a lot of the issues black atheists are dealing with are issues of economic disparity, of poverty, of crime, prison reform, education issues, access to education... which white atheists don't want to deal with, or talk about or help them with. I think we should we work together more on that. That's an example of something, where I don't think that like, there's so much deliberate, intentional racism it's just people aren't listening to this or taking this seriously, and I think they should be. That's one aspect of it.

Where we have more deliberate and malicious stuff recently has been sexism and misogyny. And there's been actually ruthless campaigns of digital harassment of the outspoken women in our movement. That's the one thing that I think if we could stop that, we could finally talk a lot less about the sexism issue and talking about a lot of the other things that we'd rather talk about. But in fact, it's the anti-feminists, and the sexists and the misogynists who keep trying to drive the agenda by continuing to harass and cause problems in this sphere. It makes it very, very difficult for women to be outspoken participants and leaders in this movement when the moment they say anything, they're just bombarded with this kind of harassment. To the point that it's literally driving women out. It's actually driven several women out, they don't want to deal with it anymore, they're sick of it. And I know, it must be driving women out who aren't going... women who haven't gone up for example. Women who won't put forward, who won't speak out because they see what's going to happen to them so they'd rather go and do something else.

So this is actually impacting on the ability of us to actually grow the number of women in our leadership. Fortunately, because of Atheism+ we've been able to show support for women who want to do this and so I think we've helped in the extent that we're kind of keeping it moving forward in terms of increasing the number of women speakers, and the number of women leaders. But it's really been against this hostile push back against this. It really is upsetting to me, the kinds of things that I've seen done in this respect. It really shocked me and surprised me that there would be push back against my calling this out. This is one of the things I said is, "finally we can get rid of these misogynists who are doing these horrible things and engaging in this harassment, we can finally renounce them."

Just at the mere act of my saying we can finally renounce them and denounce them and so on created a massive backlash, so there was actually people defending these other people. That surprised me. The fact that they were cowed, and that they've continued to engage in these campaigns of harassment is disturbing to me. I don't know what the solution is, but one thing we *have* to do is continually talk about it and oppose it and make it absolutely clear that this is wrong, and we do not want it in our movement, and that hopefully and eventually, we will finally get rid of it. I don't know how to do that yet, but talking about it is step one.

TS: [00:40:57] OK, so ironically you're saying that whether intentionally or unintentionally some of the well known figures of the atheist movement who when they espouse atheism, rationality, logical and critical thinking, say that everyone is equal across human lines – that includes obviously sexuality, gender and race – actually haven't really been practicing what they preach is..... essentially what you're saying.

RC: [00:41:22] Well, I don't know about so much to the extent of it's leaders... it's more of it's just there is *a* contingent, maybe a few hundred (I don't know how many there are), of people who will not let up in this campaign of

harassment. I haven't heard of any specific incidents where we have identified this behaviour with a particular leader in the movement, I think these are people who would rather be leaders but *aren't* leaders personally I suspect.

Nonetheless, it's a problem and the issue with leaders in the movement has been the struggle to get them to recognise that this is happening and to actually formally denounce it. Because it's important for leaders in the movement to do that, because that's one of the ways that you communicate that this is socially unacceptable is when you have leaders saying, "it's socially unacceptable, we don't want this in the movement. We don't approve of it." We've been moving towards that, that's one of the things we've been working on is trying to get more recognition and more outspoken opposition to this behaviour.

- TS: [00:42:19] OK, so into that, if the leaders step up and say this is unacceptable, then obviously it's going to make it a formal public issue, which obviously is needed in this respect. In terms of some of this harassment, obviously you would know a lot more than I do in this respect, but is it... ..is it full on threats and harassment or is it just certain people not liking certain characters? Is it more or less a description of that?
- RC: [00:42:46] Yeah, it's not criticism. Criticism wouldn't be a problem, debate would be fine. We engage in that all the time. Even members of Atheism+ engage in debate with each other and we get along with that. No, no, this is actual rape threats... sexist comments, like calling people cunts... saying they're going to kick them in the cunt. And also actual pornographic pictures, these people will do paintings and drawings of this woman speaker covered in semen and basically in a rape position and send it to her.
- TS: [00:43:25 shocked laugh]
- RC: [00:43:26] And there was one time, one of these women leaders had one of her blogs, the comment section was bombarded with like a hundred comments from apparently a team of atheists ganged up doing, joking back and forth with each other about her giving them a blow job. I mean it was, this kind of stuff. And I have to say... and also a lot of other kind of factual distortions and things like that that get very annoying. I have a problem sometimes when I put up a post I actually dread having to go through the moderation of the comments. To the extent where oftentimes I feel like I don't want to do this anymore, but I keep doing it because I know it's important. But I realise I'm not even... the kind of stuff I'm dealing with is just the bullshit. The lies... sometimes I've been called that I'm acting like a woman. Because you know...
- TS: [00:44:13] Yeah yeah yeah...
- RC: [00:44:13] ... that's the biggest insult you can give a man. That's actually a very sexist thing to say. Dealing with all that, I don't mind it but it's just very

annoying and it can wear on you. So if I were actually receiving the rape threats and death threats and just the verbal abuse that these women are facing, I don't know that I'd have the stomach or the will to put up with it. It would be difficult, a lot more difficult than I'm facing now. So, I really feel for them and I don't want that to be the case and I don't want that to discourage other women from getting more involved in the movement.

And that's really, that's kind of the biggest concern as well... it's not just the women who are facing this, which is awful and I feel really bad about that and I wish I could do something about it, but I'm also concerned for the up and coming women who *could be* involved in the movement, who could be voices in the movement who are being scared away by this behaviour. It really disturbs me. There is a lot of this going on, I don't know statistically if it's rising or declining, but all I know is the only thing I can do is call attention to it, put links up pointing to it so people see that it exists and denounce it.

That's what I've been engaging in as a member of Atheism+, and many other members of Atheism+ have also been focused on this to the extent that they can.

TS: [00:45:31] Yeah, well there you go. I asked, and you responded and that's truly..... absolutely shocking... [pfffft] and that's pretty disgusting. But it shows two things, one of them is that you can be an atheist and still hold abhorrent and disgraceful social, political values ... so that's one aspect of where atheism isn't at all political, and which is to a certain extent what I want to say. But at the same time, what you say is that we do need atheism branded with social and political values, as you would agree, and that's one reason why. Because you get ridiculous behaviour like this where people are supposedly engaged in critical thinking and are meant to have values that support equal humanity and then they come out with these kind of... well, basically just disgraceful behaviour.

Thanks for bringing that to light because I never really realised that some of that was just that ridiculous. Before I let you go Richard, talking about Atheism+, what do you think... you've talked about a lot of the issues so far, but what do you think the future will hold and what are some of the things you want to see Atheism+ do to bring more people into the community, not just our community but the social movement in itself.

RC: [00:46:46] In terms of looking into the future, I don't know to what extent the label, the actual word Atheism+ will gain currency, because that's more of an historical contingency we might not have control over. I mean, it has certain semantic difficulties. So, I don't know about the label. What I'm more concerned about is the agenda, the mission, the things that we want to accomplish - are those growing in popularity, are they becoming mainstream within the movement? And it does appear to be the case, it's happening slowly.

We've only really given this movement a name for about a year now, it's only been a year. I mean, the movement existed before that it just wasn't named. We were doing these kinds of things and pushing them and so I think, so maybe a few, maybe in the last five years at most that it's been occurring. So it's still young yet to see.

What I'd like to see within five years is more of what we want to accomplish become more mainstream become the norm for the atheism movement, so that it isn't a big deal anymore that we're doing these kind of things. Which brings me back to what you were talking about far earlier. You had asked what is the purpose of atheism as a political movement, and I think a political movement is probably the wrong phrase. I would say a *politically conscious movement* would be a better way to put it.

It goes back to that idea that we as atheists really do push the idea of logical rationality, of fallacy detection, of applying cognitive science to the way we understand the world, philosophy and so on. And also, we care about evidence. We're very, very particular about that. So, I think we can accomplish what other groups can't - which is better informing ourselves. Now there might be specific political movements, for example the gay rights movement, that's well informed on the gay rights issues and so on. But as the atheism movement, we can better inform ourselves on many issues, a broad range of issues, as citizens and as members of society. I think we can better accomplish the informing of ourselves in precisely the way... for example, Christians don't. Christians don't ask for, "let's have economic debates, let's have information disseminated and let's talk about how to rationally analyse this and how to come to better conclusions about it so that we can get more information through the networks of atheism, through the atheism movement so we can be better informed citizens. We can use our atheism, that gives us this drive for evidence based reasoning, this drive for knowledge, this drive for a better understanding of reason and logic. We can use that to become informed as political citizens of our respective countries, and as members of society, as moral members of our society."

So, I think what I would most like to see is that concept. That idea that atheists should be better informed politically and as a movement could help each other become better informed politically. And also in terms of our moral values, have a more open conversation about what our moral values should be and why, and to what extent we can realise those values in our behaviour moving forward.

TS: [00:49:51]. Ah OK, that's great points. Obviously, like as you say just because we're all atheists doesn't mean that internally we don't have differences and we need to bring some of these differences to light. What we can do in the future in terms of offering a different political voice on mainstream political issues, only time will tell. But, as it stands, I still have issues about whether as a main movement we can bring something different to mainstream politics, even if it's just being *politically conscious* of issues as atheists which could just be an issue of semantics.

I still think there's certain issues there (Atheism+) but as long as we start off with an internal dialogue, like what's going on here, and also start to realise that there are different values in our groups and that some of them, as you've elaborated on with the sexual harassment issues, demonstrate that even though atheists have some similar values there's still discrepancies and attitudes that aren't welcome in any social or political communities and this includes atheism; and its tolerance of attitudes and views that are abhorrent in any way.

Thank you Richard for your time and for your insights and thoughts into Atheism+ and why it's needed, and the future. Thank you.