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The Brights Movement as a Phenomenon of Contemporary Culture

Selected Excerpts: Introduction, Chapter 1, and
Conclusion

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Introduction

Questions of secularization, freethought, and the relationship between science and religion occupy an enormous place in contemporary intellectual life. They interest not only academic researchers but anyone whose intellectual search touches on religious questions. Publications in the media, works of art, lectures, and public debates all reflect an unprecedented social demand for discussion of religion, its socioeconomic significance, and its moral weight.

Contemporary religious processes in Western society are neither uniform nor straightforward. A few statistical indicators help illustrate why the study of the Brights movement is relevant in a global context.

According to the General Social Survey (GSS), conducted by the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago since 1972, the “No religion” category topped the list of American religious affiliations for the first time in 2018, with 23.1 percent of respondents. Catholics accounted for 23 percent, and evangelical Christians for 22.5 percent. This was reported by Ryan Burge, a political scientist at Eastern Illinois University who analyzed the survey data. His graphs show a clear upward trend in the religiously unaffiliated over time.

Crucially, “nones” are not the same as atheists. They are people who, at the time of the survey, decline to identify with any specific religion. Even so, the steady growth of this group carries significant implications for the study of contemporary religious processes.

At the same time, according to the American Family Survey conducted in the same year, more than 60 percent of respondents said religion matters to their identity: for 18 percent it is “somewhat important,” for 16 percent “very important,” and for 26 percent “extremely important.” It should be noted that this survey was conducted by a research center at Brigham Young University, one of the largest private religious universities in the United States, affiliated with the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

The American context is central to this study because the United States

is the birthplace of the Brights movement, a movement that, as will be shown, could hardly have arisen in any other environment. The First Amendment to the US Constitution establishes that Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion or prohibiting its free exercise, nor abridging freedom of speech or of the press. These rights — to profess any religion or none, and to speak freely about it — provide the optimal conditions for both religious movements and atheist, anticlerical ones to flourish. Religious freedom in the United States remains of fundamental social and political importance.

The number of Americans raised in non-religious households has also grown steadily, from around 2 percent in 1973 to 11 percent in 2018. Despite this, the United States has traditionally been a country where the religious factor carries exceptional weight in public life, including political processes. The data cited above leave no doubt that American society is secularizing and that religion plays a diminishing role in everyday life. In absolute terms, however, the religious factor remains one of the key forces shaping American culture. Hence the enormous volume of public debate about religion, its merits and its costs. Books critical of religion appear on bestseller lists with regularity.

It is in this context that we turn to the Brights movement as a phenomenon of contemporary culture. The intense interest in religion, and above all in its critical examination, is itself evidence of the topic's relevance. Moreover, neither Russian nor Western historiography has so far produced works specifically dedicated to the Brights movement. This constitutes the scientific novelty of the present study.

Aim and Objectives

The aim of the research is to identify the essential character of the Brights movement as a phenomenon of contemporary culture.

To achieve this aim, the following objectives were formulated:

1. To investigate the circumstances in which the movement arose and the historical context of its emergence.
2. To establish the movement's place in the history of freethought

and in contemporary intellectual life.

3. To determine the organizational structure of the movement, the main directions of its activity, and its socioeconomic foundations.
4. To identify the ideas, about religion and more broadly, most widely held among members of the movement.
5. To establish the basic factual data about the movement: numerical composition by country, educational levels of members, age distribution, and related characteristics.

Methodology

The methodological basis of the research is in-depth individual interviewing. The interview guide consists of a list of topics to be covered in conversation with each respondent. Unlike a questionnaire, the guide does not contain a closed list of questions; it proposes a direction for dialogue, leaving the interviewer room for improvisation while maintaining formal rigor.

Ten in-depth interviews were conducted in total. Respondents were selected on the basis of representativeness: several age groups and respondents with different educational backgrounds were included. This number reflects the nature and aims of the research. The goal is to grasp the essence of the movement by identifying its most significant characteristics. For this purpose, sources such as the website, social networks, forums, and academic publications must be consulted first. The in-depth interviews are designed to present the personal views of individual movement members on the questions listed above.

The topics covered in each interview included: age and gender; educational background and specialization; self-identification as a member of the movement and as a philosophical position; attitude toward the current state of the movement; and degree of involvement in its activities.

Structure

The thesis includes an introduction, three main chapters, a conclusion, a list of sources, and appendices. The first chapter analyses the historiography applicable to the topic. The second and third chapters examine various aspects of the Brights movement as a phenomenon of contemporary culture, with particular attention to its ideological content and the methods by which it spreads its ideas. The second chapter contains a comprehensive account of the history of the movement. The third chapter is a complex analysis of its current state.

Chapter 1. Historiographical Foundations

Social Movements as an Object of Study

Social movements are today an extremely influential force in the political and intellectual life of society. In the United States, movements have shaped history as decisively as anywhere in the world: the anti-war movements against the Vietnam War (1964–1985) and the Iraq War (2003) left a profound mark on American culture. The Brights movement did not arise in a vacuum. The tendency to organize around shared ideas, bypassing hierarchical structures, is exceptionally strong in the United States.

Before turning to a specific movement, it is necessary to clarify what a social movement actually is and how it differs from other forms of human association: political parties, civil society organizations, foundations. Any analysis of a particular movement must be grounded in an understanding of how scholarly methodology is applied to social movements in general.

Donatella Della Porta, in her monograph *Social Movements: An Introduction*, identifies four fundamental groups of questions around which the analysis of social movements should be organized. The first concerns the relationship between structural changes and transformations in patterns of social conflict. The second addresses cultural representation in social conflict, including the transformation of social problems into collective action and the formation of identity. The third involves values, interests, and ideas, and the ways they become part of a movement. The fourth relates to the concrete social circumstances that shape a movement's chances of success and the adjustments in tactics and strategy that external conditions may require. This work informs the discussion of essential features characteristic of social movements throughout the thesis.

Stephan Fuchs and Peggy Plass, in their article "Sociology and Social Movements," identify three main problems that sociology can address in the context of social movements. First, the researcher can

study the specific activities of movements, the processes of their formation, and what distinguishes a movement from other forms of human cooperation. Second, attention can be paid to the fact that the most successful movements often acquire formal character and become part of the establishment. Third, some movements, Marxism and feminism among them, have exercised substantial influence on sociology itself. In any case, the authors emphasize, sociology addresses empirical rather than normative questions: it is not equipped to judge which movements deserve support. The empirical task is to establish how a movement functions, how it forms, how it identifies itself, what values it holds. This is the approach followed in the present study.

Vincenzo Ruggiero, in his article on the Attac movement, notes that the growth of protest actions around the world and their unprecedented international character led to a significant revival of interest in studying social movements. Written in 2002, precisely when the Brights movement was taking shape, the article argues that contemporary movements are characterized by cross-nationality. This is consistent with a broader shift in the social sciences from the static to the dynamic, with mobility as the organizing concept: mobility of goods, people, information, ideas, and values. Shared ideas and values ultimately become the integrating factor that produces new types of social movements.

Kristin Guenther, in a feminist-framed article on the New Atheist movement, examines a movement closely related to the Brights. She draws on in-depth interviews and analysis of social media posts and online discussions, as well as direct attendance at New Atheist events. Her interview guide included key questions about respondents' self-identification as atheists, agnostics, freethinkers, and/or Brights. The article is a useful example of how social movements can be studied empirically, and its proximity to the subject matter makes it directly relevant to the present research.

Andrew Walder, in "Political Sociology and Social Movements," provides a comprehensive historiographical overview of research on political mobilization and offers an important classification: movements

that occupy most of a participant's time versus those that command only a fraction of it. Some movements are socially and geographically enclosed; others operate in an open, liberal atmosphere and resemble clubs of shared interest. These differences affect both the influence of movement leaders over ordinary members and the impact of the movement on broader social processes.

From this body of work, several conclusions about social movements in general can be drawn:

- A social movement always expresses some form of social conflict: a confrontation between parties rooted in an internal contradiction.
- A movement is a central actor in political life.
- A movement expresses the interests of a group united by a common characteristic. Around that characteristic, the movement's identity is typically constructed.
- A characteristic feature of contemporary movements is a high degree of mobility.
- The methodology for studying a movement must be determined case by case and may include various forms of surveys, interviews, and questionnaires, as well as any available means of information gathering.

Freethought and Atheism in the Study of Religion

The body of sources and research relevant to a study of the Brights movement falls into two main groups. The first comprises works examining the phenomenon of freethought in general: its history, philosophy, and psychology. Without engaging with these foundational works, it is impossible to situate the contemporary movement within its historical context or to appreciate its full significance.

In the Russian scholarly tradition, relevant foundational works include those of M. M. Shakhnovich, Z. A. Tazhurizina, V. M. Boguslavsky, I. P. Voronitsyn, and G. L. Livshits.

A significant body of publications in adjacent fields is devoted to New Atheism. A doctoral dissertation defended at Moscow State University in 2016 by V.V. Sleptsova, supervised by Z.A. Tazhurizina, examined “New Atheism as a Phenomenon of Contemporary Western Freethought.” The same topic has produced a substantial literature in English. Noam Chomsky has offered critical perspectives on New Atheism in public forums.

New Atheism is closely linked to the Brights movement. At its core is a radical debunking of all religions as phenomena of social consciousness rooted in human weakness, irrationality, and ignorance. New Atheism is characterized by scientism, a sharp demarcation between religion and science, anthropological naturalism, and contempt for theology.

The Brights movement is broader in scope: its only formal requirement is a commitment to a naturalistic worldview. A secular humanist in the tradition of Paul Kurtz may identify as a Bright without sharing the more combative positions of the New Atheists. Jacques Maritain, writing in 1949, distinguished between pseudo-atheists and absolute atheists, and between positive and negative atheists, anticipating in certain respects today’s critiques of New Atheism.

In 2016, I.D. Ponochevnaya defended a dissertation at St. Petersburg State University, supervised by M.M. Shakhnovich, on the philosophy of religion of Paul Kurtz. This study examines Kurtz’s relationship to new forms of freethought and the place of secular humanism among other major intellectual currents. It touches on the Brights movement as an inseparable part of today’s cultural landscape.

Works by authors affiliated with the movement, including Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Michael Shermer, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens, constitute a further relevant body of literature. In most cases these authors address broader questions rather than the movement itself. Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* is an exception: it discusses the movement’s name, responds to common criticisms, and reflects on what it means to be a Bright. The book prompted responses from scholars who questioned whether Dennett’s analysis of

religion could be considered non-evaluative, given his affiliation with the movement.

The Brights Movement: Applicable Sources

The second group of sources relates directly to the movement: its structure, ideas, values, and forms of activity. For a researcher focused on contemporary culture, these sources are decisive. There are very few of them.

The central source is the movement's official website, www.the-brights.net. Careful study of its main sections provides a coherent picture of what the movement is. The use of a website as a primary source may seem insufficiently rigorous for academic work; in the case of the Brights, it is indispensable. The website aggregates all the information needed for a comprehensive understanding of the movement, and it is the source cited by virtually every academic author who touches on the subject.

The movement's forum, accessible through the official website, functions as its primary communication platform and is among the most informative sections of the site.

It should be noted that the information on the official website may not always coincide with the positions of individual members. This problem is compounded by the international character of the movement: what is self-evident to an American Bright may be interpreted quite differently in Russia or elsewhere.

The movement also maintains a YouTube channel, though the last video was uploaded in August 2012. The channel is effectively inactive. On Facebook, the movement posts regularly. In the Russian internet, the movement is most visibly represented by a VKontakte group with nearly 60,000 members.

Conclusion

This thesis has conducted a comprehensive study of the Brights movement as a phenomenon of contemporary culture. The combination of in-depth interviewing and systematic analysis of available sources allowed the central aim to be achieved: to establish the essential character of the Brights movement.

The following conclusions were reached.

First. The Brights movement is an organization whose primary goal is the dissemination of a naturalistic worldview. It is also engaged in political activism aimed at ensuring that people with a naturalistic worldview are heard at the level of public and state institutions.

Second. The defining feature of the movement is the naturalistic worldview: a worldview free from all supernatural elements. It is grounded in scientific knowledge and presupposes the purification of science from anything not directly pertaining to it. This explains why the overwhelming majority of movement members are connected to scientific institutions or actively engaged with science outside of formal academic settings.

Third. The organizational structure of the movement is horizontal and network-based, with hierarchical elements reduced to a minimum. The central body, Brights Central, holds no authority and performs exclusively coordinating functions. Formal registration of new members serves only to track their overall number: to be part of the movement, it is sufficient to share its ideas and consider oneself a member. The movement includes a number of local clusters and offers members the opportunity to participate in special initiative groups. The most significant element of the movement's social structure, however, remains each individual member.

Fourth. The precise numerical composition of the movement cannot be determined, since the threshold for entry is extremely low. According to the movement's own records, approximately 55,000 people are registered worldwide, but many Brights are unaware that registration

is even an option.

Fifth. The forms of activism offered by the movement range from individual to collective. The most significant current projects concern science education: a poster on evolutionary theory designed for classroom use, and a project on the origins of morality grounded in current scientific understanding.

The study also produced several broader findings. The Brights movement emerged in a specific historical context, namely post-September 11 America, and its organizational structure, ideology, and methods of action are inseparable from that context. Its network character, low entry threshold, and emphasis on identity over formal membership reflect the logic of contemporary movements built around ideas rather than institutional goals.

The movement's activity in Russia has effectively ceased. The VKontakte group has not been updated since 2018. The Russian website is inaccessible. The last significant event, the Bright Forum in Moscow, took place in November 2017. Despite this organizational dormancy, members continue to identify with the movement, because its central element is not institutional activity but a shared system of values. As long as people hold those values, the movement in some form persists.

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