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**FACULTY OF GRADUATE AND
POSTDOCTORAL STUDIES**

Steven Tomlins

AUTEUR DE LA THÈSE / AUTHOR OF THESIS

M.A. (Religious Studies)

GRADE / DEGREE

Department of Religious Studies

FACULTÉ, ÉCOLE, DÉPARTEMENT / FACULTY, SCHOOL, DEPARTMENT

In Science we Trust: Dissecting the Chimera of New Atheism

TITRE DE LA THÈSE / TITLE OF THESIS

Lori Beaman

DIRECTEUR (DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS SUPERVISOR

CO-DIRECTEUR (CO-DIRECTRICE) DE LA THÈSE / THESIS CO-SUPERVISOR

Peter Beyer

Anne Vallely

Gary W. Slater

Le Doyen de la Faculté des études supérieures et postdoctorales / Dean of the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

**IN SCIENCE WE TRUST: DISSECTING THE CHIMERA OF NEW
ATHEISM**

Steven Tomlins

Student Number: 5345726

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Thesis Director: Lori G. Beaman

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ABSTRACT

New Atheism is a neologism that is explicitly linked to four public intellectuals: Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett. At the heart of this movement are the five books these four atheists have written specifically on the topic of religion. Throughout the New Atheist literature science is conceptualized as the most powerful force for secularization in the modern era. This thesis is a textual discourse analysis of the New Atheist literature, with a primary focus on how the themes ‘secularization’ and ‘science’ are framed. It will explore how notions of secularization and science often bleed into each other, with science being portrayed as necessarily opposed to religion. It will also highlight the New Atheists’ similarities and diversities of opinion on these matters, as well as examine where their stances are located in the broader debates concerning the so-called secular/religious divide and the interactions between science and religion.

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1. HOLDING A MOVEMENT IN A PETRI DISH: AN INTRODUCTION TO SELECT CULTURES OF NEW ATHEISM

Atheism has attracted a great deal of media attention during the last four years. Atheists have been interviewed on numerous news shows and atheist books have become bestsellers. In 2007, when informed that atheist book sales had overtaken that of Christian book sales, Christopher Hitchens, the author of *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* told the associated press that “There is something like a change in the zeitgeist.”¹ Richard Dawkins, perhaps the best known of the contemporary atheists, has been depicted on the popular adult-cartoon South Park and his book, *The God Delusion*, has been featured in an episode of Family Guy. Along with Sam Harris and Daniel Dennett, they have been self-described as the “Four Horsemen.”² The movement they are a part of has been called “New Atheism.”³

At the heart of this so-called ‘movement’ are the five books these four men have written specifically on the topic of religion.⁴ New atheism is a neologism that was born from media interest in these bestselling books, the fact that they arrived on the scene at roughly the

¹ Terry Sanderson, 2007, “Atheist Books overtaking Christian Titles in Best-Sellers Lists,” <http://humaniststudies.org/enews/?id=300&article=8> *Institute For Humanist Studies*, June 6, (retrieved December 5, 2008).

² On the 30th of September 30 2007, the four authors held a 2-hour discussion, which was later released on DVD format by The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason (RDFRS) under the title *The Four Horseman*.

³ In an interview with BBC World News on June 1, 2010, Christopher Hitchens explains: “My main allegiance now that I’m past 60 and got to the memoir stage is to a group of people who basically deal in doubt. I mean, sometimes we’re called the New Atheists, it’s a silly term in a way, but, we’re certain of one thing which is the uncertainty principle where we’re resolved for doubt; we’re adamant for scepticism.” “Christopher Hitchens on BBC world news,” <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Za-QBJxINEI>, *Youtube.ca*, uploaded by DailyHitchens 22, June 2, 2010.

⁴ These books are: *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004) and *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006) by Sam Harris; *The God Delusion* (2006) by Richard Dawkins; *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007) by Christopher Hitchens; and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006) by Daniel Dennett.

same time, and the willingness of the authors to maintain a united front in order to increase public space for atheism.

My thesis will address a major theme that threads through the New Atheist literature, that of the interactions between science and religion. The research question for my thesis is the following: *How do the New Atheists construct secularization and science in relation to religion?* Secularization plays a key role in this discussion, since the New Atheists conceive of science as a significant vehicle of secularization. Science comes across as both intertwined with and often driving secularism; it is a secular pursuit that makes religion obsolete. In fact, science often comes across in their books about religion as the most potent force for secularization in the modern era. In *god is not great*, Hitchens writes, for example that “[r]eligion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important.”⁵ Science has created the conditions for secularization and it provides a continuing force supporting its growth and maintenance.

New Atheism is a modern phenomenon that has gained public traction in the form of bestselling books, newspaper and magazine articles, debates, and television spots. Post 9/11 there has been a noticeable increase in the percentage of Western individuals who openly identify as atheist. Numerous censuses attest to this fact, as does an increase in atheist student group start-ups and enrolments in North American universities.⁶ Since Dawkins,

⁵ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2007), 282.

⁶ Eric Gorski, 2009, “Atheist Student Groups Flower on College Campuses: On college campuses, atheist student groups search for acceptance and struggle for identity,” <http://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory?id=9145342>, *ABC News*, November 21, (retrieved December 1, 2009).; “Report 1: Religious Affiliation”, <http://religions.pewforum.org/reports>, *The Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life*, US Religious Landscape Survey, (retrieved June 28, 2010).; Stuart Laidlaw, 2008, “Embracing goodness, without God: Atheism is on the rise in Canada. Or maybe it's just that people now are willing to admit it,” <http://www.thestar.com/living/article/469380>, *Toronto Star*, August 2, (retrieved April 21, 2009).; William Couch, Juan Tomassie, and Thad Allender, “Shifting Religious Identities: A New Study Shows

Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett have become the contemporary public “face” of atheism, it is important to gain a solid understanding from a sociological perspective on how symmetrical that face actually is. Analyzing how secularization and science are constructed by each author will also shed light on the opinions of key voices in the contemporary debate regarding the role of science as it relates to religion. Issues relating to the interaction of science and religion have become mainstay fodder for mainstream news media and have a direct affect on the daily life of countless agents from varied backgrounds.⁷ Considering the popularity⁸ of the writings of New Atheists, a solid understanding of how they frame the secular/religious divide in terms of science/non-science will add to our overall understanding of where the contemporary discourse itself is situated.

1.1 Meet the New Atheists

The new voices of atheism seem to have gained prominence in 2006 with the publication of Sam Harris’ *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Richard Dawkins’ *The God Delusion*, and Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. Christopher Hitchens contributed to the debate in 2007 with *god is not great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, and by that year the media was routinely referring to these writers as the

Americans’ Shifting Spiritual Choices, Including Rising Numbers of People With No Religion, Within a Generation,” http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-03-09-ARIS-faith-survey_N.htm, *USA Today*, Findings from 2008 (retrieved June 28, 2010).

⁷ From politicians: 2009, “Science minister’s coyness on evolution worries researchers,” <http://www.cbc.ca/technology/story/2009/03/17/tech-090317-gary-goodyear-evolution.html>, *CBC*, March 17, (accessed March 17, 2009); to everyone, according to a study by University of Illinois psychology professor Jesse Preston: 2008, “God or science? A belief in one weakens positive feelings for the other,” <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2008/12/081215121559.htm>, *Science Daily*, December 19, (retrieved December 19, 2008).

⁸ Bernard Lightman, 2007, “Beating up on the new Atheists,” <http://www.trincoll.edu/depts/csrpl/RINVol10%20Nos1,2/newatheists.htm>, *Religion in the News*, Hartford: Trinity College, 1(1&2), (retrieved May 6 2009). “Two successful books by atheists can be written off as a coincidence. Three begin to constitute a trend. But four in two years signal a significant cultural phenomenon.”

New Atheists. So, who are these so-called “New Atheists” who have made headlines in news outlets such as *CNN*, *The Nation* and *PBS*?⁹

A member of the Royal Academy of Science, Richard Dawkins has been named one of the “100 Most Influential People” by Time magazine and was voted “Britain’s leading public intellectual” by readers of *Prospect* magazine. He is well known for his popular science writing on evolutionary biology, and in 2006 his anti-religion book *The God Delusion* came out and also went on to become a New York Times Bestseller.¹⁰ His most recent book is an explanation of evolution, titled *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009).

Sam Harris’ first book, *The End of Faith: Religion Terror and the Future of Reason* (2004), was a New York Times bestseller. His subsequent publication, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006), was also a New York Times Bestseller. Whereas *The End of Faith* is a polemic attack primarily against the Abrahamic religions, citing Judaism, Islam, and Christianity as a danger to humanity, *Letter to a Christian Nation* is written in the form of an open letter to Christians in America, his country of origin. Harris graduated with a major in Philosophy from Stanford University, and he is presently studying towards a PhD in neuroscience where his main area of interest is the use of magnetic resonance imaging to study the neural basis of belief.¹¹

Christopher Hitchens is a celebrated English journalist and author, as well as a literary critic. A self-described anti-theist, his book *god is not great: How Religion Poisons*

⁹ To offer a few examples: Simon Hooper, 2006, “The rise of the ‘New Atheists’”, <http://www.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/11/08/atheism.feature/index.html>, *CNN*, November 9, (retrieved August 1, 2010); Ronald Aronson, 2007, “The New Atheists”, <http://www.thenation.com/article/new-atheists>, *The Nation*, June 7, (retrieved November 5, 2009); Betty Rollin, 2007, “The New Atheists”, <http://www.pbs.org/wnet/religionandethics/episodes/january-5-2007/the-new-atheists/3734/>, *PBS Religion & Ethics Newsweekly*, January 7, (retrieved July 7, 2010).

¹⁰ “The Reason Project Advisory Board”, 2009, http://www.reasonproject.org/about/advisory_board/, *The Reason Project*, retrieved August 21 2009.

¹¹ The Reason, retrieved August 21 2009.

Everything (2007) is a #1 New York Times Bestseller, and in 2005 *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines named him one of “the world’s Top 100 Public Intellectuals.”¹² His most recent book is a memoir titled *Hitch 22*.

Daniel Dennett is a professor of philosophy, and the Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. A member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Dennett penned *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), which argues for the scientific study of religion. Whereas Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins come across as quite polemic and harsh in tone, Dennett’s explanation of religion is notably more subdued. As Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas write in *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations*, the tone of Dennett’s writing is “noticeably different from Dawkins. Dennett’s aim is to coax, rather than shock – to take his reader by the hand in order to ask questions that have so far been considered ‘off-limits’ for many Americans.”¹³ These main differences in writing style aside, each of these four atheists are outspoken secularists. Their secularism comes across clearly in their texts on religion, each of which advocates science and atheism.

With the exception of Sam Harris, the New Atheists have written many books and articles in other areas of their interests, but this thesis focuses on their writings specifically dealing religion. Hitchens has written numerous books on politics, and Dawkins has written numerous books on evolutionary biology, for example, that do not directly relate to religion. When religion has been a topic in these books it has not been at the forefront and it does not contradict the opinions they present in their books on atheism, which offers similar opinions

¹² The Reason, retrieved August 21 2009.

¹³ Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2008), 59.

in much more detail. The previous works by the New Atheists will be cited in explicit cases where they do offer new insights, but they are not the focus of this thesis.

Their five books on religion - *The God Delusion*; *The End of Faith: Religion Terror and the Future of Reason*; *Letter to a Christian Nation*; *god is not great: How Religion Poisons Everything*; and *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* - form the core of my data for the analysis contained in this thesis. See Table 1 for a chart outlining the structure of each book.

Table 1

	Dawkins' <i>The God Delusion</i>	Harris'* <i>The End of Faith</i>	Hitchens' <i>god is not Great</i>	Dennett's <i>Breaking the Spell</i>
Chapter 1	A Deeply Religious Non-Believer	Reason in Exile	Putting it Mildly	Breaking Which Spell?
Chapter 2	The God Hypothesis	The Nature of Belief	Religion Kills	Some Questions About Science
Chapter 3	Arguments for God's Existence	In the Shadow of God	A Short Digression on the Pig; or, Why Heaven Hates Ham	Why Good Things Happen
Chapter 4	Why There Almost Certainly is No God	The Problem with Islam	A Note on Health, to Which Religion Can Be Hazardous	The Roots of Religion
Chapter 5	The Roots of Religion	West of Eden	The Metaphysical Claims of Religion Are False	Religion, the Early Days
Chapter 6	The Roots of Morality: Why are we Good?	A Science of Good and Evil	Arguments from Design	The Evolution of Stewardship
Chapter 7	The 'Good' Book and the Changing Moral <i>Zeitgeist</i>	Experiments in Consciousness	Revelation: The Nightmare of the "Old" Testament	The Invention of Team Spirit
Chapter 8	What's Wrong with Religion? Why be so Hostile?		The "New" Testament Exceeds the Evil of the "Old" One	Belief in Belief
Chapter 9	Childhood, Abuse and the Escape from Religion		The Koran is Borrowed from Both Jewish and Christian Myths	Toward a Buyer's Guide to Religions
Chapter 10	A Much Needed Gap?		The Tawdriness of the Miraculous and the Decline of Hell	Morality and Religion
Chapter 11			"The Lowly Stamp of Their Origin": Religion's Corrupt Beginnings	Now What Do We Do?
Chapter 12			A Coda: How Religions End	
Chapter 13			Does Religion Make People Behave Better?	
Chapter 14			There Is No "Eastern" Solution	
Chapter 15			Religion as an Original Sin	
Chapter 16			Is Religion Child Abuse?	
Chapter 17			An Objection Anticipated: The Last-Ditch "Case" Against Secularism	
Chapter 18			A Finer Tradition: The Resistance of the Rational	
Chapter 19			In Conclusion: The Need for a New Enlightenment	

* Harris' *Letter to a Christian Nation* is excluded from this table because it is written as a letter that does not have any chapters.

1.2 On a Personal Note

As an undergrad I became interested in the western philosophy of religion, as well as issues pertaining to the interaction of science and religion. Both of these areas of interest coincided with the release of new books written by self-proclaimed atheists, so I naturally picked them up to see what was behind all the media interest. I was already familiar with Dawkins, who had previously left his mark on the philosophy of religion and the study of the science/religion relationship through his book *The Blind Watchmaker*, which articulately argues against Paley's argument from design in favour of natural selection. The other names were new to me – Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett – but reading through their works on religion I could understand why they generated such heated public debate.

Some people enjoy polemics, as evidenced by the success of media personalities as diverse as Michael Moore, Denis Leary, Ann Coulter, and Eminem, to name but a few otherwise unrelated personalities who 'hold nothing back'. The entertainment value of controversy; a love for freedom of speech; and a certain respect for and/or interest in people who are not afraid to be blunt, to 'speak their mind', are all factors which undoubtedly contributed to the bestselling status of these books written by the newly dubbed "New Atheists". Behind the polemic entertainment value of the personalities and their literature, however, were serious arguments against the perceived values of religion, and for the values of rationality, scepticism, and science. New books by Christian apologists began to appear on the bookshelves, arguing against the New Atheists 'doctrine' and for the inherent value of religion. The debate interested me, as it hinted at an 'interfaith' dialogue between theists and atheists, while it also pointed to the influence that the New Atheists' books may have been

having. *Is there a genuine new atheist movement afoot? If so, what is the scope of this movement? Will it have lasting appeal? What exactly is new about it? How do their arguments affect the larger issues regarding science and religion?* These were some of the questions that initially concerned me as I began flipping through the numerous websites and videos that were growing online on the subject.

When it came time to conceive of a topic to study for my Master's thesis, it occurred to me that New Atheism, while ironically not a religion, would be a worthwhile topic to investigate in religious studies. It certainly concerns religion, and in fact derives its name in opposition to a religious belief. More tellingly, of course, was the sheer volume of books about, by, and against atheism that were taking up space in the religion sections of local bookstores. For practical purposes of categorization at least, atheism falls squarely under the banner of religion.

Writing a thesis on New Atheism can take many forms; the topic is fresh enough that many avenues are available for exploration. The atheist bus ad campaign, for example, is an intriguing controversy which could be made to fit under the New Atheism banner, especially considering Dawkins' involvement with the campaign.¹⁴ The growth of atheist groups in universities could be explored, as could the Christian reaction to New Atheism in general. These were considerations I had, but I ultimately diverted back to a seemingly simple question: *what is the scope of New Atheism?* Keeping in mind that the definition of the word *definition* is "to limit", I decided that while the scope of New Atheism can be stretched and

¹⁴ Henry Chu, 2009, "Richard Dawkins on board with a pro-atheist message". <http://www.latimes.com/news/nationworld/world/la-fg-dawkinsqa122009jan1201625954.full.story>, *LA Times*, January 11, (accessed January 11, 2009). Created by British comedian Arianne Sherine in 2008, the Atheist Bus Campaign began with the slogan "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life." Richard Dawkins very publicly backed the campaign and matched donations to it up to 5,500 pounds. For more information visit the official website at <http://www.atheistbus.org.uk/faq/>.

interpreted in numerous ways by numerous scholars, the core or essence of the movement really belongs to four authors and five of their books. It is because of these authors that the term ‘New Atheism’ was coined, and by limiting a study of New Atheism to these authors, and more particularly, their writings on atheism and religion, I could determine a better understanding of what makes them One (i.e. – a group) instead of Four (i.e. – individuals). If New Atheism is a movement that is unified enough to have four individuals fall under the same umbrella term, there certainly must be striking similarities in the way they all think about the subjects in question.

Much has been written on their similarities, and in my opinion, most of the clichés are true: the New Atheists are polemic; they tend to use straw man arguments; they tend to ignore Christian doctrines and theology; and similar arguments have been made in the past.¹⁵ In writing a thesis there would be no point in simply reiterating these points and others like them. A fresher approach, it occurred to me, would be to look honestly at how each of the individual authors express a divide between science and religion, and how this divide is linked to the notion of secularization.

1.3 Previous Work on New Atheism

The contemporary sociological literature directly addressing New Atheism is scarce. A forthcoming title, *Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal*, which features

¹⁵ Note that I am not condemning their arguments, as none of these clichés address the notion of truth (to briefly address the clichés: polemic is a style, not a front for dishonesty; straw men do indeed exist; one needn’t be an expert in something to rightly disagree with or condemn it – rape, for example; both good and bad ideas constantly come back into fashion). That said, I will not condone their arguments either. For the purposes of this thesis, my opinions on these matters are irrelevant. I would rather examine select arguments and opinions of the New Atheists themselves by giving them context, (which will occasionally necessitate the use of explaining counter-arguments made by scholars).

William Stahl amongst other sociologists, looks promising,¹⁶ but other than this volume the field is surprisingly barren. Although this is admittedly a hindrance, it also presents both an opportunity and a need. There is no lack of contemporary literature on the subject, but the literature is often written by people who have a non-social scientific, and often polemic, religious agenda.¹⁷ Literature on the history of atheism itself, such as that of Michael J. Buckley and Jennifer Hecht are helpful for putting the contemporary situation into context, as are the writings of past atheists, such as Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Sigmund Freud, and Bertrand Russell. Popular critics of New Atheism, such as Terry Eagleton, Karen Armstrong, Alister McGrath, and Chris Hedges are useful for understanding which themes found in the New Atheist literature cause them the most concern, as well as gauging how the New Atheists tend to lose their individual distinctions in such criticisms.

Since the New Atheists write about religion, science, and atheism in terms which relate to the so-called secular/religious divide, previous sociological work on secularization theory, as well as work on defining abstract terms such as “religion”, do indeed relate to this discussion. Although the ‘grand secularization narrative’ is widely considered outdated, and theories of secularization have been rewritten and/or dismissed by numerous social scientists since the latter half of the nineteenth century, it has also been embraced by others, and elements of both belief and disbelief in secularization are found throughout the New Atheist

¹⁶ Its release date of late July 2010 coincided with the completion of this thesis; otherwise it would have likely made a useful read.

¹⁷ Here are a few examples: Wilson, Andrew. *Deluded by Dawkins? A Christian Response to the God Delusion*. Eastbourne: Kingsway Communications Ltd, 2007.; Aikman, David. *The Delusion of Disbelief: Why the new Atheism is a Threat to Your Life, Liberty, and Pursuit of Happiness*. Illinois: SaltRiver, 2008.; Garrison, Becky. *The New Atheist Crusaders and Their Unholy Grail: The Misguided Quest to Destroy Your Faith*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2007.; Myers, David G. *A Friendly Letter to Skeptics and Atheists: Musings on Why God is Good and Faith isn't Evil*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.; Day, Vox. *The Irrational Atheist: Dissecting the Unholy Trinity of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens*. Dallas: Benbella Books, Inc., 2008.

literature. There is a wide range of academic writing on secularization, ranging from acceptance of the idea that religion's social significance has increasingly diminished since the Enlightenment, to a complete rejection of the theory. Relevant sociological theorists who have contributed to modern conceptions of the secularization theory will be utilized to explore the complexity of the debate, as will scholars who have contributed greatly to modern conceptions, definitions and understandings of the interactions between science and religion.

1.4 Procedure and Methodology

This Master's thesis is titled *In Science we Trust: Dissecting the Chimera of New Atheism*. This thesis is a careful examination, through textual analysis, of the writings of the New Atheists. The central goal is to explore the ways in which the New Atheists position themselves as scientific-minded secularists in conflict with anti-scientific religionists. In the process of conducting this analysis I also examine the ways in which these four writers differ from each other.

The methodology I employ is a textual discourse analysis centered on select conceptualized abstract themes found in New Atheist literature in order to deconstruct popular notions of their uniformity. Preliminary work for this analysis included the coding of the New Atheists' books on religion into twenty-seven categories.¹⁸ From these I selected six reoccurring themes which represent the most compelling and enlightening

¹⁸ The twenty-seven coded categories derived from themes in the New Atheists' books are: Purpose for Writing; Atheism; Portrayal of Atheists; Science; Portrayal of Scientists; Science and Religion; Religion; Portrayal of Religious Personalities; Scholars of Religion; Belief; Faith; Causes of War; Sense of Urgency; Concern for Children; Liberalism; Morality; Secularization; Progress; Utopia; Disrespectful Language; Mention of Each Other; Reason; Counter-Arguments; Use of the Bible; Origins of Religion; Scholarship; Personal Anecdotes.

conceptualizations utilized by each author. These themes are: Atheism, Religion, Science, Faith, Morality, and Secularization. A further refinement and focus of the themes narrowed the list down to two areas: Secularization and Science. In terms of New Atheism, these two areas often bleed into each other, as science is commonly portrayed by the authors as a powerful force for secularization.

Secularization and Science were selected as the main themes for this thesis because they provide a thematic coherence which is well suited for analyzing the New Atheist literature. They are central themes which form the core basis of their arguments with, and about, religion, in a way in which the other six themes I had narrowed my selection down to did not. This is not to suggest that the other four themes – Atheism, Religion, Faith, and Morality - do not make an appearance in this thesis. With the exception of Morality, they certainly do play have roles, although their roles are not as central to my thesis as that of the two of which I have chosen to dedicate my focus.

To give an analysis on the portrayal of Religion in the New Atheists' literature justice, a comparative analysis would have to be undertaken discussing various sociological definitions of religion, and this would in turn need to be related to the New Atheists' simplistic conceptualizations of religion. In terms of length for this thesis this is problematic, but even more crucially, this thesis decidedly does not rest on how religion is portrayed in comparison to the 'reality' of religion, but rather, seeks to address the reasons behind *why* it is portrayed in the negative. It should be noted, however, that the way religion is narrowly framed in the New Atheist literature does not correlate to the rich varieties of religious experiences, expressions, and notions that are dealt with in great detail throughout the academic discourse in Religious Studies and the Sociology of Religion.

The themes of Faith and Morality were dismissed due to a similar rationale. In terms of both length and centrality I decided these themes would be better suited for use in later projects. Atheism, which is certainly weaved throughout this thesis much like religion is, falls into the same pattern of dismissal. Enough of the material comes across in other discussions, particularly on the chapter on defining atheism, that I felt more dedication to it as a thematic topic were unnecessary. My coding in this area, for example, points to further discussions on how the New Atheists' portray atheism in light of Stalinism and Nazism, and how atheists should raise children, but I felt that these topics would ultimately make for good future projects rather than dilute the themes I have chosen to give priority.

One of the major challenges – and interesting findings – of analyzing the New Atheists is that as I began to work through the coding of their books I realized that there were some fairly significant discrepancies in how they addressed certain topics. I realised that it would be inaccurate to present their ideas in a strictly uniform way. Thus, the work presented in this thesis tries to capture both the variations and the similarities of the New Atheists' thoughts in areas such as valorizing science and embracing the secular.

Since this thesis is ultimately about producing clarity in understanding the opinions of four individuals, this thesis uses academic literature that addresses the themes identified above. This allows for a better understanding of where their opinions are situated alongside one another, as well as how their opinions relate to the larger discussion of secularization and the interactions between science and religion. For example, in the discussion of how each New Atheist conceptualizes the secular in relation to the religious, I draw heavily from secularization theorists. Likewise, scholars who have written constructive works on the

relationship between science and religion are also utilized to situate New Atheism and New Atheist arguments within the larger debates and provide an element of context

This project aims to provide an analytical window from which pragmatic understandings of commonalities and divergences of opinions on secularization and science can be gauged. By deconstructing these selected coded themes derived directly from the New Atheist textual source material, this discourse analysis will delve behind the animated rhetoric coming from all sides of the atheist-theist debate, and provide a more nuanced interpretation of how the New Atheists frame the secular, science, and religion.

1.5 Structure and Organization

This thesis consists of five chapters. In chapters two and three I position the New Atheists historically and contemporarily within the larger area of atheism. In the latter chapters I focus on their positions regarding secularization, science, and religion.

Chapter Two is a history of atheism, spanning the days of the ancients to the rise of modernity. The purpose of this chapter is to set the context for New Atheism. One cannot understand what is ‘new’ about New Atheism if one is unfamiliar with the atheism of past generations. One of the main difficulties in writing a millennium-spanning history is that it necessitates selectivity on a grand scale. Another is that the only voices of the long deceased that still reverberate today originated from those who made some kind of impact – the opinions of ‘common folk’ are often absent in historical narratives. In any case, it is my hope that by selecting a few ‘atheists’ whose lives had enough impact to make the historical record it will be possible to take a few snapshots from the tapestry of ideas surrounding the origins of atheism that will help highlight how “non-believers” thought, were understood,

and presented at specific points in time. In many ways, this chapter is a selected history of western philosophy, theology, and science. It does not deal with eastern history, eastern philosophy, eastern theology, eastern science, etc., since it is my contention that New Atheism is primarily concerned with denying western religions and a western conception of God.

Chapter Three explores the definition of atheism, as it applies to the contemporary western setting. Definitions from atheist organizations are presented, as are personal explanations of each new atheist's connection to the term most often used in media to describe them. Do all of the New Atheists consider themselves to be an 'atheist'? Do they embrace the term, and wear it as a badge of honour, or do they wear it reluctantly, out of default rather than pride? This chapter deals with the problems that can arise from using the term atheism, as well as the additional difficulty of defining a branch of atheism as 'new'. It also serves as a means for consideration of how like-minded the four authors behind New Atheism truly are.

Secularization is the subject of Chapter Four. The secularization thesis is one which many sociologists feel has passed its prime, yet others argue legitimately explains a 'de-religionization' taking place in modern society. With regards to the New Atheists, it is important to understand where they stand on this topic. Do they believe religion is on its way out – if so, why spark a movement against it – why beat a dead horse? Do they believe religion is on the rise – if so, how do they account for that; has the so-called 'enlightenment project' been a failure? To understand atheism – old or new - it is important to understand how atheists locate themselves in the secular, maintaining a concrete divide between the secular and the religious that many sociologists call into question.

Chapter Five develops a main point made from the preceding chapter: the New Atheists' conceive of science as both corrosive to religion and the most potent vehicle toward secularization. With this having been established, the purpose of Chapter Five is to take a closer look at what they mean when they use the term 'science'. The word can be found throughout the new atheistic literature on religion, and each writer views it with high regard. Areas explored include how they portray scientists, especially those who claim a personal belief in a deity; their arguments for the necessity of conflict between science and religion; Stephen Jay Gould's concept of Non-Overlapping Magisteria, often referred to as NOMA; and the debate over evolution and design by God, which is often expressed by the New Atheists as being over science and religion. Since the New Atheists often credit science with having given them the gift of atheism, it should be revealing to explore the contours of science, and how they commonly position science as in conflict with religion.

In the concluding chapter I summarize key points and arguments, as well as offer my own speculations as to why I believe the arguments for conflict between science and religion are so important to the New Atheists. The debate rages for many reasons, and I hope to highlight a select few contributing factors that are presently keeping it ignited.

2. SETTING THE HISTORICAL CONTEXT: THE EVOLUTION OF ATHEISM

It would be misleading to say that atheism began in Ancient Greece. It would be misleading to say that atheism found completion in the nineteenth century. It would, however, be fair to say that philosophical reasoning that denied the popular conceptions of the gods began in Ancient Greece, and the nineteenth century was a time when an atheist could, for the most part, publicly announce a disbelief in God and advance an atheistic theory without the threat of serious (life-threatening) persecution. The history of atheism begins with fragments and ends with a continuous conversation. The history of literacy, philosophy, and science are the primary guides for this millennium spanning journey. Atheism is the result of the development of communication technology (from the alphabet to the printing press), philosophy and theology, the increasing relevance of science, and the human desire to know what exists and why. Ironically perhaps, atheism owes its development first and foremost to theism, be it monotheism, pantheism, deism, or polytheism; for without theism, there would never have been a reason to disbelieve in the first place.

In this chapter I have selectively identified some key atheist voices from the Classical Greek period to the dawn of the twentieth century. These individuals will be used to explain the phenomenon of atheism itself in connotation with the different climates from which it has sprung. One problem in attempting a history spanning two and a half millennia is that the definition of atheism needs to change in unison with the eras to which it applies. Atheism is not a static term. It is forever linked to the term “theism,” which it both contains and counters (*a* meaning *without*; *theism* meaning *God*) and as such an atheist can only be

understood in comparison with the deity of that atheist's society and culture. Another problem that must be addressed is that loudly proclaiming oneself an atheist is a relatively recent event. An announcement of atheism in Ancient Greece was considered a threat to the city-state to which one belonged. An announcement of atheism during the height of the Christian Empire was considered an insult to a God intolerant of blasphemy; horrendous death was a justified response, (although, to be fair, in more forgiving cases repentance after torture was permitted). Atheism was a derogatory term applied to those who dared to question the established faith. No non-suicidal individual would dare recant the mother faith in a public forum, and it can be assumed that a majority of medieval "atheists" were atheists only by accusation, and not of their own consideration and agreement.

2.1 Rejecting the Olympian Gods

Atheism is nothing less than the denial of a worldview in favour of another worldview. It is heavily tied to philosophy, and as such it should come as no surprise that we find the earliest examples of "atheistic" thought in Ancient Greece. Thales of Miletus (620-540 BCE), is credited with being the first philosopher of Ancient Greece, which also gives him the distinction of being the founder of Western Philosophy.¹⁹ His fame came from his attempts to explain worldly phenomena by seeking a common reason, an underlining scientific (by today's terminology) principle. As a philosopher, he questioned his society's belief in supernatural beings having the ability to influence the world as he knew it, and he sought rational reasons for natural phenomenon. With the aid of hindsight, we can now establish that his theories of natural phenomenon were inaccurate, such as his belief that the

¹⁹ Philip Stokes, *Philosophy 100 Essential Thinkers*, (Arcturus Publishing Limited, 2004), 9.

flat earth floated on water which was the single origin of matter, but in attempting to explain natural phenomenon he has been credited as one of the first Greek scientists: “The Milesians were the first to abandon supernatural or religious explanations for natural phenomena and instead to seek purely physical causes.”²⁰ Thales tried to account for “the nature of the world without appealing to the wills and whims of anthropomorphic, Homeric Gods.”²¹ Perhaps his greatest achievement, as viewed through the eyes of his contemporaries, was in his ability to “predict a solar eclipse and the solstices, thereby demonstrating that occultation of the sun and the length of days were not determined by divine whim.”²² This achievement would have been an exemplary boost to the credibility of what we now term science, and by extension natural philosophy, for the distinction between what we now consider two distinct fields of inquiry had not yet been made. Miletus was a strong economic center with important trading links throughout the Mediterranean. A notable achievement of this Greek coastal city in Ionia, (present day Turkey), is the completion of the alphabet in around 650 BCE.²³ Although we cannot claim Thales to be an atheist, his search for truth through the contemplation of nature was extremely influential, and it seems reasonable to assume that the completion of the Greek alphabet, (the first phonetic alphabet in history), approximately thirty years prior to his birth, played an important role in fostering that influence. His ideas, like that of other philosophers, could be written and transmitted with the ease of a new alphabet whose extraordinary usefulness is

²⁰ Walter Donlan, Sarah B. Pomeroy, Stanley M. Burstein, and Jennifer Tolbert Roberts, *Ancient Greece: A Political, Social, and Cultural History*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 139.

²¹ Stokes, 9.

²² Donlan, 139.

²³ Gustave Glotz, *Ancient Greece at Work: An Economic History of Greece from the Homeric Period to the Roman Conquest*, (New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 1987), 117.

evident in the fact that its main achievement – the use of vowels - is being used while I write, and you read, this very sentence.

A follower of Thales, Xenophanes of Colophon, (570-475 BCE), focused his philosophy on the absurdity of believing in the anthropomorphic gods of his time:

Men believe that the gods are born, are clothed and shaped and speak like themselves; if oxen and horses and lions could draw and paint, they would delineate their gods in their own image; the Negroes believe that their gods are flat-nosed and black, the Thracians that theirs have blue eyes and red hair.²⁴

This is clearly a critique of the gods of his time, in that their attributes have been created by human beings. By pointing out that different cultures have different gods, similar in that they appear human yet that human appearance is always identical to that of the race of said culture, we can assume that trade played an important role in his conclusions. Trade gave the Greeks an opportunity to discover a variety of cultures and races – this would have also brought them familiarity with a variety of similar, yet physically different, anthropomorphic gods. Perhaps such a familiarity gave rise to questions of one's own gods, and Xenophanes came to the conclusion that the gods, if they do exist, surely wouldn't be "clothed and shaped and speak" like the people that worship them. While it cannot be claimed that Xenophanes was an atheist as we understand it today, he obviously was skeptical of the commonly held attributes of the gods his fellow Greeks identified with.

Protagoras (490 - 420 BCE) was a well respected Sophist philosopher (Sophist being a "loose term that denotes the critical intellectuals" of the "second half of the fifth century B.C.") who taught in Athens until his opinions on belief in the gods met with serious public disapproval and he was subsequently remembered as an atheist.²⁵ His statement "man is the

²⁴ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, (London: Glyndendal, 1922), 18.

²⁵ Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 12-13.

measure of all things” is well known but often misinterpreted as arrogantly human-centric.²⁶ What he meant was that we can only understand things through our human condition, just as a lion can only understand things through the lion’s lens of their world.²⁷ Following that thought – that knowledge is limited to us by our humanness – Protagoras presented an opinion about the “unknowability” of gods in his book *Of the Gods*:

About the gods I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist or what they are like to look at; many things prevent my knowing – among others, the fact that they are never seen and the shortness of human life.²⁸

From this passage we can not claim that Protagoras is an atheist, for he fails to deny the gods, although we can claim that he is agnostic towards them; he is certain of the appropriateness of being uncertain about their existence. What follows from such a statement, however, is atheism in practice. To be agnostic is a form of unbelief, albeit based on different reasoning than atheism, which implies the odds favoring their being no God or gods. This was perceived by Athenian society, which favored the protection and privilege of the gods, and he was subsequently tried for impiety, leading, in all likelihood, to his subsequent exile.²⁹

The Athenian criminal law “asebeia” translates into English as “impiety or disrespect towards the gods.”³⁰ It became law around the beginning of the Peloponnesian War, perhaps as a response to those who chose to disrespect the Eleusinian Mysteries and the mutilation of the Hermae, and continued until the dusk of the fourth century BCE.³¹ The fact that some philosophers were willing to express unpopular opinions of the gods while the threat of

²⁶ Bill Cooke, *Dictionary of Atheism, Skepticism, & Humanism*. (New York: Prometheus Books, 2006), 416.

²⁷ Cooke, 416.

²⁸ Cooke, 417.

²⁹ Cooke, 416.

³⁰ Drachmann, 6.

³¹ Drachmann, 6-7, 40.

persecution hovered over their heads is a testament to the importance they must have held towards the expression of truth through contemplative knowledge (as understood by each individual).

Anaxagoras (500-428 BCE), a pre-Socratic philosopher, had to flee Athens at the outbreak of the Peloponnesian War amidst charges of impiety. He had claimed that heavenly bodies were not gods; they were natural objects: “[H]e had taught that the sun was a red-hot mass, and that the moon was earth and larger than Peloponnese.”³² His atheism came about through a desire to understand the natural world free from superstition. In short, he was seeking naturalist answers to reality; a precursor to what we now consider science.

The most famous of all philosophers to be tried for impiety is without doubt, Socrates of Athens. Much has been written about the philosopher, his trial, and execution, so I will not go into great detail. The important point to make here is that he was accused of being an atheist. By his own words, as filtered through the writing of Plato in his *Apology*, we learn that rumors of his “theories about the heavens,” investigation of “everything below the earth,” and novel method of argumentation brought accusers who convinced “those who hear them (to) suppose that anyone who inquires into such matters must be an atheist.”³³ He denied the charges of “refusing to acknowledge the official gods of Athens” and of corrupting the youth by his lessons, but was still sentenced to death by drinking Hemlock.³⁴ Although he wasn’t an atheist per se, his case has come to be known as a sort of martyrdom for free thought. During a period when the city-state was at war with Sparta, Athenians could not tolerate any potential insult to the gods, for retribution could only bring disaster.

³² Drachmann, 25: In the case of Anaxagoras, there is reason to believe that the charges for impiety were politically motivated.

³³ Martin, 14.

³⁴ Cooke, 492.

Yet Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Protagoras (amongst others) risked their lives by thinking critically – in the case of the later two, respectively - about the misrepresentation of natural objects for false gods; and the inability to know if the gods exist.

At the beginning of his *Metaphysics*, Aristotle writes about all human beings having a desire to know.³⁵ This is the origin of both science and philosophy – the human desire for an explanation. Religion offers ready-made answers, but when one begins to find religion unsatisfactory, knowledge must be sought elsewhere. In this case, for a few, philosophy shed light on the unsatisfactory elements of the Homeric gods. Prior to the Athenian “god-denying philosopher witch-hunt,” (so to speak), philosophers who were inclined to speak against at least an aspect of the gods may have believed they were performing a service to the community. Some may have been enthralled by the ability to look at the moon through a fresh set of ideas and contemplate the possibilities, and wanted to share the excitement with the rest of the community. They may have misjudged the public’s reaction; rationalized the risk. In any case, one factor is important to note here as to why philosophy was growing, and that factor is *literacy*. According to Bremmer, “The sophists were connected to books by their contemporaries, and this points to literacy as an important condition for the development of critical philosophy.”³⁶ The ability to read and write, in addition to important trading and communication links between Ionia and the mainland, allowed ideas to be passed along and contemplated over with much more practicality than ever before. In order to risk one’s life over the forwarding of an idea, a philosopher must believe that the idea – that knowledge itself – is extremely important.

³⁵ James A. Arieti, and Patrick A. *The Scientific and the Divine; Conflict and Reconciliation from Ancient Greece to the Present*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 3.

³⁶ Martin, 13.

Philosophers had clearly made an impression on Athenian society. In a play that dates to around 430 BCE, the playwright Euripides included a character, Bellerophon, who gave a speech which is clearly atheistic in content:

Does someone say there are indeed gods in heaven? There are not, if a man is willing not to rely foolishly on the antiquated reasoning. Consider for yourselves, do not base your opinion on words of mine. I say myself that tyranny kills very many men and deprives them of their possessions; and that tyrants break their oaths to ransack cities, and in doing this they are more prosperous under heaven than men who live quietly in reverence from day to day. I know too of small cities doing honour to the gods that are subject to larger, more impious ones, because they are overcome by a more numerous army. I think that, if a man were lazy and prayed to the gods and did not go gathering his livelihood with his hand, you would (here is a lacuna in the text) fortify religion, and ill-fortune.³⁷

While it is often suggested that Euripides was not himself an atheist, he clearly has knowledge of an atheist argument against belief in the gods. If the purpose of the character is meant to mock an atheistic belief it nonetheless points out that a case was being made that devotion to the gods does not result in practical benefits. If we can call Euripides' plays a part of Athenian popular culture, then this argument, even if satirized, shows definitively that atheism had entered the public discourse by the mid-fifth century.

Evidence as to the seriousness of atheism can be found in the development of an atheistic understanding of the origin of polytheism. As we have seen, arguments that humans are unable to know if god exists (Protagoras), that the gods are anthropomorphic (Xenophanes), that the supposed gods of the heavens were in fact natural objects (Anaxagoras), and that the devout believers still suffer (Euripides), had been added into the philosophical milieu of classical Greece. The next logical step, for the philosopher who accepts any or all of the previous arguments against believing in the gods, is to explain where the idea of the gods came from.

³⁷ Martin, 16.

Prodicus of Keos (465 – 395 BCE) claimed “that the gods of popular belief do not exist nor do they know, but primitive man, (out of admiration, deified) the fruits of the earth and virtually everything that contributed to his existence.”³⁸ In other words, our distant ancestors admired the natural world, including the food that kept them sustained, and imagined entities and products of nature as gods. Each god represents something, not because they are the cause of that thing (wine), nor are they actually that thing (the sun), but because humankind gave that already existent thing a name and called it a god. This is a step from *highlighting* uncertainties or absurdities about the gods; it is an attempt to *explain* the gods as fictitious.

Euripides has been attributed with the creation of another origin explanation found on a fragment of a play known as *Sisyphus*, although it has also been attributed to Critias; the matter of authorship still remains the subject of scholarly debate.³⁹ For our purposes, the author - or originator - of the theory behind it is less important than is the fact that it is a play, meant for public consumption, which contains a lengthy speech, atheistic in message, which explains the origin of the gods:

A time there was when disorder ruled /Human lives, which were then, like lives of beasts, /Enslaved to force; nor was there then reward /For the good, nor for the wicked punishment. /Next, it seems to me, humans established laws /For punishment, that justice might rule /Over the tribe of mortals, and wanton injury be subdued; /And whosoever did wrong was penalized. /Next, as the laws held [mortals] back from deeds /Of open violence. but still such deeds /Were done in secret,--then, I think, /Some shrewd man first, a man in judgment wise, /Found for mortals the fear of gods, /Thereby to frighten the wicked should they /Even act or speak or scheme in secret.⁴⁰

This fragment from a play is clear evidence that atheistic explanations for the creation of imaginary gods had made it into a public form. Whether the argument was denounced later

³⁸ Martin, 15.

³⁹ Martin, 16.

⁴⁰ J. Garrett, “The Critas Fragment”, <http://www.wku.edu/~jan.garrett/302/critias.htm>
Western Kentucky University, From Sextus Empiricus, *Adversus Mathematicos* ix 54, (Translated by R. G. Bury, Revised by J. Garrett), (retrieved December 11, 2008).

in the play (chances are it was) or not, the character offers what must have been understood as a compelling argument against the divinity of the gods. The message is clear: Humans created laws to create order and to ensure that, even when alone, everyone was on her or his best behaviour; a “shrewd man” concocted the idea that there were gods who actively watched over the human population. The gods, according to the character of this play, were invented to scare chaotic humans into submitting to organized societal norms. Regardless of how such a message was absorbed by the public, (negatively - one can only assume) the fact is that an atheistic explanation gained enough traction to be dealt with on a stage.

After the close of the fourth century BCE, there are no known trials for impiety in Greece, and “it is beyond doubt that the practice in regards to theoretical denial of the gods was changed.”⁴¹ There were still those with liberal views on Greek theology, but the climate wasn’t as harsh for those who wished to express such views, although Drachmann suggests that the law was in all likelihood still in effect, even if not often used: “It is evident that Athens had arrived at the point of view that the theoretical denial of the gods might be tolerated, whereas the law, of course, continued to protect public worship.”⁴² Perhaps the Spartan-led siege of Athens and the horrors of starvation and disease it prompted brought the citizens together. Perhaps the end of the Peloponnesian War in 404 BCE, followed by the rule of thirty-three tyrants took the wind out of the movement of trying atheists, either from a sense of lack of importance (the war was now over and they had surrendered), or the shift from democracy to an oligarchy made the law mute. In any case, philosophers whom we can conceive of as having atheist-like opinions in the post-classical period and throughout the

⁴¹ Drachmann, 8.

⁴² Drachmann, 8.

Hellenistic period were mostly re-defining the gods – not denying them. At least we know that the *myths* surrounding the gods could relatively be safely pushed aside, as in the case of Epicurus.

Epicurus was a philosopher who founded a school in his name that taught that “man is mortal, that the cosmos is the result of accident, that there is no providential god, and that the criterion of the good life is pleasure.”⁴³ He developed an intricate theory of atoms that was based on sense perception, and limited the gods to a role outside of human affairs:

Gods exist, atomic compounds like everything else, but take no thought for this cosmos or any other, living an ideal life of eternal, undisturbed happiness – the Epicurean ideal. It is good for men to respect and admire them, without expecting favours or punishments from them.⁴⁴

We can see why he was considered to be an atheist by those who came after him, (including the Christians), because of his absolute denial of the anthropomorphic behaviour and interventionist powers of the gods. The gods Epicurus believed in were in another plateau, they did not interfere with human affairs whatsoever. While he is clearly not an atheist in so long as the evidence (his writings) points to his having claimed belief in the gods, his re-definition of the gods so as to eradicate their mythology and limit their relationship with humanity to absolutely nothing places his philosophy in a position that deserves mention. In so far as he was not persecuted for his beliefs during his lifetime, it can be assumed that the climate was that of tolerance to the re-definition of the gods, at least as long as one still claimed to have a belief in them. It is important also to note that although his atomic theory is quite different from our modern, scientific one, Epicurus must have been driven to his conclusions based on a desire for an underlying knowledge of how the universe works while simultaneously disregarding the gods from playing even the most insignificant of roles.

⁴³ Simon Hornblower, and Antony Spawforth. *The Oxford Companion to Classical Civilization*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 261.

⁴⁴ Hornblower and Spawforth, 262.

2.2 A Short Interlude into the Empire of Rome

Hellenism led to a spread of Greek culture, including philosophy, throughout the Mediterranean, which eventually became the Roman Empire. Some Greek schools of thought, such as Neo-Platonism and Skepticism, had an impact on local religions, but were not taken as a threat. In fact, by the late republic period the Roman upper classes had “picked up the essential skepticism of Greek intellectuals almost by osmosis,” yet even if “with their minds educated Romans doubted the traditional gods, they nevertheless embraced the whole pantheon with their hearts.”⁴⁵ Romans indifference to questions about the validity of the gods may have been due to their lack of emphasis on myth in the first place. Religion served more of a political purpose; it was wrapped up in the state.⁴⁶ Cicero, for example, adhered to religion on an official level but he never once mentioned faith in any of the voluminous letters he wrote that have survived.⁴⁷ He was, however, quite passionate about philosophy, especially stoicism. The rise of the Roman Empire seemed to coincide with a decrease in the importance of oracles; Strabo wrote that divination had lost much of its importance by his day, during the reign of Augustus.⁴⁸ This points to a lessening of the seriousness attached to religion, but the gods continued to be worshiped nonetheless. In any case, we know of no actual cases of atheism in Rome, and it does not seem to have been a concern. While there are satirical writings about the gods,⁴⁹ and there seems to be acceptance that mythology should be taken with more than a grain of salt; there is as-yet no

⁴⁵ Henry C. Boren, *Roman Society: A Social, Economic, and Cultural History*, (Canada: D.C. Heath and Company, 1992), 156.

⁴⁶ Boren, 156.

⁴⁷ Drachmann, 115-116.

⁴⁸ Drachmann, 97.

⁴⁹ Lucian's *Timon* is a great example.

evidence of flat out denial of the gods. Of course the Jews considered those who weren't Jewish to be deniers of their god. Likewise for non-Jews when it came to their gods. This occasionally caused conflict when the Jews were under Greek and later, Roman rule, but it is not atheism in that each side was still a believer in a god or gods. The same accusations apply to the early Christians and the Romans, the latter of which were more concerned with the Christians refusal to worship the Emperor than with their denial of other gods.

When Christianity became the official religion of the Roman Empire the tables turned, with a slight twist. The Platonian (and later Jewish) concept of demons had influenced Christianity which argued that the "pagan" gods didn't simply *not* exist, they were *actually* demons. Those who continued to worship their demonic gods were considered deniers of the true god, Yahweh.⁵⁰ Although accusations by Christians of others (including heathen Christians and so-called witches) denying the gods were commonplace for at least the next thirteen hundred years, those claims were false by our definition. To deny one god does not make one an atheist, as long as one still believes in at least one god. The atheistic ideas found in Greek philosophy were shelved and/or denounced (as in Epicurean schools) under Christian rule. The history of atheism continues with the history of philosophy, and how the marriage of philosophy and Christian theology dealt with the struggle to prove God's existence intelligently, as well as the means by which that god is to be described.

2.3 Christian Theology, Philosophy, and Science

The growth and the authority of the Christian Empire that stretched throughout Europe, the Americas, and beyond was not tolerant of criticism. Debate about the existence

⁵⁰ Drachmann, 129-130.

of God was relegated to being between theologians who, it should not be doubted, had empire-friendly intentions. Philosophy was primarily used as a tool for constructing a coherent, sensible, picture of God, although theologians often disagreed on many issues in their attempts to do so. Philosophy was also used to develop so-called “proofs” of God’s existence, which should more accurately be referred to as “arguments.” Following Plato’s notion of the Universal, Anselm concocted the ontological proof. Aquinas evoked Aristotle’s prime mover thesis into a role performed by God, and put forth a version of the argument from design, amongst others. These attempts to validate God’s existence should be seen as a means of keeping belief in God satisfyingly intelligent, although Anselm’s contrasting the believer with the fool who doesn’t believe in God points to a concern – small though it may have been – that there were potential atheists in his midst. The problem this marriage of philosophy and theology posed, however, was where opinions on important conceptions of understanding diverged.

One of the Christian debates most relevant to our topic is that of the use of language to describe God. In the thirteenth century CE Aquinas argued that language, when applied to any definition of God or his attributes must be analogous or God risks losing his ontological distinction between humanity and himself: “God is not a measure that is proportionate to what is measured; so it does not follow that he and his creatures belong to the same order.”⁵¹ Duns Scotus (1266-1308), on the other hand, in an attempt to enshrine *reason* into theology, argued that “being is univocal to the created and uncreated.”⁵² In an essay on and entitled *Atheism in Modern History*, Hyman writes that:

⁵¹ Martin, 41.

⁵² Martin, 41.

[a]s a consequence of this, “being” was no longer something emerging from and created by God, but something in which God and humanity shared,” and “[w]ith this move, the ontological difference between God’s being and human being was destroyed, and for many commentators, this marks the fundamental turning point that laid the foundations not only for the distinctively modern concept of theism, but also for the modern world-view itself.⁵³

The definition of God was altered to include reason, the consequence of this made it possible to reason God away - although it must be stressed that this was a step towards that possibility and in no way an overnight repercussion; the debate over the definition of God continues in various circles to this very day.

In addition to defining God’s attributes there were countless other disputes between theologians and philosophers over God and Catholic doctrines, (Aquinas and Duns Scotus, for example, also disagreed on Mary’s state at conception)⁵⁴ and many of these arguments took on quite a degree of complexity. There is far from universal agreement on any of these issues within Christianity even today. It is important to understand that the abundance of contrasting opinions of those within the Christian tradition were given wider distribution by an advancement in technology that had momentous repercussions in a number of areas: the invention of the *printing press*. Johannes Gutenberg created the printing press in the fifteenth century, and introduced his new invention to the public with the pressing of two-hundred copies of his two-volume version of the Bible.⁵⁵ This achievement meant not only a wider distribution of Christian literature including philosophical and theological arguments, but it also meant an ease in the reproduction of scientific journals, which also gained a much wider distribution. This may seem like an elementary point, but its impact was enormous. Ideas were much more easily shared, and although scientists were still Christian and subject

⁵³ Martin, 31.

⁵⁴ L.J. Suenens, *Mary Mother of God*, New York: Hawthorn Books, 1959, 29. In 1954 Pope Pius XI, following the Marion theology of Duns Scotus, proclaimed that Mary was indeed immaculately conceived.

⁵⁵ “The Printing Press”, <http://www.historyguide.org/intellect/press.html>, *The History Guide*, Steven Kreis 2000, Last Revised May 13 2004, (retrieved Dec 12th 2008).

to church authority (the Islamic world notwithstanding), the increased transmission of ideas helped advance science as an increasingly productive discipline with practical and significant results.⁵⁶ While this essay does not intend to address all of the achievements of the Renaissance, Scientific Revolution,⁵⁷ and Modernity, (nor define these periods) the importance of *literacy* to the history of atheism, (as exemplified in the philosophy of Ancient Greece) as well as a climate of invention, science, and theological discourse to which greater portions of the population had increasing access, are important areas to address and to contemplate. The achievements of Copernicus and Galileo, however, should not be overlooked. In short, Copernicus forwarded a theory that the world was not at the center of our solar system. Galileo was able to prove it, and he forwarded a method that became extremely important to the discipline of science: prediction. Just imagine what it was like before Copernicus forwarded his theory. The sun rose in the east in the morning, traveled overhead during the day, and set in the west in the evening. After Galileo it had been demonstrated that it was the earth that was sailing around the sun – what we thought was the sun traveling through our sky was nothing more than an illusion. This illusion was based on our ignorance, and science had shown us the truth. We were not at the center of the universe as the church had taught – in fact, we weren't even at the center of our solar system. This is

⁵⁶ Elizabeth L. Eisenstein, 1968, "Some Conjectures about the Impact of Printing on Western Society and Thought: A Preliminary Report," *The Journal of Modern History*, 40(1):1-56, 46. Take for instance Leonardo Da Vinci. His notebooks contributed little to the discipline of anatomy only "because his notebooks were not processed by sixteenth-century printers. His curious position as a scientific genius who contributed almost nothing to sixteenth-century science serves to underline connections between a 'scientific contribution' and the act of publication."

⁵⁷ George Basalla, 1967, "The Spread of Western Science", *Science, New Series*, 156(3775) 611-622, 611. Considering the emphasis I am placing on the rise of science in this period, a little clarification on what is meant by the Scientific Revolution may be in order. According to Basalla: "A small circle of Western European nations provide the original home for modern science during the 16th and 17th centuries: Italy, France, England, the Netherlands, Germany, Austria, and the Scandinavian countries. The relatively small geographical area covered by these nations was the scene of the Scientific Revolution which firmly established the philosophical viewpoint, experimental activity, and social institutions we now identify as modern science."

what is meant by a new climate of science: an entirely new way of viewing ourselves - and our world.

By the mid-eighteenth century numerous ideas about the Judeo-Christian God had been developed; some consistent, some hotly debated. In “light of the new thinking about the heliocentric universe” and critical of religion, while living in Holland (which was relatively more tolerant of diverse religious opinions than other European countries), Baruch Spinoza (1632-1677) developed “unorthodox religious views” that led to his excommunication with his Jewish community, and a ban on his anonymously published book *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus*.⁵⁸ Religious historian Karen Armstrong writes: “He evolved ideas which were profoundly different from conventional Judaism and which had been influenced by scientific thinkers such as Descartes and the Christian scholastics.”⁵⁹ He was denounced an atheist, but his views were more accurately that of pantheism.⁶⁰ He re-defined faith out of God, took fact out of the Bible, considered immortality to be impossible and argued that God was an impersonal but universal substance, at times synonymous with nature.⁶¹ Spinoza serves as but one example of the re-definition of God during this period post-reformation.⁶² There were other ways of believing in a redefined God in the wake of

⁵⁸ Cooke, 501.

⁵⁹ Karen Armstrong, *A History of God: The 4,000-Year Quest of Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 311.

⁶⁰ Christopher Brooke, 2006, “How the Stoics Became Atheists”, *The Historical Journal*, 49(2):387–402, 396. In response to the Spinoza controversy, Christian philosophers such as Buddeus linked Spinoza’s “atheism” to Stoicism, thereby tarnishing the reputation of Stoics, including those who also considered themselves to be Christian. Buddeus came up with two categories of atheists, placing Spinoza and the Stoics in the second: “In the first category, I put those who shamelessly and straightforwardly deny the existence of God, or those who – owing to their bad faith – can only deny or ignore the atheism which necessarily flows from their principles. In the second category, I put those who set up principles from which one can validly infer conclusions which are either prejudicial or injurious to the Providence and the liberty of God.”

⁶¹ Cooke, 502.

⁶² The Protestant Reformation, made possible in part by the public’s increased access to the Bible itself, and the Catholic Counter-Reformation culminated in the Thirty Year War between France and England while Spinoza was reflecting on redefining God in Holland.

reformation and worldview-altering scientific achievements, deism being a notable one considering its influence on the founding fathers of America; but in our history of atheism, we have finally come to the first genuine account of atheism as it is commonly perceived through our contemporary lens: the denial of the Christian God, all gods and religion whatsoever. We now turn our attention from Holland to France.

2.4 The First Known 'Modern' Atheist

We have seen how science and philosophy (along with its partner theology) led to the re-definition of God. Less than twenty years after the Thirty Year War, in the midst of contrasting scholarly opinions about God, (Protestant, Catholic, Pantheist, Deist, etc.), which were able to cross borders through the increasing prevalence of literature, a boy was born who would end up denying everything to do with God and his many flocks. The first, bonafide atheist that actually put his name on his own writing in which he outright denied God and religion was the Frenchman Jean Meslier (1664-1729). Of Meslier, atheist philosopher Michel Onfray writes "at last an identifiable saint, hero and martyr of the atheist cause!"⁶³ The word martyr is a bit misleading though: Meslier didn't exactly die from his atheism - he kept it secret until his passing, although, aware of how his corpse might be treated by the church upon the discovery of his voluminous writings denouncing all things theistic, he did, in a sense offer us his dead body for his cause: "They can fricassee it," he wrote, "and eat it, with whatever sauce they like."⁶⁴

⁶³ Michel Onfray, *In Defense of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), 29.

⁶⁴ Colin Brewer, 2007, "Thinker: Jean Meslier", <http://newhumanist.org.uk/1425>, *New Humanist Magazine*, 122(4), (retrieved Dec 12th 2008).

During his lifetime, Meslier was an unassuming Catholic priest, but he left behind scandalous critiques of religion that were anything but candid. For example, he described Jesus as “arch-fanatic ... equally mad, out of his mind, unhappy rogue, a man of the abyss, vile and despicable,” and he described the Eucharist host as “an idol of paste and flour.”⁶⁵ He certainly didn’t hold any punches back; in his will he wrote “I would like, and this would be the last and most ardent of my wishes, I would like the last king to be strangled with the guts of the last priest.”⁶⁶ In a section of the writing he left behind, entitled *Memoir of the Thoughts and Feelings of Jean Meslier: Clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity of All the Religions of the World*, he addressed his parishioners with an explanation as to why he kept his atheism hidden from them:

I would have enlightened you sooner if I could have done so with safety. You are my witnesses that I have never exacted the fees which attach to my office as curate. I discouraged you from bigotry and I spoke to you as seldom as possible of our wretched dogmas. I had to carry out the duties of my office but how I suffered when I had to preach to you those pious lies that I detest in my heart! A thousand times I was on the point of breaking out publicly and opening your eyes but a fear stronger than myself held me back and forced me to keep silence until my death.⁶⁷

It can never be known how many priests, farmers, architects, painters, beggars, and kings lived a life like Meslier, that of an atheist in Christian clothing, but Meslier wanted the world to know the truth as he saw it. His memoir was eventually published in an “extract” by Voltaire who, quite incorrectly, tainted him a likeminded deist, but it wasn’t published in full until 1864 by a Dutch Humanist.⁶⁸ His atheism is largely that of obscurity today (besides fragments of his work have yet to be translated into English),⁶⁹ but as the first known atheist

⁶⁵ Brewer

⁶⁶ Jack Huberman, *The Quotable Atheist: Ammunition for Nonbelievers, Political Junkies, Gadflies, and Those Generally Hell-Bound*, (New York: Nation Books, 2007), 211.

⁶⁷ Cooke, 340-341.

⁶⁸ Brewer

⁶⁹ Brewer

to proclaim himself as such, and sign it onto pages that blatantly attack God and all things religious, Jean Meslier deserves more attention than his name has thus far received.

In our history of atheism, we have spanned over two-thousand years for fragments that relate in any way to the denial of God. It is finally in the French countryside, with the unassuming death of a common Catholic priest in 1729 that we have our first evidence of a fully-fledged self-proclaimed atheist. His courage to be so bold about his unbelief, mind you, came from his successful plan to keep it hidden until his death. The philosophers that followed continued to redefine God and religion so as to make their definitions fit with the new conceptions of the universe, and humanities place in it, that were being proposed by science. Hume, Kant, Voltaire, etc. sought a rational place for God, even though that place was becoming increasingly stretched and displaced from the concept of the miraculous, personally accessible, creator God as found in the Biblical texts. Kant later coined a term that would come to describe the atmosphere of excitement towards scientific progress during the eighteenth century, (and arguably into the early nineteenth): “The Enlightenment.”

2.5 Reason, Rationality, and Publicly Denying a Cosmic Maker

Science and philosophy had been separating from the Church and theology since around the time of what has been called the Scientific Revolution. Each was in the process of becoming a separate discourse to knowledge or truth yet they still attempted to complement each other, although this was becoming increasingly more tedious. Newton, for example, advanced the scientific understanding of how the solar system worked, but in order to fit his Christian god into it, he wrote God into the gaps of his theory. This became a normative response by Christian scientists, and people started to question the relevance of

God. Atheists, while still unpopular, felt increasingly compelled to announce themselves publicly. Diderot, a French philosopher who compiled an influential seventeen-volume encyclopedia, was imprisoned for twelve months for publishing *A Letter to the Blind for the Use of Those Who See*, which “introduced a full-blown atheism to the general public.”⁷⁰ In what may be a cryptic ode to Socrates, (whose sentence was death by hemlock), when objections were raised to his atheistic book by Voltaire, Diderot replied in a way that affirms a belief in God yet demonstrates how the question of God’s relevance was becoming less and less relevant:

I believe in God, although I live very well with the atheists....It is...very important not to mistake hemlock for parsley; but to believe or not to believe in God is not important at all.⁷¹

Disbelief in God was certainly becoming more accepted than in the past – and more outspoken, even if still carefully admitted. Armstrong summarizes the rise of atheism at the height of the Enlightenment (in language that parallels Hyman’s discussion on Duns Scotus) as such:

For centuries monotheists in each of the God-religions had insisted that God was not another being. He did not exist like the other phenomena we experience. In the west, however, Christian theologians had got into the habit of talking about God as though he really were one of the things that existed. They had seized upon the new science to prove the objective reality of God as though he could be tested and analyzed like anything else. Diderot, Holbach and Laplace had turned this attempt on its head and come to the same conclusion as the more extreme mystics: there was nothing out there.⁷²

By the mid-nineteenth century “reason” and “rationality” had already become catch phrases. The promise of progress was accelerated with the beginning of the industrial revolution, but as the social order began to deconstruct and reconstruct, and the negative repercussion of the new social order became obvious in areas such as slums, poverty, and chimneys, disillusionment began to set in. In America, as elsewhere, religious changes had

⁷⁰ Armstrong, 342.

⁷¹ Armstrong, 342.

⁷² Armstrong, 345.

been taking place. The north-eastern “Burnt-over District” had already spawned new branches and forms of Christianity, such as the Mormons, the Millerites and the Shakers. In England the authoritative church was still Anglican, as it had been since Henry VIII had established it, although there were also smaller branches of Christianity such as the Presbyterians and the Unitarians, the later of which developed the humanitarian movement, albeit in a religious sense (it wasn’t until the twentieth century that liberal humanitarianism questioned theism and advocated secularism).⁷³ Christianity was no longer the sole property of Catholicism. It was divided, and so too were the opinions of scholars (philosophers, theologians, and scientists alike) on what the repercussions of Charles Darwin’s groundbreaking theory of evolution were. According to evolutionary biologist and atheist Richard Dawkins:

An atheist before Darwin could have said, following Hume: ‘I have no explanation for complex biological design. All I know is that God isn’t a good explanation, so we must wait and hope that somebody comes up with a better one.’ I can’t help feeling that such a position, though logically sound, would have left one feeling pretty unsatisfied, and that although atheism might have been logically tenable before Darwin, Darwin made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist.⁷⁴

Darwin himself wasn’t an atheist, although he described himself as an agnostic later in life.⁷⁵ The term agnosticism itself was coined by a contemporary of Darwin, T.H. Huxley. Appropriately called by contemporaries “Darwin’s Bulldog” for enthusiastically advocating Darwin’s controversial theory, Huxley did not believe that scientific advances should lead to atheism. Ironically following the logic of Anglican Bishop Henry Mansel, (who in turn borrowed selectively from Kant’s epistemology) he believed that science could tell us

⁷³ Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, 2007, “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism”, *Sociology of Religion*, 68(4):407-424, 408. “The religious roots of humanism can be found in Unitarian and Universalist ideals, which emerged after a segment of Congregational churches in the eighteenth century rejected such key Christian doctrines as the Trinity and the teaching that God can condemn people to hell.”

⁷⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2006), 6.

⁷⁵ Christopher Clausen, 1976, “Agnosticism, Religion, and Science: Some Unexplained Implications”, *Rocky Mountain Review of Language and Literature*, 30(2):73-85, 73.

nothing about God.⁷⁶ Unlike Mansel, who placed importance on the revelation of the Bible, Huxley, who believed only science could provide knowledge, concluded that God's existence was ultimately unknowable:

Agnosticism is of the essence of science, whether ancient or modern. It simply means that a man shall not say he knows or believes that which he has no scientific grounds for professing to know or believe... Consequently Agnosticism puts aside not only the greater part of popular theology, but also the greater part of anti-theology.⁷⁷

According to Lightman, Huxley and his English contemporaries who had come from the new middle class were led by “a desire for social and occupational, as well as intellectual, independence, because scientific naturalists argued for an empirically based discipline that need not take into account the Bible, the doctrines of the Anglican Church or the opinions of the clergy.”⁷⁸ The English Agnosticism movement, while not atheistic by definition, was nonetheless an appeal to unbelief. In the middle ages this would have been a capital crime. Times had changed, and a stance of disbelief, (agnostic or atheistic), while still not widely accepted by society, was no longer a belief (or lack thereof) that would result in death or imprisonment. For the church to do so – Anglican or Catholic – would have been a failure of the church to recognize the validity of science, which by the late eighteenth century had become well entangled with philosophy. I suggest that a faith struggling with ways to relate to (and with) science was not a faith that wished to risk distancing the now separate discipline which the public – and society - had come to respect, and in some cases, perhaps, revere.

⁷⁶ Bernard Lightman, *The Origins of Agnosticism: Victorian Unbelief and the limits of Knowledge*. (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1987), 9.

⁷⁷ Alister McGrath, *Dawkins' God: Genes, Memes, and the Meaning of Life*. (Malden, MA USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2007), 54.

⁷⁸ Lightman, 92.

Agnosticism was a novel approach to the problem relationship of science and religion, and the initial movement, while it didn't last past a generation, left us with the term that identifies those uncertain about God's existence (agnostics) from those who are certain that God does not exist (atheists). Considering the common associations made between agnostics and atheists nowadays, (especially on surveys), it was worth addressing agnosticism in this history of atheism. It also serves to highlight the varied religious reactions to the displacement of religion by science in some areas; specifically, in the worldview changing discovery last mentioned: that of the origin of our species. It was no longer necessary for God to have designed anything in nature; there was another explanation as to why everything appeared designed. Just as Copernicus (and Galileo) had revealed a new way of understanding our world, Darwin's theory of evolution had shown us a new way of understanding *our place* in that heliocentric world, and it was far from dignified. Christians of course had their own varied reactions, much of which is still fodder for the news today, but we won't get into that here. The important point is that if anyone had any tendencies towards outright disbelief in the God of the Bible, (which, incidentally, was being scientifically scrutinized by those who, following Spinoza's lead, began looking at the text as humanly-derived literature worthy of criticism)⁷⁹ the needlessness to invoke God to explain the origin of our species may have been the icing on the cake. After all, Galileo had already proved that Copernicus was correct, that humanity was not at the center of the universe, and with evolution offering an explanation for the appearance of design on a self-sustaining planet God had become increasingly marginalized by science.

⁷⁹ Walter E. Stueremann, 1960-1961, "Benedict Spinoza: A Pioneer in Biblical Criticism", *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research*, 29:133-179, 154. "According to Spinoza, the study of the Bible is to proceed by use of the tool of natural reason, and it will seek to investigate the biblical texts in the critical and empirical manner in which the sciences study natural phenomena."

During the nineteenth century atheists continued to share ideas and make their cases known. There are too many, - philosophers, novelists, scientists, etc. - to give each one justice, so I will touch upon a selection of the most relevant, or at least the most well-known. In *The Essence of Christianity*, Ludwig Feuerbach (1804-1872), had argued that God was simply a projection of a weakened humanity; God was perfection while humans were frail; God was infinite while humans were finite.⁸⁰ Following Feuerbach's argument, Karl Marx (1818-1883), a staunch atheist, believed religion was an illusory symptom of an oppressed humanity:

Religious distress is at the same time the *expression* of real distress and the *protest* against real distress. Religion is the sign of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the *opium* of the people.⁸¹

Sigmund Freud believed that God was an illusion, a projection of the unconscious which could be understood through psychology. God is an infantile remnant of humanities early desire to be protected by a father-figure, and the time had come for humanity to accept adulthood by sweeping God away.⁸² In *The Future of an Illusion* Freud wrote:

[T]he terrifying impressions of helplessness in childhood aroused the need for protection – for protection through love – which was provided by the father; and the recognition that this helplessness lasts throughout life made it necessary to cling to the existence of a father, but this time a more powerful one. Thus the benevolent rule of a divine Providence allays our fear of the dangers of life; the establishment of a moral world-order ensures the fulfillment of the demands of justice, which have so often remained unfulfilled in human civilization; and the prolongation of earthly existence in a future life provides the local and temporal framework in which these wish-fulfillments shall take place.⁸³

While Marx saw religion as an illusion based on social oppression, Freud saw it as an illusion based on a childish need for protection and lust for life after death. Atheism had

⁸⁰ Armstrong, 354.

⁸¹ Christopher Hitchens, *the Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever*, (United States: Da Capo Press, 2007), 65. Emphasis in original. Excerpt from *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* by Karl Marx.

⁸² Armstrong, 357.

⁸³ Hitchens, 147: Excerpt from *The Future of an Illusion* by Sigmund Freud, as translated and edited by James Strachey.

arrived at a place where prominent citizens could openly and seriously proclaim God an illusion. Atheists were not satisfied with pronouncing the absurdity of religion, they wanted to explain how it came about, and how it could be removed or replaced. There was one atheist, however, who didn't believe there was a need to remove God – he argued that God was already dead.

In *The Gay Science*, Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) wrote a short parable about a madman who informed the townspeople that God was dead, and “we” – western civilization – had killed him: “We have killed him, - you and I! We are his murderers!”⁸⁴ An atheist philosopher, Nietzsche was not celebrating the death of God, but rather, pointing out the feelings of the times: “Nietzsche wasn't lamenting the death of God so much as our awareness of the magnitude of what was happening.”⁸⁵ These were changing times, and even though he was an unbeliever himself, Nietzsche was concerned with the repercussions of a godless society, which he felt could lead to nihilism. While his solutions to the problems are unorthodox and considered by many to be unrealistic, his announcement of the death of God shows how much the emphasis of reason and rationality had infiltrated western society and led to fear of the displacement, or loss, of God. Where some saw opportunity others saw loss. As it turns out, Nietzsche's proclamation may have been a little premature; God is still very much alive to millions of believers. On the other hand, the denial of God had embedded itself into members from all aspects of society, even if their numbers were still comparatively small to that of theists. The opportunity to announce one's own atheism without the risk of fatality (or serious repercussion)⁸⁶ in Europe and America meant a serious

⁸⁴ Armstrong, 356.

⁸⁵ Cooke, 132.

⁸⁶ The word “serious” is, admittedly, one of interpretation – I argue here only in relation to the past.

shift in the public's acceptance of that opinion.⁸⁷ To those atheists, the god that lived in all aspects of society was no longer as prevalent, as all-encompassing, as he had been prior to his placement under the microscope. Atheism, even if it was the opinion of a minority, had shown itself to have influence and staying power – and the people knew it.

Atheism, for the first time in recorded history, had become a phenomenon openly professed in the public sphere, and atheists were not afraid of being killed for being honest. The consequences of the shift from religion to science were many and will continue to effect humanity until humanity ceases to exist. From ancient Greek philosophy to the Reformation, atheism was not a continuous idea. There were scattered patches of atheistic reasoning and agnosticism throughout, but it wasn't until Post-and-Counter-Reformation, sparked by an increase in access to literature and the rise of science, that atheism, as a continuing idea with contributions from each passing generation, actually gained traction. With the worldview altering realization that we are not at the center of the universe, and a credible option to design, atheism gained strong footholds in western society that have yet to be relinquished. The death of God certainly has not taken place in the eyes of the majority, but the arguments against believing in a deity put forth by Xenophanes of Colophon and Protagoras, as well as the arguments explaining away theism put forth by Ludwig Feuerbach and Freud, offer a growing minority something they can relate to – perhaps even believe in.

This chapter has served to set the stage for the atheism of today. From this historical survey of key figures we have seen the definition of atheism rewoven for different uses relating to changing settings. We have also seen the introduction of a relatively new term, “Agnosticism”. Utilizing the philosopher Bertrand Russell as an initial bridge from

⁸⁷ While “acceptance” was still limited and persecutions did still occur (most notably in issues relating to law), the repercussions were comparatively less severe than at any previous time in western history.

twentieth century atheism to twenty-first century atheism, the next chapter focuses primarily on defining atheism today. By doing so, it will introduce new terms describing various forms or emphases of atheism, all of which will have originated from self-definition.

Although Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett are often characterized as being “New Atheists”, they all define themselves in individual terms, each of which expresses an area of their ‘unreligiosity’ they wish to highlight. Before turning to thoughts of the New Atheists, the chapter will explore how atheist organizations define themselves. Interestingly, key themes such as reason, rationality, the secular, and science seem to flow through many of the self-definitions presented, providing those who call themselves atheist and those who respond to the title of New Atheism a sense of unity.

3. SELF-DESCRIBED ATHEISTS: BY DEFAULT OR BY DESIGN?

Thanks at least in part to ‘New Atheism’, atheism has received plenty of media attention lately. The New Atheists have appeared on numerous television shows – from news to comedy – and the so-called atheism bus campaign made headlines when it traveled from its birthplace in England to a variety of continents. In addition, atheist organizations such as Atheist Alliance International have been growing, as have university atheist associations in America. With this renewed interest in atheism it is important to elucidate how atheism is being defined in the contemporary context. Perhaps the most accurate way to define atheism is to listen to how the most prominent atheists define their own disbeliefs. Atheism may seem like a simple denial of God, but atheists come from different backgrounds and bring with them different perspectives on what atheism is. Atheism is not a clear cut proclamation of disbelief; rather, it is an umbrella term that contains a variety of opinions and diverse points of view.

The term atheism has had, and continues to have, a variety of meanings and uses. Some may use it to point to the infidels in their midst, while others find it useful to find like-minded people. Pre-enlightenment, atheism was used primarily (the word *solely* may be more accurate although improvable) to point out the blasphemous infidels. Post-enlightenment, however, self-identification with the term has increased, and today self-proclaimed atheists have created communities for networking and inspiring each other, as well as for purposes of leading potential converts away from theism. Before delving into operational definitions of atheism, it is helpful to clarify the origin of the word itself.

3.1 The Origin of 'Atheism'

The English word “atheism” has at its origin ancient Greek roots. While the Greeks didn’t use the word atheism, they did use *atheos* - “a” translates as “without” or “not” and *theos* refers to “god.”⁸⁸ According to Drachman, “In Greek they said *atheos* and *atheotes*; to these the English words ungodly and ungodliness correspond rather closely.”⁸⁹ *Atheos* is a philosophical term applied to those who were “deniers of the gods,” whereas *atheotes* was a criminal offense, the charge being that of “impiety or disrespect towards the gods.”⁹⁰ French philosopher and self-proclaimed atheist Michel Onfray offers this brief summary of the term *atheos*: “The Greek term “*atheos*” dates from the seventh century BCE, was later incorporated into Latin, and thus was in use throughout Greek and Roman antiquity. It was an expression of severe censure and moral condemnation.”⁹¹ Onfray notes that although the concept of “godlessness” is old, it wasn’t until the sixteenth century that the word “atheist” actually entered the French and English language.⁹²

3.2 Defining the 'Atheisms'

The Oxford dictionary defines atheism as “disbelief in the existence of a god or gods.”⁹³ A statement regarding “a conscious attempt to avoid supernaturalism” may be warranted as well, particularly as it applies to today’s bestselling atheists. In that way we can avoid a definition that could include arguably atheistic religions, such as Theravada

⁸⁸ Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

⁸⁹ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, (London: Glydendal, 1922), 5.

⁹⁰ Drachmann, 5-6.

⁹¹ Michel Onfray, *In Defense of Atheism: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam*, (Toronto: Penguin Canada, 2007), 15.

⁹² Onfray, 15.

⁹³ Catherine Soanes; Sara Hawker; and Julia Elliot, *Oxford Dictionary of Current English: Fourth Edition*, (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 2006), 49.

Buddhism, that reject deities but favour liberation through a non-Christian “ultimate reality,” to borrow John Hicks phrase, as well as those who favour a spiritual connection with nature. I propose the following for an operational definition for contemporary western atheism that, while narrow enough to allow for focus, is still open enough from within its perimeters to allow for the natural diversity within the atheistic “community” to have their voices heard: *Contemporary western Atheism is the belief that there is no god and are no gods, and one should live with a conscious attempt to avoid supernaturalism.*

3.3. Two Common Branches

Atheism itself needs to be understood as having three different time eras: Classical antiquity in which atheism was an accusation; the Christian era in which atheism was also an accusation; and the Modern era in which atheism is often a self-proclamation. Turning now to the latter, it is important to understand that there are branches within atheism that require even greater clarification. There are two main types of atheism. The first is that of holding *no belief* “in the existence of a God or gods”⁹⁴ We can call that position *negative* atheism. The other position is that of *believing* “that there is no God or gods.”⁹⁵ We can call that position *positive* atheism. The difference is that negative atheists simply hold no belief in God, while positive atheists affirm their belief that there is no God. In *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, following distinctions proposed by William L. Rowe, breaks down these two positions even further by considering two sub-sections found in both positive and negative atheism - that of being *broad* and that of being *narrow*:

⁹⁴ Martin, 1.

⁹⁵ Martin, 1.

Negative atheism in the broad sense is then the absence of belief in any god or Gods, not just the absence of belief in a personal theistic God, and negative atheism in the narrow sense is the absence of belief in a theistic God. Positive atheism in the broad sense is, in turn, disbelief in all gods, with positive atheism in the narrow sense being the disbelief in a theistic God. For positive atheism in the narrow sense to be successfully defended, two tasks must be accomplished. First, the reasons for believing in a theistic God must be refuted; in other words, negative atheism in the narrow sense must be established. Second, reasons for disbelieving in the theistic God must be given.⁹⁶

It is important to distinguish these branches of atheism as they do shed some light on the variety of disbeliefs that fall under the term. This thesis is primarily concerned with contemporary atheism and its most vocal and well-known proponents who are positive atheists. For purposes of concision and relevance, this essay is primarily concerned with contemporary atheism as it lives today, and the prominent players of this movement happen to fall into the category of positive atheism.

Before turning to contemporary atheists, we will first explore how the philosopher Bertrand Russell understood his atheism, particularly as expressed through his writings from 1942-1952. In his critical review of *The God Delusion*, Terry Eagleton called Dawkins “the nearest thing to a professional atheist we have had since Bertrand Russell”.⁹⁷ Indeed, Russell was quite prominent in his role as “professional atheist”, and his brand of atheism was arguably an important influence on the atheism of today.

3.4 According to Russell

Bertrand Russell was a nineteenth century forerunner of the modern atheist movement. Of course, prominent atheists such as Nietzsche, Freud, Feuerbach, and a whole host of other intellectuals were also forerunners of today’s atheism, but Russell, arguably, can be considered a direct precursor to the new breed of atheists. In terms of arguments,

⁹⁶ Martin, 2.

⁹⁷ Terry Eagleton, 2006, “Lunging, Flailing, Punching,” <http://www.lrb.co.uk/v28/n20/terry-eagleton/lunging-flailing-mispunching>, *London Review of Books*, (retrieved July 22, 2010)

style, and tone, Russell expresses his atheism in a similar fashion to many atheists today.

A Nobel Prize winning British Philosopher, Bertrand Russell was an outspoken and influential proponent of scepticism and rationalism. Although he is commonly described as an atheist, and he indeed used the term to describe his own sceptical position, he also addressed the question of agnosticism. In a speech entitled *Am I An Atheist or An Agnostic: A Plea For Tolerance in the Face of New Dogmas*, Russell explained his difficulty in identifying himself with regards to the different audiences inquiring:

Here there comes in a practical question which has often troubled me. Whenever I go into a foreign country or a prison or any similar place they always ask me what is my religion. I never quite know whether I should say "Agnostic" or whether I should say "Atheist." It is a very difficult question and I daresay that some of you have been troubled about it. As a philosopher, if I were speaking to a purely philosophic audience I should say that I ought to describe myself as an Agnostic, because I do not think there is a conclusive argument by which one can prove that there is not a God. On the other hand, if I am to convey the right impression to the ordinary man in the street I think that I ought to say that I am an Atheist, because when I say that I cannot prove that there is not a God, I ought to add equally that I cannot prove that there are not Homeric gods.⁹⁸

Russell used the term atheism for purposes of practicality. Philosophically, he defined himself as an agnostic, since there are no means by which God can be disproved. He later came up with an analogy, named Russell's Teapot, to explain this position further. Russell argued that no one can disprove that there is not a teapot revolving around the sun, so long the assertion is made that the teapot is much too small to be discovered by our telescopes.⁹⁹ In other words, to Russell, we are all agnostic in the sense that none of us can prove definitively that a teapot – and by extension, God – does not exist. Throughout much of his writing, however, he identified himself strongly with "the supremacy of reason"¹⁰⁰ and scepticism: "one should not regard anything that one accepts as quite certain, but only as

⁹⁸ Bertrand Russell, *Am I An Atheist or An Agnostic: A Plea For Tolerance in the Face of New Dogmas*, from *Atheism: Collected Essays, 1943-1949*. (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 7.

⁹⁹ Bertrand Russell, "Is There a God?" http://www.cfpf.org.uk/articles/religion/br/br_god.html Commissioned - but not published – by *Illustrated Magazine* in 1952, *The Campaign for Philosophical Freedom*, cfpf.org.uk (retrieved December 11, 2008).

¹⁰⁰ Russell, 3.

probable in a greater or a less degree.”¹⁰¹ To Russell, atheism is simply where sceptical reasoning led him. He considered religion to be “superstition” and advocated the practical use of scepticism, which he believed has the potential to convert people to reason and lead to a better world. His atheism is far from a polite refrain from religious belief; throughout his writings in this area he constantly and strongly attacks religion on many levels, “I myself am a dissenter from all known religions, and I hope that every kind of religious belief will die out.”¹⁰² Russell’s “teapot agnosticism,” promotion of reason, and unflinching verbal assaults on the inherent dangers of religion are common attributes of the most prominent atheists of the so-called “New Atheism” movement of the present. The promotion of reason is also a common attribute of online atheist communities. It is to the worldwide web that we now turn in order to understand how contemporary atheist groups define their atheism.

3.5 The Information Highway

As with so many other groups the world over, atheists have flocked to the internet to find communities of like-minded people. Atheist Alliance International, founded in 1991, is one such group that has heard the call for an integrated and united community of atheists and has since brought that message online.¹⁰³ It is an association of independent atheist societies which serves the purpose of uniting various international voices, although the vast majority of its membership comes from American atheist groups; of their 56 member organizations 45

¹⁰¹ Russell, 5.

¹⁰² Bertrand Russell, *Can Men be Rational*, from *Atheism: Collected Essays, 1943-1949*. (New York: Arno Press, 1972), 7.

¹⁰³ “About the Organization”, 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/AAIpress-kit.pdf> Press Kit, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 4, 2008).

are from the United States.¹⁰⁴ Its mission statement is “[t]o tear down negative stereotyping of atheists. We want to encourage critical thinking and common sense decision making using reason – not prayer,”¹⁰⁵ and its goal is to facilitate the growth of independent atheistic groups in every American state and eventually the world.¹⁰⁶ Although it is a strong atheist presence on the internet, it is by no means limited to cyber space. The association sponsors conferences, publishes magazines and educational material, and urges new members to become active within their local atheist communities. Atheist children’s camps are offered, as are special celebrations including award ceremonies.¹⁰⁷ Considering the variety of “humanists” and “freethinkers” that fall under the banner atheism, it may be enlightening to discover how this growing association of atheists defines atheism, or more particularly, defines itself.

According to its website, Atheist Alliance International defines atheism as “living one’s life without the supernatural.”¹⁰⁸ They describe an atheist as being:

anyone who has no belief in any god, whether the god is called Jehovah, Satan, Vishnu, Allah, Loki, Zeus, or any other name. Therefore, atheists hold many varieties of social and political philosophies. There is no atheist dogma, and the Atheist Alliance International has no catechism. However, most of us are atheists because we are rationalists. That means we look for the best evidence in deciding what to believe.¹⁰⁹

To the governing body, atheists are rationalists who have declared that belief in the supernatural, including God, has no evidence to back it up. They highlight scientific inquiry

¹⁰⁴ “The Atheist Alliance Member Organizations”, 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/members.php>, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 10, 2008). Two of the member organizations are within Canada.

¹⁰⁵ “Organization Fast Facts”, 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/AAIpress-kit.pdf> Press Kit, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 4, 2008).

¹⁰⁶ *What does the Atheist Alliance Do?* 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/index.php>, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 3, 2008).

¹⁰⁷ “Atheist Alliance International”, 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/>, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 4, 2008). See the “News”, “Spotlight”, and “Events” sections.

¹⁰⁸ “Who We Are”, 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/index.php>, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 3, 2008).

¹⁰⁹ “Who We Are”, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/index.php> (retrieved December 3, 2008).

as having proved to be “the best process for improving the physical welfare of humankind” and it “should be pursued with vigor and without compromise throughout the world.”¹¹⁰ It should be of no surprise that they feel the teaching of creationism in public schools is an assault on the First Amendment right to freedom of and from religion. They feel the only way to protect people from religion is to unify atheists into one grand movement:

Atheism, with a human centered vision and a reality-based approach to problem solving, can lead us away from this regressive trap and back toward intellectual growth, personal freedom, and social, environmental and scientific progress.¹¹¹

It is clear that the pursuit of science is intertwined with their definition of the atheist movement which they work vigorously to unify. In fact, they point out that most atheists are against any form of supernaturalism, including ghosts, spirits, the reincarnation of souls, astrology, and the “denial of established historical events, such as the Nazi mass murder of Jews, homosexuals, Gypsies, and atheists during World War II.”¹¹² Atheist Alliance International has widened the commonly understood definition of atheism as “the belief that God does not exist,” into an umbrella of likeminded rationalists that advocate scientific progress while denouncing anything that isn’t based on evidence as supernatural and not based on reason.

It was important to highlight that modern atheism is more than ‘New Atheism’, yet many of the atheist online communities do indeed express their respect for science and reason in similar ways to the New Atheists. Having examined how some contemporary

¹¹⁰ “Who We Are”, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/index.php> (retrieved December 3, 2008).

¹¹¹ Why an Atheist Alliance, 2008, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/index.php>, *Atheist Alliance*, (retrieved December 3, 2008).

¹¹² “Who We Are”, <http://www.atheistalliance.org/aai/index.php> (retrieved December 3, 2008).

atheist groups define their atheism, we will now turn to a textual discourse analysis of how the New Atheists do the same.

3.6 Under the Umbrella of New Atheism

Today's media routinely generalizes Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett under the term "New Atheism." They have also been dubbed "The Four Horsemen". Although this works on a practical level, each of the "horsemen" brings with him a unique perspective of what it actually means to be an atheist. By focusing on how these atheists individually define their own lack of theistic belief we can gain an idea of the uniqueness and similarities of these public figures who share the term "atheist." In the following sections I will examine more closely how each of the New Atheists defines his disbelief.

3.6.1 Dawkins

The Brights is a social movement that promotes a worldview free from religion. Richard Dawkins 'came out' as a Bright in 2003. According to the official Brights' website, "[t]he noun form of the term *bright* refers to *a person whose worldview is naturalistic--free of supernatural and mystical elements. A Bright's ethics and actions are based on a naturalistic worldview.*"¹¹³ Dawkins advocated the noun in an article published by the Guardian UK, comparing its usefulness in consciousness raising to that of the gay community adopting the term "gay":

¹¹³ "Bright (n.) What is the Definition?" 2008, <http://www.the-brights.net/vision/faq.html#1>, Frequently Asked Questions, *The Brights' Net*, The Brights' Network, 2008, (retrieved November 12, 2008).

Those of us who subscribe to no religion; those of us whose view of the universe is natural rather than supernatural; those of us who rejoice in the real and scorn the false comfort of the unreal, we need a word of our own, a word like "gay" [...] Like gay, it should be positive, warm, cheerful, bright. [...] As with gays, the more brights come out, the easier it will be for yet more brights to do so. People reluctant to use the word atheist might be happy to come out as a bright.¹¹⁴

Although Dawkins still publicly labels himself a Bright (with notably less frequency than when he came out as one in 2003) he is also a staunch defender of the term "atheist," and considers agnosticism to be a label stricken with "poverty."¹¹⁵ Technically, he places himself in a category between the consideration of the god hypothesis to be of "very low probability, but short of zero" and leaning towards being a strong atheist who absolutely knows there is not a God. "I am agnostic only to the extent that I am agnostic about fairies at the bottom of the garden."¹¹⁶ Similar to Bertrand Russell's opinion before him, he considers everyone to be an atheist with regards to "Zeus, Apollo, Amen Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Woton, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster," and he just happens to be an individual who goes one step further. Dawkins has also suggested redefining atheists as "*nontheists*" since "it lacks the connotation of positive conviction that there is definitely no god, and it could therefore easily be embraced by Teapot or Tooth Fairy Agnostics. It is less familiar than *atheist* and lacks its phobic connotations."¹¹⁷

Although he considers *nontheist* to be a potentially useful euphemism for atheism, he constantly resorts to atheism as the most accurate definition for his stance in the debate against religion:

¹¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, 2003, "The Future Looks Bright", <http://www.guardian.co.uk/books/2003/jun/21/society.richarddawkins> guardian.co.uk, *The Guardian*, June 21, (retrieved November 13, 2008).

¹¹⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 69.

¹¹⁶ Dawkins, *The God*, 73-74

¹¹⁷ Richard Dawkins, 2006, "A Challenge To Atheists: Come Out of the Closet", (<http://richarddawkins.net/article,117,A-Challenge-to-Atheists-come-out-of-the-closet,Richard-Dawkins>) *RichardDawkins.net*, May 15, (retrieved Nov 14th 2008).

The alternative [to nontheism] which I favor is to renounce all euphemisms and grasp the nettle of the word *atheism* itself, precisely because it *is a* taboo word carrying *frissons* of hysterical phobia. Critical mass may be harder to achieve than with some non-confrontational euphemism, but if we did achieve it with the dread word *atheist*, the political impact would be all the greater.¹¹⁸

To Dawkins, atheism is a respectable and accurate word, even though – and indeed, perhaps even because – it has negative connotations. A euphemism such as *nontheist*, and we can assume *Bright* fits into a similar category here – is useful for gathering flock, but atheism is ultimately the most accurate - and constructive - brand for his position.

3.6.2 Harris

Sam Harris' first book, *The End of Faith*, is also an attack on religion, but interestingly – and perhaps tellingly - he does not identify himself as an atheist anywhere within its pages. In his second book, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, he explains atheism to be nothing more than an admission of the obvious, and he goes on to state that it is:

a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a “non-astrologer” or a “non-alchemist.” We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. Atheism is nothing more than the noises reasonable people make in the presence of unjustified religious beliefs.¹¹⁹

In a speech given at a conference in 2007 held by a group known as the Atheist Alliance, Harris stood in a roomful of self-proclaimed atheists and said the following:

We should not call ourselves “atheists.” We should not call ourselves “secularists.” We should not call ourselves “humanists,” or “secular humanists,” or “naturalists,” or “skeptics,” or “anti-theists,” or “rationalists,” or “freethinkers,” or “brights.” We should not call ourselves anything. We should go under the radar - for the rest of our lives.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Dawkins, *A Challenge To Atheists: Come Out of the Closet*, (retrieved November 14, 2008).

¹¹⁹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 51.

¹²⁰ Sam Harris, “The Problem with Atheism”, http://newsweek.washingtonpost.com/onfaith/sam_harris/2007/10/the_problem_with_atheism.html On Faith, *Newsweek* and *washingtonpost.com*, Posted Oct 2 2007, (accessed Nov 14th 2008): “*This is an edited transcript of a talk given at the Atheist Alliance conference in Washington D.C. on September 28th, 2007 [emphasis in original].*”

By going under the radar Harris means atheists should not submit to or promote any definition of themselves and instead simply point out that they are human beings who happen to make use of “reason” and “evidence.” It is hard for people to argue against the use of reason, but it is easy for people to consider anyone under the banner of atheism to be arrogant, claiming to have knowledge that God doesn’t exist. For practical reasons, Harris is constantly referred to as an atheist, and if one defines atheism as one who denies that there is a God then he certainly falls into that category, but the way he defines the term, *atheism* means absolutely nothing – it is not even a worldview:

Attaching a label to something carries real liabilities, especially if the thing you are naming isn’t really a thing at all. And atheism, I would argue, is not a thing. It is not a philosophy, just as “non-racism” is not one. Atheism is not a worldview—and yet most people imagine it to be one and attack it as such. We who do not believe in God are collaborating in this misunderstanding by consenting to be named and by even naming ourselves.¹²¹

Thus Harris does not want to be labelled an atheist since he believes that atheism is not a worldview. He advocates instead that he makes use of reason and evidence, and sees the use of a name for those who do not believe in God as unnecessary and misleading; it promotes a sense that atheism is somehow real when Harris believes it is not.

3.6.3 Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens has an alternative opinion on the usefulness of the term “Brights” than two of his fellow New Atheists. He believes that the attempt by Dawkins and Dennett to publicly redefine atheists as Brights is “silly” and “annoying.”¹²² He disagrees with its usefulness, and finds the term problematic: “My own annoyance at Professor

¹²¹ Harris, *The Problem With Atheism*, (accessed Nov 14th 2008).

¹²² “Word Associating with Christopher Hitchens”, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=egILZ4ZQpPs> youtube, posted Nov 8 2007 by rationalresponders, (retrieved November 13, 2008).

Dawkins and Daniel Dennett, for their cringe-making proposal that atheists should conceitedly nominate themselves to be called “brights,” is part of a continuous argument.”¹²³

Hitchens is comfortable using the term atheist to describe his position, even though he is well aware it is a pure negative. Although he would much rather be called an atheist than an agnostic, or - heaven forbid - a Bright, Hitchens would be even more happy if people would define him as an “anti-theist.” In his *Letters to a Young Contrarian* he writes:

You seem to have guessed, from some remarks I have already made in passing, that I am not a religious believer. In order to be absolutely honest, I should not leave you with the impression that I am part of the generalized agnosticism of our culture. I am not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist; I not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but I hold that the influence of churches, and the effect of religious belief, is positively harmful. Reviewing the false claims of religion I do not wish, as some sentimental agnostics affect to wish, that they were true. I do not envy believers their faith. I am relieved to think that the whole story is a sinister fairy tale; life would be miserable if what the faithful affirmed was actually the case.¹²⁴

To Hitchens, atheism doesn’t go far enough, you cannot just respectfully disagree with those who believe that there is a God; you have to get in there and go to verbal and written battle with religion in all its poisonous forms.

3.6.4 Dennett

When asked by an interviewer in 2004 if he would call himself an atheist, Daniel C. Dennett, answered:

I don’t like the term atheist because it usually means somebody who’s going around upbraiding people trying to force them to listen to his arguments for why there is no God [...] It’s not that I passionately believe that there is no God, it’s that of course there isn’t a God, but so what?¹²⁵

Although technically a “teapot agnostic” in the sense that just as he can’t technically prove with 100% certainty that there is not a teapot orbiting the sun – an argument borrowed

¹²³ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2007), 5.

¹²⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian*. (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 55.

¹²⁵ Robert Wright, “Robert Wright Interviews Daniel Dennett”, meaningoflife.tv/video.php?speaker=dennett Meaning of Life TV, *Google Video*, Sept 1 2004 (retrieved November 14, 2008)

from Russell - for all practical purposes Dennett is an atheist. His dislike of the negative connotations of the term, however, has led him to embrace the umbrella-term “Bright.” He is a passionate supporter and advocate of the “Bright movement,” which seeks to unify atheists and agnostics under the positive, upbeat label of being “Bright.” In fact, the Bright movement received a serious boost when Dennett wrote an article published in the New York Times in 2003, officially “coming out” as a Bright and advocating “bright rights.”¹²⁶

A bright is a person with a naturalist as opposed to a supernaturalist world view. We brights don't believe in ghosts or elves or the Easter Bunny -- or God. We disagree about many things, and hold a variety of views about morality, politics and the meaning of life, but we share a disbelief in black magic -- and life after death.¹²⁷

Their goal, and that of Dennett, is to rid naturalistic thinkers of negative terms such as *atheist*, and create a visible community that can eventually garner “a place at the civic table.”¹²⁸ As previously mentioned, Dawkins has embraced the term atheist, and distanced himself from the term Bright.¹²⁹ I have yet to come across any reason to believe that Dennett has done the same. My default *assumption*¹³⁰ is that he would still rather be considered a Bright than an atheist.

3.7 Conclusion

¹²⁶ Note: In writings about and by the Brights' movement, the term is often lower-cased but also appears capitalized mid-sentence. For ease of comprehension and continuity this paper will use the term in capitalized form unless it is found within a direct quote.

¹²⁷ Daniel Dennett, 2003. “The Bright Stuff”, <http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D03E1DE1E3DF931A25754C0A9659C8B63&sec=&spon=&pagewanted=1> *New York Times*, Opinion, July 12, (retrieved November 12, 2008).

¹²⁸ “What are the goals of the Brights' movement?” 2008, <http://www.the-brights.net/vision/faq.html#1> Frequently Asked Questions, *The Brights' Net*, The Brights' Network, (retrieved November 12, 2008).

¹²⁹ One can only speculate as to why Dawkins has distanced himself from a movement attempting to redefine atheism in a more positive light – my speculation is that he wears the title of atheist proudly, and that with the success of New Atheism, the Brights movement has become unnecessary and, truth be told, rather egotistical and cheesy sounding.

¹³⁰ I assume that assumptions often make for celebrated theories, but they make for problematic facts. I base this one on numerous internet searches - although since his profile is less public than Dawkins and Hitchens it is impossible to say if and/or when he had a change of opinion, so my default opinion is that he hasn't.

Ludwig Feuerbach once remarked “[t]he individual who knows and says nothing more about me than that I am an atheist, knows and says nothing about me.”¹³¹ His point is made even stronger considering that the term “atheism” can be defined in different ways with different emphasises. The blanket of atheism contains many threads. While the blanket at first appears to be of one color, upon closer examination it is multi-hued. Atheist organizations include freethinkers and rationalists; some atheists consider themselves to be Brights, others anti-theists, others nonbelievers, disbelievers and there are those, including Sam Harris, who feel the term shouldn’t even exist. At the height of the Christian Empire to be called an atheist was to be threatened with death or banishment. It was not something to be proud of – it was something to be kept hidden and denied. Atheists today, however, have become more vocal, more heated, and proud. They choose to define themselves as they see fit, and these definitions betray a sense of their motives. Anti-theists attack a God they don’t believe in; Brights embrace their reason, and atheist organizations, such as Atheist Alliance International, advocate free-thought, rationalism and the progress of science against the supernatural. Atheism is much more than simply the disbelief in a God. In the ancient Greco-Roman world it was often a re-definition or displacement of God; the rise of Christianity found atheists in those with different theistic beliefs. The rise of modernity brought atheists, including Nietzsche, Freud, and Feuerbach, who, at least by being vocal about their disbelief in the Judeo-Christian God, paved the way for the outspokenness of Bertrand Russell, and the current rise of “New Atheism” we have today. Perhaps the greatest difference between the atheism of old and the atheism of new is that of self-affirmation. By

¹³¹ Ronald M. Green, 1979, “Ernst Bloch’s Revision of Atheism”, *Journal of Religion*, 49(2):128-135.

affirming and proclaiming atheism, the players of today have called on themselves to define what it means to be an atheist – they will not let others tell them what they believe.

This chapter served to highlight the variety of definitions of atheism in use today. There does not appear to be one definition that fits all, although many descriptors do tend to find common ground in the familial aura these definitions elucidate. Although the New Atheists have arguably become today's public face of atheism, it is important to put atheism in context and appreciate its multi-layered texture. Each individual atheist, as well as separate atheist groups, highlights important aspects of what they hold key to their identification as an atheist. By analyzing select definitions of contemporary atheists, both continuity and difference arise. In terms of continuity, in many definitions God is presented as a supernatural concept and the atheist worldview is presented as one free from the supernatural. This rejection of the plausibility of the supernatural, and by default, deities of all persuasion, is evident through the New Atheist literature which embraces the secular/religious dichotomy. The next chapter will focus on how the New Atheists view this dichotomy in relation to proper theories of secularization. This is an area they have in common – a deep respect and advocacy for the secular as opposed to the religious – so it is to this hotly contested and widely debated socio-historical notion that we now turn.

4. THE FOUNDATION STONE OF SECULARIZATION: GATHERING MOMENTUM OR MOSS?

The writings of the New Atheists present their views on religion in language that corresponds – and differs - with that of various theories on secularization. While secularization theory has its origin in an enlightenment-era assumption of the inevitable decline of religion, today secularization is by no means a singular thesis. Theories of secularization have been rewritten, dismissed, and embraced by numerous social scientists. Although the New Atheists do not formally address much of the literature that has been produced on the subject of secularization, they often write of ‘the secular’ as an opponent of ‘the religious.’ It seems to be taken-for-granted that secularization is a desirable reality, and that the secularization of societies has been occurring since Darwin “made it possible to be an intellectually fulfilled atheist,”¹³² as Richard Dawkins writes in his book *The Blind Watchmaker*. Yet, the New Atheists seem troubled by the failure of the Enlightenment’s promise of a world free from religion. By analysing statements and assumptions about the secular and areas of secularization that these New Atheists make, we can look behind their ‘taken-for-granted status’ and see how they relate and compare to the thoughts of scholars who have proposed some of the most celebrated secularization theories in the field of sociology. By discovering where the New Atheists and the sociological theorists agree and where they differ, we can situate their work in relation to scholarly theories of secularization. A positive and no less interesting side effect of this discussion will be in highlighting where the individual atheist writers agree and where they disagree amongst themselves. After all, the unlikely grouping of ‘freethinkers’ under a media-friendly banner does not necessarily

¹³² Richard Dawkins, *The Blind Watchmaker*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2006), 6.

mean these four men of varied backgrounds are of one opinion on such a complicated issue as the state of religion in the world today. While Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett confidently write of the relationship between the religious and the secular, a thorough examination of their statements in this area will show that their thinking is largely lacking in a comprehensive secularization theory and seemingly ignorant of the academic debate in this area, as well as occasionally disjointed from each other. The New Atheists use the language of secularization in a variety of ways. They use it to express how the world is, and to position themselves on the secular/religious divide accordingly, as well as to express how the world should be. A content analysis of the works of the New Atheists will show the degree to which they consider other theories of secularization, and the extent to which they may not be concerned with them.

The debate over secularization is a rich, complex affair. Although various theories differ as to the reality and scale of secularization, the main concept at the centre of the term is that elements in society, from institutions to individuals, have separated from religious influence. On one extreme, secularization can refer to loss of individual religiosity, on another it points to the separation of religion as a public practice to a private practice. Karel Dobbalaere defines secularization as

“a process by which the overarching and transcendent religious system of old is being reduced in a modern functionally differentiated society to a subsystem alongside other subsystems, losing in this process its overarching claims over the other subsystems. As a result, the societal significance of religion is greatly diminished.”¹³³

One of the core assumptions in the secularization thesis is that institutions, such as those of government, are kept separate from religious influence. America, which

¹³³ Karel Dobbalaere, 1999, “Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization,” *Sociology of Religion*, 60(3): 231-232. The New Atheists themselves do not define what “the secular” actually means to them, although this essay is an attempt to sort that out.

constitutionally separates the church and state, is particularly problematic to the secularization thesis, since its citizens hold a higher degree of personal religiosity compared with their European counterparts. Some contend that this means that religion is just as vibrant as it has always been, therefore negating the reality of the secularization thesis. Stark and Finke articulate this position, arguing instead for a rational choice theory which contends that people balance the cost and benefits of religious membership in order to maximize personal gain: “People will only accept high religious costs if there is such high levels of religious benefits that the result is a favorable ratio.”¹³⁴ They see benefits to religion in both America and Europe, and argue as such that religion is not on the decline.

In *Religious America, Secular Europe?: A Theme and Variations* Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas tackle the same issue but find a different conclusion. They argue that the United States is just as modern as is Europe, yet their relationships to religion are quite different. Like rational choice theory (RCT), secularization theory is shown to offer a partial explanation, but not a trans-Atlantic narrative: “Who is right and who is wrong – the advocates of secularization theory or the protagonists of RCT? Neither probably. The crucial point lies deeper [...] it lies in the fact that Europeans, as a consequence of the church state system, regard their churches as public utilities rather than competing firms [as in America].”¹³⁵ Moreover, in America religion is often “seen as a resource [...] in Europe, it is part of the problem”¹³⁶ This calls the secularization theory into question, as differences between a countries history translates into a multi-layered arraignments based on various church-state relations; there is not one overarching secularization theory. This question of

¹³⁴ Stark, 51.

¹³⁵ Davie, 35.

¹³⁶ Davie, 126.

American versus European religiosity does not find consensus throughout the various takes on secularization.

Arguing that Christianity is “a religion for departing from religion,”¹³⁷ Marcel Gauchet does not believe that religion in America plays a larger role in social organization than in Europe: “The United States shows us how spiritual and cultural influence was preserved by denominational membership within a society whose workings, orientations, and values were just as far removed from the structure of dependency toward the other as the older, superficially more de-Christianized or laicized, European societies”.¹³⁸

Another area of secularization up for debate is the impact that a secular society has on religious institutions. Steve Bruce, a staunch defender of the secularization thesis, argues that religion in the west is being replaced by secular influences. He contends that the secularization paradigm rests on a “long-term decline in the power, popularity and prestige of religious beliefs and rituals,”¹³⁹ which he believes has been met due to cultural diversity, egalitarianism, liberal democracies, individualism, and ultimately, religious indifference. Yet even if one grants that churches have become less influential than in past centuries, this does not mean that personal religiosity is necessarily in decline. Again, there is definitely no consensus on this issue. Thomas Luckmann, for example, argues that secular societies can contain worldviews that articulate the “sacred cosmos” without necessarily having “a special institutional basis that carries that cosmos”.¹⁴⁰ He argues that since has largely become a private affair, to be chosen by the individual. In their research into traditional religious

¹³⁷ Marcel Gauchet, *The Disenchantment of the World: A Political History of Religion*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1997), 101.

¹³⁸ Gauchet, 164.

¹³⁹ Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West*, (Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, 2002), 44.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas Luckmann, *The Invisible Religion: The Problem of Religion in Modern Society*, (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 62.

practice and non-traditional spiritual practice, Paul Heelas and Linda Woodhead highlight an increase in spiritual “subjective-life” individualism while traditional “life-as” authoritative religion has continued to suffer a decline in adherents. They argue that while traditional church-going is on the decrease, spirituality is on the rise.¹⁴¹

The entirety of the literature on secularization cannot be reviewed here and is outside the scope of this thesis. Rather, some of the core ideas and theorists of secularization will be examined using a selected body of literature. Bruce has been chosen as he is a major proponent of the secularization thesis. Stark and Finke have been chosen as they offer a great counter-balance to Bruce’s theory. They are opposed to the secularization thesis, and consider it “a product of wishful thinking.”¹⁴² While this necessarily limits the discussion, the ideas reflected in their theorizing will nonetheless help to shed light on how the New Atheists expression of secularization relates to those engaged in the academic debate in this area.

In *Secularization: An analysis at Three Levels*, Karel Dobbelaere analyzes various uses of the term ‘secularization’ in sociological theory and distinguishes three separate dimensions. For ease of organization, this chapter will be divided by using two of these three levels, which will act as springboards for discussion. The first dimension Dobbelaere mentions is that of Societal Secularization, which refers to “the shrinking relevance of everyday life in modern society.”¹⁴³ Dobbelaere explains that:

¹⁴¹ See: Paul Heelas; Linda Woodhead; Benjamin Seel; Bronislaw Szerszynski; and Karin Tusting, *The Spiritual Revolution: Why Religion is giving way to Spirituality*. Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2005.

¹⁴² Rodney Stark, and Roger Finke, *Acts of Faith: Exploring the Human Side of Religion*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 78.

¹⁴³ Karel Dobbelaere, *Secularization: An Analysis at Three Levels*, (New York: P.I.E.-Peter Lang, 2002), 19.

The notion of secularization as a process of societal secularization implies a comparative historical perspective, an historical “base-line”, and the evaluation of the process depends not only on the base-line selected but also on how religion is defined.¹⁴⁴

Dobbelaere explains that secularization occurs as the result of deliberate policy, as well as a latent process.¹⁴⁵ Societal Secularization will make up the main body of our discussion, as the New Atheists are primarily concerned with the big picture: religion in modern societies. The subtitle for Hitchens’ book, for example, speaks of how “religion poisons *everything*.” To Dawkins, God – and religion in all of its forms – is “delusional.” Their main concern is how religion plays out in societies at the global level (with an emphasis on the west), and as such most of their writing in this area deals with the religious and the secular divide at the societal level.

Dobbelaere’s second dimension is that of Organizational Secularization. Organizational Secularization refers to the “adaptation to the secular values of society”¹⁴⁶ by religious institutions such as churches and New Religious Movements. Although the New Atheists are not concerned with how churches adapt to secularization, (they tend to characterize all religion as outdated and ridiculous), they do make references to societal changes in this area which shed light on their opinions of secularization as a whole. Since it offers interesting insights into how the New Atheists see the scope of secularization, Organizational Secularization will be addressed in this chapter.

The third dimension Dobbelaere offers is that of Individual Secularization, which recognizes “a decline in involvement in churches and denominations,”¹⁴⁷ and addresses individual behaviours and changes toward religious interaction. Besides some speculation

¹⁴⁴ Dobbelaere, 45.

¹⁴⁵ Dobbelaere, 29.

¹⁴⁶ Dobbelaere, 22.

¹⁴⁷ Dobbelaere, 18.

on Harris' part on the possibility that a religionless spirituality can one day be scientifically studied and verified,¹⁴⁸ the literature produced by the New Atheists is silent on this dimension. The religion which the New Atheists are addressing is not a private, individual matter, but rather a very public, and very organized, nuisance, so Dobbelaere's third dimension will not be addressed in this chapter. The focus will be on Organizational Secularization, followed by Societal Secularization. Societal Secularization will be broken into two sections, one on the religiosity of America and Europe, the other on the 'power' of science to drive secularization.

The following sections present a brief discussion of the topic followed by the opinions of each New Atheist. The goal is to accurately present how the New Atheists conceive of secularization and how that relates to the larger academic discourse.

4.1 Organizational Secularization

The New Atheists are not concerned with demonstrating secularization through organizational adaptation; their main concern is with western society at large. They portray religion as delusional, irrational, menacing, and dangerous, and one does not get the impression that they take much effort to distinguish between different doses of religion. They argue that even the smallest dose of religion is problematic, so cases in which institutions such as churches could be seen as adapting to secularization are largely ignored. There are, however, a few hints in their writings that offer a bit of insight into their thinking in this area, and since this in turn offers insight into how they understand the secularization process as a whole, they are well worth exploring.

¹⁴⁸ See section 6.1.2 of this thesis.

The question of whether or not secularization has occurred with regards to organizations such as churches or congregations ultimately depends how one compares past communities to present communities. Writing about the past, Bruce explains:

Britain in the thirteenth century was a Christian society. The cosmology supposed a divine creator and heaven and hell as alternative destinations for the godly and the ungodly. The church was an immensely powerful social institution that played a significant role in every aspect of public life. [...] Although not always Christian in a manner the Church desired, most people were religious to an extent and in a taken-for-granted manner now difficult to imagine.¹⁴⁹

Bruce contends that the influences churches once held with regards to social interaction and social organization have been severely diminished.¹⁵⁰ Bruce clearly considers present Christianity to be less religious than the Christianity of the thirteenth century.

Stark and Finke mention Catholic adaptation with regards to Vatican II, which called for the religious to engage with the “secular world” and “modernize the entire lifestyle of the orders.”¹⁵¹ Although they do not believe that the changes to vocational rewards were successful, this is but one example of what is ultimately essential to their theory: the ability for religions to change in order to meet the needs of the evolving consumers.¹⁵² Although Bruce is not concerned with demonstrating the ability of churches to adapt so much as he is with showing a decrease in their overall importance, he does mention how “the catechisms that were once standard in Catholic and Protestant churches [...] are now only used by the most conservative elements of those confessions,” and that today the “fundamental laws of

¹⁴⁹ Bruce, 140.

¹⁵⁰ Bruce, 141.

¹⁵¹ Stark, 178.

¹⁵² Stark and Finke argue that the vocational changes of Vatican II made the costs higher than the rewards, which led to a decrease in vocations: “As it jettisoned many sacred traditions and thereby reduced the rewards of vocations, the church did not adopt positions that would have substantially reduced the costs of religious life; instead, it adopted a ‘worst of both worlds’ position” (179). Of course, the Roman Catholicism is only one competitor in the religious marketplace.

physics and chemistry are taught to school-children.”¹⁵³ With these two opinions in mind let us turn to how the New Atheists view the secularization of religious organizations.

4.1.1 Dawkins

Dawkins does not extend an olive branch to any religious establishments in the form of a compliment for having even partially secularized over the years. Scriptures are taken to be immoral and irrational, and the problem is that too many people take them *literally*. In addressing and ridiculing the argument that his worldview is ‘nineteenth century’, Dawkins does, however, allude to a change in what is acceptable religious discourse:

The nineteenth century is the last time when it was possible for an educated person to admit to believing in miracles like the virgin birth without embarrassment. When pressed, many educated Christians today are too loyal to deny the virgin birth and the resurrection. But it embarrasses them because their rational minds know it is absurd, so they would rather not be asked.¹⁵⁴

Dawkins suggests that while educated Christians will still profess a belief in miracles and official church doctrine, they need to be “pressed” to do so. They are embarrassed by it. This does not directly address a change in religious institutions, but it does at least raise the possibility that churches may have toned down what the educated in their congregation find to be ‘embarrassing’ rhetoric. Moreover, it hints at congregations having adapted to an outside secular climate. Dawkins is blunt when he discusses how morality has changed since biblical times, and how “no religious leader today (apart from the likes of the Taliban or the American Christian equivalent) thinks like Moses,”¹⁵⁵ but he does not directly address changes toward the secular in religious institutions themselves. Either an individual is religious or an individual is a secularist, either an institution is religious or an institution is

¹⁵³ Bruce, 115-116.

¹⁵⁴ Dawkins, *The God*, 187.

¹⁵⁵ Dawkins, *The God*, 279.

secular – Dawkins does not demonstrate any interest in exploring the possibility that an individual or an institution can be a shifting degree of both.

4.1.2 Harris

In *The End of Faith*, Harris acknowledges that most Christians have secularized in terms of not taking their scriptures literally. He makes this point while criticizing Islam: “A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do.”¹⁵⁶ Harris’ statement is a rather blunt one, in that he argues that Christians have not only allowed their scriptures to be scrutinized, but that they have learned to *ignore* them. This points to a change – an adaption – within Christian communities, at least in how they relate to their official scriptures.

Besides a change in how scriptures are regarded, Harris seems unable or unwilling to find any relevant adaptations of the secular into religious institutions. Using alchemy for an example, Harris explains that some “bad ideas” can become obsolete, and he hopes for religion to follow suit: “Consider the case of alchemy: it fascinated human beings for over a thousand years, and yet anyone who seriously claims to be a practicing alchemist today will have disqualified himself for most positions of responsibility in our society. Faith-based religion must suffer the same slide into obsolescence.”¹⁵⁷ Here he is calling for a slide into obsolescence, but he does not give any impression that the slide has already begun. Moreover, when using a thought game to demonstrate how ridiculous it is for our century to

¹⁵⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004), 110.

¹⁵⁷ Harris, *The End*, 14.

continue valuing religion, Harris gives the impression that no adaptation to the secular has occurred whatsoever:

Imagine that we could revive a well-educated Christian of the fourteenth century. The man would prove to be a total ignoramus, except on matters of faith. His beliefs about geography, astronomy, and medicine would embarrass even a child, but he would know more or less everything about God. Though he would be considered a fool to think that the earth is the center of the cosmos [...] his religious ideas would be beyond reproach. There are two explanations for this: either we perfected our religious understanding of the world a millennium ago – while our knowledge on all other fronts was still hopelessly inchoate – or religion, being the mere maintenance of dogma, is one area of discourse that does not admit of progress.¹⁵⁸

Harris is obviously of the latter option, that religion “does not admit of progress.” It is no surprise, then, that Harris does not go out of his way to compliment religious institutions when they allow for science and inquiry to seep into their structure. In fact, to take Harris at his word, he believes that the “religious ideas” of a fourteenth century Christian would still be “beyond reproach” today. Interestingly, with regards to this point, Harris contradicts himself when making another point about the juvenile delinquency of Islam: “In thinking about Islam, and about the risk it now poses to the West, we should imagine what it would take to live peacefully with the Christians of the fourteenth century – Christians who were still eager to prosecute people for crimes like host desecration and witchcraft. We are in the presence of the past.”¹⁵⁹ Harris, then, is quite inconsistent in this matter, and the inconsistencies seem to depend on his subject matter. When the subject is Islam, the west has progressively dropped illusionary religious crimes such as witchcraft from its register, and has learned to “ignore” its scriptures. When the subject is the west itself, the west hasn’t progressed at all, for “religion is one area of discourse that does not admit of progress.”¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Harris, *The End*, 21-22.

¹⁵⁹ Harris, *The End*, 150.

¹⁶⁰ Stark and Finke’s theory is in disagreement with Harris but for entirely different reasons than Bruce, who, as we have seen, argues that the Britain of the thirteenth century was more religious than the present. Rational choice theory ultimately depends on the notion that successful religions are those that have been able to adapt to new consumer demands, or to offer a superior level of benefits. In fact, it would be difficult to find an

4.1.3 Hitchens

Hitchens is of the opinion that contemporary Western societies shun contemplation on foolish debates such as the length of angels' wings. He writes that today, "even the religious will speak with embarrassment of the time when theologians would dispute over futile propositions with fanatical intensity."¹⁶¹ He clearly believes theologians have evolved and adapted some secular thinking, at least in as much as they no longer argue on how many angels could dance on the head of a pin. Bruce, of course, would agree, whereas Stark and Finke would dispute the assumption that most theologians, not to mention ordinary people, lost sleep on 'the head of a pin' debate in the first place.

In a rare compliment to a religion, Hitchens points to the secularization of the Roman Catholic Church when admitting to being slightly impressed with the papacy of the previous Pope:

I was a guarded admirer of the late Pope John Paul II, who by any human standards was a brave and serious person capable of displaying both moral and physical courage. [...] His papacy was in some ways shockingly conservative and authoritarian, but showed itself open to science and inquiry (except when the AIDS virus was under discussion) and even in its dogma about abortion made some concessions to a "life ethic" which, for example, began to teach that capital punishment was almost always wrong.¹⁶²

It is clear that Hitchens sees and admires the adaptation of secular 'values' such as science and inquiry into the Roman Catholic Church. This is a rare compliment that does not have an equivalent in the books on religion by either Dawkins or Harris. In fact, Harris and Hitchens seem to be of two contrary opinions on this matter, although, as previously

academic in the area of religion that would agree with Harris' statement that religion "does not admit of progress." There may be more than a few who will take issue with the term 'progress', but the inference that religious dogma has stayed static for centuries would easily be refuted; one need only point to Vatican II for an obvious example.

¹⁶¹ Hitchens, 68.

¹⁶² Hitchens, 193.

mentioned, Harris also contradicts himself as to whether or not Christianity has adapted or evolved do to secularizing influences.¹⁶³

In his critique of the ‘backwardness’ of Islam, Hitchens hints to the secularization of scripture, that is to say, the ability in the west to scrutinize the Torah and Bible as one would any other volume of literature:

“Reformation” has meant, for Jews and Christians, a minimal willingness to reconsider holy writ as if it were (as Salman Rushdie so daringly proposed in his turn) something that can be subjected to literary and textual scrutiny. The number of possible “Bibles” is now admitted to be immense, and we know for example that the portentous Christian term “Jehovah” is a mistranslation of the uttered spaces between the letters of the Hebrew “Yahweh.” Yet no comparable project has ever been undertaken in Koranic scholarship.¹⁶⁴

While he does not spell it out, the assumption is that at least some western religious institutions and individuals do not feel threatened by applying secular analysis to their sacred texts. This points to a belief in at least the partial secularizing of churches and synagogues in the west. This is reminiscent of Harris’ similar statement in this area, that Christians have “learned to ignore most of their canon”; with the exception that Harris uses the stronger word *ignore*, while Hitchens has chosen the softer word *scrutinize*.¹⁶⁵ In any case, Hitchens see’s an adaptation in the way western religions view their scriptures, which points to a secularization effect within Christianity communities and congregations.

4.1.4 Dennett

Dennett does not come across nearly as troubled about religion as do the others. His goal in *Breaking the Spell* is to get scholars thinking about taking the scientific study of

¹⁶³ Either a) Harris believes there was never much of a vigorous debate in the past about how many angels could dance on the head of a pin, in which case he disagrees with Hitchens, or b), Harris is of the opinion that the debate still rages, in which case he disagrees with Hitchens. In the case that he is of the opinion that the debate has lessened over time, he contradicts his statement that religion “does not admit of progress” (see section 4.1).

¹⁶⁴ Hitchens, 137.

¹⁶⁵ Sam Harris, *The End*, 110.

religion as a natural phenomenon seriously. Judging by his writing he is not seeking the secularization of the world to the degree that his New Atheist contemporaries do, but unlike Dawkins (who simply wants no churches), Dennett is definitely in favour of churches adapting the secular ‘values’ of science. While explaining the benefits that science may provide to religion (such as potentially verifying that religion is good for one’s health), Dennett writes:

Not for nothing have the new religions of the last century or two been given names like Christian Science and Scientology. Even the Roman Catholic Church, with its unfortunate legacy of persecution of its own scientists, has recently been eager to seek scientific confirmation – and accept the risk of disconfirmation – of its traditional claims about the Shroud of Turin, for example.¹⁶⁶

From this passage it is clear that Dennett is of the opinion that religious institutions are not only capable of re-organizing to include the secular – in this case science – but that the secularization of religious organizations has already been occurring, and Dennett is an advocate of it. Whereas Dawkins and Harris have no interest in advocating that churches embrace science or acknowledging when they do, since they instead advocate that churches should cease to exist, Dennett is in agreement with Hitchens that embracing science is a positive reality for at least the Roman Catholic Church. By bringing up Christian Science and Scientology Dennett is also pointing out that some New Religious Movements are clearly embracing science, and by extension, the secular.¹⁶⁷

4.2 Societal Secularization Part One – Problematic America, Progressive Europe

¹⁶⁶ Dennett, 274.

¹⁶⁷ Regarding New Religious Movements, Dobbelaere writes: “The emergence of New Religious Movements (NRMs) is related to the process of secularization. The ‘Christian collective consciousness’ of the West was disintegrating. Pluralism had undermined its ‘objectivity,’ and the slowly perceived useless character of Christian religions on the societal level accompanied by a loss of status and power, allowed exotic religions to improve their position on the religious market.” Karel Dobbelaere, “Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization,” *Sociology of Religion*, 60(3): 235.

In *God is Dead*, Steve Bruce argues against the assumption that America is not secularized. He admits that America is exceptional in that it is more religious than other western countries, but he nonetheless believes American religiosity is on the decrease. He writes that:

while organized religion remains much more vigorous in the USA than in any other industrial democracy of the 'First World', there are very clear signs that the mainstream Christian churches are declining in popularity and that the conservative Protestant churches are losing their doctrinal and behavioral distinctiveness.¹⁶⁸

Bruce cites privatization, individualism and relativism as the primary causes for religious decline in America, as, he argues, has been the case with England. Stark and Finke are of the opposite opinion: that American religiosity is not in decline. This can be best explained by one of the many propositions made in *Acts of Faith*:

Proposition 75. To the degree that religious economies are unregulated and competitive, overall levels of religious commitment will be high. (Conversely, lacking competition, the dominant firm[s] will be too inefficient to sustain vigorous marketing efforts, and the result will be a low overall level of religious commitment, with the average person minimizing and delaying payment of religious costs.)¹⁶⁹

According to Stark and Finke, America's religious economy, which is "unregulated and competitive" it is quite healthy, and not in a progressive decline, as Bruce contends.

On the subject of low levels of church participation in Western Europe, Stark and Finke write: "European religion suffers from the weaknesses now well known to plague socialism, because, whatever the character of their commercial economies, most European nations sustain a *socialized* religious economy,"¹⁷⁰ and they later add "[t]he heart of our position is that Europeans are poor attenders because of the ineffective efforts of their

¹⁶⁸ Bruce, 227.

¹⁶⁹ Stark, 284.

¹⁷⁰ Stark, 228. Emphasis in original.

churches, and that faced with American-style churches, Europeans would respond as Americans do.”¹⁷¹

Bruce dismisses Stark and Finke’s theory as hyperbole and instead contends that England is undoubtedly secularized thanks to privatization, individualism and relativism, the same three forces at work in America: “[t]hose three forces weakened religion by undermining the cohesion of religious organizations, reducing the degree of background affirmation provided for any worldview in the flow of everyday life, and weakening the commitment of individuals to ensuring the successful transmission of their religious culture intact to their children.”¹⁷²

Stark and Finke argue that the supposed high degree of religiosity in the past is a greatly exaggerated untruth. “When medieval people did go to church they often did so unwillingly and behaved very inappropriately while there.”¹⁷³ While there is no doubt there were some in the religious elite who took religion quite seriously, Stark and Finke believe that does not translate into utterly religious societies, since ordinary people were not as religious as proponents of the secularization thesis maintain: “the masses knew next to nothing in terms of basic Christian culture.”¹⁷⁴ In order for the secularization thesis to hold any water, it must be demonstrated that people in the past were more religious than in the present.¹⁷⁵ Bruce takes offence to the argument that people, specifically in Britain, were no

¹⁷¹ Stark, 237-238.

¹⁷² Bruce, 227-228.

¹⁷³ Stark, 66.

¹⁷⁴ Stark, 63.

¹⁷⁵ This is in reference to the grand secularization thesis which calls for a decline in religiosity which can be verified through such data as church attendance. This does not apply to theory’s that allow for secularization and religiosity.

more religious than they are at present. He agrees that to “talk of secularization is to suppose that the present is less religious than the past,”¹⁷⁶ and explains that:

What is required in the contrast between the past and the present is that there be an identifiable difference in the popularity and salience of beliefs, actions and institutions that assume the existence of supernatural entities with powers of action, or impersonal powers or processes possessed of moral purpose.¹⁷⁷

Bruce disputes the notion that there was a so-called golden age of faith, but clearly is of the opinion that people in Britain, including ordinary folk, were more religious in the past than they are at present. He writes that even the most sceptical historians “document a degree of popular involvement with institutional religion far greater than anything found in contemporary Britain,” and “when the people were not practicing orthodox Christianity, they were doing something else that, unless we are going to subscribe to an excessively narrow Protestant definition, we would still call religion.”¹⁷⁸

4.2.1 Dawkins

Dawkins is particularly disturbed by the religiosity of America, which he believes is “truly remarkable.”¹⁷⁹ Dawkins clearly believes that America has become more religious, especially in the political realm, since its founding: “The genie of religious fanaticism is rampant in present-day America, and the Founding Fathers would have been horrified.” Driving the point home, that the political founders of America were secularists whereas the American politicians of today are dangerously religious, Dawkins writes that “Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Adams and all their friends” would have “recoiled in horror from the

¹⁷⁶ Bruce, 45.

¹⁷⁷ Bruce, 58.

¹⁷⁸ Bruce, 58.

¹⁷⁹ Dawkins, *The God*, 26.

theocrats of early 21st century Washington.”¹⁸⁰ Dawkins clearly is of the opinion that America's religiosity, particularly in the political realm, has increased since America's founding.

Dawkins concedes that he does not know why America is so religious, and offers a few possible explanations: “A colleague points out to me that immigrants, uprooted from the stability and comfort of an extended family in Europe, could well have embraced a church as a kind of kinsubstitute on alien soil. It is an interesting idea, worth researching further.”¹⁸¹ While he does not seem to be aware that there has already been a large body of research in the area of ethno-religious diasporas, Dawkins at least sees a link between religion and identity as offering a possible, if even only partial, explanation. Another explanation is to be found in his comparison of America with his native England. While highlighting the high degree of religiosity in America, Dawkins compares it to the more secularized England: “The paradox has often been noted that the United States, founded in secularism, is now the most religious country in Christendom, while England, with an established church headed by its constitutional monarch, is amongst the least.”¹⁸² Without naming it as such, Dawkins gives an explanation of this paradox that appears partially to coincide with that of Stark and Finke's rational choice theory:

Yet another hypothesis is that the religiosity of America stems paradoxically from the secularism of its constitution. Precisely because America is legally secular, religion has become free enterprise. Rival churches compete for congregations – not least for the fat tithes that they bring – and the competition is waged with all the aggressive hard-sell techniques of the marketplace. What works for soap flakes works for God, and the result is something approaching religious mania among today's less educated

¹⁸⁰ Dawkins, *The God*, 63,67. Dawkins also makes it a point to question the commonly assumed deism of America's Founding Fathers: “it is tantalizing to speculate that at least some of the Founders might have gone beyond deism. Might they have been agnostics or even out-and-out atheists?” (63) “Certainly their writings on religion in their own time leave me in no doubt that most of them would have been atheists in ours” (60).

¹⁸¹ Richard Dawkins, *The God*, 61-62.

¹⁸² Dawkins, 61-62.

classes. In England, by contrast, religion under the aegis of the established church has become little more than a pleasant social pastime, scarcely recognizable as religious at all.¹⁸³

While Stark and Finke would no doubt disagree with Dawkins mention of “fat tithes,”¹⁸⁴ “soap opera flakes” and “today’s less educated classes,” his explanation of “free enterprise,” “rival churches” and “competition” corresponds well with the rational choice theory they have put forth.

Dawkins also writes that “the isolation of American atheists is an illusion, assiduously cultivated by prejudice. Atheists in America are more numerous than most people realize.”¹⁸⁵ Dawkins does not believe that all Americans that claim to believe in God can be trusted as telling the truth. He uses politicians as an example:

There are 435 members of the House of Representatives and 100 members of the Senate. Assuming that the majority of these 535 individuals are an educated sample of the population, it is statistically all but inevitable that a substantial number of them must be atheists. They must have lied, or concealed their true feelings, in order to get elected.¹⁸⁶

Whereas Dawkins clearly sees being religious as the opposite of being secular, it is worth noting that it is not necessarily a contradiction for individuals to be both. Jose Casanova explains that “at least in America, both religious “fundamentalists” and fundamentalist “secular humanists” are cognitive minorities, [...] the majority of Americans tend to be humanists, who are simultaneously religious and secular.”¹⁸⁷ Dawkins does not seem to be aware of this possibility. It is also interesting that he does not hypothesize that American politicians are secretly agnostic; he tends to view individuals as either religious or atheist.

¹⁸³ Dawkins, *The God*, 62.

¹⁸⁴ Although Proposition 65 states “To the extent that ecclesiastics enjoy a favorable reward ratio, religious motives will be less important among those entering the position.” Stark, 283.

¹⁸⁵ Dawkins, *The God*, 65-66.

¹⁸⁶ Dawkins, *The God*, 67.

¹⁸⁷ Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World*, (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1994), 38.

4.2.2 Harris

In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris explains that the “primary purpose of the book is to arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy, against their opponents on the Christian Right.”¹⁸⁸ He is concerned with the “extraordinary influence” Christians exert over the national discourse in America, “in our courts, in our schools, and in every branch of government.”¹⁸⁹ Harris views the survival of religion in America, and the subsequent necessity to write *Letter to a Christian Nation*, to be the result of failure:

the failure of the many brilliant attacks upon religion that preceded it, the failure of our schools to announce the death of God in a way that each generation can understand, the failure of the media to criticize the abject religious certainties of our public figures – failures great and small that have kept almost every society on this earth muddling over God and despising those who muddle differently.¹⁹⁰ (91)

The latter part of that statement seems to clearly indicate that Harris believes that religion is a thriving, if problematic, reality not just in America but in “almost every society” on our planet, yet he contradicts this claim when explaining that a world free from religion is a real possibility:

While you believe that bringing an end to religion is an impossible goal, it is important to realize that much of the developed world has nearly accomplished it. Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom are among the least religious societies on earth.¹⁹¹

Of course, this assertion is problematic in itself in that a list of the “least religious societies on earth” does not prove that “much of the developed world” has nearly brought “an end to religion,” anymore than a list of the skinniest societies on earth would prove that those societies have nearly brought an end to eating, or a list of the fattest societies would

¹⁸⁸ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), xiii.

¹⁸⁹ Harris, viii-ix.

¹⁹⁰ Harris, 91.

¹⁹¹ Harris, 43-44.

demonstrate a near elimination of dieting.¹⁹² Nonetheless, it is clear that Harris considers Western Europe to be progressively secularized, whereas America is problematically religious. According to Harris, the secularization of the west has been relatively successful, whereas America is the exception.

4.2.3 Hitchens

In *god is not Great*, Christopher Hitchens makes it clear that he believes the American political system is heavily influenced by religion. Writing about the aftermath of the September 11th 2001 attacks, Hitchens explains:

At the time, the United States had an attorney general named John Ashcroft, who had stated that America had "no king but Jesus" (a claim that was exactly two words too long). It had a president who wanted to hand over the care of the poor to "faith based" institutions. Might this not be a moment where the light of reason, and the defence of a society that separated church and state and valued free expression and free inquiry, be granted a point or two? The disappointment was, and to me remains, acute.¹⁹³

He goes on to denounce the distribution "of cheap and mass-produced Saudi editions of the Koran" in America's prison systems, saying not only that the translations "went even further than the original in recommending holy war against all Christians and Jews and secularists," but calling their distribution "unconstitutional and anti-American."¹⁹⁴ To Hitchens, America is certainly religious even though its founders were secular. Referring more generally to the

¹⁹² While Harris has compiled a list of what he offers are the world's least religious countries, it is important to note that they are not all 'on the same ship,' so to speak. Each country has its own historical influences and pillars, and varies in degrees of religiosity and secularization. Writing specifically about countries with Christian histories, David Martin explains: "Instead of regarding secularization as a once-for-all unilateral process, one might rather think in terms of successive Christianizations followed or accompanied by recoils. Each Christianization is a salient of faith driven into the secular from a different angle, each pays a characteristic cost which affects the character of the recoil, and each undergoes a partial collapse into some version of 'nature'." David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory*, (Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishers Company; 2005), 3.

¹⁹³ Christopher Hitchens. *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2007), 32.

¹⁹⁴ Hitchens, 33.

Western world, Hitchens makes a statement which demonstrates a belief that the West is only partially secular:

In our new semi-secular and mediocre condition, even the religious will speak with embarrassment of the time when theologians would dispute over futile propositions with fanatical intensity: measuring the length of angels' wings, for example, or debating how many such mystical creatures could dance on the head of a pin.¹⁹⁵ (68)

This sense of progress, from a more religious past to a less religious present is also expressed in the following statement: "In much the same way as prophets and seers and great theologians seem to have died out, so the age of miracles seems to lie somewhere in our past."¹⁹⁶ While not stating it bluntly, Hitchens is clearly of the view that secularization is an ongoing reality at the societal level, where debate over religious topics such as angels and miracles is no longer acceptable. "The person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species. It may be a long farewell, but it has begun, and, like all farewells, should not be protracted."¹⁹⁷ This sense of a farewell to religion shows that Hitchens's mindset is in line with the secularization thesis, especially as celebrated by Bruce, although it has been disputed by Stark and Finke.

4.2.4 Dennett

In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett provides an overview of Stark and Finke's rational choice theory and states "Stark and Finke's applications of rational choice theory to many of the trends and disparities observable in American religious denominations are not yet proven,

¹⁹⁵ Hitchens, 68.

¹⁹⁶ Hitchens, 140. It is worth pointing out here that Hitchens contradicts himself in *God is not Great* when he discusses and attempts to debunk miraculous claims of our time – but his likely exaggerated language here is used to drive home what he feels is assumedly a self-evident point, that people in the past were more religious than in the present.

¹⁹⁷ Hitchens, 11.

and have spirited detractors, but they are certainly worth further research.”¹⁹⁸ Dennett is impressed with the “remarkable job” Stark and Fink have done “articulating the rational choice answer,”¹⁹⁹ but he remains cautiously agnostic on the validity of all of its implications: “I am not declaring a verdict on the soundness or conclusiveness of any of this work, but only introducing what I take to be examples of the work that needs to be taken seriously from now on, and either firmly and fairly refuted or – however begrudgingly – acknowledged for its genuine contributions to our understanding.”²⁰⁰ In his conclusion to this subject, Dennett offers his opinion that Stark and Finke’s theory plays a role in understanding the persistence of religion, although he does not believe that role is all-encompassing:

We can make progress by acknowledging that submission to a religion need not be cast as a deliberate economic decision, while also recognizing that the analytic and predictive power of the perspective that views religions as designed systems competing in a dynamic marketplace for adherents with different needs and tastes.²⁰¹

Dennett makes no specific mention of how he thinks Stark and Finke’s theory applies in different national contexts, although he does acknowledge an interest in their observations that the “proportion of Americans who actually belong to a specific church congregation (as opposed to naming a religious preference when asked) has hovered around 65 percent for many decades.”²⁰² He states: “It will be interesting to try to learn more about the 35 percent who are just not cut out for the church, as well as the proportion of those churchgoers who

¹⁹⁸ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007), 195.

¹⁹⁹ Dennett, 190. Considering the way they have begun to market themselves through various foundations, conferences, videos, and in particularly in the case of Dawkins, through bus advertisements, New Atheism could be applied to rational choice theory as well. If that does not appeal to the atheists themselves, perhaps it would be a worthwhile project for academia.

²⁰⁰ Dennett, 197.

²⁰¹ Dennett, 199.

²⁰² Dennett, 198.

are not cut out for high-tension, expensive religions of the sort Stark favors.”²⁰³

Considering Dennett’s confidence in Stark’s statistics and his curiosity in the percentage of non-churchgoers, it is interesting that Dennett later dismisses data from the 2001 American Religious Identification Survey which shows that the “three categories with the largest gain in membership since the previous survey of 1990 were evangelical/born-again (42 percent), nondenominational (37 percent) and no religion (23 percent).”²⁰⁴ Dennett acknowledges that the data supports “the view that secularism is on the rise,” yet he dismisses the survey results as problematic due to a change in wording from the previous survey (also note that he translates “no religion” directly to “secularism”). He also cites a survey by Michael Shermer, the director of the Skeptic Society that found that “only 64 percent [of Americans] said they believed in God – and 25 percent said they disbelieved in God,”²⁰⁵ which indicates a large percentage of non-believers, yet he dismisses that survey because only one out of ten individuals who received the survey in the mail returned it, “a relatively low rate of return, so we can’t draw any interesting conclusions.”²⁰⁶ Dennett’s dismissal of statistics that would seem to favour the opinion that America’s religiosity is to some degree overhyped is particularly noteworthy considering Dawkins comment, based on no statistical data, that the percentage of non-believers in the States is higher than surveys indicate.²⁰⁷

4.3 Societal Secularization Part Two – Science Behind the Wheel

²⁰³ Dennett, 198.

²⁰⁴ Dennett, 319.

²⁰⁵ Dennett, 320.

²⁰⁶ Dennett, 321.

²⁰⁷ See again Dawkins, *The God*, 65-66, in which he claims: “Atheists in America are more numerous than most people realize.”

In *Acts of Faith*, Stark and Finke state that “the presumed incompatibility between religion and science seems mythological.”²⁰⁸ In light of their overall theory this proclamation makes sense, as religion is seen as a rational choice, quite unlike the beacon of irrationality that the New Atheists make religion out to be. Stark and Fink dismiss the notion that science has a corrosive effect on religion, and since they see science as a vital element of the secularization thesis they believe it furthers their case that the secularization thesis is dead. They write that “implicit in all versions” of the secularization thesis “it is science that has the most deadly implications for religion.”²⁰⁹ In *God is Dead*, Steve Bruce responds to this critique by stating that Stark “should know better”²¹⁰ than to consider science to be an element of the secularization thesis because “no contemporary sociologist of religion argues that Christianity has been fatally undermined by science.”²¹¹

Considering that the New Atheists tend to place science on the side of the secular, one would assume that proponents of the secularism thesis such as Bruce would also be of the opinion that science and religion are incompatible, with science, and the secular, being the rational victor. It is interesting that this is not always the case. Bruce argues that:

the primary secularizing effects of science came not from its direct refutation of religious ideas but through the general encouragement to a rationalistic outlook in bureaucracy as the dominant form of social organization; and the role of technology in increasing our sense of mastery over our own fate.²¹²

Despite some high profile instances of disagreements, science and religion, according to Bruce, are not in conflict. The secularization thesis does not rest on science, as religion has the ability to offer scientific propositions and has some similarities to science: “That science

²⁰⁸ Stark, 61.

²⁰⁹ Stark, 61.

²¹⁰ Bruce, 106.

²¹¹ Bruce, 117.

²¹² Bruce, 117.

and religion may clash over specific propositions about the nature of the world should not cause us to miss the similarities of cognitive style and epistemology.”²¹³

Whereas Bruce, a contemporary proponent of the secularization thesis considers the incompatibility of science and religion to be an exaggerated non-starter that has no impact on his thesis, the believed conflict between the secular science and religion is a vital aspect of the New Atheist’s arguments, one that comes up time and time again. Although Bruce does not include science as a contributor to secularization, it is important for balance in this discussion to mention that there are others proponents of secularization that do.

Dobbelaere defines science as “an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world,” and believes that science “as a secular potency has diminished the impact of the theological outlook on the world.”²¹⁴ Peter Berger writes that secularization “may be observed in the contents in the arts, in philosophy, in literature and, most important of all, in the rise of science as an autonomous, thoroughly secular perspective on the world.”²¹⁵ In *Social Theory and Religion*, James A. Beckford concurs that while it has its critics, there are many sociologists who link science to the secularization thesis. During a discussion on the relationship between rationality and secularization, Beckford writes:

The force of the argument about the secularizing effects of rationalization depends heavily on the assumption that rational and religious ways of thinking are mutually exclusive – or, at least, that they are locked into a winner-takes-all competition. Thus, substantiated claims about the replacement of ways of thinking and acting that used to have religious meaning by ideas and practices that were shown to be merely efficient and effective amount to evidence of secularization by rationalism. For example, the growing authority of rational, scientific ideas about the world of nature, cosmogony, disease, education, work and so on has tended to replace or to marginalize religious authorities on the same issues.²¹⁶ (48)

²¹³ Bruce, 116.

²¹⁴ Dobbelaere, 31. In “Towards an Integrated Perspective of the Processes Related to the Descriptive Concept of Secularization,” *Sociology of Religion*, 60(3): 232, Dobbelaere writes that secularization “refers to a specific social conflict, to wit, a religiously based resistance to functional differentiation.” The New Atheists see the “social conflict” primarily in terms of religious (irrational) resistance to scientific (rational) truth.

²¹⁵ Peter Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*, (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1967), 107.

²¹⁶ James A. Beckford, *Social Theory & Religion*, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 48.

It seems clear that Dobbelaere, Berger, and Beckford link science to the process of secularization. Stark and Finke, as noted, do as well, while also dismissing the secularization thesis as an outdated modern mythology. Bruce, as we have seen, believes the secularization thesis does not rest on science. Now let us turn to how the New Atheists view the potential – and power – of science to secularize.

4.3.1 Dawkins

Dawkins takes an interesting approach toward explaining the conflict between science and religion. He argues that “the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other.”²¹⁷ Explaining this, Dawkins writes:

[A] universe in which we are alone except for other slowly evolved intelligences is a very different universe from one with an original guiding agent whose intelligent design is responsible for its very existence. [...] there is something utterly special about the hypothesis of ultimate design, and equally special about the only known alternative: gradual evolution in the broad sense. They are close to being irreconcilably different.²¹⁸

Dawkins is principally concerned with creationism and Intelligent Design, two sides of the same Christian coin which he believes is a danger to the honest pursuit of science: “In parts of the United States, science is under attack from a well-organized, politically well-connected and, above all, well-financed opposition, and the teaching of evolution is in the front-line trench.”²¹⁹ Science, which is a secular pursuit, is depicted in a favourable light, whereas religion is seen as the bully: “Far from respecting the separateness of science's turf, creationists like nothing better than to trample their dirty hobnails all over it. And they fight

²¹⁷ Dawkins, *The God*, 72.

²¹⁸ Dawkins, *The God*, 85.

²¹⁹ Dawkins, *The God*, 91.

dirty, too.”²²⁰ The powerful opponent in this case is presumably the Christian lobbies behind both creationism and Intelligent Design. Considering Dawkins career engagement with evolution, it is not surprising that he often writes of the enemies of science as being those who oppose neo-Darwinism. Creationists are not simply opposed to *one* branch of science – evolution – they are seen as being opposed to science in general. This positions Dawkins in the role of defence, protecting truth from those who attack it on irrational grounds. As the title to his book suggests, Dawkins defines belief in god as delusional, and this extends to religious claims about the origin of the universe, whereas science is a sober means of providing clarity by careful consideration of evidence.

Dawkins also believes that science has the ability to convert people to atheism. In fact, he explains that in his case, knowledge of evolution aided him on his journey toward atheism. While on the subject of court proceedings involving the teaching of creationism in science classes, Dawkins writes:

Any creationist lawyer who got me on the stand could win over the jury simply by asking me: ‘Has your knowledge of evolution influenced you in the direction of becoming an atheist?’ I would have to answer yes and, at one stroke, I would have lost the jury. By contrast, the judicially correct answer from the secularist side would be: ‘My religious beliefs, or lack of them, are a private matter, neither the business of this court nor connected in any way with my science.’ I couldn’t honestly say this [...]²²¹

According to Dawkins, his science is connected to his atheism. Science, and particularly Darwinian and neo-Darwinian evolution, has the power to secularise. On a personal level, science has influenced Dawkins in the direction of becoming an atheist, and there should be no doubt that he feels it does the same for others.²²²

²²⁰ Dawkins, *The God*, 93.

²²¹ Dawkins, *The God*, 68.

²²² For details on Dawkins’ opinion of the irreligiosity of scientists see section 5.1.

4.3.2 Harris

Harris writes that “the conflict between religion and science is unavoidable. The success of science often comes at the expense of religious dogma; the maintenance of religious dogma always comes at the expense of science.”²²³ The relationship between these two areas, according to Harris, is one of cost to the other. When religion wins an area of conflict it has a cost to science; when science wins a battle, the cost is to religion. When science advances, religion loses ground.

Harris is of course on the side of science, arguing that science makes claims based on good evidence, whereas religion makes claims based on bad evidence: “The conflict between science and religion is reducible to a simple fact of human cognition and discourse: either a person has good reasons for what he believes, or he does not.”²²⁴ From this we can assume that where there are good reasons for a belief there is science, and where there are bad reasons for a belief there is religion. His view of the relationship between science and religion is that of high polarity, and science is portrayed as the bearer of truth that has the power to put religion into a state of retreat.

4.3.3 Hitchens

In a statement that would not be out of place in any of the atheist writings of his colleagues, Hitchens writes with clarity his opinion of religion that “[t]hanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important.”²²⁵ From Hitchens’ perspective, the achievements of science – in this case the telescope and the

²²³ Harris, 63.

²²⁴ Harris, 66-67.

²²⁵ Hitchens, 282.

microscope – have rendered religion obsolete. Science has removed our need for turning to religion for explanations; it has replaced religion in the field of inquiry. Moreover, Hitchens considers religion to be rooted in outdated, primitive attempts by our species to explain the natural world:

“[T]here would be no such churches in the first place if humanity had not been afraid of the weather, the dark, the plague, the eclipse, and all manner of other things now easily explicable.”²²⁶

Thanks to science, natural phenomena are explained and understood, thus there is no more need for churches. Had the ancients of humankind not been afraid of the things that we now understand scientifically, according to this line of thought, they would never have built places of religious worship in the first place. Clearly Hitchens believes that science is a potent force for the secularization of society. Thanks to science the need for churches has diminished. Elsewhere in *god in not great* Hitchens considers science to be capable of providing “absolutely certain knowledge,” and he considers religion to be “an enemy of science and inquiry.”²²⁷ As with Dawkins and Harris, Hitchens portrays science as the *bearer* of truth, while religion is portrayed as a *barrier* to truth.

4.3.5 Dennett

Dennett defines religions as “social systems whose participants avow belief in the supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought.”²²⁸ Since he explains that the natural sciences “takes everything in Nature as their topic,”²²⁹ and he considers religion to be a natural phenomenon, it is not surprising that he feels that religion is a subject that can be studied and explained by science. Science has the ability to study religion, whereas religion

²²⁶ Hitchens, 64-65.

²²⁷ Hitchens, 149, 229.

²²⁸ Dennett, 9.

²²⁹ Dennett, 26.

is not presented as having the authority to study science. This makes for an interesting dynamic to the relationship between the two areas. In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett also highlights William James proposition that religion survives by “using science’s own peculiar methods and weapons” such as “experiment and verification.”²³⁰ From this perspective, even religion has been secularized to some extent by the powerful tools of science.

While Dennett also believes that religion and science have been in conflict, particularly with the creationism debate in America²³¹, his tone is much more restrained than the others. Perhaps this is due in part to his explanation that:

the proposition that god exists is *not even* a theory [...] That assertion is so prodigiously ambiguous that it expresses, at best, an unorganized set of dozens or hundreds – or billions – of quite *different* possible theories, most of them disqualified as theories in any case, because they are systematically immune to confirmation or disqualification.²³²

Whereas Dawkins views the ‘God hypothesis’ as a theory competing in the realm of science, Dennett dismisses religious attempts to be scientific as ‘disqualified.’ The assumption is that theories are important, offering opportunity for truth, so when Dennett dismisses the “proposition that god exists” as “*not even* a theory”, he is also in effect downplaying religions ability to express truth. Although Dennett and Dawkins may disagree on whether or not the ‘God hypothesis’ is a theory, they both agree on the positive importance of science over that of religion. In fact, as we have seen, all of New Atheists agree that science is a positive secularizing force for societies, whereas religion is at best a falsehood, and at worst a dangerous menace in an unavoidable conflict with science.

4.4 Conclusion

²³⁰ Dennett, 271.

²³¹ Dennett is a strong advocate for evolution and has written a book on the subject titled *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meanings of Life* (1995)

²³² Dennett, 311.

Writing in 1971, Colin Campbell stated:

Given that a wide range of campaigns, movements and voluntary associations promoted secularism, rationalism, atheism and humanism in Britain and elsewhere, it is important to consider their direct and indirect contributions to secularization *and* to interpretations of secularisation.²³³

Campbell is certainly correct, and it is no less interesting to learn how today's "four horsemen of atheism" conceive of secularization and interpret the secular. Since Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Richard Dawkins, and Daniel Dennett are public personalities whose influence has even spread into popular cartoon sitcoms,²³⁴ it was worth digging a little deeper to hear exactly what they are saying when they argue for a secular society. Their conceptions may occasionally be disjointed, but their opinions, and their messages, are certainly being heard, and as such they deserve our attention.

Throughout their writings, the New Atheists mention the secular as opposed to the religious, and each author is certainly concerned with religion. The very fact that they are concerned tells us that they believe religion has some degree of power. By looking at how their individual explanations of where that power has been, where it is now, and where it is going, we have been able to gain some insight as to how they understand the secular, a term they often take for granted. The media has placed them under a unified title which they have embraced as they seek an end to religion and the secularization of the world. Although they constantly cite each other in their books, and belong to various atheist organizations which promote a sense of unity, their views on secularization are just as often in disagreement with each other as they are in agreement. In the case of Harris, his views in one area occasionally contradict his views in another. The New Atheists at times seem to be unaware of the raging debate that has occupied social scientific theorists in the area of secularization since at least

²³³ Beckford, 36.

²³⁴ *Family Guy* and *South Park* – arguably a good barometer for social impact, interest, and/or influence.

the latter half of the twentieth century. It is also possible that they simply do not care about the debate – they take the notion of the secular and shape it in opposition to religion, and in favour to science. In so doing they avoid becoming engaged and perhaps sidetracked with the larger debates; they do not have to contend with the complexity of the issue, and instead can focus on formulating arguments in support of the secular and in opposition to its often stated counterpart. This bolsters the science/religion dichotomy deployed by each of them by allowing for the discussion to revolve around an offered solution – science – to the problem – religion.

It is interesting to note that there are a few key ideas that the New Atheists do not acknowledge which could be used to bolster their claims. Bruce, for instance, believes that “the greatest damage to religion has been caused, not by competing secular ideas, but by the general relativism that supposes that all ideologies are equally true.”²³⁵ The New Atheists do not mention relativism as a possible contributor to their cause, nor do they even touch upon the area of pluralism.²³⁶ In fact, Oliver Tschannen cites pluralism as being one of the principle causes of atheism. He writes that unbelief can be explained in one of two ways:

One can either consider it to be a result of the superior explicative power of science [...] or one can view it as the result of the loss of plausibility incurred by the different religions in their fight against one another in a pluralistic situation. In the latter case, it is the very existence of competing and

²³⁵ Bruce, 116.

²³⁶ Stark and Finke believe that increased pluralism, which means an increase in the religious market, is a positive influence on religiosity as it increases competition which in turn helps to develop superior products. They argue that “only in unregulated religious economies with a multitude of competing religious firms will there be high levels of commitment” (257). Diversity increases religious commitment, due to the fact that “to the extent that organizations work harder, they are more successful” (257). According to Stark and Finke, pluralism increases religious commitment. On the other hand, Steve Bruce argues that “A society in which almost everyone shares a particular religion can give that faith pride of place in its operations. [...] But a society that was becoming increasingly egalitarian and democratic and more culturally diverse had to place social harmony before the endorsement of religious orthodoxy. The result was an increasingly neutral state. Religious establishments were abandoned altogether (as with the constitution of the United States) or were neutered (the British case) [...] this reduced the social power and scope of organized religion” (16-17). The New Atheists are completely silent on the possibility that religious diversity may benefit (or hinder) their cause.

incompatible explanations of the world that gives the individual pause to think, and finally to reject, all of them.²³⁷

It is interesting that out of these two major ‘causes’ of unbelief, the New Atheists place most of their weight on science, and fail to acknowledge contemporary religious diversity. Moreover, for the most part they portray religions as one and the same: irrational, delusional, poisonous, and dangerous. They have stacked up their argument by putting all of their emphasis on the “superior explicative power of science,” as Tschannen writes, and have hindered the pluralistic argument for unbelief by painting all religions with a similar brush.

The only area on which all four seem to fully agree is on science. They all believe that science is in direct conflict with religion. All consider science to be a secular endeavour, which is in stark contrast to religion. The secular/religious divide is most strongly articulated by the New Atheists in the battle between science and religion. This argument is most strongly articulated in the writings of Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins, whereas Dennett is much more subdued in expressing it.

It is worth closing this discussion on the atheists’ views relating to secularization by mentioning that Sam Harris is the co-founder of the Reason Project, a non-profit foundation with the stated goal of “spreading scientific knowledge and secular values in society,” while “eroding the influence of dogmatism, superstition, and bigotry in our world.”²³⁸ Hitchens, Dennett, and Dawkins are members of the Advisory Board. Clearly science is considered by each to be a principle proponent of the secular. If either one of the New Atheists were to write a book solely on the topic of their own secularization thesis, there should be no doubt

²³⁷ Olivier Tschannen, 1991, “The Secularization Paradigm: A Systematization,” *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, 30(4):402.

²³⁸ “About The Reason Project”, 2009, <http://www.reasonproject.org/about/>, *The Reason Project*, (retrieved August 21 2009).

that science would be expressively linked with their notion of the secular, and science would be defined as highly corrosive to religion. Due to the importance that science holds in shaping their views, their beliefs that science and religion are in conflict, and that science is corrosive to religiosity, it is to a more thorough understanding of how the New Atheists conceive of the conflict between science and religion that will be explored in the next chapter.

5. BLINDED BY SCIENCE: THE ROAD TO DAMASCUS, OR TO DE-MASK US?

The role of science comes up consistently in discussions about New Atheism - and atheism in general, for that matter. This is not surprising, since the literature produced by Hitchens, Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris frequently portray science as if it is a Seeing Eye dog that guides them toward the truth of reality; a dog that theists often neglect and sometimes abuse. Theists often counter by arguing that science does not hold all the answers, it may be led astray, and genuine science is always compatible with religion (cases where they appear to be in disagreement are simply cases where scientists are in error, not science itself).²³⁹ The compatibility of religion and science has long been questioned and debated by prominent players from both fields of discovery. The debate is most prominent today in the area of Creationism (and Intelligent Design) and evolution, and the New Atheists have been rather loud in expressing their belief that science and religion are fundamentally opposed. So too have religious fundamentalists who seek science from ancient scripture and dismiss modern science as misleading. Many Christians, however, believe reason and faith – science and religion - to be complementary to one another.²⁴⁰ Science's relationship to religion is a hotly contested one, and like other hotly contested areas of concern, the consensus is far from universal.

²³⁹ See the Institute for Creation Research, which argues that evolution is a “story” but not real science: <http://www.icr.org/>

²⁴⁰ In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins writes: “Unless otherwise stated, I shall have Christianity mostly in mind, but only because it is the version with which I happen to be most familiar.” (Dawkins, *The God*, 58). Since most of the arguments relating to science/religion found in the other New Atheist books are also catered to Christianity I shall also have Christianity in mind when referring to religion in this chapter.

In *The Scientific and the Divine*, James A. Arieti and Patrick A. Wilson incisively point out that the human desire to *know* is at the heart of both religion and science. Both offer answers, and even if the answers are wrong, we would rather submit to a false belief than have a gap in our knowledge of the world.²⁴¹ This may seem an obvious observation of human nature but it is nonetheless an astute and relevant one. Thomas Dixon points out that “religion and science share an interest in the same fundamental questions about the origins and nature of the physical universe in general, and of human beings in particular.”²⁴² This desire to understand nature and our origins explains Epicurus’ contribution of swerves to the ancient atomic theory²⁴³, and it also explains Newton’s consideration of the invisible God tinkering with the rotating planets every now and then, giving them a gentle push.²⁴⁴ It also leads to a problem when new answers make the old ones suddenly become obsolete. It was only when those engaged in certain sciences, such as Biblical Criticism and palaeontology, started to seriously doubt, or disprove, the accuracy of scripture, and by association religion, that science as a discipline became viewed as potentially problematic toward religion. The human desire to know²⁴⁵ had found an outlet outside religion, and the notion – or possibility - of conflict had arisen.

The notion that science and religion are, or may be, in conflict is a relatively recent one. In fact, the phrase “science and religion” did not appear until the early years of the nineteenth century, and books with that phrase in their title did not appear until the 1820s and

²⁴¹ James A. Arieti and Patrick A. Wilson, *The Scientific and the Divine; Conflict and Reconciliation from Ancient Greece to the Present*, (New York: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003), 12-16.

²⁴² Thomas Dixon, “Religion and Science,” pg. 509-525, in John Hinnells, *The Routledge Companion to The Study of Religion: Second edition*, (New York: Routledge, 2010), 509.

²⁴³ Arieti, 86.

²⁴⁴ Arieti, 228.

²⁴⁵ A common English translation of Aristotle’s *Metaphysics* I.980a21 is “All men by nature desire to know.” I agree with this notion, that humankind is a curious species, but I can only assume its validity and not prove it since it is philosophical.

1830s.²⁴⁶ Ronald L. Numbers points out that this is a “sure sign that the authors were coming to view the two enterprises as independent if related,” and “during the 1850s and 1860s several colleges and seminaries established professorships devoted to demonstrating (and preserving) the harmony of science and religion.”²⁴⁷ After the publication of Darwin’s *Origin of Species* (1859), the tone changed from that of compatibility to conflict. Besides the designer-less implications raised by evolution, Numbers points to two reasons for this dramatic change in dynamic:

first, when partisan historians of science and religion joined the debate and, second, when a group of hardcore “scientific naturalists” went out of their way to offend churchmen and to caricature organized religion as inimical to science.²⁴⁸

While some historians began writing about the supposed war between science and religion, ‘scientific naturalists’ sought the advancement of science through the subtraction of religion. The New Atheists are presently following in the footsteps of that latter tradition.²⁴⁹ This chapter will explore how the New Atheists *understand* science, and ultimately the interactions between science and religion. Please note that in keeping with the assumed meaning behind the word ‘religion’ when addressed by the New Atheists in this area, I am referring to Christianity.

In *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*, John F. Haught highlights the following four distinct ways people understand the relationship between religion and science:

²⁴⁶ Ronald L. Numbers, “Aggressors, Victims, and Peacemakers,” pg. 15-53, in Harold W. Attridge, *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 16.

²⁴⁷ Numbers, 16-17.

²⁴⁸ Numbers, 31.

²⁴⁹ Tina Beattie, a critic of the New Atheism, makes this point abundantly clear: “Today, the new atheists are as hostile towards theologians as the most militant Victorian scientists were, but the battle lines are still drawn between two protagonists – the Christian men of God and Western men of science – in a way which reflects little of the plurality and diversity of other world-views.” Tina Beattie, *The New Atheists: The Twilight of Reason & The War on Religion*, (Great Britain: Darton, Longman and Todd Ltd, 2007), 54.

- 1) *Conflict* - the conviction that science and religion are fundamentally irreconcilable;
- 2) *Contrast* – the claim that there can be no genuine conflict since religion and science are each responding to radically different questions;
- 3) *Contact* – an approach that looks for dialogue, interaction, and possible “consonance” between science and religion, and especially for ways in which science shapes religious and theological understanding;
- 4) *Confirmation* – a somewhat quieter, but extremely important perspective that highlights the ways in which, at a very deep level, religion supports and nourishes the entire scientific enterprise.²⁵⁰

Other scholars have postulated similar typologies for conceptualizing religion’s relationship to science, but for purposes of understanding the way the New Atheist’s conceive of that relationship, Haught’s description of the conflict typology works quite well. Regarding that typology, Haught explains:

Many scientific thinkers are quite certain that religion can never be reconciled with science. If you are a scientist, they say, it is hard to imagine how you could honestly also be religious, at least in the sense of believing in God. Their main reason for drawing this conclusion is that religion apparently cannot demonstrate the truth of its ideas in a straightforward way, whereas science can. Religion tries to sneak by without providing any concrete evidence of God’s existence. Science, on the other hand, is willing to test all of its hypotheses and theories against “experience.” Religion cannot claim to do this in a way that is satisfying to an impartial witness, sceptics’ claim, so there must be a “conflict” between the scientific and the religious ways of understanding.²⁵¹

Haught’s description of the conflict typology regarding the religion/science debate fits the New Atheists conception of the science-religion relationship. In the spirit of balance, as well as in an attempt to locate the forthcoming debates on the relationship between science and religion in a larger context, four scholars of different backgrounds who do not adhere to the conflict typology will provide a counter-discourse. Conflict is not the only way to understand the science/religion debate, and Michael Poole, Alister McGrath, Alvin Plantinga, and Robert Wuthnow will be utilized to contextualize the complexity of the debate, particularly as they articulate various strands of the Haught’s other typologies.

This chapter is divided into sections which explore the New Atheists’ opinions on the religiosity of scientists, the conceptualization of conflict, Gould’s NOMA compromise, and

²⁵⁰ John F. Haught, *Science & Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1995), 9.

²⁵¹ Haught, 9-10.

opposition to evolution. After a brief discussion of each topic as conceived through the conflict lens and the compatibility lens, the opinions of each New Atheist on the topic is expressed, as derived from their primary writings on religion. The goal is to accurately present how the New Atheists conceive of both science and science's relationship to religion, which will in turn present us with greater understanding(s) of where they fit within the larger debate(s). The first section deals with how those who earn a livelihood from scientific endeavours are interpreted with regard to their relations - or lack thereof - with religion.

5.1 Oxymoronic Scientists?

If science is based on a worldview free from the supernatural, and the discipline is one in opposition to religion, than one would expect most – if not all – scientists to be atheists. The religiosity of scientists is therefore an area that the New Atheists, especially Dawkins and Harris, feel the need to address. Their explanations regarding why some scientists are religious tells us how strongly they feel about science as an opponent of religion, as well as how they gauge the current area of debate.²⁵²

In describing adherents and devotees of the conflict typology, Haught's defining explanation that if "you are a scientist, they say, it is hard to imagine how you could honestly also be religious, at least in the sense of believing in God,"²⁵³ accurately describes how Dawkins addresses the issue. Picking up the tone of those who subscribe to the conflict typology, Haught writes that:

²⁵² It is also worth noting that an interest in the religiosity of scientists is certainly not limited to the New Atheists; studies, polls, articles, and books inquire into the faith of scientists much more heavily than they do the faith of those in other careers – furniture designers and puppeteers for example. Is this because the religiosity of scientists is assumed to tell us something about science itself, or is it because of concerns that 'godless' scientists will engage in unethical research?

²⁵³ Haught, 9-10.

It is hard for us to imagine how anyone who takes science seriously can now come to any other conclusion than the idea of a personal God is now utterly unbelievable. Science offers no evidence whatsoever that any divine personality underlies the universe or has ever had any interest in it.²⁵⁴

He also extends this train of thought to explaining how one of the most cited scientists of our time has been misunderstood in this area:

Einstein talked a lot about God, it is true, and he spoke of himself as a “religious” man. But he was religious only to the extent that he believed that there is something permanently mysterious about the universe, or in the sense that we should be committed to “supernatural” ethical values that can give meaning to our lives. [...] He clearly denied the existence of a personal God. [...] The notion of a personal God, [Einstein] wrote, is not only unnecessary for science; it is a primitive superstition that even religion can now do without. Belief in a personal God, said Einstein, is the main cause of conflicts between science and religion.²⁵⁵

If science is genuinely in conflict with religion, then it logically follows that scientists are in conflict with theologians – at least with regards to the battlefield of ideas. Yet it also seems to be the case that there are some scientists who profess a belief in God. This is a circle that needs to be squared by those who adhere to the conflict typology, but not by those who do not see the necessity for conflict.

The conflict typology is far from being universally accepted, and there are those who maintain that there is nothing absurd or conflicting when it comes to being both a scientist and a religious believer: “Studying science is a very worthwhile career and many religious believers have engaged in it. [...] Many of the founder members of the Royal Society, founded in 1660, were themselves in Holy Orders.”²⁵⁶ Concerning more contemporary scientists, Poole sees no intrinsic contradiction in being a scientist who also happens to be religious.

The late Revd Dr Arthur Peacocke was an Oxford researcher on DNA and sometimes Dean of Clare College, Cambridge; Professor Russell Stannard was head of the physics department at the Open University; and Revd Dr John Polkinghorne was professor of mathematical physics at Cambridge.

²⁵⁴ Haught, 28.

²⁵⁵ Haught, 29-30.

²⁵⁶ Michael Poole, *The ‘New’ Atheism: 10 Arguments that Don’t Hold Water?* (England: Lion Hudson, 2009), 62.

There is nothing ‘Dickensian’ about any of them: men of razor-sharp minds and prolific academic outputs, both in science and in the relationships between science and religion.²⁵⁷

Biologist Francis Collins, leader of the Human Genome Project, found “the experience of sequencing the human genome, and uncovering this most remarkable of all texts,” to be “both a stunning scientific achievement and an occasion of worship”.²⁵⁸ If it is the case that there are many religious scientists, then the misconception that scientists are overwhelmingly not religious needs explanation. One way is to argue that the confusion regarding the issue derives from scientists who oppose religion, and not the other way around:

One consequence of regarding science too highly, and as being opposed to religion, is a corresponding tendency to downplay scientists who practice their religion in parallel with their scientific careers. The facts and figures show, however, that there is rather more activity within *academia* on relating science to religion than some atheists seem aware.²⁵⁹

From the compatibility perspective, the confusion brought about by downplaying scientists’ ability to have religious belief is propagated by wishful thinkers such as the New Atheists. Addressing this point, and Dawkins specifically, McGrath explains that there “is a massive observational discrepancy between the number of scientists that Dawkins believes should be atheists and those who are so in practice.”²⁶⁰ He also points out that Dawkins – and by extension those who follow the conflict typology – do not speak for all scientists:

Most unbelieving scientists of my acquaintance are atheists on grounds other than their science; they bring those assumptions *to* their science rather than basing them *on* their science. Indeed, if my own personal conversations are anything to go by, some of Dawkin’s most vociferous critics among scientists are actually atheists. His dogmatic insistence that all “real” scientists ought to be atheists has met with fierce resistance from precisely the community that he believes should be his fiercest and most loyal supporter. Dawkins clearly has no mandate whatsoever to speak for the scientific community at this point or on this topic.²⁶¹

²⁵⁷ Poole, 67.

²⁵⁸ Poole, 61.

²⁵⁹ Poole, 88. Emphasis in original. It is interesting that Poole links a high level of activity within academia relating science to religion as proof of compatibility between scientists and religious belief.

²⁶⁰ Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion? Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine*, (Illinois: IVP Books, 2007), 44. Please note that although the book is co-written, on the About the Authors page it states that is “has mostly been written by Alister McGrath”. For that reason I have decided to refer to the quotations selected from this book as coming from the voice of Alister McGrath as opposed to the McGraths.

²⁶¹ McGrath, 44. Emphasis in original.

According to McGrath even atheist scientists are often opposed to the notion that religion and science are in conflict. Another perspective from the compatibility side is to acknowledge that there are indeed many irreligious scientists, and argue that this fact itself leads to the appearance of conflict between profession and faith. Wuthnow, who takes this view, argues that the truth of the matter is that “very few scientists are religious (at least in conventional ways),”²⁶² and that at least gives the impression of conflict.

For instance, in a recent national survey of physicists, chemists, and biologists at elite research universities, only 8 percent said they had no doubt about God’s existence, while 38 percent said they did not believe in God, and another 29 percent said they did not know if there is a God and believed there was no way to find out. In the same survey, 55 percent said they had no religious affiliation and only 16 percent attended religious services at least once a month. These figures underscore the sharp differences that exist between scientists and the general public, where, for instance, only 7 percent can be regarded as atheists or agnostics. If the public imagines that scientists’ personal views influence their scholarship, then perceptions of conflict between religion and science would not be surprising.²⁶³

Wuthnow is not arguing that science and religion are necessarily in conflict; rather, he is interpreting the data and pointing out that the appearance of conflict may arise from the high degree of irreligiosity expressed by scientists.

Contrary to the conflict typology, from Poole’s point of view, there is no clash of commitment when it comes to being a scientist who holds religious beliefs. McGrath agrees and adds that even atheist scientists do not necessarily see a conflict in this area. Wuthnow points to the possible *appearance* of conflict due to the public’s perception of irreligious scientists. Having highlighted a small sampling of alternative views in this area, let us turn to the thoughts of the New Atheists on this matter, beginning with Dawkins.

5.1.1 Dawkins

²⁶² Robert Wuthnow, “No Contradictions Here”, pg. 155-177, in Harold W. Attridge, *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 167.

²⁶³ Wuthnow, 167.

Dawkins seems unable to conceive of scientists as having beliefs in a God. When addressing examples of scientists who outright claim religiosity – those who openly state they believe in God – Dawkins is either sceptical of their declaration of belief or he admits to being entirely bewildered. In the case of evolutionary scientist Stephen Jay Gould, who postulated the nonoverlapping magisterial (NOMA) theory²⁶⁴, Dawkins belittles his colleague's principles and suggests that Gould had ulterior motives for arguing that science and religion were compatible:

I simply do not believe that Gould could possibly have meant much of what he wrote in *Rock of Ages*. As I say, we have all been guilty of bending over backwards to be nice to an unworthy but powerful opponent, and I can only think that this is what Gould was doing.²⁶⁵

Dawkins clearly cannot fathom how a respected scientist, especially one who shares his field, can possibly believe science and religion are not at odds. This bafflement is also noted, by Dawkins himself, when he addresses other scientists who have publicly stated their religious beliefs. Dawkins explains:

Nevertheless, there are some genuine specimens of good scientists who are sincerely religious in the full, traditional sense. Among contemporary British scientists, the same three names crop up with the likeable familiarity of senior partners in a firm of Dickensian lawyers: Peacocke, Stannard and Polkinghorne. All three have either won the Templeton Prize or are on the Templeton board of Trustees. After amicable discussions with all of them, both in public and in private, I remain baffled, not so much by their belief in a cosmic lawgiver of some kind, as by their belief in the details of the Christian religion: resurrection, forgiveness of sins and all.²⁶⁶

Dawkins also notes that there are a few such American examples of religious scientists, and further dismisses them as the exception, not the rule. He believes that, “as in Britain, they stand out for their rarity and are a subject of amused bafflement to their peers in the academic community.”²⁶⁷

²⁶⁴ NOMA is addressed in more depth in section 5.3.

²⁶⁵ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*. (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2004), 81.

²⁶⁶ Dawkins, 125.

²⁶⁷ Dawkins, 125.

When it comes to scientists of the pre-Enlightenment past, such as Newton, Dawkins concedes that they claimed to be religious, but argues that this was due to “social and judicial pressure” which lessened in the nineteenth century.²⁶⁸ Newton was a product of his time, and as such his religious claims can be understood, but post-nineteenth century there has been “scientific support for abandoning” religion.²⁶⁹ Since two of the most popular scientists of the twentieth century – Albert Einstein and Stephen Hawking – have mentioned God in ways which can be interpreted literally as validation of his existence, Dawkins feels obliged to explain their respective conceptions of God as misunderstood and misconstrued. In fact, according to Dawkins, both scientists did not mean a literal God, but were speaking metaphorically: “Einstein was using ‘God’ in a purely metaphorical, poetic sense. So is Stephen Hawking, and so are most of the physicists who occasionally slip into the language of religious metaphor.”²⁷⁰

According to Dawkins, scientists who profess a belief in God are either “bending over backwards to be nice to an unworthy but powerful opponent”, as in the case of Gould; a “rarity and are a subject of amused bafflement to their peers in the academic community”, such as Peacocke, Stannard, and Polkinghorne; or simply “speaking metaphorically”, as in the case of Einstein and Hawking. There is no *understandable* way for a scientist to be authentically religious; to Dawkins the very notion of a ‘religious scientist’ is oxymoronic.

5.1.2 Harris

²⁶⁸ Dawkins, 124.

²⁶⁹ Dawkins, 124.

²⁷⁰ Dawkins, 40.

In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris also writes of the conflict between religion and science as involving religious believers and scientists. According to Harris, scientists seem, as if by definition, to be opposed to religious belief: “Any intellectually honest person will admit that he does not know why the universe exists. Scientists, of course, readily admit their ignorance on this point. Religious believers do not.”²⁷¹ Scientists are thus portrayed as being intellectually honest, while religious believers are portrayed as being intellectually dishonest; religious believers are at best mistaken and at worse liars. He continues:

One of the monumental ironies of religious discourse can be appreciated in the frequency with which people of faith praise themselves for their humility, while condemning scientists and other non-believers for their intellectual arrogance.²⁷²

This statement contains two points which are relevant to this discussion of Harris’ opinion of scientists when it comes to their relationship with religion. First, scientists are defined as *non-believers*, and second, believers (“people of faith”) condemn scientists. To Harris, a scientist is one who is honest and perpetually at odds with dishonest religious believers.

When it comes to addressing scientists who hold religious convictions, Harris explains that they are not ‘real’ scientists, but simply people who have managed to get a degree and put on a scientific disguise. They are believers in scientific clothing.

It is also worth noting that one can obtain a Ph.D. in any branch of science for no other purpose than to make cynical use of scientific language in an effort to rationalize the glaring inadequacies of the Bible. A handful of Christians appear to have done this; some have even obtained their degrees from reputable universities. No doubt, others will follow in their footsteps. While such people are technically “scientists,” they are not behaving like scientists. They simply are not engaged in an honest inquiry into the nature of the universe.²⁷³

Scientists are again portrayed as being honest, whereas believers, even those with reputable science degrees, are dishonest. To Harris, when it comes to a scientist’s relationship with

²⁷¹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. (New York: Vintage Books, 2008), 74.

²⁷² Harris, *Letter*, 74.

²⁷³ Harris, *Letter*, 69-70.

religion, an ‘honest religious scientist’ is the oxymoronic notion he is most concerned with. For a scientist to be religious, Harris indicates, a scientist would have to be dishonest.

5.1.3 Hitchens

Hitchens does not seem to be as concerned as Harris and Dawkins with apologising for modern scientists who claim to hold legitimate religious faith. In *God is Not Great*, however, he does acknowledge that “It is true that scientists have sometimes been religious, or at any rate superstitious.”²⁷⁴ He cites Sir Isaac Newton and Fred Hoyle as two such “laughable”²⁷⁵ examples, and then states that “Stephen Hawking is not a believer, and when invited to Rome to meet the late Pope John Paul II asked to be shown the records of the trial of Galileo.”²⁷⁶ Like Dawkins, Hitchens locates the scientific turn away from attributing the reality of existence to God to the period when “Charles Darwin revolutionized our entire concept of our origins”, and adds that this was followed by Albert Einstein who “did the same for the beginnings of our cosmos.”²⁷⁷ Like Dawkins he also points out that pre-evolutionary theory’s general acceptance, scientists were not that religious. Of this matter he writes:

[M]any scientists and philosophers and mathematicians took what might be called the default position and professed one or another version of “deism,” which held that the order and predictability of the universe seemed indeed to imply a designer, if not necessarily a designer who took any active part in human affairs.²⁷⁸

²⁷⁴ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart Ltd., 2007), 15.

²⁷⁵ Hitchens, 65.

²⁷⁶ Hitchens, 65.

²⁷⁷ Hitchens, 65-66.

²⁷⁸ Hitchens, 65-66.

He explains that “this compromise was a logical and rational one for its time,”²⁷⁹ which insinuates that a deist compromise for our times would be illogical and irrational - certainly not scientific. Although he does not spend as much time explaining the separation of religiousness from the minds of scientists as does Dawkins, Hitchens nonetheless addresses the issue with an apologetic answer that basically amounts to explaining that pre-Darwin/Enlightenment scientists did not know any better. He also links their religious belief to deism, which entails a lack of devotion and service to an inactive God – hardly the kind of people that come to mind when one thinks of the phrase ‘religious belief’.

Unlike Dawkins and Harris, Hitchens ignores (or is not as interested in) the question of contemporary religious scientists; with the above noted exception of stating flat out that Hawking “is not a believer” with the assumed proof or example being his interest in the Vatican’s records “of the trial of Galileo” (which, it should be noted, takes an assumption on the part of the reader to discern why he was interested in the Galileo records, even if it is indeed the fact that he is an atheist).

5.1.4 Dennett

Dennett does not use his main book on religion as an opportunity to explain (or apologize for), why some reputable scientists may have had, or still have, religious beliefs. In fact, when he writes about scientists he does so in a way that comes across as strikingly devoid of rose-coloured glasses. It seems to be the process – the scientific method – that he holds as a pillar of honesty, as opposed to scientists in and of themselves. Take the following quote for example:

²⁷⁹ Hitchens, 65-66.

Scientists in every field have pet theories they hope to confirm, or target hypotheses that they yearn to demolish, but, knowing this, they take a variety of tried-and-true steps to prevent their bias from polluting their evidence-gathering: double-blind experiments, peer review, statistical tests, and many other standard constraints of good scientific method.²⁸⁰

Dennett acknowledges that scientists do indeed have biases, and he points to the proper ('tried-and-true') use of the scientific method as a bias-filter. By this logic, scientists can be as dishonest as any human beings from any path of career; it is the scientific method itself that will determine what is true, and what is false. Science itself weeds out the invalid from the valid. This point is made even clearer in the following statement by Dennett:

[T]he cutting edge of science seen up close looks ragged and chaotic, a bunch of big egos engaging in shouting matches, their judgement distorted by jealousy, ambition, and greed, but behind them, agreed upon by all the disputants, is the massive routine weight of accumulated results, the facts that give science its power.²⁸¹

The 'power' of science, (which assumedly derives from its ability to offer truth), comes not necessarily from individual honest and noble scientists, but from the scientific results: the evidence. Unlike Dawkins, Harris, or Hitchens, Dennett acknowledges that scientists may not be particularly noble. Dennett does not argue for their opinions on religious matters any more than he argues that they are more honest than anyone else (religious or otherwise); to Dennett it is their methods that produce reliable evidence, not necessarily their motives, goals, or beliefs.

When it comes to sciences' more esteemed personalities, Dennett maintains his distance from placing them on a pedestal of truthfulness, instead favouring the method from which their ideas are, and will be, judged. Dennett writes:

When Nobel laureates disagree over a scientific claim, at least one of them is just wrong, in spite of being anointed prince or princess of the church of science. And what about the occasional scandals of

²⁸⁰ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, (Toronto: Penguin Books, 2007), 32. Dennett continues: "But in the study of religion, the stakes have often been seen to be higher. If you think that the disconfirmation of a hypotheses about one religious phenomenon or another would not be just an undesirable crack in the foundation of some theory but a moral calamity, you tend not to run all the controls."

²⁸¹ Dennett, 372.

fraudulent data and suppression of results? Scientists are not infallible, nor are they, as a rule, more virtuous than laypeople, but they do submit to a remarkable discipline that *keeps them* honest in spite of themselves, imposing elaborate systems of self-restraint and review, and to a remarkable degree *depersonalizing* their individual contributions. So, although it is true that there have been eminent scientists who were racists, or sexists or drug addicts or just plain crazy, their contributions almost always stand or fall independently of these personal failings, thanks to the filters, checks, and balances that the discipline of science has concocted to weed out the unreliable work.²⁸²

Even the most prominent members of the scientific community may be wrong, according to Dennett. Scientists are “not infallible” nor are they “more virtuous than laypeople.” Scientists have (and can be) been raciest, sexist, drug addicts, and mentally challenged. They do however “submit to a discipline” which provides honesty. Unlike Dawkins and Harris, Dennett does not wrap concepts of honesty and truthfulness around individual scientists. He wills to see them equally as flawed as non-scientists (as laypeople). Instead, Dennett points to the method they use, the discipline they are dedicated to, as offering the honesty and truthfulness we so often desire (we being humans).

Another interesting diversion from the others is that, since Dennett’s main purpose in writing *Breaking the Spell* is to convince the public and academia that studying religion scientifically as a natural phenomenon is in everyone’s best interests, he alone seems concerned with addressing scientists of sociology and religion. He is concerned that not enough social scientists study religion, and of those that do only a few are any ‘good’.

[I]f you set out to design an impermeable barrier between scientists and an underexplored phenomenon, you could hardly do better than to fabricate the dreary aura of low prestige, backbiting, and dubious results that currently envelops the topic of religion. And since we know from the onset that many people think such research violates a taboo, or at least meddles impertinently in matters best left private, it is not so surprising that few good researchers, in any discipline, want to touch the topic.²⁸³

Although there are certainly many social scientists who would disagree with his judgment, Dennett is nonetheless acknowledging that scientists reach beyond the study of biology,

²⁸² Dennett, 371. Emphasis in original.

²⁸³ Dennett, 33-34.

physics and chemistry: there are also scientists who study religion. He may not be satisfied with the majority's contribution; by doing so he does, however, stretch the concept of scientist into areas often neglected by his New Atheist counterparts.

5.2 The Necessity of Conflict

To the New Atheists, science and religion are at odds. From the viewpoint of those who side with science over religion in this conflict, Haught explains that "Scientific sceptics (i.e. those who reject religion in the name of science) declare that religion lacks the robust probity of science. The God-hypothesis, for example, seems to be completely beyond falsification, so it cannot pass muster before the courts of science."²⁸⁴ The very act of speaking about God as a hypothesis places religion squarely under the scientific microscope, where it can be tested, confirmed or denied. Dawkins also speaks of God as a scientific hypothesis, one that he believes lacks too much evidence to be regarded as fact. By such a rationale, belief in an unproven hypothesis such as God is a direct assault on science proper. Believing firmly in an unproven theory flies in the face of the objective nature of science.

Haught mentions this notion of science being objective while offering the following summary of the way the relationship is understood by advocates of science:

Religion is based, sceptics often claim, on a priori assumptions, or "faith," whereas science takes nothing for granted. In addition, religion relies heavily on untamed imagination, whereas science sticks to observational facts. And religion is highly emotional, passionate and subjective, whereas science strives to remain disinterested, dispassionate and objective. These antitheses seem to add up to nothing less than an insuperable mutual hostility between science and religion.²⁸⁵

Haught describes this hostility as mutual, with religion being imaginative and science being factual. Religion is subjective, whereas science is objective. By this definition of science,

²⁸⁴ Haught, 11.

²⁸⁵ Haught, 11.

religion, and their hostility, it is clear that the two are necessarily antagonistic. Bound by definition, there would seem to be little hope for reconciliation between the two mutual antagonists. From the perspective of those who view science and religion as compatible, however, the idea that they are in conflict is often presented as a misunderstanding.

From the perspective of someone who takes the comparative viewpoint, the notion that religion and science are in conflict comes from a misunderstanding of the limits of science; they believe that there are some questions about existence that are simply out of science's grasp. To Poole, religion is about, or deals with, that which is other than the natural world, and since science is limited to the natural world it does not have a say in religious matters.

*The scientific enterprise, by its subject matter of material things and by its methods, does not concern itself with First Causes. They lie outside of science's remit, allowing those of all faiths, and of none, to work together in a worthwhile enterprise. So there is something odd about turning to science, the study of the natural world, in the hope of answering religious questions about whether there is anything *other* than the natural world (that is, God) to which the natural world owes its existence.²⁸⁶*

Some people may take offence to the notion that the First Cause is not a scientific question, but in line with Poole's thinking in the above quotation it is likely that he considers the First Cause to be that which started nature, and is thus outside of nature. In any case, Poole clearly articulates that nature is in science's realm, and religious questions which deal with that which is other than nature fall outside of science's sphere of questioning.

The most controversial subject in the conflict between science and religion is evolution. In addressing the notion of conflict, Poole thus takes this into account and offers his own explanation of where the confusion on this topic arises, with regards to claims that evolution disproves God's existence.

²⁸⁶ Poole, 57-58. Emphasis in original.

So Nature – ‘everything physical there is’, and spelt with a capital N – creates everything physical there is – or does it? Or again, ‘Natural selection, not a divine designer, was the sculptor of life.’ Expressions of this kind slide into what, in logic, is called the *fallacy of reification* – confusing a *concept* with an actual object or cause. Concepts such as ‘gravity’, ‘evolution’ and ‘nature’ are particularly prone to this kind of treatment, being credited with the ability to act as purposive agents. It is all very well jokingly to blame ‘gravity’ if we drop a plate and break it, or to blame ‘entropy’ for the untidy state of our room. But it is a serious matter to confuse categories and reify concepts by saying ‘It wasn’t God; evolution *did* it.’²⁸⁷

Poole therefore believes the confusion lies with those who consider evolution to be a cause, therefore removing the need, or the space, for God as creator. He argues instead that evolution is a concept as opposed to a cause, therefore leaving room for God as creator and negating the necessity for conflict between science and religion.

There are also opinions in this matter that call for compatibility while acknowledging that conflict occasionally does arise. Plantinga links the notion of conflict with evolution, yet he does acknowledge that there is indeed conflict involved in the debate on this area.

Plantinga explains:

Ever since Darwin’s day, there has been friction, misunderstanding, and mutual recrimination between those who accept Darwinism in one form or another and Christians of various kinds, and of course this conflict is a main source of the continuing debate between religion and science. Many Christian fundamentalists find incompatibility between the contemporary Darwinian evolutionary account of our origins and their version of the Christian faith. Many Darwinian fundamentalists (as the late Stephen Jay Gould called them) second the motion: they too claim there is conflict between Darwinian evolution and classical Christian or even theistic belief.²⁸⁸

This does not mean that Plantinga believes that the conflict is necessary²⁸⁹; it simply means he acknowledges that conflict does exist related largely to the area and understanding of evolution. He also agrees with Poole that misunderstanding about science’s power to remove God from all explanations has played into the notion of conflict: “Another source of the continuing debate, therefore, is the mistaken claim on the part of such writers as Dawkins that the scientific theory implies that the living world and human beings in particular have

²⁸⁷ Poole, 54. Emphasis in original.

²⁸⁸ Alvin Plantinga, “Science and Religion,” pg. 93-123, in Harold W. Attridge, *The Religion and Science Debate: Why Does it Continue?* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 103.

²⁸⁹ In fact, he believes it is unnecessary, as shall be explained in section 5.4.

not been designed and created by God.”²⁹⁰ According to Plantinga, the scientific theory cannot remove the possibility that God is the creator of nature, and as such conflict can be negated.

Wuthnow, on the other hand, offers yet another reason for conflict between science and religion: ambiguity. He views the debate as one that is constantly in flux without any resolutions. Moreover, he also points to the social battle over resources as playing a prominent role. Wuthnow explains:

The more relevant point, [...] is that ambiguity also opens the door for continuing conflict. It is simply impossible to look back at some historic event and conclude that the debate between religion and science was *finally resolved*. As long as the two have fuzzy edges, proponents, antagonists, and bystanders in the general public will be able to contest where one domain should end and the other begin. The likelihood of such contestation increases [...] because religion and science are never static. Indeed, both struggle to assert themselves as legitimate ways of addressing important issues and thus as legitimate claimants of social resources.²⁹¹

Just as with any relationship, the one between science and religion is never static and always evolving; there is a ‘give and take’ which can lead to conflict. The notion that Wuthnow makes that there is more at stake than truth, in that social resources play a role, is an interesting one that does not come across as the reason for conflict in the writing of those, such as the New Atheists, who argue instead that conflict is a necessary outcome of one side being correct and another being wrong. Having offered a few scholarly suggestions as to the truth behind the reality, reason, and necessity of conflict between science and religion, we will now take a look at how the New Atheists view the issue at hand, beginning with Dawkins.

5.2.1 Dawkins

²⁹⁰ Plantinga, 110.

²⁹¹ Wuthnow, 165.

To Dawkins religion and science are irreconcilable and necessarily in conflict because he views religion as intruding on science's territory. Dawkins considers miracles to be nothing less than scientific claims:

Did Jesus raise Lazarus from the dead? Did he himself come alive again, three days after being crucified? There is an answer to every such question, whether or not we can discover it in practice, and it is a strictly scientific answer.²⁹²

Understood in this light, religion makes scientific claims without any concrete evidence to back them up. In other words, religion is meddlesome since it acts as 'bad' science; it makes claims which it can not back up with evidence. In terms of monotheism, Dawkins believes that the "existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other."²⁹³ He places what is often considered a religious, theological, or philosophical notion/question – that God exists – directly in the realm of science: "God's existence or non-existence is a scientific fact about the universe, discoverable in principle if not in practice."²⁹⁴ By framing all religious claims, from the miraculous to claim of God's existence, as scientific claims, Dawkins points to the lack of hard, concrete evidence in their favor, and thus refutes them as unscientific. Dawkins thus considers religions to be pseudo-sciences, and as such they are always in conflict with evidenced-based 'real' science.

5.2.2 Harris

Harris follows much the same logic as Dawkins when it comes to the relationship religion has with science. He states clearly that "the conflict between religion and science is

²⁹² Dawkins, 83.

²⁹³ Dawkins, 13.

²⁹⁴ Dawkins, 13.

unavoidable.”²⁹⁵ Like Dawkins, Harris insists that religions make scientific claims and ignore the principles of good science, namely judging evidence. Harris explains:

Like science, every religion makes scientific claims about the way the world is. These claims purport to be about facts – the creator of the universe can hear (and will occasionally answer) your prayers; the soul enters the zygote at the moment of conception; if you do not believe the right things about God, you will suffer terribly after death. Such claims are intrinsically in conflict with the claims of science, because they are claims made on terrible evidence.²⁹⁶

Harris believes that science “represents our best efforts to know what is true about our world [...whereas] Religion is the one area of our lives where people imagine that some other standard of intellectual integrity applies.”²⁹⁷ Religion is understood to be intellectually dishonest about scientific facts, and since the claims religions make are scientific they are always at odds with the integrity of ‘real’ or ‘honest’ science.

5.2.3 Hitchens

Hitchens believes that all “attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule”.²⁹⁸ Using modern medicine as an example, Hitchens explains the relationship of religion to science:

The attitude of religion to medicine, like the attitude of religion to science, is always necessarily problematic and often necessarily hostile. A modern believer can say and even believe that his faith is quite compatible with science and medicine, but the awkward fact will always be that both things have a tendency to break religions’ monopoly, and have often been fiercely resisted for that reason.²⁹⁹

Hitchens understanding of the relationship religion has with science is that of conflict, with science always being the victor. Religion is hostile to science because science has the potential to diminish it. Modern climatologists kill the rainmakers, just as modern surgeons

²⁹⁵ Harris, *Letter*, 63-64.

²⁹⁶ Harris, *Letter*, 63-64.

²⁹⁷ Harris, *Letter*, 64-65.

²⁹⁸ Hitchens, 64-65.

²⁹⁹ Hitchens, 46-47.

kill the shamans.³⁰⁰ Unlike Harris and Dawkins, Hitchens does not argue that religion asks scientific questions and then ignores the evidence. Instead Hitchens portrays religions as holding onto ridiculous solutions (visiting a shaman for healing) when science offers vastly superior solutions (modern surgeons). The relationship is not so much about asking scientific questions or making scientific proposition so much as it is about practicality. Religion and science are both seen as practical, with science being much more practical. Whereas Harris and Dawkins both view religion as making scientific claims, Hitchens views religion as having lost some of its ground to science; religion has lost some of its usefulness due to the increased usefulness of science. Their relationship is often hostile because religion simply cannot compete.

5.2.4 Dennett

Dennett does not come across nearly as antagonistic to religion in his writing on the subject as do the other New Atheists. While he certainly sees religion and science as different, and in cases such as the creationism/evolution saga as oppositional, he nonetheless does not seem concerned with arguing that they are at war or in direct conflict. In fact, he even acknowledges religion's role in producing science as we know it today, writing that, "science [was] born out of religion and civilization's other projects, a very recent cultural phenomenon but one that has transformed the planet like nothing else in the last sixty-five million years."³⁰¹ While acknowledging science's debt to religion, Dennett nonetheless views their relationship today to be one of competition. He explains that:

³⁰⁰ Hitchens, 13.

³⁰¹ Dennett, 370. By other projects he refers to projects such as calculating when the winter solstice would occur for religious purposes: "Astronomers and mathematicians collaborated with priests at the onset, helping

[W]ithout the question-posing by religion, science might never have found the funding it needed to get off the ground. More recently, of course, these specialists' perspectives have diverged into competing worldviews, a divorce made public and irrevocable at the dawn of modern science in the seventeenth century.³⁰²

While they are certainly not the same, and one helped develop the other, modern science is thus in competition with religion. As with the other New Atheists, it is clear where Dennett sides in this contest of ideas: "there is no better source of truth on any topic than well-conducted science".³⁰³

Dennett explains that "the most important difference between the division of labour in religion and science" is that the scientific experts:

understand the methods they use – not everything about them, but enough to explain to one another and to themselves why the amazingly accurate results come out of them. [...] In religion, however, the experts are not exaggerating for effect when they say they don't know what they are talking about. The fundamental incomprehensibility of God is insisted upon as a central tenet of faith, and the propositions in question are themselves declared to be systematically elusive to everybody.³⁰⁴

The main difference between science and religion is not that one lies while the other is honest, but rather it is about the methods being used. Experts in science understand their methods and come up with accurate results. Religious experts "don't know what they are talking about", but they are honest about limitation, and do not see it is a failure toward truth-seeking: "These matters are mysterious to everybody [*to everybody in italics*], experts and laypeople alike."³⁰⁵ Dennet does not see the conflict between religion and science as necessarily one of intellectual honesty and dishonesty; it is between two honest camps, one with a good method of detecting truth, the other with a flawed one.

each other with difficult questions: How many days till we can have our winter-solstice ritual? When will the stars be in the right position for the most effective and proper sacrificial ceremony?"

³⁰² Dennett, 370.

³⁰³ Dennett, 372.

³⁰⁴ Dennett, 220.

³⁰⁵ Dennett, 200.

While Dennett does not call God a ‘hypothesis’, he does call for science to study religion. He writes that “the religious experiences, beliefs, practices, texts, artifacts, institutions, conflicts, and history of H. Sapiens, then this is a voluminous catalogue of unquestionably natural phenomena.”³⁰⁶ Science, which evolved from “question-posing by religion”, has now reached a point where it should study religion as a product of nature. The relationship between science and religion, according to Dennett’s writing on the subject, comes across as familial, kinetic, and competitive.

5.3 Just Say No to NOMA

In 1999, well respected palaeontologist, evolutionary biologist, and self proclaimed agnostic (8) Stephen Jay Gould had his controversial book, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, published. In it Gould expresses an opinion that there simply is no conflict between the two separate domains, or as he calls them “magisterium” (“from the Latin *magister*, or teacher”³⁰⁷). He explains that the “supposed conflict between science and religion, [is] a debate that exists only in people’s minds and social practices, not in the logic or proper utility of these entirely different, and equally vital, subjects.”³⁰⁸

From Gould’s point of view, there is no need for the two domains to be at odds with each other; they are logically speaking of different areas; they have different concerns.

Gould explains:

Science tries to document the factual character of the natural world, and to develop theories that coordinate and explain these facts. Religion, on the other hand, operates in the equally important, but

³⁰⁶ Dennett, 29.

³⁰⁷ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*, (New York: The Ballantine Publishing Group, 1999), 5.

³⁰⁸ Gould, 3.

utterly different, realm of human purposes, meanings and values – subjects that the factual domain of science might illuminate, but can never resolve.³⁰⁹

From this premise, Gould coined the Principle of NOMA, which stands for Non-Overlapping Magisteria. He summarizes NOMA in the following paragraph from the Preamble to Rocks of Ages:

To summarize, [...] the net, or magisterium, of science covers the empirical realm: what is the universe made of (fact) and why does it work this way (theory). The magisterium of religion extends over questions of ultimate meaning and moral value. These two magisterium do not overlap, nor do they encompass all inquiry (consider, for example, the magisterium of art and the meaning of beauty). To cite the old clichés, science gets the age of rocks, and religion the rock of ages; science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven.³¹⁰

Gould's proposed principle of NOMA clearly speaks against any possibility that science and religion are incompatible, and especially that they are in conflict. As Haught explains, from the perspective of someone who subscribes to the conflict theory, "science is the only trustworthy guide to truth, and since it has not come close to finding any evidence of cosmic purpose, we must conclude that it is quite unlikely that there is any."³¹¹ From Gould's perspective, the search for purpose does not belong to the realm of science; it is religions' to discover, and it is religions to articulate what is true in that area and what is false. Since Gould, who passed away in 2002, was a highly regarded scientist, it should be illuminating to see how the New Atheists deal with his proposed principal of NOMA, which speaks directly against the notion of conflict. It should also be interesting to explore how a sampling of those who argue for the compatibility of religion and science view NOMA, so it is to that which we now turn.

One does not need to agree with NOMA in order to believe that science and religion are compatible. McGrath is critical of Gould's NOMA proposition, yet he makes it a point

³⁰⁹ Gould, 4.

³¹⁰ Gould, 6.

³¹¹ Haught, 167-168.

to explain that it is not a case of being on the side of Gould, or being on the side of Dawkins. McGrath is unsatisfied with the NOMA position proposed by Gould as well as Dawkins insistence that science and religion are in conflict:

It's not Gould versus Dawkins here, as if these two positions define the only intellectual options available to us. At times, Dawkins seems to assume that discrediting Gould necessarily implies the validation of his own position. The reality, however, is that Gould and Dawkins represent only two positions on a broad spectrum of possibilities already known to scholarship. The inadequacies of both suggest that these alternatives merit closer examination in the future.³¹²

For his part, McGrath offers another proposition, that of partially overlapping magisterial (POMA), which he explains as “reflecting a realization that science and religion offer possibilities of cross-fertilization on account of the interpenetration of their subjects and methods.”³¹³ McGrath is careful not to articulate that POMA is perfect, instead it comes across as an example of how the relationship between science and religion can be interpreted in many different models, and they need not be that of NOMA or conflict.

Wuthnow's views differ; he argues that the “idea that science merely describes the natural world, leaving questions about purpose and worth to religion, is simply untrue.”³¹⁴ The complexity and scope of the relationship that modern humans have with science comes across in his explanation for the previous statement:

The sharp rise in developing nations' initiation of government-sponsored science ministries and participation in international scientific organizations illustrates the extent to which being “modern” and “progressive” requires at least a symbolic commitment to science. Being an educated person does not require knowing anything about religion but does involve taking courses in science, passing examinations testing one's familiarity with scientific thinking, and being respectful to science in one's work and at parties. In these ways, science shapes the cultural norms that serve as standards of self worth. Personal identity is deeply influenced in other ways by scientific discoveries. The meaning of human personhood is profoundly shaped by how humanity itself is located in an evolutionary chain or an expanding view of nearly infinite galaxies.³¹⁵

³¹² McGrath, 41.

³¹³ McGrath, 41. He continues: “In my own ‘scientific theology’ project I explore how theology can learn from the methodology of the natural sciences in exploring and developing its ideas. This approach of ‘overlapping magisterial’ is implicit in the philosophy of ‘critical realism,’ which is currently having such an impact on illuminating the relationship of the natural and social sciences.”

³¹⁴ Wuthnow, 162.

³¹⁵ Wuthnow, 162.

While speaking directly about NOMA, Wuthnow nonetheless clearly believes that science is quite involved in questions of norms, worth, and meaning – areas which proponents of NOMA would attribute solely to religion. He also suggests that “boundary questions become important because definitions of ‘religion’ and ‘science’ are themselves subject to cultural construction.”³¹⁶ According to this line of thought, the definitions themselves are not static, and as such boundaries can be redrawn, regressed, and extended for either camp. If the definitions of science and religion are relative to culture, so too are the boundaries that ‘supposedly’ separate them. This would mean that NOMA, conflict, and even McGraths suggestion of POMA are equally true and equally false, depending on the construction of definitions. This is an interesting perspective, especially considering the certainty, ‘either-or’ way in which the boundaries of science and religion are often framed.

Unlike Wuthnow, Poole is not concerned with science’s extension into areas such as “meaning,” nor does he express concern over the complexity of “boundary questions”. Actually, from Poole’s explanation, the issue of boundaries sounds rather straightforward:

[S]cience, religion and ethics each have their own special terms or concepts, with specific meanings within that area of study. ‘Work’, ‘power’ and ‘energy’ have different meanings in physics from their meanings in everyday life. ‘Reinforcement’ means one thing in psychology and something different in war studies. Science has concepts such as mass, velocity, species, electron and alkali, while religion has concepts such as God, spirit and resurrection. Ethics is constituted by concepts such as obligation, right and wrong. But we don’t expect to encounter ‘God-talk’ in science or ‘chromosomes’ in religion.³¹⁷

While Poole isn’t directly addressing NOMA here, he is explaining how he views science, religion – and ethics! – as belonging to three different spheres which can easily be distinguished. Whereas McGrath explains there are a variety of propositions to choose from besides simply NOMA and conflict, and Wuthnow highlights the complexity of the boundary

³¹⁶ Wuthnow, 164.

³¹⁷ Poole, 58.

issue, Poole makes it sound quite commonsensical and straightforwardly simplistic to decipher. As we turn to how the New Atheists view the relationship between science and religion in light of Gould's NOMA proposition, it is certainly worth keeping in mind that there are more than two opinions to choose from, and whether the New Atheists address the issue in that light.

5.3.1 Dawkins

Dawkins considers Gould's concept of NOMA to be disingenuous as well as unscientific. When addressing NOMA directly, Dawkins writes: "Gould carried the art of bending over backwards to positively supine lengths in one of his less admired books, *Rocks of Ages*. There he coined the acronym NOMA for the phrase 'nonoverlapping magisterial'."³¹⁸ Regarding the basic concept, that "science studies how the heavens go, religion how to go to heaven,"³¹⁹ Dawkins explains "This sounds terrific – right up until you give it a moment's thought. What are these ultimate questions in whose presence religion is an honoured guest and science must respectfully slink away?"³²⁰

Dawkins takes aim at the notion of a why question being out of science's grasp, and falling into the realm of the religious: "It is a tedious cliché (and unlike many clichés, it isn't even true) that science concerns itself with how questions, but only theology is equipped to answer why questions. What on earth is a why question?"³²¹ To Dawkins, if science cannot provide an answer to a specific question there is no reason to suppose that religion can.³²² As

³¹⁸ Dawkins, 78-79.

³¹⁹ Gould, 6.

³²⁰ Dawkins, 78-79.

³²¹ Dawkins, 80.

³²² Dawkins, 80-81.

mentioned in the discussion of scientists, Dawkins asserts that he does not believe that Gould “could possibly have meant much of what he wrote in *Rock of Ages*.”³²³ According to Dawkins Gould was thus disingenuously pandering to the faithful, trying to make science more acceptable to those who may take it to be a threat to religion. Moreover, Dawkins points out that those in the religious camp are hypocritical when it comes to their use of NOMA, at least hypothetically:

NOMA is popular only because there is no evidence to favour the God Hypothesis. The moment there was the smallest suggestion of any evidence in favour of religious belief, religious apologists would lose no time in throwing NOMA out of the window.³²⁴

By reinstating the notion that God is a “hypothesis”, Dawkins re-affirms his assertion that whether or not God exists is a scientific question, and therefore well within his realm as a scientist to explore. If God is a scientific question, it naturally follows that NOMA, which seeks to place the question of God’s existence into that of the non-scientific religious magisterial, is wrong. It seems that to Dawkins every ‘legitimate’ question is a scientific question, and should be addressed as such.³²⁵ Still on the subject of NOMA, Dawkins mentions that by removing religion from the magisterial of science, many religious practitioners do not follow Gould’s reasoning in this area. Dawkins writes: “Note, however, that the miracle free religion defended by Gould would not be recognized by most practising theists in the pew or on the prayer mat. It would, indeed, be a grave disappointment to them.”³²⁶ NOMA is therefore dismissed by genuine scientists as well as true believers. Scientists want to study religious claims, and theists believe miracles to be scientifically

³²³ Dawkins, 81.

³²⁴ Dawkins, 83.

³²⁵ Dawkins also notes that some questions, such as “Why are unicorns hollow?” are illegitimate and “simply do not deserve an answer.” Dawkins, 80.

³²⁶ Dawkins, 83.

factual. In both cases Dawkins believes NOMA is an unsatisfactory and misguided approach to the relationship between science and religion, which is ultimately that of conflict.

5.3.2 Harris

Harris does not elaborate on NOMA, nor does he speculate on Gould's motives. The concept is not mentioned directly but only briefly alluded to by Harris in *The End of Faith*.

Harris writes that:

[I]ntellectuals as diverse as H.G. Wells, Albert Einstein, Carl Jung, Max Planck, Freeman Dyson, and Stephen Jay Gould have declared the war between reason and faith to be long over. On this view, there is no need to have all of our beliefs about the universe cohere. A person can be a God-fearing Christian on Sunday and a working scientist come Monday morning, without ever having to account for the partition that seems to have erected itself in his head while he slept. He can, as it were, have his reason and eat it too.³²⁷

Here Harris is mocking the notion that the “war between reason and faith” is over, and portrays Gould as an advocate of living two contradictory lives, one as a religious believer and one in the secular, scientific world. Harris clearly is of the opinion that living this way - divided - is an act of sorts that is only available to Westerners because of a loosening of the Church's authority. Harris explains that:

it is only because the church has been politically hobbled in the West that anyone can afford to think this way. In places where scholars can still be stoned to death for doubting the veracity of the Koran, Gould's notion of a “loving concordat” between faith and reason would be perfectly delusional.³²⁸

According to Harris, the very proposition of being both a “God-fearing Christian on Sunday and a working scientist come Monday morning” comes from the West's loss of religious influence outside of the Church. In places where religion holds more influence, the proposition is described as simply “delusional.” By this reasoning, in places such as Saudi

³²⁷ Sam Harris, *The End*, 15-16.

³²⁸ Harris, *The End*, 15-16.

Arabia we can expect to find either scientists or God-fearing Muslims. The proposition that one can be both is, according to Harris, delusional. It is beyond the scope of this thesis to do a proper study of how science and faith is rectified in the Islamic world, but it is worth consideration. As far as the West is concerned, Harris seems to indicate that by leading two very different lives people are actually lying to themselves, trying to have the best of both worlds. Harris does not indicate any possibility that one can be both religious and reasonable, for to be religious is to “eat” reason on Sundays.

5.3.3 Hitchens

Like Dawkins (and unlike Harris) Hitchens directly mentions the conceptual proposition of NOMA. Unlike Dawkins, he does not go into any detail about NOMA; he simply shrugs it off in the next sentence: “The late Stephen Jay Gould generously wrote that science and religion belong to “non-overlapping *magisterial*.” They most certainly do not overlap, but this does not mean that they are not antagonistic.”³²⁹ Science and religion, being two separate ‘things’ do not overlap – *that* he agrees with. He does however, see them as antagonistic. Unlike Gould, Hitchens conceives of science and religion as being at odds with each other; they are not mutually compatible. It is interesting that Hitchens’ describes Gould’s concept as being “generously” written, because that seems to imply that Gould was making a friendly gesture; an olive branch from science to religion. Of course, Hitchens may have been referring to the concept itself as taking imaginative liberties; of being a bit of a stretch.

³²⁹ Hitchens, 282. Emphasis in original.

Hitchens does not go into any greater detail on NOMA, but it is worth noting that he seems to highly respect the integrity of Gould. At one point in *God is Not Great*, After quoting Gould on his realization that if we could rewind the tape of history back to our earliest ancestor (our earliest known vertebrae), and if that ancestor did not survive the second time around none of us would exist, Hitchens writes of Gould that, “[h]ere is the cool, authentic voice of a dedicated scientist and humanist.”³³⁰ Gould, who coined NOMA with the argument that science and religion are not in conflict, is described in quite a positive tone, as not only a scientist, but a “humanist”. It is interesting that Hitchens does not offer any explanation for how this “authentic voice” could have come up with, and propagated, a concept of the relationship between science and religion that is quite foreign to the conflict model Hitchens articulates throughout his book.

5.3.4 Dennett

Dennett also addresses the concept of NOMA, writing that Gould “looked at religion with the eyes of a scientist and thought he could see a boundary that revealed two domains of human activity.”³³¹ Dennett calls the validity of this concept “a scientific, factual question.”³³² Unlike Dawkins, Dennett does not question Gould’s motives. He seems to accept Gould at his word, that Gould believed in a clear distinction between science and religion in what they try to explain. Dennett does not explain Gould as being generous, nor does he simply dismiss the concept as a case of wanting to have reason and “eat it too”, as do Hitchens and Harris, respectively. Dennett acknowledges the validity of at least posing the

³³⁰ Hitchens, 93.

³³¹ Dennett, 30-31.

³³² Dennett, 30-31.

theory. This does not mean, however, that Dennett prescribes to it. While he finds the attempt to reconcile religion and science noble, he nonetheless dismisses Gould's proposition. Dennett explains:

Although Gould's desire for peace between these often warring perspectives was laudable, his proposal found little favor on either side, since in the minds of the religious it proposed abandoning all religious claims to factual truth and understanding of the natural world (including the claims that God created the universe, or performs miracles, or listens to prayers), whereas in the minds of the secularists it granted too much authority to religion in matters of ethics and meaning.³³³

Dennett does not believe that Gould's offering has produced many followers because people on both camps found that they had something to lose by subscribing to NOMA. Moreover, Dennett explains that Gould's attempt to blame all conflict between science and religion on one side or the other crossing its proper boundary line is "implausible":

Gould exposed some clear instances of immodest folly on both sides, but the claim that *all* conflict between the two perspectives is due to overreaching by one side or the other is implausible, and few readers were persuaded.³³⁴

In short, Dennett seems to respect Gould's attempt to make room for both science and religion, but he believes the theory is both impractical for scientists and religious believers, as well as "implausible" for failing to acknowledge that there are indeed cases where science and religion have genuine conflicts.

5.4 The Attack on Darwinian Evolution

Writing in the voice of those who follow the conflict typology, Haught explains that creation science "is really not science at all. [...] Creation science would not even be worth discussing were it not for the fact that its devotees stir up so much public controversy in their

³³³ Dennett, 30.

³³⁴ Dennett, 30. Emphasis in original.

attempts to keep evolutionary theory out of schools and textbooks.”³³⁵ Haught explains that those with the conflict point of view regarding the science-religion relationship believe that creationists are opposed to evolution because they see it as a very real threat to their faith. Haught writes of creationists that:

They are aware that creation stories in the bible contradict the evolutionary interpretation of the cosmos and its origins. But, deeper than that, they rightly sense evolution’s fundamental incompatibility with *any* religious vision. We are not surprised that they share our conviction that evolution and God are incompatible.³³⁶

This may be so, but Haught also suggests that creationism is “particularly annoying” to those who abide by the conflict model. In the case of Dawkins especially, this seems to be an acute, and legitimate, observation. In fact, one area on which the New Atheists all seem to agree on is the inappropriateness of the Creationism and Intelligent Design (ID) movements, both of which are viewed as religious education intruding on science’s (and thus their) turf. It is also worth briefly looking at how some scholars who do not adhere to the conflict typology view both creationism and the ID movements.

Poole acknowledges that the creationism movement, in at least one of its forms, is counter-productive and polarizing. In *The ‘New’ Atheism* he writes:

Its mid-twentieth-century disinterring of beliefs in a geologically young Earth, part of ‘young Earth’ creationism, has not helped at all. This has resurfaced despite the verdict of historians of science such as Professor David Livingstone that ‘by and large, Christian geologists had both encountered and accommodated the issue of the age of the earth long before the appearance of Darwin’s theory’.³³⁷

Poole then acknowledges that “young Earth” creationism does unnecessarily spark conflict with religion, yet he believes that by removing the emphasis on the age of the Earth, a belief in creation can still hold legitimacy. He explains:

Some well-argued lectures on evolution end up by dismissing creationism in a few words at the end, without distinguishing it from traditional beliefs in creation. It is only the ‘young-Earth’ part that

³³⁵ Haught, 51-52.

³³⁶ Haught, 51.

³³⁷ Poole, 61-62. Emphasis in original.

goes. Thus a second goal may arise if others who rightly reject a young Earth, illegitimately portray it as justifying the rejection of creation also.³³⁸

Although the young Earth theory, according to Poole, may be discredited by science, it would be dishonest to insinuate that it follows that nature was not created. He uses the same argument when critiquing the Intelligent Design (ID) movement:

There are difficulties about the ID movement's biology, logic and theology. [...] Richard Dawkins is right to point out that this [ID] involves a classic example of the God of the Gaps. It has resulted in an own goal for its followers. Despite this, the traditional arguments for design are not affected by ID's poor argument.³³⁹

Agreeing with Dawkins, and arguably most evolutionary biologists, that ID is flawed in conception and argument, Poole again highlights that a problematic movement does not negate the possibility that the world was designed. Regarding the compatibility of belief in evolution with belief in God, Poole explains that Dawkins, and by extension those who subscribe to the conflict typology, are mistaken when they argue that evolution and God cannot both be truths:

Dawkins' belief that evolution is the only alternative to 'ultimate design' involves a *category mistake*. Once life has arisen, evolution provides a scientific explanation of the *adaptation* of living things to their environments. It can tell us nothing about pre-biotic states, nor whether God is responsible for the processes involved.³⁴⁰

McGrath also acknowledges that the ID movement is problematic, and like Poole, he does not defend it. Instead McGrath criticizes it for being "a movement, based on gaps in scientific explanation, such as the 'irreducible complexity' of the world."³⁴¹ He points out that it "is not an approach which I accept, either on scientific or theological grounds. In my view, those who adapt this approach make Christianity deeply – and needlessly – vulnerable to scientific progress."³⁴² Having distanced himself from promoters of ID, McGrath follows

³³⁸ Poole, 76-77. Emphasis in original.

³³⁹ Poole, 75, 76.

³⁴⁰ Poole, 77. Emphases in original.

³⁴¹ McGrath, 30.

³⁴² McGrath, 30.

Poole's logic in dismissing the movement as having already been rejected historically:

“[T]he ‘God of the gaps’ approach is only one of many Christian approaches to the question of how the God hypothesis makes sense of things. In my view it was misguided; it was a failed apologetic strategy from an earlier period in history that has now been rendered obsolete.”³⁴³ According to McGrath, ‘God of the gaps’ arguments are non-scientific and misguided, but he also explains that such an approach to incorporate a belief in God into evolution is only one of many approaches. There may be conflict in this approach, but that does not mean that science and religion are necessarily in conflict with regard to the debate over evolution.

Alvin Plantinga has a different view of the ID movement than do Poole and McGrath.

Plantinga defends intelligent design and argues that it is compatible with evolution.

According to Plantinga, no conflict need exist:

Now the central claim of ID is that certain organisms or organic systems cannot be explained by unguided natural selection and that the best scientific hypothesis, with respect to those phenomena, is that they have been intelligently designed. This claim, that intelligent design in the living world can be empirically detected, is consistent with Darwinism as such; but of course if you confuse Darwinism with *unguided* Darwinism, or evolution with *unguided* evolution, then you will see ID as incompatible with evolution.”³⁴⁴

Plantinga's main argument in defence of design is that evolution can be guided. To assume that it is not guided is to make an unverifiable, unscientific assumption.

This confusion between Darwinism and unguided Darwinism is a crucial cause of the continuing debate. Darwinism, the scientific theory, is compatible with theism and theistic religion; unguided Darwinism, a consequence of naturalism, is incompatible with theism but is not entailed by the scientific theory. It is instead a metaphysical or theological add-on.³⁴⁵

His argument is that those who see conflict are those who have added-on a naturalistic, or atheistic, belief, and evolution itself is logically compatible with a belief in God as

³⁴³ McGrath, 31.

³⁴⁴ Plantinga, 116. Emphasis in original.

³⁴⁵ Plantinga, 116.

designer.³⁴⁶ He singles out both Dawkins and Dennett for adding that evolution is unguided to the science/religion debate as the major source of conflict.³⁴⁷ Dawkins and Dennett, as well as their fellow New Atheists, do not view the debate this way. To them creationists and ID advocates are intruding on the turf of science. It is the religionists who are portrayed as offensive, with the new Atheists speaking out in the defence of science, and by extension, the upholders of truth.

5.4.1 Dawkins

Being an evolutionary biologist and proponent of Darwin's legacy, it should come as no surprise that Dawkins dismisses any notion of a cosmic creator as inferior to the theory of evolution. Of the relationship between Intelligent Design and evolution Dawkins explains:

They are close to being irreconcilably different. Like nothing else, evolution really does provide an explanation for the existence of entities whose improbability would otherwise, for practical purposes, rule them out.³⁴⁸

This harkens back to one of Dawkins main points, that "a universe in which we are alone except for other lowly evolved intelligences is a very different universe from one with an original guiding agent whose intelligent design is responsible for its very existence."³⁴⁹ Dawkins is adamantly opposed to Christian attempts to forward any argument from design as

³⁴⁶ Plantinga, 107. Plantinga offers an explanation of how evolution and God could be compatible: "It could be, for example, that God directs and orchestrates the Darwinian process; perhaps, indeed, God causes the right genetic mutation to arise at the right time. There is nothing in the scientific theory of evolution to preclude God from causing the relevant genetic mutations."

³⁴⁷ Plantinga, 115. "[W]hen Dennett, Dawkins, and their friends go on to add that the process is unguided by God or any other intelligent agent, then, of course, conflict and inconsistency arise. Hence if you confuse Darwinism with unguided Darwinism, a confusion Dennett makes and Dawkins encourages, you will see science and religion in conflict at this point."

³⁴⁸ Dawkins, 85.

³⁴⁹ Dawkins, 85.

a scientific theory. He dismissed these attempts as “lazy and defeatist – classic ‘God of the Gaps’ reasoning,” dubbing it “the Argument from Personal Incredulity.”³⁵⁰

To Dawkins the intelligent design and Creationist movements are theology disguised in science’s clothing, and since they hold genuine influence in America their meddling is quite serious. Dawkins argues that the theory of evolution is under attack: “In parts of the United States, science is under attack from a well-organized, politically well-connected and, above all, well financed opposition, and the teaching of evolution is in the front-line trench.”³⁵¹ Here Dawkins links the dismissal of the theory of evolution as an “attack on science”. This raises the question of which theories can be argued and dismissed (string theory, for example) yet not be considered an attack on science as a whole. This question goes unanswered, although there is no doubt that ‘evidence’ would play a role in any supposed hierarchy of theory (from dismissal as constructive for science to dismissal as an attack on science).

Regarding Creationism in particular, Dawkins writing becomes quite animated; he clearly takes the attack on evolution personally: “Far from respecting the separateness of science’s turf, creationists like nothing better than to trample their dirty hobnails all over it. And they fight dirty, too.”³⁵² As an example of their dirty fighting, Dawkins explains that his name has been used in court cases by creationist lawyers who wish to link evolution directly to atheism in order to influence the opinions of jurors who have religious biases against atheists. The language Dawkins uses when explaining the situation puts evolution (and science) on the defence against an attack by a dirty fighting opposition. Besides the politics

³⁵⁰ Dawkins, 155.

³⁵¹ Dawkins, 91.

³⁵² Dawkins, 93.

of the debate, Dawkins is adamant that design simply does not explain anything,³⁵³ whereas evolution offers truth: “Natural selection is a real solution. It is the only workable solution that has been suggested. And it is not only a workable solution, it is a solution of stunning elegance and power.”³⁵⁴ On one hand the issue is that of truth, of scientific integrity, and on the other it is about defending science from those who seek to undermine it. The battle of creationism and intelligent design verses evolution seems akin (to Dawkins) to a battle between religion and science.

5.4.2 Harris

Harris also links evolution with science, arguing that those who dismiss evolution are misconstruing its validity by misappropriating the term ‘theory’. Harris explains:

Christians who doubt the truth of evolution are apt to say things like ‘Evolution is just a theory, not a fact.’ Such statements betray a serious misunderstanding of the way the term ‘theory’ is used in scientific discourse. [...] Theories make predictions and can, in principle, be tested. The phrase ‘the theory of evolution’ does not in the least suggest that evolution is not a fact.³⁵⁵

It is interesting that Harris singles out Christians as the main proponents of doubt when it comes to the theory of evolution. To Harris part of the problem is an ignorance-based misunderstanding on the part of Christians when it comes to the scientific language. This misunderstanding revolves around the concept of a ‘theory’, and the use of theories in scientific discourse.

Regarding Intelligent Design (ID), Harris, like Dawkins, also links the movement to politics and the inappropriate impersonation of science by religion: “The problem with ID is that it is nothing more than a program of political and religious advocacy masquerading as

³⁵³ Dawkins, 146-147. Dawkins explains: “it raises an even bigger problem than it solves: who designed the designer?”

³⁵⁴ Dawkins, 147-148.

³⁵⁵ Harris, *Letter*, 69.

science.”³⁵⁶ He also explains that intelligent design boils down to a ‘God of the gaps’ argument: “ID theorists invariably stake their claim on the areas of scientific ignorance.”³⁵⁷ Where science has yet to offer an explanation, Intelligent Design comes in to fill in the gap. Moreover, Harris argues that Intelligent Design arguments are vitally flawed for assuming that if our universe was intelligently designed, the designer would be the God of Christianity. Harris points out that “If intelligently designed, our universe could be running on a supercomputer. Or it could be the work of an evil God, or of two such gods playing tug-of-war with a larger cosmos.”³⁵⁸ In any case, Harris clearly is of the opinion that the Intelligent Design argument is an affront to the intellectual honesty of science. Unsubstantiated claims such as the God of the Bible creating the universe, even when in disguise, offer an example of religion in direct conflict with science.

5.4.3 Hitchens

Hitchens is not overtly concerned with arguing on behalf of science against Creationism. When he does mention it he hints at its dwindling impact:

Now that the courts have protected Americans (at least for the moment) from the inculcation of compulsory ‘creationist’ stupidity in the classroom, we can echo that other great Victorian Lord Macaulay and say that ‘every schoolchild knows’ that Paley had put his creaking, leaking cart in front of his wheezing and broken-down old horse.³⁵⁹

Unlike Dawkins, Hitchens downplays the Creationist movement – if Creationists or those promoting Intelligent Design are “attacking” science, as Dawkins argues, Hitchens does not seem phased in the least. Science is clearly the victor over the “stupidity” that is an argument from design. Hitchens writes of religion that, “[i]t is [...] fully aware of the ever-

³⁵⁶ Harris, *Letter*, 71-72.

³⁵⁷ Harris, *Letter*, 72.

³⁵⁸ Harris, *Letter*, 13.

³⁵⁹ Hitchens, 78.

mounting evidence, concerning the origins of the cosmos and the origin of species, which consign it to marginality if not irrelevance.”³⁶⁰ Whereas Dawkins was certain to point out that Creationists are on the attack and fight dirty, Hitchens’ tone is closer to shrugging them off as increasingly impotent, breaking down their arguments to mere “stupidity” which the American courts have appropriately dealt with by removing it from the classroom.

5.4.4 Dennett

In *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett acknowledges that even in the face of mounting evidence, the disbelief in evolution is widespread in America. Dennett writes:

According to a recent survey, only about a quarter of the population of the United States understands that evolution is about as well established as the fact that water is H₂O. But how, in that face of so much striking confirmation and massive scientific evidence, could so many Americans disbelieve in evolution?³⁶¹

Dennett is quick to answer the question he has posed, explaining that the problem lies with the experts laypeople consult on matters which pertain to their faith: “It is simple: they have been solemnly *told* that the theory of evolution is false (or at least unproven) by people they trust more than scientists.”³⁶² Dennett goes on to explain that the people more trusted than scientists are ministers, who act as “experts” for the laypeople whose ears are pointed in their authoritative direction. According to Dennett, these ministers have been spreading misinformation. He then addresses the main proponents of misinformation from where many ministers receive their talking points:

What about the Scientific Creationists and Intelligent Design proponents who are so vocal and visible in well-publicized campaigns? They have all been carefully and patiently rebutted by conscientious scientists who have taken the trouble to penetrate their smoke screens of propaganda and expose both their apparently deliberate misrepresentations and evasions.³⁶³

³⁶⁰ Hitchens, 229.

³⁶¹ Dennett, 60.

³⁶² Dennett, 60. Emphasis in original.

³⁶³ Dennett, 61.

Creationists and Intelligent Design proponents are thus described as deliberately misrepresenting the facts, and this misinformation is in turn passed on to ministers who use their authority to misinform their flock. Considering the survey Dennett cites, that “only about a quarter of the population of the United States understands that evolution is about as well established as the fact that water is H₂O”, that would mean that three-fourths of the population have been duped by their unquestionable dedication to the weight of words coming from the mouth of ministers. Since these ministers receive their (mis)information from Creationists and Intelligent Design proponents, it may be assumed that Dennett believes they have been extremely successful at their “deliberate misrepresentations and evasions.” Even so, Dennett does not push the matter any further. If readers choose to stubbornly argue that the Bible supports creationism and dismisses evolution, Dennett dismisses the reader with the following sentence: “Good-bye, and I hope to see you back again someday.”³⁶⁴ This of course highlights his main purpose for writing *Breaking the Spell* in the first place; Dennett is concerned with convincing readers that science should study religion as a natural phenomenon – he is not overly concerned with convincing the religiously stubborn to become rationalists (although he undoubtedly would appreciate that as a welcomed offshoot).

5.5 Conclusion

Throughout this chapter we have learned how the New Atheists express their views on the war between science and religion. All of them are passionately on the side of science, and consider religion to be meddlesome whenever it comes into contact with science. In the

³⁶⁴ Dennett, 61.

case of scientists, Dawkins especially finds it difficult to understand how someone can genuinely dedicate ones life to science while also leaving room for religion – especially maintaining a traditional belief in God. Harris articulates his belief that scientists are honest while those of a religious persuasion are dishonest. Hitchens believes the time for a scientist to hold religious persuasion is past its prime, while Dennett focuses on the power of the method scientists use, as opposed to the virtues of the individuals. Overall, their opinions of scientists fits them well within Haught's conception of the conflict typology, while Poole, McGrath, and Wuthnow call into question the assumption that scientists cannot be religious.

The necessity of conflict between science and religion is taken as a given by the New Atheists. Dawkins believes that God is a scientific hypothesis, and a failure at that. Harris considers the conflict unavoidable because religion makes scientific claims and uses bad evidence. Hitchens considers religion to be impractical as compared to science, making reconciliation between the two consigned to failure. Dennett considers the main difference between science and religion to be the methods they use: science uses valid methods of deriving at truth whereas religion's methods are ineffective and flawed. Poole, Plantigna, Wuthnow call into question the assumption that science and religion are in conflict, and point out that there is more than one way for people to interpret their relationship.

NOMA, a proposition offered by Gould as an alternative to conflict in favour of compatibility, is dismissed as nonsense by the New Atheists. Dawkins can't even bring himself to believe that Gould actually meant what he wrote, whereas Harris, who does not directly mention NOMA, mocks any attempts for someone to be both God-fearing and scientific. Hitchens has a problem with Gould's assertions that science and religion can live in harmony, arguing instead that they are antagonistic toward each other. Dennett finds

Gould's attempt at reconciliation to be noble, but ultimately it failed to gain traction because it causes a loss on both sides of the science/religion divide. McGrath, Wuthnow, and Poole serve to demonstrate that when it comes to science's relationship to religion there are more than the two commonly expressed options – conflict and NOMA – to choose from. There are in fact many theories as to how they co-relate, and the conflict model as expressed by the new atheists is but one offering.

The main opponents of science, according to the New Atheists, are the proponents of creationism and Intelligent Design.³⁶⁵ Dawkins views both as an attack on truth, forcing noble scientists such as himself into a position of defence against a ruthless enemy of reason and rationality. Harris believes the problem is related to Christian misunderstandings of what a theory means in science, and considers ID's arguments to be religious advocacy and an affront to honest science. Hitchens is not as concerned as the others over creationism, considering the movement to be one with a diminishing impact, while Dennett blames the top-down distribution of misinformation for convincing lay people that the theory of evolution is false – a definite affront to science. Poole, McGrath, and Plantinga offer insight into how those who believe religion and science are compatible endeavours do not all see eye to eye on creationism and ID. Whereas Poole and McGrath distance themselves from these movements as unscientific and therefore problematic, Plantinga uses philosophical reasoning to show that ID and evolution need not be at odds.

The debate over the relationship science has to religion and vice-versa is multilayered with many voices from various backgrounds offering different interpretations. The New Atheists follow the conflict model and express their views as such. There should be no doubt

³⁶⁵ The main proponent of the Intelligent Design movement is the Discovery Institute, the website of which is <http://www.discovery.org/>. Also see their ID specific website at <http://www.intelligentdesign.org/>.

that they believe what they write, and that they truly believe science and religion are irreconcilably antagonistic. There is, of course, no consensus – even within the scientific community – that the conflict model is the one that closest expresses the truth of the situation. The New Atheists place much of their argument on highlighting the religious opponents to evolution, yet evolution is one of many areas in science, and creationists certainly do not speak for all Christians, let alone all people of religious faith. In fact Wuthnow points out that “a CBS News survey conducted in 2005 found that 67 percent of the [American] public believes it is ‘possible to believe in both God and evolution,’ while only 29 percent thought this was not possible.”³⁶⁶ While some people might be alarmed at the 29 percent who think God and evolution are not compatible, it is worth keeping in mind the 67 percent who view do not see a conflict between propositions.

When it comes to understanding the complex web of interactions between science and religion the New Atheists have not created a new area of debate, rather, they have added to the strand of a previously existing one. Their contribution to the present state of affairs between science and religion is located largely in their portrayal of science as a secularizing influence. While some contend that the two are compatible, and others argue that science is limited from engaging in religious matters, the New Atheists insist that it is simply science’s duty to root out untruth, and this includes criticizing and dismissing religious truth claims. Moreover, they view religion as imposing itself onto scientific affairs rather than the other way around. This is especially evident in the discussion of faith-based opposition to evolution; science is portrayed as standing up for honesty and integrity while religion is seen

³⁶⁶ Wuthnow, 159.

as dishonest and misleading. Science is portrayed as a secular force that frees humanity from our remaining superstitions; religion is seen as a leftover remnant from a pre-enlightened era.

As the history of atheism has shown, there certainly is a connection to the rise of science. This does not mean, however, that science inherently leads to atheism. To Huxley it led to agnosticism; to Francis Collins it brings about a sense of worship. To the New Atheists, and Dawkins in particular, there is no doubt that science has contributed to an atheist worldview. Science is seen as on the secular side of a war against religion, and therefore it is difficult for the New Atheists to accept notions of scientists having faith. Perhaps this has much to do with the way they describe science as if it is one strand, as opposed to many strands. If science and evolution are co-joined, and evolution disproves God, or at least turns God into an unsupported scientific hypothesis, then science and God are at odds. If, however, evolution is but one strand of many strands of science, and that strand is at odds, that does not mean that science as a whole is at odds with religion. From this perspective the sense that science is an ‘all or nothing’ ‘you’re either with me or against me’ venture is a simplification of the complexity of science. In any case, what is certain is that much of the debate between science and religion has to do with how one portrays each area, and the New Atheists certainly favour the former over the latter.

Having analyzed how the New Atheists portray the science/religion debate, and offered a few examples to highlight that the debate is by no means monopolized by those who fit into the conflict typology as proposed by Haught, we now turn to the concluding chapter. Besides highlighting the themes of secularization, science and religion that have

already been expressed, I will also explore possibilities on why the insistence on conflict arises.

6. REPLACED AND MISLEAD: A CONCLUSION BORN OF CONFLICT

New Atheism is a contemporary continuation on the post-scientific revolution debate regarding the roles of both science and religion and how they relate to each other. As science grew into its own and separated from the Christian theology and philosophy that spawned and nurtured it for over a millennium it became increasingly beneficial to humankind of its own accord.³⁶⁷ From medicine to agriculture, science has come to play a dominant part in everyone's life, regardless of one's religious persuasion. Besides providing benefits such as immunization and anaesthetics which raise life expectancy,³⁶⁸ science has also contributed to the reframing of our worldview, the theories of Copernicus and Darwin being two great examples. As science evolves so has religion, and today, as in the past, there is debate over where the borders of each separate sphere lies. From the perspective of the New Atheists, the scientific worldview has proven religion to be unnecessary, misleading, and menacing. They arrive at the debate from a secular standpoint, and they express the relationship between science and religion as one of engagement in a battle for the titles of honesty, legitimacy, and reality.

The New Atheists are clearly on the side of science, and they express displeasure at religion, which they view as an antagonistic enemy of science. This opinion comes across strikingly in their discussions of the religiosity of scientists, the irrationality of Gould's

³⁶⁷ One could have fun writing a paper arguing that science is suffering from an Oedipus Complex, hating it's father Theology and copulating with it's mother Philosophy.

³⁶⁸ Jim Oeppen, and James W. Vaupel, 2002, "Broken Limits to Life Expectancy" *Science*, 296(5570): 1029-1031. "World life expectancy more than doubled over the past two centuries, from roughly 25 years to about 65 for men and 70 for women." From 1840 to 2002, Women's life expectancy has increased at a "steady pace of almost 3 months per year". Scientific achievements in nutrition, sanitation, improvements in childbirth, disease control, etc. have also aided in this dramatic increase in human life expectancy.

NOMA compromise, and the bully elements within creationism and Intelligent Design movements. They see conflict between science, which is portrayed as a noble, secular pursuit, and religion, which is a remnant from a pre-enlightened time. But why such animosity? Factors the New Atheists themselves cite include those noted in this thesis regarding religions incursion into science's realm, as well as the intrinsic danger of religious faith in terms of death and destruction.³⁶⁹ I would like to propose another way of looking at the issue. I propose that part of the hostility lies in the fact that they do not view science simply as an *enemy* of religion – they view science as a *replacement* for it. From this perspective, they see secularization as part of the process of the replacement of religion with science. The conceptualizing of conflict – and the confusion over how some scientists can also be religious – are signs of the impatience that comes from recognizing that the unwavering course to universal enlightenment through the secularizing influence of science has yet to fully materialize. Science has replaced religion for the New Atheists, and the fact that it has not done so for others is a likely contributor to their frustration and shaping of the science/religion dichotomy.

Throughout their writings, the New Atheists offer many illustrations that science has replaced religion. Hitchens writes, for example that “[t]hanks to the telescope and the microscope, [religion] no longer offers an explanation of anything important.”³⁷⁰ Dawkins writes of the God hypothesis as unnecessary because evolution explains it away. Dennett finds scientific knowledge reliable and religious knowledge misleading. Harris’ writings agree with all of these points, and in his forthcoming book he argues that science can dictate morality.

³⁶⁹ For a few examples see: Dawkins, *The God*, 346; Harris, *The End*, 15, 66; Hitchens, *god is*, 32.

³⁷⁰ Hitchens, 282.

All of the New Atheists seem to agree that the roles religion has played in the past have been replaced by science, which is portrayed as offering real explanations for everything from disease to our origins, whereas, at best, religion only offers the comfort of fictional stories. Yet, there is one role that religion has that many people would not likely attribute to science: that of evoking a sense of transcendence, mysticism, awe. One would expect the New Atheists to simply dismiss notions of anything beyond the natural, material world which can be probed and prodded to be outside of the realm of science. It is interesting that this is not necessarily the case, as will be shown below in section 6.1. The real problem the New Atheists have with religion is that they have absolutely no use for it, and think that the world would be a much better place if everyone thought about science and religion the same way that they do. From their perspectives, science can replace every positive role religion has ever had, including explaining spirituality and offering a sense of awe, thus making religion completely and utterly obsolete.

6.1 Opening up to Say Awe

In *Science and Religion: From Conflict to Conversation*, Haught writes (from the perspective of subscribers to the conflict typology) that:

An atheist can easily claim to be “religious” in the sense of being committed to ethical values or being awed by the mystery of the cosmos. Einstein [...] considered himself “religious” in both of these ways. But [...] the controversy about science and religion has real piquancy only when we ask whether science is compatible with the interested, personal God of theism.³⁷¹

While this may be the case, it is worth keeping in mind two questions pertaining to a rationalistic view of awe: 1) Can ‘science’ itself invoke awe; and 2) Does religion offer something – be it awe, mysticism, connection to an otherworldly realm, etc. that science

³⁷¹ Haught, 31.

cannot? There is no doubt that by definition alone, being an atheist necessitates not being a theist – not believing in a smaller god, nor belief in one with a capital G. But do the New Atheists believe that there is (or there may be) *something* beyond science, something that science cannot probe, but religion offers access too?

Haught explains that from the conflict viewpoint:

Science works on the assumption that any reality we encounter, no matter how mysterious it initially appears to be, can eventually be broken down into consistent components and processes that can be completely explained in terms of the most basic sciences. Any opposition to this assumption will only arrest the growth of science. If we leave even the slightest opening for some sort of non-physical “explanation,” we fail in our vocation as scientists. [...] Our job then is to do all we can to explain things naturalistically, that is, without resorting to mysticism.³⁷²

Yet, can mysticism be something that is understood scientifically? Here we may find that not all of the New Atheists agree. On the other hand, if mysticism is indeed real, can science be used to understand and explain it? Haught also suggests that, “no territory is off limits to scientific probing. We can competently provide a purely materialist explanation not only of life and mind, but also of ethics and religion. Our objective, in other words, is to “demystify” the universe.”³⁷³ If mysticism and awe are genuine products of the human mind, which itself is no more than a product of nature, than surely the New Atheists would agree that they can be probed and tested – perhaps eventually explained. This section deals with how the New Atheists understand concepts such as awe, mysticism, spirituality, and inspiration; whether they believe science has limits (and if so where these limits fall); and above all else, whether science is a tool that can be used for probing awe, or whether it is a vehicle for achieving it.

6.1.1 Dawkins

³⁷² Haught, 75.

³⁷³ Haught, 75.

In a revealing aside on the subject of great artists and their religious subject matters, Dawkins reveals the inspirational beauty that science could have provided had historical factors played more into science's hands than that of the Vatican:

If history had worked out differently, and Michelangelo had been commissioned to paint a ceiling for a giant Museum of Science, mightn't he have produced something at least as inspirational as the Sistine Chapel? How sad that we shall never hear Beethoven's Mesozoic Symphony, or Mozart's opera The Expanding Universe. And what a shame that we are deprived of Haydn's Evolution Oratorio.³⁷⁴

Dawkins point is that science is 'at least' as awe-inspiring as religion. In another passage which critiques the Christian emphasis on sin, Dawkins applies much the same thought, directed in this case, to the poetic beauty of nature being a suitable replacement subject for scripture: "[Christians] could have devoted their pages and their sermons to extolling the sky splashed with stars, or mountains and green forests, seas and dawn choruses."³⁷⁵ Dawkins also writes of the "power of consciousness raising" that an understanding of natural selection provides. He explains that natural selection "not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance."³⁷⁶ He goes on to add that "perhaps you need to be steeped in natural selection, immersed in it, swim in it, before you can truly appreciate its power."³⁷⁷ According to Dawkins, this emphasis on the consciousness raising 'power' is not limited to natural selection; it is also a trait of other fields of science, such as astronomy and geology.³⁷⁸

Dawkins seems to be aware of the argument that awe for nature, or a deep devotion to the achievements/theories of science, can be misconstrued as being religious. He admits as

³⁷⁴ Dawkins, 111.

³⁷⁵ Dawkins, 285.

³⁷⁶ Dawkins, 141.

³⁷⁷ Dawkins, 142.

³⁷⁸ Dawkins, 143.

much in his discussion on the faith, or lack of faith, on behalf of scientists such as Einstein who sound religious by invoking religious words such as ‘God’ in a poetic sense (although he argues strongly that they are not theists). Dawkins explains: “A quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists. It has no connection with supernatural belief.”³⁷⁹ One can therefore be a rational scientist with a “quasi-mystical response to nature” and a reverence for the consciousness-raising power of scientific theories and discoveries, yet as Dawkins explains, these are not on par with religious beliefs, which are considered delusions. Dawkins has no problem in acknowledging inspiration by the natural world; where he draws the line is when it comes to finding inspiration in the supernatural, a category in which he places the mythos of God.

6.1.2 Harris

Whereas Dawkins infers that science can replace religion in terms of themes for art, awe, and appreciation of nature, Harris believes it is limited. He acknowledges the “spiritual needs” of humans, and states clearly that science is unable to meet these needs:

There is no denying that most of us have emotional and spiritual needs that are now addressed – however obliquely and at a terrible price – by mainstream religion. And these are needs that a mere *understanding* of our world, scientific or otherwise, will never fulfill.³⁸⁰

Harris articulates that science is for understanding our world, but it is unable to fulfill our spiritual needs. Whereas Dawkins sees science as being able to “at least” match the beauty or usefulness of religion as a subject matter, and be awe-inspiring, Harris sees it as limited. Harris acknowledges that religion does something that science cannot do: religion can fulfill spiritual needs. This is a sharp difference in conception between Dawkins and Harris. It is

³⁷⁹ Dawkins, 31.

³⁸⁰ Harris, *The End*, 16. Emphasis in original.

difficult to conceive of Dawkins acknowledging that there is something that religion does better (in both senses of the word) than science – and it is especially difficult to conceive of Dawkins admitting of there being such a thing as spirituality.

Harris makes another statement that would seem quite out of place in any of Dawkins' writings. Harris suggests that "[t]here is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life."³⁸¹

While Harris does not believe in the faith claims of organized religion, he clearly believes in the validity of spirituality and argues for the importance of coming to terms with a "sacred dimension to our existence." Interestingly, when it comes to exploring this sacred dimension and spirituality, Harris believes science still plays a role – and will increasingly play a role.

Harris explains:

Science will not remain mute on spiritual and ethical questions for long. Even now, we can see the first stirrings among psychologists and neuroscientists of what may one day become a genuinely rational approach to these matters – one that will bring even the most rarefied mystical experience within the purview of open, scientific inquiry. It is time we realized that we need not be unreasonable to suffuse our lives with love, compassion, ecstasy, and awe; nor must we renounce all forms of spirituality or mysticism to be on good terms with reason.³⁸²

This passage seems rather striking for its defence of a belief in spirituality, awe, and mysticism. Harris does not argue that there is any evidence for a sacred dimension, yet he sounds confident that science will one day provide some. In fact, he argues that spirituality and mysticism should be studied scientifically. Of the latter he writes: "As a phenomenon to be studied, spiritual experience is no more refractory than dreams, emotions, perceptual illusions, or, indeed, thoughts themselves."³⁸³ Of mysticism he argues:

Mysticism is a rational enterprise. [...] The mystic has recognized something about the nature of consciousness prior to thought, and this recognition is susceptible to rational discussion. The mystic

³⁸¹ Harris, *The End*, 16.

³⁸² Harris, *The End*, 43.

³⁸³ Harris, *The End*, 220.

has reasons for what he believes, and these reasons are empirical. The roiling mystery of the world can be analyzed with concepts (this is science), or it can be experienced free of concepts (this is mysticism).³⁸⁴

This belief in both spirituality and mysticism, as opposed to ‘pseudo-mysticism’, is in sharp contrast to Dawkins position, which is that non-belief, or agnosticism, is the default position where the evidence is lacking.³⁸⁵ In any case, Harris seems to limit science to the position of a tool for understanding our world, and which may one day aid in our understanding of how to come to terms with our real ‘mystical’ and ‘spiritual’ needs, whereas Dawkins believes science (and nature) can potentially provide humans with a sense of the ‘quasi-mystical’.

6.1.3 Hitchens

In *God is not Great*, Hitchens does not mention spirituality or a sacred dimension as a viable reality – or even a potentiality. He does, however, offer a few comments which seem in line with Dawkins’ thought on the matter of science invoking awe. Hitchens writes that “the findings of science are far more awe-inspiring than the ranting of the godly.”³⁸⁶ Whereas Dawkins argues that science can be ‘consciousness rising’, Hitchens’ states that its findings are “awe-inspiring.” Just as Dawkins mentions how religious sermons could have been better served by explaining the wonder of nature, Hitchens points out that science offers more awe than the “ranting of the godly.” Hitchens also gives some examples of how much more awe-inspiring science can be than religion:

If you devote a little time to studying the staggering photographs taken by the Hubble telescope, you will be scrutinizing things that are far more awesome and mysterious and beautiful – and more chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding – than any creation or “end of days” story. If you read Hawking on the “event horizon,” that theoretical lip of the “black hole” over which one could in theory plunge and

³⁸⁴ Harris, *The End*, 221.

³⁸⁵ Although, Harris could potentially argue, the evidence is experiential. Many theists would argue that the evidence for God is also experiential.

³⁸⁶ Hitchens, 57-59.

see the past and the future [...] I shall be surprised if you can still go on gaping at Moses and his unimpressive “burning bush.”³⁸⁷

As previously mentioned, unlike Harris, Hitchens does not offer any details that even hint at spirituality, but he certainly displays a similar conception of science’s unlimited potential for inspiration to that of Dawkins. Whereas Harris suggests that science is limited in what it can offer in this area, Hitchens insinuates that science offers more than enough fulfillment; it offers a glimpse at the “awesome and mysterious and beautiful”, the “chaotic and overwhelming and forbidding”.

6.1.4 Dennett

Unlike Dawkins and Hitchens, Dennett does not write of science as a vehicle of awe, nor does he follow Harris in acknowledging its limits in addressing “spiritual needs”. He does, however, seem to hold open the possibility that there may be a limit to what science can address: “There may be some domain that is religion’s alone to command, some realm of human activity that science can’t properly address and religion can, but that does not mean that science cannot or should not study this very fact.”³⁸⁸ Unlike Harris, Dennett does not go into any detail in explaining what exactly this realm might be, but in another passage he explains that there is such a thing as ‘religious ecstasy’ – and this ecstasy can be probed and deciphered by science: “Considered as psychological states, drug-induced hallucination and religious ecstasy are both amenable to study by neuroscientists and psychologists.”³⁸⁹ Like Harris, Dennett infers that religious states – in this case ecstasy – should be understood as natural, and since nature is science’s turf, science should study it. Science is understood

³⁸⁷ Hitchens, 8-9.

³⁸⁸ Dennett, 30.

³⁸⁹ Dennett, 29.

firmly as a tool toward deciphering ecstasy, and not as a vehicle driving toward it.

Dennett also offers a reflection on science that is absolutely unique among the four writers.

Dennett explains that he has faith in science, which is something that the other New Atheists would not agree with, since their understanding of faith is in stark opposition to evidence, of which science is a prime supporter. Commenting on the difference between faith in science and faith in religion Dennett writes:

This idea that we prove our faith by one extravagant act or another – such as choosing death over recanting an item of doctrine that we don’t understand – permits us to draw a strong distinction between religious faith and the sort of faith that I, for one, have in science. My faith in the expertise of physicists like Richard Feynman, for instance, permits me to endorse – and, if it comes to it, bet heavily on the truth of – a proposition that I don’t understand. So far, my faith is not unlike religious faith, but I am not in the slightest bit motivated to go to my death rather than recant the formulations of physics.³⁹⁰

While Dennett admits of a similarity in his faith in science with religious faith, he points to a difference in the importance that faith holds over him. Dennett would have no problems recanting his faith in science, whereas those (or some) with religious faith would rather die.

This is not the only difference he has found:

There is a big difference between religious faith and scientific faith: what has driven the changes in concepts in physics is not just heightened scepticism from an increasingly worldly and sophisticated clientele, but a tidal wave of exquisitely detailed positive results [...] And this makes a huge difference because it gives beliefs about the truths of physics a place where the rubber meets the road, where there is more than mere professing that can be done.³⁹¹

Here we can see that Dennett considers his faith in science, which is a practical faith, to have practical applications in the real world. Although this does not speak directly to a sense of awe, it does point to his relationship with science. Science is about practicality, and science takes faith. In terms of its practicality, Dennett’s line of thinking is close to Harris’ understanding of science as a tool. Whereas Harris limits the use of that tool due to an inability to provide spiritual needs, Dennett does not. Instead Dennett limits science to a

³⁹⁰ Dennett, 231.

³⁹¹ Dennett, 233.

version of faith, one that consists of “betting heavily”, as well as the ability to recant with relative ease. In any case, it is quite interesting that Dennett admits to having a personal faith in science which the others do not even come close to addressing in their major works on religion.

6.2 Conclusion

Science is not atheistic. It does not speak in God’s defence or in offense to God. Interpretations of science may lead some to atheism, and it may lead others to faith in God.³⁹² In the case of the New Atheists, it would appear that their faith in science has led to, or at least reinforces, their atheism. From their perspective science does what religion does, in terms of proving awe and explaining existence, only science does it better. Religion is a relic of the past whereas science is the provider of the present, and the saviour of the future. Nowhere in the New Atheist writings do any of the writers seriously engage in concerns that people have – religious or not – over the problems science has contributed to our world. Nuclear warfare, biological weapons, global warming, oil spills, genetic engineering; none of these modern concerns are addressed. Science is instead depicted through rose coloured glasses: it has contributed to the secular prosperity of Western civilization; it provides wondrous answers to perplexing questions, and gives us insight into some of the truths of reality. This is not to argue that science is good or that science is bad. It is to point out that science can contribute to both good and bad ideas and situations, yet in their push against religion, the New Atheists do not provide a balanced exposé as to the scope of science.

³⁹² Anthony Flew is a good example of someone being persuaded by scientific and philosophic evidence to believe in a deity. Previously a staunch atheist, Flew believes that evidence led him to change his mind. See Anthony Flew, with Roy Abraham Varghese, *There is A God: How the World’s Most Notorious Atheist Changed his Mind*. (New York: HarperCollins), 2007.

Science, in fact, is actually made up of various strands, as is religion. There is no real *science* as such, there are only *sciences*. This simple rephrasing of sciences in the plural as science in the singular skews the reality of the science/religion debate. By depicting science as one thing against religion in the singular, the battles between the various strands is misconstrued as being an all or nothing war. Either science is in conflict with religion or it is not. The truth of the matter is more complex. Some strands of science – carbon dating and Darwinism, for example – are most certainly in conflict with some strands of religion – Christian fundamentalism and young earth creationism, for example. Some strands are not in conflict; the Catholic Church has no problem accepting carbon dating and Darwinism. Even in the case of a creationist, can it really be said that an individual that does not believe in evolution is against science? What if that individual is a computer programmer by trade? No, the truth of the matter is there is no sense in claiming that religion as a whole is either in conflict with science as a whole or it is not. The hypothetical creationist computer programmer is in conflict with the strands of science that deal with evolution, but that does not necessitate that the individual is also in conflict with other strands of science, such as the theory of relativity, and indeed, computer science. This, it must be pointed out, is not just a problem with the assumptions made by the New Atheists. It is also a problem when sociologists such as Stark and Finke and Bruce state flat out that science and religion are compatible. Thomas Dixon makes this point explicably clear:

Too frequently in the pages of books about religion and science one encounters statements about ‘the relationship’ between two ‘disciplines’ called ‘science’ and ‘religion’, or, indeed, about building a bridge between ‘the religious community’ and ‘the scientific community’, as if these were all singular items. In reality of course, there are, and have been historically, an almost infinitely wide array of different sciences and different religions. [...] They are abstractions that stand for a plurality of individuals, communities, institutions and practices, as well as ideas and theories.³⁹³

³⁹³ Dixon, 513.

Indeed, some strands certainly are compatible; but to ignore the fact that some are not is simply as disingenuous as to claim the opposite, that science and religion are in perpetual conflict.³⁹⁴

Science is not the only area often misconstrued as monolithic when in fact it is an umbrella term for a variety of strands and theories. As the title to Jakobsen and Pellegrini's book *Secularisms* suggests, there are many ways of conceiving 'the secular', and there are many avenues for exploration under the term secularization. The New Atheists approach the secular from the point of view that the secular is singular and strictly anti-religious. They follow the secularization narrative, which Jakobsen and Pellegrini criticize as including:

“[A] network of binary oppositions established by its central terms. Each term stands in contradiction to its opposite, and these distinctions are linked together in a mutually reinforcing manner. A secular society is one not bound by religion. Thus a network of associations is established between the religious-secular opposition and that between bondage and freedom.”³⁹⁵

Following this train of thought, the New Atheists also view science, being a secular pursuit, as opposed to religion. The assumption here is that areas often considered secular – banks for example – are not just separate or absent from religion, but are opponents of religion.³⁹⁶ By portraying the secular as an opponent of religion, and by portraying science as secular, the New Atheists conceive of science as embattled with religion. The fact that religion has not been replaced by science in Western populations at large means that something is amiss

³⁹⁴ My thesis, I must confess, has been guilty of using the misleading singular for science and religion instead of the realistic plural – my reason, be it excusable or not, is that I adopted the language of the literature I was analysing.

³⁹⁵ Janet R. Jakobsen, Ann Pellegrini, *Secularisms*, (United States: Duke University Press, 2008), 6. Jakobsen and Pellegrini argue that “secularism is inflected by religion (and vice versa), thus fundamentally undoing the binary opposition between (secular) universalism and (religious) particularism.”(16).

³⁹⁶ This conception of the secular as an opposed to religion does not translate into all theories of secularization. A secular bank, to use the same example, is not necessarily anti-religious; rather, it simply does not engage in religious activities. This is why the United States is widely held as both a secular country (separation of church and state), and a religious country (by populous).

with the overall secularization theory. The so-called resurgence of religion³⁹⁷ likely contributes to the New Atheists' concerns. When science is understood as replacing religion and secularizing the world, the notion that there are those who still cling to religion is both a frustrating and deflating one. The New Atheists believe everyone should think like they do in this area, that scientific evidence trumps faith, and they are concerned that religion is standing in the way of the assumed progressive and enlightening muscle of secularization. Yet secularization, like science and religion, is multifaceted. One theory does not fit all situations, and to conceive of secularization, science, and religion as if they nicely fit into one packaged theory is to misappropriate each specific area and the many ways they are conceived by players of all locals and stripes. Each of these terms are plural, and are understood in a number of ways. Binary opposition between secular/religion and science/religion represents one way of considering the debate, and it is presented by the New Atheists as the only legitimate one. In so doing, the Enlightenment project must either be a failure or an ongoing process suffering from a few hiccups on the road to a religion free world. It would appear that from the New Atheists perspective the project is still very much alive; it just needs voices like theirs to help it get past a few stumbling blocks.

The New Atheists have contributed to relatively old debates. They have vibrantly articulated their beliefs that a secular society is worth striving for, and that the secular pursuit that is science deserves to win the battle between the irrational and unreasonable delusion that is religion. The debate in these areas, however, is not limited to them, nor is it limited to fundamentalists on the other side of the podium who would argue that evolution is a

³⁹⁷ Jakobsen and Pellegrini point out that the Iranian revolution in 1979, and the realization that it represented "one of a number of powerful contemporary social movements in many parts of the world that were organized in the name of religion" caused a "major reevaluation of the secularization narrative" amongst sociologists. (9-10).

delusion. There are many voice and many opinions, some arguing for compatibility, others dismissing it. In the real world, however, there are instances of clashes and there are instances of co-operation. Science has given us many benefits, and it has also presented us with many worries. A question to ponder is this: "If the New Atheists had their way, and religion was eliminated from existence, would there still be opposition to science from other areas?" I will leave you with one final question, although perhaps the answer is manifold: "If something replaces religion, does that by default mean the replacement has religious properties?"

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