

The Ethics of Disbelief:

What Does New Atheism Mean for America?

An honors thesis for the Department of Religion

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The Ethics of Disbelief: An Introduction

Journalists have used the term “New Atheism” to describe a 21st-century movement spurred by the success of several non-fiction books. These books, authored by hard-line secularists and consumed by millions, have made a particularly large splash in the United States over the past five years, sparking a national public debate about God and religion. In this introductory segment of my paper, I will explain what distinguishes New Atheism from other kinds of atheism, and will identify the factors that have led the American public and mainstream media to interpret New Atheism as a “new” social and intellectual innovation. In other words, I will examine the unique features of New Atheism that render it a social *movement* rather than just a descriptive term for those who do not believe in God or supernatural forces. Additionally, I will argue that New Atheism is distinguished by a unique ethic of epistemology in which the moral status of science is high above that of faith, and religious thought is considered inherently problematic.

In addition to providing an introduction to the ethics of New Atheism, I will go on in this paper to explore three major issues brought up by the movement. In Chapter 1, entitled “The ‘Secular’ and the ‘Religious’: Questioning New Atheist Categories,” I will discuss the New Atheist reliance on culturally bound notions of what constitutes the secular and the religious in an effort to challenge what I see as a problematic narrative of secular progress underlying New Atheism. Building on my critique of the secular progress narrative, the second chapter of my work will question the causal relationship that the New Atheist movement perceives between religion and violence, and argue that the phenomenon of religious violence is more complex than New Atheism suggests. Lastly, my third and final chapter will consider the implications of the movement for public life in the United States, and discuss its significance for the American traditions of pluralism and multiculturalism.

The Formation of a Social Movement

American atheists have long joined together and organized themselves to promote secularist values, but no group has ever garnered such attention and provoked such controversy as the New Atheists. For example, the American Humanist Organization, one of the foremost secularist organizations in the United States, was formed in 1941, more than half a century before the New Atheist movement came into existence (“Frequently”). American Atheists, another secularist organization, was formed after the 1963 American court case, *Murray v. Curlett*, which ruled against the mandatory recitation of prayer in American public schools (“About”). Groups like the American Humanist Organization and the American Atheists have played important roles in advocating for atheist rights, and have shared many of the concerns voiced by the New Atheists. So, we might ask ourselves: What distinguishes New Atheism? How has it become, as the mainstream media insists, a “movement?”

Firstly, the New Atheist movement is not a cohesive organization. Rather, it is a term that journalists have employed to describe a specific breed of atheism expounded by such best-selling books as *The God Delusion* by Richard Dawkins, *Breaking the Spell* by Daniel Dennett, *Letter to a Christian Nation* and *The End of Faith* by Samuel Harris and *god is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens. Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens, who passed away earlier this year after an extended battle with esophageal cancer, have been nicknamed “the four horsemen” [of the apocalypse]” by the mainstream media, and have become the public faces of “aggressive atheism” or “New Atheism” in America and England (Winston). The phrase “New Atheism” first appeared in *Wired Magazine* in a 2006 article that identified the four aforementioned

authors as “a band of intellectual brothers...mounting a crusade against belief in God” (Wolf). The article explains that part of what sets the New Atheists apart from other nonbelievers is their desire to convince non-religious audiences to *take a stand against religion*, rather than just abstain from participating in it. It explains, “[The New Atheists] condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking” (Wolf). So, we might conclude, New Atheism is “new” in several ways. Firstly, it is new in its insistence that religion is not just silly or incorrect, but also seriously dangerous. Secondly, it is new in its commitment to converting those not moved to action by their atheism to take a stand against religion and defend their right to criticize it. Thirdly, it frames atheism - the very state of disbelief - as entailing an *active* commitment to a set of ethical beliefs and obligations.

A Word on Ethics

Before I move forward, I would like to clarify what I mean when I use the terms “ethic,” and “ethics” in this paper. When I speak about ethics in relation to New Atheism, I refer to the way in which the New Atheists believe people should behave in order to help make the world a better place. In other words, ethical concerns are those that pertain to how people *ought* to act in the world. Furthermore, I do not make a firm distinction between ethics and morals, and believe that they both refer to the obligation to act in certain ways and not others, in the name of human peace and progress.

What's at Stake?

As we have seen, New Atheism is about more than disbelief. It is explicitly about right and wrong, about the improvement of the world and the salvaging of innocents from the dangerous grip of religious thought. The strong accusations that the “four horsemen” wage

against religion have serious implications for law and public policy; they are accusations that are *supposed to inspire action* and instigate real change. Furthermore, the ethical commitments that the New Atheists hold are multifaceted. Of course, the New Atheists are concerned with upholding the basic rights of nonbelievers, but that is not their only concern. They also argue passionately that critical inquiry, empirical investigation and freethought be presented to children everywhere as virtuous. At the same time, though, they are also concerned with issues such as the Israeli occupation in Gaza and the West Bank, the traumatization of children by their religious upbringings and the violence undertaken by Islamic extremists. This is because they hold that religion divides people across national and ethnic boundaries and causes them to act violently towards one another. We will go on to discuss New Atheism's ideas about religion and violence later on in this paper. Now, though, I hope to establish firmly that although the ethical concerns the New Atheists hold are many and varied, that they consider the promotion of the secularist worldview the antidote to the full gamut of problems caused by religion.

Making note of its impassioned tone and almost devotional regard for science, some have posited that New Atheism resembles religion, perhaps even the "fundamentalist" strains of religion that it so deplors. A movement fueled by strong conviction, New Atheism sees its own prescription for salvation (or peace) as the ultimate one. In other words, it does not consider the possibility of "multiple truths." Furthermore, New Atheism even concerns itself with the evangelization of its beliefs, as is evidenced by an internet forum intended to help "closeted" atheists "come out." This website, entitled "The Converts' Corner," is sponsored by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science. Furthermore, as can be observed by the use of queer terminology around atheism and references to feminism, the New Atheists identify strongly with other marginalized social groups. They view the task of securing equality for

atheists as allied with and similar to the task of ensuring equality for various groups who have (and continue to) face discrimination and abuse by mainstream society. Later on in this work, I will go on to discuss in greater detail the meaning behind this identification, and the implications that it has for our understanding of New Atheism.

In response to the critical characterization of New Atheism as a kind of fundamentalism not unlike that it disdains, Richard Dawkins writes, “It is impossible to overstress the difference between such a passionate commitment to biblical fundamentals and the true scientist’s equally passionate commitment to evidence” (*The God Delusion* 19). While the layperson might mistake New Atheism’s passion, confidence and sense of urgency with fundamentalism, Dawkins posits, the movement is importantly distinguished by its reliance on evidence, and its strong *promotion of evidence* as a means of reaching conclusions about the nature of the universe. Of course, when Dawkins says “evidence,” he is referring to a specific kind of scientifically sanctioned proof, and not such forms that the religious might cite for their beliefs: personal revelation, faith, a relationship with God, etc. For the New Atheists, the main factor separating religion from what is not religion is religion’s reliance on “blind faith,” or lack of proof for what it espouses as true. The way in which religions, and especially Christianity (the religious tradition with which the New Atheists are most familiar), market “mystery” as a special and sacred aspect of devotion is of particular annoyance to the New Atheists, who view this as a self-referential and circular mechanism by which religion validates its refusal to put forth basic support for its claims.

In addition to accusing religion of sanctifying mystery in order to avoid having to justify its convictions, the New Atheists also take issue with the way in which society at large abstains from questioning religion. In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett points out that religion has enjoyed the privilege of being left alone by the secular scientific community, a privilege that he

sees as being upheld by the belief that religion is especially facilitative of morality. He writes, "What apparently grounds the widespread respect in which religions of all kinds are held is the sense that those who are religious are well intentioned, trying to lead morally good lives, earnest in their desire not to do evil, and to make amends for their transgressions" (*Breaking the Spell* 12). And yet, despite the conventional wisdom to avoid offending the religious, Dennett is deeply bothered by also by society's refusal to critique, or at the very least investigate, religious claims. He writes, "...what I am calling for is a concerted effort to achieve a mutual agreement under which religion - all religion - becomes a proper object of scientific study" (*Breaking the Spell* 39). The other New Atheists also demand that we take religion off its prestigious pedestal, lest it continue to inflict harm on the world. Dawkins writes of the criticism that New Atheism is overly aggressive and "strident" in this respect: "We've all been brought up with the view that religion has some kind of special privileged status. You're not allowed to criticise it. And therefore, if you offer even a fairly mild criticism, it really does sound strident, because it violates this expectation that religion is out of bounds" (Aitkenhead). --

New Atheism's Ethic of Epistemology

We have seen that the New Atheists distinguish themselves from religious people by appealing to the way in which they use evidence to make their case. Additionally, we saw that this evidence is of a very particular kind; namely, the type of evidence recognized by the Western scientific community as valid. In general, we can assume that this evidence is empirical, or based on scientific observation. Interestingly, however, New Atheism is not only concerned with this kind of evidence solely because it is, according to science, facilitative of *truth*. Rather, the movement is devoted to evidence (and the empirical worldview in general) because of the conviction that it is *morally superior to religious/non-scientific alternatives*. What I am

proposing is that the New Atheists consider the scientific way of thinking more facilitative of goodness in the world – more *moral* - than religious alternatives. They prioritize one way of gathering information over another, thus espousing, via their atheist manifestos, a particular ethic of epistemology that is not obviously entailed by “atheism,” a term that merely describes the state of not believing in God.

In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins laments, “If somebody thinks taxes should go up or down you are free to have an argument about it. But on the other hand if somebody says ‘I mustn’t move a light switch on a Saturday,’ you say, ‘I *respect* that’” (42). Here, we return to the New Atheist argument against the unconditional respect of others’ religious beliefs. However, if we look closer here, we can see something more. Why is it, we might ask, that Dawkins has such a problem with *respecting* someone’s private expression of personal piety, in this case, the decision not to flick a light switch one day of the week? We are, by now, familiar with the violent calamities that the New Atheists see as associated with religion, from genocide to terrorism to apartheid. Of course, New Atheism refers to these calamities to support the case that religion is a significant cause of violence and malady in the world. But what about the light switch? What is at stake for Dawkins in such a small and inconsequential act? Why does he even mention it?

For the New Atheists, religious acts are those without rational justification. Since science, according to New Atheism, tells us that God probably does not exist, someone’s decision to follow rules allegedly written by God makes no sense. But, as I have proposed, the issue is not that such rules simply don’t make sense given the information available to people today. It is, instead, that those who feel compelled to follow the rules anyway receive their information about the world in a non-scientific way. Regardless of whether a Jew, for example, abstains from

flicking light switches on Saturday, eating bacon or throwing away a piece of paper with the name of God written on it out of a desire to honor tradition, religious belief or simply out of compulsion, the fact remains that the decision to comply with religious law is not one that finds its roots in secular science. And so, while some atheists might hold that so long as this person is not causing any harm to anyone her actions are benign, the New Atheist would see something inherently problematic about behaving “irrationally,” or in a way that contradicts scientific reality. This is due to the particular ethic of epistemology that underlies the New Atheist project: to understand the world in one way is more moral than to understand it another way. And so, mention of such insignificant religious actions as one’s choice not to flick a light switch one day of the week bespeaks a grander hierarchy of epistemology inherent in the New Atheist project, a hierarchy in which scientific knowing is valid and religious knowing is not.

The Ethics of Disbelief

While I have made the case that New Atheism promotes a specific ethic of epistemology, it is crucial to acknowledge that there are a myriad of ethical issues raised by the movement. From advocating for basic rights for nonbelievers, who are underrepresented and discriminated against across cultures, to the promotion of the doctrine of the separation of church and state, the New Atheist “ethic of epistemology,” or the moral prioritization of scientific ways of understanding the world, is only one component of what I call “the ethics of disbelief.” The Atheists, as we have seen, are also concerned with issues of direct relevance to public policy and social justice, such as the curriculum taught in public science classrooms and the inclusion of atheists in political discourse. Furthermore, it is my hope that the title of this work encompasses not only the diverse ethical issues raised by New Atheism, but also the unacknowledged implications of the movement itself. By looking at the critiques of New Atheism, some of which

accuse the Atheists of serious biases, as well as more general critiques of conventional wisdom around secularism, I hope to continuously explore some of the more sensitive issues around disbelief, using “ethics” as a lens through which to view New Atheism and consider its broader significance for American public life.

A Note on Perspectives

In this paper, I will refer to Dawkins, Dennett, Harris and Hitchens, as well as their fans and followers, as the “New Atheists.” This being said, however, I will do my best to heed the fact that the “New Atheist movement,” as I have introduced it, is not a monolithic one, and that the “four horsemen” are not in accord on all issues. Furthermore, the ethos that I have brought to this paper is one that has been inspired by my exposure to the discipline of religious studies. Having spent the past four years engaged in the academic study of religion, I have formed strong opinions about how scholars ought to handle others’ most cherished beliefs. Like Dennett, I believe in the study of religion, and I believe that, in an ideal world, the “greatest minds” would gather around the phenomenon of religious belief and try to understand it. I believe strongly, however, that we ought not to undertake the study of religion *in order to debunk what we see as false* and certainly not to disempower religion or lessen the role that it plays in peoples’ lives.¹ Instead, in direct disagreement with New Atheism, I hold, those who study religion ought to do so with as much respect *as is possible*, and with the understanding that there are aspects of religion that cannot be understood “from the outside,” as it were. Of course, sometimes the very study of religion would seem to preclude respect for religion. My guess is that many devout people would be offended by the notion of studying religion from the elite towers of “secular” academia. However, I think we have a duty to do the best that we can to show respect to the traditions that we handle with our minds, in the name of peace and humility. I hope that my

¹ I do not mean to deny that this could be a possible outcome of studying religion, but I am focused here on the

intentionality with which we approach our work.

approach in this project is as thoughtful and sensitive toward New Atheism as it would be toward any sacred worldview I would venture to investigate.

CHAPTER 1

The “Secular” and the “Religious”: Questioning New Atheist Categories

We have seen that the New Atheist movement advocates for the superior moral status of the secular over the religious. Before we proceed in our analysis of the New Atheist project, however, it is important to first reflect on the term “secular” and to establish what exactly we mean when we say it. The *New Oxford American Dictionary* describes the term as “denoting attitudes, activities, or other things that have no religious or spiritual basis” (“Secular” def. 1). This definition, like many others, is phrased in negative terms, or in terms of what the secular is *not*. In recent years, however, scholars have invited us to think more critically about what the secular *is*. Although secularism is so often described as the product of a simple subtractive equation (i.e., x minus religion equals secular), contemporary scholars have questioned whether secularism is more complicated than a simple casting off of religious beliefs and actions; their work has testified to the idea that the secular is more than the residual category left behind by the absence of religion (Casanova 55). In this chapter, I will question New Atheism’s acceptance of the traditional categories of the “secular” and the “religious” by unearthing the socio-historical origins of what we think of as “secular.”² By showing that the “secular” is inherently tied to Western European Christianity, I will claim that it is best understood not as the absence of or freedom from religion but rather as a complex entity in and of itself and a cultural phenomenon ripe for analysis. In the next chapter, I will claim that, once the categories of the “religious” and the “secular” are revealed to be more complex and interwoven than New Atheism might like to

² By placing the words “secular” and “religious” in quotations here, I mean to emphasize that they refer to categories that are constructed, as I will later show.

admit, the New Atheist case that religion is a major source of evil and violence in the world is fundamentally disturbed.

Secular Terminology

In this chapter, I will be employing specific terminology around the “secular” and, before I go on, I would like to establish exactly what I mean when I use this terminology. Sociologist José Casanova gives a helpful explanation of the meaning of the terms “secular,” “secularization” and “secularism,” words whose meanings are often convoluted and confused in discourse. He explains, “... ‘the secular’ should be thought of as a central modern epistemic category, ‘secularization’ as an analytical conceptualization of modern world-historical processes, and ‘secularism’ as a worldview and ideology” (54). In this chapter, then, “secularization” refers to the real or perceived temporal shift away from religion and towards the secular or “non-religious.” On the other hand, “secularism,” as I will use the term, is a worldview that prioritizes the empirical, rational and scientific over the religious.³ For the secularist (this is how I will refer to a proponent of secularism), the process of secularization is a positive change that humans ought to help to bring about and expedite. I would like to make explicit here that I regard New Atheism as a brand of secularism and the New Atheists as secularists.

Secular/Religious Binaries in New Atheism

In *Rethinking Secularism* authors Craig J. Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer and Jonathan VanAntwerpen claim that there is a “commonplace dichotomy” between the secular and the religious (8). An acceptance of the dichotomy or binary between these two notions is foundational for the New Atheist polemic against religion, which frames secularism as diametrically opposed to and completely liberated from the entire category of religion. Since

³ As scholars such as Talal Asad and Charles Taylor have pointed out, secularism has different meanings in different times and places. I limit the scope of this discussion of secularism to the New Atheist movement and its specific cultural context.

New Atheism advocates so vehemently for the secular as the solution to the problems of religion, the notion that the secular and religious are connected at their roots is contrary to the movement's intuitions. After all, if the secular and the religious were found to be inherently intertwined rather than wholly separate, the New Atheist conception of religion as a source of violence and evil in the world and secularism as a peaceful solution would be compromised. In *Rethinking Secularism*, however, Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen take issue with the unquestioned categories of the "secular" and the "religious": "Since so much of contemporary social conflict is linked to religion—or, rather, to the notion that religion and secularism are in opposition—it is...urgent that we rethink the categories that make such conflict possible" (6). Before rethinking these categories, however, let us turn our attention to the New Atheist picture of the secular and the religious, and seek to understand how this picture differs from other available accounts.

As we have already seen, the New Atheist movement is about more than just setting the record straight about the existence of God; it challenges people to be more critical of the role that religion plays in our global society and to illustrate the moral benefits of secularism as a superior way of life. The New Atheists, as critics of religion, envision themselves as the intellectual and moral opponents of *all* forms of religious adherence and inclination. Dawkins writes, "I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be invented (*The God Delusion* 53). As we have discussed, for Dawkins and New Atheism, there is one inherently dangerous feature uniting faith-based ways of knowing and being in the world: religion's claims are based on no or unacceptable forms of evidence. The secular or scientific worldview, on the other hand, is verifiable by empirical data, the only kind of evidence worth taking seriously. We saw in the previous chapter that this difference is critical

for the New Atheist case. It is identified as the key feature that severs the secular from the religious and results in a moral condemnation of the entire religious enterprise.⁴

One of the main goals of the New Atheist project is to hold religion accountable for its transgressions against humanity and to prophesize about the danger that religion poses to our future as a global community. Of course, the secular or scientific worldview is proposed by the New Atheists as the solution to the problem of religion. Indeed, in order for this solution to be implemented, religion must be eliminated. The New Atheists do not see religion as capable of being informed by scientific innovation but rather envision science and religion as inherently at odds. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Samuel Harris writes, "...the conflict between science and religion 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" (63). Dawkins echoes this sentiment in *The God Delusion*, arguing that religion and science could never coexist rationally within the same person (80). These authors almost always frame religion and secularism in oppositional, binary terms. From their point of view, the religious and secular worldviews are not just two incompatible ways of viewing reality with different moral implications for our world. Instead, they are two completely unique categories that necessarily impinge on each other's territory and threaten each other's validity. The superior moral status of the secular worldview is rooted in its universal applicability and wholehearted detachment from the irrationality and sentimentality of religion. Religion is represented as a kind of pollutant responsible for obscuring true reality, and the casting off of religion is seen as a peaceful and democratic solution to an expansive array of interpersonal and societal problems.

In *Breaking the Spell*, Daniel Dennett argues that secular academia should take more

⁴ I introduced this idea in the introductory section of this paper, where I proposed that the New Atheists morally prioritize scientific thinking, and hold all religious and unscientific worldviews as inherently dangerous.

seriously the study of religion as natural phenomenon. He writes:

It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about. It affects not just our social, political, and economic conflicts, but the very meanings we find in our lives. (15)

Here, Dennett's argument in favor of "[putting] religion on the examination table" illustrates the kind of relationship between the religious and the secular presumed by much of the New Atheist literature (39). Why does Dennett insist that it is religion that needs to be placed on the examination table and not secularism, as other scholars have proposed? The very notion that religion can be viewed and assessed from the objective stance of the secular disciplines, and the idea that it *must* be, suggests something about how Dennett conceives of the secular as being positioned outside the realm of the religious, capable of standing cleanly apart from the phenomenon and drawing conclusions about its true nature. This is further indicated by Dennett's conceiving of religion as being fundamentally juxtaposed to other disciplines. His desire to make religion the "proper object of scientific study" is closely tied to his intense commitment to the pursuit of some superior truth. He implies that secular, scientific scholarship, as opposed to theological scholarship or subjective experience, is the only way to arrive at this truth as it relates to religion.⁵ Certainly many would agree that the academic disciplines have important and relevant insights into the nature of religion. The notion that a true understanding of the religious phenomenon depends entirely on the notion of the impartiality of secular agency, however, shows New Atheism's conception of secularism as an objective standpoint and religion

⁵ Many scholars of religious studies have argued in favor of taking seriously subjective religious experience, and have seen it as a special vantage point for truly understanding a religion. See Wilfred Cantwell Smith's *The Meaning and End of Religion*.

as biased and based on delusion.

In *god is not Great* Christopher Hitchens speaks of the need for a “new Enlightenment.” He writes, “We have to first transcend our prehistory, and escape the gnarled hands which reach to drag us back to the catacombs and the reeking altars and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection” (283). This quote shows that he imagines secularism as an ideal state of transcendence, liberated from the dangerous, archaic grasp of religious influence. The secularist leaves religion behind and, in doing so, frees herself. This conception of the backwards nature of religion constitutes a powerful regress/progress binary that distinguishes the religious from the secular and echoes broader cultural attitudes about secularism’s role in the shaping of modernity.⁶

The Secular Progress Narrative

While the establishment of an oppositional relationship between religion and secularism is central to the New Atheist case against religion, the New Atheists were not the first to appeal to this kind of binary framework. Enlightenment era humanism drew a critical distinction between the secular and the religious, ultimately establishing what some scholars refer to as a “progress narrative.” In this narrative, religion is symbolic of the primitive past and secular science the evolved future. Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini introduce this idea in *Secularisms*, a collection of scholarly work focused on secularism and modernity. They write, “Implicit within the [Enlightenment] narrative is the idea that each step forward in time also marks a moral advance: a move away from religious authority and toward a greater intellectual freedom and more knowledge...” (4). In this way, prevailing Enlightenment ideology envisioned humanity on a progressive path through history, moving toward greater and greater moral

⁶ One of the theories endorsed by some New Atheists is that religion did *in the past* serve a helpful evolutionary role for humans, but no longer serves such a role.

achievement. Religion was viewed as evolutionarily regressive whereas secular science was considered progressive. Jakobsen and Pellegrini describe this dynamic, “secularism is central to the Enlightenment narrative in which reason progressively frees itself from the bonds of religion and in doing so liberates humanity” (2). It appears that New Atheism adopts this Enlightenment era narrative quite exactly; it posits science as the way of the future and religion represented as an archaic relic of the past or dangerous vestigial organ of modernity. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris points out that more secular nations correlate with great economic and political health whereas more religious nations face serious social perils. He writes:

Norway, Iceland, Australia, Canada, Sweden, Switzerland, Belgium, Japan, the Netherlands, Denmark, and the United Kingdom are among the least religious societies on earth. According to the United Nations’ Human Development Report (2005) they are also the healthiest, as indicated by life expectancy, adult literacy, per capita income, educational attainment, gender equality, homicide rate, and infant mortality...Conversely, the fifty nations now ranked lowest in terms of the United Nations’ human development index are unwaveringly religious. (44)

Harris states that his intention in making this kind of statement is not to claim that religion is the reason why some of the “lowest ranked” nations suffer such perils but rather to illustrate that religion is not *necessary* to the healthy functioning of human society. However, the information that he chooses to provide is suggestive and troubling. The reader is left with a picture: on one end of the evolutionary scale, we have secular countries. On the other end, we have religious ones. Harris may not explicitly state that secularism is the more evolved worldview, but his quote invites us to see matters in evolutionary terms, or in terms of a particular narrative borne of the European Enlightenment.

Whereas Harris looks at the highly developed societies of secular states in order to frame secularism as a universally accessible solution to various social ills, scholars Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen perceive the same scenario and conclude that “[the presence of secular institutions] has taken forms that have empowered some people over and against others” (11). By this they mean to say that, since the secular progress narrative imagines secular culture as more advanced than religious culture, the narrative of secular progress affords special privileges to those who pertain to secular society. We will go on to see the problematic implications of this dynamic later on in this paper. First, however, it is crucial to acknowledge that the New Atheists are not the only ones who associate secularism with human progress and religion with retrogress. This kind of thinking constitutes a broader cultural attitude toward the religious. Yet, as we go on to further explore the historical context of the categories of the “secular” and the “religious” and their relation to one another, we will render this kind of evolutionary framework conceptually problematic.

In his essay, “Why We Need a Radical Redefinition of Secularism,” philosopher Charles Taylor writes, “There is certainly a common view that sees the Enlightenment...as a passage from darkness to light, that is, as an absolute, unmitigated move from a realm of thought full of error and illusion to one where the truth is at last available.” He goes on to explain the reactionary view, which holds that the Enlightenment would be “a massive forgetting of salutary and necessary truths about the human condition” (52). According to Taylor, the unfortunate reality of our present political climate has resulted in amplification of polarized views and a lack of attention to the more complex issues inherent in the debate. He writes, “In the polemics around modernity, more nuanced understandings tend to get driven to the wall, and these two [oppositional views] slug it out” (52). The New Atheists, it seems, fall on one side of this

dynamic, “fighting against” or “attacking” religion and glorifying the secular, scientific worldview.⁷ Their opponents, the outspoken, intolerant and politically active people of faith to whom they speak directly in their books, can be seen as the reactionary forces that Taylor describes as rebelling against the Enlightenment notions of secular progress. Both sides of the fight see themselves as estranged in all of the possible ways, duking it out from worlds apart. However, Taylor’s account complicates the issue a great deal, proposing that while secularism and its implications are fundamentally different from those of religion the two ways of viewing the world are more intertwined than we realize. We will go on explore this dynamic shortly. First, however, I will present one of the most prominent incarnations of the secular progress narrative.

The Secularization Thesis: A Master Narrative

The “Enlightenment narrative” or “progress narrative” described above is intimately connected to the rigorously debated concept of secularization. The “secularization thesis,” or the view that society is moving from heavy reliance on religious authority to a more secular or irreligious constitution, is often characterized by evolutionary rhetoric. The confident words written by anthropologist Anthony F. Wallis in 1966 illustrate this tendency: “[the] evolutionary future of religion is extinction...Belief in supernatural powers is doomed to die out, all over the world, as the result of the increasingly adequacy and diffusion of scientific knowledge” (qtd. in Gorski & Altinordu 56). However, contemporary events such as the rise of the Moral Majority in the United States, the Iranian Revolution, the downfall of Soviet communism and the rapid spread of Pentecostalism in Latin America have helped to spark a rigorous academic debate about the viability of the secularization thesis. While some scholars have seriously questioned

⁷ Taylor does not go so far as to say this in his essay, but it seems a reasonable extrapolation.

the notion that humanity is moving from religiosity to secularity, others have defended the secularization hypothesis, pointing to evidence such as low levels of Christian observance in Western Europe. Much of available scholarship on secularization is devoted to the upholding of one side of the debate as to whether or not it is really happening. Sociologists Philip S. Gorski and Ateş Altınordu explore this issue:

Debates about the meaning of the secularization concept or the implications of secularization theory are often thinly veiled debates about the reality of secularization and the future of religion. As a result, disentangling evidence from argument is not always easy. (62)

Instead of making a case about whether the secularization thesis is viable, I am more interested in the rhetoric around the debate itself and the unstated assumptions on both sides of the issue. I propose that by looking more closely at the secularization thesis and the controversy surrounding it, we can gain valuable insight into our cultural attitudes about the relationship between the secular and the religious.

The secularization thesis is connected to the progress narrative because both imagine moral evolution over time. While the secularization thesis does not necessarily imply that society becomes increasingly moral as it moves away from religion, secularization has often been viewed as the coming of age of mankind and regarded a sign of maturation and evolution (Lyon 229). In this sense, we might imagine that a narrative of progress could be implicit in one about secularization. This is because of the temporal element that gives the secularization thesis its moral meaning. Since the thesis imagines a secular future and a religious past, secular societies are viewed as ahead of the evolutionary curve, with religious societies lagging behind. Jackobsen and Pellegrini elaborate on this phenomenon in *Secularisms*:

If over time secularization allows societies to increase in autonomy, then secularization implies progress, whereas the continuation (or, still worse, reassertion) of religion maintains constraint and implies stasis or even regression. This temporal division implies a simultaneous moral division. Those societies that are ‘ahead’ are also understood to be ‘better’ – more rational and freer, for example – than those that are ‘behind.’ (6)

In this way, the secularization thesis is intimately tied to the secular progress narrative we discussed early in this chapter. From the evolutionary conception of the secular as “ahead” and religion as “behind,” Jackobsen and Pellegrini explain, the secular is seen as more peaceful than religion. They write, “According to the conventional ways of telling the story, secularism does not just promise the progress bought about by emancipation. It also promises peace, or at least a more peaceful resolution to conflicts” (9). In this way, we see yet again that secularism is not just about the absence of religion or about ontological “truth”; it is about the perceived significance of these things for the world. The New Atheists, in their insistent commitment to the secular over the religious, see themselves as advocating for a more just, peaceful future for humanity. We will return later to this idea of secularism as a means to peace and religion as an agent of violence in the following chapter.

We have seen that the secularization thesis often carries with it the assumption of secular progress. While some scholars have hotly contested the secularization thesis for decades, others have recently begun to discuss the viability of the secularization thesis on the grounds that it oversimplifies the story of secularism in modernity. Rather than claiming that secularization is or is not happening, these critics are more focused on the notion that secularism is somehow simply what is “left behind” in the wake of religion. Charles Taylor has coined these kinds of accounts

“subtraction stories.” According to Taylor, a subtraction story holds that “...we have just shucked off some false beliefs, baseless fears, and imagined objects” (“Western Secularity” 39). As an alternative to this view, Taylor proposes an analysis of what he sees as the dawning of a “secular age.” He describes the phenomenon of living in secular as opposed to religious times:

One of the big differences between our forerunners and us is that we live with a much firmer sense of the boundary between self and other. We are “buffered” selves. We have changed. We sometimes find it hard to be frightened the way they were, and, indeed, we tend to invoke the uncanny things they feared with a pleasurable frisson, as if sitting through films about witches and sorcerers. They would have found this incomprehensible. (39)

In this sense, while he disagrees with conventional formulations of the secularization thesis, Taylor acknowledges that the role of religion in our world has changed and that we have entered into a new secular era. However, instead of proposing that religion has exited the picture and left behind the neutral category of the secular, he is proposing that secularization has involved a change in sensibility. Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen describe the new secular situation: “It is an age in which most people in modern societies, including religious people, make sense of things entirely or mainly in terms of this-worldly causality” (10). This picture of secularization looks very different from the one we are offered by the conventional formulation of the secularization thesis, which fails to see the content of the thing we call the “secular.”

The New Atheist project often speaks in terms of subtraction stories. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Sam Harris writes, “Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply an admission of the obvious. In fact, ‘atheism’ is a term that should not even exist...” (51). In this way, he views religion as a lens which distorts the world, and atheism – or,

rather, secularism - as the state of viewing the world without mediation. Casanova writes that accounts like these "...disregard, indeed mask, the particular and contingent historicity of the process [of secularization], projecting it onto the level of universal human development" (56). For Casanova, Taylor's account of the secular age is viable, but general attitudes about the process of secularization are often misleading in their presentation of the secular as a neutral state or what is left behind when religious authority wanes. This is due to the fact that they ignore the broader historical context in which the notion of the secular first arose.

Blurring the "The Secular" and "The Religious"

In *Secularism & Secularity* Barry A. Kosmin engages in a close analysis of the language of the secular:

The terms 'secular,' 'secularism,' and 'secularization' have a range of meanings. The words derive from the Latin, *saeculum*, which means both this age and this world, and combines a spatial sense and a temporal sense. In the Middle ages, secular referred to priests who took vows of poverty and secluded themselves in monastic communities. These latter priests were called 'religious.' During the Reformation, secularization denoted a seizure of Catholic ecclesiastical properties by the state and their conversion to non-religious use. In all of these instances, the secular indicates a distancing from the sacred, the eternal, and the otherworldly. (2)

Here, we see that our understanding of the word "secularization" has evolved over time. Kosmin goes on to explain that modern sociological theories have come to view secularization as having to do with economic differentiation. He describes the process of differentiation as the division of labor into different "spheres," each governed by a different set of principles. He writes, "As a result [of differentiation], there is no master, integrating principle or narrative that holds social

life, institutions, ideas, and ideals together” (4). Whereas the Catholic Church once held ultimate authority over essentially all areas of social life, the Church eventually came to be designated to a particular sphere or realm of influence: the religious.

Like Kosmin, many scholars have recently become interested in the origins of what we think of as secular. Ultimately, these origins can be traced back to two main places. Firstly, there is the idea of the secular as it relates to the vocabulary of the Church. Originally, the term was not exactly juxtaposed with religion but rather with the notion of eternity. The description of secular was employed by the Church to describe priests who, instead of working within the realm of a religious order, served worldly parishes. In fact, the Church still uses the term this way (Kosmin 8). And it makes sense to think of these priests as secular; indeed, their daily lives involve helping laypeople with their experiences in the everyday world of the mundane. This can be contrasted with the lives of the monks, who spend their days in prayer and meditation, focused on the divine. On the other hand, however, we can also view the notion of the secular as an outgrowth of the seizure of control and authority from the hands of the Church by the secular state, a process called laicization. Casanova writes of the drive “...to emancipate all secular spheres from clerical-ecclesiastical control,” speaking to the way in which our conception of the secular has come about largely as a result of this political change (57).

While we can understand the origins of the category of the secular as stemming from certain distinctions within the Church as well as from the process of laicization, it is also possible to frame the secular in terms of its connection to Protestant Christian theology. One of the most distinguishing features of Protestant Christianity is its heavy emphasis on personal commitment and devotion as opposed to other dimensions of Christianity such as ritual. Taylor writes of the significance of this feature of Protestantism: “...a striking feature of the Western march toward

secularity is that it has been interwoven from the start with this drive toward a personal religion” (“Western Secularity” 38). The rise of Protestantism not only contributed to the shrinking of the Catholic Church’s domain of power, but it encouraged a more personal, democratized outlook on religious matters. Scholar David Lyon explains, “...theology embraced in its own bosom what others believed to be a serpent. Secularization, confusingly, but not illegitimately, was proposed as a valid interpretation of Christianity-human beings were at last enabled to fulfill their mandate to have dominion in the world” (231). And so, although it might seem “an epic irony,” the very roots of the category of the secular can be found in the essential claims of various Christian reform movements.

In the introduction to *Secularisms*, Jakobsen and Pellegrini pose the question, "How did it come to pass that secularism as a 'world' discourse was also intertwined with one particular religion?" (1). In presenting this question, Jakobsen and Pellegrini are not implying that secularism is a kind of veiled religion. Rather, they are pointing out that the true relationship between the secular and the religious is more complex than our dominant cultural narratives might suggest. What we regard as secularism, they propose, is not freestanding but rather “linked at its origins to a particular religion and a particular location, and...was maintained [over time by] a particular set of practices” (3). This recognition of the particularity of secularism in the West helps to call into question the assumed universality of the secular. “Secularism remains tied to a particular religion, just as the secular calendar remains tied to Christianity,” Jakobsen and Pellegrini boldly propose (3). When we think about our calendar, we do not regard it as being reflective of any religion. Most would say that our calendar is nothing but secular, a way of tracking our ordinary, worldly and time-bound lives. However, the “secular” calendar we utilize is tied to one particular religion: Christianity. The idea is not that the calendar is inherently

religious, but rather that it is not completely detached from or cleansed of religion. As members of Western Christian culture, whether or not we think of ourselves this way, we count our years starting from Jesus' birth, as though that were the beginning of time. Calendars from other traditions seem exotic and strange to us, or especially "religious." But it seems feasible that the Mayan or the Jewish calendars are no more religious than the one that even the most secular of Americans accept mindlessly. The point is that we do not see the ways in which religion has informed our "secular" or "modern" world and that, if we did, we would be more skeptical of the notion of secular progress.

Thus far, we have discussed some of the ways in which authors Jakobsen and Pellegrini believe our cultural ideas about secular are tied to the theological tenets of the Protestant reformation. In addition, they are also especially impressed with German sociologist Max Weber's account of the connection between the secular's freedom from religion and the freedom of economic markets in capitalist society. They write:

[In Weber's account], secularism's freedom from religion was also freedom for the market. This market freedom as not fully secular but was, in fact, tied to a specific form of religious activity – reformed Protestantism...Secularism and religion are in this sense coimplicated. Recognizing the co-origination of secularism and market-reformed Protestantism unmask the national and religious particularities that have come to pass as a universal secular. (3)

In this sense, in the same way that they utilize the example of our "secular" calendar, Jakobsen and Pellegrini are challenging the secular/religious binary by suggesting that our economic system, another fact of our culture we take to be wholly "secular," is actually rooted in certain formations of Protestant Christianity. This account of secularism stands in contrast to the

narrative with which we are familiar, the narrative that sees secularism as the result of what Charles Taylor refers to as “subtraction.” As we will see, this abandonment of a more simplistic notion of how we obtained the secular from the religious will fundamentally disturb the two categories as we currently know them.

We have seen the various ways in which the notion of the secular is connected at its origins to a particular religious tradition. However, the emergence of the very realm of the “religious” in the West is tied to the process of secularization; before secularization, there was no need to describe any particular institution or ideology as “religious” because there was no alternative. And it works both ways: the secular doesn’t just happen to be non-religious; it is by virtue of its very meaning the absence of religion. In order to fully communicate what we mean when we say “secular,” we must make reference to religion. In our rhetoric today, we constitute the secular in terms of the religious and the religious in terms of the secular. Already, we see, the strict binary between the religious and the secular is disturbed. Couldn’t we imagine that these two notions, dependent on each other for their very meanings, exist in a relationship other than mere diametrical opposition?

In their account, Calhoun, Juergensmeyer and VanAntwerpen explain that “...the term ‘religion’ was not one that was frequently used, even by Christians, until the Enlightenment’s deployment of the secular/religious distinction” (7). Religion, they go on to explain, only makes sense when it is juxtaposed with the secular. Interestingly, they point out that the word “religion” is often very difficult to translate into non-Western languages, speaking to the sense in which our conception of it is very much a product of our particular history. It was only through the process of colonization that the notion of the “religious” entered the consciousness of certain global cultures. Moreover, there is no consensus in the scholarly community as to what even constitutes

religion in our own culture. The New Atheists use the quality of the supernatural or belief on pure faith to define religion, but this is not necessarily an authoritative characterization. Without a clear idea of what the religious even is, it is difficult to put faith in (pun intended) the idea that it stands neatly away from something we call secular.

Secular Content

When we rethink the tight categories of the secular and the religious and come to see these categories blurring together into a more complex and nuanced picture, it is difficult to accept the presumption that the secular category is somehow a neutral, unpolluted domain of pure reason. Like religion, secularism has a story behind it, but scholars have largely ignored that story. Casanova writes of this issue, "... 'the religious' and 'the secular' are always and everywhere mutually constituted. Yet while the social sciences have dedicated much effort to the scientific study of religion, the task of developing a reflexive anthropology and sociology of the secular is only now beginning" (54). In other words, there is a sheer lack of inquiry into the secular as a phenomenon. And, as scholars Gorski and Altnordu explain, this might be because the scholarly world has often treated "... secularism as a vacuum of meaning and moral content ... [and as a] rational, and neutral way of ordering social and political life" (73). Here, we are reminded of Harris's description of atheism as a plain "admission of the obvious" as well as Dennett's instincts about delegating the study of religion to the scientific disciplines (Harris 51; Dennett 39). Is the secular worldview really this? Moving forward, we will approach the New Atheist project with a special awareness of the fact that secularism, rather than being a neutral default position, has its own content and history, which, like religion, is culturally bound.

For the New Atheists, the disproof of God and promotion of atheism is not only a means of ensuring that people do not adhere to ontological falsehoods; it is the necessary groundwork

for the promotion of secularism as a worldview. According to the voices of New Atheism, secularism involves casting off religion and adhering to the universal discourse of reason, which is inherently more peaceful, democratic and thus more civilized than the religious alternative. But this picture of the secular as the sole product of a subtractive equation is difficult to accept. No discourse exists in a vacuum, be that secular or religious discourse; just as human culture has been imperative in the formation of religions, it has been imperative in the formation of the secular worldview. Every human discourse can be traced back to its socio-historical roots, and so necessarily carries with it, implicitly or explicitly, markers of its cultural origins.

In a 2008 interview with journalist Ronald A. Kuipers, Charles Taylor refers to the “master narrative of secularization.” This narrative, he proposes, is harmful: “. . .the problem with . . .what’s called the secularization thesis, that people got lulled into – you know, that religion is a thing of the past, that it’s disappearing, that it did all these terrible things but it’s going to go away and so on – [is that when] it comes back people are just undone” (Kuipers). In the case of the New Atheists, religion is one of the principle causes of violence and misery in the world and the adoption of a secular worldview is the only viable option for humanity. The fact that secularization has not happened in the way that scholars once confidently assured us that it would leads the New Atheists to conclude, if rather hastily, that religion is at fault for modernity’s most shameful feature: the persistence of large-scale violence, ignorance and hatred amidst glorious advances in science and technology. In the next chapter, I will go on to discuss the way in which a more nuanced understanding of the relation between the secular and the religious pose some serious problems for the New Atheist argument that religion is a wellspring of violence in our world.

CHAPTER 2

Is Religion Inherently Violent?

In the previous chapter, I argued that the categories of the “secular” and the “religious” are historically tied and thus conceptually intertwined. Through disturbing the neatness of these two categories, I challenged the validity of certain narratives of progress that have long reigned authoritative in the imagination of the colonial West. Without the ability to conceptually distill the world of the religious, I proposed, the notions of secular progress and religious regress appear artificial and contrived. Disrupting the divide between the secular and religious, however, is more than a mere philosophical exercise. It also has great implications for the critical question nested at the heart of the New Atheist polemic: *Is religion to blame for the violent atrocities that humanity has committed against itself?* Or is religion merely prone to being mixed up with and involved in human violence? In this chapter, I will be exploring this issue at two levels. Firstly, I will look at some of the major scholarship on the alleged causal relationship between religion and violence. Then, I will pry deeper into the meaning of the word “violence” and show that it refers not only to political acts of war, terrorism and genocide but also to debilitating systems of oppression that have victimized the vulnerable throughout history. Next, I will argue that it would be a vast intellectual oversimplification to understand religion in and of itself as a motivating cause of political violence, and that to do so would have dangerous repercussions for our world. Finally, I will turn to consider the implications of New Atheism for the historically oppressed, and question whether the failure of New Atheism to acknowledge its own biases is perpetuating unconscious attitudes that contribute to unjust social hierarchies.

The Accusation Against Religion

In my earlier discussion of what I have referred to as the New Atheist ethic of epistemology, we saw that New Atheism prioritizes an empirical, secularist understanding of the world for moral as well as intellectual reasons. To accept as true only that which can be verified by scientifically sanctioned evidence, for the New Atheists, is not only superior because it results in a greater accuracy of human understanding; it also has serious ethical implications for humanity. There is a lot at stake in the New Atheist ethic of epistemology. The “fundamentalist” religious strains that New Atheism decries behold their own moral codes as matters of urgent life-or-death significance, and New Atheism’s moral polemic against religion is no less potent. This ethical reading of New Atheism, I have argued, explains why the New Atheists have advocated so vigorously for secularism as the solution to the world’s greatest problems, and even serves to elucidate their arguably evangelistic practices of spreading atheism to the masses.

At the heart of the New Atheist ethic there is the belief that religion, superstition and all worldviews that sanction faith as a way of understanding the world underlie the unshakability of human violence. In “On Religious Violence and Social Darwinism in New Atheism” philosopher Adam Scarfe writes, “For the New Atheists, religion creates divisions among people. It breeds terrorism and violence, and it threatens to extinguish civilization as we know it, rather than promoting the peace and harmony it so generally espouses” (58). One of the few scholars writing explicitly about the relationship between religion and violence in New Atheism, Scarfe points to several places in the New Atheist canon where religion is depicted as inherently violent:

[Christopher] Hitchens reveals his anxiety that “people of faith are in their different ways planning our and my destruction, and the destruction of [our] . . . hard-won human attainments.” Similarly, according to Dennett, today, religionists

are actively seeking to bring “celestial justice to those they consider sinners.” For Harris, “religious violence is . . . with us because our religions are intrinsically hostile to one another,” and technological advances “in the art of war have rendered our religious differences—and hence our religious beliefs—antithetical to our survival.” Religion, for Harris, is an impediment to global civilization because “competing religious doctrines have shattered our world into separate moral communities, and these divisions have become a continual source of human conflict.” (58)

In these selections that Scarfe provides, we can see that the New Atheists view religion as a blameworthy institution.⁸ And although Daniel Dennett acknowledges that religion is responsible for both good and bad and Sam Harris acknowledges the way in which the “spiritual” aspects of religion are important, the fact remain that none of the New Atheists actually take the positive aspects of religion seriously (Dennett 45; Harris 87). We will return to this idea later on in this chapter.

Perhaps the most clear and striking example of the way in which the New Atheists perceive a causal relationship between religion and violence can be found in the preface to Richard Dawkins’s *The God Delusion*. He writes:

In January 2006 I presented a two-part television documentary on British television (Channel Four) called *Root of All Evil?* From the start, I didn’t like the title and fought it hard. Religion is not the root of *all* evil, for no one thing is the root of all anything. But I was delighted with the advertisement that Channel Four put in the national newspapers. It was a picture of the Manhattan skyline with the

⁸ Scarfe goes on to make the case that New Atheism has socially Darwinistic tendencies. I do not espouse this particular view in my account, but nonetheless his characterization of New Atheism’s stance on religion and violence is elucidating.

caption ‘Imagine a world without religion.’ What was the connection? The twin towers of the World Trade Center were conspicuously present....Imagine, with John Lennon, a world with no religion. Imagine no suicide bombers, no 9/11, no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as ‘Christ-killers’, no Northern Ireland ‘troubles’, no ‘honour killings’, no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money (‘God wants you to give till it hurts’). Imagine no Taliban to blow up ancient statues, no public beheadings of blasphemers, no flogging of female skin for the crime of showing an inch of it. (25-26)

And so, according to Dawkins, religion is not the root of *all* evil, but it takes its fair share of blame. We might wonder whether by “evil” Dawkins really means “violence.” As far as this paper is concerned, when the New Atheists speak of “evil” they are indeed referring to violence, even if not the kinds of things that the word “violence” would refer to instinctually. Later on in this chapter we will explore the relationship between violence, evil and the New Atheist ethic more deeply. But what we must now take away from the New Atheists is their claim that religion is to blame for a great deal of gratuitous death and suffering in the world and that, in order to curtail this death and suffering, religion must be obliterated or, at the very least, drastically changed.

As human civilization has soared to unforeseen heights of technological and scientific sophistication, we have, as a global community, continually failed to make similar progress in terms of how we treat one another. The 20th century saw some of the most grotesque and inhumane violence in all of human history, and our violent actions towards each other continue

into the present day. Many have wondered why, in spite of having come so far intellectually, humanity's inclination towards violence has seemed to remain stagnant. The New Atheists claim that religion is one of the major wellsprings of violence in the contemporary world and strive to debunk the notion that religion can serve as a legitimate force for peace. They are frustrated with the liberal sentiment that religion is well-intentioned and innocent institution vulnerable to being hijacked by human aggressors and used to carry out political violence. Instead, they claim, it is a popular and appealing mode of thinking and understanding the world that leads people to become violent due to certain specific characteristics that it possesses. In this way, the persistence of religion helps to explain why humanity continues to rage against itself with increasing destructive capacity.

This being said, it is not my intention to denigrate the New Atheist view. Certainly the thinkers behind the New Atheist movement understand very well that human violence is a complex phenomenon and recognize that peace on earth would require more than just the doing away with religion. Rather, the idea that I am advancing here is that the New Atheists see religion as a major threat to the attainment of world peace. Its cultural specificity and failure to universalize according to the laws of logic and empirical science render it a threat to non-violent human discourse. I would suggest that the reason why the New Atheists are so motivated to denounce religion publicly is because they feel motivated to help curtail the pain, suffering and death for which they think the institution of religion is responsible. In other words, I think their intentions are pure. What I will critique is the way in which their view relies on the idea that secularism is somehow an inherently peaceful alternative that must replace religion in order to prevent violence.

What is Violence?

Before going on to discuss at length the relationship between religion and violence it is critical to first establish what we mean by “violence.” When we think about religious violence, we are provoked to remember history lessons on the crusades and horrific images of toppling skyscrapers broadcast on television screens. But religious violence has many forms. Forms of violent colonialist, racist, sexist and classist oppression have also transpired under the banner of religion over the course of centuries. Some of the ways in which religiously associated violence occurs are so subtle and so normative that we may not even notice them, or they may be hidden behind closed doors. We can imagine that American Christian virtues of obedience and humility helped to keep countless African Americans, women and other oppressed groups in subjugation for most of American history, or that Hinduism’s caste system is reflected in the vast social inequalities that plague Indian society today. No matter what stance one takes on the question of whether or not religion is the cause of violence, it would be difficult to deny that there is at the very least a major and troublesome correlation at hand that is ripe for investigation, and that this correlation is not limited to religious wars and terrorist attacks by extremists.

This chapter’s discussion will concern the relationship between religion and what we might conventionally think of as violence. Later on in this paper, however, I will go on to broaden the definition of violence a great deal in order to explore how religion may or may not be responsible for deep seated institutions of social oppression that have fueled much of the violent hardship that Americans have undergone and still experience today. By thinking about violence in terms of systemic oppression and broadening the scope of this discussion to include violence as it relates to race, class and gender in America, it is my hope that this account will take into consideration the perspectives of those who are not represented in New Atheist

leadership and underrepresented in the movement at large and yet those who, as a broader demographic, have been seriously victimized by religion.

Questioning Cause and Effect

As we have seen, many posit that religion is greatly inclined towards violence and that, for this reason, secular institutions should absorb power from religion in the name of peace. Theologian William T. Cavanaugh asserts, "...what is implied in the conventional wisdom that religion is prone to violence is that Christianity, Islam, and other faiths are *more* inclined toward violence than ideologies and institutions that are identified as 'secular'" ("Does Religion"). In the previous chapter, I drew heavily from *Secularisms*, an anthology co-edited by Janet R. Jakobsen and Ann Pellegrini, in order to show that the conceptual categories of the "secular" and the "religious" are more historically and philosophically related than is generally acknowledged. The purpose of challenging the delineation of the categories of the "secular" and the "religious," however, has critical implications for our exploration of the theme of religion and violence. Cavanaugh explains, "What I call the 'myth of religious violence' is the idea that religion is a transhistorical and transcultural feature of human life, essentially distinct from secular features such as politics and economics, which has a peculiarly dangerous inclination to promote violence" (*The Myth of Religious Violence* 3). In other words, when the very feasibility of separating the religious from the secular is called into question, it is impossible to sustain any kind of argument in favor of the idea that religion is to blame for violence. This is because, without a clean separation between the religious and secular worldviews, the two categories are co-implicated.

Before her work on *Secularisms*, Janet Jakobsen wrote an essay entitled "Is Secularism Less Violent than Religion?" in which she explores the question of whether we ought take

seriously the idea that religion is more violent than secularism. She is especially interested in exploring the soundness of the popular notion that secularism, as a worldview, is inherently more peaceful than religious alternatives. For Jakobsen, blaming religion for human brutality is not only intellectually incoherent; it is also a dangerous practice that fuels the vicious cycle of violence. We will return to this idea in a moment.

Jakobsen begins her argument by pointing out that while religion has certainly supported many atrocious acts of violence in the world, it has also been used as a great tool for peace. She writes, “Just as some of the most horrendous militarism and violence in the history of our ever smaller world has been religiously motivated, so has some of the most grand and most successful efforts for peace and peaceful social change been religiously grounded” (50). Jakobsen is not alone in her assertion that religion has played a tremendous role in the resolution of social conflict and pursuit of peace. From the Christian liberation theology of Latin America to Quaker teachings on non-violence to the American civil rights movement of the previous century, it seems absurd to speak only of religion’s involvement in transgressions against humanity without acknowledging its prouder moments. In his 2004 essay, “Is Religion the Problem?,” scholar Mark Juergensmyer puts it eloquently: “We know that there are strata of religious imagination that deal with all sides and moods of human existence, the peace and the perversity, the tranquility and the terror” (5). Neither Juergensmyer nor Jakobsen stop short of saying that religion is often behind violent acts, but both authors feel compelled to qualify this by reminding readers that religion is also behind some of the most inspiring moments of human history.

Closely tied to Jakobsen’s assertion about religion as an instrument of peace is her opinion on the possible political role of religion. She seems to suggest that in the same way that

we often forget the way that religion has served and continues to serve as a force for peace, we also forget that it has often played an important role in advancing progressive social causes. Today, because popular American Christianity has come to be so strongly associated with political and social conservatism, it is easy to forget that religion is not always married to a conservative political agenda. Scholar EJ Dionne touches on this issue in his writings on religion and American public life. He explains:

On significant parts of the right and left, there is a sense that religion always has been and always will be a conservative force. There are Republican candidates and political operatives who assume that religious people live on the political right, care primarily about issues such as gay marriage and abortion, and will forever be part of the GOP's political base. There are liberals - though fewer than conservatives think - who buy this Republican account and write off religious people as backward and reactionary busybodies obsessed with sex. (1)

While we will be exploring Dionne's account on religion and liberalism in the coming chapter, his assertion that religion in America is not inherently aligned with conservative politics resonates well with Jakobsen's position. She writes, "...religion is not always and everywhere conservative. In the United States, we need only think of the religious roots of the civil rights movement to see that religion can be a force for progressive as well as for conservative social change....These facts [run] counter to the dominant narratives of the mainstream media" (53). In this way, we can see that, like Dionne, she is concerned with revealing the ways in which contemporary political events and media coverage offer a misleading picture of religion's true political identity.

Although Jakobsen may be correct in saying that religion can be progressive, it does not necessary follow that religion bears no blame for violence. So why does Jakobsen bring up the issue of political conservatism in relation to her discussion of religion as a source of violence? And, furthermore, why would an understanding of religion as a liberal political force undermine the notion that religion is to blame for violence? Firstly, many of the same people who denounce religion on the grounds that it gives way to violence take issue with the contemporary rise of the conservative Religious Right in American politics. This demographic is often greatly critical of the acts of violence carried out by the U.S. military in response to the rising threat of terrorism under the Bush administration; namely, the two foreign wars initiated in response to the perceived threat of terrorism after 9/11. By questioning the presupposition that religion is inherently politically conservative, Jakobsen challenges some of the underlying reasoning behind the common idea that religion is inherently violent. This is not to say, of course, that a conservative person could not regard religion as a significant source of violence in the world, but Jakobsen seems to be targeting a particular subset of the population in her paper, a politically liberal subset that, perhaps due to recent political affairs, views religion as unique threat to global peace.

In addition to the argument that religion has been used to facilitate peace and progress as well as violence and regress, there is also the idea that secularism, or that the secularist state itself, has been a great source of violence. Jakobsen writes, "...the most horrific and deadly wars of the twentieth century, particularly the two world wars, were pursued by putatively secular nation-states" (53). In this way, she aims to weaken the argument that religion is really a major cause of violence by showing that violence – most violence, even - transpires outside the influence of religion. In pointing out the various ways that the relationship between religion and

violence is indeed messier than it is often portrayed to be, Jakobsen nudges readers toward a particular conclusion; namely, that religion, although often associated with violence, is not in and of itself a violent phenomenon. Taking this a step further, Jakobsen will also go on to argue that the promotion of secularism over religion in the name of peace can have violent repercussions of its own.

Violence and the Progress Narrative

As I have already stated, the strict separation and hierarchal ordering of the “secular” and the “religious” do not hold very well when placed in socio-historical context. Since this separation is critical to what I have introduced as the “secular progress narrative,” to challenge it is to also challenge the idea that secularism is more progressive than religion. In Jakobsen’s account, the notion that religion is inherently violent stems from this narrative and serves the purpose of perpetuating a dangerous myth that unfairly favors some over others. She explains, “The idea that secularism is the best response to religious violence is part of the progress narrative that organizes modernity. In this story, progress is marked by an advance from religious faith to secular reason. Secularism is an advance over religion because reason provides a means of resolving conflict without violence” (58). While she is careful to specify that religious groups do indeed sometimes sanction violence, she holds that the condemnation of religion as a distinguished cause of violence in the world is unfounded. Beyond this, though, it also stems from a particular problematic outlook that has reigned in the imagination of the West.

According to thinkers like Jakobsen, we ought to be careful not to mindlessly accept the secular progress narrative. The narrative, she explains, serves to perpetuate the very violence that it seeks to prevent. For example, violence sanctioned by a “reasonable” and “rational” secular

state is all too hastily accepted as legitimate and right when we conceive of the secular state and peace as compatible and naturally aligned. She writes:

...we must recognize that since the horrible day of September 11th, 2001 we have witnessed a massive storm of governmental violence in relation to a smaller wave of terrorist attacks. In terms of numbers, we can have no doubt that more people have died in the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq than in isolated terrorist attacks, and that many of these people have been civilians. And, we must remember that this last war was pre-emptive. If the question is one of quantity – of ‘less’ and ‘more’ – we have to say that states, and modern secular states in particular, have the lock on “more.” They have the weapons, and they use them. (Jakobsen 65)

Because the popular notion of secular progress implies that religion is more culturally specific and particular and that secularism is a universally adaptable discourse, many are driven to hastily conclude that religion is more violent than secularism. We accept state sanctioned “secular” violence as an inevitable fact of the modern world, watching the death count of present day wars climb higher and higher on our television screens. And yet, because this violence is violence that has been justified by secular institutions, we are slower to criticize it than we are religiously justified violence. We shake our heads but are sooner to blame the hyper religious “other” than we are to examine our own destructive maneuvers. Cavanaugh shares this view. He writes, “religion-and-violence arguments serve a particular need for their consumers in the West. These arguments are part of a broader Enlightenment narrative that has invented a dichotomy between the religious and the secular and constructed the former as an irrational and dangerous impulse....” He goes on to warn, “...institutions labeled secular can be just as absolutist, divisive, and irrational as those labeled religious” (*The Myth of Religious Violence* 6). In this sense, the

authority of the secular progress narrative that presents secularism as somehow more peaceful than religion can help to disguise unjustified violence as justified.

In *The Myth of Religious Violence*, Cavanaugh also references an October 2001 *New York Times* article written by the conservative political journalist Andrew Sullivan. The article, entitled “This *Is* a Religious War,” is referenced as an example “of how the myth of religious violence appears in public discourse to establish a sharp contrast between *our* peaceableness and *their* violence” (202). In his attempt to call attention to the religious nature of the conflict, Cavanaugh points out that Sullivan’s line of argument creates a hierarchal social order in which the secular West is portrayed as more civilized and peaceful than the religious Middle East. As we saw in the previous chapter, the notion that secularism is somehow universal or objective is tenuous. After all, it emerged from a very singular cultural context. So, while it seems perfectly relevant and obvious to some, it might seem foreign and threatening to others. Passively accepting what Cavanaugh refers to as “conventional wisdom” about the peacefulness of the secular state and the violent tendency of religion, it seems, can serve to obscure the graveness of the violence undertaken by the secular state, which is not *necessarily* any more inherently peaceful than a religious actor (185).

In addition to the worry that the secular progress narrative serves to legitimate potentially unjustified violence, there is also the worry that this narrative functions to fuel political hostility between different groups. As Juergensmeyer argues in his essay “Rethinking Secular and Religious Aspects of Violence,” the narrative of secular progress can serve to oppress those religious groups who are relegated by it and cause them to attempt to reclaim their power through the execution of violent acts. He writes:

Behind many of the strident new religious movements that have arisen around the world in recent years lie some common themes. Regardless of their religious tradition—from Islamic jihadist militants to Jewish anti-Arab activists to Christian militia in the United States—the activists involved in these movements are parts of communities that perceive themselves to be fragile, vulnerable, and under siege from a hostile secular world. (185)

Juergensmyer goes on to conclude that condemning and shutting out religion is not the proper way to facilitate peace. Rather, he proposes, “. . .the solution to religious violence is not more violence but more religion” (Juergensmyer 8). What he means by this is that in order to solve the problem of religiously charged fighting, it is necessary to be more thoughtful about what religion really is and what it means to the people who commit violence in its name.

Religion, Social Oppression and Violence

Thus far, I have challenged New Atheism’s proposal that the promotion of secularism is the proper response to religiously affiliated violence. Now, I will discuss the ways in which the notion of secular progress that I have challenged is capable of upholding oppressive social hierarchies. As I have previously implied, these hierarchies are inherently violent in that they have served to keep marginalized social groups in subjugation for most of recorded history. A discussion of religion and violence would be incomplete without mention of them, and they constitute, in my view, one of the most problematic aspects of the notion of secular progress espoused by New Atheism.

As we have seen, New Atheism considers religion to be at the root of a great deal of social oppression. In fact, as we saw earlier, the New Atheists identify strongly with the struggles of a myriad of socially oppressed groups, and compare their cause to the gay and women’s rights

movements. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes, “The status of atheists today in America is on a par with that of homosexuals fifty years ago” (26). He also utilizes feminist language with respect to “consciousness raising,” and implies that the atheist movement should learn from the successes of social liberation movements of the past (28). Daniel Dennett’s use of the term “bright” to describe a non-believer is consistent with Dawkins’s ideas, and he even explicitly states in *Breaking the Spell* that the term was inspired by the gay movement’s appropriation of the term “queer” (21).⁹

I agree wholeheartedly with the New Atheists that atheists in our culture today are, on the whole, subjected to a great deal of social injustice and even violent oppression. The facts are as they stand: violent hate crimes against atheists are a tragic and pathetic fact of life in America today and Americans would sooner elect a Mormon or gay president than they would an atheist (Dawkins 28). New Atheist identification with other socially oppressed groups makes a great deal of sense, and I believe their mission to defend the rights of non-believers in the face of great adversity is highly honorable and of critical importance. However, although the New Atheists’ identification with these groups is justifiable, their failure to acknowledge the ways in which issues of race, class, gender and other forms of cultural privilege relate to their work, and specifically to their endorsement of secular progress, is problematic.

A Closer Look at Race, Class and Gender in New Atheism

Even though the New Atheists identify strongly with oppressed groups because they have been subjugated in various ways as a result of their disbelief, some thinkers are speaking out critically against the New Atheists for their failure to acknowledge the race, class and gender biases inherent in their case against religion. In an article entitled “New Atheism and the Old

⁹ Interestingly, the New Atheist appropriation of the term “bright” is one of the issues that divide the four horsemen. Whereas Dennett has embraced the term, Dawkins finds it elitist and has spoken out against it (Dawkins 380).

Boys' Club," published in 2011 in *Bitch Magazine*, Victoria Bekiempis accuses New Atheism but especially the mainstream media of machismo and serious gender bias when it comes to disbelief. She writes sarcastically:

Women are God-fearing and don't challenge institutions. Men, on the other hand, are skeptical and rational, and go out of their way to publicly call bullshit on faith and religion—which is why today's well-known secular thinkers, especially in the ranks of the New Atheism movement, are all male. (Bekiempis)

Bekiempis goes on to point out that although women have been triumphs of the secular cause for decades, the New Atheist movement, which has garnered so much media attention and a tremendous profit in book sales and speaking engagements, is male-dominated. She points out that an internet search for New Atheist women is more likely to yield the personal blogs of men complaining about not being able to find non-believing girlfriends than it is to provide any useful information for women atheists. Furthermore, in her 2011 book entitled *Moral Combat*, sociologist and atheist of color Sikivu Hutchinson describes New Atheism and as an "elite white alpha dog world." She writes, "There is little analysis of the relationship between economic disenfranchisement, race, gender, and religiosity in New Atheist or secular humanist critiques of organized religion. It is for this reason that much of New Atheist critique has limited cultural relevance for people of color" (199). Although there are few sources at hand that deal explicitly with issues of privilege and how they relate to the New Atheists project, Hutchinson's recent account is quite thorough in its treatment, and attempts to discuss the implications of secularism for at-risk groups and for their supporters.

It may seem peculiar to bring up issues of privilege in a chapter on New Atheism and violence. However, the scholars we have seen so far have made the case that a lack of

acknowledgement of cultural bias on the part of privileged groups fuels the fire of religious conflict. Similarly, I propose, failure on the part of the New Atheist movement to acknowledge its privileged standpoint on the secularist scene serves to uphold structures of oppression that facilitate violence against those who do not enjoy “New Atheist privilege.” To the extent that New Atheism is monopolized by the “four [white, Anglo-Saxon, wealthy, well-educated] horsemen,” it will fail to be an inclusive movement with universal applicability. And many aspects of the white, masculinist culture embodied by the New Atheist movement relate directly to the cultural specificity of Enlightenment progress ideology that we discussed earlier in this chapter and in the previous one.

Although they intend no such offense, the New Atheists’ espousal of the secular as more highly evolved than the religious has some problematic implications given that social groups like women and African Americans tend to be more religious than the populace at large. The Pew Forum’s 2009 study entitled “A Religious Portrait of African Americans” revealed that, although 2% of the total American population self-identifies as atheist, only .5% of the African American population does. Furthermore, 79% of African Americans polled said that religion was “very important” to them whereas only 56% of Americans responded this way (Pew Forum 2009). In addition, sociologist Darren E. Sherkat, who studies belief in the United States, writes, “Women choose significantly more faithful stances about god when compared to men. Net of other factors, being female increases the odds of holding more confident beliefs about god by seventy-two percent” (452). While it is not my aim to speculate as to the reason behind this higher level of religious observance among African Americans and women, it seems helpful to remember that religion has served as a liberating force (as well as an oppressive one) for disenfranchised groups throughout history. I will go on to further discuss the implications of this in the coming chapter

but now would like to suggest that, although they frame their argument in universal terms, the New Atheists' call to reason has different implications for disenfranchised demographics (i.e., women and people of color), *who are more religious*, than those who enjoy higher levels of social privilege and are less religious. In this way, claims of secular progress are especially loaded for those who, on the basis of their religious beliefs, would be deemed less enlightened by the New Atheists.

Hutchinson, with a keen eye to the social context in which Enlightenment progress narratives of secular progress first arose, elaborates on the danger that these narratives pose in their hierarchal ordering of the secular over the religious:

Enlightenment values such as rationalism and empiricism were informed by white supremacy. Here, the black body provided the basis for validation of empirical methods of categorizing race and defining racial difference. The intersection of white supremacy, Judeo Christian ideology, and Enlightenment epistemology established hierarchies of masculine/feminine, black/white, civilized/savage that legitimized racist and sexist views of white women and people of color. (34)

In this way, we see that the cultural specificity of secularism that we discussed in the previous chapter renders narratives of secular progress extremely problematic. Perhaps for the New Atheists, the history underlying these narratives is irrelevant, and conversation around religion and violence ought to be limited to a discussion of the current affairs on the ground. However, for Hutchinson, to espouse secular progress without acknowledging its problematic historical roots is socially irresponsible.

In this discussion of social oppression and the notion of secular progress, it is important to keep in mind New Atheism's identification with underprivileged groups and status as a

persecuted, underrepresented group itself. Hutchinson argues that this leads the New Atheists to feel somehow immune to the problem of privilege bias when she writes, "...for some reason many white atheist humanists believe that just being an atheist magically exempts them from the institutionally racist belief systems and practices of dominant culture" (213). As we have seen, New Atheists relate to the experiences of the socially oppressed, and for good reasons. However, in spite of being underprivileged in certain ways, the secularist culture at large is heavily dominated by educated white males. According to the American Religious Identification Survey of 2001, about 70% of America's self-identifying atheists are male (Keysar 35). Furthermore, Shekrat explains, "education is particularly predictive of being agnostic versus being an absolute believer" (452). According to Hutchinson, because the history of knowledge production in our culture has been so heavily dominated by white males, it is particularly problematic to find a movement comprised almost exclusively by educated, wealthy males of European descent claiming ownership of a universally valid and urgent worldview. She writes, "Many humanists and atheists of color look around and see a movement whose public face and official leadership is white and largely male" (Hutchinson 205).

Earlier, we discussed ways in which religion has served as a vehicle for peace as well as violence. However, what we did not discuss is the way in which religion, in addition to aiding in various peace movements, has been a "social and historical necessity" for many groups throughout history (Hutchinson 224). To appeal to the objectivity of science and argue that religion is simply untrue, as the New Atheists do repeatedly in their writings, does not do much to address the fact that oppressed groups have clung to religion for their most basic human needs for centuries. It is much easier for a white, wealthy, educated man to shed his religious beliefs than it is for a black, uneducated female dependent on her church for basic welfare to do the

same. This, of course, does not disprove or invalidate the New Atheist case against religion, but it does reveal an underdeveloped aspect of the secularist account and render the New Atheist espousal of secular progress problematic. The issue of privilege and the significance of religion for the historically oppressed is an important aspect of American religion that is simply ignored by New Atheism. Hutchinson writes, “[The New Athiests] provide no sociological insight into why organized religion and religiosity have an enduring hold on disenfranchised communities in the richest, most powerful nation on the planet” (24). Furthermore, she argues, blaming violence and social ills on religion distracts from the fact that secular, governmental institutions are to blame for much of the institutionalized violence and oppression against the underprivileged. The New Atheists are quick to blame religious institutions for keeping the disenfranchised in subjection, but do not consider the possibility that “secular” shortcomings like the lack of quality public education, affordable healthcare and other social resources could be at the root of the problem.

In the previous section of this chapter we saw that blaming religion for violence, in addition to causing increased tensions and frustrations and contributing to conflict, distracts from or masks the fallibility of violent secular institutions. In this same sense, failing to take into account the way in which socially oppressed groups have been wronged by secular institutions and blaming religious institutions for taking their money, corrupting their education, stunting them emotionally and preventing them from being freethinkers is also a distraction from the critical issue at hand. When he was asked by reporter Deborah Solomon, “Wouldn't it be more worthwhile to spend your time and research money looking for a cure for AIDS?”, Daniel Dennett replied, “How about if we study hatred and fear? Don't you think that would be worthwhile?” (“The Nonbeliever”). In other words, for Dennett, religion is a major source of

hatred and fear. And yet, secular institutions have failed repeatedly to provide for those who are needy by no fault of their own, and people have relied on religion to meet their needs. It is my view that shifting blame onto religion is a dangerous response to America's failure to care for its most vulnerable citizens, and stark realities of social injustice ought to be addressed by New Atheism if the movement is at all serious about promoting peace. After all, as confirmed by the World Health Organization, poverty - and not religious violence - is the greatest danger to humankind (Farmer 50).

In this chapter I have discussed the issue of religion and violence, and have tried to touch upon the ways in which blaming religion for violence is a problematic practice that threatens to hinder efforts to attain peace. First, I looked at sources that discuss religion and the traditional conception of violence, and explored ways in which the secular progress narrative can provide unjustified validation of secular institutions' violent actions. I also proposed that failing to take into account the complexity of religion and its meaning for peoples' lives can lead to increased tension and hostility between groups. I then moved on to explore the significance of New Atheism for historically oppressed groups, and ultimately made the case that New Atheism's failure to acknowledge its own race, class and gender biases has problematic implications for its ultimate goal of providing a universal plan decreasing violence.

CHAPTER 3

New Atheism, Religion and Public Life in America

In the previous chapter, we saw that the New Atheists view religion as a major wellspring of violence in our world and blame it for humanity's failure to progress past self-destructive behavior. By calling into question some of the underlying assumptions in this argument, I made the case that the true relationship between religion and violence is not one of direct causation. I went so far as to claim that blaming religion for human violence is a practice that fuels vicious cycles of antagonism between groups of people, a practice that is at best inefficacious but potentially very dangerous. The notion that religion is inherently violent has some major implications for the New Atheist account, especially when it comes to the New Atheist stance on the role of religion in American public life. Because of their understanding of religion as an inherently violent force in the world, the New Atheists argue strongly in favor of keeping religion out of the public domain on the grounds that not doing so would violate basic freedoms of non-religious Americans and empower religious people to commit potentially violent acts in the name of their beliefs. In this chapter, I will suggest that this political stance is both a manifestation of a perceived bifurcation or "culture war" in America between religiously conservative and politically progressive individuals as well as a polarizing instrument that serves to exacerbate political discord between these groups. Then, I will touch on how the New Atheist political stance on the issue of religion and public life is inconsistent with the American liberal tradition of multiculturalism and tolerance. I will ultimately make the case that the New Atheist desire to expunge religion from American public life is based on a faulty conception of American pluralism and a neglect to acknowledge the sophisticated political philosophy that undergirds it.

Imagining the Public Sphere

Before moving forward, I hope to clarify what I mean when I talk about the place or debated role of religion in American politics or in American “public life.” I struggle with these words because of their lack of precision, and I will take special care not to conflate them in this section. While I would classify the debate about the proper role of religion in American public life as a *political* one, this chapter is not confined to the discussion of religion and politics. I will discuss places where religion and politics overlap; for example, I will make frequent reference to the rise of the Religious Right in the United States at the end of the 20th century. However, I recognize that the word “political” does not describe what is really at stake for those of us who grapple

with the question of what role of religion should play in our society. Instead of focusing solely on “religion and politics,” then, I hope to address generally the specific phenomenon of religion in American public life. My hope is that the term “public life” will direct the mind to recall an almost physical space or domain. The scope of this domain would be impossible to delineate exactly, but definitely includes the public roads we travel to work and then back home again, the schools where we send our children to become educated and the hospitals where our community members enter and leave the world, among other places. These kinds of spaces—in addition to our governing institutions—constitute the contested territory in the debate over religion’s proper place in American society.

Constitutional Contradictions

The United States is a particularly rich arena for investigation of religion and public life because of its ongoing struggle to honor its supreme law of religious freedom and anti-establishment, which is outlined in the first constitutional amendment of the Bill of Rights. The amendment reads, “Congress shall make respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting

the free exercise thereof...” (United States “First Amendment”). This guarantees both religious freedom to the American people and simultaneously prohibits the official establishment of any one religion by the federal government. As we will see, Americans of all religious backgrounds and political persuasions have struggled to interpret this seemingly contradictory official stance on the proper domain of religion in American public life. While the New Atheists view their strict position against the inclusion of religion in politics as recommended by the United States Constitution, many religious Americans are equally as confident that their freedom to publicly express and even make political decisions on the basis of their religious convictions is constitutionally protected.

Another confusing dimension of the First Amendment’s anti-establishment clause has to do with a lack of specificity as to what really constitutes establishment in the first place. Previously, I defined American “public life” for the purpose of this paper as inclusive of political organizations but also of other shared space in American society such as schools, hospitals and roads. Does the anti-establishment clause, or the prohibition against the establishment of a religion by the American state, translate to mean that these public spaces should be religiously neutral? Or does it actually refer only to political entities with the power to make laws privileging one religion over another? Furthermore, some might even be skeptical of the very notion that religious neutrality is possible. Does “strictly secular” really mean religiously neutral? These questions and problems as to the proper interpretation of the anti-establishment clause are important to keep in mind in this paper, especially since the New Atheist movement presents one interpretation of the issue as absolutely correct.

In addition to the United States’ longstanding confusion about how to deal with religion and public life, this country has also seen a surge in the political power of conservative

Christians (often referred to as the rise of the Religious Right) in recent years. The result has been a hotbed of controversy over issues related to religion and politics. The New Atheists make a point to criticize the United States for its religiosity, which is unrivaled by other industrialized Western nations. In fact, some scholars and journalists have speculated that the New Atheist movement itself is first and foremost a reaction to the political manifestations of the rise in power of the American Religious Right in the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Some (and I would tend to agree with them) have gone so far as to claim that the true intended audience of much of the New Atheist literature is not comprised of Christian fundamentalists from the Bible Belt but rather of American liberals alarmed by the political implications of conservative Christianity and the Bush era. These liberals, whose creed has traditionally upheld the ideal of a religiously tolerant and pluralistic society, are the same people the New Atheist movement condemns as apologists responsible for enabling religiously fueled violence. In fact, the New Atheists take special care to assert that even liberal religious moderates, or those who subscribe to religious or spiritual beliefs but also respect the beliefs of others, are especially dangerous because they enable more “extreme” or “fundamentalist” religious types to thrive and gain power. In *The End of Faith*, Sam Harris writes “religious moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others”(9). Rather than think that their anti-religion manifestos would realistically be capable of converting the zealously religious and socially conservative to atheism, we might imagine that the New Atheists seek to motivate progressive liberals to take on staunch atheism as a progressive cause, and reject the religious ways of others as a means of salvaging society from the dangerous grasp of faith.¹⁰ But, as we will see, the question of

¹⁰ Even though I and others suspect that a major intended audience of the New Atheists is mostly secular educated liberals, Richard Dawkins writes in his Introduction to *The God Delusion*, “If this book works as I intend, religious

whether the New Atheist position is one that liberal, progressive Americans should be inclined to adopt is laden with controversy.

As we have already discussed, the New Atheist movement perceives religion as an inherent source of regress and violence in the world, or as a dangerous force that must be stopped. I also explained that they even scorn religious tolerance (at least on the interpersonal level) since they believe that it enables religious transgressions against peace and human progress. It should come as no surprise, then, that the New Atheists are staunch proponents of a strictly secular government. Since they see religion as a force for evil in the world, they consider religion and politics a dangerous if not lethal combination. The New Atheist case holds that religiosity should be confined to individuals' homes and should not be granted access to the public sphere, since this would involve a special privileging of religion, which would violate the prohibition against religious establishment. The New Atheists believe that America's founders created the prohibition against establishment because secularism, as a discourse, is inherently facilitative of democratic ideals whereas religious influence precludes inclusivity because of its tendency towards cultural specificity. Because the New Atheists associate secularism with objectivity, they also regard it as inherently more democratic and more inclined towards inclusivity than religiosity. We will consider alternative interpretations of the reason behind the anti-establishment clause later in this chapter, but will first take a look at the way in which the New Atheists view the Religious Right in the United States.

All four New Atheists make clear references to religiously affiliated American political conservatism, and each regards this breed of conservatism as a fundamental threat to the ideals of liberty and democracy. In fact, in the same way as I characterized New Atheism as a reaction to religiously affiliated violence of the early 21st century, I would also consider the rise of the

readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down" (28).

Religious Right in the United States as motivation for the emergence of the New Atheist movement. Scholar Jeff Nall writes of this idea:

The entire [New Atheist] movement has grown frustrated and fearful of President George W. Bush's eight years in office. In those years atheists watched as millions of federal tax dollars were funneled into religious programs. In particular, the movement has sought to counter the Religious Right's influence on civil liberties (attempts to ban gay marriage and eliminate abortion), public education (demand for abstinence-only education, discrediting theory of evolution, and the teaching of 'intelligent design') and history (the assertion that the United States is a 'Christian' nation). (265)

Here, Nall proposes that the New Atheists are particularly concerned about the problematic implications of religion for American public life. New Atheist literature seems to support this assertion. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins writes, "The genie of religious fanaticism is rampant in present-day America, and the Founding Fathers would have been horrified" (41). He is particularly concerned with the rights of children, and takes special issue with their religious socialization, thereby extending his concern even beyond the public sphere and into the private homes of individuals and families: "...Isn't it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have thought about?" he asks (345). While he does not outline what he believes would be a correct political response to this alleged form of child abuse, he seems to imply that the government should somehow intervene in the lives of religious people in order to protect innocent children from the trauma of growing up in a religious family. Like Dawkins, Harris also sees religion a dangerous threat to American progress, and deems religious America (as opposed to the more secular European nations) a

“lumbering, bellicose, dim-witted giant” (xi). This characterization of America, as lagging behind her European peers in intelligence and wisdom, according to Harris, is directly correlated with the unrivaled religiosity of Americans.

We know that the stakes for the New Atheists are extremely high, and that their disdain for religion is not only intellectual but also moral. For the New Atheist, religion and superstitious thinking is one of the main reasons for the persistence of violence and suffering on earth and a major blockade to human process. However, in recent years, some scholars have begun to call into question the compatibility of the New Atheist political agenda with ideals such as plurality and inclusivity. Of course, there is a constitutional prohibition against the creation of laws that privilege one religion over others. However, as American legal scholar Stephen Carter points out, nowhere in the Constitution does it state that religion ought not to enter the public sphere, or that religious politicians ought to be forced to “bracket,” or suppress, their religious beliefs while in office (11). The notion that public spaces like schools, highways and non-profit organizations that receive public funding should be strictly secular is an even more controversial extrapolation from the actual constitutional text.

The Separation of Church and State

Previously, I established that the New Atheists believe that religion ought to be kept out of politics and that the public sphere ought to be shielded from religious expression. Another way to say this is that the New Atheists believe that Americans ought to honor the doctrine of the “separation between church and state,” which is a phrase that has been popularized to describe the idea that the government should be secular. There are two major objections raised by political scholars with regard to this concept. The first of these objections deals with constitutional integrity, and the other is pragmatic. Let us first turn to the Constitution. Whether or not the

founders of the United States intended for there to be a clean separation of church and state is vigorously debated. Moreover, even if our founders intended this separation, their vision may have been different from that held by the New Atheists. However, one thing is for sure: Contrary to popular perception, the words “separation of church and state” are not to be found in the United States Constitution, nor in the Bill of Rights. They appeared for the first time in a letter written by Thomas Jefferson in 1802. The letter that contained them was addressed to the Danbury Baptist Association, and scholars believe that Jefferson’s intention behind the letter was to reassure the religious leaders that he was speaking to that the prohibition against a governmental religious establishment would *protect* the American religious enterprise. So, even though secularists so often invoke the words “separation of church and state” as a way to disempower religion, the phrase was originally intended to describe a doctrine that would *benefit* religious communities. Remember that the First Amendment prohibits the creation of any law “respecting the establishment of religion.” However, it also guarantees the “free exercise” of religion and the freedom of speech. This fact has led many scholars to contemplate whether our founders envisioned an American public inhospitable to religious expression, or simply unaffiliated with any one particular religion.

Stephen Carter grapples with this very issue in his book, *The Culture of Disbelief*. He points out that the idea of an absolute separation of church and state has taken on a myth-like status among the liberal American populace as a reaction to the voices of conservative Christians. According to Carter, the Constitution does little to simplify the situation. He writes, "The First Amendment to the Constitution, often cited as the place where this difficulty [as to the proper role of religion in American public life] is resolved, merely restates it. The First Amendment guarantees the 'free exercise' of religion but also prohibits its 'establishment' by the

government” (11). Where, then, we might ask, is America to stand when one (a politician, for example) seeks to exercise religious freedom but also holds public office? Is it unconstitutional for students to pray in public schools? What about for teachers to wear religious apparel or keep a bible in their classrooms? Should nativity scenes and menorahs decorate our public parks in December? And should religious minorities receive special accommodations at school and work that allow them to live by their faiths? The New Atheists have answers to these questions, but these answers, quite ironically, require a leap of faith: they are not explicitly given to the American people in the Constitution.

While some thinkers have grappled with the ambiguity and tension inherent in the co-existence of religious and expressive freedom and a prohibition against religious establishment by the state, others have doubted fundamentally the very possibility of creating a true separation between religion and government or public life in the first place. In his 2008 book, *Souled Out*, political commentator E.J. Dionne writes, "Our question can certainly not be the old one of whether religion and politics should be mixed. They inescapably do mix, like it or not" (37). This idea that religion cannot be distilled from the political runs parallel to my earlier argument about the inextricable nature of the categories of the secular and the religious. According to Dionne, an individual's religious convictions cannot be separated from his political decisions, just like I have argued that the secular cannot be completely isolated from the religious.¹¹ It is not surprising, then, that he takes great issue with the New Atheist disapproval of religious toleration. Dionne not only disagrees with the New Atheist position on the issue of respecting others' religions, he finds the position inconsistent with American liberalism. Later on, I will address this question of New Atheism's compatibility with American progressivism and

¹¹ For more on the inseparable nature of the secular and the religious, see Chapter 1 of this paper.

liberalism. First, however, I will place New Atheism in the context of what has been referred to as the American “culture war,” and suggest that New Atheism invokes the rhetoric of the “liberal” camp of the war on certain issues while, at the same time, failing to embody traditional liberal ideals.

New Atheism’s Place in the American Culture War

If we are to understand the New Atheist movement as reactionary, or as a response to the rise of the American Religious Right during the late 20th century and the religious violence of September 11, 2001, then we must view the movement in the greater context of what has come to be known as the American “culture war.” Regardless of whether or not the current state of affairs in the US qualifies as a culture war, most of the rhetoric around the *notion* of this war subscribes to a distinctive narrative. In the same way that we examined some of the problems associated with the progress narrative underlying the European Enlightenment, we will now see that the grand narrative of the American culture war can be misleading in its representation of where Americans fall on the issue of religion and public life. The narrative tells of two poles, or groups of Americans. On one hand, the liberal pole perceives religiosity and the invocation of religious justification for public action as a threat to fundamental liberties. In short, this liberal pole is “secular,” and liberals take for granted that the public sphere is most hospitable to progress when cleansed of religious influence. For the liberal warriors of the culture war, religiosity, when not checked at the door of public life, poses a threat to the health of the American democratic system. These liberals frequently cite appeals to the doctrine of the “separation of church and state,” which, as we have seen, many mistakenly regard as an explicit constitutional principle. They sense the encroaching of the so-called Religious Right into designated non-religious public space. On the other side of the culture war, there are the religious

conservatives. They claim that secularists, a dangerously misguided elite, wrongly hijacked the public sphere and are driving it to hell. These conservatives are against abortion and gay marriage because of their “fundamentalist” or “evangelical” religious beliefs.

The narrative of the American culture war is overly simplistic. It describes two groups only, and attributes a set of characteristics to each group without leaving space for the possibility that an individual or community could, for example, be both against abortion and committed to secularism or pro gay marriage and deeply religious. Furthermore, it leads Americans to wrongly assume that religion is always and everywhere a conservative force in the world, and to forget that religion has served as an invaluable tool for social progressives from Mohandas Gandhi to Martin Luther King, Jr. Scholar EJ Dionne writes:

A great many of Americans have come to believe that [God] has, in fact, changed his party after all these years. On significant parts of the right and left, there is a sense that religion always has been and always will be a conservative force. There are Republican candidates and political operatives who assume that religious people live on the political right, care primarily about issues such as gay marriage and abortion, and will forever be part of the GOP's political base. There are liberals - though fewer than conservatives think - who buy this Republican account and write off religious people as backward and reactionary busybodies obsessed with sex. (1)

Dionne goes on to point out that this kind of characterization completely neglects entire demographics of Americans; for example, African Americans, who we have seen are some of the most religious people in this country but who also tend to identify as political liberals. He writes:

It is striking that in all the talk about how Americans who are 'religious' and 'evangelical' are overwhelmingly conservative and Republican, so little attention is paid to African Americans. One of the most religious and evangelical groups in the nation, they are decidedly not Republican and are, on most issues, loyally liberal. It makes little sense to argue that conservative Christianity is automatically allied with conservative politics. (53)

In this way, we can begin to call into question the narrative of the culture war and see ways in which it gives quite an inaccurate picture of how American religiosity corresponds with political views. Like Dionne, Carter also contests the picture presented by the culture war narrative by drawing on the example of the black community. He writes, "The liberal reluctance to acknowledge the religious content of the civil rights movement is a close cousin to another societal blind spot: the refusal to admit the centrality of religion to most of the black community itself. As a group, black Americans are significantly more devout than white Americans" (60). Here, Carter also alludes to the idea that religion has played a liberal role in American politics, such as in the case of the civil rights movement of the 1960's. In the previous chapter we discussed this idea with respect to violence, and saw that religion has been a force for progress not only throughout American history but also in other parts of the world and across cultures. From the liberation theology of Latin America to Christian abolition and civil rights in the United States, religion's impact has been liberal as well as conservative. As we will go on to see, the New Atheists, who are frequently read and portrayed by mainstream media as clear embodiments of the secular liberalism at the left-most extreme of the culture war narrative, actually have quite a complex political identity. They don't fit the mold of the bifurcation narrative that reigns authoritative in our national psyche. By paying more attention to their true

political identity, I hope to challenge the notion that New Atheism is truly compatible with American liberalism (as I understand it).

The New Atheists, when analyzed through the lens of the culture war narrative, fall cleanly on one side of the conflict. On a mission to protect Americans from the influence of runaway religiosity, they appear to be a fine sample of some of the liberal soldiers of the American culture war. They have elicited passionate responses from figures on both sides of the conflict, with some displaying strong support for the movement and others dismay. And yet, most of those who speak out against the New Atheist agenda often do so on theological grounds, pointing to ways in which the movement misunderstands the whole point of the religious enterprise. Critiques such as these have sprung forth from characters of different faith traditions, and from both sides of the culture war (i.e., from liberals as well as conservatives). They comment on such issues as historicity, ontology and progressive theology. However, the way in which the responses to New Atheism have been largely from religious people only further obscures the picture at hand because it reifies the notion of secular/religious duality of the culture war narrative. Interestingly, though, some critics of New Atheism have written about the movement not on the grounds that it mischaracterizes the religious enterprise, but because of its tricky and potentially dangerous political implications.

In their critiques of religion, the New Atheists help to point out some key tensions that are often associated with the incorporation of religious perspectives into the project of public decision-making. Some of these tensions include those between individual freedom and majority preference or freedom of expression and freedom from persecution. Unconcerned with cultural particularities and focused on the creation of sweeping universal claims, the New Atheists make little reference to the actual wording of the Constitution. It is possible that this avoidance is due

to the fact that the constitutional text itself is blatantly indecisive as to the proper role of religion in American public life, and almost intentionally vague in its wording. To look at the actual wording for the First Amendment and the contradictory rulings of the Supreme Court on these issues would be to admit the lack of certainty and concreteness that characterize what many scholars acknowledge as a true dilemma about what to do with religion and public life. However, much to the New Atheists' lament, one proposed solution to the problem has been traditionally very popular among American liberals. In this next section, we will be looking at the liberal tradition of multiculturalism and pluralism as a political philosophy.

Multiculturalism: An American Ideal?

In this paper, I am interested in looking specifically at the implications of the New Atheist political agenda for the United States, the country with which I am most familiar and a nation with a rich history and contemporary culture of political pluralism and multiculturalism. I will refer to the notions of "pluralism" and "multiculturalism" with great frequency, and openly regard these concepts as ideals. While it is conceivable that one could consider these terms merely descriptive (i.e., a society where many different ethnic groups thrive is "pluralist" or "multiculturalist"), I use these words to describe a particular ideology in which the existence of a diversity of cultures (and, therefore religions) is valued as a cultural ideal. As a liberal American and religious and ethnic minority, I have long associated the United States with the *ideals* of pluralism and multiculturalism. I was taught in my history classes throughout public school that America is a "nation of immigrants," a place that prides itself not only on its commitment to protecting religious freedom but also on its attitude of openness and acceptance of many different kinds of people into the fabric of its culture. I learned about other cultures and religions in school. In spite of the fact that no one in my family had ever really left the New York

metropolitan area or mingled with those outside their insular ethnic circle, I learned, through my exposure to the public education system, not only to be aware of but also to celebrate and *definitely* to respect religions and cultures other than my own, and to view religion and culture as inseparable. I watched awkwardly as a teacher scolded students for passing judgment on the valedictorian of my high school, a Pakistani girl who chose to wear a veil and recite a blessing in Arabic in her hard-earned graduation speech. I sang Anglican Christmas carols, African-American gospel music, Israeli folk songs and Cherokee chants in the school choir. Our community, like so many American communities, was culturally and religiously colorful. Multiculturalism, the philosophy behind the education I received, was introduced to me as one of the most special and distinctive facets of American life, and the key to living peacefully and harmoniously in a diverse setting and an increasingly small world. And in just two short months, when I assume the role of teacher in a diverse American public school comprised mainly of immigrants and minority students, I will present this same ethic to my pupils, who will inevitably struggle to accept and respect religious beliefs and cultural norms that seem to clash with their own. As a budding educator, I know that, in addition to the prescribed curriculum, it is my responsibility to teach my students how to coexist peacefully in a classroom environment full of traditionally “incompatible” worldviews, an environment that, on a small scale, is not unlike that of our nation at large. The rigorous espousal of multiculturalist and pluralist ideals, I believe, has been for me and will be for my students the most effective and ethical means of promoting peace and harmony. However, I acknowledge that this is not an official or universal view. Especially in light of the events of September 11, 2001, I also acknowledge that the “ideal” of multiculturalism has been seriously challenged, and not only by the New Atheist movement.

Some, the New Atheists among them, have been very critical of the ideals of multiculturalism and do not agree that Americans should “respect” others’ religious beliefs that they hold to be dangerous. For example, throughout their writings, it is clear that the New Atheists find the preservation of traditional cultures (which are oftentimes religious) a frivolous effort, and find little moral value in the quest to do so. In fact, since they find religion dangerous, they find this effort dangerous as well. In *The God Delusion*, Richard Dawkins points to the Amish to illustrate his views on the issue. For Dawkins, Americans should not feel obliged to “respect” the religious views of the Amish, even though Amish culture is endangered and would probably disappear were it not granted special minority group rights. Dawkins indirectly accuses Americans of treating Amish culture as a “spectacle” preserved for the sake of novelty rather than out of concern for Amish people. He writes of the issue, “There is, indeed, something attractively quaint about an island of seventeenth-century life as a spectacle for today’s eyes. Isn’t it worth preserving, for the sake of the enrichment of human diversity?” He goes on to assert, however: “There is something breathtakingly condescending, as well as inhumane, about the sacrificing of anyone... on the altar of ‘diversity’ and the virtue of preserving a variety of religious traditions” (372). In *The End of Faith*, Harris writes, “...we can no longer afford the luxury of...political correctness,” seeming to imply that abiding by the policy of respecting others’ religious beliefs is a formality with dangerous implications (23). According to Harris, a strict commitment to the policy of respect incurs an unjustifiable moral and intellectual cost to society.

In the same way that the New Atheists are skeptical of the practice of unreserved respect for others’ religious beliefs, others have also struggled with multiculturalism and viewed it as a dangerous ideology. Lynne Cheney, the wife of the former Vice President of the United States

and former chairwoman for the National Endowment for the Humanities has fought vigorously to remove multicultural history education from American public schools, claiming that the promotion of a culture of tolerance and diversity sends the message that Americans bear responsibility for the events of 9/11. And although the New Atheists probably would not appreciate being compared to Cheney, it is difficult to deny the fact that she holds similar views on the issue of multiculturalism. Scholars Derek Rubin and Jaap Verheul write:

...unapologetically promoting national history and patriotism over diversity and tolerance, Cheney advanced her long-standing agenda to steer the national curriculum clear of multiculturalism. Her decision to assail what she called the “multicultural argument” in the wake of this national disaster also made clear that the ongoing debate over multiculturalism, diversity, and national identity was more alive than ever, as Americans struggled to make sense of “9/11.” (7)

In this way, while the New Atheists reject multiculturalism when they urge readers to challenge rather than respect others’ religious views, here we see a conservative political opposition to multiculturalism grounded in the fear that respecting the religious views of others is apologetic and inherently unpatriotic in light of recent current events. Later on in this paper, we will view another objection to multiculturalism coming from the liberal perspective and discuss its relationship to the New Atheist case.

As we have seen, there is discord as to whether or not multiculturalism is an ideal or just a philosophy among many other alternatives. It is not the work of this chapter to argue in favor of multiculturalism or to defend it as an ideal. Rather, I hope to be transparent about the fact that I *do* hold multiculturalism to be an American ideal and, perhaps more importantly, an important component of American liberalism, an ideology with which I strongly identify. It is my ultimate

hope to show that, although the New Atheists believe that multiculturalism is a false idol to which indispensable freedoms are sacrificed, the situation at hand is actually much more complex. I hope to do justice to the web of the issues around the philosophy of multiculturalism and, in doing this, illuminate an interesting and problematic facet of the New Atheist case.

Are the New Atheists Progressive?

We have already seen that the New Atheists consider themselves progressives, and identify their push for atheist rights with other civil rights movements throughout history. However, the culture war narrative, because it imagines two distinct warring groups, has been the tendency to cause us to think in binary terms when it comes to characterizing America's political identities. As we saw above, the association of secular people with liberal political leanings and religious people with conservative ones is very common. However, when we make these kinds of associations, we are acting in accordance with a simplistic narrative that presumes polarization. The notion that the New Atheists could be progressive on certain issues and not on others does not seem intuitive, especially because of the way they identify with progressive social causes and groups throughout their writings and so vehemently reject the American Religious Right. However, the New Atheist disapproval of diversity and lack of regard for what I consider the American virtue of religious toleration complicate the political identity of the New Atheist movement. How is it that the New Atheists identify as political progressives when their political convictions seem incompatible with the basic principles of American liberalism? Some scholars have proposed that, although the intended audience of the New Atheist message is made up of secular progressives, New Atheism contradicts progressive ideals. Scholar Damon Linker writes of this idea, "To be liberal in the classical sense is to accept intellectual variety—and the social complexity that goes with it—as the ineradicable condition of a free society" (18).

He goes on to explain, “To liberals frightened by the faith-based conservatism of George Bush or the theistic fanaticism of Osama bin Laden—or both—the feisty language of Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens sounds refreshing, apt, and bold.” And yet he goes on to assert that liberals should not be fooled by the New Atheist appeal, “...the intellectual lineage to which these authors belong should in fact give liberals pause. Among other problems, it isn’t a liberal tradition at all” (16). Linker is not the only scholar skeptical of New Atheism’s compatibility with the liberal creed. Dionne, in response to American secularist intolerance of religion and defense of toleration and mutual respect, writes, “One of liberalism's great achievements has been its resolute opposition to bigotry. Bigotry against people of faith is not only ugly; it is inconsistent with the liberal creed” (15). I would not venture to say that the New Atheist literature is “bigotry”; that is a strong accusation. However, Dionne’s point here is that abandoning a policy of respect and tolerance would threaten to lead to bigotry, and is thus an unacceptable liberal response to religious conservatism. In a piece featured in *Wired Magazine*, secular humanist journalist Robert Wright explains:

...this year, doubts about the [New Atheist] mission have taken root among the New Atheists' key demographic: intellectuals who aren't religious and aren't conservative. Even on the secular left, the implications of the 'crusade against religion' are becoming apparent: Though the New Atheists claim to be a progressive force, they often abet fundamentalists and reactionaries, from the heartland of America to the Middle East. (54)

In other words, Wright is claiming that the assuredness with which the New Atheists present their view and their intolerance of views distinct from their own liken them to the very people that they set out to critique. This is quite a common critique of New Atheism and, as we have seen, one that

Dawkins responds to in *The God Delusion*.¹² And while the question of whether this accusation of New Atheism is a fair one remains, we can see that at the very least there is a tension between liberal principles of respect and tolerance for diverse beliefs and the New Atheist intervention. For Linker, Dionne and Wright, New Atheism's intolerant attitude is not only unpleasant but also threatening to liberal principles. This critique is especially poignant due to the fact that the New Atheists identify as progressive liberals; it challenges not only the acceptability of their arguments but also their very political identities.

Liberal Inconsistencies

The New Atheist movement is not the only self-described progressive social movement that has struggled with liberalism's commitment to multiculturalism. In their writings, the New Atheists allude to the way in which minority group privileges serve to perpetuate religious practices and ideologies that are fundamentally harmful to women. While they do not acknowledge that their disapproval of multiculturalism is a serious problem for the liberal tradition of multiculturalism, debates in the feminist community have centered on this issue. In her 1999 essay entitled "Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?" political philosopher Susan Moller Okin made the case that women's issues should not be overshadowed by the goal of preserving minority cultures and diversity. In her essay, Okin points out a kind of inherent conflict between two social causes that liberals have traditionally held very dear: multiculturalism, which entails the protection of minority cultures (and sometimes traditional religions), often through the granting of special rights and privileges to these cultures, and equality for women. She argues that multiculturalism serves to facilitate oppressive acts of violence against women, and is the reason why practices such as polygamy and child marriage

¹² See page 5 of this paper.

have been tolerated in otherwise liberal societies. In such cases, she proposes, basic individual rights ought to take precedent over any other liberal agenda, such as the preservation of cultural diversity. Okin writes, “[Minority group rights] substantially limit the capacities of women and girls of that culture to live with human dignity equal to that of men and boys, and to live as freely chosen lives as they can” (12).

And yet, although voices like Okin’s might help to legitimize the New Atheist skepticism around respecting others’ religious beliefs as a principle, multiculturalists have attempted to make the case that liberals need not abandon their commitment to equality in their embrace of multiculturalism as political ideology. In fact, multiculturalist Will Kymlicka has even argued that the instincts of skeptics like Okin are philosophically aligned with those of multiculturalists. He writes:

I think this way of opposing feminism and multiculturalism is regrettable...Okin has argued that women's equality cannot be achieved solely by giving women the same set of formal individual rights which men possess. We must also pay attention to the structure of societal institutions...and to the sorts of images and expectations people are exposed to in schools and the media, since these are typically gendered in an unfair way, using the male as the ‘norm.’ (“Liberal Complacencies”)

According to Kymlicka, multiculturalists make the same case for members of minority cultures. He proposes the careful regulation of the restrictions that powerful members of minority groups are permitted to place on individuals within the minority society is the way to promote multiculturalism while still protecting women’s rights. Okin, though, would probably be skeptical that this approach is adequate, since the private, familiar sphere, where oppressive

structures are so often maintained, is so difficult to regulate.

Must We Choose?

According to the New Atheists and theorists like Okin, liberals must make a choice when it comes to the issue of how to approach religious conservatism. Although liberals have long espoused a general policy of respect and tolerance, they claim, we must come to face the unfortunate reality that sometimes respecting others' religions has problematic consequences, especially for vulnerable groups like women and children. Kymlicka, we have seen, responds to this issue by highlighting the similarities between the philosophy of feminism and that of multiculturalism, ultimately claiming that they are genetically related and not mutually exclusive. And yet, although Kymlicka recommends monitoring minority religious groups and intervening when they transgress on the freedom of vulnerable individuals within their societies, one would be hard-pressed to say that this policy is an adequate solution to the problem outlined in Okin's essay, and to some of the problems mentioned by the New Atheists, such as the indoctrination of young Muslims by violent fundamentalists or the instilling a fear of damnation in a young child. This is because, as Okin argues, the domestic is far out of reach of officials, and many times we are not even aware of what goes on behind closed doors in the private homes of families. She writes:

...culturally endorsed practices that are oppressive to women can often remain hidden in the private or domestic sphere.... It is clear that many instances of private sphere discrimination against women on cultural grounds are never likely to emerge in public, where courts can enforce their rights and political theorists can label such practices as illiberal and therefore unjustified violations of women's physical or mental integrity. ("Is Multiculturalism Bad for Women?")

And, following Okin's logic, we might be prompted to consider other ways in which the domestic sphere is problematic for those committed to instilling what they consider to be healthy worldviews in the young and protecting the traditionally oppressed. For example, the home is undoubtedly a place where crippling social institutions such as racism, classism and homophobia thrive, protected from any form of state intervention. How ought we to approach such a "private" space, which is perhaps even more complicated and problematic than the public one that we discussed earlier in this chapter? I do not know whether or not we must choose to abide by the principles of multiculturalism or to pursue other indispensable social causes (i.e., whether multiculturalism and feminism/egalitarianism are mutually exclusive). However, my hope is to show how arguments that present the issue as a simple matter of standing up for what is right over taking a passive role are misrepresenting the "option" of multiculturalism, which is rarely represented as an active and self-regulating political philosophy in these either/or accounts.

Taking Pluralism Seriously

For the New Atheists, the liberal commitments to multiculturalism and pluralism are well intentioned, but ultimately problematic. They frame the policy of religious tolerance as a passive stance in which religious moderates and non-religious people feel that, in order to be seen as kind and good, they must withhold from critiquing more conservative religious people. Earlier, I made the case that a major objective of the New Atheist movement is to convince liberal Americans to stop being so tolerant of conservative religion and realize that it is a mortal threat to the most important of liberal causes. The Atheists present readers with a choice to (a) be tolerant and accepting of conservative religious worldviews or (b) stand up for equality and progress by *speaking out against conservative religion*. Previously, I made the case that blaming religion for human violence increases hostility between groups and can serve to fuel rather than

quell conflict, and I would make the same characterization of the New Atheist stance against religious tolerance. And yet, as I have previously acknowledged, there are complex issues at play, especially when it comes to the rights of women and children, who are so often exploited in the domestic sphere. I am not prepared to fully address these problems; however, I *will* attempt to give a more complete picture of why multiculturalism deserves a fairer representation by the New Atheists in their challenge to religious tolerance. I will argue here that an active, rigorous philosophy of religious pluralism has tremendous capability to mitigate many of the “problems with religion” identified by the New Atheist movement, and that it is essentially misrepresented by New Atheism.

In *Secularism, Religion and Multicultural Citizenship* scholars Geoffrey Brahm Levey and Tariq Modood write, “The commitment to reach understanding between different viewpoints does not open the floodgates to fundamentalisms of various kinds, but rather serves to draw fundamentalisms into a terrain in which they will not flourish” (281). For the multiculturalist, fostering a pluralistic environment and diffusing polarized conflict between groups is not undertaken out of a desire to behold the visual spectacles of hyper conservative religious life nor out of some fundamental commitment to being nice. It is neither about aesthetics nor politeness. Multiculturalism, religious pluralism and diversity, for many of the people who advocate for the rights of religious conservatives and traditionalists to live out their beliefs, are active rather than passive commitments. They are aggressively pursued with ethical conviction, in the same way that the New Atheists pursue secularist ideals, because of the belief that, in a free society where respect, sensitivity and thoughtfulness are practiced, religiously affiliated violence and hatred will diminish. Scholar Lawrence Wild writes of this idea in his essay, “The Antinomies of Aggressive Atheism,” “The equation of multiculturalism with an ‘anything goes’ relativism is a

gross caricature. Supporters of multicultural societies are committed to the core values of inclusive democratic states, and claims for the accommodation of religious views and practices will be weighed against those values" (281). Here, Wild, like Kymlicka, leaves room for the possibility that multiculturalists can honor their commitment to diversity and the protection of vulnerable religious minorities while still negotiating policies and regulations that would protect core democratic values. In this sense, I would argue, the New Atheist notion that secularism is an ideology of taking action against the dangers posed by conservative religion and multiculturalism is about sacrificing the victims of those dangers at the "altar of religious diversity" is misleading. In the first section of this paper I showed that New Atheism is about more than disbelief, and also includes the promotion of a certain ethical worldview through active (and arguably aggressive) means. New Atheism is one active response to religious violence and, I would argue, multiculturalism is an alternative response.

In his 2007 book, *Democracy and Tradition*, political philosopher and pluralist Jeffrey L. Stout proposes that diversity is a fact of American life, and that, so long as our society remains a religiously diverse one, no one religious viewpoint will grow strong enough to "take over" the political sphere. He takes care to distinguish between the terms "secularization" and "secularism," explaining, "...secularization...does not reflect a commitment to secularism, secular liberalism, or any other ideology" (634). Instead, he claims, "secularization" refers to the end of theocracy, which he sees as a historical occurrence borne of increased contact between diverse peoples. In this way, he claims that so long as the public sphere is religiously diverse it is, to an extent, "secularized." Stout writes, "Our society is religiously plural, and has remained so for several centuries despite constant efforts on the part of its religious members to appeal to

their fellow citizens with reasons for converting to a single theology” (636). He goes on to explain:

The burden of proof is on those who want to change it [American religious diversity]. Because it is an aspect of our substantive commitment to the ethical life of democracy, because it coheres with the widely (but not unanimously) held conviction that no merely human perspective has a monopoly on the truth, it seems inappropriate to think of it as a mere *modus vivendi*. It is not something we ‘settle for’ in the absence of real social contract or authentic communitarian unity... (637)

For Stout, the solution to religious conflict and violence is not the promotion of an ideology of secularism, but rather the facilitation of discourse between the diverse groups that are a fact of American life. His account of religion in public life is a clear example of one that proposes an alternative, but not more passive or less visionary approach than that put forth by New Atheism.

Looking Forward: A Conclusion

In this work, I have looked at the ethical issues presented by and surrounding the New Atheist movement in order to challenge hierarchal, ethnocentric ways of thinking about other peoples' religious beliefs. Throughout the entirety of my adolescence, I have felt the rumblings of a culture war beneath my feet, and I have felt the pressure to join the fight. But, after four years in the classroom grappling with complexities around religion, I stand on the sidelines. The real war worth fighting, I have come to believe, is the one in defense of our most cherished American values of democracy and toleration, and the best weapon in our arsenal is dialogue. I am as troubled by religiously motivated violence and conservatism as the New Atheists, and yet, instead of proposing the promotion of secularism as the ultimate solution to these problems, I propose the very thing that the New Atheists are critical of: respect. As I move away from the study of religion and toward a future in education, it is my sincerest hope that I will be able to teach my students - not to cherish what is "right" over what is "wrong" - but to cherish one another in spite of their differences.

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