SCIENTISM, HUMANISM, AND RELIGION: THE NEW ATHEISM AND THE RISE
OF THE SECULAR MOVEMENT

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the New Atheism as a secular fundamentalism that is both a utopian ideology and a social movement. It situates New Atheist thought within the context of the historical development of atheist thought and outlines the features of the ideology it promotes. It also examines the New Atheism's role in the secular movement through research on major movement actions, campaigns, and debates on goals and strategies. It argues that the New Atheism comes into conflict with two other movement discourses: secular humanism and libertarian rationalism. These ideological conflicts are propelling the movement away from the New Atheism's aggressive critique of religion toward more a more accommodating and inclusive approach that emphasizes basic humanistic values.

DEDICATION

For the love and support they have given me all my life, I dedicate this dissertation to my parents, Paul and Daphne LeDrew. In the final months of writing, during the most difficult time, they gave me what no one else could: the comfort of home.

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INTRODUCTION

Atheism and Secularity: An Emerging Field

In 2012 a special issue of the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* was devoted to the theme of "Non-religion and Secularity". Articles in this issue gave a sampling of studies of the non-religious in the United States, Great Britain, and India, while an introductory essay addressed the "state of the union" in the emerging interdisciplinary field of non-religion and secularity, a sub-field within the social scientific study of religion (Bullivant and Lee 2012). The editors of this special issue, Stephen Bullivant and Lois Lee, founded the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network in 2008, and a journal specifically dedicated to the field (*Secularism and Nonreligion*) in 2012. In her Research Note on terminology in the same issue, Lee (2012) explains that the concepts of "nonreligion" and "secularity" are intended to cover all positions that are defined in reference to religion but are considered to be other than religious. She also acknowledges that the name given to the field is a problematic issue and her proposal is not accepted by all those working in it (as a nascent field, some disagreement regarding basic terminology is to be expected). Phil Zuckerman, author of two qualitative studies of the beliefs of atheists in the United States and Scandinavia (2008; 2011), uses "atheism and secularity" to describe the field in his collection on the subject (2010). While noting that none of these terms or titles are perfect, I will use "atheism and secularity" for the moment. But the more important issue is, why did this new field come about, and what exactly are its concerns?

Atheism and secularity studies is a scholarly response to the same social, cultural, and political developments that are addressed by the burgeoning literature on secularism and post-secularism (e.g. Calhoun et al. 2011; Gorski et al. 2012; Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2011), which is heavily influenced by Charles Taylor's seminal work, *A Secular Age* (2007). Taylor argues that the persistence of religion as an element of both public and private life compels us to question the assumptions that underwrite the secularization thesis, which posits that modernization brings functional differentiation of secular (public/political) and religious (private) spheres, and in some formulations, a

decline in religious belief and practice (Taylor 2007). Major events like the Iranian Revolution and the rise of the Christian Right led some scholars to point to a "deprivatization" of religion worldwide that contradicts the traditional secularization paradigm, with religion continuing to play a significant role in politics globally (Berger 1999, Casanova 1994). This trend continued with the election of George W. Bush, and the destruction of the World Trade Center and the subsequent "war on terror". Meanwhile, the numbers of those who declare no religious affiliation in western societies has been growing for twenty years (Bruce 2011). Taylor argues that there is in fact no contradiction here, and that rather than moving inexorably toward a society where religion slowly disappears, our "secular age" is characterized by an explosion in the possibilities of belief *and* non-belief.

Atheism and secularity studies are concerned with one specific group that is characteristic of this secular age and its new forms of belief – one which appears to be growing in number in western societies. While data on atheists specifically is scattershot and inconclusive, evidence does point to the steady growth of those who have no religious affiliation. This group is commonly known as the "nones" because they select "No Religion" in surveys and censuses. The nature of this group and the reasons for its growth, particularly its relationship to the 'religious revival' that contradicts the secularization thesis, are topics of growing interest (e.g. Baker and Smith 2009a, 2009b; Lim et al. 2010; Schwadel 2010; Vargas 2012). Within the category of the nones are those who are not simply religiously unaffiliated, but non-religious or explicitly atheist, a group that constitutes a sub-field in its own right, with a literature whose purpose can be divided into two major categories: (1) understanding the process of and reasons for apostasy, as well as the demographic and psychological characteristics of atheists (e.g. Beit-Hallahmi 2007; LeDrew 2012; Smith 2011; Stinson et al. 2013; Zuckerman 2008, 2011),and (2) examining the perceptions of atheists among the general public in various contexts, particularly with respect to the notion of "discrimination" (e.g. Cragun et al. 2012; Didyoung et al. 2013; Edgell et al. 2006; Hammer et al. 2012; Swan and Heesacker 2012; Zuckerman 2009). More specifically there are those who explicitly and publicly

declare their opposition to religion and their adoption of atheism as both a belief and an identity, and join (or to some extent participate in) atheist organizations. This group of "active atheists" is of concern in the present study, which contributes to a developing literature specifically on this topic (e.g. Cimino and Smith 2007, 2011, 2012; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; LeDrew 2013; Niose 2012; Pasquale 2010; Smith 2013). In addition to these focused areas, there have recently been a number of collections and companions to atheism and secularity studies in general (e.g. Arweck et al. 2013; Bullivant and Ruse 2013; Martin 2007; Zuckerman 2010).

The surge in scholarship in these fields came about – not coincidentally – in the wake of the intellectual and literary phenomenon known as the New Atheism, most famously represented by Richard Dawkins (2006), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Sam Harris (2004), and Daniel Dennett (2006). The books by these authors (the first three in particular) were phenomenal bestsellers and ignited a wave of public debate about religion and its place in the modern world. There is an interdisciplinary literature devoted to a critical analysis of New Atheist thought, and to understanding the significance of their success in terms of the socio-cultural context of their emergence (e.g. Amarasingam 2010; Eagleton 2009; Fergusson 2009; LeDrew 2012; McAnulla 2012; Plantinga 2011; Schulzke 2013a, 2013b; Wilde 2010). These works, and the many others like them, treat the New Atheism strictly as an intellectual current. They pay little to no attention to the fact that these thinkers are also part of a new and growing social movement, a socially significant fact that merits scholarly attention.

This dissertation contributes to these literatures by bridging the divide between the theoretically and historically focused critical analyses of the New Atheism as an intellectual current and the more specifically sociological studies of "active atheists" discussed above. It accomplishes this by recognizing the connection between New Atheism as *ideology* and as a *social movement*. The dissertation therefore consists of two parts: the first situates the New Atheism within the history of atheist thought and delineates the belief system it advances and its purposes, while the second examines how the New Atheism gives rise to social action, focusing on how it interacts with competing

and complementary groups and ideologies. The relationship between these two dimensions of the New Atheism (ideology and movement) and the two types of analysis contained herein are explained by my overarching analytical device: a theory of *secular fundamentalism*. I argue that the New Atheism is a form of fundamentalism that, like other fundamentalisms, advances a highly structured belief system that is perceived to be under threat by the uncertainty that characterizes late modernity, and seeks to universalize this belief system through ideological action within an existing, but rapidly expanding and developing, social movement.

New Atheism as Secular Fundamentalism

A number of scholars have taken a view of the New Atheism as a kind of fundamentalism (e.g. Eagleton 2009; Plantinga 2011; Stahl 2010), but none offer a substantive definition of the concept or a rigorous analysis of how it applies in this case. I thus begin by developing a concept of secular fundamentalism, which provides a framework by which to approach the New Atheism. I should first note that there is a vast literature on fundamentalism and much disagreement on the meaning of the concept, but these debates are not my concern here. I draw on a very select set of sources and one particular interpretation of the concept that applies to my case study and empirical findings. My approach, then, was inductive: rather than beginning with a theory of fundamentalism that framed my analysis, I began with an analysis of the beliefs and practices of the New Atheism and, through this analysis, themes and relationships emerged that required explanation. The concept of secular fundamentalism as outlined below is, in my view, an appropriate means to understand the nature of the New Atheism and the relationship between its two dimensions: belief system (or more precisely, ideology) and social movement.

Rather than a vestige of pre-modern beliefs, Eisenstadt (1999) argues that fundamentalism is an expression *of* modernity as much as a reaction to it, at once an anti-modern utopian ideology and a modern social and political movement, or set of movements. Fundamentalisms are anti-Enlightenment, but also distinctly modern in the

sense that they react to challenges to traditional patterns of belief, and share the totalizing and utopian aspirations of modern political movements and ideologies (such as communism, fascism, and Social Darwinism). Like these political movements, fundamentalism seeks to remake society in accordance with a vision of some essential truths. Davie (2013) adds that these truths are re-affirmed within the context of profound upheavals, including an expanding global economy and modernity's clash with traditional cultures.

An example is the evangelical fundamentalism that drives the Christian Right, which defends established beliefs and traditional values against secular values and scientific understandings of the nature of life. It is totalizing in seeking to bring an entire nation under religious rule, and also utopian in promising salvation through the establishment of a Christian nation in God's favour (Williams 2012). The enemy of the Christian Right is secularism, or secularization, a force they wish to reverse. The Christian Right is anti-modern (or more specifically, anti-Enlightenment) to the extent that it associates science and reason with the process of secularization, understood both as the functional differentiation of religious and political spheres (i.e. church-state separation) as well as the relativization of all belief systems that comes with constitutional pluralism and some important characteristics of late modernity, including globalization and multiculturalism. It thus advances a totalizing ideology and political program that re-affirms the essential truths of a particular tradition and its authority in all spheres of life, and takes concrete action, attempting to gain political power by influencing government and electing government representatives sympathetic to the cause (Williams 2012). As such, it is both ideology and a social movement.

While we might typically associate fundamentalism with religion, Davie (2013) argues that this need not be the case and that some secular ideologies also fit the description. She explains that in late modernity faith in the universal emancipatory powers of science and reason begins to wane and the "secular certainties" that provided the ground for religious criticism themselves come under attack: "...precisely those ideologies which have threatened (and to some extent continue to threaten) the traditional

certainties of a whole range of religious groups become, at least potentially, the victims rather than the perpetrators of economic and cultural change. No longer are they seen as the confident alternatives, but become instead – like the religious certainties they once sought to undermine – the threatened tradition, themselves requiring justification and, at times, aggressive rehabilitation" (Davie 2013: 200-201). Thus we see the emergence of *secular fundamentalism*, which seeks to re-assert the "secular certainties" of science and reason. In this view, then, fundamentalism is an attempt to re-create certainty and authority in response to challenges to established patterns of belief: religious fundamentalism in response to modernity (more precisely its Enlightenment manifestations), and secular fundamentalism in response to late/post-modernity (specifically, relativism and pluralism, which challenge the universality of reason and scientific authority).

Davie argues that the New Atheism may be understood as just such a fundamentalist secular ideology, a view my research supports. This dissertation analyzes the New Atheism as a politicized reaction to two major developments in late modern society: (1) the rise of religious fundamentalism, and (2) epistemic relativism (represented in academic postmodernism), and cultural pluralism (represented in policies of multiculturalism). Both of these developments are perceived as challenges to the universal authority of science. With respect to the first, the New Atheism may be understood as a response to anti-Enlightenment fundamentalism, substituting its own reverse form of fundamentalism: an Enlightenment utopia based on faith in the emancipatory powers of science and reason and the progressive nature of social evolution in modern societies, which involves a transition from religious authority to a secular science-based social order (thus they defend a version of the traditional secularization thesis).

The New Atheism, then, is a response to religious fundamentalism (i.e. the Christian Right and Islamicism), which it considers to be 'pre-modern' and thus opposed to modernity. But just as importantly in my view, it also reacts to what it considers the 'post-modern' forces of pluralism and relativism, which undermine scientific authority

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and the universalization of Enlightenment values. The New Atheism advances an ideology that is universalist and absolutist, and more than a critique of religion, it is a critique of all epistemological and ethical belief systems that are perceived to conflict with the hegemony of scientific rationality. The *modern* utopia it envisions must be defended against these two anti-modern forces, and it does this by offering its belief system in the 'marketplace of ideas', and by promoting and defending atheism and scientific rationalism through the structure of a social – or more specifically, cultural – movement. I argue that the New Atheism is much more than just the writings of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett; rather, these four are leaders of a broader movement. This dissertation explains the New Atheism as a secular fundamentalism that advances a rigid set of beliefs and values – which I term an "ideology" – that legitimate a certain conception of modernity and secularization, and an associated form of authority. This takes the form of an intellectual and social movement that is essentially political, but adopts "cultural" goals and strategies.

The distinction between these two types of movements is important in the context of this study precisely because the New Atheism is one part of a broader secular movement that includes two other groups that favour instrumental political goals, as opposed to the New Atheism's cultural goal of ideological universalization. In general, I favour David Snow's definition of social movements as "collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part" (2004: 11). In this view movements are essentially challenges to authority (or in the case of the New Atheism, a defence of the extant authority of science). This authority can be institutionally or culturally based, and where the authority is perceived to lie will determine the target of collective action. This may be the state for forms of authority that lie in state institutions, or the general public for cultural forms of authority. In the former case movements take shape according to instrumental political goals that involve legislative and policy change, while in the latter case action is ideologically

oriented to promote a certain set of beliefs while denigrating and excluding rivals. The New Atheism, I argue, is a "cultural" movement that attempts to change belief and values through ideological action, while other groups in the movement adopt "political" goals and strategies aimed at protecting secular social institutions from religious interference, and legally protecting atheists from discrimination. This difference in goals and strategies, and more importantly, the distinct ideological orientations they result from, are the source of major tension within the movement. There is a further tension with respect to the very idea of being a movement. Many members of atheist and secularist organizations prefer to think of themselves as members of a community of non-believers, rather than collectivities mobilized to engage in instrumental action, and are motivated by a desire for fellowship and a sense of belonging, which comes by creating a space within a culturally pluralistic society. This is in contrast to the New Atheism's goal of cultural universalism, which I argue is being eclipsed in recent developments in the movement by a turn to a more community-based approach that favours engagement with other groups – even religious ones – that share basic values.

The secular movement and the religious fundamentalism that it is in part a response to are deeply intertwined. Indeed, the secular movement would not exist without the Christian Right and radical Islamism (or it would at least be very different and much smaller in scale). Cimino and Smith (2007) argue that the Christian Right served as a "tonic" for the secular movement even before the New Atheism came about by presenting an 'other' or an enemy to rally against, though it is clear that it would never have expanded the way it has without Dawkins and the others to lead this growth by drawing unprecedented public attention to atheism. As noted above, the Christian Right is similarly dependent on secularism for its strength, portraying Christians as "embattled" by encroaching secularism and thus enhancing group solidarity (C. Smith 1998). This interdependence is clear in a billboard advertisement appearing in New York and San Francisco in October 2013, which was sponsored by Answers in Genesis, a creationist organization founded by Ken Hamm, who is also the founder of the Creation Museum in Petersburg, Kentucky. The billboards carry the message, "To all of our atheist friends:

Thank God You're Wrong" along with a link to the organization's website. According to Hamm, the message is necessary because "We're in a battle. We're in a spiritual war and we're to be out there wielding our swords, the word of God" (Gryboski 2013a).

Hamm is correct that this "spiritual war" is being waged by the New Atheism as well, though this competition might be better understood in terms of the "religious economies" approach developed by Stark and Finke (2000) that applies rational choice theory to religion and suggests that in religiously pluralistic societies, actors will choose religious beliefs and organizations based on a cost/benefit calculation, and further, that greater religious supply produces greater demand.

The New Atheism actively engages in this 'religious marketplace', increasing the supply by offering its own belief system to compete with others that also offer firm answers, essential truths, and a program for the organization of social and political life. Its strategy for advancing its essentially political ideology, then, is a cultural one that involves entering the 'marketplace of ideas' and seeking a broad transformation in beliefs – that is, a conversion to its belief system of scientism or "scientific atheism". They attempt to do this by proselytizing atheism, which in turn is done primarily by a scathing critique of religion (atheism as an intellectual current), and also by constructing and promoting a positive atheist identity that emphasizes morality (atheism as a social, or more specifically, cultural movement). The New Atheism's reductionist critique of religion presents it as a false set of beliefs regarding nature, a pre-modern attempt at scientific explanation that relies on the supernatural to fill in gaps in understanding. This is typical of many reductionist, transhistorical and transcultural concepts of religion as different sets of incompatible and non-rational truth claims that inevitably lead to conflict and violence, which Cavanaugh (2009) argues is one of the foundational legitimating myths of Western society, and is used to legitimate neo-colonial violence against non-Western others (particularly the Muslim world).

My research indicates that this is precisely how the ideology of the New Atheism functions. Its discourse on religion is in fact an element in an ideology that legitimates scientism and the "political doctrine" (Asad 2003) of secularization, and more

specifically, its discourse on Islam is a legitimation of Western society that constructs a vision of 'civilization' through a contrast with its 'barbaric' Other. The New Atheism might in fact be understood as a renewed defence and promotion of the idea of secularization – which crystallized in the social sciences in the 20th century but has been present since the Enlightenment – against a perceived *failure* of secularism in practice in late modern society. This failure, which is ultimately considered only temporary, is a result of the 'pre-modern' and 'post-modern' threats of religion and relativism. Like religious fundamentalism, the New Atheism is a reaction to the explosion in possibilities of belief that characterize our "secular age" (Taylor 2007), and though they are both totalizing ideologies that seek to eradicate opposing worldviews, both are also themselves manifestations of the expanding possibilities in ways of being – or not being – religious.

Overview and Chapter Outline

The dissertation consists of two parts, each consisting of two chapters. The first part (Chapters 1 and 2) is a detailed examination of the ideology of New Atheism, focusing on the four leaders commonly known as the Four Horsemen (Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett) and situating them within one of two major categories of atheist thought, which are arrived at through a review of the history of atheism in chapter 1. The second part (Chapters 3 and 4) examines New Atheism's manifestation as a social movement that seeks cultural universalization, thus sharing the totalizing aspirations of other fundamentalisms, and focuses on tensions within the movement between competing sub-groups with distinct goals and ideologies, and the New Atheism's relative impact and current status.

These two parts are relatively distinct projects, but both are required to understand New Atheism, conceived comprehensively as a secular fundamentalism that is both ideology and social movement. I will argue that New Atheism should be understood precisely as a cultural movement that seeks to change beliefs and universalize an ideology characterized by scientism and a political doctrine of secularization. My research indicates that, though the atheist movement was for a time dominated by New

Atheism, ongoing intra-movement tensions, complexities in the views of its members, and new directions in terms of goals and strategy indicate that New Atheism is only one of a number of different ideologies and groups seeking to advance their agendas, with the outcome of these processes still unclear.

The opening chapter, "A Definition of Modern Atheism", examines the historical development of atheism, seeking to establish an unconventional definition of atheism not as "disbelief" or "lack of belief", but rather, as itself a form (or forms) of belief. Reviewing the literature on theories and definitions of atheism in historical perspective – and drawing primarily on Buckley (1987, 2004) and Berman (1988) – it examines atheism's relationship to several intellectual and socio-cultural developments: (1) the scientific revolution and an accompanying revolution in theology, (2) the Enlightenment, (3) Darwinism and science's challenge to church authority, and (4) the rise of the social sciences. This historical analysis establishes two general categories of atheism arising out of a 19th century division of atheist thought into two trajectories: "scientific atheism" and "humanistic atheism". Scientific atheism considers religion a false explanation of nature that must be destroyed by rational-scientific critique and replaced with a scientific worldview. It is also a political program characterized by scientism, liberalism, a Darwinistic conception of social progress, and in certain cases (notably the sociology of Herbert Spencer, whose theories provided the intellectual foundation for Social Darwinism), a defense of free market capitalism and individualistic approaches to social organization. Humanistic atheism is equally political but conceives of religion as a manifestation of, and response to, injustice, alienation, and existential crisis – or in other words, as a social phenomenon that responds to social conditions. Hence, humanistic atheism focuses its critique not on the irrational elements of religious faith, but rather, on the social conditions that give rise to them, manipulate them, and create the need for their consoling effects; or as Marx writes, "the critique of heaven turns into the critique of Earth" (1983: 116).

The chapter then introduces the Four Horsemen (Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens), the leaders of the New Atheism, who seek to

revive the tradition of scientific atheism in response to developments in late modern society, producing a secular fundamentalist ideology that has translated into a social movement. I argue that their emergence and popular success is best understood in the context of two major events: the increasing tensions between the West and the Islamic world, manifest in the destruction of the World Trade Center and subsequent debates about Muslim immigration in western countries; and the increasing influence of the Christian Right in American politics under the George W. Bush administration. The global significance of these events, and their perceived threat to the Enlightenment principles of reason and scientific inquiry, inspired this movement's reactionary attack on religion. After briefly establishing the socio-political context of the emergence of the New Atheism and introducing the Four Horsemen, the chapter concludes by noting that the distinction between the two major historical trajectories of atheism provides a basic initial framework for the following chapter's more detailed analysis of the ideology the New Atheists advance. This ideology is rooted in scientific atheism, though updated with respect to advances in science, and explicitly tailored to the socio-political circumstances of the 21st century.

The second chapter, "The New Atheism", presents a critical analysis of the four canonical New Atheism texts (Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006; Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007) and the ideas advanced by their authors. I interpret the New Atheism – which is essentially scientific atheism updated with the language and theories of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience – as a belief system designed not only to destroy religion, but to advance an evolutionistic vision of the Enlightenment narrative of progress and reclaim the authority of science in social and political life. These two aspects of the ideology at the heart of the New Atheism are discussed in distinct sections. Each refers to the New Atheism's response to a perceived crisis of modernity, which is threatened both by 'pre-modern' forces of religious ignorance and 'post-modern' forces of cultural and intellectual relativism.

The chapter examines the New Atheism as a defence of a particular vision of modernity against a perceived threat from the emergence of what they consider to be

'pre-modern' religious fundamentalism and scientific ignorance. This anti-modern Other, taking form more conspicuously in Islam but also in other fundamentalist forms of monotheism and even its more liberal variants, serves as a contrast by which to construct and defend its own fundamentalist secular ideology. This ideology centers on the notion of modernity as a progressive step from barbarity toward an ultimate form of civilization driven by the engine of science and reason. A critical element in this progress is the process of secularization, which, following an evolutionary understanding of the development of human society and culture, is considered inevitable, even though it faces a major challenge in the rise of fundamentalism globally. The New Atheism adopts the task of defeating this 'pre-modern' challenge to the hegemony of science through rational-scientific attacks on a core concept of all monotheistic religions: faith. At the same time, it endorses its own brand of faith in a teleological vision of modernity as the event that brings us to the end of history, with social and cultural evolution culminating in the universal adoption of a scientific worldview.

To achieve this vision, the New Atheism also aims to resolve a second crisis within modernity, that of the challenge from what they consider 'post-modern' relativism. They counter relativism with a defence of the authority of the natural sciences in all realms of inquiry, which is the essence of scientism. The social sciences and in particular the paradigm of postmodernism, with its epistemic relativism, are perceived as a 'post-modern' challenge to modernity and scientific authority. Relativism, for the New Atheism, is as dangerous as religious faith because it removes the grounding for the construction of civilization – namely, universalist science and reason. The social sciences are rejected as a redundant addition to the application of Darwinian theories and concepts to society, culture, and economics. The scientism that the New Atheism promotes, then, involves replacing the social sciences with sociobiology, and democratic politics with scientific authority.

The final critical insight developed in this chapter pertains to the New Atheism's celebration of modernity as a social and cultural state of affairs that allows for the progressive evolution of civilization. This is tantamount to what TalalAsad (2003)

describes as the "political doctrine" of secularization, and universalizing this ideology is the goal of New Atheism. This is an essentially political project that is advanced primarily through ideological action: promoting and attacking various sets of beliefs in the public sphere. The other strategy adopted by the New Atheism is something quite different. It involves building a sense of community and a positive collective identity to create a hospitable cultural environment for atheism to flourish, which in practice amounts to a social – or more precisely, cultural – movement. The following chapter examines the social movement aspects of New Atheism, including its conflicts with other elements within the atheist and secularist movement, which is vexed by tensions between factions that are motivated by distinct ideologies.

The third chapter, "The Atheist Movement", begins by briefly tracing the history of atheist activism in the United States and establishing a theoretical framework by which we can research and analyze the atheist movement. Drawing primarily on Alberto Melucci's (1989, 1996) work on identity-based movements, I make a distinction between "cultural" movements that seek to change beliefs, norms, and values through direct engagement with the public, and "political" movements that seek to achieve legal and public policy changes through instrumental action, including protests and lawsuits, aimed at putting pressure on state authorities. Following this definition, I argue that the New Atheism is a cultural movement, since its target is not the state, but public opinion, and its goal is not legislative change, but broad cultural transformation – namely, the widespread adoption of the scientific atheist worldview, defined primarily by scientism. However, the New Atheism emerged within an already-existing atheist movement that has traditionally been structured more as a political movement concerned with civil rights for an atheist minority and maintaining respect for constitutionally mandated separation of church and state. Tensions have emerged between advocates of these two approaches. These tensions are the primary driving force shaping movement dynamics, and they are revealed in debates concerning goals and strategy, which should be understood in the first instance through an examination of processes of collective identity construction.

What I refer to broadly as the "atheist movement" is actually comprised of a loosely-knit network of organizations defined by atheism, secularism, humanism, rationalism, and freethinking, all with porous ideological boundaries (the movement is also commonly called the "secular movement" and the "freethought movement", and there is no universal agreement on terminology). The primary focus of this study is North America, where the atheist movement is most active, a result of the influence of the Christian Right in this context, primarily in the U.S. but to a lesser extent also in Canada (McDonald 2011). However, the movement is largely deterritorialized and based on the internet, though it materializes in specific projects in local and national contexts. For this reason it was possible to study the movement largely through internet research. For a period of over three years I have regularly monitored a number of websites and blogs of atheist organizations and public figures/leaders. These include the websites of the Center for Inquiry (including President Ronald Lindsay's blog), Center for Inquiry Canada, Atheist Alliance International, American Atheists, Freedom From Religion Foundation, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, and the blogs Pharyngula and Friendly Atheist. I chose these websites because they represent the largest and most active atheist organizations, and the blogs because they are among the most frequently-visited and are written by influential public figures PZ Myers and Hemant Mehta, respectively (it must be noted that there is a vast array of blogs, discussion forums, and internet shows and podcasts dedicated to atheism, and that this is a small sampling restricted to some of the most important ones). I listened to the Center for Inquiry's weekly podcast, *Point of Inquiry*, for the period of 2007-2013, with the exception of those episodes that were not relevant to atheism, religion, or the atheist movement – for instance, episodes featuring discussion of new discoveries in science – and also read all issues of *Free Inquiry*, the Center for Inquiry's bi-monthly magazine, for the period of 2007-2012. Atheist organizations frequently hold conferences that feature speakers and discussions, many of which are available online, and I have watched many presentations given at Atheist Alliance International and Center for Inquiry conferences from 2007-2012. I attended two conferences in person: the Centre for Inquiry Canada 2010

conference in Toronto, and the Atheist Alliance International 2010 Annual Convention in Montreal, organized in partnership with Humanist Canada (I conducted interviews with attendees of the latter event – these are the subject of the following chapter).

All of this research contributed to my general knowledge of the movement and informed my analysis, though the chapter focuses on a few specific instances of activism and movement campaigns and what they tell us about the movement's goals and the ongoing debate regarding movement strategy. The chapter examines processes of collective identity construction within the movement, identifying three phases: coming out, community building, and self-representation as a moral minority, reflecting the division of the chapter according to three sub-headings. These processes are examined through the lens of some major instances of atheist activism, including the Coming Out Campaign, the Atheist Bus Campaign, and the Reason Rally. The analysis reveals a tension within the movement between those who deny that atheists are an "oppressed minority" and prefer to self-represent as the emerging mainstream (the New Atheists belong to this group, a position that corresponds to the goal of universalism), and those who wish to move in a more political direction, constructing a "political identity" (Bernstein 2008) in order to achieve minority recognition. This approach is expected to allow atheists to carve out a distinctive space in the cultural landscape, and to grant them a stronger voice in public affairs.

This tension regarding identity and atheists' relationship to society is further expressed in debates regarding movement strategy, and together they reveal a more fundamental tension threatening the movement's survival. The atheist movement today is defined by tensions between three major sub-groups that I refer to as atheists, secular humanists, and libertarian rationalists. I argue that these groups and their differences with respect to goals and strategy should be understood in terms of their distinct ideological foundations. Regarding goals, the distinction is between those who aggressively promote a scientistic worldview, those for whom atheism implies a shared responsibility for social justice, and those who seek to protect individual and economic freedom from intrusion by organized religion or the state, or both, as they are seen to be

in confluence – hence this group's emphasis on the goal of political secularism (church-state separation). The ideologies at the heart of these divisions are scientific atheism, humanistic atheism, and individualism.

The division is revealed in the first instance through intra-movement debates on the issue of whether to adopt a strategy of "confrontation" of religion or "accommodation" of liberal religious groups that are not hostile to science. Those who favour confrontation (including the New Atheists) advocate intolerance of religious individuals and groups. This position is derived from the basic ideology of scientific atheism, in which religion is understood as the antithesis of science that must be eliminated in the name of progress. Those favouring "accommodation" are open to working with liberal religious groups that are not hostile to science because their views are more in line with humanistic atheism, which understands religion as a manifestation of alienating and oppressive social conditions. These underlying social conditions, rather than their cultural manifestation in religion, are of ultimate concern in this approach. What is clear from the analyses of collective identity and strategy debates is that the New Atheism's cultural project is no longer the dominant goal. Today, most atheists as well as secular humanists pursue more precisely political goals: for the former, an aggressive defence of a minority identity and distinct ideological boundaries; and for the latter, the pursuit of social issues such as science education, the environment, and most significant recently, gender equality. Both groups, of course, favour a goal of political secularism – that is, separation of church and state.

The tension in terms of strategy, then, could be expressed as one between atheists and humanists. However, the situation is complicated by a third group that shares features with these groups and yet is ideologically distinct from both, which I call the "libertarian rationalists". Their understanding of religion falls in line with that of the New Atheists and other scientific atheists, so the historical model holds in this respect. But their politics, and their desired goals for the movement, are quite different. This group's primary concern is individual freedom and opposition to intervention in civil and economic life by the state, which may serve as an instrument of religious forces. This

libertarianism, and particularly the *laissez-faire* approach to economics and social assistance, reflects the division in 19th century scientific atheism between liberals and Social Darwinists influenced by Herbert Spencer – scientific atheism is still divided between Darwinists and Spencerists today. I argue that these libertarians constitute an "Atheist Right", illustrating more than any other group the atheist movement's relationship to the Christian Right. That is, both are fundamentalisms that advance a reactionary political ideology, while each uses the other as an enemy against which to unite (thus serving as an effective mobilization tool), even as they pursue goals that sometimes overlap. The libertarians are in tension with the other groups, particularly a recently emerged faction that retains an opposition to religion rooted in science, and which wants to tie the atheist movement to the notion of social justice. This particular tension cannot be reduced to the distinction between scientific and humanistic atheism because of the unique combination of these groups' positions on religion and their politics.

Alain Touraine writes that any social movement features "a changing set of debates, tensions and internal rifts; it is torn between grass-roots opinion and the political projects of its leaders" (2000: 94). The fourth chapter, "Atheists", examines these tensions and internal rifts between the leaders of the atheist movement and its "grass-roots" members, reporting and analyzing the results of in-depth interviews with fifteen members of atheist organizations in North America (details on the interviewing method and contexts are discussed in the chapter). These interviews explore questions such as the extent to which members' beliefs are influenced by the New Atheism, the nature and origin of religious belief as they understand it, their views on the meaning of atheism and the goals of the movement, and areas of disagreement with the official discourse and movement actions discussed in the previous chapter. This is a small sampling of atheists and the intention is not to generalize their views as representative of the movement as a whole. Rather, this chapter constructs a detailed picture of how a small group of atheists understand the movement, including the tensions they experience with various aspects of it.

A surprising finding is that these members express significant ambivalence about the debates regarding strategy, and considerably more nuanced views on religion than those of the New Atheists or other more ideologically motivated movement leaders. Indeed, their views are more in line with humanistic atheism than scientific atheism, but they tend to draw on the discourses provided by movement leaders because they lack alternative conceptual frameworks. These nuances in the views of grass-roots members, and the tensions between their views and those of movement leaders, reinforce the argument made in the previous chapter that the atheist movement is facing a daunting challenge to its internal coherence, and even continued existence. Fundamental ideological differences – the deep root of tensions in the atheist movement – and a lack of a coherent focus are threatening to fracture the movement into distinct, and even opposed, spheres of thought and action. Perhaps most important to note is that many members do not support the New Atheism's goal of universalization but instead seek to carve out a space for atheists in the cultural landscape and create communities for non-believers, which seems to support Taylor's (2007) point regarding the pluralist cultural logic of the secular age, where dogmatism and absolutism (religious or secular) give way to the possibility of different forms of belief co-existing with one another.

I conclude by arguing that we are now in the midst of a watershed moment in the history of atheism. While the New Atheism was a clear extension of the scientific atheism of the 19th century, the libertarian rationalists and social justice advocates represent the evolution of new forms of atheism. The atheist movement is at risk of fragmentation among groups with distinct political projects sometimes directly at odds with each other, which include ideological universalization, political secularism, civil and economic liberty, and social justice projects (particularly gender equality). Whether the movement will be able to survive this fragmentation is a question that only time will answer. What seems clear is that we are seeing more complex forms of atheism emerging in the movement today, with different groups claiming different meanings of atheism and developing new ideologies that mix atheism and politics in novel ways that are peculiar to the social, cultural, and political circumstances of the 21st century. Darwin's

description of evolution as a "radiating bush" that continually produces new forms of increasing complexity seems apt as a metaphor for contemporary developments in atheism.

CHAPTER 1

A DEFINITION OF MODERN ATHEISM

"Atheism" is a complex term with an even more complex history, and thus notoriously difficult to define. The first and most crucial point in the definition advanced herein is that the term "atheism" should not be understood as a *lack of belief* in God, or *disbelief* in the existence of God – positions commonly referred to as "negative atheism" and "positive atheism", respectively (Martin 2007). Negative atheism, sometimes also called "soft" atheism, might be better understood as a kind of agnosticism, which is essentially the position of neither believing nor believing that God exists, but simply lacking belief. Unlike agnostics, true atheists assert that *God does not exist*, and therefore when we speak about atheism we are really speaking about "positive" atheism. But this is only a starting point, and this definition tells us little about what atheism means, and has meant, to the people who hold this position.

This chapter defines atheism by examining its historical development and the various meanings and beliefs that have been attached to it since explicit, "avowed" atheism emerged in the Enlightenment (Berman 1988). The period covered in this analysis may appear somewhat arbitrary, since atheist thought can be traced back at least as far as ancient Greek philosophers such as Epicurus and Lucretius. But as Fergusson (2009) argues, modern atheism has its own distinct cultural context, and thus differs in important ways from earlier forms, even if there are also similarities. Modern atheism expresses modern forms of belief and it responds to its specific context. The selection of authors and events covered here may also appear somewhat arbitrary, and there are many important thinkers who are not mentioned, or are mentioned only briefly. The thinkers and events I have selected are those considered within the literature on the topic most important to the development and expansion of atheist thought in the intellectual sphere, and the public sphere more generally. There are many more important figures in the development of what I call "humanistic atheism" than the few discussed in this chapter,

but these few – particularly Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche (with Feuerbach important as an earlier pioneer of the perspective) are distinctive for their popular impact as well as their influence on intellectuals. John Stuart Mill's views on the "utility of religion" were certainly influential on philosophers and social scientists, but few among the general public would know of them. A great deal many more, however, are aware of Marx's description of religion as "the opium of the masses" and Nietzsche's famous proclamation that "God is dead".

From this historical perspective, atheism is a modern movement of thought and practice emerging from political turmoil and revolutions in various intellectual fields, and a form of belief – rather than a lack of belief – shaped by its socio-historical context. To understand the New Atheism, then, we need to begin with an historical examination of atheist thought and practice. Such an examination reveals that "atheism" is inextricably bound up with a tradition of Enlightenment principles, including emancipation through reason, liberal democracy, the primacy of the individual, scientific rationality, and the notion of progress, which is closely related to the theory – or as TalalAsad (2003) describes it, the "political doctrine" – of secularization (more on this in the following chapter).

Following some existing theories and histories of atheism, most importantly Berman (1988) and Buckley (1987, 2004), I review several key events and thinkers that characterize a particular conception of modern Western atheism, rooted in the Enlightenment and the rise of reason and empiricism, though this is by no means an attempt to provide a definitive, comprehensive account of the history of something so elusive and contested in its meaning. This history is intended to demonstrate that New Atheism is not really 'new', but rather just the most recent incarnation of a particular kind of non-belief from a particular intellectual tradition; that this 'new' atheism excludes certain other kinds of engagement with religion that developed diverging lines of critique in the 19th and early 20th centuries; and that this exclusion is a result of certain political and epistemological irreconcilabilities.

The historical narrative constructed here, then, serves the purpose of defining what is commonly termed "atheism" by distinguishing it historically from other kinds of (non-)belief and religious criticism. The chapter outlines a theory of how atheism emerged from a dialectical relationship between religion and science in early modernity, which gradually gave way to a dichotomy in the Enlightenment, and particularly in the 19th century as Darwinists used the theory of evolution by natural selection as a case for the emancipation of science from the fetters of institutionalized religion. These Darwinists cultivated a "scientific atheism" that views religion primarily as the antithesis of science and an obstacle to social and scientific progress (progress of the former type being contingent upon the latter in this view). At the same time, another distinct tradition of atheist thought emerged from the social sciences. This "humanistic atheism" considered religion primarily a social phenomenon rather than an attempt at explaining nature.

This split in atheist thought into two major trajectories in the 19th century is a useful reference point for the recent emergence of the New Atheism, which carries on the scientific tradition while ignoring humanistic approaches due to political and epistemological irreconcilabilities. Both approaches are much more than a critical inquiry into religious faith: they are essentially political projects. Scientific atheism understands religion as an obstacle to scientific mastery of the world and concomitant social progress, and seeks to eradicate this relic of the pre-modern world through science education and 'enlightenment'. Humanistic atheism understands religion not as a pseudo-scientific hypothesis, but as a very human response to living in the world that can be manipulated and used to control and limit freedom and human potential. In some (but not all) versions it rejects the structure of a world that gives rise to religion, which is not a challenge to modernity, but rather, provides ideological support for modernity by rationalizing its inequities. It thus imagines alternative social formations that would cause religion to vanish. These different positions on religion, understandings of what atheism means, and how it should be put into action, are still debated within the atheist movement today. This historical review of the meanings of atheism, then, helps us to understand the dynamics and tensions shaping the contemporary atheist movement's early development.

Atheism and Enlightenment

Michael J. Buckley (1987; 2004) has offered a compelling account of the dialectical origins of atheism, with atheism emerging not out of an antagonism between religion and science, but rather, a relative harmony in early modernity. In the seventeenth century, science was not opposed to Christianity, but rather, science was considered work in the service of Christianity. Buckley argues that atheism came not from a contradiction between religion and science, but from an internal contradiction within theism itself that led to theology turning to science for its foundations. Gavin Hyman (2007) endorses Buckley's theory, suggesting that in early modernity a modern concept of God arose that did away with transcendence as his essential property, instead offering a conception of God as a 'thing' in the world of definite substance and location. When theologians determined that God was a material thing that exists within nature, God by definition became an object of scientific inquiry, according to both science and orthodox theology.

Scientists, meanwhile, thought it natural to ground apologetic arguments through empirical evidence, and were encouraged to do so by theologians and clerics alike. The most important figure in the development of this early modern dialectic was perhaps Isaac Newton, a devout Christian who devoted much of his later life to writing about the Bible rather than the natural sciences. He filled in some gaps in his scientific theories with God, claiming that only divine intervention could account for certain irregularities within nature (Thrower 2000). Newton's discoveries brought about a profound shift and step forward in our understanding of the universe that signaled the possibility that science might be able to find answers to questions that had long been the province of theology, transforming the enchanted universe into a "system of intelligible forces" (Hampson 1968: 37).

With time, even Newton's claim that the universe was created by a supreme being who intervenes in its operations for maintenance work from time to time began to appear dubious to many scientists, simply because it seemed to be an unnecessary addition to a fairly self-sufficient set of theories. By the mid-18th century science had rejected the

notion of a static universe with laws generated by God in favour of a view that accepted nature as a product of great revolutionary transformations over an immense period of time, thereby making the addition of God to existing explanations superfluous (Hampson 1968). This development represented a new phase in the science/religion dialectic as the ideological foundation of atheism, with science making discoveries that did not need the concept of the divine designer. Buckley does point out, however, that not needing a designer to explain things is not the same thing as saying there is no designer. Scientists were not arguing that God does not exist; indeed, most prominent thinkers of the Scientific Revolution were passionate believers and many developed theological positions to accompany their naturalistic theories (Henry 2010). Science did, however, begin to claim primary entitlement to what many considered to be the primary function of religion: an explanation of the origin and nature of material reality.

Buckley (2004) suggests that this development paved the way for atheism, since theism that was built on scientific knowledge eventually generated its own negation. For modern rationalist critiques to apply to God, there first had to be some change in theology that made God an object that could be critiqued rationally and investigated scientifically. Atheism, then, was not an external challenge to theism, but rather it was the result of a revolution with theology itself, which is to say that the origins of modern atheism are ultimately theological (Hyman 2007). In this theory atheism is not the result of a *conflict* between science and religion – this false notion of the enduring and intractable conflict between the epistemologies and institutions of religion and science is referred to by some historians simply as the "conflict myth" (Lindberg 2010) – but on the contrary, atheism arose from an immanent contradiction within orthodox theology produced by its apologetic strategies (Buckley 2004).

This theory of the origin of atheism dominates the literature on the topic, finding further support (with slight differences) from Alan Charles Kors (1990) and James Turner (1985) in their studies of the origins of modern unbelief in France and the Unites States, respectively. Turner suggests that atheism in America emerged from a dialectical relationship between religion and the rise of modern science and Enlightenment

rationalism, and that ultimately it was theology itself that generated its own negation by attempting to adapt religious beliefs to social and cultural changes, and to the standards of scientific knowledge. In so doing, "the defenders of God slowly strangled him" (Turner 1985: xiii). Like Buckley, Turner sees atheism arising immanently from within theology as it adapted to the modern world. Kors (1990) argues that in France, atheism emerged immanently from within the orthodox tradition in its attempt to defend the existence of God against agents of 'natural philosophy' (what would become modern science). Debates between two major theological schools on how best to philosophically demonstrate the existence of God ironically produced better arguments *against* the existence of God, resulting in the negation of both positions. Buttressing Buckley's analysis, Kors demonstrates atheism arising out of a contradiction within theology and its apologetic strategies.

Science and natural theology were principal among these apologetic strategies, and in the early days of concurrent revolutions in science and theology there was thus no real conflict, but rather, science and religion were bound together. The shifting theological understanding of God – that is, the move from transcendence to materiality – resulted in a shift of emphasis from revelation to natural theology, which was predicated upon the idea that the existence of God could be inferred by reason and that science could provide hard evidence of his presence in nature (Topham 2010). This relationship would evolve and give birth to a modern form of atheism that rejected a modern form of theism that was ultimately unsustainable (Hyman 2007).   That is, a theism grounded upon a conception of God as a natural entity amenable to scientific investigation would inevitably fail when the evidence failed to demonstrate his role in nature, but rather seemed to demonstrate more and more that the concept of God was not required to explain nature.

It must be noted, however, that these developments generally did not lead directly to atheism, but rather to skepticism of revelation and to a belief in 'natural religion' or *deism* (or in other words, a move from revelation to natural theology). Deists rejected the specificities of revealed religion (which was based on hearsay and thus could not be

verified rationally or empirically) while embracing the view that religion should be founded upon rational proofs and that evidence of God's design could be found in nature (Byrne 1989). The prevailing Enlightenment sentiment was that religion that could not be established by reason was nothing but superstition (Thrower 2000). This transitional phase to true atheism emerged out of the dialectical relationship between religion and science, a product of the Scientific Revolution and a revolution within theology. Many skeptics of this period famous for their critiques of religion were in fact deists, including David Hume, Denis Diderot, and notably Voltaire, whose scathing attacks on religion were not motivated by atheism, but rather were directed at corruption within the Church. Voltaire was a critic of religious institutions and revealed religion, rather than the idea of God, which he, like Hume, sought to situate within nature and to establish through reason.

The deism trend was not restricted to Europe. In his history of unbelief in the United States, James Turner argues that in 18th century America "unbelief in fact remained unthinkable to all but a tiny handful", but the changes wrought by science and Enlightenment rationalism meant that even here the nature of faith had to change: "if belief were to remain secure, it needed footings solid enough to endure the buffetings of changing times. Thus, by the 1790s its underpinnings had altered drastically, at least for the educated, as believers sought to anchor God firmly in the modern world" (1985: 35). Hence, deism became popular among many intellectuals and elites, most notably revolutionary figures such as Thomas Jefferson and Thomas Paine. Rejection of religious authority in favour of liberal democracy, then, was an important element in revolutionary politics in America as it was in France, and the grounds for this rejection were found in deism, which undermined the authority of traditional religious institutions.

The major exception to the rule of deism during the Enlightenment was a watershed event in the history of atheism: the publication of Baron d'Holbach's *System of Nature* in 1770, which is generally considered the first published work of avowed (explicit and publicly stated) atheism in Europe (Berman 1988). D'Holbach considered atheism to be directly connected to the Enlightenment project of emancipation from

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ignorance, traditional authority, and the tyranny of church and king. His criticism of religion may be distilled to three essential points: it is unscientific and its teachings are contrary to scientific truth, it supports a corrupt social order by diverting attention away from the here-and-now and instead toward the afterlife, and it is not a useful foundation for morality (Thrower 2000: 107). These points refer to three dimensions of critique: epistemological, political, and moral, corresponding to the dimensions of the Enlightenment critique of religion as outlined by Casanova (1994), which includes the categories "cognitive", "practical-political", and the unwieldy "subjective expressive-aesthetic-moral", which can be more succinctly stated as the "moral-subjective" critique.

The critical engagement with religion among 18th century Enlightenment thinkers, for the most part, was rarely as boldly and proudly atheistic as the work of d'Holbach, and never quite escaped the influence of deism and the problem of design. Atheism, however, would find new life in the 19th century. It was in this period that atheism evolved from its Enlightenment origins and took shape according to several new points of origin, from which we can derive most contemporary forms. These new strands of atheism grew from the Enlightenment's approach of general skepticism and gave it new grounding in the nascent disciplines of biology, anthropology, sociology, and psychology.

Evolution, Religion, and Society

The influence of the concept of "evolution" in the history of atheism has been unjustly ignored and under-theorized. In the 19th century Enlightenment notions of progress found expression in the idea of evolution, which was not only a scientific theory, but became a dominant narrative in depictions of the history and nature of western civilization. It also became a cornerstone of atheism, solving (to some minds) the problem of the argument from the design and the question of human origins. But even before Darwin brought it into the scientific mainstream, evolutionistic thinking was applied in the emerging science of society that August Comte would come to call "sociology". The atheism of this period that connected Enlightenment skepticism to the

expanding influence of evolutionary theories of both the natural and social worlds is what I call "scientific atheism".

A theory of religion was integral to Comte's general theory of society. Comte considered religion a slowly disappearing relic of a bygone period of social evolution. This idea was expressed in his famous "Law of Three Stages" which posited that all societies pass through three historical phases in their development: theological, metaphysical, and positive. In the theological stage, marking all of human history up until the advent of modernity, humans understand themselves and their world in thoroughly religious terms and "suppose all phenomena to be caused by the immediate action of supernatural beings" (Olson 2008: 67). Subscribing to the animist theory of the origins of religion, Comte argues that man has a natural tendency to conceive of "all external bodies as animated by a life analogous to his own" (1961a: 646). This is essentially a less refined version of the "intentional stance" theory of religious origins derived from contemporary evolutionary psychology – a theory supported by Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), and Pascal Boyer (2001), among others – which holds that a propensity for religious belief is a by-product of adaptive mental processes that enhanced our ancestors' prospects for selection (namely, attributing agency to all animate and inanimate objects). Comte similarly describes "the primary tendency of Man to transfer the sense of his own nature into the radical explanation of all phenomena whatever" (1896: 310). Comte here refers to primitive man's projection of human-like agency to all phenomena, i.e. "The only way that he can explain any phenomena is by likening them, as much as possible, to his own acts" (1896: 310). Further, in his view man's attempts to control the course of the stars through primitive religious rituals constitute "the first symptoms of the awakening of human intelligence and activity" (1961a: 651), and perhaps, as Dawkins and Hitchens believe, our most primitive attempts at science.

The dominance of theological understandings of self and nature begins to sway in the intermediate metaphysical stage which begins in early modernity and "reconciles, for a time, the radical opposition of the other two, adapting itself to the gradual decline of the

one, and the preparatory rise of the other, so as to spare our dislike of abrupt change, and to afford us a transition almost imperceptible" (Comte 1961b: 1338). In this stage supernatural beings are replaced by abstract forces as the cause of all phenomena, and philosophy turns to speculating about the nature of these forces. Finally we arrive at the positive stage, where speculation concerning abstract forces is abandoned in favour of empirical investigation into observable natural and social phenomena and the laws that regulate their relationships – in other words, modern science. Comte's positivism assumes that "all phenomena are capable of being incorporated into invariable natural laws" and that it is an important goal to reduce all natural laws to the smallest possible number (Olson 2008:67). Echoes of this sentiment resonate in Daniel Dennett's chapter section on "Who's Afraid of Reductionism?" in *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995:80) and Richard Dawkins – always in search of "ultimate" explanations – lamenting that reductionism has become a "dirty word" in academic circles (1982:113). We cannot say that the New Atheists' ideas are directly influenced by Comte, but his indirect influence as one of the preeminent figures in early positivist and empiricist philosophy is clear, and his way of thinking deeply permeated Western culture, particularly after Darwin. Unlike some New Atheists, however, Comte did not go so far as to suggest that social phenomena are reducible to biological phenomena and argued instead that the social world required its own science, but his "social physics" was clearly informed by an underlying evolutionistic orientation that has given rise to a pattern of speculation repeated again and again since the Enlightenment.

Comte can thus be placed in the same camp as contemporary scientific atheists who consider religion a pseudo-scientific theory or explanation of natural phenomena. Indeed, he mused that supernatural religion was not only inevitable, but that it is surprising that "the mind of Man should have restrained as far as it did the tendency to illusion which was encouraged by the only theories then possible" (1961a: 650). He and other like-minded "positivistic evolutionists" of this period "relegated the role of religion exclusively to the early stages of social development" (Parsons 1961:646), much like the New Atheists do today. Indeed, Comte's ideas could be considered a proto-secularization

theory, outlining a teleological path of social evolution characterized by a gradual decline in religious belief, which is replaced by secular science. The New Atheism is, in fact, very much a Comtean ideology of secularization, a point to which I will return in the following chapter. But in order to understand this ideology we must understand atheism's historical relationship to evolution as a scientific theory; hence, we must understand the impact of Darwinism.

The publication of *The Origin of Species* in 1859 is not only one of the most significant events in the history of science, but perhaps also the most significant event in the history of atheism. Charles Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection was one of the most provocative and controversial ideas in human history, chiefly due to its implicit challenge to religious explanations of human origins. This simple but astonishingly successful explanation of life had no need for invocation of the divine. It was self-sufficient and for the first time provided an answer to the riddle of the existence of life that was for thousands of years answered with God, and thus provided atheism with an answer to the lacuna that had plagued it for centuries. Darwin's theory not only challenged the argument from design but nullified it by providing a rational, evidence-based alternative explanation of the appearance of design in life (Dawkins 1986). Darwin himself notes the implications of his theory for the oldest argument for religion in his autobiography: "There seems to be no more design in the variability of organic beings, and in the action of natural selection, than in the course which the wind blows" (2007: 94). Though he never called himself an atheist, he expressed an agnosticism that grew out of the implications of his theory of evolution, which provided new scientific grounding for atheism and the critique of religion (Irvine 1955). Darwin himself pointed to the implications of his theory for the understanding of religion, explaining it, like Comte, in evolutionary terms as an early attempt at explanation of nature:

> ...the belief in unseen or spiritual agencies...seems to be almost
> universal... nor is it difficult to comprehend how it arose. As soon as
> the important faculties of the imagination, wonder, and curiosity,
> together with some power of reasoning, had become partially

developed, man would naturally have craved to understand what was

passing around him, and have vaguely speculated on his own existence

(quoted in Dennett 2006:124).

Darwin, a shy and chronically ill recluse, rarely spoke publicly and instead left the defence of his highly controversial theory in the public sphere mainly to Thomas Huxley, who would become famous for, among other things, coining the term "agnosticism", and gaining a reputation as "Darwin's bulldog" by arguing vigorously on behalf of Darwin's theory. Huxley and a handful of others took to defending and promoting the theory of evolution in the academy and in the more inclusive public sphere, and "effectively collaborated to take over the scientific establishment, with the goal of enthroning naturalism as the ideology of science and science as the mainspring of modern society" (Larson 2006: 108). Darwin's theory, of course, met with resistance from religious authorities (as well as dissenters from the scientific community), and this coupled with the fact that the Biblical account of the creation and significance of human beings contradicted evolution led some early Darwinists to engage in a public conflict with religious ideas. This conflict still shapes the discourse of the New Atheism today.

It is crucial to note that for these early Darwinists, the theory of evolution was not simply a scientific fact that needed to be defended against irrational forces that would seek to discredit it. The theory of evolution was, from the beginning, tied to a certain political orientation. Darwin was born into a wealthy family of capitalists and scientists (Browne 2006). This socialization proved determinative of his character and political views, which in turn were instructive in the development of his scientific theory, which was informed by a worldview informed by liberalism, individualism, and *laissez-faire* capitalism, and the right of individuals to pursue their self-interest in a freely competitive society (Desmond and Moore 1991). Soon after its publication, Huxley declared *Origin of Species* to be a gun in the armory of liberalism, the most effective new weapon for attacking superstitious beliefs and thus promoting rational materialism (Larson 2006).

Evolution was clearly not politically neutral in the minds of its defenders. Rather, the idea was tied to liberalism and rationalism and used to promote modern goals and

values, and thus transcended science to become a cornerstone of the political ideology of the Victorian liberal intelligentsia (Jones 1980). Indeed, many scholars agree that Darwin's theory not only validated his political views, but that the theory itself was a product of Victorian culture, with Darwin early in his scientific career committing himself to a theory of nature that reflected the Malthusian socio-economic inclinations of British high society. In this view, the theory of natural selection was a contingent result of social history, rather than an inevitable conclusion (Radick 2009). As atheism became tied to the theory of evolution, it moved from simple negation of religious beliefs to an affirmation of liberalism, scientific rationality, and the legitimacy of the institutions and methodology of modern science – and thus from religious criticism to a complete ideological system.

In addition to linking evolution with liberalism and capitalism, Darwinists found in the theory support for the idea of Western Europe as the world's most advanced (or highly-evolved) society. The theory of evolution thus took on enormous significance outside the realm of science, shaping the social and political thought of the day (Budd 1977). To this extent, it became as much an instrument of conservative political ideology as it was an instrument of liberalism. This is most clear in the example of Herbert Spencer, who drew on both Darwinian and Lamarckian ideas for his conception of social evolution. In Spencer's social theory, evolution defines the stages that a society passes through (Wiltshire 1978). The mechanism that drives this process is natural selection, or competition between the more and less "fit" members of society: "Society advances where its fittest members are allowed to assert their fitness with the least hindrance, and where the least fitted are not artificially prevented from dying out" (Spencer 1965: 81). In this sentence we see Spencer's radical laissez-faire individualism (Gondermann 2007) and a warning against the danger posed to the advancement of society by welfare state programs and support for the poor, all with the legitimacy provided by a scientific theory. While Spencer did not concentrate on religious criticism and was not directly involved in the development of atheism, he was directly involved in the development of evolutionistic social theories. His view of religion was firmly in line with that of both

Comte and Darwin, which is clear in this statement: "Religions that are diametrically opposite in their dogmas agree in tacitly recognizing that the world, with all it contains and all that surrounds it, is a mystery seeking an explanation" (quoted in Durkheim, 1995: 22). Religion, then, is a false explanation of nature, and both Spencer and Comte believed that social evolution and the rise of science would bring an end to religion.

It is important to note that this idea of progressive social evolution, with its vision of a "natural unfolding of social complexity" (Dunbar 2007: 32), is predicated upon a misreading of Darwin, who viewed evolution as a process with no fixed direction, and invoked the metaphor of a "radiating bush" to describe adaptation and differentiation (Dunbar 2007: 31). For Spencer, who inflected biological evolution with his own prejudices and politics, evolution was a journey down a singular line of improvement, and the key to this improvement was creating the conditions whereby the fittest could flourish, and would not be hindered by the lesser elements in society. With Spencer, evolution moved from liberal-rationalist ideology to what would become known as Social Darwinism, a political ideology modeled after the conditions of survival in nature – it is, in short, *society* red in tooth and claw. In many circles, scientific and otherwise, atheism became intertwined with this ideology, even though Darwin himself considered atheism to be an untenable position and instead preferred to refer to himself as an agnostic (Desmond and Moore 1991).

Despite Darwin's reservations, the theory of evolution meant for some that science was able to complete the break from religion instigated by the Scientific Revolution and a contemporaneous revolution in theology, now having an explanation of the origin of life to supplement the explanation of the cosmos. The atheism of the Victorian Darwinists, constituted by this explanatory model of religion, as well as political liberalism and a defence of the Enlightenment principles of progress, universalism, and scientific-rationalism, is what I call *scientific atheism*. It carries on the cognitive critique, focusing on the irrationality of religious beliefs, with the expectation that the lights of reason would eliminate the darkness of religious ignorance and superstition. It emerged out of the dialectic described by Buckley, which, in the

Victorian period following Darwin's theory of the origin of life, culminated in the view that science had replaced religion as the explanation of the material world, and that modern scientific society must reject religion (Segal 2004). With science claiming sole right to explanation of nature, critique of religion was in essence a rejection of worldviews that stood in the way of the legitimation and institutionalization of modern scientific methods.

It is crucial to again point out that scientific atheism was not restricted to those in the fields of the natural sciences. Thinkers in the fields of sociology and anthropology also took to positing religion as a lower stage in the evolution of humanity, such as in Comte's Law of Three Stages. E.B. Tylor shared the scientific atheist view of religion as a pseudo-scientific hypothesis (what Richard Dawkins [2006] calls the "God Hypothesis") and believed that religion's function is the same as that of science: to account for events in the material world (Segal 2004). It is equally important to note that not all Darwinists took the Spencerian view of progressive evolution, and that scientific atheists in the Darwinian tradition today – Richard Dawkins is the prime example – are inclined to warp the theory of natural selection to fit their own particular visions of social progress. These facts taken together tell us that scientific atheism is not a necessary consequence of a Darwinian worldview, but rather an ideology that uses "evolution" and "natural selection" as metaphors in the advancement of what is in fact a deeply political position.

From Heaven to Earth

The atheist defenders of Darwin, emboldened by the revolutionary theory of evolution by natural selection and the answer it provided to the argument from design, extended and refined the Enlightenment tradition of religious criticism, most importantly the cognitive critique. At the same time, another revolution in thought was taking place, one founded on the notion that the cognitive critique did not account for the non-rational forces that cause belief in God. This revolution produced what David Berman (1988) calls the "anthropological approach" to criticism of religion, which steers atheism away

from ontological questions concerning God's existence. Instead, thinkers in this tradition assumed God's non-existence, focusing their attention on the question of why people believe in God and how that belief is sustained despite the revelations of science. If the 'light' of reason and science failed to illuminate the 'darkness' of religion – if people continued to believe even after Newton, Darwin, and the rationalist philosophers – then ignorance alone could not explain the motivations and causes for religious beliefs.

This move might be understood as a departure from scientific atheism, which is a denial of the existence of God and the refutation of religious (as opposed to scientific) explanations of nature, and toward an approach that shifted focus from 'nature' to 'humanity', as nineteenth century atheism directed its energy toward ennobling humanity rather than attacking the irrationality of religion (Buckley 2004). The atheism of the 19th century anthropological approach to criticism, and subsequent criticism rooted in this tradition – which understands religion as a social and psychological phenomenon and emerged from the social and human sciences – may therefore be called *humanistic atheism*. This approach surfaced largely as a response to discontent with the promise of the Enlightenment that modernity would lead to greater prosperity for all, as well as a recognition that the rationalist cognitive critique of religion did nothing to address the non-rational sources of religious belief, which include alienation, suffering, infantile neurosis and insecurity, and fear of death. It understood God as a projection of alienation and suffering, thereby centering humanity and its earthly interests, rather than theological constructions of God and the supernatural realm, as the object of inquiry. Its origin may be traced to Ludwig Feuerbach, while Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud are the other major pioneers in this tradition. Of these four, only Marx could be considered a true social scientist, while the others come from the perspectives of philosophy and psychology, but all took account of the social in their theories of religion. It may seem a strange collection, and indeed this is a very diverse group of thinkers. Nonetheless, these four are representatives of a turn in atheist thought toward a conception of religion as a product of the human/social condition, rather than an outdated from of pseudo-scientific knowledge or simple ignorance. There are, of course, many

others from this period who take similar approaches. These are the four Berman (1988) identifies as the most significant, and indeed, in terms of both scholarly and general influence, it is difficult to imagine a more significant trio than Marx, Freud, and Nietzsche. Feuerbach, meanwhile, was a precursor to all three, and was particularly influential in the development of Marx's views.

Feuerbach's contribution to the development of atheism was the notion of God as projection of the human onto the divine, which is a projection of alienation: "Religion is the disuniting of man from himself; he sets God before him as the antithesis of himself" (Feuerbach 1957: 33). That is, everything that is great about God is alienated from humanity. Feuerbach considers this act of projection and what it reveals about the human condition the true, anthropological essence of Christianity, while rejecting its theological claims as a "false essence" (Feuerbach 1957). His project was thus to repair the division with the human by revealing the secret or 'true' essence of religion, which is that it is not God that is worshipped, but humanity alienated from itself.

This philosophical project seeks to reclaim the divine properties for humanity; hence the basis of Feuerbach's atheism is not a scientific-rationalist discrediting theological claims, but rather a recognition of the essentially human character of God. With this recognition established, he declares that "By his God thou knowest the man, and by the man his God; the two are identical" (Feuerbach 1957: 12), an insight that led him to a different kind of approach to religion that involved turning theology into anthropology. Feuerbach believed that in order to understand (and effectively critique) religion we must understand the conditions of life that give rise to it. Hence, he sought to replace the science of God with the science of Man (Hyman 2007). This shift in emphasis, from theological claims to the human condition, and from an understanding of religion as false explanation of nature to one that considers it a social phenomenon, is the essence of humanistic atheism. This approach was adopted by Marx, who reconfigured Feuerbach's theory by defining more precisely the nature of the human experience that resulted in the projection of God – that is, alienation.

Marx sought to to expose the distorting ideas about social life within religion and

the underlying interests sustaining it, and argued that religion could not be analytically separated from the social world it resides in (Beckford 1989). In his analysis religion could not somehow be siphoned off from social context, and in particular the material conditions of social life. For him religion is an ideological manifestation of alienation, or an expression of, and protest against, earthly human suffering. Roughly speaking, he echoed Feuerbach's theory of God as projected alienation: "The basis of irreligious criticism is: man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion, indeed, is the self-consciousness and the self-esteem of the man who has not yet found himself or who has already lost himself" (Marx 1983: 115). The alienated self, buried by oppressive conditions, is projected onto the divine figure, which in turn promises relief from this oppression in the next world.

Marx's description of religion as the "opium of the people" and "the heart of a heartless world" (1983: 115-116) serves to elucidate what Feuerbach meant by the "true" anthropological essence of religion as opposed to the "false" theological essence. Religion is true not in its theological claims, but in the sense that it is a real expression and manifestation of the human experience of oppression and suffering; thus, the critique of religion is really the critique of an unjust and oppressive world, and "the critique of heaven turns into the critique of earth" (Marx 1983: 116). Marx insists that if the world were recreated according to his socialist vision it would have a heart of its own, and religion would be reduced to a vestigial organ of an oppressive social body, eventually to be left in the dustbin of history along with capitalism. He agreed with Feuerbach that the elimination of religion is necessary for human beings to be restored to their humanity, and by extension this requires the end of alienation, which is at the heart of religious faith: "The criticism of religion ends in the teaching that *man is the highest being for man*, hence in the *categorical imperative to overthrow all those conditions* in which man is a debased, enslaved, abandoned, contemptible being" (Marx 1983: 119).

Marx diverges from the Enlightenment tradition in his outline of the method for the abolishment of religion, claiming that when the oppressive conditions that necessitate religious belief are transformed, the comforting illusion of religion will no longer be

necessary and it will simply disappear – the ideology vanishes as its material foundation crumbles. While scientific atheism focuses on rational-scientific education and analysis of religion's transcendent ideas, Marx pointed out that this would do nothing to transform the earthly social relations that constitute their foundation. He argued that the strategy of rational deliberation was bound to fail because it did not address this true essence of religion. Hence, just as Feuerbach wanted to turn the science of God into the science of Man by "resolving the religious world into its secular basis" (Marx 2002: 183), Marx similarly argued that the critique of heaven necessarily becomes the critique of Earth. He notes that "Feuerbach resolves the religious essence into the *human* essence", while adding that this is not an individual abstraction, but rather 'the ensemble of the social relations' (Marx 2002: 183). The point of emphasis is therefore not enlightenment, but social transformation.

This shift in perspective reflects a new understanding of the essence of religion, moving well beyond simply pointing out that Judeo-Christian doctrine is at odds with modern science, and particularly an evolutionary account of the origins of human life. Marx's thought on religion signals a progressive development in atheist thought, moving from rational-scientific refutation of theology to consideration of religion as a social phenomenon, including its sources and its social and political consequences. It also signals a point of divergence among different schools of atheist thought. The Darwinists continued the project of the emancipation of science that originally gave birth to atheism, and specifically sought to establish scientific hegemony within the academy and employed evolutionary biology as a strategy to this effect (Fuller 2006) while virtually ignoring Marx's more sociological and anthropological brand of criticism.

Like Marx, Freud described religion as an illusion, and though the specifics of this are quite different, these thinkers do share an understanding of the essential value of religion to the believer. Religious illusions, for both thinkers, are in part a mechanism for coping with suffering and the harsh realities of life. Freud located the roots of this illusion not in the material conditions of production, but in something much less tangible: the human unconscious. He conceives of the religious believer as a fearful and

wondering child; helpless, afraid, and ignorant of the nature of the world, which appears before him as a terrifying and threatening place. He paints a portrait of humans desperate for some measure of control over the forces of nature which to them are so terrifying. This is only possible if nature is controlled by an anthropomorphic figure who can be influenced, and the result is the idea of God, master and creator of all of nature, who can be cajoled to prevent volcanic eruptions, droughts, hurricanes, and pestilence, to name just a few of his limitless powers (Freud 1989b: 20-21).

This helplessness experienced by the adult in relation to nature experienced is much like the helplessness experienced by the child in relation to his parents (Freud 1989b: 21). Putting these two elements together – the helplessness against nature and infantile helplessness – we get a picture of religion as

> the system of doctrines and promises which on the one hand explains to
> him the riddles of this world with enviable completeness, and, on the
> other, assures him that a careful Providence will watch over his life and
> will compensate him in a future existence for any frustrations he suffers
> here. The common man cannot imagine this Providence otherwise than in
> the figure of an enormously exalted father (Freud 1989a: 22).

Here Freud complements the explanatory view of religion with a psychoanalytic account of the adoption of these beliefs. In this respect he diverges from scientific atheism, which is not influenced by humanistic considerations but concentrates entirely on the conflict between the factual claims of science and religion. At the same time, his empiricism and derision of non-scientific explanations of reality, including his attitude regarding religion as a failed ancient explanation of natural processes analogous to Dawkins' (2006) God Hypothesis – does raise echoes of scientific atheism so clear that it is stunning that the contemporary New Atheists utterly ignore Freud's contribution to atheism.

While the notion of religion as irrational, infantile wish fulfillment dominates discussion of Freud's work on religion, another crucial aspect of his thought on the issue is often overlooked. This is the place of the adult's experience of oppression and suffering in civilization, that state of affairs that guarantees humans a certain degree of

security and protection from harm in exchange for a renunciation of our most anti-social instincts and a submission to external authority, which results in a general unhappiness (Freud 1989a). While civilization in any form is bound to result in repression and psychic discontent, for which religion is a remedy, the problem is exacerbated by the particular configuration of civilization we are presented with, which is characterized by exploitation and oppression. Here a link to Marx emerges, revealing a common understanding of the source of religion's value to the believer. Like Marx, Freud sees in the concepts of God and heaven a means of coping with Earthly injustice through the promise of divine justice: "In the end all good is rewarded and all evil punished, if not actually in this form of life then in the later existences that begin after death. In this way all the terrors, the sufferings and the hardships of life are destined to be obliterated" (1989b: 24). Like Marx, then, Freud directs criticism away from ontological questions of God's existence and toward the social and psychological conditions of life.

Another pioneer of humanistic atheism is the self-declared anti-humanist, Friedrich Nietzsche. His philosophy rejects any epistemology of transcendence or universality. His famous declaration that "God is dead" (Nietzsche 1974: 167) is not, of course, a statement of fact about God's existence. Rather, Nietzsche here refers to the condition of modernity, characterized by skepticism, transformation, and recognition of the possibility of self-determination. That is, the notion of the death of God refers to the end of "belief in any sort of absolute centre or unshakable foundation" (Caputo 2007: 270). It is a necessary step in the evolution of man, where man is a step between animal and Ubermensch, when humanity itself, rather than a distant God, becomes the meaning of Earth (Ansell-Pearson 1994: 138). Here we see a link between Nietzsche and Feuerbach's theory of God as projected alienated humanity. That is, man cannot become Ubermensch – master of himself and creator of his own truth and morality – until God, the universalizing and alienating foundation of truth and morality, is 'dead'.

Nietzsche takes a position not so alien from scientific atheism to the extent that he believes that faith robs people of their own capacity for understanding, instead forcing them to rely on the church to explain, and provide meaning to, their existence, deepening

their dependence on clergy. At the same time, he takes a humanistic approach to his conception of the suffering that is at the heart of religious belief: "Man shall not look around him, he shall look down into himself; he shall not look prudently and cautiously into things in order to learn, he shall not look at all: he shall *suffer*…And he shall suffer in such a way that he has need of the priest at all times" (Nietzsche 2003: 177). He describes religion as an illusion constructed as an escape from reality: "it is the expression of a profound discontent with the actual…But that explains everything. Who alone has reason to *lie himself out* of actuality? He who *suffers* from it" (Nietzsche 2003: 137).

In this sense Nietzsche can be placed in line with Marx and Freud in their diagnosis of religion as both an expression of suffering and compensation for it. This idea is expressed most forcefully in his disdain for Christian morality, which for Nietzsche is nothing other than a slave morality, with the oppressed living by a moral code that legitimates their oppression and encourages their passivity and submission to powerful rulers, impeding the progress toward a higher "master" morality of self-determination (Kaufmann 1974: 371). This sentiment is voiced by Zarathustra, who says he has "often laughed at the weaklings who thought themselves good because they had no claws" (Nietzsche 1966:118). In Nietzsche's view, "slaves" accept a God of consolation and belief in future happiness in the afterlife, which eliminates (or at least tempers) the motivation to revolt and seek earthly justice by promising a much more meaningful divine justice to come (Salaquarda 1996). For Nietzsche, then, as for Marx, religion turns our attention away from what is really important, which is human social relations, and toward the appeasement of a supernatural deity who has the power to end our suffering if only we are prepared to submit to his will – which, of course, is really the will of powerful clerics. The biggest difference between these thinkers is perhaps in their attitude toward the oppressed. Marx is clearly empathetic, while Nietzsche derides the weak masses beguiled by the Christian slave morality, and Freud is equally contemptuous of the majority who are mired in an infantile fantasy and "will never be able to rise above this view of life" (Freud 1989b: 22).

Two Atheisms: Scientific and Humanistic

This brief overview indicates that atheism cannot be reduced to one single all-encompassing definition. There are actually (at least) two atheisms, one scientific and one humanistic. These atheist ideologies both grow and diverge from Enlightenment rationalism, which in turn developed its critiques in response to a contradiction within theology arising from the dialectical relationship between religion and science in early modernity. We find, then, that atheism has evolved like a radiating bush, borrowing Darwin's own analogy. New forms have arisen in response to social upheavals and changing conditions of knowledge, with intellectual revolutions in the natural and social sciences in the 19th century, and their accompanying political dimensions, producing the two major atheist ideologies.

The first type, scientific atheism, is defined by its denial of the existence of God and its understanding of religion as an ancient myth or superstition that developed in the absence of a scientific understanding of the material basis of natural phenomena. It involves a rejection of any truth claims not amenable to rational or empirical verification (for example, religious revelation) and a claim that science and reason constitute the only legitimate path to knowledge regarding natural processes. This view may be described as *scientism*, or the idea that science (referring specifically to the natural sciences) sets the boundaries for what can be known about reality, and that no aspect of physical or social life is outside of its domain (Stenmark 1997). Scientific atheism therefore places emphasis on one major element of the Enlightenment critique of religion, the cognitive critique, which situates religion as the binary opposite of science and a contradiction of reason. This strategy seeks to eradicate religious belief through rational-scientific critique of its tenets and truth claims, thus ending the 'darkness' of religious superstition by shining the 'light' of reason.

While these features can all be considered aspects of Enlightenment criticism, what makes scientific atheism unique is the role of the concept of evolution in this ideology, both in its general influence in the intellectual sphere, and particularly in its

Darwinian incarnation. Indeed, scientific atheism arose in tandem with the defence of the theory of evolution by natural selection and against objections from conservative religious quarters, and Darwinism became a case for the emancipation of science from religious authority. It thereby coincided with the cause of liberalism, conceived as individual freedom as well as the imperative that collective decision making should proceed from rational deliberations and examination of scientific knowledge. The view that this system of government would result in greater prosperity for all was based on the belief that social progress is contingent on scientific progress. A stronger version of scientific atheism, represented by Spencer and influenced by Comte, implies that civilization is an evolutionary process driven by science and reason, and that religion is therefore an impediment to social progress.

While a distinction between scientific and humanistic atheism should be recognized, these are mutually exclusive lines of criticism. Indeed, Freud and even Nietzsche at moments sound very much like rationalists in their critiques of the dogma of faith. The point is that the humanistic atheists took the scientific position for granted and advanced toward a more sophisticated mode of engagement. The irrationality of faith, and the limitations and contradictions within modern theology, were only a starting point for Marx, Feuerbach, Freud, and Nietzsche, who sought to understand the historical, social, and psychological forces that generate and sustain these irrational beliefs. In so doing they turned their attention away from the cognitive critique (since it was taken for granted that religions are myths, as in Feuerbach's notion of religion's "false theological essence") and toward the two dimensions of Enlightenment religious criticism more relevant to the social sciences and humanities: the practical-political and moral-subjective critiques. In a certain sense, humanistic atheism is truer to Enlightenment criticism than scientific atheism, which focuses on the cognitive critique at the expense of the other two approaches.

Feuerbach and Marx viewed religion as a legitimating ideology for a particular social formation and a conservative force quelling the motivation to revolt against earthly injustice by promising divine justice. Nietzsche took issue with the Christian "slave

morality" that made a virtue out of the submission to powerful rulers. Freud, meanwhile, viewed religion as an infantile fantasy, with the figure of God as a benevolent father and expression of humanity's impotence with respect to nature and social injustices. These thinkers positioned religion as a social and psychological phenomenon that responds to human experiences, rather than a mistaken pseudo-scientific hypothesis pertaining to the natural world. In this view religion cannot be eradicated with science education, since religion is not in the first place an attempt at doing science or explaining nature. Rather, the human experience that is manifest in religious beliefs and practices, and which these beliefs and practices in turn legitimate, is the object of criticism. The vicious circle of oppression and legitimation cannot be broken by rational critique, in this view, because this does nothing to address religion's material and social foundations. Humanistic atheism insists that in order for religion to vanish, the conditions of life that sustain it, and that it in turn legitimates, must be transformed – hence Marx's view that the critique of heaven must become the critique of Earth. An important implication of this perspective is that, because religion is a manifestation of the human experience, it is best understood from the perspective of the human sciences, broadly conceived to include the social sciences (including psychology) and humanities.

Aside from their position on the nature and origin of religious beliefs, the major distinction between these two ideologies is in their politics. In scientific atheism, society advances in lockstep with science, and this advancement is threatened and limited by religious ignorance. There is no embedded social critique, but rather, an implicit assumption that social progress is a fact and that religion is the main obstacle to overcome. Humanistic atheism has a very different perspective, namely, that it is not religion, but society itself that is the problem. Religion is a manifestation of what is fundamentally wrong with the social structure. While it also poses religion as a response to existential crisis and individual psychology, humanistic atheism first and foremost posits that minimizing suffering and maximizing well-being and fulfillment in life are the only thing likely to make religion vanish. This means that the social order must be questioned and transformed, a position that sets humanistic atheism apart from the more

conservative *laissez-faire* liberalism of scientific atheism. In short, the distinction is this: scientific atheism seeks to release modernity from religious shackles, while humanistic atheism questions the foundations of modernity itself and seeks to resolve the inequities that characterize it.

In the 20th century both forms of atheism became highly politicized and were involved in major social, political, and cultural transformations. Other kinds of atheism emerged and garnered some interest, notably existentialism, which enjoyed a period of popularity, but its influence was not as great or as durable as the others. In this period the most important strands of atheist thought were scientific atheism and Marxism, or at least these were the two that had the greatest impact on society. In terms of the social significance of atheism in the 20th century, the major example is the Soviet Union, which ostensibly took up Marx's dictum that religion is an ideology of oppression and class society, and thus sought to eradicate it. Interestingly, early Soviet anti-religious activity involved a strategy of enlightenment employed primarily through a propaganda campaign that focused on rational and scientific proofs against the existence of God (Peris 1998). This was the subject of great debate and created divisions within the highest ranks of the Communist Party, but generally enlightenment was the favoured strategy, ironically defying the Marxian idea that social transformation would make enlightenment on the question of religion superfluous. Nonetheless, the purported atheism of the Soviet Union was a manifestation and expression of the politicized atheism of Marxism. The project of rapid secularization in the Soviet Union was largely a failure and the masses defiantly held to their religious beliefs despite their supposed liberation from oppression, a massive propaganda campaign, and fear of persecution (Peris 1998; Froese 2004). It is perhaps the connection to the oppression and violence within the Soviet Union and other communist nations (particularly China) that has left the Marxist atheist tradition in ruins, even if in practice these nations generally did not meet the condition of the eradication of oppression which Marx's theory was predicated upon. In other instances, such as in Latin America, religion itself was an emancipative force that united masses in revolution, quite the opposite role from that which Marx relegated it to. Religion there was indeed the sigh

of the oppressed, but hardly the opium of the people.

Scientific atheism and its relationship with evolution also played an important role in 20th century history. particularly in the United States, where scientists and educators have been defending their practices against attack from religious quarters – though the religious would surely also claim to be under siege by science and secularism – since John Scopes was prosecuted and convicted in Dayton, Tennessee in 1926 for violating a new law prohibiting the teaching of evolution in public schools. This case – popularly known as the "Monkey Trial" in reference to the notion that humans and apes share common ancestors – famously pitted celebrated defence attorney and avowed atheist Clarence Darrow against prosecutor William Jennings Bryan, political populist and "America's foremost champion of Christian government" (Larson 2006: 212). In a dramatic twist, Darrow cross-examined Bryan, one of the prosecutors, and the trial became a seminal event in American cultural, scientific, and legal history. Darrow's cool (and often scathing) rationalism represented the Darwinist side of the debate, while Bryan's evangelical defence of revealed religion represented the voice of conservative Christianity.

Scopes was convicted of breaking the law, but in the court of public opinion Darrow was perhaps the victor, with Bryan repeatedly confounded by Darrow's questions requiring him to defend inconsistencies within scripture. By the time they got through the first few verses of Genesis some newspapers had taken to ridiculing Bryan, though his "impassioned objections made anti-evolutionism all but an article of faith among conservative American Christians" (Larson 2006: 217). Obviously both sides claimed victory, and the trial had the lasting effect of polarizing both sides of the debate and setting the stage for a century of political struggle between religious "creationists" on the one hand and scientific rationalists and secularists on the other. This struggle has largely played out on the issue of public education, and in 2006 a second "Monkey Trial" took place in Dover, Pennsylvania, where this time it was secularists who mounted a successful challenge against the teaching of "intelligent design" theory in public schools, which the presiding judge ruled was equivalent to religious instruction and thus

prohibited from state education by the constitution. Most importantly, it was in this trial that atheism and Darwinism were permanently fused in the American context. Among many conservative American Christians, believing in evolution is tantamount to denying God, hence the rejection of the theory that constitutes the foundation of the science of biology and that, for most people in the Western world and almost all scientists, is simply a scientific fact.

The Four Horsemen: Scientific Atheism in the 21st Century

The Scopes trial was one of the most important events in the politicization of atheism (certainly the scientific version). This politicization was, however, largely restricted to the United States, where science frequently found itself under attack from religion, while in Western Europe scientists faced no similar interference from the church or religious activists. Highly politicized atheism returned with renewed vigor in the infancy of the 21st century with the emergence of the New Atheism and its celebrated leaders, and an increasingly vocal and radical secular public, particularly in the United Kingdom and North America. This "New Atheism" was new only in the extent of its impact in the public sphere, where debates regarding religion and its relationship to science suddenly became common features in mass media. Its discourse on science and religion, on the other hand, is quite familiar, reflecting the same debates that shaped scientific atheism in the 19th century.

The New Atheists would be at home in the Victorian context from which scientific atheism emerged. Indeed, two of the most famous New Atheists are British, and the growing Muslim population in Great Britain and western Europe more generally is an important factor in their emergence, though the events of September 11, 2001 and their cultural and political aftershocks – most importantly the expanding influence and audacity of the Christian Right, dedicated opponent of Darwinism, as well as escalating rhetoric and violence from Islamic extremists – are the key factors. But the social and intellectual roots of the movement are found in 19th century England and the debates concerning Darwin's theory of evolution. Their arguments differ from those of their 19th

century predecessors mainly in the sophistication brought to the theory of evolution by the Modern Synthesis that united Darwinian natural selection with genetics and molecular biology (Larson 2006), and more importantly in the addition of theories derived from the emerging fields of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. Drawing on these new sciences, the New Atheists craft a vision of religion not only as pre-scientific explanation – what Richard Dawkins (2006) refers to as the "God hypothesis" – but as a natural phenomenon. This means that religion is produced by natural forces rather than social forces, and these can be understood by recourse to evolutionary theory, applied to both culture and individual psychology. Their evolutionistic theories treat religion strictly as belief – there is little to no accounting of the social nature of religious practice.

The Atheist Alliance International Convention in September 2007 was a watershed event in the recent history of atheism. It was the first time that the four writers who would collectively come to represent an intellectual wave known as the New Atheism – that is, Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens – appeared at the same event. This was the New Atheism as its wave of popularity was cresting, with Hitchens publishing his entry in the canon that year, and the three others releasing titles the year prior. The event was co-organized by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS), and Dawkins took the opportunity of their appearances at the convention to bring all these writers together in a more informal setting to talk about their views on religion, atheism, and critical responses to their work. The conversation was released on DVD by RDFRS under the title *The Four Horsemen*, the moniker that had popularly been applied to these most prominent of contemporary advocates of atheism, referring to the infamous Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse of the book of Revelation.

Sam Harris has the distinction of publishing the first New Atheism text, *The End of Faith*, in 2004, following it up in 2006 with *Letter to a Christian Nation*, addressed specifically to American Christian fundamentalists. These books are a call to arms for what Harris believes is an unavoidable battle: science and reason versus the forces of

faith and superstition, with devastating consequences should the former fail. *The End of Faith* today reads very much like a fevered response to 9/11 in its discussions of the West's engagement with Islam as a clash of civilizations, with one representing Enlightenment and moral progress, and the other representing barbarism. At the time it was published Harris held a bachelor's degree in philosophy from Stanford University, but no other significant credentials, though he has since completed a PhD in Neuroscience at UCLA. The book defied expectations for a critical work on religion from an unknown author by achieving bestseller status and winning the PEN award for non-fiction.

Harris tapped into post-9/11 anxiety concerning Islam and the West's relationship with the Middle East directly and effectively, which perhaps accounts for the unexpected and overwhelming success of the book. A good example of his approach is a passage in which he warns that, should an Islamist regime gain control of nuclear weapons, "the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own" (2004: 129). The apocalyptic fervour and frequency with which Harris prognosticates on such scenarios was no doubt a source of his appeal in a historical and cultural milieu that stoked the flames of Islamophobia. Harris is also a polished writer, skilled at crafting seductive arguments for a mass audience amenable to his point of view. He employs limit-case examples of religious extremism as his primary rhetorical technique, exploiting his audience's fears while ostensibly appealing to their rational faculties. His success is therefore not accidental or incomprehensible, though had he written the book a decade earlier it likely would have slipped silently into the cracks of bookstore shelves.

Despite being the first text in the New Atheism 'canon' and a bestseller and PEN award winner, *The End of Faith* is not the most important text in this canon, and on its own would likely not have initiated the atheist movement that we know today. That distinction clearly belongs to Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, a phenomenal bestseller that launched a period of unprecedented mass media attention devoted to atheist commentators. Dawkins is the de facto leader of the New Atheism. Before becoming the world's most famous and vocal atheist he was an evolutionary biologist

who held a professorship in zoology at Berkeley in the late 1960s before taking a position as lecturer, and later reader, at Oxford. Dawkins garnered international recognition both inside and outside the academy with the publication of *The Selfish Gene* in 1976, where he sought to explain his gene-centred theory of evolution by natural selection to a mass audience. His ability to clearly convey complicated scientific principles to a general audience made him a successful author of popular science, and in 1995 he was awarded the first Simonyi Professorship for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford University, a position he retired from in 2008.

Dawkins' reputation as a public intellectual, then, was established well before he embarked on his new career as advocate for atheism. He rather suddenly went from a mostly gentle defender of science to a fierce critic of religion with the broadcast of a two-part television documentary in 2006 called *Root Of All Evil?* The film follows Dawkins in conversation with Islamists and Orthodox Jews in Jerusalem, attending a clandestine gathering of atheists in Colorado, and interviewing Ted Haggard, then president of the National Association of Evangelicals.[1] It was followed by the publication of *The God Delusion,* the success of which ignited a heated public debate about the place of religion in the West, and made Dawkins a celebrity. The book was not an unforeseeable move for Dawkins, who had already made attacking "intelligent design" (the 'scientific' version of biblical creationism) a priority in his public lectures and writings, notably in *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986). A book attacking religion, the foundation of intelligent design, was a logical step given his trajectory. It stands as the key text of the contemporary atheist movement, and was a significant cultural event in its own right. As of January 2010 the book had sold over two million copies in English alone, with many more sold throughout Europe (Dawkins himself reported at this same time that the German edition had sold over 260,000 copies).[2]

The God Delusion is primarily a sustained argument that "God almost certainly does not exist", while also exploring the topics of religion's harmful social and psychological effects, and a Darwinian theory of the origin and purpose of religious belief. Dawkins treats God as a natural entity amenable to scientific investigation,

precisely because he adopts a position of scientific materialism, or the view that "everything that exists (life, mind, morality, religion, and so on) can be completely explained in terms of matter or physical nature" (Stenmark 1997: 24). That is, Dawkins believes that anything that exists must exist within nature, and that there is no object of inquiry that lies outside the boundaries of science. What is ostensibly an examination of the nature of religious belief, then, is actually a polemic on the merits of the scientific method and its universal applicability.

In general, the most important theme in Dawkins' many writings, lectures, and films about religion actually has little to do with religion itself; rather, his most pressing issue is his vigorous promotion of science and particularly evolutionary theory, with natural selection serving as his God-of-the-gaps. The theme of the 2009 AAI convention, presented in conjunction with Dawkins' Foundation for Reason and Science, was "Darwin's Legacy", and the presentations as a whole paid little attention to religion and instead were geared almost exclusively toward highlighting science's capacity to produce knowledge as well as a sense of wonder (or as Freud would put it, the "oceanic feeling", a distinctly religious sentiment). Dawkins dogmatically insists that the natural sciences are and must be capable of explaining *everything*. He sets religion up as the opponent of science in the tradition of his 19th century Darwinist forebears, and then attempts (mostly in vain) to use science to discredit religious beliefs in his "crusade to use Darwinism as a means of dissolving all traditional belief in a purposeful universe" (Bowler, 2003[1983]: 361). The goal is ultimately not to clear the way for secularization as such, but to clear the way for the continuing scientization of secular spheres and to increase the influence of the Darwinian Left.

Dawkins spelled these intentions out quite clearly in a talk given in 2002 at the annual TED lecture series. Here, several years before writing *The God Delusion*, he reveals his true purpose, which is to attack creationism, as an opponent of evolution, by attacking religion: "My approach to attacking creationism is – unlike the evolution lobby – my approach to attacking creationism is to attack religion as a whole" (Dawkins, 2002). His engagement with religion, then, is in essence an attack on creationism as a rival to

evolutionary biology's account of the origins of life. There is nothing inherently wrong with an attack on creationism using Darwinian theory, since creationism and Biblical literalism are, in fact, in conflict with the scientific knowledge on the issue. Taking this approach, however, means that his critiques of religion really only address the most literal and fundamentalist kinds of faith. More nuanced (and pragmatic) faith does not have the same built-in incompatibility with scientific explanations of nature. The salient point to be gleaned here, though, is that it is not really religion per se that Dawkins is interested in. Rather, it is opposition to Darwinism that concerns him, and it just so happens that the strongest opposition to Darwinism comes from religious fundamentalism (notably in the United States). In order to combat his true enemy, creationism, Dawkins uses evolutionary theory, and science more generally, in an attempt to undermine the foundations of religious belief as a whole.

Dawkins is joined in his battle against creationism by his colleague Daniel Dennett, Professor of Philosophy and Co-Director of the Center for Cognitive Studies at Tufts University. Before becoming known for his atheism, Dennett had achieved some success as a public intellectual with such works as *Darwin's Dangerous Idea* (1995) and *Consciousness Explained* (1992). His foray into the philosophy of religion, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, makes the simple argument that religious claims should be subject to scrutiny just like any other; hence "breaking the spell" of insulation to criticism that religion has cast upon us is his major goal. This would be a very reasonable request but that Dennett adds that religion must be understood as a *natural phenomenon*, and thus, crucially, *not* a social phenomenon. Dennett writes, "The spell that I say must be broken is the taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many" (2006: 17). Like Dawkins, Dennett's understanding of religion, and culture more generally, is firmly rooted in the natural sciences (particularly Darwinism), explicitly rejecting sociological approaches.

Dennett is the least significant among the Four Horsemen in terms of prominence within the New Atheism movement, and he did not achieve the fame enjoyed by his

colleagues. This is perhaps because his entry in the canon is the least impassioned and most carefully measured, reflecting the more prudently detached reasoning of a philosopher. He thus stands in stark contrast to the last of the Four Horsemen, Christopher Hitchens, whose aggressive attack on religion resonated much more strongly with atheists. Hitchens is something of an outlier in this group, being neither a scientist nor philosopher of science. He was primarily a journalist covering politics, though he was also a general critic who wrote on a vast array of topics, from Thomas Paine (2008) to Mother Theresa (1995). As a columnist for major publications like *Vanity Fair* and *The Atlantic* (among many others), and a regular presence on television talk shows, Hitchens was a public intellectual with a significant presence well before the publication of *God Is Not Great* brought him to new heights of international celebrity. The book catalogues many of the standard arguments against religion and covers such familiar themes as inter-faith violence, religion's allegedly intractable conflict with science and reason, and the barbaric morality and inconsistencies contained within the major monotheistic texts. Hitchens described himself as an "antitheist" (2007a: xxii), believing that religious myths are not only untrue, but that their truth is undesirable because it would mean that we are all under surveillance by a "celestial dictator" who may punish us for the private thoughts we hold, referring to the Orwellian notion of "thought crime" in making his case against God. In 2010 Hitchens was diagnosed with esophageal cancer and given a bleak prognosis. Some wondered whether his views on religion would change, or if there might even be a death bed conversion. Instead, he claimed that "the special pleading for salvation, redemption and supernatural deliverance appears even more hollow and artificial to me than it did before".[3] He succumbed to the illness in 2011.

Together these four thinkers helped to usher in a new era of atheist thought and activism. That it was these four in particular may be somewhat arbitrary, particularly with respect to Harris, the only member of this group who was unknown prior to his engagement with religion. But there is no doubt that they galvanized a moribund movement, and their success itself is indicative of a generational turn, with many young

skeptics finding in them a voice for the expression of views that were previously not found in the public sphere. The following chapter examines their thought in detail, revealing that they are not simply critics of religion and superstition, but advocates of a systematic form of belief that I call scientific atheism. The Four Horsemen reject (or ignore) humanistic atheism because it conflicts with their understanding of religion as a substitute for true (scientific) knowledge. Sam Harris claims that faith is "the licence people give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail – faith fills the cracks in the evidence and gaps in logic" (2004: 232) and that "faith is nothing more than a willingness to await the evidence – be it the Day of Judgment or some other downpour of corroboration. It is the search for knowledge on the installment plan: believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day, and you will discover that you were right" (2004: 66). In these two quotations we see both Dawkins' "God Hypothesis" and his idea of the "god of the gaps". Religion for Harris, as for Dawkins, is an explanation of the inexplicable, a pseudo-scientific way of filling in gaps in understanding with a 'hypothesis' that needs no verification, and thus their approach falls within the category of scientific atheism. But this is only the beginning: the New Atheism, like the historical forms of atheism reviewed in this chapter, is not an absence of belief. It is itself a belief system, or more precisely an ideology, ostensibly concerned with epistemology but essentially political in nature. This ideology is indeed rooted in scientific atheism, but updated with respect to developments in science (particularly in the fields of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience), and explicitly tailored to the socio-political circumstances of the 21st century.

CHAPTER 2

THE NEW ATHEISM

The New Atheism has emerged in the wake of a broad acceptance that the naive secularization thesis, holding as a universal principle that religion declines as scientific modernity advances, is a myth and product of ideology rather than an empirical reality (Asad 2003; Berger 1999; Casanova 1994). The New Atheism's strategy of aggressive confrontation with religious ideas is a tacit recognition of this failure of the secularization thesis to come to fruition. That is, rather than waiting for the natural progress of history to unfold, the New Atheism seeks to aggressively push history forward.

This development in atheism is a product of three major events or trends: (1) the rise of young-Earth Creationism and Intelligent Design among anti-evolution Christians; (2) 9/11 and its cultural aftershocks; and (3) the influence of 'relativism' in two forms falling under the umbrella of "postmodernism", which the New Atheists understand as a combination of epistemic relativism and cultural pluralism, manifest in policies of multiculturalism in liberal democracies. These factors refer us to reactions to two very different kinds of ongoing threats: one 'pre-modern' (in the case of creationism and 9/11, which the New Atheists understand as natural consequences of the persistence of pre-modern forms of religious fundamentalism), and one 'post-modern' (in the case of epistemic and cultural relativism, which the New Atheists consider responsible for a misguided effort toward tolerance that takes the form of multiculturalism). This chapter examines their thought as a response to these perceived threats to modernity and its promise of bringing us toward what they consider the highest form of civilization: one shaped by science, the engine of progress.

While the term "New Atheism" is sometimes considered synonymous with a group of four main thinkers, I treat it as an intellectual movement for which the works of these four serve as a canon, while there are many other thinkers and organizations that espouse the same basic ideology. The following chapter examines these related thinkers

and organizations, and the atheist movement more broadly, in terms of the ways in which they support and challenge the core of New Atheist thought. Here I focus on the canon, constituted by the works of the group popularly known as the "Four Horsemen".

Science, Modernity, and Secularization: The Ideology of New Atheism

The New Atheism, I argue, is not an absence of belief or a critique of religion, but is itself a belief system, or more precisely, an ideology. By this I do not mean ideology in an orthodox Marxian sense of illusory beliefs or false consciousness. Rather, I mean a view of ideologies as "coherent and relatively stable sets of beliefs and values" (van Dijk 1998: 256) that bracket social cognition, and provide "schematically organized complexes of representation and attitudes with regard to certain aspects of the social world" (van Dijk 1998: 258). In this view ideology is a schematic or rigid framework of preconceived ideas that shape, and thus potentially distort, understanding (Eagleton 1991). But as Thompson (1984) argues, ideology refers not only to belief systems. It is also a means of legitimating the authority of this belief system and the group that advances it. Ideology is thus not only about epistemology – what can be known and what precisely is known – but also about power. I thus take ideology to refer to *a stable structure of beliefs and attitudes that determine how knowledge is constructed and interpreted to legitimate a form of authority*.

While Thompson understands ideology as a means to "sustain relations of domination" (1984: 4), I take it to apply to any means of legitimating authority that follows certain criteria, regardless of whether and to what extent the group advancing it actually occupies a position of domination (hence ideology can also be a property of subordinate or oppressed groups). I take these criteria from Eagleton (1991: 5-6), who writes,

> A dominant power may legitimate itself by *promoting* beliefs and values
> congenial to it; *naturalizing* and *universalizing* such beliefs so as to
> render them self-evident and apparently inevitable; *denigrating* ideas
> which might challenge it; *excluding* rival forms of thought, perhaps by

some unspoken but systematic logic; and *obscuring* social reality in ways convenient to itself. Such 'mystification', as it is commonly known, frequently takes the form of masking or suppressing social conflicts, from which arises the conception of ideology as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions.

Eagleton notes that a problem with this definition is that not all beliefs we might consider ideological are associated with a dominant political power, but again, the "dominant power" part here may be excluded and the definition can then apply to any group seeking to advance its own interests through advancing a belief system legitimated by these means. Crucially, in this understanding of ideology the beliefs that are promoted are not necessarily false or illusory, as in the Marxian version. Rather, any belief system that seeks legitimation by these means may be considered ideological regardless of the question of their 'truth'.

The New Atheism advances an ideology that meets these criteria. Its goal is the legitimation of scientific authority. It *promotes* a belief system characterized primarily by scientism, which is the grounding of its epistemology, its critique of religion, and its politics. It *naturalizes* and *universalizes* this belief system by equating it with objective science and the pinnacle of human intellectual progress, thus representing it as the only universally valid one, and further, the outcome of a natural and inevitable process of accumulating knowledge and an according restructuring of society. Like all ideologies, it is thus *dehistoricizing* in its denial that this belief system is specific to a particular time, place, and social group (Eagleton 1991: 59). It *denigrates* religion, which is the belief system it considers its direct antagonist. It *excludes* social scientific thought on religion, which it considers a rival to its own Darwinian understanding of the origin and function of religious beliefs, as well as a direct challenge to scientific authority in the form of "postmodernism" and epistemic relativism. Finally, it *obscures* social reality in its insistence that scientific progress is equivalent to social progress, and that religion is the cause of the major ills of modernity, including its new forms of conflict, violence, and oppression. The contradiction represented in Horkheimer and Adorno's (1995[1944])

"dialectic of Enlightenment" – which understands modernity in terms of a tension between the quest for emancipation and new forms of oppression that replace 'Church and King' – is thus resolved by rejecting the idea that such a contradiction exists in the first place, and that the only problem with modern society is the stubborn persistence of pre-modern ways of thinking, most importantly religion.

The following sections of this chapter explore these elements of the ideology that is "New Atheism", including its critique of religion, its rejection of the social sciences as a rival form of thought, and its political implications with respect to the nature of modern societies and the challenges they face. But first we must identity the belief system it promotes, which I have identified above as *scientism*.

For JurgenHabermas, scientism means that "we no longer understand science as *one* form of possible knowledge, but rather identify knowledge with science" (1971: 4). This is to say that scientific knowledge is the only kind of knowledge there is. Mikael Stenmark (1997) more precisely outlines a number of different kinds of scientism. The best and most relevant for my purposes is his definition of "epistemic scientism", which is "The view that the only reality that we can know anything about is the one science has access to," and further, that "what lies beyond the reach of scientists cannot count as knowledge. The only sort of knowledge we have is the scientific kind of knowledge" (Stenmark 1997: 19). Like Habermas, Stenmark defines scientism as the reduction of all knowledge to scientific knowledge, but adds that scientism is not merely a statement on knowledge, but on the nature of reality. That is, science defines the parameters not only of what can be known, but what can be said to exist, or what is real. Something that is now knowable by science cannot be said to exist or to have any basis in reality.

It is important to be precise about what "science" means here. I understand scientism to refer specifically to the extension of the authority of the natural sciences beyond the boundaries of nature. Scientism in this view is "the attempt to apply the methods of natural science to the study of society" (Gorski 1990: 279), or more precisely, an attempt to "bring methods, concepts, practices, and attitudes from the investigation of the natural world to bear on human activities and institutions" (Olson 2008: 3). Richard

G. Olson suggests that we can speak of scientism when "scientific attitudes, methods, and modes of thought are extended and applied beyond the domain of natural phenomena to a wide range of cultural issues that involve human interactions and value structures" (2008: 60), thus adding ethics to the purview of science.

Scientism, then, involves two major characteristics: first, the view from Habermas and Stenmark of scientism as a statement on the limits of knowledge and nature of reality; and second, the view from Gorski and Olson that scientism is an extension of the authority of the natural sciences, specifically, to non-natural or immaterial social and cultural phenomena. Hence, I define scientism as *the view that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge; that the domain of knowledge of the natural sciences encompasses human behaviour, institutions, and value structures; and that the theories and methods of the natural sciences are the best approach to the study of society and culture*.

In the case of the New Atheism, where the centrality of Darwinism to atheistic thought has never been clearer, we can identify a more specific kind of scientism: *evolutionism*. Matthew Flamm, himself an atheist writing in the pages of *Free Inquiry*, the magazine of the Council for Secular Humanism, writes that the New Atheism, "while similar to that of positivists of previous generations in its scientistic, naturalistic rejection of religious claims as knowledge, is grounded in the latest synthesis of multiple scientific areas of study, filed compendiously under the heading of 'evolutionary biology'" (2011: 23). Flamm's point reflects my argument that the New Atheism is scientific atheism updated with recent advances in fields closely related to evolutionary biology, particularly evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. I would further argue, however, that evolution is not only the basis of religious criticism, but also a vision of the nature and historical development of human society and culture. The scientistic application of theories and concepts derived from Darwinian evolution to the social world is the basis of the social theory and political science at the heart of the New Atheism. While scientism is their epistemology, then, it is more precisely *evolutionism* that is their ideology. It is a

vision of the world that is expressed in their views on religion and science, secularization, and the nature of modernity.

The key idea within this ideology is the evolution of society from the pre-modern phase of religious superstition to the modern phase characterized by scientism and its application to social and political questions and problems. This involves a teleological vision of human progress, with 'pre-modern' giving way to 'modern' ways of thinking and living. That is, enchantment and superstition are replaced by science and reason. From this perspective religion is an obsolete evolutionary adaptation akin to the appendix, a vestigial organ of a pre-modern ancestor that stubbornly refuses to go away even though it is no longer needed, and indeed, can even cause us great harm. Modernity is that historical period, and social and political structure, that represents the project of universalization of scientism.

The New Atheism, then, should be understood as a vigorous defence of an ideological vision of modernity that is grounded in the notions of progress and civilization, which in turn are characterized primarily by the spread of scientific rationality in social and political institutions, and in the general culture. It rejects what it sees as the pre-modern ways of thinking and living that are characteristic of religion and of 'uncivilized' societies more generally. Just as important, however, is its position on what it considers to be *post*-modern epistemology and politics. The key point is that the New Atheists are responding to what they perceive to be a modern crisis brought on by two very different challenges to the authority of scientific rationality and the socio-cultural configuration that is presumed to accompany it. These challenges are 'pre-modern' religious fundamentalism, and 'post-modern' cultural pluralism and epistemic relativism. This latter challenge to modernity is a concern for the New Atheists because it not only rejects their claims to universality and objectivity, but in some sense it legitimates the first force ('pre-modern' fundamentalism) by undermining the rational-scientific grounding of critique.

So while the New Atheism claims to be a reaction against pre-modern ways of thinking, it is actually more an attempt to deal with a crisis of modernity brought on by

what some would call an entry into postmodernity (fundamentalism, not ironically, is also a response to this crisis, perceiving pluralism and relativism as a threat to traditional values and social structures). They battle not only competing epistemologies and faith systems, but also history itself in their construction of the Enlightenment as the apex of a teleological process of social evolution that is still playing out and must be protected. Dawkins is a fervent believer in moral progress (or evolution), arguing that there is a steady change in social consciousness in a relatively consistent direction in "modern" liberal democratic societies (2006: 270). He does admit that there are challenges and interruptions to this progress, but nonetheless believes that progress is inevitable: "Of course, the advance is not a smooth incline but a meandering sawtooth. There are local and temporary setbacks... But over the longer timescale, the progressive trend is unmistakeable and it will continue" (2006: 271). Hitchens is more measured in his celebration of the ideals of Enlightenment and progress than his New Atheist colleagues, noting that "...only the most naive utopian can believe that this new humane civilization will develop, like some dream of 'progress', in a straight line. We first have to transcend our prehistory, and escape the gnarled hands which reach out to drag us back to the catacombs and the reeking altars and the guilty pleasures of subjection and abjection" (2007: 283). While Hitchens problematizes the notion of 'progress' here in a way that Dawkins never does, it is only problematic for him in practice, not in principle. He presents religion as a pre-modern challenge to be overcome, and devotes the final chapter of his treatise on religion to "The Need for a New Enlightenment" (Hitchens 2007).

In equating being "modern" with Enlightenment, however, the New Atheists ignore some of the most important intellectual developments of the intervening period, leaving a bare-boned empiricism bereft of any inkling of real humanist philosophy, and substituting the requirements of scientific progress for politics and democratically-determined ethics. It is because of this strict attachment to a sub-section of Enlightenment thought and a general commitment to scientism that we should not equate the New Atheism with secular humanism, as many commentators are apt to, or for that matter with secularism (indeed, this is the basis of the distinction made in the previous chapter

regarding atheist ideologies). In fact, it is in part a reaction *against* secularism. The New Atheism is a manifestation of an ideology that takes the form of radical secularism as a political doctrine "which is not just about religion and its removal from public life, but has a particular vision of the world" (Asad, 2003: 191). This vision, in short, is a global civilization where cultural differences are eroded by the universalization of the scientific worldview, and more implicitly, where decisions regarding the common good are best made by scientific experts.

To understand the New Atheism, then, we must establish its position on secularization, a concept at the core of its concerns. One understanding of secularization holds that "the religious beliefs of antiquity irreversibly lost their credibility as scientific cosmologies progressively embarrassed them" (Brooke 2010: 105), and thus attachment to religious beliefs was bound to fade. This idea pre-dates social science and originated in the Enlightenment, which produced the view that modernization produces a decline of religion, both in society and in the minds of individuals (Berger 1999). This refers to two very different processes, and thus the theory of secularization should actually be understood as two separate but related sub-theses which posit that secularization is a process characterized by (1) a general decline in religious belief and practice, and (2) functional differentiation of religious and secular spheres and a concomitant distinction between private and public dimensions of life (Asad 2003; Bruce 2002; Casanova 1994; Taylor 2007). It is clear that sub-thesis (1) is not necessary for sub-thesis (2), though in traditional formulations of the secularization paradigm in the sociology of religion these were seen as complimentary processes, dating back at least to Durkheim (1995[1912]). Charles Taylor (2007) has added a third sub-thesis: the "nova effect", an explosion in the possibilities of belief and unbelief in late modernity whereby belief in God is just one among many options. Indeed, many prominent scholars in various fields have in recent years weighed in on the secularization debate, resulting in an emerging majority view – with some significant exceptions (e.g. Bruce 2011; Norris and Inglehart 2004) – that we must begin to speak of a "post-secular" age where religion continues to exert a strong influence in public life and co-exists with other forms of belief and ways of life (c.f.

Taylor 2007; Calhoun et. al. 2011; Gorski et. al. 2012; Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2011).

The New Atheists do not explicitly address the secularization thesis, but an examination of their work reveals that while they obviously support the first sub-thesis (decline in belief), they are very much at odds with the next two. Taylor's "nova effect" is definitely not the type of secularization the New Atheism would endorse, as it implies that any kind of belief is possible, and is thus an affront to the foundational premise of scientific atheism, which is that only beliefs that are supported by empirical evidence are acceptable. The relationship to the second sub-thesis is complicated because of the "deprivatization" of religion and its emergence as a major political force in the late 20th century, most clearly exemplified in the Islamic Revolution and the rise of the Christian Right, which shook the foundations of the secularization thesis (Casanova 1994). Even where secularism was an important force, the realization came that "a straightforward narrative of progress from the religious to the secular is no longer acceptable" (Asad, 2003: 1), and that religion was in fact growing stronger in some areas of the world.

This deprivatization led to a unique situation in the history of atheism: suddenly atheists were in a certain sense seeking to *reverse* the process of secularization, or at least one aspect of it, the move from public to private. This is because religion, though still considered a private matter of individual choice and belief, was exercising a huge influence in the public sphere. This nominally private status granted it "immunity from the force of public reason" (Asad 2003: 8), and in these conditions it flourished. This is a crisis of conflict between the two primary sub-theses of the secularization thesis, which the atheist movement views as a danger and as an opportunity. The New Atheism seeks to counter religion's immunity to critique by bringing it into the public sphere – or at least revealing that it was never effectively private – so that it can be subjected to public reason, and thereby eradicated. They want to undermine religious authority through a campaign of scientific-rational critique, and enhance the authority of science – the same project undertaken by Victorian Darwinists who exercised a campaign for the authority of

science in academic institutions (Fuller, 2006), which has now been expanded to a much larger scale.

There is another understanding of secularization beyond the two (or three) sub-theses typically associated with it that is pertinent to my discussion. This approach views it not only as a theory of a social process bound up with modernization, but more importantly, as a political doctrine, rendering its empirical validity irrelevant and pointing us instead to questions pertaining to the origins and consequences of secularization as an ideology (Szonyi 2009). Jose Casanova suggests that "theories of secularization double as empirically descriptive theories of modern social processes and as normatively prescriptive theories of modern societies, and thus serve to legitimize ideologically a particular historical form of institutionalization of modernity" (1994: 41). In his view, secularization is a myth perpetuated by Enlightenment thinkers and defenders that "was never either rigorously examined or even formulated explicitly and systematically" (Casanova 1994: 17). This is also the view favoured by Asad (2003), who, as noted above, describes secularization as a straightforward narrative of progress that, upon closer inspection, is more ideology than actual social process.

The New Atheism might be understood as an expression of this ideology, instituting this narrative of progress as historical reality through its discourses regarding the universal and emancipative nature of modern scientific rationality and its inherent conflict with the pre-modern force of religion. It thus adopts the ideology of secularization to the extent that it is a normative prescription for the development of modern societies. In the ideology of evolutionistic scientism adopted by the New Atheists, the theory of secularization is ideological support for a political project, rather than a theory of an actual socio-historical process. Hence, rather than evidence that the *process* of secularization is indeed proceeding as it was once expected, the New Atheism is a reaction to the fact that the *ideology* of secularization has come under threat by the deprivatization of religion and the influence of postmodernism in Western scholarship, particularly with respect to the social sciences.

These two developments indicate to the New Atheists that the second secularization sub-thesis – functional differentiation of religious and secular spheres – is untenable. Religion continues to invade the public and political spheres, and criticism of this process is undermined by the current liberal imperative for pluralism. Since religion cannot be sequestered within the private sphere, the only option is to eradicate it completely. The New Atheists thus represent the move to a secular world specifically as a move to a world where religion simply disappears under the light of science. Their project is to hasten this process; in other words, to defend modernity as a process of cultural universalization defined by the authority of scientific rationality in all spheres of life, both public and private, and in individual minds. The strategy is to engage in an ideological struggle against the modernity's antagonists, specifically pre-modern religion and post-modern relativism and pluralism, to ensure that the progress of secularization continues. Modernity, for the New Atheists, is co-terminous with secularization, which in their view is essentially the progressive universalization of scientism. We might in fact say that what the New Atheists want is not so much secularization, but the *scientization* of politics and culture. This means scientization with respect to both secularization sub-theses. That is, the authority of science within political institutions, but more importantly, the adoption of a scientistic worldview by individuals to such an extent that it becomes culturally dominant.

While not explicitly addressing a "secularization thesis" as such, we can say that the New Atheism neglects the second secularization sub-thesis (functional differentiation of secular and religious spheres) in favour of advancing the first (decline of religious belief). In summary, the goal of the New Atheism is not simply to critique religious beliefs, but rather, they seek a broad cultural transformation that would see religious belief and all other forms of superstition replaced with scientism. Given this general goal, I argue that the new atheist movement adopts three central strategies: (1) to discredit claims made by religious texts, institutions, and leaders in areas ranging from social history to natural history, and most importantly on the question of the existence of God, by way of rational-scientific critique; (2) to persuade others to adopt a worldview
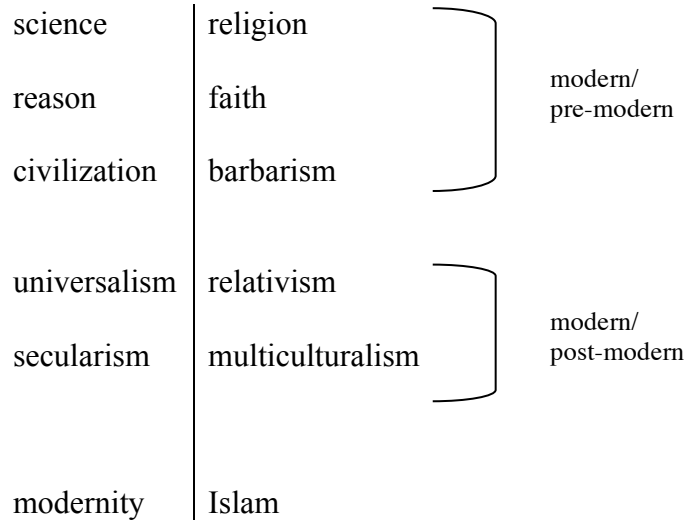
defined by scientism and, more specifically, evolutionism; and (3) to build a sense of community and a positive collective identity for atheists in order to encourage others to "come out" and to create a hospitable environment for atheism to flourish. These three strategies reflect the dimensions of ideology discussed above with reference to Eagleton (1991). These include promoting a belief system that is naturalized, universalized, and dehistoricized, and denigrating and excluding challenging ideas and rival forms of thought.

The first two strategies – that is, the negation of the religious worldview and construction of an alternative scientistic one – are addressed by public intellectuals such as the Four Horsemen, along with an array of supporting figures and organizations (these will be discussed in detail in the following chapter). These two strategies are addressed in the following sections, which deal with the New Atheism's response to the two major threats to modernity. The third strategy refers to social movement activity within atheist organizations, which is covered in the following chapter. Through an analysis of the New Atheism's response to the perceived dual threat to modernity we will arrive at an understanding of the ideology that underwrites their thought, which I argue is in essence a political ideology that advances a particular vision of the nature of the world and a normative prescription for achieving progress toward the highest form of civilization – one where science is dominant in epistemology, politics, and ethics.

This ideology is represented in Figure 1 as a set of binaries that establish its tenets through negation and opposition. These binaries should be understood in terms of their relationship to the evolutionism at the heart of this ideology, implying a natural and inevitable progression in both the intellectual and social worlds that is driven by science. They serve to distinguish modernity from its 'others', equating religion, faith, and barbarism with the pre-modern, and relativism, multiculturalism, and pluralism with the post-modern. Islam is directly contrasted with modernity in this table because, in New Atheist discourse, it embodies both pre- and post-modern otherness. That is, it is a barbaric form of religious faith that threatens western civilization because relativism and multiculturalism have rendered the West impotent to defend its values against this foreign

intruder. These binaries, and the ideology they constitute, are all interrogated in the following analysis of the New Atheism's defence of modernity, beginning with the first strategy of discrediting and denigrating religious beliefs, the pre-modern threat.

Figure 1: Binaries in ideology of New Atheism

science	religion	
reason	faith	modern/ pre-modern
civilization	barbarism	
universalism	relativism	
secularism	multiculturalism	modern/ post-modern
modernity	Islam	

The Scientific Critique of Religion

The New Atheism's critique of religion is predicated on the assumption that the purpose of religion is to explain nature (this assumption is not a result of any kind of empirical inquiry into religious belief and practice, but is assumed a priori on ideological grounds). Science reveals that it fails in this task, therefore religious belief is irrational. These irrational beliefs could develop in the first place because ancient people were ignorant of the truths of science and had no alternative explanations. They are maintained in the modern age because of evolutionary processes that have endowed us with brains susceptible to supernatural beliefs. Overcoming these irrational beliefs and the cognitive tendencies that allow them to persist, and taking the step toward a higher form of thinking characterized by scientific rationality, is the challenge, and promise, of modernity.

This view is expressed in the following passage from Christopher Hitchens:

One must state it plainly. Religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody – not even the mighty Democritus who concluded that all matter was made from atoms – had the smallest idea what was going on. It comes from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species, and is a babyish attempt to meet our inescapable demand for knowledge (as well as for comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs)...All attempts to reconcile faith with science and reason are consigned to failure and ridicule for precisely these reasons (Hitchens 2007: 64-65).

Here we are offered the theory of religion that characterizes scientific atheism, namely, religion as explanation of the mysterious and threatening forces of nature. Other sources of religious belief, such as those offered by the 19th century humanistic atheists (with "comfort, reassurance, and other infantile needs" Hitchens echoes Freud), are relegated to a brief parenthetical aside, despite their obvious and overwhelming importance. Religion is, rather, a relic of the ignorance of the pre-modern, or pre-scientific, "period of human prehistory". This is one major idea shared by all the New Atheists, and it is expressed most clearly in Richard Dawkins' description of God as a pseudo-scientific hypothesis.

Dawkins' understanding of religion begins with one simple premise: the "God Hypothesis"[4], or the idea that God is "a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analyzed as sceptically as any other" (2006: 2). He formulates it, on behalf of all religions and religious believers, like this: "there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us" (2006: 31). This hypothesis about the origin of the universe can be empirically tested, argues Dawkins: "Either he exists or he doesn't. It's a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability" (2006: 48). Dawkins, of course, deems that the probability is exceedingly in favour of non-existence.

In the history of atheism outlined in Chapter 1, I discussed Michael J. Buckley's (2004) description of the development of a modern theological conception of God that

departed from an emphasis on transcendence and instead described God as a 'thing' of definite substance and location with a role in nature. This is clearly the God that Dawkins is talking about, but even if we were to base our understanding of religious faith on the modern conception of God as an immanent force within nature, Dawkins' critique fails to achieve logical coherence. This failure might be explained with reference to one of Dawkins' own rhetorical devices, the notion of the "God of the gaps", or God as the explanation used to fill gaps in our understanding of nature. Modern science has achieved impressive results in solving the mystery of nature, though crevices where explanations are lacking are still filled with God: "Creationists eagerly seek a gap in present-day knowledge or understanding. If an apparent gap is found, it is *assumed* that God, by default, must fill it. What worries thoughtful theologians….is that gaps shrink as science advances, and God is threatened with eventually having nothing to do and nowhere to hide" (Dawkins 2006: 125). Dawkins argues that Darwinian evolution forces God out of his last refuge – namely, the origin of life – thereby filling in the last major gap in our understanding (despite the major issue of how life came to exist in the first place – Darwinism is an explanation only for the evolution of existing life forms, not for the origin of life). From this follows the conclusion that the God Hypothesis has been 'proven' false, leading Dawkins to proclaim that "God almost certainly does not exist" (2006: 158). A more appropriate conclusion would be that modern science is in conflict with a literal interpretation of the biblical account of creation. Dawkins' proof that God does not exist is predicated upon the assumption that God's existence is tied to the historical accuracy of Genesis.

Nonetheless, Dawkins maintains that science and religion are incommensurable forms of knowledge with respect to the natural world that are characteristic of distinct periods of human history. This brings us to the heart of the matter: the supposed conflict between religion/faith and science/reason, which, he claims, is essentially a conflict between ways of thinking that are characteristic of the pre-modern and modern world, namely, superstition and rationalism, of which religion and science are just particular forms (2006: 67). His major point of emphasis is not that religion is harmful, but rather,

that it is an obstacle to truth and the greatest of the "enemies of reason".[5] The harm that religion does is measured by Dawkins not in social, but in intellectual terms: "As a scientist, I am hostile to fundamentalist religion because it actively debauches the scientific enterprise. It teaches us not to change our minds, and not to want to know exciting things that are available to be known. It subverts science and saps the intellect" (2006: 284). Note that Dawkins refers specifically to fundamentalist religion, while his main problem with "moderate" religion is that it is "making the world safe for fundamentalism by teaching children, from their earliest years, that unquestioning faith is a virtue" (2006: 286).

Sam Harris takes precisely the same view of faith as Dawkins, claiming that faith is "the licence people give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail – faith fills the cracks in the evidence and gaps in logic" (2004: 232), and that "faith is nothing more than a willingness to await the evidence – be it the Day of Judgment or some other downpour of corroboration. It is the search for knowledge on the instalment plan: believe now, live an untestable hypothesis until your dying day, and you will discover that you were right" (2004: 66). In these two quotations we see both Dawkins' "God Hypothesis" and his idea of the "god of the gaps". Religion for Harris, as for Dawkins, is a false knowledge claim, a pre-scientific explanation of the inexplicable that fills gaps in understanding with a hypothesis that needs no verification. The remedy to this condition is substituting the true knowledge of science, as if the faithful just do not yet know enough about science to abandon their false religious ideas, or alternatively, their brains have been wired by evolution to accept the God Hypothesis despite evidence to the contrary.

Harris goes to great lengths to argue for the latter view, namely, that religious belief is not only a product of ignorance, but that it is a direct result of physical processes in the brain, which in turn are a product of evolutionary pressures that have selected genes that pre-condition us for religious belief. Given his interest in neuroscience (or alternatively, ideological commitment to scientism), it is not surprising that Harris, discussing the nature of religious belief, asks "What neural events underlie this process?

What must a brain do in order to believe that a given statement is *true* or *false*? We currently have no idea" (2004: 51). This simple inquiry demonstrates an unwillingness to look outside of the natural sciences for an explanation of faith. He awaits neurological evidence to explain how it is that brains are able to manage the trick of reconciling illogical beliefs with the demands of reason and logical coherence. That is, he wonders how a *brain* – rather than a *person* – manages to combine, or navigate between, these ostensibly incommensurable ways of thinking? The social existence of the person whose head houses this brain seems relatively unimportant.

Addressing this question, Harris suggests that religious belief may be indicative of a defect in brain functioning, implying a material distinction between believers and rational atheists. Richard Dawkins suggests as much when he claims that "atheism nearly always indicates....a healthy mind" (2006: 3). Harris goes so far as to equate faith not only with ignorance, but with mental illness:

> We have names for people who have many beliefs for which there is no
> rational justification. When their beliefs are extremely common we call
> them 'religious'; otherwise, they are likely to be called 'mad,',
> 'psychotic,' or 'delusional'….it is merely an accident of history that it is
> considered normal in our society to believe that the Creator of the
> universe can hear your thoughts, while it is demonstrative of mental
> illness to believe that he is communicating with you by having the rain
> tap in Morse code on your bedroom window. And so, while religious
> people are not generally mad, their core beliefs absolutely are….In fact,
> it is difficult to imagine a set of beliefs more suggestive of mental
> illness than those that lie at the heart of many of our religious traditions
> (2004: 72).

If beliefs persist despite evidence that renders them illogical, then, the only logical explanation for this is that there must be some defect in brain functioning or something resembling mental illness. Social and cultural reasons for believing are not explored, or even mentioned for that matter. Though he does admit that religious people are not

"mad", he also suggests that making an exception for religious people in terms of madness is just an "accident of history", implying that religious beliefs are suggestive of some kind of mental illness or deficiency.

Dawkins also grounds his theory of religion in a strictly materialist account of the religious impulse experienced by human brains, thus eschewing human thought, agency, and culture: "Knowing that we are products of Darwinian evolution, we should ask what pressure or pressures exerted by natural selection originally favoured the impulse to religion" (2006: 163). The point is that any social behaviour humans engage in must be explained in evolutionary terms, particularly behaviour that has been exhibited by humans everywhere and at all times, such as religion: "Universal features of a species demand a Darwinian explanation" (2006: 166). Dawkins' use of the term "species" here, while technically correct of course, is very revealing of the problem with his approach in general, which is to view the behaviour of people the way he would any other animal, as in his pondering of the evolutionary benefit of a medieval cathedral, which "could consume a hundred man-centuries in its construction, yet was never used as a dwelling, or for any recognizably useful purpose. Was it some kind of architectural peacock's tail?" (2006: 164). Here Dawkins reduces certain (non-scientific) human cultural developments and artistic achievements to an ostentatious display that might be understood as a kind of "peacock's tail" to the extent that there must be a sensible Darwinian explanation for such apparently nonsensical (i.e. non-adaptive) behaviour.

Dawkins claims that human culture 'evolves' progressively in precisely the same way that biological entities evolve; that is, by natural selection: "Fashions in dress and diet, ceremonies and customs, art and architecture, engineering and technology, all evolve in historical time in a way that looks like highly speeded up genetic evolution, but has really nothing to do with genetic evolution. As in genetic evolution though, the change may be progressive" (1989: 190). The difference is the unit of transmission: in biological evolution it is the gene, while in cultural evolution the "meme" (roughly analogous to "idea") is the unit that is negatively or positively selected and transmitted.

Memes are the "new replicators", doing the job of cultural transmission and evolution just as genes do the job of biological evolution.

Dawkins' theory of religion, bearing these guiding principles in mind, proceeds in two steps: biological disposition, followed by memetic transmission. He insists that Darwinism is an "ultimate" explanation of religion, while theories derived from the social sciences are only "proximate" explanations. In his 'ultimate', Darwinian view, religion is a by-product of evolutionary adaptations: "The religious behaviour may be a misfiring, an unfortunate by-product of an underlying psychological propensity which in other circumstances is, or once was, useful" (2006: 174). This is most obvious in the case of children, who are hard-wired by genetic evolution to trust the words of their elders, a useful adaptation for survival, with the unfortunate by-product being "vulnerability to infection by mind viruses" (2006: 176). These "mind viruses" are ideas or beliefs that are transmitted from brain to brain by a process analogous to genetic replication. The most ubiquitous and pernicious of these mind viruses is, of course, the meme for God. Dawkins refers to this as the "God virus", which has been evolving and infecting brains for thousands of years – much like a measles epidemic in an elementary school, we are led to understand (2006: 194). Those "faith sufferers" (Dawkins 1995) infected with the God virus are harmed by it, yet it has "survival value" because of its psychological appeal, which lies in its "superficially plausible answer to deep and troubling questions about existence" (Dawkins 1989: 193). That is, it works as *explanation*.

Dennett (2006) supports Dawkins' by-product theory in his emphasis on the importance of the "intentional stance", or an evolutionarily adaptive proclivity to ascribe intention and agency to inanimate objects and natural events. In this theory, humanity's ancestors – or more precisely, their genes, if we take Dawkins' (1989) gene-level view of evolution – were selected for survival for their tendency to suspect anything and everything of being a potential predator, or at least a thing with intention to bring harm. This tendency induced caution and therefore enhanced the prospects of survival, but as a by-product, it produced organisms that saw consciousness and intention where there was none. This condition, over evolutionary time scales, produced animism among primitive

humans, an early precursor to theistic religions. These tendencies presumably remain intact today when evangelical leaders in the United States claim that natural disasters are a result of insufficient faith and/or God's punishment for sin.

The New Atheists have not only a theory of the evolutionary processes that create psychological preconditions for religious belief, but also a mechanism for the development of different forms of religious belief. Faith evolves from an abstract principle into complex belief systems and religious institutions, and Dawkins goes to great pains to argue that these beliefs and institutions must be regarded as the outcome of natural processes rather than human agency:

> Organized religions are organized by people: by priests and bishops, rabbis, imams and ayatollahs. But....that doesn't mean they were conceived and designed by people. Even where religions have been exploited and manipulated to the benefit of powerful individuals, the strong possibility remains that the detailed form of each religion has been largely shaped by unconscious evolution....The role of genetic natural selection in the story is to provide the brain...the hardware platform and low-level system software which form the background to memetic selection. Given this background, memetic natural selection of some kind seems to me to offer a plausible account of the detailed evolution of particular religions (2006: 200-201).

Religious memes, then, have evolved independently of human agents and infect our brains, which have achieved a God-ready state by way of a by-product of the evolutionarily adaptive proclivity of children to trust the authority of their elders and to impute intentionality and design to inanimate objects. He throws in the idea of "memeplexes" – "cartels of mutually compatible memes" – to explain the process by which "a religion becomes organized, elaborate and arbitrarily different from other religions" (2006: 201). That he considers differences among religions to be "arbitrary" betrays an indifference to the history of religion and its social and political nature.

Daniel Dennett is a champion of Dawkins' meme theory, which he applies in his discussion of the taboo against a rational-scientific investigation of religion, claiming that this taboo can be understood as a kind of evolutionary adaptation. That is, the taboo is really a meme-complex of prohibitions and defences. For example, we have internalized the idea that it is "impolite" to question a religious person about the nature of their beliefs too strongly, and the religious person in turn has been taught that such questioning is insulting or disrespectful, and possibly even inspired by Satan himself (Dennett 2006: 206-207). Though he doesn't explicitly use the term "meme" in this discussion, there is no mistaking what Dennett is talking about when he says of this process, "What a fine protective screen this virus provides – permitting it to shed the antibodies of skepticism so effortlessly!" (2006: 207). Using Dawkins' language, Dennett suggests that faith is a "virus" (meme) that has evolved immunity to "antibodies" (rational-scientific skepticism). Dawkins himself simply states that the meme for blind faith "secures its own perpetuation by the simple unconscious expedient of discouraging rational inquiry" (Dawkins 1989: 198).

Hitchens, who is not a scientist or philosopher of science, does not seek to advance a materialist explanation of the origins of religious belief derived from evolutionary biology and neuroscience, though he does defend these efforts (2007: 165). For Hitchens, the notion of the ignorance of ancient people is enough to explain where religion comes from. Religion fulfilled a thirst for knowledge that could not otherwise be quenched, until modern science came along and made it, and those whose understanding of the world is based on it, irrelevant in a world characterized by scientific skepticism and constant questioning: "The person who is certain, and who claims divine warrant for his certainty, belongs now to the infancy of our species. It may be a long farewell, but it has begun and, like all farewells, should not be protracted" (2007: 11). While Hitchens does not develop a Darwinian theory of religion, then, there is an evolutionistic essence to this argument, which posits that humanity has evolved beyond religion, and that those who claim certainty for their religious beliefs represent a lower stage in our evolution.

In general, the scientific critique of religion advanced in the New Atheism is informed by the ideology of scientism at its core. More specifically, evolutionism provides the foundation of the critique, positing that religion is a vestige of cognitive processes determined by evolution, and a pre-modern, pseudo-scientific explanation of nature that continued to fill gaps in our understanding in the modern period, though those gaps are shrinking. The New Atheism's critique is distinguishable from 19th century scientific atheism only in the greater sophistication brought to it by the theories and technologies of the nascent disciplines of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience, which purport to explain the mechanisms that drive religious belief. Further, we find in the case of Dawkins and Dennett that the critique of religion is motivated by a desire to defend Darwinism against its critics, again mirroring the scientific atheism of the 19[th]century, which I have argued was in fact driven by a desire to defend evolution against religious critics. Indeed, Dawkins spelled these intentions out quite clearly in a talk given in 2002 at the annual TED lecture series. Here, several years before writing *The God Delusion*, he reveals his true purpose, which is to undermine creationism, as an opponent of evolution, by attacking religion: "My approach to attacking creationism is – unlike the evolution lobby – my approach to attacking creationism is to attack religion as a whole" (Dawkins 2002). His engagement with religion, then, is in essence an attack on creationism as a rival to evolutionary biology. In order to combat his true enemy, creationism, Dawkins uses evolutionary theory, and science more generally, in an attempt to undermine the foundations of religious belief as a whole.

The preceding review illustrates the exclusivity of the theories and methods of the natural sciences in their critique, and utter indifference toward knowledge on religion developed in the social sciences. William Stahl (2010: 102) notes that the New Atheism makes the assumption that "religion can be abstracted and reduced to cognitive beliefs separated from culture. Sociologically, this is a one-dimensional and impoverished understanding of religion...Religion also involves experiences, rituals, traditions, and community, which for many groups are far more important than beliefs." The New Atheists, he writes, "accept the fundamentalists' self-understanding and assume that it

can adequately describe all religion" (Stahl 2010: 102). The view of religion taken by fundamentalists that Stahl refers to is precisely that of the New Atheists, namely, that religion is an explanation of where the universe came from and how humanity came to be. In taking fundamentalism as the essence of all religion, the New Atheism reduces all religion to beliefs about the nature of reality. This generalization is only possible in wilful ignorance of, and ideological opposition to, the vast reserves of empirical and theoretical work on religion in the social sciences and humanities, which demonstrate the centrality of practice, ritual, and community. The rejection of social scientific understandings of religion is one aspect of the New Atheism's rejection of the social sciences more generally. This rejection is rooted in the scientistic belief that the natural sciences, and specifically Darwinism, are all that is needed to understand the psychology and social world of human beings. Further, the New Atheism tends to equate the social sciences with "postmodernism" and the flourishing of pluralism and relativism in late modern culture. The account of religion discussed here, then, is only one example of an ideological system that includes as one of its goals the institution of sociobiology as a replacement for the social sciences and humanities.

Science and Civilization

The New Atheism's position on the 'post-modern' threat is best understood through an examination of its discourse on Islam, the 'other' of enlightened modernity. For the New Atheism, Islam represents both types of threats. As a religion founded on faith it is a 'pre-modern' threat to scientific modernity, and it illustrates the progressive evolution of human societies, with Islamic societies representing barbarism and the West representing civilization. But it also represents the 'post-modern' threat in the sense that the New Atheists believe that epistemic relativism and cultural pluralism have paradoxically rendered the West incapable of effectively dealing with the threat posed by radical Islam – and religion more generally – to its core liberal values. Islam is also represented as a threat to the West's very existence in Harris' scenario of a "diabolical clockwork" consisting of blind faith in the tenets of an inherently violent religion coupled

with the availability of weapons of mass destruction, which together constitute "a recipe for the fall of civilization" (Harris 2004: 26).

Islam, indeed, is the most important element in the New Atheism's construction of an ideal of Western civilization. This should be understood in light of their 19th century intellectual heritage. I refer in particular to that century's dominant ideas regarding the relationship between evolutionism and social development – in other words, the theory of the progress of *civilization*. We might understand this in terms of the "comparative method" in anthropology, which was the practice of studying how civilization evolves over time by looking at different groups in the present that are at different stages in this process (Stocking, 1968: 75). Study of the cultures of 'savages' was believed to offer a window into history, a glimpse of a previous stage of 'civilized' European culture, as it was believed that all groups follow a similar path of development since they are determined by a common human nature, a view that predated Darwin but was buttressed by his insights. The concept of "unilinear evolutionary progress whose eventual goal was perfection and whose highest present manifestation was western European society" led to the inference that "the various societies coexisting in the present *represented* the various stages in this sequence" (Stocking, 1968: 26). A further and necessary consequence of this theory was the view that "the normal course of human social development... in the case of savages had for some reason stopped short" (Stocking, 1968: 27), leading to speculations regarding the reasons for this that in many cases culminated in the construction of cultural and racial hierarchies.

We see precisely the same line of thought in the New Atheism. Consider, for instance, Sam Harris' view that the Islamic world is a "civilization with an arrested history", explaining that "It is as though a portal in time has opened, and fourteenth-century hordes are pouring into our world" (2004: 107). His "portal in time" is in no way different from the comparative method of 18th and 19th century anthropologists and their view that social development is unevenly distributed among different cultures and ethnic groups. Stocking notes the importance of the concept of evolution in the construction of European supremacy: "The assumption of white superiority was certainly not original

with Victorian evolutionists; yet the interrelation of the theories of cultural and organic evolution, with their implicit hierarchy of race, gave it a new rationale" (1968: 122). Richard Dawkins' own amalgam of organic and cultural evolution (the latter represented in his meme theory) reflects these Victorian efforts at establishing the supremacy of European civilization. While not founded in essentialist doctrines of race, Dawkins' cultural evolution implies a hierarchy of civilization with the West on top because it recognizes the epistemic authority of scientific rationality.

For Harris, Islam and the global population of Muslims constitute modernity's Other. All followers of this religion are indicted equally on the basis of the contents of the Koran. Taking the view that "not all cultures are at the same stage of moral development" (2004: 143), Harris concludes that Islam and its followers are in fact frozen in history, and that Islamic societies are "societies whose moral and political development...lags behind our own" (2004: 145). This view is central to the ideology of modernity that the New Atheists embrace, which involves a path of development from barbarism to civilization, represented by the Middle East and the West in the New Atheism's own "comparative method". A teleology of morality is implied here, with all societies evolving toward an ultimate end-state civilization, and some lagging behind in their progress.

The subtext, of course, is the imperative to shape the world according to western culture: "We are at war with Islam...It is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been 'hijacked' by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran" (2004: 109). Harris seems less inclined to declare war against Christianity or Judaism, which he considers relatively more benign, while he believes that "Islam, more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death" (2004: 123). So completely are Muslims consumed by the Koran, according to Harris, that they wilfully accept their own oppression as mandated by it: "At this point in their history, give most Muslims the freedom to vote, and they will freely vote to tear out their political freedoms

by the root. We should not for a moment lose sight of the possibility that they would curtail our freedoms as well, if they only had the power to do so" (2004: 132).

Dawkins' views on the relationship between 'Islam' and 'civilization' are made clear from the opening frames of his television documentary *Root Of All Evil?*, which features footage of people being carried into ambulances on stretchers intercut with images of Arab people in military fatigues loading machine guns, with Dawkins' voice-over narration:

> There are would-be murderers all around the world who want to kill you and me, and themselves, because they're motivated by what they think is the highest ideal. Of course politics are important.... But as we wake up to this huge challenge to our civilized values, don't let's forget the elephant in the room: an elephant called religion (Dawkins and Kidd, 2006).

While Dawkins does not target Islam specifically in *The God Delusion*, he has addressed this religion in his numerous interviews and public lectures. Perhaps most telling is a controversy that erupted in 2012 over Dawkins' repeated use of the term "barbarians" in comments made about Muslims on Twitter. In one tweet that garnered a great deal of attention, Dawkins revealed that he has never read the Koran, and in the next sentence referred to Islam as the "greatest force for evil today" (Dawkins Twitter March 13 2013). He was subsequently taken to task by commentators in *The Guardian* (Greenwald 2013), *Salon* (Lean 2013), and *Al-Jazeera* (Hussain 2013), who took the opportunity to make note of a rising Islamophobia among the New Atheists, particularly Dawkins and Harris, pointing to recent tweets and blog posts indicating that the tone of discourse had become more hostile and the views advanced more intolerant. After a library in Timbuktu was destroyed by Islamic extremists, Dawkins tweeted: "Like Alexandria, like Bamiyan, Timbuktu's priceless manuscript heritage destroyed by Islamic barbarians", and subsequently defended his use of the term (Gryboski 2013b). Not long after this incident Harris wrote a blog post explaining his support for ethnic and religious profiling by airport security, arguing that "We should profile Muslims, or anyone who looks like he or she could conceivably be Muslim, and we should be honest about it" (Harris 2012).

Harris and Dawkins have recently made many similar statements, with Dawkins being particularly frank in scornful tweets about 'barbaric' Islamic societies.

Like both Harris and Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens believed that religion is a threat to civilization (i.e. the West), and that among all religions none is a greater threat than Islam. Examples of how religion stunts the progress of civilization abound in *God Is Not Great*, along with an analysis of contributing factors. The most important of these is the concept of faith and the imperative that it not be questioned by its practitioners, and that it be respected by those outside the religion. Hitchens explains:

> All religions take care to silence or to execute those who question them...It has, however, been some time since Judaism and Christianity resorted openly to torture and censorship. Not only did Islam begin by condemning all doubters to eternal fire, but it still claims the right to do so in almost all of its dominions, and still preaches that these same dominions can and must be extended by war. There has never been an attempt in any age to challenge or even investigate the claims of Islam that has not been met with extremely harsh and swift repression (2007: 125).

This passage, in striving to demonize Islam by contrasting it with more 'civilized' western monotheism, wilfully ignores ongoing attempts at censorship by Christians in the United States who objection to the teaching of evolutionary biology and the mere mention of homosexuality in public schools. Hitchens also disingenuously signals that condemning doubters to hellfire is a characteristic unique to Islam. The Vatican's official position is that eternity in hell awaits those who fail to accept Christ as saviour, while American Christians focus much of their attention in public discourse on sin, Satan, and final judgment.

The Muslim world is represented as the Other of the modern – and purportedly mostly secular – West. Discussing the reasons that the West is secularizing, Hitchens explains that "The availability and accessibility of well-produced books, cassettes, and DVDs, emphasizing the triumphs of science and reason, is a large part of this success.

And so, of course, is the increasingly clear realization, on the part of civilized people, that the main enemy we face is 'faith-based'" (2007a: xxv). Besides a proud defence of the scientific atheist movement, this is a claim that an escalating clash of civilizations is pushing people to choose a side between "reason" and "faith", which actually seem to be equivalent to "West" and "(Middle) East". That is, "civilized people" here means the white Western world, while the Islamic world is a faith-based "enemy". This dichotomy reflects Hitchens' general tendency to represent global politics in the black-and-white terms of a struggle between courageous heroes and evil villains.

Hitchens explains what he believes to be the major obstacle in this struggle between the forces of reason and faith within the West. Discussing the infamous incident of the publishing of cartoons depicting Mohamed in a newspaper in Denmark and the wave of protest and violence it spawned, resulting in many major news agencies refusing to reproduce the images, Hitchens blames the mass media's capitulation to the protesters on fear and relativism: "To the ignoble motive of fear one must add the morally lazy practice of relativism: no group of nonreligious people threatening and practicing violence would have been granted such an easy victory, or had their excuses – not that they offered any of their own – made for them" (2007: 281). This is one example among many criticisms in Hitchens' work of a postmodern cultural climate where matters of faith are beyond question.

Here we arrive at the crux of the matter: the New Atheism's rejection of a liberal politics of tolerance, represented by policies of multiculturalism, and in academic circles by a 'post-modern' epistemology of relativism. Grace Davie (2004: 78) explains the challenge postmodernity introduces to the theory, and doctrine, of secularization:

> ...the secular certainties (science, rationalism, progress, etc.), the erstwhile competitors of religious truth, are themselves under attack... No longer is it assumed that a secular discourse will gradually overcome a recognizable and unified religious alternative. Instead, both secular and religious thinking will evolve, as multiple groups of

people find their own ways forward and creeds (both secular and religious) to live by in the early years of the 21st century.

Here Davie expresses the view that Taylor (2007) would articulate as the defining characteristic of our "secular age", namely, that secularism does not mean the hegemonic triumph of scientific rationality over religion, but rather, that secular and religious ways of living co-exist and evolve into novel forms in late modern society. The New Atheism is a reaction against precisely this kind of secularism, where science loses its footing as the bedrock of secularization, and truth and meaning are permanently contested and socially constructed fields. This kind of secularization is therefore undesirable, and the New Atheism thus advocates not secularization, but the scientization of society and culture.

Davie suggests that in Europe there have been two religious responses to the challenge presented by the uncertainty of post/late modernity, two forms of religious life that have been able to prosper: New Age and fundamentalism. New age spiritualities have "adapted most easily to the flux of late modernity", while fundamentalism involves "tightly bound groups" that "provide havens for those people that find it difficult to live with change and uncertainty (the hallmarks of postmodernism)" (2004: 78). I posit that the New Atheism is another such response, and the scientistic belief system it promotes answers uncertainty with absolutism. My view is supported by William Stahl, who argues that "both the New Atheism and fundamentalism are attempts to recreate authority in the face of crises of meaning in late modernity" (2010: 97), and that both are involved in a "quest for certainty, for an authoritative foundation that can ground a normative order" (2010: 101).

The ground for this normative order is scientism. Harris has gone so far as to claim in his book *The Moral Landscape* that the study of ethics falls within the domain of the natural sciences, and advances in evolutionary psychology and particularly neuroscience allow scientists to "determine" proper values (Harris 2010). The grounding for this normative order is perceived to be threatened by "postmodernism", which is equated with epistemic relativism, a product of developments in the social sciences and

humanities in the late 20th century. Because the social sciences are perceived as the grounding of relativism – and thus represent a rival form of thought that must be excluded and denigrated, according to Eagleton's (1991) definition of ideology – the New Atheism targets this segment of the academy for attack. The strategy is to argue for sociobiology as a replacement for the social sciences, which Darwinism has made redundant. This is the view (in-)famously advanced by Harvard entomologist E.O. Wilson in his 1975 book *Sociobiology*, which argues that the social sciences should be considered an undeveloped branch of evolutionary biology.

Richard Dawkins enthusiastically agrees. On the very first page of *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins laments that "Philosophy and the subjects known as 'humanities' are still taught almost as if Darwin had never lived" (1989: 1). In another revealing passage, he ponders the potentially limitless scope of natural selection: "The laws of physics are supposed to be true all over the accessible universe. Are there any principles of biology that are likely to have similar universal validity?" (1989: 191). This presumed universal validity extends beyond the natural world and into the social world, where Dawkins' meme-based theory of religion emerges as a speculative translation of evolutionary biology into cultural theory. This leap in logic is an extension of the ideological view that "Darwinism is too big a theory to be confined to the narrow context of the gene" (Dawkins 1989: 191), and is indicative of his general contempt for the social sciences.

The explanations of religion provided by the social sciences, Dawkins (2006) tells us, are "proximate", and not "ultimate" explanations. Only the Darwinian explanation *ultimately* arrives at the truth about where religion comes from, and it involves an application of the theory to two things: our brains and the genetic evolution that gave rise to them, and ideas which exist outside of these brains in a meme-pool which is also subject to the process of natural selection. He does deal very briefly with "proximate" explanations (i.e. those that lie outside of the province of the natural sciences and are therefore inferior to "ultimate" explanations) in the final chapter of *The God Delusion*, where he notes that "Religion has at one time or another been thought to fill four main

roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation and inspiration" (2006: 347), but like Hitchens, he considers these minor and relatively insignificant factors.

Daniel Dennett is Dawkins' closest ally among the Four Horsemen on the matter of sociobiology. Dennett is even more explicit about his support for Darwinistic interpretations of socio-cultural phenomena and his portrayal of the social sciences as an antagonist to scientific truth. This is clear when he writes, "Anyone who tries to bring an evolutionary perspective to bear on any item of human culture, not just religion, can expect rebuffs ranging from howls of outrage to haughty dismissal from the literary, historical, and cultural experts in the humanities and social sciences" (Dennett 2006: 259). Like Dawkins, he dismisses the "proximate" explanations of religious belief, which are symptoms of a "disorder often encountered in the humanities and social sciences: premature curiosity satisfaction" (Dennett 2006: 103). This "disorder" is demonstrated when questions regarding origins are "left unexamined by people who lose interest once they have found a *purpose* or *function* for religion that strikes them as plausible" (2006: 102). The purposes Dennett cites are comfort, explanation, and cooperation, and with that he perfunctorily summarizes, and dismisses, the social scientific understanding of religion. Instead, Dennett supports Dawkins' evolutionistic theory of religion, explaining its general nature as a by-product of adaptive characteristics, with meme theory explaining the particularities. Also like Dawkins, Dennett believes Darwinism is sufficient to explain social and cultural phenomena more generally, claiming that "in principle the process of natural selection is *substrate-neutral*" and that evolution will occur wherever the conditions of replication, variation, and differential fitness (or competition) are met (2006: 341). In organic evolution the substrate for natural selection is the unit of the gene, organism, or group (Dawkins favours a gene-centred view), and in cultural evolution the substrate is ideas.

The New Atheism, certainly as represented by Dawkins and Dennett, might be understood as a manifestation of a resurgence of sociobiology in recent decades. Sociobiologists like Wilson, Dawkins, and Dennett who invoke evolution by natural selection as a universal explanatory framework, effectively "challenged the basic

assumption on which the social sciences of the twentieth century had been built: the rejection of biology as a determinant of human behaviour" (Bowler 2003: 360). In essence, then, "The project of sociobiology, so clearly set out by Wilson, is to render the social sciences unnecessary" (Rose and Rose 2010: 112). Sociobiology is a foundational element in the project of scientific hegemony, demanding that "only genetic causes of behaviour should be taken seriously, and it is therefore presented in metaphors which rule out human freedom, presenting people, along with other animals and plants, as machines" (Midgley 2002: 151). It thus seeks to render the social sciences redundant.

Dawkins has recently become more assertive in this regard, particularly on social media, where he tends to express his views most frankly. In response to tweets he received accusing him of racism for comments about Muslim "barbarism", Dawkins wrote: "So many people incapable of drawing an elementary distinction: between racism and INSTITUTIONAL racism. Probably studied sociology" (Dawkins Twitter May 24 2013). If his contempt for sociology were not clear here, it is abundantly clear in a re-tweet of a comment made by one of his followers, a sign of a view he supports: "@RichardDawkins be fair, sociology allows McDonald's to get a slightly more educated staff pool" (Dawkins Twitter May 24 2013). When another Twitter user made the obviously problematic claim that one cannot by definition be racist or sexist against white men because they are the group holding power, Dawkins responded with: "Really? By whose dictionary? Certainly not the Oxford Dictionary. Dictionary of sociology perhaps?" Finally, Dawkins notably offered a blurb for Alan Sokal and Jean Bricmont's (1998) *Fashionable Nonsense*, an extended critique of the social sciences and humanities that equates them with postmodernism, relativism, obscurantism, and of course, general nonsense. This was a follow up to Sokal's infamous hoax publication in the journal *Social Text* that instigated the "science wars" of the 1990s (Ross 1996). On the back cover Dawkins is found saying that "the hoax was earnestly needed and richly justified". There is no longer any ambiguity with respect to his disdain for sociology, which he equates with relativism and a general distortion of scientific truth.

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The salient point here is that the rejection of the social sciences is more precisely a rejection of relativism. Replacing the social sciences with sociobiology is in fact an endorsement of absolutism, with the natural sciences providing 'ultimate' knowledge with respect to questions and issues that, from a sociological standpoint, have no clear answer and are not reducible to a single all-encompassing explanation. The epistemic relativism attributed to the social sciences is an obstacle to the scientific critique of religion. The social sciences are therefore reduced to an undeveloped branch of evolutionary biology, subsumed to what Dawkins (2006) considers the "ultimate" theory of natural selection, which Daniel Dennett views as a theory of such vast scope that it transcends disciplinary boundaries, "promising to unite and explain just about everything in one magnificent vision" (1995: 82).   Sociobiology not only undermines the social sciences, but also provides a 'scientific' theoretical framework for the New Atheism's views on socio-cultural evolution, explaining differences between the West and its Others as a matter of more or less advanced stages of progress, which is stunted as a function of the relative influence of religion.

The epistemic relativism that threatens the scientific critique of religion is intimately wedded to cultural relativism, the primary object of the New Atheism's political critique. We see the two converge in Dawkins' analysis of the main obstacle to the critique of religion: the cultural imperative to respect individual beliefs, no matter how they accord with science or reason. The two sources of this imperative are the demand for respect for private faith, which is supported by a climate of epistemic relativism, and the development of a political culture that has abandoned the universal as a guiding principle in favour of multiculturalism and cultural relativism, which embraces diversity in pluralistic societies. These are both grounded in the same general principle, which is that no one has a monopoly on truth and morality, a position Dawkins attributes to a general tendency to embrace a diversity of perspectives and to accept all cultures, ways of thinking, and ways of living as equally valid – in other words, relativism. In the New Atheism discourse these are characteristics of a 'postmodern' liberalism that emphasizes pluralism and tolerance of difference. This is in contrast with the 'modern'

liberalism Dawkins favours, which is essentially an appeal to scientific authority as an absolute foundation for decision making, regardless of cultural considerations.

Dawkins sees the Western liberal world wading into the waters of relativism, and his concern with religion is more fundamentally a fear that science is losing its place as the pillar of modern society and engine of progress. Further, he seems disturbed that rationalism is being replaced in politics with a pluralistic embrace of diversity to such an extent that it becomes impossible to take a position on anything, with liberalism rendered entirely ineffectual:

> The same tendency to glory in the quaintness of ethnic religious habits, and to justify cruelties in their name, crops up again and again. It is the source of squirming internal conflict in the minds of nice liberal people who, on the one hand, cannot bear suffering and cruelty, but on the other hand have been trained by postmodernists and relativists to respect other cultures no less than their own. Female circumcision is undoubtedly hideously painful....and one half of the decent liberal mind wants to abolish the practice. The other half, however, 'respects' ethnic cultures and feels that we should not interfere if 'they' want to mutilate 'their' girls (Dawkins 2006: 328).

Liberals, Dawkins argues, have lost their original guiding impetus of rationalism and empiricism after being "trained" by "postmodernists" to embrace cultural relativism. This makes it difficult to take a firm position on cultural practices such as female genital mutilation, which should naturally offend the liberal mind as a barbaric violation of human health and dignity. Cultural relativism, if it defends irrationalism, is an affront to the notion of universal human rights, and the only answer to this problem is to return to rationalism and empiricism, to reason and scientific evidence, as the basis of politics (if it ever was in the first place – Dawkins' Enlightenment utopia only ever existed in his own mind). Dawkins, then, takes the same position on the 'problem of tolerance' that Sam Harris takes: both want to rescue liberalism from a descent into the abyss of relativism, which neutralizes our capacity to respond to the challenge religion poses to civilization.

Here the 'pre-modern' and 'post-modern' threats to modernity and the project of secularization converge.

The New Atheism's position on this perceived crisis within liberalism and modernity were summarized in a revealing Los Angeles Times piece by Sam Harris entitled "The End of Liberalism". It is worth quoting here in some detail (my italics):

> Increasingly, Americans will come to believe that the only people hard-headed enough to fight the religious lunatics of the Muslim world are the religious lunatics of the West. Indeed, it is telling that the people who speak with the greatest *moral clarity* about the current wars in the Middle East are members of the Christian right, whose infatuation with biblical prophecy is nearly as troubling as the ideology of *our enemies*. Religious dogmatism is now playing both sides of the board in a very dangerous game.
>
> While liberals should be the ones pointing the way beyond this Iron Age madness, they are rendering themselves increasingly irrelevant. Being generally reasonable and *tolerant* of *diversity*, liberals should be especially sensitive to the dangers of religious literalism. But they aren't.
>
> The same *failure of liberalism* is evident in Western Europe, where the dogma of *multiculturalism* has left a secular Europe very slow to address the looming problem of religious extremism among its immigrants. The people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists.
>
> To say that this does not bode well for liberalism is an understatement: It does not bode well for the future of *civilization*.[6]

To summarize, Harris' view is that the "dogma of multiculturalism", with its emphasis on tolerance of diversity, constitutes a "failure of liberalism" by rendering it incapable of addressing the threat "our enemies" (that is, Muslims) pose to "civilization". Perhaps most striking in this passage is that Harris attributes the greatest "moral clarity" on the

issue of Islam to European fascists and the Christian right. These are the people who, by his own admission, share his perspective on how to approach the "looming problem" immigration of Muslims poses to civilized Europe. In a similar vein, Dawkins, in reference to a ruling by the European court against crucifixes in public school classrooms, wrote on his website, "If I thought the motive was secularist I would indeed welcome it. But are we sure it is not pandering to 'multiculturalism', which in Europe is code for Islam? And if you think Catholicism is evil . ." (Dawkins 2009b). Dawkins interprets the ruling as being motivated by a multiculturalist accommodation of Islam – which is much more "evil" than Catholicism – rather than secularism.

Harris argues that religious "moderates" – that is, non-fundamentalists – and liberals who preach tolerance and respect of difference, "provide the context in which scriptural literalism and religious violence can never be adequately opposed" (Harris 2004: 45), a view shared by all the Four Horsemen. Harris insists that science and reason alone can rescue humanity from an accelerating descent into apocalyptic global conflict: "Only openness to evidence and argument will secure a common world for us" (2004: 48). This is an implicit rejection of pluralism and the accommodation of cultural diversity. In contrast, Harris advocates a model of politics based on the authority of scientific rationality, where democratic consensus is mediated by science and its 'experts'. Tolerance of beliefs that contradict scientific knowledge simply does not fit into the worldview of someone who suggests that "Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them" (Harris 2004: 52-53).

This is an extreme example of what TalalAsad refers to as "the violence of universalizing reason" (2003: 59) at the heart of liberalism. This violence occurs because "to make an enlightened space, the liberal must continually attack the darkness of the outside world that threatens to overwhelm that space" (Asad, 2003: 59). A menacing outside is constructed, against which the enlightened space is contrasted and defended, and they exercise different types of violence: "Violence required by the cultivation of enlightenment is therefore distinguished from the violence of the dark jungle" (Asad, 2003: 60). That is, the former is justifiable in the name of progress, while the latter is the

violence of terror and ignorance. Asad argues that liberal violence is not the "necessary unfolding of an Enlightenment essence", but rather it is "just a way some liberals have argued and acted" (2003: 60).

The New Atheists are just the kind of liberals he refers to. This liberalism is characterized not by freedom and diversity, but rather by a specific worldview and mode of social organization that its supporters believe they have a duty to bring to bring to others (or impose on them by force, if necessary), justified by the ideals of progress and civilization. In their view, political decisions must be made through a process of deliberation under the auspices of scientific authority. Neither governments, nor individuals or groups whose politics are informed by identity or cultural traditions, have the right to supersede the authority of science and reason in matters involving the public good. Perhaps the best example of this is Dawkins' (2006) view that socialization of children in any religious tradition constitutes child abuse because the child is not yet capable of deciding for themselves, through reason, what to believe. Dawkins thus argues that those guilty of religious indoctrination of their children should, perhaps, lose their parental rights and have their children taken from them by the state, acting in the name of 'reason'. Dawkins' version of liberalism clearly would not grant individuals the freedom to practice cultural traditions. In his world freedom would be constrained to beliefs and practices that meet the requirements of rationality and empirical verifiability – anything that lies outside of this realm can be understood as "indoctrination". We should be careful, then, not to interpret the New Atheists' advocacy of liberalism as support for individual freedom and participatory democracy. It is, rather, a statement on the cognitive, moral, and ultimately political authority of science and its expert practitioners.

There is a corollary here to the religious revival of the late 20th century. Terry Eagleton suggests that "The recent religious resurgence is distinctive not just because it is everywhere on the rise, but because it often takes a *political* form…. postmodernity is the era in which religion goes public and collective once again, but more as a substitute for classical politics than a reassertion of it" (2009: 44). Fundamentalist forms of religion, Eagleton argues, set out to transform the world rather than take refuge from it – this

corresponds with Eisenstadt's (1999) view of fundamentalism as both a utopian belief system and a social movement with aspirations for profound social transformation. They are political, or "antipolitical" in their desire to substitute politics with "culturalism" taking the form of religion (Eagleton 2009: 42-43). This is exemplified most clearly in the Islamic revolution, which instituted the Koran as the unquestionable source of political authority, leaving no room for democratic deliberations. The Christian Right is also effectively anti-political to the extent that political and ethical principles are derived exclusively from the Bible, which is interpreted by religious authorities, leaving no room for democratic deliberations among citizens. The New Atheism follows a similarly anti-political fundamentalist logic, but rather than substituting culture for politics, they wish to substitute science for politics. In so doing they reject deliberative democracy, which is subject to non-scientific cultural influences, in favour of scientific authority.

Indeed, the sociobiology that informs the New Atheism's understanding of religion, culture more generally, and the social world, is in essence a political program for enhancing the power and influence of science. This is the view expressed in biologist Richard Lewontin's critique of Edward O. Wilson's book *Sociobiology*, in which he sees "a vision of neurobiologists and sociobiologists as the technocrats of the near future who will provide the necessary knowledge for ethical and political decisions in the planned society…Sociobiology is basically a political science whose results may be used, eventually, as the scientific tools of 'correct' social organization" (Lewontin 1977: 16).

Lewontin's critique of Wilson effectively captures what I consider the political science at the heart of the New Atheism. Sociobiology is a 'scientific' approach to politics and social problems that is effectively depoliticized to the extent that it is presented as an objective science, and thus stands outside the realm of democratic deliberations because its politics do not rely on consensus of opinion, but simply scientific fact. The New Atheism, then, is effectively a political ideology disguised as disinterested scientific inquiry, which in turn is how their views are naturalized and universalized. Its attack on religion, and on the social sciences and humanities, is effectively a statement on the nature of modern society and a defence of an evolutionistic

vision of progress. Its Darwinistic 'social theory' carries an imperative for the correct mode of social organization, and appropriate systems of belief. While Asad (2003) describes secularism as a "political doctrine" that sets up the conditions for a secular democracy, the New Atheism's ideology of scientism and secularization is essentially anti-democratic and authoritarian in its insistence on relegating not just cognitive, but also moral and political authority, to science and its practitioners.

Conclusion

The New Atheism is much more than an assault on religion. Indeed, this assault is only one element of an ideology with the goal of legitimating scientific authority. Returning to the dimensions of ideology identified above, the New Atheism promotes its own belief system (scientism/evolutionism) that is essentially political in nature, naturalizes and universalizes these beliefs by equating them with objective science and 'natural' laws determining the course of history, denigrates challenging ideas (religion), excludes rival forms of thought (social sciences/humanities), and obscures social reality by making religion a scapegoat for social problems at the expense of a careful examination of the structure of modern society, insisting instead that submission to the authority of science is the solution to these problems and the only path to civilization. This secular ideology can be understood as a secular fundamentalism, constructing a modern utopia (as opposed to anti-modern religious fundamentalisms) founded on the universal authority, and inherently progressive nature, of science. Like other fundamentalisms, New Atheism is a totalizing ideology that seeks to universalize its particular belief system, presenting it as an essential truth and the only path to legitimate knowledge.

The belief system the New Atheism promotes is different from 19th century scientific atheism only in the greater sophistication brought to evolutionism by the nascent disciplines of evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. Like other thinkers in this tradition, the scientific critique of religion is only one element in the promotion of a vision of the world, how it should be, how we determine how it should be, and who has

the authority to say so.   For the New Atheism, this vision is, in a word, *scientism*. The 19th century split in atheism is represented today by a group that has appropriated the term 'atheism' as a synonym for scientism and a Darwinian view of human nature and society.   This is an extension of the view of some Victorian Darwinists who manufactured the idea of an inevitable and eternal struggle between religion and science "to provide a world-historic pretext for Darwin's challenge to religious control over all levels of education, even in nominally secular countries" (Fuller, 2008: 87). This false notion of the enduring and intractable conflict between the epistemologies and institutions of religion and science – referred to by some historians of science and religion simply as the "conflict myth" (Lindberg 2010) – is today wielded by the Four Horsemen for the polemical purpose of advancing the 19th century view that "Moderns, who by definition possess science, must therefore reject religion and magic. A cultural evolution has occurred, and there is no looking back" (Segal 2004: 135).

The New Atheism's critique of religion, then, is a manifestation of its defence of a teleological vision of modernity as a universal unfolding of history from pre-scientific barbarism to scientific civilization. This, again, is tied to a politicized understanding of evolution as a social process, with all cultures at various stages of evolution toward a singular civilization driven and defined by scientific rationality. This view of social evolution as a progressive scientization of socio-political institutions is thus an instance of secularization as political doctrine, in which modernity is understood as a project of universalizing scientism and the emerging authority of scientific experts. These views on the nature of modernity and civilization arise most clearly in the New Atheist discourse on Islam, with Islamic societies represented as "backward" and "uncivilized", and the presence of Muslims in the west a threat to progress. Islamic civilizations serve as the Other of enlightened modernity, a notion employed in portraying the advanced status of western secular-liberal society. Cavanaugh (2009) notes that this is a typical ideological function of transcultural and transcultural conceptions of religions as sets of truth claims, like that the New Atheism advances.

The New Atheism's promotion of its own ideology, rooted in a defence of its vision of modernity, was analyzed in this chapter in terms of two major strategies that amount to attacking its 'pre-modern' and 'post-modern' rivals, religion and relativism. These strategies involve ideological action, or promoting and attacking various sets of beliefs in the public sphere. The third strategy adopted by the New Atheism is something quite different. It involves building a sense of community and a positive collective identity to create a hospitable cultural environment for atheism to flourish. In this respect the New Atheism is not only an intellectual current, but also a social movement that – like other forms of fundamentalism – seeks to shape the world according to its belief system and set of essential truths (Eisenstadt 1999). The following chapter examines the social movement aspects of New Atheism, including its conflicts with other elements within the atheist and secularist movement, particularly groups that aim at more explicitly political goals at the expense of the New Atheism's goal of broad cultural transformation and the promotion of scientism as a belief system.

CHAPTER 3

THE ATHEIST MOVEMENT

The Atheist Movement(s): An Analytical Framework

The New Atheists defend a particular vision of modernity, the enemies of which are 'pre-modern' superstition and 'post-modern' relativism. The unexpected appearance of these enemies has in their view derailed the process of secularization, and they set out to combat each with the rhetorical tools of science and reason. Their aggressive and uncompromising approach, a product ultimately of frustration at a failed vision of modernity and secularization and reaction to perceived challenges to scientific hegemony, has brought the secularist movement unprecedented attention. It has also created a rift within the movement, which had heretofore been constituted by atheism and secular humanism, which have historically been considered roughly interchangeable positions and collections of individuals under the banner of "freethinkers" (Jacoby 2004). That is, humanists could generally be considered to be atheists and vice versa, though these two groups might choose to emphasize different things (non-belief in God for the latter, humanistic ethics for the former).

Today new tensions are emerging between these groups, with those scientific atheists represented and influenced by the New Atheists continuing on the path of the dialectical development of atheism (discussed in the first chapter), and many secular humanists ready to move beyond the religion/science dichotomy and focus on basic underlying values and social issues that their movement should strive to represent and fight for (for example, science-driven policy decisions and social justice). This chapter analyzes the emergence of the New Atheism as a sub-group within an already existing freethought movement, which I take to be comprised of organizations defined by any one or more of atheism, secularism, rationalism, and humanism (I will sometimes refer to this movement simply as the "atheist movement", which I use as inclusive of these terms). It examines the New Atheism's goals and strategies in relation to the ideology that

underwrites it, as well some recent and ongoing tensions between atheists and secular humanists that arise from the engagement in identity politics. Specifically, the former group emphasizes difference and their minority status, while the latter seeks assimilation and cooperation with groups – possibly including religious groups – that share their concerns regarding science education and social issues.

It should be noted at the outset that calling atheism a "movement" is somewhat controversial. In his analysis of the New Atheism phenomenon, William Stahl puts it bluntly: "Atheism is not a social movement" (2010: 97). In general, scholars studying atheism have made scant reference to the notion of social movements, with the singular exception of Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith (2007, 2010), and even they argue that it is better understood as a subculture than a social movement. I argue that recent events indicate that the associations of people Cimino and Smith (2007) refer to collectively as "freethinkers" – i.e. atheists, rationalists, secularists, and humanists – must be treated as a social movement, but we must be specific about what type of movement it is. We must also be specific about which group we are referring to, because I will argue that within this group of freethinkers there are sub-groups with fairly distinct goals, ideological groundings, and strategic orientations. The analysis is complicated by the fact that there is considerable overlap between these groups. Doubtless many individuals would identify with all three. I believe that it is possible, however, to identify various distinctions regarding goals, strategies, and ideology that compel us to recognize at least three sub-groups as relatively distinct elements within the freethought movement. These include secular humanists, new (scientific) atheists, and libertarian rationalists. My primary task is to understand the phenomenon of the New Atheism. I will therefore emphasize this ideological subset of the movement in my analysis, but this phenomenon can only be understood in relation to *and in distinction from* the other groups that oppose each other in some important ways.

While atheist and secularist organizations have been around for some time, the New Atheist movement is new, even though it has emerged within the structure of existing social movement organizations, such as the Council for Secular Humanism and

its parent organization the Center for Inquiry (CFI), and Atheist Alliance International (AAI). While I will refer to other organizations in this analysis (Table 1 lists these according to their major focus), I focus on CFI and AAI because they are the organizations the New Atheists have been most active in. The Four Horsemen famously all delivered presentations at the 2007 convention of the Atheist Alliance International. The 2009 edition of the AAI convention was co-organized by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS). In this instance Dawkins was not just an influential figure and celebrity speaker, but actively involved as an organizer and movement leader. AAI and particularly CFI are the organizations where the presence of these four has been felt most strongly (aside from RDFRS, of course). Because of their strong presence and influence within CFI and AAI, these are the organizations I have chosen as the focus of my research.

Traditionally the atheist/secularist movement has addressed one element of the secularization thesis, while the New Atheism addresses the other. These two sub-theses posit that secularization is a process characterized by (1) the differentiation of religious and secular spheres and the concomitant distinction between private and public dimensions of life, and (2) a general decline in religious belief and practice (Asad, 2003; Bruce, 2002; Casanova, 1994; Taylor, 2007). In its emphasis on church-state separation (in recent years manifest most conspicuously in legal battles regarding creationism vs. evolution in public education), civil liberties, and protection for atheists from discrimination, the freethought movement has traditionally addressed the first sub-thesis through instrumental political action that can take the form of lobbying government, organized protests and demonstrations, and lawsuits (Cimino and Smith 2007).

American Atheists, for instance, was founded by Madalyn Murray O'Hair in 1963 in the wake of her constitutional challenge to religious instruction in public schools, and thus was born of a particular instance of instrumental legal-political action (LeBeau, 2003). Today its mandate is "Supporting civil rights for atheists and the separation of church and state" (*American Atheists* 2013), a conspicuously political goal. The Secular Coalition for America website explains that the group's purpose is to "formalize a

cooperative structure for visible, unified activism to improve the civic situation of citizens with a naturalistic worldview", and that it is located in Washington, D.C. "for ready access to government" in their lobbying efforts to represent the views of atheists (*Secular Coalition* 2013). The Freedom From Religion Foundation, an American secularist group founded in 1976, is guided by the primary goal of "protecting the constitutional principle of the separation of church and state" (*Freedom from Religion* 2013), a political goal that involves lobbying efforts and lawsuits against government agencies and public institutions. Examining the mandates and activities of these organizations, we see that the freethought movement as a whole has traditionally had clear political goals and has essentially acted as a movement for secularism as differentiation (i.e. the first sub-thesis) or at best to promote the civil rights of atheists, who in their view constitute a marginalized and even oppressed segment of American society.

Table 1. Movement organizations

Atheist	Secularist	Humanist	Rationalist
Atheist Alliance International	Freedom From Religion Foundation (US)	American Humanist Association	Center for Inquiry (US)
Atheist Alliance of America	Secular Student Alliance (US)	Humanist Canada	Centre for Inquiry Canada
American Atheists	Canadian Secular Alliance		Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (international)
Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers (US)	Secular Coalition for America		

The New Atheists' effort to change people's beliefs and to convince them of the superiority of their particular ethico-epistemic system places attention on the second

secularization sub-thesis (encouraging the abandonment of religious belief) and exhibits greater concern with cultural beliefs and values than politics (the first secularization sub-thesis, differentiation of public/secular and private/religious spheres, is more clearly a political process). They therefore eschew instrumental legal and public political pursuits, and focus attention on the second secularization sub-thesis. Toward this end, they pursue a goal of broad cultural transformation, arguing that religion cannot be simply pushed to the private sphere, but rather, religious beliefs must be destroyed and replaced with scientific rationality in the name of progress. We can thus distinguish the New Atheist movement within the previously existing freethought movement on the basis of this distinction: the former is primarily a *cultural* movement while the latter is a *political* movement.

In taking this view I am drawing primarily on Alberto Melucci's (1989; 1996) pioneering work on contemporary movements that direct action outside the formal political system, and adopt "cultural" goals like collectively constructing identity, transforming representations of cultural groups and minorities, and challenging dominant values. Melucci's work was part of the "new social movements" paradigm that emerged mostly outside of the American context in the 1990's. It sought to develop a new framework for research on identity-based movements that resisted explanation within the framework of the existing structure-based approaches of resource mobilization (Tilly 1978) and political process (McAdam 1982). These understood social movements as collective action directed at the state on the part of actors sharing a common structural location, and thus a common disenfranchisement. These approaches focused on class as the condition giving rise to collective action, while tending to neglect the key problems of identity and ideology, resulting in a "structural bias" (McAdam 1994) and the presumption of "an already-existing collective actor able to recognize the opening of political opportunities and to mobilize indigenous resources for political purposes" (Polletta and Jasper 2001: 286). The "new" social movements in question – primarily identity-based ones such as the women's movement and the gay rights movement – involved actors sharing a common identity but no common structural location (Johnston

et. al., 1994). Hence, a new paradigm emerged that offered something more than the existing "utilitarian economic models" (W. Gamson, 1992: 53) that tended to neglect the subjective dimensions of identity and meaning.

Melucci (1996) argued precisely that the locus of social conflict has shifted from class to questions of meaning and identity, and that state-centred approaches could not sufficiently account for the distinctly non-political goals and targets of emerging forms of collective action.   These new movements did not express themselves through political action, but rather, "raised cultural challenges to the dominant language" (Melucci 1995: 41).   Melucci defines the political (in relation to social movements) narrowly as interaction between actors within the formal political system of governance and state authority. Much action in new social movements is not 'political' in this sense, even if it clearly has political implications in a more expansive understanding of the concept, and the social and cultural problems addressed by this action cannot be resolved at the level of the state.

In the new social movements paradigm, groups with no clear political goals (i.e. influencing government authorities) can be considered social movement actors on the basis of strictly cultural goals, such as promoting a particular idea or worldview (Staggenborg, 2008). Perhaps most significantly, movements can transform cultural representations and social norms in terms of how groups see themselves are how they are seen by others (Polletta and Jasper, 2001: 284). This can be an enormous achievement for a social movement, with a signature example being the gay rights movement, which succeeded in bringing about cultural transformation by constructing and promoting identity and challenging conventional assumptions and biases *outside* of the formal political system.   That is, the movement was not directed at the state, but rather, addressed homophobia in society. Indeed, for new social movements, ideology and collective identity construction are the most important elements of collective action (Melucci 1989; McAdam 1994). In this view, successful movement outcomes are not limited to legislative and policy changes achieved through direct interaction with the state, but rather, cultural impacts on their own can be considered successful outcomes,

regardless of whether they result in state action, and identity may be a worthwhile goal in itself (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008; W. Gamson 1998).

Many have pointed out that identity construction is not exclusive to new social movements, but an important element of movements historically, including the labour movement (Calhoun, 1993; W. Gamson, 1992; Tilly, 1988), and that any self-defining group by definition makes a collective identity claim (Hunt et. al., 1994). I therefore choose not to use the term "new" social movements, but rather, I will refer to these identity- and ideology-based movements as "cultural" movements, in contrast with the "political" movements that direct action toward the state, as in the instrumental, rational-actor models (i.e. political process and resource mobilization theory). Here I do not mean to make a rigid distinction between cultural and political spheres of social life and action, but rather, these terms distinguish different types of social movement goals and activity for analytical purposes. I thus offer the following definitions: *Political movements involve instrumental action aimed at the state with the goal of legislative and policy change. Cultural movements involve constructing and defending shared identities, as well as ideological action aimed at society with the goal of transforming beliefs and values*.

The distinction between these two types of movements is summarized in Table 2. It is formulated in relation to Melucci's model of the three dimensions of movement activity that together comprise its "action system", with collective identity emerging from the process of negotiating tensions regarding orientation to the action system:

> Individuals or subgroups contribute to the formation of a 'we' (more or less stable and integrated according to the type of action) by rendering common and laboriously adjusting three orders of orientations: those relating to the ends of the actions (the sense the action has for the actor); those relating to the means (the possibilities and the limits of the action); and finally those relating to relationships with the environment (the field in which the action takes place). The action system of a collective actor is thus organized along a number of polarities in a state of mutual tension. The collective actor seeks to give an acceptable and

lasting unity to such a system, which is continuously subject to tensions because action has to meet multiple and contrasting requirements in terms of ends, means, and environment. Collective mobilization can occur and can even continue because the actor has succeeded in realizing, and in the course of the action continues to realize, a certain integration between those contrasting requirements. This 'social construction' of the 'collective' through negotiation and renegotiation is continually at work when a form of collective action occurs. A failure or a break in this constructive process makes the action impossible (Melucci 1995: 43-44).

Table 2. Characteristics of political and cultural movements

	Political Movements	**Cultural Movements**
General orientation	formal and restrictive	informal and expansive
Goals (ends)	legal and policy change	changing norms, values, beliefs
Strategy (means)	instrumental action	ideological action
Target (field)	state	civil society

A collective actor, then, is defined in terms of a common orientation to an action system, which includes three elements: the desired goals of the action (ends), the strategies by which they might be realized (means), and the environment or field within which the action is carried out, and where and to whom it is directed (that is, the target of the action). Table 2 outlines a distinction between general orientations to the action system in political and cultural movements. Political movements are more formal and restrictive in their approach: their goals involve specific legal and policy changes, they take an instrumental approach to realizing these goals, and the target of action is the state, with action aimed within the formal political system. Negotiation of the action system within a political movement will involve different approaches to these specific dimensions of the

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actions system – that is, differences in terms of what specific laws of policies should be instituted or challenged, what type of instrumental action is required (e.g. a protest, a lawsuit, and so on), and what specific state authorities should be targeted – but they will concur in terms of the general political orientation. Cultural movements, meanwhile, are more informal and expansive: their goals involve changing norms, values, and beliefs in society in general, and their means of doing so involve ideological action through public advocacy and promotion (e.g. protests, books, videos, websites, and so on). Again, while there will be debate on specifics, a cultural movement will agree on the general orientation to the action system.

This perspective involves a more expansive definition of social movements than those of the political process and mobilization school. David Snow (2004: 11) provides a suitably expansive definition, writing that social movements are "collectivities acting with some degree of organization and continuity outside of institutional or organizational channels for the purpose of challenging or defending extant authority, whether it is institutionally or culturally based, in the group, organization, society, culture, or world order of which they are a part". The key concept here is *authority* – both cultural and political movements involve challenges to authority, whether instionalized (for example, in the state) or based in dominant cultural norms, beliefs, and values. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) argue that we need such an expansive definition because domination is not organized around one source of power (i.e. the state), but rather, there are multiple sources of power in society, both material and symbolic.   In this view, collective actors need not challenge the state to be considered a social movement, but rather, sustained challenges to "cultural systems of oppression and authority" can be understood as movement activity (Armstrong and Bernstein 2008: 79). These authors propose a "multi-institutional politics" approach that recognizes both political and cultural dimensions of social movements that challenge power and authority from multiple sources. They thus support Melucci's critique of state-centred models and his expanded framework for analyzing movements with non-political goals and targets.

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I want to argue that the atheist movement, and more specifically the New Atheism, can be understood within this framework. As I suggested above, the New Atheism was a novel development within the atheist movement, which had focused on the political goals of secularism and civil rights for atheists before the Four Horsemen came forward with a radical program of public attacks on religion and a substitute worldview defined by scientism. The New Atheism challenges the moral authority of religion by attacking its intellectual authority, arguing for the epistemic superiority of science over 'religious' forms of knowledge. The conflict between groups advocating for scientific rationality as a form of authority on the one hand, and those advocating for religious and traditional authority on the other, is a political conflict that is being played out in the cultural arena as a dispute over 'true' knowledge and values. The New Atheism positions itself and its ideology of scientism as an alternative to religion, which is represented as a cultural system of oppression and authority (the New Atheism's challenge to religious authority, and desire to replace it with scientific authority, was the theme of the previous chapter). It might therefore be considered a social movement, following the definitions of Melucci (1989, 1996), Snow (2004), and Armstrong and Bernstein (2008) discussed above. More precisely, it is a cultural movement that targets civil society, with the goal of changing beliefs and values, and uses a strategy of ideological action that takes the form of public advocacy and science education. It is thus an example of the type of movement that challenges dominant cultural "codes" rather than state authorities, institutions, or policies (Melucci 1996).

As I argued above, the New Atheism was a novel development within the atheist movement that shifted the focus from instrumental legal-political action to broad cultural transformation. This process can be understood in terms of Melucci's (1989) notion of a "latency" period that characterizes the emergence of some new social movements. This is the period before a movement becomes visible or highly organized and politically active, defined by the development of ideology and collective identity. An example of this is Christian Smith's study of the Latin American liberation theology movement, which he argues is different from traditional social movements (e.g. labour) in that "its

first task and goal was the institutionalization of novel symbolic and ideological forms in a relatively inhospitable, self-reproducing institutional structure" (1991: 55), the institutional structure referred to here being the Catholic Church. In this phase of movement emergence, dialogue is directed internally, with the priorities being ideological development and finding a structural location within which the movement can grow. In the liberation theology movement, this location was the church, an obviously natural development given its origins.

The parallels between the liberation theology and new atheist movements in their latency phase are evident in Smith's description of the initial task of the former: "The first analytic problem faced by the liberation theology activists...was not the mobilization of a powerless, excluded group for noninstitutionalized methods of political action. Rather, the first problem was essentially that of organizational takeover and validation of a new worldview. The original problem was not how, as excluded ones, to constrain the state, but how to develop, diffuse, and institutionalize a new form of consciousness in the Church" (1991: 56). Similarly, the new atheist movement emerged within the freethought movement and had to first succeed as a movement-within-a-movement, establishing and promoting its own specific ideology within the extant institutional framework. It found a home within secularist organizations such as the Center for Inquiry (CFI) and Atheist Alliance International (AAI). These organizations, of course, were not exactly hostile to this new movement, but the rise of the New Atheism was also not uniformly welcomed, and there was considerable debate within the pages of *Free Inquiry* (CFI's flagship periodical) regarding its merits and potential impacts on the movement, with CFI founder and former Chair Paul Kurtz (2008) notably critical of their "militant" approach, which he felt undermined the goal of promoting humanist ethics that constituted his vision for the organization. Nonetheless, due to the New Atheists' phenomenal publishing successes, intellectual capital, and celebrity status (particularly in the cases of Dawkins and Hitchens), they proved extremely effective mobilizers and thus were able to supplant humanism and secularism and institute scientific atheism as the dominant ideology within the freethought movement.

Figure 2 illustrates the theoretical perspective employed in this analysis. It begins with the latency phase, characterized by the development of ideology and collective identity construction. The result of this period was the establishment of the New Atheism as the dominant discourse within the movement and a new emphasis on its cultural goal (relating to the first secularization sub-thesis) of disseminating the scientific atheist worldview. However, this did not completely erase the movement's more traditional political goals (relating to the second secularization sub-thesis) of functional differentiation of religious and public spheres, and civil rights for atheists, even if this goal received less attention after the success of the New Atheism made the movement more ambitious in believing broad cultural transformation was possible. The result of this latency period was a division of the movement into two streams, represented in Figure 2 as a division in terms of cultural and political goals.

These two streams are a product of different responses to the perceived failure of secularization: one responds one responds by more aggressively attacking religion and fighting for cultural transformation, while the other seeks to carve out a niche within that culture using instrumental legal-political strategies aimed at protecting civil rights, as well as maintaining established political secularism. These two responses are represented in Figure 2 as strategies based on ideological action and instrumental action, respectively. Relating these responses to the three dimensions of a movement's action system (represented in Table 2), the cultural side of the movement employs the ideological strategy of public advocacy, the target of which is civil society, toward the goal of ideological validation and universalization. Thus, for the cultural element of the atheist movement, ideological action is aimed primarily at its own validation rather than toward other instrumental purposes. This can cross over into political goals, which the New Atheism has done in also embracing the goal of functional secularism, but the more substantive goal of transforming beliefs and values is the heart of this movement. The political side of the movement, meanwhile, employs instrumental strategies (such as protests, rallies, petitions, legal action) aimed at the state with the primary goal of maintaining established functional secularism. There are therefore two distinct

orientations with respect to the action system within the atheist movement, which are represented by the cultural and political elements or sub-movements.

Figure 2: Development of the atheist movement

feedback to latency
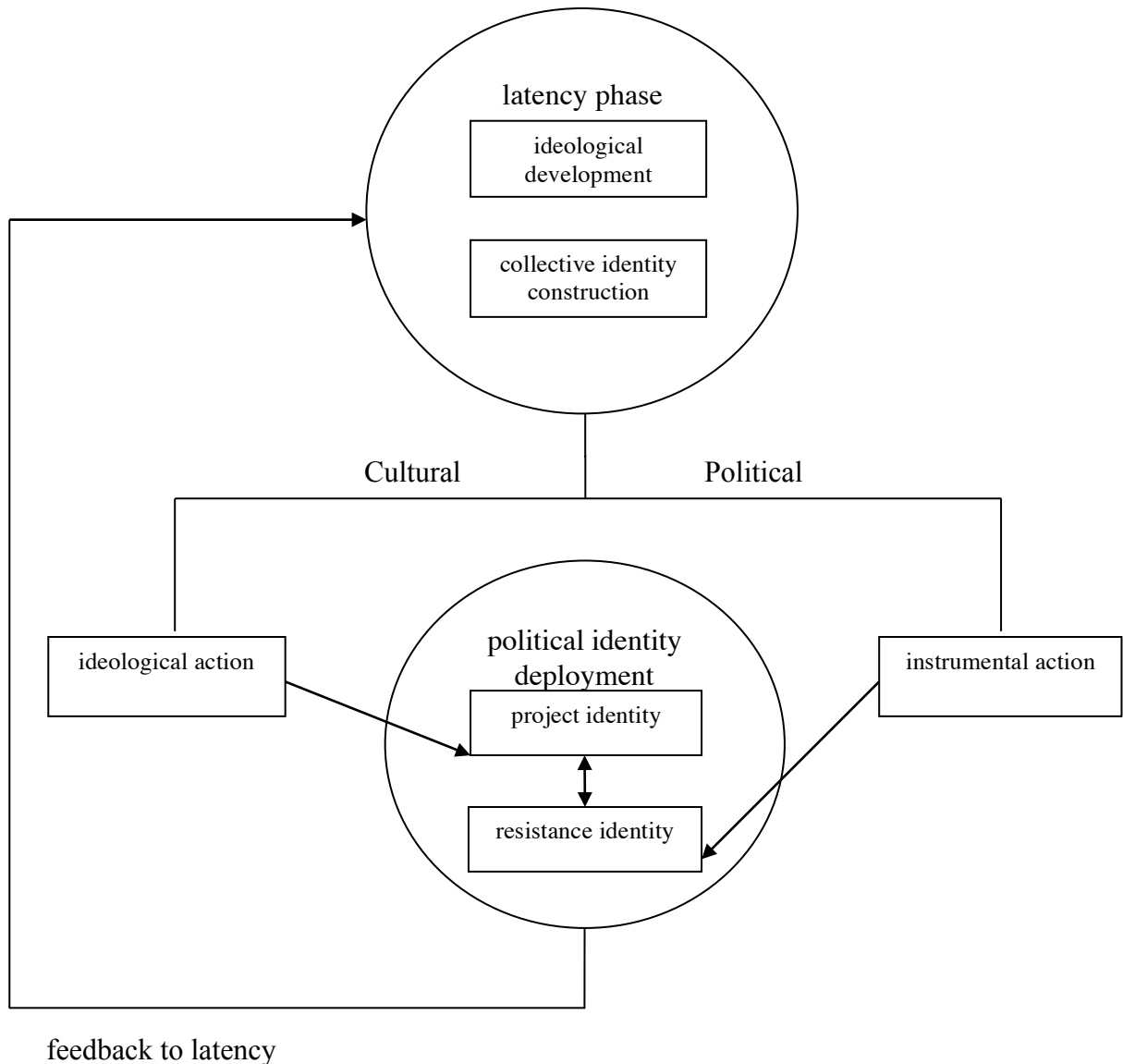
While the goal of the New Atheism may be primarily a cultural one, in practice the movement intersects with more political and instrumental dimensions of the

freethought movement. This should be expected given that cultural and political goals are not mutually exclusive or isolatable categories, but rather, identity and cultural processes are always involved to some extent in strategy, interest, and politics (Polletta and Jasper 2001). While the creation of a collective identity is a significant cultural impact regardless of whether it contributes to political goals (W. Gamson 1992), Mary Bernstein (1997; 2002) argues that collective identity construction may be only an initial phase of movement activity, and once established identity is often "deployed" as a strategy for instrumental political purposes. In Bernstein's "political identity" model, identity is not strictly a cultural matter or a tool for recruitment, but rather, "expressions of identity can be deployed at the collective level as a political strategy, which can be aimed at cultural and/or instrumental political goals" (2008: 281). Both the cultural and political dimensions of the atheist movement deploy a political identity, but disputes concerning the nature of this identity, and the goals toward which it is deployed, reveal deep divisions.

Bernstein's concept of "political identity" is a general approach to understanding the deployment of identity toward particular ends. I add two more specific categories of political identity, which are represented in Figure 2 as distinct categories within the sphere of political identity strategy. These are "resistance identity" and "project identity", concepts drawn from Manuel Castells' (2004) work on contemporary or 'new' social movements (i.e. identity-based movements) that emerge in the information age. Castells' categories of identity, I argue, can be understood as distinct political identity strategies that reflect different kinds of movements or movement goals. Resistance identity is "generated by those actors who are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society" (Castells 2004: 8). Identities for resistance emphasize the formation of communities and forms of collective resistance against oppression. Project identity is "when social actors, on the basis of whatever cultural materials are available to them,

build a new identity that redefines their position in society and, by so doing, seek the transformation of overall social structure" (Castells 2004: 8).

One example Castells gives to illustrate the difference is when feminism moved from resistance against oppression and protecting women's rights to challenging patriarchy, and thus the entire structure of society. This was in effect a transition from a resistance identity to a project identity, or from defending a marginalized group's place within society to challenging the structure of the society that produces this marginalization. The other major example Castells discusses is religious fundamentalism and the evangelistic drive to convert the entire world to a particular faith, which involves the construction (and deployment, in Bernstein's terms) of a collective identity "expanding toward the transformation of society as the prolongation of this project of identity" (2004: 10). This second example obviously resembles the New Atheist movement and the desire to eliminate supernaturalism and 'convert' the world to scientism. The New Atheism, then, is in effect a project identity that mirrors the Christian Right in some respects, while providing its own alternative vision of the new society it wants to build.

Identity deployment as movement strategy is not necessarily the same thing as identity politics, which TeemuTaira (2012: 102) defines in the context of the New Atheism as "empowering strategies and procedures which are based on differentiating a group from others on the basis of their socially constructed identity". This kind of identity politics involves self-representation as a marginalized or oppressed minority, and this is precisely where the matter becomes contentious in the case of the atheist movement. The New Atheism favours a goal of cultural universalism, and therefore represents atheism as the emergent mainstream position, as opposed to atheists as a group that must be differentiated from the rest of society. Their approach is to emphasize how atheism is a 'positive' worldview and that atheists are good, moral people. Hence, the "political identity" they construct is not based on minority status, but rather, the view that atheists are representative of an emerging cultural transformation that will reach all sectors of society – indeed, this is demanded and expected by the evolutionistic ideology

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of progress they ascribe to. Political identity in this approach is thus a strategy for changing the dominant culture's perception of atheism, which in turn is a step toward ideological validation, which is also an effort to persuade others to adopt their ideological perspective.

The New Atheism therefore involves construction of a project identity, a political identity strategy aimed at broad social and cultural transformation. However, another element within the movement that takes a more political approach favours minority/identity politics as an identity strategy aimed at improving their status within society, with the idea being that gaining recognition as an excluded minority is a pathway to a stronger voice in politics, mirroring the strategies and demands of the civil rights movement. The group within the movement that emphasizes the political goals of combating oppression of atheists and resisting organized religion's infiltration of the political system – that is, the movement as it was structured before the New Atheism emerged – therefore adopts an identity of resistance that seeks to strengthen the place of non-believers within society's institutions, rather than seeking a cultural transformation.

To New Atheists who desire universalization of the scientific atheist worldview, the engagement in identity politics necessarily condemns atheists to the fringes, a permanent minority rather than the presumptive heir to hegemonic authority. Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens have been the most vocal critics of this strategy among the New Atheists. Harris objects even to the use of the term "atheist" to describe their movement, as he feels that theirs should be the default position, and that it is supernaturalists who require a term to denote their deviation from it (AAI 2007), while Hitchens has expressed the opinion that self-representation as an oppressed minority is both a tactical error and a misrepresentation of the trend of history, which points to secularization (Four Horsemen DVD). Identity and the issue of minority discourse, then, is where cultural and political dimensions of the movement clash.

Even among those who are not opposed to engaging in identity politics, there are tensions regarding what shape that should take. This tension is expressed in the ongoing debate regarding strategies of "confrontation" versus "accommodation", with advocates

of the former seeking to mark clear lines of difference between themselves and religious groups and individuals, and the latter willing to overlook differences on the question of God in order to cooperate with those who share the ultimate goals of secularism, the emancipation of science from religious and political spheres, and basic social justice concerns. I will argue that this tension exists primarily between atheists and secular humanists, and results from the influence of the scientific and humanistic types of atheism that were discussed in Chapter One.

It is not only atheists and secular humanists who are sometimes at odds, since the matter is complicated by the rise of another group in its latent phase: the libertarian rationalists. They embrace the New Atheism's confrontational stance as well as an emphasis on difference rather than assimilation when it comes to identity construction. Their goals, however, are political rather than cultural: they supplant the New Atheism's goal of ideological universalization with the political goal of secularism, and supplant the New Atheism's liberalism with radical individualism and economic libertarianism. Indeed, these self-declared libertarians appear at least as concerned with separation of economy and state as they are with separation of church and state. The new atheist movement, then, is caught between two sub-groups in the freethought movement it resides in: secular humanists who seek assimilation and cooperation with like-minded groups on matters of science and social justice, and libertarian rationalists who are more interested in individual and economic liberty than promoting the growth of scientific atheism (though they do share most of the key features of that ideology). How tensions between these groups are resolved, or at least managed, will determine the future evolution of the new atheist movement and the freethought movement as a whole.

To understand the implications of these developments we should return to Melucci's model. For Melucci, the collective is socially constructed through negotiation of the action system, which includes goals, strategies, and the target of action (as outlined in Table 2). That is, collective identity for a social movement actor is the expression of a negotiated construction of the action system. He writes, "Collective identity takes the form of a field containing a system of vectors in tension" (Melucci 1995: 50). I would

alternatively say that collective identity is a dynamic field of tensions relating to the action system. Melucci argues that in situations of crisis or intense conflict when these tensions are too great to negotiate a common orientation to the action system, which means that the collective actor cannot define itself or its purposes, it must restructure its action according to new orientations. In effect this means a new latency phase, which is why Figure 2 is represented as a feedback loop, with latency not necessarily producing consensus but possibly a perpetual latency. If this process fails a breakdown occurs, making action impossible and potentially leading to a fragmentation of the movement.

The atheist movement can be understood within this framework, and the vectors in tension in this case are threatening a failure in the process of identity construction and a breakdown of the movement. These tensions, I argue, may be understood as a complex field of mutual tensions with respect to the action system that represent three sub-groups within the movement that are motivated by distinct ideological groundings. I refer to these groups as new atheists, secular humanists, and libertarian rationalists. I do not want to suggest that individuals within the movement can be clearly distinguished along these lines. However, I do argue that these are the three major ideological groupings in the movement, and that leaders in particular can be positioned more or less within these categories, with some overlap in some cases.

Table 3 outlines the defining characteristics of these three groups, including the type of atheism, and their goals and strategies. It also includes the nature of the political identity they work to construct, which is categorized according to either "deconstructive" or "category-supportive" approaches (Gamson 1995), or alternatively, "distinction" and "assimilation" (Ghaziani 2011). Finally, these groups are categorized in terms of their politics and their basic ideological grounding, which I will argue is the ultimate source of the divisions – manifest in identity and strategy debates – that are compelling a restructuring of the action system, and threaten a failure or breakdown of the movement. Armstrong and Bernstein (2008: 80-81) argue that once we recognize that not all movements target the state or seek entry into a single polity, questions about why actors make the decisions they do about targets, goals, and strategies – that is, orientation to the

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action system – become more interesting. These questions are especially interesting for non-political movements or those that combine political and cultural elements. In the case of the atheist movement, I argue that the answer to these questions lies in ideology, which is the basic motivation for action and its structuring logic.

Table 3: Characteristics of movement sub-groups

	New Atheists	**Secular Humanists**	**Libertarian Rationalists**
Atheism	scientific	humanistic	scientific
Goals	cultural	cultural/political	political
Strategy	ideological	ideological/instrumental	instrumental
Political Identity	category-supportive	deconstructive	category-supportive
Politics	liberal	liberal	libertarian
Ideology	scientism	secularism	individualism

My analysis of the ideologies at work in the atheist movement proceeds in two steps. In Melucci's model collective identity is the expression of a collectively negotiated orientation to the action system. Identity construction and negotiation is contested and emerges out of interactions and adjustments on the "three orders of orientations" outlined in Table 2, which in turn is informed by a basic ideological grounding, and thus we have three "sub-groups" defined by three ideological groundings collectively constructing and negotiating the action system. These three groups, and their ideological approach to the three orders of orientation, constitute a field of mutual tensions with regard to the action system that is shaping movement dynamics, with the New Atheism an increasingly marginalized approach that has given way to more distinctly approaches. This field of tensions, manifest in the debates on identity, can be understood through debates on strategy, since strategy choices and debates are also statements about identity (Melucci 1996, Polletta and Jasper 2001). This analysis of strategy debates further reveals distinct underlying ideological motivations. My strategy, then, is to begin with examining processes and projects of collective identity construction, and then work backward to see what this reveals about orientation to the

action system in terms of strategy and goals, which in turn allow us to identify the distinct ideological groupings that give rise to these different approaches.

The rest of the chapter therefore deals with identity construction (the next section) and identity strategy (the following section). This in turn will allow for an analysis of current dynamics shaping movement development, and the possibility of a failure or breakdown, as groups united only by their lack of religious belief struggle to maintain cohesion in the face of deep divisions in their politics. I argue that the ideological tensions at the heart of the movement, represented in the distinct approaches to political identity and expressed in debates on strategy and minority discourse, are much more than simply a division between cultural and political approaches. The libertarian rationalists – what I call the Atheist Right – make consensus even more difficult because it differs from both the New Atheism and secular humanism with respect to the action system and ideological grounding. Concomitantly, the response to the Atheist Right and to certain instances of social conservatism within the movement on the part of atheists expressing a desire to direct movement activity toward "social justice" introduces another layer of complexity.

These developments are driving another latency period, which is why Figure 2 is represented as a feedback loop. This new latency period, characterized by intense and diversifying ideological conflicts, may lead to restructuring, or to movement failure or fragmentation. Many movements face the problem of "identity correspondence" – the alignment of individual and collective identities – particularly those where members cannot be expected to share an extant collective identity derived from being commonly situated structurally (Snow and McAdam, 2000). Atheists are united ideologically rather than structurally, and thus the atheist movement is particularly vulnerable to fission produced by ideological disparities, but the outcome of these processes remains unclear.

The Moral Minority: Constructing Community and Identity

Alberto Melucci writes, "a certain degree of emotional investment, which enables individuals to feel like part of a common unity, is required in the definition of collective

identity. Collective identity is never entirely negotiable because participation in collective action is endowed with meaning but cannot be reduced to cost-benefit calculation and always mobilizes emotions as well" (1995: 45). The "common unity" Melucci refers to is simply a more precisely stated version of "community", an essential ingredient of any collective definition of identity and approach to action. Mobilizing actors requires emotional investment in the cause and in the collective one is asked to be part of. For some movement participants, community and a sense of belonging are all they really want (this is the case for some members of atheist organizations, as we will see in the next chapter). But even for movements with instrumental goals, community is a crucial building block in the construction and later deployment of political identity (Berezin 2001). Identity, then, can never be purely instrumental or strategic. There must be real emotional investment to mobilize participants to act, particularly in the case of "new" or identity based movements where participants do not share a structural location and must do more "identity work" to form the bonds of community (Einwohner et. al. 2008).

The present analysis of collective identity thus begins with community building projects that address precisely the requirement of emotional investment in the definition and construction of identity. In the case of the atheist movement, this emotional investment involves addressing alienation and the desire to belong by emphasizing the potential for atheists to "come out" and find others like themselves with whom they can share their concerns and frustrations. These community building efforts and other projects of identity construction at the same time are intended to counter the stigma against atheism (particularly in the United States) as an a-moral, or immoral, worldview, and by extension, against atheists as people without morality. These projects thus reject the claim that morality is derived and maintained from religion, and emphasize morality in representations of atheists. While this is intended to create the emotional investment that forms the bonds of community by appealing to atheists' desire for self-validation, it is also an important element of the movement's political identity strategy, which represents atheists specifically as an essentially good, but socially marginalized or stigmatized minority. Indeed, the more emotion-based efforts at representing atheist

identity that are crucial in early community building stages have largely been superseded by more instrumental or strategic definitions and deployment of identity; specifically, representations of atheist identity now involve minority discourse and an entry into identity politics. This move is a source of contention in the movement, and the political identity strategies being deployed, and debates concerning these strategies and representations of identity, will reveal tensions that point to the movement's ideological foundations.

Community: Get on the Bus

The atheist movement in the past decade was bookended by two of the largest and most significant single instances of activism in its history: the Godless Americans March on Washington on November 2, 2002, and the Reason Rally, also held in Washington on March 24, 2012. The Godless Americans March was a protest, orchestrated by American Atheists, against the "increasing infringement of religion in governmental affairs" (Murphy 2002). The Reason Rally was sponsored by many of today's most prominent freethought organizations, including CFI and the Richard Dawkins Foundation.[7] Both these major events were aimed at the same purpose: bringing a hitherto unrecognized identity group into focus and mobilizing participants for an emerging social movement.

Commenting on the gay and lesbian movement, Suzanne Staggenborg observes that the construction of community and collective identity can be a goal in itself or a step toward more instrumental goals:

> In some instances, activists aim to empower constituents with a sense of collective identity and to create a shared community before they can engage in more instrumental action. In other instances, the goal is to transform the values, categories, and practices of mainstream culture rather than to win specific policy changes, and activists may focus on developing community and collective identity among gays and lesbians by emphasizing their uniqueness and differences from the mainstream culture (2008: 100).

In the case of the atheist movement, construction of community and identity are goals in themselves for some, and for others they are constructed strategically to be deployed toward instrumental ends. I will here examine some campaigns aimed at building community and identity, and the ways that this identity is being deployed by those with political goals.

An early campaign aimed at community building was initiated by Richard Dawkins through his Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS), and it represents the first instance of New Atheist activism. It was called the Out Campaign, officially announced by RDFRS in July 2007 (Dawkins, 2007). The problem facing the atheist movement, he argued, is that much of the atheist population regrettably remains "in the closet" and thus "a major part of our consciousness-raising effort should be aimed, not at converting the religious but encouraging the non-religious to admit it – to themselves, to their families, and to the world" (Dawkins, 2007). Exhorting atheists to "come out", then, was the purpose of the Out Campaign, and Dawkins notes that this involves an "obvious comparison with the gay community" (Dawkins, 2007). Dawkins and his collaborators created a website and a campaign logo – a red "A" – that was printed on t-shirts and buttons to be worn by atheists to announce their beliefs and state their "atheist pride" (*Out Campaign*, 2013).

This campaign encouraged people to come out of the closet and get on the bus with their fellow atheists, so to speak. This metaphor was taken to a more literal place with the emergence of the Atheist Bus Campaign (ABC), the most visible and highly publicized campaign by the atheist movement to date and an excellent example of the scope and significance of the movement. It began in 2008 when ArianeSherine, a comedian and writer for *The Guardian*, blogged about seeing buses in London carrying a Bible quotation and a link to a web page that threatened eternal torment in hell for non-believers. Concerned about a message "advocating endless pain for atheists", Sherine proposed running an advertisement carrying the slogan, "There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life (Sherine, 2008)".[8] Encouraged by the overwhelming response to the idea on her blog, she partnered with the British Humanist Association

(BHA), which solicited donations, and raised 140,000 pounds, enough to buy advertisements on 800 buses in 26 cities and towns throughout the UK, which went up early in 2009 (Butt, 2009).

The success of ABC was a watershed moment for atheist activism. Hanne Stinson, a representative of the British Humanist Association, offered this rationale for the campaign: "We all, whether we have religious or non-religious beliefs, have a right to be heard, and no one particular set of beliefs has any more right to influence the public debate than any other. The message isn't aimed at people with religious beliefs – it's aimed at atheists and agnostics" (Butt, 2009). In other words, the campaign was aimed at non-believers in order to tell them that they were not alone, to demonstrate that there is a community of others who share their point of view. Sherine articulated the same sentiment in an interview on the CBC Radio program *Q*:

> I think atheists, because we don't see each other very much, we don't
> get together, we don't have a community in the same way as religious
> groups do. You don't really know how many people feel this way[...]So
> it seems to be this kind of underground thing, and then you see all these
> thousands and thousands of atheists coming out going, you know, I'm
> so relieved that so many people feel the way I do (Ghomeshi, 2009).

Again, the ideas of community and "coming out" are conveyed here. The ABC campaign was an effort toward constructing community and building recognition and legitimacy for the atheist identity, more so than an attempt at conversion to atheism.

The spectacular success of ABC in the UK inspired freethought groups elsewhere to participate, bringing the campaign to Canada (Toronto was the first city outside of the UK to adopt it), the United States, Ireland, Spain, Italy, Sweden, Finland, Germany, the Netherlands, Switzerland, New Zealand, and Croatia, where ads were removed after one day as a result of public complaints (*Atheist Bus Campaign*, 2009). Most recently, the Atheist Foundation of Australia launched a series of bus advertisements to coincide with the 2012 Global Atheist Convention in Melbourne, this time carrying a memorable quote

from Woody Allen: "If God exists, I hope he has a good excuse" (*Atheist Convention*, 2012).

The success of ABC, and concomitantly the success of the new atheist movement more generally, were possible only because of the internet, which, coupled with the attention brought to atheism by the publishing success of the Four Horsemen, constitutes a "cultural opportunity" (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995) for the emergence of a new identity group. Atheists have traditionally had little access to mass media, but the internet allowed geographically dispersed atheists to communicate and organize, as in the case of ABC. Today atheist groups make extensive use of blogs, discussion forums, podcasts, meetups, and so on as a way to build community – atheists even have their own social networking website, modeled after Facebook, called "Atheist Nexus", which has just under one thousand groups engaged in the project of community-building (*Atheist Nexus*, 2013). Given its transnational and geographically dispersed nature, the atheist movement is of necessity largely an online community, with local groups often quite small (Cimino and Smith, 2012). The internet adds a dimension of accessibility vastly greater than that offered by traditional print media, and introduced CFI and other atheist groups to countless more potential members who were inspired to seek them out after the New Atheists made religion, science, and atheism matters of intense public debate.

While virtual communities are crucial to everyday involvement in atheism, periodic physical gatherings continue to serve the important function of affirmation of the collective as well as reinforcing ties that were forged online through face-to-face interaction. Beyond meetings of local chapters of freethought organizations, there are a number of annual conferences and conventions hosted by major organizations. The most significant of these has been the AAI Annual Convention, which in 2007 featured the Four Horsemen, a moment that signalled the dawn of a new era in the atheist movement. Melbourne, Australia has become the site of the largest annual gathering of atheists in the world, hosting a Global Atheist Convention in 2010 that attracted over 2500 people, with the 2012 iteration looking to build on that number. There are also a number of annual celebrations and rituals observed and practiced by many atheist groups. These include,

for example, Darwin Day, which is held on February 12 (Darwin's birthday) and celebrates science and humanity through a recognition of Darwin's contribution to human knowledge (*Darwin Day,* 2013). Individuals and local groups are left to celebrate as they wish (normally this involves lectures, discussion, and parties), though the foundation's website does offer templates of e-cards that can be sent to family and friends to mark the occasion. Carl Sagan Day was created by CFI in 2009 and uses the occasion of Sagan's birthday, November 9, to "honor Carl Sagan and celebrate the beauty and wonder of the cosmos he so eloquently described" (*Center for Inquiry*, 2012). CFI also created International Blasphemy Rights Day (*Center for Inquiry* 2011)as an element of its broader Campaign for Free Expression (*Center for Inquiry* 2013). Since 2009, it has been celebrated annually on September 30th to mark the anniversary of the publication of cartoons depicting Muhammad in the Danish newspaper *Jyllands-Posten* that led to rioting among offended Muslims in 2005. It involves exhibiting explicitly blasphemous contemporary artworks in a celebration of freedom of speech.[9] In a similar vein, CFI's Toronto branch hosts a monthly "God-Awful Comedy Show" where local comedians invoke the spirit of George Carlin and Bill Hicks to poke fun at the irrationality of religious belief, and in the process cement bonds among non-believers.

Identity: Good Without God

Up to this point, I have examined two elements of the latency phase of social movement emergence: the development of ideology and validation of a worldview (covered in the previous chapter), and community building (the corollary of mobilization in political process theories). Closely related to the latter is the defining characteristic of the latency period: collective identity construction (Melucci, 1988, 1989). This involves basic identity-related self-examination, addressing the questions, "who are we?" and "how do we define ourselves?". In the political identity (Bernstein 2008) framework that I am employing, however, we must understand these questions and the way they are addressed in terms of their relationship to more instrumental questions like "what are our

goals?" and "how do we achieve them?". The OUT Campaign is both an exercise in community building, and also a project of collective identity construction. It is modeled after that of the gay and lesbian movement, which proved successful at bringing LGBT people "out of the closet" and bringing them together in visible groups where they could not only feel like members of a community, but also empowered rather than isolated and vulnerable (D'Emilio, 1983).

The efforts toward community building and constructing a positive image of atheists that we see in campaigns like OUT and Out of the Closet reflect the importance of morality in movement recruitment. Pinel and Swann (2000) argue that social movement participation is a kind of "self-verification", a confirmation of a particular conception of self through a collective identity that affirms and verifies it, a process that Snow and McAdam (2000) refer to as "identity seeking". Jesse Smith's (2011) research on atheist groups in Colorado found that morality is an essential component of individual atheist identity. More specifically, confirmation of the idea that belief in God is not necessary to be a moral person is important to atheists because a common charge against atheism is that it is morally bankrupt and leads to nihilism (e.g. McGrath, 2006). Smith also found that morality was central to these atheists' rejection of theism, and that emerging atheists "began to construct a cognitive and symbolic boundary between morality and religion, and asserted themselves as moral individuals against what they increasingly viewed as a false connection between being religious and being moral. They each in some way observed – and criticized the idea – that people *need* religion to be moral and good" (2011: 224). We should thus expect individual atheists to seek movements and embrace collective identities that verify this self-conception. Crucially, atheists have not advanced a coherent conception of morality on which they agree. That is, precisely what kind of morality they embrace is mostly left unstated, and indeed there is considerable debate within the movement regarding whether being an atheist involves adherence to particular ethical precepts (economic justice is one very contentious issue). What they clearly want to express, and what they can all agree on, is the idea that one can

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be "good without God" – that is, the idea that religion has no monopoly on morality – even if what exactly constitutes being good is unclear.

Richard Dawkins evidently also recognized the importance of morality and thus initiated the "Non-Believers Giving Aid" (NBGA) (2013) campaign in an effort to combat negative stereotypes and construct a positive identity for atheists, particularly those who are just starting to realize that they are atheists and are looking for validation of their rejection of the presumed connection between religion and morality. NBGA is a disaster relief fund collecting donations to be distributed to non-religious humanitarian aid organizations. Spear-headed by RDFRS, it involves 22 participating organizations, including AAI, FFRF, and BHA.[10] The atheist movement, then, provides moral validation for non-believers who seek it primarily by constructing a collective identity that emphasizes generosity and altruism.

The "Out" slogan and logo are now entrenched in movement discourse and have reappeared recently in other forms. In October, 2010, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) launched its "Out of the Closet" campaign. This was an effort to humanize atheists in the United States by demonstrating that "Freethinkers are your friends, neighbors, relatives, colleagues, the person who opens the door for you at your grocery store, a parent at your playground" (*Freedom from Religion*, 2011a). FFRF designed billboard advertisements that featured a photo of a local atheist along with a "freethought testimonial" that makes "an affirmative statement about being a freethinker" (*Freedom from Religion*, 2011b), and a short self-description. People were invited to design their own ads through the FFRF website, which provided a template and the opportunity to upload photos. FFRF then selected from among these user-created ads to create the actual billboards, and leaving the rest up on the website.[11] There are a number of similar campaigns, including one underway by CFI Canada they call "Good and Godless". It invites people to submit one-minute videos to their YouTube channel *Think Again! TV* where they explain what they do for charities, non-profits, or society, and ending with the statement, "That is why I am good without God."

The OUT campaign was Richard Dawkins' first attempt at establishing atheism not just as an intellectual trend, but also a social movement. Dawkins encourages the public expression of atheist pride, much in the vein of gay pride, noting that atheists are more numerous than people realize, particularly among the "educated elite" (2006: 4). The OUT Campaign was thus designed for a practical purpose beyond community building: it was the beginning of a political project. Dawkins emphasized the numbers of "closeted" atheists because he believed that, should they "come out" and organize, they would constitute a powerful political bloc. He gives the example of Jewish influence on American politics to suggest what atheists might be capable of, since atheists are far greater in number (Dawkins 2006: 44), and argues that atheists should represent themselves as a minority subjected to prejudice and discrimination, citing the example of George H.W. Bush's infamous declaration that atheists cannot be true patriots and should not even be considered American citizens because America is one nation under God (Dawkins 2006: 44). He thus takes atheism in two directions simultaneously, arguing for cultural transformation (i.e. the universalization of the ideology of scientific atheism) while also deploying a political identity toward the instrumental goal of formal recognition by state authorities of atheists' minority status. This presumably would give atheists a stronger voice in legislative and policy decisions, but would also undermine the cultural goal of ideological dominance. The development of a minority identity in the U.S. and elsewhere has been one of the major projects of the atheist movement in recent years. Minority discourse in the atheist movement is driven by morality and the notion that one can be "good without God".

The movement is evolving, of course, and has expanded its aims. New debates concerning goals and strategies have come with this. After atheists "come out" and begin constructing a positive, morality-based collective identity, some major questions emerge: what kind of status should they seek? What kind of influence should they exert, and who should be influenced? Do they want to effect broad social change or do they simply want to find their own niche within the existing social structure? These sorts of questions are essential to any social movement (particularly identity-based movements), and in the case

of atheism they have proven particularly contentious. There are some who seek to continue in the footsteps of the LGBT movement by following up on the coming out and community-building phase – that is, the latency phase – with an effort to construct a minority identity that is recognized by authorities and the general public in order to first gain protection against discrimination, and then reach a step further and use this status to gain influence in the public sphere and over state authorities. We should understand this as an instrumental political identity strategy, with cultural effects of the movement only a step toward political goals.

Community building by the freethought movement reached its zenith in the single largest and most significant instance of atheist collective action to date, the Reason Rally, billed as "the largest secular event in world history" (*Reason Rally* 2013b). An estimated 20,000 freethinkers (Fearnow& Woods 2012) gathered at the National Mall in Washington, D.C. on March 24, 2012 with the intent "to unify, energize, and embolden secular people nationwide, while dispelling the negative opinions held by so much of American society" (*Reason Rally*, 2013b). What was particularly striking about this event was that it signaled a decisive shift in emphasis in atheist discourse, with a lineup of speakers headlined by Richard Dawkins moving away from discussing the moral character of atheists to focusing on the status of atheists in American society. David Silverman, President of American Atheists, declared: "We are here to deliver a message to America. We are here and we will never be silent again" (Winston 2012). The "come out" message was repeated by a number of speakers, with Silverman offering reassurance to "closeted atheists" that "you are not alone". Fred Dewords, national director of the United Coalition of Reason, borrowed another slogan from the gay movement (substituting "godless" for "queer") in leading the crowd in a chant of "We're here, were godless, get used to it" (Aratani 2012). The Reason Rally is a clear sign that the atheist movement is a sustained and organized movement geared toward the establishment of a new minority group – or more precisely, recognition of an existing but previously dormant one – in American society. This is a very significant development.

The engagement in minority politics is a contentious issue and the idea is rejected by, among others, Sam Harris and Christopher Hitchens. Indeed, these authors do not believe that atheists require a social movement at all. In the original filmed Four Horsemen discussion, Hitchens argued for the right of non-believers to express being offended by certain religious doctrines while warning against "being self-pitying or representing ourselves as an oppressed minority" (*Four Horsemen* 2007). At the 2007 AAI convention, Harris criticized the idea of an atheist minority and even the use of the term "atheist" to describe themselves, arguing that "We're consenting to be thought of as a cranky subculture that meets in hotel ballrooms" (*Atheist Alliance* 2007). He thus condemned the movement's employment of a "subcultural identity strategy" that mirrors evangelicals' self-representation as an "embattled minority" (Cimino and Smith 2007). He argued, instead, that atheists should consider themselves the mainstream, or at least the emergent mainstream, since scepticism and rationalism should be the default positions, while engaging in minority politics marginalizes the atheist viewpoint. Harris' view here is consistent with the project of cultural transformation that characterizes the New Atheist discourse and distinguishes it from movement sub-groups that use minority discourse as a political identity strategy aimed at realizing instrumental goals.

It should be noted, however, that Dawkins is considerably less discerning in his strategy and supports just about any kind of collective action by atheists. He endorses both minority politics and tackling discrimination while also arguing for the near-universality of the scientific worldview in the modern world.[12] Others in the freethought community are similarly divided on the question of whether atheism simply means a lack of religious belief or involves a set of 'positive' beliefs (i.e. affirmation of certain principles rather than strictly negation). For example, D.J. Grothe, former host of *Point of Inquiry* and now President of the James Randi Educational Foundation and host of its podcast *For Good Reason*, insists that "atheism" means nothing other than not believing in God, and argues that atheism is not a civil rights issue, rejecting the strategy of minority politics (Grothe and Dacey 2004). PZ Myers, on the other hand, defines atheism as "a positive explanation of the world based on scientific thinking...When I talk about

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atheism I'm using a loaded word that has a lot of other content" (*TV Ontario* 2011) and exhorts atheists to "take pride in what you do believe, not what you deny" (Myers 2011).

Despite the disagreements, minority discourse and political action are cemented as a central aspect of the atheist movement. This was made abundantly clear at the Reason Rally, where it was the prevailing theme. The claim to being an "oppressed minority" that Hitchens warned against has now been embraced by the movement's mainstream. Despite Hitchens' reservations, many American atheists do report experiencing exclusion and outright discrimination (Cragun et. al. 2012), and thus legitimately fear the social consequences of revealing their beliefs. Research on public perception of atheists has consistently found that they are among the least-trusted people in the United States (Bainbridge 2007; Cragun et. al. 2012; Gervais et. al. 2011; Edgell et. al. 2006; Swan and Heesacker 2012). One major study found that Americans are significantly more accepting of Muslims and homosexuals than they are of atheists, and argued that atheists constitute an "Other" in American society, a symbolic boundary setting the terms for cultural membership and morality (Edgell et. al. 2006).

Some recent highly-publicized incidents highlight both discrimination against individual atheists and their increasing willingness to speak publicly about it as well as engage in legal action. In 2008 a soldier named Jeremy Hall filed a lawsuit against the United States Department of Defense for an unconstitutional violation of his religious freedom – in his case, freedom to have no religion (Bannerjee 2008). Hall accused the U.S. military of being a "Christian organization" with a pattern of discrimination against non-Christians. He claimed that he received death threats from other soldiers, and that he was denied promotion because of his refusal to participate in group prayer. Hall was joined by another plaintiff, the Military Religious Freedom Foundation (2013), which was founded to protect non-believing members of the Armed Forces from discrimination. In 2012, a sixteen-year-old Rhode Island high school student named Jessica Ahlquist successfully mounted a legal challenge to have a Christian prayer plaque removed from the wall of her school auditorium on the grounds that it told her, an atheist, "You don't belong here" (Goodnough 2012). The heavily Catholic population of her city responded

with outrage, sending her online threats and protesting at school board meetings, while a State Representative called her an "evil little thing" (Goodnough 2012). A representative of the Freedom From Religion Foundation said it had been a long time since she had seen "this level of revilement and ostracism and stigmatizing" (Goodnough, 2012).

One recent case provided material validation for atheists' claims to suffering discrimination. In 2011 the Center for Inquiry filed suit against Wyndgate Country Club in Rochester Hills, Michigan after it cancelled a CFI event that featured Richard Dawkins as a speaker. The grounds of the suit were breach of contract (CFI had rented the club's convention space) as well as violation of federal and state civil rights laws. The club's reason for cancelling the event was that "the owner does not wish to associate with certain individuals and philosophies", specifically citing Dawkins' recent appearance on *The O'Reilly Factor* and his discussion of atheism and religion on that program. After a successful out of court settlement, CFI claimed that this was "the first time federal and state civil rights statutes have been successfully invoked by nonbelievers in a public accommodations lawsuit", while CEO Ronald Lindsay said, "as this country now rejects discrimination based on race, sexual orientation, and religion, so must we reject just as strongly discrimination against those with no religion" (Fidalgo 2013). The case appears to indeed have been a landmark legal victory in the atheist movement's quest to establish itself as a minority group requiring protection under civil rights laws.

Discrimination against atheists (or at least a perception of discrimination) is not restricted to the United States. In 2011 CFI Canada brought its ABC campaign to Kelowna, British Columbia. Buses scheduled to carry the advertisements were found in the transit yard with the ads professionally removed, an evident statement of protest from a driver or another transit employee (*CBC News*, 2011). CFI used this incident to frame its "Good Without God" campaign. Claiming that the Kelowna incident indicated that more needed to be done to "advance the public image of our community", the Good Without God campaign, like the Out campaigns of FFRF and RDFRS, combats perceived stigma by emphasizing the moral character of atheists. This incident, then, was taken as a "cultural opportunity" (Johnston and Klandermans, 1995) to represent atheists as an

"embattled minority", a strategy which has had a "tonic" effect on secularist identity (Cimino and Smith, 2007).

The most vocal proponent of minority discourse and identity politics in the atheist movement is perhaps *Free Inquiry* editor Tom Flynn, who has argued within the pages of his magazine for several years that the movement should adopt the tactics and rhetoric of the gay and lesbian movement in an effort to destigmatize atheism. Indeed, he believes that the primary goal of the movement at this point should be to tackle the "antiatheist bigotry" which is analogous to the antigay bigotry exposed and confronted by the LGBT movement (Flynn, 2008). He notes that even if we take the lower estimates of the number of "explicitly secular and nonreligious people" (he offers a figure of 10%), that number "will empower us to operate on the same scale as America's most visible and respected activist minorities" (Flynn, 2006: 17). Flynn argues that atheists are on the verge of a "breakthrough moment" similar to those experienced by gays and lesbians, and also African-Americans and Hispanics, when their populations reached similar numbers (Flynn, 2006: 16). At the Reason Rally, Paul Fidalgo, a spokesman for CFI, echoed these sentiments by stating, "We have the numbers to be taken seriously", and "We're not just a tiny fringe group" (Aratani, 2012).

Note in these various statements the comparisons not just to other minorities, but to the discrimination and even persecution experienced by these minorities. The same sentiment is expressed by PZ Myers, who, in an article on the RDFRS web site, declares that, "we are staking out a place in the public discourse and openly discussing our concerns, rather than hiding in fear of that old Puritan scowl. We will not go back in the closet" (Myers, 2007). Several atheist organizations make minority discourse their primary concern. The Military Association of Atheists and Freethinkers represents non-believers serving in the U.S. Armed Forces, a sphere where atheists are particularly stigmatized, even by American standards. This group's web page asserts in its introductory message that "nontheists are the last unprotected minority" (*Military Atheists* 2013). American Atheists' mission statement reads: "Supporting Civil Rights for Atheists and the Separation of Church and State" (*American Atheists* 2013). This

organization demanded a public apology from Billy Ray Cyrus for his "bigoted slur" against atheists in an interview in GQ magazine (*American Atheists* 2011a).

Despite the clear differences in attitudes toward atheism in Canada versus that of the highly religious United States, Canadian atheism has also embraced minority politics and the discourse of persecution. In March 2013 CFI Canada released an internet video (ThinkAgainCFI 2013) addressing the Canadian government's announcement of the new Office of Religious Freedom. In the video CFI spokesperson Justin Trottier asks the Office of Religious Freedom to include atheists in their mandate, arguing that "all over the world, atheists, agnostics, rationalists, and secularists are subject to hatred, intolerance, and persecution for their minority religious identity." While Trottier's discussion was focused primarily on persecution of atheists in non-western contexts – particularly Islamic countries – the claim that atheism constitutes a *minority religious identity* was advanced in no uncertain terms. The video includes a clip of Canadian Minister of Foreign Affairs John Baird speaking about the Office and its position that "we don't see agnosticism or atheism as being in need of defence the same way persecuted religious minorities are", underscoring Trottier's argument that atheists in Canada need to make a stronger claim for recognition as a minority in need of protection.

Many atheist groups, then, encourage self-representation as a minority excluded by mainstream society, and thus become an in-group that finds its identity "not within but against" (Cimino and Smith, 2007: 420) – that is, not in traits they share in common internally, but in the perception of discrimination and a common enemy. This is in contrast to the New Atheists' view of a group of enlightened individuals united by a scientistic worldview, or for that matter Paul Kurtz's vision of a group united by a common humanistic epistemology and ethics. These trends support Cimino and Smith's argument that the failure of naturalism and scientific thought to become dominant over supernatural explanations of reality – which was assumed by many "progressive secularists" throughout the 20th century to be the inevitable course of history (2007: 408) – has led these movements to shift their strategy. Rather than assuming that secularization was the inevitable and natural trend of history, "the question of how

secularism can survive and even thrive in a religious society has become pressing for atheists and secular humanists" (Cimino and Smith, 2007: 408). The new strategy, in answer to this pressing question, is the construction of a subcultural identity in order to find a place in American society. Cimino and Smith identify three strategies aimed at realizing this goal: (1) creating a niche for secular humanism among irreligious people; (2) mimicking various aspects of evangelicalism in defining themselves; and (3) making use of minority discourse and engaging in identity politics (2007). The project of ideological universalization, taken for granted for much of the 20th century as the inevitable course of history, has to a large extent been abandoned in favour of defensive strategies aimed at securing a location in the religious landscape.

This defensive strategy, as I have illustrated, involves an instrumental political identity approach modeled on the gay and lesbian movement. The links to this movement are very clear in the examples that I have cited of efforts to combat the perceived stigma associated with the label "atheist" and to foster the notion that atheists constitute a hitherto unrecognized minority subject to similar forms of prejudice and discrimination. The dynamics at work within these identity movements are similar in many ways. The issue within the gay and lesbian movement most pertinent to atheists' current situation is the frequent and ongoing debates over the question of a strategy of "assimilation" versus one of "distinction" (Ghaziani, 2011) or alternatively "separatism" (Gamson, 1995). Amin Ghaziani (2011) argues that gay politics has generally moved from a very subversive and confrontational style that sought to highlight differences to a more conservative approach that emphasized things like marriage and adoption, serving in the military, and employment discrimination.

These strategic differences indicate a tension between those who seek to maintain boundaries and a clear minority identity, which in turn is their source of political power, and those who want to break down boundaries to demonstrate that these differences are socially constructed rather than essential, and thus that gays should have the same rights and privileges as anyone else (Bernstein, 1997; Gamson, 1995; Ghaziani, 2011). Joshua Gamson (1995: 391) refers to these as "category-supportive political strategies" versus

"deconstructive cultural strategies". The former emphasizes difference and the power that can come from recognition as a distinct minority that must be protected, while the latter emphasizes assimilation. The atheist movement is now faced with very similar questions and a very similar division, though it is further complicated by a series of divisions or tensions between and within various groups that reflects the dynamics involved in the emergence of a new or latent movement within the structure of an existing movement with its own tensions and internal debates. These tensions are best exemplified by an ongoing debate concerning strategies that are generally referred to as "confrontation" and "accommodation", which are analogous to Gamson's "category-supportive" and "deconstructive" strategies. Examining these tensions regarding goals and strategies will in turn tell us much about the complex and evolving nature of atheist identity, since in the theoretical framework that I have adopted, goals, strategy, and identity are inextricably linked and mutually dependent, and indeed, internal disagreements over goals and strategies are in fact statements about identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

Ideological Divisions and Movement Dynamics

The atheist movement today is defined by a set of tensions: between atheists and humanists, between libertarians and liberals, between Social Darwinism and social justice, and between those who advocate a "confrontational" approach to religion with the goal of eradicating it and those favouring an "accommodationist" position that involves working with religious groups that share the goals of supporting science, secularism, and social justice. I will argue that these tensions in terms of politics, goals, and strategies should be understood most fundamentally in terms of the historical development of distinct scientific and humanistic atheist ideologies and how these ideologies inform and shape practices within social movement organizations. But more proximally, we can understand them in relation to movement dynamics, with tensions arising due to the fact that the movement is comprised of sub-groups that follow different trajectories out of the latency phase and develop as cultural or political movements. We have seen this division manifested in the debates concerning identity construction. I turn

now to current debates concerning strategy that, when considered in relation to identity and goals, reveal the foundational ideological tension at the heart of atheism.

The New Atheists' strategy of confrontation and polarization is reflective of their view of religion and science as dichotomous terms and their desire to validate their own ideology. For Dawkins, the strategy is to destroy the "God virus" by injecting our culture with a strong dose of the evolutionism "meme". The intention seems mainly to be to mobilize inactive non-believers and to address those on the fence who might have some sense of religious belief but not a strong attachment to it by polarizing the two sides and forcing them into choosing one. Moderate positions are increasingly abandoned or viewed as untenable by both atheists and devout Christians, who are bound up in a dialectical relationship that propels them to further polarized extremes. Smith (1998) and Cimino and Smith (2007) illustrate how extreme elements of the religious and non-religious each portray themselves as an "embattled" minority set against a dominant Other. This is typical of movements that employ a strategy of difference and construct identity by maintaining social, cultural, and political boundaries, emphasizing differences between dominant and minority groups (Taylor and Whittier, 1992: 111).

This, again, is reflective of the positions Ghaziani (2011) refers to as "us versus them" and "us and them" in relation to the gay rights movement and its debates regarding identity strategies focusing on "distinction" versus "assimilation". A similar tension on questions of strategy and identity exists in the atheist movement between atheists and secular humanists, who "often contrast their positive system of ethics and values...with the more reactionary and hard-line stance atheists take in defending and promoting non-theism" (Cimino and Smith, 2007: 410). For their part, new atheists have an interest in maintaining a tension with society (rather than assimilating into it) in order to strengthen a worldview (Borer, 2010). The New Atheists are less compelled toward pragmatism precisely because their goals are more cultural than political. That is, the validation of a worldview is in and of itself the goal of the New Atheism, and maintaining a tension with 'outside' perspectives is thus crucial to their strategy. Philosopher and humanist Matthew Flamm writes in the pages of *Free Inquiry* that "the new atheists engage

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contemporary religious sensibilities after the manner of glib scientists, less interested that such engagement produces in dissenters the urge for dialogue than in the fact that it clearly lays down lines of difference" (2011: 24).

For the secularists engaged in a political struggle for the differentiation of religious (private) and secular (public) spheres, meanwhile, a pragmatic approach that involves building political power is paramount. This tension is further reflective of the division in atheist thought in the 19th century discussed in the opening chapter. The New Atheists, as scientific atheists, ascribe to a worldview where science *and only science* can provide the foundations of knowledge and social organization, and thus any 'competing' claims (i.e. 'memes') must be discredited and discarded. For others who are more concerned with protecting the rights of individual atheists than promoting a worldview, minority politics and maintaining strict lines of difference are key. Accordingly, these groups adopt the strategy of "confrontation". The secular humanists within the movement are less inclined to attack religious beliefs and more interested in issues like education, inequality, and environmental sustainability, and are open to forging pragmatic alliances with other groups – including religious ones – that share similar views on these issues. They thus adopt the strategy of "accommodation". While confrontation and accommodation are instrumental approaches to achieving particular goals, they are also statements about identity, constituting "identity strategies" (Bernstein 2002).

We could understand the division within the movement to this point in terms of identity and strategy, since accommodation corresponds to "assimilation" and confrontation corresponds to "distinction". But the matter is complicated by the fact that among those favouring the "confrontation" approach, there are further tensions in terms of movement goals and the underlying ideologies and political motivations that shape them. Hence, we cannot simply equate these strategic approaches with atheism or secular humanism – the divisions run deeper than this. To this point, I have argued that divisions within the movement are grounded in the question of *goals* (i.e. whether the movement is a political or cultural one, and what the corresponding aims are) and *strategy* (i.e. distinction versus assimilation, or alternatively, confrontation versus accommodation).

While the division on the question of strategy is fairly clear, on the question of goals the division is not rigid. New atheists and secular humanists have goals that are cultural and political – indeed, in the theoretical framework I am employing the cultural and political dimensions are essentially inextricable – but I believe that we can say that the New Atheists' goals are primarily cultural (i.e. scientific hegemony, proselytizing for evolutionism as an alternative to religious belief), and that the goals of secular humanists are primarily political (i.e. secularism as social differentiation, church-state separation, etc.). There is, however, another group that introduces a further division within the group favouring confrontation, on the basis of ideology. This group is the libertarians. The following section examines ongoing debates within the movement regarding these strategic orientations and their broader implications.

Confrontation vs. Accommodation

The most interesting development at the Council of Secular Humanism's October 2010 conference to celebrate the 30th anniversary of *Free Inquiry* was the articulation of two contrasting viewpoints in a panel discussion called "Science and Religion: Confrontation or Accommodation?" (Council for Secular Humanism 2010).[13] Four speakers, two arguing for each side, discussed their views on the relationship between science and religion and how atheists should engage with religion in the public sphere. The speakers on the "confrontation" side were biologist and blogger PZ Myers and physicist Victor Stenger. Arguing for the "accommodation" viewpoint were Eugenie Scott, director of the non-profit National Centre for Science Education (NCSE) and Chris Mooney, a science journalist and regular host *Point of Inquiry*.

Myers' blog, *Pharyngula*, is known for attacking not only religion, but almost equally proponents of "a more accommodating atheism" (Cimino and Smith 2012: 21). On this blog he has argued that the purpose of the movement is precisely to attack religious beliefs: "we're in the business of telling believers that their most cherished fantasies are lies". He therefore favours the "evangelical" (Cimino and Smith 2007) and

confrontational approach employed by the New Atheists, who treat religions as a set of truth claims that are vulnerable to competing scientific claims. Indeed, Myers set the confrontational tone at the beginning of his presentation by declaring that "this is a real battle that we're fighting in this country". He clearly identified himself as a "new atheist" and accepted the reputation for militancy that comes with the label while claiming that they "didn't start the war" and that blame should be laid "on the backs of the religious zealots who have been poisoning the minds of the young for a long, long time." His entire presentation rested on the premise that the existence of God is a falsifiable scientific hypothesis. This serves as a useful marker to erect boundaries between the in-group and out-groups, and indeed Myers' primary goal seems to be establishing and maintaining distinction and a strong and clear sense of identity: "what I personally feel is an important goal is for atheists to acquire an identity, that one of the things we have to do as a group is recognize that we're all in this together... We cannot cooperate and work with other groups if we do not have our own identity as a unique group." Myers represents a group seeking to maintain a clear boundary and reinforce difference and conflict, a manifestation of the scientific atheist commitment to the notion of religion and science as dichotomous terms as well as a strategic choice based on the assumption that an aggressive tone is effective in attracting new members and that a distinct minority identity is a path to political power. Stenger essentially reiterated similar arguments and ventured to offer hope that science can win the war against religion in the near future and that "in perhaps another generation Americans will have joined Europe and the rest of the developed world in shucking off the rusty chains of ancient superstition", a comment that drew vigorous applause from the audience and remains in line with the New Atheists' progressive and evolutionary view of history.

Eugenie Scott offered a very different perspective. She explained that in her role as director of NCSE, her goal is promoting science, not attacking religion, which can actually be an impediment to this goal. This is a major departure from the scientific atheist position, which she said fails to engage in the kind of cross-cultural critique of religion that would offer greater understanding. These reductionist accounts of religion,

she argued, mistakenly posit that religion is essentially a pseudo-science (i.e. the "God Hypothesis") and fail to appreciate that "because Christianity is not primarily about explaining the natural world it is not necessarily antithetical to science." Her position that religion is not pseudo-science, but rather addresses everyday concerns people have related to survival and suffering that cannot be addressed by science, is tantamount to humanistic atheism.

Chris Mooney expressed similar concerns about the reductionist theories and aggressive tactics employed by Myers, repeating arguments previously made in a number of writings (e.g. Mooney 2010) and conference presentations about a view of religion as a social and psychological phenomenon intimately associated with identity and politics. He began by claiming that the confrontational approach is exemplified by the New Atheists, who he has compared to religious fundamentalists in setting up a "false dichotomy" (Mooney and Kirshenbaum 2009) that alienates many "moderate" believers who might otherwise be sympathetic to science and secular values, which in his view are really what the movement should be about. He therefore advocates abandoning an aggressive strategy of confrontation and argumentation in favour of mobilizing the "pro-science moderates" and supporting religious scientists as chief messengers for reaching out to the "anti-evolution crowd". The New Atheism, he suggests, "flies in the face of this, since it is often about attacking and alienating the religious moderates" (Mooney 2010: 7). He offered the example of Francis Collins, an evangelical Christian who is also an eminent scientist and advocate of evolution and stem cell research, as someone atheists should support. Myers' response was to refer to Collins as a "clown" because of his religious beliefs. The audience responded much more to the contempt and ridicule offered by Myers and Stenger than the decidedly more measured presentations given by Mooney and Scott. The "clown" remark drew applause and cheering, while the response to Mooney's discussion of survey research and reasoned strategic positions was quite tepid in comparison.

CFI is not the only organization where the "accommodation versus confrontation" debate has emerged. In July, 2011, American Atheists filed a lawsuit against the World

Trade Center Memorial Foundation, New York City, Mayor Michael Bloomberg, and New Jersey Governor Chris Christie, among others, for displaying a 17-foot-tall cross of steel beams at the National September 11 Memorial and Museum on the grounds that it violated the U.S. Constitution and civil rights law (Gootman 2011). In an apparent response to criticism for their position on this sensitive issue, the group issued a statement on their website titled "Now Is Not The Time For Atheists to Back Down" (American Atheists 2011b):

> There are those who are adamant that we should be non-aggressive, respectful and tolerant of those who hold religious beliefs and that we should not be outspoken....While some may choose to remain silent or non-confrontational, there are a growing number of us who have decided that the time has come to no longer sit back and let the theocrats run the show.

This statement implicitly addresses the confrontation/accommodation debate – and further, a division within the movement – by referring to two groups divided in terms of their focus on "tolerance" or being "outspoken" and "confrontational". In November 2010, Chris Mooney and David Silverman, president of American Atheists, debated the future of the movement in terms that essentially mirrored the Council for Secular Humanism conference panel in pitting "moderate" against "militant" atheism (Isaak 2010).

These debates points to a tension between atheism and secular humanism within the movement, with some humanists dismayed by the ascendency of "militant" atheism (Cimino and Smith 2010). As early as 2006, the year of publication of *The God Delusion*, there were concerns about both the tone and content of the emerging discourse. For example, *Free Inquiry* columnist Julian Baggini (2007) argued for a more moderate approach in an article entitled "Toward a More Mannerly Secularism". Another *Free Inquiry* columnist criticized the idea that religion is an "outmoded method of explanation" that can be eradicated by presenting people with better theories, sardonically dismissing this view in arguing that "Megachurches will not empty out when the faithful

learn the secrets of the atom" (Hoffman 2006: 47). The most vocal critic of the New Atheism within CFI has been the organization's founder, Paul Kurtz, a philosopher and self-described secular humanist. Kurtz resigned from his position as Chair of CFI and editor-in-chief of *Free Inquiry* in 2010. By his account, he was effectively terminated by the Board of Directors in a "palace coup" (Hagerty 2009).After a prolonged period of publicly criticizing the direction it was taking as a result of the influence of "militant atheists" (Kurtz 2008: 6). His views on the matter fueled a debate with Tom Flynn in an episode of *Point of Inquiry* titled "Secular Humanism versus... Atheism?" (Isaak 2009b).The interview involved a discussion of the supposed rift within the movement between secular humanists and atheists, and the idea that some who identify as secular humanists and want to advance the cause of reason, science, and church-state separation want to avoid the label "atheist". Flynn denied any tension between the two and sought to reconcile the positions by arguing that atheism is "an essential starting point" or basic epistemological foundation for secular humanism. Kurtz, by contrast, insists that "you can be a secular humanist and not an atheist" and makes a distinction between secular humanism, which is a "positive" philosophy, and atheism, which is "negative" (Isaak 2009c).

Flynn's denial of tensions is unpersuasive, as intra-movement tensions have dominated movement discussions for well over a year. Susan Jacoby is a well-known secular activist, author, and speaker who once served as program director for the New York branch of the Center for Inquiry. She notes a distinction between "secular humanists" and "secular conservatives", which expresses itself within the movement as a division between "humanists" and people who call themselves "skeptics", with epistemological skepticism carrying none of the moral imperative of duty to others that might be claimed by humanism (Jacoby 2012). We might alternatively think about this distinction in the terms outlined in the debate between Flynn and Kurtz, and consider what relationship there might be between the division between atheism and humanism, and between those Jacoby refers to as "secular humanists" and "secular conservatives". Jacoby's distinction implicitly identifies secular humanism with liberalism. Who, then,

are the "secular conservatives" she speaks of? While I cannot say precisely who and what she was referring to, I will say that there is an identifiable group within the atheist movement who clearly seek to sever the connection between humanism, atheism, and social justice that constituted the grounding for humanistic atheism. These are the libertarians, and they introduce a complication to the divisions between secular humanism and atheism that Kurtz and Flynn discussed. That is, the libertarians combine the New Atheists' confrontational approach with the secular humanists' instrumental goals of political secularism, all while carving out their own ideological space and constructing a version of scientism that includes radical individualism as a central tenet.

The Atheist Right: Social Darwinism versus Social Justice

The growth of the right wing of the atheist movement, though still in an early latent phase, is a remarkable development. It emerges in the subtext of movement discourse, such as a CFI blog post by current President and CEO Ronald Lindsay (2012a) criticizing Chris Mooney's most recent book about the workings of the "Republican brain" (Mooney 2012). Lindsay here calls into question our understanding of the terms "liberal" and "conservative", particularly the mutual exclusivity of stereotypically liberal and conservative views. For instance, he takes issue with the presumed correspondence between conservatism and climate change skepticism, thereby critiquing the notion of a tension between conservatism and supporting science, and brings up the trope of Soviet communism to argue that proceeding leftward we also see rejection of science that conflicts with ideology (it is worth noting that atheists notoriously get frustrated by those who point out a connection between atheism and 20th century totalitarian political movements, yet Lindsay employs the same tactic in his critique of the Left). He also objects to Mooney's inference that liberals are more "open-minded" than conservatives by nature, and argues that there is no inconsistency in being a humanist and a Republican (Lindsay 2012a).

Lindsay is opposed to government intervention in the economy to ensure a more egalitarian distribution of wealth because it removes incentives to individuals to

"innovate" and "take risks", and claims that humanism has no problem with "significant disparities in income and wealth" (Lindsay 2012b). Lindsay's political views, like many libertarians, seem to lie somewhere outside of the traditional left-right spectrum (i.e. economic libertarians align with the extreme Right on taxation and government regulation of the economy, but might adopt progressive positions on social issues like sexuality and gender equality, education policy, and environmental stewardship, with the caveat that they are opposed to state support and regulation in all these cases). What is quite clear is that Ronald Lindsay is not an advocate for the Left, and his writings suggest that movements for economic justice are irrational, while the current system, with its free market and "incentives" for "innovation", is inherently rational and therefore just. His leadership of CFI is the clearest sign of contemporary atheism's departure from its roots in social justice movements and ideologies as it moves away from humanism and embraces something like Ayn Rand's vision of atheistic individualism.

Individual rights concerning free speech is a common theme in *Free Inquiry* and *Point of Inquiry*. One striking example is Wendy Kaminer's (2010) critique of the Left and the culture of political correctness for censoring ideas that might be deemed offensive, citing the example of a Harvard law student who was reprimanded for writing in an email that she is open to the possibility that African Americans are, on average, genetically predisposed to be less intelligent. The author points to the Left wing of the academy and certain "anti-libertarian trends on campus that are anathema to reason" (Kaminer, 2010: 14) as the cause of this censorship and assault on individual liberty and freedom of inquiry.

The rhetoric of "freedom" and "responsibility" is not restricted to free speech and a sense of duty to truth. Economic freedom has become a major topic of conversation, sometimes overshadowing discussion of science and religion. For example, Frank Pasquale (2010b), in an article titled "The Quintessential Secular Institution", argues that we should celebrate corporations as the most substantially secular institutions in human history, and that we should not over-generalize in our descriptions of them (i.e. they are not all rapacious or greedy or destructive). TiborMachan argues that "everyone has the

inalienable right to private property", and that nobody has the right to make demands on anyone else's property or wealth (2011a:13). He equates state support for victims of natural disasters and illness with "penalizing" or "fining" other individuals, which is a violation of their right to private property. He further argues that the notion of "surplus wealth" is a "myth" because we cannot determine what constitutes a surplus here. His reasoning is that someone who has a lot of wealth may be "powerfully enriched, psychologically, by holding onto wealth beyond what others may consider reasonable" (2011a: 13) – in other words, they enjoy being wealthy. It is notable that Machan, an emeritus member of the Philosophy Department at Auburn University, has described Ayn Rand as "a writer with powerful philosophical ideas", and her novel *The Fountainhead* as "inspiring", "a literary masterpiece", and "*the* American novel of the twentieth century" (Machan 2011b).

Science writer Michael Shermer, publisher of *Skeptic* magazine and monthly columnist for *Scientific American*, makes regular appearances on *Point of Inquiry*. He is a libertarian and a Darwinist who has written books on evolutionary theories of morality (2004) and religious belief (2011), as well as "evolutionary economics" (2009), arguing that the free market is a natural reflection of innate human motivations related to economics and justice, concluding that a free-market capitalist system thus has an inherent "morality" derived from nature. In a 2009 *POI* appearance, he argued for the abolition of state support for the unemployed: "How do I know that they can't actually earn that money? Maybe they just don't want to, they'd rather not work" (Isaak 2009a). In this same interview, he also defends increasing wealth disparity as a symptom of a healthy economy, claims that individuals in the West are responsible for their own circumstances and that poverty is a result of making poor decisions, and argues for Ayn Rand's contemporary relevance.

Shermer's interviewer, D.J. Groethe (the original host of *POI*), notes during the discussion that many of the "big guns" in the movement are libertarians, lending credence to the notion that the members of the supporting cast I have just introduced represent the views held by some lead players. For instance, Tom Flynn (2011) has compared social

welfare programs to Ponzi schemes, and I have already discussed Ronald Lindsay's views on atheism's relationship to politics and economics. These Darwinists clearly espouse scientific atheism, and indeed, their views are antithetical to humanistic atheism with its concerns regarding alienation, oppression, suffering, and struggle for social justice. The tension between atheistic individualists and more moderate liberal humanists is evident in a recent issue of *Free Inquiry* centred on the theme of activism in secularist organizations. It featured articles from members of various organizations offering examples of people "who are *living* the values of secular humanism" by collectively engaging in community service and volunteer work, and organizations that believe that "secular humanism is a way of living that compels them to stand up and become part of their communities, encourages them to offer their hands to strangers, and inspires them to do what they can to improve the lives of their fellow human beings" (Becker 2012: 20). Lauren Becker's introductory article comes with the following Note From the Editor (Tom Flynn):

> Several articles in this section take a strong position in favor of shared charitable or social-service work as a platform for secular humanist activism. It is not the intent of *Free Inquiry* or the Council for Secular Humanism to advocate this variety of activism for all. We recognize that some readers will...find the idea at odds with their understanding of secularism as an individualistic and cosmopolitan framework that encourages men and women to connect to the highest levels of society as directly as possible, relying on their community of belief for nothing that does not immediately concern their life stance. (Flynn 2012b).

The authors in this issue offer stories of how they and others in their respective groups were inspired by humanistic concerns to collectively engage in charitable work to help others. This type of activity is evidently so contentious within the atheist movement that the pieces required a disclaimer noting that they did not represent the official position of CFI. Ronald Lindsay's column arguing that humanism is not mutually exclusive to

being a Republican (discussed above) also appeared in this issue, providing stark contrast to the pieces arguing for a conception of secular humanism rooted in social justice.

Not long after the publication of Tom Flynn's comment comparing social welfare programs to Ponzi schemes, Texas Governor Rick Perry – a devout and very right-wing Evangelical Christian supported by the pious Tea Party – garnered some attention for making a similar analogy concerning Social Security during his ill-fated campaign for the Republican Presidential nomination (Calmes& Pear, 2011). This apparent irony points us to some interesting facts and questions emerging from the rise of libertarianism to a position of power and influence within the atheist movement. While critics have frequently labelled the New Atheists "fundamentalists" in their own right, they are very different politically from the Christian fundamentalists to whom they are so frequently compared. The rise of the libertarians brings new resonance to the comparison between atheists and religious fundamentalists because they share so much politically. In their opposition to state intervention in socio-economic life (particularly in social welfare), their support for neoliberal capitalism, and their view that *individuals* bear responsibility for their own problems and the problems facing the world, these groups are united. While the New Atheists are sometimes described as "fundamentalists" (e.g. McGrath 2006) to the extent that their worldview is shaped by scientism and they reject all other claims to knowledge (i.e. they are fundamentalists with respect to epistemology), they bear little similarity to the religious variant politically. The libertarians, on the other hand, have a good deal in common with Christian fundamentalists in terms of their position on the state and the market. Just as there are liberal Christians and a Christian Right, there seem to be both liberal atheists and an atheist Right.

Given the significant degree of correspondence between libertarians and Christian fundamentalists on matters of social justice and inequality, we might ask whether the New Atheists have more in common with libertarian atheists or with liberal Christians. While the New Atheists are scientistic in their epistemology and Darwinian in their views of human nature, their politics are generally liberal.[14] Unlike many of their 19th century predecessors, they do not reason through Darwinism to arrive at the conclusion that the

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welfare state is an unnatural and hence undesirable construction (though they do have very specific ideas about decision-making authority), and they do not advocate cutthroat socio-economic policies in an effort to allow the fittest to flourish while the less fit are weeded out (this is not to say, of course, that they are fundamentally opposed to capitalism). Indeed, Sam Harris argues that the libertarian view that individuals bear full responsibility for their own circumstances is founded on "flagrantly irrational ideas about the human condition" held by people who "seem to feel responsible for their intellectual gifts, for their freedom from injury and disease, and for the fact that they were born at a specific moment in history" (Harris 2011). Social Darwinism is, however, not too far from the anti-state, laissez-faire position of the libertarians, for whom Darwinism has been translated into ideological fodder for free-market capitalism through the rhetoric of freedom, individual rights, and human nature (Michael Shermer's "evolutionary economics" [2009], with its theory of the "invisible hand" of natural selection regulating the market, could be described as evolutionistic neoliberal apologetics). The Christian Right has similarly translated Christianity into ideological fodder through essentially the same rhetoric, substituting a religious vision of human nature for a scientific one while holding the same basic tenets. Though the foundational principles are different – i.e. Darwinism versus Christianity – the ideological upshot is the same, at least with respect to social inequality and the responsibilities of the state.

The controversy over the notion of "social justice" within the atheist movement is so intense that the most recent event of significance at the time of writing has been the emergence of a group calling themselves "Atheism+", which means atheism *plus* social justice. It was formed by several self-described feminist atheists[15] in response to specific perceived misogyny within the atheist community. According to the group's website, "Atheism Plus is a term used to designate spaces, persons, and groups dedicated to promoting social justice and countering misogyny, racism, homo/bi/transphobia, ableism and other such bigotry inside and outside of the atheist community" (Atheism Plus 2013). At this point the group has no discernible goals beyond this mandate and has not yet engaged in any action other than creating a website, which is still under construction and

currently contains only a short FAQ about the group and a discussion forum (which is already very active). Examining the blogs written by the founders of the group, however, indicates that they very clearly embrace the scientism that the movement is grounded in, as well as a confrontational approach to religion. And yet, they claim that "there is a sizable contingent of atheists who agree that a desire for social justice connects to their atheism in a meaningful way" (Atheism Plus 2013).

Atheism+ has been criticized by a number of prominent movement leaders (including no less than Richard Dawkins and Ronald Lindsay), and discussion forums of atheist web sites in recent months have hosted intense, in many cases hostile, debates concerning the relationship between atheism and responsibilities toward social justice. The debates concerning Atheism+ point to major disagreements over the nature and limits of atheism as an identity and as a movement. Perhaps the most important thing that we can learn from the emergence of Atheism+ and the reaction to it is that the historical division in atheist thought, ostensibly epistemological but more essentially political in nature, still resonates today. Atheism+ does not distinguish itself from other atheist groups epistemologically (they don't voice any opposition to scientism, a confrontational approach to religion, or a minority identity). Rather, the distinction is essentially political. The contemporary atheist movement, then, reflects the division that emerged in the 19th century between a scientific atheism rooted in liberal individualism and a humanistic atheism rooted in social justice.

This group is in a very early stage of development and it remains to be seen whether it can be considered an emerging latent movement, or a temporary response to a specific internal issue. With 2810 registered members and a total of 93830 posts to the site's discussion forum as of October 16, 2013 (Atheism Plus 2013), it is not insignificant and clearly speaks to the concerns of many atheists. What we can say is that Atheism+ illustrates the difficulty in maintaining cohesion within a movement comprised of individuals united only by shared identity rather than a shared structural location. The debates concerning minority politics, strategies of accommodation and confrontation, and the connection (or lack thereof) between atheism and social justice, are all instances of

identity work, and these tensions must be reconciled – if not fully overcome – for the movement to work in a united fashion to achieve its goals (which themselves are also up for debate). Atheism+ explicitly distinguishes itself from humanism and makes atheism specifically the core characteristic of the group, so in effect it introduces a further complication and shows the movement becoming more and more internally divided and makes identity work more and more difficult. It remains to be seen if sufficient work can be done to overcome these differences and keep the movement from splintering into a number of politically divided factions. Because atheism is not an identity related to some fixed characteristic (e.g. race, class, sex), but rather an achieved identity that must be collectively constructed, this movement is particularly susceptible to factionalism.

Conclusion

The situation facing the New Atheism is this: liberal, Left-leaning Christians are targeted for attack by the New Atheism because of a disagreement on the matter of a First Cause even though their basic political orientations are similar, while libertarian atheists – ostensibly allies of the New Atheists – are inclined to denounce Left-wing socio-economic policies as much as irrational religious dogma. In fact, it's difficult to determine which they find more objectionable, or indeed which is of greater interest or more closely related to their goals, given that *Free Inquiry* and *Point of Inquiry* have in recent years featured many libertarian critiques of taxation and state welfare programs, and conversely, defences of corporations and the free market. This puts the libertarians at odds politically with both new atheists and secular humanists. The thing that unites them all is that they favour a scientific view of the universe over a religious one and reject the existence of god(s), but divisions in terms of movement goals and strategies, and the ideologies that underwrite them, run deep. The secular humanists recognize the political common ground with liberal Christians, while the New Atheists ignore this commonality because their attention is focused on other differences (i.e. religion/science), and the libertarians are on different ground altogether.

New Atheists, secular humanists, and the Atheism+ movement are similar in their basically liberal political orientation. The New Atheists are positioned somewhat further to the right than secular humanists on social issues because of their lower tolerance for religious groups. Libertarian atheists, on the other hand, somewhat ironically share more common ground with fundamentalist Christians on economic issues and even on the question of the individual's relationship to the state and to society. Since New Atheists and secular humanists share a roughly similar political orientation, the divisions between them must be with respect to goals and strategy – i.e. how best to realize a desirable political vision – which are informed by ideology and carry implications for the construction and expression of collective identity. It also requires a decision regarding which is the greater priority: social justice and welfare, or scientific hegemony. This is the question facing the new atheists – and here I refer not to the leaders of this sub-group (who are staunch in their position of difference) but rather to the many movement participants who identify with them or were drawn to the movement in the first place through their work – as they determine whether they should side with the secular humanists and "accommodationists" or with the libertarians and "confrontationists" (the views of members are addressed in the following chapter).

These divisions can be understood in relation to the characteristics that define the three major sub-groups within the movement, as outlined in Table 3. Unpacking this will require further research and analysis, but for now we can draw several conclusions and raise some key questions and issues for future work on the atheist movement. As my concern here is primarily the phenomenon of the "new" atheism, my discussion focuses on this group more specifically and its relationship with the others. McAdam (1994: 47) argues that "it is usually possible to identify a particular segment within the movement as dominant. To the extent that this segment is widely perceived as substantially effective its cultural 'package' will likely be privileged as well". I have argued that this is the case for the sub-movement called the new atheism, which became privileged thanks to the phenomenal publishing successes of the 'Four Horsemen' that drew attention to the movement and proved very effective in recruitment. Its "cultural package" (McAdam,

1994) included the characteristics listed in Table 3; i.e. scientific atheism, liberalism, confrontational strategies employing rational-scientific rhetoric, and the cultural goal of changing attitudes about science and religion. Cimino and Smith note that with the rise of the New Atheism, "the 'missionary impulse' to roll back the 'ignorance' and 'unenlightenment' of religion has been revived among freethinkers to an extent that outweighs the concern about equal rights" (2010: 143). Even secular humanists took the success of the New Atheism as a "cultural opportunity" (Johnston and Klandermans 1995) to expand the horizons of the movement and attract members.

I have argued that this trend is now being reversed. After the glow provided by the surprising success and celebrity of the New Atheists had dimmed somewhat, their cultural package gradually came into question by *both* secular humanists and libertarian atheists, two other sub-groups vying for dominance. McAdam further argues that to the extent that a sub-group "is seen as ineffective, strategic and organizational control of the movement will likely shift (often following a period of conflict) to some other contender, thereby enhancing the importance of its cultural package" (1994: 48). The accommodation versus confrontation debate is a challenge by secular humanists to the effectiveness of the New Atheism's aggressive, uncompromising approach and its cultural goal of ideological proliferation. Some influential libertarians, meanwhile, have conversely moved a step beyond the New Atheism in terms of confrontational style and ideological militancy while at the same time employing these tools toward different ends, pursuing the political goals of minority recognition, protection from discrimination, and securing individual rights. The goals of the New Atheism, then, have essentially been eclipsed by a return to the traditional freethought discourse of civil rights and goals of maintaining the differentiation of secular and religious spheres. The model of movement development presented in Figure 2, then, could be viewed as a feedback loop, with persisting political differences and debates over goals and strategy leading to a 'perpetual latency' and a movement constantly in flux and changing directions.

Returning to the question that I raised above regarding priorities, we can see that the new atheists face a dilemma: their cultural package – i.e. the ideology and collective

identity they promote – risks losing its dominant position in the movement as libertarians co-opt much of their discourse but inject it with a more Darwinist slant that involves a return to 19th century models of the 'natural' (and thus only legitimate) social order. In its crudest forms this discourse is tantamount to Social Darwinism. These libertarian rationalists espouse a "radical individualism" (Flynn 2012) that not only opposes state constraints on individual liberty, but opposes state involvement in economic life in any way because the free market is equated with this liberty, while taxation and social welfare are considered inherently authoritarian. An alternative for new atheists is to unite more closely with the secular humanists, but in the view of leaders this would mean also "accommodating" liberal or moderate religion and thus compromising the ultimate goals and the underlying ideology of a movement intent on dispelling religious myths and cementing the hegemonic authority of science over and against its dichotomous Other. The final option is to oppose the political radicalization of atheism while staying the course in terms of the cultural objective, but given their strategic concordance (favouring a category-supportive political identity strategy grounded in distinction, as opposed to the secular humanists' deconstructive strategy that seeks assimilation) and their shared scientific atheism, it seems somewhat unlikely that the New Atheists will seek to establish a clear distinction from the libertarians. What can be concluded from my analysis is that the three sub-groups within the movement are linked to each other in various ways, but the only thing they all share is non-belief, while all three can be distinguished on the basis of ideology and the tensions between them will require considerable work to overcome if the movement is to avoid factionalism. Indeed, these tensions have already resulted in a new group marking their political differences with the broader atheist movement.

It is worth noting the correspondence between the division within atheism today and that which occurred in the 19th century when, as I have argued, atheism diverged into two major trajectories, scientific and humanistic. I also argued that within scientific atheism of that period, which was closely attached to Darwinism, there was a further division between liberal scientific atheism and the more extreme atheistic individualism

of Social Darwinism, represented and advocated principally by Herbert Spencer. That 19th century constellation of humanistic atheism, scientific atheism, and Social Darwinism mirrors that of the contemporary atheist movement and the composition of the three major sub-groups (or sub-ideologies) that constitute it. While the libertarian rationalists would likely reject the label Social Darwinism because of the stigma it carries, their views are essentially Spencerian. More proximally, they appear to be influenced by Ayn Rand, who essentially advocated for Spencerism and added a more explicit and vigorous critique of religion.

The grass roots nature of Atheism+ and its opposition to the atheist Right compels us to consider where the members of the movement stand on these issues. That is, are they scientific atheists who oppose religion as the Other of scientific rationalism and modernity? Or are they secular humanists who embrace naturalism and humanist ethics seeking to promote science education and tolerance of diversity? Are they mainly liberals or libertarians, and are there any socialists among them? Do they seek assimilation and cooperation with religious people, or do they favour minority politics as the route to finding a space within society? In the following chapter I examine interviews with fifteen members of the atheist movement in an effort to begin to understand what kinds of views they hold on these issues.

CHAPTER 4
ATHEISTS

This chapter presents research undertaken in Montreal and Toronto that involved interviews with attendees of an international atheist convention and members of local atheist groups. A total of fifteen interviews were conducted. Twelve interviews were conducted at the Atheist Alliance International (AAI) Annual Convention (organized in partnership with Humanist Canada) held in Montreal, Quebec from October 1-3, 2010. I contacted the organizers of the event in advance and informed them of the nature of my research and my intention to interview participants, and they offered me a private meeting room in the convention area in which to conduct the interviews over the course of the weekend. The number of interviews conducted at this event was limited by the fact that it took place within one weekend and participants were kept busy by a hectic presentation schedule. I therefore conducted three more interviews in Toronto with members of the Ontario branch of the Centre for Inquiry (CFI) to increase the sample size, though I also wanted to keep the number of subjects drawn from this pool small to prevent this specific city and organization from distorting the results. Two of these interviews took place in a park near the CFI office in downtown Toronto, and one more took place in a cafe. CFI is the largest atheist organization in North America, while the AAI convention is attended by hundreds of atheists each year and provided a good opportunity to conduct interviews with atheists from disparate geographic locations (the 2010 convention was attended, according to an organizer I interviewed, by approximately 300 people). These organizations were also the primary object of the social movements analysis in the preceding chapter, so I restricted interview subjects to members of these organizations to ensure coherence.

Respondents were selected by non-random means. Specifically, the sampling method involved emails with requests for interview subjects sent to organization listservs on my behalf by the Executive Director of CFI upon my emailed request. Subjects at the AAI convention were located by posting a message to the group's Facebook page in

advance of the convention, with the exception of one subject who agreed to an interview following a casual conversation at our table at the end of a presentation we had attended. My respondents ranged in age from 23 to 58 years old, with nine females and six males. All had attended university, ranging from one year of undergraduate education to PhD-level study. In terms of religious background, the traditions represented include five Catholics, one Baptist, one United Church, one Hindu, one Buddhist, one Ismaili Muslim, while five subjects had secular upbringings. Details on sample demographics are summarized in Table 4.

The semi-structured interviews asked open-ended questions that invited respondents to talk about their religious background, experiences that contributed to their changing views on religion, their motivations for joining atheist organizations, current views on the New Atheism and the nature of religion and its relationship to science, tensions and conflicts they see within the movement, and areas where they find themselves disagreeing with official discourse or fellow members. Because I used a open-ended format and wanted to encourage subjects to follow lines of thought that emerged in the course of their responses, the interviews sometimes drifted to topics I didn't anticipate in advance (it bears noting that these subjects were generally very open and little encouragement was required for them to give extensive answers and opinions on all the topics that came up). This in turn also meant that some questions that I did plan in advance weren't addressed in every interview. In cases where not all subjects were asked a particular question, I have noted the number of subjects the question applied to in the frequency tables summarizing the responses.

While many questions were open-ended, some were designed so as to elicit fairly straightforward answers. This is most obvious in questions pertaining to the extent and duration of involvement in the movement, family religious background, and so on. Some others did not necessarily have a straightforward answer – for example, "Is the existence of God a scientific question? – but are reported here as a Yes/No response in summary tables, with some elaborations in the text. In these cases I have "reduced" (Guest 2012) or "simplified" the data for the purpose of comparing these responses with the dominant

Table 4: Sample Demographics (N=15)

Age	21-30	5
	31-40	4
	41-50	1
	51-60	5
Sex	Female	9
	Male	6
Nationality	Canada	10
	United States	4
	Sweden*	1
Ethnicity	White	12
	South Asian	1
	East Asian	1
	African	1
Education**	Some university	2
	Bachelor's Degree	8
	Master's Degree	4
	PhD	1
Religious Background	Catholic	5
	United Church	1
	Baptist	1
	Hindu	1
	Buddhist	1
	Ismaili	1
	Secular	5

* Now resides in the United States.
** Areas of study: Human Relations, Business (4), Public Health, Liberal Arts, Communication Studies, Criminology, Labour Relations, Library and Information Science, Social Work, Fine Arts, Chemistry (2), Psychology, Statistics (N = 17 due to two joint majors)

themes of official movement discourse. In this example there was a roughly even split on the matter of whether the existence of God is a scientific question, which is an interesting contrast to the prevailing view among the New Atheists and their supporters that it is, of course, a scientific question regarding the origins and functioning of nature. This strategy of data reduction through an interpretive reconstruction of responses into codes was employed in a number of other instances for purposes of drawing comparisons between members' views and New Atheism discourse, including the questions of why people believe in God, and what causes them to lose their beliefs. These questions are all covered in the chapter section on "Science, Religion, and the New Atheism".

This chapter analyzes these themes, and is structured according to the general categories they fall in, reflected in the chapter's division into three major sections. The first, "Trajectories of Belief", examines the various paths to atheism travelled by my respondents. It demonstrates that there is no one "standard" path to atheism, but that these subjects came to their beliefs from different points of origin and proceeded through different stages. The second section, "Science, Religion, and the New Atheism", presents responses to such questions as whether the existence of god is a scientific question, why people believe in god, and why they stop believing. It also examines the influence of the New Atheism in the development of religious beliefs. The final section, "The Atheist Movement", details respondents' reasons for joining atheist groups and how they discovered them, their views on the purpose of the movement, tensions they perceive within the movement, and tensions they themselves feel with aspects of the movement.

Trajectories of Belief

Smith (2011) identifies four stages in the "slow progression" toward atheism: the ubiquity of theism, questioning theism, rejecting theism, and coming out atheist. This process involves starting out in a culture steeped in theism with people generally accepting the religious beliefs that dominate American society, proceeding to a "period of doubt" (generally occurring from the teenage years into the twenties) where these beliefs are gradually questioned, examined, and finally rejected as false. This period of doubt

and eventual rejection of theism culminates in "coming out," which involves people claiming an atheist identity and explicitly using the label "atheist" to describe their beliefs to others, with the public expression of an atheist identity "an important step toward a new self-concept and a feeling of independence and empowerment" (Smith 2011:229).

Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2007) and Zuckerman (2011) offer similar portraits of "apostates" – people experiencing a religious socialization who were believers, but went through a process of questioning and doubt that eventually resulted in abandoning their beliefs and adopting an atheist identity. I propose that this model of atheist identity formation, rooted in a narrative of conversion, should be called the standard trajectory. It represents both the majority of atheists in these various studies, as well as, perhaps, our intuitive expectations about how the process might work. It involves a linear progression from a theistic socialization, through questioning and doubt that comes with education and being exposed to new ideas, to a conversion from believer to atheist. This linear view of the development of atheism is endorsed by leading figures like Richard Dawkins who consider religion a kind of primitive pseudo-science and assume progress from religion to scientific rationality at both the macro socio-historical level and at the micro individual level.

My research both confirms and challenges the findings of Smith (2011) and Altemeyer and Hunsberger (2007). These authors found that atheists commonly experience an extended period of doubt, usually coinciding with the teenage years and advancing education in high school and university. This finding is supported by my research. Among my ten subjects who were raised in a religious family and attended church at least periodically, all but two report experiencing a period of doubt as teenagers culminating in fully-realized atheism most frequently by the late teens and no later than the age of twenty-one. These respondents report going through a gradual process of questioning of religious doctrines and reflection on their own beliefs – Smith describes this, in the words of one of his interview subjects, as a "slow progression" toward atheism. This would not surprise Michael, one of my respondents who has been active in

atheist organizations for almost thirty years, who said: "Most atheists I know go through at least, if they've been raised religious, go through some kind of a journey. It's very rare that you find a sort of overnight conversion."

A good example to illustrate this process is Fahim, who at the age of twenty-one completed a protracted journey from devout religiosity, through a period of doubt and questioning, to committed atheism. Fahim, 26, was born in British Columbia to Ismaili Muslim parents who emigrated from Africa before he was born. His parents were not only strong believers, but very active in the local Ismaili community. He himself was "absolutely" a believer in his childhood and enjoyed going to Mosque, where he participated in religious debates. But by the age of twelve, he says, "I knew there was something majorly off and I couldn't articulate it, I couldn't put it into words." Between the ages of thirteen and sixteen he entered a period of doubt when "things weren't making sense because questions weren't being answered." He became interested in science and particularly reading popular science magazines, and observed that "there was a consistent sense of agreement at a very general level as to the ideas of scientific discourse," while when it came to religion he observed the opposite. That is, science was governed by rules of method and rationality, which he saw as representing an "objective reality", while religion appeared as a "subjective reality" where there were many different viewpoints (i.e. belief and value systems, understandings of the nature of scripture, etc.), and "none of them could be consolidated, and when you couldn't consolidate something you left people in a state of confusion. When they're in confusion they tend to go somewhere else." Because religion didn't meet up to the objective standards of knowledge and universality he admired in science, he began to question the truths it espoused.

These seeds of doubt took root when he went to university. He still went to Mosque during his first year of study, but also met atheists for the first time in his life, including two of his roommates, and "the conversation started to pop up" – that is, the conversation addressing the question of God's existence. Studying science intensively was, for Fahim, a process of discovering that "there was something greater going on

beyond the scope of religion," and that science addressed questions and a greater truth that religion was not equipped to deal with. A signature event in his fourth year of study signaled the end of his period of doubt and his transition to atheism: reading Richard Dawkins' (2006) *The God Delusion*. While this book did not convert him from believer to non-believer (this process was already well underway), it did give him the language and concepts to articulate the doubts and questions he had struggled with for years. He explains:

> I knew right away that was a book I had to read...So then I actually picked up the book and I pretty much laughed my way through the book because it was almost hilarious to me, I almost read it as a comedy show of how people are ridiculous. Like, it just shows, I didn't know if I could have figured it out on my own, maybe it would have taken me longer, but as soon as I got through the first hundred pages the book was pretty much closed to me. I didn't need – I continued to finish it obviously, and read it over a couple times, but I knew at that point what it is that I was missing. I knew all the ideas and thoughts that I had had now been put into words.

Fahim's path to atheism follows the standard trajectory and his views echo those of the New Atheists, who assume that atheism is the end point of a gradual progression from religiously-fueled ignorance to scientific enlightenment. This sentiment was also expressed by Tim, who in describing his transition from believing Catholic to atheist says, "as any child growing up you're fed this information, you know, you have no alternative theories to evaluate...as you grow up, you're exposed to more information." The "period of doubt" is clearly an important concept that represents a common stage in the process of atheist identity formation, and the mid-to-late teenage years seem to be a critical period in the development of non-religious beliefs and identities.

Not all atheists pass through this stage, however, and those who do can arrive at it from different directions. The standard trajectory implies a particular kind of socialization and an initial state of belief, but we should expect to encounter atheists from

a wide range of religious and non-religious backgrounds and social environments. Recognizing this heterogeneity in religious socialization, I divide my sample into two major categories. The first is "secular socialization" – those for whom religion was absent or a very insignificant element of their upbringing, and thus were never believers. The second is "religious socialization" – those who were raised in religious environments of varying degrees of intensity of belief and practice and were once believers. Baker and Smith (2009a, 2009b) employ the same categories in their analysis of the "nones," and define religious socialization simply as having parents who are believers and attending religious services, which of course all varies in frequency and intensity. Taking these two categories as a starting point, I outline five different paths to atheism followed by my subjects, represented in Figure 3.

Two paths were taken by those in the category of "secular socialization." The first and most straightforward is simply an extension of socialization, where the individual starts life in a secular private sphere and never adopts religious beliefs, represented in Figure 3 as path (1). For example, Stacey was raised by her non-religious mother and says that religion simply was not a part of her upbringing. She didn't go to church and her mother never talked about religion, so in her early years she had a very limited understanding of what religion actually was. She was once taken to Sunday school by her father, who attended a Methodist church, where she was introduced to the ideas for the first time. She says of the experience, "Once someone finally explained the premise to me, I was like, okay, so you believe there's an invisible man in the sky (laughter)...It never jived with me." Stacey was raised in a secular environment and did not feel the presence of religion in her life in any significant way, never held religious beliefs, and never experienced a desire to believe or any real curiosity regarding the practice of religion. Her atheism proceeded directly from her socialization.

The other path to atheism for individuals in this category, represented in Figure 3 as path (2), is indicative of the dynamic nature of the development of atheism. Individuals following this trajectory experience a secular socialization and grow up non-believers, and then at some point and for some reason experiment with religion, in some cases fully

converting. This is represented in Figure 3 as a phase of "seeking religion," a detour on the path from secular socialization to atheism, before proceeding through the period of doubt and back to atheism. Three respondents took this route, with one, Diana, seeking religion in early childhood. She was raised by agnostic parents but at about the age of six started to have questions about God and became interested in religion "because the fact is, you know, lots of other people are doing it so there must be something there." She joined a Bible study class in school, but explains that "I just had a lot of questions that I never got satisfactory answers, so I just obviously stayed on the agnostic side of things."

Figure 3: Trajectories to atheism
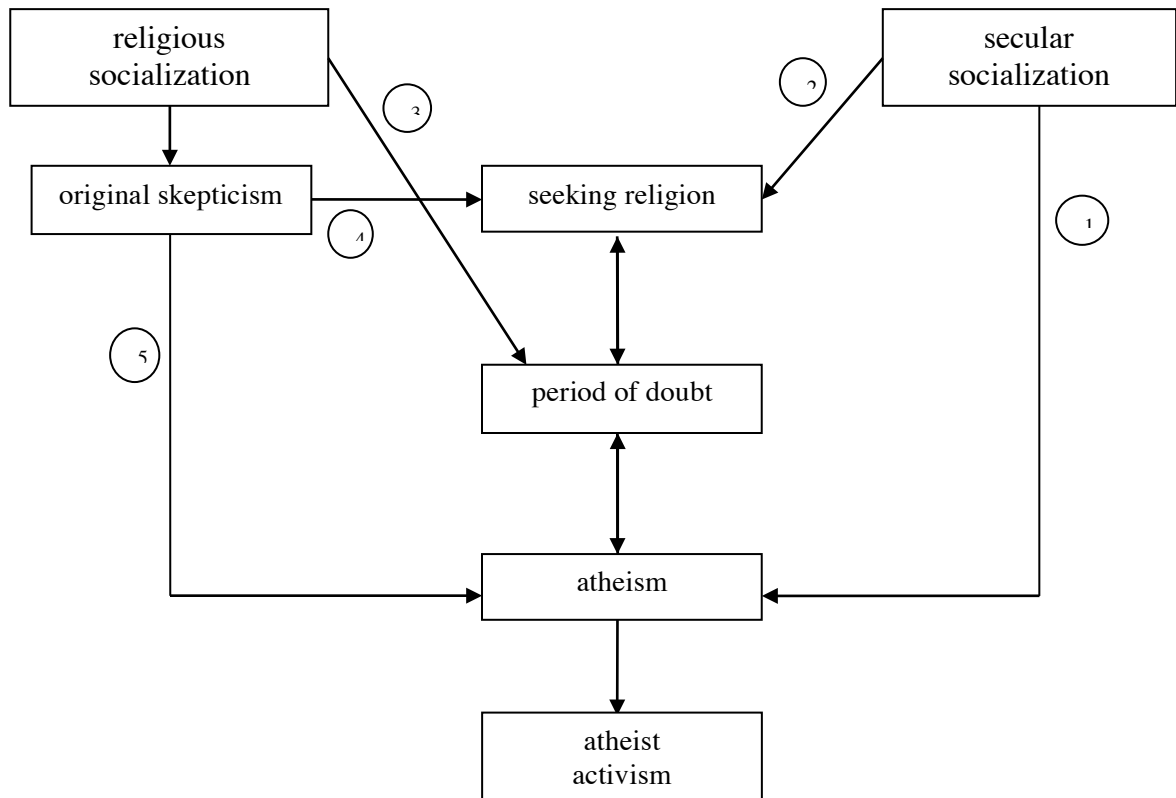
Two others sought religion as adults. Phil was raised by a father who was a scientist and agnostic and a mother who was religious but didn't "push it" on him.

Despite his secular upbringing, he found himself motivated to seek religion: "Most of my life I was sort of an agnostic that wanted to believe. So, and I thought good people believed, so wanting to be a good person I was trying to believe." Recovery from alcohol addiction motivated him to probe "issues around religion and spirituality" more intensively. Believing there was a link between religiosity and morality, he began looking for books to "help me believe there was a God" but instead discovered Bertrand Russell's essay *Why I Am Not a Christian* and a collection of writings by atheists including Freud and Nietzsche. Reading these texts brought on an extended period of doubt that finally convinced him at the age of 46 that he was an atheist.

Alicia was raised in Sweden in a family and social environment where religion was "non-existent" (and thus provides a useful contrast to the theistically ubiquitous context of Smith's study). At the age of twenty-five she met a colleague at work who practiced Kabbalah and persuaded her to adopt the religion. She explains: "I had many questions like, is there evil in the world? Is there evil people? Because I saw people doing evil things to me. So I thought there must be a Satan or evil. And he could answer those questions for me, at the time." After becoming heavily involved with the religion for five years she entered the transitional period of doubt. In her case, however, it came not after the ubiquity of theism, but rather, the ubiquity of secularism: her experience of the presence of evil in the world led her to seek explanations that, for several years, were satisfactorily provided by religion.

In the second major category of Figure 3 we have those experiencing a religious socialization. The first path for those in this category is the standard trajectory, represented here as path (3). Fahim, discussed above, is a clear example here, proceeding from religious socialization and professed belief through a period of doubt to atheism. Even in this path, however, there is an exception that illustrates the fluidity of the process. Tim was raised Catholic and was a believer who for a time thought about becoming a priest before entering a period of doubt in his early teenage years brought on by his discomfort with stringent doctrines concerning sexual morality and the notion of hell. A fully-realized atheist by his late teens, he returned to the Catholic church as an

adult after a time of crisis that included a divorce and addiction to cocaine. He credits a priest as crucial in his recovery, but explains that after only six months another period of doubt came: "And then as I grew out of the emotional situation, and got stronger, the same questions that I had before were back again...It was in a time of a lot of stress that I went back, and I thought it could help me. And it temporarily did, but it didn't change the whole make up of my thought process." Tim's journey involved oscillating between religion and atheism, and it is not atypical in my sample, which is clear from the examples of religious seekers. What these subjects share, along with the fluidity of their beliefs, is a time of personal crisis as the trigger for their turn to religion.

I have outlined two further paths to atheism for those in the religious socialization category that are taken by an unusual subgroup: those who experienced a religious socialization but claim never to have believed and to have been skeptical of religious ideas and teachings since early childhood (that is, as far back as the subjects can remember). Borrowing from Catholic theology, I refer to this as "original skepticism." For example, Elaine, a high school science teacher, describes herself as "atheist since birth" despite being raised by practicing Catholics in Quebec. She explains: "Maybe it's because I'm a scientist by trade, maybe it's because my personality brought me to science. I have a very hard time believing imaginary things." She indicates here that she considers herself in some way predisposed to reject religion because of a personality type that also led her to science. Patrice, a francophone Quebecer also raised in a Catholic family, says "I was never a big fan of religion" and explains that he rebelled against religious teachings at a young age: "I was a big problem in school at religion classes. In exam, you know, religious exam, I was giving them shit from one end to the other. My average at school was ninety except I was flunking religion, you know?" Terry, who regularly attended Sunday school classes in the United Church, claims he never accepted religious teachings:

> …there was something in me that always thought, it doesn't make sense
> to me. I didn't grasp the truth. When I went to Sunday school and I
> learned more about the stories it kind of confirmed to me that it was all

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nonsense...So I sometimes say I don't think I was born with a God gene, if there's such a thing, because I always questioned…so I guess I was always a curious kid. Different maybe, I don't know…And I wasn't an overly, you know, highly intelligent kid, I was just a regular kid, but I was, I guess I was never taking it for face value. I guess I was a free thinking kid.

Figure 3 illustrates two separate paths taken by these original skeptics. Path (5) is a corollary to path (1) in the sense that they both bypass the central period of doubt. It includes people who never believed and claim to have been atheists their entire lives, despite the presence of religion in their private spheres (Patrice and Terry are representatives of this path). Path (4) is a corollary to the detour taken by the religious seekers following path (2). It involves moving from original skepticism to seeking religion, proceeding through a period of doubt to atheism. Again we see a fluid and dynamic process at work, with subjects in this trajectory moving from atheism to seeking religion and back to atheism. The example here is Elaine, mentioned above, who struggled to find a way to believe what she was taught by her Catholic parents and priests, but was always limited by an underlying skepticism:

I really tried to find that spark, that thing that everybody managed to capture or get that made them suddenly light up and say, yeah, yeah, of course I believe. And it was always elusive to me, it never, never worked. And at one point I was like, what's wrong with me? Why can't I believe? And then eventually I got older and I started reasoning with myself and instead of saying what's wrong with me, I started thinking, what's wrong with them? And that's when I really, you know, defined myself as an atheist instead of trying to be a believer that just wouldn't be.

Elaine's seeking (as well as that of Phil, discussed above) reflects Altemeyer and Hunsberger's finding that apostates frequently said they gave up their faith because they "could not make themselves believe what they had been taught" and in many cases

"indicated they truly wished they could believe" (2007:42). For these respondents seeking religion did not culminate in believing or taking on a religious identity, but it does again illustrate the fluidity of religious and non-religious identities.

Atheism is clearly not a permanent condition or culmination of a narrowly-defined evolutionary trajectory. The development of non-belief and the adoption of an atheist identity is a complex process that can follow various trajectories. The special cases I have discussed of the "original skeptics" and the "religious seekers" should lead us to carefully examine and question not only the influence of socialization, but the linear progression that occurs within the standard trajectory. My research indicates that identity formation among individuals socialized in both religious and secular environments is a fluid process, with individuals moving dynamically between belief, non-belief, and doubt, returning to religion or atheism and back again a number of times. This fluidity corresponds with research reporting that many "nones" oscillate between affiliated and unaffiliated or occupy a perpetually "liminal" position (Lim et al. 2010). We might understand this as akin to cases of individuals who exhibit fluid sexual orientation and identity over time, experiencing attraction to males, females, both, or neither at any given point (Diamond 2008). Similarly, religious and non-religious identities are not permanently fixed. Figure 3 illustrates a range of possible (and reversible) trajectories to atheist identity.The end point of all trajectories outlined in Figure 3 is "atheist activism". Accounting for this step is essential in any research that focuses specifically on active atheists, and this step is examined more closely in the final section of this chapter. Before proceeding to a discussion of activism and the atheist movement, however, I will more closely examine respondents' views on the nature of religion and its relationship to science. This analysis illustrates that these members are not as influenced by the discourse of the New Atheism as might be expected, and in fact hold many views that are in direct conflict with those of the Four Horsemen.

Table 5: Views on Religion, Science, and the New Atheism

General atheistic orientation	scientific	3
	humanistic	12
Why do people believe in God?	comfort	9
	socialization/culture	7
	explanation	5
	fear of death	4
	meaning	3
	control	3
	biological factors	2
	community	1
	moral guidance	1
Why do people stop believing in God? (N=12)	intellectual	6
	moral/political	2
	both	1
	don't know	3
Is the existence of God a scientific question? (N=12)	Yes	7
	No	5
Which of the four major New Atheist books have you read?	Dawkins	11
	Harris	8
	Hitchens	7
	Dennett	3
	All	3
	None*	3

* These three respondents all said they had watched some of these authors' lectures on the internet.

Science, Religion, and the New Atheism

   This section analyzes respondents' views on the nature of religion and motivations for belief, religion's relationship to science, and the New Atheism. By examining views on these specific issues I make a general assessment of their position on

religion – scientific or humanistic. Of course the distinction is not clear-cut, but some trends emerge that I think allow me to position most of them as more humanistic than scientific in their orientation. Results of my research in this section are summarized in Table 5.

Is the existence of God a scientific question?

Respondents were presented with Richard Dawkins' "God Hypothesis", which is his view that the idea of God is actually an attempt to explain nature, including the origin of life and of the universe. He thus believes it should be treated as "a scientific hypothesis about the universe, which should be analyzed as sceptically as any other" (Dawkins 2006: 2). Subjecting the God Hypothesis to scientific scrutiny, Dawkins concludes that it is false. I questioned respondents on this issue, reviewing Dawkins' idea of the God Hypothesis and asking them whether they think the existence of God is a scientific question that can be proven true or false.

While all respondents were asked questions regarding the relationship between religion and science, only twelve were asked to comment specifically on the God Hypothesis (three respondents were not asked because in those cases respondents veered into other topics that I allowed them to discuss at length before the question of the God Hypothesis could be raised, and after the discussion moved to these other places we did not return, but rather pursued these new lines of thought). Of these twelve, seven agreed that the existence of God is essentially a scientific question that can, at least in theory, be answered by scientific methods, while five disagreed. A few on either side were very certain of their answers. For example, Sahani was adamant that "It's impossible to disprove something that is by definition unseeable," while Jen conversely believes that "it's like any phenomenon in science, you take something, you test your hypothesis, if it doesn't work out then you reject the hypothesis. So yeah, I do agree with that... if you treat it like any other scientific phenomenon then you can answer it that way." Patrice referred to Bertrand Russell's famous example of a hypothetical "celestial teapot"

orbiting the sun to argue that one cannot prove the non-existence of something that cannot be observed:

> I think I would need more than that. I mean just working on the God Hypothesis as it exists or not, prove it, I mean, I don't see how I, on what I can work on, you know? If you add to that "and the Bible proves it", you know, then I can destroy it because the Bible there are so many contradictions, stupidities, that this is not the word of a God, okay? I need something else to destroy because the God Hypothesis, it's like the teapot of Russell, okay? You cannot prove a negative.

There were many nuances in other responses, however. For example, Terry's answer is no, but he seems to indicate that neuroscience might eventually prove that God is a product of the human brain, which would effectively 'prove' that he does not exist:

> It's like trying to analyze Santa Claus as a scientific question, 'cause it's something that's made up in our imagination, so it's hard to- They are actually learning about it through neuroscience, the brain. Like certain areas where we pray, it's the same as meditation, I think...I can't remember the part of the brain that lights up, sparks up when we pray, and maybe that's the God part of our brain, right? So maybe through neuroscience we can explain, and I think we are already, this make believe magic that we need, right? But yeah, there's still a lot of stuff that we don't know, but I don't think we can prove that God doesn't exist by science...

In a similar vein, Phil believes that "The definitive proof of whether God exists is outside the boundaries of science," but adds the caveat, "For now, anyways," implying, like Terry, that while the answer right now is "no", science may be on track to reach a point where it is equipped to address the question.

There was also some uncertainty and even self-contradiction among those who agree with Dawkins' view. Fahim argues, like Patrice, that one cannot prove a negative, yet also suggests that science can rule out the existence of God with near, but not absolute, certainty:

> Science is based on falsifiability. So we can falsify things. It can't prove, you can't be asked to, you know, prove a negative. So in this it can say the likelihood of it not existing, or the likelihood of it existing. It won't say it in absolute terms, science is not an absolute...That doesn't mean that it doesn't exist, it's just that there's no evidence right now, and as [Stephen] Hawking puts it, you can build the universe without a God. So yeah, there's a 99.9% chance, 100% would be saying you're arrogant...So yeah, I think science can disprove it to a point where it's negligible, but I would refrain from saying absolute just for the sake of not being arrogant.

Diana says that "If there's a God, I suppose we could test that empirically," but also indicates that there may be a supernatural realm outside the boundaries of science: "I suppose if you really want to get into sophisticated philosophical speculations about it there's room for belief in the supernatural, and that's interesting to do, it's an interesting intellectual exercise. But for practical purposes it's probably useful to assume that there's not." While Fahim's argument for near-certainty echoes Dawkins' own position, Diana's view is completely out of line with that author's insistence that there is nothing that can be called "supernatural" because anything that exists – including God – must be material and thus "natural".

Why do people believe in God, and why do they stop believing?

Respondents were asked for their opinion on the question of why people believe in God and invited to offer as many reasons as they thought were pertinent. I made an assessment of each subject's "atheistic orientation" on the basis of these responses as well as their views on the God Hypothesis question noted above. There was some

overlap, but my interpretation is that three subjects fall primarily in the "scientific" category while twelve could roughly be characterized as "humanistic" atheists. The most common reason given for religious belief was "comfort", followed closely by "upbringing" or "cultural and social influences", which I have combined into the category "socialization/culture". "Explanation" – that is, the idea that religion offers an explanation of nature/reality and our place in it, the hallmark of scientific atheism – ranked third, and only one respondent mentioned the possibility that biological factors may play a role. Other reasons given included the fear of death (which could actually be included in the "comfort" category) and people's desire for meaning and control over their own lives. In general these responses are much more in line with the sociological/anthropological approach of humanistic atheism, which understands religion as a social phenomenon, rather than scientific atheism and its view of religion as false explanation and product of scientific ignorance (as well as, for some, a product of the evolution of the human brain).

Most respondents thought comfort was the most important reason for belief in God, citing existential insecurities and suffering. For example, Helen focuses on comfort in the face of death and loss: "I think it's really scary to think that you have, say eighty years, and then it's done and that's it. And I think it's really hard to believe that when someone you love is gone, they're gone, and you're not going to ever see them again...My father had cancer, and so you kind of, it's something to comfort you and to cling to. And it's a nice idea, right, to think that somebody's going to a better place." Sarah puts it a little more bluntly: "That's one thing that being an atheist hasn't helped me with, isfear of dying...I accept that, I mean, we can never really know, but we can have a pretty good idea. And to me the pretty good idea at this point points to nothing." Diana, like Sarah, mentions dealing with the fear of death, but says that she does not need help with that in her response: "Comfort, probably. Answers to questions that – I think sometimes people aren't okay with there not being answers to questions. And I'm perfectly comfortable with that for some reason. I know that we don't know what happens after we die, and I'm okay with that." Tim, meanwhile, relates to the

consolation that religion provides to people who are suffering: "I am a very empathetic person and when I see all the misery and suffering in this world it just, sometimes it just... takes you back. And this is what I see religion as doing. Parts of religion might be helpful, but the premise of it is not. It separates people." He explains that the promise of an afterlife is especially appealing to people who suffer in their lives, which is roughly equivalent to the position taken by Marx, who saw religion's promise of a just afterlife as a powerful ideological instrument. Some respondents combined comfort with explanation, seeing explanation as itself a kind of comfort.

Respondents also noted the importance of socialization and the impact of culture and social pressures, which was articulated in a number of forms, including "brainwashing of kids", "complacency with one's upbringing", "historical context", and "learned behaviour". More substantially, Sahani explains her view that "if you grow up with something you have to think outside of that frame to understand everything that's wrong with it. And I don't know how I started thinking outside the frame, but if people have gone most of their childhood and adolescence not thinking out of it, and then get to adulthood and they're asked to, I think that it's really easy to consciously choose not to step outside the frame". Combining socialization and comfort in her response, Marcia believes that "if you grow up as a secularist, you're likely going to be one as an adult unless you're very weak emotionally and you need something to cling to". Phil was one of very few respondents to focus on the social experience of religion: "You know, partly I did because I thought good people believed and it's all in the structure of society and everything and everybody believed in it...Because also there's the whole social aspect, the community aspect with the church and so on."

A few respondents invoked the idea that religion serves as explanation, which is the idea that scientific atheism rests on. Michael, for example, offers a line reminiscent of Dawkins in explaining his view of why people believe in God: "It's easy. It's a lot easier than doing the work necessary to figure things out." While Michael focuses on what is knowable, Diana suggests that what is unknowable is more important: "There's just some questions that we don't know, and I'm okay with that, and I think a lot of

people aren't." In either case, these people express the belief that the appeal of religion rests on the explanations it provides for some of our most difficult questions regarding nature and our place in it. Stacey also articulates this idea: "Like, they need to have an idea in their mind, I mean they need to think there's someone guiding them because they're just not okay with being free in the world, they're not okay with not knowing where we came from. And if they believe that there's someone guiding them and can give them all the answers to everything, then they're just, you know, more grounded." In other cases explanation was combined with a desire for meaning, control, and comfort, and most respondents mentioned more than one reason for belief in God.

Only two respondents mentioned biological factors, though neither assigned them a determinative role. One believes that biological and environmental factors "mingle", while another explained, "I think we're learning more about how the brain operates, and that some of these things we take to be profound experiences are simply a matter of neurons firing or whatever. Again, I'm not a scientist so maybe I'm using the wrong term, but again, it's a chemical, biological thing, some of these feelings." But this same respondent also suggested that comfort was the most important reason that people believe in God. Even Patrice, who I consider the closest thing to a "pure" scientific atheist in my sample, rejected genetic and neuroscientific explanations of religious belief. "Religion is not coming from the brain", he said, "it's coming from brainwashing, and the social pressure". While I would not generalize my sample, it is clear that my respondents are not biological determinists who derive their views on religion from neuroscience, and generally they are much more likely to invoke sociological or anthropological theories of religious belief than to claim, like the New Atheists, that it is a means to fill in the gaps in our understanding.

On the reverse question – namely, why people stop believing in God – the answers given somewhat contradicted the views on why people believe in the first place. While offering "humanistic" explanations for religious belief, the explanations for apostasy were generally "scientific". I have categorized answers to this question as indicating either "intellectual" or "moral/political" reasons for non-belief.   Some

examples will serve to illustrate the nature of these responses. Jen assumes that most people give up belief for the same reason she did: "science and logical inconsistencies and being unable to reconcile the two", and added, "I think the studies show that people who are more educated tend to be atheist". More bluntly, Stacey confidently suggested that the reason people give up their beliefs is "They think", and added, "They stop avoiding thinking when it comes to that part of their brain". Helen offered the explanation that "people who are less religious often are more critical thinkers". Fahim makes a link between education, standard of living, and religiosity:

> Well, it's quite obvious if you look at countries like Afghanistan,
> Pakistan, Iraq, Iran, the Middle East, countries in South America,
> versus countries like Scandinavian countries, Germany, France, I'll
> leave out the United States 'cause they're just CF [completely
> fucked], Canada. You'll notice it's quite evident where the
> standard of living is higher. Why is that? Because of education, I
> think is the first major, major point...And it's just no coincidence
> that in a more educated population that can think rationally, think
> for themselves, make good decisions, don't need someone to tell
> them what good morality is.

Patrice pointed to social pressures in restricting the individual's thinking about religion:

> It certainly helps when the family, the grasp of the family on that
> individual is not too, is not killing, you know, the freedom to think.
> I see some documentary on TV, you know, a girl that was in a very
> religious family and she decided no, that doesn't make sense, you
> know. And then the family rejects her, don't want to talk to her,
> and all her friends, nobody talks to her. I mean, this is difficult,
> you have to be a strong-minded individual to go through that.

In taking these positions these respondents embraced the narrative of scientific atheism, which posits that religious belief and science are mutually exclusive, and that for those sufficiently educated the latter will inevitably overwhelm the former, resulting in

atheism. This is in contrast with the generally humanistic orientation respondents evidenced on the question of why people believe in God. I interpret this contradiction as a result of a lack of a conceptual scheme that can account for losing religion. While some humanistic reasons for belief are fairly intuitive (fear of death, comfort, etc.), the humanistic explanations for apostasy – focusing on social conditions – are less obvious, and these people therefore resort to scientific or "New Atheist" explanations that view apostasy as a response to the "cognitive critique", one of the three major forms of religious criticism that emerged from the Enlightenment, which constitutes the basis of the division between scientific and humanistic atheism.

A few respondents did, however, cite moral or political reasons, which correspond to the other two Enlightenment forms of religious criticism, the "moral-subjective" and "practical-political" critiques. Michael says, "If you have to choose between medicine and prayer, and if you have a good social safety net the medicine, the doctors, are there. If you don't have that, well then you have to rely on prayer". These comments on standard of living present religion as a political issue. He also gave a moral reason, pointing specifically to "the problem of evil" – one of the oldest conundrums in theology (that is, if God is omnipotent and benevolent, why is there evil and suffering?) – as "the thing that drives a lot of people toward atheism". Diana similarly noted that personal tragedy can lead one to question the idea of a benevolent and loving God: "if something tragic happens you might decide that, you know, God must not care about me or whatever, and I can see people rejecting their religion on that sort of a basis". Finally, one of the respondents who declined to offer an answer did offer a negative answer. Sahani claimed that "you're not going to come to atheism because of scientific thinking on its own", thus refuting the notion that apostasy is strictly an intellectual maneuver.

How influential are the New Atheists?

The New Atheism, surprisingly, was not directly or highly influential on the development of most respondents' views. Of my fifteen subjects, only three had read all four canonical New Atheist texts, while three had not read any of them (though it bears noting that all those who hadn't read any of these books had at least watched some of the

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authors' lectures on the internet). Eleven people had read Dawkins, eight read Harris, seven read Hitchens, and only three had read Dennett. Dawkins seems to be the most important figure, which is not surprising given his prominence and celebrity status within the movement, and the fact that *The God Delusion* was a phenomenal bestseller and is widely considered the key text of the New Atheism. To underscore this point, every subject who had read at least one of the four authors had read Dawkins. In general, only a few younger subjects reported being somewhat to heavily influenced by the New Atheists. They do not seem to be of particular importance among older respondents, and for those people I interviewed who had been involved in the movement for a decade or more the New Atheists are basically irrelevant.

Several interviewees noted that while the New Atheists didn't change their views or "convert" them to atheism, they did "reinforce" their views. In response to being asked whether the New Atheists had any impact on their beliefs about religion, Helen said, "It more felt like my ideas were being reinforced when I started reading them." Diana suggested that "They're just saying what lots of us have been thinking for a long time." Similarly, Phil said, "I guess they might have made me more confirmed in my dislike of religion." This notion of a "reinforcement" of ideas – often articulated using this specific word – was a common response. This is true even for respondents who reported being heavily influenced by the New Atheists. A good example is Fahim, who described *The God Delusion* as "the book that put words to my thoughts in a way that I could have never thought that would happen", suggesting that Dawkins didn't change his mind so much as give clear expression to views he already held. Sarah reported a similar experience: "[Dawkins] was able to put some arguments of why religion is detrimental together. I'm not sure that I felt quite as strongly about that before I read Dawkins...I think it pushed me a little bit further toward anti-religious, not just a-religious, not just not-religious but anti-religious." The best way to describe the influence of the New Atheism, then, would be that it has been very effective in terms of recruitment and mobilization, while not having a large impact on actual beliefs. The following section

examines these atheists' participation in the movement, and their opinions regarding its purpose and the tensions that currently shape it.

The Atheist Movement

From atheism to activism: Discovering the atheist movement

There was some variance in my sample in terms of the duration of involvement with organized atheism, with the range spanning from two weeks to almost three decades. All but two, however, have been members only since 2007, with one joining in 2000 and another in 1984. The 2007 cut-off point makes sense since this year was the height of the New Atheism. It was when Hitchens arrived to round out the 'Four Horsemen', and one year after the publication of Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, and Harris' second foray into religious criticism, *Letter to a Christian Nation*. It is not a coincidence that membership in these organizations and participation in atheist events began to swell at about this time. As evidence of the impact of the New Atheism on membership numbers, the Freedom From Religion Foundation did report a 25% increase in membership in the year 2006 alone (Zuckerman, 2012: 4), while the British Humanist Association's membership increased by 103.5% from 2004 to 2008, from 3713 to 7556 (Bullivant 2010: 122). (I sent a request for membership data to CFI communications director Paul Fidalgo, but he offered little information other than that they have "over 4000 donors", and "tens of thousands" of email subscribers.) The trend of growth is reflected in the fact that seven of my respondents – about half of the total – had joined the movement in the same year in which I interviewed them, though I cannot say whether the growth is still ongoing or has stalled. More details on respondents' participation with the atheist movement, including duration and what organizations they are members of, are summarized in Table 6.

While the New Atheists may not have transformed a lot of opinions, then, they do appear to have had some effect on the development of identity, playing an important role in the construction of a collective identity and community that appeals to atheists seeking external validation. One interviewee credited the New Atheism and the corresponding

social movement with "making it okay to be an out atheist," while another said that the major goal of the movement is to "make it socially acceptable to be an atheist," a view most of my subjects shared. The New Atheism, then, was important mainly as a very effective instrument of mobilization and recruitment rather than a force of conversion.

While the New Atheism was a key catalyst for the surge in growth in the atheist movement in the past decade, it would have remained primarily a popular literary phenomenon without the internet. Most of my respondents said that they discovered the atheist movement through the internet after reading articles and watching YouTube videos about the Four Horsemen. In some cases this occurred by chance, through web surfing and a random click of a link that might bring one to the home page of AAI or CFI. Helen's story of how she discovered atheism is a good example of the importance of both the New Atheism and the internet:

> I think it may have been a Bill Maher episode and Richard Dawkins was on it. And I was really interested in what he was saying and I went out and bought The God Delusion and it just kind of snowballed. I bought The God Delusion, I started watching YouTube videos of Dawkins. Then, you know how YouTube has that suggested videos? And then I stumbled upon Sam Harris, and I bought Letter to a Christina Nation, and it was just very much through television and through YouTube that I discovered all of these, the Four Horsemen and Hitchens, and I just started buying books. I mean, nobody else around me was into that kind of thing. My mother was like what are you doing, who cares, what does it matter, you know? But I think that that was my first encounter, I think it was an interview with Richard Dawkins.

Importantly, Helen explained that Dawkins and the New Atheists didn't change her views or convert her to atheism: "it wasn't like, oh, I never thought of it that way. It more felt like my ideas were being reinforced when I started reading them." Eventually her internet searching revealed that there were organizations dedicated to the same causes that the New Atheists were arguing for, and she joined a local atheist group. So again,

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the New Atheism was a force of recruitment, rather than a force of conversion. In another example, Elaine discovered the movement through social media, where her Facebook status as an "atheist" brought her messages and links to information from other people on the network:

> It's basically when I started meeting other people online, and that was only a year or two ago that I started on Facebook. And finding other people who were atheist who happened to see that I was an atheist and started friending me, and then started posting, you know, a lot of YouTube videos about people, you know, arguing against religion, showing the inconsistencies with it, and some blogs online.

Elaine's discovery of the atheist movement through social media was a revelation to her. As her network of Facebook friends grew and she gradually became aware of the atheist organizations they were members of, and she described her elation at "that connection, that feeling that, oh wow, there's other people out there who think like me". This was a common sentiment among all respondents, who frequently pointed to being in the company of "like-minded people" as a primary motivation for attending gatherings in person rather than strictly participating online (though many also pointed to the internet as their primary connection to the movement for much of the time, with in-person meetings happening infrequently for those not affiliated with a local group). This points to the two major reasons that my respondents gave for their participation in the movement: a desire for a sense of *community* and *identity*. While an intellectual interest in the New Atheism may have shown them the way to the movement, it was the social satisfactions the movement provided that kept them there.

Elaine is again a good example here, as she points specifically to the "social aspect" of the movement as its most important function. For Jen, her involvement with the Centre for Inquiry was motivated more by social concerns than intellectual ones:

> I originally started up, joined them, because I was in a new country, I didn't know anybody. It was a way to meet friends, and then it ended up taking over my life. But it's something I enjoyed so I was okay with

that... I'm naturally attracted to these types of people... I mean I've lived in Toronto all my life but I've never really gotten to know a lot of people. My friends have moved away...So yeah, CFI just helps me find, meet people.

Table 6: Movement participation

Year of first participation in atheist movement	2010	7
	2009	2
	2008	3
	2007	1
	2000	1
	1984	1
Organization membership*	CFI	7
	AAI	3
	FFRF	1
	AHA	1
	local groups**	5
	Non-members***	4
Purpose of the movement	community	11
	identity	8
	political/instrumental	5

*CFI=Center for Inquiry, AAI=Atheist Alliance International, FFRF=Freedom From Religion Foundation, AHA-American Humanist Association.

**Only one of these respondents was a member of a local group exclusively. The other four were also members of an international organization.

*** Two of these respondents were people interviewed at the 2010 AAI convention in Montreal who were attending their first meeting of an atheist group. Another two were people who had previously attended AAI conventions but had not officially joined any organization. All other respondents were members of a national (FFRF, AHA) or international (CFI, AAI) atheist organization, and some were also members of local groups.

Several respondents also noted that their atheist groups provided an environment where they could discuss some of their interests and concerns that they wouldn't feel

comfortable expressing in other places. Alicia likes the fact that, among atheists, "I can say whatever, I don't have to censor anything". Terry appreciates being able to "just be with a bunch of atheists", which is "a good thing because you can bitch about religion to each other, and sometimes you can say really awful things and no one cares". Sahani has friends who are non-religious but "even with them I never felt completely comfortable questioning religious practices", so she likes that in her atheist group she can "feel safe to discuss certain things without worrying about offending someone or their mother". Being able to feely express ideas with "like-minded people" was a commonly reported motivation for participation.

A few respondents expressed a more intense experience that drew them to atheist groups. Marcia, who has been active in various atheist, humanist, and secularist organizations for over a decade, described her elation after discovering that the atheist movement existed, which told her, "there's a name for me, and there are organizations, and there are publications, and there are conventions, and there are groups, and that's when I realized that I wasn't the only one." A few others also mentioned feeling "alone" and how joining atheist groups eased that feeling. Phil developed a drinking problem and went to AA, which did help him with his drinking, and yet he felt "sort of a distance with the other people that do believe". The religious elements of AA made him feel excluded, and though he still attends their meetings, he feels more of a sense of community with his local atheist organization. Sarah described very clearly what meetings with her atheist group do for her:

> I wanted to meet some people...that I could discuss this with because I didn't really have anyone. I was looking for a little stimulation, a little conversation and an outlet for my frustrations with, just, things related to atheism, you know?...I feel better after having left, and sort of just had it out with what's been on my mind bothering me lately about what I've seen on tv, or just, you know, what I saw out on the street...I'm still in a place where I feel totally overwhelmed by my position in relation

to the rest of societyon religion. So I'm just starting to make sense of it

with them.

Sarah's articulation of feeling "overwhelmed" in relation to society captures the essence of an experience reported by these and some other respondents: alienation. For a rationalist or simply a non-believer, living in a world where those who believe in gods and supernatural miracles are the majority can be a mystifying and alienating experience. Alicia describes a similar experience when explaining her reaction to watching the 2007 AAI convention, which she stumbled across on Netflix:

Every single speaker talked about things that I had already thought in

my mind. I thought I was kind of crazy or something. Or you're not

allowed to say that, or that I'm the only person thinking that. But they

just laid it out. And it was almost like being born again, I use that

expression. I guess being in Texas, everything is just kind of, you

know, medieval, at times…I was crippled with fear that the world is

crazy. And, wow, this ain't never going to work for me, I can't live in

this world 'cause they're crazy…So they gave me the voice of reason

and I could relax.

Surrounded by fervent believers in her Texas town, Alicia's fear that "the world is crazy" is an experience of alienation, or at least a profound disconnection from those around her. The New Atheism, and attending atheist conventions, gave her a perspective that allowed her to make sense of what she was seeing and told her that she was, in fact, not alone in her views on religion and her social experience. She added that attending atheist gatherings was also a way for her to meet men: "I want to meet guys, ok. (laughs). That's kind of the human side of it. Because there's not a lot of interesting guys in Texas. I'm never going to meet anybody there. 'Cause it's religious, it feels like it's hard to meet somebody".

The experience of alienation is not limited to the private sphere and personal relationships. In describing what motivates his activity in atheist organizations, Terry articulates a common sentiment: "Well I think it makes me feel a part of society in a way,

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like, my voice is a part of society. Because it's growing and we're getting a voice... so it makes me feel part of that voice, whereas for too long it was just, you know, an atheist on my own kind of thing, you know?" Through his involvement with the atheist movement, Terry feels a sense of both connection to others and empowerment, whereas as an atheist on his own he felt isolated and powerless in a religious society. Being a member of the atheist movement therefore addresses a kind of political alienation. Several other respondents referred to the notion of gaining a "voice" through the movement and being encouraged by their experiences to become more "vocal" about their atheism, or in other words, to "come out" and embrace an atheist identity.

This last point is crucial. My interviews indicate that the most important function of the atheist movement has been creating an environment where people who are already non-believers can experience the benefits of a community of like-minded people and can feel comfortable "coming out". This is in some contrast to the official goals of the major organizations discussed in the previous chapter, which focus on political goals. The following section explores members' views on the purposes of the atheist movement, and demonstrates that they consider community and identity the most important goals, not surprising given that these are their most important reasons for joining the movement in the first place.

What is the purpose of the movement?

I have grouped respondents' views on the purposes of the movement into three major categories: community, identity, and political change. The last two categories overlap to the extent that atheist collective identity construction is a project of political identity deployment (Bernstein 1997; 2002; 2008), but generally these refer to different kinds of goals, with some respondents pointing to instrumental pursuits like church-state separation. The frequencies of these responses are included in Table 6, with community the most frequent response, identity second, and political goals last. In general, these respondents considered the atheist movement a project of community- and identity-building, and placed much less attention on political goals than we see in official movement discourse. Some respondents cited purposes that fall in multiple categories,

but only two, Stacey and Michael, discussed all three kinds of goals. It is noteworthy that these two respondents are both very active, occupying positions on the executive committees of their organizations, and are therefore familiar with the formal mandates of their organizations and framed their responses in those terms. Some other members who are more casually involved gave more personal responses, pointing out what the purpose of the movement is for them personally and what they would like to see it strive for.

Michael's views on the purpose of the movement amounted to the official purposes of his local organization, of which he is a founding member and has served as president. His outline of these purposes encapsulates the three major types of goals reported by all respondents:

> We have three purposes. The first is to provide a community for atheists...We have black communities, gay communities, women's groups. We're an atheist group, we provide this community for atheists...The second thing is to educate the public about atheism. Now that's to let us define ourselves rather than have Pat Robertson define us...Again it's not to try to convert everyone in the public to an atheist, it's just to say we're atheist, this is what an atheist is, this is the atheist worldview. You know, we're not Satan worshippers, we're not evil, we're not hedonists...And then the third purpose we have, and this is something we do try to change people's minds on, is to promote separation of church and state. And that's our third thing because, third in importance because you already have the American Civil Liberties Union out there doing that as well.

The goal of building community is explicitly noted here as such. The related purpose of identity construction is here stated as a project to "define ourselves" and delineate the "atheist worldview", and to show people that "we're not evil", an allusion to the morality-based nature of atheist representations of identity (mentioning evangelical pastor Pat Robertson is important here because it means rejecting the representation of atheists as immoral people). Finally, the least important purpose is promoting separation

of church and state, the only explicitly political goal he references. It is important to note that he explicitly states that converting people to atheism is not a goal, which reflects a division between movement members and those New Atheists who seek broad cultural transformation where scientific rationality replaces religion. Michael's prioritization of the purposes of the movement reflects that of my sample as a whole. The frequency of responses for each of the major categories, as well as the importance individuals placed on these, points to a hierarchy of goals with community at the top, identity a close second, and instrumental/political goals a clear third.

Eleven of the fifteen respondents cited community as a purpose of the movement, and for many of them this was the most important goal. Several said that atheist organizations provide an alternative source of support for those who no longer have a support "system" or "network" to rely on after leaving religion. For example, Tim explains his view that "there's alternative people out there who are reasonable, who desire a better world. And I think there's a lot people that are probably...who don't have a support system to navigate through their feelings, like religions do. So I think this provides that opportunity". Respondents also pointed to the importance of being with "like-minded people" with whom they can freely express their views. Marcia, referring to her own experiences as well as those of others she has spoken with, explains that "there are those who come because they realize, okay, these are people who I can really talk to about these things. So it's very positive in that aspect because of the camaraderie, because people can feel like they're not alone". Alicia similarly thinks the movement is important primarily because it provides its members with "a place where they belong – where they're not outcasts, a place where they don't have to lie", giving them "somebody to talk to" without having to "pretend constantly". These references to atheists as "outcasts" and the importance of having a place where they can feel that "they're not alone" were common among my respondents and point to the experience of alienation that I believe drives many to participation in the movement.

While community ranked as the most important purpose of the movement, political goals were the least important, with only five respondents pointing to

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instrumental pursuits as a desired focus of movement activity. None of these respondents cited political goals alone as the movement's purpose – in all cases they combined political goals with at least one of the other two major types. Two respondents – both American – cited separation of church and state as a primary movement goal. Diana suggested that "upholding human rights" should be a goal of the movement, including the rights of atheists to protection from discrimination. She spoke of her desire for atheism to become a "social justice movement", pointing to birth control and the right to die as social issues that atheists should be fighting for. Two more respondents had no clear idea of what specific political goals should be pursued, but felt that the atheist movement should have a voice in politics. Phil said, "I'd like to see us try to get more of a political movement, to get more politically involved to try to have our voice be more included in governance," without elaborating on what exactly that "voice" might say. Patrice, taking the same point of view, explained, "I think that, fuck, I mean, when you stay quiet in the corner, people, they run it in a crazy way, okay? They run the society in a crazy way." Like Phil, Patrice's reference to political goals is vague. While he wants atheists to have a voice in politics, he also does not have a clear vision of what specific goals they would pursue. When pressed on the question of specific goals, he turned to discussing identity as a goal, and indeed this is where, I have argued, cultural and political goals intersect.

Identity, the second purpose that Michael referred to, was also the second most common answer to the question of movement purpose among my sample. Responses in this vein frequently referred to combating a perceived stigma associated with atheism, which is understood as a notion that atheism is without a moral foundation and atheists can therefore be expected to be immoral. Several respondents echoed Michael's comment implying that religious people might view atheists as "Satan worshippers". Diana wants to point out to people that this "makes no sense of course because if we don't believe in God we're probably not going to believe in the Devil either" and suggests that "atheism maybe could use a PR campaign". Sarah and Stacey both think one of the movement's most important purposes is to make it more "socially acceptable"

to be an atheist. Stacey and Patrice believe that it is important to "come out" in public and become more visible, with the goal of making people more comfortable with atheists.

All of these respondents referred in some way to stigma and the need for atheists to construct an alternative representation of themselves that emphasizes their capacity to be good, moral people. The imperative to "come out" is a strategy toward this goal of constructing a positive identity and fostering a cultural climate in which atheism is accepted, which, as demonstrated in the last chapter, is viewed as a necessary step in growing the movement and pursuing more ambitious goals of cultural and political change. Sahani describes just this view in describing her own coming out:

> Because even though I came out to my parents as an atheist when I was
> fifteen, it still, it wasn't, I think that it's a big part of my identity now
> because I think that religion, I've seen so much more how much of an
> impact religion has on public policy and things like that. And that's
> why I think it's more important to sort of be open about your atheism
> too, so other atheists feel more comfortable too, and we can become
> more of a force for secularism in our society.

Fahim echoes this view, describing a similar process of first constructing identity for the purpose of gaining acceptance and recognition, which in turn opens up opportunities for social movement activity: "First of all it has to become acceptable, that's our first step. And once it becomes acceptable, then we have to get people to think about it in a meaningful way, and once it becomes that then you can really start holding the reins and having an impact in politics". Many other respondents spoke of the importance of coming out in the development of the movement and its goals (precisely nine invoked the phrase "coming out" or "out of the closet"), and like the leaders and organizations discussed in the previous chapter, they seem to feel an affinity with the LGBT movement. For example, Terry speaks of atheists facing a similar challenge of first dealing with stigma:

> ...that's why you say you're an atheist, because once people realize that
> you're just a regular person then it gets rid of the stereotype. Like the

gay movement, right?...So CFI does that, we're saying it's ok, like the
gay movement said it's ok to be queer, we're queer and we're here and
we're not going away. It's the same thing now, it's like we're out, were
talking about it.

Like Sahani and Fahim, Terry recognizes the importance of identity as both a
strategy and a goal in itself. That is, these atheists view the construction of a positive
identity based on morality as a worthwhile goal for atheists who feel stigmatized, but also
as a strategic necessity prior to pursuing more instrumental goals. We can therefore see
the hierarchy of movement purposes reflected in these interviews as a process of
movement development, following the latency model of Melucci (1988, 1989) presented
in the previous chapter. This process is comprised of three elements or stages:
community, identity, and instrumental pursuits. The sample studied here suggests that
community is the first and most important purpose of the atheist movement. Identity
comes next, with collective expression of identity a tool for building community, the
greatest goal, as well as a goal in itself. The collective attracts more members by offering
an avenue for the expression of individual identities, a process Snow and McAdam refer
to as "identity seeking", where "individuals strongly imbued with a particular identity
actively search for groups (movements, cults, subcultures) with perspectives and
practices consistent with that identity and that allow for its expression" (2000: 48).
Joining these communities provides atheists with "self-verification" (Pinel and Swann,
2000) and empowers them to "come out" and embrace the identity shared by the
collective. Finally, there are instrumental pursuits such as church-state separation and the
more vague goal of gaining a "voice" in politics and governance.

Reflecting the official discourse reviewed in the previous chapter, atheists in my
sample seem to believe that identity construction is an important step – and strategy –
toward these instrumental goals. Bernstein's "political identity" approach, then, seems
appropriate for understanding this process at the levels of leadership and official
discourse as well as individual members. At all of these levels, atheists encourage the
construction and deployment of identity as a strategy for achieving instrumental goals.

There are, however, important differences between these organizations and their members regarding the specific nature of these goals. My interviews reveal that these atheists are not interested in conversion and therefore do not embrace the New Atheist cultural project of replacing religion with scientific authority (or at least do not view this as a primary goal of movement activity). Rather, they seek to build communities and to carve out their own space in the cultural landscape and assert their claim to self-representation by collectively – and publicly – constructing an atheist identity. Instrumental political goals are also not a high priority for these atheists, and those who did discuss instrumental goals were more inclined to mention social justice and secularism than scientism and individualism, which are emerging goals of organizations under the influence of leaders from the new atheist and libertarian factions. The grass roots rebellion against established discourse that took the form of Atheism+ is therefore not surprising given the incongruence between the goals of leaders and the goals of regular members revealed in these interviews. The following section addresses this incongruence in more detail by examining respondents' views on the tensions within the movement that were discussed in the previous chapter.

Atheism and Humanism: Scientism versus Social Justice

In the course of interviews I asked respondents if there were any contentious issues within the movement or points on which they found themselves disagreeing with leaders or other members. In a few cases these questions received little in the way of response, but most subjects referred to some common issues and some offered quite extensive discussions. Most significantly, they spoke of tensions between atheists and humanists, and between those favouring confrontation and accommodation (they did not always use precisely these terms). It's difficult to quantify these views on tensions simply because these individual members' views are much more nuanced than those of the New Atheists and other movement leaders, and they often expressed contradictory opinions and were not sure where they stood. In a few cases people gave clear answers and felt very certain. For example, Patrice favours a confrontational approach to religion in the vein of the New Atheism, a product of his strong view that religion is "a crime

against humanity" that must be eliminated. Diana, by contrast, feels that "challenging these groups directly" is not worthwhile because "they're not going to listen", and instead thinks atheists should try to "prevent more people from being persuaded to that side of things" and suggests encouraging the more "gentle aspects" of religion that make it "positive" for some people. This is a very different tone from that of Dawkins, and her fellow member Patrice, who refuse to grant that religion can do much of anything that is positive to anybody. In general respondents expressed a range of opinions on this issue, though most were moderate and generally favoured an accommodating stance. But many expressed ambivalence on these issues. Rather than attempting to summarize and interpret a larger number of responses, I have chosen to focus on a few individuals and present some more extended quotations here to let them speak for themselves and to demonstrate the nuances, complexities, and contradictions in their views, which are arrived at through struggle and careful consideration and illustrate that these atheists are not passive receptacles of ideology.

Marcia, 38, has been involved with what she calls the "freethought movement" since 2000. She was raised in Florida in a Southern Baptist family and was a "fundamentalist" until she gradually lost her religious beliefs in her early 20's. Some years later she wrote a book about her experiences with religion and becoming a self-described secular humanist, and was invited to speak at a meeting of a freethought group in her home town. Following this she became very active in the movement, serving on the executive committee of the Council for Secular Humanism, and participating in major events like the Godless Americans March on Washington in 2002. She left her position with CSH in 2003 and since then has pursued independent projects that she regularly promotes at freethought events, such as the AAI Convention, where I interviewed her. She offered a number of insights based on her experiences with the movement, including some comments on the tensions within it between secular humanists and those she refers to as "purists":

> Well, you've got different, let's say, factions of freethought. The purists
> are one part of the spectrum. If you were to compare them between a

liberal Christian and a right-wing Christian, the purist would be the right-wing Christian parallel. And I think the secular humanists would be on the other end of the spectrum, they'd be liberal Christians. The purists, they do not want to hold any notion whatsoever that there should be any doubt that there isn't a God. They assert that there absolutely is no higher power whatsoever, don't even think about the possibility, it just plain isn't. And it's kind of a closed-minded angle, too much so to actually call one a freethinker from that point of view, in my opinion. The purist doesn't seem very open-minded to me. And they tend to be – I don't want to make a sweeping generalization of purists, but there are many who tend to be anti-religion, so I guess that would be part of the New Atheism as well, they're more of a purist, evangelical almost, aspect of it. Me personally, I assert that I don't know and can't know if there's some sort of higher power but I'm not going to make something up until there's evidence of such. I can suspend my judgment indefinitely, I'm okay with that. Purists, they made their judgment, there's no suspension of judgment, there is no God, period.

Marcia's analogical use of Christianity here posits that "purists" are, in their own way, fundamentalists – in her words, "evangelical" – who are just as dogmatic in their approach to the subject of religion as fundamentalists of the Christian variety. She notes that the New Atheists are purists of this kind, and opposes purists to secular humanists, who she identifies with and who she feels embrace a properly open-minded attitude that is skeptical but not certain. These different "factions", as she puts it, roughly correspond to the two groups I have identified: new atheists and secular humanists (the libertarians, as I argued in the last chapter, are best understood as a sub-section of the new atheist group distinguished by their political orientation and unique view of movement goals). Marcia went on to explain that the "purists" don't speak for everyone within the

movement, and that many are opposed to their ideological militancy and insistence on attacking religion:

> The religious bashing, it's actually less frequent than you would think. A lot – like I said, there are a lot of freethinkers who are in that agnostic spectrum, and they tend to show how much they dislike the whole bashing aspect of religion... I don't hear it a lot in the community, jabs here and there, but overall there's not that much hostility.

Alicia, 35 years old, grew up in Sweden in a secular family and as an adult moved to Texas, where she currently resides. She expressed concerns about the movement that closely reflect Marcia's views on "purists". Discussing an atheist event at which Sam Harris was booed for talking about meditation and spirituality, she points to members of the movement who don't embody what she feels atheism is about:

> I guess when I heard that Sam Harris got booed at some, in Washington, when he talked about the meditation or something like that, I guess I would be a little afraid of meeting those people that would boo Sam Harris. 'Cause then I would feel the same as, ok, these are religious nuts but on the other end of the spectrum. I guess what I'm now learning is that there's atheists that also have closed their mind on to… that there's something going on in the brain that we don't know about. They say, 'No, the brain is just the brain. It makes us fart. It makes us eat. It makes us fuck'. And that's it. Which I find, for me personally, I don't go there. 'Cause that feels like religion to me. 'Cause there's so much that we don't really know...And I feel that that's kind of sad because my view of the atheist people would be that they would be scientifically geared and not dogma geared.

These "dogma-geared" atheists, she feels, neglect an important aspect of what it means to be human in focusing only on material, physical processes. This point is revealed in her response to the question of what she thinks is not being sufficiently accounted for in the dominant discourse on religion in the movement:

I think it's the emotional importance of being a human. Just what Sam

Harris is talking about, the feeling of this, you know, Godly love that

religious organizations have now patented and trademarked and kept to

themselves. They have a copyright on that. I think that's the most

important thing. 'Cause feelings, in my view, are the things that guide

us and I don't think it's addressed, I don't think it's addressed at all,

actually.

Alicia's critique of dogmatic materialism among some atheists is only one point of contention. She also has problems with the politics of some atheists:

I have a problem with – I don't know if this pertains to anything here,

but Ayn Rand, I have a problem with that. 'Cause I heard that there's a

lot of atheists who are the Ayn Rand fans, like every man just needs to

go and do whatever he needs to be doing right now, without any regard,

you know, if he, whatever, blah blahblah, objectivist, you know,

everything will work. Well it don't work, I mean, to me. The U.S., it

don't work, it's a third world country, and it's all about objectivism.

Don't help anybody, don't do anything, you know, it's all for me, I'm

not gonna pay for anybody, blah blah. It doesn't work.

As a humanist, Alicia is opposed to the libertarianism in the movement – which, as she notes, often takes the form of Ayn Rand's atheistic individualism – which does not match her idea of the values of atheism. Finally, she also expresses opposition to the strategy of confrontation that dominates official movement discourse. Her favouring of accommodation perhaps reflects her general attitude about atheism and the movement. She believes atheists should be "open-minded" and not "dogmatic", and this applies to dealing with believers:

You can't tell people what they don't know. You have to come to that

conclusion yourself. You can't tell a religious person or a person on the

fence that, hey, that's bullshit, cause nobody wants to be wrong. You

can't tell people that they're wrong, and you can't try to manipulate

them either, 'cause that's not going to be the truth for them.

Fahim, a respondent I have identified as a scientific atheist, expresses considerable ambivalence on movement positions regarding strategy and discourse on the nature of religion. When asked if there were any presentations of discussions at the AAI convention that he found problematic or disagreed with, this was his response:

Yeah, there was actually a few things I kind of disagreed with. And

they were saying how, you know, religion serves no purpose, or some

people made some comments about, you know, religion is completely

useless or doesn't serve any purpose, and I think that's just completely

false. I've grown up in a religion that's very serving to the people, and

very good. It does wonders, I mean we've had families in our house

stay from Afghanistan, get them over here. If it wasn't for the religion I

probably wouldn't be in a place like Canada today...So I think some of

the unfair bias, because maybe they've had some bad experiences in

their life, yeah, I can see that there's maybe not, they're not totally

objective to that.

Though he is a strong atheist, Fahim nonetheless recognizes some value in religion, and in describing the attitudes of some atheists toward religion as "not totally objective" he takes the same position as Marcia and Alicia, who are dismayed by the "closed-minded" and "dogmatic" approach they see in the movement. Fahim's views on strategy thus take a similar form:

I think we should engage them first, rather than provoke them. But that

level of engagement is so much more difficult and I just know that first-

hand having chatted with two levels of extreme, whether it's my parents

or a friend. I know that engaging is extremely difficult, but I think

that's something we need to continue to do.

Preferring to "engage" with the religious rather than "provoke" them, Fahim clearly favours a strategy of accommodation over confrontation. This position, along with his

more nuanced views on the nature and value of religion, sets him apart from the New Atheists and other leaders who craft official discourse.

Michael, 51, was raised in a Catholic family in Minnesota. He framed atheism and humanism as distinct but complimentary groups and positions within the freethought movement that need to work together to achieve their goals:

> If you think of this as an operation, the whole trying to get religion out of society as an operation, atheism is like the sharp scalpel. You've got to cut out the nonsense. And humanism is like the healing, the bedside manner and the stitches and the recovery. So you need the atheism to go in there and cut out the superstition, but then you've got to follow through with the healing and the alternatives and the healthy lifestyle. So they can work hand in hand, they each have sort of a different mission… There's a lot of emphasis, there's been more emphasis in atheist groups on going after things in religion that are factually incorrect. Resurrections, miracles, that kind of thing. A more analytical approach. And I think in humanist movements, they're more interested in the emotional stuff. Meaning in life, and trying to create the society that is emotionally fulfilling and replaces the emotional needs, the emotional things that religion supplies. So yeah, the atheists are the more analytical, intellectual thing, and the humanists are the more societal, emotional aspect. And that's where I've been very interested for a number of years now in trying to fuse those two, get those groups to come together. It used to be that a lot of the humanists were afraid in the atheist community, but that's less and less now. So the humanists are not afraid of the atheists, they realize the value of atheists. And I think the atheists are starting to realize that it takes more than bashing religion to be successful, we have to have an alternative life. And so the humanists have been working on that. So we do well together, we can work together, and to really be successful we'll need both parts.

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Though he notes a tension, he also believes that each of these groups recognizes that the other has a role to play in the movement and will eventually overcome their differences. What is crucial is that, in his view, they *must* overcome these differences for the movement to be effective. Like Alicia, he notes the importance of the "emotional stuff", which he sees as the province of humanism, while atheism has a more scientific or "analytical" mission. He also pointed out the tension regarding strategy, which he describes as one between "hard-line" and "friendly" approaches to dealing with religion. Given that it directly addresses some of the debates discussed in the preceding chapter, his comments are worth quoting at length:

> Well, there is sort of a disagreement in the movement about whether we should be real hard and edgy and ridiculing, that's one camp. And the other camp is friendly and some would call accommodationalist in a derisive way. So some will say, you know, religion wherever we find it is the enemy, we should go after it full force, we should ridicule it. That's, you could call it the hard-line atheism. And others would say, look, we've got family and friends who are religious. We don't want to alienate them, especially if they're liberal religious people who might vote with us, and if you start ridiculing the liberal religious people who might otherwise vote with us, you might just drive them into the other camp. But going back to the first group of people, they say, and this is Sam Harris' idea, that any kind of religiosity, even liberal religiosity, gives cover to the more extreme kind. That as long as you give anybody a pass on believing anything supernatural, you're giving an ok to anything, anything supernatural, giving cover to it so we should strike at it wherever we find it. So that's, I think, one of the struggles or disagreements that sometimes exist… I used to be totally in the friendly approach because I want to treat other people the way I would want to be treated. I don't want to be ridiculed, so why should I ridicule somebody else? When you ridicule somebody they become defensive,

you know, they fold their arms, they back away emotionally. I don't
think it's a very good tactic, and I don't think it's very respectful. On
the other hand I did once have a young woman come up to me and say
'it was the ridicule of religion that shook me'….SoI think ridicule has
its place but we've got to separate ridiculing ideas from ridiculing
people. I do think we should be respectful toward people, but you
know, if someone says the earth is only 6000 years old, we can say
"that's ridiculous because", and you have to get into some evidence. So
I think that's okay.

Some elements of this passage worth highlighting include Michael's summary of
the "friendly" (accommodation) position as being rooted in a desire not to alienate
"liberal religious people who might vote with us". He indicates here that the essence of
this position is the view that social issues and politics are of primary concern, whereas for
"hard-line" (confrontation) atheists religion is an enemy, and the imperative to attack it
"wherever we find it" trumps other concerns. When it comes to his own opinion on
which strategy is better, he expresses considerable ambivalence, explaining that he "used
to be totally in the friendly approach", indicating that he has wavered on this position.
He argues that ridicule isn't a good tactic, but then immediately also suggests that
ridicule has its place but should be accompanied by respect. How ridicule and respect go
together is a problem he does not address, and the contradictory nature of this statement
reflects the ambivalence many atheists feel on this issue.

Another respondent who expressed a similar ambivalence regarding strategy is
Terry, a 51-year-old gay man from Ontario who was raised in the United Church. He
describes his desire to "build bridges" with liberal religious groups while at the same time
trying to balance this strategic choice with a "strong dislike" for religion in general that
comes in part from its association with conservative positions on sexuality:

I want to try to build bridges and be one of those atheists that are, like,
building bridges with liberal religious people. It's not possible to do it
with fundamentalists, there's too much of a divide… You know, you

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don't want to really piss them off if they're just liberal Christians or whatever or liberal Muslims, and they have some of the same values that we have, for human rights and things like that, women's rights and gay rights, stuff like that…I do have to be careful because like I said I do have issues with religion. I wouldn't call it hatred, but a very strong dislike...I can't let that voice out, and I have to think, maybe you're being a little harsh. You know, maybe, try to balance yourself, you know? Not all religious people are like that. Which is true, so it's good for me to actually go out and meet religious people, and I don't enough because I'm always with atheists, right? So it's good to have that balance because it's easy to get hooked into, when you're in a movement, it's easy to get wrapped up in "Yeah, yeah", you know, that kind of fanaticism. And I'm not really like that, like, I do have a lot of anger about a lot of things about religion, but I also respect people and their right to believe whatever they want to believe. So there's a bit of a fight there in my head.

Like Michael, Terry speaks about building relationships with "liberal religious people" with whom he and other atheists share core values relating to human rights. The essence of his concerns, then, is related to questions of social justice rather than a desire to assert the superiority of truths revealed by science. Like Michael, his humanistic values and desire to advance liberal politics take priority over an ideological conflict with religion. Also like Michael, however, he expresses considerable ambivalence on how to relate to religious people. Taking a "friendly" or "accommodating" approach involves a constant struggle with some deeply felt antagonism toward religion. This ambivalence is even more clear in his comments on which New Atheists he likes most:

I think actually of all of them I probably like him [Dennett] the best, even though I've read less of him than anyone. He just seems kind of moderate, he's not like, he doesn't have anger. Although I do like Hitchens. A lot of atheists don't like him 'cause he's too loud and

offensive and pisses off religious people, but like, we've been pissed

off by religious people a long time, so why not?

Here Terry at once favours Dennett for his "moderate" approach that comes without "anger", but at the same time like Hitchens for precisely the opposite reason: because his approach does come with anger and is blatantly combative. Relating this to his comments regarding strategy, I believe he favours an accommodating position as a reasoned strategic approach, but struggles with his more emotional and reactionary side that responds to aggression and attack.

While struggling on the question of strategy and relating to religious people, Terry is less ambivalent when it comes to the ideological divide between those Marcia calls "purists" (i.e. new atheists) and the more "open-minded" secular humanists. He refers to this divide in discussing an experience with the Japanese healing art Reiki in which, contrary to his expectations, he found himself convinced of its effectiveness:

As a very strong atheist, I thought, this is challenging my whole

worldview. And time and time again other stuff has happened where

it's like, how could that happen? So it gives me sort of an interesting

perspective because a lot of people that are atheist, like especially some

of the real vocal, loudmouth, angry ones, are like, there's nothing, the

way it is is the way it is. And I'm going no, I don't believe there's any

god in the sky and stuff for universal energy, whatever, but there's so

much stuff that we don't know, and just accept that, it's a great feeling.

And actually a lot of people who are believers would probably not want

to do Reiki because they think it's a demon's work or evil. And I'm

thinking there's something to it, and one day science will probably

show what it is, right? But until then, whatever, and that's the good

thing about being an atheist, is that you're not just stuck believing these

old stories that are 99.99%, I'm sure, false. It gives you the ability to

accept that there's mysteries to be discovered, and it's

exciting...Because some atheists are sceptics, right? And I'm a skeptic,

obviously. But they're almost negative sceptics, they go in saying it's not true, there's nothing rational about it, without actually having an open mind, right? So I guess I'm an open-minded skeptic. There are possible things that we don't understand. And it's like, don't get worried sceptics, it's not because of something supernatural, it's a natural explanation that we don't understand yet.

Like Marcia, Alicia, and Fahim, Terry marks his distinction from "vocal, loudmouth, angry" atheists, and emphasizes the importance of being "open-minded" and avoiding a dogmatic approach that excludes certain questions and approaches. His descrption of atheists who say "there's nothing, the way it is is the way it is" is very much like Alicia's description of atheists who say "the brain is just the brain", and like her, he counters these views with "there's so much stuff that we don't know".

Sahani, 23 years old, was born in Sri Lanka and moved to Canada with her family when she was a small child. She was raised Hindu, as she describes it, "in a pretty lax way". At the time of our interview she had recently taken on an administrative position with a major atheist organization, but only weeks into this role she was already having doubts about her participation in the movement that were related to the same issues raised by other respondents – that is, ideological dogmatism and a confrontational strategy. This is revealed in Sahani's discussion of CFI's "Extraordinary Claims" campaign, another advertising campaign like ABC that asserts that "Extraordinary Claims Require Extraordinary Evidence" and lists among these "claims" bigfoot, UFO's, Allah, and Jesus:

I didn't want to read The God Delusion because I felt like I had been driven to tears by these people who wanted to convince me that I was wrong, and I never wanted to put anyone else in that position. And I felt that these books and this campaign, Extraordinary Claims, is sort of doing that. They're not sitting in a corner and forcing you to listen to them, but it's such a private, such an intimate part of people's identities, even if they only believe a little bit or if they're on the cusp of

switching, it's not going to help to tell them that they're idiots... So, like I was saying about the words "the God delusion' and things like that. I think when it's a negative – when it's a campaign that's framed negatively by telling people to question themselves instead of seeing the benefit that comes from the other point of view. I mean, it doesn't seem to say "atheism makes sense", it's more like "religion does not make sense for these reasons", which doesn't give people an incentive to join the atheist movement. Even if I was religious or I was at that stage where I was on the cusp of not being religious, seeing those ads would not make me want to become atheist. It would make me really angry, and it still makes me really angry because I think it's the same attitude that a lot of evangelicals have, where they have a specific frame to put things and their frame makes sense to them. It's not going to make sense to you, and that rationalist framework that we each come to on our own as atheists does not apply necessarily to religious people. And it's just – Creating a fence is not a way to create dialogue...I'm not sure I want to stay openly part of an organization that is doing that campaign right now.

While Sahani enjoys the experience of community provided by her atheist group, she disagrees with its dogmatically scientistic and confrontational approach, so much so that she is debating whether she wants to continue participating in the organization. Like Marcia and Alicia, she compares some more dogmatic atheists to evangelicals, and feels that rather than trying to discredit religion, they should be focusing on what's positive about atheism. This is based on her view that applying a rationalist framework to religion and presenting it to religious people is a fundamental error in understanding what motivates religious people – that is, their beliefs are not motivated by reason. A confrontational approach, then, is misguided. She further elaborates these views in her discussion of the New Atheists' aggressive attack on religion:

I feel like it turns people off more than anything, so it doesn't accomplish what they're trying to do. And then, it doesn't accomplish what they're trying to do, and at the same time it makes atheists seem like these awful people who are belittling and creating really extreme analogies which we accuse the religious people of doing about atheists....It's when they talk positively about the meaning that atheism can bring versus when they talk negatively about what God has done to our society that I find more appealing.

...people don't come to god as a scientific hypothesis. They don't come to it that way. If they're looking at it that way they're already on the side of Richard Dawkins. So putting it in that framing is only really going to convince the people on the fence who are already looking at this in that way anyway. I mean, I didn't decide that I wasn't going to believe in God because I thought about the rationale for it and then realized that, overt, careful, rational thinking, that I didn't believe.

Again, Sahani doesn't believe that rational argumentation and scientific evidence are going to convince people to give up their religious beliefs. She also thinks that the confrontational approach is a style of discourse that atheists criticize in religion and is thus hypocritical. Rather than focusing on the negative attacks, she prefers focusing on doing something positive: "I'd really like them to do more charity work to show that it doesn't have to be churches who do it. Because that's often an argument that comes up, about how we need religion because otherwise who would run the soup kitchens?" In taking this position, Sahani indicates that she would like her group to do some of the "healing" work that Michael described as the job of humanism. Sahani, like many of the other respondents, may not believe in God, but she is much more a humanist than a "new atheist".

Finally, Sahani made an interesting observation no doubt related to her experience of being a member of a minority group. She frames it in the discourse on Christmas and other religious holidays that sometimes comes up in the atheist movement:

> So there's this, I don't want to put a stereotype on this either, but it seems like people who are against Christmas are probably, they get the sense that anything cultural is sort of beneath them because they're not cultural, but they don't realize they're cultural. And it also speaks to somebody who's had a lot of privilege and comes from the majority culture and doesn't see that minority cultures, which include religious cultures, have just as much right to be there.
>
> But things to address I guess, it would be nice, now that we've talked about it, to talk about the intersection between culture and religion and where to draw the line for what we accept in terms of religion but what we need to accept in terms of culture. Because otherwise we're just, we're being blind and exercising a privilege that we don't have the right to exercise over these oppressed minorities.

Sahani notes here a conflict between multiculturalism (or pluralism) and hard-line atheism. We might again see this in terms of ideological tensions between new atheists and secular humanists, and confrontationists and accommodationists. For the ideologically militant new atheists, multiculturalism and pluralism are out of the question, since the goal is cultural homogenization through scientific hegemony. For secular humanists who embrace a more accommodating position, multiculturalism is a value to be embraced.

In the comments from all these respondents, there is discussion of tensions between atheism and humanism, and between confrontation and accommodation. There is also an equation of "hard-line" atheism with confrontation, while accommodation is associated with a more "open-minded" approach that emphasizes underlying values and

political ideals rather than an attack on religion. This is the approach favoured by humanistic atheists, who place social concerns above ideological opposition to religion.

Conclusion

The research presented in this chapter indicates that atheists very a great deal in terms of their religious backgrounds, the development of their beliefs, their current views on religion and science, and their motivations for joining the movement and the goals they wish to pursue. Analysis of trajectories to atheism reveals that there is no one standard path (as implied by the New Atheists, who assume progression from ignorance to enlightenment is analogous to a move from religious superstition to science). Rather, people come to atheism from different directions and for different reasons. Furthermore, most atheists in my sample follow a humanistic, rather than scientific, approach to religion, which is the reverse of leaders and official discourse, where scientific atheism is the norm. That is, these atheists understand the reasons for religious belief in humanistic terms (socialization, comfort, fear of death, etc.). However, on the question of apostasy, they preferred to cite intellectual, rather than moral/political/social reasons, in my view because they do not have an alternative framework for understanding the complexities and variables involved in this process, but instead reduce it to the level of individual consciousness – the view promoted by the New Atheism. Interestingly, the New Atheism does not appear to have had a major or direct impact on the development of beliefs among these respondents. Rather, they "reinforce" existing positions, while their major success was in their effectiveness as a tool of recruitment and mobilization, rather than conversion.

The most frequently cited purpose of the movement was community, followed by identity, with direct political (instrumental) goals a clear third, and not clearly defined. For these members, the movement is not about changing the world, it is about providing a sense of community and belonging for an alienated group. Importantly, they equated the purpose of the movement with their own experiences and reasons for joining, which was generally a search for community. Examination of atheists' views on issues within the

movement and points of disagreement revealed that there are some major internal tensions, including an ideological tension between new atheists ("purists", "hard-liners") and secular humanists, and a strategic tension between those who favour accommodation and those favouring confrontation. The interviews therefore support the preceding chapter's analysis, which argued that the movement is internally divided on ideological grounds, a division manifest in disagreements concerning strategy and identity. Those in my sample are generally supportive of a more accommodating atheism, with some ambivalence about the issue. This is because their objection to religion seems to be a lower priority than liberal political concerns – the ideological and strategic tensions, and the greater emphasis on advancing a liberal agenda on social issues than attacking religion, reflect the generally humanistic orientation of the sample, in contrast to the scientific orientation of the leaders and most of the official discourse. For members, social justice is a higher priority than the New Atheism's goal of advancing a scientistic worldview by attacking religion. This reflects the previous chapter's finding that new groups are emerging that assign similar priorities to the movement.

The discrepancy between the views of members and movement leaders is the most interesting finding to emerge from this research. Rather than a homogeneous group of followers of Richard Dawkins, the presumptive leader of the New Atheism, these members are agents who weigh the views of these leaders against their own ideas and lived experiences, asserting their own positions and goals for the movement. What makes this distinct from other cultural movements that might have more internal cohesion and top-down following of leaders is that this one is based on a belief system (or a number of belief systems sometimes in conflict with each other) rather than some more intrinsic characteristic (e.g. sexuality) or a position on a specific social issue (e.g. environmentalism). A movement about beliefs is bound to experience tensions between people holding different beliefs. Unlike religious fundamentalisms, atheism has no text that serves as an unquestionable source of authority, thus the meaning of atheism is continually constructed and re-constructed by individuals and groups with different views. The New Atheism is only one of these groups, and while *The God Delusion* might

anchor a canon, it is not sacred. Perhaps most importantly, these members generally do not share the New Atheism's goal of universalization, but instead seek to carve out a space for atheists in the cultural landscape and create communities for non-believers, and are willing to accommodate religious (and other) groups and points of view that share a basic progressive position on social issues. This seems to support Taylor's (2007) point regarding the pluralist cultural logic of the secular age, where dogmatism and absolutism (religious or secular) give way to acceptance of the possibility of a vast array of different forms of belief co-existing.

CONCLUSION

Atheism was born of – and took shape in association with – politically radical intellectual and social justice movements, including the French Revolution, Marxism, and Darwinism's resistance to church authority. The progressive element is largely absent in the New Atheism, which supplants it with a laissez-faire view that the only problem with the socio-political arrangement of modernity is the persistence of irrational religious beliefs, which impede natural social progress. While New Atheism is typically understood as a "liberal" ideology (Eagleton 2009; McAnulla 2012; Schulzke 2013b), there are conservative dimensions to the movement, particularly with respect to Eurocentrism/Orientalism, libertarianism, Social Darwinism, and patriarchy. These are not features of progressive liberalism, or the Left, but rather they are tantamount to a conservative defense of the status quo and a hierarchical social structure.

Commenting on the New Atheism, Terry Eagleton writes, "Your average liberal rationalist does not need to believe that despite the tormented condition of humanity there might still, implausibly enough, be hope, since they do not credit such a condition in the first place" (2009: 38). This complacent view insists that the 'darkness' outside modernity's boundaries can be precisely located in religious fundamentalism within the West, and in the Middle East in general. This "mindless progressivism" (Eagleton 2010:155) is the product of a kind of faith – not in a transcendent deity or divine law, but rather in the power of science to create a perfect world. This involves a dualistic worldview where religion is the cause of modern social problems, while science is the engine of progress that will inevitably solve these problems (Harrison 2010). The only contradiction within modernity, for the New Atheism, is the persistence of religion, which has proven more resilient than once thought within the secularization paradigm of the social sciences as well as in evolutionistic narratives of progress. The ideology of New Atheism, however, holds to the traditional secularization narrative, and a general faith in progress, that is tantamount to the passive acceptance of the conditions of modern life. Eagleton notes that in some formulations, "the very concept of ideology is synonymous with the attempt to provide rational, technical, 'scientific' rationales for

social domination, rather than mythic, religious or metaphysical ones" (1991:37). New Atheism might be considered a case in point, instituting rational-scientific rationales for domination that replace less efficient (and more dubious) religious ones. In casting religion as a scapegoat for the inequities that plague modernity, asserting science as an unquestionable source of authority, and insisting that techno-scientific progress is social and moral progress, it legitimates the current neoliberal world order. In one particular case – the libertarian element within the movement – it does so explicitly. The Four Horsemen also adopt Hebert Spencer's evolutionistic vision of social progress. While they do not explicitly support his advocacy of cutthroat economics, any mention of capitalism as a source of social problems is absent from their work, which assigns blame for social ills to the persistence of violent, irrational religion, in line with the legitimating myth of modernity (Cavanaugh 2009).

New Atheism is, indeed, an ideological defense of a modern utopia against its perceived antagonists: religion and relativism. It does this by taking shape as a cultural movement that seeks to universalize this ideology, converting masses to a science-based belief system and asserting scientific authority in all spheres of life. As both a utopian belief system and a social movement that advances a political program, it can be understood as a secular fundamentalism, as opposed to religious fundamentalisms that are anti-modern (Eisenstadt 1999). Like all fundamentalisms, New Atheism is totalizing. Just as communists claimed to have a scientific understanding of the "laws of motion of history" and thus legitimated the centralized management of society by "experts" (Held 1980), the New Atheists see a law of evolution guiding history on its natural course toward 'civilization' – that is, a society administered according to scientific authority.

The New Atheism's legacy is somewhat unclear. While tremendously popular for a short period of time, it remains to be seen if the New Atheists' ideas will prove influential in a lasting way, and to what extent they have contributed to a significant cultural transformation, as they intend. As noted in the introduction of this dissertation, the "nones" (the religiously unaffiliated) are growing in western societies. While we cannot attribute causality to the New Atheism (in fact the growth was noticed in the early

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1990s), it may be fair to say that they are bound up in one process. We cannot say whether this process is secularization as traditionally formulated, or simply the emergence of one more group in accordance with the expanding possibilities of belief in the "secular age" (Taylor 2007). However, I do think this is open to questioning, contrary to the emerging axiomatic position of "post-secularism" (e.g. Calhoun et al. 2011; Gorski et al. 2012; Mendieta and VanAntwerpen 2011). That is, the question of secularization is not yet settled, and a version of the thesis is still defended by some, notably Steve Bruce (2002, 2011). Might the rise of atheists and the nones portend a generational shift away from religious belief? Or does it simply point to a diversification in religious belief and practice, with atheism arriving as one more position in a pluralistic cultural landscape? We might also ask whether the apparent "desecularization" of the world (Berger 1999) – or, the deprivatization of religion and its growing influence in politics – negates the secularization thesis, or whether this might be understood as just another stage in religious decline. That is, is this revival, and particularly the turn to fundamentalism and more extreme forms of belief, religion's 'last gasp' before it finally succumbs to the pressures of modernization? Predictions of this kind of sweeping historical change are probably best avoided: we perhaps should have learned to be wary from previous predictions of religion's demise that were articulated with the same certainty found in today's dominant claim that religion is here to stay. The outcome of these processes is not certain, and while it is possible that the New Atheism was a temporary phenomenon with a limited scope, it is also possible that it signals a step toward an age that is secular in a more traditional sense of the term.

In terms of its legacy within the secular movement, my research illustrates that after a period of dominance and profound influence by the New Atheism, deep tensions have risen to the surface and another latency period appears to be underway. The New Atheism's social movement aspirations and dimensions are being challenged by competing ideologies and groups within the movement more broadly, and the future of these developments is unclear. Darwin viewed evolution as a process with no fixed direction, and invoked the metaphor of a "radiating bush" to describe adaptation and

differentiation to changing environmental conditions. We might apply the same metaphor to contemporary developments in the atheist movement, which is changing rapidly in response to social, cultural, and political changes. We are seeing a process of differentiation in the movement, with distinct groups seeking to advance their own agendas, and a potential for fragmentation or total breakdown. The New Atheism came to prominence in the mid-2000s, when the events of September 11, 2001 were not as distant, and Canada, the United States, and Britain were deeply involved in military conflicts in Iraq and Afghanistan. In the post-9/11 context, where religious fundamentalism on both sides of the "clash of civilizations" was reaching new heights of influence, the New Atheism presented a radical critique and a promise of social transformation that clearly spoke to many people. However, the cultural project of ideological universalism, which seemed tantalizingly realizable at the height of the New Atheism's popularity and public presence, has given way to more moderate and specific instrumental goals of constructing and defending a minority identity, and the functional differentiation of religious and political spheres. This strategy is a tacit recognition that the narrative of secularization has not been realized as expected and likely will not be in the foreseeable future. The evangelical approach of the New Atheism, which was predicated upon the supposition that scientism was the inevitable and proximate trend of history, has thus given way to a defence of strict ideological boundaries through an identity strategy that emphasizes a distinction from, rather than assimilation with, mainstream society.

Aside from a failed prophecy of secularization and a mass turn to a science-based worldview, New Atheism has also been challenged by other groups within the atheist movement motivated by humanistic ethics and political secularism (in the case of secular humanists) as well as by individualism and the opposition to state intervention in the economic sphere (in the case of libertarian rationalists). Further, a newer emerging trend in the movement is toward "social justice", particularly with respect to sexuality and gender. These are not rigidly distinct groups of people, since it is likely that many movement participants embrace views that cross the boundaries between these systems of

belief (this is confirmed by the interview research in this dissertation). However, they are distinct ideologies that carry implications for what goals and strategies should be pursued. Most importantly, they all abandon the totalizing tendencies of New Atheism and turn instead toward finding a place in what is, and is expected to remain, a pluralistic society.

The fact that New Atheism is influential but controversial within the movement, and that there are groups distinctly opposed to it in some ways, was an unexpected finding. It is but one group and one ideology within a diverse and complex movement that is still struggling to define itself and its goals. The key distinction is perhaps best expressed by Michael, a long-time member of the movement, who cautioned against alienating liberal religious people because "they might vote with us". This is in contrast to New Atheists who insist on attacking religious beliefs and those who hold them wherever they appear. Michael's core concern, like other secularists in the movement, is political. Given an agreement on some core political issues he is willing to overlook a disagreement on religion, as opposed to New Atheism, which makes religion the primary target because their goal is not social justice, but scientific authority. This disconnection between members and their leaders/organizations, and the struggle between groups with different goals and values, reveals a movement with major obstacles to maintaining cohesion. The movement is developing beyond New Atheism and combining different ideologies and goals in novel ways (e.g. scientific atheism combined with the goal of pursuing social justice) that may result in further diversification, or simply to fragmentation or breakdown.

Whether the movement will be able to survive these challenges is a question that only time will answer. What seems clear is that we are in the midst of another revolution in atheism's history. The two forms that have dominated since the 19th century are further evolving into the more complex forms that we see emerging in the atheist movement today, such as Atheism+. The issue of sexism within the movement that inspired Atheism+ has only grown more controversial, culminating in Chris Mooney's resignation as host of *Point of Inquiry* after Ronald Lindsay's opening remarks at the

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Women in Secularism conference in 2013 that rebuked feminists in the movement for "silencing men" (Lee 2013). These ongoing developments, and how the movement will respond, are matters for further study.

Problems, Limitations, and Outstanding Questions

There are some limitations to this project with respect to the research on the atheist movement. First, it only addresses the North American context, while the movement may take different shapes in other contexts. However, the New Atheism movement specifically (that is, New Atheism as an intellectual current and cultural movement) is not tied to any particular context or location. It is a transnational ideological movement that seeks cultural universalism. The atheist movement more broadly, however, is bound to develop different goals, strategies, and identities in other contexts, as it responds to specific social, cultural, and political situations. Notably, the movement in western Europe is likely to look much different from that in the United States given the wide gap in levels of religiosity, and religious influence in public affairs, and specifically, on government officials. Atheists in some other contexts might also not be nearly as highly stigmatized – indeed, atheism is the norm in many western countries, notably in Scandinavia, which has some of the lowest rates of religiosity in the world (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Somewhat surprisingly, some atheist groups in Canada (Center for Inquiry Canada, Canadian Secular Alliance) have embraced the minority discourse of their American counterparts, arguing that atheists should be protected from discrimination, though their focus is generally on atheists globally rather than in Canada specifically. Despite a great deal of overlap in discourse and activism among atheist groups in Canada and the U.S., more rigorous research on each context is required. This is particularly true for Canada, where research on atheists is virtually non-existent despite the fact that there are very active atheist groups across the country, and that the numbers of atheists and the religiously unaffiliated are growing. Between 1991 and 2001 the proportion of the Canadian population with no religious affiliation grew from 12.3% to 16.2% (Statistics Canada 2003), while a more recent study projects that by 2031 fully

one-fifth of Canadians will be religiously unaffiliated, even accounting for immigration from countries with higher rates of religiosity (Statistics Canada 2010). These are significant developments that merit closer attention.

With respect to the interview research in chapter four, there are several shortcomings. First and most obvious is the small sample, which was a result of limited resources. Without research funding I was not able to travel to attend atheist meetings and conduct interviews. The one convention I did attend was in Montreal, where I was able to interview people from different geographic areas. I added some interviews with members of CFI in Toronto, and could have done more there, but I was wary of an over-representation of this context. I was interested in getting perspectives from different geographical and cultural contexts to see how much of a common experience there is within a movement that is largely deterritorialized and transnational.   A major omission from the interviews is a direct inquiry into respondents' political views. While this came out organically in the course of interviews in some cases, a clearer understanding of atheists' politics would obviously be very beneficial. This omission is a product of the generally inductive and exploratory approach I took in the interviews. At that stage of the project I was interested in learning about atheists' views on religion and its relationship to science, and did not anticipate the importance of political goals for the movement, or the tensions between groups with different politics and motivated by different ideologies. Research on the political orientations of atheists is one of the most important outstanding questions facing atheism and secularity studies (note the discussion above of how my research illustrates that the assumption that atheists are 'liberal' should be questioned). In addition to a qualitative understanding of the beliefs of atheists, quantitative data on their political views would be helpful in understanding the development of the movement.

Some important questions emerge from my findings and arguments about the diversity in paths to atheism, particularly in terms of the categories I add to Smith's (2011) model. First and foremost, what effect does the intensity of religious socialization have on the nature and the development of atheist identities? The possible variation in

intensity of religious socialization is a variable that should be addressed in future research. Smith (2011) offers a preliminary hypothesis based on his finding that atheists from a strong religious background tend to have greater feelings of acrimony toward religion and to be more outspoken about their beliefs, and this is a point worth examining in more detail. There are also many questions we might want to address regarding the "original skeptics" I discussed, such as Elaine, who claims she is "atheist since birth," and Terry, who believes he was a "free thinking kid." These questions might include: How do they differ from other atheists? Is this a matter of individual psychology? What social conditions are involved? Another significant issue is the matter of "seeking religion" among those who experienced a secular socialization. The question, specifically, is what compels those who never held religious beliefs or practiced religion to experiment with religion? In the very few cases I examined, social pressures seemed to be important, with these subjects reporting asking themselves questions like "What's wrong with me?" given that so many others around them apparently believed. As mentioned above, one subject sought religion because she had questions that were not being answered, such as the question of why there is evil in the world. The obvious irony here is that the problem of evil has traditionally been employed as an argument against the existence of God, and following the logic and assumptions that underpin this argument we would expect the problem of evil to incline one to move away from religion, rather than toward it. It seems that disconcerting existential questions can lead to religiosity or atheism, depending where one starts out from.

The biggest question that emerges from this paper is *why* exactly people doubt, or what exactly their doubt is rooted in (this study has principally dealt with the "how" of discovering atheism and the steps involved in the process). In terms of why people become atheist, there are many possible reasons. The literature reviewed in chapter four posits that most atheists reject religion primarily for intellectual reasons, coming to feel that they cannot reconcile religious beliefs with science and reason (e.g. Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2007; Smith 2011). Others have argued that apostates turn away from religion primarily for political and moral reasons, since most atheists have liberal views on social

issues and many associate religion with conservatism (e.g. Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Hout and Fischer 2002; Nelson 1988; Putnam and Campbell 2010). My own research has raised the possibility that atheists reject religion for other reasons having to do with individual psychology and personality, as in the example of "original skeptics". These people apparently experienced a religious socialization similar to many others', and yet never believed, a fact that might require us to look for differences at the level of the individual if we cannot discern salient social factors.

The key question here is what reasons are most important and for whom. Just as Smith (2011) suggests that a stronger religious background might result in stronger antipathy to religion and a stronger anti-religious identity, I would suggest that a similar relationship may exist concerning stronger political views given the perceived correspondence between religiosity and conservatism. Comments from Marcia, a self-described progressive liberal, are revealing of the importance of political views in the development of an atheist identity:

> Because religion interferes with policies, and just the religious climate,
> the Right is just being very, very, what's the word I'm looking for?
> Invasive. And I think people are getting fed up, and those who are
> already of the mindset of, well I don't believe in that bullshit, are just
> verbalizing their thoughts more now...It's definitely reactionary, there's
> nothing proactive about it, it's being defensive, finally being verbal.

For Marcia, the politics of religion compels her to atheist activism and strengthens her identity, and it is in cases like hers that collective identity and social movement discourse is clearly important in identity formation. Here the link between the atheist movement and the Christian Right is explicit: these movements grow and develop in close relationship to each other.

There is also much work to be done to understand the structure of the atheist movement and the organizations that comprise it, including the linkages between them, the sources of their funding, and membership numbers and demographics. I have focused here on discourse and major examples of activism, but a more rigorous analysis of

movement structure is clearly required. In general, my analysis of the movement and the three groups is only an entry into this topic. It is a necessary first step given the nascent status of the field at this point. My research is an original contribution to a body of knowledge that is in a very early stage of development – indeed, this project is the first major study of its kind – and thus it is necessarily somewhat limited and exploratory, given that there was no existing research to build on or frame my own approach. What I have proposed is a framework for future research and analysis, and the arguments presented here require much more empirical investigation and support. Social movement scholarship has not yet addressed the atheist movement, which is a major lacuna in that field. Given the growth and level of activity in atheist organizations, however, I expect that more rigorous research and analysis of the movement is coming. I hope that this dissertation provides a useful entry point.

In terms of my own future research interests, I would like to pursue a different direction. My interest in New Atheism is rooted more in the sociology of religion, and I would like to further develop the understanding of New Atheism as a form of belief by moving beyond the concept of secular fundamentalism, and approaching it specifically as a secular *religion*. I want to explore how a concept of secular religion can help us to understand New Atheism as a belief system, as well as forms of ritual and collective practices, that construct meaning and community. In some classic formulations, including Berger (1967), Geertz (1973), and Weber (1963), religion is defined as a system of meaning-making for which the supernatural is not an essential requirement. Berger specifically cites science as a secular form of cosmization (the process of meaning-making and constructing purpose for human life), creating a space for the notion of secular religion. This concept can, I think, be applied in the case of the New Atheism as well as the atheist movement more broadly (or at least some elements and groups within it). I have argued in this dissertation that New Atheism is an ideology. But our understanding of it, the sources of its appeal, and how it translates into social practices may be enhanced with the concept of religion, its ostensible adversary.

NOTES

[1] Shortly after the documentary was released Haggard was forced to resign his position due to the revelation that he had purchased methamphetamine from a male prostitute, who alleged the two had also had regular sex for three years (http://articles.cnn.com/2006-11-03/us/haggard.allegations_1_sexually-immoral-conduct-morning-services-church-forces?_s=PM:US)

[2] http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/5000#455619

[3] http://old.richarddawkins.net/articles/618232-message-to-american-atheists

[4] The same notion appears in the book *God: The Failed Hypothesis* by American physicist Victor Stenger (2008), a contemporary of the Four Horsemen.

[5] Dawkins participated in another documentary for Channel 4 called *The Enemies of Reason* where he deals with this conflict between superstition and rationalism. The film follows him in conversations with psychics, astrologers, etc., as well as their followers, in an examination of how the continuing popularity of pre-modern superstitions and pseudo-sciences demonstrates that we have a long way to go to achieve a rational society and that the 'pre-modern' enchanted world is very much still with us.

[6] The version of the article cited here is the one reprinted on Harris' web site (http://www.samharris.org/site/full_text/the-end-of-liberalism)

[7] Major sponsoring organizations include American Atheists, American Humanist Association, Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, United Coalition of Reason, Center for Inquiry, StiefelFreethought Foundation, Secular Coalition for America, Secular Student Alliance, and the Freedom From Religion Foundation (*Reason Rally*, 2013a).

[8] The word "probably" was initially used for legal reasons, since claiming that "there is no God" could lead to the advertisers having to prove it. When the campaign came to North America, the use of the word "probably" was explained by organizers as a reflection of the proper scientific position on the existence of God, which is not certainty but scepticism based on lack of evidence.

[9] The most infamous work to come out of this celebration is "Jesus Does His Nails" by Dana Ellyn, a submission to the 2009 Blasphemy Rights Day exhibit which depicts Jesus applying nail polish to nails driven through his hands.

[10] Organizations participate simply by linking the donation site to their own websites.

[11] Out of the Closet user-created billboards can be viewed at http://ffrf.org/get-involved/bus-billboard-campaign/out-of-the-closet-campaign/.

[12] To provide evidence for his belief that Christianity is much less pervasive in Britain than commonly thought, Dawkins commissioned a study through RDFRS that concluded that most British are only nominal Christians because, among other reasons, most who identified as Christians could not name the first book of the New Testament (Kirby 2012). Soon after the study was reported Dawkins was challenged on this point by an interviewer who asked him for the full title of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. Dawkins' inability to provide the answer (the full title is "On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life") – and his muttering "Oh, God" as he became flummoxed – were a major embarrassment (McGrath 2012).

[13] Streaming video of many of the conference sessions, including this one, can be viewed at http://www.secularhumanism.org/laconference/live.html, which serves as the reference for all of my discussion of this debate. Edited versions of the four presentations were published in the June/July 2011 issue of *Free Inquiry* (vol. 31 no. 4).

[14] PZ Myers describes himself as a "godless liberal" (http://scienceblogs.com/pharyngula/about.php). At the CSH conference Sam Harris took pains to make it clear that he is a Left-leaning liberal with progressive views on gender equality, gay marriage, economic inequality, and wealth redistribution. In August of 2011 he wrote a blog entry under the heading "How Rich is Too Rich?" (http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/how-rich-is-too-rich/) where he advocated increasing taxes on the wealthy in order to address the economic crisis in the United States. Noting the large amount of negative feedback he received about this post – much of it presumably from atheists, who surely constitute the majority of his readers – which

was "a little crazier than normal", he followed it up with another post discussing the American "quasi-religious abhorrence of 'wealth redistribution'" and suggests that "The conviction that taxation is intrinsically evil has achieved a sadomasochistic fervor in conservative circles", including libertarians who consider it a species of theft (http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/how-to-lose-readers-without-even-trying/). This post includes a critique of Ayn Rand's objectivism – which Harris describes as "a view that makes a religious fetish of selfishness and disposes of altruism and compassion as character flaws" – in response to the many objectivists and libertarians who were "enraged that I could support taxation in *any* form".

[15]Atheism+ was originally conceived by Jen McCreight, author of the blog *Blag Hag* (http://freethoughtblogs.com/blaghag), which is hosted on the *Freethought Blogs* network headed by PZ Myers.

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