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# FAITH TOO BIG TO FAIL? THE STRUGGLES AND WISHES OF NEW ATHEISM

Joe Rice

195 Pages

After September 11th, 2001, public criticism of religion took front and center stage in the United States like never before, epitomized by the works of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens – the so-called “New Atheists”. In this thesis, I reunderstand the New Atheism as an oppositional social movement that promises important contributions to the recent trend in academic scholarship geared toward the study of religion and secularism. Reunderstanding is essential because the mainstream scholarly treatment of the New Atheism has not fully, much less charitably, drawn out the purpose and upshot of New Atheist viewpoints in areas such as international relations and American political culture. Accordingly I correct prominent misconceptions (the ‘struggles’) of the New Atheism that stem from this uncharitable and, at times, summarily dismissive engagement. These misconceptions include the charges that New Atheists are: mere polemicists and fundamentalists of a secular kind; ‘Islamophobic’ neoconservatives who pedal a strident white male identity politics; and bad philosophers ill-equipped to the task of growing public knowledge through sophisticated discourse. I then make explicit the contributions (the ‘wishes’) of the New Atheists through three distinct, but related approaches, namely critical theory, affinity politics, and public philosophy. These contributions include the vigorous support for taking religion more seriously by: redeploying the power of ideas in analyses of religious violence; reestablishing liberal principles in the face of multicultural relativism; and reasserting secular citizenship in the face of civil and

uncivil religion. In sum, New Atheists challenge the legitimacy, integrity, and pedigree of faith-based belief in a modern world where faith may very well be ‘too big to fail.’

KEYWORDS: New Atheism, Religion, Secularism, Critical Theory, Affinity Politics, Public Philosophy

FAITH TOO BIG TO FAIL? THE STRUGGLES AND WISHES OF NEW ATHEISM

JOE RICE

A Thesis Submitted in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

Department of Politics and Government

ILLINOIS STATE UNIVERSITY

2018

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FAITH TOO BIG TO FAIL? THE STRUGGLES AND WISHES OF NEW ATHEISM

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student, yet he only ever offers his insight and expertise through easygoing dialogue. A love for words and well-articulated questions enlivens his lectures and trains his students to pay attention to these almost intangible displays of genius. Professor Shapiro has been especially gracious with his time and affordances of energy (and his office), having spent the last year on a research-intensive sabbatical. Rest assured, while I have yet to make a significant dent in his collection of great books, I now can say that I have sat in the company (and chair) of greatness.

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J. R

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## CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

Man is manifestly *not* the measure of all things. This universe is shot through with mystery. The very fact of its being, and of our own, is a mystery absolute, and the only miracle worthy of the name. The consciousness that animates us is itself central to this mystery and the ground for any experience we might wish to call "spiritual."

No myths need be embraced for us to commune with the profundity of our circumstance. No personal God need be worshiped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation. No tribal fictions need be rehearsed for us to realize, one fine day, that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our interdependence demands that people everywhere be given the opportunity to flourish.

The days of our religious identities are clearly numbered. Whether the days of civilization itself are numbered would seem to depend, rather too much, on how soon we realize this.

~ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (2004)

### Statement of the Problem

After September 11th, 2001, public criticism of religion took front and center stage in the United States like never before, epitomized by the works of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens – the so-called “New Atheists”. In this thesis, I reunderstand the New Atheism as an oppositional social movement that promises important contributions to the recent trend in academic scholarship geared toward the study of religion and secularism. Reunderstanding is essential because the mainstream scholarly treatment of the New Atheism has not fully, much less charitably, drawn out the purpose and upshot of New Atheist viewpoints in areas diverse as international relations and American political culture. My ultimate argument is that the struggles and wishes of the New Atheism exemplify the state of scholarly discourse on religion and secularism.

Accordingly I correct prominent misconceptions (the ‘struggles’) of the New Atheism that stem from this uncharitable and, at times, summarily dismissive engagement. To echo Andrew Johnson, “The charges against the New Atheism are legion. It would be a practically

impossible undertaking to defend the New Atheism against all of them, and I would not wish to do so even if it were not impractical” (2013, 6). These misconceptions include the charges that New Atheists are: mere polemicists and fundamentalists of a secular kind; ‘Islamophobic’ neoconservatives who pedal a strident white male identity politics; and bad philosophers ill-equipped to the task of growing public knowledge through sophisticated discourse. I then make explicit the contributions (the ‘wishes’) of the New Atheists through three distinct, but related approaches, namely critical theory, affinity politics, and public philosophy. These contributions include redeploying the power of ideas in analyses of religious violence; reestablishing liberal principles in the face of religious fundamentalism and secular multicultural relativism; and reasserting secular citizenship in the face of civil and uncivil religion.. In sum, New Atheists deem religious faith the prime exemplar of “*bad ideas, held for bad reasons, leading to bad behavior*” (Harris 2013, emphasis mine), and so challenge the legitimacy, integrity, and pedigree of faith-based belief in a world where faith may very well be ‘too big to fail.’

At the turning point of the century, the American experience cascaded into screaming clouds of debris and death. New York City, the so-called ‘crossroads of the world’, laid in ruin while the pious and impious muddled through the scrapheap of history. Some observers claimed the events could only be described as a religiously sanctioned massacre, soon to be followed by a religiously sanctioned crusade, a reflection of the spirit of the times insofar as religion persisted as a force to be reckoned with. For some, such as Sam Harris, the turn to public criticism of religion began on September 12<sup>th</sup>, 2001. For others, such as Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens, public criticism of religion was already a bona fide career. Others still, such as Ayaan Hirsi Ali, welcomed public criticism of religion as a form of rescue from illiberal and insular religious cultures. In the face of global democratic alarm and the ‘War on Terror’,

this select group of public intellectuals gave voice to a movement that saw religion as part of the problem, rather than part of the solution. “What the New Atheists share is a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises” (Hooper 2006). According to the Cambridge Union (2013), “New Atheism increasingly propagates the notion that religion is a force to be combatted.” Stuart McAnulla summarizes the various claims made by the New Atheists in five overarching conclusions:

1. There is *probably* no God – New atheists believe that there is no good evidence or reason to believe a deity exists, though they generally accept there remains a small possibility that one could.
2. Developments in science, literary criticism, archaeology and other disciplines now provide overwhelming evidence against the claims of monotheistic religion. Consequently, non-believers should not feel obliged to passively accept the social, political and institutional privileges commonly conferred on religions such as Christianity, Islam and Judaism.
3. The morality expressed within religious texts is often questionable and even dangerous. Secular literature can often provide better moral guidance. We should not accord automatic respect for religious beliefs that lack convincing foundations.
4. Even ‘moderate’ forms of religion can be problematic in that they may help legitimize belief in supernatural claims, which can be used by others for ill-effect. We should not allow established social customs or political correctness to divert us from the needs to challenge such beliefs.
5. Institutional religion can confer unquestioned authority upon people who may then misuse it. (2013, 126)

Given the nature of these views and the implications they pose for the status quo, it is unsurprising that immense controversy surrounds the New Atheists in their unrelenting critique of faith-based belief. After all, they define religion as a poison, a virus, a first science, a failed science, a backwards politics, and a protected repository of moral and epistemological confusion. “The vehemence of their arguments can largely be understood as a frustrated backlash against a religious revival that is still gathering pace, especially in the U.S.” (Hooper 2006). While the New Atheists have made a great deal of noise in the public sphere, to the tune of best-selling

books and high-profile debates, not nearly enough noise has been made about their contributions in the refined debates of political thought. As I will show, previous attempts to critically examine the New Atheism generally offer inadequate appraisals that thrust aside, obscure, or totally mischaracterize the impact of New Atheist arguments and ideas.

Amarnath Amarasingam (2010), editor of the first multidisciplinary treatment of the New Atheism, characterizes the movement from the outset as “petulant and provocative, challenging yet cranky, urgent but uninformed.” I suspect that such an inauspicious start to understanding the New Atheism is symptomatic of the mainstream academic culture that is largely unwilling to challenge the hegemony of religious faith, and perfectly willing to deride vocal critics. The study of religion has essentially pitted the “respectful, deferential, diplomatic, tentative [putting on the kid gloves]” against the “hostile, invasive, and contemptuous [having an ax to grind]” (Dennett 2006, 32). Indeed, the New Atheists have an ax to grind insofar as this academic culture operates as a smokescreen that protects religion from irreverent scrutiny. The scholarly discourse, set in opposition in this way, has produced a laundry list of complaints against the New Atheism, including, but not limited to:

The New Atheists are overly polemical, aggressive, rude and intolerant, have a superficial conception of religious belief and, ironically (given that the assertion of a 'new' atheism came from its opponents), offer little originality in terms of philosophical and intellectual argument. It is also regularly claimed that new atheism is an exclusivist preserve of a Western, white, male, intellectual elite, comprising a fundamentalist, ideologically right-wing worldview with imperialist, if not racist, undertones. Comparisons to totalitarian regimes, notably Fascism and Communism, are frequent too, with this being seen as indicative of the moral vacuum at the heart of atheism and its inability to offer any positive values of its own beyond excoriating religion. (Kettell 2013)

Of course, there are some notable exceptions to the general lack of regard (or disregard) for the New Atheism. For instance, Marcus Schulzke (2013) claims that “to the extent that scholars have commented on new atheists’ political thought, they have generally misinterpreted

it and presented it as being intolerant.” Instead, “New atheism should be treated as a legitimate political movement that raises important questions about the place of religion in public life while staying within the boundaries of healthy democratic political contestation.” Yet even these positive evaluations concede that “scholarly analysis of new atheism, particularly its political dimensions, remains embryonic” (Kettell 2013). In response, this thesis expands the scholarly analysis of the movement as to “grasp new atheism as a total social fact: individual and collective, psychological and social, cognitive and perceptual, economic and cultural” (Cimino and Smith 2010, 156). I reunderstand the movement through a normative evaluation of the main arguments and interventions in the discourse on religion and secularism. I contend that behind the dubious term “New Atheism” is a critical theory, an affinity politics, and a public philosophy that are ripe for scholarly inclusion. Granted, “Some of the debates with which the new atheists inevitably and, at times unknowingly, engage” (Amarasingam 2010) are not always clearly related to mainstream scholarship, so my purpose will be to clarify their best contributions through these selected approaches.

### Faith Too Big To Fail?

As the title suggests, the New Atheists focus on and object to the unfalsifiable nature of faith-based belief. Dennett wonders if the religious mindset is equipped to apply punishing skepticism to its strongest convictions, “Do you ever ask yourself: What if I’m wrong?” (2006, 51). According to Harris, the religious mindset guards against skeptical inquiry unless it further confirms its strongest convictions, for “faith is simply the license they give themselves to keep believing when reasons fail. When rational inquiry supports the creed it is championed; when it poses a threat, it is derided; sometimes in the same sentence” (2004, 232). Here I borrow ‘too big to fail’ from the parlance of financiers. Since the global financial crisis and ensuing recession of

the past decade, ‘too big to fail’ has been uttered *ad nauseum*, in particular by critics of Wall Street speculation who hold that the crisis occurred because of a pervasive and unprevented ‘moral hazard’. For years America’s leading financial entities operated without adequate regulatory oversight, and often with the privilege of regulatory collusion. Left to their own self-serving devices, several lending institutions and commercial agencies conspired in disastrous risk-taking that led directly to mass economic meltdown. Political and corporate leaders were helpless to punish the culpable or to leaven the inequality these institutions thrived on, lest they allow the economy to collapse under its own fraudulently amassed weight. Philip Mirowski (2014) argues that neoliberal capitalism survived the financial crisis because it has achieved the status of an unfalsifiable theory of everything: “Neoliberal thought has become so pervasive that any countervailing evidence serves only to further convince disciples of its ultimate truth... it could no longer be falsified by mere data from the ‘real’ economy.” Stephen Mihm connects this recent history to the sordid antiquity of American counterfeit: “Confidence was the engine of economic growth, the mysterious sentiment that permitted a country poor in specie but rich in promises to create something from nothing” (2007, 10). The point is that crises of religion are never far removed from crises of capital. In American law, literature, and political life, faith-based belief is supposedly compatible with scientific inquiry, economic growth, good governance, and strong communities. Moreover, religious faith is avowed as a virtuous orientation and a vital means to partake in spiritual experience, historical narrative, and patriotic displays. The American civil religion, otherwise defined and criticized by the New Atheists as the primary arm of religious correctness, is taken to be an inconvenient cover for religious fundamentalism and the pitfalls of faith-based belief when it occupies the public sphere in an



uncritical discourse.<sup>i</sup> Left unchallenged, religious faith is a moral hazard, even more when it is overwhelmingly enhanced by state, society, and special interests.

The moral hazard of religion is concretized in the taboo that insulates ‘faith’ from public criticism. For the New Atheists, our uncritical accommodation of religion protects faith-based belief from the scrutiny that all other viable endeavors and domains of inquiry must endure. Since religious faith is able to inspire evocative actions and demarcate vast tracts of the ‘sacred’ and the ‘profane’ and the ‘sinful’, this insulation from scrutiny poses unique risks and increasing dangers in a globalized world. As per Harris (2006), “Religion raises the stakes of human conflict much higher than tribalism, racism, or politics ever can, as it is the only form of in-group/out-group thinking that casts the differences between people in terms of eternal rewards and punishments.” As per Dennett, “Religions are certainly the most prolific source of the ‘moral certainties’ and ‘absolutes’ that such zealotry depends on” (2006, 284). As per Dawkins, “Religious faith is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others” (2006, 306). And as per Hitchens (2007), “Religion has been an enormous multiplier of tribal suspicion and hatred, with members of each group talking of the other in precisely the tones of the bigot.” All in all, religious faith is identified as the x-factor because it prepares the ground for false certainty, sectarian division, persecutory sanctions, intellectual repression, and divinely ordained violence. As a result of this ‘religious correctness’, in which public criticism of religion is equated with the needlessly impolitic and offensive, religious fundamentalists are inevitably enabled to take risks in proclaiming their beliefs, risks that are unavailable to religious moderates. Perversely, this exposes religious moderates to the actual costs of having to ‘bail out’ faith-based belief whenever extremists commit some act of violence or callous intolerance.

I simply call this moral hazard “faith too big to fail”, whereas Daniel Dennett refers to this phenomenon as “belief in belief,” the cultural taboo of leaving religion aside or encased from critique. The democratic virtue of tolerance has become a euphemism for the permission to let faith-based beliefs defy falsifiability.<sup>ii</sup> Before he was considered a New Atheist, Dennett wrote, “The lion is beautiful but dangerous; if you let the lion roam free, it would kill me; safety demands that it be put in a cage. Safety demands that religions be put in cages, too – when absolutely necessary” (1995, 515). After 9/11, Americans were encouraged to spend their savings, defend their flag, and most of all, have faith. In other words, by ‘insuring’ the preservation of faith-based belief, religious moderates allow for religious fundamentalism in much the same way that government bailouts allow for the cowboy capitalism of our financial system, and unmanaged cages allow lions to roam free. Ellen Johnson, former president of American Atheists, said, “Today religion is being bailed out by the government. That’s why religion is equated with patriotism” (Cimino and Smith 2014, 23). The equation of piety and patriotism comprises what has come to be known as the American civil religion.

It is a hallmark of scholarship to portray American political culture as a civil religion with deep and palpable historical ‘Judeo-Christian’ roots (Dewey 1934; Herberg 1955; Bellah 1967; Taylor 2007; Gorski 2017). Of course, the founders recognized the command of religion as a social device; the kind described by Edward Gibbon in his evaluation of the Roman world, where religion is true to the common, false to the wise, and useful to the powerful. With the dreams of an enlightened republic astride their bodies of work, many of the founders attempted to moderate the rather paranoid relations between church and state. American secularism became the constitutional and institutional apparatus that would guarantee religious liberty more than the apparatus that would effectively neutralize governmental treatment of citizens endowed with the

liberty of conscience; while the United States was a not a Christian nation *de jure*, it was, in spirit, *de facto* (Sehat 2015). American secularism, then, is a religion-centered secularism: the disestablishment and free exercise clauses institute the category and beneficence of religion that proscribe legal falsification. In many ways, civil religion is the modern social imaginary in which “rights, liberties and democracy” achieves equilibrium with “obedience, hierarchy, belonging to, even sacrifice” (Taylor 2007, 414). In the United States, the “neo-Durkheimian embedding of religion in a state,” that is, a “close interweaving of religion, life-style and patriotism” (2007, 505-506) predominates.

According to Will Herberg, “Religion has become part of the ethos of American life to such a degree that overt anti-religion is all but inconceivable” (1955, 260). Fifty years later, the New Atheism emerged in overt anti-religion fashion, conceived precisely in spite and because of the religious ethos of American life. Herberg also observed that “The new status of religion as a basic form of American ‘belonging,’ along with other factors tending in the same direction, has led to the virtual disappearance of anti-religious prejudice, once by no means uncommon in our national life” (1955, 259). Religion as necessary for social cohesion seems to eliminate or at least discredit anti-religious prejudice that New Atheists represent in national life, yet it is not religion alone that energizes the American civil religion or the New Atheist reaction. “The basic formula for civil religion in American history has been prophetic religion plus civic republicanism<sup>iii</sup>, or, more succinctly, prophetic republicanism” (Gorski 2017, 19). Civil religion, despite pretensions to civic republican virtue, employs theological language draped in the allure of a Promised Land, a chosen people, a destiny to manifest, all in view of divine judgment, as a summary of the American experiment and American exceptionalism, a spotlight cast on that idyllic city upon a hill. Gorski locates the United States within the historical tension that Rousseau articulated

centuries earlier: “No State has ever been founded without a religious basis, and to the latter, that the law of Christianity at bottom does more harm by weakening than good by strengthening the constitution of the State.”

To summarize civil religion along these lines, Rousseau wrote, “There is therefore a purely civil profession of faith of which the Sovereign should fix the articles, not exactly as religious dogmas, but as social sentiments without which a man cannot be a good citizen or a faithful subject.” Tocqueville picked up on this sentimentality most acutely at the level of townships whereby “religion gave birth to Anglo-American society. In the United States religion is therefore commingled with all the habits of the nation and all the feelings of patriotism; whence it derives a peculiar force.” The peculiar force of American civil religion has come to be known as ‘social capital’, the lively and voluntary associations that connect individuals in prosocial bonds conducive to democratic norms (Bourdieu 1983, Putnam 1996; Paxton 2002). The quarantine of social capital by the American civil religion is pivotal to understand the relationship between personal belonging and propositional believing – a matrix of human contact, trust, solidarity, as well as conformity and fervor. In evolutionary terms, it is plausible that Americans, as a nation of immigrants, “embraced a church as a kind of kin-substitute on alien soil... There is no doubt that many Americans see their own local church as an important unit of identity, which does indeed have some of the attributes of an extended family” (Dawkins 2006, 40).

There is no question that religion is a cultural pillar, still central to the American narrative of a patriotic republic that grants religious liberty to all. If the civil religion were to somehow fail, many suppose that the American narrative and the sense of identity it safeguards would be unforgivably damaged. As such, believers and nonbelievers alike do not revel in the alternatives

and tacitly endorse the civil religion as common ground (Nussbaum 2008). A nation without a belief in God, however firm or fervent, is a nation assured of decadence and destruction. As the New Atheists point out, it is rarely ever considered whether faith-based beliefs are justifiable in an existential sense, “Are these addictions? Or are these genuine needs that we should strive to preserve, at almost any cost?” (Dennett 2006, 14). Because they estimate the costs as unceasing, New Atheists suggest that the criticism of religion should be no less barbed than the criticism of the pharmaceutical industry, or any other powerful institution, regnant idea, or cultural pillar that has evolved under shifting historical conditions and introduced tremendous social harms. The New Atheism is ultimately a social movement that demands the criticism (or caging) of religion be seen as an absolute necessity. Here it is worth quoting Dennett at length:

Few forces in the world are as potent, as influential, as religion. As we struggle to resolve the terrible economic and social inequities that currently disfigure our planet, and minimize the violence and degradation we see, we have to recognize that if we have a blind spot about religion our efforts will almost certainly fail, and may make matters much worse. We wouldn't permit the world's food-producing interests to deflect us from studying human agriculture and nutrition, and we have learned not to exempt the banking-and-insurance world from intense and continuous scrutiny. Their effects are too important to take on faith. So what I am calling for is a concerted effort to achieve a mutual agreement under which religion—all religion—becomes a proper object of scientific study.... if we don't subject religion to such scrutiny now, and work out together whatever revisions and reforms are called for, we will pass on a legacy of ever more toxic forms of religion to our descendants. (2006, 38-39)

Of course, the study of religion has been a mainstay in academia for some time. Recent scholarship, in particular, applies incredible scrutiny to the historical and conceptual binary of secularism and religion, as well as the conceits of secularization theory that seem unable to account for the persistence of religion in the modern world. Still, there exists a chasm between the New Atheist insistence on studying religion as a natural phenomenon, deserving of criticism, and the political culture in which religion is studied by academics, reported by journalists, mobilized by politicians, co-opted by capitalists, and perhaps most of all, lived by believers. For

the vast majority of humans, faith is too big to fail insofar as religion is “the best hope we have for peace, a lifeboat we dare not rock lest we overturn it and all of us perish,” and at the same time, secularization in comparatively developed nations indicates that a growing number “see religious self-identification as the main source of conflict and violence in the world, and believe just as fervently that religious conviction is a terrible substitute for calm, informed reasoning” (Dennett 2006, 16). The New Atheists identify an asymmetry wherein secular people “welcome the most intensive and objective examination of their views, practices, and reasons” whereas religious people “often bristle at the impertinence, the lack of respect, the sacrilege, implies by anybody who wants to investigate their views” (Dennett 2006, 17). In making religion a proper object of study, the asymmetrical binary of secular-religious scrutiny cannot persist. Falsification must go both ways if faith-based religion is to maintain the enormous respect it currently relishes.

The definition of politics as the authoritative allocation of values in society is a very helpful one, as there is a positive and negative case for the New Atheism to make – some values to revalue, and others to abandon. Faith-based religion, in the New Atheist view, is not long for our world, if we are to ever build a sustainable collective future and spur civilizational progress in an ethical direction. The levels of violence and division that stem from religion moves their criticism of religion to declare a state of intellectual and political emergency. The imagined reallocation of values that define New Atheist politics requires a comprehensive takedown of faith and a simultaneous transition to rational secular alternatives. This denotes the negative and positive cases the New Atheists represent in their works. As for the negative case, “the primary purpose,” Harris (2006) writes in his *Letter to a Christian Nation*, is to “arm secularists in our society, who believe that religion should be kept out of public policy,” to which Hitchens added,

a ‘clear-eyed rejection’ of religion is accomplished “in the hope of strengthening and arming the resistance to the faith-based, and faith itself” (2007, xxvi). New Atheism thus challenges the willingness of intellectuals to place faith beyond question, or to give religion a pass from firm, fair-minded criticism. As Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2007) puts it, “Some things must be said, and there are times when silence becomes an accomplice to injustice.” It is in this sense of justice that the New Atheists variously enact public criticisms of religion:

While religious tolerance is surely better than religious war, tolerance is not without its problems. Our fear of provoking religious hatred has rendered us unwilling to criticize ideas that are increasingly maladaptive and patently ridiculous. It has also obliged us to lie to ourselves—repeatedly and at the highest levels of discourse—about the compatibility between religious faith and scientific rationality. (Harris 2006)

Up to now, there has been a largely unexamined mutual agreement that scientists and other researchers will leave religion alone, or restrict themselves to a few sidelong glances, since people get so upset at the mere thought of a more intensive inquiry. I propose to disrupt this presumption. (Dennett 2006, 18)

A widespread assumption, which nearly everybody in our society accepts - the non-religious included - is that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an abnormally thick wall of respect, in a different class from the respect that any human being should pay to any other. (Dawkins 2006, 20)

At the very point when Islam ought to be joining its predecessors in subjecting itself to rereadings, there is a "soft" consensus among almost all the religious that, because of the supposed duty of respect that we owe the faithful, this is the very time to allow Islam to assert its claims at their own face value. Once again, faith is helping to choke free inquiry and the emancipating consequences that it might bring. (Hitchens 2007)

A form of religious tolerance in throe to political correctness, the presumption that faith and reason are not in conflict, and the backlash of this presumption in the case of Islam are cited throughout the popular works of the New Atheism, but there are also strands that move beyond criticism. As for the positive case, the New Atheism promotes a strident defense of freethought and emboldens freethinkers to rework the secularization of American political culture, in particular the civil rights, liberties, and prestige of secular citizens. Furthermore, the New Atheist

movement works to amend the rules of public discourse in favor of unfettered inquiry and open-minded debate that informs policy, education, and cultural production at large. Importantly, the New Atheists contend that religion prevents investigation of alternative sources of morality, spirituality, and community. Hitchens challenged his theistic interlocutors, “Propose a right action committed, or morally right statement made, by a believer that could not have been made, or performed, or uttered by a non-believer” and as a corollary, “Can you imagine or can you think of, a wicked action undertaken, or a wicked statement made, by a believer because of their belief that would not be attributable to a non-believer?” Not only is it possible to be ‘good without god’, the New Atheists believe that it is possible to discuss morality in an entirely secular context and on an entirely scientific foundation vis-à-vis the well-being of conscious creatures. Of course, “a kernel of truth lurks at the heart of religion, because spiritual experience, ethical behavior, and strong communities are essential for human happiness” (Harris 2004, 221), but a kernel of truth is insufficient to embrace the persistence of religion.

Dawkins draws on John Lennon’s “Imagine” to conceive of a world devoid of religion and the bevy of avoidable conflict it underwrites, with what he calls the ‘magic of reality’, the aesthetic and intellectual wonders of science and art leftover in a thoroughly secular imaginary. “the mystical reverence for nature” (Gorski et al. 2012, 8). New Atheists hold that both the conceptual notion and numinous experience of nonreligious spirituality deserve respect. According to Dawkins, “a quasi-mystical response to nature and the universe is common among scientists and rationalists,” and while this response has “no connection with supernatural belief”, the New Atheists earnestly attempt to “touch the nerve-endings of transcendent wonder that religion monopolized in past centuries” (2006, 12). Dennett challenges the “common and unreflective” views of spiritual experience that pass in the secular humanist movement: “What



fascinates me about this delightfully versatile craving for ‘spirituality’ is that people think they know what they are talking about, even though—or perhaps because— nobody bothers to explain just what they mean.” (Dennett 2006, 302). Hitchens was confident in the plethora of sources for creative inspiration and ethical reflection, the thrust of which outstrips religious scripture as a unique authority:

There are the beauties of science and the extraordinary marvels of nature. There is the consolation and irony of philosophy. There are the infinite splendors of literature and poetry, not excluding the liturgical and devotional aspects of these. There is the grand resource of art and music and architecture, again not excluding those elements that aspire to the sublime. In all of these pursuits, any of one them enough to absorb a lifetime, there may be found a sense of awe and magnificence that does not depend at all on any invocation of the supernatural. (Hitchens 2007, xxii)

Harris is the most involved purveyor of secular spiritual experience, explaining what he means by spirituality in terms of a ‘rational mysticism’ and ‘contemplative science’. Harris even refers to the positive campaign as a “religion of reason” (Wolf 2006), though in his work sticks with ‘spirituality’, for “there is no other term with which to discuss the efforts people make, through meditation, psychedelics, or other means, to fully bring their minds into the present or to induce nonordinary state of consciousness. And no other word links the spectrum of experience to our ethical lives” (2014, 6-7). Harris conceives of secular spirituality as the “beauty of significance that provokes awe” in a “more personally transformative sense” (2014, 209). And “while a visit to any New Age bookstore will reveal that modern man has embraced a daunting range of “spiritual” preoccupations—ranging from the healing power of crystals and colonic irrigation to the ardors of alien abduction” (Harris 2004), New Atheist spirituality is a searching and skeptical undertaking that attempts “to pluck the diamond from the dunghill of esoteric religion” (2014, 10). This diamond signifies the potential gains of the human species to recognize core truths about ourselves, about one another, and about the changeable nature of our

condition, but “getting it in hand requires that we remain true to the deepest principles of scientific skepticism and make no obeisance to tradition” (2014, 10). The dunghill signifies the dangers of pursuing an intrepid spirituality amenable to expanding modes of scientific inquiry, given the sheer profusion of immorality in our religious lineages.

A secularized version of the human condition, along the lines of New Atheist spirituality, seems to demand that all the relevant virtues of our religious traditions are subsumed in a new humanism, and all their collective and individual vices subdued to an old memory. Compared to the obviously ‘bad parts’ of religion, the seemingly ‘good parts’ have “been spared the same winnowing because we do not yet have a truly modern understanding of our ethical intuitions and our capacity for spiritual experience” (Harris 2004, 20). Once we do, it is supposed, the normative secularization of morality, spirituality, and community is only a matter of time. By normative, I mean the new values, new norms, new rules, new policies, and new spiritual terrain that comprise the New Atheist positive case for secular alternatives to religion. “Whether or not great numbers of human beings will ever be in a position to explore this terrain depends on how our discourse on religion proceeds. There is clearly no greater obstacle to a truly empirical approach to spiritual experience than our current beliefs about God” (Harris 2004, 214). The New Atheism frames this obstacle as a social fact to be overcome through increasingly reasonable and honest conversation. This thesis investigates the New Atheist conversation within the scholarly discourse.

### Research Questions

Ali, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, Hitchens, and the many others referred to as New Atheists severely inveigh on the very same topics that preoccupy scholarly discourse, so I propose solutions along the related lines of clarification, incorporation, vindication, and authentication.

Clarification includes a lucid presentation of New Atheist arguments, denuded of the misconceptions that continue to taint scholarly analysis of the movement. Incorporation requires placing New Atheist arguments within the discourse on secularism and religion, surveying overlap and scrutinizing contrasts. Vindication involves defending the New Atheists as legitimate interlocutors and extremely insightful critics of religion. Authentication entails displaying the ample evidence in support of their views, the purpose and upshot of which are indispensable for political thought. Of course, a project with ambitious scope needs to be grounded in fine-grained research questions (and well-rounded answers), and where interesting questions are in abundance, an ambitious project needs to determine which lie outside its purview. What exactly are the ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’ of the New Atheism? And what conceptual and practical bearing do these ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’ have on contemporary political thought? The key questions are two-fold:

- How do the New Atheists *fit* into political thought?
- How do the New Atheists *fare* once charitably engaged in the scholarship?

In my estimation, Richard Dawkins (2007) prepared the ground for this thesis when he said, “Our struggle is not so much an intellectual struggle, as a political one: What are we going to do about it?” This call to action is a nice summation of the New Atheist social movement, which distinguishes the related, but distinct political struggle to curb policy debates, mobilize citizen networks, and revalue social values, from the intellectual struggle to engage argumentatively with philosophical issues regarding secularism and religion. Breaking down this question, therefore, is paramount to clarifying the struggles and wishes of the movement. Dawkins’s question, “What are we going to do about it?” presupposes another more foundational questions, such as, “How should we understand ourselves?” And this leads to my central question: How should we understand the New Atheism from a scholarly perspective? Given the

heavy-hitting controversy of the movement, I really mean, “How should we re-understand the New Atheism?” And how does reunderstanding New Atheism contribute to the study of religion and secularism?

### Relevance and Significance

Why the New Atheism? Why now? Why is this movement worthy of a defense and further consideration? Why is the task of clarifying the ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’ of the New Atheists important, pressing, and necessary to accomplish? The rise of the nonreligious in the United States, popularly known as “The Nones” or “The Unaffiliated”, has renewed scholarly interest in secular lifestyles (Baker and Smith 2015). The tenability of secularization in America has long been called the principle outlier amidst more advanced nations, but it is no longer the case that the demographic landscape in the United States involves an “unchanging proportion of religiously committed and active citizens” (Habermas 2008). Putnam and Campbell (2010) demonstrate that Americans with advanced education now attend church more regularly than their less educated peers, and as Norris and Inglehart (2011) demonstrate, they do so without holding devout religious belief, “masking the fading strength of underlying religious values” (248). The 22% of Americans who find religion either not too important or not at all important testify to the changing nature of America’s spiritual landscape (Drescher 2016). According to Pew (2015), “The unaffiliated are now second in size only to evangelical Protestants among major religious groups in the U.S.” Gervais and Najle (2017) suggest that as high as one-third of Americans are atheists (as opposed to merely unchurched or religiously indifferent), which implies that dismissals of secularization in America may be premature or miscalculated. Given that this nonreligious growth spurt is projected to continue, other demographical shifts guarantee to contribute to the decline of white Christian America. “By 2044, more than half of all

Americans are projected to belong to a minority group (any group other than non-Hispanic White alone)” (Colby and Ortman 2015). Worldwide, nonbelievers rank fourth behind Christianity, Islam, and Hinduism (Zuckerman and Shook 2017). These developments speak to the possibility of forming even stronger nonreligious coalitions that are politically active and nonreligious communities that amass social capital in ways that both secularize and transcend religious modes.

On the one hand, this claim is clearly nothing more than a consequence of atheists’ greater visibility and of theists feeling vulnerable. On the other hand, this is a sincere expression of atheists’ raised expectations due, at least in part, to the popularity of the new atheism. (Cimino and Smith 2010, 151).

There are several conceivable avenues to explain ‘the rise of the nones’, but the avenue I want to traverse in this thesis involves taking account of the New Atheism and how they have hit a nerve “as both a symptom and cause of a cultural trend which has manifested itself in provocative criticisms of religion” (McAnulla 2013, 125). Part of any explanation for ‘the rise of the nones’ will feature the New Atheist foray into the public sphere, regardless of how they are substantively evaluated. Of course, “disentangling new atheism from the wider non-religious population is no easy task. Atheists often subscribe to a number of overlapping identity markers (such as: “agnostic”, “humanist”, “freethinker”, “skeptic”, “secularist” and so on)” (Kettell 2016). Part of disentangling the influence of New Atheism within this cultural trend is discerning important patterns and shifts in American political thought.<sup>iv</sup> An American progress report published in 2009 claimed that the culture wars were over in light of “ongoing demographic shifts have seriously eroded the mass base for culture wars politics and will continue to erode this base in the future”. However, recent events indicate that reports of this kind are premature and that “out with the old and in with the new” is not yet a popular sentiment in an era of rejuvenated golden-age thinking. However, the relevance and significance of the New Atheism is

apparent only to scholars often and unfortunately for no other reason than to reject their project out of hand. The consensus seems to be that scholars can classify the New Atheism more “as another phenomenon to be explained, than a contribution to the explanation of religious phenomena” (Quadrio 2017, 89). According to Charles Taylor, one of the leading scholarly authorities on religion and secularism,

What we need to do, and this is something many religious people fail to do, is to consider why this phenomena of the new atheism is happening at this time. Atheists are reacting in the same way that religious fundamentalists reacted in the past. They are people who have been very comfortable with a sense that their particular position is what makes sense of everything and so on, and then when they are confronted by something else they just go bananas and throw up the most incredibly bad arguments in a tone of indignation and anger. (Kuipers 2008)

Although the best-selling books and high-profile debates have not totally kept pace with the times, at least as it did over a decade ago, I argue that the New Atheism still promises some interesting and informative contributions, yet have been, on balance, uncharitably encountered, narrowly rendered, and hastily excluded from the scholarly debates. As we will see, Taylor’s response only exemplifies my concern. At this point, it is counterproductive to pretend the New Atheists have nothing of serious interest to offer, or that the phenomenon was merely a short-lived sub-cultural reaction to the persistence of religion. Rather, I consider the New Atheism an important missing piece in our scholarly discourse on secularism and the future of religion. Nevertheless, “because new atheism is not a clearly stated ideology and because it lacks clear leadership as a social movement, there is no definitive statement of new atheist theory” (Schulzke 2013, 780). This is the gap in knowledge on which my thesis is premised: *the definitive statement of New Atheist contributions to political thought*.

## Method and Roadmap

In the chapters entitled ‘New Atheism, New Wars’ and ‘New Atheism, New Left’, I intend to reunderstand the New Atheism along the respective lines of struggles and wishes. The categories of ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’ are an ode to Karl Marx, which have been taken up by many contemporary political thinkers eager to appropriate his definition of political thought. In his own words, Marx referred to political theory as “the self-clarification of the struggles and wishes of the age.” Nancy Fraser holds that political thought, insofar as it functions on Marx’s definition, “frames its research program and its conceptual framework with an eye to the aims and activities of those oppositional social movements with which it has a partisan though not uncritical identification” (1985, 97). It is in this sense that I refer to the New Atheists as having ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’. Since the culture wars endure as a global and domestic phenomenon, a spectacle of conversation and violence, the escalating tension between religious persistence and religious displacement figures among the most significant of our age. As we will see, the New Atheists represent the aims and activities in line with an “oppositional social movement” that takes public issue with the status quo of religious correctness and offers an alternative vision of the future. Hence I turn ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’ into organizational categories that speak to the prominent misconceptions and potential contributions. ‘Struggles’ and ‘wishes’ are intrinsically futuristic because human emancipation is a process of collectively moving our lives toward a state of affairs more conducive to human freedom and human flourishing. The question is “are there deep shifts now in motion which point to a different political future?” (Kelley 1977, 561). To answer this question, I draw on the technique that William Connolly calls “interim visualization”:

It proceeds through a critique of established priorities to an interim image of a possible future. By an interim future I mean one close enough in time and shape to enable us to

think about its possible details, even if the image is apt to be disturbed by surprising events. By image I mean the actual visualization of such a future, a visualization filled with positive affect. (Connolly 2008, xi-xiii)

*Limitations:* To be clear, I am not *producing* a New Atheist political theory, but rather *making explicit* the political thought of the New Atheists and the potential import it may have for scholarship. As I will show, New Atheism is a movement within streams of liberalism, secularism, and humanism, whose controversial status is a result of intellectual schisms that have not been neatly resolved. At their best, New Atheists are self-critical and detect flaws in their own theoretical frameworks. They attempt to explain these flaws and rework explanations from a more cerebral, normative, and evolutionary perspective. This thesis is at once a summary, an analysis, and a normative lens through which to see the debates. In this reunderstanding, I allow the New Atheists, in their own words, to do some heavy lifting (Sam Harris is frequently invoked as the most untiring envoy of the movement). The summary dismissal of the New Atheism is a result of scholars not actually engaging with their work and choosing to lump their criticisms together as those angry “New Atheists”. As Zenk argues, the social movement itself “cannot be subtracted from the label” (2013, 258), so in the absence of a better label with which to frame this thesis, I provisionally use “New Atheism” as the leading designation, as to foreground my claim that the movement has been categorically misconstrued by numerous scholars. It is simply not within the scope of this thesis to move beyond the New Atheism. First must come a thorough re-understanding. According to Connolly, “The single most important effect of positive visualization is the effect it has on our energy to act militantly in support of the interim future visualized” (2008, 95). My main intention is to assess the impediments and possibilities for a secular liberal humanist imaginary conversant with New Atheist viewpoints and revaluation of values. With these methodological parameters in mind, below is a roadmap that outlines some of



the mainstream literature to be reviewed, the arguments to be marshalled, as well as the logical and topical structure of each chapter.

*Literature Review:* Here I provide a background on the New Atheism, as the recent trend in academic scholarship on religion and secularism, and the scholarly reception of the movement within this context. The historical and conceptual terrain of secularization theory is laid out to position the following chapters as substantive analyses of the ways in which the New Atheism fits and fares in the scholarly discourse.

*New Atheism, New Wars:* Here I correct some prominent misconceptions of the New Atheism in terms of ‘struggles’. Given their inordinate emphasis on Islam and Islamism, I frame the prominent misconceptions of this chapter as having arisen during the New Atheist response to the persistence of religion in general and Islam in particular. To be sure, many of these misconceptions stem from the contentious politics of the culture wars in the United States and Europe. But more dire than the ‘culture wars’ are the ‘new wars’ described by Mary Kaldor as a modern hybrid that, in the case of Islamist terrorism, links identity and ideology in a volatile mixture. However, the New Atheist criticism of this volatility within faith-based religion in general and Islam in particular has been overcome by contemptuous and incoherent accusations. Indeed, “the incoherence is symptomatic of the frailty of what might be called the new anti-atheism” (Wood 2009). In my view, the New Atheists have been unfairly maligned by the new anti-atheism, critics of the movement who lend a perfunctory analysis that does not charitably render the purpose and upshot of the New Atheism. For instance, Terry Eagleton understands the New Atheists as “liberal dogmatists, doctrinaire flag-wavers for Progress, and Islamophobic intellectuals” (Eagleton 2009, 169). It is to these erroneous understandings that I turn my attention. In response I argue that the New Atheism levels necessary insights and agendas that

should not be obscured by a lack of scholarly charity. It is my aim to model the charity that has been noticeably absent from these debates. Although New Atheists have addressed several of the misconceptions levelled against them, their postmortem responses to controversy have yet to establish their contributions in mainstream scholarly discourse, and therefore require correction before we can move forward.

*New Atheism, New Left:* Here I make explicit the promising contributions of the New Atheism to the scholarly discourse on religion and secularism in terms of ‘wishes’. Specifically, I argue that the New Atheist treatment of ‘Islamism’ fulfills the post-9/11 scholarly pledge to take religion more seriously through redeploying the power of ideas, reestablishing liberal principles, and reasserting secular citizenship. In addition, I contend that the New Atheist treatment of ‘regressive leftism’ is a nice example of self-critical liberal politics. As such, the New Atheists join other progressive scholars, such as William Connolly, who insist on a new left ‘resonance machine’ that enjoins an assembly who share a liberal ethos and “energizes action in interwoven institutions and individuals including labor unions, churches, the news media, political candidates, writers, investors, governments at all levels, educational intuitions at all levels, consumers, professional associations, international organizes, and the courts” (Connolly 2008, xi-xiii). I present these contributions through three distinct, but related approaches in political thought, namely affinity politics, public philosophy, and critical theory. According to Neuman and Kreuger, “Pre-existing theory provides the empty boxes. The researcher sees whether evidence can be gathered to fill them. The evidence in the boxes confirms or reject the theory” (2003, 329). These selected approaches are intended to serve as correctives to the various misconceptions, verily the ‘empty boxes’ for reunderstanding the New Atheism. I test each approach and survey the relevant evidence through an illustrative method that describes,

explains, and integrates New Atheist viewpoints in the framework of pre-existing theory. Finally, I will summarize the accomplishments, limitations, and implications of this thesis, and then recommendations for future research. As before, it is not within the scope of this thesis to insert a new moniker to replace “New Atheism”. Instead of a different banner to single out the many controversial figures who publicly criticize religion, we will be left with a great merger of affinity politics, public philosophy, and critical theory to reunderstand the future of religion and secularism. Most of all, we will be left with the New Atheist vision for the future, one in which we welcome a new enlightenment. In such a future, the New Atheists contend, faith can, should, will, and must fail.

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... The first spell—the taboo—and the second spell—religion itself—are bound together in a curious embrace. Part of the strength of the second may be—may be—the protection it receives from the first.

The relationship between these two spells is vividly illustrated in Hans Christian Andersen's charming fable "The Emperor's New Clothes." Sometimes falsehoods and myths that are "common wisdom" can survive indefinitely simply because the prospect of exposing them is itself rendered daunting or awkward by a taboo. An indefensible mutual presumption can be kept aloft for years or even centuries because each person assumes that somebody else has some very good reasons for maintaining it, and nobody dares to challenge it.

~ Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006)

## CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Much ink has been spilled on the secularization thesis, but distressingly little has been spilled in understanding the New Atheism as a promising and imperative part of the debates. Many other questions about “what's right, what's wrong, what's inconclusive, and what's missing in the existing literature” (Knopf 2006, 127) still remain unanswered. What is right about the New Atheist criticism of religion? What is wrong about the style and content of the New Atheism? What is missing in the New Atheist perspectives on religion and secularism? Most importantly, for my purposes, what is missing in the scholarly perspectives on the New Atheism? In this first chapter, I review the relevant ways of understanding the New Atheism that scholars have provided. First, I introduce the New Atheism as a vast social movement, only part of which I will analyze in this thesis. Second, I survey the historical and conceptual terrain in secularization theory as to establish the type of scholarship I argue is impinged by the New Atheism. Third, I locate the mainly negative reception of the New Atheism within the scholarly discourse as to preview some prominent misconceptions. Fourth, I better situate the New Atheism within this discourse in order to show why a reunderstanding is essential, given the important overlap in theoretical concerns between the New Atheism and the secularization discourse.

### What is the New Atheism?

To begin, the New Atheism is recognized by most scholars to be a social movement, a phenomenon and unit of analysis that is amenable to the study of politics. According to Charles Tilly, social movements are defined by a fusion of three general features:

1. A sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities (let us call it a *campaign*);
2. Employment of combinations from among the following forms of political action: creation of special-purpose associations and coalitions, public meetings, and solemn

processions, vigils, rallies, demonstrations, petition drives, statements to and in public media, and pamphleteering (call the variable ensemble of performances *the social movement repertoire*); and

3. Participants' concerted public representations of WUNC: worthiness, unity, numbers, and commitment on the part of themselves and/or their constituencies (all them *WUNC displays*) (2009, 3-4)

Although this thesis will focus on the collective claims of the New Atheist campaign and the ramifications they have for target authorities in scholarship and elsewhere, it is important to provide an overview of the social movement in its most expansive sense.<sup>v</sup> By no means is New Atheism purely “an abstract philosophy – it is a thoroughly social phenomenon” (LeDrew 2016, 2). “Certainly, the New Atheism is ‘about’ a certain set of philosophical and political ideas, expressed in a certain way and with a certain tone. But it is also ‘about’ adverts on the sides of buses, parodic internet subcultures, and much else besides” (Buillivant 2010, vii). The social movement unit of analysis comprises precisely this “much else besides” as the context in which the New Atheist repertoire and displays of unity amongst personnel in the public sphere gain traction and attention. The Atheist Bus Campaign, for instance, was the literal and figurative vehicle for the movement in its early stages, whose notorious slogan, “There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life,” became an advertising colossus in the United States and Britain (Lee 2017). As part and parcel of the greater ‘Out Campaign’, New Atheist advertising efforts consistently put forth the message that the coming out process for nonbelievers encompasses a wide variety of individuals, social networks, and worldviews (Brewster 2014; Drescher 2016).

The movement boasts a large internet fan base enamored with New Atheist viewpoints and personalities, found on innumerable YouTube channels, blogs, podcasts, forums, threads, and other miscellaneous websites<sup>vi</sup>. It seems that the extensive and interactive online presence of

New Atheism attests to Tully's prediction that "once social movements establish themselves in one political setting, modeling, communication, and collaboration facilitate their adoption in other connected settings" (2009, 152). According to Cimino and Smith, "the substantial transformations in our contemporary mediascape are creating a new space for atheists to come out, speak out, and 'meet up' in a still largely religious society" (2010, 147). There are noteworthy institutional parameters and points of contact between the New Atheism and similar movements, organizations, and programs in the secular humanist community, such as the Center for Inquiry, the Freedom from Religion Foundation, and the annual Reason Rally. However, the New Atheism is distinctive insofar as their spokespersons differentiate their aims from the merely secular and promote what has been called 'radical secularism' (Sacks 2011; Gorski 2017; Lee 2017).

To be sure, the goals of marginalizing religion and swelling the integrity of science figure prominently into the New Atheist agenda, yet it is unclear whether additional commitments beyond energetic criticism of religion are required to be considered a "New Atheist" (Kettell 2013). Of course, the New Atheists are not limited to Ali, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. Indeed, there are many others that make similar critical noises in public hearings, who could plausibly count as social movement 'personnel'.<sup>vii</sup> As before, "*What the New Atheists share is a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises*" (Hooper 2006, emphasis mine). For purposes of this thesis, I will mostly limit my reunderstanding of the New Atheism to the most popular and representative figures of the social movement: the 'Four Horsemen' and 'One Horsewoman', but this by no means prevents a more expansive reference of New Atheist personnel when necessary or instructive.

The New Atheist ‘campaign’ materialized primarily in the United States and Britain after the terrorist attacks of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001 and July 7<sup>th</sup>, 2005. Amarasingam (2010) refers to these locations as the “twin epicenters” of the movement, although with the publication of New Atheist material in multiple languages, as well as the circulation of New Atheism on the internet, the movement is likely to have a more diffuse global impact that is difficult to quantify (Cimino and Smith 2010; Zenk 2012; Mastiaux 2017). In any case, the New Atheism has resonated in many places with the notoriety of a few widely recognized faces, whose backgrounds speak to the diversity of the movement: Ayaan Hirsi Ali, a feminist activist and Muslim reformer with fellowships at Stanford and Harvard University; Richard Dawkins, an evolutionary biologist at the University of Oxford; Daniel Dennett, an academic philosopher at Tufts University; Sam Harris, a neuroscientist; and the late Christopher Hitchens, a journalist. Their campaign focuses on consciousness-raising, in the sense of bringing public attention to the viability of secular lifestyles and in the sense of enlightening the public about the toxic role of religion.

As before, Dawkins (1986; 1998; 2003), Dennett (1996), and Hitchens (1995; 2001) were publically critical of religion for decades, and rather loosely aligned in their unbelief, before joining forces. In 2002, Dawkins delivered a Ted Talk entitled, “Militant Atheism,” in which he encouraged a political coalition of unbelievers to actively, directly, and roundly challenge religion in the public sphere. But it was Harris (2004) who established the publishing trend, which the others rapidly adopted, that combined a modernist indignation at the target authorities of ‘premodern’ religious enthusiasm and ‘postmodern’ liberal obscurantism manifest in American domestic and foreign policy:

Scriptural literalism, intolerance of diversity, mistrust of science, disregard for the real causes of human and animal suffering—too often, this is how the division between facts and values expresses itself on the religious right. Secular liberals, on the other hand, tend to imagine that no objective answers to moral questions exist. Multiculturalism, moral



relativism, political correctness, tolerance even of intolerance—these are the familiar consequences of separating facts and values on the left. It should concern us that these two orientations are not equally empowering. (Harris 2010, 5)

In 2007, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens met for a roundtable discussion, which cemented the movement as a unified effort to devise forward-looking strategies for secular liberals to advocate a more critical posture toward religion and defense of scientific inquiry. They were christened, in no uncertain terms, as the Four Horsemen and One Horsewoman of the Apocalypse. Although Hirsi Ali did not attend the original roundtable as scheduled, she did join Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris five years later at the Global Atheist Convention for a similar conversation and commemoration of the late Christopher Hitchens. The moniker of “New Atheism” was first coined by the journalist Gary Wolf (2006), and since then has sustained as the most popular description of the movement.<sup>viii</sup> After interviewing Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris, Wolf had written off their unified effort as no more than anti-religious screeds of a kindred character. Wolf painted the New Atheist approach as unlike the easygoing atheism familiar and fond to most unbelievers, “an older, peaceable, quietly frustrated lot, who meet partly out of idealism and partly out of loneliness”. Instead, the collective claims of the New Atheists rebuke fundamentalism, and probe moderates who accommodate public religion and provide a degree of cover and a conducive political culture for fundamentalism to retain influence. Wolf, a fellow atheist himself, refers to the New Atheist declaration of war as a war of ideas:

We are called upon, we lax agnostics, we noncommittal nonbelievers, we vague deists who would be embarrassed to defend antique absurdities like the Virgin Birth or the notion that Mary rose into heaven without dying, or any other blatant myth; we are called out, we fence-sitters, and told to help exorcise this debilitating curse: the curse of faith. The New Atheists will not let us off the hook simply because we are not doctrinaire believers. They condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. (Wolf 2006)

On the point about respect, Dawkins unpacks his contentious approach in the words of the journalist Johann Hari, “I respect you as a person too much to respect your ridiculous beliefs”

(Four Horsemen 2007). Harris focuses on the connection between beliefs and behavior in terms of their neuroscientific underpinnings, as well as the phenomenology that demonstrates this connection. At the level of the brain, it seems, religious beliefs are no different than nonreligious beliefs insofar as they represent a state of affairs that is experientially understood to be true and related to overlapping sites of activity (Harris et al 2008; Harris et al 2009). “A belief is a lever that, once pulled, moves almost everything else in a person's life... Your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior; they determine your emotional responses to other human beings” (Harris 2004, 12). The need to understand the power and danger of religious belief is ever more important, given that religious beliefs are often cast in a transcendent light, which consecrates belief with divine sanction and the utmost motivation. “Religion exploits and engenders five prevalent intellectual vices: black-and-white thinking, wishful thinking, close-mindedness, false certainty, and credulity” (Johnson 2013, 18). For these reasons, religious belief can make humans behave in ways starkly unlike the majority of nonreligious beliefs.

While the percentage of nonreligious Americans continues to grow, the New Atheists struggle with the civil religion and the spell it has cast over faith-based belief. The first spell, according to Dennett, is the ‘belief in belief’, the cultural taboo, and the second spell is specific belief systems, a la every religion. Civil religion is just this ‘belief in belief’, “a sort of camouflage that disengages much-needed criticism” (Dennett 2006, 45), or as Herberg called it fifty years prior, a “faith in faith, this religion that makes religion its own object” (1955, 265). They argue that social tolerance of faith-based belief needlessly constrains political discourse. By leaving religion off the table or by dealing with religion with a hands off approach, that is, not dealing with religion at all, American political culture is divorced from its secular history and aspirations, and the American experience is the worse for it. As such, faith-based beliefs must

undergo vigorous interrogation on par with all other politically important belief systems and repositories of ethical wisdom. As a “sustained, organized public effort making collective claims on target authorities”, specifically collective claims that implicate both religious and secular authorities, the New Atheism can only be understood in the context of religion and secularism.

### Understanding Religion and Secularism

In this section, I survey the historical and conceptual terrain in secularization theory in order to establish the type of scholarship I argue is most impinged by the New Atheism. As theory-laden as the term has become, secularization affords “a focal point for scholarly debate, and empirical knowledge tends to condense and accumulate around theoretical concepts of this sort” (Gorski & Altinordu 2008, 75). The notion that religion was not long for the modern world, as seen in the Enlightenment, eventually became a well-subscribed thesis that achieved a kind of orthodoxy in the social sciences (C. Wright Mills 1959; Anthony Wallace 1966; Bryan Wilson 1966; Thomas Luckmann 1967; Peter Berger 1969; Talcott Parsons 1974). Secularization was broadly understood as a consequence of modernization, a law-like entropy of religion, conjoined at the hip of several other modernist paradigms that afforded the individual and institutional goods religion once alone supplied. In April 1966, the cover of *Time* magazine asked the question, “Is God Dead?” Harkening back to Nietzsche, this question considered secularization to be a process happening in real time. Soon, the question of the death of god would become rhetorical in a modern world that founded rationality in secular and scientific formations. If God was not already dead, He was at the very least on His death bed.

Many scholars operated under the assumption that human development, “Progress”, embodied in secularized institutions and social interactions, would inevitably displace religion to the private sphere, where the erstwhile influence of religion on and function in the public sphere

would be decidedly checked by the state legitimated by virtue of its monopoly on violence. Essentially the state could make war, extract resources, protect markets, and ensure the safety of citizens. All this increasingly without genuflecting to religious sources of authority (Tilly 1985). Astride the death of god is the end of history, specifically the end of religion making history in light of the triumph of secular liberal democracy and capitalism (Fukuyama 1992). This grand/master/metanarrative had obvious implications at the civilizational-level of discourse.

Gilbert Rist (1997) offered a biological metaphor of secularization as human development. Secularization is *directional* insofar as a linear trajectory or teleology. Secularization is *continuous* insofar as connects long-term historical changes of religion losing various points of contact in ordinary lives. Secularization is *cumulative* insofar as it limns the process of maturation from a pre-modern “enchanted world” to a modern “disenchanted world” through our accrued stores of knowledge. Finally, secularization is *irreversible* insofar as it denies the notion that a later stage of secularism could regress to an earlier stage of religion. Thus, secularization became the pet theory of both Western intelligentsia and political entrepreneurs, or as some have called it, “an ideological imperialism masquerading as an intellectual inevitability” (Gregory 2012, 386). Policy analysts and diplomats alike supposed the displacement of traditional religion to be a hallmark of modernization and globalization. As a universal process, secularization resonated with burgeoning models of economic development and international intervention in non-Western regions, destined for secular markets and secular statehood. To summarize the original thesis a la Douglas Adams: *Well That About Wraps It Up for God*. Certain historical occurrences in the twentieth century, however, rekindled an urgent sense of intrigue in religion. Parallel developments in nearly every society penned unanticipated additions to the history of religion. The persistence and the perseverance of religion, in seeming

disregard of modernization, came as a surprise to scholars who cast sociological aspersions on the future of religion.

Liberation theologies crossbred with socialism in Central and South America. The budding dominion of Catholicism and Pentecostalism extended in Africa and South America. In the United States, progressive and liberal religion spurred the Civil Rights movement while reactionary and conservative religion spurred the Christian Right. Islamist theocracy and terrorism struck a wide range of Muslim-majority countries, as well as parts of Europe in which panic spread astride the influx of ill- assimilatory migrants/refugees and ill-accommodative governments. The protracted Israeli and Palestinian conflict defined the foreign policy of an entire region. Buddhist and Hindu nationalism in South Asia complicated the indexes of post-colonial trajectories. Even New Age spirituality turned patrons onto various items of occult interest. This historical and current survey of religious persistence – in terms of values and violence – comes to us as a global resurgence. “The resurgence of religious faith is a type of cultural critique of the kind of world modernity has brought us. It marks the end of a certain kind of modern faith in the idea of progress, and an optimism about the ability of science and technology to solve the problems created by the modern world” (Thomas 2005, 43). The global spread of religious missions, the rise of fundamentalism, and the cynical political use of religion forcefully counter the metanarrative once in vogue (Habermas 2008; Walzer 2015). What happens when a simple idea, perhaps an oversimplified idea, meets a complicated turn of events and revivals? According to Nick Srnicek and Alex Williams,

The complex and often disastrous record of the twentieth century demonstrated conclusively that history could not be relied upon to follow any predetermined course. Regression was as likely as progress, genocide as possible as democratization. In other words, there was nothing inherent in the nature of history, the development of economic systems, or sequences of political struggle that could guarantee any particular outcome (2015, 73).

Clearly, the aforementioned turn of events and revivals apply to the predetermined course of secularization. These are but a few shining piety movements and religious surges, some of which are fundamentalist, some of which are reformist, but all of which resist the formulation of the secularization thesis and all of which establish the objections of religious populations who felt marginal and misgiven within the disenchanting modern world. These events and revivals also confirm the suspicions of many scholars longtime unconvinced of such “subtraction stories.” A sociological theologian and prolific critic of the secularization thesis, David Martin (1965; 1978; 2005) points to the ideological and statecraft dimensions of secularism as most indicative of its downfall. The recent trend in secularization theory recasts modernity as a context-dependent historical process whereby religious traditions adapt to, as well as contest, modern forms of life. Though some religious traditions have nosedived into obscurity or ruin, mainstream (well-subscribed) religions like Buddhism, Christianity, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism, and Sikhism remain on the world historical stage.

Many scholars now echo the complaint that both religion and secularism were conceptually misunderstood or misplaced in the original secularization thesis. The version of secularization whose prognosis for religion was undeniably bleak, is longer sacrosanct in academic circles, much less credible. In fact, the original thesis became a sacred myth of the social sciences (Hadden 1987; Bellah 1991). As will be seen in the second chapter, this is the version of secularization many scholars believe the New Atheists try to resuscitate. Religion, it is now understood, is capable of strong persistence despite ceding many of its functions to secular institutions, and much of its authority to individual adherents (Casanova 1994). The binary of public and private religion is obliterated when we reinterpret private to mean “personal relevance”, which is observably compatible with “public influence.” Hence recent theory

understands and explains the persistence of religion as it persists at the societal, organizational, and individual levels of society (Dobbelaere 2002). On the basis of ‘public religions’, recent secularization theory revises secularization in more intricate terms, as a contingent, non-linear, and reversible process whose path depends on specific religious cultures (Asad 2003).

The work of Charles Taylor (2007) exemplifies the contemporary sea change in political theory, sharply moving away from what he considers naïve “subtraction stories”, particularly those that have prized a strictly rational public sphere, a debate that preoccupied the likes of Habermas and Rawls for many years. Taylor opts out of the anticipatory mood to better understand and trace the conditions that undergird our phenomenological movements within modern forms of pluralism. Generally, this approach is “more analytically specific, and less politically laden” (Gorski & Altnordu 2008, 75) than the preceding approach that sought to predict the demise of religion. In this vein, Peter Berger underlined the importance and power of alternative worldviews that inevitably lacerate the “sacred canopy” of a given religious culture. Pluralism alters the lived experience of individuals within every religious culture it touches. As such, the plausibility structure of a secularized culture becomes increasingly open to new formations and arrangement, many of which apply pressure to religious thought. As many have noted, Berger recanted his acceptance of the original secularization thesis and has come to see current events with new eyes, “as furiously religious as it ever was, and in some places more than ever” (1999, 2). This recent trend not only desacralizes secularization theory as, in Burger’s words, “essentially mistaken”, but recognizes the de-secularization in much of the world, “an emerging majority view that the secularization paradigm is effectively moribund” (LeDrew 2016, 61).

The pluralism approach to understanding religion and secularism remains intact and in many ways guides the discourse today. Taylor argues that our age is definitively secular, insofar as the “index of doubt” has been noticeably raised over time to signal a grand experiential shift in terms of our religious belief and unbelief. William Sims Bainbridge (1997), Laurence Iannaccone (1998), and Rodney Starke and Roger Finke (2000), and others have applied rational choice models to the growing religious pluralism. The need for affiliation and for our God-sized holes to be filled is seemingly best met by religious organizations. By extension, this supply-side paradigm assumes the inelasticity of religious demand no matter the level of human development. “The biggest problem for the prophets of secularization is that the surge of religion is being driven by the same two things that have driven the success of market capitalism: competition and choice” (Micklethwait and Wooldridge 2009, 21). As David Martin puts it, “declining social significance is entirely compatible with increased critical activity in the public sphere” (2014, 11). Although pluralism may, on balance, reduce fundamentalist convictions, globalized religious pluralism in a conducive and fair-minded democratic atmosphere tends to increase denominational competition between religious ‘firms’, which come to form and refine a marketplace of religious experience. While skeptics of the religious economy model have shown that it is not replicable outside the seeming anomaly of the United States, it is an indispensable part of American ‘social capital’, the lively and voluntary associations that connect individuals in prosocial bonds conducive to democratic norms (Bourdieu 1983, Putnam 1996; Paxton 2002). The quarantine of social capital by religious organizations is pivotal to understand the relationship between personal belonging and believing – a matrix of human contact, trust, solidarity, as well as conformity and fervor.

Whether we call pluralism an up-switch on the index of doubt, a wide opening in terms of



the plausibility structure, or an expanding religious marketplace, lived experience attests to the positive reality of tolerance. Thus, the discourse on secularization has redefined the ideology and statecraft of secularism in terms more positive than its association with religion previously allowed. Secularism is now understood as a *presence* rather than an *absence*. Taylor calls this presence the “immanent frame,” that is, the orientation of human society to natural (as opposed to supernatural) values, as well as the autonomous shift away from metaphysics and toward worldly pursuits of knowledge, power, and communion. As will be seen in the third chapter, the New Atheists envision a secularism positively invigorated by public reason, rather than a secularism merely devoid of faith. Two edited volumes, *Varieties of Secularism in a Secular Age* (2010) and *Rethinking Secularism* (2011), enlisted prominent scholars, such as Talal Asad, Wendy Brown, Judith Butler, Jose Casanova, Craig Calhoun, William Connolly, Saba Mahmood, John Milbank, and others, whose work regularly engages the realities and possibilities of secularism. Although secularism by necessity implicates religion, there are more than a few conceptions of how secularism relates to religion.

It is either the absence of it, the control over it, the equal treatment of its various forms, or its replacement by the social values common to a secular way of life... it is therefore in need of elaboration and understanding. Whether it is seen as an ideology, a worldview, a stance toward religion, a constitutional framework, or simply an aspect of some other project – of science or a particular philosophical system. (Calhoun, Juergensmeyer, and VanAntwerpen 2011, 5)

The consensus seems to be that only a multiplicity of secularisms and modernities encounters the empirical realities of a modern world that appears everywhere multiplied and rarely clasped by simplistic prediction. These edited volumes were followed up with a public radio podcast series, *The Myth of the Secular* (2012) hosted by David Cayley, as well as the distinguished internet blogpost of the same name, the “Immanent Frame: Secularism, Religion, and the Public Sphere.” *The Myth of the Secular* podcast featured such prominent scholars, all of

whom suggested “the old map of the religious and the secular no longer fits the territory” (Caley 2012), and so the very categories of religion and secularism are thrown into question and critiqued. After all, both religion and secularism are constructs that are historically contingent in nature, with religion being an invented noun of recent history and secularism being a transfiguration of an ancient Christian dichotomy (Smith 1962).

Jurgen Habermas (2008) introduced the term “post-secularism” as a catchword to account for the “unexhausted force” of religious faith and the fatigued deficits of secular reason. He went so far as to publish a dialogue with then Catholic prefect, Joseph Ratzinger, who would thereafter assume the papacy. His work has since disclosed noteworthy shifts in his public criticism of religion because of the shortcomings of a “narrow secularist consciousness,” the kind of hortatory confidence (“secularistic certainty,” in Habermas’s words) that overlooked the intrinsically political character of religion. Many “secularized” countries, especially in Western Europe, assumed a trajectory of overcoming religious influence, but given the drastic changes in demographic composition within and without these countries, secular citizens must peacefully apportion the public sphere in steady engagement with religious citizens. “Quite apart from their numerical weight, religious communities can obviously still claim a ‘seat’ in the life of societies that are largely secularized” (Habermas 2008), provided that the communicative gulf between religious and secular citizens does not carry over a resolutely secularist answer. As will be seen in the second chapter, many scholars construe the New Atheism as a resolutely secularist campaign unable to productively engage with religious citizens. In contrast, Habermas argues that conflict resolution co-mediated by secular and religious minds may stand as a sort of second-chance secularism, lest tensions worsen as a result of globalizing seizures of national power that depoliticize and fragment democratic contestation. According to Anthony Giddens,

We are the first generation to live in global society, whose contours we can as yet only dimly see. It is shaking up our existing ways of life, no matter where we happen to be. This is... emerging in an anarchic, haphazard, fashion... it is not settled or secure, but fraught with anxieties, as well as scarred by deep divisions. Many of us feel in the grip of forces over which we have no control (2002, 19).

The post-secular age requires a coming together of religious and secular worldviews, a complementary learning process that broadens religious and secularist consciousness through communicative and discursive practices. The purpose of his reconceptualization is to move “from an uneasy *modus vivendi*”, wherein religious and secular citizens are belligerents of the culture wars, to a “balance between shared citizenship and cultural difference”, wherein religious and secular citizens peaceably renegotiate the terms and conditions of the public sphere. Wendy Brown takes the post-secular condition as something to be overcome, whereupon “the context of a progressivist Western historiography of modernity” comes apart from the development of “a more democratic, reasoned, and cosmopolitan bearing” (2009, 179). As will be seen in the third chapter, the New Atheists believe that a peaceable renegotiation is possible but underline the responsibility of liberals to find this balance through a reasoned, cosmopolitan bearing. The research program of comparative secularisms implores scholars to survey the global landscape to figure out if the persistence of religion is compatible with democratic deliberation in the public sphere across cultures (Stepan 2001, Diamond 2005; Ekins 2005). The primary models of contemporary secularism, including the American, British, French, and Indian varieties, typify the spectrum of assertive and passive state policies of separation and regulation toward religion (Khuru 2009). At this point, the persistence of religion is indisputable – the majority of the global population is religious and growing – but what is disputed is whether this orientation is compatible or parallel with the secularization of developed societies and the growing number of nonbelievers within them. As will be seen in the second and third chapters, the New Atheists use

a comparative perspective to differentiate the harm contemporary forms of religiosity are likely to produce, with Islam at the front of their critique.

As an abstract and dramatic analysis of human development, the original secularization thesis is justifiably described as controverted, yet many aspects of secularization maintain empirical support. According to Steve Bruce (2002), *desacralizing* secularization does not *discontinue* secularization. In the West, liberal industrial democracies have experienced a precipitous decline in the cognitive and functional role of religion. Bruce defends the unfashionable theory of secularization despite the fact that it has been repeatedly upbraided. Contrary to the popular scholarly opinion that paints ‘secularization’ as an academic myth or apparatus of state and market interests, Bruce’s version does not assert universal coverage, inevitable onset, an even trajectory, or the truth value of atheism. “The bottom line is this: individualism, diversity and egalitarianism in the context of liberal democracy undermine the authority of religious beliefs” (Bruce 2002, 30). Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2011) further provide an informative defense of the secularization thesis that avers the overall experience of existential security and human development in advanced nations drives secularization. Although they do not deny the problematic features of the original thesis – secularization is “a tendency, not an iron law” – they present important amendments that stress how “religiosity persists most strongly among vulnerable populations, especially those living in poorer nations, facing personal survival-threatening risks” (2011, 4). This demand-side paradigm assumes the opposite of the religious economy supply-side theory, such that demand for religious goods and services is elastic and contingent on various matrices of development. However, uneven and unsustainable global development has generated a perverse state of affairs wherein “rich societies are secularizing but they contain a dwindling share of the world’s population;

while poor societies are not secularizing and they contain a rising share of the world's population" (2011, 25).

Norris and Inglehart acknowledge the multiplicity of paths that secularization may take across nations with divergent religious cultures, but they hold this multiplicity to be consistent with the hierarchy of needs and values they map onto the world historical stage. Importantly, their view of human development does not pretend neutrality nor disguise the package of goods that accompany modernization, equality, and existential security: "In the long term, if high levels of existential security are conducive to secularization, then expanding human security through sustainable development around the world, and economic equality within societies, may contribute to reducing tensions over religious values" (2011, 282). As I will argue in reunderstanding the New Atheism, the movement defends the tenability of secularization "*to the extent that it is a normative prescription for the development of modern societies*" (LeDrew 2016, 63, emphasis mine). The New Atheists imagine a long-term confrontation with religious values that de-escalates tensions by criticizing the defects of religious values and offering different sources of values. However, it is necessary to survey how the New Atheism has been heretofore understood before I can preview the case for how it needs to be reunderstood.

### Understanding the New Atheism

It could be said that secularization was *beset* by the persistence of religion in the public sphere, as well as in violent conflicts worldwide. In turn, it could also be said, the New Atheist criticism of religion *upsets* the once favored assumptions and assurances of secularization. Martin Mickan (2010) dubbed the New Atheism 'The Community of Reason as a Social Movement of Secularization', and I take this as one way into understanding the New Atheism in the context of the discourse on religion and secularism. In this section I pinpoint the reception of

the New Atheism within scholarly discourse. Over the course of the past decade, the New Atheists have been “both cheered and jeered” (Gorski and Altinordu 2008, 57). Sympathetic observers remark on the effectiveness of atheist consciousness-raising, the timely challenge to religious fundamentalism, the advocacy of scientific literacy, and crisp articulations of secular morality. Cimino and Smith note how the New Atheists have galvanized secular humanist organizations such as ‘American Atheists’ and secular humanist magazines such as *Free Inquiry*:

The new atheist books—and the enormous amount of secondary literature that interest in them has generated in the form of articles, blogs, forums, podcasts, webcasts, conferences, lectures, news stories, debates, deconversion narratives, blasphemy challenges, bus ads, and even (rebuttal) sermons—have succeeded in familiarizing much of the world with atheism. (2010, 148)

Media coverage of New Atheists, however fair-minded or inflammatory the tone, has generated a kind of profile-raising unbeknownst to erstwhile unbelievers, which facilitates an ever more vocal and visible minority.<sup>ix</sup> Phillip Johnson and John Mark Reynolds contend that the New Atheism “opens up an opportunity for university discussions in and out of the classroom that can make teaching more exciting for the instructor and the students” (2010, 8). Remarking on the cultural taboo that the New Atheists have enthusiastically violated, specifically in the context of academia, “The resulting tumult legitimates critical discussion of questions that have been swept under the rug for decades by the intellectual classes” (2010, 9). Elizabeth Drescher notes that the New Atheism has been a source of inspiration for the growing percentage of nonreligious Americans, many of whom operate without companion memoirs to validate their experience in a culture where narratives of the nonreligious are “more often told by the religiously affiliated. Typically, these are presented as cautionary tales cast in terms of loss and failure, the tragedy of religious change mitigated only by the hope that the prodigals will eventually return” (2016, 54).

For the most part, however, the scholarly reception of the movement has been broadly ambivalent by secular humanist activists and decidedly antagonistic by scholars. Taboos entail censure when trespassed, and given the severity of violating the taboo that protects faith-based belief, the New Atheism has borne the brunt of this censure. “No sooner had the New Atheism become a cottage industry than a competing cottage industry of anti-New-Atheist and predominantly pro-Christian apologetics had sprung up beside it” (Johnson 2013, 6). To this day, the outcry of negative responses from across scholarly disciplines cramp an improved understanding of New Atheism despite the fact that “there is now a vibrant publishing industry devoted to the articulation and assessment of these various critical charges” (Kidd 2017, 51). These disciplines include philosophy (Pigliucci 2013; Ruse 2013), theology (Keller 2008; Copan and Craig 2009; Plantinga 2011; McGrath 2013), history (Painter 2012; LeDrew 2016; Oppy 2017), literature (Bradley and Tate 2010), education (Noddings 2008; Johnson and Reynolds 2010), law (Larson 2013), sociology (McAnulla 2014), biology (Wilson 2012), mathematics (Lennox 2009), psychology (Haidt 2012), anthropology (Konner 2008; Atran 2010; de Waal 2013), religious studies (Armstrong 2009; Aslan 2010), journalism (Hedges 2009; Werleman 2015), and political science (Eagleton 2009; Wilde 2010). This section highlights the most common objections to the movement.

Both the style and the substance of the New Atheist criticism of religion have received sharp disapproval, hailed as an unsavory mix of insensitive gainsaying, unsophisticated polemics, impractical strategies, and even ill-concealed bigotry toward religious populations, namely Muslims. With titles like *The End of Faith*, *Breaking the Spell*, *The God Delusion*, *Infidel*, *god is Not Great* (Hitchens 2007), *Godless*, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, *Faith vs. Fact*, *Heretic*, and so on, it is no surprise that the movement was quickly construed as an enemy of

faith-based belief. Aaron James (2012), in his national bestseller *Assholes*, contends that Dawkins, and presumably other New Atheists, stands behind an asshole title, which is replete with bombast and hyperbole and which lacks seriousness and credibility. Moreover, James crowns Dawkins, and presumably other New Atheists, an honorary asshole insofar as they argue “cocksurely that the views of millions of reasonable and intelligent people (even if ultimately mistaken) have no merit whatsoever and feels entitled to give sloppy treatment to arguments for the existence of God that have seriously engaged philosophers of thousands of years” (2012, 40). This short excerpt provides a laundry list of complaints regularly levied against the New Atheists: their “cocksure” and “entitled” rhetorical stance, their “sloppy” philosophy, and their “unqualified” status as interlocutors.

In some sense, the overwhelming negative reception is unsurprising. “Their tone is overtly confrontational rather than gently persuasive” (Hooper 2006), and this lack of delicacy has created a rift amongst those who may identify as an atheist, agnostic, secularist, etc. Clearly, then, an explicit secular or atheist identity is not enough to adopt the New Atheist stance toward religion. Substantive tensions persist within and without the New Atheism, although it is important to note, “A social movement open to internal antagonism is a movement that is active, not fractured” (Cimino and Smith 2010, 155). Within the narrow movement, Ali, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens operate as agreeable colleagues. Nevertheless, while there is incredible consensus on many important items, “New atheist authors have diverging emphases and sometimes contrasting opinions” (McAnulla 2013, 126). There is also occasional discord between major figures within the movement, “as is normal in the claustrophobia of powerless subcultures” (Wolf 2006). This, in turn, makes it extremely difficult to generalize about the movement as well as to treat the New Atheists as “a single person with four heads” (Harris



2007), or five heads, or however many horsemen and women it requires to usher in the end of faith. While Dawkins may claim that he is not confrontational, and that he does not consider the adversarial format “as well designed to get at the truth”, the New Atheists have “acquired a reputation for pugnacity towards religion” (2006, 281). As such, the Buddhist philosopher Stephen Batchelor points out, “The militancy of their atheist rhetoric has obscured a rather more nuanced attitude to questions of religious experience that comes through elsewhere in their writings” (Fisher 2011). For instance,

Sam Harris, in particular, is clearly sympathetic to and has practiced Buddhist meditation. Christopher Hitchens’ endorsement of my last book declares a surprising openness to the possibility of ‘numinous’ experience. And Richard Dawkins has recently published a book called *The Magic of Reality*. (Fisher 2011)

Likewise, Evan Thompson suggests that the spiritual components of New Atheism, rather than the critical dismissal of religion, are key to the secularization of spirituality “in a way maintains and enriches what’s best, which are the contemplative traditions and the social ethics informed by them, while leaving behind regressive and outmoded belief systems” (Frenkel 2015). The source of the greatest contrast opinion amongst the New Atheists is the place and priority of the atheist identity in the criticism of religion and promotion of secularism.<sup>x</sup> Dawkins and Dennett generally agree that the political enfranchisement of nonreligious naturalists ought to emulate the feminist and gay liberation movements of recent memory. As Tilly suggests, this is emblematic of social movements: “Standing claims assert ties and similarities to other political actors, for example as excluded minorities” (2009, 151). Of course, the ‘atheist’ identity is notoriously disliked amongst minorities, branded with the scarlet letter “A” (Schmidt 2016), yet “there are many people who know, in their heart of hearts, that they are atheists, but dare not admit it to their families or even, in some cases, to themselves. Partly, this is because the very word 'atheist' has been assiduously built up as a terrible and frightening label” (Dawkins 2006,

4). According to Kettell, the ties and similarities asserted by New Atheists have both modern and postmodern emphases.

New atheism seeks to advance a distinctly modernist agenda based on a reassertion of the Enlightenment-based principles of reason and rationality (precisely the kind of metanarrative that postmodernists railed against), but does so by utilizing distinctly postmodern concerns and strategies based on issues of culture and identity. (Kettell 2016)

In any case, the standing claims to an ‘atheist’ identity have not been unanimously accepted. Harris and Hitchens generally disagree with Dawkins and Dennett in this respect, arguing that ‘Atheist’ is by definition without significant content and the surrogate ‘Bright’ smacks of condescension no matter how it is explained. This tension within the New Atheist inner circle introduces the following paradox:

Atheists want to mobilize to challenge and eliminate the stigma associated with nonbelief. However, in mobilizing and articulating claims they need to use the stigmatized identity they aim to change. In doing so, and in seeking recognition, they run the risk of strengthening the biased social category of nonbelief they aim to overturn insofar as it suffers from historical stereotypes and is associated with negative characteristics and carries negative connotations (Cimino and Smith 2014, 43-44)

The New Atheists are by no means the first movement to encourage self-criticism of the ‘atheist’ identity. Marx wrote, “Atheism, as the denial of this unreality [of theism], has no longer any meaning, for atheism is a negation of God, and postulates the existence of man through this negation.” At some point, it is meant, atheists should be able to positively define themselves in a way that is “no longer mediated through the abolition of religion.” This is precisely what Charles Taylor (2007) means when he says “God is still a reference point for unbelievers” and when Stephen Batchelor (2011) says an ‘atheist’ identity “paradoxically keeps one in thrall to the language of theism”. The solution to the problem of atheism, on this account, becomes a matter of “moving past it without abandoning it” (Develennes 2016, 131). Many atheists enjoy satirizing the ‘atheist’ identity by noting that “bald is not a hair color”, “not collecting stamps is

not a hobby,” and “there is no special word for saying that I do not believe in the tooth fairy.”

But Harris went so far as to refute the ‘atheist’ identity at the Atheist Alliance Conference, echoing the complaints of Marx who saw atheism as a given starting point, but not an end:

Atheism is not a philosophy; it is not even a view of the world; it is simply an admission of the obvious. In fact, "atheism" is a term that should not even exist. No one ever needs to identify himself as a "non-astrologer" or a "non-chemist." We do not have words for people who doubt that Elvis is still alive or that aliens have traversed the galaxy only to molest ranchers and their cattle. (2006, 51)

Rather, “All we need are words like ‘reason’ and ‘evidence’ and ‘common sense’ and ‘bullshit’ to put astrologers in their place, and so it could be with religion” (Harris 2007). Harris ultimately rejects the identity politics of atheism because “the rejection of absurdity is much bigger than atheism.” The rejection of absurdity, having standards of reason, evidence, common sense, and bullshit, approximates the New Atheist conception of scientific inquiry and secular ethics. As Onfray argues, atheism is instrumental in coming to “another morality, a new ethic” (2007, 34). Atheism, as a philosophical default on the level of non-astrology and non-alchemy, is an instructive redefinition. Neither ‘non-astrologer’ nor ‘non-chemist’ count as identities because the rejection of alchemy and astrology as legitimate modes of inquiry is largely a given. It is a *contingent* given, as is the presumably widespread unbelief in mythic gods. Atheism, then, is relative to whatever deity or deities are being denied.

None of us feels an obligation to disprove any of the millions of far-fetched things that a fertile or facetious imagination might dream up. I have found it an amusing strategy, when asked whether I am an atheist, to point out that the questioner is also an atheist when considering Zeus, Apollo, Amon Ra, Mithras, Baal, Thor, Wotan, the Golden Calf and the Flying Spaghetti Monster. I just go one god further. (Dawkins 2006, 77)

However, the advice to drop the ‘atheist’ identity is continuously raised without a consensus because “such advice significantly downplays the strong, and often primary, identity commitment atheism holds for many secularists” (Cimino and Smith 2014, 143). According to

Hitchens, the necessity of atheism in the zeitgeist of a largely religious world, a secular age as per Taylor, is blatantly unlike the necessity of a-toothfairyism:

We do not have to emerge from a past when tooth fairies held sway. The fans of the tooth fairy do not bang on your door and try to convert you. They do not insist that their pseudo-science be taught in schools. They do not condemn believers in rival tooth fairies to death and damnation. They do not say that all morality comes from tooth fairy ceremonies, and that without the tooth fairy there would be fornication in the streets and the abolition of private property. They do not say that the tooth fairy made the world, and that all of us must therefore bow the knee to the Big Brother tooth fairy. They do not say that the tooth fairy will order you to kill your sister if she is seen in public with a man who is not her brother. (Hitchens 2007, xxi)

In emerging from this theistic past and filibustering a theistic present, Hitchens recommends the position of ‘anti-theism’ that happily respites in the improbability of theism and would not wish theism to be true even whilst maintaining atheism. Given the aggressive nature of explicitly oppositional positions, New Atheists have polarized supporters and addled colleagues, both for questioning the tenability of the ‘atheist’ identity and refusing to accommodate religious moderates as a political tactic. In this way, New Atheists fit the description Michael Walzer associates with the dedicated social critic, for whom “his fiercest criticism is often aimed at those individuals and groups to whom he feels closest, who are most likely to disappoint him” (2003, 451). This applies to the New Atheist insistence on relentless criticism of specific beliefs, often to the exclusion of partnerships with religious or secular liberals that want to maintain the integrity of religious faith.

Many secular liberals, otherwise reliable allies on a number of issues, have distanced themselves from the aggressive style of New Atheists (Bagini 2007; Epstein 2009; Aiken and Talisse 2011; Kitcher 2011; Berlinerblau 2012; De Botton 2012; Stedman 2012; Kurtz 2014). Many of these secular liberals who object have been dubbed the ‘New’ New Atheists, taking the critique of religion in practical directions that favor interfaith dialogue and inoffensive study. As

a matter of strategy, it is argued, spreading the good word of atheism, and the strident identity that goes along with it, contradicts ground level efforts to combat fundamentalist intrusion in public policy, such as the teaching of creationism and intelligent design in public schools. Instead, these matters are best administered by those generally tolerant of and gentler toward religion, many of whom are signatories of humanist manifestoes or otherwise progressive religionists. These tensions recapitulate centuries old differences of opinion and strategy amongst committed secularists:

One of the key fault lines within the British secularist movement during the nineteenth century, for example, involved factional in-fighting around the leading figures of George Holyoke and Charles Bradlaugh, central to which was a dispute over whether non-religious activism should openly confront religious authority (the approach favored by Bradlaugh) or adopt more accommodating political strategies (preferred by Holyoke). (Kettell 2016)

In-fighting continues over the seemingly mutually exclusive approaches of ‘confrontation’ and ‘accommodation’. McAnulla (2013) designates the New Atheism as a “refreshed version” of the Bradlaugh camp. Despite the historical precedents in secularist campaigns, some critics reject the very possibility of an ‘atheist’ identity politics. Simply put, “Atheism is not a social movement” (Stahl 2010). “There is simply no program or manifesto of ‘New Atheism’ and there is no all-embracing organization, in which all, or even most, of the so-labelled persons are united” (Zenk 2013, 255). “Secularists (or de facto atheists) have no group-specific traits in common but their disbelief” (Cimino and Smith 2014, 48). Without a program, manifesto, group-specific traits, or even an underlying movement, many have pointed out that the New Atheist critique of religion is more imitative of ‘Old Atheism’, as it draws on a vast tradition of irreligious thought. This much is obvious since each New Atheist pays regular homage to intellectual predecessors. Case in point, Hitchens (2007a) edited *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Non-Believer*, an anthology that repackages ancient and modern

critiques of religion proffered by a variety of freethinkers. Several other edited volumes, such as Dimitrios Roussopoulos (2008), reiterate the indebtedness of the New Atheists to the well-worn ground of their daring forebearers.

Dawkins, as Baron d'Holbach did, deploys science against religion; this renowned evolutionary biologist is particularly scathing on the argument for "intelligent design." Hitchens disputes religion's historical and moral claims, as Jean Meslier did. As Charles Bradlaugh and Ernestine Rose often did, Harris underlines the connections among various contemporary outrages and religions, particularly Islam (not the main target of those eighteenth-and-nineteenth century Europeans). (Stephens 2014, 269)

By 'daring' it is also meant 'disorderly'. On balance, New Atheist argumentation has been generally received more as a subpar and insipid simulacrum of past critiques of religion than an endearing homage (Gray 2007; Haught 2008). Bradley and Tate describe the New Atheism as "distinctly post-Humean but fatally pre-Nietzschean expression of nonbelief" (2010, 105). LeDrew describes the New Atheism as "new only to the extent that it is current, while the ideology it advances is no different from the scientific atheism that arose from a fusion of Enlightenment rationalism and Victorian Darwinism in the nineteenth century" (2016, 4). Which is to say, the New Atheists are in fact philosophically untrained, theologically unrefined, and scientifically overconfident. Many critics suggest that wither their vicious style the New Atheists are without the requisite academic credentials to study religion. Their seemingly untutored content is what displaces their attempt at taking philosophy to the public sphere. Alvin Plantinga (2007) describes their philosophical forays as "at best sophomoric, but that would be unfair to sophomores." Michael Ruse (2009) quips that Dawkins could not pass an introductory philosophy of religion course. Stanley Hauerwas said, "Quite frankly I cannot bring myself to read most of [the New Atheist literature]... The secular has just become so stupid. They don't know how the grammar of our faith works" (David, Keller, and Stanley 2010, 111). Mark Johnston (2011) describes the movement as an 'undergraduate' atheism that elides the

‘postgraduate’ literature on religion. Cornel West (2011) calls the New Atheists “religiously tone-deaf and flat-footed.” Evidently, the New Atheism has not impressed major religious philosophers, let alone religious historians. Jonathan Rée traces the first recorded instance of the term “New Atheism” to the 17th century work of François Lamy, who wrote *Nouvel Athéisme* in response to the blasphemous work of Spinoza. However, as the development of Enlightenment thought relaxed the loathing of atheism, the polemical label shifted not only in connotation but the denotation of specific philosophical figures as well.

During the 19th century, as Spinoza came to be viewed as a pious mystic rather than a raucous infidel, the “new atheist” tag was transferred first to proponents of the mutability of species, then to Auguste Comte and the positivists, followed by the indomitable secularists Harriet Martineau and George Holyoake, Spencerian evolutionists and Darwinian natural-selectionists, and eventually Friedrich Nietzsche and his enigmatic hero Zarathustra. (Ree 2011)

If the polemical label itself is not entirely original, then what puts the “New” in the “New Atheism”? To be sure, their confrontational style of presentation and espousal, their emphasis on scientifically informed approaches, and the popularity of their material. “Traditional atheism is characterized by quietism about the role of religion in public life, a willingness to allow science and religion to coexist as separate discourses, and the view that atheism is a personal belief, not a political cause” (Schulzke 2013, 780). Of course, the Old Atheists were decidedly less confrontational, as to favor a confrontational style would be interpreted as unbecoming conduct and likely to attract surplus hostility. In fact, “much atheist writing in the first half of the twentieth century was not widely discussed outside of academia” (McAnulla 2013, 128). Now, the criticism of religion is being renewed and widely disseminated to meet the charmed status of faith-based belief. According to Dawkins (2003), “Those of us who have for years politely concealed our contempt for the dangerous collective delusion of religion need to stand up and speak out. Things are different after September 11<sup>th</sup>. All is changed, changed utterly.”

Sympathetic critics (Kettell 2013; McAnulla 2013; Schulzke 2013) agree that the genuinely newfangled elements in the New Atheism center on their political aspirations, scientific perspectives, technological alarmism, and sense of moral emergency. Hence Dawkins reports the movement to be decidedly more ‘political’ (a matter of secularism vs. theocracy) than ‘intellectual’ (a matter of atheism vs. theism). As for the label “New Atheism”, while it is true that “leading atheists have tended to accept and use the label themselves, despite occasional misgivings” (McAnulla 2013, 141), the occasional misgivings with the pejorative speak volumes:

The construction and subsequent popularization of the label “new atheism”, then, did not stem from a disinterested attempt at classifying a new form of non-religious thought, but was part of a politically motivated campaign to discredit and delegitimize the views of leading atheist advocates. The principal strategy here was to define a particular group of atheists as being “new”, so that they could then be denounced for having nothing genuinely new to offer. (Kettell 2016)

Victor Stenger (2009) is a lone notable exception, having the moniker as the title of his book, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*, but the label has mostly been rejected or only very obliquely accepted by the personnel it is supposed to typify. As before, I conceive of the “New Atheist” label as a necessary misnomer that foregrounds my claim that the movement has been exceptionally misconstrued by numerous scholars dedicated to the study of religion and secularism. It is my contention that the predominant modes of understanding the New Atheism function as a set of ruinous misconceptions that obscure promising contributions, thus calling for a thorough reunderstanding of the movement’s articulated claims and goals.

### Reunderstanding the New Atheism

The appropriate response to uncharitable interpretations is to recuperate the principle of charity in the present analysis, which means including and engaging the New Atheists as



legitimate interlocutors in the discourse on religion and secularism. Prior to correcting misconceptions and establishing contributions, it is important to show why reunderstanding the New Atheism is essential. In this section I better situate the New Atheism within this discourse for precisely this reason. If secularization is *beset* by the persistence of religion, and the New Atheist criticism of religion *upsets* the once favored assumptions and assurances of secularization, then we should understand the New Atheism as a social movement that endeavors to *reset* the secularization thesis under more normative and cerebral terms and conditions. In fact, their criticisms help to explain these failures by noticing defects in our intellectual thought on religion and secularism, and their recommendations are equally discerning, which I will preview in their takes on the persistence of religion, the importance of pluralism, and the possibility of secular spirituality.

By entwining the accounts of secularization and the New Atheism, we can begin to consider some preliminary misconceptions that have spate the movement and some preliminary contributions that warrant serious reconsideration. In line with my thesis, Christopher Craig Brittain (2009) defines the New Atheism as a “counter-reaction” to mainstream scholarship, yet this “counter reaction” has been detested as “a veritable secular eschaton that leaves us solidly ensconced in immanence” (Smith 2012, 160) and of a piece with the “failed prophecy of sudden and mass secularization” (LeDrew 2016, 216). Charles Taylor similarly gestures to “pessimistic variants” of the secularization narrative, which tend to assert that

Whatever faults and inadequacies were responsible for these earlier phases may still be operative in human life. Idolatry may be a continuing temptation of the human heart; or irrationality and hence religious belief may be something which most humans have trouble doing without. Hence the relegation may not be complete. But at our best, we can do without these relics. (2007, 770-771)

It is fair to refer to the New Atheism as pessimistic in the sense that they admit several “faults and inadequacies” of secularization. Dennett considers the possibility that “the Enlightenment is long gone; the creeping ‘secularization’ of modern societies that has been anticipated for two centuries is evaporating before our eyes” (2006, 35). Harris contends that religiosity persists despite the expectation that “wither in the light of modernity” (2010, 145), but modernity, it seems, is not all light. Essentially, secular disenchantment was insufficient to disillusion mass support for faith-based belief systems. Hitchens conceded that our discourse has grown “semi-secular and mediocre” in light of the persistence of religion and that “the rejection of the man-made concept of god is not a sufficient condition for intellectual or moral emancipation”, rather it is “the *necessary* condition by throwing off the infancy of the species and disclaiming a special place in the natural scheme” (Hitchens 2007, xxi). The *sufficient* condition, it seems, is a collective political task more than an isolated intellectual effort:

Things can go terribly wrong in our world – not because life is unfair or moral progress impossible *but because we have failed, generation after generation, to abolish the delusions and animosities of our ignorant ancestors*. The worst ideas continue to thrive – and are still imparted, in their purest form, to children. (Harris 2014, 202, emphasis mine)

Rationally surpassed in cognitive terms, functionally replaced in prosocial terms, religion ought to have disappeared by now, but the failure to raise explicit awareness about the normative status of rational and functional secularization of society has resulted in more and more faith-based movements that defy the predictions of the original secularization thesis. Consider “the timid heterodoxies of modernity—the gay and lesbian ministers, the Muslim clerics who have lost their taste for public amputations, or the Sunday churchgoers who have never read their Bibles quite through” (Harris 2004, 78). “In other words, the secularization of the mind must come before the secularization of the world” (LeDrew 2016, 217), and in the New Atheist view the secularization of the mind has been less hurried to develop and adapt to the changing

technological state of affairs than previously suppose. Faith-based beliefs “persist simply because they haven’t yet been sufficiently costly to be selected against” (Dennett 2006, 141), but taken on a global scale the costs are beginning to obviate a defensive stance toward faith.

The great pressure of accumulating knowledge – in science, medicine, history – has begun to scour our culture of many of these [religious] ideas. With the force of a glacier, perhaps, but at a similar pace. The exponential increase in the power of technology brings with it a commensurate increase in the consequences of human ignorance. We do not have centuries to wait for our neighbors to come to their senses. (Harris 2014, 203)

Hence the New Atheists consider secularization a normative process that must be hurried along by an insistence on the enormous harm religious ideology generates, as well as a redirection toward liberal principles that outstrip religious culture, and secular citizenship that upholds scientific inquiry broadly construed as basis for rational public discourse. There is nothing inherent in history or modernity that can guarantee the decline or end of religion. “Secularization is certainly not a steady and continuous process, without backlash effects, but rather an ongoing struggle” (Jean-Claude Monod 2015, 8). The emergence of the New Atheism as a social movement testifies not only to the persistence of religion as a backlash to contested forms of secular modernity, but to the ongoing struggle in which the New Atheists partake through bestselling books and high-profile debates.

Conversely, the fact that these books and public hearings commanded such attention, however contentious, seems to grant some degree of secularization and accomplishment in the ongoing struggle, which proceeds despite manifold efforts to counter and discontinue it. “Rather than waiting for the natural progress of history to unfold, the New Atheists seek to aggressively push history forward” (LeDrew 2016, 55). “It may be a long farewell,” Hitchens wrote, “but it has begun and, like all farewells, should not be protracted” (2007, 11). This normative emphasis maps onto the deliberative democracy envisioned by Habermas, who argues that religion is fair

game for criticism, “confronted with the necessity of relating its articles of faith to competing systems of belief and to the scientific monopoly on the production of factual knowledge” (2010, 21). Yet on their view it is outlandish to presume the spread of scientific rationality is on par with the spread of religiosity since it is possible, and in many parts of the United States, desirable for a person to be a “God-fearing Christian on Sunday and a working scientist come Monday morning, without ever having to account for the partition that seems to have erected itself in his head while he slept. He can, as it were, have his reason and eat it too” (Harris 2004, 16).

By advocating for the destruction of this partition and the recognition of the inherent conflict between science and religion as modes of inquiry and potentially as citizens, Mooney and Kirshenbaum argue, the New Atheism “threatens to leave science itself caught in the middle between extremes, unable to find a cover in a destructive, seemingly unending, culture war” (2010, 98). But as the New Atheists answer back, normative secularization depends on the purposeful collapse of this cognitive partition:

Secularists mistook the consumerist enthusiasm for the technological fruits of science that proliferated through the twenties – radio, talking motion pictures, automatic traffic lights, to name only a few – for a genuine understanding and acceptance of science as a way of interpreting nature in general and human behavior in particular. (Jacoby 2004, 251-252)

The goal is not to get more Americans to merely accept the truth of evolution (or any other scientific theory); the goal is to get them to value the principles of reasoning and educated discourse that now make a belief in evolution obligatory. Doubt about evolution is merely a symptom of an underlying condition, the condition is faith itself – conviction without sufficient reason, hope mistaken for knowledge, bad ideas protected from good ones, wishful thinking elevated to a principle of salvation” (Harris 2010, 175, emphasis mine)

The New Atheists contend that scientific reason and religious faith are incompatible modes of thought that operate under different rules of intellectual discourse. This incompatibility view is often referred to as the ‘conflict thesis’, which models science and religion as inevitably

in tension, and that secularization resolves by ensuring the place of science on the social dais.<sup>xi</sup> However, the most common view of science and religion, and the privileged view of the American civil religion, is often referred to as NOMA, ‘non-overlapping magisteria’, a term introduced by Stephen Jay Gould (1999). This view models science and religion as independent modes of inquiry that do not conflict because neither domain ideally traverses the boundaries of the other. Science is constrained to the empirical investigation of the natural world and the derivation of ‘facts’ therefrom, whereas religion is constrained to notions of the supernatural and the normative delivery of ‘values’ relevant to ethical, communal, and spiritual matters.

Many theologians have taken NOMA to mean that faith and reason are complementary insofar as faith without reason is blind and reason without faith is limp. Reason, it is said, can potentially supplement and defend faith. So despite what celebrity scientists such as Richard Dawkins, Stephen Hawking, Carl Sagan, Steven Weinberg, and E.O. Wilson have said about the conflict thesis, religion and science are widely held to be compatible in American political culture (Giberson and Artigas 2007). “The efforts of apologists to find genuinely distinguished modern scientists who are religious,” such as Francis Collins and Ben Carson, inevitably “have an air of desperation” (Dawkins 2006, 126). “A commitment to experiment and find evidence is no guarantee of immunity to superstition,” and the minority of scientists today who profess religious faith only “testify to the extreme stubbornness with which intelligent people will cling to unsupported opinions” (Hitchens 2007, xxi).

In the New Atheist version of the ‘conflict thesis’, the coexistence of science and religion – even in the minds of admired scientists past and present – is one of *partition* rather than *integration*.<sup>xiii</sup> Beyond the confines of separate domains, this cognitive partition avoids the inevitable conflict of science and religion by “abandoning all religious claims to factual truth and

understanding of the natural world (including the claims that God created the universe, or performs miracles, or listens to prayers)” and at the same time aggravates the conflict by ceding “too much authority to religion in matters of ethics and meaning” (Dennett 2006, 30). Hence “the need for a strong secularist defense of science is especially urgent today, as many of the antisecularists right’s policy goals are intimately linked to an irrational distrust of science and scientists” (Jacoby 2004, 360). For the New Atheists, a normative secularization means no more NOMA, a cultural shift toward scientific inquiry as the successor of religion.

Peter Berger (2013) argues that “aggressive atheists are an expression, not so much of secularization, but of pluralism—the co-existence in the same society of competing beliefs and values”. Certainly, the New Atheists expressly understand themselves as “part of a wider enlightenment in which well-grounded unbelief has become a genuinely strong and rooted presence” (Hitchens 2007, xxv). On the one hand, the recent trend in scholarship on religion and secularism, perhaps encapsulated in *A Secular Age* by Charles Taylor, is correct to identify pluralism as the historical lynchpin for secularization as it is experienced. The New Atheists recapitulate this point. According to Hitchens (2007), “The end of god-worship discloses itself at the moment, which is somewhat more gradually revealed, when it becomes optional, or only one among many possible beliefs.” According to Dennett,

It may often have been true in the past that for most people the only available road to that fulfillment involved a commitment to the supernatural, and more particularly to a specific institutional version of the supernatural, but today we can see that there is a bounty of alternative highways and footpaths to consider. (2006, 307)

On the other hand, explicit atheism remains a detestable stance in much of the world. Harris argues “it is only because the church has been politically hobbled in the West that anyone can afford to think this way. In places where scholars can still be stoned to death for doubting the veracity of the Koran, the notion of a ‘loving concordat’ between faith and reason would be

perfectly delusional” (2004, 16). Taylor concedes as much when he writes, “Our age is very far from settling into a comfortable unbelief” (2007, 727). The sorts of unbelief that are more and more acceptable, if not comfortable, include the New Atheism. It could be said that ‘comfortable unbelief’ is the one of the major goals of the New Atheism and secularization is the process by which this goal can be achieved. It could also be said that the diminishment of faith and the advancement of reason is their normative prescription. They argue the primary context of religiosity is still fear, “the backstop against which people keep hurling their faith” (Harris 2008). Fear stems from a felt sense of existential insecurity, which much of the developing world suffers and discharges far more frequently through their respective religions than do their more secure living conditions. Beyond advocacy for material development, the New Atheism wants to take the reins of secularization and steer it in a direction that cannot be overtaken by religious ideologues the world over. Otherwise, “the all-out assault waged by Dawkins and his fellow travelers against the forces of superstition and irrationalism may be thwarted as much by birth rates as beliefs” (Hooper 2006).

Because they focus on the actual notions of ‘God’ and ‘faith’ referenced daily by most religious believers, New Atheists bring attention to the issues that motivate a great deal of unrest in American political culture. By extension, the sophisticated theology and philosophy of religion are deliberately left out of their analysis, in some important sense a necessity in light of their public roles and logic of alacrity. Again and again religious faith is identified as a leading problem, which is only exacerbated by the deference that is paid to theology and overly respectful treatments of religion in the discourse on secularization. Yet it is said that their criticism of religion amounts to caricature that all but ignores the sentiments of religious moderates and the sophistication of philosophy of religion and theology. Robert Wright argues

that the New Atheists have done little more than refute “the traditional, anthropomorphic god” (Wright 2009, 445), as if this was a straw man of what most religious believers profess belief in.<sup>xiii</sup> The New Atheist reply is that “this kind of understated, decent, revisionist religion is numerically negligible” (Dawkins 2006, 15). Dawkins defines religious faith by way of well-subscribed beliefs, for “if the word God is not to become completely useless, it should be used in the way people have generally understood it: to denote a supernatural creator that is 'appropriate for us to worship'” (2006, 13). ‘Einsteinian religion’ is the only religion Dawkins considers worthy of respect, insofar as it is distinguished from supernatural religion and understood in a “special metaphorical sense” that is “light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible, of priests, mullahs and rabbis, and of ordinary language” (2006, 19). To be sure,

A deity that is completely causally isolated from the physical universe, a deity that has never revealed his nature or his will to any human being, a deity that never answers prayers or works miracles, is not the sort of deity belief in which alarms the New Atheists. Nor is it the sort of deity whose existence is endorsed by the vast majority of religious believers. (Johnson 2013, 23)

Phillip Kitcher is a proponent of ‘soft atheism’ that wants to recommence secularism as an ethical project and gradually move beyond refined religion, which “sees the fundamental religious attitude not as belief in a doctrine but as a commitment to promoting the most enduring values” (Gutting 2017, 78). In terms of promoting the most enduring values, the famous theologian Paul Tillich (1963) defined religious faith as “the state of being grasped by an ultimate concern, a concern which qualifies all other concerns as preliminary and which itself contains the answer to the question of the meaning of life”. In his criticism of the New Atheism, Bryan Cooke asks, “Why, by contrast, isn’t this passage of Tillich closer to the essence of Christianity than, say, the worst pronouncements of the Reverend Jerry Falwell?” (2014, 137).



New Atheists reject sophisticated theology as intellectually dishonest because it is centered on notions such as the “spirit of the law” that acrobatically bend to make exegetical good sense and utility out of scripture, whilst simply leaving out the unbendable parts that constitute the “letter of the law”. Harris writes,

Paul Tillich, in his *Dynamics of Faith*, rarefied the original import of [faith] out of existence, casting away what he called "idolatrous faith" and, indeed, all equations between faith and belief. Surely other theologians have done likewise. Of course, anyone is free to redefine the term “faith” however he sees fit and thereby bring it into conformity with some rational or mystical ideal. But this is not the “faith” that has animated the faithful for millennia. The faith that I am calling into question is precisely the gesture that Tillich himself decried as "an act of knowledge that has a low degree of evidence." My argument, after all, is aimed at the majority of the faithful in every religious tradition, not at Tillich's blameless parish of one. (Harris 2004, 65)

The New Atheist criticism of sophisticated theology is not merely a number’s game, for they question the very legitimacy of the so-called ‘queen of the sciences’, as it is founded on the inviolable divinity of scriptural revelation and proceeds by splitting interpretative hairs against the majoritarian grain. Dennett refers to theology as ‘intellectual tennis without a net’, which is to say that “an appeal to faith is out of bounds, quite literally, in the serious game of empirical research” (Dennett 2006, 409). New Atheists regurgitate the “God of the Gaps” narrative of secularization, in which religious beliefs originate as hastily conjured explanations (and predictions) of the unknown, and contract in accordance with the increasingly capacious explanatory and predictive powers of science, “refining the ore obtained by millennia of informal curiosity into the purified metal of investigation” (Dennett 2006, 368). Clearly, their view of secularization dovetails with their superficial engagement (or lack of sophistication and nuance) with fine-grained theology and philosophy of religion.<sup>xiv</sup> According to Dawkins, there are some good reasons to avoid this engagement, as it appears in many cases to be a fool’s errand:

If God existed and wanted to convince us of it, he could 'fill the world with super-miracles'. But then Swinburne lets fall his gem: 'There is quite a lot of evidence anyway

of God's existence, and too much might not be good for us.' Too much might not be good for us! Read it again. *Too much evidence might not be good for us*. Richard Swinburne is the recently retired holder of one of Britain's most prestigious professorships of theology, and is a Fellow of the British Academy. If it's a theologian you want, they don't come much more distinguished. Perhaps you don't want a theologian. (2006, 65)

It seems that New Atheists deem theologians as the actual extremists insofar as their rarefied philosophy is on the fringe, and even religious leaders who fancy sophisticated theology in their private intellectual study are said to live by two sets of books, one of which is preached to the congregation, theology that is “beefed up again for general consumption” (Four Horsemen 2007). Habermas calls this ‘beefing up’ process the “labor of dogmatization”, which is ultimately “subject to the reservation that the communities must be able to recognize their own faith in the theological doctrines” (2010, 79). It is fair to say then that the New Atheists do not think religious communities recognize their own faith in most sophisticated theology, and therefore purposefully give theology short shrift. Because they insist on epistemic virtues such as intellectual honesty, any theology that maintains some divine status for scripture or religious truth claims cannot withstand scrutiny. The posturing of Swinburne is a typical defense of faith-based belief that passes for sophistication. This is not to deny the underdeveloped or poorly developed arguments the New Atheists have offered, but only to note that the general conclusions they reach are often in agreement with the majority of philosophers, who identify as atheist and to one or another degree consider theology an outmoded discipline that has lost incredible currency in academia.

Despite the fact that Wolf claims, “For the New Atheists, the problem is not any specific doctrine, but religion in general,” Harris argues that there is no such thing as religion in general. This is to say, religions cannot be equated according to doctrinal tenets, spiritual practices, or moral principles, and perhaps can be equated only to the degree to which they rely upon faith-

based belief and in-group mentalities. Our world religions are said to provide a range of differential responses to the human condition that resists a single, exhaustive category. Faith-based belief, then, is the aspect of religion that relates our separate traditions through some family resemblance. Harris describes the internal diversity of the category of 'religion' as an imperative to analyze significant differences whenever they arise in a set of well-subscribed beliefs. This construal of religion locates specific beliefs on parallel spectrums of harm and commitment. Although Dennett defines religion in the more traditional sense as "social systems whose participations avow belief in [or invocations of] a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought" (2006, 9), notes that traditional religions are themselves diverse and may evolve in symbiotic terms to be good (mutualist), bad (parasite), or neutral (commensal). In any case, I consider the definition Harris offers as more in tune with the scholarly discourse that applies pressure to the binary of religion and secularism. He compares 'religion' to ambiguous continuum terms like 'sports':

Some sports are peaceful but spectacularly dangerous ("free solo" rock climbing, street luge); some are safer but synonymous with violence (boxing, mixed martial arts); and some entail no more risk of serious injury than standing in the shower (bowling, badminton). To speak of "sports" as a generic activity makes it impossible to discuss what athletes actually do, or the physical attributes required to do it. What do all sports have in common, apart from breathing? Not much. The term "religion" is scarcely more useful. (2014, 19)

The category of religion signifies an overly generic activity makes it impossible to discuss what ideas our religions actually promote, or the material resources required to expound their ideas. As we will revisit in chapter two, some religions, like Jainism, pose no apparent risk of violence, in view of their central tenet of non-harm that is extended to all life forms, whereas other religions, like Islam, have thrived as monotheistic doctrines that occasion acts of violence that rival the worst of its many versions. William Connolly (1999) argues that the categorical lack of clarity equally applies to secularism given the strains of dogmatism that contradict

normative secularization. Hitchens grants, “Just as secularists and atheists have withstood clerical and theocratic tyrannies, so religious believers have resisted pagan and materialistic ones” but notes that “this would only be to split the difference” (2007, 230). The ultimate tally of this religious-secular binary is largely ambiguous, if not extraneous. “The interesting question is not whether evil (or good) individual human beings were religious or were atheists. We are not in the business of counting evil heads and compiling two rival roll calls of iniquity” (Dawkins 2006, 273). Rather, the New Atheists envision an alternative that secularizes religions in a rational, normative way.

Alain de Botton suggests that religion is too complex a phenomenon and too valuable a resource to outright dismiss. His 2012 Ted Talk, entitled, “Atheism 2.0,” is a sample of this approach, in which the secularization of religion is negotiated along the lines of strong morals, communities, and the transmission of wisdom. Negotiation of this kind entails a respectful impiety that lifts from religion whatever is deemed beneficial. “Atheism 2.0 is about going through religions and asking, ‘What here could we use?’ The secular world is full of holes. *We have secularized badly, I would argue.* And a thorough study of religion could give us all sorts of insights into areas of life that are not going too well” (emphasis mine). De Botton brilliantly captures the utility of select religious ideas and institutions, yet sidesteps the New Atheism in their views on secular ethics and spirituality, who take a similar position in their negotiation with religion, in broad agreement with many scholars that “there is no reason to assume that secular citizens cannot learn from, or be inspired by, religious texts or theological works” (Gorski 2017, 212). While the New Atheists do not recommend any thoroughgoing secularized religions, citing unsuccessful precedents such as August Comte’s religion of humanity, Helena Blavatsky’s

theosophy, and Aldous Huxley's perennial philosophy, there is not a significant difference between their views and other secularists who embrace 'nontheistic' forms of spirituality.

For instance, William Connolly explained his rejection of the secularist identity precisely in these terms. When secularists in a hostile way "try to seal public life from religious doctrines they also cast out a set of nontheistic orientations to reverence, ethics, and public life that deserve to be heard" (1999, 5). It seems that spiritual experience that appeals to both our rational skepticism and our emotional search for meaning and belonging "exceed most secular representations and resist theological monopolization" (Connolly 1999, 16). Harris affirms this secularist poverty of spirituality insofar as "spirituality remains the great hole in secularism, humanism, rationalism, atheism, and all the other defensive postures that reasonable men and women strike in the presence of unreasonable faith" (2014, 202). Harris, profoundly informed by the Buddhist and Hindu contemplative traditions, is by no means original in his endeavor to secularize the Indian worldview (Flanagan 2011; Garfield 2014; Thompson 2015; Batchelor 2015), but differentiates himself insofar as he seldom yields his critical posture towards religion.<sup>xv</sup>

The notion of a secular age is unpacked by Taylor to mean the pursuit of and aspiration for 'fullness'; for believers, fullness entails a transcendent reality, whereas for unbelievers, fullness entails the "potentiality of human beings understood naturalistically" (2007, 8). The notion of a post-secular condition is unpacked by Habermas to designate an awareness that secularization has been amiss and awash in the conceits of "a narrow secularist consciousness" that turned away from exclusively humanist pursuits and aspirations of fullness. Moreover, it is an awareness of what is missing, namely secular rituals that draw from our religious traditions without dogmatic attachment: "The enlightened modern age has failed to find a suitable

replacement for a religious way of coping” (Habermas 2010, 15), and so the immanent frame is impoverished when compared to religious pursuits and aspirations of fullness. But as far as the New Atheism is concerned, this comparison is not built to last: “At its best, religion is a set of stories that recount the ethical and contemplative insights of our wisest ancestors. But these stories come to us bundled with ancient confusion and perennial lies. And they inevitably harden into doctrines that defy revision, generation after generation” (Harris 2014, 203). In the introduction, I presented New Atheist spirituality as a searching and skeptical undertaking that attempts “to pluck the diamond from the dunghill of esoteric religion” (Harris 2014, 10). As Habermas puts it, plucking this diamond is about “lifting for wider public semantic potentials what would otherwise remain sunken in the idiom of particular religious communities” (2011, 115). Secularization is the process whereby secular culture and cosmopolitanism outstrips religious scripture and particularism, but this process can evidently become mishandled in any given state and society. Indeed, the New Atheists agree with scholars who are disappointed with secularization and intrigued by the ways in which certain religious ideas can guide us without a basis in faith as to leaven the spiritual poverty of secularization.

### Summary

Much ink has been spilled on the secularization thesis, but distressingly little has been spilled in understanding the New Atheism as a promising and imperative part of the debates. In this chapter, I reviewed the relevant ways of understanding the New Atheism in the scholarly discourse on religion and secularism. I surveyed the historical and conceptual terrain of secularization theory to show why a reunderstanding of New Atheism is essential, given the overlap in theoretical concerns such as the persistence of religion, the importance of pluralism, and the possibilities of secular spirituality. With the reunderstanding already under way, this

literature review sets up the following chapters in which I correct prominent misconceptions of the movement (chapter two) and make explicit promising contributions to the study of religion and secularism (chapter three). It is in these chapters that I will provide substantive analyses of the ways in which the New Atheism fits and fares in the scholarly discourse.

Here is something I have learned the hard way, but which a lot of well-meaning people in the West have a hard time accepting: *All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not.*

A culture that celebrates femininity and considers women to be the masters of their own lives is better than a culture that mutilates girls' genitals and confines them behind walls and veils or flogs or stones them for falling in love. A culture that protects women's rights by law is better than a culture in which a man can lawfully have four wives at once and women are denied alimony and half their inheritance. A culture that appoints women to its supreme court is better than a culture that declares that the testimony of a woman is worth half that of a man.

It is part of Muslim culture to oppress women and part of all tribal cultures to institutionalize patronage, nepotism, and corruption. The culture of the Western Enlightenment is better. In the real world, equal respect for all cultures doesn't translate into a rich mosaic of colorful and proud peoples interacting peacefully while maintaining a delightful diversity of food and craftwork. It translates into closed pockets of oppression, ignorance, and abuse.

~ Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Nomad: From Islam to America* (2010)



### CHAPTER III: NEW ATHEISM, NEW WARS

A specter is haunting international relations—the specter of Islamism. In their criticism of religion, the New Atheists claim that Islam represents a particularly dangerous set of ideas that underwrite the violent and repressive Islamic fundamentalist movements of recent history. These various movements on the Muslim right are often referred to as comprising ‘Islamism’, which “denotes the views of those Muslims who claim that Islam, or more specifically, the Islamic *sharī‘ah*, provides guidance for all areas of human life, individual and social” (Esposito 2009). In this chapter I correct the prominent misconceptions that attach themselves to the New Atheist criticism of Islam and Islamism. I argue that New Atheist analyses of religious violence fulfill the post-9/11 scholarly pledge to take religion more seriously. While the New Atheists do not explicitly describe Islamism as a ‘specter’, I introduce the phrase to stand for the unholy alliance of right-wing bigotry and left-wing obfuscation the New Atheists claim doubly inhibits our upholding liberal principles when debating the link between Islam and Islamism. I take the specter of Islamism to exemplify the persistence of religion discussed last chapter.

As self-described liberals, the New Atheists repudiate much of what they view as the ‘premodern’ and ‘postmodern’ elements that contribute to the specter of Islamism. On the one hand, premodern forms of religious dogmatism include militant and political Islamist groups, the Christian right in the United States, as well as the various hate groups in Europe that openly embrace xenophobia, racism, and fascism, often with a religious zeal. On the other hand, postmodern trends of identity politics, multicultural relativism, and political correctness have combined to depreciate the moral clarity of liberal principles, especially when applied to criticism of Islamic religious culture. In general, the New Atheists purport to spread the light of criticism to all faith-based religions, but their focus on Islam is based on the blatant and subtle

*differences* that obtain between faith-based religions, insofar as they differentially justify violence and nonviolence. The New Atheists triangulate the dangers of Islamism most importantly in terms of the religious violence that is carried out through modern forms of political organization, military strategy, technology, and diffusion of impact whether through hard power (e.g. acts of terrorism) or soft power (e.g. propaganda). As the title of the chapter suggests, New Atheist concerns about the ascendant power of religion maps onto what Mary Kaldor calls the ‘new wars’, a social condition that envelops global conflict with hybrid methods and irregular tactics that resist the boundaries of conventional warfare and traditional armed forces.<sup>xvi</sup> Specifically, I examine the overlap of identity politics and fundamentalist ideology that Kaldor says are definitive features of the radical shift in warfare that has developed since the end of the Cold War. The ‘War on Terror’ is the premier example of this radical shift, with civil wars, and terrorist networks of state and non-state actors, overtaking the ‘old wars’ of interstate strife flanked by competing superpowers.

According to Kaldor, “In areas of endemic conflict, identity politics often becomes more extreme and morphs into fundamentalism, that is to say, rigid adherence to doctrine. Certain sects of Islam, for example, aim to create pure Islamic states through the conversion of non-Muslims as opposed to exclusion” (2012, 80). Indeed, certain sects of Islam tout the purity of Islamist rule and the necessity to utilize acts of terror, even if that means internecine warfare and the repression and ruin of human life. In this vein, Micklethwait and Wooldridge (2009) refer to the ‘New Wars of Religion’ that centrally implicate radical Islam. I submit that the New Atheism normatively render the ‘new wars’ to the extent that the harmful effects of religion have metastasized, such that “our technical advances in the art of war have finally rendered our

religious differences – and hence our religious beliefs – antithetical to our survival,” developments that could promise “the terminal phase of our credulity” (Harris 2004, 13-14).

Post 9/11, the New Atheists were not alone in their recognition of the power of religion. Scholars of international relations quickly caught onto the persistence of religion as a force that not only refuted naïve secularization, but a force to be reckoned with in theory and practice. Many have admitted that the field of study needs to take religion more seriously, rather than carrying on the assumption that the Peace of Westphalia instated a durable form of secularism that need only be exported to the rest of the world (Keohane 2002; Philpott 2002; Habermas and Derrida 2003; Huntington 2004; Thomas 2005; Tickner 2005; Hurd 2009). The retrospective offered by Robert Keohane depicts American statecraft as “unable to process coherently the information that its various agencies had gathered because religious beliefs are an unintelligible part of a conventional understanding of politics.” Similarly, journalistic exposes on the ‘War on Terror’, such as *The Assassins' Gate* by George Packer (2005), *The Looming Tower* by Lawrence Wright (2006), and “General Failure” by Thomas Ricks (2012) depict American statecraft as working at cross-purposes, unable to advance the long-term project of state and civil society building, and more damningly, negligent to cognize the gravity of ethnic tensions at the level of religious culture.

Elizabeth Shakman Hurd rejects the prevailing notion of religion in international relations, and the foreign policy of the United States, which during the ‘War on Terror’ treated religion as “either private by prior assumption or a cultural relic to be handled by anthropologists” (2011, 167). In this respect, the New Atheists do not differ in their approach insofar as religion cannot be assumed to be private, for ‘religion’ entails specific features, as well as the degree to which those features contribute to public expressions. Harris cautions,

Clearly, religion cannot be reduced to a mere concatenation of religious beliefs. Every religion consists of rites, rituals, prayers, social institutions, holidays, etc., and these serve a wide variety of purposes, conscious and otherwise. However, religious *belief* – that is, the acceptance of specific historical and metaphysical propositions as being true – is generally what renders these enterprises relevant, or even comprehensible (Harris 2010, 148)

Furthermore, the New Atheists accept that religion cannot be stowed away as a cultural relic, even if this figures to be a normative goal of their movement.<sup>xvii</sup> They readily admit that a ‘naked public square’ is impossible, and are therefore skeptical of the prowess of secularism as presently conceived. Harris writes, “Belief is not a private matter; it has never been merely private. In fact, beliefs are scarcely more private than actions are, for every belief is a fount of action *in potentia*” (2004, 44). In some sense, then, the strict separation of church and state is a futile effort because the notion that genuine religious belief can be privatized by the rule of law is flawed to the core. Harris clarifies this point not only in the foreign affairs of the ‘War on Terror’, but the domestic affairs in the ‘War on Sin’, in which the tensions between private freedom and private pleasure, as well as public risk and public safety, come to the fore: “The true genius lurking behind many of our laws stands revealed. The idea of a victimless crime is nothing more than a judicial reprise of the Christian notion of sin” (2004, 159). The God that most Americans subscribe to commands the punishment of sin for a number of indiscretions, which obliterates the bright line between private and public. Oddly enough, the fears of Richard John Neuhaus (1986) are assuaged by the New Atheist insistence on the logical connection between belief and behavior, which precludes the public sphere from ever being denuded by secularist fantasies of privatization. Rather, this connection only ensures that the public sphere is clothed in the many (and often conflicting) beliefs of its citizens. As before, the specter of Islamism is merely one prime example of the persistence of religion and the inseparability of religion from politics.

Ayaan Hirsi Ali (2015) frames her criticism of Islam with this concern of inseparability since “Islam from the outset aspired to be church, state and empire.” Because there is no obvious scriptural basis for an organic kind of secularism, Islam is ‘exceptional’ in the sense that God’s speech is received and sanctified through a political order, in which popular sovereignty and the separation of public and private spheres can be negotiated only to a certain extent without going against the core religious message (Hamid 2016). There is now a widespread belief in the Muslim world that this political order is under siege by Western powers. The Islamist turn is rooted in a fundamentalist ideology that wants to restore the core religious message of Islam and surmount all internal and external threats. Gabriel Almond, Scott Appleby, and Emmanuel Sivan define religious fundamentalism as a “discernible pattern of religious militancy by which self-styled ‘true believers’ attempt to arrest the erosion of religious identity, fortify the boundaries of the religious community, and create viable alternatives to secular institutions and behaviors” (2003, 17). The New Atheists find that this definition leaves out that ‘true believers’ style themselves in the specific terms of their faith that may be more or less plausible based on the given religion. As for Islam, there are undeniably deeply illiberal beliefs available to true believers, capable of ending conversations and lives.

Religious ideology exists upon a spectrum of commitment, some more disposed to promote violence than others, which speaks to the ambiguity of fundamentalism. Dennett refers to “William James's old speculation that there are two kinds of people, those who require ‘acute’ [i.e. fundamentalists] religion and those whose needs are ‘chronic’ and ‘mild’ [i.e. moderates]” (2006, 317), and based on this distinction, Harris notes that “their various passions and projects should not be confused” (2004, 14). In fact, the New Atheists are clear that religious moderation is preferable, despite the problems they ultimately associate with religious moderation. This

already to correct one misconception. As Jacques Berlinablau puts it, “Surely a school of thought that can’t distinguish between a member of the Taliban beheading a journalist and a Methodist running a soup kitchen in Cincinnati is not posed to make the sound policy decision that accrue to the good of secularism” (2012, 55). The “spectrum of probabilities” on which the religious moderates and religious fundamentalists co-exist varies widely (from strong theism to strong atheism), and the New Atheists are very careful not to equate these protrusions of identity.

Daniel McKaughan cautions, “Obviously there are a lot of cases of religious violence in which the connection between belief and action is far less direct and straightforward” (2015, 296). However, religious fundamentalism is by the New Atheist definition an earnest attempt at a direct, straightforward, and literalist interpretation of scripture that attempts to intuit the thrust of the core religious message, leaving out as little as possible, and making consistent as much as possible. The New Atheists take Islamic fundamentalism to demonstrate that much of our international relations cannot see the forest for the trees. To be sure, the logical connection between doctrine, identity, and violence has been evidenced in many case studies that span entire religious cultures from Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to Hinduism, Buddhism, and Sikhism, but the New Atheists problematize the debates about the nature and theoretical significance of this connection. Despite the pledge to take religion more seriously, New Atheists claim that the observable and self-reported power of religious belief, as a matter of neurology and phenomenology, is rarely attested to in the straightforward way it deserves, and instead it is often abridged to other relevant variables.

When illiberal beliefs are well-subscribed and brutally enforced within Muslim societies on the basis of religious ideology, the New Atheists argue that we must take religion even more seriously, as it is in the case of Islamism hostile to the well-being of both Muslims and their

neighbors. The New Atheists especially oppose what they deem a ‘regressive’ form of liberalism that routinely denies the link between Islam and Islamism, and inadvertently abandons vulnerable Muslim minorities to illiberal religious cultures. Politicians, entrepreneurs, journalists, activists, and scholars alike continue to insist from an apparently liberal perspective that Islam is unquestionably a religion of peace, whose international reputation has been perverted by extremists that do not represent the Muslim faith. As such, the many critics of the New Atheism hold that their treatment of Islam is decidedly off the mark, so these claims must be addressed before any substantive contributions can be established.

### Struggles

There are three major objections to the New Atheism that warrant serious reconsideration. First, it is objected that the New Atheists articulate an uncritical theory of society because they too often reflect the ideological dogmatism of their religious opponents. They are essentially secular fundamentalists, evangelical atheists, and devotees of scientism, whose unsophisticated polemics achieve little more than profile-raising through debate rather than genuine insight through dialogue. Second, it is objected that the New Atheists are solely concerned with a strident and elitist politics of identity that is prone to discount minority voices and perspectives from their predominantly white, educated, male, and noisily irreligious midst. Without a clear, unified, or even practical direction to their campaign, the style of criticism the New Atheists offer fails to register with the majority of scholars and secular activists. Given their inordinate emphasis on Islam, their critique is irreparably associated with Islamophobia, an irrational fear of and bigotry toward Muslims as people<sup>xviii</sup>, as evidenced by their alleged flirtation with the neoconservative agenda in the ‘War on Terror’. Third, it is objected that New Atheists are bad philosophers who overstate the phenomenon of religious violence and

understate the historical and contemporary impact of secular state violence. Poorly suited to deal with the more academic issues that outline contemporary study of religion and secularism, the New Atheism is said to represent the natural limits of public intellectualism. Because these objections may impinge on reunderstanding the New Atheism, this chapter must “bear the obligation to examine if there are some intrinsic features of theorization and theory that render [the New Atheism] susceptible to public misinterpretation and vulnerable to political abuse” (Shalom 2009, 303).

Perhaps the best constellation of these misconceptions occurred on an October 2014 episode of *Real Time* with Bill Maher. Sam Harris clashed with the actor Ben Affleck and the journalist Nick Kristof over the connection between Islamic doctrine and the gale of religious violence that engulfs large parts of the Muslim world. Harris argued, and Maher agreed, that Western liberals have lent insufficient support to estranged sub-groups within Muslim societies, such as liberal, secular, feminist, or gay Muslims. Together, Harris and Maher held that criticism of Islam was a necessary stance for liberals to enact, a stance many self-described liberals fail to ratify out of a fear of being labelled a bigot. Harris said, “We have been sold this meme of Islamophobia, where every criticism of the doctrine of Islam gets conflated with bigotry toward Muslims as people.” This carefully articulated criticism of Islam was immediately met with hostile accusations of racism, warmongering, and memorably, “Islamophobia.” Maher asked Affleck, “Why are you so hostile about this concept?” Affleck jumped, “Because it’s gross! It’s racist! It’s disgusting!” Kristoff added, “This does have the tinge a little bit of the way white racists talk about African-Americans, and define blacks by black criminals, which are not representative.” The point is that these accusations and comparisons ultimately make little sense given what the New Atheists actually say about Islam and Islamism. In fact, these accusations



and comparisons exemplify the very point, “Where every criticism of the doctrine of Islam gets conflated with bigotry toward Muslims as people.” I argue that such misconceptions are a recognizable consequence of uncharitable engagement with the New Atheism, and inevitably bleed into the scholarly discourse.

### Uncritical Theory

This charge alleges that the New Atheism mirrors the *style* of religious fundamentalists despite their seeming opposition in terms of *content*. The aggressive vigor with which the New Atheists identify faith-based belief as problematic is often construed as its own version of a faith, albeit based in secular and scientific language (McGrath and McGrath 2007; Armstrong 2009; Davie 2013; Fiala 2017). In this way, New Atheism is said to represent a potent threat to religious liberty and interfaith dialogue, as their clamorous irreligiosity demands the attenuation, if not abolition, of religion in the public sphere. According to Elizabeth Shakman Hurd, “A philosophy of radical atheism, like other philosophies depends upon a particular series of metaphysical assumptions. Radical atheism is itself a form of faith” (2008, 19). Indeed, an atheist or secular ‘faith’ is precisely the complaint levied against the New Atheism, which is but a “gospel of unbelief” (Hart 2009), “more a matter of personal ideology than of research and scholarly argumentation” (Calhoun 2012, 351), and a whole host of other unsavory comparisons:

The parallels with religious fundamentalism are obvious and startling: the conviction that they are in sole possession of truth, the troubling lack of tolerance for the views of their critics, the insistence on a literalist reading of scripture, the simplistic reductionism of the religious phenomenon, and perhaps, most bizarrely, their overwhelming sense of siege: the belief that they have been oppressed and marginalized by Western societies and are just not going to take it anymore. (Aslan 2010, xiii)

Furthermore, the New Atheism is said to be overly simplistic: “religion=bad; atheism=good” (Cotter 2017, 43). Rob Warner claims, “What is striking is that the new atheism shares with fundamentalism *an authoritarian dismissal of alternative views and a suspicion of dialogue or*

*compromise*” (2010, 107, emphasis mine). Michael Ian Borer relates the New Atheism to the subcultural identity theory used to study Evangelical Christians, who “present themselves as an ‘embattled’ minority at least in part to help their claims thrive” (2010, 134). Granted, the ‘Atheist Bus Campaign’ was an explicit material response to the vociferous advertising of moneyed evangelicals, but the New Atheists rejoin that the charge of evangelical atheism is a rhetorical tactic intended to partially obscure or entirely avoid their pressing criticisms of religion. Dawkins argues that critics have conflated fundamentalism with a passionate defense of reason, science, and free inquiry:

I may well appear passionate when I defend evolution against a fundamentalist creationist, but this is not because of a rival fundamentalism of my own. It is because the evidence for evolution is overwhelmingly strong and I am passionately distressed that my opponent can't see it - or, more usually, refuses to look at it because it contradicts his holy book. My passion is increased when I think about how much the poor fundamentalists, and those whom they influence, are missing. (2006, 283)

Dawkins suggests that evolutionary theory is falsifiable, and that if sufficient counterevidence were forthcoming, he would gladly change his mind. Conversely, fundamentalists are largely unwilling to budge from their religious beliefs and simply do not have a comparable principle of falsification to reference, let alone revere. “New atheists privilege science as a means of gaining knowledge of the natural world, but recognize degrees of fallibility to that knowledge in a manner which the religious fundamentalist could not concede with regard to their interpretation of a religious tradition” (McAnulla 2013, 140-141). As Harris makes clear, changing your mind when presented with new and convincing evidence can win you points in the scientific community, a unique dimension of intellectual honesty. Of course, Dawkins reminds us, “In practice, not all scientists would. But all scientists pay lip service to it as an ideal - unlike, say, politicians who would probably condemn it as flip-flopping” (2006, 284). The New

Atheists claim not to proselytize in the sense of actively seeking converts, but in the sense of generating cognitive dissonance in believers and cognitive buoyancy in unbelievers:

And here is the point, about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, open mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake. We do not hold our convictions dogmatically. (Hitchens 2007, 5)

It is safe to assume that secular fundamentalism emulates the basic pattern of religious militancy defined by Almond, Appleby, and Sivan (2003). Which is to say, self-styled ‘true unbelievers’ attempt to arrest the growth of religious identity and fortify the boundaries of secular state and society through a militant, reactive, selective, Manichean, millennialist, and absolutist approach. Dawkins went so far as to say about *The God Delusion*, “If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down.” His intention reflects the conversational strategy of ‘street epistemology’, by which atheists employ the Socratic method to facilitate belief change in religious believers and disabuse them of their closed faith-based belief systems through reasoned argumentation (Boghossian 2013). Indeed, as Dawkins acknowledges, this “presumptuous optimism” has a certain proselytizing spirit, yet he clarifies that by conversion to atheism he only means conversion to “a healthy independence of mind.” In this sense, militant atheism that spreads the good news of a healthy independence of mind, as well as the recognition of nonreligious sources of morality, hardly amounts to the level of religious proselytizing. Militancy of this kind “denotes active and aggressive support of a cause, the word carries connotations of violence that are completely inapplicable” (Johnson 2013, 17).

Many critics accuse the New Atheists of scientism, a distinct brand of secular fundamentalism that is wildly reductive of all inquiry to the unquestionable authority of the natural sciences, whereby “every true proposition must be based in empirical evidence rather

than faith” (Haught 2008, 11). The problem is that the New Atheists “regard social science as a subdivision of natural science rather than being on a par” (Tuckett 2017, 224). The supposed positivism of the New Atheists is said to inform and infect their criticism of religion to the point of becoming a faith-based belief system, a ‘faith in science’, and a cosmic mythology that turns evolutionary biology into a strange kind of religion. According to Borer, “Science *is* the New Atheists’ new god, and Charles Darwin is their patron saint” (2010, 137). Likewise, Steve Fuller (2010) argues that the figure of Darwin is the New Atheist icon, who permeates their criticism of religion with “talismanic significance.” The positivistic worship of Darwinian evolutionary theory is probably the most egregious misconception as it belies the New Atheists’ explicit acknowledgement of evolutionary limitations and the conceits of positivistic approaches. According to Dennett, “Scientists are not infallible, nor are they, as a rule, more virtuous than laypeople, but they do submit to a remarkable discipline that keeps them honest in spite of themselves,” in contrast to the indefinite methodology of religious knowledge, “imposing elaborate systems of self-restraint and review, and to a remarkable degree depersonalizing their individual contributions” (Dennett 2006, 371). In other words, the optimal remedy to “the failings and biases of science”, especially those associated with positivism, is better science and a rededication to “self-policing and self-correction”.

Given their collective emphasis on evolutionary biology and psychology, it is generally accepted that religion may have been evolutionarily advantageous in the past, even if religion was a byproduct of some other adaptation. However, faith-based religion in the present is untenable to guide our navigations and negotiations of global civil society, much less our assured survival as a species. According to Harris, “Appeals to genetics and natural selection can take us only so far, because nature has not adapted us to do anything more than breed” (2004, 186).

Furthermore, whatever moral values we have evolved to revere no longer need entail some nasty, brutish, tribal logic because of their biological roots. The basic decency in the golden rule is “gradually learned, as part of the painfully slow evolution of the species, and once grasped is never forgotten. Ordinary conscience will do, without any heavenly wrath behind it” (Hitchens 2007, 214), “for while nature is indeed red in tooth and claw, it is not merely so” (Harris 2004, 172). Further, the most New Atheists are willing to concede is that “a proper understanding of the magnificence of the real world,” through the lens of evolution, “while never becoming a religion, can fill the inspirational role that religion has historically - and inadequately – usurped” (Dawkins 2006, 3). Still, Curtis White sees the New Atheism as suffering from ‘the science delusion’, the demand that the arts, humanities, and social sciences submit to the authority of the natural sciences, especially neuroscience:

The human mind and human creations are not the consequence of something called the Will, or inspiration, or communion with a muse or daemon, and least of all are they the result of genius. All that is nebulous; it is the weak-minded religion of the poets. The human mind is a machine of flesh, neurons, and chemicals. With enough money and computing power the jigsaw of the brain will be completed, and we will know what we are how we should act. (2013, 9)

The concern by those who accuse the New Atheists of scientism seems to be that the New Atheists reduce persons to material processes “hobbled by the assumption that the only alternative to religion is to insist that the ultimate explanation of everything must lie in particle physics, string theory, or whatever invariant spatiotemporal laws govern the elements of which the material world is composed” (Nagel 2009, 25). As a result, “The social existence of the person whose head houses this brain is relatively unimportant... thus eschewing human thought, agency, and culture” (LeDrew 2016, 69-70). Massimo Pigliucci argues that this ‘scientific turn’ in secular activism is what makes the New Atheism distinctively novel and distinctively uncritical. He defines scientism as “a totalizing attitude that regards science as the ultimate

standard and arbiter of all interesting questions; or alternatively that seeks to expand the very definition and scope of science to encompass all aspects of human knowledge and understanding” (2013, 144). LeDrew further defines scientism as “the view that science is the only legitimate form of knowledge; that the domain of knowledge of the natural sciences encompasses human behavior, institutions, and value structures” (2016, 58). The charge of scientism has led scholars to cast the New Atheism as a movement of authoritarian technocrats who reject deliberative democracy on purely sociobiological grounds. But do the New Atheists wield in their criticism of religion “a totalizing attitude that regards science as the ultimate standard and arbiter of all interesting questions” or “the only legitimate form of knowledge”?

To vindicate the New Atheists of scientism is to vindicate them of the underlying charge of ‘evidentialism’, which is the view that rational beliefs are based on the vetting of supportive evidence that is not overturned by counterevidence. This strand of epistemology demands higher-order awareness of available evidence and as many are apt to point out seems to result in an infinite regress of evidentiary justification. By placing evidence over and above other epistemic virtues, the New Atheism “attacks religious faith from the vantage point of scientific reason, claiming that the one cannot be reconciled with the other, and demands that religion be ejected from public life, which should be a realm of pure reason” (Gorski 2017, 29). I will not pursue an in-depth analysis of epistemology mostly because it is unnecessary to correct this misconception. Of course, the New Atheists emphasize the value of ‘evidence’ and ‘reason’ in public life, but they do not appear to overreach insofar as they consider rationality to be at least somewhat nested in another strand of epistemology, ‘reliablism’, the view that rational beliefs are based on reliable cognitive faculties. The New Atheists accept that in most cases the demand

for personal vetting of evidence is not required to justify beliefs as rational. Consider the following statements:

Reliance upon the authority of experts, and upon the testimony of ordinary people, is the stuff of which worldviews are made. In fact, the more educated we become, the more our beliefs come to us at second hand. *A person who believes only those propositions for which he can provide full sensory or theoretical justification will know almost nothing about the world; that is, if he is not swiftly killed by his own ignorance.* (Harris 2004, 73, emphasis mine)

We can expect that our ancestors, no matter how curious they were by temperament, did more or less what we all still do today: rely on "what everyone knows." *Most* of what you (think you) know you just accept on faith. By this I do *not* mean the faith of religious belief, but something much simpler: the practical, always revisable policy of simply trusting the first thing that comes to your mind without obsessing over why it does so. (Dennett 2006, 161)

These are devastatingly clear statements in support of some construal of reliabilist epistemology in non-scientific contexts, and at the very least helps to correct the misconception. We are inclined to cut ourselves slack and relieve the burden of evidence as a matter of expedience. An important aspect of reliabilist epistemology is that beliefs are ‘true until proven false’ or ‘innocent until proven guilty’, which is to say that unless relevant defeaters are shown to undermine a given belief then justification normally stands fast. While Harris admits that our “default setting may be to accept appearances as reality until they prove to be otherwise,” he equally cautions, “This does not suggest, however, that all forms of authority are valid; nor does it suggest that even the best authorities will always prove reliable” (2004, 73). In this sense, the New Atheism is an attempt to permanently shift the burden of proof from the unbeliever to believer, who must demonstrate theism as a superior explanation. Of course, this shakes up the presumption of knowledge to the extent that theism is presumed to be a justified belief system with reliable authorities. According to Andrew Johnson, “Understanding the role that Ockham’s Razor plays in the thought of the New Atheists is essential for seeing that their atheism is not a matter of blind faith or epistemic overreach” (2013, 11). In other words, if we consider the

principle of simplicity, the New Atheist criticism of religion is based on neither secular fundamentalism nor scientism.<sup>xix</sup>

The presumption of atheism, then, becomes the philosophical default in light of scientific accounts that no longer require a creator or intelligent design to explain the origin of the species and the cosmos, as well as the good sense not to multiply hypotheses or assumptions beyond necessity. Dawkins contends that the ‘God hypothesis’ is superfluous precisely because the principle of simplicity implies a superior explanation in naturalistic theories without recourse to extraordinary claims of God’s existence.

The dictum that "extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence" remains a reasonable guide in these areas, but this does not mean that the universe isn't far stranger than many of us suppose. It is important to realize that a healthy, scientific skepticism is compatible with a fundamental openness of mind. (Harris 2004, 41)

To be clear, “New Atheists are not demanding certainty. We can never be certain that the best explanation is true; we can know at most that it is better than other explanations we have so far considered” (Johnson 2013, 12). Hence Dawkins accepts the possibility of God while arguing that such a high degree of improbability warrants the presumption of atheism. “It takes no faith to believe in the simpler of two competing hypotheses (naturalism) when the more complex hypothesis (supernaturalism) isn’t redeemed by possession of other explanatory virtues to a greater degree” (Johnson 2013, 13). The New Atheists move to contend that the vetting of available evidence and counterevidence, whether or not we call it ‘evidentialism’ in a scientific context, demarcates science from pseudoscience. Science is the domain in which evidence must be adduced in favor of a given theory to strictly qualify as scientific knowledge. In other words, scientific conviction not only scales with the available evidence, but with the concerted effort to provide counterevidence and pressure test hypotheses in a rigorous way.



Falsification, at least in part, seems to be the New Atheist key to solving the demarcation problem. "Science is science because it represents our most committed effort to verify that our statements about the world are true (or at least not false)" (Harris 2004, 76). "That is the ethos of science: the price you pay for the authoritative confirmation of your favorite hypothesis is risking an authoritative refutation of it" (Dennett 2006, 274). "It is better and healthier for the mind to 'choose' the path of skepticism and inquiry in any case, because only by continual exercise of these faculties can we hope to achieve anything" (Hitchens 2007, 278). So, the reliability of our cognitive faculties cannot be safeguarded by mere presumption of justified knowledge in the avoidance of defeaters. However, even the New Atheist form of demarcation problem is said to be faith-based insofar as they hold metaphysical assumptions (or presumptions) about the very prospects of science. Johnson concedes, "The New Atheists' embrace of science does involve a 'faith that the universe is comprehensible'", but notes, "This 'faith' assumes far less than religious faith does" (2013, 15). Since the New Atheist form of faith assumes far less than religious faith, the fallacy of equivocation marks this particular misconception. Clearly, faith can be defined in multiple ways, in multiple degrees, and to multiple effects<sup>xx</sup>, but the New Atheists repeatedly distinguish faith in the sense of general, non-dogmatic optimism and religious faith. For instance,

Each of us has to get out of bed in the morning and live his life, and we do this in a context of uncertainty, and in the context of terrible certainties, like the certainty of death. This positive disposition, this willingness to set a course in life without any assurance that things will go one's way, is occasionally called "faith." Thus, one may prop up a disconsolate friend with the words "have faith in yourself." Such words are almost never facetious, even on the forked tongue of an atheist. Let me state for the record that I see nothing wrong with this kind of "faith." But this is not the faith that has given us religion. It would be rather remarkable if a positive attitude in the face of uncertainty led inevitably to ludicrous convictions about the divine origin of certain books, to bizarre cultural taboos, to the abject hatred of homosexuals, and to the diminished status of women. Adopt too positive an outlook, and the next thing you know architects and

engineers may start flying planes into buildings. (Harris 2004, 232)

Indeed, faith-based religion and positive attitudes in the face of uncertainty are a very different objects of study, yet the New Atheists theorize that secularism is in desperate need of the latter. According to Hitchens, “The howling wilderness of nothing is much more likely to result from holy war or religious conflict or theocracy than from a proper secularism,” which he argued would have to turn religion into a humanist enterprise that would “in a sense welcome the persistence of something like faith” (Four Horsemen 2007). With or without faith, New Atheists do not “belittle” philosophy, the humanities, or the social sciences as redundant or inadequate efforts, in favor of the natural sciences. If anything, the New Atheists are guilty of scientism only to the extent that they “seek to expand the very definition and scope of science to encompass all aspects of human knowledge and understanding” (Pigliucci 2013, 144), as to support their normative secularizing project. To be sure, New Atheism introduces a broad conception of science akin to a systematically experimental form of philosophy. The nature of the scientific enterprise is imbued with values of evidence, logic, and rigor, as well as trust in the good judgment in our intellect and the apparatuses we construct. This expansive redefinition of science<sup>xxi</sup> is not meant to encompass all aspects of knowledge, but to begin to draw increasingly bright lines between fact-based science and faith-based religion:

The cutting edge of science seen up close looks ragged and chaotic, a bunch of big egos engaging in shouting matches, their judgment distorted by jealousy, ambition, and greed, but behind them, agreed upon by all the disputants, is the massive routine weight of accumulated results, the facts that give science its power. (Dennett 2006, 372)

This “wide-angle perspective” is one in which the ideals and methods of science broadly construed preponderate as the most reliable source of knowledge yet bound to the plainly stated contention that “science doesn't have the monopoly on truth” (Dennett 2006, 370). It seems the very terms of the new anti-atheism critique – fundamentalism, evangelical, faith-based, etc. –

have been secularized insofar as they are glibly attributed to the New Atheists. McAnulla vets the criteria that scholars associate with fundamentalism, and finds each of them wanting, namely the ‘black-and-white’ worldview. Jurgen Habermas argues that in a political culture where neither religious nor secular citizenship is elevated over above the other, “a philosophy which relates to religion as a contemporary intellectual formation *enters into a dialogue with it instead of talking about it*” (2010, 77, emphasis mine). Given that New Atheists want to destroy the intellectual pretensions of religious faith, religious apologists suggest that the kind of dialogue Habermas envisions is for the most part foreclosed. Admittedly, the cordial but unproductive debates between Ayaan Hirsi Ali and Tariq Ramadan, Richard Dawkins and Rowan Williams, Daniel Dennett and Alvin Plantinga, Sam Harris and William Lane Craig, and Christopher Hitchens and Al Sharpton exhibit some uncharitable engagement on either side. But the misconceptions perpetrated by religious scholars is disproportionate by comparison. For instance, John Haught says that “even though the new atheists reject the God of creationists, fundamentalists, terrorists, and ‘intelligent design’ (ID) advocates, it is not without interest that they have decided to debate with these extremists rather than with any major theologians” (2008, 46).<sup>xxii</sup> As before, the New Atheists comprehend the grammar of religious faith in majoritarian terms, and given the professions of American faith in the God of fundamentalists, they debate major theologians only to the extent that they represent the views of most religious believers in the United States. Contrary to scholarly portrayals of insularity, the New Atheists have been more successful in generating constructive dialogue and rich exchanges:

New atheists’ methods of contesting religion have been consistent with these liberal values and conducive to constructive political discourse. New atheists’ awareness raising is far less aggressive and militant than critics maintain, as new atheists are committed to peaceful expression of their opposition to religion and demonstrated a willingness to discuss their views with prominent religious leaders. (Schulzke 2013)

Indeed, the New Atheists have frequently collaborated with their religious counterparts. Hitchens toured extensively in the “Bible Belt” to promote his book and to politely engage religious apologists along the way. He also wrote a book with evangelical preacher, Douglas Wilson, *Is Christianity Good for the World?* (2008), which later became a documentary film, *Collision* (2009). Likewise, Daniel Dennett wrote a book with theologian Alister McGrath, *The Future of Atheism* (2008) and Sam Harris co-authored with Muslim reformer Maajid Nawaz, *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* (2015). Richard Dawkins started a foundation in his name as a division of the Center for Inquiry dedicated to “teaching the value of science and advancing secularism”, a nonprofit that dovetails with related endeavors, such as The Clergy Project, which enlists the help of ex-clergy to lead skeptical or forlorn religious leaders beyond belief (Dennett and LaScola, 2010). Evidently, the New Atheists are no more uncritical than they are unengaged, and in light of the constructive dialogue that has ensued, it seems the bundle of charges under the egis of secular fundamentalism simply does not accurately characterize the New Atheism.

### Identity Politics

This charge alleges that the New Atheism is a strident and blinkered politics of identity that “does not balance interests, does not make compromises, does not seek common ground” (Wolf 2006). As they seem to care only about the configuration of publically defensible beliefs on the basis of rational deliberation, their political hopes to reset secularization appear slender. Not only is their rhetorical posture too rigid, their expectations for social change are too unrealistic. Moreover, it is alleged, by not understanding the root causes of their popularity, New Atheists are unable to viably represent even their most sympathetic fans, much less change the minds of a religious majority nation:

Internal debates in the atheist community, particularly arguments directed against new atheist writers, has a lot to do with the new atheists’ failure to understand not only the

social and historical conditions that led to their popularity and influence in the first place, but also the demographical and cultural characteristics of those whom they have influenced. (Amarasingam and Brewster 2016, 119)

On this point, the New Atheists have been accused of functioning as “significant tools in atheist identity politics rather than as fully convincing analyses of religion as a sociocultural phenomenon” (Taira 2012, 97). The introduction to the latest edited volume on the New Atheism begins with an attribution of a racial and gendered identity to the social movement, as “the popular works of a small number of (white male) authors” (Cotter, Quadrio, and Tucket 2017). It is true that white males comprise the predominant demographic of the New Atheism, or at least its public face with Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens. According to Steven Salaita, “If we were to pursue atheism according to their blueprint, then we’d all become vainglorious white men with inordinate privilege who wine about the discrimination we experience” (2008, 159). The New Atheist blueprint, then, is a design for racial and gendered bias, if not racial and gendered supremacy. In spite of the fact that there are several feminist atheists that are similarly hostile toward faith-based belief, critics allude to overwhelmingly white male authorship and readership of the movement, a demographic that is also noteworthy for its age and aggression (Hutchinson 2011; Brewster 2014; Finger 2017).

Siviku Hutchinson relates this view of New Atheist identity politics to the underrepresentation of women and racial minorities as a serious problem for the public viability of secularism. If the New Atheism is not inclusive of underrepresented groups, then their intellectual and political goals will be inevitably unsupported by potential allies. Worse, Hutchinson considers this evident lack of diversity in the New Atheism indicative of a more ominous situation:

The New Atheism preserves and reproduces the status quo of white supremacy in its arrogant insularity. In this universe, oppressed minorities are more imperiled by their own

investment in organized religion than white supremacy. Liberation is not a matter of fighting against white racism, sexism, and classism, but of throwing off the shackles of superstition (2011, 218)

Even the New Atheist defense of oppressed Muslim women is construed as the “cultural imperialist exploitation of feminism” (Taira 2012, 109). Their fixation on Islam as a distinctively problematic religion is decried as an example of ‘Islamophobia’, regardless of their defense of immiserated women. To be sure, the underrepresentation of women and other minorities figures to be a major concern for the social movement going forward. “The debates concerning minority politics, strategies of accommodation and confrontation, and the connection (or lack thereof) between atheism and social justice are all tensions that must be reconciled to be some extent for the movement to work in a unified fashion to achieve its goals” (LeDrew 2016, 214). Yet it seems that these tensions do not properly impinge on the arguments that New Atheists brandish against faith-based belief. As many have pointed out, the positions taken against the American civil religion, for instance, are not exclusive to any one privileged or preferred identity (Brewster 2014). There are at least some atheists thinking about this issue and seek to actively include feminist and minority perspectives (e.g. the sub-movement, Atheism+), while it must be noted that Hitchens repeatedly pinpointed that religion was not only man-made, but male/masculine-made. On his view, liberation of women and minorities was the simultaneous fight against sexism, racism, and classism, as well as religious superstitions that so often amplify these hatreds and resentments.

Norm Allen, the director of African Americans for Humanism, has defended the New Atheists as the inheritors of the American tradition of freethought, whose movement seeks to “accelerate the agenda of moderates” by “taking atheism and naturalism to the masses in a way that’s seldom been seen in this century” (2007, 52). Susan Jacoby (2013) also contends that “none of this history is far removed from the task of twenty-first-century atheists and

secularists.” New Atheists, then, continue the tradition of freethought defined by Jacoby in terms of rationalist and antireligious arguments reaching “a much broader public than they ever had in the past.” However, activists and scholars alike implore critics of religion who promote an atheist identity politics to “spread the light of criticism equally in all direction at all moments” (Four Horsemen 2007). As a result, critics like the New Atheists are discouraged from making distinctions within and between our religious traditions. According to Luke Savage, the appeal of the New Atheism depends on a cultural milieu wherein racist warmongering passes as criticism of Islam:

It is simply impossible to imagine the commercial and intellectual success of the New Atheist project in a pre-9/11 world without both rising anti-Muslim sentiments across Western societies or neoconservative geopolitics. It is against the backdrop of the war on terror, with its violent and destructive adventurism, that the notion of a monolithic evil called “Islam” has found a sizable constituency in the circles of liberal respectability. (Savage 2014)

Here we see that the New Atheist criticism of Islam is also said to inadvertently serve the neoconservative agenda, which justifies foreign intervention, as well as the systematic capture and torture of suspected terrorists. According to Steven Salaita, New Atheism “essentially advocates voluntary ethnic cleansing of those whom the practice of belief is indivisible from peoplehood” (2008, 159). Tina Beattie argues that religious believers, namely Muslims, “are treated not as feeling, thinking human beings but as objects of study by a highly unsympathetic Western elite which sets out to destroy those beliefs by ‘breaking the spell’, to use Dennett’s expression, or by freeing them from a ‘delusion’, to use Dawkins’s expression” (2007, 7). Karen Armstrong contends that New Atheists view their religious counterparts in the Muslim world as “the epitome of evil” (2009, 293). Similarly, Chris Hedges (2009) attributes an Orwellian bent to the New Atheism, as if their emphasis on the faith-based belief of Muslims at the very least favored the death penalty for thought crime, and at the very most a nuclear first-strike on the

Muslim world.<sup>xxiii</sup> For Rory Dickson, New Atheists criticize “not simply an off shoot, sect, or political faction of Islam, or even a set of its laws or tenets, but rather the religion itself, in its entirety” (2010, 38).

By going after the entire religion of Islam, “The New Atheists’ contempt for the beliefs of common people at times translates into contempt for common people themselves” (Lloyd and Ratzman 2011, 3). The journalist Glenn Greenwald (2013) opines that the New Atheists conceal an “irrational anti-Muslim animus” that promotes Islamophobia and American militarism. Since beliefs and believers are so intimately adjoined within a single religion, it is repeatedly said that a harsh focus on belief tends to “interlock with racist, Islamophobic and intolerant views” (Quadrio 2017, 106). It is in this sense Stephen LeDrew rebrands the New Atheism as the “patriotic atheism” and the “atheist right,” disinclined to criticize Western power and therefore misguided in its targeted attack on religion. Furthermore, their willful focus on Islamism is said to caricature the Muslim faith as thoroughly pre-modern and discernable only by its barbarism, which ‘others’ Muslims from civilizational discourse as morally less developed, if not morally depraved. New Atheists, then, under the guise of liberalism, are neo-colonialists of a kind “who are called on to provide a beacon of light within the dark jungle” (LeDrew 2016, 88). In sum,

Beneath its superficial rationalism, then, the New Atheism amounts to little more than an intellectual defense of empire and a smokescreen for the injustices of global capitalism. It is a parochial universalism whose potency lies in its capacity to appear simultaneously iconoclastic, dissenting, and disinterested, while channeling vulgar prejudices, promoting imperial projects, and dressing up banal truisms as deep insights. (Savage 2014)

Although the New Atheist criticism of religion is saliently concerned with Islam, their criticisms always take care not to demonize Muslims as individual believers. As a religion that includes childhood devotees as well as converts new and old, Islam is more than an ethnic demography ascribed from geographical and cultural accidents of birth. The insinuation of



racism appears as a red herring in this regard given that Muslims span nearly every racial identity as a result of the universalizing Islamic creed. In fact, New Atheists have been even more critical of Western converts (e.g. Adam Gadahn) because they were not indoctrinated at an early age. This is the crucial distinction the New Atheists assert: When Islam is criticized, it is the *ideas* that occupy the Islamic scriptural tradition that receive the vituperative impact, not the *people* raised under the awning of identity and ideology. This distinction seems to dismantle the notion that criticizing ideas and criticizing persons must be related in some one-to-one ratio.

When the popular reproach of Islamophobia is used to describe and discredit the New Atheism, the criticism of ideas is unreservedly conflated with the criticism of persons. At this point, ‘Islamophobia’ becomes a nurse’s tale, a term to deflect secular criticism and defensively avoid reasonable misgivings, which “amounts to making Islam a subject that one cannot touch without being accused of racism” (Bruckner 2010, 48). If Islamic doctrine cannot be properly analyzed as the motivation for Islamist activities, then the New Atheists suggest that genuine bigots, to whom the term ‘Islamophobia’ rightly belongs, are free to pontificate about the degradations of (usually Arab) Muslims as people without considering the pertinent ideas that typify their being Muslim. Central to the New Atheist criticism of Islam is the recognition that those who suffer the most under Islamism are other Muslims, namely Muslim feminists, secularists, liberals, homosexuals, and apostates. The New Atheism is premised on the notion that religious ideologies, such as Islam, Christianity, or Judaism, should not be safeguarded from criticism anymore than secular ideologies, such as Communism, Socialism, or Anarchism.<sup>xxiv</sup> Simply put, “There is no contradiction between having a civil, but nonetheless hard-hitting and searching conversation about a very important, even inflammatory, topic, and having a positive ethical orientation toward the person you are arguing with” (Harris 2015). Liberal principles do

not involve the prevention of criticism, which can take place at the level of intellectual disrespect while not becoming legally or existentially intolerant.

New atheists reserve the right to withhold respect for religion and to strongly criticize and condemn religion where they consider appropriate. Yet, if little else, the new atheists at least offer religion tolerance in that they will do nothing to prevent people freely practicing religion. What is often blurred in these debates is the important distinction between the arguments of new atheists and their acceptance of rights of their opponents to reject their views. (McAnulla 2013, 134)

The right to withhold respect for religion carries with it the right to withdraw respect from religion, one of the first premises of the New Atheism. Furthermore, New Atheists issue neither sprawling generalizations nor blanket condemnations of Islam since they junk the notion that there is an essential ‘religion’ that cuts across time. To make their contentious point that Islamism is both a malignant and representative form of Islam, New Atheists tether their critique to actual professions of faith within the Muslim world. Whether professed through opinion polls, personal narratives, structured interviews, or anecdotal remarks, it is evident that well-subscribed beliefs, whose basis in Islamic doctrine implicates the holy texts themselves, is more widespread than many liberal commentators are willing to admit.

The ‘neoconservative’ label picks out a bellicose liberalism that speaks of moral clarity, military strength, and hawkish campaigns to impose Western models of democracy, development, free market enterprise, and religious cultural values<sup>xxv</sup> in what the Bush Administration declared a modern-day ‘crusade’ of good versus evil (Brown 2006). The state building projects in the Middle East were energized by a sanguine idealism that envisioned long-term regional stability by deposing a psychopathic regime and defusing the Islamists that awaited such a power vacuum. Consequently, the New Atheists have been maligned as unabashed champions of the ‘War on Terror’. According to Noam Chomsky,

If it is to be even minimally serious, the “new atheism” should focus its concerns on the virulent secular religions of state worship, so well exemplified by those who laud huge atrocities like the invasion of Iraq, or cannot comprehend why they might have some concern when their own state. (Werleman 2015)

Granted, the criticism of American imperialism is not what the New Atheism is known for, but to the extent that faith-based belief inflects foreign policy and national security, the New Atheists cannot be said to qualify as ‘apologists’ for the United States, as Chomsky claims.<sup>xxvi</sup> Surely to indict Islamist terror is not to exonerate American statecraft. The list of atrocities carried out by secularisms, in the affairs and fiats of the state or the machinations of an advanced capitalist society, is necessary for liberal critics of religion to absorb. If the New Atheists wish to reestablish and celebrate liberal principles in the Muslim world, it is vital they spread the light of criticism to secularism. Turning the light to American crimes,

There is no doubt that the United States has much to atone for, both domestically and abroad. In this respect, we can more or less swallow Chomsky's thesis whole. To produce this horrible confection at home, start with our genocidal treatment of the Native Americans, add a couple hundred years of slavery, along with our denial of entry to Jewish refugees fleeing the death camps of the Third Reich, stir in our collusion with a long list of modern despots and our subsequent disregard for their appalling human rights records, add our bombing of Cambodia and the Pentagon Papers to taste, and then top with our recent refusals to sign the Kyoto protocol for greenhouse emissions, to support any ban on land mines, and to submit ourselves to the rulings of the International Criminal Court. The result should smell of death, hypocrisy, and fresh brimstone. (Harris 2004, 140)

Though merely a sample of American style death, hypocrisy, and fresh brimstone, it is clear that the New Atheism is critical of the United States in more ways than one and do not accede to some fervent militarism.<sup>xxvii</sup> In fact, the New Atheists partake in the culture wars, the pervasive idiom that describes the always intense and sometimes volatile politics of American dialectic of identity, tradition, and destiny, as a site of contestation to challenge the American civil religion, “whether over abortion, affirmative action, art, censorship, evolution, family values, feminism, homosexuality, intelligence testing, media, multiculturalism, national history

standards, pornography, school prayer, sex education, the Western canon – the list goes on and on” (Hartman 2015). As such, their criticism of religion covers considerable ground: the incessant din of God-talk by religious leaders in the media<sup>xxviii</sup>, faith-based initiatives and tax exemptions for religious organizations that blur the separation between church and state<sup>xxix</sup>, ascendant homophobia<sup>xxx</sup>, manipulating drug policy<sup>xxxi</sup> (while religious sects get permission to experiment with drugs ritualistically<sup>xxxii</sup>), blocking of medical research such as stem cell and cas9<sup>xxxiii</sup>, a targeted attack on evolution by creationists and intelligent design theorists<sup>xxxiv</sup>, demagogues and zealots given positions of immense responsibility in government<sup>xxxv</sup>, and the injection of apocalyptic hope in political rhetoric.<sup>xxxvi</sup>

As a journalist, Hitchens regularly castigated American foreign policy decisions with respect to human rights issues and the self-determination of persecuted minorities. His liberal positions on international relations generally did not budge, even as his public support of the Iraq War made him the only New Atheist to believe military intervention at that time was assuredly the right move. While he never identified himself as a neocon, his pro-war stance was associated with Alan Dershowitz, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz, and so on. Indeed, Hitchens sided with many neocons, justifying his stance as a necessary action to depose the malevolent dictatorship of Saddam Hussein and display a robust liberalism that enforced international humanitarian law. For her association with the American Enterprise Institute, Ayaan Hirsi Ali has been branded a neocon and orientalist, among other rebukes (Oudenampsen 2016).

Hitchens, and to a lesser extent Hirsi Ali, joined neocons in the recognition that liberalism had somewhere lost its way as the guardian of human rights. In an interview with Johann Harri (2004), Hitchens reflected, “It was a time when the left was mostly taking the conservative, status quo position... that kind of conservatism can easily mutate into actual support for the

aggressors”. While Hitchens kept to this position, he nevertheless distanced himself from the cynical ‘conservative’ element of the movement insofar as he framed the Iraq War as a postponed liberation of the Iraqi and Kurdish peoples. Out of fellow-feeling with the forces of liberal democracy in the Muslim world, Hitchens deemed the Iraq War conscionable, albeit horribly blundered, for reasons other than the search for weapons of mass destruction. Evidently, the charges of racist warmongering do not accurately characterize the New Atheism in the least. Rather, the prominence of liberalism in their criticism of Islam is embedded in ideals of human solidarity and the emancipatory potential of international cosmopolitanism.

### Bad Philosophy

This charge alleges that the New Atheism fails to engage with the nuances of philosophy in their work. New Atheists are said to be less philosophically inclined than ‘Old Atheists’, if not philosophically untrained. Granted, Daniel Dennett is the only academic philosopher in the ‘Four Horsemen’, but even his philosophical style has been disparaged. For instance, Martha Nussbaum refers to his work as arrogant, smug, and contemptuous that not only suggests that religionists are dim by comparison, but goes against the widely held view that “people’s religious commitments should be respected, and that it is simply not respectful to imply that religion is a ‘spell’” (2008, 10). All in all, the New Atheists have been received as intellectually suspect in their analysis of religious violence and an impediment to debate on how to move forward. “Or put another way, they get too much wrong and are needlessly difficult to talk to” (Kidd 2017, 56). On the contrary, I will show that New Atheists are intellectually astute on the topic of religious violence. Certainly, their style of presentation is not always tactful and often marked by the impatience of a group disadvantaged in the larger political culture despite their platform. Yet Dawkins has insisted,

I am not in favor of offending or hurting anyone just for the sake of it. But I am intrigued and mystified by the disproportionate privileging of religion in our otherwise secular societies. All politicians must get used to disrespectful cartoons of their faces, and nobody riots in their defense. What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect? (2006, 27)

On this point, the New Atheists have only earned some recognition that resists the poor reputation that precedes them in most scholarship. For instance, Melanie Brewster writes, “In their books, lectures, and debates the founders of New Atheism generally appear composed, thoughtful, informed, and even humorous or playful” (2014, 2). These appearances oppose the charges of ignorance, arrogance, and several other epistemic vices regularly levied against them, but it is no less controversial that the New Atheists take a decisive stance in making their use of philosophy accessible to the public without continual recourse to academic scholarship.

According to Weinstein (2014), there are two objections to ventures in the type of philosophy that the New Atheists find attractive. First, “audiences are usually unaware of the philosophical literature that preceded their discussion and, as a result, old ground is retrodden, and no new knowledge is created.” Second, “public philosophy is just *bad* philosophy.” Both of these objections seem to reflect much of the criticism of the New Atheism.

In response to the first objection, A.C. Grayling has said, “The old arguments have been forgotten by the reviving, resurgent, insistent, assertive-to-the-point-of-bombing religionists. Shall we keep silent because the arguments are not new?” As Tom Flynn (2010) puts it, “The triumph of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens was to take arguments that were long familiar to insiders, brilliantly repackage them, and expose them to millions who would never otherwise pick up an atheist book.” In response to the second objection, Harris (2010) argues that the “inside baseball” of academic philosophy “directly increases the boredom in the world”. As before, New Atheists package philosophy and science together as a unified intellectual enterprise

that the public can access through common sense, open-mindedness, and critical thinking. Yet it is these epistemological virtues that critics deny the New Atheists represent by way of their shrugging aside philosophical literature. Andrew Johnson argues that New Atheists have been mischaracterized as bad philosophy: “None of the bestselling New Atheist books were written for an academic audience; that, in all likelihood, some avoidance of complexity and nuance was deliberate. *And this means there may be more to be said in defense of some of the New Atheists’ key contentions than the New Atheists actually say*” (2013, 7, emphasis mine). Dougherty and Gage concede that while the New Atheists may neglect what Dennett calls “the academic micro-discipline of philosophical theology” (2006, 59), they ultimately “seize on the right *kind* of problem” (2015, 52), namely religious violence. Even if some of their philosophy is by necessity underdeveloped, the brunt of their arguments are well-supported and easily improved upon. Here the charge of bad philosophy hinges on whether the New Atheist criticism of religion is charitable to the various religious arguments they reject.

Religion is not *the* problem, critics of the New Atheists observe, it is merely problematic. *The* problem, if there is a gradation at all, is American imperialism. Chomsky admits that while “condemnation of dangerous beliefs and great crimes is always in order,” he considers the New Atheists imbalanced in their critique of ‘secular religions’. If and when religion goes away, perhaps in a future wrought by secularization, many suspect that humanity will be unmoored to moral systems that ultimately rely on some form of faith-based belief. A litany of scholars argue that the bloodshed and body count of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was a product not of religious violence, but the logical consequence of secular and atheistic regimes whose climax occurred in the ‘old wars’. I call this kaleidoscope of secular violence ‘seculapocalypse’ as to indicate the readiness with which scholars place ‘modern’ secularism on par with ‘pre-modern’ religion in terms of

their apocalyptic potential. In some cases, such as the atomic bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the violence of ‘modern’ secularism is considered worse than its religious predecessors because of its access to and control of dangerous technology. As some might have it, “Secularism, what crimes are committed in your name!” Slavoj Žižek relates these well-intentioned crimes to the paved road to hell: “An excessive commitment to Good may in itself become the greatest Evil: real Evil is any kind of fanatical dogmatism, especially exerted in the name of supreme Good” (1989, 27). Indeed, ‘seculapocalypse’ is the sinister underside of modernity and a runaway emphasis on instrumental rationality that masked a debauched core of ‘reason’ run amok.<sup>xxxvii</sup>

Hans Blumenberg (1983) characterized what I have called ‘seculapocalypse’ as a category of ‘historical wrong’ that includes all the miserable shortcomings and brutal excesses of modernity, and places the very legitimacy of the modern age in question. Craig Calhoun (2013) represents the concern of ‘seculapocalypse’ when he describes a kind of “unreflective secularism” that portrays global civil society in a way that “greatly underestimates the role of religious organizations, or imagining cosmopolitanism as a sort of escape from culture into a realm of reason where religion is of little influence”. The New Atheists are often chastised for defending the faults of secularism and the historical wrongs of modernity, or at least conveniently setting them aside in their criticism of religion. The supposed denial or downplaying of secular violence is maintained by critics to be symptomatic of the fledgling ideology of secularism the New Atheists try to defend. This objection indicates that New Atheists neglect an evenhanded analysis of religious verse secular atrocities.

Rather, New Atheists are selective in their treatment of history. According to William Cavanaugh, the New Atheists perpetuate the myth of religious violence insofar as they hold a



double standard in their criticism of religion: “Violence labelled religious is always irrational, peculiarly virulent, and reprehensible. Violence labelled secular, on the other hand, no matter how regrettable, is often necessary and sometimes even praiseworthy for the job it does defending us from religious violence” (2009, 216). Talal Asad raises the question, “Why is it that aggression in the name of God shocks secular liberal sensibilities,” presumably the sensibilities of the New Atheists, “whereas the art of killing in the name of the secular nation, of democracy, does not?” (2011, 295). Jose Casanova asserts that by changing the subject from secular violence to religious violence, a confirmation bias is revealed: “one may suspect that the function of such a selective historical memory is to safeguard the perception of the progressive achievements of Western secular modernity” (2011, 70). David Martin (2014) also touches on the supposed asymmetry of New Atheist moral outrage, arguing that they “successfully avoid any nuanced scrutiny of the degree and kind of religious involvement in war and violence.” Like Cavanaugh, Martin claims that New Atheists “load the blame onto religion” and in doing so perpetuate “the myth of the special ability of religion to introduce irrationality and division” (2014, 28). If we are to vindicate the New Atheism on this charge, it is imperative to assess whether the New Atheists perpetuate this myth.

The subtitle of *god is not Great* by Christopher Hitchens is “How Religion Poisons Everything.” It is easy to see how this deliberately hyperbolic banner could lead Cavanaugh to question if this amounts to the claim that “Everything Poisonous is Religious.” If it is true that religion poisons everything, then the antidote should be on display when secular states predominate. However, this is already to misread the New Atheists. They simply do not blame religion for everything. Dawkins notes, “Religion is not the root of all evil, for no one thing is the root of all anything,” adding that to focus on religious violence is to plainly indicate that

religion persists as a potent and prolific justification for enacting conflict and incredible brutality, even if the majority of religiosity appears benign:

A war might be motivated by economic greed, by political ambition, by ethnic or racial prejudice, by deep grievance or revenge, or by patriotic belief in the destiny of a nation. Even more plausible as a motive for war is an unshakeable faith that one's own religion is the only true one, reinforced by a holy book that explicitly condemns all heretics and followers of rival religions to death, and explicitly promises that the soldiers of God will go straight to a martyrs' heaven. (2006, 278)

Dawkins admits that the title of his documentary, *The Root of All Evil?*, was the choice of his producers and was only intended to produce controversy. While religious ideology may not dependably inspire large-scale conflict, religious identity is a dependable background and occasional focal point. Dawkins continues, "Religion is a *label* of in-group/out-group enmity and vendetta, not necessarily worse than other labels such as skin color, language or preferred football team, but often available when other labels are not" (2006, 259). The problem of ideology and the danger of theological disagreements, as Dawkins suggests, can exist apart from the problem of identity and the danger of "wanton and carefully nurtured divisiveness - its deliberate and cultivated pandering to humanity's natural tendency to favor in-groups and shun outgroups" (2006, 262). If anything, ideological differences often inflect and reinforce differences of identity with a specifically forceful character.<sup>xxxviii</sup> The New Atheists enumerate historical and contemporary instances of global religious conflict. For instance,

The recent conflicts in Palestine (Jews vs. Muslims), the Balkans (Orthodox Serbians vs. Catholic Croats; Orthodox Serbians vs. Bosnian and Albanian Muslims), Northern Ireland (Protestants vs. Catholics), Kashmir (Muslims vs. Hindus), Sudan (Muslims vs. Christians and animists), Nigeria (Muslims vs. Christians), Ethiopia and Eritrea (Muslims vs. Christians), Sri Lanka (Sinhalese Buddhists vs. Tamil Hindus), Indonesia (Muslims vs. Timorese Christians), Iran and Iraq (Shiite vs. Sunni Muslims), and the Caucasus (Orthodox Russians vs. Chechen Muslims; Muslim Azerbaijanis vs. Catholic and Orthodox Armenians) are merely a few cases in point. (Harris 2004, 26)

The growing catalogue of intra and inter-religious violence is replete with examples that apply empirical pressure to the myth of religious violence.<sup>xxxix</sup> Of course, “Lists of atrocities sometimes appear on scorecards in polemical arguments between critics of religion and apologists attempting to weigh these social ills against those acts similarly attributable to atheist or secular regimes” (McKaughan 2015, 293). The weighing of social ills is precisely the gauge the New Atheists use to scrutinize the connection between religious ideology and violence. Throughout their analysis, the New Atheists deny that our innate predisposition to tribalism is the fault of religion, and further deny that if religion were to somehow vanish overnight all iterations of tribalism would evaporate. Secular violence would undoubtedly persist in the various forms of state mandated violence, as well as interpersonal and intergroup conflict.<sup>xl</sup>

We all know that human beings are capable of incredible brutality, but we would do well to ask, *What sort of ideology will make us most capable of it?* And how can we place these beliefs beyond the fray of normal discourse, so that they might endure for thousands of years, unperturbed by the course of history or the conquests of reason? (2004, 44, emphasis mine)

The New Atheists understand religion as the outgrowth of our tribalism, search for meaning, knowledge, and moral community, but taken to the upper limits of our most toxic impulses of self-deception, self-hatred, and self-righteousness. As Mark Juergensmeyer argues in *Terror in the Mind of God* (2017), most religious violence is premised on the achievement of peace by forceful means. New Atheists respond that both the means and ends of religious conflict are problematic, if not entirely menacing. For instance, conceptions of theocratic peace in the Muslim world, wrought through acts of extreme violence and the purposeful infliction of suffering, appear utterly incompatible with civil society. Besides, these conceptions simultaneously demand the safeguarding of irreconcilable and unstable identities.

Rather than find real reasons for human solidarity, faith offers us a solidarity born of tribal and tribalizing fictions. Religion is one of the great limiters of moral identity, since

most believers differentiate themselves, in moral terms, from those who do not share their faith. *No other ideology is so eloquent on the subject of what divides one moral community from another. Once a person accepts the premises upon which most religious identities are built, the withdrawal of his moral concern from those who do not share these premises follows quite naturally.* (Harris 2004, 176-177, emphasis mine)

The eloquence with which religious ideology breeds division and brandishes hostility is said to unveil the power of belief and the logical connection to subsequent violent behavior. The maintenance of separate religious identities (where ‘Muslims’ understand themselves as meaningfully different from ‘Christians’, ‘Hindus’, and ‘Buddhists’, and vice versa) rears not only unavoidable divineness, but separate moral communities and the explicitly incompatible truth claims upheld by fundamentalists within each moral community. To be sure, “Religion is to be credited as much for wars of conquest as for feast days and brotherly love. But in its effect upon the modern world—a world already united, at least potentially, by economic, environmental, political, and epidemiological necessity—religious ideology is dangerously retrograde” (Harris 2004, 25). The dangerous part of the retrograde standing of religion is that faith-based ideology and identity amplifies, exacerbates, and sanctifies violent conflict.

The New Atheist criticism of religious violence is not born out of an “animus against religion *as such* but because in their view irrationality is so powerfully manifested in and reinforced by so many forms of religion” (Johnson 2013, 17). Yet Cavanaugh and others insist that the New Atheist analysis on religious violence is simplistic and polemical, as if religion today held the global monopoly on inspiring or justifying violence. Meic Pearse argues that the New Atheists “have some important superficial validity but are far from the whole truth” (2007, 15). The whole truth seems to be that religion is at most one of many contributing factors to global conflict and at least an advantageous guise for the power hungry and depraved to engineer violence for self-serving ends other than peace.

Violent ideas and images are not the monopoly of any single religion. Virtually every major religious tradition – Christian, Jewish, Muslim, Hindi, Sikh, and Buddhist – has served as a resource for violent actors. Perhaps it is not fair to label Osama bin Laden a Muslim terrorist or to characterize Anders Breivik a Christian one – as if they were violent because of their Islamic and Christian beliefs. (Juergensmeyer 2017, xv)

In their analysis of religious violence, New Atheists dispel the myth of religious convergence that Juergensmeyer articulates. The myth is that all religions, in part or in whole, are equally valid, equally authentic, equally compatible, and equally adept to expound the same message of peace and unity, and thereby deserve equal respect. All religions are also equally susceptible to misinterpretation and misappropriation, through no fault of their own, but through the fault of extremists with ulterior motives, such as Osama bin Laden, and thereby deserve equal criticism. Juergensmeyer is not alone when he claims that the modern advent of violent fundamentalism perverts the true syncretic core of our world religions. As we will see in the next chapter, it is a myth perpetuated by world leaders. The myth of religious convergence serves as a nice contrast with the myth of religious violence. If one is dispelled, so is the other. The New Atheist reply is that our religious traditions are different, that they cannot be subsumed since they *diverge* on important matters, and that we must attend to these differences.

The severity of religious violence in the Muslim world, the New Atheists argue, illustrates these differences in both name and form. In name, the identity politics of raising societies along the lines of Muslim and non-Muslim, with a scriptural basis that condones violence in defense and even in growth of the faith. In form, our failure to understand our world religions through specific ideologies, some of which are cradles of chronic and acute violence uniquely concretized in truth claims and cults of personality. The myth of religious convergence does very little justice to the specific historical and doctrinal claims religious traditions make, a great many of which are incompatible. According to Michael Cook (2014), the Islamic religious

heritage is comparatively more disposed to and adaptive for fundamentalism. While there are important counterparts to Islamism in other religious heritages, Islam is a special repository for political and militant iterations. In many ways, Cook agrees with the New Atheist dismissal of religious convergence, since all religions “offer significantly different combinations of assets and liabilities for those engaged in modern politics.” He adds, “Think of a religious heritage as a set of circuits that the politically inclined may or may not choose to switch on or as a menu from which they may or may not choose to make a selection,” which “provides its modern adherents with a set of options that do not determine their choices but do constrain them” (Cook 2014, xii). But it has been an uphill battle for the New Atheists in their attempt to portray religious violence as a distinctive form of violence that in many cases supersede evaluation of secular violence.

Amarasingam (2010) claims that New Atheists commit the ultimate attribution error insofar as they explain away the most murderous secular regimes as ‘faith-based’ when in fact they were irreligious. Mark Vernon suspects that the New Atheist ‘faith’ in rationalism underlies their evasion of ‘seculapocalypse’ since it is absurd “to think that all the evil in the world is the result of bad thinking, and that good thinking will put all the bad right” (2010, 225). After all, Vernon points out, “Clear thinking did nothing to mitigate the horrors of the twentieth century”. Bryan Cooke claims that the New Atheists are “constitutively blind” to the dialectic of Enlightenment presented by Adorno and Horkheimer, whereby “the way in which battles fought in the name of reason can, in the absence of appropriate critical vigilance, fall prey to (and be it in the service of) irrational passions and goals” and this blindness “renders their own polemics, however well-motivated, blithely inattentive to the social, cultural and economic dynamics of late-capitalist societies and the role those dynamics play in shaping both the actuality of contemporary (un)reason and the latter’s popular image” (2014, 132-133). On this point, LeDrew

suggests that the dialectical “tension between the quest for emancipation and the rise of new forms of oppression that replace ‘Church and King’” is put to rest by the New Atheists simply “by rejecting the idea that such a contradiction exists in the first place and insisting that the only problem with modern society is the stubborn persistence of pre-modern beliefs and ways of thinking” (2016, 57).

However, New Atheists have not evaded ‘seculapocalypse’. In fact, Hitchens provided an impressive summary of the problem from the point of view of his once zealous Marxism: “Those of us who had sought a rational alternative to religion had reached a terminus that was comparably dogmatic” (Hitchens 2007, 153). He continued to press this concern, in concert with other New Atheists:

When the worst has been said about the Inquisition and the witch trials and the Crusades and the Islamic imperial conquests and the horrors of the Old Testament, is it not true that secular and atheist regimes have committed crimes and massacres that are, in the scale of things, at least as bad if not worse? And does not the corollary hold, that men freed from religious awe will act in the most unbridled and abandoned manner? One could go further and say that secular totalitarianism has actually provided us with the summa of human evil. The examples most in common use—those of the Hitler and Stalin regimes—show us with terrible clarity what can happen when men usurp the role of gods. (Hitchens 2007, 229)

It has grown fashionable to assert that the true horror of the Holocaust, apart from its scale, was that it was an expression of *reason*, and that it therefore demonstrates a pathology inherent to the Western Enlightenment tradition. The truth of this assertion is held by many scholars to be self-evident—for no one can deny that technology, bureaucracy, and systematic managerial thinking made the genocidal ambitions of the Third Reich possible. The romantic thesis lurking here is that reason itself has a "shadow side" and is therefore no place to turn for the safeguarding of human happiness. (Harris 2004, 259)

The *Zeitgeist* may move, and move in a generally progressive direction, but as I have said it is a sawtooth not a smooth improvement, and there have been some appalling reversals. Outstanding reversals, deep and terrible ones, are provided by the dictators of the twentieth century. (Dawkins 2006, 272)

Without the divine carrot and stick, goes this reasoning, people would loll about aimlessly or indulge their basest desires, break their promises, cheat on their spouses,

neglect their duties, and so on. There are two well-known problems with this reasoning: (1) it doesn't seem to be true, which is good news, since (2) it is such a demeaning view of human nature. (Dennett 2006, 279)

The New Atheist reply to this objection is that 'seculapocalypse' is a rather egregious canard of the discourse on religion and secularism, and a flagrant misdiagnosis of historical wrong. Their critics seem to implicate a monolithic Enlightenment that is taken as the scapegoat for 'seculapocalypse', but the New Atheists disassociate the ideals of the Enlightenment from the large-scale technologically administrated massacres that occurred under its supposed historical wingspan. They urge a reassessment of history to vindicate Enlightenment ideals of secular ethics and demonstrate how the ordeals of 'seculapocalypse' are the products of political religions. "The source of desecration and profanity is religious" and genocides such as the Holocaust "could not have been 'ethnic cleansing' without its precursors in 'religious cleansing'" (Hitchens 2007, xx). In other words, secular forms of desecration, profanity, and genocidal solutions merely imitate, instrumentalize, and expand upon the religious stylings of earlier times. "New secular religions were embarking on a quest for heaven on earth with as little regard for the distinction between the knowable and the unknowable as the old religions manifested when they preached of a heaven beyond earthly existence" (Jacoby 2004, 267).

To be sure, the New Atheists reflect that "some of the world's nastiest regimes have been nominally secular" but do not go as far as Steven Salaita, who adds that many of these regimes have also been "completely unreligious" (2008, 156). While I cannot reproduce the New Atheist historical treatment here, it is important to point out that their treatment is allied with contemporary views about the nature of many of the worst twentieth-century secular regimes and the religious arsenals they utilized in fashions both manifest and latent (Glover 1999; Berman 2003; Gentile 2006). These views about the faith-based belief in a given political religion were



first enunciated Ernst Cassirer (1946) in *The Myth of The State*. Cassirer described the suspension of disbelief in all sorts of myth, many of which possessed religious undertones, that helped enliven and prolong totalitarian regimes.<sup>xli</sup> As Mark Taylor has since put it, religion can be “most influential when it is least obvious” (Caley 2012). The serial bloodletting of the twentieth-century, the New Atheists reckon, qualifies as a supreme instance of camouflaged influence:

While some of the most despicable political movements in human history have been explicitly irreligious, they were not especially rational. The public pronouncements of these regimes have been mere litanies of delusion—about race, economics, national identity, the march of history, or the moral dangers of intellectualism. Auschwitz, the gulag, and the killing fields are not examples of what happens when people become *too critical of unjustified beliefs*; to the contrary, these horrors testify to the dangers of not thinking critically enough about specific secular ideologies. (Harris 2004, 231)

Endemic to ‘seculapocalypse’ is a system of ethics without an acceptable objective basis, and whose forms of relativism leave no room for clarity and courage of conviction. According to Phil Ryan, “The New Atheists’ failure to present a plausible post-religious ethics would seem to support the view that morality requires a religious foundation” (2014, 17). However, the post-religious ethics of the New Atheism comprises a stance of moral realism, which dispenses both with the absolutism of religious ethics and the relativism of secular ethics. Their system of ethics, if we can call it that, attempts to overcome ‘seculapocalypse’ by arguing that religion is not the source of moral value and duties or the ultimate context for spiritual experience and community. ‘Seculapocalypse’, then, is not only a misconception, it is an intellectual slight against secular ethics, a “condescending, unimaginative, and pessimistic view of the rest of humanity—and of generations to come” (Harris 2010, 25). Phil Zuckerman distinguishes “organic atheism” and “coercive atheism”, which is essential not only to correct the

misconception of ‘seculapocalypse’, but to understand the extent to which secularization thesis retains considerable empirical force in a predominantly religious world:

Nations marked by coercive atheism – such as North Korea and former Soviet states – are marked by all that comes with totalitarianism: poor economic development, censorship, corruption, depression, etc. However, nations marked by high levels of organic atheism – such as Sweden, or the Netherlands – are among the healthiest, wealthiest, best education, and freest societies on earth. (2007, 57)

In the same way, organic secularism must be distinguished from the problematic state-led and state-imposed model of secularism that entraps parts of the Muslim world, for instance. The New Atheists point to advanced industrial nations, particularly in Scandinavia, that are largely irreligious and yet consistently self-report high levels of individual happiness, in addition to indexes that already indicate notable political stability and social well-being. ‘Seculapocalypse’, then, depends on these varieties of secularism not coming apart in any important sense, and therefore charges secularism as guilty by association with its worst versions. Talal Asad writes, "The sacred for atheism is the human being himself, the human being of reason, and there is nothing greater than this human being. It replaces revelation by reason and God with humanity" (2003, 55). Of course, there is no atheist manifesto from which to derive a “single clear ‘logic of atheism’”, and as we know the New Atheism is at least ambivalent and at most unconvinced about the ‘atheist’ identity:

Atheism is taken to mean simply absence of belief in God, and thus of itself offers no positive content that would automatically lead a person to lead a morally upstanding life. The aim here is primarily to counter the claim of some religious apologists that without the existence of a God to objectively ground moral standards, people are likely to slip into moral relativism and damaging behaviors. (McAnulla 2013, 137)

The distinction between ‘organic’ and ‘coercive’ atheism serves the New Atheist retort that ‘coercive’ secularisms operate as political religions. “The new idols”, Monod writes of the twentieth-century, “were not gods but the nation, the race, and the class – and a radical

secularization would entail a rejection or destruction of all these idols” (2015, 8). As radical secularists of a kind, the New Atheists apply the criticism of religion to “any ‘substitute religion,’ as Nietzsche has called what he perceived as new collective ‘faiths’ and mass organizations promising a (secular) collective salvation” (Monod 2015, 8). While there were few, if any, supernatural gods in the political religions that define ‘seculapocalypse’, there were still masters, all of whom represent the pyrrhic victories of secularism. Nonetheless, the New Atheists demonstrate that ‘organic’ secularism need not be apocalyptic, or ethically unsustainable, to define modern state and society.

### Summary

In this chapter I have argued the New Atheism levels necessary insights and agendas that should not be obscured by a lack of scholarly charity. It has been my aim to model the charity that has been noticeably absent from many of these debates. As the ‘new wars’ continue to transfigure modern warfare, it is high time that scholars acknowledge the New Atheism as well-placed to fulfill the pledge to take religion more seriously. If the sleep of reason produces monsters, the waking life of reason produces, among other things, modesty. For the New Atheists, the secular religions of the twentieth-century constituted a sleep of reason whose despicable crimes cannot be accrued to secularism per se, much less the merits of a proper secularism. Harris argues, “I know of no society in human history that ever suffered because its people became too reasonable” or “too desirous of evidence in support of their core beliefs”. Secular modesty, Dennett contends, is not refuted by the ‘seculapocalypse’ concern and considers a passage from William James, who quoted “a clear-headed Austrian officer, ‘Far better is it for an army to be too savage, too cruel, too barbarous, than to possess too much sentimentality and human reasonableness’” (2006, 284). Although the struggles of the New

Atheism have been repeatedly addressed by those who stand accused, what I have abridged as the charges of uncritical theory, identity politics, and bad philosophy, the various postmortem responses to controversy have yet to establish the contributions of the New Atheists in mainstream scholarly discourse. In the next chapter, I turn to these promising contributions and propose three distinct but related approaches to reunderstand the New Atheism.

There is no all-seeing all-loving god to keep us free from harm. But atheism is not a recipe for despair. I think the opposite.

By disclaiming the idea of the next life, we can take more excitement in this one. The here and now is not something to be endured before eternal bliss or damnation. The here and now is all we have, an inspiration to make the most of it. So atheism is life-affirming, in a way religion can never be. Look around you. Nature demands our attention, begs us to explore, to question. Religion can provide only facile, ultimately unsatisfying answers. Science, in constantly seeking real explanations, reveals the true majesty of our world in all its complexity.

People sometimes say, “There must be more than just this world, than just this life”. But how much more do you want? We are going to die, and that makes us the lucky ones. Most people are never going to die because they’re never going to be born. The number of people who could be here, in my place, outnumber the sand grains of Sahara. If you think about all the different ways in which our genes could be permuted, you and I are quite grotesquely lucky to be here, the number of events that had to happen in order for you to exist, in order for me to exist. We are privileged to be alive and we should make the most of our time on this world.

~ Richard Dawkins, *The Root of All Evil?* (2006)

## CHAPTER IV: NEW ATHEISM, NEW LEFT

In this last chapter, I make explicit the promising contributions of the New Atheism to the scholarly discourse on religion and secularism. Specifically, I argue that the New Atheist criticism of religion helps redeploy the power of ideas, reestablish liberal principles, and reassert secular citizenship. The New Atheist treatment of American civil religion joins other scholars, such as William Connolly, who insist on a new left ‘resonance machine’ that enjoins an assembly of citizens who share a liberal ethos of engagement and “energizes action in interwoven institutions and individuals including labor unions, churches, the news media, political candidates, writers, investors, governments at all levels, educational institutions at all levels, consumers, professional associations, international organizations, and the courts” (Connolly 2008, xi-xiii). It is important to link the New Atheist criticism of religion in the United States with that of Connolly, since both parties try to pick apart American political culture in complementary ways through a blistering critique of the Christian right and its influence on American social and fiscal policy. Connolly argues that civil religion is a euphemism for hegemony, which he describes in terms of an ‘Evangelical-Capitalist resonance machine.’ He seems to recognize the validity of the New Atheist movement at least on these terms: “We must acknowledge actively and publicly the multifaceted role that faith plays in our existential assumptions, identifications, and economic projections” (2008, 35). New Atheists and scholars of religion and secularism like Connolly share many points of contact in applied ethics and while they similarly advocate a more egalitarian and ecologically-minded shift in domestic and foreign policy, they also differ in many important respects.<sup>xlii</sup>

For the purpose of this chapter, I will refer to this difference in terms of the New Atheist criticism of illiberal liberalism, or what Maajid Nawaz (2012) has called the ‘Regressive Left’,

which he defines as naïve, but well-intentioned liberals who inadvertently pander to Islamists by stifling criticism of Islam and the link between Islamic doctrine and Islamist movements. I consider Ayaan Hirsi Ali, Sam Harris, and Maajid Nawaz representative of a deepening partnership that overcomes the misconceptions of how secularists can engage in public discourse. Nawaz, a former Islamist, co-founded (with Ed Husain, another former Islamist) the Quilliam Foundation, which aims to counter Muslim extremism and usher in a grassroots transformation of Islam that is amenable to liberal democracy. After an inharmonious first meeting, in which they sparred over whether Islam was definitively a religion of peace or a religion violence, Harris and Nawaz entered into a friendly and fruitful dialogue that produced *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* (2015). Furthermore, as Muslim reformers that differ in their belief and cultural attachment, Hirsi Ali (an ex-Muslim atheist) and Nawaz (a secular Muslim) have collided in the past over similar issues, but have begun to collaborate in many forums and with many other reformers, such as Mona Eltahawy, Sarah Haider, Irshad Manji, Ali Rizvi, Arman Navabi, and Faisal Saeed Al Mutar. Their collective efforts to open Islam to criticism from within and from without reflect the New Atheist wish for Western liberals to arouse a principled stance of fellow feeling with freethinking Muslims, who are either immiserated in Muslim societies or overlooked in Western societies.

New Atheists observe that liberal principles and secular citizenship have been repeatedly betrayed for the sake of political correctness and because of a risk averse multicultural cowardice. In their view of Islam, the New Atheists find the ‘regressive leftists’ lockstep to the left, in effect, duty-bound by identity politics to practice a double standard that censures the dedicated criticism of Islam. Outside of interfaith dialogue, a strange consensus in which we seem to recognize a syncretic core to the world religions that is impervious to criticism (what I

called in the previous chapter the myth of religious convergence), many liberals do not attempt to prioritize value systems since an objective rank-order of moral or cultural systems is deeply complicated, if not rejected, by postmodern thinking. To pinpoint the regressive aspects of modern liberalism is to pinpoint the downsides of the liberation movements of the ‘New Left’, which have devolved into separatist identity politics, wherein the “rights to self-expression and self-determination are rooted in particular identities and cultural narratives which are not accountable to the judgment of outsiders” (Beattie 2007, 133). Placing value systems on more or less the same level has turned mainstream liberalism into an “anti-establishment ‘folk politics’ about feelings of personal empowerment, masking an absence of strategic gains” (Srnicsek and Williams 2015, 8). It is this absence of strategic gains that Michael Walzer (2015) argues represents “the failures of the cultural reproduction of the secular left”, and that Connolly suggests entails “a complex understanding of the necessity to build a resonance machine to achieve one’s goals” (Develennes 2016, 130).

While our world religions may converge, our cross-cultural morality does not. The New Atheist complaint is that the liberal practices of radical multiculturalism and epistemologies of relativism have undermined liberal principles. The conflation of Islamophobia and the criticism of Islam means that Muslims have been relegated to live under illiberal rule and ways of life that are *not accountable to the judgment of outsiders*. “To lose the conviction that you can actually be right—about anything—” such as the superiority of liberal principles, “seems a recipe for the End of Days chaos envisioned by Yeats: when ‘the best lack all conviction, while the worst are full of passionate intensity’” (Harris 2004, 180). The illusion of knowledge, even that the illusion that knowledge is strictly relative, functions for the New Atheists as testament not only to Yeats, but to the Dunning-Krueger effect<sup>xliii</sup> by which is meant “secular democracies are left supine



before the unreasoning zeal of old-time religion” (Harris 2010, 5). In this context that juxtaposes dogmatism and doubt, liberal institutions are taken for granted and the persistence of religious cultures are taken as a foregone conclusion. Harris and Nawaz (2015) point out that even leftists who may privately admit the connection between doctrine and violence, publicly resist articulating this connection out of a fear of offending Muslims, some significant subset of which (young men, in particular) are susceptible to radicalization. This fear of causing offense is an ironic concoction, basically a phobia of Islamophobia. According to Juan Cole (2015), if Islamists are able to polarize American and European politics along the lines of national ethnicity and religion, they can “start creating a common political identity around grievance against discrimination.” Criticism of Islam is apparently perfect bait for terrorist networks:

The assault on religion by a clique of Western polemicists risks becoming a self-fulfilling prophecy in its labelling of religion as violent and extremist, for it is stoking the fires of resentment at a time of global volatility when, for many of the world’s people, religious faith holds out the only possibility of living a meaningful and dignified life. (Beattie 2007, 134)

The apparent purpose of maintaining the image of a peaceful yet corrupted Islam is to hamstring Islamist recruiters, who can no longer recruit new members on the contention that Western powers are at war with Islam, and by extension, all Muslims. This cynical rhetorical device has been a strategic mainstay of recent presidential administrations, namely those of George W. Bush and Barack Obama. The question, therefore, is whether this fear is unfounded, and whether Muslim populations are better served with an honest rendering or a rendering that is nominally pragmatic and ultimately obscurantist.<sup>xliv</sup> It is by analyzing this honest rendering that I will make explicit the contributions of the New Atheism.

## Wishes

I present the contributions of the New Atheism to scholarly discourse through three distinct, but related approaches in political thought, namely critical theory, affinity politics, and public philosophy. According to Neuman and Kreuger, “Pre-existing theory provides the empty boxes. The researcher sees whether evidence can be gathered to fill them. The evidence in the boxes confirms or reject the theory” (2003, 329). These selected approaches are intended to serve as correctives to the prominent misconceptions discussed and corrected in the previous chapter, verily the ‘empty boxes’ for reunderstanding the New Atheism as an oppositional social movement intimately engaged in the wider debates of religion and secularism. In this chapter I test each approach through an illustrative method that describes, explains, and integrates New Atheist viewpoints in the framework of pre-existing theory.

### Critical Theory

The noted critical theorist Jurgen Habermas writes, “We can view these conflicts either as power struggles between state authority and religious movements or as conflicts between secular and religious convictions” (2010, 20). While the New Atheists recognize power struggles as a pervasive feature of international politics, their approach centrally focuses on the secular and religious convictions they find most problematic in our discourse. As such, New Atheists qualify as “ideas people” insofar as their explanatory slant to behavior such as religious violence is based on understanding specific, well-subscribed beliefs (Tilly 2003). In this way, their criticism of religion functions as a critical theory that challenges extremism through the analysis of the relevant and operative ideas. Part of taking religion seriously is taking the guidance of ideas seriously from the first-person perspective. When it comes to the violent extremes of ideological commitment, Islamist terrorists for instance, Harris argues,

Such people are merely acting rationally within the framework of their religious beliefs... Such apparently unreasonable behavior is often in the service of reason, since it aims at the empirical authentication of religious doctrine. In fact, even the most extreme expressions of faith are often perfectly rational, given the requisite beliefs. (2004, 69)

If we broaden our understanding of rationality and the uses (and abuses) of religious ecstasy in the justification of violence, the New Atheists suggest that we will be better equipped to recognize the link between specific beliefs and behaviors. Of course, the New Atheism is an incisively normative social movement, given their “avowed intent of criticizing particular social arrangements and/or outcomes,” “demonstrate how they came to exist,” and “indicating alternative futures or social modes of operation that do not currently exist, but might be brought into being” (Kurki and Wright 2011, 27-28). The lens of critical theory reconceives the New Atheism as an oppositional and emancipatory-minded social movement that locates ideological alternatives in the present as source points for free inquiry and social reform (Bronner 2011). “We are merely guilty of assuming that our fellow Homo sapiens possess the requisite intelligence and emotional maturity to respond to rational argument, satire, and ridicule on the subject of religion – just as they respond to these discursive pressures on all other subjects” (Harris 2010, 175). Granted, the critique of political economy is conspicuously absent throughout the work of most New Atheists, who are generally less radical in their criticism of global neoliberal capitalism.

Marxist atheists and critics of the New Atheism, such as Terry Eagleton and Slavoj Zizek imply that this conspicuous absence is suggestive of a petty bourgeois rationalism that Marx described as “assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the bogeyman”. The public criticism of religion, for critical theory in the tradition of Marx, paled in comparison with the transgression of the public criticism of property relations. Hitchens was an important exception, a self-described Marxist and anti-theist who easily squared a commitment

to human emancipation through the international working class, understood in dialectical terms with his very public and insistent stance of atheism in a political culture where the criticism of religion, Islam in particular, was still necessary:

At the very point when Islam ought to be joining its predecessors in subjecting itself to rereadings, there is a "soft" consensus among almost all the religious that, because of the supposed duty of respect that we owe the faithful, this is the very time to allow Islam to assert its claims at their own face value. Once again, faith is helping to choke free inquiry and the emancipating consequences that it might bring. (Hitchens 2007)

As Jerry Coyne (2013) put it, in his own ode to Marx, "Up to now, most atheists have simply criticized religion in various ways, but the point is to dispel it." In order to dispel religion, the power of religious ideas must be redeployed in our analysis of religious violence. To be clear, "the New Atheists have little to contribute to Marxist literature, and they largely fit within a reactionary type of atheism, and one embedded within the liberal struggle against religion" (Develennes 2016, 128), yet "put in the context of Marx's dialectic, they remind us that the struggle against religious encroachments is not over, but needs to be re-enacted on a continual basis" (2016, 128). That human nature is changeable and human action is potentially emancipatory are assumptions that rest at the heart of critical theory. Harris writes,

It is as yet undetermined what it means to be human, because every facet of our culture – and even our biology itself – remains open to innovation and insight. We do not know what we will be a thousand years from now – or indeed that we will be, given the lethal absurdity of many of our beliefs – but whatever changes await us, one thing seems unlikely to change: as long as experience endures, the difference between happiness and suffering will remain our paramount concern (2004, 226).

In his critical theory Marx described human nature as acutely contingent on enveloping social relations and trained his system of action to the real suffering and real happiness of the species, which he claimed was discoverable in the aftermath of religious criticism and class consciousness. That theorists ought to enact a ruthless distrust of the status quo, that ideology is employed upon the masses, and that the fact-value gap can be safely bridged are other critical

theory assumptions that permeate the New Atheism. These assumptions serve as the connective tissue for a New Atheist analysis of religious ideology. “Rather than being content to advocate atheism purely at an academic or intellectual level, the emphasis is on popularizing anti-religious sentiment in order to support efforts to challenge the institutional and social power of religion” (McAnulla 2013, 126). By challenging extremism as a set of ideas that may or may not be well-subscribed, the New Atheists challenge the institutional and social power of religion.

From the New Atheist point of view, the ‘War on Terror’ is a misnomer that is neither edifying nor effective. Declaring war on a selected tactic, in the case of Islamism, conceals the religious ideology that backs the specified use of the tactic, and mires the ‘new wars’ in old, inherited, and unsuccessful strategies. The heretofore safe assumption of rationality that international relations scholars have long maintained, to one or another degree, is nullified when matched with an ideology that scholars do not understand or cannot take seriously enough. The New Atheists assert that this much is evident in the war cry, “We love death more than the infidel loves life!” This does literal and figurative violence to our naked trust in the state-centric logic of realism and the prevention of mutually assured destruction.

Notions of martyrdom and jihad run roughshod over the logic that allowed the United States and the Soviet Union to pass half a century perched, more or less stably, on the brink of Armageddon. What will we do if an Islamist regime, which grows dewy-eyed at the mere mention of paradise, ever acquires long-range nuclear weaponry? (Harris 2004, 129)

Even the temporary reversal of the balance of power to the side of militant Islamists, in terms of the capacity to decimate Western lands, is difficult to convert to state-centric logic. The New Atheists suspect that all realists can say is that such a hypothetical Islamist regime indicates an entirely ‘irrational’ motivation and outcome that scholars should be wary to fathom as a direct effect of religious ideology. The nuclear deal with Iran is unfortunate proof that Islamist regimes

need not adjust their ideology in cooperating with Western powers. The purpose of challenging extremism is to challenge the ideas that lay behind every act of extremism. Once we understand the extent to which ideas guide behavior, the role of religion in international relations can be more clearly defined and operationalized. In this way, the New Atheists wish for widespread ideology adjustment in prosecuting the specter of Islamism:

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, and further elaborated in the literature of the hadith, which recounts the sayings and actions of the Prophet. A future in which Islam and the West do not stand on the brink of mutual annihilation is a future in which most Muslims have learned to ignore most of their canon, just as most Christians have learned to do. Such a transformation is by no means guaranteed to occur, however, given the tenets of Islam. (Harris 2004, 111-112)

The tenets of Islam cannot be ignored when significant numbers of Muslims profess intolerant beliefs about apostasy, blasphemy, homosexuality, the honor of women, and the status of noncombatants in armed conflict. If anything the tenets of Islam, or at least the fundamentalist construal of them, means the borders and the innards of Islam are prone to repression and the shedding of blood. In the case of Islamism, Dawkins argues, "The take-home message is that we should blame religion itself, not religious extremism - as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion" (2006, 306). Such sweeping professions of faith certify a "war of ideas" or "clash of ideologies" between Islamism and liberalism (rather than a "clash of civilizations" between Christianity and Islam). As to not confuse fringe extremism with mainstream Islam, Harris and Nawaz schematize 'concentric circles' of Muslim dispositions based on a number of polls taken in the Muslim world.<sup>xlv</sup> This schematization refigures the 'fringe' by placing the most combative Islamists at the center, leading out into the variety of conservative, moderate, and liberal forms of profession.<sup>xlvi</sup> Islamism exists on a spectrum of commitment with multiple points. On one end are militant Islamists who wage violent jihad as

holy war and on the opposite end are Islamists vying for political authority through nonviolent means. While the points between these ends of the spectrum encompass distinct factions and uses of force, Islamism is an umbrella term for oppositional movements that purport to express the fundamentals of Islam, foisted upon the public and private spheres, through a combination of ballots and bombs, that is, stealth theocracy and suicidal terror. According to the New Atheists, this political ascendancy speaks to the invidious differences between religions.

The rise of Islamic fundamentalism" is only a problem because the *fundamentals of Islam* are a problem. A rise of Jain fundamentalism would endanger no one. In fact, the uncontrollable spread of Jainism throughout the world would improve our situation immensely. We would lose more of our crops to pests, perhaps (observant Jains generally will not kill anything, including insects), but we would not find ourselves surrounded by suicidal terrorists or by a civilization that widely condones their actions. (Harris 2004, 148)

Jainism is merely one example that demonstrates the faulty assumption that our world religions share in the functional capacity to promote identical levels of violence if interpreted with a fundamentalist eye. This assumption belies the fact that the potential for violence innate in fundamentalist Jainism is radically dissimilar from the potential for violence in fundamentalist Islam. Therefore, any power hungry or depraved adoption of religious language and symbols will likely result in radically dissimilar consequences. Even if it is true that "smoldering conflicts... profane in origin are first ignited once coded in religious terms" (Habermas 2008, 5), the New Atheists contend that the intensity of the blaze depends on the given religion and the available range of scriptural interpretation. However, scholars have yet to take the link between the ideas of jihad and martyrdom and the act of suicide bombing, for instance, as a logical connection that alludes to ideology.

Challenging extremism on the basis of ideas is at the very least disputed ground. Malise Ruthven describes Islamic fundamentalism in terms of a besieged search for meaning, "the

struggle between pragmatism and ideological purity” (Caley 2012). This identity politics view runs together with Graham Fuller (2003; 2010), who argues that the Islamic religion succumbs to divisive violence because of complicated political schisms between and within Shia and Sunni sects, rather than the dominance of ideas. The objection to religious ideology is often traced to the work of Robert Pape (2005) and Scott Atran (2010), both of whom argue that the strategic logic of suicide bombing is largely nonreligious in nature, premised on the attainment of nationalist goals, such as independence from domestic regimes, as well as foreign occupation or intervention. The Tamil Tigers are routinely cited as the leading secular perpetrators of suicidal terrorism, whose grievances are not ideological in a religious sense but depend solely on extenuating political and material circumstances. In the case of Islamism, the stagnation of legitimate governance in the Muslim world is said to have triggered the recent descent into violence and enabled Islamists to ascend the political ladder in sometimes creeping, sometimes explosive steps (Zakaria 2003). Two decades of case studies suggest that religious ideology is an atypical cause when compared with groups like the Tamil Tigers. Scholars have become reluctant to accept the testimonies of suicide bombers at face-value. Behind their self-reported intentions and aspirations, terror of this magnitude is said to most strongly congeal with secular anxieties, nationalist concerns, and realist calculations. Scott Thomas suggests the rational choice paradigm inflects the study of terrorism:

Ideas or ideology, including culture and religion, are epiphenomenal forces. They are the result of more basic material, economic, or technological forces in society. Therefore, they have no independent role in any explanation. Culture and religion are part of the ephemeral realm of values, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings, and are an effect of the more obdurate and observable and measurable facts of social life – income inequality, unemployment, fertility rates, or crime – and are not a cause of social or material life. (2005, 62)



By taking culture and religion seriously (too seriously), the New Atheist treatment of Islam is said constitute a misrepresentation of the connection between religious movements and violence because it “ignores the Israeli occupation of the West Bank, it ignores the collusion of Western powers with Middle Eastern dictatorships, and it ignores endemic poverty in the Arab world” (Cavanaugh 2009, 213). Mainstream Islam is *fundamentally* dissimilar from the extremism most Muslims disavow as fringe, lunatic, or condemnable (Esposito and Moghed 2007). The counterargument the New Atheists mount to this construal of strategic logic rejects the overlay of secular disputes as a facile explanation.

Defenders of religion are quick to point out that terrorists typically have political, not religious agendas, which may well be true in many or most cases, or even in all cases, but that is not the end of it. The political agendas of violent fanatics often lead them to adopt a religious guise, and to exploit the organizational infrastructure and tradition of unquestioning loyalty of whichever religion is handy. (Dennett 2006, 299)

Furthermore, many Islamist terrorists are both affluent and educated. Norris and Inglehart demonstrate as much with regard to the Israel-Palestine conflict, “which have well-educated populations with moderate or relatively high levels of material wealth but are experiencing insecurities linked with deep-rooted civic conflict and ethnic conflict” (2011, 255). It is this deep-rooted civic and ethnic conflict that the New Atheists claim raises the specter of Islamist ideas. Leaving the more basic material, economic, and technological factors aside only further demonstrates for the New Atheists how Islamism is incomparable to other religious opposition movements in terms of scale and justification.

Where are the Palestinian *Christian* suicide bombers? They, too, suffer the daily indignity of the Israeli occupation. Where, for that matter, are the Tibetan Buddhist suicide bombers? Tibetans have suffered an occupation far more cynical and repressive than any that the United States or Israel has ever imposed upon the Muslim world. Where are the throngs of Tibetans ready to perpetrate suicidal atrocities against Chinese noncombatants? They do not exist. What is the difference that makes the difference? The difference lies in the specific tenets of Islam. (Harris 2004)

When Muslims volunteer *en masse* to become glorified and aggrandized cannon fodder, whilst comparably oppressed populations do not, it is imperative that we understand the phenomenology of the regnant belief system. According to Harris, “Suicide bombing, in the Muslim world at least, is an explicitly religious phenomenon that is inextricable from notions of martyrdom and jihad, predictable on their basis, and sanctified by their logic” (2004, 261). The extent to which the Tamil Tigers can be considered secular is also disputed since their Hindu identity turns a worldview that condones martyrdom into an implicitly religious phenomenon reliant on faith-based belief. More and more, Michael Walzer argues, scholars are unable to appreciate the power of religious belief and the sway of religious identity. The rational choice mindset, it seems, curiously doubles as a neo-Marxist framework: “Aren’t all religions the ideological tools of the ruling class? And aren’t all millennialist and messianic uprisings the ideologically distorted response of subaltern groups to material oppression?” (Walzer 2015). The New Atheist mindset and theoretical framework holds that violent acts such as suicide bombing “*must make reference to the specifically religious goals and self-understanding of the actors, that taking such considerations seriously is critical to understanding religious violence*” (McKaughan 2015, 295, emphasis mine). Challenging extremism, then, is a matter of understanding the phenomenology of extremists and how it reflects on the influence of religious ideas.

It is most helpful to unpack ideology in terms of “soft power”, as a contrast to the “hard power” of nationalist grievances and material leveraging (Nye 1990), yet many scholars continue to question the softness of religious soft power. For instance, Juergensmeyer (2017) confesses that it is difficult to imagine the level of conviction that animates violent fundamentalism. The New Atheists believe that a lack of imagination in this area is simply inexcusable. When hordes

of devotees believe in the illusory nature of death and the glorious reality of eternal salvation, the taking of lives is recast in terms of certainty, duty, and enthusiasm, not to be denied as genuine phenomenology or explained away as a mere byproduct. The nonreligious factors that influence suicidal terror remain crucial, yet cannot be treated separately from the drivers of ideology and identity.<sup>xlvii</sup> The concrete political agendas of Islamism are cloaked in the paradise-colored lenses, language, and loyalties of religion, all of which magnify the sense of grievance and the susceptibility of young Muslims.

One of two things may happen: those who are innocently credulous may become easy prey for those who are less scrupulous and who seek to "lead" and "inspire" them. Or those whose credulity has led their own society into stagnation may seek a solution, not in true self-examination, but in blaming others for their backwardness. (Hitchens 2007)

While it is true that a variable such as Islamism cannot be explained solely by the constant of Islam, the New Atheists argue that this variable cannot begin to be explained without Islam, not as a monolith belief system devoid of interpretative nuance, but as a set of ideas that when rendered by fundamentalists become an ideological dogma. According to Nawaz, ideological dogma is one facet of the Islamist radicalization process that tends to operate in concert with three other elements: a grievance narrative, an identity crisis, and charismatic recruiters. The point is that ideas enjoin primed actors who have a felt sense of exclusion, so the content of any given set of ideas is maximally important. As Eric Hoffer put it in *The True Believer* (1951), ideology “penetrates only into minds already open.” Appleby points out that generational changes in Muslim societies may usher in a new procedure of radicalization, as recruiters “keep the movements honest, that is, to train at least one eye on the heavens, but they must also abide a new class of lay religious technocrats who read sacred scriptures the way an engineer reads a blueprint” (2011, 244). The new class of lay religious technocrats, many of

whom fill the ranks of the Islamic State and other militant groups, are much more likely to advance ideas that are devoid of interpretative nuance and deepen fundamentalist intuitions.

Marc Sageman (2011) further suggests that with the spread of Islamist propaganda, the charismatic recruiter component of radicalization is not a necessary condition since individuals with a sense of grievance and crisis have sought conscription online or, in many cases, orchestrated a terrorist attack without the personal direction of an Islamist leader. Example after example of what Sageman calls “leaderless jihad” in terms of homegrown terror (e.g. Omar Mateen) spring to mind. Typically in the wake of these attacks one or another Islamist group takes credit. Truly, the New Atheists take the specter of Islamism to show that “it is no use saying people who use religion to legitimate hatred and violence are simply abusing or misinterpreting religious traditions for their own misguided purposes” (Thomas 2005, 13). The fact that martyrdom is defined as ‘dying to win’, be it paradise for oneself or preparing the battleground for the eschatological last day, the New Atheists argue that the phenomenology of Islamist belief can no longer be occluded. Indeed, I have argued their critical theory is based on these dynamics.

### Affinity Politics

The emphasis on identity politics in the ‘new wars’ of religion serves as a nice contrast for reunderstanding the New Atheism as an affinity politics. On the one hand, religious fundamentalism seems to have taken to the apparatus of the state and the thoroughfare of society in the Muslim world. On the other hand, the defense of freethought and liberal principles seems to have taken a backseat to religious fundamentalism by squashing the criticism of the Islamist ideology and its connection to Islam. To uplift human life out of a felt sense of cosmopolitan

solidarity and to demand legitimate governance and the rule of law are part and parcel of the liberalism the New Atheists endorse in their work. Thus,

New atheists' critiques of religion and of faith in general, are informed by their desire to protect fundamental liberal values. New atheists do not borrow a specific liberal philosophy, but they do tacitly defend a form of political liberalism that coheres with core liberal doctrines. New atheists' critique of religion's harmful effects is based on their belief that religion is antithetical to liberal values, such as freedom of expression and the separation of public from private life. (Schulzke 2013, 790)

If we follow David Easton's definition of politics as the "authoritative allocation of values for a society," identity politics would mean the authoritative allocation of values through "natural identification," whereas affinity politics would mean the authoritative allocation of values through a "conscious coalition." This is the view that Donna Haraway introduced, who favors affinity politics because the boundaries of human identity are far more fluid and manifold than the agendas of particularist identity politics let on, notwithstanding the fact that some emphasis on natural identification has been and will continue to be necessary to enfranchise minority groups. "Identities seem contradictory, partial, and strategic. With the hard-won recognition of their social and historical constitution, gender, race, and class cannot provide the basis for belief in 'essential' unity" (Haraway 1991). In search of an essential liberal unity, I reunderstand the New Atheism by testing the selected approach of affinity politics, which reconceives the New Atheists precisely as a conscious coalition of liberals who make "common complaints" (Walzer 2003) and "collective challenges" (Tarrow 1994) through "a partisan though not uncritical identification" (Fraser 1985) with liberalism and the left.

Affinity politics is forward-looking, according to Mary Kaldor, a politics of ideas that "tends to be integrative, embracing all those who support the idea," whereas identity politics "tends to be fragmentive, backward-looking, and exclusive" (2012, 80). The New Atheists argue that "there is no reason to automatically assume that racial or sexual identity group membership

should be any more primary than an interest or ideological affiliation based in nonbelief” (Cimino and Smith 2014, 48). In making ideological affiliation more primary, the New Atheism provokes liberals to confront religion to an extent that outweighs identity politics narrowly conceived. If identity politics are a form of communitarianism, as Kaldor suggests, then affinity politics are a form of cosmopolitanism, which is not a negation of identity but “a celebration of the diversity of global identities, acceptance, and indeed, enthusiasm for multiple overlapping identities, and, at the same time, a commitment to the equality of all human beings and to respect for human dignity” (2012, 91). Cosmopolitanism, then, necessitates a different species of politics to combat inequality and alleviate the tensions between cultural revolution and social democracy. As Charles Tilly held, “Identity claims consist of assertions that ‘we’ – the claimants – constitute a unified force to be reckoned with” (2009, 151). None of this is to deny the broad identity claim that most New Atheists make in their ‘consciousness-raising’ campaign. There is a significant difference between a politics of identity that prioritizes accidents of birth or culture and identity claims that prioritize some mutual ideological affinity.

Reunderstood as an affinity politics, I argue that the New Atheism is well-placed to recalibrate liberalism and the left by deepening partnerships with Muslims who acknowledge the connection between Islam and Islamism. The New Atheists envision a global civil society in which citizens of the world recognize a shared environment, interconnected cultures and economies, and a mutually beneficial establishment of liberal principles. In this vision, “individual liberty, democracy, gender equality, and religious pluralism aren’t really Western values; they are universal values” (Walzer 2015). As the New Atheists contend, these universal values have yet to take root in many Islamic religious cultures, whether under authoritarian rule or astride terrorist insurgency. The possibility that Islamist regimes or militant rogues could

obtain weapons of mass destruction further intensifies the debates. The fear of Islamification pales in comparison to the prospect of nuclear war. However, “such fears are tied to some measure of optimism that once the dangers of dogmatic religion are clearly recognized, some deliverance from strife can be realized” (McAnulla 2013, 138). In this respect, the New Atheist ‘wish’ is apparent not only in their outlined positions, but the untapped potential of defending liberal principles in areas of endemic conflict. The New Atheists attribute the ‘untapped’ nature of this potential not only to the taboo that protects religion from criticism, but the failure of leftist courage, the courage of liberal convictions.

Affinity politics require Western liberals to understand that “Muslims, like other people, are susceptible to the siren's song of liberalism” (Harris 2004, 138), “that there are no acts more dishonorable than harming ‘infidels’ of one stripe or another for ‘disrespecting’ a flag, a cross, a holy text” (Dennett 2006, 257), and “that anyone concerned with human safety or dignity would have to hope fervently for a mass outbreak of democratic and republican secularism” (Hitchens 2007, 28). While the specter of Islamism has shown formulations such as the end of history to be terrifyingly off base, the end of Islamism is not out of the question for the New Atheist movement.<sup>xlviii</sup> To bring about the end of Islamism, Ayaan Hirsi Ali recommends “a relentless campaign of blasphemy,” which is to say a relentless campaign of unified freethinkers who are openly critical of Islam as a set of ideas that underwrite Islamism, whilst maintaining their commitment to reform the lived experience of Muslims everywhere. Given that adversaries of liberalism “are so well-equipped, [liberals] needs to put aside differences and find common lines of flight, common affective affinities, and amplify those through a pluralistic framework” (Develennes 2016, 130). Can the New Atheism, as an affinity politics, facilitate an essential unity of liberals? Indeed, to the extent the movement has been charitably encountered, “new

atheism has opened up a space for freethinkers,” and consistent with liberal principles, “this is the same space occupied by their antagonists” (Cimino and Smith 2010, 152). Whether this space can be applied in the near term to the Muslim world is an open question that needs to be considered by Muslim reformers in “sustained interactions with elites, opponents, and authorities” (Tarrow 1994, 12).

It will suffice to mention one example of a sustained interactions: the Quilliam Foundation. Co-founded by Nawaz and Husain to combat the spread of Islamism, Quilliam is an agent of change with programs in Britain and the United States at the grassroots organizational level. Admittedly, the New Atheist collaboration with Muslim reformers is liable to create rifts in Muslim communities, some of whom resent the inauthentic and elitist arrogation of critique and the work of reform by non-Muslims and ostensibly secular Muslims. On this score, Quilliam has not evaded criticism. While their partnership with the British government has bolstered their position of influence in terms of public funding and exposure, they have recently come under scrutiny for associating with elected officials who make use of dog whistles such as “muscular liberalism” and governmental strategies such as “Prevent”. The loss of credibility as a result of ‘professionalization’, both on the part of New Atheists for their neoconservative leanings and Quilliam for their acquiescence to British statecraft, is a scenario Charles Tilly entertained, wherein supporters of a given social movement or political cause

worry that social movement activists, already drawn disproportionately from prosperous, well-educated, well-connected segments of the population, will sell out the interests of truly disadvantaged people, establish comfortable relations with authorities, rely increasingly on support from the rich and powerful, and/or become social movement bureaucrats, more interested in forwarding their own organizations and careers than in the welfare of their supposed constituencies (2009, 155)

Even so, it is my contention that intellectually honest criticism of Islam contributes to the reformist discourse in several ways, not least of which is the recognition that Muslim societies



are undergoing generational shifts that promise immense change and perhaps a greater openness to innovation and adoption of liberal democracy. The liberalism that the New Atheism imbibes seems to overlap with the concern that Herbert Marcuse (1964) articulated, “Independence of thought, autonomy, and the right to political opposition are being deprived of their basic critical function in a society which seems increasingly capable of satisfying the needs of the Individuals through the way in which it is organized.” Of course, New Atheists diverge from Marcuse in their emphasis on illiberal liberalism. For instance, Marcuse refers to liberalism as “a historical freak between organized capitalism and socialism, servitude and freedom, totalitarianism and happiness,” whereas New Atheists believe liberalism to be the lifeblood of civil society, whose vitality is being deprived in confrontation with religious fundamentalists:

The majority of us don't cause needless suffering; we believe in free speech and protect it even if we disagree with what is being said; we pay our taxes; we don't cheat, don't kill, don't commit incest, don't do things to others that we would not wish done to us. Some of these good principles can be found in holy books, but buried alongside much else that no decent person would wish to follow: and the holy books do not supply any rules for distinguishing the good principles from the bad. (Dawkins 2006, 263)

While Marcuse regarded advanced democracy as the supreme authoritarian form of repression, New Atheists regard authoritarian threats of the Islamist variety as far more pressing, as they are emboldened by religious ideology, the liberal abstention of criticism, and less amenable to contestation than advanced democracy. Quilliam is one of the many sources of optimism for reform in a post-Arab Spring environment, given the power of information and communication technology to streamline protest and garner supportive coverage. Of course, the very same technology enables militant Islamists to spread their message, raise funds, and recruit supporters. In any case, it is evident that part of the ‘new wars’ are fought in the low-intensity, but high-impact space of information and communication technology, what has been called the 21<sup>st</sup> century version of the 16<sup>th</sup> century printing press that helped spur a reformation:

Imagine a platform for Muslim dissidents that communicated their message through YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram. Imagine ten reformist magazines for every one issue of IS's "Dibuq" or Al-Qaeda's "Inspire". Such a strategy would also give us an opportunity to shift our alliances to those Muslim individuals and groups who actually share our values and practices. (Hirsi Ali 2015)

But what makes the response of Western liberals to the specter of Islamism so dissatisfying for the New Atheists? The New Atheists hold that when it comes to assessing the link between the Islamic doctrine and Islamist terrorism, liberals have lost both their nerve and their empathy. The New Atheists invite us to consider Mormonism as another example of the differences that obtain between religions. Trey Parker and Matt Stone, the notorious creators of *South Park*, hilariously satirized the Mormon faith in their award-winning 2011 play, *The Book of Mormon*. In response, Mormon leaders advertised in playbill to the effect of, "You've seen the play, now read the book!" Conversely, the satirical treatment of Muhammad in Danish and French cartoon depictions have incited religious violence and social discord. Whereas the Mormon response suggests that even satirical publicity is good publicity in American political culture, the Islamist response is that any satirical publicity is idolatry, and therefore grounds for violent reprisal. In the wake of these terrorist attacks, several premier media outlets declined to republish the drawings.<sup>xlix</sup> Evidently, the cartoons that shook the world could not shake the politically correct dust off their feet. "In other words, a handful of religious bullies and bigmouths could, so to speak, outvote the tradition of free expression in its Western heartland" (Hitchens 2007, 281). Whereas a sense of humor and an accepted modicum of criticism allowed many Mormons to embrace their publicity, if only as a vehicle for conversion, many Muslims are currently unwilling to embrace, let alone tolerate, such liberal positions on freedom of expression. In this regard, the New Atheist wish for freethought to serve as a united front for liberals worldwide is beset by the persecution of novelists, bloggers, intellectuals, and activists,

who, without Western support, will continue to suffer in the absence of solidarity displays. It is at this point that the New Atheism is becomes more political (secularist vs. theocrat) than intellectual (atheist vs. theist) since affinity for freethought encompasses a variety of liberal ways of lifestyles:

Running the gamut from the truly antireligious – those who regarded all religion as a form of superstition and wished to reduce its influence in every aspect of society – to those who adhered to a private unconventional faith revering some form of God or Providence but at odds with orthodox religious authority. (Jacoby 2004, 4).

The New Atheists maintain that it is up to liberals to “share the risk” (Four Horsemen and One Horsewoman 2012). They place the onus for the liberal critique of American power on “affluent, well-educated Westerners who bear the greatest responsibility for the spread of ideas” (Harris 2006, 294). At first blush, this might appear to endorse some version of the white man’s burden. But Harris adds that by mere dint of literacy, “You are in better position to influence the course of history than almost any person in history” (2006, 294). It seems, then, that “affluent, well-educated Westerners” are responsible for the spread of good ideas insofar as they are complicit in the spread of bad ideas. In effect, ‘the liberal tradition’ in American life and foreign policy, where citizens are “held together, not by the knowledge that they were different parts of a corporate whole, but by the knowledge that they were similar participants in a uniform way of life” (Hartz 55, 1955), a la ‘Out of many, one’, appears to be under great duress by the specter of Islamism and the unprincipled response of Western liberals. Alas, many critics of New Atheism suspect that the wish to inspire reform through criticism may lapse into wishful thinking.

The persistence of religion in general and Islamism in particular suggest that “God isn’t going anywhere. And when we treat religion as something to be derided, dismissed, or destroyed, we risk amplifying its worst faults” (Armstrong 2009, 55). Post 9/11, while scholars pledged to take religion more seriously, the United Nations introduced resolutions concerning the

“defamation of religion,” bound only to the view that blasphemy was a punishable offense and that criticism of religion was a slippery slope. Jurgen Habermas points to the ongoing debates within liberalism on this very issue, the opposing halves of the liberal mind that comprise ‘radical multiculturalism’ and ‘militant secularism’:

The party of the multiculturalists appeals to the protection of collective identities and accuses the other side of representing a “fundamentalism of the Enlightenment”, whereas the secularists insist on the uncompromising inclusion of minorities in the existing political frame and accuse their opponents of a “multiculturalist betrayal” of the core values of the Enlightenment. (2008)

As a result of this liberal fissure, the debates have invariably devolved to the point where radical multiculturalists claim “if you are critical of Islam, you are joining hands with the new xenophobes of the West” (Walzer 2015). Since militant secularists are critical of Islam, they are consistently accused of Islamophobia. The ‘cultural elitism’ and ‘militant atheism’ of the radical secularists is said to amount to “little more than a misguided effort at cultural censorship, political illiberalism dressed up as liberal politics” (Gorski 2017, 3). Ironically, this description is identical to how the New Atheists describe multiculturalism – a misguided effort to gag criticism of Islam, illiberal to the degree that free expression is depreciated through a sanitized liberal politics. Perversely, many liberals sympathize with the oppositional nature of Islamists, condemning their violence while disregarding their religious justification in favor of that familiar rational choice/neo-Marxist frame. Islamists are said to be engaged in the struggle for national liberation, anti-imperialist outfits that defend Muslim lands by any means necessary. Islamist terrorism, then, is revolutionary in nature, rather than reactionary. The real problem of Islamophobia stems from not understanding these dynamics. More than sympathy, some liberals consider Islamist uses of terror as righteous in light of the oppressive circumstances:

The saying goes, ‘One person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter,’ and while this may be true, a holy martyr is not the same thing as a freedom fighter. What the

subjectivism of this common phrase hides is that there can be different types of motivation and legitimacy for what social scientists seek to identify as a certain type of collective violence. (Thomas 2005, 142)

Paul Berman (2003) considers this common turn of phrase ‘liberalism as denial’. So long as liberals are in a state of denial about the type of freedom that is being fought over, Harris suspects that liberals are confronted by international relations so absurd and deranged that the ‘new xenophobes’ are the only party adequately worried about the specter of Islamism and willing to employ moral clarity. At this moment, the New Atheists suggest, right-wing populism in America and Europe is empowered by the abandonment of liberal principles. Liberals of the past allowed crimes against humanity to occur in deference to budding anti-establishment ideologies. Communism and fascism swept by the woebegone liberal politics of the ‘old wars’, and today liberals stand to let history repeat itself in the ‘new wars’.

The New Atheists contend that the inability to recognize the danger of Islamist ideology, as it exists apart from the anti-establishment critique of modern power (neoconservative statecraft, neoliberal capitalism, neocolonial dependencies) and the establishment narrative of postmodernism (particularistic identity politics, political correctness, multiculturalism, relativism) amounts to liberalism as denial. Liberalism as denial seems to imply that major scholarly figures on the left hold regressive positions on Islamism, such as Judith Butler<sup>l</sup>, Wendy Brown<sup>li</sup>, and Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri<sup>liii</sup>. Harris claims that the rhetoric pedaled by prominent liberals of this sort is not informed by a close, or even cursory, reading of the official propaganda outlet of the Islamic State, *Dabiq*. For instance, the June 2016 issue of *Dabiq* featured an article entitled, “Why We Hate You and Why We Fight You,” which spells out in almost nauseating clarity the theological grievances that motivate their variety of Islamist terror.<sup>liii</sup> Unlike Berman, Harris argues that while Islamist ideology is indeed totalitarian, it

cannot be considered nihilistic.<sup>liv</sup> Islamism is run on ideological soft power as much as it is on technological hard power.

When liberals allow Islamists to speak for themselves, they do not discover the views of “people who share with the European Left its reading of U.S. foreign policy” (Thomas 2005, 144). On the European Left, Jean Baduriallard (2003) argued that the ‘War on Terror’ “points past the specter of America (which is perhaps the epicenter, but in no sense the sole embodiment, of globalization) and the specter of Islam (which is not the embodiment of terrorism either) to triumphant globalization battling against itself.” To position the debate as past the specters of America and Islamism is to position the debate beyond ideology, and subsequently double down on moral equivalence, mere terror against terror, as Baduriallard was fond of saying. Slavoj Zizek (2009) claims that Islamists are “really motivated neither by religion nor by a Leftist sense of justice, but by resentment,” namely of liberal tolerance. “In their very opposition”, Zizek continues, liberal tolerance and Islamist terrorism are “two faces of the same system,” that is, global capitalism and its discontents. Yet the likes of Osama bin-Laden endorsed the account of Michael Scheuer (2004), a former CIA operative who tracked bin-Laden’s activities prior to 9/11. The leader of Al-Qaeda stated plainly, “If you want to understand what's going on and if you would like to get to know some of the reasons for your losing the war against us, then read the book of Michael Scheuer.”

In his book, Scheuer says that the Islamists oppose Western power “because they believe America, through its policies and actions, is trying to destroy Muslims and the Islamic faith.” This is the narrative bin-Laden endorsed and promised his supporters that he would rectify. Curiously, it is also a narrative that does not becloud the link between religion and violence. While in the Muslim world, “The jihad narrative has become ‘the default anti-establishment

politics of today” (Ali 2015), the ‘narrative’ narrative wavers as the default establishment politics of today. Harris and Nawz (2015) define the ‘narrative’ narrative as a discursive technique to resist Islamism by refusing to name Islamism, by refusing to give in to the validity of Islamism as Islamic. In this narrative, the many grievances Muslims have with secular regimes or with the global media portray of Islam are unpacked by Islamists as part of a Western conspiracy against Muslims, and this is supposedly the lynchpin to radicalization. Thus liberals shy away from criticism and bowdlerize those who do not share in their reticence. Islam is thus maintained to be a religion of peace, and to say otherwise is to play into the hands of the Islamists.

Meredith Tax calls the liberal derogation of the moral high ground, born of fear and confusion, a “double bind”, whereby the Anglo-American left sidetracks due condemnation of the Muslim right with a masochistic critique of Western imperialism. Keeping the disparagement of Ayaan Hirsi Ali as a neoconservative in mind, Tax argues that feminists who criticize the Muslim right for gender politics will be reliably branded as orientalist, colonialist, or in the case of Hirsi Ali, “a woman of color or feminist from the Global South, she will be considered to lack authenticity” (2013, 99), and her criticisms will be flagged as militant. Surely part of the reestablishment of liberal principles is the ability to differentiate secular criticism and value conflicts from prejudice and discrimination (Imhoff and Recker 2012). Criticism of Islam in particular is necessary, the New Atheists maintain, because other major world religions, such as Judaism and Christianity, have been revamped over time and the “vision of life” that is prescribed in the Bible is not widely adhered to by professing Jews and Christians, whereas a significant subset the Muslim world struggle to renegotiate this vision.<sup>lv</sup> The Muslim identity, when it is placed over and above a commitment to human rights, and is allowed to survive unscathed in communal enclaves, is at odds with the already fraught democratic aims of Muslim

societies and “may conflict with individual political rights” (Kaldor 2012, 80). The Western liberal response to Islamist regimes and rogue actors is mired in identity politics that seemingly disregards the conflict with the individual political rights of liberal Muslims. “Indeed the rhetoric of the ‘War on Terror’ can be perceived as a way of reinventing that distinctive Western identity” (Kaldor 2012, 85). Yet what is normatively distinctive, the enlivening of liberal values and cosmopolitan perspectives, has been demeaned in environments where such values and perspectives are desperately needed.

No doubt, Westerners don’t always live in accordance with these values and often fail to defend them when they need defense, but these are values to which Western hypocrisy pays tribute—and which some of us Westerners struggle to uphold. [Islamist] zealotry is a value zealotry, theologically driven, and it is a real challenge to “Western” values. (Walzer 2015)

As for the reply when one is confronted by the charge of Islamophobia, Ayaan Hirsi Ali recommends the following, “What’s more important: a sacred text, a drawing of Muhammad or the rule of law, personal freedom, dignity and human life itself?” The reestablishment of liberal principles is contained in the latter half of this response, as is the promise of an affinity politics on the left. As such, the New Atheists contend that Western liberals, and the nations in which they enjoy liberal institutions that practice liberal principles, should not yield to the demands for accommodation or cries for multicultural respect. In turn, liberals in the Muslim world must be supported and their dissent must be funded, for the attempt to transform Islam from the inside is a grim and unenviable duty. Tax argues, “Solidarity is the only way to cut through the knots of the double bind” (2013, 103). Clearly, ‘regressive’ liberals have serious questions to consider in their approach to confronting the specter of Islamism, as do Muslim reformers in making their religion amenable to liberal principles. “But how can we ever hope to reason with the Muslim



world if we are not reasonable ourselves? It accomplishes nothing to merely declare that ‘we all worship the same God’” (Harris 2006).

It has been pointed out that there is no “clear demarcation of domestic policy and international relations,” such that “domestic interest groups can distort the formation of state preferences and lead to suboptimal international behavior” (Walt 1998, 42). Trump’s proposed Muslim ban exemplifies the penchant for “state leaders to pursue policies that incite more participants in predominately Islamic states to conclude that the United States is waging a Crusade against them” (Connolly 2008, 35) In the next section, I interrogate in greater detail the New Atheist response to the ‘unreason’ that energizes the American civil religion. As we will see, domestic interest groups can make strange bedfellows when certain interests and orientations traverse common ground. William Connolly argues that American political culture is vitally responsive to the whims of the Evangelical-Capitalist resonance machine, a bona fide American specter if there ever was one. It is hypocritical and counterproductive to focus squarely on the specter of Islamism without following up with a liberal critique of American power and a vision for an ethical culture. The reestablishment of liberal principles is under duress in America and the New Atheists have some new rules of conversation and new narratives intended to remedy the situation.

### Public Philosophy

The crisis of secularism that scholars have variously articulated is not lost on the New Atheism. In particular, they treat American political culture as a scandalous case study in religious unreason and secular cowardice. Although faith-based belief has “grown tame” compared to violent fundamentalism elsewhere in the world, American religion continues to dangle “very long claws” (Harris 2004, 149). The marriage of faith and works in the United

States is depicted as a creeping theocracy by the New Atheists that impends the validity of secularism and holds the democratic process captive. The Christian Right garners support from a ‘moral majority’ of religious believers, who identify their nation with a religious culture that ought to be politically ascendant. On this note, the New Atheists concede “there are sources of irrationality other than religious faith, of course, but none of them are celebrated for their role in shaping public policy” (Harris 2004, 165). The purpose of their criticism of religion is to pave the way for a shift in public discourse and discussions of public policy on the basis of an explicit secularism.

American civil religion, “notwithstanding the banality of the doctrine, its canned anecdotes, and its questionable fundraising” (Wolf 2006), stunts the confidence of secularists insofar as their ranks are encouraged to indulge in the bigotry of low expectations, a “condescending, unimaginative, and pessimistic view of the rest of humanity – and of generations to come” that “while *they* can get along just fine without an imaginary friend, *most* human beings,” let alone most Americans, “will always need to believe in God” (Harris 2010, 24-25, emphasis mine). The New Atheism is premised on a reaffirmation of secularist confidence, imagination, and optimism. Susan Jacoby recommends secularists “restore secularism, and its noble and essential contributions at every stage of the American experiment, to its proper place in our nation’s historical memory and vision of the future” (2004, 11). Part of this restoration entails that dedicated secularists “stop pussyfooting around the issue of the harm that religion is capable of doing” (2004, 358). It is necessary to criticize the harms of religion because “only mainstream religious dogmatism receives the unqualified support of government. And yet, religious faith obscures uncertainty where uncertainty manifestly exists, allowing the unknown, the implausible, and the patently false to achieve primacy over the facts” (Harris 2004,

165). The primacy of facts in the New Atheist take on American political culture is contrasted by the virulent strain of anti-intellectualism and science denial that pervades American politics, uniquely ascendant at this moment under the Trump administration.<sup>lvi</sup> The New Atheists and scholars like William Connolly alike are disaffected by what American political culture has become, a glorified religious spectacle, first as tragedy with Bush, now as farce with Trump.

We live in a country in which a person cannot get elected president if he openly doubts the existence of heaven and hell. This is truly remarkable, given that there is no other body of "knowledge" that we require our political leaders to master... They do not have to be political scientists, economists, or even lawyers; they need not have studied international relations, military history, resource management, civil engineering, or any other field of knowledge that might be brought to bear in the governance of a modern superpower; they need only be expert fund-raisers, comport themselves well on television, and be indulgent of certain myths. In our next presidential election, an actor who reads his Bible would almost certainly defeat a rocket scientist who does not. Could there be any clearer indication that we are allowing unreason and otherworldliness to govern our affairs? (Harris 2004, 39)

In our last election, it was not an actor who reads his Bible, but a real estate mogul and reality television star that emerged victorious, whose biblical literacy is heavily disputed<sup>lvii</sup>, to say nothing of his ethical character. It is now avowed that Trump won largely because he persuaded a sufficient number of evangelicals that he was cunning enough to win their culture wars (Kellner 2016). In fact, expert fund-raising and decent public comporting appear to have little to do with his success; if anything his subpar funds and subpar performances should have ensured his defeat. Based on Harris's interpretation, it seems his indulgence of certain myths, such as the great and glorious past of a 'normative America' that must be remade, ensured his alliance with evangelicals and consequently his improbable victory. A full-bodied threat emerges when evangelical Christianity and cowboy capitalism, of the type to which Trump aspires, come together to form a political economy with theological flair, but at this point in our unevenly secularized political culture, the spirit of capitalism is more impetuous than ascetic.

As Connolly describes it, “Faith in the equation of capital and providence can easily become transfigured into an ethos of bitterness if things don’t work out as promised” (2008, 141). The ‘resonance’ of the evangelical-capitalist resonance machine accounts for the hard-to-pin-down causal relations that outline much of our political culture, especially “surprising events and unexpected coalitions” such as an impressive portion of the Evangelical voting bloc joining forces with Trump, who share an ethos of resentment and political expediency more than an ideological accord, given that the eight years under Obama did not seem to work out as promised:

Today resentment against cultural diversity, economic egalitarianism, and the future whirl together in the same resonance machine. That is why its participants identify similar targets of hatred and marginalization, such as gay marriage, women who seek equal status in work, family and business; secularists, atheists, devotees of Islamic faith, and African American residents of the inner city. (Connolly 2008, 55)

Connolly has long focused on the increasing alienation of the white working and middle class, and their recruitment into “a militant politics of individual aspiration, which first makes them identify with classes above their reach and, second, encourages them to neutralize or demonize a series of minority movements” (2008, 149). The election of Trump only serves to confirm this alienation as a tipping point. The rise of the nonreligious is evidently not restricted to those who lean left, but curiously features a growing minority of ‘alt-right’ unbelievers who support Trump regardless of his feigned evangelism (Beinart 2017). In any case, the New Atheists conclude from this state of affairs that “the rules of civil discourse must change” (Harris 2004, 168). The lens of public philosophy reconceives the New Atheism, in style and content, as an endeavor to open public discourse on matters of religion and secularism through experiments in conversations and commitments to making sense. New Atheists attempt to reason honestly, earnestly, and inclusively about public affairs, in public venues, and for a public audience.

Richard Howe (2008) argues that New Atheists are distinctively ‘new’ in the sense that they do not limit their arguments to an elite set of academics and instead aim for a mass audience. This movement has all the hallmarks of a public philosophy insofar as New Atheists “throw a critical light on the field of practices in which civic struggles take place and the practices of civic freedom available to change them” (Tully 2008). The culture wars function as the field of practices in which the New Atheists address the civic struggles they argue emerge from an unchallenged civil religion. The practices of civil freedom are based on liberal principles. The movement strives for the available openings to change some important terms and conditions of American political culture, such as the respect accorded to faith-based belief and the prestige of science.

In the vernacular set out by Michael Warner (2002), the New Atheists are a kind of intellectual ‘counter-public’ that enthusiastically countenances the mainly religious American ‘public’, but contrary to scholarly reception, the public philosophy the New Atheists espouse has generated rich intellectual exchanges at a critical juncture in American political culture. As a counterpublic that has taken to the internet and developed a virtual presence, Jack Laughlin argues “even if its growth as a social fact is true, and even as it develops agendas for social change, it is neither discursively or substantively robust enough to challenge any aspect of the contemporary neoliberal order” (2016, 315). It is important to note the modest aims the New Atheists have in mind. Surely, the contemporary neoliberal order exaggerates the target of most New Atheist criticism. As per Dennett, their goal is for religion to become merely “one natural phenomenon among many”, devoid of the special privileges it has heretofore enjoyed. It seems that the atheistic counter-public is less concerned with the theistic public than it is the fundamentalist assault on secularist causes. On this point, Marx wrote, “If there is to be talk

about philosophy, there should be less trifling with the label ‘atheism’ (which reminds one of children, assuring everyone who is ready to listen to them that they are not afraid of the boggy man), *and that instead the content of philosophy should be brought to the people.*”

With the exception of James Tully and Michael Sandel, public philosophy has yet to retain much of a status in a religion-centric public. Of course, public reason is a popular candidate, considering its prominence throughout the work of John Rawls, but it is no less controversial as an alternative to civil religion. “Where public reason is composed solely of abstract values (especially freedom and equality), civil religion includes historical narratives and exemplary figures, public poetry and civic heroism, as well as public reason” (Gorski 2017, 205). This ‘realm of pure reason’ is decried as not only unattainable, but downright counterproductive to the task of bringing philosophy to the public. After all, “A new movement on the democratic left, if it emerges, will be organized across religious, class, gender, ethnic, and generational lines without trying to pretend that citizens can leave their faiths entirely behind them when they enter public life” (Connolly 2008, x). But the New Atheists also discard the realm of pure reason as an unrealistic expectation and instead speak of a mutual interrogation of religious and secular worldviews, an interrogation that Habermas dubs as a mutual learning process.<sup>lviii</sup> For the New Atheists, mutual interrogation means that we “abandon the principle of automatic respect for religious faith” (Dawkins 2006, 306). It also means that religious citizens do not have to ‘translate’ their beliefs into the language of public reason. The liberal mandate of translation says that “religious arguments have a legitimate place in the public sphere only to the extent that they can be rendered in (ideally rational) terms that are not specifically religious” (Calhoun 2011, 77). This construal of public reason never measured up to the vicissitudes of public unreason that afforded faith-based belief special privileges. Rather,

We can do no better than to sit down and reason together, a political process of mutual persuasion and education that we can try to conduct in good faith. But in order to do that we have to know what we are choosing between, and we need to have a clear account of the reasons that can be offered for and against the different visions of the participants. Those who refuse to participate (because they already know the answers in their hearts) are, from the point of view of the rest of us, part of the problem. (Dennett 2006, 14)

The habit of self-described secular liberals to reject religious arguments on the spot whenever they arise in the public sphere is symptomatic of a public philosophy that is disconnected from actual conversation between religious and secular people. It is not that the New Atheists want to exclude religious arguments as wholly irrational so much as they want to include religious arguments and then dispense with their irrational aspects once the spell over public criticism has been sufficiently broken. New Atheist overtures in American political culture vary, but at their most practical revolve around new rules of conversation. Liberal principles are repulsed by violence unless as a last resort to prevent harm. Intellectual honesty and humility are more or less norms enforced to considerable degree in some areas of inquiry, as they constitute “a virtuous disposition to eschew deception when given an incentive for deception” (Guenin 2005, 179). To claim that American political culture is in dire need of new rules to jumpstart a more cerebral public philosophy is to claim that American political culture must be revalued at some level.

Rules, after all, are value-laden, and so the New Atheists argue that social rules for discussion and debate ought to reflect values that enable discussion and debate to fructify, not merely to do no harm or maintain a confused deference to tradition. The possibility of new rules follows Paul Steinberg (2014) in his calculated optimism concerning the inchoate and amenable character of social rules and the exasperating, but achievable, process of changing them. In the New Atheist case, new social rules will ensure that intellectual debate is a matter of playing tennis *with the net*, a net of agreed upon conversational standards that does not include

authoritative references to faith-based belief. Dennett (2013) unpacks these standards for public discourse in terms of Anatole Rapaport's list of rules:

1. You should attempt to re-express your target's position so clearly, vividly, and fairly that your target says, "Thanks, I wish I'd thought of putting it that way."
2. You should list any points of agreement (especially if they are not matters of general or widespread agreement).
3. You should mention anything you have learned from your target.
4. Only then are you permitted to say so much as a word of rebuttal or criticism.

The elevation and advocacy of charity, cordiality, and incremental concordance in public discourse is the attempt by New Atheists to curtail, if not win, the culture wars that rely on less philosophical standards. According to McAnulla, "For new atheists, unlike some other campaigning secularists, it is not sufficient just to separate religion and state, or to prevent religion having a special place in the public sphere", but rather they view it as imperative to "overturn the common convention that people's religious beliefs should not be challenged in conversation. In this respect new atheism goes beyond concern with the public sphere in articulating a politics which has implications for dealings in the 'private' sphere too" (2013, 132). New Atheist politics, then, recognizes the utility of negative social sanctions, short of legal intolerance and censure, that accompany moments of faith-based epistemic closure. The failure to reason together and abide by the reasonable standards of civil discourse is surely one of the premier impediments to public philosophy. However,

If we as a society come to see the typically unchallenged statement "I have faith that such-and-such is true" as equivalent to the intellectually irresponsible "I believe that such-and-such is true even though I have no good evidence for it," we will have taken an important step toward becoming more rational and beginning to overcome all of the problems our propensity toward irrationality has given rise to. (Johnson 2013, 24)

New rules of conversation are one important aspect of the New Atheist public philosophy. New narratives of religion and secularism are another, especially those that straddle both international relations and American political culture. The loose talk and ludicrous policies



put forth by the Trump Administration have already reverberated in Muslim communities in America and elsewhere, creating “the polarization of this debate between those who insist that Islam is a religion of war and proceed to engage in war for it, and those who insist that Islam is a religion of war and proceed to engage in war against it” (Harris and Nawaz 2015). On this issue, an election has partly been decided. The ways in which politicians talk about terrorism, the way in which they shape the public philosophy on such important topics, resonates with voters on a massive scale. According to a Pew poll conducted before the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, seventy percent of self-described conservatives preferred the next President to “speak bluntly even if critical of Islam as a whole” (Mitchell 2016). Eighty percent of self-described liberals preferred the next President “be careful not to speak critical of Islam as a whole.” Throughout his campaign, Trump attributed his hard stance on Islam and Muslim immigration to his premier placement in the polls. The rhetoric of Hillary Clinton, while at times downplaying the strategic precedent of Obama, employed a comparatively soft stance. According to Clinton, “Whether you call it radical jihadism or radical Islamism, I’m happy to say either. I think they mean the same thing... It mattered we got bin Laden, not what name we called him” (Diamond and Gaouette 2016). Asra Nomani, a Muslim-American reformer, published an article in the *Washington Post* after the 2016 election, in which she disclosed having cast her vote for Donald Trump. Her single issue reasoning may shock the casual reader who saw far more at stake than rhetorical postures, but she argued that because Trump spoke more honestly than Clinton about the problem with Islam, the prospects for success in combatting Islamism went to the side of Trump. Of course, as Nomani notes, this is not to say Trump spoke intelligibly, but merely that his posture expressed the need to confront Islamism more directly and consistently without mincing anymore words.

The Southern Poverty Law Center, a supposed bastion for secular liberal causes in the United States with a storied history of battling racism and religious overreach, recently added Maajid Nawaz and Ayaan Hirsi Ali to their official list of “anti-Muslim extremists” because of “their presence in national and local media and for the pernicious brand of extremism and hate they espouse against Muslim communities and the Islamic faith” (SPLC 2016). Despite the fact that Ali and Nawaz have taken great pains to describe right-wing bigotry and left-wing obfuscation as abetting the specter of Islamism, their criticisms have been invalidated by an actual form of bigotry. In this case, the bigotry of low expectations occurs when secular liberals commit a double standard: we can be critical of Western power in our public philosophy, but not religious power, specifically foreign and minority religious power. This suggests that the greater populace is unable to distinguish intentions from consequences or ideology from tactic. The New Atheists and their Muslim reformist partners object that this politically correct script and foreign policy strategy, feigning to be a public philosophy, is practically inept and intellectually dishonest. Michael Walzer argues that liberals need to reorient their treatment of Islamism along the lines of an ideological clash: “We should clearly name the zealots our enemies and commit ourselves to an intellectual campaign against them—that is, a campaign in defense of liberty, democracy, equality, and pluralism.” Yet a clash of ideologies is precisely what is denied in the ‘narrative’ narrative. It seems that to change this narrative, we must first change our assumptions about the purpose and upshot of the New Atheism.

The transformation of Islam via public philosophy requires what Hirsi Ali refers to as innovation of faith, but many Muslims still consider this “one of the gravest sins in Islam, on a par with murder and apostasy”. Lasting innovation entails that Muslims admit that a literalist interpretation of scripture and an enactment of Sharia law are incompatible with a civil society,

that Muhammad is a historical figure who was fallible, that life after death is a mystery that Islam alone cannot apprehend, that jihad must be understood as a greater jihad of the soul, a peaceful, spiritual endeavor, rather than a lesser and indeed repugnant jihad of the sword, the waging of holy war (Ali 2015). Innovations such as these depend in large measure on the ability of secular liberals to support the philosophical claims of reformers:

If such claims are to succeed, they would have to be situated in a global context; they would have to involve greater access and openness towards global levels of governance; and they would have to be based on greater democratic accountability for all inhabitants of the territory in question, not just for those with a particular label. (Kaldor 2012, 91)

However, the simultaneous empowerment of the Western xenophobes and disempowerment of secularism does not bode well for intellectually honest criticism of Islam, or the issues of governance Kaldor mentions. The self-imposed limitation to identify the Islamist ideology is a silence that speaks volumes, echoing the inadequate quietude of moderate and secular elites in the Muslim world. As per Bruce Russett, “The incentives to avoid doing anything that might inflame Islamic sentiments are very real. All this implies the possibility of an inadequate response to global terrorism” (Dunne, Kurki, and Smith 2011, 111). For all his successes as Commander-in-Chief, Obama’s public philosophical espousal of the ‘narrative’ narrative betrays a regressive liberal conceit that makes Trump and other xenophobes an unfortunate part of his legacy. Looking back, the Obama Administration was an “industry of apology and obfuscation designed, it would seem, to protect Muslims from having to grapple with... the connection between Islamist ideology and Muslim intolerance and violence” (Harris and Nawaz 2015).

On numerous occasions, Obama made it clear that the link between doctrine and violence will not be confirmed by any public philosophy, let alone official foreign policy stance. The secular liberal fallacy that is built on multicultural concessions remains a party line for Democrats

seeking election. “The formula is simple enough: Liberal electoral victories trump liberal principles” (Barber 2009). Fortunately, there are promising exceptions, such as Tulsi Gabbard, an Iraq War veteran and Congresswoman from Hawaii. Gabbard has said, “You look at the vast majority of terrorist attacks that are being committed around the world, there's one common element here and it is this radical Islamist ideology. This war cannot be won, this enemy and threat cannot be defeated unless we understand what's driving them, what is their ideology” (Knox 2015). While it is easy to agree that the bombast of Trump is grist for the Islamist mill, it should not proscribe a more measured alternative to targeting the religious ideology in a new counter-narrative, somewhere between conservative bigotry and liberal obfuscation. Speaking frankly about the nature of religious violence with moral clarity of liberal principles and secular citizenship need not be a partisan issue. Saying that “Islam is a religion peace” over and over again, to the consternation of the powerful and virulent Islamist strain in the Muslim world, *does not make it true*, nor does saying that “Islamism is an ideological course for terrorism” turn Muslims into violent Islamists.

### Summary

In this chapter, I have argued that the New Atheists provide an insightful analysis of religion and secularism through three distinct but related approaches. Their critical theory redeploys the power of ideas, their affinity politics reestablishes liberal principles, and their public philosophy reasserts secular citizenship. Yet the wishes of the New Atheism are not merely to change the language of American domestic and foreign policy. Rather, it is a wish for a more fundamental change in strategy, a deeper understanding of ideology and strategic logic of religious extremists everywhere, as well as the radicalization process. While a rose may retain its wondrous aroma regardless of linguistic designation, Islamism and other violent or repressive

fundamentalisms need to be called by their name. In the present state of the ‘new wars’ and the potential future of the ‘new left’, it must be said by liberal observers, critics, activists, and diplomats alike, despite all objections to political incorrectness, that Islamism *is* Islamic, insofar as Islamists believe in the ultimate truth, utility, and specialty of the tenets of Islam. According to the New Atheists, the specter of Islamism and the American civil religion, and the problem with faith-based belief it reveals, will only intensify fears of terror and threats to democracy so long as we continue to pass over religion in debate, or worse, in silence. For the time being, the New Atheists in partnership with Muslim reformers promote what we might call a liberalism of acceptance: in the words of Ayaan Hirsi Ali, “All human beings are equal, but all cultures and religions are not.”

Above all, we are in need of a renewed Enlightenment, which will base itself on the proposition that the proper study of mankind is man, and woman. This Enlightenment will not need to depend, like its predecessors, on the heroic breakthroughs of a few gifted and exceptionally courageous people. It is within the compass of the average person.

The study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals, can now easily depose the scrutiny of sacred texts that have been found to be corrupt and confected. The pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry, and the availability of new findings to masses of people by easy electronic means, will revolutionize our concepts of research and development. Very importantly, the divorce between the sexual life and fear, and the sexual life and disease, and the sexual life and tyranny, can now at last be attempted, on the sole condition that we banish all religions from the discourse.

And all this and more is, for the first time in our history, within the reach if not the grasp of everyone.

~ Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great* (2007)

## CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

### Restatement of the Problem

In this thesis, I introduced a reunderstanding of the New Atheism as an oppositional social movement that promises important contributions to the recent trend in academic scholarship geared toward the study of religion and secularism. Reunderstanding is essential because up to now the mainstream scholarly treatment of the New Atheism has not fully, much less charitably, drawn out the purpose and upshot of New Atheist viewpoints in areas such as international relations and American political culture. Accordingly I addressed and corrected the major objections to and misconceptions of the New Atheism that stem from this uncharitable and, at times, summarily dismissive engagement. These misconceptions include the charges that New Atheists are: mere polemicists unable to produce a viable alternative to religion because they are themselves fundamentalists of a secular kind; ‘Islamophobic’ neoconservatives who pedal a strident white male identity politics; and bad philosophers ill-equipped to the task of growing public knowledge through sophisticated discourse. I also shed light on the foremost contributions of the New Atheists to scholarship through three distinct, but related lenses, namely critical theory, affinity politics, and public philosophy. These contributions include redeploying the power of ideas in analyses of religious violence; reestablishing liberal principles in the face of religious fundamentalism and secular multicultural relativism; and reasserting secular citizenship in the face of civil and uncivil religion.

In conclusion, it appears that the New Atheism both fits well and fares well in the discourse on religion and secularism. A shade over fifty years since the death of god was raised on the cover of *Time*, in April 2017, a different, but arguably related question was raised, "Is Truth Dead?" The virulent strain of anti-intellectualism that gives free reign to ‘fake news’,

‘alternative facts’, ‘post-truth’, and ‘reality-based communities’ has created a predicament both intellectually and politically that I have argued New Atheist viewpoints help resolve. According to Dennett, “We have learned in recent years that the techniques of misinformation and misdirection have become so refined that, even in an open society, a cleverly directed flood of misinformation can overwhelm the truth” (2006, 412). In an era of negligent journalism and hostility toward and mistrust of the media, where hackneyed expressions like ‘alternative facts’ find an ease of utterance and an eager audience, it is crucial to distinguish truth from half-truth, inchoate truth, and outright falsity. “Nothing stands in the way of this project more than the respect we accord religious faith. While there is no guarantee that rational people will always agree, the irrational are certain to be divided by their dogmas” (Harris 2006, 296-297). As I have argued, the definition of politics as the authoritative allocation of values in society is a very helpful one to reunderstand the New Atheism. Faith-based religion, in the New Atheist view, is not long for our world, if we are to ever build a sustainable collective future and spur civilizational progress in an ethical direction. The levels of violence, division, and unreason that stem from religion moves their criticism of religion to declare a state of intellectual and political emergency. The imagined reallocation of values that define New Atheist politics requires a comprehensive takedown of faith and a simultaneous transition to rational secular alternatives.

#### Future Research

Looking forward, I suspect that the New Atheism may also be reunderstood as an attempt to restore the much disputed idea of progress. Many scholars continue to interrogate the extent to which human society has been secularized over time. However, recent interrogations have disproportionately favored religion as an evolving and elastic force that does not stand in abeyance to reason and science. As a result, religion must be considered an inherently



progressive (and self-critical) force responsible, in one way or another, for most of our modern scientific, aesthetic, and institutional achievements. Anymore the idea of progress is severely disputed intellectual history. At best, ‘progress’ animates a certain intuition that things are better off when humans are more intimately connected in sustainable forums, and knowledge and resources are more diffuse and easily reached. At worst, ‘progress’ is a harbinger of totalitarian efforts to perfect the human species, which assuredly proceeds through an annihilation of some part of the species, its cultures, or its environment. It is the former intuition that the New Atheists offer and solidify in their analysis of religion and science as inherently conflictual, a sordid affair in the philosophy of history referred to as the conflict thesis. In the New Atheist view, the historical catalogue is not kind to the notion that religion is capable of producing the great social changes that by and large define modernity. This cuts against political theology, the umbrella term for the view that modernity is a legacy of a religious heritage that continues to receive nourishment from this heritage and is rudderless without this heritage. As Carl Schmitt famously put it, “All significant concepts of the modern theory of the state are secularized theological concepts”. Political theology inflects much of the recent trend in secularization theory and attributes nearly all stable iterations of progress to ‘secularized’ theological underpinnings and religious roots (Agamben 2005; Taylor 2007; Milbank 2008; Kahn 2011; Gregory 2012; Martin 2014; Gorski 2017).

Many scholars contend that the roots of seemingly everything we treasure in modernity, such as science, democracy, nonviolent civil disobedience, human rights, etc., are theological to the core and as such uphold the persistence of religion as a brute, and sometimes blessed, fact. On the one hand, political theology serves as a genealogy of religion that suggests the New Atheist criticism of religion is misguided. Rather, it is argued, a theological footprint is stamped

on every modern reform, and every innovation. New Atheists offer a different origin story that attributes progress to the “pressures of modernity,” sometimes “hammer blows,” other times mere argument. In this way, ‘civil religion’ is ‘civil’ and ‘religious correctness’ is ‘correct’ precisely because religion needed to be civilized and corrected through a process outside its ideological domain, a tipping point beyond its scriptural confines, a diffusion of innovations that contrast with the rigidity of faith-based belief. Modern refinements in knowledge, technology, and moral responsibility are irreducible to our religious traditions and the constraints of scripture, yet they are constantly laid over with theological apology and obscurantist accounts of history.

At issue, then, for future research is the origin, significance, and legitimacy of progress as an impetus of modernity. Though I had little reason to believe I could do this argument justice given the space restrictions, future research on the struggles and wishes of the New Atheism should investigate the relevant notions of progress that New Atheists seem to entertain. For instance, Stephen LeDrew begins to pin down the New Atheism in just this sense as “a vigorous defense 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” (2016, 59). The wish for a new enlightenment is central to the New Atheism, and I regard their goals for education reform, namely a curriculum that both integrates the study of religion as a natural phenomenon and cultural wellspring, as worthy of future research as well.<sup>lix</sup>

This thesis both displays and extends the New Atheist undertaking in political thought, in order to establish that New Atheists not only *fit* rather well in the wider and refined debates, but that they *fare* rather well as conspicuous participants. However, it is plainly not within the scope of this thesis to insert a new moniker to replace “New Atheism”, given the energy needed

to clarify the ‘struggles’ and ‘wishes’. Perhaps this is an appalling limitation, but it is my hope that that there does not need to be a different banner to single out the many controversial figures who publicly criticize religion in the ways I have discussed. It is not enough to merely recruit critical theory, affinity politics, and public philosophy as helpful lenses to view the New Atheism. Rather, these lenses help supplant the dubious banner of New Atheism, and so far as we recognize this social movement whose point is to oppose the degradations of religious faith and propose a recipe for secular cosmopolitanism, we recognize a critical theory of religious belief, an affinity politics of freethought, and a public philosophy of intellectual honesty – a vision for the future, one in a new enlightenment is synonymous with a normative secularization. In such a future, faith can, should, will, and must fail.

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## ENDNOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Tocqueville argued that the sway of Christianity "is not only that of a philosophical doctrine which has been adopted upon inquiry, but of a religion which is believed without discussion."

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ii On the efficacy of prayer, for instance, “The alleged power of intercessory prayer is at least in principle within the reach of science. A double-blind experiment can be done and was done. It could have yielded a positive result. And if it had, can you imagine that a single religious apologist would have dismissed it on the grounds that scientific research has no bearing on religious matters? Of course not. Needless to say, the negative results of the experiment will not shake the faithful” (Dawkins 2006, 65).

iii Gorski elides the other republicanisms described by Robert Kelley (1977), who provides a few differing visions of American revolutionary republicanism in terms of Northern Moralistic Republicanism, Southern Libertarian Republicanism, Middle-state Egalitarian Republicanism, and Middle-state Nationalist Republicanism, none of which nicely map onto the almost ahistorical ‘civic republicanism’.

iv According to Jacoby, “An avowedly secular, nonobservant Jew – one who considered himself Jewish in a cultural rather than a religious sense – would never have been selected for a major party’s national ticket” (2004, 8). Consider the underdog campaign of Bernie Sanders, whose avowedly secular platform was basically sabotaged by Democratic Party leaders. WikiLeaks revealed email correspondence between the DNC and the Clinton campaign that included unflattering references to Sanders’s cultural Jewish identity, which when brought up on the campaign trail would have the effect of downgrading Sanders, insinuated to be an atheist, in the polls. It is impossible to imagine an avowed atheist or even agnostic winning or being nominated for the presidency. Along with the rise of the nonreligious, we have also witnessed a rise in support for an atheist presidential candidate, from 18% in 1958 to 58% in 2015 (Saad 2015). Still, while this attitudinal shift is encouraging, an openly atheistic candidate is unlikely to excite religious constituencies “regardless of his or her other qualifications (Jacoby 2004, 7). As Harris puts it, an atheistic candidate could have the good looks of George Clooney and the social grace of Oprah Winfrey, and still not get elected if they disbelieve in God. In some parts of the United States, to be an atheist is to be thoroughly un-American, is to invite controversy and suspicion, is to welcome odium and calumny, is to be a communist sympathizer, is to stand in violation of the civil religion, is to expatriate one’s self. As George H.W. Bush is reported to have said during his presidency, “I don’t know that atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.” Even if Bush did not speak so despicably, we hardly demur at such an utterance. More recently, John Kasich, the Governor of Ohio, joined the fun. When Kasich learned that Daniel Radcliffe, best known for the lead role in *Harry Potter*, was an atheist, he said, “What the hell is wrong with him?”

v Also see Hirschman, Albert O. *Exit, voice, and loyalty: Responses to decline in firms, organizations, and states*. Vol. 25. Harvard university press, 1970. New Atheists exhibit the ‘voice’ response with regard to the decline in American scientific literacy, for instance.

vi Prominent examples include “Butterflies and Wheels” by Ophelia Benson, “The Orbit” by Greta Christina, “Why Evolution is True” by Jerry Coyne, “The Atheist Experience” by Matt Dilahunty, “Pharangyula” by PZ Myers, and “Waking Up” by Sam Harris.

vii As Cimino and Smith (2010, 144) observe, there has been “an attempt to broaden the canon of new atheist literature to include new authors with similar critiques of theism” such as Michael Onfay (2007), Steven Pinker (2011), and Alexander Rosenberg (2011). Blackford and Schüklenk (2011) edited a volume of atheistic origin stories from renowned philosophers. A.C. Grayling wrote *The Good Book*, a secularist bible of sorts, and is elsewhere a staunch defender of humanism. Michael Shermer applies skepticism to a variety of topics, namely religious belief and science denial. Historians such as Jennifer Hecht (2004) and Susan Jacoby (2004) revise our view of secularism given that its intellectual forbearers are all too often written out of history. The evolutionary biologists Jerry Coyne (2011) and P.Z. Myers (2013) join Dawkins in his advocacy of scientific literacy and rebuffing the compatibility between religion and science. Physicists Lawrence Krauss (2012) and Victor Stenger (2009; 2010) similarly contend that religious cosmologies are outstripped by scientific models of the universe. Interestingly, the New Atheist

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movement is not limited to the academically inclined debates. Journalists such as Jeffrey Taylor, Nick Cohen, and Polly Toynbee, and attorneys such as Wendy Kaminer and Michael Newdow, use their platform to deride the influence of religion on policy, law, and public education. Entertainers such as George Carlin, Stephen Fry, Ricky Gervais, Penn Jillette, Bill Maher, James Randi, Joe Rogan, and Julia Sweeney have all skewered the absurdities of religion throughout their careers. While the non-fiction sector of publication casts a decent shadow, there have also been several works of fiction that embrace a New Atheist perspective (Bradley & Tate 2010). Most notably, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, David Mills, Salman Rushdie, and Philip Pullman have all, like their public nonfiction contemporaries, assumed an indignant stance toward religion in the modern world

<sup>viii</sup> Farmelant (2008) argues that the first use of the phrase “New Atheists” in recent history was by Ronald Aronson in his article, “Faith no more?” (2005). However, Cotter (2017) argues that the theologian Alister McGrath coined “New Atheism” in *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (2005, 174).

<sup>ix</sup> Prominent examples of documentary films include *The Root of All Evil?* (2004) with Richard Dawkins, *Atheism: A Rough History of Disbelief* (2004) with Jonathan Miller, *The God Who Wasn't There* (2005) with Sam Harris, *Religulous* (2008) with Bill Maher, *Collision* (2009) with Christopher Hitchens and Douglas Wilson, *The Unbelievers* (2013) with Richard Dawkins and Lawrence Krauss, and the forthcoming *Islam and the Future of Tolerance* with Sam Harris and Maajid Nawaz.

<sup>x</sup> To be sure, there are other periphery sources of contrasting opinions, but do not majorly impinge on the togetherness of the New Atheism. For instance, Dennett (2003) and Harris (2012) disagree on whether free will is phenomenologically compatible with determinism and indeterminism.

<sup>xi</sup> To be clear, there are defenders of science and defenders of religion who support the conflict thesis. The leap of faith is the springboard of fideism, which holds reason to be a subordinate means of arriving at important truths. We can detect this view in the church father Tertullian, who posed the question, “What has Athens to do with Jerusalem? What has the Academy to do with the Church?” The answer he had in mind, “When we believe, we desire no further belief”, places faith beyond the jurisdiction of reason. Consider Ignatius Loyola, “We sacrifice the intellect to God,” or Martin Luther, “Reason is the Devil's harlot, who can do nought but slander and harm whatever God says and does.” According to Hitchens, “Francis Bacon, writing during the reign of Queen Elizabeth, liked to say— perhaps following Tertullian's assertion that the greater the absurdity the stronger his belief in it—that faith is at its greatest when its teachings are least amenable to reason. Pierre Bayle, writing a few decades later, was fond of stating all the claims of reason against a given belief, only to add “so much the greater is the triumph of faith in nevertheless believing” (2007, 151).

<sup>xii</sup> In the words of Frederick Lewis Allen, “The pious might still keep their religion locked in a science-proof compartment of their minds”.

<sup>xiii</sup> As Paul Tillich put it, “They have not only not refuted religion, but they have done it a considerable service. They have forced it to reconsider and restate the meaning of the tremendous word God” (1959, 5). For the New Atheists, reconsiderations and restatements of God have “a proven capacity to confuse” since “pantheism is sexed-up atheism. Deism is watered-down theism” (Dawkins 2006, 18).

<sup>xiv</sup> “If an apparent gap is found, it is *assumed* that God, by default, must fill it. What worries thoughtful theologians such as Dietrich Bonhoeffer is that gaps shrink as science advances, and God is threatened with eventually having nothing to do and nowhere to hide. What worries scientists is something else. It is an essential part of the scientific enterprise to admit ignorance, even to exult in ignorance as a challenge

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to future conquests... one of the truly bad effects of religion is that it teaches us that it is a virtue to be satisfied with not understanding” (Dawkins 2006, 126).

<sup>xv</sup> The main forerunner is Stephen Batchelor, a former Tibetan monk, who has been a notable proponent and expositor of a secular Buddhism, or Buddhist atheism, for decades. He construes the noble truths as the noble tasks, as an existential guide for the cessation of suffering, shorn of unjustified and unjustifiable beliefs, and a set of moral injunctions to purify the human experience. Furthermore, he sees this secularized Buddhist path as not only on compatible with scientific research, but a personally transformative enterprise.

<sup>xvi</sup> According to Carl von Clausewitz, “Every age has its own kind of war, its own limiting conditions, and its own peculiar preconceptions” (1989, 593).

<sup>xvii</sup> The New Atheists exhibit some ambivalence as to whether religion will ever subside, or disappear altogether. Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris agree it ought to, and when compared with historical precedents such as slavery and witchcraft, suggest that to a great extent it can. Hitchens was notably pessimistic insofar as he contended that the intrinsic tribalism of the human species will likely prohibit doing away with the religious impulse. “Religious faith is, precisely because we are still-evolving creatures, ineradicable. It will never die out, or at least not until we get over our fear of death, and of the dark, and of the unknown, and of each other” (Hitchens 2007, 12). In his anthology of atheism, Hitchens added, “That could be a lengthy stretch of time. However, it is just as certain that we shall continue to cast a skeptical and ironic and even witty eye on what we have ourselves invented. If religion is innate in us, then so is our doubt of it and our contempt for our weakness” (2007, xxiii). Moreover, Hitchens showed the marks of a true liberal when he wished for the debate between ‘faith’ and ‘reason’ to go on without end, as to clarify and expose for public scrutiny all the arguments on either side. Religion will persist and as such will need to be confronted (Four Horseman 2007).

<sup>xviii</sup> According to the Islamophobia Studies Journal, “For some, rising anti-Muslim sentiments are immediately explained away as a ‘natural’ outcome of the many violent events in the Muslim world and ‘terrorism’ in general. However, we maintain that the rising negative sentiments may have to do with the presence of a well-organized and well-funded Islamophobic industry that has managed to invade and capture civil society and public discourses without serious contestation. Up to this point, anti-racist and progressive voices have not been effective in challenging this industry, nor have they been able to provide the needed resources to mount regional and national responses” (Bazian and Leung 2014).

<sup>xix</sup> Alternatively, there is a similar dictum, which has been labelled “Hitchens’s Razor” due to his fondness of the phrase, “What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence.”

<sup>xx</sup> William James famously decried ‘the ethics of belief’ offered by William Clifford, imagining a scenario wherein a belief without evidence, what he calls ‘faith’, pays off as a self-fulfilling prophecy. “There are then cases where faith creates its own verification. Believe, and you shall be right, for you shall save yourself; doubt, and you shall again be right, for you shall perish. The only difference is that to believe is greatly to your advantage.” This is precisely the equivocation that Harris addresses. “We must have faith in our open society, in knowledge, in continuing pressure to make the world a better place for people to live, and we must recognize that people need to see their lives as having meaning” (Dennett 2006, 334). Faith as a positive attitude in the face of uncertainty is a pragmatic technique everyone adopts to one or another degree, but James ignores the faith that has given us religion. For their part, the New Atheists side with Clifford and recognize the increasing necessity for an ethics of belief: “It is time we realized that to presume knowledge where one has only pious hope is a species of evil” (Harris 2004, 225). “That’s why those who have an unquestioning faith in the correctness of the moral teachings of their religion are a problem: if they themselves haven’t conscientiously considered, on their own, whether their

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pastors or priests or rabbis or imams are worthy of this delegated authority over their own lives, then they are in fact taking a personally immoral stand” (Dennett 2006: 295). “Credulity may be a form of innocence, and even innocuous in itself, but it provides a standing invitation for the wicked and the clever to exploit their brothers and sisters, and is thus one of humanity's great vulnerabilities” (Hitchens 2007, 160).

<sup>xxi</sup> The ideals of science and the ordeals of the sciences are distinct matters. Bruno Latour disassociates the ‘sciences’ from “Science” because the latter scarcely describes the activities of the former. In fact, ‘Science’ is more vulnerable to the “politicization of the sciences through epistemology in order to render ordinary political life impotent through the threat of an incontestable nature” (2004, 10). Note, this technocratic concern is different than the broad redefinition of science that interests the New Atheism. Much like Latour, the New Atheists wish to deepen and widen the impact of the sciences, which Latour deems “the highly respectable form of epistemology” (2004, 13), in democratic forums and institutions. Latour contends, “It is perfectly possible to speak of external reality without immediately confusing it with its hasty unification” of a grand authoritative Science (2004, 50). In the same way, the New Atheists think it is perfectly possible to speak of science in the singular (and lower case) as a broad construal of clear thinking, which informs and unifies sciences in being *scientific*, without immediately confusing it with the overblown version of Science. Latour seems to embrace both possibilities when he argues that there is “little point in differentiating between those groups of people who want to understand ecosystems, defend the environment, or protect nature, and those who want to revive public life” (2004, 8). Harris (2014) similarly argues that our narrow definition of science and the sciences is unhelpful since “the boundaries between true intellectual disciplines are currently enforced by little more than university budgets and architecture. . . . The real distinction we should care about—the observation of which is the sine qua non of the scientific attitude—is between demanding good reasons for what one believes and being satisfied with bad ones.”

<sup>xxii</sup> Haught then tallies seven common views of the movement, one of which states “apart from nature, which includes human beings and our cultural creations, there is nothing. There is no God, no soul, and no life beyond death.” However, New Atheists like Harris are far more open-minded than this view lets on: “There may yet be good reasons to believe in psychic phenomena, alien life, the doctrine of rebirth, the healing power of prayer, or anything else—but our credulity must scale with the evidence. The doctrine of faith denies this. From the perspective of faith, it is better to ape the behavior of one's ancestors than to find creative ways to uncover new truths in the present” (2004, 165).

<sup>xxiii</sup> Hedges cites a passage in *The End of Faith*, in which Harris writes, “Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them” (2004, 52-53). When the statement is taken out of context, Hedges’s inference may be more or less reasonable. In context, however, this statement amounts to the harm principle of liberalism. Other New Atheists imply the relevance of the harm principle to matters of religious freedom. Dennett affirms as much when he refers to the harm principle as unassailable: “We others have no right to intrude on their private practices so long as we can be quite sure that they are not injuring others” (2006, 14). As for Harris, his point seems to be that some beliefs appear to draw a straight line to acts of violence, so as to constitute the intervention of the state to protect citizens from undue harm. Consider the passage in its entirety:

The link between belief and behavior raises the stakes considerably. Some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them. This may seem an extraordinary claim, but it merely enunciates an ordinary fact about the world in which we live. Certain beliefs place their adherents beyond the reach of every peaceful means of persuasion, while inspiring them to commit acts of extraordinary violence against others. There is, in fact, no

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talking to some people. If they cannot be captured, and they often cannot, otherwise tolerant people may be justified in killing them in self-defense. (Harris 2004, 52-53)

<sup>xxiv</sup> There are, of course, some sad precedents to this red herring of “Islamophobia”. Charges of anti-Catholicism and anti-Semitism come to mind. In one of the more regrettable episodes in the long-lived posthumous career of Nietzsche, his philosophical legacy became the ward of his sister’s estate. Elizabeth Nietzsche bent over backwards to turn Nietzsche’s ethical supremacism into a perfect justification for German nationalism, and the anti-Semitism it genocidally espoused. But the intercession started by Walter Kaufman and continued by Douglas Smith has exonerated Nietzsche. Though he criticized Judaism as a religious ideology, it is clear he did not endorse the persecution of Jews as people. Similarly, anti-Catholicism is a red herring the moment criticism of Catholicism “is understood not as an attack on the constitutionally guaranteed right of all Catholics to practice their religion but as opposition to Catholic doctrine and its promulgation with public money” (Jacoby 2004: 302).

<sup>xxv</sup> Neoconservatives such as Irving Kristol openly supported the American civil religion, as well as the battle-ready evangelicals who “were confronted with a perfect storm of secular power that they deemed a threat to their way of life and to the Christian nation they believed the United States once was and ought to be again” (Hartman 2015, 71). According to Hartman, Kristol “valued religion as foundational to representative democracy, believing it helped curb the unmoored urges of people left to their own devices” (2015, 70). Kristol (1976) wrote, “The individual who is abruptly ‘liberated’ from the sovereignty of traditional values will soon find himself experiencing the vertigo and despair of nihilism”. Needless to say, the New Atheist movement is about the liberation of individuals from the ‘sovereignty of traditional values’ without the experience of nihilism.

<sup>xxvi</sup> Chomsky and Christopher Hitchens had collaborated and debated on numerous occasions throughout their careers, and these exchanges became barbed only after 9/11. In *The End of Faith*, Harris was quite critical of Chomsky and as recently as 2015 exchanged body blows over email in what was a surprisingly uncongenial dialogue. <https://samharris.org/the-limits-of-discourse/>

<sup>xxvii</sup> If support for reparations is a litmus test for consistent and judicious liberalism, the New Atheists seem to pass. Hitchens (2003) endorsed reparations for slavery and debated anti-reparations conservative David Horowitz in print. Additionally, Harris writes, “There may be much that Western powers, and the United States in particular, should pay reparations for. And our failure to acknowledge our misdeeds over the years has undermined our credibility in the international community” (2004, 140).

<sup>xxviii</sup> “We have the likes of Bill Moyers convening earnest gatherings of scholars for the high purpose of determining just how the book of Genesis can be reconciled with life in the modern world” (Harris 2004, 47). “Why does our society beat a path to their door, as though they had some expertise comparable to that of, say, a moral philosopher, a family lawyer or a doctor?” (Dawkins 2006, 22)

<sup>xxix</sup> “Reasonable people may disagree about how high the wall should rise in specific situations, but an official checklist inviting churches to begin feeding at the federal trough – and providing detailed instructions on how to strike the best deal – does not even acknowledge the existence of a line, much less a wall” (Jacoby 2004, 352-353). “One of the concerns with giving federal funds to religious organizations is that these organizations are not bound by the same equal employment opportunity regulations that apply to the rest of the nonprofit world. Church groups can ban homosexuals, people who have divorced and remarried, those who have married interracially, etc., and still receive federal funds. They can also find creative ways to use these funds to proselytize. Granting such funds in the first place puts the federal government in the position of deciding what is, and what isn’t, a genuine religion—a responsibility that seems fraught with problems of its own” (Harris 2004, 266). “Far better, of course, would be to abandon the promotion of religion altogether as grounds for charitable status. The benefits of this to society would

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be great, especially in the United States, where the sums of tax-free money sucked in by churches, and polishing the heels of already well-heeled televangelists, reach levels that could fairly be described as obscene” (Dawkins 2006, 32).

<sup>xxx</sup> “Free speech is deemed not to include 'hate speech'. But hate only has to prove it is religious, and it no longer counts as hate... if such people took their stand on the right to free speech, one might reluctantly sympathize. But that isn't what it is about. The legal case in favor of discrimination against homosexuals is being mounted as a counter-suit against alleged religious discrimination! And the law seems to respect this” (Dawkins 2006: 23). “One fundamentalist splinter group has since taken to picketing the funerals of American soldiers killed in Iraq, claiming that their murders are god's punishment for American homosexuality. One especially tasteful sign, waved in the faces of the mourners, is ‘Thank God for IEDs,’ the roadside bombs placed by equally anti-gay Muslim fascists” (Hitchens 2007).

<sup>xxxi</sup> “Under our current laws, it is safe to say, if a drug were invented that posed no risk of physical harm or addiction to its users but produced a brief feeling of spiritual bliss and epiphany in 100 percent of those who tried it, this drug would be illegal, and people would be punished mercilessly for its use. Only anxiety about the biblical crime of idolatry would appear to make sense of this retributive impulse. Because we are a people of faith, taught to concern ourselves with the sinfulness of our neighbors, we have grown tolerant of irrational uses of state power” (Harris 2004, 162).

<sup>xxxii</sup> “Imagine members of an art appreciation society pleading in court that they 'believe' they need a hallucinogenic drug in order to enhance their understanding of Impressionist or Surrealist paintings. Yet, when a church claims an equivalent need, it is backed by the highest court in the land. Such is the power of religion as a talisman” (Dawkins 2006, 22).

<sup>xxxiii</sup> “This research may also be essential for our understanding of cancer, along with a wide variety of developmental disorders. Given these facts, it is almost impossible to exaggerate the promise of stem-cell research. It is true, of course, that research on embryonic stem cells entails the destruction of three-day-old human embryos... A three-day-old human embryo is a collection of 150 cells called a blastocyst. There are, for the sake of comparison, more than 100,000 cells in the brain of a fly. The human embryos that are destroyed in stem-cell research do not have brains, or even neurons. Consequently, there is no reason to believe they can suffer their destruction in any way at all. It is worth remembering, in this context, that when a person's brain has died, we currently deem it acceptable to harvest his organs (provided he has donated them for this purpose) and bury him in the ground” (Harris 2006, 29).

<sup>xxxiv</sup> “Over 99 percent of the species that ever walked, flew, or slithered upon this earth are now extinct. This fact alone appears to rule out intelligent design. When we look at the natural world, we see extraordinary complexity, but we do not see optimal design.” (Harris 2006). “It is, indeed, only because of the frightening emptiness elsewhere that we are bound to be impressed by the apparently unique and beautiful conditions that have allowed intelligent life to occur on earth. But then, vain as we are, we would be impressed, wouldn't we? This vanity allows us to overlook the implacable fact that, of the other bodies in our own solar system alone, the rest are all either far too cold to support anything recognizable as life, or far too hot. The same, as it happens, is true of our own blue and rounded planetary home, where heat contends with cold to make large tracts of it into useless wasteland, and where we have come to learn that we live, and have always lived, on a climatic knife edge. Meanwhile, the sun is getting ready to explode and devour its dependent planets like some jealous chief or tribal deity. Some design!” (Hitchens 2007, 80).

<sup>xxxv</sup> Supreme Court Justices, such as the recently departed Antonin Scalia and recently arrived Neil Gorsich, “who see civil government through a theological lens” (Jacoby 2004, 350).



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<sup>xxxvi</sup> “These intrusions of eschatology into modern politics suggest that the dangers of religious faith can scarcely be overstated. Millions of Christians and Muslims now organize their lives around prophetic traditions that will only find fulfillment once rivers of blood begin flowing from Jerusalem. It is not at all difficult to imagine how prophecies of internecine war, once taken seriously, could become self-fulfilling” (Harris 2004). “There are some among them who are working hard to “hasten the inevitable,” not merely anticipating the End Days with joy in their hearts, but taking political action to bring about the conditions they think are the prerequisites for that occasion. And these people are not funny at all. They are dangerous, for the same reason that red-diaper babies are dangerous: they put their allegiance to their creed ahead of their commitment to democracy, to peace, to (earthly) justice—and to truth. If push comes to shove, some of them are prepared to lie and even to kill, to do whatever it takes to help bring what they consider celestial justice to those they consider the sinners” (Dennett 2006, 338). “With a necessary part of its collective mind, religion looks forward to the destruction of the world. By this I do not mean it ‘looks forward’ in the purely eschatological sense of anticipating the end. I mean, rather, that it openly or covertly wishes that end to occur” (Hitchens 2007, 56).

<sup>xxxvii</sup> Consider the ostensibly secular catastrophes perpetrated by states such as Nazi Germany under Hitler, France under the Vichy Republic, Italy under Mussolini, the Soviet Union under Stalin, China under Mao, Khmer Rouge Cambodia under Pol Pot, Congo under Mobutu, Egypt under Mubarak, Greece under Papadopoulos, Iran under the Shah, Iraq under Hussein, South Africa under apartheid, and North Korea under Kim Jong-Il, etc.

<sup>xxxviii</sup> “There is an old Belfast joke about the man stopped at a roadblock and asked his religion. When he replies that he is an atheist he is asked, ‘Protestant or Catholic atheist?’... The ostensible pretext for this mayhem is rival nationalisms, but the street language used by opposing rival tribes consists of terms insulting to the other confession” (Hitchens 2007). Also consider Norris and Inglehart, “The difference between the worldviews of Estonians and Russians, ‘We are all atheists; but I am a Lutheran atheist, and they are Orthodox atheists’” (2011, 17).

<sup>xxxix</sup> By the same token, Hitchens (2007) points to a few cases, but restrains himself to the letter ‘B’, that is, Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad, which is to suggest that the alphabet of religiously inflected and reinforced conflict is overwhelming to analyze.

<sup>xl</sup> Gandhi dispelled his own myth of religious violence in Chapter XVII of *Hind Swaraj*. He suggested that ‘love force’ operates independently from ‘brute force’ throughout history. Actual history is surfeited with acts of kindness that sustain the world, whereas recorded history is surfeited with conflict, violent change, and evil. “The fact that there are so many men still alive in the world shows that it is based not on the force of arms but on the force of truth or love. Therefore, the greatest and most unimpeachable evidence of the success of this force is to be found in the fact that, in spite of the wars of the world, it still lives on.”

<sup>xli</sup> Taking a page out of Cassirer, Harris writes, “The problem with such tyrants is not that they reject the dogma of religion, but that they embrace other life-destroying myths. Most become the center of a quasi-religious personality cult, requiring the continual use of propaganda for its maintenance. There is a difference between propaganda and the honest dissemination of information that we (generally) expect from a liberal democracy. Tyrants who orchestrate genocides, or who happily preside over the starvation of their own people, also tend to be profoundly idiosyncratic men, not champions of reason” (Harris 2006, 41).

<sup>xlii</sup> For instance, the New Atheists contend that religious moderates provide cover for religious fundamentalists by their affirmation of faith-based belief, whereas Connolly is more inclined to support religious moderation, as well as the pervasive metaphysics of ‘faith.’ While I will not pursue these

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divergences here, I think New Atheists such as Harris and scholars such as Connolly are much closer in their approaches than many might suppose. Consider the following passage:

The most significant thing about the heartfelt promise of Rapture, Christo-terrorism, and the Day of Judgment is not the horrendous future it anticipates, though that is notable. It is its effect upon the current conduct of millions of people who entertain the vision. To embrace this vision is to place a series of defiled doctrines, institutions, and constituencies under daily suspicion; it is to foment a collective will to revenge against nonbelievers held to be responsible for the time of tribulation and obstacles to future bliss awaiting believers. Moreover, the Antichrist and his followers are visualized as consummate masters of deception and intrigue. Believers must distrust those who promise social progress by humanist means. For followers of the devil often present themselves as agents of beneficence. So an aura of suspicion, resentment, and revenge is slipped into the daily perceptions of the faithful, encouraging them to make the worst interpretations of outsiders and to accept any scandalous story against them contrived by right-wing talk shows, the Republican advertising machine, Internet blogs, and preachers on the Right.

Who wrote this –Sam Harris or William Connolly? Stylistically, it's a toss-up. Topically, also a toss-up. As one might guess, making similar noises is at the very least a starting point for resonance. In fact, Connolly (2005, 875) wrote the passage, and seems to cement an openness to the criticism of religion the New Atheism contributes to the discourse.

<sup>xliii</sup> The Dunning-Krueger effect is “the observation that people who are ignorant or unskilled in a given domain tend to believe they are much more competent than they are” (Poundstone 2017). The New Atheists attribute this inflated sense of competency to both the ‘premodern’ forms of religious zeal and the ‘postmodern’ trends of secular relativism. Surely, Yeats meant that things should be otherwise than they are, that that the best should be full of passionate intensity and the worst should lack all conviction.

<sup>xliiv</sup> On the one hand, the Bush administration’s ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric notched one too many clash-of-civilizations references on its belt. While Bush would later walk back some of his religiously infused language, Trump has characteristically doubled down. On the other hand, the Obama administration’s ‘War on Terror’ rhetoric notched one too few. Where Trump has been careless to a fault, Obama was *careful to a fault*. Early in his presidency, Obama regarded Islamist ideology as a pressing threat to U.S. security interests, stating, “What you have seen in terms of radical Islam is an approach that says that any efforts to modernize, any efforts to provide basic human rights, any efforts to democratize are somehow anti-Islam... And I think that is absolutely wrong.” In a few years’ time, Obama preferred to target specific groups by name rather than by their stated representation Islam. Al-Qaeda, for instance, was pursued for their violent terrorist activity, not for the scriptural ideology that they referenced and revered. Initially, this rhetorical strategy effected a change in the maneuvering of Al-Qaeda. Osama bin Laden himself wrote that the label “al-Qaeda,”

Reduces the feeling of Muslims that we belong to them, and allows the enemies to claim deceptively that they are not at war with Islam and Muslims, but they are at war with the organization of al-Qaeda, which is an outside entity from the teachings of Islam and this is what was raised repeatedly in the past as indicated by Obama, that our war is not on Islam or on the Muslim people but rather our war is on the al-Qaida organization, so if the word al-Qaida was derived from or had strong ties to the world Islam or Muslims; or if it had the name Islamic party, it would be difficult for Obama to say that. (Combating Terrorism Center 2012)

<sup>xliv</sup> “If Islam is largely (or entirely) what Muslims make of it, the state of Muslim public opinion is important to take into account. A 2013 PEW poll (Desilver and Masci 2013) conducted in eleven Muslim-majority countries showed that support for suicide bombing against civilians in defense of Islam has

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declined in recent years. Nevertheless, the numbers of people who still think that this form of violence against noncombatants is “often” or “sometimes” justified are sobering: Egypt (25 percent), Indonesia (6 percent), Jordan (12 percent), Lebanon (33 percent), Malaysia (27 percent), Nigeria (8 percent), Pakistan (3 percent), the Palestinian territories (62 percent), Senegal (18 percent), Tunisia (12 percent), and Turkey (16 percent). There are 1.6 billion Muslims worldwide. If even 10 percent support suicide bombing against civilians in defense of the faith, that’s 160 million supporters of terrorism” (Harris and Nawaz 2015, 44).

<sup>xlvi</sup> Islamism spans political Islam (e.g. the Muslim Brotherhood), revolutionary Islam (e.g. the Iranian revival), and militant Islam on the global (e.g. the Islamic State and al-Qaeda) and regional levels (e.g. Al-Shabaab, Boko Haram, Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Taliban). Islamist sentiments also enliven some of the conservative majority of Muslims, who disavow the violence of their militant coreligionists, and yet overwhelmingly support sharia and perpetuate structural violence through deeply illiberal patriarchal hierarchies (Lipka 2017).

<sup>xlvii</sup> Doubtless, tense militaristic interventions and exploitative occupations create a rallying point for strategic terror. Western models of secularism imposed on Muslim societies have become a response and “opposition to particular representations of Islam” (Hurd 2008, 63). Following Norris and Inglehart (2011), fundamentalism gains most traction in environments bereft of existential security and human development. Ruthven claims that “anxieties that have a social origin will very often find expression in religious terms” (Caley 2012). Tiffany Howard (2014) contends that that fragile and failed states are breeding grounds for religious terrorism insofar as there is a palpable absence of security, as well as a presence of potential recruits and locations for terrorist hideouts, not to mention “the perfusion of warlords, criminals, or drug barons that fill the vacuum within failed states” (Bilgin and Morton 2004). However, the New Atheists maintain these factors do not impinge on the link between belief and behavior. “The fact that terrorist groups have demonstrable, short-term goals does not in the least suggest that they are not primarily motivated by their religious dogmas” (Harris 2004, 261).

<sup>xlviii</sup> In formulating ‘the end of history’ as the hard-won staying power of liberal democracy, Francis Fukuyama left room for Islam: “The appeal of Islam is potentially universal, reaching out to all men as men, and not just to members of a particular ethnic or national group. And Islam has indeed defeated liberal democracy in many parts of the Islamic world, posing a grave threat to liberal practices even in countries where it has not achieved political power directly” (1992, 45). That said, Fukuyama could not account for the specter of Islamism that would usher in the twenty-first century. The appeal of Islam, in terms of identity and ideology, cannot be understated in the near-term, even if “the Islamic world would seem more vulnerable to liberal ideas in the long run than the reverse, since such liberalism has attracted numerous and powerful Muslim adherents over the past century and a half” (1992, 46).

<sup>xlix</sup> Yale University Press declined to republish the Danish cartoons in Jytte Klausen’s (2009) analysis of the incident, against the expressed wishes of the author.

<sup>1</sup> According to Butler, “Understanding Hamas/Hezbollah as social movements that are progressive, that are on the left, that are part of a global left, is extremely important. That does not stop us from being critical of certain dimensions of both movements” (Totten 2012).

<sup>ii</sup> According to Brown, “Superiority is sustained by the conceit that liberalism can tolerate religions without being conquered by them, or tolerate certain fundamentalisms without becoming fundamentalist. In contrast, fundamentalism cannot tolerate or incorporate liberalism; the superior entity is the more capacious one, the one that can harbor difference and not be felled by it” (2009, 187).

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<sup>lii</sup> According to Hardt and Negri, “The postmodernity of fundamentalism has to be recognized primarily in its refusal of modernity as a weapon of Euro-American hegemony—and in this regard Islamic fundamentalism is indeed the paradigmatic case” (2000, 149).

<sup>liii</sup> In “Why We Hate You & Why We Fight You,” it is written, “So in the end, you cannot bring an indefinite halt to our war against you. At most, you could only delay it temporarily.” This chosen narrative seems to confirm what Bernard Lewis wrote, “The presumption is that the duty of jihad will continue, interrupted only by truces, until all the world either adopts the Muslim faith or submits to Muslim rule” (2003, 32).

<sup>liv</sup> In a statement made by President Obama on the Islamic State, he suggested that their ideology is more nihilistic than religious. “ISIL is not ‘Islamic.’ No religion condones the killing of innocents. And the vast majority of ISIL’s victims have been Muslim. And ISIL is certainly not a state. It was formerly al Qaeda’s affiliate in Iraq, and has taken advantage of sectarian strife and Syria’s civil war to gain territory on both sides of the Iraq-Syrian border. It is recognized by no government, nor by the people it subjugates. ISIL is a terrorist organization, pure and simple. And it has no vision other than the slaughter of all who stand in its way.”

<sup>lv</sup> “‘Reformation’ has meant, for Jews and Christians, a minimal willingness to reconsider holy writ as if it were (as Salman Rushdie so daringly proposed in his turn) something that can be subjected to literary and textual scrutiny... Yet no comparable project has ever been undertaken in Koranic scholarship. No serious attempt has been made to catalog the discrepancies between its various editions and manuscripts, and even the most tentative efforts to do so have been met with almost Inquisitional rage” (Hitchens 2007, 136).

<sup>lvi</sup> Faith-based belief appears inherent in the paranoid style, described by Richard Hofstadter over fifty years ago, insofar as it is bent on “warding off the profane intrusions of the secular political world.” Henry Adams educated us on the matter, “Practical politics consists in ignoring facts.” If ignoring facts is practical politics, then manufacturing “alternative facts” to the facts already ignored or denounced is realpolitik, real politics, “a struggle not of men,” Adams reminds us, “but of forces.” What are the forces of modern politics? As Dennett suggests, perhaps no force is better placed to navigate the spaces of ignorance, hatred, fear, greed, and paranoia than faith. Hannah Arendt likewise warned, “The ideal subject of totalitarian rule is not the convinced Nazi or the convinced Communist, but people for whom the distinction between fact and fiction (i.e., the reality of experience) and the distinction between true and false (i.e., the standards of thought) no longer exist.”

<sup>lvii</sup> In a January 2016 campaign speech at Liberty University, Donald Trump evinced his ability as a biblical conversationalist when he recited, “Two Corinthians 3:17, that's the whole ballgame. ... Is that the one you like?” As Jessica Taylor (2016) pointed out, “That's a verse that's etched on campus buildings, but that verse comes from ‘Second Corinthians’ — not ‘Two.’” It is also worth noting that Liberty University was founded by Jerry Fallwell, Sr., and is now overseen by his son, who Trump has appointed to a position within the United States Department of Education.

<sup>lviii</sup> Harris cautions, “This spirit of mutual inquiry is the very antithesis of religious faith... Our primary task in our discourse with one another should be to identify those beliefs that seem least likely to survive another thousand years of human inquiry, or most likely to prevent it, and subject them to sustained criticism. (2004, 48). Still, Dennett insists, “They would teach us something. And we would teach them something. And perhaps the gulf of difference between us would never be crossed, but we shouldn't assume this worst-case prospect. In the meantime, the way to prepare for this Utopian global conversation is to study, as compassionately and dispassionately as we can, both their ways and our own ways” (2006, 329).

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<sup>lix</sup> Steven Pinker, who notoriously refused to teach an introductory “Faith and Reason” course at Harvard University, justified his refusal in terms that resonate with the New Atheism: “The juxtaposition of the two words makes it sound like 'faith' and 'reason' are parallel and equivalent ways of knowing. But universities are about reason, pure and simple. There is an enormous constituency of people who would hold that faith and reason are two routes to knowledge. It is a mistake to affirm that. It's like having a requirement in 'Astronomy & Astrology.' They're not comparable topics” (Miller 2010). However, Pinker clarified, this is not to refuse the study of religion as a natural phenomenon. Harvard University now offers free online educational programs on the world religions and scriptural literacy in general. Most recently, Pinker has written *Enlightenment Now: The Case for Reason, Science, Humanism, and Progress* (2018), with which future research on religion and secularism must consider.