

Misunderstanding Religion:
A Critique of the New Atheists

by

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Chapter One

The New Atheists

In the age of mass media and the internet it is rare for any book to create controversy on an international level. Yet, Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion, a relatively short nonfiction volume about religion, has managed to catch the attention of book readers, television anchors, and internet bloggers across the United States and the world. As I began to investigate what all this fuss was about, one of the first stories I found explained that all the controversy was due to the fact that there are actually “two versions of The God Delusion: one of them moderate, reasonable and utterly convincing and bought only by atheists, and the other vicious, aggressive and offensive, and exclusively bought by Christians.”¹ Richard Dawkins has been identified as one of the spokesmen for the group of authors known as the “New Atheists,” and, as this joke suggests, their writings have been so divisive that it is as though people are reading different books. The vehement public disagreement these books have provoked is more than enough to attract the eye of anyone interested in religion, and cause him to ask who the New Atheists are and what are they saying.

In 2005, Ronald Aronson wrote a review entitled “Faith No More” for *BookForum Magazine*. In this review Aronson coined the term “New Atheists” to describe the contemporary authors who are vehemently advocating atheism in the midst of a religious American society. His article covered the release of seven books responding to the surge of religious activity around the world in the past several

¹Paula Kirby. “Fleabytes.” RichardDawkins.net - The Official Richard Dawkins Website. 11 Apr. 2009 <<http://richarddawkins.net/article,2285,Fleabytes,Paula-Kirby>>.

decades. This apparent increase in religious observance has challenged a generation of nonbelievers. Although Aronson was able to identify the emergence of the New Atheists, he could not predict their success. Of the seven books he reviewed in 2005, six went on to achieve modest success as niche non-fiction books. One became a bestseller.

In his 2005 review, Aronson declared that Sam Harris' The End of Faith resuscitated the image of atheism as “dogmatic, fanatically rationalistic, and at war [with] religion.”² By May 2007 The End of Faith had won the PEN award for best new nonfiction, been translated in fourteen languages, and was reported to have sold a quarter of a million copies.³ Harris was publicly carrying the New Atheist banner. Since Aronson's initial review, more established authors have joined the fray and the New Atheists have garnered greater attention with each successive publication. In September 2006, philosopher Daniel Dennett and scientist Richard Dawkins published Breaking the Spell and The God Delusion, respectively. Within eight months Dennett had sold an estimated 52,000 copies,⁴ while Dawkins had sold a staggering 282,00 copies.⁵ Journalist Christopher Hitchens published his book, God is Not Great, in 2007, and it is threatening to outsell all the other New Atheists. Within four days of its publishing, the publishers of God Is Not Great had put 95,000 copies

² Ronald Aronson. “Faith No More?” BookForum Fall 2005.

³ Tim Shipman. “Atheists Go On the Political Offensive in the God-Fearing US.” Telegraph [London] 7 May 2007.

⁴ Hemant Mehta. “How Well Are the Atheist Books Selling?” Friendly Atheist. 11 Apr. 2009 <<http://friendlyatheist.com/2007/06/07/how-well-are-the-atheist-books-selling/>>.

⁵ Lynn Andriani. “Believe It or Not.” Publishers Weekly 6 Apr. 2007.

into print,⁶ and the book has sold steadily since then. Suffice it to say, New Atheist writing has sold well.

Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens are not the only current atheist writers, but they are the most prominent. Their works are the ones that have established what New Atheism is, and they recognize one another as being the most central New Atheists. Dennett and Dawkins cite one another extensively in their books, and all four authors were brought together by Dawkins to film a two-hour conversation entitled “The Four Horsemen.” In terms of public visibility, and their own estimation, Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens are the authors most responsible for shaping New Atheism.

In defining New Atheism it is important to look at both what is being said and how it is being said. In 2005, Aronson characterized the new wave of atheists as being “not part of a movement, they...lack the sense that history is going their way. At the same time, these writers are refreshingly free from the hidden theology of history-as-progress that inspired past atheist writers...They cannot appeal to self-evident trends, and this gives each of their works a refreshing quality of standing on its own. Accordingly, in these books the argument is everything. And they are contemporary, having had to respond to September 11, to Islam as well as Judaism and Christianity, and to modern science. They have had to rethink atheism in terms of its historical possibility, its reputation for negativity, and the ways in which it might become more appealing.”⁷ Aronson’s review was written before some of the most

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Aronson. “Faith No More?”

influential New Atheist books were published, but it anticipates the central scope, tone, and challenges of New Atheism.

According to Aronson, atheists have spent centuries optimistically anticipating the inexorable arrival of the day when religion would be overwhelmed by reason and equality. From the Enlightenment to the hippie movement, from Comte and the philosophical positivists to the rise of socialism, it seemed that religion's power was waning. At some point in the 1970s, however, the tide shifted and it became apparent that religion is not simply going to disappear. Now, in the early years of the twenty-first century, it is clear that an atheist victory is far from inevitable, and notions of secular progress must be reevaluated. The content of the New Atheist argument must be understood in the context of this lineage.

It is difficult to offer a concise summary of what the New Atheists are saying because each author presents a different argument, but they do share some strident similarities. Borrowing from both Andrew Brown and Al Mohler, Jr.,⁸ I think the best description of the New Atheist platform is as follows. The New Atheists celebrate their atheism, and hope to spread atheism to others. They believe that religion may be the single greatest threat to world peace, and the most dangerous aspect of religion is faith. Faith, the unjustified belief in unreasonable propositions, causes good people to blindly defend their religions even when their religions are doing bad things. All manifestations of faith are bad, regardless of whether they occur

⁸ Andrew Brown. "The New Atheism: Definition and a Quiz." The Guardian 29 Dec. 2008.

Al Mohler, Jr. "The New Atheism and the Endgame of Secularism." W.H. Griffith Thomas Memorial Lecture. Dallas Theological Seminary. 5 Feb. 2008.
<<http://www.dts.edu/media/play/>>.

in extremist religious communities or moderate ones. Faced with such a noxious understanding of faith, the New Atheists turn to science. They believe the best antidote to faith is science. By advocating science and speaking critically about religion, we may be able to improve the world. The New Atheists have taken it upon themselves to be the voices of reason in an unreasonable world.

Skepticism is as old as belief, and the project of questioning the value of religion is hardly a new project. The newness of the New Atheists comes from the way they make their argument as much as it does from the argument itself. Unlike older models of atheism that depend on complex philosophical or theological arguments, New Atheism is intentionally designed for mass consumption. All of the authors adopt a conversational tone. They write in the first person, and try to avoid technical language. This open and personal way of addressing the reader also makes the New Atheists a remarkably emotional group. They are not opposed to religion on a purely intellectual level. Religion makes them angry. The September 11 attacks scared and energized them. Frequently called militant atheists, the New Atheists have a definite sense of oppression and marginalization that stems from the collapse of the grand narrative of secularization, and the seemingly endless cycle of religious intolerance and violence. The New Atheists write as though religion has invaded their homes. The anger, frustration, and indignation that run throughout all their books is part of what defines this as an atheist voice we have not heard before. The New Atheists are not discussing their anti-religious message in scholarly journals. They are writing manifestoes calling upon “[us] lax agnostics, [us] noncommittal nonbelievers,

[us] vague deists...to help exorcise this debilitating curse: the curse of faith.”⁹ New Atheism is as much about the combative and impassioned tone of the authors as it is their provocative message.

Reactions to the New Atheists have been mixed. Generally speaking, atheists have cheered, religious people have booed, and religious studies scholars have turned away. Within a small community of nonbelievers, they have been hailed as heroes. Some atheists had been waiting a long time for champions to combat the overbearing voice of religion, and for them, the New Atheists have brought a welcome change in the public discourse. The ardent fans attending lectures, waging Internet debates, and buying atheist bus advertisements in both England and the United States are a testament to how ready some people were for the New Atheists.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, religious people have rallied to the defense of religion with just as much passion as their atheist antagonists. For many religious people, the New Atheists are not merely wrong. They are blasphemous, offensive, and morally reprehensible. In response, religious people have organized protests and criticized the New Atheists in conversation, in sermons, in print, and on-air. In 2009, Dawkins even faced legal action as Todd Thomsen, a representative in the Oklahoma House of Representatives, introduced a resolution intended to prevent Dawkins from giving a lecture at the University of Oklahoma. Books like The Dawkins Delusion, I Don't Believe in Atheists, and The End of Reason indicate that some theists are taking the same aggressive stance as the New Atheists.¹⁰ The outcry

⁹ Gary Wolf. “The Church of the Non-Believers.” Wired Nov. 2006: 184.

¹⁰ Alister McGrath. The Dawkins Delusion? Grand Rapids: SPCK, 2007.
Chris Hedges. I Don't Believe in Atheists. New York: Free, 2008.

against the new atheists has been so great that some religious leaders have reassured their congregants that “Christians have nothing to fear from the new atheist surge. We evangelicals, in our advocacy for the gospel, also have no need for blunt weaponry.”¹¹ The fact that a preacher found it necessary to publish an article asking Christians to refrain from engaging in the debate demonstrates just how passionately theists have reacted to the New Atheists.

While a portion of the population has been heatedly debating the merits of religion, one group has remained conspicuously quiet. Academic scholars of religion have, to date, had little interest in the New Atheists. By and large, the academic institution has not found the controversy surrounding the New Atheists to be sufficiently intellectual to merit much discussion. It is easy to look at the New Atheists and see that they are not experts in religion. They do not use academic language, and they show precious little understanding of the terms and theories that scholars of religion have spent decades honing. The general attitude of scholars of religion can be boiled down to the penultimate sentence in *The Washington Post*'s review of God Is Not Great. In this review Stephen Prothero, the chair of Boston University's Religion Department, says, “I have never encountered a book whose author is so fundamentally unacquainted with its subject.”¹² Why would an academic want to respond to someone who, like Hitchens, struggles to give the most basic interpretation of the parable of the Good Samaritan? This is not to say that college religion departments are unaware of the New Atheists. Many professors have looked

Ravi K. Zacharias. The End of Reason: A Response to the New Atheists. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008.

¹¹ David Aikman. “Puncturing Atheism.” Christianity Today Oct. 2007.

¹² Stephen Prothero. “The Unbeliever.” The Washington Post 6 May 2007.

at the books, but, even though some have responded, the general sentiment seems to be that the New Atheist books do not belong in the same category as those by Mark Taylor, Thomas Alitzer, or any other serious scholars questioning the place of religion in modernity.

The general disinterest of the academy, thus far, has left the discourse surrounding the New Atheists to be defined by those with a vested interest in seeing one side come out on top. Rather than a discussion of the merits of this popular new argument, the reception of the New Atheists has been reduced to a debate. On one side are the ardent atheists, and, on the other, the equally aroused believers. A few components of the anti-New Atheist critique ought to be discussed before this paper continues.

The most basic point of contention in this debate the existence of God. Simply put, while the New Atheists deny the existence of God, many religious people try to demonstrate that God does, in fact, exist. Although this is an emotional issue for both sides, I find myself agreeing with Dennett, the only New Atheist to avoid a demonstration of a lack of evidence for God's existence, when he says, "diminishing returns [have] set in on the arguments about God's existence, and I doubt that any breakthroughs are in the offing, from either side."¹³ Nothing I have seen indicates that there is something new to be said about the existence of God. As this is a paper about the New Atheists, I will seek to avoid issues where old arguments are simply being rehashed. As a result, this paper will not spend time covering Pascal's wager or any other familiar cudgel in the war between believers and skeptics.

¹³ Daniel C. Dennett. Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon. New York: Penguin, 2007. P. 27.

Some aspects of their arguments are, however, original in both content and style. These have, in turn, inspired new and interesting refutations. The most provocative common criticism of the New Atheists is that they have become what they criticize. They are, effectively, dogmatic believers in a faith-based belief system seeking impose their beliefs upon everyone in the world. It is easy to find critics drawing parallels between the New Atheist and fundamentalist Christian attitudes. The New Atheists have even been called “secular fundamentalists,”¹⁴ and their belief that humans may be able to move beyond religion is construed as the “[belief] that the human species is marching forward, that there is an advancement toward some kind of collective moral progress—that we are moving towards, if not a Utopian, certainly a better, more perfected human society. That’s fundamental to the Christian right, and it’s also fundamental to the New Atheists.”¹⁵ One book review of God Is Not Great concludes by saying, “In the end, this maddeningly dogmatic book does little more than illustrate one of Hitchens’ pet themes—the ability of dogma to put reason to sleep.”¹⁶ Although the New Atheists must feel that these accusations are baseless slander, they are worth responding to.

The New Atheists are combative. They believe that an atheist worldview is, in virtually every circumstance, better than a religious one. In order to promote their worldview, they are willing to venture well beyond their expertise and pick fights with people who hold religion to be a central part of who they are. The New Atheists are emboldened in their attacks on religion because they believe themselves, like

¹⁴ John Gray. “The Atheist Delusion.” *The Guardian* [London] 15 Mar. 2008.

¹⁵ Chris Hedges. “I Don’t Believe in Atheists.” Interview with Charly Wilder. Salon 13 Mar. 2008.

¹⁶ Prothero. “The Unbeliever.”

many religious extremists, to be the representatives of an oppressed minority. Aside from Dawkins, the New Atheists are not scientists, and, as a result, they must rely on others to adequately explain evolution and other facts of the world. To this extent, Dennett, Hitchens, and Harris are promoting an ideology that depends on taking some things “on faith.” All of this may be true, and may be part of a valuable critique of the New Atheists. It does not, however, make them fundamentalists. Accusing the New Atheists of being fundamentalists may sound clever, but it is not a substantive criticism. The similarities between the New Atheists and fundamentalists depend largely on misinterpreting how words like “faith” and “progress” are being used. There are many flaws in the New Atheist project, but simply dismissing it as fundamentalism fails to exhibit the most basic understanding of what it is advocating. Ending the conversation by calling the New Atheists fundamentalists is little more than sophistry.

When people like the New Atheists confront moderate religious people with the spectacles of religious extremism, the religious moderates often insist that we ought not to dismiss their religion because a small number of people have used it violently. We are asked to create distinctions among the different kinds of religious practitioners, and try to see the fundamental goodness at the root of their beliefs. I think the New Atheists present just such a case for the secular side of the story. Although many people have found the New Atheists objectionable, we should not generalize our reactions to these books. The first thing we ought to do, in fact, is look more closely at the New Atheists themselves, and try to find the differences between and among these four authors. Only after we understand the full range of their views

can we begin to analyze them properly. In preparing this paper I have found that the New Atheist books are a mixed bag. All four authors offer distinct takes on what atheism is, and how one ought to advocate on its behalf. There are useful and compelling parts of all of these books, as well as unnecessary and inflammatory parts. The New Atheists are not the final word in the discussion, but they are worth considering.

We, who are a part of the academic study of religion, ought to look seriously at the New Atheists. As Gregory R. Peterson said in his article “Why The New Atheists Shouldn’t Be Completely Dismissed,” the simplest reason to pay attention to these authors is that the public is paying attention to them. He says, “it is a remarkable fact that books promoting atheism and attacking religion, typically in the name of science and reason, are now regularly making best-sellers’ lists, and this should be of no small interest, at the very least, to those of us interested in the history and social dynamics of religion and science.”¹⁷ Religion is not a strange animal living in some exotic locale. It is created and enacted in the everyday actions of people. If people are reading books about atheism, then scholars of religion need to pay attention to the reasons people are suddenly reading these books. To quote Peterson again, “Clearly these works have tapped into a vein of public discontent with religious fundamentalism in the wake of horrific terrorist attacks in the United States and Europe as well as nearly a decade of dominance of American politics by a Republican party under the sway of the religious right.”¹⁸ Any time a significant number of

¹⁷ Gregory R. Peterson. “Why the New Atheists Shouldn’t Be Completely Dismissed.” Journal of Religion and Science 42 (2007).

¹⁸ Ibid.

laypeople are interested in religious issues, students of religion ought to pay attention.

But the New Atheists are more than a demographic phenomenon. They offer substantive ideas in addition to their controversial delivery. As this paper will discuss, some of their suggestions about adding evolutionary and biological methods to the study of religion have the potential to yield meaningful advances in the field of religious studies. Even more important than their potential contributions to academic study, however, is the most fundamental premise of the New Atheists: there are people who don't find any religious tradition credible. Many of these people feel threatened by the way religion acts in the world, and they are not ridiculous for doing so. A critical and serious discussion of the social implications of religious faith, particularly in light of the events of the past eight years in America, is a worthwhile undertaking. There are a lot of reasons to criticize the way the New Atheists present their argument, but, given the role that religion plays in global politics, it is important that their challenge to investigate our suppositions about religion and morality be answered.

This paper will seek to investigate the arguments of the New Atheists without getting bogged down by weighing all of the truth claims they present. My interest lies in investigating how the New Atheists make their case, and the implications of that presentation for what it means to be an atheist. The New Atheists, as they make their arguments against religion, are constructing what it means to be an atheist, and passing this image of atheism on to all their readers. Given the wide circulation of their books, the New Atheists have the potential to affect both how atheists understand themselves and how they are understood by religious communities. As we

shall see, the construction of an atheist identity requires a definition of what religion is. This means that there is a massive public debate occurring about what religion means and how to oppose it, and yet, academics have declined to examine it. The articulation of a particular way of being an atheist is much more than the simple contestation of facts and claims of oppression it might appear to be. The differences between and among the New Atheists are indicative of how they understand religion, and, as a result, atheism. All of these understandings have their benefits, but, ultimately, all of these atheist identities fall short. It is the goal of this paper to analyze the moves each author makes, and to use their shortcomings to formulate a more complete atheist identity.

Chapter Two

The End of Faith

Sam Harris' The End of Faith was the first of the New Atheist books to be published, and, in many ways, provides a blueprint for the books that would follow. Harris explains his motivation for writing The End of Faith by stating that “there seems...to be a problem with some of our most cherished beliefs about the world: they are leading us, inexorably, to kill one another.”¹⁹ Some of the New Atheists are provoked by the false nature of religious truth claims, or the way religion threatens science. While these are important issues for Harris, he writes from a more basic fear. Harris is concerned that someone else's religious belief could lead to his own death. The critique of religion is, for Harris, quite literally a matter of life and death, and this pressing terror is evident from the first page of the book.

The End of Faith begins with a desperate picture that sets the tone for the rest of the book. As the first chapter opens, Harris describes a scene in which a “young man boards the bus as it leaves the terminal. He wears an overcoat. Beneath his overcoat, he is wearing a bomb. His pockets are filled with nails, ball bearings, and rat poison...The young man smiles. With the press of a button he destroys himself... and twenty others on the bus.”²⁰ The specter of this unidentified suicide bomber haunts Harris, and stands as a sort of metonymy for all the bad actions that religious people have done and may do.

¹⁹ Sam Harris. The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason. New York: W. W. Norton, 2005. 12.

²⁰ Ibid. 11.

Most people would accept the claim that some religious people do terrible things, but Harris argues that religious people do horrible things because they are religious. Religious people often claim that someone who murders in the name of religion has misinterpreted the true tenets of religion. In The End of Faith, Harris inverts this argument to claim that religion itself is inherently divisive and dangerous, and anyone killing in the name of religion has probably understood it correctly. In defending this claim, Harris begins with belief.

Faith and belief, for Harris, are not personal intellectual stances about ideas, but courses for actions. Harris explains, “your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior.”²¹ For him, beliefs are ideas upon which we base our behavior. We trust that these ideas accurately represent the world, and use them to formulate actions. Faith is the operative term in The End of Faith.

This definition of belief is the ground from which Harris begins his assault. If we accept Harris’ definition, there are two statements he thinks follow directly. First, “the moment we admit that our beliefs are attempts to represent states of the world, we see that they must stand in the right relation to the world to be valid.”²² Second, if we accept that “as a man believes, so he will act...[then] it follows...that certain beliefs are *intrinsically* dangerous.”²³ Harris is willing to extend these claims so far as to assert that “some propositions are so dangerous that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.”²⁴ Harris asserts that wrong beliefs, principles of action

²¹ Ibid. 12.

²² Ibid. 63.

²³ Ibid. 44. Italics original.

²⁴ Ibid. 52-3.

that do not correctly represent the world around them, are intrinsically dangerous. They become deadly, however, with the addition of faith.

Harris defines faith as the willful attempt to eschew outside confirmation of beliefs. He is quick to point out that the rejection of evidence-based thinking is characteristic of only the religious and the insane. At this point Harris has set up an epistemological framework relating ideas, actions, belief, and faith. It is important to note that this system includes a standard for evaluating beliefs as valid or invalid. By assessing validity and repeatedly making comparison to insane and mistaken beliefs, Harris makes it clear that he refuses to place religious beliefs in a category that is distinct from other kinds of thought. Relativism has no place in this system. Beliefs are good or bad, true or false, and it's possible to evaluate them as such. At this point, it might appear that Harris has prepared a foundation for a book attempting to use science to disprove some religious claims. However, he is more interested in judging what beliefs make people do than evaluating the content of the beliefs themselves. Instead of busying himself proving that the beliefs of the faithful are not valid representations of the world, Harris chooses to prove that religion is an intrinsically bad idea by showing that it provides dangerous principles for action.

Although The End of Faith is making claims about all religion, Harris' real interest lies in Islam and Christianity. He first focuses himself on the historical atrocities of Christianity. He explains that his "purpose in this chapter has been to intimate...some of the terrible consequences that have arisen, logically and inevitably, out of Christian faith... Auschwitz, the Cathar heresy, the witch hunts—these phrases signify the depths of human depravity...Study will reveal that the

history of Christianity is principally a story of mankind's misery and ignorance rather than of its requited love of God."²⁵ Although asserting that the Inquisition and anti-Semitism are ugly stains in the history of Christianity is not new, it is significant to Harris for two reasons. It provides evidence for his claim that religious people often perform terrible acts. And, more importantly, it establishes his methodology. If the reader allows Harris' point that witch hunts or blood libels come out of Christian doctrine, even with the concession that "Christianity has few living inquisitors today,"²⁶ then the reader has implicitly agreed to allow Harris to establish that religions are responsible for the actions of their adherents and we have the ability to judge those actions without sophisticated historical, exegetical, or anthropological justification. Condemning Christian practices that have already been cast aside allows Harris to set up a critical structure that uses contemporary western ethics to judge other belief systems by the actions of their most sensational and notorious practitioners. This structure will provide the backing for his claim that the modern practice of Islam is like "fourteenth century hordes...pouring into our world."²⁷

For Harris, Islam is an imminent threat. Beyond being merely another case of religion canonizing incomplete explanations of things in the world, Islam's particular brand of irrationality, as embodied in Al Qaeda and other violent sects, is currently menacing the western world in politically visible and physically dangerous ways. Harris responds to the worry of Muslim terrorism with his most vitriolic condemnations. His insistence that the recent development of terrorism and militant

²⁵ Ibid. 106.

²⁶ Ibid. 106.

²⁷ Ibid. 107.

extremism is not an example of “an otherwise peaceful religion that has been ‘hijacked’ by extremists”²⁸ is crucial to his understanding of Islam. Harris thinks this violence stems from the most basic tenet of Islamic doctrine. For him, Islam is a religion driven to “convert, subjugate, or kill unbelievers; kill apostates; and conquer the world.”²⁹ Given this analysis of the fundamental nature of Islam, the statement “we are at war with Islam”³⁰ is literally deadly.

As he did with historical Christianity, Harris primarily relies on the historical misbehavior of believers to justify his claims about the horrific nature of a religion. He chronicles fifty-one dates where Arab Muslim countries sponsored anti-Semitic pogroms and massacres.³¹ Unlike in his previous chapter, however, Harris tries to connect Muslim misbehavior with a scriptural motivation. He attempts to demonstrate the murderous nature of Islam by recounting all the places in the Koran where unbelievers are vilified.³² This list is over five pages long. While impressive in length, these passages lack any interpretive effort. He seems to think the lists speak for themselves, and abruptly moves on to discussing a study polling Muslims around the issue of suicide bombing. These three pieces constitute all the historical, textual, and sociological analysis that Harris finds necessary. The rest of the chapter is dedicated to assertions rather than evidence.

Harris is remarkably dismissive of Islam, which he thinks “more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing

²⁸ Ibid. 109.

²⁹ Ibid. 113.

³⁰ Ibid. 109.

³¹ Ibid. 114.

³² Ibid. 117-123.

cult of death.”³³ Harris summarily dismisses any arguments that try to contextualize Muslim terrorism. He has no interest in anything that suggests that humiliation at the hands of the west, corrupt rulers having created an Arab Muslim society that is both undereducated and bitter, or the actions of the United States within the Arab world might have provoked Muslim violence. In his view, the civilized west has nothing to do with it. Violence is an inherently Muslim characteristic that does not require any outside stimulus, and westerners are simply reacting to the barbaric tendencies of Muslims. His repetition of the claim that “many Muslims [are] standing eye deep in the red barbarity of the fourteenth century”³⁴ is indicative of the way he tries to create distance between the reader and Arab Muslims. We are not even living in the same era as those people who once “stood on the cusp of modernity and then, tragically fell backward.”³⁵ Harris’ creation of Muslims as an other allows him to question whether “given what many Muslims believe...genuine peace in this world [is] possible?”³⁶ This question alone is terrifying. Harris is despairing of finding peace with well over a billion people.

In addition to raising fears of Muslim barbarity, Harris attempts to present a way forward in the United States’ interactions with Islam. In the event that a Muslim state does obtain nuclear warheads, Harris predicts, “the only thing likely to ensure our survival may be a nuclear first strike of our own.”³⁷ In order to prevent this cataclysmic possibility, Harris urges the United States to invest in alternative fuel so

³³ Ibid.123.

³⁴ Ibid. 145.

³⁵ Ibid. 147.

³⁶ Ibid. 137.

³⁷ Ibid. 129.

that it is possible to impose economic isolation upon the Muslim world. Economic isolation would free the United States from worrying about the economic repercussions of trying to install “some form of benign dictatorship...to bridge the gap”³⁸ between where the Muslim world is now and a civil society. For Harris a civil society “is a place where ideas...can be criticized without the risk of physical violence.”³⁹ Harris believes that Muslims are uncivil and unready to be civilized, and this is a result of religious beliefs. Until those religious beliefs change, and the culture changes as a result, Harris sees the Muslim world as a ticking time bomb.

Having enumerated the flaws of Islam, Harris returns to Christianity.

Although Harris counsels that “compared with the theocratic terrors of medieval Europe, or those that persist in much of the Muslim world, the influence of religion in the West now seems rather benign. We should not be misled by such comparisons,”⁴⁰ he devotes roughly one third of the space expended on Islam to condemning contemporary Christianity. In discussing Christianity, the repeated theme is that while religious beliefs have already caused a lot of harm, the nature of these beliefs has the potential to cause even greater harm. Harris’ criticism of Christianity hinges on the war on drugs, and the unsettling manner in which some members of the United States’ government view their appointment as being part of a divine plan. Without ever stating it explicitly, it is quickly clear that Harris is really only interested in Christianity as it is embodied in American conservative evangelicalism. This is too limited of a focus, and this chapter of The End of Faith lacks the immediacy and

³⁸ Ibid. 151.

³⁹ Ibid. 150.

⁴⁰ Ibid.153.

impact of his other discussions. Likely, this is because Harris is not dealing with arresting examples of barbarity, and his intimations that “many prominent Republicans belong to the Council for National Policy, a secretive Christian pressure group,”⁴¹ read more like conspiracy theories than careful critique. In asserting that the United States is run on Christian notions, Harris achieves nothing new since the people he is attempting to expose are proud of their Christian bias. The most significant piece of his analysis of American politics appears in his notion of ‘the war on sin.’

Harris sees Christianity’s ability to force ethics formulated around supposedly biblical demands upon American politics as truly noxious. The banning of drugs and prosecution of sodomy are examples of “victimless crimes” that are illegal only because they contradict Christian notions of right and wrong. Harris claims that emphasizing biblically grounded morality misses out on the real basis of ethics, human suffering. By refusing to consider the impact of laws on humans as more important than the coherence of those laws with the bible, “faith drives a wedge between ethics and suffering.”⁴² Harris is a student of philosophy and neuroscience, and, after one hundred and seventy pages, he has arrived in the subject area where he feels most comfortable.

Harris, as should be clear by now, is no relativist, and in the climax of his book he sets about attempting to erect a post-religious set of ethics. Harris’ morality is best summed up in the statement that “if we are in a position to affect the happiness

⁴¹ Ibid. 155.

⁴² Ibid. 168.

or suffering of others, we have ethical responsibilities towards them.”⁴³ This ethical project is supported by the dual claims that ethics is a thoroughly modern undertaking upon which tradition asserts no real authority, and that the human moral impulse stems from a biological trait. In asserting that morality began in the early stages of our species, but is best understood through contemporary eyes, Harris removes any religious claims to moral authority. Having summarily dismissed the claim that religions act as ethical arbiters, Harris turns to science. Harris thinks, “ethics represents a genuine sphere of knowledge, it represents a sphere of potential progress (and regress),”⁴⁴ and he is quick to see the potential for ethical progress in the expansion of scientific understanding of consciousness. The belief that “there will probably come a time when we achieve a detailed understanding of human happiness, and of ethical judgments themselves, at the level of the brain”⁴⁵ serves as the ground from which Harris makes his ethical pronouncements. Harris’ faith in neurology allows him to dismiss concepts of cultural relativism as well as religious claims of moral authority.

This section reveals Harris’ basic thesis in its most explicit form. He is arguing that religion provides an outdated standard of ethics. Rather than adhere to an ancient standard of how to act towards one another, humans now have to ability to turn towards science, and science’s companion, reason, to guide us. Indeed, “reason is nothing less than the guardian of love.”⁴⁶ Only at this late stage does it become clear that this book is an attempt at fashioning a new ethical standard in contradistinction to

⁴³ Ibid. 171.

⁴⁴ Ibid. 171.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 175.

⁴⁶ Ibid. 190.

religious systems. Harris concludes the book saying, “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.”⁴⁷ He then finds it necessary to add “the days of our religious identities are clearly numbered. Whether the days of civilization itself are numbered would seem to depend...on how soon we realize this.”⁴⁸ Harris wants to show that a new ethical standard is possible and necessary. It is possible because of the advance of science, and necessary because humanity’s adherence to old religious standards is growing increasingly dangerous. Perhaps rereading The End of Faith as a text on ethics responding to the failure of religious systems of morality will allow us to better evaluate the merits of Harris’ argument.

Through the lens of an argument for a universal ethics we return to examine the fundamentals of Harris’ project, his thinking on belief. Harris equates belief with action. His understanding that “your beliefs define your vision of the world; they dictate your behavior”⁴⁹ asserts a direct equivalence between beliefs and actions. He then turns to religious texts and reads them as though they were long lists of action-inspiring beliefs. The argument is as follows: beliefs create actions, and good actions come from correct beliefs about the world. If religions offer incorrect beliefs about the world, then they must inspire bad actions. While this logic appears to be sound, it is not fully valid because of its overwhelming lack of subtlety around the concepts of

⁴⁷ Ibid. 227.

⁴⁸ Ibid. 227.

⁴⁹ Ibid. 12.

good and bad beliefs and actions. One of the simplest revelations of modern psychology, which Harris certainly respects, is that virtually everyone holds false beliefs about the world to some degree. Whether it be confirmation bias, spotlight phenomena, or fundamental attribution error, humans consistently form false beliefs about the world. This may make their actions misinformed, but imposing the value judgment that all actions based on imperfect perceptions are bad makes it almost impossible for people to perform “good” actions. So, even if Harris’ claims about belief were entirely correct, his equation would need to condemn the workings of the human mind almost as much as it condemns religion. Furthermore, evaluating beliefs based on their ability to represent the world ignores Harris’ own basis for ethics. If the true measure of morality is alleviating suffering, then the beliefs that lead a person to help someone else are irrelevant. All that ought to matter is if suffering is increased or decreased. The way Harris has described morality obligates him to value action over belief.

Harris, however, tries to have it both ways. After pages of epistemological work making assertions about human thought, Harris tries to prove that religion is an intrinsically bad idea by showing how religious people have used it as a dangerous principle for action. He claims, “there is no substitute for confronting the text itself,”⁵⁰ but he enumerates infamous misbehaviors rather than spend time weighing the merits of particular texts or belief systems. If Harris is committed to evaluating beliefs by examining the actions they produce, then he is obligated to consider the good actions of religious people. It is clear that many people have been able to use

⁵⁰ Ibid. 123.

religion for good. In Harris' system these actions should vindicate the beliefs to some extent, but he only sees religion's potential to provoke bad actions.

Considering that he is a philosophy and neuroscience student, it is surprising to see Harris completely write off human subjectivity. His portrayal of religious people as uncritically ingesting texts that immediately become beliefs and bases for terrible actions ignores the storied exegetical traditions that come with all of the religious texts that he quotes. Interpretation is a fundamentally human act, and a centerpiece of religion. Groups like American Christian fundamentalists may advocate a "literal" reading of the bible, but this tradition of literal reading has only come into practice over the course of the past century or so. Harris generally assumes that most religious people, dating at least as far back as the Middle Ages, have read their holy books literally, and have accepted what they read to be literal truth with the power to shape their actions. This understanding of the religious person portrays her as an object being acted upon by texts and preachers, rather than as a subject actively navigating the different messages she receives. The passivity and homogeneity that Harris imputes to religious people come from a slippage in terms around the word belief. Harris' concept of belief as direct principle for action is not what religious people mean when they claim to have faith. The belief of a religious person is complicated and mediated, but Harris wants to elide the difference between his definition of faith and a religious person's in order to form a behaviorist analysis of the religious person. Behaviorism is an old psychological paradigm best embodied in the works of B.F. Skinner. Skinner analyzed the ways in which the actions of human objects were determined by forces beyond them. His book Beyond Freedom and

Dignity, which posits that humans have no indwelling personality and ought to be programmed to behave properly, represents the logical conclusion to behaviorist thought. If humans are understood as objects, they are no longer responsible for their actions, and the best ethics we can hope for is one of control. Harris performs the difficult task of denying the ability of religious people to interpret while simultaneously blaming them for the beliefs that he thinks are nonnegotiable.

The End of Faith truly fails as a universal ethical system when Harris begins to attack religious people rather than the beliefs they hold. Harris' quarrel ought to be with illogical beliefs, but because he bases his critique on the actions of religious people he often slips into attacking religious people themselves. A new ethical system that purports to have universal application simply cannot succeed by denigrating a huge percentage of the population. Harris' discussion of Muslims and moderates makes it abundantly clear that although he is attempting to write a new moral guideline, he is really stuck in polemical aggression.

Although Harris also points to flaws in Christianity and Judaism, it is clear that Islam is the religion he targets most. Some of his statements appear to demonize Muslims themselves rather than the set of beliefs they hold. Harris says, "Can we say that Middle Eastern men who are murderously obsessed with female sexual purity actually love their wives, daughters, and sisters *less* than American or European men do? Of course, we can."⁵¹ Harris' exploration of love continues as he asks, "what is love? Few of us will be tempted to consult a dictionary on the subject. We know that

⁵¹ Ibid. 189. Italics original.

we want those we love to be happy.”⁵² Thus, because some Muslims believe that attempting to guarantee a place in paradise for the women in their lives requires difficult sacrifices, we can clearly see that they do not love these women. There are many legitimate criticisms of Islam that can be made, but asserting that some Middle Eastern men cannot love is not one of them. Claiming that Muslims love inadequately, and a nuclear strike may be necessary, is clearly a terrible base for a morality based on reason and science. Cultural relativism can certainly be challenged, but it must be done in a rigorous and critical manner. Harris dismisses relativism without a sufficient discussion, and leaves the readers to make the leap on their own.

Over the last half century, science has repeatedly shown that people’s actions are greatly influenced by their surroundings. Ever since the demise of eugenics it has been commonly understood that the vast majority of people are capable of morally positive actions. Harris’ polemical attacks on religious people deemphasize the influence of context in people’s decision making, and imply that there is something directly deficient with religious people themselves. His statement that “life under the Taliban is, to a first approximation, what millions of Muslims around the world want to impose on the rest of us. They long to establish a society in which—when times are *good*—women will remain vanquished and invisible, and anyone given to spiritual, intellectual or sexual freedom will be slaughtered before crowds of sullen, uneducated men... Theirs is a kill-the-children-first approach to war”⁵³ is directly contradicted not only by the voices of Muslims who have condemned the Taliban, but also by social scientists working in the Muslim world. Rather than seriously deal with the wealth of

⁵² Ibid. 189.

⁵³ Ibid. 203. Italics original.

information that has been published examining the forces that create the divide between the west and the Muslim world, Harris wants to claim that it is all a matter of religion. Not only is this move unverified, but repeated attacks upon and demonization of a specific group of people are no place from which to begin an ethical system.

This is not to say that Harris cannot criticize Islam, but that any such criticism of Islam as a standard for action must deal with the beliefs themselves, not the nature of the people who happen to be raised in areas dominated by those beliefs. The claim that one religion is more dangerous than another is a claim that could be valid and might bear investigation. Sincere and critical textual analysis might lead a person to conclude that “the basis for liberalism in the doctrine of Islam seems meager to the point of being illusory. Although we have seen that the bible is itself a great reservoir of intolerance, for Christians and Jews alike—as everything from the writings of Augustine to the present actions of Israeli settlers demonstrates—it is not difficult to find great swaths of the Good Book, as well as Christian and Jewish exegesis, that offer counter arguments.”⁵⁴ But the issue with Harris making this claim is twofold. First, he has not demonstrated to the reader that he performed the extensive analysis of the writings that would be necessary to offer this claim in any persuasive fashion. He has made a long list of what he believes to be xenophobic passages in the Koran, but this is insufficient grounding for such a huge assertion. Harris is neither a biblical nor koranic scholar, neither a historian nor sociologist, and does not wield sufficient expertise or research to make the condemnations of Islam that he does. The second

⁵⁴ Ibid. 137.

issue with Harris is the way his standard of evaluation directly contradicts other principles of The End of Faith. He claims that one of the reasons Islam is worse than Christianity and Judaism is because it provides less grounding for liberalism, but never allows that a greater basis for liberalism would make a better religion.

Throughout The End of Faith, Harris insists that while some religions may be better than others, the basic concept of religion is inherently dangerous. Accordingly, Harris is, for the majority of the book, unwilling to embrace liberal or moderate religious practices. As he see it, “Moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or simply ignore) much of their canons in the interest of living in the modern world...The first thing to observe about the moderate’s retreat from scriptural literalism is that it draws its inspiration not from scripture but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God’s utterances difficult to accept as written.”⁵⁵ This is to say, religious moderates willfully misinterpret religious traditions in order to align them with modern ways of thinking. Harris says, “this is a problem for ‘moderation’ in religion: it has nothing underwriting it other than the unacknowledged neglect of the letter of the divine law.”⁵⁶ The compromise that moderates make is that they “don’t want to kill anyone in the name of God, but they want us to keep using the word ‘God’ as though we knew what we were talking about.”⁵⁷ The moderate interpretation of God is benign, but, Harris argues, any use of the word “God” grants credence to religious language. If moderates continue to quote

⁵⁵ Ibid. 17.

⁵⁶ Ibid. 18.

⁵⁷ Ibid. 22.

the bible and use God as an explanation for their actions, it allows extremists to do the same thing. In this view, moderates enable fanatics.

Harris' accusation that we often do not know what we are talking about when we speak about God is important. "God" is a vague term, but, despite the ambiguity of the word, many religious people's actions are largely a consequence of how they understand "God." Given the centrality of God to religious life it is surprising to note that Harris offers no definition of "God," or even "religion." He implicitly accepts the definition of religion and interpretation of God offered by the people he would call religious extremists. This is not an insignificant move. Viewed through the lens of an extremist, it is not surprising that religion appears extreme. Harris criticizes without looking critically, and this leaves him with nowhere to go.

The End of Faith wants to establish a new post-religious set of ethics. It wants to be a wake up call to all those who have not realized how religion has retarded the ethical, scientific, and cultural growth of humanity. These are lofty goals, but in order for a book to effectively change people, it must be able to reach them. The End of Faith, despite its financial success, has provoked more controversy than conversion, and this is a result of Harris' arguments. Harris assaults the religious reader, and strands the atheist reader. By the conclusion of The End of Faith, Harris has caricatured the completely irreversible irrationality of the religious fanatic, and the logically untenable compromise of the moderate. In maintaining that atheism is the only reasonable path, Harris places all religious thinkers beyond the pale of reason. There is no one for the atheist to move forward with. Reasonable atheists must defend themselves against the barbarisms of the religious extremist without turning to

moderates for support. Harris is not interested in a gradual transition out of a world dominated by religion; he wants an immediate transformation. He insists, “what is the alternative to religion as we know it? As it turns out, this is the wrong question to ask. Chemistry was not ‘an alternative’ to alchemy; it was a wholesale exchange of ignorance at its most rococo for genuine knowledge. We will find that, as with alchemy, to speak of ‘alternatives’ to religious faith is to miss the point.”⁵⁸ This rhetoric misses the fact that that there were many intermediate steps between alchemy and chemistry that combined elements of both without demonizing practitioners of either. Many of the flaws in Harris’ argument could be forgiven or amended if he were offering a tenable resolution to the division between religious and atheist ways of viewing the world. However, the book that he has offered only manages to further divide already disparate parties. If The End of Faith is meant to signal the start of another morality, it is not an auspicious beginning.

⁵⁸ Ibid. 14.

Chapter Three

The God Delusion

Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion is based on the understanding that science and religion present two fundamentally different ways to understand the world, and, of these two ways, science is better. Dawkins begins by creating a division between the religious and the scientific. He defines religious people as people who believe in “a supernatural creator that is ‘appropriate for us to worship’.”⁵⁹ Expanding on that definition, Dawkins contrasts the theist who imagines “a supernatural intelligence who, in addition to his main work of creating the universe in the first place, is still around to oversee and influence the subsequent fate of his initial creation...[and] answers prayers; forgives or punishes sins; [and] intervenes in the world by performing miracles,”⁶⁰ with the atheist who, in addition to opposing the theist, sculpts her understanding of the world with scientific systems based on doubt and evidence. Dawkins is in awe of science, and in The God Delusion he wants to convince the reader that scientific atheism ought to occupy the place of reverence that religion currently holds in our society.

Dawkins' project is to investigate, evaluate, and eventually discredit the undeservedly elevated status that religion has been granted. He worries that critical thought about religion has been limited because of “a widespread assumption...that religious faith is especially vulnerable to offence and should be protected by an

⁵⁹ Richard Dawkins. The God Delusion. New York: Mariner Books, 2008. 33.

⁶⁰ Ibid. 39.

abnormally thick wall of respect.”⁶¹ Dawkins has taken it upon himself to reopen a critical investigation of religion. All that he promises the reader is “I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would handle anything else.”⁶²

This disclaimer is immediately followed by what is probably the most offensive sentence in the book. Dawkins writes, “The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, bloodthirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sado-masochistic, capriciously malevolent bully.”⁶³ This is meant to be startling. Dawkins does so little to unpack this sentence that it is best understood as a warning of things to come. He admits that this characterization of the biblical God is “an easy target,”⁶⁴ but we should know from the start that Dawkins is a new kind of atheist. Having got our attention, he turns to what he understands to be the essence of religion. Dawkins states that his opponent is the belief that “*there exists a superhuman, supernatural intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it, including us.*”⁶⁵ The God Delusion is mostly concerned with the so-called Abrahamic faiths, but Dawkins insists “I am not attacking any particular vision of God or gods. I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they have been or will be

⁶¹ Ibid. 42.

⁶² Ibid. 50.

⁶³ Ibid. 51.

⁶⁴ Ibid. 51.

⁶⁵ Ibid. 52. Italics original.

invented.”⁶⁶ The opponent is not one particular manifestation of religion, but religion itself. Dawkins’ work depends on a simple opposition between believer and atheist. People who refuse to pick a side, however, threaten to undermine this dichotomy. Before he can present an argument against religion, Dawkins must find a way to place deists, agnostics, and other ambiguous cases into his simple categories of theist and atheist.

Dawkins is quick to claim that his heroes were actually atheists. He begins by examining the words of Albert Einstein, Carl Sagan, and Stephen Hawking. These great scientists have often used religious language to express their scientific awe, but Dawkins insists that “the metaphorical or pantheistic God of physicists is light years away from the interventionist, miracle-wreaking, thought-reading, sin-punishing, prayer-answering God of the Bible of priests, mullahs and rabbis.”⁶⁷ It is important for Dawkins to make it clear that science is fundamentally atheist because establishing who is and is not religious is really about establishing what is religion and what is secular. His comment that deliberately confusing scientific awe with religious conviction is “an act of intellectual high treason”⁶⁸ is particularly revealing. Treason is the crime of switching sides, and trying to make science sound like religion rates as a criminal obfuscation for Dawkins. He makes a similar argument about the American Founding Fathers. Although they were not openly atheist, Dawkins lays claim to their Enlightenment values. He asserts that “whether Jefferson and his colleagues were theists, deists, agnostics, or atheists, they were passionate secularists

⁶⁶ Ibid. 57.

⁶⁷ Ibid. 41.

⁶⁸ Ibid. 41.

who believed that the religious opinions of a President, or lack of them, were entirely his own business.”⁶⁹ Arguing for the essential secularity of the founding fathers is significant to Dawkins for two reasons. The first is to provide a concrete example of his claim that people may be atheists, or allies of atheists, without explicitly identifying themselves as such. He expands this claim in his discussion of agnosticism. The second reason that the beliefs of a small number of men in the eighteenth century is important to Dawkins is that those men’s beliefs are the basis of the American ideology. Dawkins argues that the massive influence of religion in America today is a perversion of those ideals. He insists that the “facts about today’s political climate in the United States, and what they imply, would have horrified Jefferson, Washington, Madison, Adams and all their friends. Whether they were atheists, agnostics, deists or Christians, they would have recoiled in horror from the theocrats of early 21st-century Washington.”⁷⁰ Asserting the secular beliefs of the Founding Fathers not only provides a basis for attacking what Dawkins considers to be one of the worst modern manifestations of religion, but also sets a precedent for transforming deists and agnostics into atheists.

Dawkins, making no attempt to mask his feelings, titles his section about agnostics “The Poverty of Agnosticism.” He believes agnostics are trying to avoid the controversy that comes with honestly declaring an opinion about religion. By remaining neutral they allow religious people to continue browbeating the rest of the world and lie to themselves about their own beliefs. This is not to say that all agnosticism is entirely bad. Dawkins concedes that as we consider the question of

⁶⁹ Ibid. 65.

⁷⁰ Ibid. 67.

God's existence some degree of agnosticism ought to be inevitable. There is no completely conclusive proof that settles the question of whether God exists, and saying "I don't know for certain" is honest and reasonable. He does, however, insist that we ought not to claim that the question God's existence is beyond human investigation. He says, "agnosticism about the existence of God belongs firmly in the temporary... category. Either he exists, or he doesn't. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer, and meanwhile we can say something pretty strong about the probability."⁷¹ Dawkins bases his claim that God's existence is a scientific fact on the simple logic that "if he existed and chose to reveal it, God could clinch the argument."⁷² If such a direct proof is conceivable, then the existence of God as an entity within the world is a scientific fact that is "discoverable in principle if not in practice."⁷³ But until such proof is manifest, it is probability that lies at the heart of Dawkins' rejection of agnosticism.

Dawkins explains that science can never prove the nonexistence of anything. Although we do not prove that things definitely do not exist, we do form opinions about the likelihood of their existence. People who hold on to their agnosticism to avoid participating in the debate ignore the simple fact that they live their life based on a probability. They either pray and use God as an explanation for things that occur in the world, or they generally ignore God. This does not require certainty one way or another, but, according to Dawkins, it does demonstrate that virtually all people do actually have a side in the debate around religion. It is his suggestion that any

⁷¹ Ibid. 70.

⁷² Ibid. 73.

⁷³ Ibid. 73.

agnostics who don't go to church on Sundays are already living as atheists. One of the goals of The God Delusion is to prompt agnostics and hidden nonbelievers to stop downplaying their own skepticism and ally themselves with the atheists. Dawkins' discussion of agnosticism should indicate his lack of nuance in considering people's religious identity. As we shall see, he has no appreciation of religious identities that navigate the tension between religion and science. In his view, either you're with God or against God.

Dawkins begins his demonstration of God's improbability by dissecting the preexisting positive proofs of God. Beginning with Aquinas' tautological proofs, moving through modern arguments from beauty and personal experience, and concluding with mathematical proofs, Dawkins finds all of the arguments for the existence of God to be wanting. People have been arguing for and against the existence of God for centuries, and Dawkins' refutations of these arguments are little more than a summary. He dismisses Aquinas on the grounds that Aquinas is essentially playing word games, and "even if we allow the dubious luxury of arbitrarily conjuring up a terminator to an infinite regress [such as the idea of an uncaused cause] and giving it a name...there is absolutely no reason to endow that terminator with any of the properties normally ascribed to God: omnipotence, omniscience, goodness."⁷⁴ He calls a priori arguments "dialectical prestidigitation,"⁷⁵ and declares them to be too shallow to answer a question as big as the existence or non-existence of God. Arguments from beauty and personal experience are equally vacuous. They can only convey subjective interpretations, and Dawkins is quick to

⁷⁴ Ibid. 101.

⁷⁵ Ibid. 108.

point out how flawed human interpretation often is. He breezes through his discussion of the argument from scripture with a short summary of the inconsistencies in the New Testament. After thirty-six pages, in which he summarizes and dismisses eight separate arguments, Dawkins finds himself deeply unimpressed with the case for God. Most of the work refuting these arguments has been done previously, and more thoroughly, elsewhere, and Dawkins' interest in dissecting them seems to be largely a matter of due diligence before moving on to his own claims.

After laboring through the traditional arguments for the existence of God without much creativity, Dawkins finally gets to play to his strengths in crafting an argument against God's existence. Dawkins is, first and foremost, a zoologist. He relies on this expertise as he attempts to demonstrate that things in the world, which had previously only been explicable by appealing to God, can now be explained through science. Dawkins uses creationism as an antagonist against which he articulates his atheist scientific explanation. In the second chapter he said, "this book advocates [the following] view: *any creative intelligence, of sufficient complexity to design anything, comes into existence only as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.*"⁷⁶ One hundred pages later he begins to make that case.

Simply put, evolution is Dawkins' explanation for why we have no need for God. Because we are able to understand natural selection, we are no longer dependent upon the concept of God to fill in the gaps of our ignorance. He explains the significance of natural selection by saying "natural selection not only explains the whole of life; it also raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how

⁷⁶ Ibid. Italics original.

organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance.”⁷⁷ Dawkins’ summary of natural selection is essentially an updated version of Laplace’s famous response to Napoleon’s asking of why God was not represented in his astronomic model. Both Dawkins and Laplace are proud to announce, “I have no need of that hypothesis.” Dawkins has written several books outlining natural selection for lay readers, and he moves through this explication briskly in The God Delusion. He is quick to point out the inherent weaknesses of the creationist argument (Dawkins includes the more developed stance of intelligent design in his demonstration, but tends to regard it as merely creationism “in [a] politically expedient fancy dress”⁷⁸). Beyond the general lack of evidence, Dawkins argues that creationism is limited “because the designer hypothesis immediately raises the larger problem of who designed the designer.”⁷⁹ The increase in scientific knowledge leaves a religious ideology in a state of worshiping the gaps.⁸⁰ To Dawkins, creationism

⁷⁷ Ibid. 141.

⁷⁸ Ibid. 138.

⁷⁹ Ibid. 188.

⁸⁰ Dietrich Bonhoeffer anticipates this argument by over half a century in his Letters and Papers From Prison. Bonhoeffer’s theology is a lovely example of the kind of religious thinking that Dawkins cannot fathom. Bonhoeffer is a serious theologian who is willing to suggest that “God as a working hypothesis in morals, politics, or science, has been surmounted and abolished; the same thing has happened in philosophy and religion...For the sake of intellectual honesty, that working hypothesis should be dropped” (360). Bonhoeffer concedes virtually all of the points that Dawkins argues, and remains a Christian. All the theologians who, like Bonhoeffer, question the way religion interacts with the world completely unravel the New Atheist critique. I would dedicate more space to developing this argument, but I don’t want my category of “religious moderates” to become synonymous with academic theology. As we shall see, it is possible to demonstrate the shortcomings of the New Atheists’ argument without having recourse to the intricacies of theological philosophy. In order to confront the New Atheists on their own terms, I want to focus this argument on the practices of laypeople.

appears an inherently weak and compromised ideology merely trying to shield religion from the progress of science.

Dawkins, one of the world's most accomplished evolutionary scientists, is certain that natural selection is the final word on questions surrounding life in the universe. He is willing to concede that there are still elements in science that have not been explained, but he remains confident that a groundbreaking scientific discovery remains more likely than a theistic explanation. Dawkins believes this scientific discussion ought to render "the factual premise of religion—the God Hypothesis—untenable."⁸¹ The rest of the book is dedicated to dealing with the implications of believing that the foundation of all religion is simply false.

True to his training, Dawkins begins by wondering how it is that has religion evolved separately across virtually all human cultures. He thinks that religion must appeal to some basically human characteristics in order to be as successful as it is. Although there is growing scientific interest in discovering the evolutionary root of humanity's disposition for religion, it is still an open subject that is actively being debated. Dawkins' suggestion is that religion may be an evolutionary byproduct of our innate gullibility coupled with an overactive faculty for detecting agency. Humans have evolved with some psychological tendencies that increase our capacity to stay alive long enough to reproduce, but these tendencies may not always lead to a clear perception of the world. We are born gullible because children who listen to their parents generally survive longer than those who do not. Similarly, we are prone to attributing agency to things that may not possess it because it is better to think that

⁸¹ Ibid. 189.

we see a tiger when it is not present than to not see a tiger when one is present.

Dawkins thinks that religion might appear in all societies because it arises out of the fundamental human mistake of perceiving that there are active forces even when we cannot see them fully, and this error is passed down from generation to generation because of our innate tendency to accept what we are told. Dawkins' specific ideas about how religion satisfies our inherent tendencies are largely speculative, but he is strongly committed to the concept that religion exploits human tendencies that have developed as a result of evolution.

According to Dawkins, religion has been successfully transmitted from generation to generation because it successfully appeals to features of the human brain. Over time, many forms of religion have existed and Dawkins argues that religions themselves may go through a process of natural selection themselves. In this process, the religions that best take advantage of human predispositions will be passed on while those that do not will disappear. Because religions are ideas rather than organisms, this process is memetic⁸² rather than genetic, but selection occurs in a similar manner. Dawkins believes evolution is the key to understanding the development of religion. We can see how religions evolve to best take advantage of the spaces that evolution creates in the human mind. Dawkins appreciates that religion does a good job taking advantage of human dispositions, but he is not prepared to admit that the existence of religion is good for humans.

⁸² Dawkins first introduced the concept of memes in his 1973 book The Selfish Gene. Memes are replicators analogous to genes. Where genes carry biological information, memes are conceptual and ideational. Memes allow us to speak of the evolution of ideas. This paper will discuss memes more fully in the fifth chapter.

One of the most common arguments on behalf of religion is that religion provides moral structures that humans need in order to be good to one another. Dawkins insists that morality does not come from religion, but is an innately human trait as a result of natural selection. He claims that there are “four good Darwinian reasons for individuals to be altruistic, generous, or ‘moral’ towards each other. First, there is the special case of genetic kinships. Second, there is reciprocation: repayment for favors given...Third, the Darwinian benefit of acquiring a reputation for...kindness. And fourth...there is the particular additional benefit of conspicuous generosity as a way of buying unfakeably authentic advertising.”⁸³ Essentially, Dawkins’ argument is that humans are moral for selfish Darwinian reasons that stem from an individual’s urge to protect her own genes by impressing or securing the help of others. We are good to one another because individuals do better if we are decent towards one another. As a result of generations of decent people reproducing more consistently than those who are amoral, we are genetically predisposed towards acting morally. Our tendency towards altruism comes from within rather than from external religious instruction.

Dawkins provides more support for his assertion that morality is inherent by demonstrating that religion does not present a useful moral code. He does this by going through the Old and New Testaments and evaluating the moral standards they lay out. Dawkins reasons that a person could receive moral instruction from scripture either by following the divine commandments and instructions, or by using God as a role model. Dawkins claims “both scriptural routes, if followed through religiously...

⁸³ Dawkins. The God Delusion. 251.

encourage a system of morals which any civilized modern person, whether religious or not, would find—I can put it no more gently—obnoxious.”⁸⁴ To justify his claim he recites a familiar litany of Old Testament atrocities, ranging from God’s destruction of the world in the Noah story, to the demand that Abraham sacrifice Isaac, from the Lot’s decision to “hand [his daughter] to the mob, who gang-raped her all night,”⁸⁵ to the genocide God ordered when the Israelites entered Canaan.

Anticipating objections to his analysis, Dawkins says, “irritated theologians will protest that we don’t take the book of Genesis literally any more. But that is my whole point! We pick and choose which bits of scripture to believe, which bits to write off as symbols or allegories. Such picking and choosing is a matter of personal decision just as much, or as little, as the atheist’s personal decision to follow this moral precept or that.”⁸⁶ He feels no obligation to speculate on the interpretations theologians have created that convey a more positive morality, because, in Dawkins’ words, “all I am establishing is that modern morality does not come from the Bible,”⁸⁷ and the mere act of interpreting requires an external moral standard. His argument is not “that we *shouldn’t* get our morals from scripture...[but] that...we, as a matter of fact, *don’t* get our morals from scripture.”⁸⁸

Dawkins takes a similar approach when reading the New Testament. His objection is not with the actions of Jesus, which he seems to find generally commendable, but with the overarching mythology. Dawkins describes “atonement,

⁸⁴ Ibid. 268.

⁸⁵ Ibid. 273.

⁸⁶ Ibid. 269.

⁸⁷ Ibid. 279.

⁸⁸ Ibid. 283. Italics original.

the central doctrine of Christianity, as vicious, sado-masochistic and repellent”⁸⁹ because he finds the concept that humanity needs suffering to cleanse itself of a sin which reportedly happened thousands of years ago to be an awful grounding for a contemporary system of forgiveness. This approach to morality becomes even worse when God’s complicity, as an omnipotent and all-knowing power, is considered. Even if the story of Adam’s fall is considered to be symbolic, Dawkins can summarize Christianity as the claim that “in order to impress himself Jesus had himself tortured and executed, in vicarious punishment for a *symbolic* sin committed by a *non-existent* individual.”⁹⁰ He concludes that while the New Testament contains some commendable passages, they still require a moral standard that lies beyond the Bible to provide any meaningful ethical guide.

To this point, Dawkins has only discussed the ways in which religion does not fulfill the claims that it makes. He has argued that religion can neither be said to provide an accurate description of the world, nor a basis for morality. Only after attempting to disprove religious claims does Dawkins argue that religion is an actively bad force in the world. His arguments against religion are focused around science and sexual freedom, but they all stem from faith.

Dawkins describes religious faith as being “arguably a form of mental torture.”⁹¹ For him, “faith is an evil precisely because it requires no justification and brooks no argument.”⁹² This understanding of faith directly opposes faith to scientific ideals of evidence and disputation. The valuing of faith is, for Dawkins, inherently a

⁸⁹ Ibid. 287.

⁹⁰ Ibid. 287. Italics original.

⁹¹ Ibid. 323.

⁹² Ibid. 347.

strike against the principles he values most. As an evolutionary scientist Dawkins has frequently had to defend his career from assault by religiously motivated creationists, and has seen his colleagues' promising stem cell research projects face similar opposition. As a person who believes deeply in the scientific method and science's ability to elevate humanity, Dawkins is horrified by these assaults and believes that every attempt to retard scientific progress does a disservice to all of humanity.

Dawkins thinks that faith closes people's minds to science and to one another. He attributes the fact that many religions subjugate women and ostracize homosexuals to the effect that faith has upon people. When we place a great value upon holding beliefs without evidence, we allow these beliefs to become resistant to change. Dawkins has attempted to show that religious beliefs are not only false, but often cause harm. Terrorists are not motivated by Satan or psychosis, they attack "because they have been brought up, from the cradle, to have total and unquestioning *faith*."⁹³ The God Delusion is meant to be an assault on faith. Dawkins wants to devalue faith in the public eye. He wants to prevent children from having faith foisted upon them. He believes that humanity has much to gain from doing away with faith, and stands to lose little.

Faith grants structure to many people's lives, but Dawkins thinks that his life is much richer without faith. He closes the book focusing on the ability of scientific discovery to provide uplifting inspiration. Living beyond faith can enable us to take "the truly adult view...[which] is that our life is as meaningful, as full and as

⁹³ Ibid. 344 Italics original.

wonderful as we choose to make it. And we can make it very wonderful indeed.”⁹⁴

Dawkins believes that secular life is empowered, not devoid of meaning and inspiration. On the final page, fueled by the excitement of scientific progress and images of a world no longer closed in by faith, he proclaims, “I am thrilled to be alive at a time when humanity is pushing against the limits of understanding. Even better, we may eventually discover that there are no limits.”⁹⁵ At the end of The God Delusion, science triumphs over religion by proving itself to be better at explaining the world and providing inspiration for humans.

Dawkins’ conclusion that science trumps religion is contingent on the idea that religion and science are in direct competition. His description of religious beliefs as “the God hypothesis” is directly tied to the project of using science to confront religion. The word “hypothesis” is significant because it places theism in the same category as scientific theories. By calling religion a hypothesis, Dawkins has already made the move that both science and religion present systems for understanding the world, and they can be spoken about in equivalent terms. If religion is a hypothesis like any other, then Dawkins does not need to grant it privileged consideration or utilize special terms. The chapter heading, “The God Hypothesis,” covertly offers Dawkins’ definition of religion. He sees religion as a system for creating meaning. This definition places religion into direct conflict with science, a rival system of thought.

Over the course of the book, the narrowness of Dawkins’ understanding of religion reveals its own limitations. He says, “religion has at one time or another been

⁹⁴ Ibid. 404.

⁹⁵ Ibid. 420.

thought to fill four main roles in human life: explanation, exhortation, consolation, and inspiration.”⁹⁶ Although he attempts to demonstrate that science can perform all of these functions, most of his time is spent disproving religion’s power to explain. Dawkins’ ability as a scientist cannot be called into question, and his explanations of the Darwinian model’s ability to shed light on previously unanswered questions are persuasive. But Darwinian arguments are limited. They only apply to those religious people who use biblical texts as explanations of the world around us. Although Dawkins includes the results of surveys that indicate that religious literalism is increasingly common in the United States, Dennett, whom Dawkins frequently cites, has argued that these surveys are almost all inaccurate because of people’s belief in belief.⁹⁷ But even if we accept the data as accurate, there would still be many people who are not reading their scriptures literally but consider themselves to be religious. Many people have found a way to make their religious beliefs coexist with their understanding of science. Dawkins acknowledges that some prominent scientists are indeed religious, and while he notes “they stand out for their rarity and are a subject of amused bafflement to their peers in the academic community,”⁹⁸ they are clear examples of people for whom religion is about something besides scientific truth claims.

Dawkins is aware that religion extends beyond truth claims, but his discussion of this area of religion shows that his real comfort lies with truth claims. He considers exhortation, defined as moral instruction on how we ought to behave, as the second

⁹⁶ Ibid. 389.

⁹⁷ Belief in belief is a key concept in Dennett’s Breaking the Spell and will receive fuller treatment in the next chapter of this paper.

⁹⁸ Dawkins. The God Delusion. 125.

most important function of religion. He is able to marshal a lot of evidence to indicate that our moral sense is inherent, and we do not depend on scriptures for instruction. But none of that means that having a scripture as a communal text that we can use to discuss morality is useless. Religious communities around the world are involved in ongoing conversations about morality. They may be using flawed texts, but Dawkins' concept of a moral zeitgeist that matures over time and carries a community's ethical sense forward should allow for readings of scriptures that provide far greater insights than are contained in the original text. We can see this happening in the American evangelical anti-racist movement, which utilizes a text that contains specific instructions for slavery, the Bible, to move beyond the legacy of slavery in America. We may or may not get morality from scripture, but many people have shown that they are able to use scripture as a moral instrument.

Dawkins' claims about consolation and inspiration are much more conciliatory than his discussion of explanation and exhortation. Rather than arguing that religion does not provide consolation and inspiration, he settles for demonstrating that science can also provide these things. I have attempted to show how Dawkins' discussion of religion ignores the large swaths of people who do not use religion for literal explanation or exhortation in order to demonstrate that his definition of religion is too narrow. The closer we look at how Dawkins understands religion, the clearer the limitations of his argument become. Dawkins' argument is only aimed at a specific type of religious observance, one that turns to religion for explanations of what the world is and how to act in it.

The type of religion he is targeting is more specific than is immediately obvious. Although Dawkins uses the word “religion” throughout the book, he is really talking about two particular religious communities. His complaint that “to the vast majority of believers around the world, religion all too closely resembles what you hear from the likes of Robertson, Falwell or Haggard, Osama Bin Laden or the Ayatollah Khomeini”⁹⁹ is indicative of the emphasis he places on radical Arab Islam and conservative evangelical American Christianity. Writing about religion in the English-speaking world after the September 11 attacks always seems to include a lurking Islamophobia, and Dawkins includes enough references to Muslim terrorists to keep this obvious reminder of religion’s destructive power in the reader’s mind. But, unlike Harris, Dawkins is not violently fixated upon the potential threat of Islamic fanaticism. For Dawkins, the scariest boogiemans seems to be the marriage of faith and politics in the United States.

Throughout The God Delusion, Dawkins returns to the threat posed by American Christianity. Several times he refers to “the Taliban or the American equivalent”¹⁰⁰ to drive home the point that the “[absolutism that] rules the minds of a great number of people in the world today, most dangerously so in the Muslim world and in the incipient American theocracy,”¹⁰¹ is the same danger in both contexts. Although his English-speaking audience may fear Muslim terrorism, Dawkins’ entire argument is an attempt to persuade the reader that it is religion itself that needs to be feared. The power of religious belief is evident in America, where Dawkins suggests

⁹⁹ Ibid. 15.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid. 279.

¹⁰¹ Ibid. 324.

that people like “Pat Robertson would be harmless comedy, were he less typical of those who today hold power and influence in the United States.”¹⁰² Dawkins identifies the American political rightwing with religion so completely that he uses the “American right”¹⁰³ as a synonym for the conservative Christian lobby.

He cuts to the core of his conflict with the American right in his comment that “religiosity is indeed negatively correlated with education...[it] is also negatively correlated with interest in science and (strongly) with political liberalism. None of this is surprising.”¹⁰⁴ As a scientist whose work is frequently opposed and interrupted by religious objection, Dawkins has experienced conflict with American fundamentalist Christians more than any other religious group. Conservative American Christians are the ideal targets of The God Delusion. They use religion for explanation, exhortation, consolation, and inspiration. They actively oppose science and are intolerant of competing worldviews such as atheism. Dawkins has some degree of familiarity with conservative Evangelicals through his bouts with creationism, and he seems to generalize this experience to the point of assuming that all religious people are similar. This is made particularly clear in Dawkins’ examination of the claim that morality comes from religion. He analyzes the Old and New Testaments, and completely ignores the fact that a huge number of religious people have no strong connection to those texts. He attempts to make an argument about religion writ large, but never gets outside of the Bible.

¹⁰² Ibid. 271.

¹⁰³ Ibid. 61.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid. 129.

Religion is a large umbrella term, but Dawkins uses it uncritically throughout his writings. He may see himself arguing against religious belief in all contexts, but he really only forms arguments against certain kinds of religion. Even putting aside the fact that Dawkins essentially ignores all the religious believers who do not identify themselves as Jewish, Christian, or Muslim, he does not consider religious moderates adequately.

When Dawkins spends a scant seven pages on “how ‘moderation’ in faith fosters fanaticism”¹⁰⁵ he comes to the conclusion “that [when religious people do bad things] we should blame religion itself, not religious *extremism*—as though that were some kind of terrible perversion of real, decent religion.”¹⁰⁶ That conclusion may be valid, but, regardless of whether religion is essentially good or bad, there are many people who have found a way to hold religious beliefs without being a danger to society. Dawkins consistently assumes that religion implies a literalist interpretation of scripture that directly undermines science. His arguments against that kind of religion are persuasive, but he is limited by his refusal to consider moderated forms of religion.

Although his refutation of religion is ultimately much smaller than he intended, Dawkins does present a strong argument for the belief that “you can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled.”¹⁰⁷ He wants people to be proud of being atheists. He thinks that an organized political lobby of atheists is necessary because “the status of atheists in America today is on par with

¹⁰⁵ Ibid. 341.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid. 345. *Italics original.*

¹⁰⁷ Ibid. 23.

that of homosexuals fifty years ago.”¹⁰⁸ His calls for an atheist movement are stirring, but the Gay Rights movement was not successful simply because it was proud. Gay Rights activists have created a politically motivated group that includes people of all sexual identities who are committed to ending discrimination. A successful atheist movement must find a way to see the different shadings of religious people, and forge alliances with religious people who are accepting of atheists and tired of extremism. Dawkins does not create room for such an alliance in The God Delusion.

¹⁰⁸ Ibid. 26.

Chapter Four

God Is Not Great

Although this paper discusses him third, Christopher Hitchens was the fourth and last of New Atheists to enter the fray. His book, God Is Not Great, completes the quartet of central New Atheist texts, and presents the case against religion in yet another way. Hitchens may be the most provocative of the New Atheists. He frequently draws upon personal anecdotes to illustrate his points, and has maintained his antagonistic attitude with biting sarcasm and frequent clashes with theists in the media. God Is Not Great is confrontational from start to finish. Hitchens opens the book with the instruction “if the intended reader of this book should want to go beyond disagreement with its author and try to identify the sins and deformities that animated him to write it (...those who publicly affirm charity and compassion and forgiveness are often inclined to take this course), then he or she will...be quarrelling with the unknowable and ineffable creator who—presumably—opted to make me this way.”¹⁰⁹ This opening sentence sets the tone for the rest of the book. From the outset, Hitchens states that his intended reader will be offended by this book, and just to make sure, he starts by mocking her. God Is Not Great is not a conciliatory book.

Hitchens begins his defense of atheism by describing what an atheist is. He explains, “Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely on science and reason...but we distrust anything that contradicts science and reason. We differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, openmindedness, and the pursuit of

¹⁰⁹ Hitchens, Christopher. God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything. New York: Twelve Books, Hachette Book Group, 2007. 1.

ideas for their own sake.”¹¹⁰ That is to say that atheism is the advocacy for a certain mode of thought rather than the negation of the beliefs of others. Science and philosophy are the best examples of the kind of thinking that Hitchens prizes, but it is the process of rational investigation that he values the most. Hitchens understands atheism to be linked with skepticism as a healthy habit of mind. He is, like many other atheists, an optimist who believes that cultivating the habit of critical thinking allows people’s decisions to be ruled by the higher elements of human nature. He is an atheist, in part, to encourage this kind of open inquiry.

Hitchens thinks free and rational investigation will always lead to atheism because there will always “remain four irreducible objections to religious faith: that it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous social repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.”¹¹¹ Over the course of God Is Not Great Hitchens expands upon each of these objections, and they provide the basic structure of the book. People generally think the New Atheists want to bring about the end of religion, but Hitchens’ goal seems to be more nuanced. He admits, “religious faith is, precisely *because* we are still-evolving creatures, ineradicable. It will never die out...For this reason I would not prohibit it even if I could,”¹¹² but this concession does not prevent him from mustering his strongest arguments against religion. Religion, for Hitchens, is best understood as something like cruelty or greed. Humans

¹¹⁰ Ibid. 5.

¹¹¹ Ibid. 4.

¹¹² Ibid. 12 Italics original.

are imperfect beings and we have a tendency towards irrational and bad actions. It is necessary to work against these negative tendencies even as we admit that succeeding in eradicating them would necessitate radically changing what it means to be human. The impossible nature of the task does not decrease its necessity. Hitchens emphasizes the necessity of questioning religion in the passage that both closes the first chapter and provides the book with its subtitle. He writes, “As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. *Religion poisons everything.*”¹¹³

Building on this threat of religiously motivated imminent violence, Hitchens begins examining the claim that religion kills. In order to argue that religion often incites violence, Hitchens refers to a question he was once asked in an interview. The interviewer asked him to imagine himself in a strange city at night being approached by a large group of men. In this situation, would Hitchens feel more comfortable if he knew those men were returning from a prayer meeting? Hitchens responded, “Just to stay within the letter ‘B,’ I have actually had that experience in Belfast, Beirut, Bombay, Belgrade, Bethlehem, and Baghdad. In each case I can say absolutely, and can give my reasons, why I would feel immediately threatened if I thought that the group of men approaching me in the dark were coming from a religious observance.”¹¹⁴ He proceeds to give extended accounts of how he, in his travels as a journalist, has observed religion inspire acts of great cruelty in each city. All six of these cities are already famous as religious battlegrounds, and Hitchens’ accounts are

¹¹³ Ibid. 13. Italics in original.

¹¹⁴ Ibid. 18.

quick summaries. Given that almost no one would disagree with the claim that religious differences often results in bloodshed, short anecdotes are all that is necessary at this time.

Hitchens' discussion of religious violence becomes more interesting when he turns his focus on America. Like the other New Atheists, Hitchens emphasizes the equivalency between the religious zealotry of the September 11 attackers and the American Christian political figures that responded. His description of the attacks focuses on the centrality of religion to the worldviews of both parties. He explains, "the nineteen suicide murderers of New York and Washington and Pennsylvania were beyond any doubt the most sincere believers on those planes...And what is to be learned from the jubilation and the ecstatic propaganda with which this great feat of fidelity has been greeted in the Islamic world? At the time, the United States had an attorney general...who had stated that America had 'no king but Jesus'...It had a president who wanted to hand over the care of the poor to the 'faith-based' institutions."¹¹⁵ This matched religious intensity, and the notions of certainty and good and evil that attend such fervor, ensured that the reaction to the September 11 attacks would be resolute, but would ignore the real root of the problem. As Hitchens saw it, "instead of a rational discussion about the best way to contain and defeat religious fanaticism, one had the mutual reinforcement of two forms of that mania: the jihadist assault reconjured the bloodstained specter of the Crusaders. In this respect, religion is not unlike racism. One version of it inspires and provokes the

¹¹⁵ Ibid. 32.

other.”¹¹⁶ It is this self-perpetuating cycle of religious violence that caused Hitchens to realize “it is not possible for me to say, ‘Well, you pursue your Shiite dream of a hidden imam and I pursue my study of Thomas Paine... the world is big enough for both of us.’ The true believer cannot rest until the world bows the knee... [the pious believe] religious authority is paramount, and that those who decline to recognize it have forfeited their right to exist.”¹¹⁷ According to Hitchens, religion itself is the issue. He thinks religion is inherently confrontational and violent. He does not say it is the zealot or extremist who wants to bring the world to its knee; it is the “true believer.” Hearing the “American evangelicals thunder[ing] joyously about the prospect of winning the Muslim world for Jesus”¹¹⁸ is not observing an aberration. Hitchens maintains that violence is the logical conclusion of religious belief, and the religious people whose prejudices are the most blatant are simply more honest than other religious people.

Hitchens follows the gravity of a chapter about violence with a dose of levity. His investigation of “why heaven hates pigs” is meant to provide a release from the earnest anxiety and outrage that characterize most atheist writings. Sarcasm is an important tool for Hitchens. He uses it both to vary the pace of his writing and to indicate the absurdity that he sees at the center of the religious worldview. While his suggestion that ancient taboos surrounding the consumption of pig may stem from the similarity between pigs and humans is not particularly significant, Hitchens is trying to cover something substantive in this section. His writing style is dependent on

¹¹⁶ Ibid. 35.

¹¹⁷ Ibid. 31.

¹¹⁸ Ibid. 34.

examples and anecdotes, and he wants the somewhat trivial case of pork avoidance, which most readers will be willing to admit is irrational, to act as a synecdoche for the many varieties of superstition. If one superstition can be shown to be absurd, then all can be questioned.

The danger of superstition receives a fuller treatment as a health concern. Again utilizing his experiences as a journalist, Hitchens recounts multiple health initiatives he has seen stymied by religion. Whether it be Catholic resistance to condoms in the face of the AIDS epidemic, or rumors discouraging Muslims from taking the polio vaccine, religions have prevented many people from receiving and accepting the best medical care. Hitchens attributes religions' hostility towards medicine to fear. Religions, he posits, fear modern medicine because modern medicine heals better than any religion ever has. He recognizes that "a modern believer can say and even believe that his faith is quite compatible with science and medicine, but the awkward fact will always be that both things have a tendency to break religion's monopoly, and have often been fiercely resisted for that reason. What happens to the faith healer and the shaman when any poor citizen can see the full effect of drugs and surgeries?"¹¹⁹ Healing is a central part of many biblical miracle stories, but today the role of healer has largely been taken over by secular society.

For Hitchens, the idea that religions would ever slow the spread of medicine for any reason is outrageous. Saving human life is as close as we come to a universal good, and yet some religious groups do not support the lifesaving technology that is available. Hitchens equates this failure of religion with complete barbarism. He says,

¹¹⁹ Ibid. 47.

“to accept the spread of cervical cancer in the name of god is no different, morally or intellectually, from sacrificing these women on a stone altar.”¹²⁰ Religion’s reluctance to participate in the good task of saving lives through medicine has profound consequences for Hitchens. He believes that religion’s actions around healing can show us everything we need to know about religion. Hitchens writes, “Since religion has proved itself uniquely delinquent on the one subject where moral and ethical authority might be counted as universal and absolute, I think we are entitled to at least provisional conclusions. The first is that religion and the churches are manufactured, and that this salient fact is too obvious to ignore. The second is that ethics and morality are quite independent of faith, and cannot be derived from it. The third is that religion is—because it claims a special divine exemption for its practices and beliefs—not just amoral but immoral.”¹²¹ If religion is dishonest about something as large as its willingness to save lives, then Hitchens thinks he is justified in trying to find out exactly how much of religion is simply not true.

Given all that we have heard from the New Atheists, it should not be surprising that Hitchens is certain that most of religion’s claims are false. He begins by examining the metaphysical claims that religions make about the nature of God, and the creation of the universe. Hitchens has a simple explanation for why religion is unable to tell us anything reliable about the nature of the world. Religion was created by people in “the period of human prehistory where nobody...had the smallest idea what was going on.”¹²² At the time of its invention, religion provided a best available

¹²⁰ Ibid. 48.

¹²¹ Ibid. 52.

¹²² Ibid. 64.

systematic explanation of the world. Hitchens does not fault ancient people for accepting the answer that faith offered, but does insist that “faith of that sort—the sort that can stand up at least for a while in confrontation with reason—is now plainly impossible.”¹²³ The advent of science has made religion impotent. Science has repeatedly shown that it possesses greater explanatory and predictive powers than religion. Hitchens argues that religion, unlike science, insists upon complete obedience without questioning. This fear of investigation means that the mere existence of another explanatory system plunges religion into an existential crisis. The ability of science to cause people to question their assumptions is so great that “the end of god-worship discloses itself at the moment...when it becomes *optional*, or only one among many possible beliefs.”¹²⁴ Merely having multiple potential beliefs does away with the myth of complete truth.

Religion, Hitchens explains, has often claimed to be self-evident. One of the most common arguments marshaled to prove the existence of God and the veracity of religion is the argument from design. By this point we have seen the other New Atheist authors address the argument from design, and most of what Hitchens has to say is derivative. He is not a scientist, and, although he uses many of the same examples, his explanation of evolution lacks the depth and precision that Dawkins is able to muster. He generally rests on the idea that if God designed the world, then, given the multitude of imperfections that can be found in every animal, God did a pretty poor job. His analysis adds up to the conclusion that religion is the codification of human error. We think that the universe looks designed, so we invent a God to

¹²³ Ibid. 63.

¹²⁴ Ibid. 67.

retroactively design it. These inventions are revered over time, and this grants credence to our desire to use them as explanations. Hitchens says, “it is actually by *means* of the gods that we make our stupidity and gullibility into something ineffable.”¹²⁵ For a long time superstition and religion were the best available explanations of the world. We invested so much trust in these institutions that we actually made them sacred. Since the advent of a better system for explaining the world, science, we have had a hard time letting go of our emotional attachment to the old system.

Although Hitchens thinks science has provided a substitute for religious explanations, he does not think science is the only way to expose the emptiness of religion. He maintains that our invented gods are so flimsy that close inspection causes them to collapse. Upon reading the Old Testament he exclaims, “it would be harder to find an easier proof that religion is man-made.”¹²⁶ Everything in the Old Testament indicates human invention to Hitchens. He is quick to point out the complete lack of archaeological evidence for many of the biblical stories, which seems to indicate that “there was no flight from Egypt...It was all, quite simply and very ineptly, made up at a much later date.”¹²⁷ He spends some time examining the inconsistencies within the text, which indicate the likelihood that the Torah was constructed by multiple authors over many years. Hitchens is fixated on demonstrating that biblical texts were written by humans. Examining all of the flaws

¹²⁵ Ibid. 77.

¹²⁶ Ibid. 99.

¹²⁷ Ibid. 102.

in the Old Testament is a way for Hitchens to show that the story of the Bible is something “we must be glad did not [happen].”¹²⁸

Hitchens argues that the content of the Old Testament is, effectively, an argument against its own divinity. It is riddled with passages that offend modern moral sensibilities. God is overwhelmingly jealous, and afraid of losing adherents. The Ten Commandments clearly refer to wives as property. The Israelites are even commanded to commit genocide. These tendencies towards xenophobia, misogyny, and violence all bespeak a human influence. The paranoid fear of outsiders seems much more likely to have come from a small tribe attempting to maintain its identity amidst hostile neighbors than from an almighty deity. Overall, Hitchens thinks “the context is oppressively confined and *local*. None of these provincials, or their deity, seems to have any idea of a world beyond the desert...Perhaps he was made in their image?”¹²⁹ When evaluating biblical claims, the most important question for Hitchens is “does this seem like something an all-knowing and all-powerful being would have written?” The Old Testament does not meet his standards for omnipotent authorship.

He finds the New Testament to be equally disappointing. As a historical text, Hitchens deems it to be “a work of crude carpentry, hammered together long after its purported events, and full of improvised attempts to make things come out right.”¹³⁰ He finds the numerous textual inconsistencies in the Bible to be so overwhelming that they render the New Testament virtually incomprehensible. There has been a fair amount of scholarship investigating the contradictions within the New Testament, and

¹²⁸ Ibid. 106.

¹²⁹ Ibid. 107. Italics original.

¹³⁰ Ibid. 110.

Hitchens presents these ideas ably. He does not, however, attempt to deal with the content of the New Testament. The chapter title boldly proclaims “The ‘New’ Testament exceeds the evil of the ‘Old’ one,”¹³¹ but Hitchens does little to justify that claim. Instead he settles for indicating the writing flaws and historical implausibility of the biblical narrative, which he thinks is sufficient to thoroughly dismantle any belief in the New Testament.

Hitchens’ analysis of Islam attempts to show that the Koran is an even more derivative and unreliable source than the New Testament. The Koran is riddled with the same kinds of inconsistencies and contradictions that plague other scriptures, but Hitchens is particularly concerned with demonstrating the extent to which Islam incorporates Christianity and Judaism. He believes that so much of Islam is borrowed that “there is some question as to whether Islam is a separate religion at all...When examined it is not much more than a rather obvious and ill-arranged set of plagiarisms, helping itself from earlier books and traditions.”¹³² The way Islam repeats Christianity and Judaism causes Hitchens to raise what he deems to be the most obvious objection to Muhammad’s revelations: “Which is more likely—that a man should be used as a transmitter by god to deliver some already existing revelations, or that he should utter some already existing revelations and believe himself to be, or claim to be, ordered by god to do so?”¹³³ Hitchens’ opinion on the matter is unmistakable.

¹³¹ Ibid. 109.

¹³² Ibid. 129.

¹³³ Ibid. 135.

In his discussion of the three major monotheistic religions, Hitchens prioritizes showing them to be manmade. Other New Atheists have attempted to demonstrate either that the concept of God is logically untenable, or that the scriptures do not provide useful moral guides. Hitchens' assumption seems to be that if he can show that it is unreasonable to believe that the scriptures are either divine or perfect, then the entire foundation of these religions will crumble. Hitchens' argument may be threatening to those who embrace literalist readings of the text, but many religious groups already acknowledge that scripture is written through humans, and is, as a result, not infallible. Demonstrating a lack of divinity in scripture may be a strong first step, but a complete dismissal of scriptural authority seems to require a more thorough examination.

That the Koran is clearly the production of human ingenuity is only part of Hitchens' argument against Islam. He believes "there is obviously a connection between the sheer feebleness of this claim [that the Koran is divine] and the absolute fanatical certainty with which it is advanced."¹³⁴ Hitchens claims that in recent years Islam has shown itself to be uniquely volatile in defending the claim that its scripture is literal divine truth. He attributes this violence to the fact that "Islam [is] a relatively young faith, and still in the heat of its self-confidence."¹³⁵ Compared to Christianity and Judaism, Islam has not yet matured. To Hitchens, the proof of a religion's maturity is a reformation that encourages the translation of religious texts out of their original language, and some degree of willingness to consider holy texts in a literary light. The fact that "only in Islam has there been no reformation...ought to arouse

¹³⁴ Ibid. 131.

¹³⁵ Ibid. 127.

suspicion in even the slowest mind.”¹³⁶ Of the three so-called Abrahamic faiths, Hitchens dedicates the most time to showing that “Islam’s core claim—to be unimprovable and final—is at once absurd and unalterable.”¹³⁷ He is not optimistic about the utility of any religion, but seems to regard Islam as being particularly flawed.

Having asserted that religions are human inventions, Hitchens attempts to analyze the creation and downfall of religions. This section is roughly analogous to Dawkins’ and Dennett’s attempts to find biological or evolutionary bases for religion. Rather than speculate on the processes or mechanisms that lead to the creation of religion or the possible ends of religion, however, Hitchens chooses to write about a few case studies. He writes about cargo cults, Evangelical hucksterism, the Church of Latter Day Saints, and the messianic Sabbatai Sevi with more derision than insight. His characterization of Joseph Smith as “part-educated, unscrupulous, ambitious, [and] fanatical”¹³⁸ is indicative of his argumentation in this section. Rather than make a systematic attempt to prove anything, Hitchens settles for making a few examples seem absurd. His dismissal of these specific traditions does not contain any salient points that reach beyond his examples to implicate religion writ large.

Hitchens takes a similar tack on issues of morality. To engage the claim that religion helps to make people more ethical, Hitchens attempts to demonstrate that people like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Mohandas Ghandi are not the religiously inspired moral exemplars that we tend to think they are. He goes about this by

¹³⁶ Ibid. 125.

¹³⁷ Ibid. 136.

¹³⁸ Ibid. 166.

arguing that King was “in no real as opposed to nominal sense...a Christian,”¹³⁹ and that Ghandi was a religious extremist who was assassinated just before he could have enacted laws that would have created worse divisions between the Hindu and Muslim communities than already exist. His discussion of Ghandi and King may or may not be correct, but that is almost beside the point. Even if he were able to show conclusively that these two men are not the perfect union of faith and morality that they seem to be, Hitchens would have a hard time expanding that into a condemnation of faith. Arguing by anecdote is always limited to the cases that are being examined, and, while it makes for engaging reading, it does not justify the kind of stirring generalizations that God Is Not Great wants to make. Hitchens repeatedly turns to individual examples when he is justifying large claims, and every such example requires the reader to make the leap between the handful of examples that Hitchens discusses and the multitude of instances to which he wants his argument to apply. Only a sympathetic reader will make these connections, and Hitchens is far too reliant on anecdotes. Anecdotes cannot support generalizations.

Hitchens begins his next chapter, entitled “There Is No Eastern Solution,” with another such anecdote. After an extended description of some time he spent with a greedy guru near Bombay, Hitchens returns to more general arguments. This section is best understood as a response to people like Harris who see Buddhism, Hinduism, and other eastern religions as providing some sort of alternative to the evils of the “Mosaic faiths.” Hitchens insists that while “some readers of these pages will be

¹³⁹ Ibid. 176.

shocked to learn of the existence of Hindu and Buddhist murderers and sadists,”¹⁴⁰ these religions often function the same way as their western counterparts. The difference between west and east is largely a matter of terminology. Where the west tends to emphasize faith, the east puts an emphasis on the dissolution of the individual mind that horrifies Hitchens equally. For Hitchens, a staunch advocate of human rationality, irrationality is the issue regardless of the tradition. The eastern religions openly try to dismantle the way people think. Although there is a stereotype of the eastern sage, Hitchens claims, “a faith that despises the mind and the free individual, that preaches submission and resignation, and that regards life as a poor and transient thing, is ill-equipped for self-criticism.”¹⁴¹ In general, the New Atheists are fixated on Judaism, Christianity, and Islam to such a degree that the eastern religions are often entirely overlooked. In this section Hitchens is somewhat more rigorous than his colleagues, and makes it clear that he wants his uses of the word “religion” to apply to all religions.

At this point, Hitchens has demonstrated that religion often causes death either by encouraging violence or by not advocating for health services. He has spent time trying to show that religion’s metaphysical claims are false, and that scriptures are unreliable human inventions. He has attempted to establish that these flaws run throughout all religions. All of this work is the grounding he needs to begin to argue that religion is inherently bad. Hitchens asserts, “There are, indeed several ways in which religion is not just amoral, but positively immoral. And these faults and crimes are not to be found in the behavior of its adherents...but in its original precepts. These

¹⁴⁰ Ibid. 199.

¹⁴¹ Ibid. 204.

include: Presenting a false picture of the world...The doctrine of blood sacrifice. The doctrine of atonement. The doctrine of eternal reward and/or punishment. The imposition of impossible tasks and rules.”¹⁴² Religion, Hitchens claims, is founded upon the notion of a divine blood lust, and a corresponding human subservience. As these ideas have matured, a simple desire for sacrifice has evolved into a more complex concept of sin. This concept of sin places humans in an even more impossible position. We are not only commanded to be good, but to avoid the mere thought of transgression. We are forever trying to please an entity that created us in such a way that we will always be unable to please it. When the concept of eternal damnation is added to this already addled equation, Hitchens claims, we have a recipe for radical irrationality. The demands that religion puts upon people are so great that, Hitchens explains, “they can only be met in two ways. The first is by a continual scourging and mortification of the flesh, accompanied by incessant wrestling with ‘impure’ thoughts...The second solution is organized hypocrisy.”¹⁴³ Religion, according to Hitchens, is inherently bad because its most basic tenets threaten terrifying punishments for not completing impossible tasks. The psychological weight of religion is not healthy for humans.

Hitchens is so concerned about the psychological cost of religious belief that he, like Dawkins, suggests that raising children to be religious might qualify as child abuse. Dawkins is primarily concerned with what children will lose. Religious indoctrination violates a child’s right to “be taught not so much *what* to think as *how* to think...it is *their* privilege to decide what they shall think, and not their parents’

¹⁴² Ibid. 205.

¹⁴³ Ibid. 213.

privilege to impose it by *force majeure*.”¹⁴⁴ Hitchens, however, is more concerned with what children are gaining when they are given religion. He is driven by the question “how many children have had their psychological and physical lives irreparably maimed by the compulsory inculcation of faith?”¹⁴⁵ In describing the young men who have been educated in religious Muslim schools in Afghanistan, Hitchens asserts “their problem is not so much that they desire virgins as that they *are* virgins: their emotional and psychic growth irremediably stunted in the name of god, and the safety of many others menaced as a consequence of this alienation and deformation.”¹⁴⁶ Both Hitchens and Dawkins are concerned about the effect of religion upon a child’s mind, but while Dawkins is concerned with fostering a child’s right to knowledge, Hitchens worries about the way religion could prevent normal psychological development.

This differences between Dawkins and Hitchens are instructive of the way each author approaches religion. Dawkins, as we have seen, promotes science as the antidote to religion and vilifies religion as the destroyer of science. For Hitchens, the primary opposition is more along the lines of reason against unreason, or mature thought against undeveloped thought. The differences in assessment color the prescriptions that Dawkins and Hitchens offer. Dawkins sees religious people as thinking in the wrong paradigm entirely. The only solution to this is an abandonment of the wrongheaded religious kind of thinking for scientific learning. A new

¹⁴⁴ Dawkins. The God Delusion. 367. Italics original.

¹⁴⁵ Hitchens. God Is Not Great. 217.

¹⁴⁶ Ibid. 227. Italics original.

education is Dawkins' answer. For Hitchens, a different diagnosis requires a different prescription.

Religion is an essentially human tendency, but Hitchens believes other aspects of human nature can overcome it. He sees that “doubt, skepticism, and outright unbelief have always taken the same essential forms as they do today... There were always shrewd comments on the way in which religion reflected human wishes or human desires,”¹⁴⁷ and he believes that human inquiry and skepticism can triumph over religion. We live, according to Hitchens, in extraordinary times. On one hand we must be concerned because “as I write, a version of the Inquisition [Iran] is about to lay hands on a nuclear weapon,”¹⁴⁸ but hope remains because “religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important.”¹⁴⁹ We, as a species, have reached a point where we can move past religion. Hitchens envisions a new, post-religious future by calling on the great secular movement of the eighteenth century. He explains, “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... is within the compass of the average person.”¹⁵⁰ He imagines this new Enlightenment as giving rise to “the study of literature and poetry, both for its own sake, and for the eternal ethical questions with which it deals... the pursuit of unfettered scientific inquiry... the divorce between sexual life and fear... and disease... and tyranny.”¹⁵¹ This notion

¹⁴⁷ Ibid. 255.

¹⁴⁸ Ibid. 280.

¹⁴⁹ Ibid. 282.

¹⁵⁰ Ibid. 283.

¹⁵¹ Ibid. 283.

presents a wildly idealized view of both where we, as a culture stand, and what the first Enlightenment was like. The Enlightenment birthed both the United States Constitution, but also the French reign of terror. Unlikely and vague as Hitchens' renewed Enlightenment may be, it does present some idea of what he is trying to achieve with God Is Not Great.

He believes that it is necessary to confront religion directly in order to bring about a new Enlightenment. God Is Not Great is prompted by the understanding that “to clear the mind for this project, it has become necessary to know the enemy, and to prepare to fight it.”¹⁵² Undergirding this call to action is Hitchens' firm conviction that “it is better and healthier for the mind to ‘choose’ the path of skepticism in any cause, because only by continual exercise of these faculties can we hope to achieve anything.”¹⁵³ At this point it appears that Hitchens has simply returned us to the familiar New Atheist drama casting the valiant and reasonable Enlightenment scientists against the ignorant and dangerous irrational religionists.

Hitchens was the last of the New Atheists to be published, and it seems necessary to ask what new ideas he brings to the conversation. Despite covering much of the same material, and occasionally using almost the same language to do so, Hitchens almost never mentions the other New Atheists. As a result, he misses the opportunity to comment upon and refine these earlier arguments. A lot of Hitchens' argument repeats the other New Atheists. He makes the same assumptions about what it means to be religious that limit most of the New Atheist thinking, but attempts to distinguish himself with his psychological emphasis.

¹⁵² Ibid. 283.

¹⁵³ Ibid. 278.

Talking about the psychological effect of religious belief allows us to use a different vocabulary to discuss religion, and move past the oversimplifications that both Dawkins and Harris fell into. Dawkins tends to speak about religion as a belief system involved in making truth claims. For him religion and science cannot coexist and education can overcome religion. This account is too simple to capture the complexity of religion. Harris does not spend much time considering the roots of religion, and, as a result, does not offer a well-articulated account of where this phenomenon comes from or how it can be altered. He is mostly concerned with what to do with religious extremists. When Harris tells us that religious extremists are evil he is describing them as irredeemable and, possibly, intrinsically bad. His analysis dehumanizes religious people. Hitchens' suggestion that a religious upbringing is analogous to child abuse may be overstated, but it creates an entirely new way to view religious extremists.

We don't condemn victims of child abuse. We do not think that if taught science they would suddenly understand the world around them correctly. We offer treatment for victims of child abuse. We try, over a long period of time, to help adjust their views and emotions without negating their sense of who they are. It seems to me that this presents a potentially useful model for understanding religious extremists as victims of their own upbringing. This is not to suggest that anyone who holds a religious belief needs therapy, but some beliefs are dangerous enough to potential merit rehabilitation. To use the child abuse analogy, there are many people who, at some point in their childhood, received some degree of corporal punishment. Most people who have been spanked grow up without any negative consequence, and many

will eventually spank their children in order to teach them important social rules. These people are the religious moderates. It is only when punishment, or religion, becomes excessive that it can damage a person. Perhaps this analogy can provide a way to confront the reality that there are people whose religious ideas make them exceedingly dangerous, without reviling them or dismissing people whose religious ideals are either benign or positive.

Although Hitchens suggests this provocative model, he does not expand upon it. God Is Not Great is motivated by a compelling idea, but Hitchens spends most of his time on the surface. His biting sarcasm gives his writing character, but it often distracts him from advancing the project of the book. Even his fellow New Atheist, Dennett, has criticized out Hitchens' tendency to sacrifice substance for style. Dennett says, "at...times, his impatience with the smug denial of the self-righteous gets the better of him, and then he strikes glancing blows at best, and occasionally adopts a double standard, excusing his naturalist heroes for their few lapses into religious gullibility....while leaving no such wiggle room for the defenders of religion over the ages."¹⁵⁴ There are many times where Hitchens seems more interested in making a witty and inflammatory comment than developing his argument. For example, rather than delve into the implications of asserting that religion may be like child abuse, as I have tried to do, Hitchens is content to posit the similarities and move on. Brevity may be the essence of wit, but Hitchens' witty brevity ultimately does him a disservice. He has interesting ideas about the conflict between mature and underdeveloped inquisitive faculties, but his harsh tone, anecdotal style, and the speed

¹⁵⁴ Daniel C. Dennett. "Unbelievable." Boston Globe 13 May 2007.

at which he writes prevent him from developing his concepts fully. When Hitchens fails, his nuanced version of the dichotomy of reason and faith becomes a simplistic account of the clash between smart people and stupid people. Hitchens fears that religion does not encourage original thought, and that people who are not taught to be inquisitive are often dangerous. The best response to this danger is to think as best we can, but too often God Is Not Great elects to be provocative instead of thoughtful.

Chapter Five

Breaking the Spell

Daniel Dennett's Breaking the Spell is unlike the other New Atheist books in both aim and execution. The other New Atheists have written books to demonstrate that religion is inherently harmful to humanity, and describe how atheists must respond to the failures of religion. Dennett wants to understand what religion is, and why it appears in virtually every society. He does make assumptions and evaluations that many religious people might disagree with, but those assertions are part of a larger project that is distinct from the condemnatory one the other New Atheists offer.

Dennett begins, like the philosopher he is, by defining his terms. All the New Atheists write in the first person, but Dennett is the only one who opens his book by identifying his perspective. On the very first page Dennett says, "Let me begin with an obvious fact: I am an American author, and this book is addressed in the first place to American readers...My focus on America is deliberate; when it comes to contemporary religion, on the other hand, my focus on Christianity first, and Islam and Judaism next, is unintended but unavoidable."¹⁵⁵ He wants the reader to realize that what she is reading comes from a particular cultural perspective. Dennett writes for an American audience because he believes Americans have unique views on religion, and, as an American, he cannot write outside of those views. He focuses on Christianity, Islam, and Judaism because those are the religions that he is most familiar with. Dennett works to make himself as transparent as possible by referring

¹⁵⁵ Dennett, Breaking the Spell, xiii.

to his own perspective throughout the book. He is proud to declare “I am a *bright*.”¹⁵⁶ He recognizes that “many readers will be profoundly distrustful of the tack I am taking here. They will see me as just another liberal professor trying to cajole them out of some of their convictions, and they are dead right about that.”¹⁵⁷ Dennett’s attitude is shared, in varying degrees, with all the New Atheists, but he is the only one who tries to make it explicit. His candor about his bias is indicative of his approach to this entire project. Harris depends on fear as a motivator, Dawkins attempts to outsmart theists, Hitchens browbeats his opponents, but Dennett wants an educational conversation. He is confident everyone will benefit from an honest and intellectually rigorous discussion, and his thorough identification of perspective is part of creating that discussion.

He takes similar care to make his definition of religion clear. Defining religion is an issue in New Atheist books. Harris and Hitchens never directly define religion. Dawkins defines religion as the belief in “a supernatural creator that is ‘appropriate for us to worship,’”¹⁵⁸ but it quickly becomes apparent that this definition fails to account for the nuanced social aspects of religion. Dawkins spends a lot of The God Delusion criticizing aspects of religion that lie beyond the definition he offers. If his definition were adequate, he ought to be able to confine his argument within the boundaries his definition provides. Dennett does a better job recognizing the variety of roles religion plays in people’s lives. He proposes “to define religions as *social*

¹⁵⁶ Ibid. 21. Italics original. The term “bright” is Dennett’s attempt to find a term that identifies skeptics in a positive, constructive manner. “Bright” is a replacement for “atheist,” which identifies people by what they do not believe.

¹⁵⁷ Ibid. 53.

¹⁵⁸ Dawkins, God Delusion, 33.

systems whose participants avow belief in a supernatural agent or agents whose approval is to be sought."¹⁵⁹ As we shall see, the inclusion of the word 'avow' is crucial because Dennett will advance the claim that "to put it provocatively, religious belief isn't always *belief*."¹⁶⁰ He distinguishes between belief, and belief in belief, but we shall discuss this distinction later. At this point it is enough merely to note that defining religious people as those who *claim* belief leaves Dennett space to examine the notion of belief.

There is a lot at stake with this definition. A book examining religion needs to be able to identify its topic, and religion is a particularly difficult subject to define. Dennett believes that because religion is typically afforded "legal protection, honor, prestige, and a *traditional exemption from certain sorts of analysis and criticism*—a great deal hinges on how we define religion."¹⁶¹ His definition of religion, which owes a lot to Clifford Geertz's famous anthropological definition of religion as a cultural system, focuses on the practitioners.¹⁶² For Dennett, "the core phenomenon of religion, I am proposing, invokes gods who are effective agents in real time, and who play a central role in the way the *participants* think about what they ought to do."¹⁶³ His interest lies in examining where this phenomenon comes from, rather than the different ways it is manifest. He is not concerned with the specific claims of Christianity as opposed to Islam. Rather, he wants to know why humans become Christians or Muslims or any other sort of theist.

¹⁵⁹ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 9. Italics original.

¹⁶⁰ Ibid. 12, Italics original.

¹⁶¹ Ibid. 9, Italics original.

¹⁶² Clifford Geertz. "Religion as a Cultural System." *Interpretation of Cultures*. Pp. 87-125. New York: Basic Books, 2000.

¹⁶³ Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 11-2. Italics added.

Before we continue, it is important to note that when Dennett offers his definition he describes it as an attempt “to define religions as *social systems*...”¹⁶⁴ The word “religions” is crucial. Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens all refer to the singular “religion.” They assume that the numerous traditions that appear across the world are merely different manifestations of the same phenomenon. Dennett is the only New Atheist to examine critically the word “religion,” and he recognizes that “what we usually call religions are composed of a variety of quite different phenomena, not a ‘natural kind’ like a chemical element or a species.”¹⁶⁵ This understanding places Dennett in a different relationship to what he examines than the other New Atheists. The other New Atheists view religion as a single phenomenon, and believe it can be disproved or otherwise universally rejected. Dennett recognizes that interrogating religion is not about assaulting a monolith. Religion is not an overarching entity distinct from its instantiations. It is necessary to study and criticize religion by appreciating the significance of the varied ways that religion is enacted in the world around us.

Defining who he is and what he plans to investigate is the first part of Dennett’s explanation of his project. He explains his motivation by appealing to a common ant. Dennett describes “an ant...laboriously climbing up a blade of grass...like Sisyphus rolling his rock, always striving to reach the top. Why is this ant doing this? What benefit is it seeking for itself in this strenuous and unlikely activity?”¹⁶⁶ This ant, Dennett explains, receives no benefit from climbing the grass.

¹⁶⁴ Ibid. 9. Italics original.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid. 7.

¹⁶⁶ Ibid. 3.

In fact, climbing the grass makes the ant significantly more likely to be eaten. This behavior would be inexplicable from a Darwinian standpoint were it not for the presence of the lancet fluke. Lancet flukes are tiny parasites that must get into the stomach of a cow or sheep in order to complete their reproductive cycle. Lancet flukes achieve this by commandeering the brains of ants, and driving the ant into a position where it is likely to be devoured, thereby allowing the tiny brain worm to procreate. Dennett explains, “this is not an isolated phenomenon. Similarly manipulative parasites infect fish, and mice, among other species. These hitchhikers cause their hosts to behave in unlikely—even suicidal—ways, all for the benefit of the guest, not the host.”¹⁶⁷

The provocative example of the lancet fluke causes Dennett to wonder if anything like this ever happens with people. His immediate answer is “Yes indeed. We often find human beings setting aside their entire lives to furthering the interest of an *idea* that has been lodged in their brains...every good Muslim bears witness, prays five times a day...all on behalf of the idea of Allah...Christians and Jews do likewise, of course, devoting their lives spreading the Word...So do Sikhs and Hindus and Buddhists. And don’t forget the many thousands of secular humanists who have given their lives for Democracy, or Justice, or just plain Truth. There are many ideas to die for.”¹⁶⁸ Dennett accomplishes a lot in this passage. His basic argument is that ideas might be analogous to parasites. When humans are willing to die for their ideas we need to ask if it is the human who benefits, or the idea. Beyond this piece of argumentation, Dennett also demonstrates that while religion is the case in question,

¹⁶⁷ Ibid. 4.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid. 4. Italics original.

the issues he is considering can apply to any number of “ideas to die for.” All of the New Atheists argue that religious faith creates an equivalency between Sikhs and Christians, but by including secular humanists in his list of people who have died to defend their ideas Dennett tacitly asserts a greater equivalency. People are people regardless of creed. Both people of faith and rationalists have found ideas to die for. These ideas may be equally good, equally bad, or of varying value, but Dennett has already managed to articulate a position investigating an aspect of human nature that is universally present. He investigates the capacity for passionate belief in the particular case of religion, but immediately acknowledges that secular humanists are just as capable of expressing violent emotions. The other New Atheists, Harris especially, have a tendency to act as though all irrationality and violent passion are the result of religion. Dennett does not make this mistake.

As Dennett begins to argue that we ought to be studying scientifically the human religious impulse, he pauses to consider whether the questions that would certainly arise from such a study are worth asking. Serious scientific study will probably cause some disillusionment, or, to use Dennett’s term, break the spell. Many people live happy lives that revolve around religion. Demonstrating that religions are parasites that cause destructive behavior might upset the balance of these people’s lives. Before beginning to do so, Dennett asks if religion is a spell that we, as a society, ought to deem too precious to break. Dennett suggests the reasons we might be hesitant to scrutinize religions, are, in fact, the very reasons that we must do so. He writes, “for many people, probably a majority of the people on earth, nothing matters more than religion. For this very reason, it is imperative that we learn as much as we

can about it. That, in a nutshell, is the argument of this book.”¹⁶⁹ Although he suggests such study might unearth evidence that would compel skeptics to believe, Dennett’s real sympathies are betrayed when he muses, “if only we could figure out some way today to break the spell that lures thousands of poor young Muslim boys into fanatical madrassahs where they are prepared for a life of murderous martyrdom instead of being taught about the modern world, about democracy and history and science!”¹⁷⁰ Submitting to rigorous study is, for Dennett, a matter of basic intellectual honesty. He confides that “my sacred values are obvious and quite ecumenical: democracy, justice, life, love, and truth...But since I’m a philosopher, I’ve learned how to set aside the vertigo and embarrassment and ask myself what in the end supports even them.”¹⁷¹ If religious people cannot bear the thought of investigating their ideas, Dennett thinks we must conclude that those ideas do not hold up to scrutiny. He ends his consideration by declaring, “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.”¹⁷² The imperative behind this conclusion does not come from the kind of immanent danger Harris imagines, but from the possibility of perpetuating the worst forms of religion. Dennett worries, “if we *don’t* subject religion to such scrutiny now, and work out whatever revisions and reforms

¹⁶⁹ Ibid. 15.

¹⁷⁰ Ibid. 13.

¹⁷¹ Ibid. 23.

¹⁷² Ibid. 17. Italics original. The term natural is opposed to supernatural in this instance. Dennett is claiming that religion is the result of forces within the world, not divine action. Natural is not opposed to manufactured.

are called for, we will pass on a legacy of ever more toxic forms of religion to our descendants.”¹⁷³ He is not out to destroy religion, but to remove its fangs.

Having convinced himself that there is sufficient reason for religion to be studied, Dennett begins to examine what such a study might look like and what obstacles it might face. Of course religion has been studied for centuries, but Dennett advocates a different kind of study. Until now, he claims, the people who have written about religion “either want to defend their favorite religion from its critics or want to demonstrate the irrationality and futility of religion, and this tends to infect their methods with bias.”¹⁷⁴ Dennett wants to move beyond biased and qualitative studies of religion. He explains the kind of scientific questions he wants to ask by using music as an analogy. Music, like religion, is a near universal feature of human culture, and it does not cheapen the experience of listening to music for us to ask “why does music exist?...Why do we love it?...Why is it beautiful to us? This is a perfectly good biological question, but it does not yet have a good answer.”¹⁷⁵ Asking these kinds of questions about how religion is related to human biology places religion within the realm of what can be understood with science.

Dennett wants to know why religion exists. He readily acknowledges that “it makes powerful and talented people more humble and patient, it makes average people rise above themselves, it provides steady support for many people who desperately need help staying away from drink or drugs or crime,”¹⁷⁶ but none of these good effects are satisfying evolutionary explanations. Evolution is economic. If

¹⁷³ Ibid. 39. Italics original.

¹⁷⁴ Ibid. 32.

¹⁷⁵ Ibid. 43.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid. 55.

a trait persists, there must be a reason directly connected to eating, defending, or reproducing for a species to spend the resources to maintain that trait. Dennett borrows the legal phrase “cui bono” to indicate that when we investigate evolution, the question we must ask is “who benefits?” Traditionally, it was thought that natural selection was always for the benefit of the replicating individual seeking to reproduce his own genes. Dennett, however, appeals to meme theory. Meme theory, which was created by Dawkins in the 1970s, considers ideas to be replicators that can work to perpetuate their own existence without necessarily benefiting the human organisms having those ideas. Meme theory allows us to discuss the evolution of ideas. Thinking of religion as a set of ideas which interact with human biological tendencies “expands the space of possible evolutionary theories, opening up room for us to consider multilevel mixed processes, getting us away from the simplistic ideas of “genes for religion” at one extreme and “a conspiracy of priests” at the other extreme.”¹⁷⁷

Over the course of the book, Dennett offers several ways to consider the coevolution of religious ideas and human brains. As we begin to examine these ideas, it is important to remember that these suggestions are preliminary. Each of these suggestions is less important than the idea that memes evolve to take advantage of genes. Dennett offers these possibilities not as mature theories, but as hypotheses whose plausibility indicates the great potential of this line of investigation. The evolutionary explanations Dennett gives us in Breaking the Spell are the intellectual equivalent of presenting a few gold flakes to get the financing to build a gold mine. All he wants to show is the possibility of pay dirt, and he willingly admits the

¹⁷⁷ Ibid. 82.

limitations of his explanations. He writes, “I will try to tell *the best current version* of the story science can tell about how religions have become what they are. I am not at all claiming that this is what science has already established about religion. The main point of this book is to insist that we *don't* yet know—but we can discover—the answers to these important questions if we make a concerted effort.”¹⁷⁸ At this stage in his argument Dennett is establishing that we need to consider that evolution works at multiple levels if we want to explain where our own religious instincts come from. As we search for the best explanation we may find that religion greatly benefits humanity, but we also might find that it is humanity that works for the benefit of religion.

Dennett’s explanation of religion’s evolution reads like a historical narrative. Rather than look at one modern religion and try to determine what aspects of that religion might have evolutionary benefits, Dennett begins with the idea that “before any of the great organized religions existed, there were folk religions, and these provided the cultural environment from which organized religions could emerge.”¹⁷⁹ The folk religions, which can be understood as proto-religions in some cases, began as simple notions about the presence of some supernatural force. Over time they were passed down along the generations and became systematized and enshrined in cultural consciences. This progression from basic human intuitions to simple religions to self-perpetuating modern religions has been around at least since David Hume published The Natural History of Religion in 1757. Dennett does not attempt to upend this familiar narrative. He merely wants to lend the scientific tools of natural selection

¹⁷⁸ Ibid. 103. Italics original.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid. 140.

and modern neurology to the ongoing sociological and anthropological investigations of religion.

Dennett begins his explanation of the roots of religion with the basic mental functioning of humans. As Dawkins also discussed, we are predisposed to find agency in the world. Our advanced mental abilities ensure that “we experience the world as not just full of moving human bodies but of *rememberers* and *forgetters*, *thinkers* and *hoppers* and *villains* and *dupes* and *promise-breakers* and *threateners* and *allies* and *enemies*.”¹⁸⁰ We tend to make the mistake of seeing these characteristics of agency even when they are not present. Many animals also do this, but our unique facility with language allows us to take our mistaken belief that somewhere out there something is more powerful than us is lurking and turn it into a legend. We tend to generalize and we tend to anthropomorphize the unknown. These tendencies add up to a general human predilection for believing that something human-like and powerful is controlling the things we don’t understand. Dennett thinks this is a good guess at where the idea of gods began. We are biologically predisposed to make mistakes, and mentally able to keep making the same mistake over and over again.

At this point we have mostly spoken about innate human qualities, which means that our discussion has been rooted in genetic evolution. Dennett shifts the conversation to memetic evolution to describe how the bumps we hear in the night became enshrined at the center of human cultures. The best advice Dennett has to offer “potential memes is that if you want lots of rehearsals...try to *look*

¹⁸⁰ Ibid. 111. Italics original.

important!”¹⁸¹ Human biology predisposes us to tell stories about invisible anthropomorphic powers, but not all the stories we tell have endured. Dennett thinks the stories that managed to be retold incorporate a relationship to humans. At some point the simple story that a spirit controls the weather became complicated by the idea that the spirit controlling the weather cares what humans do. This, Dennett suggests, was not a change in humans, but a change in ideas. This new meme of interested gods replaced old stories of distant deities.

Throughout Breaking the Spell, Dennett criticizes social scientists for ignoring the explanatory power of evolution, particularly memetic evolution, to explain human behavior. He argues, “before we look at speculations about rituals as symbolic expressions of one deep need or belief or another, we should consider the case that can be made for rituals as memory-enhancement processes, designed by cultural evolution...to improve the copying fidelity of the very process of meme transmission they ensure.”¹⁸² Ritualistic repetition might tangentially benefit humans, but it is absolutely essential for the faithful reproduction of religious ideas. A meme will disappear if it is not copied faithfully, and humans remember active processes better than words or concepts. Thus, memes that require humans to perform repetitive tasks last longer than those that do not. This is true even if the ritual tasks are not beneficial to humans.

Increased repetition and performance of religious rituals are the basis of what Dennett calls folk religion. Folk religion is unself-conscious and self-perpetuating. In fact, “those who practice a folk religion *don’t think of themselves as practicing a*

¹⁸¹ Ibid. 121. Italics original.

¹⁸² Ibid. 142.

religion at all. Their ‘religious’ practices are a seamless part of their practical lives, alongside their hunting and gathering or tilling and harvesting... Where there is no ambient doubt to speak of, there is no need to speak of faith.”¹⁸³ As societies became more organized, labor became divided, and, according to Dennett, folk religion changed into organized religions. In this environment something wonderful happened to some memes, “they acquired stewards. Memes that are fortunate to have stewards, people who will work hard and use their intelligence to foster their propagation and protect them from their enemies, are relieved of much of the burden of keeping their own lineages going.”¹⁸⁴ The priestly stewards of religion faithfully saw to the continuation and expansion of those memes.

Here again, Dennett pauses to ask “Cui bono?” Why bother acting as a steward of religion? The simple answer is that religious concepts place people into groups, and people like to be in groups. Dennett spends a lot of time presenting theories of how humans began to work in organized groups, but he ultimately decides that while religion undoubtedly aids the formation of groups a lot of how and why it does so remains unclear. However, the implications of human groups organized by religion are clear. Dennett explains, “once our ancestors became reflective (and hyperreflective) about their own beliefs, and thus appointed themselves stewards of the beliefs they thought most important, the phenomenon of *believing in belief* became a salient social force in its own right.”¹⁸⁵

¹⁸³ Ibid. 160-1. Italics original.

¹⁸⁴ Ibid. 170.

¹⁸⁵ Ibid. 200-1. Italics original.

“Belief in belief” is an essential concept for Dennett. He says, “Many people believe in God. Many people believe in *belief in God*. What’s the difference? People who believe in God are sure that God exists, and they are glad, because they hold God to be the most wonderful of all things. People who moreover believe in belief in God are sure that *belief in God* exists...and they think that this is a good state of affairs, something to be encouraged and fostered wherever possible...One *ought* to believe in God.”¹⁸⁶ Belief in belief in God avows that faith is a virtue. In Dennett’s account, folk religions operate without a concept of belief, but organized religions are preoccupied by belief. All of the New Atheists are responding to the respect and esteem afforded to faith, but only Dennett attempts to explain how it came to be that we think faith is a virtue. He explains that as religion begins to determine identities, people start to value believing the correct set of religious precepts.

Dennett thinks the invention of belief in belief is a crucial moment in the history of religion. As soon as people believe in belief there is an active attempt to make one’s own thoughts match the claims of religious authorities. This means that people are now willing to say they believe in things they do not understand simply to demonstrate their own belief in belief. The advent of belief in belief, coupled with the rise of priests, allowed religion to develop past a layperson’s comprehension. Dennett thinks that understanding belief in belief will allow the study of religion to take a new step forward because until now “much has been written over the centuries about the historic processes by which polytheisms turned into monotheism—belief in gods being replaced by belief in God. What is less often stressed is how this belief in God

¹⁸⁶ Ibid. 221. Italics original.

joined forces with the *belief in belief* in God to motivate the migration of the concept of God in the Abrahamic religions... away from concrete anthropomorphism to ever more abstract and depersonalized concepts.”¹⁸⁷ While belief in belief has allowed religious concepts to develop towards the abstract, it has had a simplifying effect on human relationships.

Dennett attributes much of the actions of religious people not to the content of their religious beliefs, which is the move the other New Atheists want to make, but to their belief in belief. He writes, “belief in belief in God makes people reluctant to acknowledge the obvious: that much of the traditional lore about God is no more worthy of *belief* than the lore about Santa Claus or Wonder Women.”¹⁸⁸ Religion, according to Dennett, is able to hide itself from scrutiny behind belief in belief. People are brought up to think believing in God is an inherently valuable act. They are not concerned with philosophically rigorous ideas about God. Rather than interrogating the concept of God most people assume that “since everybody calls his or her version ‘God,’ there is something ‘we can all agree about’—we all believe in God; we’re not atheists! But of course it doesn’t work *that* well.”¹⁸⁹ In reality, two people who claim to believe in God might have completely different concepts of what God is. What they share, rather than any real theological sympathies, is a belief in the belief in God. From the perspective of a meme, belief in belief is a huge advantage. Religious memes will be faithfully repeated simply because people know that religious memes ought to be copied. As a memetic adaptation, Dennett thinks

¹⁸⁷ Ibid. 205. Italics original.

¹⁸⁸ Ibid. 210. Italics original.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid. 209. Italics original.

theological complexity is advantageous in two ways. He says, “first...it tends to evoke wonder and draw attention to itself...Second...incomprehensibility discourages paraphrase—which can be death to meme identity—by leaving the host with no viable choice but *verbatim* transmission.”¹⁹⁰ If religious concepts, such as the virgin birth or holy trinity, are difficult to understand, they draw our attention and force us to repeat precisely what confuses us. The advantages for memes are clear, but the effect of this memetic adaptation has interesting consequences for the host, human brains. For Dennett, “The mists of incomprehension and failure are not just annoying impediments to rigorous refutations; they are themselves design features of religion worth looking at closely on their own.”¹⁹¹

Dennett claims that as belief in belief has become more important than actual belief, “a surprising number ...[of the] leaders [of organized religions] have come to realize that the robustness of the institution of religion doesn’t depend on uniformity of *belief* at all; it depends on the uniformity of *profession*.”¹⁹² Religions don’t need people to believe them. They merely need people to *claim* to believe. As a result, organized religions have placed increasing importance on proclaiming faith. Dennett explains, “the transition from folk religion to organized religion is marked by a shift in beliefs from those with very clear, concrete consequences to those with systematically elusive consequences—paying lip service is just about the only way you *can* act on them.”¹⁹³ This part of Dennett’s claim is fairly intuitive. Once, the best way to show one’s religious devotion was to sacrifice an ox. Now, the best way to do

¹⁹⁰ Ibid. 230. Italics original.

¹⁹¹ Ibid. 217.

¹⁹² Ibid. 224. Italics original.

¹⁹³ Ibid. 227. Italics original.

it is to say you are devoted. We have replaced sacrifice and action with prayer and profession. We now value ideas more than actions because our ideas are what place us in the same moral and cooperative communities as other people.

Ideas, however, are not shared in the same way as actions. Ideas are internal and, Dennett argues, this creates a potential problem for religions. He writes, “when it comes to interpreting religious avowals of others, *everybody is an outsider*. Why? Because religious avowals concern matters that are beyond observation, beyond meaningful test.”¹⁹⁴ The unverifiable nature of ideas “makes it hard to tell who—if anybody!—actually believes in God in addition to believing in belief in God.”¹⁹⁵ Dennett is challenging people’s professed identities. He is not willing to immediately accept a person’s claim that she believes in God. Dennett asserts that many people who say they believe in God may be wrong. Anyone whose conception of God is abstract may, according to Dennett, believe in belief rather than any meaningful concept of God. He alleges, “if what you hold sacred is not any kind of person you could pray to, or consider to be an appropriate recipient kind of gratitude...you’re an atheist in my book. If, for reasons of loyalty to tradition, diplomacy, or self-protective camouflage...you want to deny what you are, that’s your business, but don’t kid yourself. Maybe in the future, if more of us brights will just come forward and calmly announce that of course we no longer believe in any of those Gods, it will be possible to elect an atheist to some office higher than senator.”¹⁹⁶ At last, we have come to Dennett’s motivation for writing Breaking the Spell.

¹⁹⁴ Ibid. 239. Italics original.

¹⁹⁵ Ibid. 223.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid. 245.

Although his thesis is that religion ought to be studied as the result of memetic evolution, Dennett is inspired to write his book by his own atheism. Ultimately, not only is Dennett an atheist, he also suspects that a large population of people who claim to be religious are much closer to atheism than they suspect. His attempt to trace the evolution of religion is an attempt to explain this underlying observation. The general question “how did religion evolve?” is prompted by the question “how is it that so many ‘religious’ people seem to know almost nothing about the religions they claim to believe?” Dennett is interested in raising these questions, not in settling them. He is clear that Breaking the Spell is meant to start conversation, rather than end it. There is, however, one more question that he thinks he must ask. Having established that many people believe in believing their religion without actually believing in the religion themselves, he is compelled to ask if this is a good thing.

In some respects religion does seem to be good for people, even if they do not fully understand what they are professing. Studies have shown that people who identify themselves as being religious tend to fare slightly better in hospitals than those who do not, and religious communities seem to be useful sites of community organization. This research is, however, still being developed, and the results we have are far from conclusive. Dennett thinks these questions are worthy of further research, but they do not cut to the core of the issue at hand. Regardless of whether or not religious belief is shown to keep people alive longer, Dennett would still be more interested in investigating whether religious believers are better people as a result of their belief. Like Harris and Dawkins, Dennett is ultimately interested in investigating religion’s ability to make people more moral.

Dennett identifies four potential arguments for the claim that religions make people more moral. The first claims that the reward of heaven and punishment of hell are influential enough that people behave better to gain the reward and avoid the punishment. Dennett responds that this argument fails for two reasons: “(1) it doesn’t seem to be true, which is good news, since (2) it is such a demeaning view of human nature.”¹⁹⁷ There is no evidence that believers’ behavior is improved by ideas about heaven and hell, and acting good to gain something is the lowest form of morality.

The second argument is that religion grants meaning to people’s lives. This argument is problematic because the meaning religion grants is not always positive. Dennett claims, “everybody already knows the evidence for the countervailing hypothesis that the belief in a reward in heaven can sometimes motivate acts of monstrous evil.”¹⁹⁸ The violent tendencies of some religious believers combine with the somewhat insecure and detached nature of belief in belief to produce a situation where “in the adult world of religion, people are dying and killing, with the moderates cowed into silence by the intransigence of the radicals in their own faiths, and many afraid to acknowledge what they actually believe for fear of breaking Granny’s heart, or offending their neighbors.”¹⁹⁹ We cannot turn to the fact that religion grants meaning to some people’s lives when so many of those people either use religion to justify violence, or refuse to condemn extremists within their faith.

The third argument for religion appeals to the importance of having religious authority figures to arbitrate moral issues. Dennett responds that there is no reason to

¹⁹⁷ Ibid. 279.

¹⁹⁸ Ibid. 280.

¹⁹⁹ Ibid. 291.

assume that religious people have better moral sense, and those “who haven’t conscientiously considered, on their own, whether their pastors or priests or rabbis or imams are worthy of this delegated authority over their own lives...are in fact taking a personally *immoral* stand.”²⁰⁰ Every person is responsible for her own moral choices. We cannot abdicate responsibility to another person simply because of her job title.

The fourth way Dennett sees people argue that religion makes people more moral is by appealing to spirituality. Dennett sees the connection between spirituality and goodness as being an irritating and ungrounded cultural supposition. In short, “there is *no reason at all* why a disbelief in the immateriality or immortality of the soul should make a person less caring, less moral, less committed to the well-being of everybody on Earth than somebody who believes in ‘the spirit.’”²⁰¹ At the end of his examination, Dennett concludes, like all of the New Atheists, that religion writ large does not encourage morality.

Dennett does not want his assessment of the shortcomings of religion to be an indictment of religious people. He insists, “believers and brights alike deplore the crass materialism...of everyday culture and yearn not just to enjoy the beauty of genuine love but to bring that joy to others. It may 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 there is a bounty of alternative highways and

²⁰⁰ Ibid. 295. Italics original.

²⁰¹ Ibid. 305. Italics original.

footpaths to consider.”²⁰² Today’s religious people are not, as a whole, bad people. They are merely using an old meme that is not necessarily the best way to go about doing good in the world. Dennett responds to the religious people who claim that religion is the only way for us to solve the modern American moral crisis by saying “I wholeheartedly agree with them that there is a moral crisis, and that nothing is more important than working together on finding paths out of our current dilemmas, but I think I have a better way.”²⁰³ He clearly thinks atheism, science, and humanism are this better way, but there is almost no discussion of how these concepts can be lived.

Dennett is well aware of the limitations of his argument. He admits, “my description of the evolution of various features of religion...is definitely ‘just a theory’ ... In a nutshell, this is what it says: Religion evolved, but it doesn’t have to be good for us in order to evolve.”²⁰⁴ In many places his evolutionary narrative feels as though it is based entirely on conjecture. It is too general and too vague to have much lasting impact on how we think about religion, but Dennett is comfortable with this outcome. He did his most meaningful work on memetic theory in 1995’s Darwin’s Dangerous Idea, and Breaking the Spell is merely meant to show that more research would be fruitful. Beyond this simple thesis, Dennett is coy about what he is actually arguing.

His notion of belief in belief is unsettling for many religious people, but he does not advocate any kind of direct action. In fact, he recommends the opposite by saying, “there is pressure on us all to act decisively today, on the basis of the little we

²⁰² Ibid. 306-7.

²⁰³ Ibid. 55.

²⁰⁴ Ibid. 309.

already (think we) know, but I am counseling patience.”²⁰⁵ Breaking the Spell is much more interested in unsettling its reader than in providing answers. Both Dawkins and Hitchens become particularly animated around questions of giving a child a religious education, but Dennett is content to say “the resolution of these dilemmas is not (yet) obvious, to say the least.”²⁰⁶ Dennett is just as aware of the danger Muslim extremism poses to the United States as Harris, but he counsels us to “respect the Muslims, empathize with them, take their disgust [with America] seriously—but then propose that they should join us in a discussion about the perspectives on which we differ.”²⁰⁷ He thinks that we must abandon the idea that questioning a faith is inherently disrespectful, but, beyond that, Dennett remains willing to seriously consider most religious viewpoints. He concludes Breaking the Spell with the words “in the end, my central policy recommendation is that we gently, firmly educate the people of the world, so that they can make truly informed choices about their lives.”²⁰⁸

Dennett is far more academically minded than the other New Atheists, and his belief in the transformative power of education is, in some ways, a satisfying response to concerns about religion. Harris holds almost no hope, while Dawkins is completely invested in science as the only alternative to religion. Dennett, however, maintains a reasonable optimism that encourages working with religious believers instead of demonizing them. He successfully avoids the mistakes that many of the New Atheists make. He readily acknowledges that “religion” is broad category that is

²⁰⁵ Ibid. 310.

²⁰⁶ Ibid. 324.

²⁰⁷ Ibid. 329.

²⁰⁸ Ibid. 339.

constantly changing. As a result, he does not ignore the existence of religious moderates, and wants to engage believers in conversation as people. Of all the New Atheist books, Breaking the Spell is by far the most conciliatory and reasonable. It is the only book that leaves atheists with a meaningful way to interact with religious people.

From a New Atheist standpoint, the biggest shortcoming of Breaking the Spell is that it is about religion. This is not a book about atheism. Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens have written books advocating atheism. Their books appeal to atheists and seek to articulate the foundations of an atheist outlook. Dennett writes to religious people about religion. Dennett is unquestionably an atheist, and he is open about this perspective. This book, however, does not address what it means to be an atheist. Although Harris' prescriptions may be misguided, he does have suggestions about what atheists ought to do. Dawkins also has a message encouraging the creation of an atheist movement, but Dennett is more interested in causing the religious to question their assumptions than in speaking to atheists. He shows us an open-minded and encouraging atheist voice, but rarely challenges religion's claims directly. Early on he claims, "I decided long ago that diminishing returns had set in on the arguments about God's existence,"²⁰⁹ and he avoids the simple argument for and against God that mires down most of the New Atheists. There is, however, a way to discuss what it means to be atheist without arguing about God's existence ad nauseam. Dennett has written a compelling book challenging a lot of our basic assumptions about religion, and he has done so as an atheist. His lack of belief in belief is the backdrop of

²⁰⁹ Ibid. 27.

Breaking the Spell, but Breaking the Spell is about forging a new way to discuss religions rather than an attempt to disprove religion. Dennett is offering a narrative for our consideration. This task is distinctly different from the other New Atheists'. Breaking the Spell does not sneer at religious people, and makes no attempt to offer a clearly articulated atheist platform. Perhaps Breaking the Spell is unsuccessful because it does not give an explanation of how and why to be atheist. Or, perhaps Dennett is offering himself as an example by holding his convictions without fixating on them. Breaking the Spell may be the best piece of atheism in action that we have seen so far.

Chapter Six

The Next Atheism

The New Atheists have succeeded in bringing a lot of attention to atheism. Suddenly, major bookstores include books on atheism in their “religion” sections, public buses plastered with the words “Why believe in a god? Just be good for goodness’ sake”²¹⁰ go about their routes in London and Washington, DC, and as President Obama was inaugurated, he referred to America as “a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus—and *non-believers*.”²¹¹ Atheism is a part of the public discourse, and the New Atheists are actively shaping that discussion. As I have tried to demonstrate, having the New Atheists publicly define atheism is a mixed blessing at best. None of the New Atheists have put together a complete argument. Harris advocates a violently close-minded atheism. Dawkins is only able to argue against a particularly rigid belief system. Hitchens is completely preoccupied with criticizing everything with the slightest religious association. Dennett makes the best effort to understand religion, but spends almost no time discussing atheism. All these prominent atheists leave us wondering how to be an atheist.

If we hope to find a livable definition of atheism, we must learn from the mistakes the New Atheists make. All of the New Atheists struggle to properly understand religion. Atheism is, for better or for worse, an identity defined in opposition to religion, and, as a result, a well-articulated atheism depends on a solid

²¹⁰ Katherine T. Phan. “Atheist Bus Ads Reach America.” Christian Post [Washington, DC.] 14 Nov. 2008.

²¹¹ Obama, Barack. “Transcript - Barack Obama’s Inaugural Address.” New York Times 20 Jan. 2009. Italics added.

definition of religion. Unfortunately for the New Atheists, religion is particularly difficult to define. *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*, in the section edited by religious studies scholar Hans Penner, defines religion “as a system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings.”²¹² As straightforward as this definition may seem, it is preceded by five paragraphs explaining “defining religion is so difficult that one might as well give up on the task.”²¹³ Regardless of whether or not we accept Penner’s frustration with the task, we can recognize that defining religion is a complex undertaking. It should be clear that the New Atheists are not working with a subtle and multifaceted definition. Perhaps the New Atheists deserve some leeway because they are writing for a lay audience in a field in which they are admittedly not experts. These are not academic books, and their authors can be forgiven for not including academic terminology. Lacking the intellectual rigor to attempt finding a meaningful working definition, however, cannot be forgiven. The New Atheists make no attempt to construct a serious and nuanced definition of religion,²¹⁴ and are content to use the most basic and inadequate definitions of religion.

When Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens look at religion they only see belief.

They express almost no awareness of the importance of ritual or the cultural connections fostered by religious practice. In their understanding, religion is a set of

²¹² Jonathan Z. Smith. Ed. “Study of Religion.” *HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995. 893.

²¹³ *Ibid.* 893.

²¹⁴ Dennett may be the exception here. In *Breaking the Spell* he makes a point of referring to “religions” as cultural systems, and demonstrates that he has struggled with the complexities of the term. Over the course of the book, however, his use of “religions” becomes less rigorous, and by the time he is offering his evolutionary explanation he has lost almost all of the nuance he initially had.

beliefs. To be religious is to blindly have faith in your tradition's truth claims. This definition of religion is particularly appealing to the New Atheists because it allows them to use science, a contradicting set of truth claims, to challenge religion. The scientific method provides a way to evaluate truth claims, but fails to account for the fact that scientific claims are fundamentally different from religious ones. Religious truth claims, unlike scientific ones, are mediated by their traditions. Religion always entails interpretation because those truth claims are expressed through ritual practice. Different communities have different standards for practicing their religion, and those practices have profound implications for the interpretation of truth claims. Religious truth claims must be evaluated within the context of tradition and practice. Science has no analogous place for interpretation. One of the New Atheists' central criticisms is that religious truth claims cannot be evaluated with the scientific method. Religious people recognize that this is so because religion and science perform different roles. The New Atheists reject this response and, instead, insist that religion resists the scientific method because it is false. The sleight of hand the New Atheists are performing should be apparent. They have taken a simplistic definition and reduced religion to an outdated proto-science that is all about believing in God. This definition of religion is clearly insufficient to describe religion. In fact, in *The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion* Penner uses "religion as 'belief in God' [as] a good example"²¹⁵ of an inadequate definition of religion. The inadequacy of this definition not only excludes the New Atheists from academia, it has dire consequences for the foundation of their arguments.

²¹⁵ [The HarperCollins Dictionary of Religion](#). 893.

The New Atheist critique depends on using science to undermine religion, and this can only be successful when religion is reduced to a set of rigid truth claims. Unfortunately, not all religious people strictly believe everything their religion claims. The New Atheists have difficulty understanding people who can moderate their religious belief. Dennett rightly points out that “when it comes to interpreting religious avowals of others, *everybody is an outsider.*”²¹⁶ There is no way to tell what people mean when they use a word like “God,” and this has proved to be problematic for the New Atheists. Many religious people have read these books and simply responded, “that’s not what I believe.” Moderated religious beliefs can be so fluid that they are impossible to break. Without any compulsion to make their beliefs align with scriptural claims, religious moderates might change their beliefs over the course of a day. Or, as Dennett suggests, they may claim to believe in God without establishing a static definition of what God means. This kind of belief gives the New Atheists nothing to define themselves against. In order to be coherent, atheism demands a staunchly orthodox antagonist.

The ideological rigidity the New Atheists both despise and require exists in religious orthodoxy. The New Atheists find their ideal targets in American fundamentalist Christianity and Arab extremist Islam. These particular religions are dogmatic, dependent on religion for explanation and exhortation, and openly resistant to science. The rise of fundamentalist Christianity and extremist Islam has created the possibility of New Atheism by providing a structure for the New Atheists to resist. New Atheism could not have begun thirty years earlier than it did because it would

²¹⁶ Dennett, Breaking the Spell, 239. Italics original.

have lacked a prominent literalist community to resist. The New Atheists depend on well publicized and openly xenophobic and violent manifestations of religion for their claims to be coherent. Ironically, New Atheism is attempting to destroy the only kinds of religion that permit New Atheism to be conceivable.

When the New Atheists try to expand their critique beyond these ideal antagonists, their arguments become noticeably less cogent. Religious moderation defeats the New Atheists' criticisms so thoroughly that there are only two ways for the New Atheists to react. They could either recognize that their arguments only apply to certain religious communities that lie well outside of the mainstream, or they could claim that the religious communities they criticize are the truest examples of religion and that religious moderates only offer a compromised form of religion. We can see which path the New Atheists chose by reading Harris. Harris says, "moderates in every faith are obliged to loosely interpret (or simply ignore) much of their canons in the interest of living in the modern world...The first thing to observe about the moderate's retreat from the scriptural literalism is that it draws its inspiration not from scripture but from cultural developments that have rendered many of God's utterances difficult to accept as written."²¹⁷ Rather than praising the ability of moderates to incorporate progressive ideas into older systems, the New Atheists accuse them of inconsistency. By doing so they legitimate dogmatism and grant religious extremists the power to define what religion is. This perplexing appreciation of religious literalism is a direct result of equating religion with belief.

²¹⁷ Harris, End of Faith, 17.

The inability of the New Atheists to create a nuanced definition of religion causes them to focus on belief rather than acts.

Atheism significantly undermines itself when it is concerned with ideas rather than actions. Actions, particularly violent ones, are a public concern because they directly affect others. Ideas are different. We cannot allow complete freedom of action, but one of the great accomplishments of western secularism is the establishment of intellectual freedom. For centuries, atheists have criticized religion's attempts to police what people believe, and now the New Atheists are mistakenly heading down that same path. A concern with people's beliefs confuses the motivation of the New Atheists. They began to write their books in response to what religious people *do*, not what they *believe*. Belief and action are certainly linked, but focusing on people's beliefs prevents atheists from differentiating between different kinds of religious people. If atheists think belief is always dangerous, then they will always feel threatened by anyone who avows any kind of religion.

In order for atheism to be a viable philosophy, atheists need to appreciate their own similarities with religious moderates, and help moderates to dissociate themselves from religious extremists. Atheists ought to be working with religious moderates because, ultimately, both groups want to live in the same kind of society. It seems obvious that the majority of people living in the west, regardless of their religious affiliation, would agree with Dennett when he declares that his "sacred values are...democracy, justice, life, love, and truth."²¹⁸ John Haught, a Catholic theologian at Georgetown University, compares the New Atheists to their intellectual

²¹⁸ Dennett, Breaking the Spell, 23.

predecessors, and criticizes the New Atheists for not desiring more radical change. He notes that “the two most significant changes the new atheists want to make are, first, that science rather than faith would become the foundation of the new culture... and, second, that morality would be rooted completely in reason.”²¹⁹ The New Atheists imagine this change as a relatively small shift. Secular democracies like the United States already value science and reason. The New Atheists are simply suggesting that we increase our appreciation of these secular values while decreasing our interest in faith. They imagine an improvement on our current culture, not a complete revolution. Haught says, “this approach to atheism...differs only superficially from the traditional theism it wants to replace...[This] brand of atheism permits the same old values and meanings to hang around.”²²⁰ Haught is correct that the New Atheists are mild when compared to their intellectual predecessors like Nietzsche, Camus, and Sartre. Haught thinks this mildness demonstrates a lack of intellectual courage, but it might actually be the greatest strength of the New Atheist critique.

If the New Atheists embrace the fact that they are proposing to slightly redirect society rather than completely rebuild culture, they might be able to greatly simplify their task. Rather than waging war on religion, which is an overwhelmingly large opponent, they could seek to protect and expand the aspects of secular society that they see threatened. Simply put, Dawkins does not need to debate a rabbi in Massachusetts. Rabbis in New England do not provide meaningful opposition to anything Dawkins holds dear. Dawkins treasures science. He ought to discard his

²¹⁹ John F. Haught. God and the New Atheism. New York: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007. 20.

²²⁰ Ibid. 21.

identity as an antagonist of religion in favor of an identity as a defender of evolution. In The God Delusion, Dawkins is at his best when he is advocating for science and demonstrating the weakness of the Intelligent Design movement. His argument only falters when he attempts to do too much. Dawkins does not sufficiently understand religion to convincingly dismiss all of its manifestations. He does, however, understand science and would be a fitting heir to Thomas Huxley's position as "Darwin's bulldog." A similar situation can be imagined for Hitchens as a champion of democracy and sexual freedom. If they were to focus their arguments, Hitchens and Dawkins could be wildly successful. As it is, the insufficiency of their arguments only reinforces the impression that religion is indomitable. If the New Atheists are serious about doing away with religion, they should stop reifying its importance.

As long as atheists argue that religion is the cause of much of humanity's woes, they are reaffirming the notion that religion is a central human concern. Having atheism as a primary identity concedes that religion is one of the most important human attributes. The best way to undermine religion is to let it atrophy. Religious extremists have a fully developed rhetoric of oppression. They have been claiming to be under attack from liberal secularists long before the New Atheists began writing. The New Atheist critique actually strengthens the claims of religious extremists by providing them with an antagonist that demonizes them almost as much as they claim to be demonized. The best response is not to exert more energy publicly castigating religious people, but to balance a declaration of atheism with a concentrated effort on issues of significance. If atheists are really beyond religion, they should be able to

stop talking about it. Atheists should not have to hide their lack of belief, but they ought not to confine themselves to simply being nonbelievers.

The New Atheists' heroes, people like Darwin, Jefferson, Paine, and Einstein, did not consider themselves to be atheists at their core. For all of these men, their convictions about religion were secondary to their commitment to their work. At the end of God Is Not Great, Hitchens calls for a new Enlightenment. If Hitchens thinks his book is an essential part of this new Enlightenment, then he sincerely misunderstands the nature of the first Enlightenment. Thinkers like Voltaire, Diderot, and Montesquieu certainly challenged the power of religion, but that was not the extent of their projects. Questioning religion was only one part of their attempts to advance democracy, science, and reason. The New Atheists have limited themselves to contradicting religion. The men that they style themselves after had much greater concerns. The great Enlightenment thinkers may have been atheists, but the New Atheists have become anti-theists, and, in so doing, have mired themselves in an unwinnable conflict that may ultimately damage the public perception of atheists.

Antitheism may have a utility, but ultimately all it can do is assert itself. Antitheism is entirely concerned with negating religion, and declaring the defiant existence of anti-theists. Although it may appear to be powerfully pugnacious, this constant assertion of existence is really a mark of insecurity. An identity that is constantly defining itself is still nascent. A truly stable identity will become integrated in people's actions, not their rhetoric. Most of the New Atheists are so intent on asserting their identity and defending their principles that they never actually apply those principles. Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens spend their entire

books explaining why one ought to be atheist, but the only thing we ever see atheists do is explain why one ought to be atheist. Dennett is the only author that provides us a way out of this circle. He, having declared himself an atheist, wants to study religion. He is not studying religion in order to disprove it and assert secularism in its place. He is studying religion in order to understand it. Dennett's opinions are unabashedly informed by his atheism, but he has opinions on things other than atheism. Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens have passions beyond atheism, but you might not know it from their presentation of atheism.

Dawkins compares New Atheism to the Gay Rights movement, and I think some aspects of this comparison can be illuminating for atheists. There was a time when simply asserting the existence and legitimacy of homosexuality was a radical move. This assertion was the beginning, not the culmination of the Gay Rights movement. As the movement matured, queer people began to focus on actively living as queer people, rather than simply defending their right to be queer. Queer theology, philosophy, and literature all discuss aspects of queer identity, but they realize that living out an identity as a queer person is infinitely more complex and more profound than the act of demanding recognition. It is time for atheism to take that same step forward. The New Atheists have loudly asserted that atheism exists. Now it is time for them to live as atheists.

Although the New Atheists think we are living in particularly religious times, the tides may already be shifting. The cover of the April 13, 2009, issue of *Newsweek* bears the words "the decline and fall of Christian America" written in the same red letters and black background that *Time* magazine used in its famous "Is God dead?"

cover in 1966. The *Newsweek* article reports that recent polls have shown that in the last eighteen years the percentage of Americans who identify themselves as Christian has fallen from eighty-six to seventy-six. A separate poll indicates that “the percentage of people who say they are unaffiliated with any particular faith has doubled in recent years, to 16 percent; in terms of voting, this group grew from 5 percent in 1988 to 12 percent in 2008—roughly the same percentage of the electorate as African-Americans...Meanwhile, the number of people willing to describe themselves as atheist or agnostic has increased about fourfold from 1990 to 2009, from 1 million to about 3.6 million. (That is about double the number of, say, Episcopalians in the United States.)”²²¹ All of this is to say that while atheists remain a minority, they are certainly not a voiceless one. Given the rising number of nonbelievers (Dennett argues that because of the negative connotations of words like “atheist,” these numbers are probably much higher than what people report, and a recent *Newsweek* poll reporting that thirty percent of Americans identify themselves as being “spiritual but not religious”²²² seems to support this argument) atheists should no longer feel obligated to fight for visibility. They are a substantial part of western society, and their numbers appear to be growing. This demographic phenomenon opens the door to new kinds of atheism.

If atheism is to gain public esteem it must move beyond simple antagonism.

This will happen when atheists stop being atheists, and start being scientists, or

²²¹ John Meacham. "The Decline and Fall of Christian America." *Newsweek* 13 Apr. 2009.

²²² Daniel Stone. "One Nation Under God?" *Newsweek* 7 Apr. 2009.
<<http://www.newsweek.com/id/192915>>.

philosophers, or actors, or barbers, or any active identity. The New Atheists have begun a conversation. They have pushed past any taboo forbidding criticism of religion. Their argument has gotten people's attention and aroused their passion. Now it is time for other atheists to come forward and announce that a successful atheist is a person who advocates for what she believes. For too long atheism has been concerned with negation. We have seen that antitheism leads nowhere. Now it is time to embrace the emptiness of atheism. A-theism is an absence. It makes no demand of its adherents. The a-theist can be anything she wants. Atheism has no dogma, and atheists need to embrace the freedom that stems from that. Without the necessity of scriptural justification or appeals to tradition, atheists can do what they think is right simply because they think it is right. Atheists need to show that they value democracy, science, and intellectual freedom, not merely offending theists. Now that the New Atheists have gotten people's attention it is time for atheist scientists to experiment, and for atheist philosophers to write. It is time for atheist actors to act, and atheist barbers to cut hair. Some of these pursuits will encounter religious opposition, and it is only right that atheists defend their passions against religious intimidation, but many atheists will be able to simply live their lives without being threatened by religion. The New Atheists have shown us what a warrior's atheism looks like. They have also shown us the limitations of this style of atheism. The best response is for atheists to take note of these limitations and live their lives. It is time for the next atheism to show that sincere, honest, and open atheism in practice will accomplish much more than any polemic.

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