



EDITED BY

STEPHEN
BULLIVANT

MICHAEL
RUSE

≡ The Oxford Handbook of
ATHEISM

THE OXFORD HANDBOOK OF

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Edited by
STEPHEN BULLIVANT

and
MICHAEL RUSE

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While not without its rewards, editing a book of this size and scope is a long and time-stealing process. Our own sleep and sanity notwithstanding, the major losers here have been our friends and family. As such, we would like publicly to thank them all—and especially Lizzie Ruse, and Jo and Grace Bullivant—for their clemency and forbearance.

This book contains forty-six separate chapters, and the labours of fifty-five individual contributors. It has been a pleasure to work with each and every one of them. It is an honour to be presenting their cumulative endeavour to the world. Thanks to them all.

Finally, two names are missing from our contents list. The British sociologist Peter B. Clarke and the American philosopher Paul Kurtz were among the first scholars we signed up to contribute to the Handbook. Sadly, neither lived long enough to grace these pages with their wisdom and insight—at least, not directly. We therefore dedicate *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* to Peter and Paul.

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INTRODUCTION

THE STUDY OF ATHEISM

STEPHEN BULLIVANT AND MICHAEL RUSE

THE DEATH OF GOD

‘God is dead!’ A cry greeted with despondency in some quarters—including that occupied by one of the editors of this volume—and with joy tinged with relief in other quarters—including that occupied by the other of the editors of this volume. The cry of course is that of the great nineteenth-century German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, and it is worth giving the whole passage (in *The Gay Science*) from which this famous aphorism is taken:

God is dead! God remains dead! And we have killed him! Yet his shadow still looms. How can we console ourselves, the murderers of all murderers! The holiest and mightiest thing the world has ever possessed has bled to death under our knives: who will wipe this blood from us? With what water could we clean ourselves? What festivals of atonement, what holy games will we have to invent for ourselves? Is the magnitude of this deed not too great for us? Do we not ourselves have to become gods merely to appear worthy of it? (Nietzsche [1882] 2001: 120)

The death of God is more, far more, than the demise of the distinguished-looking elderly fellow in the paintings of Michelangelo, someone trying hard to imitate Charlton Heston in a bed sheet. The existence of the deity—to be a believer, a theist in some sense, or to be a non-believer, an atheist in some sense—is no mere matter of academic concern and interest. Nor is it something merely of moment for the hereafter, beyond the deaths of each and every one of us. A world with God and a world without God are two very different places, with very different meanings and obligations for us humans who occupy them. Humans created, loved, and supported by the deity are humans very different from those who wander alone, without external meaning or purpose, creating their own destinies. Whether Nietzsche was right about the death of God, he was surely right about the importance and significance of the death of God. Hence this volume.

STUDYING ATHEISM

It would be fair to say that the scholarly study of *atheism*—understood in this volume in the broad sense of ‘an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’—has, historically, been something of a mixed bag. In certain times and places, and in specific disciplines, a reasonable amount of careful and serious attention has been devoted to the subject. Theologians, not surprisingly, have a longstanding interest—and one which, at least in the West, almost certainly predates the existence of (m)any *actual* atheists (see Buckley 1987; and Alan Charles Kors’ ‘The Age of Enlightenment’ chapter). Philosophers of several stripes—not just ‘of religion’, but in across a range of specialisms including ethics, language, science, and the meaning of life—can also hold their heads up high. Albeit to a lesser extent, so too may historians, literary critics, psychologists, sociologists, and

anthropologists.¹ In recent years students of atheism have, moreover, been blessed by the publication of several tough-act-to-follow multidisciplinary collections (Baier et al. 2001; Martin 2007; Flynn 2007; Amarasingam 2010; Zuckerman 2010a).

Yet while it is important to give credit where it's (over)due, it is true that atheism has not always received the attention it both deserves and, we would argue, needs. The familiar academic squalls of 'unjustly neglected,' 'significant lacunae,' 'much work still to be done'—so often a case of protesting too much—can, for once, undoubtedly be justified here (see Pasquale 2007; Zuckerman 2010b). To give but a single example, probably the very first international conference on the social-scientific study of atheism was held in Rome in 1969, featuring a veritable 'Who's Who' of contributors (e.g., Charles Glock, Robert Bellah, David Martin, Bryan R. Wilson, Harvey Cox, Karl Rahner, Peter Berger, Henri de Lubac, Milan Machovec—and even Pope Paul VI; see Caporale and Grumelli 1971). And yet, despite other signs of early promise (esp. Campbell [1971] 2013), it would be fully four decades until the next such gathering was held, on a much more modest scale, at Oxford in 2009 (Bullivant and Lee 2012). Those forty lean years coincided—it is worth pointing out—with a time of both unprecedented growth in the numbers and social significance of atheists and other nonreligionists in the West (see Callum Brown's 'The Twentieth Century' chapter), and with the continued rise and subsequent fall of many (though not all) of the world's first atheist states in the East (see Irena Borowik, Branko Ančić, and Radosław Tyrała's 'Central and Eastern Europe' chapter). Similar—or rather, in most cases, far worse—tales could be told of the fortunes of atheism in other academic fields. Which is not, of course, to say that nothing of scholarly value has been done in these areas already—far from it!—but rather that there is far more that could (and should) be done. Though they need not pretend to be lone voices crying in the scholarly wilderness, working *ex nihilo*, atheism researchers in all disciplines do indeed face a great deal of *terra incognita*—a prospect at once daunting (so much tedious bushwhacking ...) and exhilarating ('treasures of darkness and hidden riches of secret places' and all that).²

The Oxford Handbook of Atheism, we believe, constitutes a fair reflection of this situation. Evidently, the authors of our 46 chapters have collectively drawn on a huge corpus of existing research—a corpus which, like the authors themselves, spans several continents, and an array of different disciplinary perspectives. In common with other volumes in this august series, readers should be confident of finding in these chapters reliable and sure-footed guides to the existing—and, on certain topics, voluminous—literature. (Though even the most well-trodden of paths can, to the keen and experienced eye, yield surprises.) This Handbook is, however, far from being simply a survey and synthesis. The past several years have witnessed a remarkable growth in studies of atheism and related topics. As editors, it gives us very great pleasure to introduce our readers to some of the first fruits of this. There is scarcely a chapter in this book that has not benefitted from major new pieces of insight or information, in many cases published within only the last five or so years. What is more, a good number of the entries—including, but no means limited to, those on 'Jewish Atheism', 'Atheism, Gender, and Sexuality', 'Atheism, Health, and Well-being', 'The Islamic World', 'Japan', 'The Visual Arts', 'Music', and 'Film'—are among the (or even are *the*) first such scholarly treatments of the topic to be published. With so rich and diverse a subject, and the growing vim and vigour of the scholarship surrounding it, we look forward to current and future researchers—aided and abetted, we humbly hope, by our current offering—delving deeper into these areas (and, indeed, trailblazing several more). The 'work-in-progress', 'more-to-follow', 'stay-tuned' nature of much that is in this collection is by no means a failing. Rather, it is one of its cardinal strengths. After all, *catching up* with it all this ever-growing research is precisely what second (and third, and fourth) editions are for ...

Finally, as editors we are naturally well aware that atheism is an at-times hotly contested subject. Indeed, in our view, that is a large part of what makes this Handbook so interesting and—given positive atheism’s much commented-upon new ‘visibility’ within (especially) Western society and culture (cf. Taira and Illman 2012)—timely. In choosing topics and contributors we have aimed at balance, rather than a blandly uniform ‘neutrality’; this is most obvious in [Parts I](#) (philosophy) and IV (the natural sciences). All our authors can be expected to approach their topics in a scholarly and rigorous manner, and to present the full nuances of their given topics. But as leading experts in their fields—and in some cases, high-profile figures in popular or media discussions in this area—one may also assume them both to have, and to express, their own views. Some of the contributors to this volume are themselves atheists, whether ‘positive’ or ‘negative’ (see Bullivant’s ‘Defining “Atheism” chapter’); some of them are not. All of them, we aver, have something of significant value to say on their chosen subjects.

OVERVIEW OF CONTENTS

In light of the wide-ranging nature of the current scholarship on atheism—in all its varied and diffuse social, cultural, and intellectual manifestations—the Handbook is divided into seven main sections.

Part I (‘Definitions and Debates’) is primarily philosophical in nature. In the opening chapter, Stephen Bullivant surveys the various meanings of ‘atheism’, while explaining and justifying the Handbook’s own definition as ‘the absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’. The following four chapters engage arguments for and against the existence of God (and *vice versa*, against and for atheism). Rather than merely offering standard summaries of the various positions (teleological, ontological, moral argument, etc.), the first three of these instead allow three leading philosophers to present their own cases: T. J. Mawson against atheism, A. C. Grayling against theism (i.e., for negative atheism), and Graham Oppy for positive atheism. This is followed by Michael L. Peterson’s in-depth treatment of what has aptly been described as ‘the rock of atheism’ (Küng 1976: 432): the existence and extent of evil and suffering, and its manifold philosophical implications. Bold chapters on two major, academic and ‘real-life’, concerns then follow: morality (Erik J. Wielenberg), and the meaningfulness of life (Kimberly A. Blessing). The section’s final chapter, by Brian Davies, engages the thought of the medieval theologian and philosopher St Thomas Aquinas to explore religious language, the meaning of ‘God’, and the possibility of atheism.

Part II narrates the intellectual and social history of (predominantly) Western atheism,³ from antiquity right up to the present day. David Sedley ranges from the pre-Socratics to Lucretius, noting especially the difficulties of positively identifying actual atheists in this period (as opposed to those denounced as such, as most famously with Socrates). Mark Edwards continues this theme, covering the entirety of the first millennium CE, and discussing, *inter alia*, the Cynics, Sceptics, and uses of the epithet ‘atheist’ both by and about the early Christians. Chapters on atheism (and accusations thereof) in the medieval period (Dorothea Weltecke), the Renaissance and Reformation (Denis Robichaud), and the Age of Enlightenment (Alan Charles Kors) all follow. Turning more to social history, and the great cultural and societal changes shaping (and being shaped by) unbelief in Europe, North America, and beyond, David Nash narrates the nineteenth century, and Callum Brown the twentieth. Finally, Thomas Zenk brings the section right up to the twenty-first century by exploring the cluster of intellectual, social, cultural, media, and political phenomena loosely (and not un-problematically) referred to as the ‘New Atheism’. Together, these eight chapters are one of the most comprehensive and up-to-date treatments of the history of Western atheism(s) yet available.

Part III offers detailed treatments of eight atheistic systems or worldviews. These are intentionally diverse, and serve to underline the intellectual, cultural and geographical range of atheism. By including such topics as Hinduism (Jessica Frazier) and Buddhism (Andrew Skilton)—traditions that both (historically as well as in their contemporary manifestations) possess strong and influential sceptical strands—alongside Jainism (Anne Vallely) and Judaism (Jacques Berlinerblau), not to mention the classic topics of humanism (Stephen Law), Marxism (Peter Thompson), existentialism (Alison Stone) and analytic philosophy (Charles Pigden), this section helps to balance the Western emphasis of the previous section. In all cases, these chapters incorporate both historical and theoretical aspects, demonstrating the concrete manifestations and implications of unbelief in all its ‘endless forms’.

Part IV will engage a number of significant, and often very contentious, debates in the natural sciences. Rather than dilute the controversial nature of some of these topics, we have instead commissioned leading figures to survey the contemporary terrain, in addition to presenting their own views: Michael Ruse on naturalism; Taner Edis on atheism’s role (or not) in the rise of science; David P. Barash on Darwinism; and Victor Stenger on the physical sciences. These contributions are particularly important and timely, given the high status accorded to scientific arguments and concerns in much recent atheistic literature, and the buoyant media and popular interest in issues relating to science and religion—not all of it explored or expressed in a rigorous scholarly way.

Parts V and VI focus on the contemporary, social-scientific engagement with atheism—an area which, more than any other, has witnessed a notable upsurge in the past decade. **Part V** reviews and presents some of the most significant work emerging in the disciplines of sociology, psychology, and anthropology, much of it from early career scholars who are opening up new avenues of research. Among these chapters are investigations of: the relationships between atheism and secularization (Frank L. Pasquale and Barry A. Kosmin), the psychological and cognitive-anthropological understandings of unbelief (Miguel Farias and Jonathan A. Lanman respectively), societal health (Phil Zuckerman), gender and sexuality (Melanie Elyse Brewster), health and well-being (Karen Hwang), and conversion and deconversion (Ralph W. Hood Jr. and Zhuso Chen).

Complementing such thematic studies, **Part VI** explores the contemporary sociology of atheism in specific regions of the globe. Following a comprehensive, global demographics chapter (Ariela Keysar and Juhem Navarro-Rivera), we highlight six, notably diverse areas. In line with the overarching aims for this volume, these bring out the sheer breadth and variety of atheism in the modern world. Three of these chapters—on Western Europe (Lois Lee), Central and Eastern Europe (Irena Borowik, Branko Ančić, and Radosław Tyrała), and North America (Ryan T. Cragun, Joseph H. Hammer, and Jesse M. Smith)—engage with existing empirical research, both quantitative and qualitative, while updating this in light of newly emerging work. While each of these three regions forms part of the same Western history of atheism (as delineated in **Part II**), nevertheless they present markedly different case studies of atheism in contemporary culture and society. The other three chapters in this section—the Islamic world (Samuli Schielke), India (Johannes Quack), and Japan (Sarah Whilly)—have been selected to offer contrasting perspectives from the non-Western world. While exploring key historical considerations—necessary for comprehending the present—these too rely substantially on original, and in many cases pioneering, empirical work.

Finally, **Part VII** engages historical and contemporary expressions of positive and negative atheism in the arts—subjects which have, until now, received very little attention. Breaking new ground, then, are Bernard Schweizer on literature, J. Sage Elwell on the visual arts, Paul A. Bertagnolli on music, and Nina Power on film. Given the great amount of scholarly and popular interest which the field of ‘religion and the arts’ generates, this section promises to be the most

original and influential in the entire volume. It will, therefore, form a fitting conclusion to what we hope our readers will find to be a novel, useful, and illuminating collection.

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PART I

DEFINITIONS AND DEBATES

CHAPTER 1

DEFINING ‘ATHEISM’

STEPHEN BULLIVANT

ATHEISM AND AMBIGUITY

THE precise definition of ‘atheism’ is both a vexed and vexatious issue. (Incidentally, the same applies to its more-or-less equivalents in other languages: *Atheismus*, *athéisme*, *ateismi*, etc.) Etymologically, atheism is derived from the classical Greek *a-* (normally meaning ‘not’ or ‘without’) and *theos* (‘god’). Its first extant appearance in English occurs in the mid-sixteenth century, as a translation of Plutarch’s *atheotes* (Buckley 1987: 9). Even from its earliest beginnings in Greek and English, however, atheism/ *atheotes* admitted of a variety of competing, and confusing, definitions—often bearing no straightforward relationship to its strict etymology. While these lie outside the scope of the present chapter, some of the more interesting definitions and applications are discussed elsewhere in this volume.

Even today, however, there is no clear, academic consensus as to how exactly the term should be used. For example, consider the following definitions of ‘atheism’ or ‘atheist’, all taken from serious scholarly writings published in the last ten years:

1. ‘Atheism [...] is the belief that there is no God or gods’ (Baggini 2003: 3)
2. ‘At its core, atheism [...] designates a position (not a “belief”) that includes or asserts no god(s)’ (Eller 2010: 1)
3. ‘[A]n atheist is someone without a belief in God; he or she need not be someone who believes that God does not exist’ (Martin 2007: 1)
4. ‘[A]n atheist does not believe in the god that theism favours’ (Cliteur 2009: 1)
5. ‘By “atheist,” I mean precisely what the word has always been understood to mean—a principled and informed decision to *reject* belief in God’ (McGrath 2004: 175)

Of course, these definitions share certain features: all regard atheism as relating, in a negative way, to a thing or things called ‘god’, and all but one describe this relationship in terms of belief. But beyond this, it is obvious that these authors are not all talking about the same thing at all. The first and second include *gods*; the final three specify only one (which the final two give a capital G). The fourth definition, moreover, restricts this scope even further. Definitions two and three regard atheism as simply being the *absence* of a certain belief; the rest, contrariwise, see it as implying a definite belief. Moreover, the fifth definition also demands a level of intellectual—and perhaps also emotional—*conviction*, over and above simple believing.

Though our focus in this chapter is on scholarly usage(s), it is worth pointing out that everyday speech is no more monosemic. This is, perhaps, partly to be expected: after all, English is very much a global language, and is the native tongue of approaching 400 million people. Nevertheless, even

relatively homogeneous groups often display a notable lack of uniformity. For instance, a 2007 study of over 700 students—all at the same British university, at the same time, with a clear majority being a similar age and from the same country—found that, from a list of commonly encountered definitions of ‘atheist’, the most popular choice was ‘A person who believes that there is no God or gods’ (Bullivant 2008). This was, however, chosen by only 51.8 per cent of respondents: hardly an overwhelming consensus. 29.1 per cent opted instead for ‘A person who is convinced that there is no God or gods’, 13.6 per cent took the broader ‘A person who lacks a belief in a God or gods’, and 0.6 per cent answered ‘Don’t know’. Thirty-five respondents, eight of whom had already affirmed one of the suggested meanings, offered their own definitions. These included:

- ‘A person who lacks a belief in supernatural forces, without suggesting that they might exist’.
- ‘Someone who denies the validity of using the word “God” to indicate anything (other than a concept) which might be said to “exist” ’.
- ‘A person who has no belief in any deity and finds that religion is not an important part of their life’.
- ‘Someone who isn’t a member of any religion that believes in one God’.

Once again, despite general similarities, it is clear that the word is used and understood in a wide variety of different ways, even in so relatively uniform a group. (Note too the introduction of wider concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘supernatural forces’, rather than confining themselves to just God/gods, into these definitions.) Thinking more widely, it is also worth noting that both ‘atheism’ and ‘atheist’ can carry a considerable number of overtones and connotations, positive and negative: even among people agreeing on a given abstract definition, calling someone an ‘atheist’ might well communicate very different things in, say, McCarthy-era Dallas, post-communist Krakow, or twenty-first-century London.

THE BABEL HANDBOOK OF ATHEISM?

It is important to recognize that plurality of usage, as sketched above, need not imply that some scholars are right and others are wrong. Atheism simply possesses no single, objective definition: it can be used correctly in a number of related, sometimes overlapping, and often mutually exclusive ways. This is not necessarily a problem, so long as one is always clear how exactly each author is deploying the term. (There is also a valid case to be made for certain disciplines to use the word in their own, highly specialized senses.) That is not to say, however, that all definitions are equally *useful*: a too-narrow definition may inadvertently airbrush out all kinds of interesting potential data, while a too-broad one may capture a large number of ‘atheisms’ with few meaningful connections between them. Alternatively, a definition that is too idiosyncratic, or culturally bound, may obviate comparisons with other work ostensibly on the same subject. Furthermore, and quite obviously, the sheer lack of agreement creates a great deal of, at best, time-consuming effort, and at worst, hopeless confusion, for all concerned. There is, therefore, a great deal of utility to be gained from finding a generally agreed-upon, serviceable (if not perfect), scholarly definition of the word atheism.

The merits of this may be grasped if one imagines this Handbook—drawing together dozens of scholars, from widely diverse disciplines, and several continents—as a microcosm of the scholarly study of atheism. Without a ‘standard’ definition, outlined and explained in a chapter such as this, each contributor would need to explicate his or her own definition at the beginning of their chapter—or

else, as happens all too often, their readers would simply have to infer quite how he or she is using the term. The reader, of course, would need to remember this definition throughout the duration of the chapter, before consciously relearning and rerecalling what would *probably* (but not necessarily) be a different definition for the next chapter. With different authors defining the term in different ways, like-for-like comparisons between chapters would become next to impossible: the ‘atheists’ whose psychological tendencies one learns about in one chapter may well be a different (and possibly mutually exclusive) set of ‘atheists’ whose demographic trends are charted in the next. Such a collection would not, it must be said, be without value: each individual chapter could well constitute an exemplary and illuminating piece of scholarship. Furthermore, every single one of its definitions of atheism might be perfectly *valid* (if not necessarily, for the reasons mentioned above, optimally useful): clearly and precisely defined, with a weight of historical usage behind it, and having sufficient consonance with popular usage. And yet, viewed as a whole, *The Babel Handbook of Atheism* would be a frustrating morass of contradictions and cross-purposes. Such, writ large, is the state of the scholarly study of atheism today.

Throughout this volume, by contrast, and unless otherwise stated, ‘atheism’ is defined as *an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods*. As with most mainstream definitions of the term, it is simply the fruit of two basic decisions: the meaning and scope of *a-*, and the meaning and scope of *-theism*. Neither decision, of course, is either straightforward or uncontroversial. So let me explain, explore, and defend each of them in turn, while giving special attention to the question of *utility*.

a- IS FOR ...?

According to this definition, *a-* signifies a simple absence, or lack, or ‘state of being without’. In Greek grammar, this usage of *a-* is called a ‘privative *a*’ (or *alpha privativum/privans*), and features in such English words as amoral, asexual, anarchy, and anaerobic. Hence anaerobic respiration occurs in the absence of oxygen, but it is not, in itself, necessarily *opposed to* oxygen; anarchy is a principally state of lawless-ness, rather than a state of denying or opposing the existence of laws (although individual anarchists, having elaborated an ideology from the concept, may or may not do just that). By analogy, atheism thus becomes an absence of something called ‘theism’. Importantly, it does not *require* a specific denial or rejection of, nor any animus against, this ‘theism’—although, also importantly, it does not rule it out.

While this interpretation of atheism’s *a-* is indeed consonant with its Greek etymology, that is not, in itself, a strong reason for advocating it. Actual Greek usage, in fact, was itself rather variable. For example, Liddell and Scott define *atheotes* as ‘godlessness’ (1869: 27), citing the comment in Plato’s dialogue *The Statesman* about those ‘impelled to *atheotēs* and to vaunting pride and injustice by the drive of an evil nature’ (308e; quoted from Hamilton and Cairns 1961: 1081). While this is indeed an instance of *alpha privativum* (being ‘without’ god in the sense of being ‘godless’ or ‘ungodly’), the meaning intended is evidently a moral one. The same is, for example, also true in Aeschylus’ *Eumenides* when Orestes is described with the adjective *atheos* (‘atheist’). However, *atheos* could also connote ‘one who denies or dishonours the God’ (as used of Socrates in Plato’s *Apology*), a sense that goes beyond a simple, privative *absence* of belief. Furthermore, irrespective of its Greek descent, atheism is now an English word, and has been in use for over four and a half centuries. There is a long tradition in English of understanding atheism’s prefix as demanding, not merely an absence of theism, but instead a definite rejection of it. (Hence McGrath’s definition, quoted earlier: ‘a principled and informed decision to *reject* belief in God’.) As noted above, this is arguably the most usual

common-speech meaning (though it is far from ubiquitous), and it is well-represented in recent scholarly literature (among others, see: Baggini 2003: 3–4; Hyman 2007: 28–9; Cliteur 2009: 1; and Walters 2010: 171).

Nevertheless, and irrespective of any etymological arguments in its favour, a strong case can be made for preferring our interpretation on the basis of scholarly utility. Defining atheism as ‘an absence of ...’ permits it to function as an umbrella concept, comprising a range of significantly related positions and phenomena. These may usefully be subdivided into different categories, at different analytic levels. It is common, for example, for advocates of this kind of definition to distinguish ‘positive’ (or ‘strong’/‘hard’) and ‘negative’ (or ‘weak’/‘soft’) varieties of atheism (Martin 1990: 464). On this schema—which the Handbook adopts—‘negative atheism’ is consonant with our basic definition of an *absence*. It thus includes such positions as agnosticism (in both its classical sense of a specific belief that there is insufficient evidence either to believe or disbelieve in the existence of a God or gods, and in its more popular sense of not having made up one’s mind), and the view of some linguistic philosophers that the word God is literally meaningless (see Charles Pigden’s ‘Analytic Philosophy’). Any person who does not, at present, have a belief in the existence of a God or gods is thus a negative atheist. By contrast, a ‘positive atheist’ is someone who is not only without such a belief, but holds a specific belief (which may, of course, be held with varying levels of certainty or interest) that there is no God or gods. Clearly, anyone who holds *that* belief—unless they are very confused—thereby is also without a belief in God’s/gods’ existence. Thus positive atheism implies negative atheism, but not vice versa. Positive atheism too may be further subdivided into various kinds: Promethean antitheism, existentialist atheism, Soviet scientific atheism, New Atheism, and so on.

To adopt a zoological metaphor, it might be helpful to think of atheism as a ‘family’, divisible into two ‘genera’ (negative and positive), each made up of various ‘species’ (agnosticism, Promethean antitheism, etc.). This taxonomic approach to atheism permits exploration of a diverse range of stances and worldviews, united by their shared absence of theism. It encompasses, for example, the positive atheisms of the humanist Bertrand Russell, the existentialist Jean-Paul Sartre, and the Marxist Mao Zedong, but also the negative atheisms of the agnostic Anthony Kenny, the logical positivist A. J. Ayer, and some—but not all—of the secular ‘indifference’ of a large and increasing number of Westerners. It would also include any genuinely *religious* atheisms, as are sometimes identified in strands of Hinduism, Buddhism, and Jainism (though see Jessica Frazier’s, Andrew Skilton’s, and Anne Vallely’s chapters later in this Handbook). Needless to say, the great bulk of this (coherent) richness and diversity—and with it, the potential for illuminating comparisons and correlations—is lost if atheism’s prefix is understood exclusively in the sense of a rejection and/or denial.¹ Of course, scholars are not obliged to take into account all of atheism’s ‘endless forms’, whenever they want to write about a particular ‘genus’ or ‘species’: positive atheism, for example, is and will remain a discrete and significant focus of enquiry in itself. Nonetheless, there is clear value in being at least aware of how one’s specific topic relates to the bigger picture. One positive result, for instance, may be to reduce the data-skewing tendency of some students of religion to bifurcate people into ‘religious believers’ and ‘convinced atheists’, as though there were no possibility of anything in between.

Not insignificantly, this way of defining *a-* has precedents in both the writings of influential atheist writers, and in key works in the philosophical and social-scientific study of atheism (e.g., Flew 1976; Smith [1979] 1989; Martin 1990; Hiorth 2003; Hwang et al. 2009; Eller 2010). Furthermore, given the benefits of finding an agreed-upon definition among scholars of atheism (as outlined in the previous section), its recent employment in another major, multi-author reference work—*The Cambridge*

Companion to Atheism (see Martin 2007)—is a key point in its favour.

One final comment: it is important to note that this definition of *a-* in terms of an ‘absence’ is intended in a wholly value-neutral, non-pejorative sense. It is not meant to imply that there is something ‘missing’ in the atheist that he or she *ought* either to have or to be (which is, of course, a separate question entirely). However, the possibility of the definition being (mis)taken to have negative connotations is indeed a troubling one. One might, of course, substitute ‘a *lack* of belief in the existence of a God or gods’ as a direct synonym. This would, moreover, lend an elegant symmetry to the corresponding definition of ‘atheist’ as ‘one who lacks a belief in the existence of a God or gods’. However, *lack* is susceptible to the same, or worse, kinds of misunderstanding: describing something as lacking normally implies a deficiency. Unfortunately, *absence* genuinely does lack such elegant symmetry when applied to the definition of ‘atheist’, creating the decidedly tortuous ‘one from whom a belief in the existence of a God or gods is absent’. Instead, it would probably be best to choose ‘one who is *without* a belief in the existence of a God or gods’ (which, unfortunately, results in the ludicrous, cognate definition of atheism: ‘a “without-ness” of a belief in the existence of a God or gods’). On balance, ‘absence’ for atheism and ‘without’ for atheist, while far from perfect, are probably still to be preferred.²

THE MEANING(s) OF - THEISM

In the above discussion of *a-*, I have been glossing *-theism* with ‘belief in the existence of God or gods’. Yet, as with its companion, this too is the result of a conscious—and contentious—decision. Whereas defining *a-* is largely a binary affair (*either* it is understood as meaning ‘without’ or ‘an absence of’, or as signifying a specific denial), *-theism* admits of a far wider range of credible options. So let me explain what I do and don’t mean by defining it as I have done, while once again comparing it with (and defending it against) some of its recent competitors.

Obviously, this understanding of *-theism* is contingent upon the individual meanings of ‘existence’ and ‘God/gods’. Equally obviously, there is no space here to give comprehensive accounts of either of these ideas. It will be helpful, though, to make a few brief remarks about ‘existence’, before commenting in more detail on the crucial category of ‘God/gods’—upon which, as one might expect, the greatest disagreements among definers of atheism have centred.

‘Existence’ is not, perhaps, overly problematic. That is not to say that the concept does not present interesting philosophical issues and problems, but these are not specific to our current concerns. Admittedly, there are also strands within Christian theology which might want to deny, or at least qualify, the claim that God ‘exists’ (at least in the normal sense that everything within the universe is said to exist)—the influential fourth- or fifth-century theologian Pseudo-Dionysius could write that God ‘falls neither within the predicate of nonbeing nor of being’ (Luibheid and Rorem 1987: 141), for example—but this is a technical issue, beyond the scope of the present essay.³ That said, in the interests of precision, it is important to underline the role of the word ‘existence’ in defining atheism. Frequently, the word is omitted, resulting in definitions of (a)theism in terms simply of ‘belief in God(s)’. While this is fine as a handy abbreviation, as it stands the phrase is ambiguous: it can mean either *belief that* there is a God or gods, or *faith/trust in* God or the gods (Lash [1992] 2002: 18–21). In the vast majority of cases, including here, atheism relates only to the former sense (although an absence of that would, of course, ordinarily imply an absence of faith too).⁴ The presence of the word ‘existence’ also rules out those who might claim to ‘believe in God’, but only in some figurative, or anti-realist sense—in the same way that an adult, while not believing that Santa actually *exists*, might

insist ‘I believe in Santa Claus!’ in order to affirm a general commitment to the magic of Christmas. These too, being without a belief in the *existence* of a God or gods, are still atheists on our definition.

The proposed definition draws on a conventional distinction between ‘God’ (singular, capitalized) and ‘gods’ (plural, lower case). According to this, the former normally signifies the ‘genre’ of God traditionally worshipped in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam (the differences between or within those traditions notwithstanding): a supreme, personal, transcendent, omnipotent, omniscient, and omnibenevolent Creator. This is sometimes referred to as the ‘Judeo-Christian God’, or the ‘God of Classical Theism’. ‘God’ can and does, though, also refer to the supreme beings of other monotheistic religions or belief systems—e.g., Zoroastrianism, Sikhism, Neoplatonism—who may or may not conform precisely to the above description. Our second category of ‘gods’ is, however, rather harder to pin down: religious studies reference books are oddly reticent about giving a generic, non-tradition-specific definition of what a ‘god’ actually is. Certainly, most ‘gods’ are not simply multiple versions of the ‘God’ of classical theism. The Greco-Roman gods and goddesses, for example, are typically neither omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent, nor transcendent (in the sense of being *outside* of creation).⁵ It may well be, in fact, that despite there being any number of widely accepted claimants of the epithet ‘God/god’—Nyami Nyami, Hera, Odin, Baal, Wakan Tankah, Pachacamac—there is no set of essential characteristics that all gods possess, and all non-gods do not. (Being immaterial, immortal, and possessing supernatural powers, for instance, are often also considered properties of beings not normally regarded as gods, such as demons or sprites. On this point, see below.) It may also be that our Western concept of ‘a god’—arguably like ‘religion’—is one that has been artificially foisted upon belief systems, and where it now sits uneasily. If so, then perhaps it would be best to adopt a Wittgensteinian ‘family resemblance model’—such as has been proposed for defining ‘religion’ itself (e.g., Clarke and Byrne 1993)—for deciding what does or does not count as a ‘god’. This would acknowledge that there is no set of necessary and sufficient properties common to all putative ‘gods’ (thus recognizing the genuine ambiguities of the term’s real-world application), while preserving what is, after all, a useful and well-established concept.⁶

The above considerations, while seemingly a little off-topic, are worth thinking about here. Partly because of the relative difficulties involved in defining ‘god(s)’ as opposed to ‘God’, some scholars insist on defining atheism *solely* in relation to monotheism, if not in fact, to one specific instance of it. Kerry Walters, for example, affirms ‘The God whose existence atheists reject is the deity worshipped by the three “Religions of the Book”: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. [...] Each of them proclaims what’s come to be known as “the God of classical theism”’ (2010: 17). And for Paul Cliteur: ‘Atheism is concerned with *one specific concept* of god: the theistic god. The theistic god has a name and this is written with a capital: God’ (2009: 3). Relatedly, one commonly meets the claim that atheism’s definition is always relative to whatever form of theism happens to be dominant. In the words of Gavin Hyman: ‘atheism defines itself in terms of that which it is denying. From this it follows that if definitions and understandings of God change and vary, so too our definitions and understandings of atheism will change and vary. This further means that there will be as many varieties of atheism as there are varieties of theism. For atheism will always be a rejection, negation, or denial of a *particular form* of theism’ (2007: 29).

Certainly, there is some truth to this claim: *positive* atheism, at least, frequently expresses itself in opposition to some specific understanding of theism. In times and places where Christianity is prevalent, it would be strange to expend much energy critiquing the Neoplatonists’ One, or Pharaoh Akhenaten’s sun-god Aten. And nor is it surprising that Western proponents of positive atheism should now direct their attentions to Islam, as well as to their traditional target of Christianity. But the fact that prevailing theisms condition the focus and expression of certain types of atheism, need not

mean that either they or atheism in general have no wider referent. Even when specific attention is understandably given to one type of theism, this is normally accompanied and motivated by a general disavowal of all gods. (By analogy, an opposition party normally expresses itself against the policies of the government. But it would be something of a stretch to claim that, say, the essence of the Labour Party—or socialism itself—is defined exclusively by ‘what the Tories are not’.)

The practical disutility of such a definition can, moreover, be easily grasped. If atheism is defined exclusively in terms of (say) the prevailing Abrahamic monotheism, then all non-adherents in that society—including huge numbers of other types of theists, both poly and mono—are thereby made ‘atheists’. But not even the proponents of such definitions, in practice, use the concept in so broad and unwieldy a way. Furthermore, it becomes meaningless to speak of ‘atheism’ in times and places where this kind of monotheism is basically unknown: depending on one’s understanding of *a-*, either everyone in ancient Athens was an atheist (in the negative sense), or nobody was (in the positive sense). But again, even those proposing such ethnocentric definitions of atheism *still* want to single out specific groups of ‘atheists’ in classical Greece (cf. Cliteur 2009: 5).

At the other end of the spectrum, there are those who, rather than restricting the scope of *-theism* to one specific understanding of God, wish instead to extend it to encompass *all* supernatural beings, forces, and phenomena. James Thrower, for instance, distinguishes ‘relative atheism’ (such as we have just discussed) from ‘absolute atheism’, which he regards as synonymous with metaphysical naturalism ([1971] 2000: 4). Other scholars, while not defining atheism in terms of naturalism, nevertheless regard the two as intrinsically linked. Kerry Walters, for example, asserts: ‘The worldview that undergirds atheism is one whose deepest core belief is that the natural world is all that there is’ (2010: 36). He continues:

[A]ll atheists are both methodological and what might be called ‘ontological’ naturalists. They don’t just insist that scientific hypotheses must be kept free of occult explanations. They argue that scientific explanations are legitimate because there is nothing in reality that can’t be understood ultimately in material, physico-chemical, naturalistic terms. For the ontological naturalist, there is nothing apart from nature, and nature is self-originating, self-explanatory, and without overall purpose. (*ibid.*: 37)

But while this may well be the worldview of many atheists, especially Western positive atheists (though I expect many of these would wish to qualify the above précis), there seems no need to regard this as being *the* atheist worldview. There are vast numbers of people who have no belief whatsoever in anything ‘theistic’, and yet believe in other supernatural beings or phenomena (see Eller 2010: 3, 10). These may include impersonal ‘forces’ or ‘energies’, nature spirits, dead ancestors, demons, sprites, or ghosts, as well as any number of paranormal possibilities such as clairvoyance, telekinesis, messages from beyond the grave, etc.⁷ Furthermore, this applies both to the followers of multiple non-theistic world religions, as well as to wholly nonreligious, self-defining ‘atheists’ in the secular West (see, for example, Lois Lee’s chapter on ‘Western Europe’). These cases, atypical and anomalous as they may (or may not) be, are certainly interesting, and there would seem to be little gained by defining such people as non-atheists out of hand. The same applies, of course, to other attempts to identify atheism-in-general with a specific worldview (such as, most commonly, humanism). The words of George Smith are worth recalling:

From the mere fact that a person is an atheist, one cannot infer that this person subscribes to any particular positive beliefs. One’s positive convictions are quite distinct from the subject of atheism. While one may begin with a basic philosophical position and infer atheism as a consequence of it, this process cannot be reversed. One cannot move from atheism to a basic philosophical belief, because atheism can be (and has been) incorporated within many different and incompatible philosophical systems. ([1979] 1989: 21–2)

Yet again, the primary concern here is utility: the study of atheism has far too much to lose in terms

of richness and diversity by artificially excluding great sectors of those from whom a belief in the existence of a God or gods is absent.

CONCLUSION

The purpose of this chapter has been to explore the troublesome question of what *atheism* actually means, and to elucidate and justify the specific way in which it is being used in this volume. After introducing a number of background issues—the variability of word's historical and contemporary usage, and the benefits of a generally agreed-upon scholarly definition—the task was broken down into its two constituent parts: the definition of *a-*, and the definition of *-theism*. It was argued that the former is best interpreted in the privative sense of an 'absence'. This permits atheism to function as an umbrella concept, uniting a wide (but coherent) set of positions and phenomena. It is then possible to construct a systematic taxonomy of different types of atheism—the most basic division being between negative (simple absence) and positive (specific denial)—to bring clarity to further researches. The discussion regarding *-theism* was more complicated, with a broader range of credible options. Here it was argued that the central idea should be 'belief in the existence of a God or gods' (without needing to define too sharply what does or does not count as a 'god', a concept lacking a certain clarity in the field of religious studies). This steers a course between confining theism to only a specific form of it (e.g., Abrahamic monotheism), and needlessly coupling atheism itself to a particular metaphysical or ethical worldview. The resulting union of these two decisions gives us the following definition of atheism: *an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods*. Since it has been a key contention in this chapter that the definition of atheism is to be guided by the principle of scholarly utility—and not least the extent to which it helps, or hinders, the pursuit of interesting and genuinely illuminating research—then this particular one can, to a significant degree, be judged by its fruits in the rest of this Handbook.

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CHAPTER 2

THE CASE AGAINST ATHEISM

T. J. MAWSON

INTRODUCTION

‘ATHEISM’ is sometimes defined as the view that we know (or are, some or most of us, in a position to know) that there is not a God. This then naturally pairs with defining ‘theism’, by contrast, as the view that we know (or are, some or most of us, in a position to know) that there is a God, leaving ‘agnosticism’ as the view that we don’t know (many or even any of us), either way. Had this publication defined ‘atheism’ in this fashion (see Stephen Bullivant’s ‘Defining “Atheism”’), it would have been a view that had more to be said against it than atheism as it has actually defined; and, in saying some of these things against it, I would have found myself making common cause with agnostics, so understood, as well as with theists. This is because atheism, so understood, doesn’t rest content with making a claim about the truth of the belief that there’s not a God; it goes beyond that and makes a claim about this belief’s being an item of knowledge for all or some of those who have it.

A second, less bold, view thus suggests itself as one that might nevertheless be deserving of the name ‘atheism’, the view which doesn’t venture an opinion on the knowledge-status of the belief that there’s no God, but confines itself instead to its truth. And such a view is indeed frequently found in the literature under the name ‘atheism’. So, ‘atheism’ is sometimes defined simply as the claim that there is no God and theism as the claim that there is a God. An agnostic then may be taken as someone who is neither a theist nor an atheist.

This publication opts for a third way, one which makes atheism an even less bold thesis than it is on the second way of defining it, which I have just sketched. When a person claims to be an atheist in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*’s sense, he or she says of himself or herself that, as a matter of fact, he or she has failed to come to the belief that there is a God. This may be because he or she has in fact come to the belief that there’s not a God and thus is an atheist in the second (positive) sense, but it may be because he or she has simply failed to come to a belief one way or another and thus is an agnostic in the second (negative) sense.

The case against atheism, understood as it is here, must then be the case for it being *unreasonable* to fail to believe that there’s a God. That is to say, in advancing the case against atheism as it is understood by the contributors to the volume, I must argue that the arguments or some subset of the arguments of natural theology (by which I mean the project of advancing arguments for God’s existence from premises concerning the natural world) are rationally compelling. Fair enough, those are the terms of the debate framed by Bullivant’s ‘Defining “Atheism”’, and I do in fact believe this about some of the arguments of natural theology with respect to the God of classical theism, so that is what I’ll argue. (It’s because I believe this with respect to this god [the God] that I don’t then bother to mention the ‘or gods’ clause in the definition of atheism.) But, before I do so, I want to pause to make two points, the first being the one that many theists, quite consistently with their theism, would be

happy to concede that such a case cannot be made.

The sort of theist who says that whilst, given his or her particular religious experiences, it's not unreasonable for him/her to believe in God (possibly even would be unreasonable for him/her not to believe in God), but who refuses to claim that it's true of all or most others that, regardless of their individual experiences (or lack of them), it's unreasonable for *them* not to believe in God, is obviously not committed to *any* of the arguments of natural theology being rationally compelling. Such a theist could, no doubt, be pressed to agree that he or she needs a counter-argument (a defeater-defeater, as it's usually called) to the problem of evil (which otherwise, being an undefeated defeater to his or her theism, would render it unreasonable). But theism per se doesn't commit one to atheism's being unreasonable for everyone or even most.

This view is worth noting in part as it is not by any means an unusual one. Indeed, it is that of one of the two most prominent philosophers of religion alive today, Alvin Plantinga (e.g., 2000). (The other, Richard Swinburne, would support the general line I take below (see, e.g., 2004).) Theists influenced by Plantinga in this particular, thinking that their theism is properly basic, could accept that atheism—understood as failing to come to the belief that there is a God—is a position that it is reasonable for many or even most people to adopt. Some people, such a theist may say—perhaps even the majority of people—may indeed be not unreasonable in failing to come to the belief that there's a God, but, then again, such people won't have had the experiences that he or she has had, the experiences which make Theism not unreasonable, possibly even rationally compelling, for him or her. Such a theist can go on to say that if these atheists who are at the moment not unreasonable in being atheists *did* have similar experiences to those of this theist, then, but perhaps only then, they'd be unreasonable in remaining in their atheism. But, unless or until they do so, their atheism is indeed a not-unreasonable position. Such a theist may even consistently assert that atheism is the *only reasonable* position for them to adopt. These theists then have no dispute with atheism understood in the Handbook's broad sense. In fact, Plantinga thinks that there are good natural theological arguments, but the view of his that I'm focusing on here is the 'meta' one, that good natural theological arguments are not needed for theism to be rational (and indeed knowably true) for a certain subset of people, those in receipt of the right experiences (and with suitable 'defeater-defeaters' to hand should the problem of evil be presented to them). The sorts of theists I'm talking about at the moment are the sorts of theists who are inspired by him to take this meta view whilst being less optimistic than he happens to be about the prospects of natural theology understood as I am understanding it.

As well as this sort of view being worth noting as it is by no means an unusual one, it is worth noting as noting it allows us to see that the rational defensibility of Theism is not directly threatened if the argument that I'll advance against atheism doesn't in fact have the strength that I shall attribute to it or even if no argument does. That is to say that failing to show that it's unreasonable not to believe that there is a God, is not showing that it's unreasonable to believe that there is a God. To get from this failure to that conclusion, one would have to mount an extended campaign against these Plantinga-following theists. This is worth pointing out as many of those who say that there aren't any good arguments for theism go on to conclude from this that atheism is the only reasonable position without appearing even to realize that they need to engage in (and win) such a campaign. They make a few hand-waving comments about where the 'burden of proof' lies and think that that suffices; it does not.

The second point I want to make by way of introduction concerns the general issue of when it's reasonable to fail to come to a belief that *x*. My point here is that such an issue is a substantial one, for all values of *x*, and in one manner it's more than ordinarily intractable when *x* takes the value of 'God exists'.

When we decide whether or not it is reasonable to fail to come to a belief that x , we need to think of ourselves as having a pretty good idea of where the virtuous mean falls between two opposing vices, at least for that particular value of x (perhaps it falls in different places for different values). On the one hand, we should not be overly credulous—so desperate not to leave a truth out there in the cold, as it were, languishing un-believed—that we carelessly fling open the doors of our minds and allow in all manner of unworthy falsehoods, to make themselves at home. People who tell us that, on the basis of the testimony of a man they met in the pub, they now believe in the healing power of crystals will strike us as having erred on this side of virtue. On the other hand, we ought not to be so desperate not to allow an unworthy falsehood into the hallowed halls of our minds, that we close the doors prematurely in the face of all sorts of belief-worthy truths, truths that were rightly expecting admission. This is the vice towards which professional philosophers naturally err.

Can we—theists and atheists alike—agree and be pretty confident in our being right about where the virtuous mean lies between the two vices of being overly credulous and overly sceptical in the context of the particular belief that there's a God? No, because—although I don't have time to argue it here (see Mawson 2010 for more)—where the virtuous mean lies in this case depends on whether or not there is a God: roughly, if there is, then it's closer to the credulous end and, if there's not, then it's closer to the sceptical end. That being so, we can't expect an agreement between theists and atheists on where the virtuous mean lies and thus even in those cases (should there be any) where there is an agreement between theist and atheist on how good a particular argument for the existence of God is we can't always expect an agreement on whether that argument renders it unreasonable to fail to come to believe that there's a God.

So, by way of introduction, I have made two main points. First, given the way atheism has been defined (an atheist is someone from whom a belief that there's a God or gods is absent), not all theists would think that atheism is unreasonable for all or even most people; some theists indeed would insist that atheism is the only reasonable approach for those not in receipt of the sorts of religious experiences that they have received. These theists, taking Plantinga's line on this issue, are not committed to the success of any of the arguments of natural theology and thus their theism is not directly threatened if my natural theological argument below fails. Secondly, what standards it is reasonable for one to expect an argument in favour of the truth of a belief that x to reach before it becomes unreasonable to fail to come to the belief that x will vary between theists and atheists when x takes the value of 'God exists'. Thus, even were a given argument of natural theology to be agreed by each to have a certain degree of strength, they might, quite consistently with agreeing this, disagree on whether it thus made remaining in unbelief unreasonable. Both these points have obvious bearing on whether one should be in the business of demanding of the theist that he or she 'defeat' atheism with arguments and whether one will be able to agree on a standard that needs to be met for defeat to be declared. Be that as it may, the business I find myself in today is meeting that demand. So, without further ado, I'll do my best to get on with it.

CUMULATIVE CASES AND KILLER FACTS

The strongest natural theological case seems to me a cumulative one, composed of many arguments which collectively, and weighing the problem of evil in the balance too, are overall sufficient to raise the probability of there being a God to an extent where one has more reason to believe that he exists than one has to believe that he does not. This (bracketing rather the concerns raised in my introductory comments) may be taken to be equivalent to rendering it unreasonable to fail to believe

that there's a God; thus, the case against atheism would be made. And, as to the elements, I'd say that there's at least something to be said in favour of many of the traditional arguments of natural theology. That is, I think that many of these arguments do in fact do something to raise the probability of there being a God on their premises, premises which are themselves at least somewhat more plausible than their negations. But I'd also concede that there's no one 'killer fact', e.g., a fact that everyone agrees is a fact; that everyone can see needs explanation; and that obviously needs God for its explanation. It's not that atheists are simply missing something obvious. Due to considerations of space, I want to narrow my focus in what space remains to me to just one element of the larger cumulative case that I'd present were space to permit. As I say, I don't believe that there are any 'killer facts', but I've chosen this element out of the larger cumulative case as the facts from which it starts seem to me to come pretty close to being killers. The argument is a variant of the fine-tuning version of the Design Argument. On this topic, I have some original things to say, but also much that is unoriginal, so I hope that those familiar with the literature will forgive me for repeating some material which they already know.

GOD AND THE UNIVERSE

First, allow me to state how I understand a couple of crucial terms. By 'the universe', I mean the physical reality that we encounter in everyday life—we presume—and all things causally connected to it which admit, at least in principle, of scientific explanation. So, the universe includes not merely the observed universe, but also the unobserved—sections of space-time beyond our light cone. If, as the Everett interpretation of quantum mechanics suggests, each time a quantum state 'collapses' as the rest of us might put it, the universe branches, then all the branches taken together make up one universe in my sense of universe. I won't labour the point with more examples, the point being that, as I shall be using the term, the universe includes all and only entities the explanation of which would be part of a completed science. Secondly, by 'God' I shall mean the God of classical theism: a supernatural person who is omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good, and creator of everything other than himself. I take it that the existence of such a God is logically possible. (Of course this is controversial; for a defence of it, see the first half of Mawson 2005.) And I also take it that, were God to exist, He would—of necessity—not be a part of any universe as, were he to exist, he would lie outside scientific explanation in principle.

In what follows I shall be focusing on the hypothesis that every possible universe is actual, what I shall call the 'maximal multiverse hypothesis' and be considering its probability relative to that of God's being actual, the 'God hypothesis' if you will. And I shall be considering their relative probabilities on the evidence provided by certain general features of the laws of nature which we take to be operative in our universe, what might be called the 'fine tuning of the universe to us' and the 'fine tuning of us to the universe'. (I shall explain what I mean by fine tuning in a moment.) I've focused on the maximal multiverse hypothesis and the God hypothesis as these two hypotheses are, I am assuming, the simplest naturalist and supernaturalist hypotheses that one might suggest as explaining the fine tuning. The simplicity of the maximal multiverse hypothesis is an issue to which I shall return in due course; the relative simplicity of the God hypothesis amongst supernaturalist hypotheses is one that space considerations force me to assume.

In considering these hypotheses I shall be allowing myself then to think that in principle the probability of various explanatory hypotheses which make reference to things beyond the universe—specifically other universes or God—might be raised or indeed lowered by our discovery of features

of this universe.

Some people are very chary of talking of probabilities in this area for they hold exclusively to a frequentist understanding of probability, thinking that whenever one talks of probability one is gesturing to a series of trials and talking about the relative frequency of a certain outcome across that series. Where that sort of background is lacking (as it is in this case), such people say, attributing probability to a hypothesis doesn't make sense or perhaps—more minimally—makes sense but is something for which one cannot have any reasons. To see the error in this, engage in the following thought experiment with me if you please.

Suppose that scientists had discovered that the universe was composed of a certain type of fundamental particle each one of which had inscribed on it in Times Roman zero, point zero, zero, zero, some-tiny-size font, 'This Particle Created by the God of Classical Theism'. What would we say to someone who, on being made aware of this startling discovery, said this? 'My notion of probability is such as to mean that I cannot allow that this evidence raises the probability of theism for it does nothing to allow me to stand back and look at multiple universes, observing the frequency with which this property is conjoined with God and the frequency with which it is conjoined with no God'. Well, we'd surely say that they'd just shown themselves to have an overly restrictive notion of probability. That sort of evidence—had it been forthcoming—really would have raised the probability of there being a God beyond reasonable doubt and anyone whose notion of probability is such as to mean that they'd say that it wouldn't is someone whose notion of probability is one we have *ipso facto* good reason to reject as exhaustive of legitimate notions of probability.

Now we'll all have noticed that we're not actually in a universe where scientists have discovered that written on every fundamental particle is a small but unambiguous message purporting to be from the creator—that *would be* a 'killer fact' for atheism. But we are in a universe where scientists—and indeed philosophers—have discovered lots of interesting things and some of these, I suggest, have a bearing. Let's turn to the scientists first.

COSMIC FINE-TUNING

Scientists tell us that had the Big Bang had slightly more force, then the universe would have expanded at such a fast rate that no stars, planets, or life could ever have formed. Had it expanded slightly more slowly, everything would have collapsed back in on itself under gravitational attraction before life could have formed too. As well as that which controls the force of the Big Bang, there are a number of other quantities in the laws of nature, and scientists are approaching consensus on what are the maximum deviations in these quantities that would nevertheless have allowed life to have formed. Thus, they tell us, the Cosmological Constant could only have deviated by a factor of one over ten to the power of 120; the ratio of electrons to protons by one over ten to the power of 37. And so on. (There are many good discussions of these things; some are Leslie 1989; Rees 2000; Barrow 2002; Collins 2002; and Holder 2004.) We may thence be led to picture our universe as one amongst many possible universes, in each of which the same natural laws operate, yet in only a very few of which life is possible as in only a very few of which do these constants manage to hit just the right values, thus concluding that our universe is 'fine tuned' to life. And this fact, it might be suggested, needs explanation, an explanation best provided—it has often been suggested—by the God hypothesis. Thus, the classic 'fine tuning' version of the Design Argument.

By far the most common objection to the fine tuning version of the Design Argument may be put as follows: 'Fine tuning can't be in need of explanation because we couldn't observe a universe which

wasn't fine tuned. We wouldn't be here to think about it if it hadn't happened, so the fact that it has happened isn't worth thinking about'. This, despite its almost universal appeal, is, I take it, shown to be misguided by thought experiments such as the following, which I adapt from Swinburne.

A terrorist ties you up in a room with a machine. The machine is linked up to a bomb which will, if it explodes, kill you. You see the terrorist put ten ordinary packs of cards into the top of the machine. He tells you that the machine will thoroughly shuffle these cards and then select ten at random and drop them into a little tray at its front. Only if the ten it dishes out are all aces of hearts will the bomb not go off. He leaves you. The machine whirs away. The first card comes out—it's an ace of hearts; the second, another ace of hearts; the third, ace of hearts; and so on. In fact, all ten are aces of hearts. The machine goes silent; the worrying red light on the bomb turns to green. You have survived. (Mawson 2005: 145)

This would require some explanation. The chances of ten aces of hearts being dished out in a row if the machine worked as the terrorist said it did are very small and the fact that something very improbable has happened needs explanation in terms of something that would make it less improbable, for example the machine selecting cards on a basis which actually gives it a preference for aces of hearts. It may be true that you could not have observed any other outcome, but another outcome was—if what the terrorist told you was correct—immensely more likely. So, from the fact you have survived, you have reason to believe that what the terrorist told you was not correct.

Similarly then, if there were nothing outside the universe, there would be no process selecting values for these constants, constants which have to be finely tuned for life to be possible. The fact that they have the values they do would then be a matter of random chance. That is a possibility. But then the probability of their coming out in the way that they have would have been fantastically small in the one and only universe. It's far more likely then, so the argument goes, that there's something outside the universe, in some sense selecting these values. From the fact that the universe is fine tuned to life, one has reason to believe that there's almost certainly a fine tuner. At this stage, another objection is usually raised.

If the machine had dished out what we'd all think of as a random selection of cards and the bomb gone off as a result, then that state of affairs—the bomb's being set off by just that particular selection of cards—would have been just as improbable as is the state of affairs of its ending up not being set off as a result of the ten cards all being aces of hearts. Yet one would not say that the bomb's going off in this manner needed an explanation. Here we come upon an important—yet usually suppressed—premise of the traditional Design Argument: the improbable feature which one takes to be evidence of a fine tuner has to be special, and special by reference to a standard objective enough to mean that it would have applied regardless of what had happened (see Bradley 2002). Of course, the proponent of the fine tuning argument may simply assert that obviously life *is* special, if not the life of slugs or beetles, then the morally sentient life of rational, conscious, significantly free agents such as ourselves. However, such a response, whilst I would maintain in every respect true, would not go far enough.

The universality of at least some values—their holding throughout the universe—need not be questioned by the opponent of the fine tuning argument pressing this objection. The point at issue here is the putative *trans*-universality of at least the value of life of the sort we are concerned with—its holding *across* universes. (Remember: in the case of the ten aces of hearts needing an explanation, they did so because the outcome was special *by standards which would have obtained regardless of what outcome had obtained*.) The *trans*-universality of at least some values is less obviously correct than the universality of at least some values (and even that would be questioned by many), but, I believe, it is correct nevertheless. We can, I suggest, see that a universe consisting of only one hydrogen atom, for example, would have certain good features: it can be imagined to have a certain simple beauty about it (although of course there'd be no-one in it to appreciate that beauty); there

would be no suffering in it; there would also be no shameful viciousness or wilful ignorance. But there would equally certainly be bad features of a universe consisting of only one hydrogen atom: as I say, there'd be no-one in it to appreciate whatever beauty it had; there'd be no pleasure; no justifiable pride, virtue, or knowledge in it. That, in any case, would be my view. I am spared from having to defend it further as the premise of the trans-universality of value is not needed to support my final conclusion. For the moment then I shall proceed on this assumption, noting in due course when it drops out. For the moment then, allow me to assume that if the universe is fine tuned for the life of morally sentient significantly free creatures such as ourselves, it is fine tuned for something that is trans-universally valuable. Even on this assumption, so far the proponent of the fine tuning version of the Design Argument has given us no reason to posit any *extra-universal* fine tuner.

Were our universe in fact one where each of the values of what are then somewhat misleadingly called 'constants' is 'tried out' somewhere or 'somewhen', as it were, then what is sometimes called the 'wider landscape' of other possible universes would actually be encompassed within this universe and thus the fine tuning of which I have so far made mention would disappear. Perhaps ours is an oscillating universe, where each Big Bang is the other end of a Big Crunch, the curvature of space-time gradually altering with each crunch and bang towards being life-permitting. In any of a multitude of such cases, the fine tuning spoken of so far would not need an extra-universal (i.e. outside the universe in my sense of 'universe') fine tuner. It is this very fact that explains the attractiveness of views of this sort to some scientists. (Confusingly—given my use of the terms 'universe' and 'multiverse'—these views are sometimes called multiverse views.) According to some such scientists, the fine-tuning of the force of the Big Bang, for example, does need an explanation, but it gets an explanation that doesn't posit anything God-like from the fact that the wider universe (in my sense of 'universe'; those propounding these views often call this wider whole the 'multiverse'), has parts which instantiate each of the different values that the relevant constant might in principle take. The same thing goes for the other constants. If Swinburne's terrorist tried his machine out enough times to make sure that every possible series of ten cards was eventually dished out, then of course one of his victims would eventually end up surviving.

Such views (that is the multiverse views in the literature which are not maximal—see below) might seem then to make the fine tuning disappear. But in fact they merely relocate it to a higher level, in the natural laws that, for example, determine the evolution towards life-permitting conditions of the oscillating universe. If the universe as a whole (in my sense) creates space-time subsystems randomly or in an evolving way such that a life-permitting subsystem, whilst improbable in any particular instantiation or oscillation, becomes a statistical certainty over the infinite range, there is still fine tuning in that it is still a general feature of the universe that it permits in principle life-conducive space-time subsystems to come into being, rather than confines what may come into being to parameters that necessitate lifelessness. Thinking in terms of our imaginary persistent terrorist, the fact that he feeds *ten* packs of cards into the machine on each occasion he tries it out, rather than say nine (which would of course then render it impossible for anyone to survive it however many times he tried it out), permits—indeed over an infinite number of runs makes a statistical certainty of—a victim surviving. So, there is higher-level fine tuning even here.

THE 'MAXIMAL MULTIVERSE' HYPOTHESIS

There is another hypothesis that suggests itself as the natural extension of the one we've just been considering. It pushes one step out. On the hypothesis we've just been considering, the universe had

one set of natural laws, but varied in the values various ‘constants’ took in sub-systems within that universe. A natural extension of this hypothesis, what I call the ‘maximal multiverse’ hypothesis, asserts that every possible universe is actual. The higher-level fine tuning which remained on the previous hypothesis disappears on this one: the maximal multiverse hypothesis explains more; as well as explaining why the ‘constants’ are as they are (they’re every value that they can be somewhere) it explains why the natural laws are as they are (they’re every form they can be somewhere). Thus, it is preferable. The moral of the story so far then might be summed up as follows: on the assumption of the trans-universality of the value of life of our sort, you should think that the fine tuning of the universe to this sort of life needs explanation and, if you’re going to believe in a naturalistic explanation of this fine tuning, you should believe in the maximal multiverse (compare Tegmark 2007).

If you’re a terrorist who can link enough devices to enough other devices according to enough principles, you’ll find yourself trying out a bomb/card set-up such as Swinburne’s, infrequently to be sure, but an infinite number of times to be sure too, and thus a victim will, now and again, survive. If you stick enough animals in front of enough pieces of equipment, then, sure, you’ll get a frustrating proportion of slugs in front of typewriters and monkeys in front of vacuum cleaners, but you’ll occasionally get a monkey in front of a typewriter; and—if you do it enough times—this occasional happening will eventually lead to Monkey Shakespeare. So, it is a certainty that in a maximal multiverse composed of an infinite number of infinitely variable universes ‘somewhere’ in the maximal multiverse, there’ll be a universe like ours.

At this stage, we appear then to have two reasons to suppose that the maximal multiverse hypothesis is in fact a better explanation for the fine tuning of our universe to us than theism. Firstly, and most obviously, on it, the probability of our universe existing is one. Theism, by contrast, in picturing the existence of the universe as the result of a free choice on God’s part, a choice which—being free—he did not have to make in the way that he did, may be able to raise the probability of this universe existing on the hypothesis, but it cannot raise the probability of its existing on the hypothesis to one. Of course, we’re primarily interested in the probability of the hypothesis on the evidence, not that of the evidence on the hypothesis. However, as an explanation of some evidence, a hypothesis that gives that evidence a probability of one is in that respect at least the best sort of explanation one could ever get. Secondly, the maximal multiverse hypothesis is simpler than the theistic hypothesis. The maximal multiverse hypothesis might seem *prima facie* much more complicated than the hypothesis that there’s one universe and one God, but it is not really more complicated in the way we care about when comparing hypotheses. Simplicity considerations operate on types of entity as well as tokens of a type. The maximal multiverse hypothesis is simplest on types of entity; there’s only one type of thing, universes. The God hypothesis is simplest on tokens of type; on it (at its simplest) there are only two tokens, one each of two types of thing, the first God and the second the universe. I suggest that simplicity with regard to type is to be preferred over simplicity with regard to token and thus that the infinite number of infinitely variable universes hypothesis is actually a simpler hypothesis than the God hypothesis (though contrast Moreland and Craig 2003: 487, and Holder 2004: 16). If you think you might disagree with me, not to worry: rather as with my premise of the trans-universality of value, my argument doesn’t ultimately depend on this premise in that it concludes that *even if simpler*, we still shouldn’t prefer the maximal multiverse hypothesis. If it’s *not* simpler, that’s just another nail in its coffin. So, I’ll move on.

What can be said *against* the maximal multiverse hypothesis? There is something, and it is something decisive. Let us approach saying it somewhat obliquely, by looking at a danger to which the maximal multiverse hypothesis *need not* succumb.

It may look as if the maximal multiverse hypothesis, in making every possible universe actual, ‘explains too much’. It might appear to suggest that *whatever* feature of the laws of nature was discovered and posited as giving reason to believe in God, the maximal multiverse hypothesizer could, on his or her hypothesis legitimately, explain it by saying, ‘Well, every possible thing happens somewhere and this is somewhere after all’. If that *were* what the maximal multiverse hypothesizer could always—by his or her own lights, legitimately—say regardless of the feature, then that would surely be implausible. We may imagine a modified terrorist example to bring this implausibility out.

The situation is as in the original example except that the terrorist tells you that the machine will dish out *twenty* cards selected at random from the *twenty* packs it shuffles. As before, only if the first ten are aces of hearts will you live, but only if the next ten are aces of hearts *as well* will you be given a Singapore sling to toast your good fortune. The first ten are aces of hearts; you survive; the next ten are aces of hearts too; the terrorist enters, mixing your Singapore sling.

The terrorist can brush off your surviving by pointing out that he’s used the machine an infinite number of times, but he cannot brush off your getting the Singapore sling by pointing out that he’s used the machine an infinite number of times. Why? The Singapore sling needs an explanation—I take it—precisely because of those people who do manage to survive only a tiny proportion go on to enjoy a Singapore sling in addition. Assuming the terrorist tries his machine out an infinite number of times, people—an infinite number of people indeed—will survive and people—an infinite number of people indeed—will enjoy Singapore slings. But amongst the set of people who survive (amongst whom you may safely number yourself after the tenth card has been drawn) the frequency of Singapore sling drinkers is very low. The chances of you getting a Singapore sling after you’ve survived are the same as the chances of you surviving in the first place and those are very small, very small indeed. That being so (and a Singapore sling being—I am taking it—something rather special, even if not trans-universally but only to humans), the Singapore sling needs an explanation of a new sort.

So, the maximal multiverse hypothesizer must—but can—leave the door open to the possibility that there may turn out to be features of our universe that need an explanation which takes one beyond the hypothesis, i.e. features which show the maximal multiverse hypothesis to be explanatorily inadequate, ‘Singapore sling’ features if you will. Now we have noted that the door is open, let us go through it.

THE ARGUMENT FROM INDUCTION

So far we have been considering the fine tuning of the universe to us, or—more specifically—to us *qua* morally sensitive and significantly free creatures. Let us now turn to consider the fine tuning of us—or, more specifically, us *qua* morally sensitive and significantly free creatures—to the universe. We shall concentrate on a feature of our relationship to the universe that one need not posit is trans-universally valuable; one need only recognize that it is a feature which is valuable, indeed essential, to us and this nobody will deny. (So, at this stage in the argument, the assumption of the trans-universality of values is dropping out.) It is a feature that has been discovered and the significance of which has been pointed out, not by scientists, but by philosophers—arguably Kant and certainly, more recently, Walker (1999: ch. 11). The feature is the continuing tractability of the universe to the process of induction as we find ourselves engaging in it.

The process of induction is the process of believing that the future will resemble the past in the broad sense that the simplest laws that can be made to harmonize with past experience will continue to

hold in the future. This principle lies at the root of all action; induction's inescapability is secure, but its applicability—*its continuing to work*—is not. This is a point that Hume was first to press upon us and that Goodman has since made all the more pressing. Goodman famously introduced to the philosophical lexicon two portmanteau words, 'grue' and 'bleen' (Goodman 1955). We may define them—following him in spirit if not letter—thus: an object is grue in colour just if it is green before time t (where time t is a particular but arbitrary time in the future, let us stipulate then whatever time it is that will be two seconds after you finish reading this essay) and blue after time t . An object is bleen in colour by contrast if it is blue up until time t and green thereafter. Goodman pointed out that we all believe (or at least think we believe) that emeralds are green and thus believe that we are thinking that the future will resemble the past when we think that emeralds will stay green tomorrow. However, as he also pointed out, the evidence we have collected to date—all of it of course being collected before time t —equally well supports the claim that all emeralds are grue. Someone to whom the concepts of grue and bleen came naturally, in expecting nature to continue on as it has done in the past, would thus expect emeralds to stay grue, which in our terms would amount to their expecting them to change from green to blue. But we are not such people and it is *we* who get things right, get them right time after time. This is a remarkable co-incidence, the equivalent of a continuing run of aces of hearts, a continuing succession of Singapore slings being mixed up for us by the universe.

The most frequent first reaction to this point is to say that grue is a more complex concept than green, but (a) this is not obviously so from any transcendent standpoint and (b) it is irrelevant.

With regards to (a): a person who had been brought up using grue and bleen would have to have what would strike them as our hopelessly time-indexed terms 'green' and 'blue' translated for them. An object is green in colour, we would have to explain—trying our best to meet their incredulous gaze steadily—just if it is grue up until t and bleen thereafter. An object is blue, we would continue, if it is bleen up until t and grue thereafter. They would be astonished that we projected such 'bent' predicates as green and blue. 'Why are you expecting emeralds to change colour at that time?' they would ask us. 'Why not believe as we believe', they would say, 'that emeralds will continue to be the colour they always have been, grue?' On hearing this, we would naturally think that our positions were precisely the reverse: 'It's not *us* who are believing that things will change', we'd protest. And we'd think our fates were reversed too: it won't be *us*, we'd think, who will be surprised. That's what we'd confidently expect, but what are our grounds for such a confident expectation? Not, it appears, the relative simplicity of green and blue over grue and bleen. In any case, moving onto (b), the relative simplicity—even if it could be established—seems irrelevant to our concerns. What if grue and bleen were more complex by some concept-transcendent standard? What is to say that our universe will turn out to be as simple by this standard as we suppose it to be?

Evolution cannot help us here, because—so far—evolution has of course, like everything else science might draw upon to explain anything, only operated in the past and thus it cannot yet have selected against grue/bleen projectors whose time t is in the future (as the time t stipulated is). It just *couldn't* have harmed us *yet* if we happened to live in one of those logically possible universes where everything goes along just as in the universe we suppose ourselves to be in up until t and then takes what from our green/blue projecting framework would strike us as a radical turn and what would strike someone from a grue/bleen projecting framework as no change whatsoever. It's no good saying, 'But we just don't live in a universe where things change colour arbitrarily', for that is precisely what is at issue: what reason do we have to suppose this from the fact, which we may grant, that we don't live in a universe where things have changed colour arbitrarily in the past (changed by reference to our, apparently arbitrary [see point (a)], standards of arbitrariness that is)? 'Well, it would be simpler (at least by our standards) if things did continue the same (by our standards)' is of course true, but then what reason we have to suppose that that which is simplest (by our standards)

will continue to obtain is again just the point at issue. In short, there can be no solution to this problem from any feature of this universe, for whatever feature this universe is posited as having and used in the putative explanation will be indistinguishable by us on the evidence we have collected to date from a feature which is about to break down by reference to our standards of simplicity and sameness, a feature the time t of which is about to arrive. So, if we cannot solve this problem, even in principle, with resources drawn from within the universe, if we are to solve this problem, we must go outside the universe. The maximal multiverse model posits entities outside the universe; does it have the resources with which to provide an explanation of the continuing fine tuning of us to the universe? No, it certainly does not.

On the maximal multiverse hypothesis, as every possible universe is actual, so for every moment that passes for a creature in a universe without recalcitrant experience demolishing its inductively based expectations, there are an infinite number of creatures in other universes who, whilst hitherto having shared that creature's happy fate, now find their continuing experience recalcitrant in the most extreme ways. For every emerald that stays green over a moment in the actual universe, there is another universe that was precisely as ours up until that moment in which it goes blue; in another, it goes red; in another, yellow. And so on. On the maximal multiverse hypothesis, as every possible universe is actual, so from the fact that, roughly speaking, there's an infinite number of ways one might go wrong when one believes something about the future and only one way in which one might go right, there are an infinite number of people just like us up until this moment who are about to go wrong. On the maximal multiverse hypothesis then, the evidence we have collected to date through our experience does nothing to reduce the probability of us being about to discover that we're one of the ones who was about to go wrong when we suppose that emeralds will stay green. The chances on the maximal multiverse hypothesis of the next Singapore sling being served up to us by a compliant universe are infinitely low. Yet they keep being served up to us, with every moment.

Unsurprisingly (in that it could hardly do worse), the God hypothesis does better at explaining the fine tuning of us to the universe; in fact, it does much better.

The reason God would have to create, from within that set of possible universes that are conducive to morally sentient significantly free creatures, a universe which is consistently inductively tractable is easy to see: these creatures' moral sensitivity and significant freedom would be in vain, devoid of the necessary conditions for responsibility, to the extent that the world around them proved unpredictable. Of course at the extreme, without any inductive tractability at all, creatures could not be morally sensitive—often knowing what they ought to do—or significantly free—able, in principle, to choose whether or not to do as they ought. So, pending a conclusive argument in favour of the trans-universality of the disvalue of lack of moral sensitivity and significant freedom (and for that I'd need to draw back in the relevant premise), we cannot draw out with confidence a reason God would not have created such a world. But in a world that was not entirely inductively intractable but just significantly less inductively tractable than ours (for example, irregularly, but on average every five minutes or so, the laws of nature as its inhabitants had been led to think of them might 'suspend' themselves for a moment or two in localized patches before re-establishing themselves), creatures could plausibly retain at least some moral sensitivity and significant freedom, but—in proportion to the unpredictability of their world—they would find that they would nevertheless not end up doing that at which they had aimed; their freedom would be—in proportion to their universe's inductive intractability—evacuated of its moral significance and to this extent, this world would be bad for them. So, given that God had—if needs be one can say, whimsically—decided to create a world with morally sensitive and significantly free people in it, He would then have good reason, indeed overwhelming reason, to create it with natural laws that were to a large extent inductively tractable to them, the more inductively tractable, the better His reason for creating it.

With that, it is time to sum up and conclude.

FINE-TUNING: THE UNIVERSE TO US, AND US TO THE UNIVERSE

My version of the fine tuning argument to the ‘pre-established harmony’, as it were, between us and our world has progressed as follows. Initially, it appeared that the best explanation of the fine tuning of *the universe to us*—a fact which *did* need explanation on the assumption of the trans-universality of the value of life of our sort—was the maximal multiverse hypothesis. That hypothesis raises the probability of this universe existing to one and, it was argued, is simpler than the God hypothesis. By contrast, the God hypothesis raises the probability of this universe existing to less than one and, it was argued, is more complex. *However*, as we went on to see, regardless of the trans-universality of any value, the best explanation of the continuing fine tuning of *us to the universe* is the God hypothesis. On the maximal multiverse hypothesis, the probability of any universe in which there are morally sensitive and significantly free persons being a universe which those persons can more or less consistently understand through induction is infinitely small. On the God hypothesis, that probability is one. As it is infinitely small on the maximal multiverse hypothesis and one on the God hypothesis, so these hypotheses exclude one another: if there were a God, He would not have created any universes where there were morally sensitive and significantly free beings who found their universes significantly inductively intractable and there are an infinite number of these on the maximal multiverse hypothesis. The hypotheses excluding one another in this way means that we must abandon one of them. Taking all of these things into the balance then, it is obvious which one we should abandon. We should conclude that, despite its rational attractiveness in explaining the fine tuning of the universe to us in a more conclusive and arguably simpler manner than the God hypothesis, due to its abject failure to explain the continuing fine tuning of us to the universe, we should discard the maximal multiverse hypothesis and instead believe in the God hypothesis. The God hypothesis is the best explanation of the fine tuning of the universe to us and of a fact which is, if anything, even more in need of explanation—the continuing fine tuning of us to the universe.¹

CONCLUSION

As I said near the start, this is just one element of the larger cumulative case, which, if space permitted, I would seek to advance against atheism as defined in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, i.e., the case for its being unreasonable to fail to believe that there’s a God. And, as I said prior to saying that, many theists would think that even the abject failure of *all* elements of such a case would be no reason to think that their Theism was unreasonable, just reason to think that Atheism was, for some others, not unreasonable too. So, I shall conclude by repeating myself: if one is to critique theism and theistic arguments in general, not just critique what I have been calling natural theological arguments, one needs to critique their position (in addition to my arguments and the other arguments of natural theology). This, as I also observed earlier, is too infrequently done.

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CHAPTER 3

CRITIQUES OF THEISTIC ARGUMENTS

A. C. GRAYLING

INTRODUCTION

STUDENTS of philosophy and theology encounter a familiar set of arguments for the existence of deity. They are: the teleological argument or argument from design; the cosmological argument or empirical argument from the contingency of the world; the ontological argument or argument by reason alone from the definition of deity; the moral argument or argument from the normativity of ethics; and a loose family of pragmatic considerations purporting to show that theistic belief is rational, desirable, or prudent.

In all these cases it is *argument* which is offered, and which therefore invites rational scrutiny. Argument is the derivation of a conclusion from premises which support that conclusion, either demonstratively and conclusively, as in formal deductive systems, or, as in varieties of induction, by rendering the conclusion plausible or persuasive to the point of making it irrational to refuse to accept it and to act upon it if relevant—or at very least, to make it rational to accept the conclusion. The ‘arguments for God’s existence’ are of both kinds; in what follows I survey them critically.

I put scare quotes around the phrase ‘arguments for God’s existence’ because use of the capitalized word ‘God’ makes it appear to be a proper name which, in virtue of being one, putatively names something. A major philosophical debate surrounds naming, given that some names name fictional entities, so one must be alert to any question-begging implications when discussing arguments for the existence of something to which reference already seems to assume existence but whose existence is moot. We should of course insist on the formula I began with, namely, ‘arguments for the existence of deity’, immediately followed by an analysis of what is supposed to be meant by ‘deity’ or ‘god’ and their cognates, the enormous and amorphous variety of meanings of which complicates the task of getting any traction on discussions of the putative existence of any such thing.

There is another complication. This is that most religiously committed people do not subscribe to their religion on the basis of arguments. The arguments listed above are almost without exception *post hoc* rationalizations of beliefs already held. In the great majority of cases, people subscribe to one or another religion because faith in it was inculcated from early childhood, and thereafter continually and in numerous ways socially reinforced. In other cases the motive to religious commitment is emotional rather than reasoned; same-society missionary activity by religions typically targets loneliness, confusion, grief, failure, depression and anxiety as portals to conversion. Sceptics say that the subsequent fellowship in a religious community gives the psychological support that the convert ascribes to his new-found relationship with that religion’s divinity. It is hard to find reliable empirical data on how long converts remain converted, but it would be interesting to know the outcome of subsequent reflection by converts on the adequacy of traditional theistic arguments in support of their faith.

Because non-rational motivations play a far greater role in originating and sustaining religious commitment than ‘arguments for God’s existence’, I think atheist critique of these aspects is important too; but that is a separate discussion from consideration of the main arguments for the existence of a God, on which I focus here. It does however raise the question whether *faith* as such—understood as adoption of beliefs or acceptance of dogmas without evidence or even in the face of contrary evidence, and as such promoted by its proponents as a virtue—can be allowed to retain the positive status that religious apologists wish to have it accorded, given that it expressly contradicts canons of intellectually responsible enquiry.

WHO OR WHAT IS ‘GOD’?

Because it would be fruitless to attempt proof of the existence of something which is undefined, ineffable, or too mysterious for finite minds to understand or describe, one has to make a decision about what is meant by ‘God’ in talk of ‘arguments for God’s existence’. It is common for religious apologists to respond to critiques of these arguments by claiming that deity is ineffable and incomprehensible, which of course closes down the debate, for by definition there is nothing to be said about what nothing can be said about. The fact that religious apologists find, despite this, a great deal to be said about such a thing after all—that it exists, that it has such and such a nature (‘is love’, is omniscient, omnipotent, morally pure, and the like), and that it requires certain commitments and behaviours from us—does not appear to strike them as contradictory, though it is so. It is all the more so because most religious traditions have literatures purporting to convey a good deal about the concepts of deity in play, and it is these that ‘arguments for the existence of God’ turn upon. For example, the standard version of the ontological argument requires that deity must possess all ‘perfections’, meaning no limits to or defect in any property regarded as positive, for example wisdom, goodness and power (as opposed, for example, to evil, laziness, lustfulness). This is the traditional conception of deity in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, of which Islam and Mormonism are offshoots.

It is an unavoidable complication that these ‘positive’ attributes of deity look suspiciously like the ones we humans, given what we are like, approve of and wish we had. Obviously, we are limited in intelligence and knowledge, we are weak and prone to turpitudes of various kinds, our lives are short and beset with disease and trouble; traditional definitions of deity consist in negations of these, and are therefore in fact contrastively anthropomorphic. Those whom we might call ‘ineffabilists’ succeed in removing this consideration as a count against theism, which is what it is; but at the cost we have already noted.

So although all the traditional arguments for the existence of deity claim to belong to natural theology rather than revealed religion, we see from the foregoing that what the former owes the latter by way of a conception of deity is palpable and inescapable. Accordingly, it is the ‘traditional God’—omnipotent, morally perfect, eternal, omniscient, in short infinite in all ‘positive’ dimensions as human beings conceive of these—which I shall take to be the entity whose existence the arguments attempt to prove. The rider ‘traditionally conceived’ before the word ‘God’ will therefore be understood throughout.

There is also the point that this traditionally conceived deity is always referred to as ‘he’ (believers sometimes write ‘He’); this accident of history sets the common practice, which for convenience I follow.

The two most discussed arguments for the existence of deity are the teleological and ontological

arguments. I devote the following two sections to each in turn.

THE TELEOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The teleological argument concludes from the appearance of design in nature to the existence of God. It was thought particularly convincing in the eighteenth century, whose inhabitants, as inheritors of two centuries of productive scientific enquiry into the beauties and complexities of nature, yet still lacking enough astrophysics or biological knowledge to contemplate natural origins and developments of the universe and life, found the argument compelling. Perhaps the most familiar statement of the argument is the one given by William Paley in his *Natural Theology* (1802), where he talks of finding a watch on the ground while crossing a heath, and having to conclude from an inspection of its properties that it was created by an intelligent agent. But if we think a watch must be designed by a purposeful agency, how much more so the eye, which, he wrote, ‘would be alone sufficient to support the conclusion which we draw from it, as to the necessity of an intelligent Creator’ ([1802] 1838: 401; see also David P. Barash’s ‘Atheism and Darwinism’).

The best statement ever given of the design argument, however, is Cleanthes’ account in Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1779):

Look round the world; contemplate the whole and every part of it: You will find it to be nothing but one great machine, subdivided into an infinite number of lesser machines, which again admit of subdivisions to a degree beyond what human senses and faculties can trace and explain. All these various machines, and even their most minute parts, are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them. The curious adapting of means to ends, throughout all nature, resembles exactly, though it much exceeds, the productions of human contrivance; of human design, thought, wisdom, and intelligence. Since, therefore, the effects resemble each other, we are led to infer, by all the rules of analogy, that the causes also resemble; and that the Author of Nature is somewhat similar to the mind of man, though possessed of much larger faculties, proportioned to the grandeur of the work which he has executed. By this argument a posteriori, and by this argument alone, do we prove at once the existence of a Deity, and his similarity to human mind and intelligence. ([1779] 2007: 19–20)

Hume’s rejection of the design argument rests on three points: that the analogy between nature and human-built machines is weak; that there are numerous alternative explanations of how natural phenomena came to be as they are; and that at most and best, if it were established that natural phenomena could not have been other than deliberately designed, the most that this could imply is a designer.

This last was the position accepted by most deists of the eighteenth century, who, lacking alternative explanations for the emergence of a world like this one, rested content with the idea of a fabricating agency which has since ceased to be involved with the universe, or perhaps even ceased to exist. Their position turns on accepting two facets of the supposed analogy between human contrivances and the structure and function of natural phenomena: that function-serving human-made structures of course presuppose conscious purpose, and that everything has a cause; so that just as human intelligence figures in explanations of the final and efficient causes of its artefacts, so a similar intelligence must be invoked in explanations of the final and efficient causes of naturally occurring structures.

The weakness of the analogy at work is revealed by the second of Hume’s counters, namely, that there are other and better hypotheses available to explain natural phenomena—physical cosmology and evolutionary biology—which render invocation of a designing agency both unnecessary and implausible. It is unnecessary because of Ockham’s Razor, the principle of economy in explanation, stating that one must use the fewest assumptions and invoke the least number of entities necessary for

an explanation. So if there are alternative explanations which are simpler and more consistent with observed facts, invocation of an external agency is unnecessary. And it is implausible because (a) it involves offering an explanation by invoking something itself unexplained, and that means that no explanation has been given, and (b) it is inconsistent with the many examples of bad design in nature (often cited are wisdom teeth, the human appendix, the juxtaposition of organs of excretion and reproduction, but there are many even better examples) and of repeated efforts at design (the nearly two dozen different evolutionary pathways to types of eyes, a fact unknown to Paley). Point (a) is a logical point, (b) is an empirical one.

Efforts to salvage the teleological argument have involved such moves as saying that the deity works indirectly by making natural laws the instrument by which his designs are realized: he creates the laws, and the laws create nature, thus realizing his purposes. This however also violates Ockham's Razor, and is another instance of empty explanation, best illuminated by Karl Popper's observation that a theory which is consistent with everything (which admits of no counter-instances) explains nothing (see Popper [1957] 2002: 142). To move the occurrence of purposive design back down the causal chain so that no example of naturally occurring adaptation is inconsistent with it is to make it consistent with everything in just this null-explanatory way.

A more contemporary form of design argument invokes 'cosmic fine-tuning' (see T. J. Mawson's 'The Case Against Atheism'). This argument begins from the observation that the universe's initial conditions, and the physical laws and parameters operative within it, are 'fine-tuned' for life to appear on this planet. Had they differed by the smallest fraction, life as we know it would not have emerged. If the strong force in the atomic nucleus had varied in either direction by more than 5 per cent, or if the electromagnetic force binding electrons to atomic nuclei were stronger or weaker, life would not be possible. If the relative masses of neutrons and protons were any different, life would not be possible. If the gravitational force were different even by a minute amount, main sequence stars like our sun could not exist and therefore life at least of our kind would be vastly less likely. If the 'big bang' had not been exactly as it was, either the universe would have collapsed upon itself immediately, or it would have expanded too rapidly for the evolution of stars like our sun, with the result once again that our kind of life would not have appeared. The concurrence of a number of just-right values in these cases prompts what some call 'the Goldilocks enigma', namely, the apparently puzzling fact that the universe is just right for life (see Davies 2007). And from this some conclude that it must therefore have been designed by a purposive agency whose aim was to bring it about that, after some nine billion years or so (the universe is about thirteen billion years old now, with the first prokaryotes appearing on our planet less than four billion years ago), forms of life would emerge that would eventuate in us.

We shall leave aside the cosmic-sized egoism that sees the great universal story as having our wars, dentition and fashion sense as its aim and goal, and merely point out the following. If my great-great-great-grandparents had not lived exactly where they did, and done most of the things they did—and just as they did them—I would not exist. But this is a retrospective observation, which I could only make in admiration and wonder at the (what I take to be fortunate) series of coincidences which resulted in me, because in fact I exist. If my forebears had been inconsiderate enough to do other things in other places instead, with the result that I did not exist, I would not thus be marvelling at how fine-tuned history was in bringing it about that I exist. I do not however think that my existence was the point and purpose of all these happy coincidences. Rather I think that it is only because I exist that I see that I would not have existed unless these coincidences occurred.

The 'Goldilocks dilemma' of my personal existence, and that of the universe's parameters and laws, share everything in common.

A variant explanation of the illusion of purpose in the ‘fine-tuning’ version of the design argument is provided by Dr Pangloss in Voltaire’s *Candide* (1759, prompted by the 100,000 deaths in the Lisbon earthquake and tsunami of 1755 which made Voltaire doubt that this is the ‘best of all possible worlds’—itself a version of a ‘fine-tuning’ argument—or that it exists under the government of a benign agency). Dr Pangloss’s explanation of the existence of the human nose is that it is designed to support spectacles (Voltaire [1759] 1997: 2). This exposes the fallacy in the fine-tuning argument: the fact that X is a necessary condition for Y does not entail that, because Y is the case, X is in itself necessary. ‘Necessity’ in the logical sense of ‘having to be so’ is not the same thing as the necessity in a ‘necessary condition’ (things having to be so *relative* to something else’s being the way it is). In the case of X’s being a *necessary condition relative* to Y, but not *in itself necessary*, X could have been different, and if it were so, there would, or at least might, be no Y.

This is how it is with the universe. We are the Y of which the constants of nature are the X. We exist because the constants are as they are; had they been different, we would not exist. The fact that we exist as a result of what happens to be the universe’s character entails nothing about purpose or design. It is just, depending upon your point of view, a lucky or unlucky outcome of how things happen in fact to be. The universe’s parameters and laws are not fine-tuned *on purpose for us to exist*. Matters are the other way round: we exist because the laws happen to be as they are.

THE ONTOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The various versions of the ontological argument in effect come down to saying that God exists by definition. It is argument by reason alone, an *a priori* deductive argument, turning on analysis of the concept of deity.

The classical statement of an ontological argument is that of St Anselm in his *Proslogion* (1078). He proceeds by contemplating the concept of ‘a being than which no greater can be thought’ ([1078] 2007: 81). If such a being did not exist, then there would be a greater being than it, namely, an existent one. But by hypothesis ‘the being than which no greater can be thought’ is the greatest being there is. Therefore, it must exist. And Anselm then identifies this being with God.

Leave aside for a moment the undefined notion of ‘greatness’ here, and note the following. It is the case, as you read these words, that someone is the tallest person in London. This is a matter of logic, not of human physiology. If there are two or more people in London who are exactly as tall as each other, then whichever of them rose from bed latest today is presently the tallest person in London, because gravity acts to shorten us progressively throughout the day. This latter is a matter of physics and physiology, but is independent of the logical fact that one of these Londoners (perhaps the laziest of them) is the tallest. Finally, note that even if all Londoners were short, one of them would still, as a matter of logic, be the tallest.

Now consider the idea that someone is the ‘greatest’ person in London. Such a person might not be very great, he need only be less un-great than all other Londoners. One can now see why the Anselm argument does not get us from logic to God. If by ‘God’ Anselm means the least un-great individual anywhere, this is not an interesting result. And the same applies if one substitutes the phrase ‘most perfect being’ for ‘greatest being’, as in other versions of the ontological argument. The most perfect being in the universe might be very imperfect, and not at all a suitable candidate for existence as a deity. From the outset therefore there is the difficulty of attempting to get from the fact that something must have some property in the greatest, largest, most perfect degree relative to other similar things, without being any ground for thinking that such a thing is ipso facto a deity, let alone the traditionally

conceived God.

One might note, as an aside, that there is an assumption in the ontological argument that ‘perfection’ and admits of degrees, and is not an absolute but a relative notion. One might be excused for thinking that if something is perfect, then it cannot be more or less perfect than another perfect thing. One can say that something might approach to perfection more nearly than something else does, but then by hypothesis neither of the compared things is perfect anyway. Yet the ontological argument regards perfection as a matter of degree, and has to in order to make the argument work. Perhaps the argument’s proponents think that perfection is a relative notion like imperfection, given that it is a familiar fact that some things are more imperfect than others (indeed, that things can become more and less so). But might it not be a false step from accepting this to thinking that the concept of ‘most perfect’ is relative likewise?

Whether or not one regards the terms as absolute or relative, there is a further problem: what does it really mean? We know what it is for ourselves and indeed everything there is to be imperfect, and our idea of perfection is achieved by negation, that is, by supposing that we understand the concept of perfection because we can say ‘not imperfect’. The formula ‘God is perfect’ in traditional theistic doctrine is offered to mean ‘pure, all good, omnipotent, omniscient, without appetites or needs’ (though putatively capable of emotions of anger and love), and so on: but these too are terms and phrases which are arguably sayable without being thinkable. Consider: ‘omnipotent’ means ‘all powerful’ in the sense of ‘can do anything’, ‘is unlimited in action’. We run immediately into difficulties best illustrated by apparently absurd questions, such as: Can an omnipotent being eat itself? The reply might come that such a being is not the kind that eats, perhaps because it is immaterial. Does the fact that it does not eat therefore mean it cannot eat? For if so it is not omnipotent. Then the answer might be: it can do anything consistent with its nature, which eating is not. But now we need to know its nature to know the respects in which it is, within the limits of its nature, unlimited in power. But that is to say that it is qualifiedly omnipotent—which sounds like a contradiction in terms). And so on into various sorts of difficulties, contradictions and even absurdities which show that we are here working with intrinsically unclear concepts.

These considerations beset the ontological argument even before we get to its mechanics. The best known version of the argument is found in the fifth of Descartes’ *Meditations* (1641). There Descartes asserts that the concept of a non-existent ‘supremely perfect being’ is a contradiction, just as denying that the interior angles of a Euclidean triangle sum to 180 degrees is a contradiction. Accordingly, because we can conceive of (we have an idea of) a ‘supremely perfect being’, it follows that such a thing necessarily exists ([1641] 2008: 45–50).

The response to this from Immanuel Kant in the ‘Dialectic’ of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1781) was to point out that ‘existence’ is not a property of anything (see Kant [1781] 1998: 565; see also Brian Davies’ ‘Aquinas and Atheism’). In Descartes’ argument, existence is a perfection which the most perfect being cannot lack, and is thus a property among the other superlative properties ascribed to the deity. But any possessor of properties cannot have its own existence as one of those properties, said Kant; it must exist (so to speak ‘already’) in order to have any properties. You cannot say of a given table, ‘It is brown, it has four legs, it is square, *and* it exists’, for it might have properties different from being brown, four-legged and square, while still being a table—a white, three-legged, round table perhaps—but it cannot not exist and still be a table.

The problem is well illustrated by noting that if one permits Descartes’ form of the argument, it can be used by parity to prove that a Devil is a necessarily non-existent being. ‘There is a being which is the least perfect of all beings; such a being which does not exist is—since existence is a perfection—less perfect than one that does; therefore the least perfect being necessarily does not exist’. Here non-

existence is a property of a being whose other properties are malevolence, evil, and so on: but one wonders how a non-existent thing can be malevolent, etc.—thus showing that existing is a logically different category from, because a logically prior category to, any properties anything might possess.

A version of the ontological argument is offered by Alvin Plantinga (1974), who does not claim to prove the existence of God, but to show that it is rational to think that God exists. His argument exploits a now-standard way of explaining the ‘modal’ concepts *possibility* and *necessity*. Something x is said to be possible if there is at least one way a world could be—a ‘possible world’—such that x exists in that world. A world is a possible world if it is either our actual world (which in virtue of being actual is of course possible) or is a non-actual world the conception of which contains no internal contradictions. And then we say that x is necessary if it exists in every possible world—which is merely a different way of saying: a necessary x is an x that *must* exist no matter what else is the case.

Plantinga proceeds as follows: there is a possible world in which there is something that is the greatest thing there can ever be (a thing which has ‘maximal greatness’). Therefore there is such a thing. And then this thing is identified as God. Plantinga takes this, as noted, not to prove God’s existence but to make belief in it rational. Another approach might be to say that there is a possible world in which there is a necessarily existing x; and therefore x exists. And of course as with the greatest thing, this necessarily existing thing is identified as God.

Neither strategy is persuasive. The second formulation turns on a principle in modal logic; ‘if it is possible that it is necessary that p, then, by a certain rule, one can infer that p is necessary’. One can see what is being attempted: anything possible by definition exists in at least one possible world. If it is possible that there is a necessary x, then there is at least one world in which x exists. But if it is necessary, then it must exist in every world, including the actual world. Therefore if it is possible that there is a necessary x, there is actually a necessary x.

Leave aside the question what such a thing would be, and why, other than by the stipulation that God has to be a necessary being, it should follow that it is God; and ask: what ground is there for thinking anything is necessary? That is, why think it is possible that anything is necessary? The argument is in fact question-begging, for by saying that there is a world in which something is necessary, by the definition of ‘necessary’ what is thereby being asserted is that it has to exist in every possible world; yet with equal plausibility we can say ‘there is a possible world in which nothing exists necessarily’ (which is another way of saying, ‘there is a possible world in which everything is contingent’), and if that is possible—as surely it is—then by parity of reasoning it follows that nothing is necessary, because only if it is *not possible* for there to be a world in which nothing is necessary can there be any necessarily existing thing—for remember: such a thing would have to exist in *every* possible world.

The first version of Plantinga’s argument, premising the claim that ‘there is a possible world containing a maximally great entity’, is vulnerable to the challenge that one can equally premise that there is no possible world in which anything is maximally great, from which it would follow that necessarily there is no maximally great thing. On what grounds would one prefer Plantinga’s premise to this one, not least because of the problem, as discussed above, with the concept of a ‘maximally great’ something? At the least this shows that you have to begin by accepting that there can be a ‘maximally great thing’ for the argument to have any grip; and that of course is to argue in a circle.

THE COSMOLOGICAL ARGUMENT

The cosmological argument (or family of arguments) begins with observations about the world and

concludes from them that there is a God. In this sense it is like the teleological argument in purporting to be empirically based, but it differs in that, instead of arguing from the appearance of design, it focuses upon the facts that the world came into existence, that it could have been different (it is ‘contingent’), and that everything is causally linked to antecedent conditions and circumstances.

The standard moves from these observations are these: because the world came into existence, it must have (or have had) a creator. Because it is contingent, it must be rooted in something necessary. Because everything is the causal outcome of other things, there must be a first uncaused cause in order to halt a regress of causes going back infinitely, and to get the chain of causality going.

One immediate response to these moves is to say that they are expressions of a psychological need to have explanations about why there is a world and how it began and continues. Arguments of a cosmological type are found in Plato (the *Laws*) and Aristotle (his *Physics* and *Metaphysics*), but a clear statement of the underlying intuition is given by Leibniz in his *Monadology* (1714), where he states that nothing can be without ‘a sufficient reason why it is thus and not otherwise’ ([1714] 1991: 72). In the case of the world of empirical observation, this ‘principle of sufficient reason’ (and its cognates) comes down to a causal claim. It says that every contingently existing thing has a cause of its existence, that the chain of causes cannot run back infinitely, and that therefore there has to be a first cause. And since this first cause is itself not contingent upon anything else as its cause, it must be necessary. Then the usual jump is made from saying that the necessarily existing first cause is God. There can be various formulations of this argument, but this is the key underlying form.

A number of responses are possible. One is to dispute the necessity of a non-contingent first cause. Why cannot the universe just be its own reason for existing? This is a view shared by Bertrand Russell and contemporary cosmologists. In his *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*, David Hume argues that if you explain each individual contingent thing in the universe, you have thereby explained the universe, and that it is a fallacy to suppose that you still have to explain the existence of the universe taken as a whole ([1779] 2007: 66). Hume also called into question the principle of causation that underlies the argument: why accept a priori that everything has a cause, given that we can conceive of effects independently of any putative cause? Defenders of the causal principle say that without it we cannot make the universe intelligible, but this might be because of our psychological (again) need to reduce everything to neat explanatory arrangements—the universe might work in ways that do not comply with our intellectual preferences.

Kant took a different line (*Critique of Pure Reason*, 1781). He argued that the cosmological argument is in fact a concealed version of the ontological argument, for it requires the conception of a necessary being as a ground for the contingent universe; but, he points out, this conception is shown by criticisms of the ontological argument to be empty ([1781] 1998: 569–78). Critics of Kant claim that he has mistaken the idea of a *logically necessary being* with the cosmological argument’s requirement for a *metaphysically necessary being* to serve as a stopping-point for the regress of causes or as a final ground on which contingent existence can rest. But Kant can reply that the distinction being attempted here is spurious, because in either case what is being proposed is a being that *has to exist*, whether our ground for asserting this is the definition of the being (ontological argument) or the contingency and causal dependency of the world upon such a being (cosmological argument). Any counter to the claim that the idea of a necessary being makes sense is therefore a counter to both arguments.

Sometimes defenders of the cosmological argument cast it as an ‘inference to the best explanation’. In the light of our ignorance about the why, how, and origin of the world, invocation of the idea of God as its source and the reason for its existence is ‘the best available explanation’. This however is a very feeble argument; it arbitrarily clutches at something to serve as an explanatory filler for the gaps

in our knowledge, and has no better claim on our credence than if we instead invoked the existence of fairies or even mince pies as the explanation. Moreover, to summon something as undefined and implausible as a deity to fulfil this role is to invoke as an explanation for the universe something more mysterious and arbitrary than the universe itself, which gets us nowhere. One can see the null value of invoking a deity by suggesting that instead of using the word God in this context, one uses the name Fred: ‘why is there a universe? Because Fred made it’—here one vividly sees the emptiness and arbitrariness of the claim.

PRAGMATIC GROUNDS

The foregoing arguments all aim to support the proposition ‘that God exists’. A different tactic is to argue that it is prudent or rational to believe that there is a God. The most celebrated such argument is ‘Pascal’s wager’, originally found in Blaise Pascal’s *Pensées* (1670). Pascal said that because the existence of God can neither be proved nor disproved by rational argument, one has to take a different tack in deciding whether to believe. The best such tack is to consider what the advantages and disadvantages of such belief are. If there is a God, then the advantage of believing in its existence is vast; it is a benefit for all eternity. If there is not, one has not lost much by believing it anyway. So one should believe (Pascal [1670] 2003: 66–8). In contemporary theory this is stated in terms of ‘expected utility’; Pascal’s point is that no matter how small the probability of God’s existence is, just so long as this probability is non-zero the utility of believing in it far outweighs the disutility of believing in; and hence it is rational to believe in it.

Some theistic critics argue that this pragmatic ground for belief is too cold and calculating to be the kind of belief that an existent God desires from his creatures. And this might weigh against the utility of believing in this way; if God exists and is offended by the calculating nature of the belief, the sought-for benefits will not be forthcoming. So it is self-defeating.

Voltaire was robust in his response: ‘the interest I have in believing a thing is not a proof of the existence of that thing’ ([1728] 2003: 123). This is of course right. But the two chief criticisms of the argument are that Pascal’s starting-point does not do what he requires, and that it is not the case that God’s existence cannot be disproved, for it can.

First, Pascal says that just so long as the probability of God’s existence is not zero, then the utility of believing in it outweighs the utility of disbelief. Note that this is only so if you also believe that there is a posthumous existence, heaven, reward or punishment, indeed a whole lot of other things that Pascal simply assumes go along with belief in the existence of God. If the probability that there is a God is vanishingly small, what is the probability of the truth of all the paraphernalia of traditional legends? Very well: grant that the calculation applies to them too. Now consider that by parity of reasoning the same amount of sense can be made of the claim that there is a non-zero probability that fairies exist, or the gods of Olympus, or that the moon is made of green cheese, and so for much besides. Admittedly the utility of believing some of these things will be low or negative, but one can see the utility of believing others: belief in fairies, for example, might yield a great deal of charm (and thus pleasure) and even explanatory value. In no such case could these considerations alone make it *rational* to believe these things, even if it were *useful* to do so.

This point applies to other forms of a prudential or pragmatic argument. Some claim that theistic belief is to be encouraged because it makes people behave better, or comforts them, and that it can discipline whole populations by making them believe that they are monitored everywhere and at all times, even when alone, by a watchful deity. The usefulness or prudential value of any of this is

supposed to render belief rational. This is where the ‘proof’ point becomes pertinent.

A common mistake is made concerning the nature of proof. In formal systems of logic and mathematics, proof is demonstrative; in deductive logic, for example, all inferences are in fact instances of *petitio principii* because the conclusion is always contained in the premises, and deductions are merely (though often unobviously) rearrangements of the premises (consider: ‘all men are mortal; Socrates is a man; therefore Socrates is mortal’). Whereas there can be psychological novelty in the outcome of a deduction, there is never logical novelty; this latter only happens in inductive inference, where the informational content of conclusions goes beyond the informational content of their premises. But inductions are not proofs in the sense of formal proof. Their success or otherwise turns on how probable the premises make the conclusions, or—differently viewed—how rational the premises make acceptance of the conclusions.

In non-demonstrative contexts ‘proof’ is to be understood in its proper meaning of ‘test’. When steel and other materials are tested for tensile strength, they are ‘proved’—loaded until they crack or break—and this is the sense in which we talk of the ‘proof of the pudding’ or ‘the exception that proves (tests) the rule’. Claims to the existence of anything are subject to proof or test in this sense. Here is where Carl Sagan’s ‘dragon in the garage’ example demonstrates its worth (*The Demon-Haunted World*, 1995). Someone claims that a dragon lives in his garage. His friend wishes to verify his assertion, and makes every effort to do so; but the dragon turns out to be invisible, intangible, silent, breathes no fire, leaves no traces ... in short there is nothing that counts as evidence by which the claim can be tested (proved). At very best, the evidence is only ever available when the enquirer is not around, and the dragon is only perceptible to the owner of the garage. Obviously, it is not rational for the enquirer in the dragon case to believe that there is a dragon in the garage. He has proved (tested) that this is so. Indeed he has no grounds even for the assertion that there is a non-zero probability that there is a dragon in the garage.

This point can best and most succinctly be made by quoting from W. K. Clifford’s ‘The Ethics of Belief’: ‘It is wrong always, everywhere, and for anyone, to believe anything upon insufficient evidence’ ([1879] 1999: 138). When the evidence is not merely insufficient but absent or contrary, how much more wrong to do as Doubting Thomas was criticized for not doing, and as Søren Kierkegaard encouraged: to believe nevertheless!

This point weighs against those who claim that one could *choose* to believe because it was personally satisfying or comforting to do so, or because it would give one hope even if one recognized it as the slimmest of hopes. These are psychological motivations to belief which are no doubt very common among adult believers (children believe because they are evolutionarily primed to be credulous, at least for the first decade or so of life, and therefore to believe what the adults in their circle insist that they believe). But Clifford’s point about the ethics of belief places upon us a demand for responsible use of our cognitive capacities, and nothing that Pascal or William James—In 1896’s *The Will to Believe* (once criticized as giving ‘an unrestricted license for wishful thinking’—see Hick 1990: 60)—or anyone else says in the way of extolling prudence, caution, hope, or the good effects of believing, can stand against that.

THE MORAL ARGUMENT

We need only the briefest discussion of the moral argument for the existence of God, which, stated at its simplest, is that there can be no morality without God (see also Erik Wielenberg’s ‘Atheism and Morality’). This is refuted by the existence of good atheists. George Bernard Shaw remarked that the

moment when, as a teenager, he gave up theistic belief, he felt ‘the dawning of moral passion’. Indeed it is arguably the case that non-theists count among themselves the most careful moral thinkers, because in the absence of a traditional or externally imposed moral code they feel a duty to examine their outlook and duties properly.

One need only look at the thinkers of classical antiquity—Aristotle, the Stoics, and others—to see that their examination of ethical principle and action was not premised on the belief that they were under divine command, or were responding to the requirements of a deity, or were seeking the reward of any such in an afterlife. Their example also illustrates the vacuity of the claim that the moral principles we feel within us could only have been instilled by an external—and divine—agency. Nor were they persuaded that supposed analogies between moral law and natural law suggest that both require to have been laid down by a conscious agency; nor again did they think that the only ground for the actual or even apparent objectivity of moral principles and qualities is that they are the product of divine command or will.

A later thinker, Kant (in his *Critique of Practical Reason*, 1788) demonstrated one way of establishing the objectivity of moral law; he argued that it is by reason that we identify the categorical (unconditional) imperatives that specify our moral duties, and that this would be so whether or not a God exists.

The underlying thought can be generalized. The fact that anyone requires us to do or be something is not by itself a reason why we should do or be it, other than prudentially (as when we are threatened with punishment for not doing or being it); the ‘something’ itself has to be independently worthy of doing or being, or there has to be a reason other than someone’s merely wishing that we do or be it, to serve as a genuine reason for it.

The point at issue here is often described as the Euthyphro Problem, after a discussion in the dialogue by Plato of that name. It is this: is an act wrong because God says it is, or is it forbidden by God because it is wrong? If the latter, then there is a reason independently of God’s will and interests that makes that act wrong. But then there is morality without God and the moral argument for God’s existence falls. If the former, then anything God commands (murder, say, or rape) would be right just because he commands it; and then, as Leibniz puts it in his *Discourse on Metaphysics*, ‘In saying that things are not good by any rule of goodness, but merely by the will of God, it seems to me that one destroys, without realizing it, all the love of God and all his glory. For why praise him for what he has done if he would be equally praiseworthy in doing exactly the contrary?’ ([1686] 1991: 2).

What lies behind the thought that there is a need for a God to give and enforce moral principles is that such principles require the backing of authority, for otherwise the moral sceptic cannot be answered when he asks, ‘Why should I?’ with respect to any injunction, and there will be no ultimate sanction for failure to live morally. In short, morality seems—to thinkers of this persuasion—to be empty unless it can be enforced.

The example of the good atheist and the classical philosopher put paid to this view also. There are many sound reasons why we should seek to live responsibly, with generosity and sympathy towards others, with care and affection for them also, and with continence, sound judgment and honour in our own lives. There is no need for an external enforcer to back the demand that we should be people who take such thoughts seriously.

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CHAPTER 4

ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM

GRAHAM OPPY

INTRODUCTION

ATHEISM is the rejection of theism: *a-theism*. Atheists maintain some or all of the following claims: that theism is false; that theism is unbelievable; that theism is rationally unacceptable; that theism is morally unacceptable. Among arguments for atheism, there are arguments that are direct, indirect, and comparative.

Direct arguments for atheism aim to show that theism fails on its own terms: theism is meaningless, or incoherent, or internally inconsistent, or impossible, or inconsistent with known fact, or improbable given known fact, or less likely than not given known fact, or morally repugnant, and so forth.

Indirect arguments for atheism depend upon direct arguments for something else. Consider naturalism. Naturalism and theism are jointly inconsistent: they cannot both be true. Direct arguments for naturalism—arguments for the claim that naturalism is true, or rationally required, or morally required—are, *eo ipso*, arguments for atheism.

Comparative arguments for atheism are arguments for the theoretical superiority of something else to theism. Consider naturalism. An argument for the theoretical superiority of naturalism to theism is, *eo ipso*, an argument for atheism, even though such an argument need not aim to establish that naturalism is true, or rationally required, or morally required.

PRELIMINARIES

Theism is the claim that there are gods. Monotheism claims that there is just one god—God; polytheism claims that there are many gods. Gods are supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world and that are not, in turn, under the power of higher-ranking or more powerful categories of beings or forces. Thus, monotheism claims that there is just one supernatural being or force—God—that has and exercises power over the natural world and that is not, in turn, under the power of higher-ranking or more powerful categories of beings or forces.

Naturalism is the claim that there are none but natural causes, beings and forces. Naturalism entails that all causally efficacious beings and forces are located within the natural world. As noted above, naturalism is inconsistent with theism: naturalism entails that there are no supernatural beings or forces that have and exercise power over the natural world, whereas theism entails that there are supernatural beings that have and exercise power over the natural world.

Supernaturalism—perhaps it might more neatly be called ‘anaturalism’—is the denial of naturalism. Just as naturalism is only one form of atheism, so, too, theism is just one kind of

supernaturalism. There can be—and are—atheists who embrace the supernatural; there can be—and are—supernaturalists who do not embrace theism.

Monotheists disagree about the nature of God. Some monotheists suppose that God is personal; others do not. Some monotheists suppose that God is simple; others do not. Some monotheists suppose that God is impassible; others do not. Some monotheists suppose that God is triune; others do not. Some monotheists suppose that God is perfectly good; others do not. And so on.

Naturalists disagree about the nature of natural reality. Some naturalists suppose that the natural supervenes upon the microphysical; others do not. Some naturalists suppose that the natural is reducible to the physical; others do not. Some naturalists suppose that the mental is emergent relative to the biological; others do not. Some naturalists suppose that natural reality is exhausted by the spatiotemporal domain downstream from that ‘big bang’ whose remnants can be detected by our most powerful telescopes; others do not. And so on.

When particular proponents of theism and naturalism argue with one another, they will always disagree about far more than the basic claims that are constitutive of these positions. Moreover, and consequently, when particular proponents of theism and naturalism argue with one another, the details of their arguments may have little or no wider philosophical significance. While there are interesting and important observations to be made concerning the proper conduct and regulation of these kinds of disputes, we shall instead turn out attention to the prospects of finding worthier deservers of the label ‘argument for atheism’ in a more idealized setting.

Imagine, then, that Theist and Naturalist are parties to a philosophical debate. Theist is committed to the claim that there are gods; Naturalist is committed to the claim that there are none but natural causes. Beyond these minimal commitments, Theist and Naturalist are flexible: we can dress them up with further commitments, and see how they fare. But, whenever we do dress them up with further commitments, we should make sure that each is equipped with those further commitments to the same level of detail—and we should also make sure that we assess each view to the same theoretical standards and against the same benchmarks.

DIRECT ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM

One strategy that is open to Naturalist is to argue that theism fails on its own terms. In pursuing this strategy, Naturalist need not be trying to persuade Theist to adopt naturalism; the object may simply be to try to encourage Theist to give up theism.

(i) Theism is Meaningless

At various points in the history of philosophy, there have been philosophers who have tried to argue that theism is not a meaningful hypothesis. The paradigm example is A. J. Ayer. Ayer claims that the sentence ‘There exists a transcendent god’ has ‘no literal significance’ (1936: 158). In saying that this sentence—which we can take to be equivalent to the defining claim of theism, viz. that there is at least one god—has no literal significance, Ayer is saying two things: first, that this sentence is not an analytic truth—i.e., not a sentence that is true simply in virtue of the words from which it is composed—and, second, that there are no actual or possible observations that are relevant to the determination of its truth or falsehood (*ibid.*: 52).

Enthusiasm for Ayer’s position has evaporated almost entirely since the latter stages of the twentieth

century. While many contributors to Mitchell (1958) and Diamond and Lizenbury (1975) essentially agreed with Ayer, it is hard to find any philosophers beyond Nielsen (1971; 1982; 1985) and Martin (1990) who endorse the claim that the sentence ‘There is at least one god’ has no literal significance.

There are various good reasons for this. First, Ayer’s argument depends upon a controversial verificationist theory of meaning. While there are still some verificationist holdouts (e.g., Wright 1989) there are many who suppose that verificationism has been decisively refuted. (Consider, for example, the argument of Lewis 1988.) Second, despite Ayer’s confident assertion, it is not entirely obvious that there are no actual or possible observations that are relevant to the determination of the truth or falsity of theism. Certainly, there are people—including trained philosophers—who claim to have had experiences that they themselves take to directly support theism. And many suppose that they can describe possible courses of experience that would provide those who underwent those courses of experiences with good reason to suppose that there is at least one god. (See, for example, Alston 1991.) Third, it is worth observing that, on Ayer’s own account, atheism and naturalism are no more literally meaningful than theism: if a sentence is meaningless, then so is the denial (negation) of that sentence, and so, too, is any sentence that entails the denial (negation) of the sentence in question. If the argument for the meaninglessness of theism succeeded, it might well also establish the meaninglessness of naturalism and atheism (and hence might well not ultimately lead to a victory for Naturalist).

(ii) Theism is Incoherent

Logical positivism is not the only path that has been claimed to lead to the conclusion that there is something linguistically amiss with assertions of theistic commitment. Some philosophers of a broadly Wittgensteinian persuasion have argued that claims, affirming the existence of supernatural beings and forces that have and exercise power over the natural world, are ‘ungrammatical’ or otherwise an affront to the canons of ordinary linguistic understanding. (Many of these philosophers claim also to be friends of religion; they insist that religion—properly so-called—has no commerce with supernatural beings and forces that have and exercise power over the natural world. Since our present concern is with atheism rather than with irreligion, we need not pause to scruple.) Consider Rundle: ‘I can get no grip on the idea of an agent doing something where the doing, the bringing about, is not an episode in [space and] time, something involving a[n embodied and] changing agent’ (2004: 77).

Arguments of this kind stand or fall with their broadly Wittgensteinian philosophical underpinnings. On the one hand, they invite Russellian retort: how could profession of Wittgensteinian intellectual shortcoming be a good argument for anything at all? (‘I am not responsible for your intellectual shortcomings, young man!’) On the other hand, there is a fairly widespread contemporary consensus that the broadly Wittgensteinian underpinnings cannot be satisfactorily defended: rather than suppose that most philosophy is language on holidays, contemporary philosophers are much more likely to suppose that Wittgensteinian ordinary language approaches are philosophy on holidays.

(iii) Theism is Logically Inconsistent

Many philosophers have argued that particular versions of theism are logically inconsistent. If we

suppose that were God to exist, God would have a sufficiently wide range of properties—essential omniscience, essential omnipotence, essential perfect goodness, necessary existence, essential simplicity, essential impassibility, essential perfect libertarian freedom, essential consciousness, essential personality, essential foreknowledge, essential infinity, essential eternity, and so forth—then there is ample opportunity to argue for the logical inconsistency of God as thus conceived. On the one hand, we might argue that, considered alone, some of the properties in question are self-contradictory; on the other hand, we might argue that, considered together, some subsets of the properties in question are jointly contradictory. Examples abound. Some have argued that nothing can be essentially omnipotent (e.g., Sobel 2004). Some have argued that nothing can be essentially omniscient (e.g., Grim 1991). Some have argued that nothing can be essentially simple (e.g., Gale 1991). Some have argued that nothing can be essentially omnipotent and essentially perfectly good (e.g., Pike 1969). Some have argued that nothing can have essentially perfect libertarian freedom and yet be essentially perfectly good (e.g., Rowe 2004). Some have argued that nothing can be essentially conscious and essentially impassible (e.g. Drange 1998a). And so forth.

There is a great deal of detailed discussion that can be given of these kinds of arguments. I shall venture just a couple of general comments here. First, it is obvious that these kinds of arguments do not target theism—i.e., they do not target the claim that there are gods. Second, many of these arguments depend upon particular analyses of the key concepts involved: particular analyses of omnipotence, omniscience, perfect goodness, simplicity, freedom, consciousness, and so forth. To the extent that these arguments do depend upon particular analyses of the key concepts involved, they are vulnerable to the response that they have simply adopted the wrong analyses of these concepts. Third, these kinds of arguments are sometimes spectacularly successful in particular local debates; and these kinds of arguments do sometimes focus on difficulties that theists have found particularly troubling. So, for example, Leibniz and Clarke disagreed about what is required to reconcile essential perfect goodness and essentially perfect libertarian freedom; the apparent conflict between essential perfect goodness and essentially perfect libertarian freedom was a genuine difficulty for them.

(iv) Theism is Impossible

Some philosophers have argued that theism is, if not logically inconsistent, at any rate, (metaphysically) impossible. If we ignore the various qualifications and hedges introduced in the text, it seems to me to be possible to read Fales (2010) as arguing for a view of this kind. Fales actually calls for a ‘re-examination of the metaphysical and epistemological conditions that must obtain if God is to have [certain] characteristics, in the light of the best current philosophical and physical understandings of causation, laws of nature, space, time and knowledge’ (2010: 157). But the reasons that he gives for calling for this re-examination can plausibly be marshalled to construct an argument for the claim that, given our best current philosophical and physical understanding of causation, laws of nature, space, time, and knowledge, it is simply impossible that there is an omnipotent and omniscient God. While such an argument would not target theism, it might even be possible to draw upon a subset of the considerations that he marshals in order to construct an argument for the claim that, given our best current philosophical and physical understandings of causation, laws of nature, space and time, it is simply impossible for there to be gods. (‘What a theist must reckon with, to put the matter a bit differently, is that [supernatural causation] upsets the account sheet on energy and momentum; it entails that these are not conserved’ [ibid.: 154].)

I think that the best position for Naturalist to adopt is one according to which theism is impossible. All possible worlds share an initial segment with the actual world. All possible worlds evolve

according to the same laws as the actual world. It is impossible that the actual laws could oversee a transition from a purely natural state to a state in which there are supernatural entities. There have never been any supernatural entities. So supernatural entities are impossible; and hence, in particular, gods are impossible.

I also think that the best position for Theist to adopt is one according to which naturalism is impossible. All possible worlds share an initial segment with the actual world. All possible worlds evolve according to the same laws as the actual world. It is impossible that the actual laws could oversee a transition from a state in which there are gods to a purely natural state. There have always been gods. So naturalism is impossible.

Given the symmetry of this situation, I think that the prospects of a successful argument for the *impossibility* of theism stand or fall with the prospects of a successful argument for the *falsity* of theism. (Theists deny that the natural world is a causally closed system; *a fortiori*, it is unsurprising that theism ‘upsets the account sheet on energy and momentum’, if that ‘account sheet’ is supposed to be exclusively naturalistic.)

(v) Theism is Inconsistent with Known Fact

Many philosophers have argued that particular versions of theism are logically inconsistent with known fact. If we suppose that, were God to exist, God would have a particular range of properties—essential omniscience, essential omnipotence, essential perfect goodness, necessary existence, essential simplicity, essential impassibility, essential perfect libertarian freedom, essential consciousness, essential personality, essential foreknowledge, essential infinity, essential eternity, and so forth—then there is ample room to argue that God’s existence is logically inconsistent with facts about the world that are acknowledged on (almost) all sides—that there is evil, that there is moral evil, that there is a lot of evil, that it is not obvious that God exists, that there are many people who fail to believe that God exists, and so forth. Some have argued that, if God existed, God would have made a world in which everyone always freely chooses the good (e.g., Mackie 1955). Some have argued that, if God existed, God would have made God’s existence (more) obvious to all (e.g., Schellenberg 1993). Some have argued that, if God existed, God would have ensured that all human beings came to believe in God before they died (e.g., Drange 1998b). And so forth.

These arguments do not target theism. Indeed, most of these arguments target only a particular version of monotheism: one on which it is supposed that God is, at least, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. This is not to deny that these arguments have local significance: there are, after all, many theists who claim to believe that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. Moreover, there are many who also claim that, if God were not omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, then God would not be worship-worthy, i.e. not an appropriate focus for religious veneration. However, the point remains that these arguments have far more significance for a particular brand of theists than they do for any atheists: even if arguments of this kind are successful, they certainly do not succeed in showing that there are no gods. And, of course, it is controversial whether these kinds of arguments do succeed (but, of course, a detailed examination of these arguments is beyond the scope of the present article).

(vi) Theism is Improbable Given Known Fact

Many philosophers have argued that particular versions of theism are improbable in the light of

known facts. If we suppose that, were God to exist, God would have a particular range of properties—essential omniscience, essential omnipotence, essential perfect goodness, necessary existence, essential simplicity, essential impassibility, essential perfect libertarian freedom, essential consciousness, essential personality, essential foreknowledge, essential infinity, essential eternity, and so forth—then there is ample room to argue that God's existence is improbable in the light of facts about the world that are acknowledged on (almost) all sides—that there are horrendous evils, that there are evils for which we are unable to identify outweighing goods, that the universe does not appear to have a 'human scale', and so forth. Some have argued that it is improbable that, if God existed, God would have permitted certain kinds of horrendous evils (e.g., Rowe 1979). Some have argued that it is improbable that, if God existed, God would have created a universe in which the domain of humanity is so insignificant (e.g., Everitt 2004). Some have argued that it is improbable that, if God existed, God would have produced such biologically suboptimal creatures as human beings (e.g., Dawkins 1986). Some have argued that it is improbable that, if God existed, God would have created a world in which there is the distribution of pain and pleasure in sentient creatures that we find in the actual world (e.g., Draper 1989). And so forth.

These arguments do not target theism. Indeed, most of these arguments target only a particular version of monotheism: one on which it is supposed that God is, at least, omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. This is not to deny that these arguments have local significance: there are, after all, many theists who claim to believe that God is omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good. Moreover, there are many who also claim that, if God were not omnipotent, omniscient and perfectly good, then God would not be worship-worthy, i.e. not an appropriate focus for religious veneration. However, the point remains that these arguments have far more significance for a particular brand of theists than they do for any atheists: even if arguments of this kind are successful, they certainly do not succeed in showing that it is improbable that there are gods. And it is controversial whether any of these kinds of arguments succeed (either separately or jointly).

(vii) Theism is Morally Repugnant

While many people who have rejected theism have regretted their inability to believe in God or the gods, there are some people who have supposed that the theoretical unacceptability of theism dovetails nicely with its moral unacceptability. If we suppose that, were God to exist, God would have a particular range of properties—selected from among essential omniscience, essential omnipotence, essential perfect goodness, necessary existence, essential simplicity, essential impassibility, essential perfect libertarian freedom, essential consciousness, essential personality, essential foreknowledge, essential infinity, essential eternity, and so forth—then there is at least some room to argue that God's existence is morally undesirable and perhaps even morally repugnant. For instance, one might argue as follows: The only kind of freedom that it is possible to have is compatibilist freedom. But it is impossible to have compatibilist freedom if there is a causally upstream agent who selects one's beliefs and desires. So it is impossible for you to be free if you are one of God's creatures. But freedom is a highly significant moral good. So God's non-existence is morally desirable: God's non-existence is necessary for our freedom and the goods that our freedom makes possible—e.g., moral responsibility. (See Kahane 2011 for other arguments along similar lines.)

As in the previous two cases, these arguments do not target theism. Thus, for example, the sample argument that I have given only targets versions of monotheism that suppose that there is a strong sense in which God creates us. Moreover, even in the context of debate with theists who do make the relevant assumptions, it is not clear how much weight these kinds of arguments could carry: after all,

even if it were true that theism is morally repugnant, that, in itself, would certainly not be a good reason to suppose that it is false.

(viii) Finishing Touches

This survey of direct arguments for atheism has been very brief, and has certainly not mentioned—let alone considered—the wide range of direct arguments for atheism that are to be found in the literature. While I am not, myself, particularly enthusiastic about the prospects for successful direct arguments for atheism, I think that it is clear that there is a great deal more to be done in clarifying and analysing the arguments that can be put forward in the various categories that I have identified (and perhaps also in categories to which I have not attended), and also in thinking about the ways in which some of these arguments might be combined to form direct ‘cumulative’ arguments for atheism.

In closing, there is perhaps one more gambit that deserves some mention. Some people suppose that there is a standing presumption against existence claims. So, for example, such people might suppose that, prior to examination of the evidence, there is a standing presumption that there is no china teapot in orbit around Pluto. But, if that’s right, then such people might further suppose that all that one needs in order to produce a good argument for atheism is to produce good objections to all of the arguments that can be offered for theism. If no argument for theism succeeds—as argued in, for example, Oppy (2006)—then the standing presumption against existence claims kicks in, and one has good reason to accept atheism. For myself, I do not think that there is a standing presumption against existence claims; I do not think that considerations about burden of proof have a significant role in the arbitration of our dispute between Naturalist and Theist. (For more about the proper conception of the dispute between Naturalist and Theist, see Oppy 2011.)

COMPARATIVE ARGUMENTS FOR ATHEISM

A different strategy that is open to Naturalist is to argue that naturalism is theoretically superior to theism. The idea here is to compare the theoretical merits of naturalism with the theoretical merits of theism when these views are assessed against the relevant available evidence.

In order to proceed, we need to have some conception of theoretical merit. While this matter remains controversial, there is fairly broad consensus that appropriate trade off of complexity of theory with fit with data, breadth of explanatory role, and compatibility with independently established theory are amongst the considerations that are to be weighed in any assessment of the merits of competing theories. While there are competing views about how to measure the complexity of a theory, I shall suppose that relevant factors include: numbers and kinds of primitive terms; numbers and kinds of primitive predicates; and numbers and kinds of other theoretical primitives (e.g., sentential operators).

We proceed to consider how theism and naturalism measure up against these theoretical desiderata given various key pieces of evidence.

(i) Ultimate Explanation

We take as our first piece of evidence the existence of a global (efficient) causal order. Given that there is a global causal order, we can frame various hypotheses about its shape: (1) infinite regress; (2) necessary initial state; (3) contingent initial state (involving some necessary existents); (4) contingent initial state (involving only contingent existents). We can then assess the theoretical credentials of naturalism and theism against these various hypotheses.

Naturalism says that there is only the natural causal order: the ordered global causal states of the natural world. Theism says that there is the natural causal order, and more besides: there is the supernatural causal order, and there is causal commerce between the natural and the supernatural. Taking only considerations of theoretical simplicity into account, it is clear that naturalism is ahead: it postulates fewer kinds of entities, fewer kinds of causes, and so forth. Moreover, when we turn to consider questions of ultimate explanation—*Why is there something rather than nothing? Why is there a causal order? Why is there a natural causal order?*—it is clear that theism gains no advantage over naturalism. For, whatever answer to these questions turns out to be correct—*Because there always has been!* [Infinite Regress]; *Because there had to be this particular initial causal state!* [Necessary Initial State]; *Because there had to be some initial causal state or other!* [Contingent Initial State Involving Some Necessary Existents]; *Just because!* [Contingent Initial State Involving Only Contingent Existents]—naturalism supports that answer at least as well as theism does. So, given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, naturalism trumps theism.

Might there be explanations of the existence of the global (efficient) causal order that I haven't considered? I think it unlikely. Some suppose that the existence of the global (efficient) causal order might have an axiarchial explanation: there is a global (efficient) causal order because it is good that there be such a global (efficient) causal order (see, for example, Leslie 1979). However, I'm happy to rule this attempt out of court: it is impossible for the existence of the global (efficient) causal order to be explained in this way. And—at least at the time of writing—there are no other contending explanations for the existence of the global (efficient) causal order that have come into view.

(ii) Order

We take as our second piece of evidence the alleged fine-tuning for life of the domain in which we live. Although it is controversial whether the domain in which we live is fine-tuned for life, we shall, for the sake of argument, simply suppose that the domain in which we live is fine-tuned for life.

There are two hypotheses that we can frame about the point in the causal order at which the fine-tuning for life of the domain in which we live was fixed: either it has been fixed at all points in the causal order that the domain which we live is fine-tuned for life; or else there is some initial segment of the causal order in which it is not fixed that the domain in which we live is fine-tuned for life.

We can now assess the theoretical credentials of naturalism and theism against the sum of these hypotheses concerning the point in the causal order at which the fine-tuning for life of the domain in which we live was fixed and the previous hypotheses about the shape of the global causal order.

As before, it is clear that, taking only considerations of theoretical simplicity into account, naturalism is ahead. We have already seen that, when we turn to consider questions of ultimate explanation, theism gains no advantage over naturalism. But it is equally clear that adding questions about the point in the causal order at which the fine-tuning for life of the domain in which we live was fixed also creates no advantage for theism over naturalism. On the one hand, if it has been fixed at all points in the causal order that the domain in which we live is fine-tuned for life, then there is just the same range of explanatory options available to naturalism as there are available to theism: *Because*

the causal order has always been fine-tuned for life! [Infinite Regress]; Because there had to be this particular initial causal state and it had to be fine-tuned for life! [Necessary Initial State]; Because there had to be some particular initial causal state that had to be fine-tuned for life! [Contingent Initial State Involving Essential Fine-Tuning]; Just because! [Contingent Initial State Involving Inessential Fine-Tuning]. On the other hand, if there is some initial segment of the causal order in which it is not fixed that the domain in which we live is fine-tuned for life then, again, there is just the same range of explanatory options for naturalism as there are for theism: for, in this case, it can only be that it is a matter of objective chance that the domain in which we live is fine-tuned for life. So, given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation and fine-tuning (ultimate order), naturalism trumps theism.

(iii) The Necessary and Knowable A Priori

We take as our third piece of evidence the various domains that have often been taken to be home to claims and/or entities that are necessary and knowable a priori: at least logic and mathematics; and perhaps also some or all of modality, morality, meaning, (analytic) metaphysics, and so forth. Whatever among these domains is home to claims and/or entities that are necessary and knowable a priori is such that it is home to claims that are true at all points in the causal order and/or to entities that exist at all points in the causal order. So, no matter what hypothesis we make about the shape of the global causal order, whatever among these domains is home to claims and/or entities that are necessary and knowable a priori is home to claims and/or entities that are explained just as well on naturalism as they are on theism. After all, whatever is true at all points in the causal order and/or whatever exists at all points in the causal order has no cause: thus, whatever is true at all points in the causal order and/or exists at all points in the causal order is theoretically primitive, at least relative to all domains that are not home to claims and/or entities that are necessary and knowable a priori—though, of course, for example, some mathematical claims and/or entities may be explained in terms of other mathematical claims and/or entities, or in terms of logical claims and/or entities, or in terms of the claims and/or entities of some other domain that is necessary and knowable a priori.

It will of course be noted that the argument just given relies on the assumption that theism is not necessary and knowable a priori: theism does not have the same standing as whichever among logic, mathematics, modality, morality, meaning, (analytic) metaphysics, and so forth, has that standing. Some may dispute this assumption (even though I take it to be obviously correct); however, further argument over this point will need to be deferred to some other occasion.

Finally, of course, it should also be noted that it is controversial whether any of the domains mentioned in the above argument is necessary and knowable a priori. The aim of the argument is only to establish that, insofar as there are domains that are home to claims and/or entities that are necessary and knowable a priori, those domains offer no support to theism over naturalism. Given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), and the necessary and knowable a priori, naturalism trumps theism.

(iv) (Objective) Value

We take as our fourth piece of evidence the various axiological domains: moral, aesthetic, comic, and so forth. There are various hypotheses that we can frame about the way in which values are related to the causal order; however, the ones that are most hospitable to theism—and the ones that we shall

consider henceforth—suppose that values have some kind of *objective* connection to the causal order: causal agents, states, events, and processes have objective values (even though, of course, objective values are not themselves causal agents, states, events or processes).

If we suppose that values have some kind of objective connection to the causal order, then it seems to me to be inevitable that we also suppose that the connection in question is necessary. For naturalists, this is surely obvious: how could it be that purely naturalistic causal agents, states, events and processes have objective values unless there is some kind of necessary connection between those values and the ways that those purely naturalistic causal agents, states, events, and processes are? But it seems no less evident for theists. If supernatural causal agents, states, events, and processes have objective values, then there is just the same reason to suppose that there is some kind of necessary connection between those values and the ways that those supernatural causal agents, states, events and processes are. But once we have accepted that there are (primitive) necessary connections between objective values and *some* causal agents, states, events and processes, there is only theoretical loss in failing to suppose that those same (primitive) necessary connections hold for objective values and all other causal agents, states, events and processes. Put another way: either theism and naturalism are on a par—because each accepts the same kind of relationship between objective values and causal agents, states, events and processes—or else naturalism should be preferred to theism because it gives a simpler (unified) account of the relationship between objective values and causal agents, states, events and processes.

The argument just given is obviously related to the argument attributed to Socrates by Plato at *Euthyphro* 10a-11b. If some part of the causal order is supposed to establish objective connections between values and the causal order, then there is an obvious difficulty that arises concerning the objectivity of the values that apply to that very part of the causal order. No part of the causal order can come to possess an objective value merely by deeming itself to be in possession of that value; in particular, no supernatural agent or power can come to possess an objective value merely by deeming itself to be in possession of that value.

Of course, it is controversial to suppose that there are objective values. However, if there are no objective values, then there is surely no reason at all to suppose that considerations about values might somehow favour theism over naturalism. Given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), the necessary and knowable a priori, and (objective) value, naturalism trumps theism.

(v) Meaning

We take as our fifth piece of evidence the alleged meaninglessness of the causal order in the absence of the supernatural (see also Kimberly A. Blessing's 'Atheism and the Meaningfulness of Life'). Many people have claimed that, in the absence of certain kinds of supernatural agents—God, or the gods—the causal order would have no meaning or purpose, that this would be a tragic and regrettable state of affairs, that in the presence of those same kinds of supernatural agents—God, or the gods—the causal order does have meaning and purpose, and that this is a state of affairs that should be celebrated and applauded.

This can't be right. If the thoughts, feelings, and deeds of human beings are not sufficient to endow their part of the natural order with meaning, then how could the thoughts, feelings, and deeds of supernatural powers and agents be sufficient to endow a wider causal order with meaning? If a causal order can only be imbued with meaning from an external source—something outside the causal order in question—then, of course, it will be true that the natural causal order is devoid of meaning; but it

will be equally true that, if a causal order can only be imbued with meaning from an external source—something outside the causal order in question—then any larger causal order within which the natural causal order is embedded will also be devoid of meaning.

Perhaps we can also add this: Suppose that it were true that, if there were only the natural causal order, then the natural causal order could have no meaning or purpose. How, then, could it be true that adding some further part to the causal order—where that further part of the causal order itself had no meaning or purpose—somehow gave meaning or purpose to the natural causal order? Perhaps it might be suggested that there could be a kind of causal order that gave meaning and purpose to itself: a kind of intrinsically meaningful causal order. But if we suppose that supernatural powers and agents have the capacity to endow the causal order to which they belong with meaning and purpose, surely we can also suppose that natural agents have the capacity to endow the causal order to which they belong with meaning and purpose.

The upshot here is clear: considerations about the meaningfulness or otherwise of the causal order confer no advantage on theism over naturalism. Given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), the necessary and knowable a priori, (objective) value, and the meaningfulness of the causal order, naturalism trumps theism.

(vi) Consciousness

We take as our sixth piece of evidence the presence in the natural universe of entities—human beings—that have conscious mental lives. Some people have claimed that theism gives a better explanation than naturalism does of the presence in the natural universe of entities with conscious mental lives (see, e.g., Moreland 2008). While I don't really have space here to do full justice to the relevant considerations, I can at least sketch an argument for the rejection of this claim.

Naturalism is committed to affirming some kind of relation or connection between conscious states and natural states (in human beings, neural states). Opinion varies concerning the nature of this relation or connection: it might be identity, or some kind of necessity, or some kind of supervenience that falls short of necessity, or some kind of emergence that falls short of supervenience. But what options does theism encompass? If theism supposes that there is no relation or connection between conscious states and supernatural states, then it plainly has no explanatory advantage over naturalism. But if theism says that there is a connection between conscious states and supernatural states (say, states of God, or gods, or supernatural souls), then it seems to have the same range of available options concerning the nature of this relation or connection in the domain of the supernatural: it might be identity, or some kind of necessity, or some kind of supervenience that falls short of necessity, or some kind of emergence that falls short of supervenience. Since there is plainly no explanatory advantage that accrues to theism, considerations of simplicity favour naturalism, no matter how we suppose that the chips fall concerning the relationship or connection between conscious states and states in the relevant causal domain.

Perhaps it is worth noting here that on my favourite theory of the range of possibility (see above), zombies are impossible: there are no possible worlds in which the kinds of neural states that are actually—or are actually correlated with—conscious states fail to be—or to be correlated with—conscious states. My preferred position is that conscious states in human beings just are neural states; I recommend this view to naturalists, but do not suppose that they are obliged to adopt it. In any case, I conclude that, given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), the necessary and knowable a priori, (objective) value, the meaningfulness of the causal order, and consciousness, naturalism trumps theism.

(vii) Reason

We take as our seventh piece of evidence the presence in the natural universe of entities—human beings—that have higher-order cognitive capacities: the abilities to reason, infer, argue, and so forth. Some people have claimed that theism gives a better explanation than does naturalism of the presence in the natural world of beings that have higher-order cognitive capacities. (See, e.g., Lewis 1947; and Reppert 2003.) Once more, while I don't really have space here to do full justice to the relevant considerations, I can at least sketch an argument for the rejection of this claim.

Naturalism is committed to affirming some kind of relation or connection between episodes of reasoning, inferring, arguing, etc., and natural episodes (in human being, episodes intimately involving neural states). Opinion varies concerning the nature of this relation or connection: it might be identity, or some kind of necessity, or some kind of supervenience that falls short of necessity, or some kind of emergence that falls short of supervenience. But what options does theism encompass? If theism supposes that there is no relation or connection between episodes of reasoning, inferring, arguing, etc., and supernatural episodes (episodes involving God, or gods, or supernatural souls), then it plainly has no explanatory advantage over naturalism. But if theism says that there is a connection between episodes of reasoning, inferring, arguing, etc. and supernatural episodes (say, states of God, or gods, or supernatural souls), then it seems to have the same range of available options concerning the nature of this relation or connection in the domain of the supernatural: it might be identity, or some kind of necessity, or some kind of supervenience that falls short of necessity, or some kind of emergence that falls short of supervenience. Since there is no explanatory advantage that accrues to theism, considerations of simplicity favour naturalism, no matter how we suppose that the chips fall concerning the relationship or connection between episodes of reasoning, inferring, arguing, etc., and episodes in the relevant causal domain.

I conclude that, given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), the necessary and knowable *a priori*, (objective) value, the meaningfulness of the causal order, consciousness, and reason, naturalism trumps theism.

(viii) Supernatural Experience

We take as our eighth piece of evidence to be the directly and indirectly recorded supernatural experience of humanity, from its historical origins—whatever those might have been—to the present. Many people across history have claimed to have direct experiences of supernatural agents: experiences that the people in question took to be of, or to be directly caused by, supernatural agents—God, gods, angels, demons, ghosts, ancestor spirits, fairies, and so forth.

Without pretending to be able to make a full and proper assessment of the evidential weight of supernatural experience here, we can note a few salient points. First, there is no question that the history of reports of encounters with supernatural beings and forces is, *at least in very large part*, a history of fraud, gullibility, deception, stupidity, ignorance, and so forth. Second, there is no serious doubt that there is at least good *prima facie* reason to believe that there is a huge panoply of supernatural beings whose existence would be vindicated by the recorded supernatural experience of humanity if the existence of *any* supernatural beings was vindicated by that recorded supernatural experience. Third, it is quite clear that the joint effect of these first two points is to raise serious questions about the evidential worth of *any* reports of experiences that are claimed to be of, or directly caused by, supernatural agents. Fourth, it may well be that, in the absence of defeating

considerations, its seeming to someone to be the case that *p* is some reason to suppose that it is the case that *p* (cf. Swinburne 1979). But, as we have just noted, there is no serious doubt that there are very weighty candidate defeating considerations in the case of ‘seemings’ that are tied to the supernatural.

In the absence of any independent support for belief in gods—i.e., support founded in something other than reports of experiences that have been taken to be of, or directly caused by, gods—there is clearly reason to prefer the uniform treatment of reports of supernatural experiences that naturalism affords to the non-uniform treatment of reports of supernatural experiences that is required by any developed version of theism. That is: given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), the necessary and knowable *a priori*, (objective) value, the meaningfulness of the causal order, consciousness, reason, and supernatural experience, naturalism trumps theism.

(ix) (Supernatural) History

We take as our ninth piece of evidence the history of our universe, as recorded in our best scientific and historical theories. This history contains numerous direct and indirect reports of—and speculations about—supernatural engagement with the natural world. Some people suppose that the biological sciences furnish us with good reasons to suppose that a supernatural intelligent designer interfered at various points in the evolution of life in our universe. Some people suppose that various reported miracles belonging to particular religious traditions furnish us with good reasons to suppose that those reported miracles actually involved supernatural agency. Some people suppose that the contents of the scriptures of particular religious traditions furnish us with good reasons to suppose that those scriptures are actually direct products of supernatural agency. And so forth.

Again, we can do no more than note a few salient points here. First, what goes for reports of supernatural experience goes equally for ancient written reports—and, indeed, reports more generally—of the deeds of supernatural agents: there is no question that, at least in very large part, we are in the domain of fraud, gullibility, deception, stupidity, ignorance, and so forth; and there is also at least good *prima facie* reason to think that there is a huge panoply of supernatural beings whose existence would be vindicated by reports of the deeds of such agents if the existence of *any* supernatural beings was vindicated by those kinds of reports. Second, the track record of the supernatural in science is null and void: there is not one established scientific result that depends upon the postulation of the existence of something supernatural, and the history of attempts to repair alleged ‘gaps’ in natural science with supernatural filler is a long record of dismal failure.

In the absence of any independent support for belief in gods—i.e., support founded in something other than (a) reports of experiences that have been taken to be of, or directly caused by, gods; (b) reports—ancient or recent, written or verbal—of interventions by gods in the natural order; and (c) attempts to improve upon natural science by appeal to the activities of gods—there is clearly reason to prefer the uniform treatment of these topics that is afforded by naturalism to the non-uniform treatment of these topics that is provided by any developed version of theism. That is: given that we consider only questions about ultimate explanation, fine-tuning (ultimate order), the necessary and knowable *a priori*, (objective) value, the meaningfulness of the causal order, consciousness, reason, supernatural experience, and (supernatural) history, naturalism trumps theism.

(x) Finishing Touches

Clearly, the preceding sketch of a comparative argument for atheism is incomplete. First, the treatment of each of the relevant pieces of evidence is incomplete. Second, not all of the relevant evidence has been considered. And, third, there is clearly more work to be done on the theory of theoretical virtue that underpins the argument. While I can *imagine* that there is a way of filling out this sketch that justifies the conclusion that, given all of the available evidence, naturalism trumps theism, I am sceptical that the task can be completed (even in principle). However, I do think that this kind of comparative argument marks the most promising current strategy for arguing for atheism: if there is a successful argument for atheism, then, I think, it will run along something like these lines.

CONCLUSION

There are many loose ends in this discussion. I shall tie just one here. Given the way that I set up the initial discussion, it turns out—I think—that pantheism is a version of naturalism. Moreover, it turns out that there are self-identified ‘theists’ who are classified as ‘naturalists’ in the above discussion—though, interestingly, these ‘theists’ also self-identify as ‘naturalists’: see, for example, Forrest (1996) and Bishop (2007). This means that—setting disputes about the proper meanings of terms to one side—there is still a further argument to be had, within what I have called the ‘naturalist’ camp—between those who suppose that the natural world has the kinds of properties that those naturalists who call themselves ‘theists’ or ‘pantheists’ attribute to it, and those who suppose that the natural world does not have the kinds of properties that those naturalists who call themselves ‘theists’ or ‘pantheists’ attribute to it. In that debate, I certainly come done on the latter side (see, for example, Oppy 1997) but there is no space to rehearse the relevant considerations here.

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CHAPTER 5

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL

MICHAEL L. PETERSON

INTRODUCTION

THE problem of evil is ‘the rock of atheism’. This observation by Hans Küng is not hyperbole but a realistic assessment of the most formidable objection to theism and a central element in the case for atheism (1976: 432). The three major monotheistic religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam) affirm that there is an omnipotent, omniscient, and perfectly good being that created, sustains, and interacts with the world—and yet suffering, catastrophe, wrongdoing, injustice, and a host of other negatives exist in that world. Religions involving theism, therefore, face the problem of reconciling evil with their concept of deity. Other world religions have their own problems of evil generated by their own distinctive beliefs (see Bowker 1970; Peterson 2010).

Since the mid-twentieth century, analytic philosophers of religion have debated the problem within the framework of two broad formulations: the *logical argument* (which alleges a contradiction in the joint assertion that God and evil exist) and the *evidential argument* (which alleges that the facts of evil count heavily against the existence of the theistic God). Either one of these arguments becomes a ‘problem’ for the theist if she is inclined to accept its premises and wants to avoid the atheistic conclusion. The theist, then, bears the burden of finding fault with one or more of the premises while the non-theistic critic must support them. This essay traces the major arguments and counter-arguments in the evolving debate.

THE LOGICAL ARGUMENT

All versions of the logical argument from evil have a deductive structure designed to show that theism is somehow self-contradictory and therefore not rational to believe. Epicurus provided the original statement of the argument, and David Hume articulated it during the Enlightenment with impressive dialectical force: ‘Is [God] willing to prevent evil, but not able? Then he is impotent. Is he able, but not willing? Then he is malevolent. Is he both able and willing? Whence then is evil?’ ([1779] 2007: 74). In the contemporary period, however, J. L. Mackie provides the most influential formulation:

God is omnipotent; God is wholly good; and yet evil exists. There seems to be some contradiction between these three propositions, so that if any two of them were true the third would be false. But at the same time all three are essential parts of most theological positions; the theologian, it seems, at once *must* adhere and *cannot consistently* adhere to all three. (1955: 200)

Mackie’s point is ‘not that religious beliefs lack rational support, but that they are positively irrational, that several parts of the essential theological doctrine are inconsistent with one another’

(ibid.: 200).

A proposition about God's knowledge completes the allegedly inconsistent set:

- (1) God is omnipotent
- (2) God is omniscient
- (3) God is wholly good
- (4) Evil exists ¹

The contradiction is neither explicit nor formal in nature such that the rules of logic alone can detect it. So, Mackie proposes additional propositions—or ‘quasi-logical’ rules—to specify the meanings of key terms:

- (1.1) A good thing always eliminates evil as far as it can
- (2.1) There are no limits to what an omnipotent thing can do (including eliminating all evil)

We might add another proposition for completeness:

- (3.1) God knows everything it is possible to know (including how to eliminate evil).

Conjoined with (1.1)–(3.1), (1)–(3) imply

- (~4) Evil does not exist.

It appears that theism entails (~4), but the theist also accepts (4). This is the worrisome contradiction.

Mackie further claims that inadequate theodicies refuse to surrender any propositions in the set (1)–(3) and instead argue that God cannot achieve some good or worthwhile end without allowing evil. Standard theistic proposals include, for example, that evil is a necessary counterpart to good, that the world on the whole is better with evil in it, that evil is due to human free will, and so forth. All of these manoeuvres, Mackie argues, implicitly deny omnipotence because he thinks that omnipotence could achieve any of the stated goods without allowing the evil. For him, adequate theodicies escape the contradiction by giving up one or more propositions in the set.

THE FREE WILL DEFENCE

Alvin Plantinga is well known for his comprehensive defence of theism against the logical argument (1974: ch. 9; 1977). The defence seeks to establish that

- (5) God is omnipotent, omniscient, and wholly good,

which is the conjunction of (1)–(3), is consistent with

- (4) Evil exists.

To prove that any two propositions p and q are consistent, one must find a third proposition r which is consistent with p and, conjoined with p , entails q . Plantinga says that a proposition like the

following would suffice for *r*:

(6) God creates a world containing evil and has a good reason for doing so.

This proposition is drawn from a story Plantinga tells about God's creation of a world containing free creatures that are capable of moral good. However, these free creatures misused their free will to bring about moral evil. The heart of the defence, then, is the claim that the following proposition is *possible*:

(7) It was not within God's power to create a world containing moral good but no moral evil.

The conjunction of (5) and (7) is consistent and entails that (4) is possible.

The defence obviously turns on the concept of libertarian free will: the idea that free will is incompatible with any form of determinism, including divine determinism. However, most advocates of the logical argument endorse a compatibilist concept of free will, which implies that an omnipotent being can indeed create a world in which free persons never go wrong (Mackie 1955, 1962; Flew 1955, 1973). Plantinga accuses the compatibilist view of committing 'Leibniz's Lapse' because it mistakenly assumes that God can bring about any logically possible world, including a world in which libertarian free creatures are determined always to what is right. Employing the technical machinery of modal logic and possible worlds, Plantinga develops the concept of 'transworld depravity', which is the idea that, for every person who is significantly free in a given possible world, if that person were actual, it is possible that he would have gone wrong (1974: 184–190). There are no circumstances—no initial world segment—that God could instantiate to determine that person's free decision. Therefore, God could have brought about a world containing no moral evil only by creating one without significantly free persons.

Plantinga stipulates that, in order to show theism to be self-contradictory and thus irrational, the burden is on the non-theistic critic to utilize propositions that are essential to theism, or necessarily true, or logical consequences of such propositions. Clearly, there is no logical problem for the theist if he is not committed to each proposition in the set or if the set does not really entail a contradiction. The logical argument faded as theists were generally successful in rejecting the assumption that free will is compatibilist in nature as well as the assumption that God must eliminate all evil. Mackie's concession, however, comes short of full surrender:

[W]e can concede that the problem of evil does not, after all, show that the central doctrines of theism are logically inconsistent with one another. But whether [the Free Will Defence] offers a real solution of the problem is another question. (1982: 154)

Following this admission, most thinkers transitioned to the evidential argument from evil while some continued searching for a viable logical argument.

THE LOGICAL ARGUMENT REVISITED

Refusing to believe that all logical arguments are useless, Graham Oppy proposes his own 'logical argument from moral evil' which seeks to expose an undetected inconsistency in the Free Will Defence related to its view of free will (2006: 268–72). Appealing to a view of God's timeless knowledge of what agents do in all possible worlds (called 'middle knowledge'), Oppy argues that God could have actualized a better world than the actual one—i.e., a world containing moral good but either much less moral evil or none at all. It is open to theistic defenders to explore potential

weaknesses, such as whether this (still) compatibilist argument is confused about the temporal and logical relations of divine knowledge to possible worlds.

Richard Gale offers two logical arguments—one from moral and one from natural evil. A careful conceptual analysis of the omni-attributes, he claims, reveals vulnerabilities in theistic thinking: each theistic attempt to make God and moral evil logically compatible—i.e., to identify at least one possible world in which both exist—preserves libertarian free will by underplaying some particular omni-attribute (omnipotence, omniscience). However, this abandons the original theistic position (1991: ch. 4). Furthermore, Gale argues that the logical problem of natural evil is not refuted by the Free Will Defence. Plantinga's intriguing but odd defensive claim is that it is logically possible that what we call natural evil is really a species of moral evil caused by nonhuman free agents (e.g., rebellious spirits) (Plantinga 1974). In response, Gale lays down the condition that Plantinga must show that the proposition

(8) There is natural evil

is *logically impossible*. However, defending the consistency of (1)–(4) does not require that (8) is necessarily false. So, if (4) is contingent—and even if (8) is contingent—that is all that is required. It would actually be better for Gale to grant the technicality that it is logically possible that nonhuman agents cause what we label natural evils but to call for a constructive theodicy for natural evils, a project that moves us toward a more plausible theistic understanding of natural evils.

John Bishop and Ken Perszyk propose a 'normatively relativized logical argument from evil' (NRLAFE) that carefully tries to reflect theistic values in order to avoid the fallacy committed by some critics of importing their own commitments into an analysis of the omni-attributes (2011). Conscious that ethical standards (often utilitarian) that are alien to theism are commonly factored into the analysis of divine goodness, they employ a theological ethic of 'right relationship' that recognizes loving relationship as the goal of life. This, they claim, exposes an inconsistency in the statement that

(9) An omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good God sustains the causal grounds for terrible evils but also redeems those evils.

Since the amount and distribution of evil in the world does not seem to foster loving relations with God and others, God falls short of an ethic that makes just, loving relationships central. In fact, they argue that it may well be incoherent to emphasize the future redemption of persons who have been affected by evils while also ascribing to a deity who is historically complicit in sustaining those evils. As they point out, 'a vindicated "right relationship" NRLAFE would not require atheism, but it would require the rejection of the conception of God as personal-omniGod' (2011: 124). In any event, theism has been shown to be incoherent unless its theodicies can draw from a larger theological framework to explain adequately why God as creator and sustainer of the moral context does not frequently intervene within it to prevent disastrous consequences. The quest for a convincing logical argument from evil may continue in some quarters, but it is no longer a major focus in philosophy of religion.

THE EVIDENTIAL ARGUMENT

The evidential argument is now thought to capture the depth and profundity of the real philosophical problem raised by evil. Versions of this argument cite the actual amounts, kinds, and distributions of evil in the world as significant evidence against the existence of God. Edward Madden and Peter Hare pioneered a common sense rendition of the evidential argument (1968).² Wesley Salmon constructed a probabilistic version of the argument, claiming that the probability of God's existence is low because few of all possible divinely created universes exhibit the evil occurring in ours (1978.)

Yet it is William Rowe's version of the evidential argument from pointless evil that has become classic (1979: 336):

- (10) There exist instances of intense suffering which an omnipotent, omniscient being could have prevented without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. **[Factual Premise]**
- (11) An omniscient, wholly good being would prevent the occurrence of any intense suffering it could, unless it could not do so without thereby losing some greater good or permitting some evil equally bad or worse. **[Theological Premise]**

Therefore,

- (12) There does not exist an omnipotent, omniscient, wholly good being. **[Atheistic Conclusion]**

Since the argument is valid, if there are rational grounds to believe (10) and (11), then there are rational grounds for believing (12). Both theists and critics tend to assume (11) as a necessary truth. Typically, theists attack (10) to avoid the atheistic conclusion.

Rowe defends (10) based on impressive cases of human and animal suffering, such as:

- (E1) A little girl, Sue, is brutally beaten, raped, and murdered by her mother's drunken boyfriend.

and

- (E2) A fawn suffers helplessly for days and then dies in a forest fire.

These cases are symbolic of innumerable moral and natural evils, respectively, that are apparently pointless. Rowe reasons that it is highly unlikely that every instance of apparently pointless suffering actually has a point or purpose in that it is necessary to achieving some greater good or avoiding some greater evil. This supports Rowe's contention that (10) is more rational to believe than its denial and thus that the evidential argument is effective.

Rowe further supports (10) with an inductive inference from

- (P) No good state of affairs we know of is such that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being's obtaining it would morally justify that being's permitting (E1) or (E2).

to

- (Q) No good is such that an omnipotent, omniscient, perfectly good being's obtaining it would morally justify that being in permitting (E1) or (E2).

Rowe states: 'Since (Q), slightly qualified, is tantamount to (10) in the earlier argument for atheism, if we are justified in accepting (P) and justified in inferring (Q) from (P), we are justified in accepting (10)' (1991: 72–73). From (10) together with (11), (12) follows.

SKEPTICAL THEIST DEFENCE

Skeptical Theist Defence was developed in direct response to Rowe's argument (Wykstra 1984; Alston 1991; Howard-Snyder 1996; Bergmann 2001). This defence undercuts the epistemic status of (10), contending that finite human reason is in no position to discern whether or not there are goods for the sake of which God permits evils. In short, we have no rational justification for reasoning from the apparent pointlessness of many evils to their actual pointlessness—that is, inferring (Q) from (P). Wykstra's Condition Of Reasonable Epistemic Access (CORNEA) expresses this point:

On the basis of cognized situation s , human H is entitled to claim 'It appears that p ' only if it is reasonable for H to believe that, given her cognitive faculties and the use she has made of them, if p were not the case, s would likely be different than it is in some way discernible by her. (1984: 85)

If God exists, his infinite wisdom perceives the goods for the sake of which evils are allowed; but it is not rational to expect finite human understanding to be able to discern those goods. Our cognitive capacities are too limited to grasp such matters, either because the connections between evils and known goods are too complex or because God, if he exists, knows goods 'beyond our ken' to which evils are connected. In either case, there may well be goods that justify the evils in question. So, Skeptical Theist Defence maintains that (10) lacks adequate epistemic standing to support the atheistic conclusion.

Rowe's clarification at this juncture is crucial: he states that the evidential argument is concerned with Restricted Standard Theism (RST), which is standard theism unaccompanied by other theological claims. However, Skeptical Theist Defence, as he points out, unwittingly smuggles in a certain interpretation of the finite-infinite gap that is not intrinsic to RST and thus adopts a version of Expanded Standard Theism (EST, or Restricted Standard Theism conjoined with one or more other theological claims), which not all theists accept. On these terms, then, Skeptical Theist Defence fails to block the conclusion that it is more rational to believe atheism than theism.

Moreover, Rowe argues that, regardless of whether there are known or unknown goods that justify evils, for God to exist and yet allow many sufferers to have no consciousness of his love or of the fact that there is some good which justifies their suffering is to assume unbelievable things about a being who is infinite in goodness, knowledge, and power (2001). Indeed, Rowe's affirmation of our ordinary sense of gratuitous evil in an allegedly theistic world could be strengthened further by appealing to the kinds of goods relevant to our common humanity—as well as their possible connections to evils—that can be known by introspection, observation, and acceptance of common human wisdom. So, although it is logically possible that there are goods relevant to human nature that are beyond comprehension, and although it is highly probable that reality is far larger than our grasp of it, it does not follow that it is unreasonable to affirm (10).

GREATER GOOD THEODICIES

Unlike Skeptical Theist Defence, which argues that there is no reason to think (10) is true, the

enterprise of theodicy actually provides reasons to think (10) is false. These reasons are justificatory explanations for God's permission of evil as necessary to achieve a greater good. We cannot pursue here detailed issues in meta-theodicy (i.e., regarding the nature and strategy of theodicy)—such as whether theodicy must offer an explanation that is merely possible or one that is plausible in light of actual theological commitments, whether theodicy must explain global and generic connections between evils and goods or must somehow explain particular cases of evil, etc. Yet we do note that common to all traditional theodicies is an assumed Greater Good Principle: the requirement that God is justified in permitting an evil only if the evil in question is necessary to some outweighing good.

Different theodicies offer their particular explanations of why some class of evils is necessary to some greater good—for example, that good cannot be known or appreciated except by contrast with evil; that suffering and evil are a test of character; that suffering is a warning to repent; that suffering is punishment for sin. Also, there is Leibnizian theodicy, which maintains that a perfectly good and powerful being would create the best of all possible worlds; therefore the evil this world contains is the least possible amount of evil that is commensurate with its being the best world on the whole. Of all the theodicies offered by theists, three prominent ones deserve attention here.

Free Will Theodicy. For centuries, the theme of free will has been a staple in theodicy. Theistic thinkers from St Augustine to Richard Swinburne have argued that free will is a very great good because it is necessary to a range of other great goods, such as morally significant choice and action, love of God and others, etc. Free Will Theodicy, then, maintains that, for a person to possess the ability to choose among alternative courses of action is to have the power of bringing about good but also of bringing about evil. However, the good of free choice and the goods that can arise from it are worth the evils that may result from its misuse.

St Augustine's Christian perspective encounters the obvious question of how a creature that is originally created good can choose to commit sin ([398] 1961: Bk 7). Augustine's answer appeals to the mutability inherent in our creatureliness, but discussion of free will theodicy through the centuries raises other questions as well, such as:

- Granted that the goods related to free will outweigh the evils, why is there inequity in the distribution of the evils?
- Why does the exercise of the free will of some persons eliminate the free will of others—by either destroying them or diminishing their capacities?

The nature of free will remains a contentious issue, and yet Free Will Theodicy will predictably continue as a mainstay for theists because it is the most obvious strategy for locating accountability for evil in human rather than divine activity.

Natural Law Theodicy. Several different but related theistic theodicies explain why natural evils can occur within a theistic universe characterized by natural laws. C. S. Lewis argues that God must situate personal beings within some kind of natural order constituted by non-personal objects behaving according to their own properties and powers:

What we need for human society is exactly what we have—a neutral something, neither you nor I, which we can both manipulate so as to make signs to each other. [...] Society, then, implies a common field or 'world' in which its members meet. [...] If matter has a fixed nature and obeys constant laws, not all states of matter will be equally agreeable. [...] Also, we] can then exploit the fixed nature of matter to hurt one another. (1962: 30–3)

Bruce Reichenbach states that 'without the regularity which results from the governance of natural laws, rational action would be impossible', but he explains that natural evils are sometimes by-

products of the workings of the natural system (1976: 187). Taking a stronger line, Richard Swinburne maintains that moral knowledge entails the reality of natural evil: so we humans must observe natural evils in order to acquire inductive knowledge of how to bring about evil (1978).

Critics argue that God could retain desired goods within a natural system while avoiding natural evils because either he could miraculously intervene when needed or he could have created a different—and ‘better’—natural system (McCloskey 1960). Theists reply that the idea of God’s frequent intervention destroys the concept of a natural system and that it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to conceive of a completely different natural system with its own comprehensive set of laws. Contra Swinburne, Nick Trakakis maintains that knowledge of how to commit moral evil does not necessitate inference from how natural evils come about because God could communicate how to perform moral evil via prophets, angels, or other means (2005: 45–6). Debate over natural evil will continue, partly because critics believe that natural evil is powerful negative evidence against theism which cannot be mitigated by free will explanations of moral evils, and partly because theists recognize that natural evil presents a puzzlement that is yet to be completely explained by their theological commitments.

Soul-Making Theodicy. John Hick weaves together several important themes into a comprehensive explanation of evil ([1966] 1978). Abandoning familiar Augustinian ideas (e.g., evil as a result from a historical fall from a perfect original state, evil as privation of positive being, etc.), Hick employs ideas found in St Irenaeus’ eschatologically oriented theology to construct a vision of the development of the human race from self-centredness to love of God and others. God’s goal is that human beings progress spiritually and morally from relative immaturity toward greater maturity—that persons created in the ‘image of God’ become transformed to the ‘likeness of God’.

According to Hick, God created a world with strategic structural traits to serve as an environment for the soul-making process. Libertarian free will is essential because no genuine love is possible without it; but free will can also go wrong and bring about evil. A physical environment that runs more or less of its own accord is also necessary as a theatre for desirable moral and spiritual transactions; but natural processes can also bring about evil and suffering. Interestingly, Hick believes that authentic freedom requires that creatures be placed at an ‘epistemic distance’ from God—that is, that the divine presence not be too strongly impressed on their awareness. Moreover, Hick acknowledges that epistemic distance is partly constituted by the great amounts, extreme kinds, and perplexing distributions of pain and suffering, whether resulting from human or natural causes. However, as Hick argues, it is in the face of challenges, hardships, temptations, and even pain and suffering that we have opportunity to grow or fail spiritually as persons.

Two very serious objections to the idea of soul-making come from Madden and Hare (1968: 84–5): that some physical evils provide counter-examples to soul-making by destroying or debilitating persons and that the enormity of evil in the world is inexcusably inefficient since ostensibly few persons achieve God’s goal. Madden and Hare even identify several fallacies Hick commits as he attempts to secure his position:

- ‘all or nothing’—We must either have this world with its meaningful scope of human free will and exact amount of moral evil or some other world with less evil and puppets who lacked meaningful free will;
- ‘it could be worse’—Acknowledging the great degree of suffering and evil in this world, Christian theodicy must point toward an infinite future good beyond this world that makes pain and suffering worth it;
- ‘slippery slope’—Once God starts eliminating objectionable evils he would have no place to stop

short of a ‘perfect’ world in which only robots and not real human persons were possible.

Rebutting these fallacies is not difficult: (a) we need not assume that we must have this world of free creatures with exactly the amount of moral evil it has or have nothing at all; (b) we need not think that simply because the human situation could be worse in not being connected to a positive afterlife that it could not be better; (c) we need not believe that if God began eliminating evils in the world that he could not wisely stop at a point that still left the world conducive to soul-making but short of being a pleasure paradise. Although Hick does not offer convincing replies to these criticisms, he does arrive at the important insight that not every evil is specifically necessary to our spiritual development, but a world with a certain general character is necessary—i.e., a world with real contingency and risk, opportunity and danger. This insight accents the possibility of pointless evil in a theistic universe and will be explored shortly.

G. Stanley Kane, a theist, argues against Hick that virtues could still be nurtured in a world that contains little or no evil because God could have created people morally and spiritually mature from the beginning (1975). Hick’s responses are instructive: he argues that trivial hardships and temptations do not develop a meaningful depth of moral virtue and spiritual awareness; he further points out that it is impossible instantaneously to create moral and spiritual maturity, for maturity entails having navigated many challenges and temptations. To improve the cost/benefit ratio of the temporal soul-making process, Hick claims that God will bring about an afterlife in which all persons will experience fulfilment in relationship to God and render, in retrospect, all of temporal life acceptable. Many critics continue to wonder how the success of soul-making in the afterlife explains, let alone justifies, extreme suffering and evil in temporal life.

A NEW DIRECTION IN THEODICY

In addition to theistic strategies that seek to preserve the omni-attributes of God by arguing that permission of evil is necessary to important goods, other responses explicitly modify one or more of divine attributes in order to reconcile God and evil, thereby creating various forms of quasi-theism. A major example of this is Process Theodicy, inspired by the metaphysics of Alfred North Whitehead, which advocates surrendering the classical understanding of omnipotence and admitting that God cannot unilaterally eliminate evil (Griffin 1976). The process position is that God, though limited in coercive power, employs unlimited persuasive power to try to convince creatures, which have their own inherent power of self-determination, to pursue his ideal aims for the world. Evil becomes an ingredient in enriching and making more significant the experience of creatures, an ingredient which, in the end, will be fittingly incorporated into God’s experience of the whole of reality.

Since the early 1990s, Open Theism has developed as another non-traditional approach to theodicy, but it refuses to abandon classical theistic ideas in order to retreat into some form of quasi-theism. Open Theism purports to be a philosophically sophisticated interpretation of specifically Christian theism with important insights for a large number of key theological issues, including the problem of evil (Pinnock 1994, 2001; Sanders 1998; Hasker 2008). Interestingly, Openness Theodicy accepts our ordinary judgment about the reasonableness of (10), the Factual Premise, which atheistic critics also accept. However, Open Theists are still able to avoid the atheistic conclusion of the evidential argument by rejecting (11), the Theological Premise typically assumed by theist and critic alike. Their rejection of (11) is anchored in a vision of God and the world that does not entail that God meticulously arranges all evils to serve some greater good and instead entails that the world is open

to a wide range of contingent outcomes in both the moral and natural spheres.³

Open Theists maintain that their understanding of God's omni-attributes is within the bounds of theological orthodoxy but argue against interpretations of the attributes that entail that God and the human future are closed—such as simple foreknowledge, theological determinism, and middle knowledge. A prominent example is the Openness analysis of omniscience, which concludes that it is logically impossible for God to know the future contingent choices of libertarian free creatures. This analysis is part of a larger vision that revolves around the inherent relationality of God (symbolized by Trinitarian doctrine) and his creation of a relational universe in which finite personal creatures are capable of relational goods such as love, trust, mutual self-disclosure, and self-giving. As a context for relational transactions with God and our fellow human beings, God also created a natural order that operates by its own laws.

In an open relational universe, God accepts a significant degree of risk in the free choices of persons and the workings of nature and responds redemptively to good and bad outcomes as the world unfolds. In a closed no-risk (and therefore non-relational) theistic universe, God exerts control over everything that happens via a very strong type of omniscience or omnipotence. By contrast, Open Theists argue that the possibility of great relational goods is obviated by eliminating the element of non-determined contingency required to pursue or reject them. Opportunity and danger are ineluctably linked; any potential upside is not possible without its potential downside. In a truly open universe, then, the *actuality* of evil is not so much necessary to specified goods, but the *possibility* of both moral and natural evil is necessary to those goods. So, Openness Theodicy affirms that this is a very good type of world but admits that it would genuinely have been better if many evils had never occurred—an admission that traditional Greater Good Theodicy cannot make. This is the reason why Openness does not take the reality of gratuitous evil as telling evidence against theism or feel compelled to argue against it.

What about the ultimate triumph of God over evil in an open universe—a universe in which a good God was willing to allow evils that were not necessary to any greater good? There are, no doubt, some successes as persons develop positive relational qualities and greater intimacy with God. But what about those individuals who either commit or experience horrific evils that threaten to make their lives meaningless and devoid of positive value? How does the goodness of a relational God apply to them? Open Theists are sensitive to what we might call Rowe's Person Centred Requirement: that a good God would allow individuals to undergo serious suffering only if the goods for which it is permitted 'will include conscious experiences of these humans, conscious experiences which are themselves good' (1986: 244). William Hasker argues that adequate explanation of how God will defeat horrendous evils requires the richer resources of Christian doctrine and teaching, which tell us that, although no finite goods can defeat horrendous evils, the infinite goodness of God can and indeed will defeat them (2008: ch. 8).⁴ God triumphs over horrendous evils by bringing affected individuals into intimate transformative communion with himself, a process that will continue into and be consummated in the eschatological future. Regarding the eschatological triumph of God over evil, Hick as a universalist says that God's defeat of evil in the lives of all persons is a 'virtual certainty'. But the Openness view makes no guarantee that all persons who have experienced or committed great evil will freely chose to come into life with God, not even in the eschaton (Hasker 2008: 217).

THE PROBLEM OF EVIL AND WORLDVIEW ENGAGEMENT

The evidential argument from gratuitous evil is a powerful vehicle for expressing the intuition that pointless evil counts against theism and for atheism. However, as the debate over evil progresses, it is becoming increasingly clear that robust theistic responses must draw information from the richer conceptual framework of a living religion, such as Christianity. After all, religious people who are theists do not ordinarily report that they are simply theists; instead they claim faithfulness to a full-orbed theistic tradition. On the other hand, people who critically evaluate theism as incapable of accounting for evil may simply withhold belief in theism (negative atheism) or assert more directly that there is no theistic deity (positive atheism). Furthermore, people who cite evil in support of atheism often, though not always, locate their atheism within some particular compatible worldview.

So, in assessing the extent to which the problem of evil supports atheism, evaluation of the explanatory adequacy of competing worldviews is unavoidable. Rowe provides a typical example of this in officially isolating the debate over evil as the conflict between Restricted Standard Theism and (presumably) Restricted Standard Atheism but instinctively invoking philosophical naturalism when expressing his settled view. In ‘an age of faith’, Rowe writes, traditional theism struggled with the problems of evil and divine hiddenness; but the idea of God persisted because it still played an essential explanatory role and was met by no credible alternative’ (2006: 87). However, ‘in this age of reason and science’, he continues, ‘the idea of God no longer plays an essential, rational role in explaining the world and human existence’. Given horrendous evils, he reasons, divine hiddenness becomes additional evidence that tips the rational scales on the side of there being no God (on divine hiddenness, see Schellenberg 1993). Rowe concludes that the best explanation of reality is atheism. Or, since atheism *per se* is not much of an explanation, for Rowe, as for many thinkers in secular Western culture, atheism is best positioned within the worldview of naturalism, which lays claim to ‘reason and science’.

Paul Draper more straightforwardly formulates the debate as a comparison between theism and an alternative position that he proposes as the Hypothesis of Indifference (1989):

HI: neither the nature nor the condition of sentient beings on earth is the result of benevolent or malevolent actions performed by nonhuman persons.

Draper says that HI is consistent with naturalism (indeed, HI is entailed by naturalism) defined as ‘the hypothesis that the natural world is a closed system, which means that nothing that is not part of the natural world affects it’ (Draper 2007). Thus, ‘naturalism implies that there are no supernatural entities’—including God—and that therefore ultimate reality is entirely indifferent to human needs and agendas. Draper, like Rowe, associates with his brand of naturalism the facts of the world as revealed by science, including the facts of biological evolution.

For Draper, the facts of pain and pleasure are explained much better by HI than by theism, making it not rational to affirm theism. In this context, the concept of ‘explaining better’ means to make antecedently more probable. Draper’s contention, then, is that the seeming indifference with which pain and pleasure are distributed is antecedently much more probable on the assumption that HI is true than on the assumption that theism is true. Letting ‘O’ be a statement describing all of our observations of the experiences of pain and pleasure by both humans and animals as well as testimonies we gather from others about such matters, Draper’s claim is that

$$\Pr(O/HI) > \Pr(O/\text{theism}).$$

This comparative claim about antecedent probabilities, of course, rests on the assumption that theism is not intrinsically more probable than HI and that all relevant theodicies fail to raise the probability

of theism by credibly explaining what purposes God has for pain and pleasure that could not be achieved by other means. Draper thinks he has provided a good *prima facie* reason to reject theism and accept naturalism—or what he describes as evolutionary naturalism.

Of course, just as theism is not conceptually rich enough to explain evil (and many other important features of the world), neither is atheism (or HI) conceptually rich enough to explain evil (and many other important features of the world). Both positions must be embedded within compatible worldview contexts. Theism must be subsumed under a more fully worked theological understanding—say, Christian doctrine—in order to make fuller sense of the facts of evil. Likewise, atheism must invoke larger conceptual resources—for present purposes, evolutionary naturalism—to explain evil. Of course, the debate becomes proportionately more complex as it migrates in the direction of worldview engagement and broadens out into the evaluation of more worldview competitors. However, focusing here simply on the conflict between evolutionary naturalism and Christian theism, we must take into account theodicies that combine intellectually sophisticated Christian orthodoxy with realistic scientific understanding to allow for greater openness to undetermined contingency in the moral and natural realms, including randomness at the level of evolutionary process (see Hasker 2008: ch. 5). When more sophisticated and nuanced approaches that are informed by Christian theism are considered, it is not so clear that naturalism (which entails HI) is superior to Christian orthodoxy (which entails theism) as an explanation of the amount and distribution of pain and pleasure in the world.

In the conflict of worldviews, evil will always be an important piece of evidence, but it is not the only relevant evidence. Every worldview must explain a range of important phenomena, including, at the very least, rationality, morality, and personhood, as we try to arrive at the best explanation of the total evidence. In regard to explaining these other phenomena, it could be argued that Christian theistic explanations of the evidence are more credible than—or at least as credible as—explanations provided by evolutionary naturalism. Framed as a Draper-like question: On which world hypothesis—naturalism or Christian theism—are these phenomena more antecedently probable? For example, is it more likely that personhood arises from a reality that is ultimately impersonal or personal in nature? Letting ‘P’ be all we commonly know of personhood, theists argue that

$$\Pr(P/HI) < \Pr(P/\text{theism}).$$

So, judgment about the bearing of the problem of evil must be made in light of an overall assessment of the relative probabilities of the competing hypotheses with respect to many important phenomena. If some form of Expanded Theism makes better sense—or at least equally good sense—of certain fundamental features of reality, then the strong assessments of the problem of evil that are offered by some critics will have to be moderated. In the end, the larger question becomes: Which worldview narrative makes better sense of all of the relevant evidence? Pursuing this line of debate obviously becomes an extensive project, but it refuses to play the game of artificial restrictions and takes us in a much more fruitful direction (see Peterson 2012: 190–2).

CONCLUSION: RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

Throughout the centuries, the problem of evil has been the dominant intellectual objection to theistic belief and a major support for atheism. It is not difficult to understand why this is so, since the problem, even in its more formal expressions, is rooted in our deep sense of what it is like to be alive

and in our perplexity at the conditions of our existence. After decades of intense discussion in the analytic philosophy of religion, replete on all sides with important arguments and profound insights, the problem persists. On the one hand, it is notoriously difficult for critics to use the problem to deliver a fatal blow to the intellectual credibility of theism; on the other hand, it is extremely challenging for theists to dispel the problem in a way that is intellectually and morally satisfying.

The debate over God and evil will certainly continue as a crucial part of the human search for meaning. The best contributions—whether theistic or atheistic—will be ones that carefully probe the deeper realities in which we are involved in order to achieve a greater measure of understanding. As we have seen, this task inevitably leads us into the arena of worldview assessment. Although there will never be final agreement on the evidential import of evil, pursuing the issue in this larger venue will bring about some of the more promising work in the future.

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CHAPTER 6

ATHEISM AND MORALITY

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INTRODUCTION

ANY discussion of atheism and morality should begin with the recognition that ‘morality’ can mean two quite different things.¹ Sometimes ‘morality’ refers to human moral *beliefs or practices*; other times, ‘morality’ refers to moral *truths or facts*. My belief that it’s morally wrong to torture babies just for fun is part of morality in the first sense; the fact that such torture actually is morally wrong (if there is such a fact) is part of morality in the second sense.

Corresponding to these two senses of ‘morality’ are two popular worries about morality in an atheistic context. The first of these is a worry about the psychological effect upon atheists of their atheism as well as the effects of widespread atheism upon society. The worry is that the absence of belief in the existence of God or gods makes one more disposed to act immorally than one would be if one had theistic beliefs (or at least, if one had theistic beliefs of a certain sort) and, consequently, widespread atheism produces societal dysfunction. This is at least partly a psychological or sociological claim, and hence it should be investigated at least in part by an examination of the relevant empirical evidence (though, as I will suggest below, it is not *only* an empirical issue). The second worry about morality in an atheistic context is philosophical in nature: it is the worry that if there is no God or gods, then there are also no moral truths or facts that are objective in a certain sense (to be explained below).

I shall examine each of these worries in turn. With respect to the first worry, I hope to show that the relationship between atheism and human moral beliefs and practices is complex, and to display some of this complexity. With respect to the second worry, I make the case that the question of whether there are objective moral truths is independent of the existence or nonexistence of God.

ATHEISM AND HUMAN MORAL BELIEFS AND BEHAVIOUR

Religious believers have long worried about the psychological and social consequences of atheism. John Locke famously declared that atheists are ‘not at all to be tolerated’ because ‘[p]romises, covenants, and oaths, which are the bonds of human society, can have no hold upon an atheist’ (Locke [1689] 1990: 64). A 2006 study found that nearly 48 per cent of respondents (all of whom were Americans) would disapprove if their child wanted to marry an atheist (Edgell et al. 2006). In-depth interviews conducted as part of the same study suggest that atheists are commonly viewed as ‘self-interested individuals who are not concerned with the common good’ (*ibid.*: 227). And later research indicates, in line with Locke’s view, that distrust of atheists lies at the heart of anti-atheist prejudice (Gervais and Shariff 2011; see also Ryan Cragun, Joseph Hammer, and Jesse Smith’s ‘North

America').

There is also a long tradition of atheists (particularly positive atheists) viewing religion as a source of immorality. In 1929, Bertrand Russell declared that he shared Lucretius's ancient view of religion as 'a disease born of fear and a source of untold misery to the human race' ([1929] 1999: 169). More recently, Christopher Hitchens declared that 'religion poisons everything' (2007). Atheistic criticisms of religion include the charges that it encourages irrational thought, that it is divisive and promotes the persecution of non-believers, that it is an important contributing factor to much terrorism and warfare, that it manifests an irrational and destructive obsession with human sexual behaviour, and that it encourages the oppression of women (see Russell [1927] 1999; Juergensmeyer 2000; Grayling 2002; Harris 2004; Freeman 2005; Dawkins 2006; and Hitchens 2007). The teaching of the doctrine of hell has drawn particular ire from some atheistic critics, with Richard Dawkins recently arguing that teaching this doctrine to children amounts to psychological abuse (2006: 317–18).

Empirical research into the relationship between religiosity, secularism, and moral behaviour suggests a picture with substantial nuance and complexity. Consider charitable giving. Arthur Brooks claims that '[r]eligious people are far more charitable than nonreligious people' (2006: 34). He cites a 'large nationwide survey of Americans' conducted in 2000 that found that religious people were '25 percentage points more likely to give than secularists' and '23 points more likely to volunteer' (ibid.: 34). And Matt Rossano reports that '[n]umerous studies have shown that religious people engage in more charitable giving and volunteerism than do nonreligious' (2008: 182). Rossano also cites a number of studies indicating that religious people tend to have more stable and successful marriages than nonreligious people (ibid.: 182).

However, there is also a growing body of evidence suggesting that the happiest nations of the world are also the least religious and the most socially dysfunctional exhibit the highest levels of religiosity (see Paul 2005, 2009; Zuckerman 2008).² Particularly striking is Phil Zuckerman's *Society without God*, which is an examination of Sweden and Denmark. According to Zuckerman, these nations are 'probably the least religious countries in the world, and possibly in the history of the world' (2008: 2). They are also 'among the "best" countries in the world, at least according to standard sociological measures' (ibid.: 4). For example, '[w]hen it comes to the giving of *charity to poor nations*, Denmark ranks second, and Sweden third' (ibid.: 28). And Denmark and Sweden also possess some of the lowest murder rates in the world (ibid.: 28–29). (See also Phil Zuckerman's 'Atheism and Societal Health'.) Rossano, while viewing religiosity as generally conducive to morality, acknowledges some ways in which religiosity may contribute to immorality. For example, he observes that 'there is evidence that fundamentalist beliefs among both Jews and Christians are associated with a greater likelihood of child abuse' and that 'when religion can be cited as justification for aggression, perpetrators may be compelled to even greater levels of violence' (2008: 186). He concludes that 'religion is a multifaceted phenomenon that can interact in complex and not always positive ways with different individuals under different circumstances' (ibid.: 195).

Is there any pattern to be discerned here? Notice that Brooks's research is focused on the United States, whereas Zuckerman's research is cross-national. One plausible explanation of their seemingly contradictory findings is that religious belief can (to some extent) mitigate selfishness in the individualistic culture of the ethnically diverse United States (see Zuckerman 2008: 17). One way it might do this is by binding people into communities; indeed, some believe that this is one of the primary functions of religion (see Graham and Haidt 2010). Since most Americans are religious, atheists within the United States are likely to be less socially connected than their religious counterparts. This may contribute to the decreased level of charity on the part of American atheists when compared with American theists. By contrast, in ethnically homogeneous countries with more

communitarian cultures in which most people are nonreligious, religiosity is unnecessary as a corrective to selfishness. In these countries, nonreligious people are socially connected, do not feel alienated from their fellow citizens, and are perfectly willing to make personal sacrifices for the common good. Furthermore, citizens in such well-functioning and egalitarian societies experience high degrees of personal security (see Zuckerman 2008: 113–15). Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart provide extensive cross-national evidence for the following thesis:

[P]eople who experience ego-tropic risks during their formative years (posing direct threats to themselves and their families) or socio-tropic risks (threatening their community) tend to be far more religious than those who grow up under safer, comfortable, and predictable conditions. (2004: 5)

In societies that provide safety, comfort, and predictability for most citizens, religious belief can be (and tends to be) sloughed off without leading to social dysfunction. The United States experiences high degrees of both social dysfunction and religiosity as a result of its relatively high levels of social inequality (see Norris and Inglehart 2004: 106–10; Delamontagne 2010: 648). In this way, religiosity is both a symptom of and a partial corrective to social dysfunction (though as Rossano suggests it can also exacerbate dysfunction in some ways), whereas secularity is often a consequence of societal health.

This hypothesis suggests that even if religious belief sometimes contributes to moral behaviour, it is not always *necessary* for such behaviour. Sometimes there are nonreligious alternatives that can promote moral behaviour. For example, a 2009 study found that business students with higher levels of religiosity were less likely to cheat when given the opportunity than their less-religious counterparts. However, the authors also found that ‘classroom ethics instruction was more likely to reduce the extent of cheating among individuals who rarely attended church services than among those who attended religious services more frequently’ (Bloodgood et al. 2008: 565) In a similar vein, Jesse Graham and Jonathan Haidt report that ‘Putnam (2000) found that participation in tightly knit secular groups such as bowling leagues predicted charitable giving comparable to participation in religious activities’ (2010: 146; see Putnam 2000: 119–22). Thus, religiosity may be one possible source of motivation to refrain from cheating and give to charity, but is not the only possible source (see also Beit-Hallahmi 2010).

The discussion to this point may leave the reader with the impression that when it comes to assessing the impact of atheism upon moral behaviour, empirical investigation, while perhaps complicated, can in principle settle the issue. Unfortunately, the situation is not this straightforward. One complication is that religious and nonreligious people tend to disagree over what constitutes moral behaviour (see Zuckerman 2008: 25–6). Psychologist Jonathan Haidt and his colleagues have identified five ‘moral foundations’ that they believe underlie all human moral systems. These five foundations are: (i) harm/care: concerns for the suffering of others, including the virtues of caring and compassion; (ii) fairness/reciprocity: concerns about unfair treatment, inequality, and more abstract notions of justice; (iii) ingroup/loyalty: concerns related to obligations of group membership, such as loyalty, self-sacrifice, and vigilance against betrayal; (iv) authority/respect: concerns related to social order and the obligations of hierarchical relationships, such as obedience, respect, and proper role fulfillment; and (v) purity/sanctity: concerns about physical and spiritual contagion, including virtues of chastity, wholesomeness, and control of desires (Haidt and Kesebir 2010: 822).

While the moral systems of most human societies manifest each of these five foundations to some degree, cultures vary significantly in the extent to which they emphasize each foundation, particularly when it comes to the last three. Conservatives (who tend to be more religious) place much more

importance on the last three foundations than liberals (who tend to be more secular). Consequently:

Liberals are horrified by what they see as a repressive, hierarchical theocracy that conservatives want to impose on them. Conservatives are horrified by what they see as the ‘anything goes’ moral chaos that liberals have created, which many see as a violation of the will of God and as a threat to their efforts to instill virtues in their children. (Haidt and Bjorklund 2008: 209–10)

So, while presumably atheists and religious conservatives can agree that the low infant-mortality and low murder rates of highly secular Denmark are good things, they are likely to see Denmark’s 1989 legalization of same-sex unions quite differently. Atheists are likely to point to this as evidence of a correlation between secularism and morally praiseworthy progressiveness and tolerance, whereas religious conservatives are likely to point to it as evidence of how the loss of religious belief precipitates a hellish descent into immorality.

Thus, the difficulty of getting a clear picture of the relationship between atheism and moral behaviour is two-fold. First, the available empirical research suggests a complicated picture, and as more research is conducted, this picture will undoubtedly change. Second, the issue is not purely an empirical one. What impact atheism and religiosity have on moral and immoral behaviour depends in part on which behaviours are moral and which are immoral, and this is in part a philosophical issue. So while we can say that religion does not poison everything and that atheists are not always selfish, amoral bastards, the full story of the relationship between atheism, religiosity, and moral behaviour and institutions remains to be told.

Still, for those who aspire to attain the benefits of religiosity while avoiding its drawbacks, grounds for optimism are to be found in the examples of contemporary Denmark and Sweden as well as Graham and Haidt’s suggestion that most of the benefits of religiosity are derived from membership in religious communities rather than the holding of theistic beliefs (2010: 145). Such people can draw inspiration from these words by Jens, an atheistic Dane interviewed by Zuckerman:

It’s more rational that we get all people education, because if we give all people education, then you have a society—then it will be better for all of us. And the same with the health system. If we help everybody together [...] then we’ll help the society as a unit [...] and it will be better for all of us. [...] It’s alright if somebody is ill. It’s not his fault. So it is his right to go to the hospital and be treated well. And you can see the same—if people grow very old, then [...] it’s a right to live in a decent way, to be treated in a decent way [...] and you could call it moral, you could call it rationality ... but... I think it’s both. (2008: 41–2)

ATHEISM AND OBJECTIVE MORALITY

Let us turn now to the worry that, whatever the relationship between atheism and moral *beliefs and behaviour* turns out to be, atheism threatens morality in a more fundamental way: if there is no God or gods, then nothing is *objectively morally obligatory or wrong*. Perhaps no contemporary thinker has pressed this worry more forcefully than William Craig:

[I]f there is no God, then what’s so special about human beings? They’re just accidental by-products of nature that have evolved relatively recently on an infinitesimal speck of dust lost somewhere in a hostile and mindless universe and that are doomed to perish individually and collectively in a relatively short time. On the atheistic view, some action, say, rape, may not be socially advantageous, and so in the course of human development has become taboo; but that does absolutely nothing to prove that rape is really wrong. On the atheistic view, there’s nothing really *wrong* with your raping someone. (Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2004: 18)

Craig is concerned here with *objective moral wrongness*, which he explains as follows:

[T]o say, for example, that the Holocaust was objectively wrong is to say that it was wrong even though the Nazis who carried it

out thought that it was right and that it would still have been wrong even if the Nazis had won World War II and succeeded in exterminating or brainwashing everyone who disagreed with them. (ibid.: 17)³

Craig claims that if the Christian God exists, then so do real, objective moral obligation and wrongness: '[O]ur moral duties are grounded in the commands of a holy and loving God... His nature expresses itself toward us in the form of moral commands which, issuing from the Good, become moral duties for us' (ibid.: 68–9). Craig's view, then, is that objective moral obligation and wrongness exist just because there is a perfect, holy, and loving God who has issued commands to human beings. Furthermore, without God to serve as a foundation or source of moral obligation and wrongness, no actions could possess such moral features.

I believe that objective moral truths do not require a theistic foundation and furthermore that attempts to ground such truths in God are problematic. I will employ a two-pronged strategy to argue for this view. First, I will consider a variety of theistic moral theories that attempt to anchor objective moral truths in God and argue that none of these theories succeeds. If no such theory is true, then God's existence or non-existence makes no difference to the existence of objective moral obligation and wrongness. Of course, some atheists deny the reality of objective moral obligation and wrongness; some endorse *nihilism* (the view that there are no moral properties at all) or *relativism* (the view that moral properties exist but only in some relativistic way). Accordingly, the second prong of my strategy involves presenting a plausible account of how there could be objective moral truths in the absence of God.

EUTHYPHRO AND BEYOND

'Do the gods love piety because it is pious, or is it pious because they love it?' (Plato [380 BCE] 1948: 11). With this, perhaps the most famous of the questions Plato put into the mouth of Socrates, criticism of theistic approaches to morality begins in the Western philosophical tradition. Modified to fit the present context, Socrates's question becomes: are morally obligatory actions obligatory because God commands them, or does God command them because they are morally obligatory? Of course, this is a question, not an objection. And as we will see, the objection the question generates makes trouble for some God-based moral theories but not others. Everyone recognizes that criticism of theistic approaches to morality begins with Euthyphro; unfortunately, too many atheistic philosophers mistakenly believe that it ends there as well.

One prominent strand in theistic ethics is *theological voluntarism*, according to which moral rightness, wrongness, and obligation are somehow determined by God's will. This core idea can be fleshed out in a variety of ways. Let us begin by considering a simple version of theological voluntarism and working our way toward more sophisticated versions. According to a simple version of theological voluntarism, God's omnipotence gives Him unlimited control over morality. Just as He has the power to implement whatever laws of nature He sees fit through the sheer force of will, He similarly has the power to implement whatever laws of morality He sees fit. Enter Ralph Cudworth:

[D]iverse modern theologers do not only seriously, but zealously contend [...] that there is nothing absolutely, intrinsically, and naturally good and evil, just and unjust, antecedently to any positive command or prohibition of God; but that the arbitrary will and pleasure of God [...] by its commands and prohibitions, is the first and only rule and measure thereof. Whence it follows unavoidably, that nothing can be imagined so grossly wicked, or so foully unjust or dishonest, but if it were supposed to be commanded by this omnipotent Deity, must needs upon that hypothesis forthwith become holy, just, and righteous. ([1731] 1976: 9–10)

Think of the most evil, offensive, morally disgusting action you can. Cudworth's worry, in a nutshell, is that theological voluntarism implies that the horrifying action you are imagining could have been morally obligatory. This worry has its roots in the *Euthyphro*: theological voluntarists maintain that the correct answer to the Socractic question above is that morally obligatory actions are obligatory because God commands them. God could have decided to make that horrific act you are imagining morally obligatory, and, according to the view under consideration, that would have been enough to make it so. Cudworth finds this implication unacceptable; his thought seems to be that some actions are so 'grossly wicked' or 'foully unjust or dishonest' that nothing, not even divine commands, could make them morally obligatory.

Theological voluntarists have been sufficiently worried by this sort of objection that they have largely abandoned the simple version of theological voluntarism at hand. Accordingly, let us consider a somewhat more complicated version of the theory. This new version of the theory adds to the old version the idea that God's character places constraints on the sorts of acts that God could make morally obligatory. Just as some people are so honest that they cannot tell a lie, God is so filled with love that He cannot, for instance, make the torture of infants just for fun morally obligatory. In this way, the theological voluntarist seeks to avoid the implication that *anything* could have been morally obligatory (see Baggett and Walls 2011: 131–2).

Whether this reply is adequate is a matter of much debate (see Morriston 2009b; and Pruss 2009). However, let us leave *Euthyphro* behind and consider some other worries about theological voluntarism. To understand these worries, we can distinguish *will* formulations and *command* formulations of theological voluntarism.⁴ According to the former, it is God's *willing* that determines the moral status of actions, whereas according to the latter, it is God's *commands* that accomplish this. On the former theory, God can bestow a moral status upon a given action without in any way communicating that status to the relevant agent. Defenders of command theories worry that this is problematic. For example, Robert Adams writes:

[T]his yields an unattractive picture of divine-human relations, one in which the wish of God's heart imposes binding obligations without even being communicated, much less issuing in a command. Games in which one party incurs guilt for failing to guess the unexpressed wishes of the other party are not nice games. They are no nicer if God is thought of as a party to them. It is implausible to suppose that uncommunicated volitions impose obligations. (1999: 261)

To see Adams's point, imagine a military commander who wills that his soldiers perform a particular task but neglects to tell his soldiers to perform the task in question. Even though the commander is in a position to impose obligations on his soldiers, he cannot impose obligations simply by willing that his soldiers do certain things. To place an obligation upon his soldiers, he must actually command them to do something. Accordingly, Adams favours a command formulation of theological voluntarism according to which 'moral obligation is constituted by divine commands' (1999: 249).

However, theories like Adams's run into another problem. They seem unable to account for the moral obligations of reasonable non-believers:

Some—Theravada Buddhists, for instance—have been brought up in nontheistic religious communities, and quite naturally operate in terms of the assumptions of their own traditions. Others, including many western philosophers, have explicitly considered what is to be said in favor God's existence, but have not found it sufficiently persuasive. Still others have never looked into the question in a serious way, but have seen no pressing reason to do so. I shall assume that many persons in each of these categories are *reasonable* non-believers, at least in the sense that their lack of belief cannot be attributed to the violation of any epistemic duty on their part. (Morriston 2009a: 2; see also Wielenberg 2005: 60–2)

Adams is concerned to avoid the 'not nice games' objection he advanced against will formulations of theological voluntarism. Accordingly, not only does he insist that it is God's commands that create

moral obligations; he also offers an account of what it takes for God to issue a command:

(1) A divine command will always involve a *sign* [...] that is intentionally caused by God. (2) In causing the sign God must intend to issue a command, and *what* is commanded is what God intends to command thereby. (3) The sign must be such that the intended audience could understand it as conveying the intended command. (1999: 265)

But consider the following case:

[I]magine that you have received a note saying, ‘Let me borrow your car. Leave it unlocked with the key in the ignition, and I will pick it up soon’. If you know that the note is from your spouse, or that it is from a friend to whom you owe a favor, you may perhaps have an obligation to obey this instruction. But if the note is unsigned, the handwriting is unfamiliar, and you have no idea who the author might be, then it’s as clear as day that you have no such obligation. In the same way, it seems that even if our reasonable non-believer gets so far as to interpret one of Adams’ ‘signs’ as conveying the message, ‘Do not steal’, he will be under no obligation to comply with this instruction unless and until he discovers the divine source of the message. (Morriston 2009a: 5–6)

This suggests that only divine commands that meet a fourth condition in addition to the three Adams proposes can actually generate moral obligations, namely: (4) the intended audience must recognize the command as having been issued by God. Without this condition, Adams’s theory is implausible; but with it, the theory implies that reasonable non-believers have no moral obligations at all, since they do not recognize any command as having been issued by God.

It appears, then, that there are two pitfalls that threaten any version of theological voluntarism. On the one hand, without a sufficiently robust communication requirement, theological voluntarism is threatened by Adams’s ‘not nice games’ problem. On the other hand, if the communication requirement is too strong, then the theory will be unable to account for the moral obligations of reasonable non-believers.

The apparent difficulties with both will and command formulations of theological voluntarism have led some to put forward new versions of theological voluntarism. For example, Christian Miller has proposed a view according to which obligations are grounded in God’s *desires* that we act a certain way, and Matthew Jordan has proposed a view according to which the moral status of actions depends on whether God would be *pleased* or *displeased* by the performance of the acts in question (see Miller 2009a, 2009b; and Jordan 2012).⁵

It is unclear how these new proposals avoid Adams’s ‘not nice games’ worry. These newer theories may have another problem. Consider these remarks by Adams:

For many reasons, we often do not want people to be *obliged* to do what we want them to *do*. So far as I can see, God can have such reasons too, so that we should not expect God to want God’s wanting someone to do something to impose, automatically, an obligation to do it. (1999: 261)

Milton describes a case of the relevant type in *Paradise Lost*. Prior to the creation of Eve, Adam asks God to create an equal companion for him. God is reluctant, but Adam is persistent, and eventually God relents. It turns out that God wanted Adam to have an equal companion all along, but He wanted Adam to recognize his need for a companion on his own: ‘Thus far to try thee, Adam, I was pleas’d [...] I, ere thou spak’st/Knew it not good for man to be alone,/And no such company as then thou saw’st/Intended thee, for trial only brought/To see how thou could’st judge of fit and meet’ ([1667] 1956: 194–5). It seems plausible that in this situation, what God wanted Adam to do, all things considered, was to ask God to create a companion for him. On divine desire theory (DDT), this means that Adam was obligated to make such a request (see Miller 2009a: 108). Similarly, it seems plausible that in this scenario God was pleased with Adam’s request and would have been displeased with Adam’s failure to make the request. On divine attitude theory (DAT), this means that Adam was

morally obligated to make the request (see Jordan 2012). Yet it seems implausible to suppose that Adam was in any sense *required* to make this request. DDT and DAT thus seem to generate *too many obligations*. It is important to note that this objection does not depend on the actual occurrence of the kind of case described above. It is enough that it is merely possible, for DDT and DAT both imply the impossibility of this sort of case.

I have not considered all theistic approaches to ethics, and of course there is always the possibility that a new theory will arise that avoids the objections I have described here. But this section should serve to highlight some of the difficulties that any satisfactory version of theological voluntarism must overcome. Let us turn now to the prospects for objective moral truth in a godless universe.

NON-THEISTIC MORAL REALISM

When it comes to objective morality in a secular context, an apparently pressing question that often crops up is this one: without God, what serves as the ground or foundation for objective morality? There are two main strategies for dealing with this question. The first is to propose something other than God as a foundation for objective morality. Linda Zagzebski suggests that ‘the history of Western ethics since the Enlightenment can be read as a series of attempts to ground morality in something other than God’ (2005: 345). For example, Sam Harris suggests that objective moral truths are truths about human well-being (where human well-being is entirely independent of God). On Harris’s approach, objective morality is grounded in well-being; he declares that ‘a concern for well-being... is the only intelligible basis for morality and values’ (*ibid.*: 28). The second strategy is to reject the implicit assumption that objective morality needs a ground or foundation outside of itself at all. This is the strategy I favour, and it is the one I will outline here.

The dream of theism is to ground everything on God. The goal of the previous section was to suggest that this dream is unlikely to be realized. Perhaps, as some contemporary atheists hope, objective moral truths can be reduced to scientific truths about the natural world (see, for example, Brink 1989; and Boyd 2009a, 2009b; for a useful critical discussion of this approach, see Plantinga 2010). But another option worth considering has it that some objective moral truths are foundational, neither reducible to nor grounded upon non-moral truths. Explanation must come to an end somewhere; there must be some foundational truth or truths that have no further ground, foundation, source, or explanation beyond themselves. We might think of such truths as ‘metaphysical axioms’. One possibility, then, is that at least some of these metaphysical axioms are objective moral truths. On this view, the foundation of morality consists of these axiomatic objective moral truths; objective morality does not have a non-moral foundation beyond itself. This theory meshes nicely with the widely-held view that at least some moral truths are necessary truths; the foundational, axiomatic moral truths would be true in every possible world. This sort of approach has been criticized by some defenders of theistic ethics; however, as I have argued elsewhere, it turns out that the theistic theories of morality proposed by such critics are susceptible to many of the same objections their proponents raise against the sort of view described here (see Wielenberg 2009).⁶ The reason, in brief, is that theistic approaches to ethics typically reduce some but not all ethical facts to divine facts; such theories ultimately depend upon the existence of foundational moral axioms as well.

What might some of the moral axioms be? Different atheists will of course give different answers to this question. However, there are some general tendencies that are worth noting. Recall Craig’s claim from section 3 that ‘[o]n the atheistic view, there’s nothing really *wrong* with your raping someone’ (Craig and Sinnott-Armstrong 2004: 18). Walter Sinnott-Armstrong suggests that ‘[w]hat

makes rape immoral is that rape harms *the victim* in terrible ways' (ibid.: 34). Many atheists who have engaged with Craig on this topic have given similar responses. The principle that inflicting terrible harm on another for no good reason is morally wrong seems as good a candidate for a moral axiom as any.

Recall Haidt and Bjorkland's observation of secular liberals' horror toward 'what they see as a repressive, hierarchical theocracy' (2008: 209–10). Atheists tend to see religious morality as excessively focused on issues that are morally irrelevant; for example, they tend to be critical of religion's tendency toward heavily moralizing sexual behaviour and the treatment of food. Atheists also tend to be suspicious of religion's emphasis on the afterlife and favour instead moral systems that place the most importance on what happens in this world. David Hume's famous diatribe against the 'monkish virtues' conveys the discomfort many atheists feel for religious moral systems:

Celibacy, fasting, penance, mortification, self-denial, humility, silence, solitude and the whole train of monkish virtues; for what reason are they every where rejected by men of sense, but because they serve to no manner of purpose. [...] We observe, on the contrary, that they [...] stupefy the understanding and harden the heart, obscure the fancy and sour the temper. We justly, therefore, transfer them to the opposite column, and place them in the catalogue of vices. ([1751] 1998: 146)

Haidt and Bjorkland also note that religious conservatives are horrified by what they see as 'the "anything goes" moral chaos that liberals have created' (2008: 209-10). This may suggest that atheistic moral systems are always lax and undemanding. That is not so. Consider the moral views of the contemporary atheist philosopher Peter Singer. A technique Singer often employs is to begin with what appear to be simple and uncontroversial moral claims and then use these claims to argue for moral conclusions that are quite demanding. For example, in one of his best-known papers, Singer begins with two moral claims. The first is that 'suffering and death from lack of food, shelter, and medical care are bad' (1972: 231). The second is that 'if it is in our power to prevent something bad from happening, without thereby sacrificing anything of comparable moral importance, we ought, morally, to do it' (ibid.: 231). Singer argues that these two moral claims, together with some empirical truths about the state of the world, lead to the conclusion that 'we ought, morally, to be working full time to relieve great suffering that occurs as a result of famine or other disasters' (ibid.: 238). In some of his other writings, Singer highlights the immense animal suffering caused by factory farming. He argues for the view that we ought to 'boycott all meat and eggs produced by large-scale commercial methods of animal production, and encourage others to do the same' (2001: 70). It should be obvious that for the vast majority of Westerners, adhering to Singer's conclusions would require radical and pervasive changes in how we live. My aim in mentioning Singer in the present context is not to suggest that all atheists should accept his conclusions but rather to illustrate that atheistic moral systems can be very demanding.

CONCLUSION

I began this essay by identifying two popular worries relating to morality in an atheistic context. The first is that atheism promotes immoral behaviour and societal dysfunction. An examination of the available empirical evidence shows that matters are much more complicated. Contemporary Denmark and Sweden demonstrate that highly secularized societies can function well. The second worry is that God, and God alone, can serve as an adequate foundation for objective morality. If there is no God or gods, then there can be no objective moral truths. To address this worry, I illustrated the failure of various attempts to ground objective morality on God and considered two ways that objective

morality can exist without a theistic foundation. There are of course other worries about atheism and morality that I lack the space to address here. However, I hope to have shown that there is nothing irrational about maintaining the reality of objective morality while at the same time not believing in the existence of God or gods, and that those who dream of moral and happy societies whose members have largely shed traditional religious beliefs are not dreaming of the unattainable. Indeed, what such people long for is already a reality in some parts of the world.

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CHAPTER 7

ATHEISM AND THE MEANINGFULNESS OF LIFE

KIMBERLY A. BLESSING

INTRODUCTION

ON the 2nd of March 2011 a humanist group centred in Buffalo, New York, launched a multimedia advertising campaign declaring that atheists and the nonreligious can live good, meaningful lives without God. ‘You don’t need God—to hope, to care, to love, to live’ appeared on billboards in Indianapolis and Houston and on the sides of buses in Washington, DC (*Buffalo News*, 19 March 2011).¹ The president and CEO of this group, Ronald A. Lindsay, said the advertisements were aimed at ‘dispelling some myths’ about the nonreligious. ‘One common myth is that the nonreligious lead empty, meaningless, selfish, self-centred lives. This is not only false, it’s ridiculous. Unfortunately, all too many people accept this myth because that’s what they hear about nonbelievers’ (*The Christian Post*, 2 March 2011).

Atheism supposedly leads to meaninglessness because it suggests there is no point in living and it commits atheists to a pessimistic outlook on life. For example, philosopher and theist William Craig argues ‘if there is no God, then life itself becomes meaningless. Man and the universe are without ultimate significance ... if God exists, then there is hope for man. But if God does not exist, then all we are left with is despair’ (Craig [1994] 2000: 43, 46). At the same time some atheists argue that theists cannot live meaningful lives. Kurt Baier suggests that attributing a purpose to a human being is ‘offensive’ and ‘degrading for a man to be regarded as merely serving a purpose’ ([1957] 2008: 101). Erik Wielenberg believes aspects of Christianity contain ‘dangerous’ and ‘poisonous’ ideas (2005: 145, 149), which supports atheist Michael Martin’s view that Christianity presents ‘serious obstacles to developing ... a meaningful life’ (2002: 319). Since so many people are concerned with living meaningful lives, it would be a great coup for one or the other side if it were able to lay exclusive claim to meaningfulness. Hence in their attempts to win over converts both theists and atheists attempt to show that their opponent’s orientation towards religion prevents them from living truly meaningful lives. But exclusivists on both sides are wrong. For neither atheists nor theists are *necessarily* committed to meaninglessness. Contrary to what is suggested above, neither atheism nor theism precludes meaningfulness.

I shall focus attention on two key components of theistic meaning of life theories that theists argue are importantly missing from atheistic theories: immortality and a Divine Plan. Included in these sections I will survey some alternative views and critiques of each feature, as well as various theistic responses to these critiques. Later, I consider atheist alternatives to theistic accounts of meaningfulness that involve subjectivism, intrinsic values, and Susan Wolf’s hybrid theory of meaning. We shall come to see that genuine meaning for either theists or atheists requires some conceptual commitments, and the dispute about which side can live meaningfully is yet another case of the two sides talking past each other. Alternatively, if we allow for the different kinds and degrees

of meaning we will come to see that both theists and atheists are able to offer rationally acceptable theories of life's meaning(s). This inclusive pluralism that I endorse views theism and atheism as competing views that can be regarded as complements that cannot be combined to form a complete picture of life's meaning. Instead, these competing views offer ways of seeing meaningfulness that works for some people and purposes and not for others.

WHAT MEANING MEANS

Throughout this discussion, I am using a narrower definition of atheism (and theism) than that endorsed by this publication, i.e., absence of belief in God or gods. Instead, I am using 'God' to refer to the Judeo-Christian God or the God of Classical Theism, since this is the God that most meaning of life writers have in mind. In other words, theistic theories of life's meaning assume the existence of this God, while atheistic theories do not.

The following views of what 'meaning' means are fairly standard in the literature. Meaningfulness is an intrinsic and final good that varies, and comes in degrees. Meaning applies to human life, whether we are considering the whole or some part of that life, including an individual action or set of actions, project, or endeavour. As a category of value, meaningfulness is distinct from morality and happiness or well-being. The aforementioned mythology about atheism, as well as the advertising campaign aimed at dispelling this mythology, tend to lump together morality and meaningfulness. Yet the terms are not co-extensive. Famous cases such as Paul Gauguin or more troubling cases such as Adolf Hitler raise questions about whether an immoral life may still be considered meaningful. Moreover things that are non-moral by nature, such as artistic, intellectual, or athletic achievements, are commonly believed to confer a life with meaningfulness. Happiness or well-being are also not co-extensive with meaning. An unhappy life or a life that is not going well—a life marked by tragedy and unfulfilled hopes and plans—may still be considered meaningful. Likewise some kinds of suffering and self-sacrifice may be meaningful; for example, many would consider meaningful the life of the soldier who is suffering from PTSD; moreover Christians find deep meaning in the suffering of Christ.

Common synonyms for meaningfulness are 'important' or 'significant', i.e., a meaningful life suggests a 'significant existence'. But these terms are too narrow to be considered exactly synonymous. For example, Hitler's life is not necessarily meaningful just because it was devoted to non-trivial or significant ends. Conversely, just because a person does significant work this life is not necessarily meaningful—consider the life of a successful lawyer who works on behalf of battered women but only to please her over-bearing barrister mother. It is also commonly believed that asking, 'What is the meaning of life?' is equivalent to asking, 'What makes life worth living?'. Socrates boldly claims that an 'unexamined life is not worth living'. But few philosophers actually believe that unreflective human beings should commit suicide or be put to death. Furthermore theists, along with persons who believe that human life is sacred or intrinsically valuable, may take issue with the notion that a meaningless life is not worth living. Finally, meaningfulness is very closely related to purpose. But the lives of an immoral dictator or unhappy soldier have a purpose and they are not necessarily meaningful.

Prolific meaning of life scholar Thaddeus Metz opts for a family resemblance model, suggesting that questions about the meaning of life are associated with a variety of closely related but not entirely overlapping questions, such as: 'What ought one most strive for besides achieving happiness and satisfying moral requirements? How can one do something worthy of great esteem or admiration?

What is particularly worthy of love and allegiance?’, etc. (2002: 802–3). Metz believes that all major meaning of life theories are attempting to answer at least one of these questions. Whereas Metz frames questions about the meaning of life in terms of questions of *value*, he leaves out a group of *metaphysical* questions that theists are asking about the meaning of life in general, what may be considered questions about the ‘mystery of existence’. These include questions such as: ‘What is the point of it all?’, ‘Why do I exist?’, ‘Is my life part of some bigger narrative or cosmic plan?’, ‘Why are some lives meaningful while others are not?’, etc.

As we compare and contrast theistic and atheistic theories, we should pay critical attention to how the question has been framed. Atheists are looking for the meaning or meanings *in* an individual human life; specifically, they are asking, ‘What condition(s) would, if satisfied, make an individual’s life meaningful?’ Theists are additionally looking for the meaning of all human life or humanity—including mystery of existence-type questions. In other words, if we think of meaningfulness in terms of *kinds*, atheism can account for ‘terrestrial’ meaning, while theism can additionally guarantee ‘cosmic’ meaning (Edwards [1967] 2008: 124–5).

Exclusivist theists who endorse the aforementioned mythology about atheism argue that atheists who believe that their lives are (terrestrially) meaningful are wrong, because God is necessary for any kind of meaning. A more inclusive point of view suggests that from the point of view of the theist the atheist’s life is simply not as meaningful it could be, i.e., it is not cosmically meaningful. If we grant that atheists are able to live robustly meaningful lives, it’s not clear what the atheist would lose in conceding that atheism might not offer the greatest meaning possible for any human being. It is not the case that the theist’s life is really meaningful and the atheist’s is not. They are just meaningful in different ways. We may now consider the first of two key elements of theistic theories of meaningfulness.

IMMORTALITY

Philosophy’s Grim Reaper, Bertrand Russell, famously points out that the very nature of human achievement is that it will eventually come to an end: ‘All the labors of all ages, all the devotion, all the inspiration, all the noonday brightness of human genius, are destined to extinction in the vast death of the solar system, and the whole temple of man’s achievement must inevitably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins’ ([1903] 2008: 56). Craig articulates the theist’s worry regarding the temporary nature of human achievement and existence: ‘If each individual person passes out of existence when he dies, then what ultimate meaning can be given to his life’ ([1994] 2000: 42)? Historically, Arthur Schopenhauer, Leo Tolstoy, and Albert Camus share these intuitions regarding finitude and futility. But it is Tolstoy’s *Confessions*, one of only a few theistic viewpoints that appears in meaning of life anthologies, which is most influential. At a time in his life when he was ‘completely happy’ Tolstoy experiences something like a mid-life crisis. He confesses that he saw no reason to continue living: ‘I could not ascribe any sensible meaning to a single act, or my whole life ... Sooner or later there would come diseases and death ... and there would be nothing left but stench and worms’ ([1884] 2008: 9). The fact that there was nothing ahead but suffering and death—complete annihilation—suggests that life is meaningless.

Critiques of Immortality

Some read Tolstoy to be advancing a fairly popular argument designed to show that meaningfulness requires immortality. In order for something to be meaningful it must be worthwhile or worth doing. The only kinds of things that are worth doing are those which last forever (Metz 2008: 2.2). Suggesting otherwise are firm philosophical intuitions that something could be worthwhile—a life that contributes to human welfare or excellence—without having infinite existence or influence. As Anthony Flew correctly points out, ‘the mere fact that no life extends forever does not necessarily devalue all the possible achievements and activities of a lifetime’ (1963: 113). Moreover counter-intuitions about mortality are equally compelling. ‘It is at least no less rational to hold that it is precisely our mortality which makes what we do, or fail to do, so overwhelmingly important. And there is not the slightest warrant for suggesting that this alternative and opposite reaction is possible only for those who are lacking in imagination’ (ibid.: 113).

Flew’s critique may not matter for theists like Craig because it is not the duration of existence or influence of accomplishments—i.e., immortality of accomplishments—which makes something meaningful. Instead it is the fact that all human life and achievement comes to *nothing* that implies that life is meaningless. ‘The long hours spent in study at the university, our jobs, our friendships—all these are, in the final analysis, utterly meaningless. This is the horror of modern man: because he ends in nothing, he is nothing ...’ ([1994] 2000: 42). Craig believes that even if man and the universe could exist forever, yet there was no God, then ‘their existence would still have no ultimate significance’ (ibid.: 42). Even if a person could exist forever we could still ask, ‘So what?’ or other mystery-of-existence kinds of questions such as, ‘What is the point of it all?’ The response, ‘The point is simply to exist forever’, does not indicate what exactly the person in question is to be doing for this infinite amount of time. Hence, some theists argue that meaningfulness requires both immortality and God, for God gives direction and purpose for the life that is being lived. This is the idea that is illustrated by Samuel Beckett in his masterful work *Waiting for Godot*. It is not the fact that ‘the curtain closes and that’s all there is’ that matters to theists like Craig. It’s the fact that God never shows up. For without God nothing can make sense—as Beckett suggests we are just killing time waiting, for we know not what.

Likewise, Tolstoy’s worry is not that death necessarily devalues everything. It’s that death makes everything senseless or pointless—absurd. Looking to philosophy and science, or ‘rational knowledge’, Tolstoy concludes that life has no meaning. Instead, learning from observing and working with the ‘irrational’ peasants, it is ‘in faith alone’ that Tolstoy finds ‘meaning and possibility of life’; the meaning that cannot be destroyed by death is ‘the union with the infinite God, paradise’ ([1884] 2008: 14). The meaning of life—Tolstoy’s *raison d’être*—is not found in the belief that all his accomplishments and life will extend forever more. Instead by adopting the real and irrational faith of a peasant he comes to believe that his life is no longer in vain but in service to ‘God’s law’. In other words, for theists like Tolstoy it is not belief in the immortality of accomplishments that gives his life meaning. Instead meaningfulness is found in his faith in God’s Divine Plan because it gives a point or purpose for Tolstoy’s life and everything that he seeks to accomplish in his life.

For theists like Craig and Tolstoy immortal souls are not sufficient for meaningfulness. Moreover, although God’s plan entails belief in immortal souls, i.e., belief in an endless conscious existence of individual human souls that survive death, it is not clear *why* immortal souls are necessary. Theists may argue that souls are necessary for the most significant event which would be uniting with God in a spiritual realm or Heaven (Metz 2008: 2.2). A more compelling argument is that immortal souls are required for meting out perfect justice in the afterlife. The idea that life or humanity just can’t make sense if the wicked prosper while the good suffer has roots in *Ecclesiastes*. It is still the case, however, that even if an afterlife (which includes immortal souls) is required for perfect justice, it is not the case that an *eternal* afterlife is required (Metz 2008: 2.2).

Alternative Accounts of Immortality

Robert Nozick and Robert Audi offer promising alternatives to believing in immortal souls, while at the same time doing justice to intuitions regarding meaningfulness and immortality. Audi believes that ‘finite values can still be great’ (2005: 354). He argues for ‘a kind of immortality of things of value’ which would pertain to things that can survive indefinitely; for example institutions such as universities and cooperative intellectual inquiries. ‘[A]s long as there are persons, there can be ideas and ideals ...’ (ibid.: 354–5). Even though these possibilities do not imply personal immortality ‘they do show one way in which we can try to make permanently enduring contributions to things we love’ (ibid.: 355). Similarly Nozick views meaningfulness in terms of permanence, which gets cashed out in terms of transcending limits. ‘A significant life is, in some sense, permanent; it makes a permanent difference to the world—it leaves traces. To be wiped out completely, traces and all, goes a long way toward destroying the meaning of one’s life ...’ (1981: 582). Yet Nozick believes that mortality is a temporal limit ‘and traces are a way of going or seeping beyond that limit’ (ibid.). He thinks that ‘[t]o be puzzled about why death seems to undercut meaning is to fail to see the temporal limit itself as a limit’ (ibid.: 595).

Tolstoy’s search for meaning can serve as an introduction to the modern world in which the pessimist’s view threatens to be true: Life is just tragic or absurd. Poor players are we, fretting and strutting across the stage, wondering: Is ours a ‘tale told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, signifying nothing’? We simply cannot ignore the scientific point of view which reveals a macro and microscopic world of bodies which are themselves impermanent and destructible. Yet death and destruction do not necessarily devalue everything *in life*, including the value of life itself. Some theists believe that accepting this scientific point of view necessarily commits oneself to the dark pessimism of a Schopenhauer. They are wrong, for Schopenhauer is a rare bird. There is no logical impossibility, nor is it even very rare, that people (a) acknowledge the impermanent and temporary nature of their existence and subsequently (b) adopt a robustly positive attitude towards life. The former involves a fact about nature and natural things, while the latter concerns an attitude or stance one takes toward this fact. It is also possible to acknowledge this scientific view and not draw any conclusions about what it means, for from a scientific point of view death doesn’t ‘mean’ anything because there is no plan of life.

It is still the case, however, that many people have strong intuitions about finitude and futility and meaningfulness and immortality. Theists offer one way to work through these intuitions. They believe—and atheists believe they do so irrationally (or non-rationally)—that the only way to ultimately affirm life or humanity and the meaning of life is to affirm God’s existence and Divine Plan, which entails belief in immortal souls. For believers like Craig or Tolstoy it is this ‘irrational’ belief or faith that helps to make sense out of a seeming senseless existence. For atheists like Russell or Schopenhauer this simply will not work. Against the claims of exclusivist theists, mortality does not necessarily imply futility, absurdism, or pessimism, and Camus goes too far in suggesting that judging that life is not worth living would entail suicide (see [1942] 2008). Still some atheists believe that a good theory of life’s meaning should address widely held intuitions about finitude and futility and meaningfulness and immortality. These atheists would do well to consider Audi and Nozick and similar lines of thinking because they are able to account for immortality in a way that does not necessarily require belief in the existence of immortal souls or a Divine Plan.

Before analyzing and critiquing the second component of theistic theories of life's meaning, we should be clear about what theists have in mind when they talk about the Divine Plan. The Roman Catholic Church's *Baltimore Catechism* reads: 'God made us to show forth His Goodness and to share with us His everlasting happiness in heaven. To gain the happiness of heaven we must know, love, and serve God in this world' (quoted in Quinn 2000: 59). Philosopher of religion Philip Quinn states that most Christians agree that at the heart of service to God is 'obedience to the love commandments' as expressed in the Gospel of Matthew (22.37–40): First, to love God with your whole heart, soul and mind; second, to love your neighbour as yourself (Quinn 2000: 59). Quinn explains that theists believe that humans are called on to make God's purpose for mankind their purpose in their lives and actions. Since God is perfectly good, theists are assured that human life will have positive value. In other words, the life of a believer will be more or less meaningful given the extent to which they fulfil God's plan.

Critiques of Divine Plan

A sweeping criticism of purpose-theories suggests that fulfilling a purpose that was 'assigned' to us is 'degrading' for human beings and prevents us from finding meaning. Irving Singer agrees with Baier's point introduced earlier in this paper: 'we pride ourselves on being free and autonomous, capable of heroic achievements when we live in accordance with our ideals' (1992: 29). Singer believes that 'if humanity or life in general was created to serve a purpose beyond itself, our being would be analogous to that of a manufactured artefact. There seems to be little in this state of affairs to justify that exultation that religious people sometimes feel in thinking that God's plan reveals the purpose and the meaning of all reality' (ibid.).

Unfortunately these critics oversimplify and misconstrue the believer's claims. When theists talk about fulfilling God's purpose they intend to make God's purposes their own. Moreover the key to these theories is that individuals may or may not freely and intentionally choose to fulfil God's purpose. 'We are mere instruments only if we are used. But we are not used if we cheerfully affirm a grand design that exudes the highest values. Human beings would be more than tools because of our free will' (Belliotti 2001: 20). Certainly some theists may choose to view themselves as mere instruments of God so that they may refrain from taking responsibility for their own lives or choices. But on any minimally charitable reading it is hard to see this as an essential aspect of Christian teaching. Of course theistic accounts of free will are notoriously problematic, but it is not their success or failure that is at the heart of this unsuccessful critique.

A more forceful objection to Divine Plan arguments comes from Nozick who poses questions about what it is about God's nature—understood as a 'ball of meaning'—that can actually ground meaning: 'How in the world (or out of it) can there be something whose nature contains meaning, something which just glows meaning' ([1981] 2008: 230)? Even if God could ground meaning, all Divine Plan arguments share the same problem, namely a purely natural world could do the job of God, for nature can ground universal morality and final value from which meaning springs (Metz 2008: 2.1).

Pax Romana

To avoid this seeming impasse, we might consider the following distinction between the claims that: (a) God's existence can *ground* life's meaning, and (b) belief in God or religious faith can *adequately*

account for life's meaning. John Cottingham, one of the few champions of theistic theories, presents a vaguely Pascalian-Wittgensteinian² view that is compatible with the thinking of Tolstoy and Quinn. Cottingham believes that what is 'central' to Christian life is not 'reaching an intellectual decision' but 'the adoption of a framework of understanding and praxis' (2003: 90). For Cottingham it is 'the practices of spirituality' which stem from the Christian tradition that give meaning to the lives of those who adopt them, 'not in virtue of allegiance to complex theological dogmas but in virtue of a passionate commitment to a certain way of life' (ibid.: 91). Atheist Wielenberg acknowledges that thinkers like Socrates, Pascal, and Kant have endorsed believing in supernatural doctrines for reasons other than their being true, such as 'they leave us better off in this life' or they leave us of 'good cheer' (2005: 145, 143). Wielenberg ultimately rejects Christianity for he believes that Christianity is a dangerous doctrine, while naturalism is not. This matter cannot be resolved in this paper. Nor can we establish the truth or falsity of theism. If we set aside the question of the truth of theism, however, we may consider religious faith or practices as one possible avenue for providing the meaning of life. After this we can conclude this discussion by considering whether naturalism is sufficient to provide for meaning(s) in life.

The Meaning of Life

Cottingham believes that the problem with secular humanism (which is one variety of atheistic theory about life's meaning; see Stephen Law's 'Humanism') is that without an overarching structure or theory conferring meaning, a meaningful life reduces to nothing more than 'an engaged life in which the agent is systematically committed to certain projects he makes his own, *irrespective of their moral status*' (2003: 26; emphasis added). It wouldn't matter, for example, that the artistic genius is a selfish philanderer, the great athlete is a thug, or that the brilliant engineer cheats on his taxes (ibid.). On the other hand, a religious point of view provides 'a model of fulfilment that would locate our human destiny within an enduring moral framework' (ibid.: 62). Instead of thinking of our lives as a 'cosmic accident or by-product of blind forces', they would be seen as having a purpose—'that of attuning ourselves to a creative order that is inherently good' (ibid.). It's not that theism provides life with purpose and fulfilment that matters, because this could be accomplished from an atheistic point of view, at least regarding individual lives if not life itself. Instead the point is that only God's plan can guarantee that its adherents find their purpose and fulfilment in something which is inherently good. In other words, theism guarantees that meaning(s) in life and the meaning of all life or humanity can be understood in terms of realizing an end that is morally good.

It is still the case, however, that the assessment of the worth of our activities and project is, to some degree, success-oriented. Consequently, 'whether the sincere pursuit of worthwhile activity yields a meaningful life will be open to chance' (ibid.: 69), which introduces what Cottingham calls the 'problem of the frailty of goodness. 'The lucky ones on whom fortune smiles will be able to look back at the end of their lives and pronounce them meaningful, while those who are, by birth, or upbringing, or ill-health, or lack of resource, or accident, unable to pursue worthwhile goals, or prevented from reaching them, will just have to lump it' (ibid.). Cottingham finds this point of view 'ethically repugnant' because it goes against a long 'compassionate and egalitarian tradition' which suggests that every human being is eligible for salvation (ibid.). It is also 'psychologically indigestible' because it unrealistically expects us to pursue the good with no hope or assurance that we will succeed' (ibid.: 70). Theism, on the other hand, 'encourages us with hope' that the very difficult and demanding task of being virtuous contributes to some sort of moral order that the cosmos was created to realize (ibid.: 72). Cottingham suggests that 'religious claims about the

buoyancy of goodness' are very easy to misunderstand ... '[T]he hope involved here is closer to an emotional allegiance to the idea of the power of goodness than to the cognitive attitude of expectation that outcomes will be, on any given occasion, or in general, favorable ...' (ibid.: 73). The 'resilience of goodness ... is not a matter of any magical tendency to bounce back or win through, but rather a matter of something in the human spirit which can respond to the deepest stress and weakness in ways that are transforming' (ibid.: 74). Similarly, John Hick argues that all world religions offer a 'cosmic optimism' that has little to do with a cheery disposition or frame of mind. Instead this cosmic optimism says that the meaning of life offers 'an ultimate trust and confidence, even in life's darkest moments of suffering and sorrow' (Hick 2000: 275).

It has already been shown that atheism does not necessarily entail pessimism. From this it does not follow, however, that atheism would entail a hope that even in life's darkest moments, good will triumph over evil. Theists believe that such hope will provide 'the necessary confidence and resolution to follow the path of goodness' (Cottingham 2003: 72). Not only does theism guarantee that its adherents will find meaning—their purpose and fulfilment—in something that is inherently good, but it also motivates its believers towards the difficult task of pursuing that good, which is where meaning is to be found. Finally, even though misfortune prevents some individuals from living meaningful lives, theism guarantees that good will ultimately triumph over evil, which helps theists to make sense of evil and human suffering.

ATHEIST THEORIES OF MEANINGFULNESS

Atheists claim that as much as one may wish it to be otherwise, there is no rationale or 'story' as to why some are lucky and some are not. But it's not supposed to make sense, for there is no divine or beneficent being who created us, who will guarantee that the power of goodness will prevail, etc. Consequently, atheists may have to bite the bullet and accept the fact that some immoral lives or activities may be meaningful, and some, perhaps many, unlucky persons will simply not be able to live meaningful lives. Even though this point of view may be ethically repugnant or psychologically unappealing, it is true. From this it does not follow that *no* atheists are able to live genuinely meaningful lives. For even if atheism cannot address the deep mysteries of existence—metaphysical or cosmological questions about the meaning of life—it can offer theories that can adequately account for what makes an individual life, action, or project meaningful.

Subjectivism

One option available to atheists, which is ruled out by theism, is subjectivism, i.e., the view that meaningfulness depends on the subject. For example, Harry Frankfurt argues that deeply loving or caring for something is sufficient for a life to be meaningful (1982, 2002, 2004). Richard Taylor's (1970) argument, which he later rejects (1981, 1987, 1999), continues to offer the most influential account of subjectivism in terms of desire-satisfaction. Taylor argues that if the gods implanted Sisyphus with a strong desire to roll rocks up a hill then his life would be meaningful. The atheist Wielenberg claims that Taylor's point of view is 'hard to swallow' and 'goes too far' (2005: 23). Wielenberg offers a clever critique of subjectivism by comparing a grinning pianist to a grinning excrement-eater. 'A grinning excrement-eater who passes up a pianist's life for the sake of eating excrement is a fool ... No matter how great his passion, no matter how big his grin as he spoons it

down, he should be an object of pity rather than envy' (ibid.).

Even if some atheists may be willing to grant that the lives of the excrement eater and pianist are equally meaningful, the subjectivist point of view will be even harder to swallow if we consider deeply immoral lives. John Kekes argues that countless dedicated Nazi and Communist mass murderers, committed terrorists, 'people whose rage, resentment, greed, ambition, selfishness, sense of superiority or inferiority give purpose to their lives and lead them to inflict grievous unjustified harm on others ... may be successfully engaged in their projects, derive great satisfaction from them, and find their lives as scourges of their literal or metaphorical gods very meaningful' (2000: 30). Kekes acknowledges that this point of view 'outrages our moral sensibility'. But Kekes believes it must be accepted if one is to '[do] justice to the plain fact that many evil and morally unconcerned people live meaningfully' (ibid.: 34).

Perhaps subjectivism would be easier to swallow if we bear in mind that meaningfulness is not the only good for a life to obtain. Nor is it necessarily the highest good. It may be argued that meaningfulness is a second-order, or bonus, value which may or may not obtain, independent of whether or not a life or action is moral. Hence, even if atheists are forced to admit that the life of a mass murderer or terrorist could theoretically be meaningful, they may still put their faith in the truth of moral realism or ethical objectivism which would show these lives to be immoral. At the very least, it is the case that atheists can offer minimalist measures for meaningfulness, which suggests that, contrary to the belief of exclusivist theists, absurdism or nihilism is false. Moreover, if meaning-subjectivism is true, then atheists do not need to rely on immortality as a stop-gap for absurdism.

Intrinsic Values

Other atheists reject subjectivism and adopt a belief in the existence of intrinsic values or goods, which is central to many atheistic theories of meaningfulness. Ronald Dworkin argues that religious and nonreligious can agree that human life is sacred and thus has *positive intrinsic value* even if they disagree about why it is sacred (Quinn 2000: 54; emphasis added). If Dworkin is right, then atheists may still believe that meaningless lives without divine purposes are valuable, hence worth living, which at the very least will stave off Camus-like suicides. It may be asked, however, how in the world can there be something in this world whose nature contains value, something which just glows value?

Wielenberg believes that '[e]ven if there is no supernatural commander to assign purposes to our lives or a suitably Significant Deity to care about our lives, the existence of intrinsically good activities would make it possible for us to bring internal meaning to our lives' (2005: 34). Although Cottingham thinks an integral connection between meaningfulness and value 'seems absolutely right', he wonders how something like Wielenberg's godless universe manages to contain genuine intrinsic value (Cottingham 2005)? Wielenberg admits, 'I am afraid I have no philosophical proof for, say, the proposition that falling in love is intrinsically good. As has often been pointed out, though, many of the things we know are such that we cannot give an adequate philosophical proof for their truth' (2005: 35). Wielenberg invokes G. E. Moore's test, which is to ask: 'Would you find it worthwhile even if it had absolutely no consequences?': 'If it seems to you that it *would* be worthwhile, you have a good candidate for an intrinsically good activity on your hands' (ibid.). Wielenberg considers claims about intrinsic goods as the 'axioms of ethical theory; they are the starting points, the first principles', as such they can't be the types of things to be '*proved*' (ibid.).

Yet even if we accept as axiomatic that all human life is sacred and that all human life has positive intrinsic value, it does not follow that intrinsically valuable activities or lives are *necessarily* meaningful. Just because a person may be doing intrinsically good work—'contributing to the well-

being of persons' (Audi 2005)—it is not necessarily the case that this work is meaningful; for example, think back to the successful lawyer who works on behalf of battered women but only to please her mother. Conversely, immoral dictators engage in intrinsically evil activities, but their lives are not *necessarily* meaningless. Even if we assume that intrinsically valuable activities are meaningful such that a life filled with intrinsic goods would be a meaningful life, we are left without an explanation of the meaning of a life in which there are no intrinsic goods. It may be the case that such lives are meaningless. But the mystery-of-existence-question remains: 'Why are some lives meaningful and others are not?' In response, theists can invoke theodicies. Atheists will counter that these theodicies are ultimately unsound. And around we go.

Hybrid Theory

Susan Wolf recognizes that the mere existence of intrinsic values or goods is not sufficient, because meaningfulness requires a subjective as well as objective element. Wolf's rejection of subjectivism accounts for the second half of her hybrid view: 'meaning arises when subjective attraction meets objective attractiveness' (2010: 9), or meaningfulness amounts to 'loving objects that are worthy of love' (ibid.: 8). But Wolf is ever aware of her reader's 'resistance' towards her 'references to objective value' (ibid.: 33). Unfortunately, the very things that are most wanting in a good meaning of life theory are missing. As Wolf makes clear, she will 'not be offering a theory of objective value, much less a foolproof procedure for determining which things have it' (ibid.).

In claiming that meaningfulness has an objective component, (that certain projects and not others are fitting for fulfilment, or worthy of love, and so on), I mean only to insist that something other than a radically subjective account of value must be assumed. Nonetheless I must confess I have no positive account of non-subjective value with which I am satisfied. Radically objective accounts of value (Plato, G. E. Moore) are implausible and obscure, but the most obvious conceptions of value that fall between those and the radically subjective are problematic as well (ibid.: 45–6)

Wolf's hybrid theory of life's meaning appears promising. But until she can prove otherwise, her mere belief that meaningfulness is impossible without objective value must be accepted as sufficient to support her hybrid theory. Other atheists simply skirt the issue of providing a theory of objective value. Assuming objectivism is true, these atheists offer a vast array of conditions that could count as objectively meaningful.³ While these various and piecemeal accounts may do a better job than theism in terms of actually *grounding* meaning(s) in some objectively meaningful condition(s), such as 'transcending the limits of the self' (Nozick 1981; 1989), they are unable to *account for* the meaning of life. Of course atheists believe that finding meaning(s) *in* life is sufficient, while theists will not agree.

When we examine atheists' theories, we see that they all (including meaning-subjectivism) meet a minimum threshold for meaningfulness, which is tantamount to 'worth living'. Theists, on the other hand, can satisfy a minimal condition *and* their view can accommodate greater degrees of meaningfulness, because they have an objective measure—degree of submission and conformity to God's Divine Plan. Atheists reject the theist's objective measure as unsatisfactory, and offer a variety of their own objective measures for meaningfulness, none of which is fully satisfactory. Atheists are not bothered by this because they are either meaning-subjectivists, or they are only bothered because they want an objective measure. In either case, it is shown that the aforementioned mythology about atheists is false.

CONCLUSION

For all their theoretical differences, there is widespread agreement among theists and atheists regarding the content of meaningful lives. For example, theists and atheists would likely agree that great artistic and intellectual achievements are more meaningful than counting the numbers of hairs on a head or angels dancing on the head of a pin. They also tend to agree that although it is not sufficient, morality confers a life with meaning, as do rich and healthy interpersonal relationships. Many would agree that the lives of Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Martin Luther King, Bertrand Russell, Charles Darwin, and even Richard Dawkins are meaningful. Although some theists might argue that, without the faith of their religion, the particular lives of Gandhi, Mother Theresa, and King would not have been possible, they might concede that these lives are meaningful even if there is no God. Finally, theists and atheists alike acknowledge Thoreau's sad truth, that 'masses of men lead lives of quiet desperation'.

Setting aside the question of the truth of theism, I have argued that both theists and atheists are able to offer rationally acceptable theories of life's meaning(s), each of which have certain limits as well as certain strengths. An inclusive pluralist approach towards meaning suggests that (a) theists and atheists are asking different questions about meaning, i.e., 'What is the meaning of life in general?', and 'What is the meaning of my life in particular?', respectively. These differences rest on (b) the distinction between different *kinds* of meaning; while theistic theories address cosmic meaning, atheistic theories account for terrestrial meaning (the latter may include subjectivist and objectivist viewpoints). Finally, (c) meaningfulness comes in *degrees*, which means that theistic theories can account for the greatest meaning possible for humanity, while atheistic theories can account for a great degree of meaning(s) for individual lives.

For a question as grand and difficult as 'What is the meaning of life?', we would do well to seriously consider both theistic and atheistic points of view. As we do, we must bear in mind that theists and atheists, philosophers in particular, come to think about the meaning of life with various intuitions and well formed beliefs about the nature of value and happiness, as well as conceptual commitments about the truth and nature of God's existence. Consequently, theists and atheists have different views about life's meaning. While we are busy weighing their theories, theists and atheists alike will go on living genuinely meaningful lives. To suggest otherwise is as ridiculous as thinking that a person could obtain valuable insight about life's meaning from a broadside on a bus.

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CHAPTER 8

AQUINAS AND ATHEISM

BRIAN DAVIES

INTRODUCTION

ATHEISM is contingent in that it would not exist were there no such thing as theism. For the word ‘atheism’ commonly signifies a reaction against theism and gets its sense from whatever sense that the word ‘theism’ has. But what are we to take theism to be? With this question in mind one might wonder whether there is any theist who might be thought of as classically expounding and defending theism in what one might call a ‘traditional’ way. Thomas Aquinas (1224/5–1273) is someone who seems to qualify when it comes to this job description. Canonized in 1323, his intellectual influence has been enormous among religious people, especially Roman Catholics. In 1567 Pope Pius V declared him to be a Doctor of the Church. In his encyclical letter *Aeterni Patris* (1879) Pope Leo XIII commended him as a touchstone of Christian orthodoxy, as did Pope John Paul II in his 1998 encyclical *Fides et Ratio*. According to Leo XIII, ‘the universal Church borrows lustre from his admirable teaching’. According to John Paul II, ‘the Church has been justified in consistently proposing Saint Thomas as a master of thought and a model of the right way to do theology’. There are people who say that they believe in God while disagreeing with most of what Aquinas says about God. But he does seem to be someone to whom one can uncontroversially point as a paradigm theist. In what follows I shall try to indicate what his theism amounts to and how it might be connected with certain critiques of theism.

THE VIABILITY OF ATHEISM

A question worth raising at the outset is ‘Could Aquinas have countenanced atheism as a viable intellectual option?’. And the answer is ‘Yes’. For he is aware that it might be said ‘God does not exist’, and he regards the statement as partly defensible. He does not, as some have, take ‘God does not exist’ to be demonstrably self-contradictory, as we can see from his discussion of a line of argument referred to in *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 2,1. This asserts that God cannot but exist given what the word ‘God’ means and runs thus: ‘Once we understand the meaning of the word “God”, we immediately see that God exists. For the word means “that than which nothing greater can be signified”. So, since what exists in thought and fact is greater than what exists in thought alone, and since, once we understand the word “God”, he exists in thought, he must also exist in fact’ (quoted from Davies and Leftow 2006: 20). Aquinas, however, rejects this argument. He writes:

Someone hearing the word ‘God’ may very well not understand it to mean ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’ ... And even if someone thinks that what is signified by ‘God’ is ‘that than which nothing greater can be thought’, it does not follow that the person in question thinks that what is signified by ‘God’ exists in reality rather than merely as thought about. If we do not

grant that something in fact exists than which nothing greater can be thought (and nobody denying the existence of God would grant this), the conclusion that God in fact exists does not follow. (ibid.: 22)

The argument rejected by Aquinas here is a version of what is commonly known as the ‘Ontological Argument’ for God’s existence. The version considered by Aquinas seems similar to that discussed and discarded by Immanuel Kant. And Aquinas’s grounds for rejecting it seem very similar to one of those offered by Kant, who observes:

If I cancel the predicate in an identical judgment and keep the subject, then a contradiction arises; hence I say that the former necessarily pertains to the latter. But if I cancel the subject together with the predicate, then no contradiction arises; for there is no longer anything that could be contradicted. To posit a triangle and cancel its three angles is contradictory; but to cancel the triangle together with its three angles is not a contradiction. It is exactly the same with the concept of an absolutely necessary being. If you cancel its existence, then you cancel the thing itself with all its predicates; where then is the contradiction supposed to come from? (Kant [1781] 1998: 565)

Aquinas and Kant seem to agree that one cannot, so to speak, define God into existence. And they agree that ‘God does not exist’ is not a contradictory utterance.¹ Aquinas does, in fact, think that there is a sense in which ‘God does not exist’ expresses a contradiction, for he holds that knowledge of what God is would bring with it the understanding that God cannot but exist. But Aquinas does not think that we have a knowledge of what God is. Or, as he puts it: ‘The proposition “God exists” is self-evident in itself ... since God is his own existence. But because we do not know what God is, the proposition is not self-evident to us’ (Davies and Leftow 2006: 21). In other words, Aquinas does not think that we should take ‘God exists’ to be true on a priori grounds.

In that case, however, on what does he rest his case for the truth of ‘God exists’? I shall turn directly to this question shortly. For the moment, however, I would like to say something about Aquinas’s take on the proposition ‘God exists’, and also to say something about his approach to the question of reasons and belief that God exists.

Deus est?

Aquinas believes that ‘God exists’ (*Deus est*) is a true proposition, one that we can know to be true. But from where does Aquinas derive his sense of the word ‘God’? He obviously derives it from the biblical tradition, from the Old and New Testaments. And he derives it from many of his theological predecessors, such as the Fathers of the Church (people like Augustine of Hippo). Speaking as a philosopher, however, Aquinas always begins with senses of ‘God’ which are what I would call ‘minimalist’. In his austere philosophical discussions of God, Aquinas typically works from expressions like ‘source of everything existing’ or ‘source of things changing’. And a reason he does so lies in the fact that Aquinas does not take ‘God does not exist’ to be demonstrably contradictory. We cannot, he thinks, know that ‘God exists’ is true because its negation self-destructs. One might say that we can know that ‘God exists’ is true because God is an item falling within our experience, as dogs and cats are. Yet Aquinas’s general theory of knowledge prevents him from making this move. In his view, our knowledge by acquaintance is confined to what we encounter empirically. And God, he thinks, is not a spatio-temporal object. So, he reasons, if we have any knowledge of God at all, this can only be because there is *causal* reason to infer that ‘God exists’ is true. For Aquinas, knowledge of God, should it be possible at all, can only be arrived at indirectly and on the basis of what God has brought about.

Does Aquinas take this conclusion to mean that people are only intellectually entitled to assert that God exists if they are able to produce a causal case for ‘God exists’ being true? He does not do so

because he does not accept that asserting that-p always requires one to be able to demonstrate that-p or show that p is more probable than not. Aristotle insisted that reasoning cannot begin without assumptions being made that are not themselves argued for (cf. *Posterior Analytics* 1.2). Wittgenstein maintained that what we call knowledge rests on beliefs which are not arrived at on the basis of reasoning (cf. *On Certainty*'s 'Learning is based on believing'; Wittgenstein 1974: § 170). In a similar way, Aquinas thinks that people can be justified in asserting what they cannot prove. He would, for example, have said that I can be justified in saying that I have a brain tumor without first equipping myself with the understanding that would allow me to demonstrate that I have one. Again, he would have said that we can be well entitled to believe things on the say-so of another (this is part of what he means when he uses the word 'faith' [*fides*]). Aquinas never thought that we should believe anything that anyone tells us (if he had, he would not have been able to spend the time he does discussing the notion of lying). But he does think that knowledge is communicable by word of mouth and, in this sense, gained by us as we simply believe people. He would have agreed with Elizabeth Anscombe's conclusion that 'the greater part of our knowledge of reality rests upon the belief that we repose in things we have been taught and told' ([1979] 2008: 3). Hume famously says that 'a wise man ... proportions his belief to the evidence' ([1748] 2000: 84). But how do we come to be able to identify such and such as *evidence* for something? Here we depend on what we have *not* come to believe by sorting out the 'evidence'. One might have evidential criteria to employ as one tries to decide what is and what is not true in some context or other. But these criteria might well not be based on further evidential criteria on pain of an infinite regress.

Thinking along these lines, Aquinas has no problems with people who assert that God exists but are quite unable to offer anything that might be thought of as a philosophical justification for doing so. Yet he does think that a reasonable case for 'God exists' being true can be given. Some theologians have denied that this is so on theological grounds. Kierkegaard is a famous example. 'To prove the existence of one who is present', he says, 'is the most shameless affront ... The existence of a king or his presence is commonly acknowledged by an appropriate expression of subjection or submission' ([1846] 1968: 485). And many contemporary theologians are hostile to the idea that someone might know that 'God exists' is true without relying on divine revelation, as opposed to philosophical inquiry (see Davies 2009). But Aquinas, though someone who believes very strongly in the notion of divine revelation, disagrees with them. He thinks that reason can take us some way when it comes to a knowledge of God.

But how does Aquinas understand the word 'God'? I touched on this question above, and I shall be addressing it in more detail soon, but for now, and by way of background to what follows, I would like to emphasize that Aquinas never thinks of 'God' as a proper name. Plenty of people do just that, assuming that 'God' is God's name as 'Brian' is my name. And when doing so they inevitably end up talking as though God were a (nameable) person—a 'person without a body' in the words of Richard Swinburne (1993: 1). But Aquinas is not of their mind. For him, 'God' is a *nomen naturae* (the name of a nature). 'The word "God" is used to signify the divine nature', he says (*Summa Theologiae*, 1a,13,8; Davies and Leftow 2006: 157). In other words, Aquinas takes 'God' to signify whatever has the divine nature (as we might take 'gold' to signify whatever is gold). So Aquinas is happy to ask whether more than one thing can be described as 'God', as he does in his discussions of the doctrine of the Trinity (which he does not take to assert that God is three persons in one person called 'God'). If you think that 'God' is a proper name, you are going to have real problems with the doctrine of the Trinity since you will have to take it to be holding that the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit are all one thing whose proper name is God, which conflicts with orthodox Trinitarian doctrine as found in the teaching of the Council of Nicaea and in subsequent texts. But Aquinas is not involved in such conflict. For he does not, as one might put it, think of 'God' as the name of the Top Person around.

GOD AND ESSE

So what does Aquinas take God to be? His ‘big idea’ is that God is what causally accounts for there being something rather than nothing at all. People offering causal arguments for the truth of ‘God exists’ have often suggested that the fact that the universe is like *this* as opposed to like *that* has to be accounted for in terms of God. Here I think especially of design arguments for theism—arguments which hold that order or regularity in the world can only be accounted for with respect to a cosmic architect, planner, organizer, or artist of some kind. A famous example of such an argument is the one to be found in William Paley’s *Natural Theology* (1802). In recent years Richard Swinburne has defended an argument for God based on what he calls ‘regularity of succession’—the fact that things in the world continually act in accordance with laws of nature. This, Swinburne says, calls for causal explanation, though the explanation, he adds, cannot lie in a law of nature, or collection of such laws, since it is the very obtaining of natural laws with which he is concerned (see, e.g., chapter eight of Swinburne 2004). But Aquinas does not offer a design argument comparable to those of Paley or Swinburne. In *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,2 he briefly argues that goal directed activity on the part of natural things lacking awareness cannot be explained in terms of chance and can only be accounted for in terms of an agent with awareness, as the motion of arrows depends on archers aiming for a target. To say that goal directed activity on the part of things lacking awareness derives from what these things naturally are does not, for Aquinas, explain anything; it only notes what needs explaining (see Wippel 2000: 480ff.). But this line of thinking is not at the heart of Aquinas’s approach to why we should conclude that ‘God exists’ is true. The heart of this lies in his notion that God is the cause of the *esse* of things while not himself being something that has *esse*.

We can translate *esse* as ‘existing’ (or ‘being’), but we need to note that Aquinas thinks that things can have *esse* in different ways. Take, for example, my cat, Smokey. Smokey exists as a naturally occurring substance with a life of his own. But what about my DVD player? It exists, but is an artefact, not a naturally occurring substance. Aquinas would call it an *ens per accidens* (a being only in a manner of speaking). He would also, for example, speak of my mail man as being such a thing—meaning that my mail man is not someone who essentially delivers mail or cannot but do this given what he is essentially (he was a human being before he became a mail man). He is, as Aquinas would say, only ‘accidentally’ someone who delivers mail (and, therefore, an *ens per accidens*). And what about ‘exists’ in sentences like ‘Blindness exists’. Many people are blind, so ‘Blindness exists’ seems true. But is ‘blindness’ the name of a naturally occurring substance like ‘Smokey’? Aquinas thinks not. The *esse* he has in mind when saying that God causally accounts for things having *esse* is the existence actually existing substances (*entia per se*, as Aquinas calls them), things which he Aquinas takes to have essences or natures.

But are there things with essences or natures? And if there are, does it make sense to speak of any of them existing? Some philosophers have replied in the negative to both of these questions. They have denied (a) that there are naturally occurring things with distinct ways of working, and (b) that even if there were such things, they should not be said to exist. So let me at this point briefly say something about these theses and the way that Aquinas would respond to them.

(A) is effectively telling us that naturally occurring things in the universe are not objects of scientific investigation in the sense of ‘investigation’ which signifies ‘asking what it takes to be *a* such and such (as in the case of individuals such as cats and dogs) or *such and such* (as in what is commonly denoted by “mass” terms like “water” or “coal”). But that seems hard to believe. For are there not plenty of people (biologists and zoologists, for example) who spend their lives trying to understand what, for example, cats and dogs are? And are there not equally many people seeking to

expound on the nature of, say, water and coal? One might say that none of these people have arrived at a definitive account. And one might say (more in the case of living things than non-living substances) that variations in species occurring over time should leave us suspicious of supposing that, say, there is any such thing as the ‘essence’ of, for example, a cat. But biologists and zoologists who give us accounts of what various naturally occurring individuals are do not, so far as I know, claim to have provided the last word on them. They claim only to tell us what our present knowledge of them amounts to. And the fact that all members of a given species die out while being causally connected to the existence of new species gives us no reason to suppose that they cannot be described for what they are as we investigate them. Suppose that intelligent aliens had been able to examine our evolutionary predecessors. What would they have been doing? I assume that they would have been trying to offer an account of what it was that they were looking at. So even an evolutionary understanding of the world allows one to say that an account can be given of what things are in it at a given time.

And Aquinas agrees with all of this. When he speaks of things having essences, he does not claim that we have a comprehensive knowledge of the essences of things with which we are familiar. At one point, for instance he says ‘Our knowledge is weak to such a point that no philosopher would be able to investigate perfectly the nature of a single fly’ (quoted from Ayo 1988: 21). Living before Darwin and his heirs, Aquinas does not allude to the notion of evolution. But he does not deny that a thing of one species can be generated from a thing of another species (he does not think of essences as timeless, immutable entities). When worrying about change, however, Aquinas thinks that we need to consider what something undergoing change is in itself as it changes or accounts for change. Basically, he believes that there are genera and species.

And what of (B)? That conclusion amounts to the claim that no individual can be sensibly said to exist. A famous exponent of it is Bertrand Russell. According to him, it is meaningless to ascribe ‘exists’ to an individual since ‘existence is essentially a property of a propositional function’ (1956: 232, 242f.). The idea here is that existence is properly predicated of *classes* of things, not *individuals* belonging to classes. So, thinks Russell, we can intelligibly say that ‘Men exist’, meaning that ‘____ is a man’ is truly predicable of something; but we cannot intelligibly say that John, a particular man, exists. On this account existence is no property of an object in the world—a view which can also be traced in the writings of Kant and Gottlob Frege. For Kant, ‘*Being* is obviously not a real predicate’ ([1781] 1998: 567). For Frege, ‘Affirmation of existence is in fact nothing but denial of the number nought’ and is ‘a property of concepts’ ([1884] 1980: 65; cf. Williams 1981). And if Russell, Kant, and Frege are right, then Aquinas would seem to be wrong in trying to ground his philosophical case for the truth of ‘God exists’ on the notion of things having *esse*, on the notion of things simply existing.

Yet Aquinas says things about *esse* which anticipate the line of thought just noted. Russell, Kant, and Frege all seem to be saying that ‘exists’ should not be listed in a description of what something in the world is. They are saying that it would, for example, be absurd to say ‘I have two dogs that are different since one of them exists while the other does not’. But Aquinas does not think of *esse* (existence) as a distinguishing property even when it comes to naturally occurring substances. Or, in his vocabulary, *esse* is not a form. In Aquinas’s philosophy, we refer to a form as we try to explain what something is. Thus, he would have said that in ‘Smokey is a cat’ the word ‘cat’ signifies a form that Smokey has (and has essentially, since Smokey would not exist without being feline). Again, Aquinas would have said that in ‘Smokey is snoozing on my bed’ the phrase ‘snoozing on my bed’ signifies a form that Smokey has (but not essentially since he will be a cat when he wakes up and runs into my kitchen). In making these distinctions Aquinas speaks of ‘substantial’ and ‘accidental’ forms when saying (a) what something is essentially, and (b) what something happens to be but does not have to be considered as what it is essentially. But he never speaks of *esse* as being a form in either

sense. For him, we do not say what something is when saying that it exists. He thinks that what we do is note that the thing is actual with the forms that it has.

Philosophers drawing on Frege have stressed the importance of the notion of existence expressed by ‘there is a so-and-so’ (*es gibt ein ____*). As Peter Geach, for example, writes: ‘When we ask whether there is a so-and-so, we are asking concerning some *kind* of objects whether anything at all *is* that sort of thing; and we cannot ever sensibly affirm or deny existence, in this sense, of an individual object, any more than we can sensibly ask whether a *thing*, rather than a kind of things, is frequent or infrequent’ (1969: 65). As Geach goes on to observe, however, Frege also has a notion of existence as actuality (*Wirklichkeit*) and as attributable to individuals. This is the notion that allows sentences like ‘Michael Ruse exists’ to be thought of as informative. Michael Ruse did not always exist. He was not around in the time of Napoleon (good news for Napoleon, maybe). And, alas, he will not be around in the year 3000. Happily, though, he is around now. How shall we express this truth? Would not ‘Michael Ruse exists’ be a good way to do so? Aquinas, anyway, thinks that it would. He would not take ‘exists’ in ‘Michael Ruse exists’ to distinguish Michael from anything else on our planet. But he would take it to be asserting something important about Michael—that he is actual, that he is not a fiction, not dead, and not a merely ‘possible being’. He would take it to be asserting that Michael is something we can get our hands on and investigate so as to consider what he is and does.

Aquinas would put this by saying that Michael is something with a way of being that belongs to him essentially, that there is something it takes for Michael to exist at all and that if this is wiped out, then so is Michael. In short, he thinks that Michael is something with an essence or nature. But how come that Michael exists at all? Aquinas would press this question, but not, as some theists would, by asking us to suppose that Michael came to be as part of a universe that was caused to exist by God some finite time ago. For many people, to believe in God just is to believe that God got the world going at a point in the past (perhaps 6000 years ago). But that is not how Aquinas thinks. He believes that the early chapters of the book of Genesis are true, so he holds that the universe had a beginning brought about by God. But, while he thinks that ‘God exists’ can be argued for philosophically, he does not think that philosophy can show that the universe ever had a beginning. In his *De Aeternitate Mundi* (*On the Eternity of the World*) he argues that philosophy cannot establish either that the world began to be or that it did not. He also argues that there is no contradiction in saying that something is created by God though it had no beginning.² And he is able (he thinks) to maintain this position because it is true that to say that God is the Creator of X is to say that God makes X to be for as long as it exists (and whether or not it began to exist). He believes that God created a world with a beginning; but he does not think that it belongs to the meaning of ‘create’ in ‘God creates’ that what God creates is something with a beginning. For him, creation is a matter of there being things made to exist by God whenever they exist. That is the force of his claim that God accounts for the *esse* of things (their sheer existence at any time).

One can see Aquinas advancing this claim in, for example, *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, 44,1. Here, the question under discussion is ‘Must everything that is be caused by God?’. Aquinas begins his answer to this question by noting why it might be said that things can be without being caused by God. Can we not, for instance, understand what something or other is by its definition (its *ratio* in Aquinas’s language) without understanding that it is an effect? So why suppose that anything that exists has to be caused by God? Again: a necessary being does not need a cause of its existence; so not everything that exists has to be caused by God. And yet again: Can we suppose that ‘mathematical entities’ (numbers, say) have efficient causes? Surely not. But, in that case, not everything needs God as a cause. Yet Aquinas ends up maintaining that everything that exists is caused to do so by God. He reasons in this way: If you can single something out so as to say that it exists in the way that you can say that X, Y,

and Z exist (as you might say that *this cat*, *this dog*, and *this camel* exist, existence here being something they *all* have, albeit that they are things of different kinds), then you have to ask yourself whether or not existing belongs to it by nature (that to understand what it is involves understanding that it cannot but exist). But if X is something which can be thought of as not existing, then from what does its existence derive? This is a question which Aquinas takes to be one worth pursuing.

One might suppose that something which might not exist does not require a cause of its existence. But does anyone really suppose this? Does anyone presume that, for example, the drip coming out of my nose when I have a cold is something that comes to be uncaused? In that case, however, why not ask why anything which might not exist does exist? And why not assume that there is an answer to this question? If the question is taken to have a bearing on the question of God existing, one might say that it can be answered with no reference to God since it can be answered by appeal to something perfectly mundane. Thus, for example, one might say how my cat came to exist only by referring its parent cats, as Aquinas is perfectly aware. He knows very well that causal questions about the existence of this or that can be answered by referring to the causal agency of things within the world (and, as I have noted, he is even prepared to concede that it cannot be shown that appeal to such causal agency cannot be thought of as extending backwards in time indefinitely). When it comes to ‘God exists’, however, Aquinas has his mind not on the question ‘What *within* the world is producing or has produced X, Y, or Z?’ but on the question ‘Why is there any world at all as opposed to nothing?’

Aquinas is here obviously thinking in causal terms (and not in terms of questions like ‘What is the world for?’ or ‘Of what are things in the world composed?’).³ He is thinking in terms of what he calls ‘agent causation’, and he is asking what brings it about that there is any world at all at any time. But why does he feel it necessary to ask this question? And why should he think (as he does) that the answer to the question is not something about which we can raise the same question again? After all, many people have thought that the existence of the universe raises no causal questions, that questions to do with what Aquinas thinks of as agent causation are questions to be answered only with reference to things in the universe. Hence Bertrand Russell’s famous remark ‘The universe is just there, and that’s all’ (Russell and Copleston [1948] 1964: 175). And many people have thought that causal arguments for ‘God exists’ always fail because we can ask ‘What caused God to exist?’ since if we say that anything that exists has a cause of its existing, and if we say that God exists, we are, presumably, committed to the conclusion that God’s existing has a cause, and that this cause must have a cause, and so on, ad infinitum.

When it comes to the ‘What accounts for there being something rather than nothing?’ question Aquinas always makes it clear that he does not take it to ask why anything (including God) exists. He is here positively excluding God, while starting with the world of our experience and asking what accounts for the existence of anything that we take to be part of *it*. One might take issue with Aquinas here by suggesting that there is no such thing as the world—meaning that ‘the world’ is not the name of an object. And the world is obviously not an object in the sense of ‘object’ we use when, for example, saying how many distinguishable objects I have on my desk. The world/universe is hardly an object alongside other objects as the things on my desk are. Yet physicists seem to be able to think of the world as an object in the sense of it being something to be referred to and investigated—as being the upper limit of the series: Earth, solar system, galaxy, cluster of galaxies ...⁴ I take it that it is this notion of ‘world’ that Wittgenstein had in mind when saying ‘I wonder at the existence of the world’ ([1929] 1993: 41).

Aquinas, I suspect, would have sympathized with Wittgenstein here. He thinks that we are in a world in which we might ask ‘How come any of this?’ But why should we suppose that anything in the world has to have a cause of its existence? Why not just suppose that my cat, say, is something that, though it

has parents, continues to exist uncaused? Aquinas turns to this question in his *De Ente et Essentia* 4, in which he says ‘What isn’t contained in our understanding of an essence must be something extraneous added on to it’ (quoted from McDermott 1993). By ‘essence’ here Aquinas means ‘whatever it takes for something in nature (a substance) to exist as the kind of thing it is’.⁵ And his position is that anything ascribable to such a thing which is not included in an account of what it is essentially is not explicable in terms of what it is.

Developing this point, Aquinas observes:

All entities and whatnesses can be understood without understanding their existence: I can understand what humans or phoenixes are without knowing whether such things really exist; so clearly a thing’s existence differs from its essence or whatness.

Commentators on Aquinas have sometimes read this passage to mean that we can grasp a nominal definition of a noun without knowing that there is anything truly to be named by it (cf. Kenny 2002). And it is obviously true that we can do this. We can, for example, give a nominal definition of ‘unicorn’ while disbelieving that there are any unicorns. But that is not Aquinas’s point in the present context. He does not believe in purely possible essences; he takes all essences to be *actual*. In his view, were something to cease to exist, we would be left only with a noun which is not the name of anything. And at this stage of the *De Ente et Essentia* argument he is saying that we can have a grasp of what the essence of *some actual thing* is without thereby understanding that the thing exists. One might say that understanding what Smokey is goes hand in hand with realizing that he exists. But Aquinas denies this. He agrees that we cannot understand what X’s essence amounts to without presupposing that X exists (that we cannot, for instance, develop an account of what Smokey is if he does not exist). But Aquinas does not think that an understanding of what Smokey is *by nature* is inevitably going to leave us rightly concluding that *he* exists. And indeed it does not. If knowing what my cat is essentially means understanding that it exists, then I could not know what my cat is essentially without knowing that it has always existed and always will exist, which seems false.

At this point in his *De Ente et Essentia* discussion Aquinas raises the possibility of there being something a knowledge of the nature of which would involve knowing that it exists, something whose nature is being or existing, period. There could, he thinks, be only one such thing. He writes:

For to be many, things must add some differentiating characteristic to a genus to make many species, or one form must be taken on by different material to make many individuals in a species, or one must exist on its own while the other exists in something (in the way heat, if it could exist separately, would by its very separateness differ from heat existing in something).

Aquinas is saying that there can be many if (1) there are many species distinguished by various characteristics, or if (2) there are many material things in a given species because they are distinguishable from each other by being different material things, or if (3) something one can call F (pure and simple) could be distinguished from instances of things that are F (presumably Aquinas is here thinking of Plato’s theory of forms). So Aquinas concludes that something that is (by nature) just existing (something ‘whose essence was its own very existing’) cannot be multipliable. He writes: ‘Only one thing that is its own existence can exist, and all other things must have an existence differing from their whatness or nature or form’.

But is there such a thing? Turning to this question Aquinas says that a thing’s attributes derive either from its nature (as, for example, the fact that my cat meows derives from its feline nature) or from something external to it (as when my cat becomes hot because of the temperature in my apartment). And yet, Aquinas adds, what something is (its essence) can’t cause (as in ‘agent’ or ‘efficient’ cause) the thing to exist, for that would involve it bringing itself into existence, ‘which is impossible’. So

Aquinas concludes that 'everything in which existence and nature differ must get its existence from another'. And he winds up saying:

Because all getting from another must eventually lead to something possessing of itself, there must be something which can ultimately cause everything's existence because it is its own existence; otherwise the causes would go on forever, with everything which is not just existence requiring a cause of its existence.

The first occurrence of the word 'everything' in the above quotation is clearly not taken by Aquinas to include God. It means 'everything in which one can distinguish between essence and existence'. So Aquinas is not opening himself up to the objection 'If you think that everything has a cause (an agent cause) you should think that God does so as well'. And his objection in the quotation to causes going on forever clearly does not express a wholesale rejection of infinite causal regression. For, as I have noted, Aquinas is prepared to concede (philosophically) that you or I might be the product of agent causes in a world going backwards without beginning. In his *De Ente et Essentia* argument, however, Aquinas is not concerned with what in the world happens to give rise to what. He is concerned with the question 'Why is there any world at all?' And his thinking is that there being a world at any time has to be caused by what causes the world to exist at any time, that 'unless we grant the existence of an uncaused source of *esse*, the *esse* of every caused being remains unexplained. Multiplying caused causes of *esse* to infinity will not resolve anything' (Wippel 2000: 409) Suppose that someone passes a law saying 'Nobody can do anything, including asking for permission, without asking for permission'. Obviously, this is a law which cannot be obeyed since it allows for no legitimate way of asking for permission. In his *De Ente et Essentia* text Aquinas is arguing that, if the existence of something at any time depends on its *esse* being caused, then there has to be something the *esse* of which is uncaused, and that, if there were not, nothing would exist (have *esse*).

And that is a line of thinking running through much that Aquinas writes (see Wippel 2000 for further details). Can it be simply summarized without drawing on various philosophical distinctions that Aquinas makes while presenting it? I think that it can and that we might summarize Aquinas as holding: (1) The universe exists; (2) We need to ask how it comes to exist since nothing in it exists because its nature is to exist (otherwise everything in the universe would always have existed and would always exist); (3) In trying to answer this question we have to appeal to something which is not a part of the universe but something that causes everything in the universe to exist, and at any time.⁶

WHAT IS 'GOD'?

But what does Aquinas take God to be as the cause of the existence of the universe at any time? The first point to stress here is that Aquinas consistently says that we do not know what God is. 'Having recognized that something exists', he observes in one place, 'we still have to investigate the way in which it exists, so that we may come to understand what it is that exists. But we cannot know what God is, only what he is not' (Davies and Leftow 2006: 28). Aquinas is not here denying that we can make true statements about God. His point is that we cannot understand what God's nature is. We might, Aquinas thinks, understand (to some degree, anyway) what, say, a cat or a human being is. But we cannot, he maintains, have a comparable understanding of God. Some theists have said that we can have such an understanding since God is something fairly intelligible. They have said, for example, that God is a person and that our knowledge of human persons is a good guide when it comes to understanding God. Hence, for example, Richard Swinburne explains:

By a theist I understand a man who believes that there is a God. By a ‘God’ he understands something like a ‘person without a body (i.e. a spirit) who is eternal, free, able to do anything, knows everything, is perfectly good, is the proper object of human worship and obedience, the creator and sustainer of the universe.’ (1993: 1)

But Aquinas never says ‘God is a person’, and, in his view, what can be said of human persons is radically different from what can be said of God.⁷ Together with Swinburne’s theist, Aquinas wants to maintain that God is, for example, eternal, and one to whom knowledge, power and goodness can be ascribed. But he does not suppose that knowledge, power, and goodness are distinguishable attributes of God considered as what Swinburne seems to understand by the word ‘person’. Swinburne seems to think that persons are essentially immaterial individuals who exist in time and make decisions on various occasions. He thinks of them as conscious and reasoning entities. In other words, Swinburne’s ‘person’ seems decidedly similar in meaning to what Descartes has in mind when arguing that he is an essentially immaterial self. But Aquinas does not think of God as a magnified and enlarged Cartesian consciousness (so to speak).

This might be apparent to the reader from what I have already noted concerning Aquinas’s view of God as subsisting *esse* and the agent cause of everything having *esse* without being it by nature. But it emerges with full force in Aquinas’s various defenses of the claim that God is entirely simple (see, e.g., *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I, 17–25, and *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,3). Aquinas’ understanding of divine simplicity is (forgive the pun) too complex for me to expound in detail here, but it can be quickly summarized as amounting to the conclusions (a) that God is not material and is not something capable of change, (b) that God is not an individual in the sense of ‘individual’ where to call something an individual is to say that it is something of which there could be more than one of its kind, (c) that God has no distinct properties or attributes (that though it can be affirmed that, say, ‘God knows’ and ‘God is good’, knowledge and goodness in God are not distinguishable, as they are in us, nor are they distinct from God (as my knowledge can be distinguished from me in that I would still be me even were I in a coma). Aquinas typically ends his discussion of divine simplicity by insisting that God is not something in which there is a genuine distinction of essence and existence (on Aquinas on divine simplicity, see Davies 2010). And, to cut a long story short, Aquinas does mean what he says when he observes that we do not know what God is. For Aquinas, we can only know what something is (‘something’ here meaning ‘something in the world’, not, say, a triangle, or a proposition, or a tautology, or a logical fallacy) insofar as we can be aware of it by means of our senses, insofar as we can compare it with and distinguish it from other material things, and insofar as we can develop what we might call a scientific understanding of it. Given his theory of knowledge, and given that he takes God to be immaterial, Aquinas throws the towel in very quickly when it comes to claiming an understanding of what God is. He has a number of arguments in defense of propositions of the form ‘God is F’. But he does not take them to deliver an understanding of what God is. He thinks that we can use words we understand as we try to talk about God. But he also thinks that when doing so we are trying to use them to mean more than we can understand by them. Yes, he agrees, we can say that God is powerful or good, and we have reasons for saying so. But Aquinas thinks that our understanding of power or goodness is confined to what we can in our world take to be powerful or good. He concludes that we can use our mundane understanding of words like ‘power’ and ‘good’ so as to talk sensibly about what makes the difference between there being something and nothing. But he does so while always trying to prevent his readers from thinking that God is a being among beings or an object among objects.⁸

CONCLUSION: AQUINAS AND ATHEISM

In theological jargon, Aquinas is an ‘apophatic’ theologian—someone anxious not to confuse God with a creature, someone keen to insist that even the most learned of theologians are people talking about what they do not understand. So what is his final verdict on atheism? Since he believes that ‘God exists’ is true, he obviously holds that it is false to say ‘God does not exist’ and, in this sense, takes atheists to be misguided. Yet in discussions of the virtues of theism and atheism so much depends on what one takes ‘theism’ to mean. Defenders of Logical Positivism took an atheistic stance in that they declared statements with the word ‘God’ in them to be meaningless since God is not something the existence of which is empirically verifiable. Yet as many theistic critics of this position have observed, most theists do not think of God as an empirical object and, therefore, do not think of ‘God exists’ as an empirical hypothesis. Some of the more famous contemporary advocates of the ‘New Atheism’ seem regularly to suppose that theism is basically a mixture of (a) extreme biblical fundamentalism, (b) creationism, and (c) the belief that God is to be understood in anthropomorphic terms (as an item in the universe). So ‘New Atheists’ often write as though theism is scientifically refutable (see, e.g., Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2007; Hitchens 2007). But only an ignorance of the history of theology could lead one to suppose that all theists are biblical fundamentalists or creationists or anthropomorphites. Anyway, Aquinas is none of these things. To be sure, he was a man of his times, and his view of the historicity of certain biblical texts differs from what professional biblical exegetes tend to offer these days. But his philosophical take on the truth of ‘God exists’ is not tied to any particular reading of Scripture. And it certainly does not depend on a rejection of any theory of evolution, or on the supposition that God is something that science can prove to exist. That should be clear from what I have explained above. Aquinas, of course, knew nothing of theories of evolution. What would he have made of them were he alive today? Impossible to say of course, though I would guess that he would have been happy with Pope John Paul II’s endorsement of the notion of evolution in an address to the Pontifical Academy of Sciences. Michael Ruse has asked ‘Can a Darwinian be a Christian?’ (2000). Well, John Paul II seemed to think that the answer is ‘Yes’. And I see nothing in the writings of Aquinas to show that he would have resisted this answer at all costs. He would certainly have resisted the suggestion that science can show that ‘God exists’ is false. But that is because he did not think of God as part of the world that scientists explore and seek to explain. He thought of God as accounting for anything that scientists can explain. And he does not, I might say in conclusion, think of God as an explanation of anything. I presume that an explanation is something that we understand better than what we invoke it to explain. What explains why Fred is exhibiting physical symptoms X, Y, and Z? ‘Oh’, says Fred’s doctor, ‘It’s the presence in his body of B’. Is Fred’s doctor explaining Fred’s symptoms here? Of course he might be, but only if he is working with an understanding of what B is and how it has the ability to produce X, Y, and Z in Fred. If he is not, he will have to be saying something like ‘Well, Fred’s symptoms must have a cause’, which is not the giving of an explanation. Note, however, that Aquinas does not think of God as an explanation in the present sense. As we have seen, he thinks that we do not know what God is, that God seriously defies our abilities to categorize and label, and that it would be ludicrous to say ‘Ah, Fred has symptoms X, Y, and Z, and our knowledge of what God is allows us to conclude that only he could have produced them’. Aquinas does not doubt that God exists, but he does not think of God as a scientifically confirmable (or refutable) explanation of anything. Having found himself to exist in the universe, Aquinas’s basic response to atheism, we might say is:

We do not know what the answer is, but we do know that there is a mystery behind it all which we do not know, and if there were not, there would not even be a riddle. This Unknown we call *God*. If there were no God, there would be no universe to be mysterious, and nobody to be mystified. (White 1956: 18–19).

The atheism which Aquinas rejects is one which settles for an ‘It’s there’ response to the question

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PART II

HISTORY OF (WESTERN) ATHEISM

CHAPTER 9

FROM THE PRE-SOCRATICS TO THE HELLENISTIC AGE

DAVID SEDLEY

THE SEARCH FOR GREEK ATHEISTS

THE year is 399 BCE, and Socrates is on trial for his life. The charges include refusal to recognize the gods cultivated at Athens, and the introduction of new divinities. In Plato's imaginative reconstruction of the trial Socrates, cross-examining his accuser Meletus, remarks:

I can't work out whether you're saying that I teach people to recognize (*nomizein*) the existence of certain gods—in which case I do recognize the existence of gods, am by no means an atheist (*atheos*), and am not guilty on that score—but that these are different gods from the ones the city recognizes, so that this is your charge against me, that I recognize different gods. Or are you saying that I myself refuse to recognize gods altogether, and teach others to do the same? (Plato, *Apology* 26c)

Meletus opts for the latter alternative, imprudently turning the charge into one of outright (positive) atheism. And in Socrates' quoted words we find the very first recorded occurrence, in any Western language, of a word for 'atheist'. The adjective *atheos* had previously carried its literal meaning 'godless', but henceforth it came to serve in addition as a noun signifying one who upholds a specific creed: no gods exist. And it eventually acquired a cognate abstract noun, *atheotes*, 'atheism'.

A closely associated terminological point concerns another Greek word used by Socrates in the same passage, the verb *nomizein*, literally 'believe', and inadequately translated above as 'recognize'. When 'gods' are its grammatical object, its semantic scope fails to distinguish between the outward practice of 'cultivating' gods and the inner state of 'believing in' them, that is, in their existence. The expression 'not recognizing (the) gods' was the favoured way of referring to what we today call atheism. However, the explicitly existential aspect, namely denial of the gods' existence, is usually less emphasized than the cultic one: failure to take part in worship. The above passage is therefore unusual, to the extent that Plato has inserted an explicit mention of failure to recognize the gods' very existence.

Not recognizing the gods was in principle a punishable offence in ancient Greece. It had, for example, been enshrined as such in Athenian law since the 430s BCE, when the Decree of Diopoeithes outlawed 'not recognizing divine beings' (*ta theia mē nomizein*). Indeed, around that time such a charge had reportedly been brought, under Athenian law, against the physicist Anaxagoras, for daring to say that the sun is not, as generally believed, a divinity, just a red-hot stone. The slur that so-and-so calls the sun a stone came to be emblematic of the charge of atheism. In fact Meletus' very next move in the above exchange is to accuse Socrates of doing just that (26d).

Anaxagoras, despite his physicalist account of the sun, had in reality *not* been a full-blooded, positive atheist, nor had anyone else we can name from the period down to the end of the fifth century BCE. Anaxagoras described a world whose creation was initiated by a cosmic 'intelligence' (*nous*), a power that has the hallmarks of a divinity, whether or not Anaxagoras himself so called it. From Thales ('All things are full of gods') in the early sixth century BCE, to the death of Socrates at the

beginning of the fourth, the default assumption of philosophers had always been that one or more of the divinities misconceived by Homer and other early poets as anthropomorphic beings are, properly reinterpreted, genuine causal forces in the universe (cf. Sedley 2007; Trépanier 2010).

How about Democritus, the founding father of atomism active in the late fifth and early fourth centuries, according to whom *nothing* exists but atoms and void? Instead of advocating atheism, as one might have predicted, Democritus posited gods made out of atoms, nebulous living beings capable of visiting us in our dreams, and of doing us good or harm. Why did he, of all people, not take that final step and eliminate the gods from his ontology? Part of the answer no doubt lies in the ubiquity of religious experiences, such as divine epiphanies in dreams, in a culture saturated in cultic practices, mythological narratives, and divine images. It may never even have occurred to him that these divine figures were in fact illusory. Another factor, witnessed by the Decree of Diopeithes, is the social and even legal opprobrium attached to a failure to cultivate the deities on whom the city's well-being was supposed to depend. To come out as an atheist was not merely an intellectual decision, but an act of considerable courage.

Plato's last work, the *Laws*, includes in book 10 an elaborate critique of (a) atheism, along with two other heretical positions, namely (b) that the gods exist but are uninterested in us, and (c) that, although they are interested in us, they can be bought off with sacrifices and other bribes. The *Laws* was written around 350 BCE, but the dramatic date of the protracted conversation in which it consists is indeterminate, and could as well represent the late fifth century (as do most of Plato's other dialogues) as the mid fourth. What the *Laws* makes clear is that, at this dramatic date, whatever it might be, atheism is rife in Athens. Plato's main speaker, the Athenian stranger, remarks that, where he comes from, atheism is fashionable among the young, who rely on the authority of various written texts, some of them prose works, some verse.

Who were the authors of these texts? They may well have chosen to remain anonymous. At any rate, later writers who tried to identify early atheists had a hard time putting together a list of names. One favoured candidate was Prodicus of Ceos, a Sophist active in Athens in the late fifth century, who had suggested that the gods originated as deifications of commodities (e.g., corn, wine) and benefactors specially appreciated by early mankind. However, the attribution of atheism to him on this basis is likely to have originated as mere conjecture. Prodicus frequently appears in the writings of Xenophon and Plato, where he is treated respectfully, without the slightest hint that he was known as an atheist. Besides, the anthropological theory in question was certainly not enough to guarantee atheism, since it was taken up later even by the thoroughly theistic Stoics. It was after all possible to hold that those primitive deifications were early mankind's recognitions of genuinely divine forces or beings. (However, for a lucid presentation and interpretation of the evidence for Prodicus that accepts the attribution of atheism, see Mayhew 2011.)

An older contemporary of Prodicus, likewise associated with atheism in the later tradition, was the great Sophist Protagoras. The evidence is quite clear, however, that rather than a positive atheist he was the first explicit agnostic. He opened his work *On gods* as follows:

As regards gods, I am unable to know either that they exist or that they do not, or what form they have. For there are many obstacles to knowing: the obscurity of the matter, and the shortness of human life. (Protagoras fragment 4; Diels and Kranz 1952: 265)

We should nevertheless note in passing that, even if Protagoras was not a positive atheist, his words suggest a cultural context in which positive atheism was an established position, available to endorse or reject. Before someone can explicitly suspend judgement as to whether or not x exists, cases both for and against x 's existence are likely already to have some currency. Hence the Athenian atheist

movement deplored by Plato in the *Laws* was probably in existence well before Protagoras' death, c. 420 BCE.

Another suggested early atheist was Diagoras of Melos (see Winiarczyk 1981), a controversial figure active in late fifth-century Athens, who was indeed known as *ho atheos*. However, it is now widely agreed that the epithet did not in this context mean 'the atheist', but 'the godless'. For Diagoras had a price put on his head at Athens after notoriously mocking the religious mysteries.

THE SISYPHUS FRAGMENT

The final name on the early list of supposed positive atheists is a more plausible candidate: Critias, an uncle of Plato, notorious for his membership of a vicious junta at Athens, the Thirty Tyrants, in 404 BCE. He was reputed in some quarters (see Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* 9.54) to be the author of a scandalous dramatic passage, known today as the Sisyphus fragment, in which the speaker alleges that the gods were invented by politicians or lawmakers. Placed in the mouth of the mythical villain Sisyphus, the theory runs as follows.

Because the earliest laws proved ineffective against those who had found ways of committing crimes unobserved, someone had the brainwave of inventing superhuman supervisors who could see everything we do and even read our thoughts:

Hence he introduced the divine, saying that there is a deity endowed with immortal life, who with his mind hears, sees, understands and takes account of these things, and who bears a divine nature—one who is going to hear everything said among mortals, and be able to see everything they do. If you plan some misdeed silently, this will not escape the gods' notice, for there is <exceptional> power of understanding in them. (Lines 16–24, as quoted by Sextus Empiricus, *Against the professors* 9.54)

Locating them in the sky, Sisyphus continues, was itself a further stroke of genius, because the sky is at once the source both of the greatest benefits to mankind—sun and rain in particular—and of the greatest terrors, such as thunder and lightning. Thus the gods were at once a 24-hour satellite surveillance system, our greatest benefactors if pleased with us, and the greatest threat to our well-being if displeased.

This brilliant passage was undoubtedly one of the canonical atheistic verse texts invoked by the atheists according to Plato. Whether its author really was Critias is a harder question to answer. Other sources attributed it to Euripides, and this split in our evidence may well indicate that its true authorship was in reality unknown, a matter for conjecture alone. Given the social and at times even legal obstacles to public atheism, it would not in fact be all that surprising if the actual author, whoever he was, preferred the veil of anonymity. The same is likely to apply to the other atheist authorities mentioned by Plato.

THE ATHEISTS IN PLATO'S LAWS

Whether or not they included Critias, the atheists criticized in Plato's *Laws* had a well-developed position, which Plato takes the trouble to sketch to us. Contrary to a widely shared assumption on the part of scholars, there is no reason to think that Plato has invented this atheist case, piecing it together himself out of various fifth-century concepts and theories. Its coherence, and its inclusion of details which as far as we know are original, favour the assumption that there really was such a movement at Athens in the late fifth and/or early fourth century (see Sedley 2013). It amounts, if so, to the earliest

comprehensive defence of positive atheism.

According to these anonymous early atheists (*Laws* 889a–890a), the world and its occupants originally came into being out of inanimate material elements, harmoniously shaped not by intelligence but by the interplay of natural forces. Human crafts provide an inferior supplement to, or imitation of, what nature has already achieved on a grand scale. Some of these crafts, for example medicine and agriculture, are founded in truth, because they build on nature's workings, but others, including the creative arts, are basically fictive, and are therefore a poor guide to truth. Prominent among the latter, fictive crafts is legislation, which fabricates norms of justice and injustice: that justice and injustice are indeed mere human inventions, rather than founded in natural truth, is confirmed by the way their norms differ from place to place. Now what has been said about justice can equally be said about the gods: they too differ markedly from place to place and from culture to culture. This is because the gods have been instituted in each city by law, and are, along with justice, a mere legislative device. (It is in this final stage that we can see the Sisyphus fragment, with its attribution of the invention of the gods to a pioneering legislator, providing a vital component of the theory.)

This is a globally conceived theory, locating the invention of gods within a complete world history in order to demonstrate the point at which they entered: not at the outset, in the origination and structuring of the world, but at the very end, where human society was inventing means of stabilizing itself.

So ambitious an account could not have been constructed before the late fifth century, when for the first time it was possible to combine a theory of the world's purely accidental origin, as developed by the atomists Leucippus and Democritus, with an anthropological theory—typical of the Sophistic era—concerning the origins of social institutions, law and religion included.

Plato, in his final years, devoted a remarkable amount of space to arguing and (hypothetically) legislating against atheism. What was at stake? Atheism is presented in the *Laws* as undermining morality, by reinforcing the call of those radical moralists who advocate an abandonment of 'conventional' or 'legal' values—the Greek noun *nomos* covers both convention and law—and a reversion to 'natural' norms whereby the strong may dominate the weak without restraint. We cannot know whether the atheists targeted in *Laws* 10 all drew this consequence, but it is likely enough that some did. Indeed, we can be confident that in the Sisyphus fragment, one of their canonical texts, the villainous Sisyphus (later punished by having to push a stone uphill in Hades for all eternity) was using his atheist declaration precisely in order to justify his own life of wrongdoing. Greek religion had evolved in partnership with law, and we should not be surprised if liberation from the former was widely perceived as bringing with it a corresponding liberation from the latter.

PUNISHING ATHEISM

Plato's main speaker in the *Laws* posits a very strong link between atheism and lawlessness: 'No one believing in the existence of the gods according to the laws has ever deliberately done an unholy deed or uttered lawless words, but only someone of whom one of the following three things is true: either, as I have said, not believing in them, or, second, thinking that they exist but do not concern themselves with mankind, or, third, thinking that they are easily appeased by being bought off with sacrifices and prayers' (885b). Given the work's titular theme of legislation for an imaginary city, and the further fact that that city, Magnesia, is to be constructed as a theocracy, in which the laws stand proxy for divine intellect itself, it is natural that Plato's focus should be on the role of the gods in the legal

system—both as the subjects of cults sanctioned by the laws, and as divine powers reinforcing the authority of the laws.

In addition, the full Platonic picture involves the identification of celestial gods with the soul or souls that move the heavens with perfect orderliness, and hence their proclamation as a model for humans to emulate in their own lives. In Plato's earlier *Republic* the concern had been an educational one: the gods and heroes of mythology are role models for the young, so must not be portrayed as practising deceit, violence, etc. In his later work, the celestial gods have largely taken over from the traditional Olympians, and they do not behave in a recognizably 'moral' way, but rather constitute models of rational orderliness. Even in that guise they set a standard which, if properly internalized, makes a vital contribution to human morality. This is all under threat, in Plato's eyes, if atheism takes hold.

Plato's main speaker proposes precise penalties for the various forms of impiety, forms among which outright atheism is included (908b–909d). In the framing of the relevant law it is conceded that there may be atheists of naturally just temperament and behaviour. But even these, the legislator continues, are a threat to society, since they are bound to mock religious rituals, thus undermining their fellow-citizens' faith in them. One is reminded here of an Athenian society contemporary with Plato which called itself the Bad Luck Club, or *Kakodaimonistai*. Scandalously, it was said to schedule its private dinners for reputedly ill-omened days, in order to make fun of the gods and the laws (Lysias, as quoted by Athenaeus 12.76.15–29). Plato seems to think that even less vocal atheists, however good their character in other respects, will have the same insidious effect on civic discipline. Their punishment is to be isolation in the city's *phrontisterion* or 'sound-mind centre' (one of its three established prisons) for a minimum of five years, during which only members of the city's governing council will be permitted contact with them, for the purpose of remedial instruction. After that initial sentence, they will have an opportunity to prove their return to soundness of mind; but in the absence of such proof, they will face the death penalty.

A worse kind of outright atheist is one who combines disbelief in the divine with bad moral character. Typically such people are driven by strong passions, and use cunning, including even the cynical manipulation of others by religious fraud, to gain and exploit power, perhaps even to become tyrants. Their punishment is to be total isolation in a different prison far out in the countryside, where none but slaves will have contact with them. This is apparently to be a life sentence, and after death their bodies must be unceremoniously dumped, without burial, beyond the civic boundaries.

THE CYNICS

So much for Plato. In the remainder of the fourth century BCE there is little sign of atheism, positive or negative, beyond a handful of anecdotes in which philosophers belonging to or influenced by the Cynic movement are reported to have expressed suitably provocative doubts about recognizing and/or cultivating the gods (see Drozdek 2007: 207–14). One of these (reported by Tertullian, *Ad nationes* 2.2), contains a declaration of agnosticism: Diogenes the Cynic remarks that he does not know whether the gods exist, only that it is expedient that they *should*. But by and large, Cynicism was more concerned to challenge religious convention than to take a stance on existential questions about divinity.

EPICURUS: A CRYPTO-ATHEIST?

We thus move into the Hellenistic age, officially 323–31 BCE, the period sandwiched between the collapse of Alexander’s empire and the start of the Roman empire. At the very end of the fourth century the first new Hellenistic school emerged, bringing atheistic issues very much to the fore. This was the Epicurean school, with its revised and updated atomism. Like his atomist predecessor Democritus, Epicurus had a tightly restricted ontology: nothing exists but atoms, void and their supervenient properties. Consequently he could not admit gods to his universe unless they were themselves composed of atoms. The evidence is very clear that in the Epicurean universe gods do exist, and that they are indeed made of atoms. However, when it is asked what this mode of atomic existence amounts to, interpreters divide into two broad parties, the realists and the idealists, with the latter interpretation in effect making Epicurus an atheist. It is to this question that we must now turn.

First of all, consider god an immortal and blessed living being, as the common notion of god is in outline, and attach to him nothing alien to imperishability or inappropriate to blessedness, but believe about him everything that is capable of protecting that combination of blessedness and imperishability. For although there are gods—the knowledge of them being self-evident—they are not as the many regard them, since by regarding them as of that kind the many *fail* to protect them. (Epicurus, *Letter to Menoeceus* 123–4)

This heavily coded statement combines the firm assertion that there are gods with an instruction to us to conceive those gods in a way which will ‘protect’ them. Later Epicureans seem to have no doubt that their school’s founder was referring, in realist mode, to biologically immortal beings. But the language chosen at least licenses an idealist alternative, that our gods are a projection of our own thought, whose invulnerability it falls to us to ensure.

According to our best Epicurean sources, the gods are anthropomorphic beings, known to us through ‘images’ (Greek *eidōla*) which enter our minds directly, especially during sleep. Images are films of atoms, usually travelling at high speed from solid bodies to our sense organs and thus enabling sense-perception, but others are spontaneously formed in mid air. Some of them are so fine in texture that they make themselves known directly to the mind as the stuff of dreaming and imagining, by-passing the sense organs. It was by means of these images that, as the Epicurean Lucretius explains (5.1169–82), early mankind dreamt of superhuman-seeming beings, and attributed to them the divine properties of blessedness and eternal existence. They thus formed the generic conception of god.

Their critics regularly accused them of crypto-atheism: their ‘gods’, it was alleged, were nothing more than these streams of images. Whether the charge was accurate depends on the extremely difficult question, where the images were thought to come from. On the realist view (e.g., Mansfeld 1993; Konstan 2011), the gods themselves exist as biologically immortal beings, probably living in the spaces between worlds called *intermundia* in Latin, rather than in worlds like ours, which are themselves definitely held to be perishable. These gods are either made of constantly renewed streams of images, or have permanent atomically constituted bodies so fine as not to be subject to damage by any coarser bodies that may happen to pass through them. It is from their distant abodes that their images travel to our world and impinge on our dreams.

According to the idealist interpreters (e.g. Long and Sedley 1987; Obbink 1996; Sedley 2011), by contrast, such indestructible beings could not actually exist in an Epicurean universe, where all compounds are emphatically said to be subject to eventual dissolution; nor could apparently living dream figures, elsewhere dismissed by Epicurean physics as a source of illusion (Lucretius 4.722–822), possibly provide telepathic knowledge of the gods as far-distant biologically immortal beings. Rather, Epicurus’ real meaning is taken to be that we intuitively construct the gods as projections of our own moral ideal, visualizing them especially in our dreams, in which we ourselves compose them out of the constantly available images, just as we do all other dream pictures (Lucretius 4.962–

1036). The gods do exist, then, but as our intuitive thought-objects. They play a vital role in ethics by representing our moral ideal. The underlying conception is of entirely tranquil beings, altogether unaffected by the fear of death which so plagues human lives, and uninterested in building and governing worlds, since such activities would detract from their sublime peace of mind, much as political involvement detracts from human happiness.

The gods are, in short, idealizations of the Epicurean way of life. They are anthropomorphic because, as idealized versions of our own human lives, they could be nothing else. They can therefore be identified with the anthropomorphic gods of popular religion, with the qualification that these latter have typically been misconceived as having additional characteristics, such as warlikeness or vindictiveness, that detract from their blissful existence. Even here, according to the idealist reading, those characteristics are projections of human thought, albeit this time morally misguided thought that wrongly attaches positive value to the wielding of power. True religion—understood as the correct conception of the ideal human existence—is to be arrived at by means of moral education.

Even according to the alternative, realist interpretation, Epicurus sides with atheism to the extent that he denies all divine intervention in the running of the world, thus claiming to liberate his followers from the fear of divine wrath. But on the idealist interpretation his position is one that in most theological contexts would be called fully atheistic, and indeed was so called by Epicurus' own critics. Why, if so, would he not declare his atheism openly? Part of the answer may be that Epicurean communities, wherever they sprang up, relied on toleration from the local authorities, and a reputation for atheism, with its implied rejection of civic cults, would have hampered that objective. But in any case, Epicurus on moral grounds sincerely recommended participation in religious cults as a proper expression of respect for ideal beings, a stance which would have sat very oddly with an outright assertion that these beings do not actually exist.

THEODORUS AND EUHemerus

Two other early Hellenistic intellectuals—the Cyrenaic philosopher Theodorus, nicknamed ‘Theodorus the atheist’, and a maverick chronicler-cum-novelist named Euhemerus—came in time to be added to the standard list of atheists. The reports of Theodorus’ atheism include little detail, although intriguingly he was credited with the authorship of a book entitled *On gods* which was alleged to have influenced Epicurus (Diogenes Laertius 2.97). Euhemerus, by contrast, came to be a celebrated figure who exercised a subtle but pervasive influence on Hellenistic and Roman thought. ‘Euhemerism’ has in fact come to be a regular term for the policy of rationalizing myth to the point where it no longer contains any divine element. Euhemerus’ own contribution seems to have consisted in describing, apparently in the form of historical reportage, the human origin of the traditional gods Ouranos, Cronos, and Zeus on the island of Crete. This has much in common with the apotheosis theory attributed to Prodicus (see above), and it did in time earn Euhemerus the label ‘atheist’, although it is no easier than it was with Prodicus to be sure the epithet was accurate. It is important to bear in mind that the deification of human dynasts had by his day become a common political practice, and was not likely to be seen as far-fetched.

CARNEADES

The final figure in our story is one whose contribution to atheism has been largely overlooked.

Carneades was the head of the Academy in the mid second century BCE. This prestigious school, founded by Plato in the fourth century, had since the 260s BCE adhered to a fundamentally sceptical stance, subjecting all philosophical positions to systematic doubt. Carneades himself wrote nothing, but his arguments were recorded by his follower Clitomachus, and after his death they became the basis of a schism among his successors.

How did this schism come about? Clitomachus himself understood Carneades' arguments as serving the goal of sceptical *epochē*, 'suspension of judgement', which we may interpret as the policy of keeping all philosophical debates unresolved. This result was achieved, not necessarily by arguing against every position, but sometimes by actually defending one position in order to provide a counterweight to another. Thus for instance in order to induce suspension of judgement about determinism, which had been ably defended by the Stoics, Carneades sought to strengthen the Epicurean anti-determinist stance (Cicero, *On fate* 23). In Clitomachus' view such defences were strategic, and never represented Carneades' own philosophical preference.

However, another close associate of Carneades, Metrodorus of Stratonicea, claimed to have been privy to the master's own sincerely held beliefs, and rejected the *epochē* interpretation of his strategy in favour of a more doctrinal alternative. Metrodorus' view influenced Philo of Larissa, who became head of the Academy in 110 and soon adopted a fallibilist policy, retrojected onto Carneades, according to which it is proper, after examining both sides of a debate, to endorse the more 'likely' or 'convincing' doctrine, so long as you acknowledge that you could be wrong.

The relevance of this background is as follows. Carneades produced a whole battery of arguments against the existence of gods, on which Cicero (a major source on Carneades, and himself a pupil of Philo) makes his Academic spokesman Cotta comment as follows: 'Carneades used to say these things not in order to eliminate the gods (for what could be less fitting for a philosopher than that?), but to convict the Stoics of failing to settle any matter concerning the gods' (*On the nature of the gods* 3.44). This interpretation amounts to a kind of fallibilism, implying that Stoic theism could well be fundamentally true but is not philosophically proven. As a historical thesis, Cicero's remark reads like an exercise in apologetics, intended to make Carneades acceptable to a Roman audience, as is in fact confirmed by a striking parallel. Back in 155 BCE Carneades had shocked Roman audiences when he made a speech in favour of justice, but another the next day against justice. Cicero (as reported by Lactantius, *Divine institutes* 5.14.3–5 and *Epitome* 50.8) adopted a similar apologetic stance with regard to this episode too, maintaining that Carneades' aim on that notorious occasion had been not to undermine justice, merely to show that the defences of justice by Plato and Aristotle were fallible. In both cases Cicero's apologetic justification looks like an unhistorical concession to Roman conservatism.

Cicero's claim that Carneades' theological arguments were nothing more than attacks on the Stoics has been generally accepted, but there are excellent reasons for disbelieving it. The later Sceptic Sextus Empiricus (*Against the professors* 9.138–90) has preserved for us, apparently more or less verbatim, a large number of these arguments, drawn from Clitomachus' full catalogue of them. Nearly all of them conclude: 'Therefore there are no gods'. Many arguments from the same collection are presented by Cicero too (*On the nature of the gods* 3.29–52), but in the guise of a response to Stoic theology, with the specifically atheistic conclusions suppressed. On close examination, none of them really serves that anti-Stoic agenda. True, some of them use premises of Stoic origin, but no more numerous than those they borrow from Plato, Aristotle, poets, and other philosophers, or for that matter from common religious belief. To all appearances the arguments are aimed against a broad coalition of theists, without discrimination among them, and draw their premises from a similarly broad range of respectable sources. In response to this coalition, they aim

specifically to make a case for the non-existence of the gods.

Here are some examples. The most famous of Carneades' arguments are *sorites* or 'little-by-little' arguments, well targeted at both philosophical and popular theologies, which had alike failed to determine where the boundary of the 'divine' is located (see Burnyeat 1982). Between the clearly divine and the clearly mortal there lay various grades of beings, such as daimons and heroes. Likewise the divinization of major cosmic components, such as the sea's identification with Poseidon, left the status of smaller bodies of water in doubt: rivers were generally divinized too, but in that case why exclude streams, and even seasonal torrents? Carneades' *sorites* arguments thus typically took the form 'If A (e.g., Zeus) is a god, B is a god; if B is a god, C is a god; ... if F is a god, G (e.g., a torrent) is a god; but G is not a god; therefore A is not a god; but if there were gods, A would be a god; therefore there are no gods'.

Various other of his arguments start from the premiss that gods, if they exist, are 'living beings' (*zōia*). This classification was in fact common to nearly all the major philosophers, including Plato, Aristotle, the Stoics, and the Epicureans. (The Greek word means 'animal', but calling god an animal sounds misleadingly weird in English.) What Carneades sought to show is that (a) divine living beings would have to be endowed with at least as many senses as we have; (b) the sensory process would in its very nature involve changes and strains; and (c) these would in turn undermine god's essential inalterability and indestructibility. Then there are dilemmatic arguments that turn on the unacceptable consequences of god's being either finite or infinite, either bodily or non-bodily, either with or without speech, and so on. Finally, we may mention the long series of arguments on god's moral qualities: being *ex hypothesi* good, he must possess all the virtues; but these will have to include, for example, courage, which implies that he is not immune to danger.

The fact that his arguments were all aimed at establishing the non-existence of the gods does not make Carneades a positive atheist. There is every probability that his anti-theistic arguments were, in accordance with Clitomachus' interpretation of his strategy, meant to restore a balance between the two opposed cases, that for and that against the gods' existence. The Stoics had themselves provided a long series of syllogisms arguing the case for theism, whereas the philosophical tradition had bequeathed little on the atheist side. It fell to Carneades to rectify that imbalance. Hence from the arguments themselves nothing can be inferred about Carneades' own theological stance.

Nevertheless, two important consequences do follow. First, what we possess, stemming from Carneades, is a very substantial catalogue of dialectical arguments *for positive atheism*. In the history of atheism they deserve to be acknowledged as such. Second, if we go with Clitomachus' historically credible interpretation, Carneades was a negative atheist as the term is understood here (that is, he did not positively affirm the existence of any god or gods), and moreover a kind of agnostic. The term 'agnostic' is appropriate because his ideal of suspending judgement about everything included in its scope suspending judgement as to the gods' existence. His approach differed from conventional agnosticism in that it did not privilege theism over any other doctrinal stance as a target of philosophical doubt. Nevertheless, unusually motivated though it was, it did add up to a variety of agnosticism.

CONCLUSION

In the four centuries down to the beginning of the Roman empire in 31 BCE, disbelief in the existence of gods was a recognizable if rare stance. Yet we know of virtually no public intellectual during that period who displayed it with complete openness. The authors of the positive atheist texts criticized in

Plato's *Laws* apparently succeeded in remaining anonymous. Epicurus, if, as some hold, he had a leaning toward atheism, presented it as a kind of theism. Protagoras and Carneades, for all their courage in the face of religious teachings, opted for versions of negative atheism. Theodorus 'the atheist' may conceivably have been an exception to this pattern, and have actually flaunted his atheism, but our evidence for him is too thin to provide confirmation.

Atheism has often been a politically, culturally, and even legally risky thesis to embrace. As we have now seen, its early history bears eloquent witness to that fact.

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CHAPTER 10

THE FIRST MILLENIUM

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INTRODUCTION

In the longest study to date of atheism in antiquity, Drachmann found that there was almost no such thing, at least if we mean by atheism the denial that gods exist, or even the more innocuous ‘absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’ (1922). Those who were known as atheists were never called so consistently, and none has left a record of his opinions; others (chiefly the Epicureans) are known to have been atheists in the qualified sense that they granted the gods no role in the superintendence of the world. In late antiquity atheism can also mean impiety, the refusal to worship the gods whom society has agreed to honour; this was the crime for which Christians were punished, and was compatible, as we shall see, with the belief that gods exist or have existed but are unworthy of our adoration. Christians, for their part, could denounce as ‘atheism’ any doctrine or mode of worship that belied the existence of the one God or misrepresented his nature. The term could therefore comprehend polytheism, idolatry, heresy, more than one of these, or one by assertion and another by innuendo. In all disputation the true, or literal, atheist is an unseen but ineradicable presence like a ticklish cough in the audience that, although it is never located, is so persistent that it almost comes to be heard as part of the music. The voices that make up the choir itself, however, may be sceptical, cynical, or Christian in both ancient and modern senses of these terms, without ever hitting the note of unequivocal disbelief.

SCEPTIC AND EPICUREAN

Scepticism is the one school of philosophy in ancient times whose champions never positively affirmed or assumed the reality of the gods. Sextus Empiricus, writing as the apostle of Pyrrhonism in the second century CE, aims to show not that the tenets of any rival school are demonstrably false, but that all of them claim to know more than is knowable in our present circumstances. The sceptic will not make a dangerous show of atheism by abstaining from civic cults, but will participate in these cults without embracing the beliefs of the common worshipper (Bett 2009). It is not this unargued faith that he sets out to undermine in his refutation of the dogmatists, but the presuppositions of natural theology, a discipline which Varro, a Roman sceptic of a different school, has already distinguished both from the civic tradition and from the fabling of the poets (Augustine, *City of God* 6.5).

Having discounted a series of unlikely speculations on the origins of belief in the gods, Sextus reduces the case for their existence to four propositions (*Against the Mathematicians* 9.60–61). The first is that belief is universal, that all nations have decreed offerings and altars to unseen agents,

never believing them to be transient and perishable like the kings to whom similar honours are accorded (9.62). The second is that the harmony and regular vicissitude of the natural order attest the activity of a divine intelligence (9.75–103); the Stoics advanced the supplementary argument that if there are many natures there must be one that is best, and since we know that reason is the highest thing in nature, the nature that sustains and directs all others must be rational (9.104). The third proposition is that if the existence of the gods is denied, absurdities will follow: there will, for example be no such art as divination, and, worse still, there will be no object for piety (*eusēbeia*), which is acknowledged to be the wellspring of all the virtues (9.123–4). Furthermore, it is generally allowed that God is the object of a science, but there can be no science of the non-existent (9.125). The final proposition, that the existence of gods can be proved by inspection of the opposing arguments, is not set out at length, but parenthetically subsumed in Sextus' presentation of the other three.

The shoddy inference from a science of God to his existence may be the germ of a more celebrated argument in the second book of *On Free Choice* (c.395 CE) by the Christian theologian Augustine of Hippo. Without undertaking to demonstrate the existence of God—this being already granted—Augustine urges that if there is wisdom it must have an object; reasoning that the thing known is always superior to the knowledge of it, he concludes that the proper terminus of philosophy is not wisdom itself but its object, which we cannot fail to identify with God (2.2.5). The Stoic premiss that whatever is perfect must be predicable of the highest power foreshadows the ontological argument of the medieval philosopher St Anselm of Canterbury (d. 1109 CE). We are reminded of Anselm's interlocutor Gaunilo when an objector proposes to demonstrate, on the same principle, that the highest power must be perfectly grammatical or poetic; the Stoic pre-empts the very words of Anselm when he replies that he was speaking of absolute perfection, not of perfection in a certain kind (9.108). Sextus, for his part, never responds in detail to the arguments that he has adumbrated in detail; instead he attempts to outflank all the theists in one manoeuvre, reviving a series of dilemmas first propounded by Carneades (see David Sedley's 'From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age'), and designed to show that the postulate of a God is contradictory. It is evident that God is either an animal or not an animal, and that if he is not an animal, he is inferior to the sentient creation. If, on the other hand, he is an animal, he will have senses, but these senses will acquaint him only with perishable objects; the consequence, on the principle that like is known by like, is that he himself will be perishable, yet this is excluded by the initial definition of God (9.142–147). Again, he must be either corporeal or incorporeal. If he is corporeal, he will be circumscribed and perishable; but if he is incorporeal, he cannot be an object of knowledge and cannot act upon the world (9.151).

This (it must be remembered) is the reasoning of a sceptic, not an atheist, and Sextus is unaware of any credible attempt to account for belief in the gods without positing their existence. The thesis that we construct them from images perceived in dreams cannot explain why we should suppose them to be more blessed or less mutable than any other beings (9.45). Those who contend that lawgivers invented the gods in order to give a sanction to morality beg the question, for such figments would mean nothing in a society which did not possess any antecedent notion of the divine (9.31–34). At the same time, though he twice describes Euhemerus as an atheist (9.17, 9.51), Sextus refers without disapprobation to his theory that the gods existed once, but only as mortal benefactors of humanity, who have been repaid with everlasting garlands after death.

That scepticism is more conducive to piety than Epicureanism is the burden of Plutarch's treatise *Against Colotes*, a rejoinder to an uncouth and acerbic declamation against the whole regiment of Greek philosophers. Writing in the third century BCE Colotes alleged that, since the sceptic has faith in nothing, he denies himself the knowledge that an Epicurean gathers from his senses. Plutarch (c.100 CE) retorts that, since the Epicurean puts faith in nothing but his senses, he is not so well equipped as the sceptic to judge the probability of statements about the gods (*Against Colotes* 29–33). Colotes

makes three errors: he assumes that its rites are burdensome, that by menacing the soul with infernal torments it augments the fear of death, and that it is possible to live virtuous and pleasant lives without belief in celestial tutelage or a reckoning after death. The man who thinks like Plutarch, on the contrary, finds nothing so delightful as a festival, is more terrified by the thought of annihilation than by obsolete tales of hellfire, and is conscious that the statutes of the wisest legislators were grounded in filial obedience to the gods (*A Pleasant Life Impossible* 18, 26; *Against Colotes* 31). Plutarch, none the less, is at one with Colotes in his abhorrence of superstition: better, he says, to admit no God than to grovel to an ogre, just as I would rather have the world think that there is no Plutarch than that Plutarch is a false and vicious man (*On Superstition* 10).

CHRISTIANS AS ATHEISTS

Christian apologists of the second century repeatedly complained that they were called atheists by men who might more justly have stood in the dock upon the same charge. The true definition of atheism, they argued, presupposes an understanding of the true God, whom Christians know to be the one author of the universe, the overseer of worldly affairs, the one dispenser of rewards and punishments after death. If this were atheism, Athenagoras argues (c.175 CE), Plato would be an atheist when he ascribes the origin of the visible world to a single demiurge, and the poets would be atheists when they celebrate the omnipotence of Zeus (*Embassy* 6; 10). The worshippers of the Creator, says Justin (c.165 CE), are so far from being atheists that they repudiate the works of atheism along with all the other vices (*First Apology* 5.1). It is true, he concedes, that Christians are atheists—non-believers and non-worshippers—with regard to the gods of their persecutors, but so were Socrates and Heraclitus (5.4). Again it is true that some who pass for Christians deny that the Creator (or the Demiurge, as they call him) is the true Deity: these heretics, he avers, we shun as atheists, and he adds for good measure ‘we take no part in their atheistic feasts’ (*Trypho* 35.5).

Justin predicts that those whom God condemns will include a great number of Jews who have fallen into atheism, forfeiting their inheritance as children of Abraham (*Trypho* 120.2). Since he also enumerates other sins, he may be treating moral turpitude as evidence of contempt for the first commandment; or he may mean that the Jews as a race are peculiarly godless because they have sent abroad chosen emissaries to inform the world that the Christians are an atheistic sect (108.2). We may readily believe that in the second century Jews were at pains to shield themselves from the penalties which the law reserved for Christians; conversely, it seems probable that the Christians, who were still Galileans to pagans of this epoch, had their own share in the universal obloquy that had come to be seen as the birthright of the Jews. There is, however, no evidence that the turbulence of the Jews was ever attributed to atheism, rather than to the bellicosity of their ancestral god. Christians, on the other hand, could cite no ancestral warrant for their neglect of pagan altars, and their apologists, unlike those of the Jews, were therefore obliged to defend their position in the Roman Empire by denying every deity but their own.

According to a hagiographic account of the death in c.155 of Polycarp, bishop of Smyrna, the Jews of the city gathered faggots for his pyre with zeal while the governor instructed him to denounce his fellow-atheists (Musurillo 1972: 5). When the narrator records that he complied by extending his arm toward the crowd and crying loudly ‘away with the atheists’, he has put the polemical arguments of Justin in a nutshell (Musurillo 1972: 9). The most commonly quoted verse in the acts of the martyrs is not drawn either from the Old Testament or from the Gospels: it is Acts 4.24, where the God of Moses is extolled as sole creator of heaven and earth.

LUCIAN AND THE CYNICS

Cynics, like Epicureans, had some reputation as atheists, and perhaps with better reason. Where Epicureans were studious conformists, Diogenes (d. 323 BC) and Menippus (fl. 250 BC) had thrown deliberate sacrilege in the teeth of their contemporaries. A later assault on the probity of oracles by Oenomaus of Gadara (second century CE) occupies the greater part of the fifth book in Eusebius of Caesarea's *Preparation for the Gospel*. Yet this is guerrilla warfare against credulity rather than militantly positive atheism. Neither this creed nor the simple deism that some scholars have attributed to Diogenes (Goulet-Caze 1996: 47) can be found in the otherwise motley wardrobe of the sophist Lucian, a camp-follower of the Cynics, who says more while asserting less about the gods than any other professional writer of his time.

Lucian of Samosata (c.125—c.185 CE) has been styled the Voltaire of antiquity, and it can be said of him, as of Voltaire, that he had neither good reason for theism nor the will to be an atheist. It should not be assumed that his most satirical mouthpiece is immune to criticism: the teasing interlocutor of his Cynic, for example, does not obviously come off best from his cross-examination of the philosopher, and Lucian expresses an unqualified admiration for the Cynics in other writings. Yet this too is not the case everywhere: the Cynic protagonist of his *Icaromenippus* is a regular Munchausen, and when Menippus descends in other dialogues from bombast to the vernacular, his coprophilic manners are surely intended to be as disgusting to the reader as to his fictional interlocutors. The solemn treatise *On the Goddess of Syria* is often assumed to be tacitly facetious, yet one might surmise that his use of the Herodotean dialect, while it certainly puts the subject at distance from the author, also puts it beyond the reach of the flagrant parody which is characteristic of Lucian's Attic prose. It is possible that he is not so much a sceptic as a man in whom the inveterate habit of doubt and the will to believe stand in perpetual though uneasy counterpoise (Edwards 2009). He is best remembered, now as in late antiquity, for works in which his mockery of prevalent beliefs about the gods is unalloyed; as we shall see, however, even these one-sided sallies were not always judged to be inimical to Christian belief.

In *Zeus Cross-Examined*, Cyniscus (whose name betrays his philosophy) asks the king of the gods whether anything comes to pass against the will of the three Fates, Clotho, Lachesis, and Atropos (2). When Zeus replies in the negative, Cyniscus wonders what place can be found for Fate and Destiny if they not belong to this triad, and why the Zeus of Homer can boast grandiloquently of his power if he too is subject to the dominion of these agents (3–4). He finds it equally strange that sacrifice should be offered to gods who, by the confession of Zeus himself, are subject to higher edicts; when he is told that the best among mortals do not sacrifice for gain, but to honour beings who are happier themselves, he cites a catalogue of myths to prove that not all gods enjoy the same felicity (7). Furthermore, he demands to know how, in a world that was justly governed from above, a Socrates would be put to death while his accusers incurred no penalty (16), and why Apollo (who, as a deity, ought to be imperturbable) should be so malevolently disposed to Croesus as to cheat him into throwing away his empire (12–14). In answer to the claim that all injustices are righted after death at the tribunal of Minos, he argues that, if our lives are ruled by destiny and fate, it is they who ought to be put on trial (18–19). Zeus in reply can only stutter maledictions, but at the beginning of another notorious dialogue, *Zeus Rants*, we find him brandishing the thunderbolt, from a safe theatrical distance, against the Epicurean Damis, who has undertaken to show in public debate with a Stoic philosopher, that the gods not only have no concern for us, but do not exist (*Zeus Rants* 4).

This, as Lucian knew, was blasphemy to Epicurus; to Zeus, Epicurus and Damis are one, since both encourage the populace to starve the gods of offerings. The Olympians take their seats above the

disputants, but are jostled by the foreigners Mithras and Anubis (9), dwarfed by the colossus of Rhodes (11), disturbed by the quarrels of Heracles and Dionysus (12) and thrown into confusion by the scoffing of Momus, who puts the Epicurean case in heaven before it is heard on earth (19–22). The Stoic, a poor speaker, is easily disarmed as Damis sets one poetic quotation against another, and asks him how, if he is willing to defend the absurdities of the barbarians, he can give the lie to the Cretans who display the grave of Zeus (45). As he chases Damis from the stage with violence (52), Hermes tries to console Zeus with the observation that even the Epicurean seldom finds an audience; Zeus, with a plagiarism from Herodotus (*Histories* 3.153) and an irony more impenetrable than that of Hume or Cicero, retorts that he would rather have one Damis than a hundred Babylons (53).

Diatribes against the folly of sacrifice and the trumpery of funerals are attributed to Lucian, while his *Dialogues of the Gods* have still not lost their power to amuse. In the *Parliament of the Gods* he makes play again with the motley composition of the Roman pantheon, while the divine contestants in his *Judgment of Paris* are in no respect superior to any three mortal women in whom ambition has outrun virtue. In these works, however, Lucian is merely adding his own salt to a tradition of levity which goes back to Homer; it was in *Zeus Rants*—or so it seemed to his later Byzantine commentators—that his wit became intolerably corrosive (Edwards 2010). Because its reasoning militates as strongly against the Christian doctrine of providence as against any pagan forerunner, the author of such an exercise can only be a swine (*Scholia* 81.6), a romancer (81.10), a libertine (81.18), an ‘accursed, impious babbler’ (77.27) and an envier or despiser of the poor (77.28, 81.24). He is urged to take an emetic (80.2) and to stop concealing his atheism under a tragic mask (75.26–27). Arethas, a bibliophile and scholiast of the ninth century, challenges Damis to explain how, if the natural order is governed by immutable necessity, the emergence of new entities which deviate from all previous types is possible (71.26–75.4). When Damis holds up a brutal cult in Scythia as a specimen of the human propensity to superstition, Arethas responds that he has mistaken an ignorant servant for the master and has judged all painting by an amateur’s daub (76.3–24). We may think this an untimely intervention, since as a Christian he is bound to deny the validity of all polytheistic systems; nevertheless it would seem that he holds—and is one of the earliest Christians to hold openly—that, insofar as even false religion is religion, its premises are worthy of defence.

He was led to this view, no doubt, by the fact that Lucian was the author of an undisguised lampoon on Christianity, the *Death of Peregrinus* (c.167 CE). This history of a Christian mountebank, who crowns his career by inflicting upon himself the spectacular death that his co-religionists typically sought at the hands of others, was disparaged by the scholiasts in chorus as a ‘filthy’ and ‘toxic’ exercise (216.8), whose author was more guilty than his protagonist of swaggering, snivelling, slander, imposture, coxcombry and enmity to virtue (216.4–218.22, 220.13–222.10). Covert attacks on the true faith were detected in other writings—most palpably in the *Lover of Lies*, where Lucian’s mockery of a Syrian exorcist was perceived as a skit on the ministry of Christ (163.10–14). Yet Lucian found a more sympathetic reader in the learned and versatile Photius, whose *Bibliotheca*, or *Library*, advises his readers to study Lucian’s *Dialogues of the Dead* and his declamation *On Phalaris* as edifying satires on the errors of the pagans, ‘the monstrous fancies and fictions of their poets, their consequent errors in statesmanship’ and ‘the boasting of their philosophers, full of nothing but humbug and idle opinions’ (*Bibliotheca* 128; trans. Freese). He does not take Lucian either for an atheist or for an unwitting Christian, and shrinks from attributing to him any dogma other than the sceptical one that nothing is known for certain. His judgment is not wholly laudatory, since he cannot commend the frivolity of Lucian’s style, and he offers no excuse for those works that had given the greatest offence to Christian scholars. Nevertheless, he certainly holds that Lucian should be read; Arethas could hardly demur, unless he failed to see that the preservation of his dissenting marginalia would depend on the continuing transmission of Lucian’s text.

Christians, in reciprocating the pagan charge, made only rhetorical use of the strict definitions of atheism as either an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods ('negative atheism'), or a definite belief in the non-existence of the same ('positive atheism'). Clement of Alexandria (c.150—c.215 BC), after insisting that no worshipper of the God who creates all things can be an atheist, adds that this word should apply only to 'one who acknowledges no gods' (*Stromateis* 7.4.1). He proceeds at once, however, to contrast this infidel with the *deisidaimôn*, 'fearer of demons', and in assigning his pagan readers to this third category, he tacitly intimates that there may be some who, like the Athenians whom Paul addressed with the same term, are ignorant worshippers of the true God (cf. Acts 17.22–3). Atheism is in fact most likely to be imputed not to pagans, but to Christians whom an author deems to be ignorant or heretical. The early third-century author of the *Elenchos*, or *Refutation of all Heresies*, having proved that no philosopher is acquainted with the true God, can make an atheist at will of any antagonist who can be shown to have read Empedocles or to hold tenets resembling those of Heraclitus (pp. 54, 56, 314, 342, 343). A pious impostor of the fifth or sixth century CE, writing under the name of Dionysius the Areopagite, assumes in one of his letters that a man who begins by turning from the Church will end in *to atheon* (189.2); according to his *Mystical Theology*, the characteristic offence of the atheist is the portrayal in images of the One who can be known only by the renunciation of all descriptive knowledge (143.2). He does not say that a false image is invariably one that is consecrated to a false god.

But even if no-one publically denies the gods, are there not some, known to God himself, who are atheists in secret? Two celebrated Psalms (14.1; 53.1) denounce the fool who 'has said in his heart, *There is no God*'. Ancient and modern commentators have commonly agreed that the fool is not a confessing atheist but a man who (as the rabbis said) denies the four commandments relating to God by his shameless violation of the other six which relate to his neighbour. The most ingenious of the Psalmist's Christian readers, Diodore of Tarsus (c.330—c.390 CE), identifies the fool with the Assyrian herald, the Rabshakeh, who, when his countrymen were besieging Jerusalem, warned the inhabitants that their God would fail them as surely as the gods of every other nation had failed their votaries (2 Kings 18.28–35). Diodore does not surmise that the Rabshakeh, in arguing that these gods were no true gods, assumed them to be purely mythical, or that he thought his own people equally deluded (pp. 42–3); the more celebrated Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428 CE), however, in comments that are clearly indebted to Diodore, goes so far as to say that the Rabshakeh believed in no divinity at all (p. 159). This unusual imputation of literal atheism is no doubt prompted by a desire to explain why the text alludes to a saying 'in the heart' and not to any open avowal of disbelief. Augustine too, in his exegesis of Psalm 53, maintains that the fool's depravity is a symptom of real ignorance, of which he thinks it possible to distinguish two varieties, one rare, the other both common and hydra-headed (*Exposition of Psalms* 53.2). The minority who do not admit the existence of any god are ashamed to confess this, though they inevitably betray it by their conduct, those, on the other hand, who acknowledge some god while rejecting the divinity of Christ include the Jews who crucified him, the obdurate pagans who remain deaf to the gospel, and in the latter days the Arians and Eunomians, who deny him a share in the Godhead of the Father. One might suspect that the atheists of the first category are Epicureans and sceptics, but Augustine does not flatter them with the name of any school, and in his brief annotation to Psalm 14, he exclaims that even the basest and most impious of the philosophers do not deny the existence of a god.

DEMISE OF THE ANCIENT GODS

All the Germanic peoples had their deities, whom they ostensibly forsook for Christianity. Both contamination of religions and reversion to paganism were known phenomena; where there was any notion of atheism, however, this could signify only a refusal to acknowledge the gods of others. If an author was a cleric—and there were few others—disavowal of pagan gods was always mandatory, and therefore often perfunctory. Where, however, the love of the past was strong or curiosity tenacious, this partisan atheism takes the form of systematic attempt to explain the origins of false belief.

Euhemerism, the doctrine that it is we who create the gods by deifying our benefactors, might have seemed to an unsympathetic observer of Roman practice to have been verified by every new decree in which the senate announced the elevation to heaven of the last emperor. It was evidently more than a hypothesis when a thinker of Cicero's acumen could believe that he could make his daughter a goddess by the erection of a shrine (Drachmann 1922: 116). It was possible for pagans in their turn to see Christianity as a vernacular species of Euhemerism—the worship of a crucified sophist according to Lucian (*Death of Peregrinus* 13), or, as Porphyry professed to have learned from an oracle, the pious misrepresentation of a sage who had never imagined himself to be more than an exemplar of divine wisdom (Augustine, *City of God* 19.23). It was only to be expected that the Christian apologists, in reciprocating the charge of atheism, would also take up the Euhemeristic theory with both hands. Minucius Felix (c.180 CE) appears to take the Greek author's whimsical almanac of divine birthdays as a true history, adding that the sophist Prodicus held the gods to have been itinerant mortals who had sown the knowledge of the arts of life among all peoples (*Octavius* 21). He reports that Alexander the Great, himself a deified king, had been entrusted with a volume in which Vulcan was represented as 'prince [or originator] of all' and Jove as one of our first progenitors. A whole guild of Roman authors can be summoned to prove that Saturn had been a human king in Latium; Lactantius (c.240—c.320 CE) taking up the same story, asserts that it was Saturn himself who had named his parents heaven and earth in the pious hope of rendering the memory of them eternal by this falsehood (*Divine Institutes* 1.11). A conciliatory, rather than polemical, spirit is evident in the adoption of a theory which casts no obloquy on the founders of religion and is derived from books by accredited pagan authors, whose opinions, though debatable, were not deemed either irreverent or absurd.

A theory of quite a different tenor—borrowed not from any pagan source, but from the Jewish Book of Enoch (Sparks 1983: 188–93)—taught that the creators of the pagan cults were angels, who, being lured to earth by the beauty of mortal women, found themselves captives, and avenged themselves by inventing first the tools of agriculture and metallurgy and then the trumpery of shrines and oracles, with all the cruel and useless ceremonies that they continue to enjoin in their responses (Justin Martyr, *First Apology* 5.2). Martin of Braga, writing in the sixth century, was perhaps the first to conflate the Euhemeristic and the Enochian revelations (*Correction of Paganism* 3–7). After the flood had wiped out the degenerate posterity of Adam, he tells us, a new epidemic took hold of Noah's descendants, as they forgot the creator and started instead to adore the sun, the waters and other creatures. Thus they fell prey to the devil and his fallen crew, who, veiling their identities under the names of human criminals, demanded worship with unholy oblations in the woods and upon the high places. Anglo-Saxon imitators of Martin also smuggle the tower of Babel into his narrative (Dronke [1977] 1996: 156–7); this hostile aetiology is ignored, however, by Isidore of Seville (c.560–636 CE) in favour of a more emollient Euhemerism (*Etymologies* 8.11). His account of Isis, Apollo, Vulcan, and Minerva as beneficent mortals, each becoming the deity of the people whom they enriched by their merits, was digested into the popular compendium, *De Universo*, by Hrabanus

Maurus, in the ninth century (Dronke [1977] 1996: 166). An author whom we know as the Second Vatican Mythographer, sometimes thought to be Remigius of Arles (c.439—533 CE), follows Isidore's source with a supplementary, and incongruous paragraph, reproducing the Stoic conjecture that the gods are neither real fictions, but personify attributes of the true divinity (Bode 1834: 74). The Third Vatican Mythographer endorses what we may call this atheism without irreverence, which implies that, though the gods have never existed, it was possible (before Christ came) to worship them without sin (Bode 1834: 152).

The deities of pagan Ireland appear in Christian sources as the *Tuatha de Danaan*, the last in a series of invading hosts who settled the island before the advent of the Celts. Their leader Nuada, is evidently a diminished form of Nodens, whose cult is attested in Roman Britain long before the composition of the *Book of Invasions* (*Lebor Gabála Érenn*), from which we now derive our knowledge of the Irish pantheon. The more malevolent gods, the Fomors, are represented in this book as the aboriginal inhabitants of Ireland, who defeat, absorb or make terms with every newcomer before the *Tuatha de Danaan*. The latter were said to have been forced underground by the Milesians, whom we know as the Celts or Goidels, though it was probably the Christian saints who dispossessed them in their cultic centres. They and their immediate predecessors, the Fir Bolg, have retained a spectral divinity as the fairy-folk, of Sidhe, in popular legend and the romantic literature of the Celtic twilight (Mackillop 1998: 234–5, 239–40, 415–16). The gods of northern Europe were not so fortunate, and we need not suppose that the Welsh historian Nennius wished to flatter the English and Saxon kings whose lines he traced to Woden (*British History* 59–61). In Saxo Grammaticus' *History of the Danes* (pp. 24–5), Odin is not a figure of great antiquity but a tyrant in Upsala, who enjoys a false reputation as a god until, disgraced by the cupidity of his wife, he is forced into exile. Others usurp his pretensions to divinity in his absence, but the death of his wife enables him to return, unmasking his rivals and leaving even the historian uncertain of his own fate. Snorri Sturluson in his *Prose Edda* (pp. 3–5) furnishes Odin with an august genealogy, commencing with the marriage of Sif, a Sibyl of mysterious lineage, to Thor (initially Tror), a son of Priam. The line descends through many generations to Odin or Woden, who traverses the Germanic lands with his consort Frig, setting up their own sons as overlords in various provinces. The discrepancies between this account and that of Snorri's *Ynglinga Saga*—where Njord, Frey and Freya, the gods of the Vanir, assume a more prominent role (pp. 1–15)—suggest that he is openly claiming licence to supply the defect of knowledge by invention. What he knew of Euhemerism may have come down to him through the Vatican mythographers (Dronke [1977] 1996: 168), though it is also possible that he is simply following his instinct as a Christian priest, for whom the canonisation of such figures as King Olaf offered a clue to the origins of a pantheon which, in deference to his fathers, he could not believe to be wholly imaginary.

AFTERWORD

A study of atheism may legitimately encompass both explicit disavowals of belief and the methodical refusal of the philosophers to avow it. A longer, and even more diffuse, inquiry might address questions that have been put by modern scholarship to texts that are neither negative nor sceptical, but simply fail to exhibit any vital belief in providence or a personal creator. What, for example, did the poet of *Beowulf* understand by the power that he calls Dryhten (Tolkien 1983: 36–42)? What should we make of Plotinus the Neoplatonist, who postulates (but does not appear to worship) a sovereign principle which neither loves the present world nor willed it into being (Gerson 1994: 272–300)? In

fact more protracted investigation of such questions would be unlikely to yield any confident answer except the short (and perhaps irrelevant) one that neither author would have considered himself an atheist. ‘Atheist’ was always a pejorative and nebulous, often a hypothetical epithet in late antiquity; the present essay could be written only by applying the term, as Drachmann and some of our ancient witnesses do, to thinkers who were far from godless, but maintained their own creed in defiance of a rival notion of God or of the gods.

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CHAPTER 11

THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD

DOROTHEA WELTECKE

INTRODUCTION: RESEARCH TRADITIONS

DID atheism exist in the Middle Ages? While this question is not easy to answer in one sentence, it is clear that the Middle Ages were, in many ways, one of the decisive periods in the history of atheism and therefore deserve attention. This statement may seem surprising, and certainly it contradicts popular assumptions about the Middle Ages as a dark and irrational period, and atheism as a result of rational reasoning. For that reason the present overview will start with an outline of the dominant popular assumptions as well as the research traditions, before presenting the results of empirical investigations.

On the one hand, it is very common to presume that inquisitors or religious elites in general persecuted atheism during the Middle Ages. On the other hand, the Middle Ages are thought to have been unable to even conceptualize the idea that there is no God. The period is often described as an age of faith, during which the doubts and the rational critique against theological propositions that spread in the Modern Era were unknown. These two assumptions are mutually exclusive and indicate that the study of medieval atheism is a field of controversies and many open questions and also, as will be shown here, of popular myths.

Both these theories—the persecution theory and the romantic Age of Faith—go back to traditions emerging in sixteenth and seventeenth-century Europe, at that time deeply involved in denominational conflicts. Within these struggles the idea gained ground that advanced thinkers had always seen through the machinations of the clergy, who in turn had continuously tried to suppress the truth. Some medieval individuals were named as examples, mostly well known personalities. They were taken from lists of medieval heretics, which were first compiled by Protestants and Catholics in order to provide historical examples for their own respective positions. Many names gathered in these corpora were inherited by the modern scholarly debate on atheism. Western scholars also sought affirmation from outside Europe for their opposition towards the established Western Churches. They found them in Eastern writings and gathered names from Arabic polemical literature as examples for early Muslim atheists. During the nineteenth century the thesis gained ground that Muslim philosophy was even instrumental for the emergence of enlightenment and atheism in Europe.

At the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth century the European debate on atheism reached one of its first peaks. Hermann Reuter, John Robertson, and Fritz Mauthner wrote the first comprehensive histories of atheism. They summarized the examples and polemical sources and handed them down to scholars in the twentieth century, who were to become deeply influenced by their works (Reuter 1875–1877; Robertson 1899; Mauthner [1920–30] 1985). The category ‘atheism’ they used (or ‘enlightenment’, which appeared as a synonym in their studies) was very broad. They defined atheism, enlightenment, scientific and scholastic thinking, heresy, criticism of the church and

free thought as part of the same opposing movement against religion.

The seminal works just quoted were historical studies, but they were not written by professional historians. Rather, the scholarly field was dominated by the theologians, philosophers, and philologists. These disciplines shaped the definitions of atheism, the choice of sources as well as the methods of the research tradition: individual writers and their thoughts remained in the focus. During the twentieth century many writings of both Arabic and Latin thinkers were edited and studied.

One important research result of this research made revisions inevitable and caused controversies to the present. A close look revealed that many of the assumed early heroes of atheism were much less radical than previously expected. None of those named before could be proven to have themselves denied the existence of a God.

At the same time, historical studies (e.g., Thomas 1950; Murray 1986; Goodich 1988; Arnold 2005) showed that medieval societies were far less in line with official dogmas than earlier generations had imagined. While historians of the Middle Ages had largely abstained from taking part in the debates on atheism, they had intensively investigated medieval spiritual life in its concrete forms.

On the basis of this research it makes theoretical and empirical sense to presuppose the existence of doubts about religious propositions, ignorance, disinterest, and the absence of belief in the medieval world, both Muslim and Latin Christian. Yet, the actual forms and extent of this phenomenon, and its relation to modern atheism, remain highly controversial even among those who generally favour this position. What is more, the overall scarcity of medieval sources and especially the lack of so called ego-documents, autobiographical writings, and other documents produced by the people themselves testifying to their personal convictions, make general statements of any kind highly speculative.

Early experiments to include Jewish influences on medieval Latin philosophy have not been followed up in recent years and there is generally less interest in atheism among Jews in the Middle Ages. This is also true for Orthodox and ancient Oriental Churches. Both Jews and Eastern Christians were not included in the European discourses sketched above and thus have remained in the shadow. The state of research is therefore very unbalanced within the different fields of medieval studies.

CHALLENGES TO INSTITUTIONALIZED RELIGIONS

The age before 1500 was a period of religious dynamics and diversity. Even the beliefs of those who tried to be more or less in line with the approved teachings were neither simple nor uniform. Because of the overwhelming majority of illiterates there was also sheer ignorance, which led to propositions different from orthodox theology. Where some teachings and snippets of texts were known through oral transmission, they contradicted experiences of everyday life. Men and women knew about practical processes of procreation, life and death, production processes of food, necessities of commerce, social realities, and other everyday concerns (Arnold 2010). Virgin birth, resurrection, incarnation, transubstantiation, and other teachings were not congruent with these experiences. Even the philosophically trained thinkers, clerics as well as philosophers, had their doubts about the incarnation. Common sense as well as philosophy struggled with speculative teachings like the *creatio ex nihilo*. While the forms of opposition against the main religions differed dramatically between the Arabic and the Latin world, they both faced a simple truth: not a single theological teaching, be it Jewish, Muslim, or Christian (or pagan, for that matter), was left unquestioned either by polemics from outside, by opposing groups from inside, or even by those who, with the best of intentions, could not help not to be convinced.

In two main waves of heated inter- and intra-religious controversies the main arguments against

Jewish, Christian, and Muslim teachings were developed and spread. The first surge swept over Western and Central Asia during the first centuries of Muslim rule. It was set in motion by the polemical debates between the religions and the philosophical circles (see Ess 1991–1997). The second wave included twelfth to fourteenth-century Europe. At that time Europe received translations from classical philosophy and Arabic learning. In the emerging schools and universities these texts were discussed eagerly, though not as radically as in the early Muslim world. Still, some masters in the Latin universities and Byzantine scholars developed their own views on theology, the cosmos, creation, the stars, life and death, or anthropology, which differed from orthodox Christian doctrine. In the West, like in the East, religious movements and sects additionally challenged the institutionalized religions. To answer these challenges, apologetic tracts were written.

Some of the objections made by medieval contemporaries have been interpreted as signs of atheism (e.g., the theory of the eternity of the world, mortality of the soul, invalidity of prophethood, faked sacred texts). While this might sometimes be the case—an example will be given later—these elements alone cannot serve as a positive proof. For what might be a cornerstone of atheism in the modern world could be part of an individual way to believe in the Middle Ages. For example, the so-called ‘Ortlieber’, a religious sect, believed in the eternity of the world (Fössel 1993). The outspoken church critic Thomas Müntzer (1489–1525) rejected the divine revelation of the Bible, but was nonetheless deeply religious. Medieval religious discourses were in some respect more diverse than modern ones.

Therefore, an unequivocal context for certain propositions is needed in order to decide on their philosophical motivation. In this respect, one missing element is most striking: none of the medieval polemics ever actively denied the existence of God or even claimed an agnostic position for a given author. As a case in point, Burzōē the Persian in the sixth century, after having failed to find criteria to decide which of the bickering theologians defended the best religious system, did indeed turn away from them all. Contrary to modern interpretations, however, he did not renounce faith in God. Instead, he continued his own individual ways to care for the afterlife of his soul by pleasing God as best he could (Burzōē the Persian [500s] 1912).

LAWS, HERESIOGRAPHY, AND THE ALLEGED PERSECUTION OF ATHEISTS

The sheer lack of unequivocal sources is often explained by the assumption that atheists were afraid to expose their ideas. Thus, a closer look at legal conceptions and persecutions in the Middle Ages is in order. Medieval societies were deeply concerned with maintaining the ever-fragile order and internal peace. Personal loyalty or rather faithfulness to God and man was the building block of society. Personal convictions, on the other hand, were not. Jewish, Christian, and Muslim religious leaders demanded personal acceptance of basic religious propositions by lay people. Abū Ḥanīfa (d. 767 CE), an important Muslim theologian, held that to be called a ‘believer’ a Muslim needed to assent to the teaching of the one-ness of God and the prophethood of Mohammed (on the concepts of believer/unbeliever, see Griffel 2000). Sa‘adyā Gaon (882–942), an influential Jewish sage, demanded that individuals should adhere to Judaism with knowledge and active understanding (Sa‘adyā Gaon [933] 1989). The Fourth Lateran Council in the year 1215 demanded that Christians should firmly believe in the basic Credo of the church.

After all, however, these convictions were an individual soteriological problem. Faith, on the other hand, was also a crucial legal and social category. The conception comprised commitment and trust. Thus, those who were designated as ‘unbelievers’ in medieval thinking were not primarily thought of

as individuals who were not personally convinced of the existence of God. Rather, this term signified members of other religions, enemies outside of one's own secular system of loyalty or rebels from the inside. The English terms 'infidels', 'infidelity' and 'faithlessness' still show traces of this understanding.

Any good Muslim or an acknowledged authority traditionally had and still has the right to *takfir*, to declare a Muslim opponent as an 'unbeliever' in front of the community, which has serious consequences for the accused. Yet, in the past atheists were not the target of this accusation—at least, there is no proof that they ever were. Only today this indictment can be shown to threaten atheists. Apostasy as defection was systematically dealt with in Muslim and Late Antique Christian law and harshly punished. In medieval Christianity the notion of heresy was more important. Judaism developed more allowing legal constructions. A Jewish apostate was perhaps counted as a bad Jew, but he or she remained Jewish. Neither of these legal practices defined apostasy as a synonym of atheism (Slaughter 1993; Cohen 1999).

Medieval religious thinkers of the different religions also developed conceptions of religious unorthodoxy, which implied in their eyes disloyal, immoral, or even rebellious behaviour. They defined certain rulings which led to the excommunication of such errant members or even to their secular punishment. Concerning atheism the Muslim-Arabic world and the Latin world differed in their concepts of deviance. Muslim heresiography (Ess 2011) contains terms like *mulhid* (lit. deviator), *zindiq* (lit. Manichean) or *dahri* (lit. believer in fate and the eternity of the world; see Samuli Schielke's 'The Islamic World'). These notions designate a wider range of teachings and actions a writer deemed as aberrant, and they are not synonymous with atheism. *Dahri*, for example, could be used in a polemical way against Christians. Christianity could even be called the worst *dahriyya* of all (Tannous 2010: 536). Yet, atheism could clearly be one intended understanding of these conceptions in the heresiographical literature (Chokr 1993; Ess 2011; Crone 2012). On the other hand, all of the known individuals designated with these terms, as well as all of those actually brought before court and punished, can be shown to have been believing in some God or gods (Stroumsa 1999). One important example is the notorious critic of Islam, Ibn al-Rawandi (c.827–864/911). Jewish heresiographers used some of the Arabic terms already mentioned (like *dahri*) as well as the ominous notion 'Epicureans' to designate deviant groups. This word appears in the Talmud. Friedrich Niewöhner has suggested that the term included the idea of atheism (Niewöhner 1999). This supposition is not undisputed and no individual was ever identified to be an atheist.

In the Latin world, an ever increasing number of teachings and actions since the eleventh century were judged as heresy. The debate on the mortality of the soul occupied the public and the inquisitorial tribunals in the Late Middle Ages alike (e.g., Murray 1986). At that time lawlessness and a libertine lifestyle were also conceptualized as 'Epicureanism'. Similar to the Jewish sources 'Epicureans' were said to deny the punishment of the soul in the hereafter. Therefore they seemed not to have a reason to abide by the law. Vice versa, immoral individuals were called 'Epicureans' because of their actions, regardless of their personal attitudes. As perpetrators often had no secular enforcement to fear and because of the resulting general lack of social peace, 'Epicureans' seemed to be existing in great numbers, especially in Italy. In the inquisitorial protocols, however, contemporaries who deny the immortality of the soul, can only very rarely be identified (Murray 1984).

Numerous inquisitorial protocols reveal a wealth of unorthodox and radical beliefs. Yet, among the suspects tried before court by the inquisitor Bernard Gui (1261/2–1331) only perhaps one peasant in 900 seems to have been an atheist (Given 1997). What is more, the peasant in question and a small number of others were punished for rival teachings, not for atheism. The sheer absence of belief in

the existence of a God was never defined as a heresy. As the inquisitorial and heresiological writings aimed to be comprehensive, this absence must be intentional.

In medieval Islam, blasphemy against the prophet and his companions by Muslims or non-Muslims was conceptualized as rebellious behaviour. Blasphemy could be processed by a court and punished by death (Slaughter 1993; Wiederhold 1997). This was also the case in Latin Christianity from the thirteenth century. Although in modern days medieval blasphemy has often been seen as a sign of medieval atheism, this inference is not confirmed by empirical research on court protocols (Schwerhoff 2005). During the Latin Middle Ages blasphemy was understood as a hostile speech act against God, which could threaten the relation between him and his community on earth. In the centuries after 1500 legislation against blasphemy seems indeed to have been directed against atheists, but for the Middle Ages proofs are lacking.

Religious doubt as a problem of religious law has been little studied. Religious sceptics in a philosophical sense are again featured in Arabic Muslim heresiography (Turki 1979; Ess 1991–1997). They are generally subsumed among one of the heretical categories mentioned above, regardless of the personal belief they might have had. In Latin Christianity indications of religious scepticism of the philosophical kind are not extant. Neither scepticism nor spiritual doubts were featured in canon or criminal law. The famous norm '*Dubius in fide infidelis est ...*' from the decretals by Pope Gregory IX (*Corpus Iuris Canonici*, vii, 1) has often been misinterpreted. *Dubius* is not the medieval term for a sceptic, but for unreliable humans or things (like roads or relationships). The sentence is best understood in the context of the persecution of heretics. The decretal refers to an unreliable witness in court, when heretics are questioned, because the witness has a tendency to heresy. Inquisitorial manuals as well as ecclesiastical and criminal law also show that doubt was never defined a crime.

The persecution of religious deviances was in any case restricted to certain areas, religious trends or jurisdictions—the Abbasid caliphate, the Roman church—and depended on aims, means and ends to carry out persecutions of certain propositions or groups. Jewish communities in the Middle Ages had neither the means nor the strategies to persecute religious deviance violently. Christian minorities in Muslim countries also refrained from systematic persecution of their heretics as it would only have given a pretext for external harassment by secular powers.

The results of one hundred years of modern study of religious persecutions were and are very useful for the history of atheism. The scarcity of positive witnesses for medieval atheism can today no longer be explained by persecution. There is ample proof for deviant propositions which were defended with conviction. Thus a dominant trope of modern literature on atheism, the assumption that medieval atheists did not speak out for fear, can now best be explained by the internal dynamics of the modern atheism discourse mentioned above.

SECULAR LITERATURE

Some of the examples for allegedly unbelieving individuals go back to secular literature like chronicles, sagas, songs, poems and parodies of the Latin Christian world. Since the early Middle Ages stories were told about extremely impious contemporaries, who mocked faith in God in the strongest terms (Prinz 1989). Tales about impious kings and nobles, about simple villagers and fools and, last but not least, about the clergy itself, entertained the public. Some of these accounts were transculturally spread by attaching them to new personages. These texts are often critical of the secular and religious hierarchy and are part of the contemporary discourses on political power and the state of the church. Parodies and comical dialogues clearly serve to amuse, even in a sometimes

daring manner. Monastic and pious life did not exclude rude jokes.

While there is every reason to assume that some mighty lords were not very pious, the source value of the narrations is limited because of these critical tendencies. Also the wording is misleading. Philological studies show that the very phrase ‘to deny God’ or ‘not to believe in God’ had a wider meaning in the Middle Ages, comprising ‘to abnegate, to defect’ or ‘not to trust’. The texts on seeming non-believers therefore include a wider range of deviant and disloyal behaviour than the wording suggests. As an example a wilful French knight shall be mentioned, who mutilated two other knights and betrayed their trust in him. Because of this action he is called a cruel enemy of the faith who negates and abjures God and the faith (*Vaux-de-Cerney*, 128–32), again regardless of his personal religious convictions. This phrase refers to the Biblical Psalm 14 ‘the fool says in his heart that there is no God’, which mentions a tyrannical person, who does not care for the needs of the weak. Read in the context the fool of the Psalms clearly affirms the existence of a God, but he does not care about his commandments. Thus, the sentence ‘he says in his heart that there is no God’ was often connected with irresponsible and immoral individuals in order to criticize them, even if the narrator clearly knew that the person in question believed in a God (Weltecke 2010: 261).

In secular literature there are also stories narrated about individuals, often about noble men, who were severely tormented by religious doubts. They served as examples of bad human fate and must be interpreted within the context of the respective works where they appear. More of these examples are gathered in spiritual literature, discussed further on.

THEOLOGICAL LITERATURE AND THE CASE OF THE PROOFS

The first medieval thinkers to probe the idea that there is no God were philosophers during the period of the formation of Muslim speculative theology (eighth to tenth centuries). They, for example, recorded disputations between a Muslim and various religious opponents. Some of these adversaries allegedly came forward with the confession that they did not believe in the existence of a God (Chokr 1993: 111ff.; Daiber 1999), often to be convinced of the contrary by the victorious Muslim in the course of the debate. Heresiographers systematically described the propositions of various deviant groups, among them again groups of people who denied that there existed anything outside the tangible world. These groups are sometimes also referred to as ancient philosophers and in general remain rather oblique (Ibn Warraq in McDermott 1984). The Muslim writers interpreted these propositions not only as aberrant thoughts, but also in ethical terms: they saw them as arrogant philosophy, as moral deficiency, anarchy or madness and folly. The Jewish sage Sa’adyā Gaon also referred to those who did not believe in the existence of God as ignorants or libertines driven by their desires (Sa’adyā Gaon [933] 1989: 33; Stroumsa 1999: 140). These judgements later also reappear in the Latin world, where the interpretation of atheism as foolishness dominated.

Muslim theological writings of different genres often contained a proof of the existence of God. Muslim and Jewish thinkers also gathered philosophical reasons for the contrary. They then set out to refute these arguments. These demonstrations are often placed at the beginning of their comprehensive works of speculative theology as will be the case later in the Latin world.

There is an on-going controversy among scholars of Islam on the relation between these passages, the adversaries they mention, and the social reality of the time. Crone argues that these works confirm the existence of atheism (2012). Stroumsa stresses the observation that no individual was shown to have held this idea. She rejects the idea that the texts refer to real atheists (Stroumsa 1999: 122–4).

In the European world some arguments of the early Muslim world were repeated some centuries

later. At that time the professionalized speculative theologians of the era of the so-called scholasticism (twelfth to fourteenth centuries) composed the proofs of God's existence. The Latin Masters actively quoted some Arabic scholars. In the tract by Anselm of Canterbury (c. 1033–1109), who started the tradition, the adversary is clearly a theoretical construct ([1078] 1986): again we meet the fool, who speaks in his heart that there is no God (Psalms 14 and 51). This time, the phrase is meant in the literal sense. In form and scope Anselm's work reaches a new level compared to earlier Christian commentaries to this Psalm. Anselm strives to dispute the thesis that there is no God with rational arguments and without the help of revealed truths. In the following centuries these lines of reasoning form part of the introductions of the great theological works of the masters, which were the obligatory textbooks of the time (Daniels 1909). These broadly read school works were the *Summae* as well as the commentaries on the *Sententiae* of Peter the Lombard. One most influential author of a *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas (c.1225–1274) probed the theistic proposition without mentioning any historical adversary ([1265–1274] 1888–1906: I-I, qu. 2, art. iii). William of Ockham (1285/90–1348), another important master, refers to anonymous contemporaries who doubt that there is a God ([1322–4] 1980: I, 1. 1, p. 2, 27–8).

The proofs did not establish the basis of belief, either in the Arabic or in the Latin treatises. Belief was given by faith. Opponents of Muslim and Latin speculative theology even considered these proofs to be superfluous at best and heretical at worst. In their eyes God surpassed human reasoning. Yet the arguments demonstrated the reliability of the rational method the intellectuals advocated (Stroumsa 1999: 122ff.). Here, too, some modern scholars support the theory that the anonymous non-believers of William of Ockham and the general interest in these demonstrations represent real atheists of the time (Reynolds 1991; Pluta 2011).

However, there are good reasons to assume that those who systematically treated the sentence that there is no God were not the heterodox philosophers. Rather the orthodox theologians themselves developed the argument. One may say, therefore, that beside the ancient traditions one of the main roots of Western atheism is the speculative theology of the Middle Ages. The difference between the medieval world and the modern era is not so much an increase of radicality or validity of the proposition, but rather the fact that at the time none of the Latin masters, neither theologians nor philosophers, took the thought seriously. Consequently, unlike many other propositions (e.g., the eternity of the world), the sentence 'there is no God' was never banned from being discussed in the European schools. It could be treated as a sophistic assertion of the same quality as the absurd statement that the Trojan War is still continuing. In this context Siger of Brabant (c.1240–1283) presented the idea that there is no God in his so-called *Impossibilia*, intended for the training of students in logical disputation ([c.1270s] 1974: 67–97).

A case in point is the pagan interlocutor in a fictitious inter-religious disputation between a Jew, a Christian, and a Muslim by Raimundus Lullus (1232/3–1316). This pagan man, clearly a theoretical construct like Anselm's fool, is presented as a sad and ignorant fool as long as he has no knowledge of God. Only after being introduced to this basic information by the three religious sages is he designated a 'wise philosopher' (Ramon Lull [c.1270s]). The reception of the materialistic cosmography of Lucretius (c.99–c.55 BCE) in the Latin Middle Ages is another example. Far from ever appearing on black lists the work was copied a few times for monasteries in the early Middle Ages. The work was repeatedly used as a stylistic model, yet was not taken seriously as a cosmological theory. In the scholars' eyes, Lucretius was simply a poor madman with absurd ideas, who suffered from a terrible life and death (Reeve 2007).

Hugh of St Victor (1096–1141) in Paris explained different levels of faith. On the lowest level the existence of God is recognized (*fides cognitionis*). On the next levels the divine truth is accepted and

actively taken on, the believer entirely trusts his life to God, he now believes in God (Weltecke 2010: 437). An educated man from the schools had at least reached the first level. Knowledge of God distinguished him from ignorant peasants, women, or beasts. Writers occasionally reveal the anxiety that perhaps it was the other way round and the believer might be the fool, yet this apprehension remained an undercurrent. Only at the end of the Middle Ages the tides seem slowly to begin to turn. Some scholars, like their Muslim counterparts centuries earlier, connect the idea of doubts in belief or in the purposefulness of any religious cult to the arrogance of philosophy as well as to bodily ailments (Hankins 2007). At the occasion of the Council of Constance, 1414–18, Poggio Braccioloni (1380–1459), who, like other humanists, browsed old libraries in search of old manuscripts, visited the monasteries of the region. He came across a manuscript of Lucretius and, while remaining a theist himself, considered the materialist cosmology at least worth studying. A new era began.

RELIGIOUS EDUCATION AND SPIRITUAL CARE

Doubts free of adherence to a heresy were gathered in books used for education and for spiritual edification. One could perhaps also read Sa'adyā Gaon's *Book of Beliefs and Opinions* in this context. Sa'adyā was a sagacious teacher indeed, who took the doubts of students seriously and as one step towards knowledge (Sa'adyā Gaon [933] 1989: 9–26). At the same time Sa'adyā polemicized against those who rejected rational inquiring of this kind. Sa'adyā mentions people who seemed not to believe in or to worship any God or Gods (ibid.: 34–5). Interestingly, he does not dispute the idea that there is no God, but instead refutes the proposition that there are two (ibid.: 37ff.). Dualistic theology in general was the more menacing tendency for monotheists than atheism and thus reappears in polemics and theoretical theology. This was also the case in the Latin world. Ramón Sibiuda (d. 1436) wrote a tract for not professionally trained monks (like Carthusians), nuns and laypeople also covering dualism and many other doubts about orthodox Christian teachings, but not atheism ([1434–6] 1966).

Following early traditions the Latin Christian world conceptualized religious doubts as 'temptations', as something which torments the believer with God's assent to prove his worth. Pope Gregory the Great (c.540–604) wrote about them, and he was widely read in monastic and clerical circles. During the next centuries temptations all in all remained behind the walls of the monasteries and inside the confessors' chambers. Only at the threshold to the High Middle Ages, the Benedictine Monk Otloh of St Emmeram (c.1010–79) wrote openly about them. Instead of 'philosopher' as a 'friend of wisdom' he calls the protagonist of his story a 'friend of doubts' (*amator dubitationis*). This persona doubts the truth of the Holy Scriptures and the existence of God. His own sad situation and the terrible state of the world seemed plausible arguments (Otloh of St Emmeram [1060s] 1999: 256, 286). A demon seems to susurrate these destabilizing thoughts into his ear. Mention should be made here of a contemporary parallel from the Muslim world. In his philosophical parable 'Hayy b. Yaqzān' the Persian scholar Ibn Sina (973/980–1037) also speaks about demons whispering into the ear of humans and taking over their thoughts and their behaviour. They suggest that there is no eternal being that rules in heaven (Ibn Sīnā, § 19, p. 46). Otloh had no knowledge of Ibn Sīnā. Yet the faithful on both sides of the Mediterranean faced similar problems and found similar ways to describe and to conceptualize them. Otloh intended his *Liber de Temptatione* for novices who suffered like the tempted persona of his narration did. Some modern scholars struggled to accept Otloh's sentences for what they are, but Otloh is sufficiently explicit about them. Other writers were much more oblique. Edifying self-descriptions by doubters, although written to the present age, are very rare.

More often atheist thoughts are related about others. These stories, edifying *exempla*, intended for use in the spiritual care, were especially told about unschooled hermits, monks, nuns, and recluses. The religious sincerity and the high morality of these personas were given within the frame of these narrations (not in others) and thus listeners could identify themselves with their struggles.

Another way to interpret atheist thoughts was to declare them as lack of knowledge. When Latin pastors became more interested in the religious state of the lay communities during the central Middle Ages, atheistic feelings among them were noted. One of these acute observers was Peter of Cornwall, the Prior of Holy Trinity in Algate (c.1139–1221). In the preface to a work of his Peter wrote that few people still believed in idols nowadays, but many assumed that there was no God, that the world was eternal and that it was ruled by chance, not by divine providence. Peter interpreted these erroneous convictions as childish ignorance. He claims to confront these doubts with a collection of narrations on visions (Flanagan 2008: 86). A hundred years later Guillaume Peyrault (c.1200–71) also treated the problem of non-belief in his widely read work intended for (not university trained) pastors and for their flock in the cities (Guillaume Peyrault, 46). He explained to them that the belief that there is no God was an utterly foolish proposition. Those who accepted such a theory as true were not even worth a punishment. They needed brains instead of beatings. Four hundred years before Blaise Pascal (1623–62) and 400 years after the first Muslim thinkers (Chokr: 1993: 124) he demonstrated that to believe was the more prudent and the more rational decision. While Guillaume acknowledged the lack of empirical proof he stressed that believing would cause no harm, should it be unfounded. Not to believe, however, could result in an unwelcome surprise in the face of the Divine Judge after death (Guillaume Peyrault, 50–51; Weltecke 2010: 445f).

By regularly asking penitents whether they believed ‘firmly’ as was demanded by the Fourth Lateran Council, confessors became aware of doubts. The situation of confession itself also gave rise to introspection and doubts. As reformers were aware of this correlation they advised parsons not to be too harsh with tormented penitents. However, the theologians did not consider these feelings worthy of theological and philosophical consideration.

As the Latin pastoral reformers tried to systematize acts and thoughts by the communities they developed the received Early Christian categories of vices and virtues since the 13th century. These categories reveal their observations and interpretations. An important category was *acedia*. *Acedia* (among other aspects) described a state in which a person’s relation towards faith and the church in general was affected. In this case feelings like strong tedium, dislike of and indifference towards God and everything spiritual accompanied the reluctance to act as one should. *Acedia* by definition named a pure rejection of and disinterest in faith on an ascending scale. In the middle of the fifteenth century the Augustinian Canon Stephan of Landskron (d. 1477) in Vienna wrote a spiritual work in German for lay people in the cities who were able to read German. His book, *The Road to Heaven* (hymelstraß), is very mild in its exhortations and easy to read. Talking about *acedia* he acknowledged feelings and thoughts against the faith which already had become traditional. According to Stephan, these feelings destroyed one’s internal consent to faith. Yet one should not distress oneself because of such uncontrolled thoughts. Only when a person gave his or her inner consent to this dislike *acedia* became a capital sin (Stephan von Landskron, f. 102r–102v). This is also the case for those who despised, actively scorned or disturbed the celebration of the sacraments in church because of their irreconcilable aversion (Stephan von Landskron, f. 53r). As a sin *acedia* was punished with excommunication. In order to obtain penitence one had to ask for it with sincere contrition. According to these writings contrition was not self-understood. Stephan is very aware that his admonitions reached only those who were interested in their spiritual welfare.

In the early Muslim world the theodicy problem was discussed intensively because of the

confrontation between monotheist and dualist religions. In Eastern Christian communities the experience of catastrophes led to a theological debate on the theodicy question. In the Latin world the theodicy problem was of no concern for theoretical thought until the New Modern Era. Latin theoreticians relied largely on traditional answers from the Late Antiquity like the *Consolatio Philosophiae* by Boethius (475/8–c.525). As an answer to why the tyrant was not hindered by the almighty God, Boethius explained that the tyrant might do what he liked but not what he really wished. The true aim of everything human, he said, was the highest good. The tyrant, however, was never able to reach it. In this respect the oppressor is powerless, in spite of his worldly might. More than 400 manuscripts of this text are extant, many commentaries explain the difficult language. Boethius even provided an influential model for explaining fugacity, felicity and providence. Later writers strove to emulate him and composed consolatory books (Auer 1928). Other philosophical traditions like stoicism taught how to endure injustice. Astrologers explained catastrophes with the laws of nature and the effects of the stars.

When practitioners were confronted with concrete questions concerning Divine Justice in the face of earthly injustices they conceptualized these protests as a vice, the vice of *murmur*. Numerous examples in the spiritual literature confirm that *murmur* was something of an ambient noise of medieval Christian life. Many pastors saw *murmur* during a deadly disease as especially dangerous for the soul and constantly warned against impatience (*impatientia*) during illness. They acknowledged that on their deathbed some people were afflicted with fury and spoke in their hearts ‘there is no God at all, there is no justice’ (Stephan von Landskron: f. 200v–201r).

CONCLUSION

The medieval period was decisive for the formation of the atheist discourse in two ways. Intensive interreligious debates and the professionalization of theology and philosophy produced rational, philosophically founded polemics against particular religious systems by the different opponents. In the modern world, these arguments were ready to be taken up by critics of any religion. The atheist alternative in the Middle Ages also existed as a thought. Yet it is known to us as a theoretical construct by the orthodox academics themselves. The masters gathered arguments for and against the proposition that there is no God, without ever affirming it themselves. As their debate augmented and surpassed the ancient discussion on atheism and as their treatment was an integral part of any systematic theological tract, one could argue that the scholars were in part also responsible for the emergence of the phenomenon itself. At any rate their debate was also taken up after the year 1500 by critics of religion.

Although there are obvious differences between the established religions’ treatment of the atheistic idea there are also clear parallels. The Latin world even repeated debates some centuries after the early Muslims, albeit not on the same high intellectual level. In general the medieval reactions to the absence of faith are similar among each other and differ from the modern world. In contrast to modern obsessions with the atheism debate, the medieval worlds did not take atheism all too seriously. Instead, religious and secular elites largely considered alternative religious convictions as much more dangerous than no belief at all.

From the extant court records and legal collections it seems that neither religious law nor any concrete forms of persecution were aimed at the persecution of atheists. The reason for the fact that no heterodox philosophers are known who affirmed the atheist idea, was certainly not the fear of persecution. Atheism was considered as an immorality, as a sign of ignorance, or as a spiritual

problem. For that reason atheistic feelings among the public were treated with educational means and confessional admonition. Latin Christianity systematized atheistic thoughts as a spiritual problem and as a vice. Finally, to come back to the questions asked in the beginning: did atheism exist in the Middle Ages? The answer will be yes and no: modern atheism developed within a specific discourse, which rests on medieval roots but which started with a radical reshuffle of medieval arguments. There are good sources to argue, however, that there were people who did not believe in the existence of a God or gods.

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CHAPTER 12

RENAISSANCE AND REFORMATION

DENIS J.-J. ROBICHAUD

*Ainsi la fausse opinion
Se masquant de religion,
Elle peut nuire davantage,
Que quand ce masque estant osté,
On se garde qu'elle n'outrage,
En découvrant de quel costé
Pourroit arriver le dommage.*

—P. Nicolas Girault, *Minime* (Mersenne 1624)

ATHEISTS AND ATHEISM

WERE there atheists and was there atheism in the Renaissance and the Reformation? There are no clear records for self-professed atheists at the twilight of the Renaissance and the Reformation. Still Marin Mersenne, the influential member of the order of the Minim Friars and an acquaintance of René Descartes and other notable philosophers, believed that atheists masked themselves as Christians and in his *Questiones celeberrimae in genesim* of 1623 he states that one can find fifty thousand atheists solely in Paris (Mersenne 1623: cols. 235–462). Just four years earlier the Italian philosopher Giulio Cesare Vanini was tried and executed by the Parlement of Toulouse for the crimes of *lèse-majesté* and atheism. To be sure Mersenne counted Vanini among contemporary atheists (Hine 1976). Later periods often either questioned Mersenne's inflated numbers or objected to his attack against imagined atheists. Voltaire, for instance, was not convinced. In his *Dictionnaire philosophique*, he contradicts Mersenne (whom he sardonically calls 'le minime et très minime Mersenne') by not only claiming that Vanini was not an atheist but that presumed atheists were usually mere unorthodox philosophers (Voltaire [1764] 1994: *Athée, Athéisme*). Yet by the eighteenth century, a period when there were self-professed atheists, the doubt in the existence of atheists persisted. Diderot, a likely atheist, recounts in a well-known anecdote that when David Hume first sat at the table of the Baron d'Holbach, Hume denied the existence of atheists and stated that he had never seen one. To which d'Holbach is said to have replied: 'Count how many we are here. We are eighteen' (Buckley 1987: 375 n. 68).

Identifying oneself freely as an atheist, as d'Holbach had done, was one thing and being accused, as Vanini had been, was certainly another. In both cases, however, atheism was a meaningful position to which persons could ascribe or with which they could be imputed. Even as Hume doubted the existence of atheists he could not have doubted the existence of atheism, as he understood the term. In fact, for certain Early Modern Europeans it is because they assumed that atheism had abominable moral consequences that they doubted the existence of atheists. The aforementioned thinkers belong to a period later than the one in question but their opinions imply that they were working with pre-

established traditions of atheism.

It is largely during the Renaissance and Reformation that the semantic field of modern atheism began to be assembled and articulated. However, in one way or another various strategies have been adopted to study the history of atheism and atheists in this period in order to negotiate the lack of clear records of self-professed atheists. Some categorically deny the existence of atheists beyond the level of accusations, while others point to esoteric atheists. Some look for more visible evidence by studying atheism as a product of modern secularism, others by studying the history of theism.

ACCUSATIONS AND DOUBTS

Because there are no clear cases of self-professed atheists in the period, it seems that one is left to study either the history of hidden atheists, as Ernest Renan and David Wootton prescribe, or the history of atheism as a coherent intellectual position, which Lucien Febvre in his seminal study on Renaissance unbelief concluded was literally inconceivable according to the '*outillage mental*' ('mental equipment') of the period beyond an accusation. Nevertheless, the fact that a masked atheist bugbear was lurking in the periphery of many Renaissance and Reformation theologians and writers, as it did in Mersenne's, and that others doubted the existence of such creatures, as Hume and Voltaire did, neither confirms nor denies *eo ipso* that there were atheists. It does confirm, however, that atheism existed as an articulated position voiced against or by an atheistic *persona*.

By the end of the sixteenth century the term 'atheist' was being bandied about as a denunciation of another person's set of beliefs. The literature is ripe with examples. Rabelais accused Julius Caesar Scaliger of atheism in a letter to Erasmus; Étienne Dolet, the humanist who was himself burned at the stake for the crime of atheism, accused Erasmus of Lucianic atheism (Febvre [1942] 2003: 126–38). That is, as Febvre, Don Cameron Allen, Paul Oskar Kristeller, and even Voltaire have said, 'atheist' did not primarily denote someone who does not believe in the existence of God but characterized another's divergent, unorthodox, or heretical theism. The accusations released by the fractured grounds of religion in the Reformation are in certain respects analogous to the charges of atheism in Late Antiquity levelled by apologetic Church Fathers and pagan philosophers at each other—the former for abandoning the gods of the Greco-Roman polytheistic pantheon and the latter for not recognizing the Christian Trinity (Beatrice 2004; see also Mark Edwards' 'The First Millennium').

In both periods the use of 'atheist' as a term of accusation speaks to the polemical and apologetic nature of its semantics. As Nicholas Davidson explains in his study of unbelief in Italy:

[C]ertainly the word was used rather freely: for suicides and opponents of belief in witchcraft, for the immoral and the physically self-indulgent. But contemporaries used a number of such representative words as insults. In 1533, for example, the Venetian Council of Ten warned their officials in Verona that the friars of S. Fermo, who were responsible for many 'filthinesses' (*spurcie*) with the nuns of Magdalene, 'do not want to live under the rule of their founder, but as sons of iniquity ... as Epicureans and Lutherans.' Yet nobody now suggests that, in the sixteenth century, the word 'Lutheran' did not refer to something that really existed, even though it could also be used inaccurately; and the appearance of the word 'atheist' similarly indicates a contemporary awareness of at least the possibility of serious unbelief. It would hardly have been effective as an insult unless it had conveyed some sort of agreed meaning. (1992: 57)

Davidson rightly insists that the use of the word 'atheist' implies an agreement of meaning but prudently does not push the analogy so far as to say that it implies the existence of atheists.

It turns out that the comparison with Lutheranism is not completely accurate. For one, there were self-professing Lutherans who formed communities. If the accusation of 'Lutheran' implies the actual existence in the sixteenth century of Lutherans then, the analogy would conclude, the accusation of

‘atheist’ implies the actual existence of atheists. This is not necessarily the case. It implies contextualized meaning but it does not imply (nor does it preclude) the actual existence of convinced atheists any more than the use of the word ‘bogeyman’ implies the actual existence of such creatures. This is not to say that actual atheists did not exist, but that the use of a term merely indicates a shared language, idiom, and argument. Moreover, it does not necessarily designate an individual’s convinced certainty. To continue with the example of Lutherans, nobody would deny the actual existence of Lutherans in the sixteenth century even though we are unable to know the actual sense of certainty in the convictions of the self-declared Lutherans. How then can it be different with atheists? Doubts need grounds just as much as assertions; more than an insult or a profession of faith, the *persona* of the atheist expresses the modalities of possible certainties and uncertainties regarding atheism.

SECULARISM AND HUMANISM IN THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE

The devout Mersenne is neither the first nor the last to have sought for atheists among humanists and philosophers of the Renaissance. In fact, Febvre was going against the grain in arguing that there was no atheism in Renaissance humanism. Several writers who have weighed in on the question of the origins of modern atheism yoke it to secularism, a term coined in the nineteenth century by George Jacob Holyoake to avoid the negative moral connotations of atheism (Buckley 1987: 10), by tracing secularism’s intellectual genealogy to the humanists and philosophers of the Italian Renaissance. Most scholars of the word ‘humanism’ trace its modern origins to Friedrich Immanuel Niethammer who used the term in 1808 to describe a reform of German education based on classical learning and languages. To be sure, there are affinities between the proposed paedagogy of nineteenth-century Germany and the work of the Renaissance humanists who sought to expand the field of classical studies in the Renaissance (cf. Celenza 2010 and the literature cited therein). Nevertheless, ‘humanism’ has meant many things to many people. The humanism of Italian humanists, the argument often runs, is not merely a description of their interest in the ancients, but also a philosophical and secular reorientation of thought centred on the flourishing of man in this world.

Indeed, the claim that Renaissance humanists in Italy are the source of secularism has been made polemically both by theists and atheists who, depending on their sympathies, have turned to them as a source either of error or progress. For example, one only needs to look at current secular humanists, whose name itself is a patronym reflecting the movement’s self-professed intellectual genealogy. What then does secular humanism have in common with the humanists of the Italian Renaissance? The *Declaration* drafted by Paul Kurtz for the *Council for Secular Humanism* describes the humanism of the Renaissance as the secular naturalistic view of the universe that ended the religious Dark Ages, and influenced the Age of Reason and the Enlightenment (Kurtz 1980). Renaissance humanists were the gatekeepers between two periods and two views of the world, and the *causa efficiens*, so to speak, for the rebirth of secularism and unbelief. Thus one finds similar concepts describing the secular humanism and the Renaissance in *The New Encyclopedia of Unbelief* (2007) edited by Tom Flynn, in which Gianozzo Manetti, Marsilio Ficino, and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola are cited as evidence of Renaissance secular humanism: ‘It was during the Renaissance, beginning in the fourteenth century—when there was a turning away from the Bible back to classical pagan virtues, and an effort to secularize morality—that humanism began to flourish again as a literary and philosophical movement’ (Flynn 2007: 692; 437).

Although the fourth book of Manetti’s work seeks to confute Pope Innocent III’s *De contemptu mundi*, the work is not atheistic in the least. It is indeed true that Manetti cites classical non-Christian

texts but it is false that he also ‘turn[ed] away from the Bible’. In making his arguments Manetti deploys scriptural passages, the writings of the Church Fathers, as well as classical texts. For example, against Dicaearchus’ arguments that the soul does not exist, and against the myriad of ‘stupid, thick, and dense’ ancient philosophers who argue that the soul is corporeal (his list includes Thales, Democritus, Heraclitus, Empedocles, Anaxagoras, Diogenes, Leucippus, Hippias, Archelaus, Zeno, Aristoxenus, and Varro), Manetti quotes one of the greatest humanist models for philosophical inquiry and Latin style, Cicero, to the effect that the soul is in no way earthly but completely divine and from God, which, Manetti states, in all things ‘agrees to the highest degree with the faith and truths of Catholicism’ (Manetti [1453] 1952: 452). His approach, and that of many other Renaissance humanists, is less of a naturalist thinking without God but more of a classicist, philosopher, or rhetorician thinking with ancient texts. Christianity mediated humanist engagements with the ancients, and thus often led them to test the boundaries of orthodoxy (Celenza 2004). Pico, for his part, was excommunicated in 1487 by Pope Innocent VIII neither because he was an atheist, nor because he espoused a secular naturalistic worldview, but because the 900 highly theological theses that accompanied his *Oratio de hominis dignitate* were unorthodox and potentially heretical. Yet he too in the *Oratio* does not shy away from religion, but seeks to exclaim the theological and philosophical reasons for the great wonder that is man. Moreover, it is only in the generations after Kant that his *Oratio* came to be known as a founding document for modern human freedom and dignity (Copenhaver 2012).

In the periodization and historical narrative outlined by secular humanists, historians will undoubtedly be reminded of the meaning given to the Renaissance by Jacob Burckhardt whose work *Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien* (1860) famously claims that during the Italian Renaissance the Medieval veil of religious faith, illusion, childish superstitions, and collective consciousness first melted to reveal the self-reflexive modern secular individual who could study the world objectively. While the Burckhardtian paradigm has been called into question by scholars of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance alike, the force and vitality of his argument has maintained a certain élan to this day. Periodizations, historical narratives, intellectual genealogies, and prosopographies give order and meaning to the present by categorizing and charting the development of identities. It seems that for this group of modern thinkers, ‘humanism’ is a thinly veiled euphemism describing the beginning of the historical trajectory towards modern secularism, atheism, and unbelief.

In his voluminous *A Secular Age* (2007), Charles Taylor offers three understandings of modern secularism: emptying human society of God, turning away from the belief in God, and the positive historical conditions that take ‘us from a society in which it was virtually impossible not to believe in God, to one in which faith, even for the staunchest believer, is one human possibility among others’ (2007: 3) For our purposes a few points should be taken away from the work. Taylor’s historical narrative differs from the secular humanists’ and Burckhardt’s accounts insofar as his third understanding of modern secularism reacts against what he calls histories of ‘subtraction’, that is histories grounded in the first two understandings of secularism: emptying of and turning away from God—Kurtz’s ‘turning away from the Bible’ and Burckhardt’s lifting of the veil. A typical subtractive history understands the modern worldview as what remains after religion, superstition, and belief have been removed (it is thus akin to certain whiggish histories of the Reformation, Weberian histories of disenchantment, and other notable works like Keith Thomas’ *Religion and the Decline of Magic*). A subtractive history of modern atheism thus describes the historical process of the removal of the belief in God, and is often presented as the inevitable slide from humanism, through the religious pluralisms, conflicts, and doubts of the Reformation, the rational deism of the Enlightenment, and finally into modern secular atheism.

Rather than a subtractive account of the negation of God, Taylor, who like Burckhardt studies an

‘age’, proposes to study the positive shift of ‘the whole background framework in which one believes or refuses to believe in God’ (2007: 13). He outlines a change from a framework in which man naïvely believed in an enchanted world ordered by a transcendent God and sought his flourishing therein, to one where man self-reflectively acknowledges the background of belief, and allows for exclusive humanism, i.e., a position that holds that human flourishing is in a world with no transcendent but an immanent order. As Taylor explains, at least for the European élite, ‘this new humanism has deep roots in the Renaissance era, which dovetail with but are partly independent of religious belief’ (2007: 99). His account of the framework for secularism also shares certain affinities with Febvre’s ‘*outillage mental*’ of unbelief, insofar as Taylor argues that prior to the Renaissance unbelief would have been conceptually impossible since humanism is one of the conditions that allows for the very possibility of atheism to be articulated.

THE THEISMS AND DISBELIEFS OF THEOLOGIANS AND PHILOSOPHERS

Not too long after Febvre published his influential study, in 1953 Paul Oskar Kristeller identified Ernest Renan’s book *Averroès et l’Averroïsme* (1852) as the source of the ‘myth of Renaissance atheism’ at the heart of the primarily French historiography of *libertinage*:

Paduan Averroism which includes such thinkers as Pomponazzi and Cremonini represents a phase in the history of free thought. The theory of the double truth, as it was applied especially to the problem of the immortality of the soul, separating the doctrine of Aristotle and the conclusions of natural reason from the articles of faith, was nothing but a protective device. It is this secret disbelief which makes the Paduans interesting to the modern historians whereas their positive teachings are outdated and unimportant. ([1953] 1993: 542)

Understood according to Taylor’s concept of a subtractive history, the history of atheism-cum-libertinage records the liberation of thought from God and religion. Believing atheism to be nothing more than a polemical accusation, Kristeller warns against the teleological anachronism of reading the French *libertinage* of the seventeenth century and the explicit deism and atheism of the eighteenth century into the Italian Renaissance. Examining original sources from the period he concludes that the works in natural philosophy from the Italian Renaissance neither engage with free thought as such, nor question, nor even exert themselves to discuss the existence of God. Instead of ‘an insincere device for covering secret disbelief’, Kristeller considers the theory of the ‘double truth’ and the philosophical attitude of the Paduan Averroists as merely reflective of the traditional tendency to separate philosophy and theology in Medieval university curricula ([1953] 1993: 545–6).

More recent scholars who have sought the origins of atheism tend to short-circuit the Renaissance and, on the one hand, pull back its genesis into the Late Middle Ages in the philosophical and theological writings of Duns Scotus and William of Ockham, and on the other, push it forwards into post-Cartesian rationalism and science.

If atheism positions itself in relation to a theism that it does not believe, the identification of the latter will help explain the former. Thus instead of offering another subtractive history, Michael J. Buckley and other historians of atheism have turned to the history of the changing conceptions of God, beginning in the Late Middle Ages, in order to understand the origins, growth, and development of the phenomenon. Therefore, if ‘atheism is itself an intrinsically “modern” disposition’ and ‘if modernity creates the conditions for the possibility of atheism’ (Hyman 2010: xviii), as Gavin Hyman has argued in agreement with Taylor, the historian of atheism is confronted with the question: when and how was the God of both modern theism and modern atheism formulated?

To answer this question Hyman and Brad Gregory, for instance, equally draw on Amos

Funkenstein's arguments (and on a deeper level on Hans Urs von Balthasar) to argue that the theism rejected by atheists—a theism that postulates that creator and creatures are ontologically univocal—finds its roots with Scotus and Ockham. 'Metaphysical univocity and nominalism spread along with [European universities]. At the outset of the sixteenth century, the dominant scholastic view of God was not *esse* but an *ens*—not the incomprehensible act of to-be, but a highest being among other beings' (Gregory 2012: 38). Thus if God was no longer conceived as transcending creation but rather thought to be subsumed within the immanent order of nature, he became an expendable causal explanation. Univocalist metaphysics along with the Renaissance revivals of Platonism, Stoicism, and Epicureanism, Gregory argues, became essential layers of the Early Modern seedbed for the modern secular atheism (2012: 38–9). Hyman, for his part, skips over Renaissance humanism and traces an Averroistic continuity from Scotus to Descartes. Acknowledging that Scotus and Descartes were *sensu stricto* neither Averroists nor atheists, Hyman offers an amalgamation of their thought as the theism largely rejected by atheists. Funkenstein describes this process as the beginnings of secular theology, 'the universe that became, in the seventeenth century, both unequivocal and homogeneous inspired a fusion between theology and physics to an extent unknown earlier and later. Theological and physical arguments became nearly indistinguishable' (1986: 72). Whereas previous scholars considered Averroists to be atheists for separating the truth of philosophy from the truth of theology, this newer approach emphasizes how their philosophy fused with theology to produce the epistemology necessary for modern atheism.

This is largely in agreement with Buckley who states that atheism—again understood as a thoroughly modern idea—is seen in a fully crystallized form in Diderot and d'Holbach. These *philosophes* pushed the rationalist mathematics of Descartes and the mechanical empiricism of natural philosophy and science to their apex, where God was no longer seen as a necessary first principle to the immanent order of nature. The seeming paradox underscored by Buckley is that seventeenth-century theologians, like Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne, gave them the equipment required for the climb. They and theologians of their ilk adopted the epistemology of natural philosophy as a grounding for theology—a process similar to the fusion described by Funkenstein—to argue against atheism on purely philosophical terms. According to Buckley, the religious storms at the height of the Enlightenment may have fomented during the Renaissance and Reformation, but thinkers from this period like Bruno, and others from the seventeenth century like Spinoza, 'were either too removed from the discussions in natural philosophy or too intrinsically ambiguous to form a concatenated series of disciples that advocated their heritage within the Enlightenment' (1987: 33).

Alan Charles Kors, like Buckley, sets brackets to the chronological limits of his field of inquiry with Descartes and d'Holbach, and also finds the origins of atheism within the Christian theology of the period (1990; see also Kors' 'The Age of Enlightenment'). He records, in his terms, a great contest or fratricide between Aristotelian and Cartesian Catholics. Both camps, he reasons, engaged in a type of century-long disputation, the product of which was the speculative or theoretical atheist of the eighteenth century. Beyond these conditions, he neglects neither that Early Modern European encounters with new peoples, places, and cultures (some of whom according to reports from the period had no notion of God) nor that the rediscovered ancient works impacted theological perspectives and fractured the argument of universal belief in the existence of God.

Given that the atheistic bogeyman haunted the imaginations of theologians, and that accusations of atheism did in fact end in executions, it is expected that other scholars, like Michel de Certeau, have traced parallels between atheism and witchcraft. For de Certeau, both express the sixteenth-century doubt and uncertainty vis-à-vis the end of a medieval theological world. In Hyman's opinion, while witchcraft destabilizes an established theistic order from within, atheism does so from the outside by questioning the validity of the order itself. Yet Walter Stephens' study of witchcraft and unbelief

shows that the sets of belief of atheism and witchcraft did cohere within the same epistemic horizons.

It would facilitate the task of the historian if atheism could be studied as a phenomenon isolated from unbelief as a whole, since atheism, here understood, means the unbelief of a specific proposition or dogma, God's existence, while religious unbelief could be of a number of them, for instance, the immortal soul, hell, miracles, sacraments, or providence. Yet such a separation is untenable since in the Renaissance and the Reformation the semantic field of atheism does unmistakably encompass unbelief in such doctrines as well as the impious behaviour that such unbelief was thought to engender. As a case in point, the Renaissance and Reformation theologians who sought to prove the existence of witches, Stephens argues, were primarily worried about the existence of spiritual, immaterial, and transcendental being as a whole. In seeking proof of demonic corporeality witchcraft theorists and theologians were in effect trying to settle their doubts over the incompatibility of Aristotelian philosophy with Christian doctrines.

Not that everyone who advocated the pursuit and punishment of witches was an atheist. But the thought was lurking in the logic of their arguments and actions. It was often, to quote Borges, 'the only prohibited word.' At times, in its disguise as the thought of another, it was painfully explicit. For several centuries, 'the thought' was, not atheism proper, but what nervous Christians called *Sadducism* or *Sadduceeism*, a disbelief in the reality of spirit, what we would now call materialism. A desire to be convinced of the reality of spirit was the psychic glue that held the witch myth together, from Johannes Nider to sometime in the eighteenth century. (2002: 366)

Stephens quotes from the diary of John Wesley, the eighteenth-century founder of the Methodist movement, where he writes that if only one account of witches could be proven true 'all *their* Deism, Atheism, and Materialism' would be refuted (2002: 367). While one could argue against Wesley that the ontological reality of the immaterial is not an all-or-nothing proposition and that one can disbelieve in witches and still believe in God, Early Modern theologians were often afraid of throwing out the baby with the bath water.

One can easily see that within such Early Modern epistemic horizons, the proof for the existence of a spiritual and immaterial being—one spiritual *ens* or *entitas* such as a witch or the immortal soul—serves as a rampart defending the very possibility of the existence of spiritual entities as such, and *a fortiori* the possibility of God's existence. Thus for many Renaissance and Reformation thinkers the belief or disbelief in the immortality of the soul became, *a fortiori*, a paramount test for belief or disbelief in the existence of God. In short, according to many the disbelief in the immortality of the soul meant that one was an atheist. In the words of the sixteenth-century fideist Pyrrhonist Gentian Hervetus: 'Indeed it is they who, seeing that they are completely inimical to all religion and piety, have rightly obtained the name 'atheists' (*atheōn*): they thought to be able to wage war on God (*theomakhein*) with no better reason than by wholly destroying the divine part that is in them' (translated from Latin in Busson 1922: 279)

HUMANISTS REVISITED: WERE THERE DOGS WITHOUT MASTERS?

François Berriot, Tullio Gregory, David Wootton, and Nicholas Davidson have begun to assault the claims that atheists and atheism did not exist in the Renaissance. The conclusions reached by the atheistic *De tribus impostoribus* and the *Theophrastus redivivus*, Berriot and Gregory argue, were already articulated in various ways in the Renaissance (Berriot 1977; Gregory 1979.) Davidson insists that 'certainly, in early modern Italy all the arguments necessary for a fully developed atheism were put into circulation by believers' (1992: 59), and Wootton states, 'Historians lost sight of the fact that wherever persecution and censorship are established, there will be those who practise what Hume

termed ‘innocent dissimulation’. In an era of freedom of speech dissimulation no longer seemed innocent’ (1992: 19). He suggests that beyond the ones formulated by theologians one can identify actual atheists by reading between the lines, so to speak, of works by authors such as Paolo Sarpi and Pierre Charron.

In the eyes of Richard Popkin, however, Charron was no more than a sceptic who fell in line with a broad current Pyrrhonian fideism, a strong presence since the humanist Giovanni Pico della Mirandola first made extensive use of the writings of Sextus Empiricus. Concerning other *libertins érudits* like Gabriel Naudé and Guy Patin, true to the sceptical *epokhē*, Popkin initially suspends his judgment as to whether they were atheists or sincere Catholics (2003: 82). Nonetheless he is fully aware that because of fear of prosecution Early Modern authors often wrote between the lines: ‘Considering the various disguises that people have, is it possible to really ascertain in any given case, what somebody actually believes?’ (ibid.: 88) Forced to give an answer he claims that the evidence leads one to conclude that the *libertins* had ‘some form of minimal Christian belief’ (ibid.: 89).

New attention has also been given to the atheistic influence of Lucretius and Epicureanism among fifteenth century Italian humanists. Alison Brown has studied the alleged influence of Lucretius on the likes of Bartolomeo Scala, Marcello Adriani, Machiavelli, and Ficino, and Stephen Greenblatt has written a Pulitzer Prize winning work which argues that Poggio Bracciolini’s 1417 rediscovery of Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* became a momentous impetus for modernity. In Lucretius’ dactylic hexameter are found all its prerequisites: a material and homogeneous universe composed of void and the random collisions of atoms, an attempt to dispel the fear of death and religious superstitions, a liberation of moral pleasure and human flourishing in the world, and arguments against the immortality of the soul. To be sure, Lucretius and Epicurus are not professed atheists. Yet since the gods that they postulate are indifferent to human concerns, and since they remove final causation from their materialist universe, the resulting theism is one that denies providence and rejects transcendentalism. Even so, in a critical review of Greenblatt’s volume, John Monfasani concludes that there is no evidence to ‘suggest the grand subversive influence posited by Greenblatt’ (2011). Lucretius did not have as great an influence as other ancients such as the Neoplatonists and the sceptics. Moreover, I would remind the reader that, concerning the lack of extant *De Rerum Natura* manuscripts between the ninth and fifteenth centuries, Michael Reeve’s critical study of the poem’s manuscript traditions had already ‘cast doubt on the common notion that Christian scruples were to blame [for its] neglect’ (2007: 206).

I will offer concluding remarks on atheism and Marsilio Ficino, a fifteenth century Florentine humanist, priest, theologian, and Neoplatonist. Ficino is still celebrated primarily for having completed the first full Latin translation of Plato and Plotinus, and for writing his eighteen volume *Platonic Theology: On the Immortality of Souls*. He is by all accounts a Neoplatonist, but he also received a scholastic education, was an adept at Galenic medicine, and an enthusiastic reader of Lucretius in his youth. Yet Ficino claims to have burned his early *commentariola* on the poet. In his person, therefore, we already see in the mid-fifteenth century a convergence of all previously discussed vectors of traditions and forms of thought. It should therefore come as no surprise that he had something to say regarding atheism.

Tracing Ficino’s arguments in the *Platonic Theology* against the Lucretian opinion that religion is a symptom of illness, James Hankins has recently identified ‘Ficino as the fountainhead of Renaissance discussions of the physiological causes of atheism’ (2011: 30). He comments that Ficino in all likelihood was responding to his own youthful opinions. Turning the Lucretian position upside-down, Ficino understands religion as such (and not just Christianity) as a natural condition for man and

concludes that the lack thereof is a corruption or sickness of the soul that he associates with saturnine melancholia.

It is reported that Diagoras, Dicaearchus, Epicurus, and Lucretius were impious (*impios*) beyond others, but that occasionally they too were compelled by nature to assent to sundry religious observances, as their books testify. But just as they raised various objections against religion without being punished, so, if the impious (*impii*) were in the majority, many other philosophers too would have openly spewed out the poison of their godlessness (*impietatis*). But not to admit, as many do, one or other religious cult is not the same as rejecting all religion entirely. Very few have attempted the latter and they have done so indeed by voicing doubts rather than rooted convictions. (Ficino [1482] 2001–6: XIV, x)

Hankins is certainly correct in explaining that Ficino identifies the ‘soft atheism’ of those ‘who reject the dogmas and moral tenets of traditional Christianity’ (2011: 27). However, Ficino also addresses the conceptual possibility of the ‘hard atheism’ of those who reject religion altogether (*omnem religionem*), yet he expresses that such a possibility remains the product of doubts (*suspicantes*) rather than assertions (*asseverantes*).

Although Ficino claims in his *Platonic Theology* that the impious philosopher Diagoras, who was called ‘the Atheist’ and had a bounty on his head in Athens for his impiety towards the Eleusinian Mysteries, never went so far as to lack belief in the existence of God, in his earlier *Tractatus On God and the Soul*, which circulated in at least a dozen manuscripts in the vernacular as early as 1454, he declares:

Only Diagoras among all philosophers denies explicitly that God exists. Protagoras and Theodorus did not overtly deny God but doubted whether he existed or not. For this reason Diagoras was called by the name ‘the Atheist’ (*sancta Dio*), and Protagoras was exiled (*sterminato*) and his books burned. Leucippus, Democritus, Epicurus, Hermarchus, Menece, Aristippus, Metrodorus, and Lucretius admitted that God existed, but was thought to be in such tranquillity that he neither orders nor cares for anything outside himself. (Ficino [1454] 1937–45: 129–30)

Drawing on ancient sources to construct a specific lineage or group of irreligious philosophers, Ficino does conceive, even if only in the person of Diagoras, of the possibility of atheism and atheists who not only doubt the existence of God but also ‘explicitly deny that God exists’.

One may object, however, that Ficino had no conception of atheism since he in fact does not employ the word; he uses the Latin *impious* and the vernacular *negare Iddio esse* and *sancta Iddio*. *Atheos* is obviously a word of Greek origins, and much importance seems to have been given to vernacular transliterations in the Renaissance—it appeared in English in 1540 and in French in 1549 (Busson 1954; Buckley 1987: 9). Yet humanists were principally educated to write in Latin according to specific models of Latinity, and *atheos* was neither in common use among classical Latin authors nor among Latin Church Fathers. Moreover, the Vulgate translation of *atheoi* from *Ephesians* 2:12 is *sine Deo* and not a Greek transliteration like our modern English ‘atheists’. It remains to be seen if *atheos* was transliterated in Medieval Latin translations of the Greek Fathers. Cicero uses the Greek term once in *De natura deorum* (1.23) to characterize Diagoras and also employs *sacrilegus* and *impious* in the same context. Among the Latin Fathers, Arnobius and his pupil Lactantius offer the only recorded uses of the Greek term. They too seem to have set standards for the early Renaissance since they also use the Greek with *impious* (Arnobius, *Disputationum*: 1.29, 3.28; Lactantius, *De ira*: ix). Cicero and Lactantius were some of Ficino’s sources and the former’s assertion (voiced by the interlocutor Cotta) that Epicureanism destroys all religion and piety (Cicero, *N. D.*, I. 41) and the latter’s opinion that ‘when [Epicurus] removed providence he also denied the existence of God’ (Lactantius, *De ira*: ix) seem to fit with Renaissance conceptions of atheism.

Ficino’s study and translations of Plato also forced him to confront ancient atheism. While Plato did not coin the word he did establish clear philosophical uses and recorded for posterity that Socrates

was tried and condemned to death for being an *atheos*. Therefore when translating Plato Ficino does not transliterate *atheos* and *atheotēs* with the Latin *atheus* and *atheismus* but translates the Greek with various terms belonging to the same semantic field. Three times he gives us ‘without God or divinity’ (*divinitatis expers*, *Alc.* 134e4; *absque deo*, *Ap.* 26c4; *dei expers*, *Thea.* 176e4), once ‘most impious or profane’ (*prophanissime*, *Rep.* IX. 589e5), and four times ‘impious or impiety’ (*impietate*, *Let.* VII, 336b5; *impie*, *Gor.* 523b3; *impius*, *Leg.* XII, 966e5; *impii*, *Leg.* XII, 967c5) (all cited from Ficino 1491).

Like atheism, impiety sets itself against an ‘other’, piety, and clearly unbelief in the existence of God does not fall within the boundaries of Renaissance and Reformation piety. In a syllogistic fashion one can say that all atheists are impious but not all impious are atheists, that is one can commit an impious act while still being a devout believer in the existence of God, but to declare the non-existence of God is *eo ipso* an impious act. The question of impiety also raises many of the difficulties of studying atheism in the Renaissance and Reformation for it seems to push the inquiry beyond the realm of belief into practice and action. While one can say that someone is demonstrably impious for committing certain acts of sacrilege, towards the Host for example, how can one demonstrably practise atheism? How does one perform uncertainty or disbelief in the existence of God? Is someone an atheist if he behaves morally as if there were no God? Atheism would thus be very close to impiety. Or, does one become an atheist by pronouncing something beyond the limits of orthodoxy and the tolerable? Atheism, not limited to the theoretical positions of later centuries, would then be akin to sacrilegious profanity and blasphemy.

During his trial Socrates faced the accusations of ‘impiety’ (*asebeia*) and of being an ‘atheist’ (*atheos*), and was also compared to the philosopher Anaxagoras, who was exiled from Athens for emptying the heavens of gods. In Plato’s *Laws* the Athenian Stranger proposes severe legal penalties for impiety and atheism, and enshrines in law as most divine that the soul is immortal and that the movements of the heavens are ordered according to the divine mind (see also David Sedley’s ‘From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age’). These seem to be the boundary markers for atheism set by the Athenian Stranger. Did they change in the Renaissance? Disparaging Anaxagoras for understanding man and the cosmos according to a strict materialism, the Athenian Stranger states: ‘It was this that involved the thinkers of those days in so many charges of atheism (*atheotētas*; Fic. *impii*) and so much unpopularity, and further inspired poets to denounce students of philosophy by comparing them with dogs baying (*kusi mataias... hulakais*; Fic. *canes frustra latratibus*) at the moon, and to talk a world of folly besides’ (Plato *Leg.* XII: 967c–d).

Plato’s canine expressions are repeated in the *Republic* where a proper philosophical training is said to produce a class of guardian watchdogs, while an early and unguided exposure to dialectic produces eristic and impious puppies that bark and bite at all around them. Ficino adopts this vocabulary in numerous writings where Cynics, Aristippians, Lucretians, Epicurians, Lucians, lascivious poetasters, and Averroists (a close resemblance to the nomenclature of sixteenth-century atheistic accusations), in short all impious philosophers, are compared to unruly dogs lacking proper training and supervision by a master, and are frequently cast in hell to bark with Cerberus. Indeed, Ficino opens his *Platonic Theology* by exclaiming that without the worship of God (*dei cultus*) and the immortality of the soul man would be the most miserable animal. This is in line with his confrontational characterization of the poet Luigi Pulci as a rabid dog. Pulci was Ficino’s competitor for cultural influence at the Medicean court, but the abuse may have extended beyond a simple *ad hominem* since Pulci was denied a Christian burial *ob scripta prophana prophano in loco* apparently for disbelieving in miracles and the soul’s immortality (Robichaud 2006). It thus seems as though Ficino, whose writings often communicate an irenic nature, also had an apologetic side that set the tone for the accusatory way in which the term *atheus* was used in the sixteenth century.

Vanini was tried for ‘*athéisme, blasphémies, impiété, et autres crimes*’ under the name of Pompeo Ucilio or ‘Lucilio’. Histories from the period record not only the crime but the dehumanization of the atheist. Gabriel Barthélemy de Grammond, who presided over the judicial magistracy of the Parlement of Toulouse, recounts with detail that before strangulating Vanini and burning his body, the executioner cut out his ‘sacrilegious tongue’. When it was seized with a pair of pincers the prisoner ‘let out a loud horrible cry that you could say resembles a cow bellowing … the shout proved him to be an animal in death’ (Grammond 1643: 210; Vasoli 1999) Losing speech, Vanini could no longer articulate atheism. The characterization of the accused atheist as an animal is more than coincidental since it persisted in other accounts of his death. François de Rosset characterizes Vanini as a ‘mad dog’ whom he claims took on the *persona* of Lucilio since ‘he borrowed this infamous name due to his love for Lucian, who was the greatest atheist of his age’ (Rosset 1619: 209, 190). With the name ‘Lucilio’, Giulio Cesare Vanini was baptized, burned, and accused of adopting the *persona* of the cynic (itself derived from the Greek word for dog) and supposedly impious atheist Lucian. Febvre, who also shares a variant of the cynic’s name, believes that Renaissance and Reformation polemicists knowingly cried wolf for rhetorical effect, especially when the wolf in question was ‘un chien sans maître’ (Febvre 127). If in the period the atheist is difficult to locate as a self-professed identity, he was more than a scholastic straw man, the proverbial fool of Anselm and Aquinas; although still uncommon, he developed the contours of a rhetorical *persona*, delineated by an expanded but demarcated language of argumentation, an intellectual genealogy and prosopography, as well as sets of beliefs and disbeliefs. At that time, some believed that the mask worn by atheists simulated Christianity, and that once removed the atheist’s true dehumanised nature would be revealed. Yet masks not only conceal, like rhetorical *personae*, they are also means of expression. Voluntarily or not, the *persona* was worn and the role was played.

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CHAPTER 13

THE AGE OF ENLIGHTENMENT

ALAN CHARLES KORS

INTRODUCTION: IDENTIFYING ‘ATHEISM’

THE term ‘atheist’ as used in early-modern thought was inherently equivocal (as indeed it has been in all ages). On the surface, at least, almost all educated minds believed that, inductively, the whole of nature, or, deductively, demonstration of God from Being itself, or, for those with less confidence in reason, inward experience established beyond sincere doubt the existence of God. Further, the educated world continued to believe (though with less confidence as encounters with foreign peoples and re-analysis of ancient texts progressed) in what was termed the ‘proof from universal consent’, namely, that every nation, every people, every school of philosophy, and every time and place had some recognition of God’s being, so obvious was its truth. Unsurprisingly, then, the atheist—most often a foil rather than an encountered mind until the turn of the eighteenth century—was described either as the ‘fool’, the *homo stultus* described by Psalms 14 and 53, or as a depraved sinner frantically trying to convince himself that no Supreme Judge had witnessed his private sins. The ‘atheist’, thus, was someone either wholly deranged or wholly insincere. In the latter case, the condition was termed ‘practical atheism’, that is, the thought of one who lived as if there were no God and sought to justify such a life.

Nonetheless, examining the foundations of theology and analysing ancient philosophies, educated early-modern Europeans recognized, despite their descriptions of the atheist as *homo stultus*, what they termed ‘speculative atheism’, a disbelief in God by means of evidence, logical argument, or both. Indeed, they offered a wide array of portraits of such atheism, further complicated by the almost ubiquitous desire, in philosophical polemics, to portray one’s opponents’ arguments as leading inadvertently to atheism. Finally, there were two groups of thinkers from the late seventeenth century on who were perceived by a growing number of their contemporaneous critics to be preaching speculative atheism: heterodox philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes, Baruch de Spinoza, and John Toland, who asserted that the most common views of God were incoherent, childish, and anthropomorphic; and fideistic thinkers (from *fides*, that is, faith) such as Blaise Pascal, Pierre Bayle, and Pierre-Daniel Huet, who claimed that belief in God rested not upon demonstrative philosophical reasoning, but, ultimately, upon faith alone. Where modern scholars are far from convinced that these thinkers were truly ‘atheistic’, early-modern critics were almost unanimous in seeing the first group as such and, occasionally, in seeing fideism as a dangerous opening to disbelief (especially in the case of Bayle).

Some modern scholars, indeed, do attribute sometimes personal atheism and, more frequently, the roots of eighteenth-century atheism to such thinkers. Thus, Paul Vernière (1954) and Jonathan Israel (2001) assign such a role to Spinoza; Gianluca Mori (1999) and Pierre Rétat (1971) suggest such an influence for Bayle; and Kors (1992) has argued for the influence of both Hobbes and Toland on late

French Enlightenment atheism.

The problem of identifying what constitutes early-modern atheism is further complicated by the tendency of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century orthodox thinkers to see equations of God and Nature or emphasis upon the cynical political utility of belief in God to princes as ‘atheistic’, where most scholars today draw a sharp distinction between ‘pantheism’ (God as the only substance and thus immanent in all being) and ‘atheism’ (an absence of belief that God was proven or was relevant to the explanation of any phenomena). Most modern scholars do not see either Spinoza or Hobbes as ‘atheistic’ philosophers. For most early-modern thinkers, however, Spinoza surely was an atheist, and Hobbes almost certainly was such. For modern scholars, a focus on the political role of religion generally functions independently of theological claims. For the early moderns, claims that religion initially arose to serve a political purpose implied that belief in God was an imposture. Because the increasing expression of deism (belief in God coupled with a rejection of all sectarian claims of revealed religion) used that political argument commonly, early-modern Christian authors frequently accused deists of atheistic disbelief.

CHANCE AND DESIGN

Although most eighteenth-century Catholic theologians and polemicists decried deism as merely a stepping-stone to atheism, this was historically, with a few exceptions, not the case. It is difficult to overstate just how wildly speculative atheism seemed to most early-modern minds. How could one explain adaptation before Darwin, and if one offered a purely theoretical explanation of it (as the atheists did), what possible evidence could one offer? Did desert animals have desert camouflage and forest animals have forest camouflage *by chance*? Was it *by chance* that every creature had the senses, organs, and instincts suited to its particular and distinct place and niche in nature? Was it *by chance* that an immeasurable number of variables fell into place exactly for all forms of life to eat, to survive, and to reproduce? Was it *by chance* that rains fell upon the earth, that the sun gave us precisely the warmth essential to life, or, indeed, as Newton stressed as an impossibility, was it *by chance* that the placement and velocity of the planets and moons prevented gravitational collapse in our solar system? The examples were endless, and for most early-modern minds, it was a simple choice between *design* and *chance* being the cause of the order that made all such phenomena possible. Darwin would offer both theory and data. The early-modern world, in any significant sense, had only theory.

Thus, in Rousseau’s account of the atheists he met at the baron d’Holbach’s salon (to which we shall return), in the ‘Profession de Foi du Vicaire Savoyard’ of his *Emile* (1762), he defined his debates with them precisely in terms of whether or not order could be the product of chance. As Rousseau told it, the atheists argued that organized bodies were combined fortuitously, and that chance had formed the world we observe. For Rousseau, as for almost all early-modern minds, it was the intellectual equivalent of believing that printer’s type, randomly spilled from a barrel, could give us *The Aeneid* ([1762] 1979: 275–7).

THE ORTHODOX SOURCES OF ATHEISM

How, then, did atheistic argument enter the early-modern dialogue? Atheism, as understood by St Thomas Aquinas in the *Summa Theologiae* (Ia. q.2), entailed the belief that there were no

demonstrative proofs of God and that all of nature could be explained without reference to God. Paradoxically, those specific arguments entered mainstream French intellectual life, in the seventeenth century, in two generations of fratricidal debate within orthodox Catholic culture. As Aristotelians, Cartesians, and Malebranchists struggled with each other over who would be the philosophical voice of Christian theology, each school adopted a tactic of going for the philosophical jugular: reducing each other to impotence before the theoretical atheist by refuting each other's proofs of God and reducing each other's physical systems to a categorical naturalism.

Almost none of these protagonists actually thought that their opponents were disbelievers, but they argued that if one began from the premises of their antagonists, one logically should conclude that God was unproven and that nature could be explained without recourse to the divine. For Cartesians, no assurance could be derived from Aquinas' and the Aristotelians' *a posteriori* proofs, because induction allowed no certainty; nothing infinite could be derived from the finite; and nothing perfect could be inferred from the imperfect. For Aristotelians, the Cartesian demonstrations of God from the idea of God were a verbal game disconnected from the phenomena of the world. The Cartesians, in their view, defined a perfect being as having necessary existence, and, lo and behold, by definition, such a being existed. The Aristotelians claimed that no finite and imperfect human mind could contain the idea of the infinite and perfect, a being we inferred, to the contrary, from the world itself. The Cartesians replied that if there could be no human idea of the actually infinite and perfect being, then the Aristotelians could not know that any cause they inferred from the world was infinite and perfect, because they could have no such idea (Kors 1990: 297–356).

For the Malebranchists, for whom the idea of God could only be God Himself, the Cartesians were correct about the impossibility of all Thomistic and Aristotelian proofs, and the Aristotelians were correct that no human idea could actually be an idea of a perfect God. Against Malebranche, both Cartesians and Aristotelians argued that he had annihilated the very idea of God. With Cartesians and Malebranchists at their height of influence, the director of all Jesuit education in Paris informed his students that when Cartesians and Malebranchists said 'God', all they really meant was 'nature' (Kors 1990: 366–8).

The combatants could engage in this philosophical sparring because of their supreme confidence in the absurdity of any disbelief in God or any categorical naturalism. If you reduced your opponents to such naturalism, it merely was a demonstration of the failings of their philosophical systems. It was inconceivable to virtually all thinkers that matter could exist or act of its own essence. God was the only possible source of the original motion and the conservation of all being. Further, the new science seemed to almost all its devotees to have provided us with boundless evidence of the intelligent design of nature. How did it become possible for the atheist to think otherwise?

It was not the Aristotelians who insisted upon naturalist conclusions from Aristotelian thought. Quite to the contrary, they insisted on the virtual indispensability of Aristotelian philosophy to Christian theism. It certainly was not the Cartesians who drew naturalist conclusions from Descartes, nor the Malebranchists who drew naturalist conclusions from Malebranche. Again, each camp saw itself as a pillar of theistic orthodoxy. Rather, the proponents of each system, proclaiming their school alone to be the appropriate voice for Christian culture and education, also claimed to see a logical naturalist conclusion to the thinking of each rival philosophy. It was in the actual, historical context of early-modern debates, passions, and polemic—played out before a fascinated reading public in book after book, refutation after refutation, and reply after reply, and spilling out into the popular learned journals—that the culture generated the model of an atheism that triumphed over (the other's) Aristotelianism, (the other's) Cartesianism, (the other's) Malebranchism. With relentlessness and skill, the dialecticians of early-modern learned France taught readers to find the atheistic

naturalism of all systems. The issue for them was where ways of thinking not their own should be judged to lead. The historical issue, however, was what such debates and characterizations placed before the reading public as lessons in naturalism.

For Aristotelians, there was a common theme of attack: by eliminating final causality in physics, Cartesian philosophy purged recognition of providence from natural philosophy; by seeking to explain the development over time of the cosmos by the laws of mechanics, it denied creation and design; by attacking Aristotelian substantial forms, it made matter-in-motion a productive agent of order. In short, the opponents of Descartes would insist that if one were a Cartesian, one had no need of God to understand the natural world.

Relentlessly, Aristotelians argued that without final causes—the purpose or *telos* of things that Cartesians ruled to be unknowable in physics—natural changes would be conceived of as explicable by the movements of matter alone. Further, for these late scholastics, who dominated the universities, the Cartesian equation of matter and extension also denied the qualitative degrees of perfection that led the mind to God, leaving nature a uniform matter combining and separating. Fatally, for the Aristotelians, the Cartesian denial of substantial forms—immaterial entities that governed the behaviour of material things—gave to matter itself a creative power, whose own purely material motions accounted for all phenomena. As the widely read Jesuit *Journal de Trévoux* put the issue in March 1708 with a bluntness typical of two generations of debate: ‘There is no longer any question of God in the Cartesian system. Everything occurs by purely mechanical general laws, and, yet worse, by laws founded not upon the choice and free will of God, but upon the very inherent and inalienable nature of things ... such that a good Cartesian can say: Give me matter and motion, and I will make a world, that is to say, with that alone, I will explain how the world was made’. It went on, ‘A strict Cartesian ... , without departing from his principles ... can suppose matter given of itself and without God’s involvement ... [and] it is quibbling on the subordinate issue after having decided the principal issue to have recourse to God for the production of motion when one has learned to dispense with him for the existence of matter’ (1708: 387–9).

Though more circumspect, there was a similar assault by the Cartesians and Malebranchists upon Aristotelians, demonstrating that they must conclude from Aristotelian premises in favour of categorical naturalism. The Benedictine Malebranchist philosopher Dom François Lamy (1636–1711), in his *L’incrédule amené à la religion*, writing for a particularly broad audience in 1710, was typical of a vast assault upon Aristotelian belief. In his critique, the Aristotelians had invested material substances with ‘forms’ and ‘virtues’ that ‘explained’ the natural behaviour of corporeal things. If they were correct, then there would be no grounds for denying that purposeful, regular activity could result from the essential nature of matter. In the Cartesian and Malebranchist systems, he argued, all depended upon the causal role of God, as the original or ongoing source of activity. In the Aristotelian system, ‘if God could give matter these forms and these faculties, capable of acting with such regularity, it is a sign that they are not contrary to the nature of things, and that they have no incompatibility whatsoever with matter. Thus, they could be eternal and serve for the arrangements of matter’s parts’. The Aristotelians could not fall back on the necessity of a divine cause of motion, for ‘if matter could receive the motive power from God [rather than motion itself], there is a natural compatibility between this power and matter’. If one allowed Aristotelian powers and forms, then the bulwark against atheism, an assurance of matter’s impotence to effect motion and order of its own nature, would be fatally breached, and ‘one can parry this blow only by maintaining, with the Cartesians, that matter is in no way susceptible of force of movement’. The Aristotelians had no need of God (1710: 78–118).

For anti-Aristotelians, then, Aristotle’s system had made the natural order creative and tending to

order of its own natural powers. How dare the Aristotelians accuse Cartesians of implicit naturalism? As the widely read Jean-Pierre Nicéron angrily observed, the Aristotelians had substituted an inherent ‘nature’, or substantial form, for the power of God, ‘to act in His place, and they speak of it in the same way as if it were in fact an intelligent Being that provides for everything with much wisdom’. Such a philosophy, in his view, and that of the many prior authors whom he cited, was nothing less than a pagan divinizing of nature itself (1727–45: XXXIII, 131–3).

For Cartesians, it was the supposition of these ‘real and distinct’ *natural* qualities which, in the Aristotelian system, eliminated the dependence of activity upon motion derived from God. As the Franciscan monk and philosopher Antoine Legrand (writing in England) put it in his *Apologia Pro Renato Des-Cartes* (1679), all natural things were either a substance or a mode of a substance. If the Aristotelians meant what they said about natural substantial forms independent of material substance, they believed in a self-subsisting natural being determining natural phenomena, a manifest self-contradiction for a Cartesian, he believed, but obviously not for an Aristotelian (1679: 18–19). It was these sorts of analyses that permitted anti-Aristotelians such as La Mothe Le Vayer to describe an Aristotle so naturalistic ‘that the majority [of thinkers] have estimated that he recognized no other God but nature itself’ (1671: 292–4). As the pious Jansenist theologian and priest Adrien Baillet, in his frequently reprinted *Vie de Descartes* (1691) put it, Aristotelian substantial forms allowed a creative matter, and the dominant philosophy could not ‘strongly combat the Atheists unto the deepest recesses of their fortifications’ (1691: II, 362–3).

In England, similarly, the Cambridge Platonists (Henry More, Joseph Glanvill, and Ralph Cudworth, in particular), viewing Hobbes’s claim that we had no knowledge of ‘immaterial substance’ as the denial of all theism and attributing Hobbes’s materialism to what they saw as Descartes’s removal of all spiritual causality from the external world, sought to reduce both Hobbes and Descartes to a set of atheistic arguments. The orthodox learned world was teaching readers how to think atheistically. Atheism would be a minor current in Enlightenment thought, which remained overwhelmingly deistic, but it would be a real and shocking presence.

ATHEISM AND PHILOSOPHICAL SCEPTICISM

A critical catalyst for the emergence of early-modern atheism, then, was that every particular proof of God had its philosophical critics, with rationalists rejecting every *a posteriori* proof of God from the evidence of nature, and empiricists rejecting every *a priori* proof of God, as non-demonstrative. Similarly, every attempt to demonstrate the indispensability of God to explanation of natural phenomena also had its orthodox critics. Sincere fideistic sceptics could reject the notion of demonstrative proofs altogether. Works universally identified as atheistic, both by the author and by readers—Jean Meslier’s *Testament* (unpublished, 1729, but circulated as a clandestine manuscript), Baron d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature* (1770), or Jacques-André Naigeon’s *Philosophie ancienne et moderne* (1789–94)—claimed that all proofs of God were circular, self-contradictory, literally incomprehensible, or beset by insoluble logical difficulties. These atheistic works further focused, aided by prior fideistic thinkers—as in Pierre Bayle’s articles ‘Pyrrho’, ‘Manicheans’, and ‘Paulicians’ in the *Dictionnaire historique et critique* ([1695–7] 1730)—on the incompatibility of a world of suffering and injustice with the existence of an omniscient, omnipotent, and benevolent deity.

Dealing with philosophical scepticism and belief in God is highly problematic historically, especially when the issue is that of theodicy (the reality of evil in a perfect God’s creation). The ‘problem of evil’ continually obsessed philosophers and theologians, from ancient Greece to the

Enlightenment (and beyond). Voltaire, for example, was a true deist who wrote extensively against atheism, insisting that the order of the world proved God as an intelligent designer. At his moment of greatest despair, however, writing his poem (1756) on the earthquake and tsunami that destroyed Lisbon in 1755, he nonetheless proclaimed that only Bayle had understood that doubt was reason's only possible conclusion about ultimate things, that the problem of evil was unanswerable, and that he would give God his 'respect', but reserve his 'love' for mankind (1756: 'Préface' and 'Poème').

David Hume (1711–76), the philosophical sceptic *par excellence*, certainly resisted dogmatic conclusions about ultimate (or, indeed, proximate) things. When he met the philosophers of Holbach's salon, he supposedly proclaimed that he did not believe that there were actual atheists, since he never had met one. Everyone in Great Britain, he noted, believed in some form of 'natural religion' (Kors 1976: 41–2). In his own *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion* (published posthumously in 1779), however, in the voice of Philo, one of his three interlocutors, Hume spent eleven of twelve dialogues eviscerating proofs of God both *a priori*, and, above all, to refute 'natural religion', from the evidence of the natural world. In the final dialogue, however, Philo conceded, in highly attenuated form, the argument from nature that he appeared to have won in the prior eleven (for reasons of substance or policy, we know not). He granted that 'the cause or causes of order in the universe probably bear some remote analogy to human intelligence', a proposition which he insisted had no implications for mankind (1779: 262). Nonetheless, in the tenth dialogue, Philo admitted, at length, that when it came to the order and coordination of the world, 'I needed all my sceptical and metaphysical subtlety to elude your grasp.' When it came to human suffering and misery, however, 'Here I triumph.' The human condition did not allow the inference of a benevolent God (*ibid.*: 171–96). Any hospital, prison, battlefield, maritime disaster, let alone 'tyranny, famine, or pestilence' sufficed to silence the defender of natural religion (*ibid.*: 180). Doubt was not a system of the world, but it was ever a presence in human thought about God.

THE PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS OF ENLIGHTENMENT ATHEISM

Full-blown and systematic atheism may have been a minor stream of Enlightenment thought, but its appearance changed the future of European thinking. John Toland's *Letter to Serena* (1704), published in London (and translated into French by Holbach in 1768), was foundational to the positive, categorically naturalist side of atheism: that nothing in nature required recourse to God for explanation. This was, as noted, the second foundation of atheism. Toland himself is difficult to pin down as a thinker: radical deist, atheist, pantheist, or all of these in succession? Many of his contemporaries and virtually all of the later French unbelievers, however, read the *Letter to Serena* as atheistic. For early-modern minds, the two great barriers to the categorical naturalism ascribed by Aquinas to speculative atheism were, first, that matter depended upon an immaterial being for its motion (matter itself being inert and thus indifferent to motion or rest); and second, that the phenomena of the human mind could not be explained by matter and its forces. Toland assaulted both of those barriers, arguing that motion was essential to matter and that the motions of the physical brain were prior to, and the cause of, thought.

Motion, the *Letters to Serena* insisted, was essential to all phenomena, and most philosophers erred by using motion to refer only to 'local motion', the acquired motion of particular beings from which we derived the science of mechanics. The presupposition of all motion, however, was 'the moving Force', or 'Action', an attribute as necessary to conceiving of both local motion and rest as matter's extension was to conceiving of dimension and shape. It required force to produce or maintain both

‘local motion’ and ‘rest’, a force essential to matter. Local motion was an ‘effect’ of the motive force of matter, and rest was ‘a real Action of Resistance between equal Motions’. Attributing this force to ‘God’ led to the absurdity either of accounting for all local motion and rest in terms of some original impetus given to matter or of assigning to God those natural causes of which one was as yet unaware. Conceive of motion as essential to matter, and one could engage in serious physical inquiry, avoiding the ontological separation of cause and effect and all the conceptual and explanatory difficulties that followed from such a separation. From our experience, Toland urged, we knew that matter was essentially active and that all sensible qualities depended upon motion. There was a material whole and its activities, including thought. To label the latter activity ‘soul’ or ‘immaterial being’ was to create an imaginary world beyond experience that was conceptually incoherent, unproductive of further knowledge, and not amenable to confirmation by experience (1704: 131–239). These arguments all became the common property of later atheists.

NATURALISM AND ATHEISM

Approaching similar issues from the perspective of the ‘life sciences’, the French physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie, in his *L’homme machine* (1748), argued that postulating ‘spirit’ or ‘immaterial substance’ to matter explained nothing and created a dead-end for further physical and physiological inquiry. Matter was inherently active and alive; thought and will were behaviours of body, specifically of the brain and central nervous system; and ‘nature’ had made us ‘organisms capable of thought’. He claimed philosophical ignorance on what he presented as the unanswerable question of the existence of God, though he noted that he had ‘a friend’ who believed that the human race would be immeasurably happier if it did not believe in such a being ([1748] 1996: 3–39).

While clandestine atheistic manuscripts circulated in the early decades of the eighteenth century, most notably the *Testament* of the priest, Jean Meslier (see Benitez 1996), the baron d’Holbach’s *Système de la nature* was the first published, unequivocal, programmatic, and self-described atheistic work of the high Enlightenment, and the first edition of 1770 included a preliminary discourse by Holbach’s fellow atheist Jacques-André Naigeon. In this and in later works by both authors, most readers entered a new and startling world in which there existed solely a corporeal nature which was the aggregate of all real things. Human beings existed as a part of that corporeal nature, but as thinking parts who wished, for diverse reasons, to imagine themselves exempt from its dominion. Thought, however, was the behaviour of a physical being, arising from physical organization. We were determined in our will, behaviour, and normal judgement by an ineluctable attraction to pleasurable experience and aversion to painful experience. These determinations, however, could be based upon either true or false notions of the causes of our well-being or suffering. The physical senses alone could be the ultimate sources of true knowledge of physical nature. Misunderstanding this, we suffered terribly. Absolute naturalism was at once our reality, the antithesis of theism, and the essential preamble to any achievement of the natural human agenda of increasing happiness and minimizing suffering.

In this view, man was solely a product of nature and wholly subject to its laws. Seeking well-being from some imaginary and illusory reality apart from observed nature had served us ill, because nature operated inexorably around and upon and within us. Either we learned empirically about it (including about ourselves), or we forfeited the possibility of that happiness and diminution of pain to which our impulses summoned us. Ignorant of real causes, we created gods, superstitions, and myths as paths to well-being, increasing our misery in the process.

For Naigeon, belief in God was the ‘barrier’ to all essential human progress. His ‘Discours préliminaire’ to the *Système de la nature* asserted that religion was a war against the natural tendencies to seek happiness, peace, and mutual benefit. Religion’s claim to authority was that it spoke on behalf of ‘a fierce God [*un Dieu farouche*] whom it presents as the Tyrant of the human race’. Humanity would not seek to understand its painful physical or social condition until it understood that the ‘force’ governing phenomena was not God, but merely the necessary laws of an amoral physical nature, and that their actual well-being depended upon the application of their knowledge to that nature. Atheism, the conception of a nature without God as source or governor, alone could lead us to seek the satisfaction of our needs and the diminution of our pains among their actual causes (1770: ‘Discours’, 1–16 [paginated separately]).

For most of Holbach’s and Naigeon’s readers, the world, whatever its substance, bespoke intelligent providential design, and foremost among the evidence for this was the adaptation of living beings—and, in particular, humans—to their environments. This was, with the question of the source of motion and of mental phenomena, the third great barrier, the culture believed, to categorical, atheistic naturalism. What were the sources of a reply to this objection?

EPICUREANISM AND ATHEISM

Holbach and Naigeon were heirs to a vast literature, most of it pious, which denied the human ability to discern the providence of God without faith. They were heirs also to a century of Cartesian and other forms of anti-finalism (all entailing the rejection of knowledge of the causal purposes of God from the particular structures of nature). They extended these themes dramatically. Crucially, they and their contemporaries were also heirs to over two centuries of an intense Epicurean presence in European thought.

The Epicurean tradition had reached the learned world of seventeenth-century France in a great diversity of forms and by a great diversity of means. It was known by classical, patristic, scholastic, and contemporaneous citations, paraphrases, commentaries, and explications; by commonplace caricature; by frequent pedagogical reference to its significance as one of the major ‘schools’ of ancient thought, for purposes both of erudition and of refutation from Christian perspectives; and by its own preserved texts, above all, Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*.

Those who viewed Epicureanism as irreligion and atheism often wrote of it as the *ne plus ultra* of pagan disbelief, but it was not the case that everyone saw it in such a light. Some early-modern orthodox minds found Epicurean atomism quite benign, judging it to be above all a philosophy of physics or of ethics, or both, with an incidental and curious theology somehow appended to it.

On the whole, most seventeenth- and eighteenth-century commentators claimed to see the Epicurean doctrine as a patently absurd system, with its atoms, its void, its plurality of worlds, its material soul, its indifferent gods, and either its denial of order or its belief that what we termed ‘order’ could be, in some sense, the product of chance. For such commentators—and their numbers were legion—Epicureanism was far more an example of the fanciful and benighted thought of the pre-Christian past than a substantial menace to any orthodox certainties. For every author who stood in horror or fascination before Epicurean thought, there were many theologians and philosophers who treated it simply as a convenient *locus classicus* of objections that the human mind had framed against providence.

For some readers, however, in numbers impossible to discern, the particular *frisson* of Epicurean philosophy—its thrill and its horror—arose from its unabashed denial of providence. Scholars and

dialecticists might well argue that objections to providence in general, entailing the attribution of causal agency to chance, were logically absurd and dependent upon an incoherent hypothesis. Nonetheless, shepherds of human souls within Christendom always had recognized that, in practice, doubts about providence in the minds of a suffering humanity were the great occasions of at least ephemeral doubts about the existence of God. For any Christian mind that could imagine (or experience) the uniting of such a cry of despair to the weight of Epicurean objections to providence, however, the prospect was quite awesome.

The Epicureans of tradition and extant text had argued against providence on the grounds that the gods were too blessed to be concerned with the world. In one sense, that was a theological argument—about the nature of divine being—that Christian theologians did not find particularly difficult to resolve: wasn’t indifference rather than governance a contradiction of divine perfection? In another sense, it was a philosophical argument that touched the heart of categorical naturalism: did the phenomena of the world truly testify to governance by a perfect being? Epicureanism, as a set of texts and commonplace positions, was an object of study and commentary in the early-modern West, and, as such, it exposed all serious students to a perspective from which a human being might gaze upon the whole of the world and find no evidence of divine mind or wisdom in its being, arrangement, and operations.

NEO-EPICUREANISM: GUILLAUME LAMY

The most influential late-seventeenth-century neo-Epicurean was Guillaume Lamy, doctor-regent of the Faculty of Medicine of the University of Paris (not to be confused with the pious François Lamy, discussed earlier). His *De Principiis Rerum* (1669) was a critical comparison of the ‘three world systems’, Aristotelian, Cartesian, and Epicurean, in which the author favoured Epicureanism at every turn. Crossing the naturalist Rubicon, Lamy proclaimed motion to be not a mode of matter, but essential to body itself (1669: 69–77, 249–68). He made plain the unprivileged natural position, in his system, of the particular world that man inhabited, arguing that there were ‘an infinity of worlds’ within the universe, and that the extinction of any sun would cause the dissolution of the cosmos that surrounded it, providing matter for neighbouring worlds, but felt no more by the universe ‘than the world would feel the death of a flea or the fall of a single tree within an infinite forest’ (*ibid.*: 277–8). He argued that if ‘chance’ were understood to mean the cause of things by the undirected physical disposition of things, it was exactly what we meant by natural explanation (*ibid.*: 283–99). Anything else was theology, not physics, he insisted, two categorically distinct realms. (He concluded piously that he was a Christian who saw God in nature by faith alone; as a philosopher, he saw only a consistent system of natural causes [*ibid.*: 296–9].)

In Lamy’s *Discours anatomiques* (1675; reprinted in Brussels in 1679), addressing the nature of anatomy, he argued that purposeful function did not create form, but, rather, form created function. The suitedness of living things, and, in particular, of man, was the outcome of chance. It was illogical, he wrote, to reason from function to purpose, accusing his critics of committing themselves to the proposition that God created the clitoris so that women could masturbate ([1675] 1679: 81–2). Eyes and ears were not made so that we could see and hear; rather, we see and hear because physiologically we have ears and eyes. The goal of anatomy was to describe according to experience, not to fabricate occult causes beyond its ken (*ibid.*: *passim*).

The mind itself, Lamy observed, contemplating its own achievements, such as mathematics and logic, refused to think of itself as ‘soiled by matter’ and wished to think of itself as ‘divine’. Indeed,

the mind achieved prodigious things, but let it not forget that one single gram of opium vitiates all its functions, that five glasses of wine renders a genius imbecilic, and that the mind is born, matures, finds it strength, and weakens with the body (ibid.: 97–120). Matter-in-motion randomly but necessarily, given its specific configurations, made this or that part ‘by a blind necessity of the movements of matter’, without purpose (ibid.: 61–5). Even the suitedness of species could be accounted for by their system. ‘At the birth of our world, which is but a small part of the universe’, he explained, the diverse arrangements of matter had produced a large variety of animals of different species. Most were not suited for survival or procreation and, unable to feed themselves or multiply, they were not observable now by natural philosophers. The remainders, some small minority of the original animals, were well suited to preserve themselves, and they compose the species that we observe today. Only the suited survived and procreated, and the world was populated by animals whose arrangements appeared suited for their needs, which wrongly occasions our wonderment (ibid.: 19–24). Lamy again claimed that faith alone saw God in all this, where philosophy sought knowledge of a system by which all things had come to be as we observed them without the intervention of intelligence, purpose, or design (ibid.: 29–31). If that were piety or fideism, then what was naturalistic disbelief?

Indeed, in the eminent John Ray’s *The Wisdom of God* (1691, and then in revised and augmented editions of 1692, 1701, and 1704), which was translated into French in 1714, he defined the ‘principal’ atheistic position as the argument ‘that things made the usages, not usage the things’. To even attempt such an argument, Ray noted, atheists needed to account for suitedness without intelligent design. That absurdity, he argued, was the last refuge of atheism ([1692] 1714: 423–5). It was precisely that ‘last refuge’ of atheists which Lamy had articulated in 1675.

HOLBACH AND LUCRETIUS

The quintessential Enlightenment atheist, Holbach, knew Lamy’s work, knew expositions of and scholarship about the Epicurean tradition, and, in particular, had a deep and active interest in Lucretius’s *De Rerum Natura*, which first had articulated Epicurean arguments at length. The catalogue of Holbach’s library, produced at his death, showed twelve Latin, English, Italian, and French editions of *De Rerum Natura*, published between 1620 and 1773 (1789: 124–5). Further, he sponsored his family’s tutor, Lagrange, to produce a prose translation of Lucretius (1768), frequently reprinted between 1668 and 1829. Lagrange’s work, with his own introduction and critical notes, was done with the assistance of Naigeon, Diderot, and Holbach himself (Diderot 1818–19: XII, 1–3; Barbier 1822–7: II, 1354; Kors 1976: 87). Lagrange’s volume was published at the moment when Holbach was making a profound transition from publishing irreligious, above all anti-Christian, works to publishing explicitly atheistic and materialist works. His requested publication of Lucretius in a very accessible French translation is thus, in some ways, Holbach’s first major step in his explicitly atheistic career. At a time when Holbach and Naigeon (as evidenced by texts but also as attested to by Naigeon himself) were, in Naigeon’s term, ‘atheizing’ their translations and editions of heterodox, mostly deistic works, the circulation of Lucretius, without gilding, sufficed (on the ‘atheizing’ of texts, see Kors 1972: 45–6).

The influence of Epicurean philosophy on Holbach’s thought appears great indeed. Recall Rousseau’s account of his debates with atheists at Holbach’s salon, where the passionate deist defined his debate with Holbach, Diderot, and their devotees precisely in terms of ‘chance’ (even if, as determinists, they would not have used that precise term). With real echoes of Lucretius in the

arguments of ‘the philosophers’ with whom he disputed there, Rousseau painted their beliefs as follows. They argued that ‘organized bodies were combined fortuitously in countless ways before taking on constant forms’. When told that nothing tossed at random could produce order, the atheists replied, ‘You forget … the number of throws’. In short, they believed that ‘combination and chance’ had formed the world we observe. The debate between deist and atheist, Rousseau noted, was precisely over whether order could be the product of chance ([1762] 1979: 275–7). Indeed, Rousseau put many of Lucretius’s (and Lamy’s) more explicit arguments in the mouths of his atheistic interlocutors at Holbach’s salon, in particular the argument that nature had produced many monstrous forms incapable of survival and reproduction, such that we only were seeing the survivors (ibid.; cf. Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, V.837–77).

Holbach’s *Système de la nature*, Enlightenment atheism in its purest form, indeed echoed these inherited Epicurean themes, and it was understandable that when the *parlement de Paris* condemned the work in 1770, it proclaimed that its author had ‘revived’ and ‘expanded upon’ the ‘system of Lucretius’. In the *Système*, all that was meant by ‘order’ was a moment of natural configuration conducive to our human survival and happiness. All that was meant by ‘disorder’ was a natural configuration conducive to our destruction or suffering. Human beings were but a moment in the eternal flux, but the narrowness of our time-frame and our illusory self-flattery about our place in the cosmos led us to believe that eternal change and natural structure existed in order to make us possible. In fact, every living entity known to us existed for a while, and then, as conditions changed, decomposed, providing materials for new entities. That was an appropriate model of nature writ large. We knew nothing about our origins or the causes of our seeming adaptability, but our planet surely was simply one among many detached celestial bodies, and life surely was the particular production of matter on this particular globe in its particular circumstances. If essential physical relationships changed, which they must, then forms of life unable ‘to coordinate’ with their surroundings would die out, and only varieties capable of that coordination would survive. We believed ourselves to be the king of nature, but (almost borrowing Lamy’s own phrase), if one atom should displace itself in the universe, it could begin a sequence that would lead to our destruction and to the reign of new forms of life on earth ([1770] 1998–2001: II, 217–18).

For Holbach, human life was a production of nature and wholly subject to its laws. Ignorant of those laws and desperate to preserve himself from pain and fear, man had invented illusory realities apart from nature, illusions on which he convinced himself that his well-being or suffering depended. This strategy, so to speak, had been profoundly dysfunctional for humankind. First, it had led us away from efforts to understand nature on its own real terms, which alone could put experience and knowledge in the service of the heart’s desire for ease from pain. We were forfeiting the very possibility of that happiness or diminution of suffering that we were seeking through religion and supernaturalism. Second, the turn away from nature, in addition to leaving us ignorant of real causes, had led us to create gods, superstitions, and myths as would-be routes to well-being, which, history taught us, had only increased our misery. Fearful and helpless, we turned to authorities that we believed could control the forces above nature, when it was our mastery of nature itself upon which our well-being depended. The only means of redressing the human condition was to see and study nature as the sole cause and site of all that concerned or affected us (ibid.: *passim*).

NATURALISTIC ATHEISM: NAIGEON AND DIDEROT

For Naigeon, writing in his *Philosophie ancienne et moderne* (1791–3) against Bacon’s argument

from design, experience disclosed that there was nothing inherently ‘beautiful’ or ‘horrible’ in nature. For human beings who ‘coexist’ successfully with nature, the universe appears a lovely example of art and design; for those who ‘coexist’ painfully with the universe, the very same sequence of eternal causes and effects will appear dark and imperfect. The spectacle of nature revealed not a permanent coexistence of the forms of life with nature, but merely the permanence of matter *per se* and the impermanence of any of its particular forms, of which man as a species was one. The beings who coexist today will pass away as conditions change, Naigeon concluded, and no one could predict what new forms of material being would emerge (1791–3: I, 368–9).

Denis Diderot (1713–84) was, like his close friends Holbach and Naigeon, an atheist, but he took no pains to publish such works during his lifetime (in fact, chiding his two comrades for their imprudence). He bequeathed his atheistic manuscripts to Naigeon for posthumous publication, most of which occurred in the nineteenth century (Kors 1976: 47–9). In the *Rêve de d'Alembert*—written in 1769, discussed among his friends, but unpublished until 1830—Diderot emphasized the proto-evolutionary sides of French Enlightenment atheism. The hypothesis of a God explained nothing about nature, Diderot urged, led to countless logical problems, and arrogantly assumed that the ephemeral world that we observed was the permanent form of nature. Give natural processes time, and nature would generate an extraordinary diversity of forms, some of which would be fitted for survival. If natural circumstances changed, existing forms would disappear and new ones emerge. The transition from living to dead forms of material being was purely physical, the difference between a statue and a living man being not the material elements of each, but merely the form of organization. The foundation of morality was the human desire for survival, pleasure, and social existence, a foundation that could not be understood and acted upon so long as people believed that there was a God ([1830] 1964: 257–371; on the evolution of species, see 301–13).

In his *Additions aux pensées philosophiques* (1770), Diderot, revising his own earlier deistic work, wrote of a misanthropic hermit who brooded for many years in search of the one act he could perform from which the maximum of human suffering would follow. The hermit emerged, at last, announcing the existence of God. In this same work, Diderot wrote of us as trying to find our way in a dark forest, with only the small lantern of reason to guide us. Along comes a stranger, he wrote, who tells us that it is so dark that we should blow out the lantern. That man, Diderot concluded, is a theologian ([1770] 1964: 59).

In the *Rêve de d'Alembert*, he suggested that the implications of atheism and naturalistic determinism for human beings were self-acceptance within the limits of possible change and self-improvement within the limits offered by knowledge of causes. He implied strongly that successful adaptation to a changing natural environment was the only and ultimate natural source of normative values. Enlightenment atheism was unable to offer the explanations of spontaneous, that is, undesigned order that Charles Darwin could offer to unbelief. It turned its attention rather, above all else, to what it saw as the moral arguments and imperatives of denial of the existence of God and explanation of nature without recourse to a Supreme Being.

CONCLUSION: CONFLUENCE AND ATHEISM

In human history, as in all matters, confluence is often everything. In a theologically confident but philosophically fractious seventeenth-century learned world, philosophical theologians sought the polemical jugular of revealing their opponents to be unintentionally incapable of proving God or avoiding a categorical naturalism that led to atheism. Their debates offered the learned world a series

of lessons on how to argue atheistically. In such a context, philosophical scepticism, long associated with fideism in Europe, now added to doubts about belief in God itself. In such a context, also, an Epicurean tradition that long had been deemed harmless by its seeming absurdity now offered answers, for some, to the question of how apparent order could emerge from chance and spontaneity. By the end of the eighteenth century, in France above all, the potential atheistic naturalism of such seeds was actualized in the speculative thought of Holbach, Naigeon, and Diderot. Quantitatively, atheism remained a minor current until Darwin. Qualitatively, it marked a remarkable moment in the history of Christian Europe.

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CHAPTER 14

THE (LONG) NINETEENTH CENTURY

DAVID NASH

A MOVEMENT AND ITS HISTORY: EARLIEST ORIGINS

THE lineage of atheism in England (and in related ways in other European countries) essentially came together from four separate places, each bringing rigid and malleable ideological materials together in a wide ranging family of ideas. These—like any family—did not always co-exist on benign and equitable terms. The ideas, movements, and individual actions of nineteenth-century atheism essentially reflected these four ideological lines in different chronological and social circumstances.¹

Probably the oldest ancestor of nineteenth-century atheism and secularism is the English mechanick tradition that appeared in the seventeenth century as a result of that century's radical, religious, and political upheavals—a consequence of the authorized vernacular version of the Bible, which enabled private study and interpretation (Hill 1994). Whilst quasi-pantheist, and neo-humanist, groups existed in the sixteenth century and conceivably even earlier, the mechanick tradition was an obvious product of the seventeenth century (Hill 1975: 25, 175). This tradition eschewed sectarian positions instead seeking individual inspiration from the Bible and other religious and politically radical sources. The key to this approach was its self-creation of cosmology and world views and how these challenged authority identifying it as Antichrist. Whilst some products of this stance (Quakers, Ranters, the Levellers, and Gerard Winstanley's Diggers) created consistent, if arcane, ideologically religious positions, other individuals proved still less orthodox than this (Morton 1970; Barbour and Frost 1988).

The essence of this individualistic position was a fierce independence of thought as the motive force in the acquisition of knowledge about the universe. This also created a remarkably long lasting autodidacticism still evident in late twentieth-century secular circles. Certainly this strand of artisan thinking was instrumental in the success of atheism, and what became termed secularism, in the nineteenth century. Those who avidly consumed books and ideas—as self-discovery—were both a mainstay of, and audience for, atheist ideas throughout the century. Several early century leaders were products of this world whilst the later century organization's movement culture provided lectures, a newspaper portfolio, and cheap editions of key works that would provide the raw material for the next generation (Nash 1995b; Nash 2005).

The second ideological line, which had some roots in the first described above, was the logical consequence of the growth of nonconformity. This involved likeminded believers clustering together in congregations in defiance of orthodoxy and authority, sometimes sharing quite esoteric theological positions. Several commentators throughout the nineteenth century noted how close both ideological and personal relationships were between atheists and Unitarians. Others described how local secular societies actively resembled species of nonconformist groupings, sharing many facets and outlooks with such groups (Amphlett-Micklewright 1969).

There was also an inheritance from English intellectual doubt that was invoked in the nineteenth-century pantheon of great atheists and freethinkers. It was customary to acknowledge the debt atheism owed to the Epicurean philosophers, both from ancient Greece, and from more recent English and European history (Barbour 1998). Epicureanism was joined by a species of deism exemplified by the writings of Charles Blount.² These were popularized by putative eighteenth-century radical journalists like Peter Annet and Jacob Ilive, the latter of whose publications were condemned and burned by the common hangman in 1753. This particular line of descent provided gravitas, intellectual weight and a cosmopolitanism which would otherwise have been distinctly lacking, within an intellectual position otherwise dependent upon the ‘mechanick tradition’ and the extension of nonconformity into Unitarian and Deist territory.

The final ideological influence upon the world of nineteenth century atheism was the influence of the French Revolution and its ripples. These were also felt elsewhere in Europe, although in France their rationalism produced a markedly less anti-religious utopian socialism (Royle 1974: 170–1). In England reactions to the French Revolution were polarized between very rigid definitions of loyalism and radicalism. Loyalism in this context identified conservative interests with the Crown and defence of the Established Church (i.e., the Church of England). Radicalism drew from the ideas of the French *philosophes* blended with the new language of natural rights which were championed in England by Thomas Paine (1737–1809). This Jacobinism assaulted religious authority and Paine’s own deism crystallized opposition to the role and privileges of the Established Church (Dyck 1988).

FROM PAINE TO CARLILE

Paine cemented his own reputation through his publication of the *Age of Reason* which arguably has been the single most important and influential text in the English speaking atheist world (Prochaska 1972). Ironically, Paine wrote this whilst in prison as a spirited defence of deism, designed to prevent the French Republic from declaring itself for wholehearted, positive atheism. However the *Age of Reason* acquired something of a life of its own in English atheist circles. It was filled with emotive, musical and pithy condemnations of the religious establishment which were easily remembered and often quoted. The *Age of Reason* also contained creative and well expressed condemnations of revealed religion and the nature of a supreme being. These cemented Thomas Paine’s reputation as an effective publicist for radical religious views, just as his reputation for stirring up political radicalism rested on his *Rights of Man* (1791).

The *Age of Reason* became especially influential in atheist and secularist circles and was scarcely out of print throughout the nineteenth century, on both sides of the Atlantic. The importance of this work was further emphasized by its appearance at a number of trials for blasphemy (again on both sides of the Atlantic), and its presence at a similarly significant number of death beds where it acquired a status as a sort of anti-catechism or anti-Bible, performing the same comforting function for atheists in their last hours (Nash 1995a; Nash 2010a). Paine’s work was vilified as soon as it appeared in Britain, and Thomas Williams was prosecuted for selling it in 1797. The attitude of the judge at this trial clearly indicated that Paine’s book was an attempt to ‘destroy all civil obligations’ thus carrying the inherent hint of revolution (Nash 1999: 77–9). This link between Jacobinism and political radicalism assisted in the growth and spread of atheist and freethinking ideas, but it equally ensured they remained marginalized and associated with plebeian unrespectability until the Victorian period.

This notoriety gained by atheistic ideas was confirmed and consolidated by the public perception of

an atheism blending aspirations of English Radicalism with the critiques of the French Revolution, to leave its mark on the radical history of this decade. The individual most responsible for this was Richard Carlile, a west-country tradesman and radical observer who had sold Wooler's *Black Dwarf* and published banned works by William Hone (Nash 1999: 80–3). He was one of the most acerbic publicists of the radical version of the Peterloo Massacre of 1819, a formative radical moment when the Manchester Yeomanry charged a peaceful crowd leaving fifteen dead and over four hundred injured, which alerted the authorities to his dangerous views (Campbell 1899: 21–9). Carlile regularly cited Diderot's desire to see 'the last King strangled with the entrails of the last priest', alongside evocations of a quasi-pantheist God of nature (Wiener 1983). Whilst these were strong views they were certainly not weakly held, since Carlile and an extremely significant number of his friends and employees spent considerable periods in gaol for publishing Carlile's works and those of Thomas Paine (Carlile 1819a; Carlile 1822a; see Nash 2010a). In a sense this movement was successful in publicizing an anti-state Church message and exposing the tyranny of vested interests entwined around each other. This set of atheist ideas had an iconoclastic edge which it arguably never wholly lost as the nineteenth century progressed, reflecting some of the amorphous anti-clericalism that was a part of plebeian culture alongside the spirited defence of just motives. However they did also offer a quasi-progressive message since Carlile regularly argued that whatever obstructed intellectual thought '... is unquestionably in most pointed opposition to the best and most important interest of our species' (Carlile 1819b: 7).

Carlile sought martyrdom through his consistent breaches of the law and his political use of the campaigns motivated against him by the Society for the Suppression of Vice, which was oft times a proxy institute for government action (Roberts 1984; Harling 2001). Carlile's use of this combative relationship sought discussion and debate on the matters closest to his ideological heart—frequently challenging the Society to defend the views it protected in both printed and verbal debate. Thus Carlile was a formative presence in the creation of an audience for atheist, secularist and freethinking views during the nineteenth century (Campbell 1899; Wiener 1983).³ His campaign emphasized the importance of publicity, and the continuity of journalistic output no matter how trying the circumstances—even editing one of his newspapers from his prison cell. Carlile's search for publicity echoed Paine, whilst his fellow workers collaborated with high profile stunts and eloquent courtroom defences, subsequently written up for consumption by the public—where free speech could be asserted, or its loss lamented, through the corruption of the legal system or the malevolent desire to suppress unpopular opinions (Royle 1974: 31–43; Nash 2010a). Alongside this Carlile also realized the fundamental importance of building an intellectual movement through the prolific publication of these courtroom defences, portraying them as episodes in a wider struggle (Carlile 1822a). He also insisted upon promoting a number of other radical causes showcasing a wider radical and secularist quasi-worldview. His newspaper the *Republican* is frequently credited with stinging the government into the introduction of the newspaper stamp duty or 'taxes on knowledge'. Another such agitation involved establishing the basis for adequate knowledge of sexuality and the control of fertility. Such a stance was enshrined in his publication of a manual of birth control knowledge which also outlined the fulfilment available to mankind through an embrace of sexuality and its possibilities (Carlile 1826; Bush and Carlile 1998).

Carlile also understood the importance of local organization and the active involvement of likeminded individuals providing inspiration, encouragement, and a popular hearing for the views he proffered. In keeping with this he was supported by a local network of what he termed 'Zetetic' societies—a self invented idea which championed the central principle of popular access to knowledge (Royle 1974: 35–36). Although initially successful their impetus relied heavily upon the inspiration of Carlile himself and the trajectory of his career.

Carlile's established a blueprint that would be followed by secularist and atheist individuals in Britain and the United States throughout the rest of the century. Carlile's message found its way to the United States, and important works by Charles Knowlton and Elihu Palmer came in the other direction. (Royle 1974: 212, 172–3; Horowitz 2002). Secularist and atheist views would periodically exist as an agitation in which important legal precedent, citizens' rights and the principle of free speech would be tested in court and would invent opportunities for journalistic comment. These opportunities presented themselves equally as reports of agitations and set-piece activity, yet other journalism catered for a diversity of tastes and needs by producing ribald, blasphemous and entertaining material contemptuous of revealed religion and Christianity. Paradoxically alongside these were quasi-high and middle brow attempts to offer literary criticism and informed commentary upon the history of ideas. These subsidiary functions of journalism remained important throughout the century with attempts to reinvent such material and readerships continuing until the First World War (Nash 1995b). Provincial outposts sustained interest, galvanized the readership and provided a viable audience structure for organizations and individuals prepared to construct and implement a robust lecture circuit.

OFFSHOOTS FORM THE 'NEW MORAL WORLD'

The organization and ideological outlook which most readily inherited this mantle was the rationalism spawned by Robert Owen's ideological impact on working class groups and key individuals on both sides of the Atlantic up until the end of the 1840s (Harrison 1969; Horowitz 2002). The impact of Robert Owen's thought was another tributary associated with ideas which inspired the French Revolution, but it also blended well with existing elements of rational philosophy which led to his anti-religious message being replicated in the United States (Royle 1974: 172–3; Horowitz 2002). Owen's philosophy sought to create a 'science of society' which would dismantle the situations which produced the distortion of virtuous human nature. Traditional institutions were blamed for the continuance of an 'old immoral world' and a logical consequence of such thought was an indictment of revealed religion. This was manifestly less combative or iconoclastic than Carlile's approach and instead emphasized the benign nature of the 'New Moral World' to be achieved through a campaign of systematic publicity and education.

Whilst perhaps appearing naïve, Owen's ideas were remarkably persuasive and a number of very high profile radicals on both sides of the Atlantic embraced them. Although Owenism at this period appeared in various guises (as a trade union movement, a labour exchange, a co-operative scheme and a utopian communitarian initiative) it also emerged as a scheme of social missionary activity. This in organizational terms followed the lead of Carlile's quest for publicity, however the means of purveying it made Owenism appear almost a religiously sectarian organization and several social Missionaries applied for preacher's licenses. Whilst a considerable network existed in England (in one twelve month period 350 towns were visited by fourteen missionaries) its policy of confronting churches and churchmen inspired animosity (Royle 1974: 62). It eventually collapsed after Owenism was widely discredited at the end of the 1840s with the demise of the last of its utopian communitarian experiments.

One notable survivor from this debacle was George Jacob Holyoake (1817–1906) who had learned hard lessons from Owen's co-operative schemes, and as an Owenite social Missionary. Chief amongst these was a recognition that attitudes to atheist views within wider society would not readily change overnight. A more accommodating and quietist outlook was required which would banish

immediate memories of Paine, Carlile and Owen. Holyoake initiated this through an Anti-Persecution Union which managed press campaigns to assist all those suffering from religious persecution at home and abroad. This organization avoided opprobrium by corresponding with, and assisting, both atheist and Christian individuals who had fallen foul of harshly enacted laws against freedom of expression. Individuals in England, Scotland, and further afield all received publicity and support (Royle 1974: 82–8; Nash 1999: 95–7).

HOLYOAKE AND MATURE SECULARISM

By the early 1850s Holyoake had grown in confidence and pushed forward with plans to organize atheist and freethinking opinion into a viable organization. Again he promoted the benefits of moderation, as well as the construction of a defensive intellectual position that would be difficult to breach by the most determined of assaults (McCabe 1908: 199–227). In 1852 Holyoake began to propound and publicize the importance of his new intellectual position which he labelled ‘secularism’. This argued that it was impossible to know the existence of another world, therefore the efficacy of revealed religion and its belief in an afterlife could be neither categorically confirmed nor categorically denied (Royle 1974: 150–2). Therefore it followed from this that Christian society could no longer legitimately treat individuals holding such views as disloyal, immoral infidels—a term which Holyoake himself always personally considered distasteful (Holyoake 1861).

Although this brand of negative atheism is recognizable as a modern and coherent agnostic position, in the England of the 1840s and 1850s there were other intellectual tides at work which influenced this. Some elements of earlier century deism survived into the logic of this position, whilst a number of Unitarians maintained their own relationship with it. Likewise whilst Holyoake argued this stance should keep secularists (as the position’s devotees quickly termed themselves) safe from animosity and persecution, as an ideological position which was the ultimate in questioning, it nonetheless offered the opportunity to debate matters with religious individuals. (Holyoake 1861, 1896). Certainly the 1850s, 1860s, and beyond were littered with high profile debates in which leading secularist speakers competed with Christian speakers, sometimes over a number of nights, for the approval of, at times, not inconsiderable audiences numbering several thousand (e.g., Grant and Holyoake 1853; Grant and Bradlaugh 1858). This intellectual position also reflected the philosophical liberalism of John Stuart Mill (1806–73) whose own model of the open platform strongly influenced the culture of a number of provincial secular societies (Nash 1992). This indicated a durable connection with mid-century liberalism and again offers evidence for atheism’s credentials as, conceivably, a form of diffuse nonconformity (Foote 1874).

Under this tutelage secular societies grew up across England generally reflecting the prevalence of light manufacturing industry, artisan trades and successful small scale commerce. Thus secularism in England took off largely in a geographical cradle stretching from the Wirral to the Wash (Royle 1980: 335–9). There were obvious outposts in the lowland belt of Scotland, South Wales, the cities of England’s East and West Midlands, and an, arguably, different style movement in London where suburbs augmented and competed with the idea of a national movement (Nash 2005). Nonetheless beyond these areas the greatest geographical preponderance of secularists and societies was in the northern textile areas of Lancashire and Yorkshire’s West Riding.

The most successful of these Holyoake-inspired secular societies existed in Leicester where its relative health was preserved by the financial and personal devotion of a successful local business family. This hosted lectures from a vast array of religious, intellectual and ideological positions

encouraged by the open debating platform, reflecting a taste for eclecticism and the pursuit of knowledge (Nash 1992). Thus it is also worth recalling that secularists in this context would have been schooled in the socialism of the Fabian essayists as much as the ideas of Russian anarchists and the individualism of the Liberty and Property Defence League.

BRADLAUGH THE ICONOCLAST

However this movement's stance was altered in the subsequent generation as the arrival of Charles Bradlaugh (1833–91) on the scene revived some of the older emphases from the ideological legacy of Thomas Paine and Richard Carlile. Bradlaugh was a more obviously combative presence than Holyoake and had, importantly, not come through the radical schooling that the ideas of Robert Owen had represented for the previous generation. Whilst secularism under Holyoake sometimes sought to improve the quality of preaching and religious teaching, Bradlaugh conversely sought its complete destruction. Some later analysts have labelled these two approaches as substitutionism and iconoclasm (Budd 1971). The first sees atheistic positions as seeking substitutes for religion whilst the second argues the removal and destruction of religion should be the sole aim of campaigning. Within their historical context it is no coincidence that Holyoake's approach, echoing Owen and Mill, would be substitutionist, whilst Bradlaugh's individualistic liberalism had innate confidence in mankind's decisions about its destiny, once the tyranny of revealed religion had been removed. The former tendency meant that Owenism's more exotic idiosyncrasies—such as phrenology—would still have a tentative foothold within the minds of mid-century secularists. The latter would seek to disassociate itself from such trappings to concentrate upon pioneering social change and activities such as biblical criticism which tackled Christianity head on (see Grant and Bradlaugh 1890).

Charles Bradlaugh also brought a new emphasis transforming what it was to be an unbeliever into a range of political issues. The most dominant of these was his own quest to enter Parliament. From his power base in Northampton, Bradlaugh successfully negotiated with the local Liberal party to support his candidature. He was elected to the seat but was unable to take it since the parliamentary rules governing the oath or affirmation effectively excluded Bradlaugh from taking either, since he did not belong to the denominations prescribed in the affirmation. This graphically exposed the folly and anachronism of the law which had not evolved to admit non-believers into full citizenship. The last of these phrases, 'anachronism', is quite important since it was a cornerstone of Bradlaugh's campaign in this and his agitation to allow an affirmation in a court of law—that such archaic discrimination labelled secularists as treacherous and their morals inherently suspect. Bradlaugh was eventually elected to the seat on three occasions and each time was refused the right to affirm with the matter only being resolved favourably in 1886 (Arnstein [1965] 1983).

One important consequence of Charles Bradlaugh's leadership was that he appeared a figure so dominant that he arguably eclipsed the movement's previous heterogeneity of ideology, style, and organization. Bradlaugh's high profile involvement in the republican campaigns of the 1870s and his subsequent quest to enter Parliament highlighted his own personal unbelief and iconoclastic attitude. Quite often different emphases would be replicated in some of the internal squabbling which bedevilled this movement and its history. Localism coalesced around the 'Holyoake wing' of the movement which felt sometimes supplanted by the national and personal emphasis of Charles Bradlaugh and his National Secular Society (NSS) which was founded in 1866 (Nash 1992, 2005). Inevitably these two individuals squabbled and the disagreement spilled into the next generation (Nash 2002a). In other instances some were concerned at the actions and notoriety of certain individuals and

how this would periodically reflect badly upon secularism. Annie Besant was regularly upbraided for her impetuous actions which many thought were an unnecessary search for publicity (Nash 2002a). Likewise in other circumstances individuals who could bring disrepute upon the movement, such as the dissolute womanizer Edward Aveling, threatened to embarrass an organization whose morals had to be visibly beyond reproach.

Certainly much of the existing historiography sees the Bradlaugh years as the high-point of secularism and unbelief's public profile in nineteenth century England (Budd 1971; Royle 1980). With his passing in 1891, secularism as a movement arguably never recaptured its prominence. Bradlaugh was succeeded as President of the NSS by George William Foote whose past journalism and martyrdom in the cause of blasphemy was the catalyst for his elevation, although ultimately his presidency was, and has been, generally considered to be a period of decline (Royle 1980). Certainly, numerically its membership began to leach away in the new century. Yet its campaigning did not cease and, arguably, it did re-invent itself with new critiques against militarism and the enduring apparent anachronism of the blasphemy laws. These were important campaigns which had some considerable influence, if not always outright success (Nash 2002b).

America arguably had its own equivalent of Bradlaugh in the figure of Colonel Robert Ingersoll, who had both an ideological and even physical resemblance which was noted even by contemporaries (Gorham 1921; Ingersoll 1941: vii). This Civil War veteran, and one time Attorney-General of Illinois, was thought capable of aspiring to the Presidency if it had not been for his atheist views. He was a controversial, though widely respected figure who saw the law as a weapon that could be made useful for the atheist cause—just as Bradlaugh had foreseen. Ingersoll was an arduous campaigner for free speech and saw this line of argument as bolstering the rights of unbelievers in America. In particular he sought to demonstrate that prejudice and the activation of the machinery of the law against them was unconstitutional in both letter and spirit. He campaigned tirelessly to defend the idea of Separation of Church and State and made a crucial appearance at the important blasphemy trial of C. B. Reynolds for blasphemy in 1885, during which he argued such a charge was contrary to the New Jersey State Constitution (Ingersoll 1888; Wakefield 1952: 36–7). Ingersoll was also, like Bradlaugh, a gifted orator and a significantly prolific writer who wrote in greater depth and sophistication than Bradlaugh, which perhaps explains the appeal of his works on both sides of the Atlantic (Cohen 1933; Ingersoll 1952).

IDEOLOGICAL UNDERCURRENTS

The ground breaking work of Paine was adopted by Richard Carlile to become what some historians have labelled, with some considerable justification, the 'Paine-Carlile tradition' (Royle 1976), which emphasized a persistent indictment of the Church-State link and those who would defend it, however unscrupulously. As we also noted an Enlightenment-inspired counter current, drawing on ideas stemming from Robert Owen, sought an idealistic if naïve end to the 'Old Immoral World'.

Alongside these it is also worth observing an undercurrent of more indigenous and quietist ideas. Certainly as we noted deism was arguably quite prevalent within the circles which surrounded unbelief, and it is possible to see an extremely close relationship with the outer edges of Christian thought represented by Unitarianism. This demonstrated that some secularists were prepared to accept merely the existence and humanity of Christ and regard him as an exemplary moral teacher. Likewise it also draws attention to the fact that the secularist 'mission' to remove the privileges of the Church-State link, would certainly have greatly appealed to those who considered themselves Unitarians. The

groups noted by the Rev. Charles Maurice Davies in his *Heterodox London* were scarcely uniform in their approach or tastes, as far as ideas or the nature of their Sunday night meetings were concerned (Davies 1874). Recently the extent of how far Secularism and converts to it truly represented a nineteenth-century crisis of faith has been severely questioned (Larsen 2006). However this line of argument has itself been challenged by suggestions that secularism in this century is far better seen as evidence of a fluidity in the religious landscape, that better explains its relationship with Christianity and the changes in emphasis seen through the lives of individual secularists (Nash 2011).

By the second half of the century some secularists were coming to be interested in, and some influenced by, the ideas of the French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798–1857) and what was termed ‘Positivism’ (Wright 1986). This was also sometimes referred to as the ‘Religion of Humanity’ and its lineage from utopian socialist influence can also be tracked amongst a number of secularists. George Jacob Holyoake was, for a time, impressed by Comte’s ideas as were John Stuart Mill and Harriet Martineau. This ‘Religion of Humanity’ in many respects represented elements of the ‘cult of evolution’ as the mainspring of change within the affairs of man. It argued that mankind’s moral evolution was on an unstoppable, benign course from primitivism to a state of ultimate enlightenment equated with the concept of the ‘Positive’. This introduced an idea of staged (positive and progressive) teleology and the ability to analyse such changes in scientific detail, which gained credit for Comte as an apparent founder of sociology as a modern social science.

In many respects this reflects what would later be considered to be modern humanism—essentially a belief in the secular perfectibility of man beyond and without the supposed ‘benefits’ or ‘inspiration’ of revealed religion. Comte’s ideas actually influenced several rank and file secularists and middle-ranking leaders leading them to form or join ‘Churches of Humanity’. These were more spiritually inclined than the secular societies or organizations they had left reverencing the achievements of mankind in a manner closely resembling the devotion given to the sacrament in Catholicism—even producing a new calendar and ‘feast days’ to reflect this emphasis. One such individual, Malcolm Quin, designed liturgies and vestments, whilst another filled his high street church with busts of the so-called benefactors of modern humanity (Nash 1991: 135). In some respects some historians have been dismissive of the Positivists and their (sometimes) strident and vocal pretensions, and occasional taste for well intentioned self-publicity. One wryly noted that the major split in the movement had occurred at a meeting in which the protagonists arrived in one coach but departed in two (Wright 1986). Despite such pejorative pictures it remains worth noting that, like Unitarianism in the first half of the nineteenth century, Positivism had some extremely high profile adherents who had influence in wider Victorian England, way beyond the numerically small number of its adherents; Frederic Harrison, Edmund Spenser Beesley and Gilbert Murray were high profile advocates, whilst members of other families, such as the Lushingtons were quite influential in government circles.⁴

Another influence which entered secularist circles at the end of the century, largely from American sources, were the ideas which clustered around Ethicism. This began as the brainchild of Felix Adler, whose name is still connected with its history in the United States. Adler founded an ethical society in New York in 1876 and his ideas came across the Atlantic via Stanton Coit who saw the potential power of such societies to transform social relations within an urban environment. Coit eventually took up residence in London’s influential South Place Chapel which thereafter itself became an Ethical Society. Along with a Positivist who became influenced by Ethicism, Frederick James Gould, Coit formed a Union of ethical societies. Some of the ideas associated with Ethicism, namely the concept of secular ideas in action in communities, served to ally those within this movement with aspects of labour politics. Both Gould and Coit themselves stood as labour candidates in either

School Board or General elections and this political stance should be contrasted with that of the previous generation of secularists (Nash 1991). Those around Bradlaugh distrusted socialism as a collectivist and foreign species of nightmare, instead embracing more obviously libertarian individualistic liberalism than many entering the movement in the early years of the twentieth century. In many respects this socialist group potentially made a circle complete in their renewal of some Owenite socialist principles associated with the environment and the perfectibility of man. Thus it is no surprise to see the modern British Humanist Association trace its lineage from the arrival of Ethicism in England. Likewise it has also proved persistently fashionable to trace the cultural fortunes of Secularism, and its associated brand of individualism, with the decline and eclipse of mainstream political Liberalism in the first two decades of the twentieth century.

One last area of influence which left a small, but noteworthy, footprint within the Secular movement was the transitory influence of continental anarchism. Certainly the logic of some aspects of anarchism would have been shared by some of an individualistic disposition, whilst others would have embraced its philosophical objection to the presumptions of moral authoritarianism inherent in Christian morality. Likewise the provincial lecturing platform and the reading culture of secularism encountered the ideas of Peter Kropotkin and the views of other Russian anarchist dissidents (Nash 1992: 136). Others, such as Guy Aldred blended anarchist views with a consistent activism which saw him engage in political radicalism, anti-colonial campaigns and the early twentieth century agitation for the spread of birth control literature masterminded by Marie Stopes (Aldred 1955).

CAMPAIGNS AND CAUSES

Blasphemy

One important aspect of the secular movement on both sides of the Atlantic during the nineteenth century was the readiness with which it engaged upon species of blasphemy. In both Britain and America the major test cases of the period invariably involved atheists or freethinkers. Frequently such individuals saw that a trial would demonstrate the extent of Christianity's power and how potentially corrupt the link between Church and State could appear in practice (Levy 1993; Nash 1999).

In England the logic of prosecution for blasphemy rested upon the judgement of Sir Matthew Hale established in a landmark case of 1675/6. In this he argued that the Christian Religion was 'part and parcel' of the laws of the land so that attacks upon religion should be considered attacks upon the law which thereby protected morality (Nash 2010b: 60). Carlile argued that his own situation represented a struggle against the control of free inquiry and discussion that blasphemy laws created and imposed. His compatriot John Barkley argued, through Carlile, that the intensity of prosecution meant that 'they naturally concluded, that such opinions were only opposed by force because they could not be answered by argument' (Carlile 1822b: iii). In the trial of Susannah Wright in 1822, she was indicted for spreading malicious accounts of the effect of Christianity upon the mind and behaviour of the populace at large and stated that she wanted the truth of Christianity exposed to the dazzling brilliance of reason. She concluded that '... but whilst I see those who are well paid for it, interested only in supporting it by the strong arm of power and brute force, I am reluctantly compelled to doubt its truth, I am an infidel to it from a disagreeable necessity which I wish to see removed' (Wright 1822: 12).

America had its similar campaigners who had a somewhat different task in seeking to uncover just

how far their comparatively new State and Constitution retained both Christianity and English Common Law in the matter of blasphemy. The most noted case in this instance was one against Abner Kneeland, a freethinking journalist not entirely dissimilar from Carlile and largely contemporary with him. Kneeland's newspaper, the *Boston Investigator*, traded on the same causes championed in England, notably rights of free speech, free love and issues around access to birth control information (Horowitz 2002). Kneeland was prosecuted when his newspaper contained articles which portrayed a ribald account of the conception of Christ and denounced Christianity as substantially a fiction. The case eventually turned around how far English Common Law precedent survived into American Law, and how far this could expunge more tolerant state laws (Nash 2010b: 135–8). The case was also noteworthy since defence lawyers actively contrasted the fustiness of old laws with the freedom that the heterodox, such as Kneeland, had a right to expect from a country with modern practices of jurisprudence. Although Kneeland lost, in this instance, this precise issue was to reappear on the legal landscape of the United States (Dunlap 1834; Parker 1834).

Later secularist leaders also learned lessons, and gained their leadership credentials from their involvement in blasphemy prosecutions. Whilst a number of ingenious attempts were made to ensnare Bradlaugh with charges of blasphemy, he sidestepped all of these through his own knowledge of legal methods to overturn such actions against him. Others were less careful and viewed the value of such prosecutions differently. George Jacob Holyoake, as early as the 1850s, had been ensnared by injudicious remarks that he had been led into making at a public meeting in Cheltenham. Holyoake had no wish to repeat this experience, but its ideological value was enshrined in his description of it as the last trial for blasphemy in England—seeking to gain ideological capital for both meanings of the word 'last' (Holyoake 1850).

Perhaps the most famous blasphemy case in England during the nineteenth century in the end cemented the reputation of its defendant so that he was able to succeed Bradlaugh as President of the National Secular Society. In 1883 George William Foote along with two others was convicted of publishing blasphemous material in several editions of his own newspaper the *Freethinker*. Foote had been incensed at the attempts to ensnare Bradlaugh and created a test case to expose the hypocrisy and injustice of both the blasphemy laws and the role of both the State and the Church in upholding them. Foote was convicted and served a prison sentence, although not without a furore that gripped England centring upon the injustice of his treatment and how such laws seemed obviously against the 'spirit of the age' (Nash 1999). The English Common Law caselaw, which eventually emerged from this incident, altered the law in a more liberal direction so that temperate criticism of the law was now permitted, circumventing the previously understood 'part and parcel' argument.

The Edwardian period witnessed a further upsurge in blasphemy with a range of prosecutions towards the end of decade, which also re-emerged periodically in the following decade. These originated in the efforts of Ernest Pack, Thomas Stewart and John Gott who blended late nineteenth century Anarchism with a determined effort to purge the socialist Syndicalist movement in England of its clerical influences and personnel (Nash 1999). Through a blend of comic ribaldry and public performance, which used the idiom of music hall skit and satire to attack Christianity, these three individuals were considered a systematic nuisance by police representatives and government alike. It was action against Gott, which resulted in his imprisonment in 1922 as the last custodial sentence imposed before the law was eventually repealed in 2008.

The issue of blasphemy in the United States in the late nineteenth century revisited the issue of Common/State and federal law clashes mentioned earlier. Several of these provided the opportunity for individuals such as Robert Ingersoll and Theodore Schroeder to conduct vigorous defences of the right to free speech, and the essential unconstitutional nature of blasphemy prosecutions amidst a state

which claimed separation of Church and State (Ingersoll 1888; Schroeder and Mockus 1919; Schroeder 1918). The United States also had its equivalent of J. W. Gott in the person of Michael Mockus whose anarchist connections led to him being considered a danger to morals and public order, once again like Gott, resulting in his conviction and imprisonment (Schroeder 1918).

All told, blasphemy offered very public challenges to the power and rhetoric of revealed Christianity, whilst effectively questioning its sacred nature and its claims to the control of morality. In the final analysis it could be argued this package represented the most enduringly effective method that secularists had of attaining a wide audience, if sometimes only episodically. They also ultimately created heroes for both the causes of free speech and freethought.

Rights and citizenship

Secularists also campaigned on the issue of access to information and products associated with birth control. This ideological mainspring was important upon both sides of the Atlantic, where it had a common link with offshoots from the Owenite Movement. In latter years the agitation was taken up by the national movement in England with the infamous Knowlton Pamphlet Trial. This was a family limitation publication by Charles Knowlton which had been prosecuted on its initial release in America in 1832. This had been subsequently published in Bristol and had been seized in 1877 (Royle 1980: 12–17). This led Charles Bradlaugh and Annie Besant to publish their own edition of the work which was prosecuted for its challenge to public morals and decency. They were eventually convicted, but the presiding judge took the extraordinary step of exonerating the two defendants of malicious motives. Thereafter an important range of secularist newspapers and periodicals would advertise the sale of books which offered fertility and family planning information, and these were constantly sailing close to the wind in the eyes of government and local authorities. In the early years of the twentieth century it was the connection between freethought and a supposed or imagined libertinism which ensnared Pack, Stewart, and Gott.

Secularists also sought recognition for their own civil rights around death and funeral rites, which were part of a quest for recognition which spanned the whole of the nineteenth century (Nash 1995a). In some respects the secularist attitude to education brought together many, or most, of their different claims about the societies they wanted to live in. It sought self-determination for all citizens and argued against the illegitimate imposition of spurious authority which could ruin and misshape young lives. In most respects they followed the nonconformist demand that religious education should be removed from the school curriculum and should thereafter be a matter for the individual conscience. Such pleas for equal treatment before the law, especially in education, are fundamental to secularist campaigning. The legacy of this can be seen by their appearance in societies still heavily influenced by actual or nominal Christian control of institutions or processes. In the contemporary world these include parts of the United States and the Republic of Ireland.

CONCLUSION

Thus atheism/secularism came together in the early nineteenth century from four disparate phenomena. Were it not for the twin catalysts provided by the radical example of the Enlightenment-inspired French Revolution, and the growth of opportunities for reading and the consumption of ideas offered by popular and cheaper versions of the printed word, this arguably might not have

happened. Throughout the nineteenth century atheism/secularism organized itself on both sides of the Atlantic to both protect itself and to advance the causes of free speech and an end to the religious monopoly wielded by the state. It was, to a great extent, successful in both of these and the measure of this success is perhaps evident in how far the achievements of the first half of the twentieth century are often seen, by both historians and those within the movement itself, to constitute a shadow of this Victorian heyday.

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CHAPTER 15

THE TWENTIETH CENTURY

CALLUM G. BROWN

INTRODUCTION

THE twentieth century witnessed huge growth in the proportion of people without religious identity, adherence, or practice. Not all of these people, if asked, would necessarily have subscribed to the notion of ‘atheism’, but many did, and the numbers of atheists were rising significantly overall. But in an important sense, the significance of positive atheism became less as the century wore on, and other categories developed greater importance. The largest numerical category was the people of no religion, which encompassed those who often self-described as atheists and agnostics, those indifferent and apathetic towards organized religion, and most of those who have been recently described as exuding a ‘fuzzy fidelity’ (Voas 2009). Describing and distinguishing these groups is difficult and without complete certainty of scholarly agreement, and the categories may change in the future.

This essay sets out to review, firstly, the advances of secularization in the twentieth century, and secondly explore the evidence of growth in the numbers of those without religion in the West, primarily in the English-speaking world. It will then, thirdly, examine using personal testimony the ways in which people lost religion and the nature of the no-religion positions they adopted. This will reveal something of the characteristics, complexity and emotionality of the processes, and the place of atheism in the spectrum of no religionism.

SECULARIZATION

Notwithstanding the evidence of declining churchgoing in many nations from the late nineteenth century, some historians now stress the longevity and strength of Christian culture and the resilience of the nineteenth-century’s ‘last puritan age’ until the middle of the twentieth century (Brown 2001; Blaschke 2002; Pasture 2004). Though adult churchgoing may have fallen in many places in Western Europe from the 1880s to the 1950s, public culture remained infused by Christian values, ideals of personal behaviour, a religious concept of respectability, and by media in which Christianity remained largely unchallenged and usually protected by state censorship well into the 1960s. But in the second half of the century, the patterns of secularization started to change, intensify and spread. The British model turned in the 1950s and 1960s to a deep slide in popular religious adherence, leading to constant church crises. This was joined in the 1960s by a collapse of the religious ‘pillars’ of most European nations which had them, including the Netherlands, Belgium, Germany, France, Sweden, Norway and Denmark, whilst a similar type of process went on in Australia and New Zealand. In addition, Canada underwent from the 1950s to the 1980s a most remarkable process of

change, from being in 1950 one of the most religious Christian nations in the world (with more than 65 per cent of adults claiming weekly churchgoing—much more than the USA) to being on a par with Britain and most of Europe in having low and rapidly falling religious adherence. The process was led by the truly staggering change to French-speaking Quebec, where the ‘Quiet Revolution’ of the 1960s broke the Catholic Church’s hold on the reins of government, leading to a wider public disaffection that saw weekly mass attendance fall from over 90 per cent to under 30 per cent in less than a quarter of a century, and in the process led to a demographic revolt against Catholic and indeed all forms of marriage (being replaced by civil unions). Taken collectively, the Christian culture of many nations collapsed from 1960 to 2000 in Europe, Canada, and Australasia, leading to millions of people reformulating their identities apart from formal religion (Brown, 2011).

Parts of the world have been much less touched by these processes. The United States, central and southern America, Africa, the Middle East and South East Asia have experienced somewhat different trajectories. Here, faith has been more vigorously sustained. In Christian, Muslim, Jewish and Hindu traditions, levels of religious practice and belief, the people of organized religion in civil and public life, have been largely sustained throughout the whole of the twentieth century. So much so, that scholarship of these places, except in relation to state secularization (Asad 2003), has been much less concerned with popular secularization than with other forms of religious change—notably the increase of conservative versions of religions (including the rise of fundamentalism within all four of those traditions), and the struggle between conservatism and liberalism within the traditions that has spilled from church affairs to politics and state policies. In this regard, divisions in Christianity have changed from being mainly denominationally-defined to being more and more to do with the religious policing of the human body—the issues of contraception, abortion, homosexuality and ordination of female clerics. In the United States especially, and in Protestant churches worldwide, the issue of gay sexuality has been proving since the 1970s to be the most divisive and for some alienating. In Islam, Hinduism and Judaism, the struggles between liberal and conservative (or orthodox) have been extremely divisive, but as yet have not shown the same signs as in Europe of large-scale alienation of people from faith altogether.

The United States is different. At one time regarded as an exceptional case that did not match the European model of secularization, it is now regarded by some as falling in with a world-wide trend of sustained faith and even, as some religious sociologists argue, of ‘de-secularization’ (Berger 1999). This view seems unlikely to be sustained; the evidence for de-secularization in the USA or elsewhere is thin, most often taken to be found in the rise of Pentecostalism and evangelicalism generally at the expense of liberal or mainstream faith. In reality, these processes are more to do with defection from one religion or one style of church to another. There is little evidence of non-believers being wooed to faith in as large numbers as those moving in the opposite direction. Still, the USA is a nation where understanding of religious change since 1950 is confused and disputed. Some see evidence of secularization (notably in the rise of the people of no religion, which we look at shortly), whilst others point to the steady state from the 1950s to the 2000s of high levels of weekly churchgoing (at around 24 per cent per week, though with a claimed level of 40–42 per cent) and the shift from mainstream to conservative traditions (Hadaway and Marler 2005). However one reads what is happening in the USA, there is no doubting that it has sharply diverged from the trajectories of change in neighbouring Canada (with which it used to share close religious evolution), nearly all of Europe, Russia, and Australasia. The USA is now the only advanced, predominantly Christian Western nation that is not yet secularizing at speed. This may change. But at the moment, in that context, it does make it exceptional.

Three other patterns of twentieth-century secularization need to be observed. First, secularization has been most evident amongst Christians and Jews; the bulk of the world’s atheists have emerged

from those traditions. Second, in racial terms secularization is overwhelmingly white; the decline of faith has been concentrated very largely in the predominantly white nations, and amongst the white people of mixed-race communities (such as in Europe, where black and Asian peoples remained at the end of the twentieth century overwhelmingly religious with relatively few becoming secular or atheist); exceptionally in the USA, religious affiliation was lower amongst blacks than whites throughout the second half of the century, though this said more about the extraordinary high levels of white religiosity than low African-American religiosity. Third, secularization has traditionally been seen as gendered, led in both Christian and Jewish traditions by men who ‘backslide’ from faith and practice, whilst their womenfolk sustain higher levels of churchgoing and domestic religious tradition (to the point where faith has been sustained within female-centred practices such as Christian Sunday lunch and Jewish Shabbat meal) (Burman 1990). However, recent research is casting doubt on this universal proposition, and raising the spectre that feminism and women’s liberation from the sixties has made women the key to understanding the sudden failure of church recruitment in the late twentieth century. The gender equalization of atheism is something still to be addressed (Brown 2013).

ENUMERATING NO RELIGIONISM

There are many data which may demonstrate the declining social significance of religion in the twentieth century—falls in churchgoing, church adherence, religious rites of passage, estimates of rising atheists, and other questions on belief and activity. Each has merit. But one series has until recently been underused by historians and has great utility. The people of no religion are those who respond ‘no religion’ or ‘none’ when asked their religion. A question with this type of wording has been used in the national censuses of various countries, sometimes stretching back to the nineteenth century, whilst other social surveys have used it. Though there has been some critical literature pointing to the varied meanings of responders, and to the trends detected in some places for a minority of such responders to not be atheists and to return to religion later in life, it remains the case that as a category it is useful in delineating a narrative of growth in the twentieth century of those who were alienated from organized religion and had lost a specific religious identity. In addition, even if not all no religionists were atheists (positive or negative), there is every reason to believe that the growth rates in the number of ‘nones’ provides a reasonable estimation of trends of growth in atheism.

Table 15.1 shows how the growth of no religionism as a significant demographic category occurred almost entirely in the second half of the twentieth century. Where it was measured in pre-1960 censuses, the proportions were uniformly below one per cent; only in Gallup polls were higher figures obtained, and these never rose above 3 per cent before the 1960s. What happened in the sixties was a dramatic change in every country where it was measured. Data from Australia shows that the big climb was between 1966 and 1971 when the ‘nones’ leapt from 0.8 per cent to 6.7 per cent. Even in Ireland, despite overall low figures, it was in the 1960s that the climb in the figures started. Data for Britain were not collected by the census until 2001 and showed that the proportion was identical to that in Australia and Canada, though behind the surging no religionism of New Zealand. Social survey questioning by the British Social Attitudes Survey suggests that in 1983 (the first year it asked this) the level stood at 31.3 per cent, and rose slowly to 43.2 per cent in 2008 (Brown 2011).¹ Just as the numbers rose, the gender composition changed significantly. In every nation in mid twentieth century, no religionists were predominantly male. Women made up only 31 per cent in Canada in

1951, 26.2 per cent in the USA in 1958, 36 per cent in Ireland in 1960, 31 per cent in England in 1965, and 42 per cent in Australia in 1976. By the 2000s, the proportions were almost even: 45.4 per cent in Canada, 40.5 per cent in Ireland, 45.9 per cent in Australia, 44.9 per cent in Northern Ireland, 47.3 per cent in New Zealand and 47.6 per cent in Scotland. Only in the USA was the figure substantially lower at 39 per cent.² Other data from Australia reveal that the changing gender composition was underway at some point between the mid fifties and mid sixties: the ratio of male to female no religionists was 236.8/100 in 1954, 180.3/100 in 1966 and 130.1/100 in 1981 (Mol 1985: 69). It was very difficult for a woman to proclaim herself of no religion in the mid twentieth century since it courted a loss of social respectability for her and her family. But, increasing gender equality in nonreligion has emerged in the decades since in every Christian-heritage nation where measurement is available. Other characteristics—social composition, educational qualifications, sexuality—have also been measured, and tend to show that from the 1950s to 2000 the no religionists were becoming younger (especially the 15–30 year olds), more degree-holding, more given to sexual liberalism, and to have had by 2000 associations with heterosexual cohabitation, gay sexuality, and working rather than non-working married women (Brown 2013). In Europe and the Western world generally, the rise of new atheism and other philosophical movements in the late century was very much located in this post-1960 demographic transition to widespread social liberalism, gender equality, gay liberation and the heterosexual revolution.

Table 15.1 People of no religion: percentage of total population

	1900	1920	1940	1960	1980	2000
Australia	0.4	0.5	0.3	0.4	10.8	15.5
Canada	0.12	0.25	0.17	0.52	7.19	15.79
Ireland				0.39	1.15	3.57
New Zealand				0.9	6.4	29.6
United Kingdom						15.4
United States		2	2	7	8	

Sources: Brown 2011, 2013.

BECOMING ATHEISTS: ORAL HISTORY

In a project interviewing over 60 atheists, humanists and freethinkers from USA, Canada, UK, and several European countries, it is clear that there was a huge variety of ways in which people became nonreligious in the twentieth century.³ On a personal level, there were differences caused by gender, by the social or class origins of an individual, and by the family history and dynamics in which a person developed his or her route to no religion. There were also different emotional responses, sometimes stimulated by personal trauma, to the development on an individual's no religionism. On a wider contextual level, there were distinctive cultural characteristics in different nations or regions, and divergences caused by the political climate, and by the impact of social and wartime trauma.

In some nations and some communities, there was a long tradition of religious doubt and principled atheism, notable amongst intellectual elites of the bourgeoisie. Christine Rawlier (b. 1923; Liege, Belgium) grew up in Belgium in the 1920s and 1930s where it was not uncommon to be atheist; her father described himself as a humanist 'who wanted to know everything', and for her it always felt natural to be without a faith. She thought that the transition to the normality of secularism in her home

city of Liege occurred in her parents' generation; though she had religious friends at school, her experience, she said, was not very unusual. 'I lived in a very protected atmosphere from that point of view. My parents were not married in Church, I wasn't baptized and that sort of thing seems to be very straightforward to me, so there was no drama, religious drama.' Going on to study science, she worked with people who were 'obviously atheists', so the religious question 'has never been urgent for me'. Many decades later in the 1980s, the professional baritone Anders Östberg (b. 1979; Växjö, Sweden) grew up in what he describes as 'a very strongly atheist family' of professional people who had been atheists over several generations. It was a society by the second half of the twentieth century in which religiosity was so weak (arguably the weakest in the free world) that people who went to church often were considered in Anders' words 'slightly weird'. Ironically, citizens of Sweden were automatically enrolled in the state Lutheran Church (in most cases in order to secure wedding and funeral rights), and the individual had to make the decision to leave, which Anders did when he was 16.

Even in the much more religious USA in the twentieth century, states with relatively low religiosity and high liberalism fostered the conditions for atheism to emerge. Oregon was and remains one of the United States' least religious states. In the 1960s, it and California played host to the highest density of new religious cultures, spiritual experimentation and new age religions. This was clearly a route for many to the atheistic and no religionist tendencies which have also been strongest in those states. In the family of Sterling Cooley (b. 1988; Ashland, Oregon), the religious counter-culture was a route to no religionism. His grandmother made her daughter dress up for Sunday service at the Catholic Church in Los Angeles in the 1950s and 60s; but at the age of 16 the daughter rebelled, becoming what her son described as 'a spiritual hippy' of the 1960s, roaming up and down the west coast of the USA and Canada until settling as a single mother with a rock band in Eugene in Oregon, and allowing her children total religious freedom from which atheism was fostered. In a similar vein, Vancouver was a centre of Canadian sixties' liberalism, and Grace Daniels (b. 1958; Vancouver) experienced a classic transition from Protestant worship in childhood to spiritual searching. She and a friend got into 'a book cult' called the 'Seth material', a series of texts from 1966 supposedly channelled by a medium, Jane Roberts, from a dead woman:

At the time there was sort of a lot of hippie influence, and all the different Eastern religions at that time. And we were sort of on the edge of that, at the age that we were, cause we were right in the sixties in our teens type of thing, right. So where I ended up was more into Sufism, and I liked the universalist aspect—that there is all these different pathways to God, and then just having some experiences where, I thought I can't explain that any other way than if there is a God type of thing, or something out there.

She spent time with a group of devotees of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi and practised her mantra, but, disliking that, she went to a camp down in California to do a Sufi meditation with Pir Vilayat Khan. From this, she would later move to humanism and loss of faith.

Whilst socialists of various hues in most Western European nations contained a significant proportion of atheists by the early twentieth century, much more demographically significant in the second half of the century were those who converted to positive atheism. Bertrand Russell (1872–1970) started his progress towards atheism when investigating at the age of 15 the rational arguments for Christian belief in which he was immersed from a young age, going alternate Sundays to Anglican and Presbyterian churches whilst becoming a Unitarian at home: 'I spent endless hours in meditation upon the subject;... I suffered acutely both from the gradual loss of faith and from the need for silence. I thought that if I ceased to believe in God, freedom and immortality, I should be very unhappy' (Russell 1975: 35). This trauma of conversion was quite common in the twentieth century too. Defection of clergy to atheism, especially Catholic priests, was not unusual in the 1960s and 1970s. Describing himself as 'a slow eater, a slow talker and I guess a slow learner', William

Kennedy (b. 1930; Winnipeg, Manitoba) studied from his late teens to his early thirties towards a Catholic vocation, trained by the Jesuits with whom he first practised as a teacher, then studied theology, leaving only two years from the end filled with doubt, and ending up as an atheist. Dick Hewetson (b. 1930; Chicago, Illinois) brought up from the age of seven in Minneapolis, found himself on a similar inexorable track though Episcopal school and seminary to the priesthood, but suppressed his doubts:

All through seminary I had a really tough time because an awful lot of it didn't make a lot of sense to me. But by this time, you know, I had realized that most people in this country were Christians and all that kinda thing and there was something wrong with me if I wasn't getting it. So I tried really hard and I prayed and, you know, they told me it's okay to doubt, and that's very healthy and all this stuff. So I went through the whole process, became a priest, served churches in small communities in Minnesota and Wisconsin, and in 1967 I had one of my terrible depression episodes and the bishop sent me to a psychiatrist and I told the psychiatrist that I was quite sure I was homosexual, and that was bothering me. And he convinced me that I wasn't [Laughs].

Eventually in the early 1970s, Dick left the priesthood and the faith in a spectacular exit down the aisle from a service where he was presiding.

In England, Terry Martin (b. 1941; London, England) started priestly training in his early teens in the 1950s, and was swept along on a strong emotional charge to faith:

I would argue that my Catholic upbringing was a deeply psychological influence, one that pushed me in the unintended (for the Church) direction of non-belief. 1956. Summer. I went to a Labour Party youth meeting [and] I encountered a charismatic lad, a Trotskyist, and from that moment my life changed. The Suez War was in full swing and the Russians were invading Hungary. What a baptism for me! Demonstrations, selling Trotskyist papers, meetings every night. This was a religious conversion to Marxist materialism and atheism that turned upside down all my former faith. I became a priest, a zealot, for the Revolution.

This type of conversion occurred for some people in religious cults, or from deeply felt positions in Christian evangelicalism and Judaism, or from Hinduism and Islam. Conrad Hadland (b. 1935; Prince Rupert, British Columbia) was brought up in the Jehovah's Witnesses, and spent seven years training for its ministry before developing serious doubt, moving into the Unitarian Universalist movement which, like Bertrand Russell and so many Canadians, proved to be a route to secular humanism.

For a third of oral-interview respondents, childhood was critical. The teenage years could lead a child into deep and profound religious experience and expectation. Not all of this was welcomed. Ivan Middleton (b. 1942; Hollywood, County Down, Northern Ireland) felt that the death of his father when he was 11 years of age resulted in his being exposed to a stronger, female-centred religious sensibility. He described his mother as

the culture carrier that meant that I was off to Sunday School in the morning, and as far as I can remember then at church service immediately following it, and then 7 o'clock in the evening ... I used to be mildly appalled when I listened to my mother and sister afterwards;... all they seemed to want to do is talk about the hideous hats some other woman was wearing or the coat she had on and could think that she could have put something better than that. I remember to think, you know, what is all this about.

When he started to date a Catholic girl in his mid teens, it was his grandmother who issued him with a warning: 'she told me that you had to be very, very careful of Catholics because once they have got their hot breath on your neck, they would get their nails into you, and you would never lose them, they would hang on to you, because obviously as a White Anglo-Saxon Protestant you were such a big prize.' It was this experience that started him on a route to questioning the validity and social reason behind religion.

As the century wore on, those raised in secularizing communities found the journey from religion changed somewhat from those raised earlier. Two aspects of this are noteworthy. First, the age of

developing an alienation from religion seems to have grown younger, to the region of 7–10 years of age. And second, for many later in the century, their families secularized before their schools did, so that there was a contrast between a religiously-indifferent domestic life and the formalistic and sometimes oppressive religious atmosphere at school.

Kirsten Bulmer (b. 1975; Livingston, Scotland) experienced a school where religious ritual and the teaching of Christian doctrine was overt.

I remember being deeply sceptical as a child and I've always been, should I say, anti-religious, organized religion—I've always been sceptical even would say cynical about it as a child. I remember thinking “what's this about, this isn't right, how can this how can this be, how can people, how can men assume that they have understood the message?” To me it was obvious it was entirely manmade as a child.

In British Columbia, Grace Daniels experienced something similar in the sixties. Attending a Protestant church, she was raised to think of the certainty and truth in her religion. But then when she was nine years old, her minister left his congregation for another denomination: ‘I thought: “Hmm, the pastor can change religions, what does this mean?”’ Her alienation was made complete when the minister tried to bribe the kids with candy to return each week: ‘And, I just thought that was really corrupt There's something wrong with that. And that was kind of my last sort of organized religion.’

Revelation of contradiction, inconsistency and irrationality in religion is a strong trend in narratives of childhood routes to atheism. Growing up in a conservative ‘redneck’ community in Oregon in the 1960s, Larry Hicok (b. 1949: Albany, Oregon) found himself at odds with the religious and later pro-Vietnam War outlook of his community. His turning point came in the early 1960s:

I became an atheist around twelve or thirteen ... I read a book by Harry Barnes, *A History of Western Civilization*. It was a three-volume book maybe, and it really went through the entire history, among other things, of religions, and it pointed out that Christianity is a collection of religious practices and beliefs and ideas and mythologies from all these other religions. And to me that pretty much said—well that's where it came from. I mean, that to me was evidence. I mean, you know you examine the ideas and where they came from instead of just spouting this mythology. And so I pretty much at that point considered myself an atheist.

Some of those who moved to a no religion position did so in reaction to exposure to militant or fundamentalist religion. In Ontario in the 1950s, a fundamentalist uncle persuaded David Fowler's (b. 1947; Welland, Ontario) parents to send him at the age of 7 to an evangelical Sunday school where he became convinced that his parents were bound for hell for holding Saturday night poker evenings; his mother, learning his fears, diverted him to the more liberal United Church Sunday school. But it was a religious school teacher, igniting his doubts about heaven and the church, who started his route from faith.

Where the route to atheism started in adulthood, personal trauma could be extremely influential. Though there is little evidence that war induced widespread secularization (Snape 2010), in a minority of cases experience of combat caused very profound alienation from religion. Norman Bruce (b. 1921, London, England) was a tank commander in Normandy after D Day in 1944, and was involved in one of the bitterest struggles of that campaign. He recalled:

And then of course came the attack, when we attacked from Normandy to Caen with pretty disastrous results really, and a number of my friends were killed and I saw, the padre came into action you know, and blessed them all. This was a terrible time and, this made me feel that there wasn't a God, there couldn't be a God, this was absolutely ridiculous and here we God lovers being killed by other God lovers, it made no sense at all. So I think it was in the midst of the battle that I said, ‘Oh fuck you God!!’ [Laughs] Quite angry, quite angry. The other impressive thing at that time was when night time came, one officer was left on guard beneath the night sky, while the others took their rest, and when there were clear skies the effect of the stars above on this sleeping battle field was somehow very, very moving and, I developed a feeling that the universe was something that should

influence one's life, that one should see oneself as a mere animal living under this, this gorgeous universe. So I had quite a sort of emotional feeling towards human life as animal life at that time.

For Bruce this was a turning point that led him into being an author and pamphleteer on humanist issues, and to develop early philanthropic endeavours in the 1960s for atheists.

Trauma came in diverse forms. For David Fowler in Ontario, after decades of having nothing to do with religion yet not having a firm view on it either, it was when his mother died in his mid thirties that he started to think seriously about what he did believe, and came to the view that he wasn't going to see his mother again in another life; that was his turning point towards atheism and becoming a humanist officiant. Mary Wallace (b. 1960; Cheshire, England) had experienced periods of religious connection in her youth—including being a Church of England bell-ringer and, for six months at the age of thirteen in the early 1970s, being overwhelmed by Pentecostalism (in which she became 'hooked' on the drama of conversion and speaking in tongues). But having drifted from that in later youth and adulthood, she became aware of atheism when she and her husband lost their third child during the later stages of the second trimester of pregnancy. This was the 'first big loss in my life', and though a very warm and empathetic hospital chaplain sensed their lack of Christian faith, he helped them with a little graveside ceremony, establishing an emotional connection. Whilst she greatly appreciated 'the comfort of this particular individual', it was at that point 'I started to think "What do you do to have a funeral if you don't believe in God? How do atheists do this stuff?"—you know if they don't, if they don't go to a minister and say would you conduct a ceremony for me'. In the week between having the baby and the funeral, she phoned the British Humanist Association and obtained literature from them on the funerals without God: 'as soon as I opened that, I thought "Ah that's it, that's it, that's really what we should be doing, that's, that means something to me". All of the words in that book meant something to me in terms of a connection that I'd never felt before in terms of all the religious clap-trap that I'd heard before at ceremonies. So yeah, that was my big turning point.' This led her and her husband to reflect: 'Hang on a minute what do we believe? What is life all about? Because that turning point in our lives was about saying "What the hell are we doing here, what is, what's life all about?"'

Religion itself caused its own traumas. Sectarianism was a strong influence upon those relatively few in Northern Ireland (less than one per cent of population by 2001) who veered from religious identity. Ivan Middleton trained as a social worker in the province in the 1960s, but found on the first day in his first job with a local authority that he was being seen as an addition to the Protestant group in his workplace. Quickly he and his wife decided to seek to leave the province, and did so in late 1969 just as the so-called 'Troubles' were intensifying. Strongly religious communities caused trying change for would-be non-believers. Leslie O'Hagan (b. 1961; Palo Alto, California) was raised in Dallas, Texas, in the 1960s and 1970s, and her parents lost their faith during her childhood. Though she attended Methodist Sunday school and summer camp, she was raised religiously as 'nothing'. She reported: 'I guess I felt like an outsider there. Everyone had their church there, and I didn't feel I fitted anywhere.' She tried very hard to 'accept Jesus into her heart' as she was urged by school teachers, church and friends.

And I felt nothing; what's wrong with me? I remember a horrifying experience around grade 3 at school. In the Bible Belt, everyone has a church and a religion, and everyone assumes you are a Christian. And we had to do a report, an oral report, on our religion, and our church. Well, I didn't have one. And I remember that terror. I had to get up and tell this story—about my Dad was this, my Mom was this. And he didn't believe. And this was humiliating, putting a child through this That scarred me. Everyone said: 'She's not one of us.' I grew up in the Bible Belt just never feeling that I belonged there.

She finally escaped her trauma when in young adulthood she met a visiting non-believer, and they

married and moved to Seattle and became Unitarian Universalists.

Education is much debated as an influence in the decline of religiosity, but though some scholars (mostly from the religious community in the USA) doubt its secularizing efficacy, the evidential base is powerful in its favour. At the top end of intellectual work in the sciences, there was clear evidence from the United States across the whole century that elite learning led to markedly increased atheism, both positive and negative. Postgraduates also tended to be more alienated from religion. But degree learning was cited by many atheists as part of the journey from religion. University in the 1950s and 1960s for many students was still a time of heavy religious influence. At McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario in the mid 1960s, as David Fowler relates, there were compulsory chapel breaks to classes every day in mid morning. The University had many evangelizing religious groups, and it was difficult to avoid fellow students with strong evangelical outlooks. But from the 1960s, the evidence is clear that the majority of secular university institutions became venues for religious decline. Learning and rationality are cited by around half of atheists as key to the development of their religious alienation. Sarah Flew's (b. 1969; Truro, Cornwall, England) journey to atheism started in her teens but lasted nearly twenty years. She recalled:

I can strongly remember when studying 'A' [level] Religious Studies being struck by the fact that the Bible was written by men; this was in connection to an essay that I was writing on the priority of Mark. We were studying the synoptic gospels and comparing how the gospel writers used previous texts. This was the first moment of doubt for me. From this point onwards, the more I studied the less I believed. I gradually moved from being a believing Church of England Christian, to generally believing in God but not in institutional forms of religion. I then moved on from a general belief in God to a stance of atheism I have been a convinced atheist since about the age of 35.

The secularizing influence of education was especially strong amongst women graduates, whose increased dedication to careers from the 1970s further decreased their religiosity as well as delaying age and likelihood of marriage, and likelihood of raising children (Brown 2013). Liberalization of values and demographic change were interacting with secularization in the West to generate the basis of a society likely to be dominated by no religionism.

THE NATURE OF NO RELIGIONISM

Atheism sits in a dynamic relationship with other characteristics and emphases in the individual's no religionism.

In the first instance, people of no religion characteristically hold multiple positions simultaneously. For some this is a position of intellectual strength and breadth. Typical is Justin Trottier (born 1982, Montreal, Canada), organizer for the Center for Inquiry in Toronto; when asked if he would describe himself as an atheist, agnostic or what, he replied: 'I think all those are appropriate, I've used them all on different occasions. I guess I am an agnostic about the epistemology of the God question, but from a practical point of view I am an atheist, I live my life as if there is no God. I am also a Humanist when it comes to my ethical world view, so all of those terms would fit me.' For many, the multiplicity of positions is often expressed as ambivalence. Born in Toronto, Ena Sparks (pseud., b. 1954, Ontario) married young, but her husband was killed in a car accident when she was 22. Though she already felt herself to be atheist, she still reflected on the possibility of a post-death meeting with him, and described her ambivalence about her no-religion position. It is common in narratives of faith loss for there to be both a movement between positions over time, and a holding of multiple positions in middle age and later life. Amongst the young, those in their teens and twenties, there is

greater certainty and single-mindedness over self-describing as ‘atheist’. But for many, agnostic rather than atheist has been the position of choice. This was selected by many respondents as a ‘scientific’ choice. Ron McLaren (b. 1940; Dundee, Scotland) said: ‘I never actually became atheist, I’m an agnostic. For reason of evidence. You can’t prove one or the other. For that reason alone. And of course Darwin was the same. Agnostic.’ David Fowler in Ontario expressed the same of his early years outside religion: ‘I think if someone asked me I would have probably called myself an agnostic then, and even with my own wife, Janet, we didn’t talk a lot about these things. But I think we both, I know we both agreed that we probably were atheist, but we didn’t use that term, so we very closely agreed on how we viewed things.’

This recourse to rationalism, scientific thinking and reason to explain their no-religionism is cited much more often by male than female atheists. Whilst in his early teens, Ernest Poser (b. 1921; Vienna, Austria) moved in 1933 with his Jewish parents from Germany when Hitler came to power, and soon was searching for a means to articulate his rationality in religion.

When we moved to England and I was now looking for something that I hadn’t found yet, I eventually came across the publications of the Rationalist Press Association. And when I found those it was an epiphany. I said ‘these are the things that I have been thinking about all the time.’ I didn’t know there were other people who thought along these lines, and suddenly the sort of guilt feelings one has for thinking thoughts that others don’t share became much reduced because I could see there were people who wrote about this, actually wrote. And so I took a subscription to the magazine ... *The Rationalist* because there was no humanist movement yet by that name. And that turned up after a while on my father’s bedside table. I said ‘Well Dad, I’m very glad that you’re reading this.’ He said, ‘Yeah, this is fascinating stuff.’ I said ‘from you?’ He said ‘Yeah, I think that’s very worthwhile.’

Reading in science and philosophy as the major cause of adopting atheism is overwhelmingly a male characteristic, and was long held to be dangerous for a woman. Bertrand Russell started to become the first ‘media atheist’ from the late 1940s, attracting admiration and some patriotic pride in Britain, even amongst Christian commentators and newspapers. But the first woman atheist to attract attention, Margaret Knight, made humanist broadcasts on the BBC in 1955, and was hounded by the press for transgressing gendered boundaries of acceptable atheism (Brown 2012). Media influence over public rationalism became really significant only in the 1970s, affirming rather than instigating individuals’ atheism. In the USA and Canada, Carl Sagan’s television series *Cosmos* in the 1980s was immensely intellectually influential. David Fowler said that: ‘I would say that Sagan was kind of my, was the bridge from just in my mind saying to myself, “this is what I don’t believe”, to going to trying to verbalize what I *do* believe without being negative, or seeing the wonders in nature as replacing having a belief in religion, that type of thing ...’. In the UK, the work of Bronowski on ‘The Ascent of Man’ acted in the same way, whilst later the books of the new atheists—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, and Sam Harris—are cited by many on both sides of the English-speaking Atlantic, usually cited in that order as a triumvirate.

Yet, many who in the late twentieth century lost religion and became humanists, rationalists, agnostics or atheists demonstrate ambivalence toward the new atheism and what some perceive as its anti-religionism. William Kennedy was brought up a Roman Catholic in Winnipeg, Manitoba, in the thirties and forties. First communion came early there, at age six, and the ceremonies of worship left a deep impression upon him. Boys were trained to be altar boys, and because he was good at remembering the Latin responses, he became a mass server and was later two-years short on the training to join the priesthood. This left a deep and comforting impression which he retained through his conversion to atheism and humanism. Interviewed at the age of 80, he said:

So and I became—I was sort of one of the—I liked the ceremonies, I still do. I have a fond memory of all that ceremonious stuff. It’s not tinged with any sort of resentment or disdain or—it’s comforting, it’s like comfort food even though I’m an atheist now I

—So my attitude to—I'll jump. So my attitude toward religions is tolerant and understanding. Getting together with a lot of people who are friendly and accepting is a good feeling.

There is an atheist sensibility, which is partly female in character, that articulates a no religionism that is not dialectical but compassionate in its emphasis on humanism. Frank O'Hara (b. 1926; Silver Centre, Ontario), raised a Catholic in the twenties and thirties, became in later years a volunteer for the Canadian Executive Service Organization (CESO) working overseas in Sri Lanka, China, Armenia, encouraging development through use of new media. He had felt throughout his life the call to service in the small things of life. 'My attitude is a very personal one, that in a sentence I feel that it's up to me to do what little I can, and little it is in the world. It's what little I can on a day to day basis. So that for example I've done a number of websites for nonprofit organizations for free, as well as my volunteering for years with CESO.' He was a member for a number of years of a large humanist society, organizing their website. But, he says:

I became disenchanted because their meetings tended to be the contrary of—sort of the opposite end of a fundamentalist Christian. In other words they had an axe to grind. A lot of the talk was against something as opposed to for something. And this didn't appeal to me. I tried several times to initiate something along the lines of trying to be active in the community. Not because people would recognize we're doing something, but because it was the right thing to do.

The humanists' call to service is articulated in one way by those who stress the emotional needs of no-religionists in the midst of suffering. One such is Mary Wallace who, from the trauma of the funeral for her lost daughter, became one of the early funeral and wedding celebrants of the Humanist Society of Scotland. It is in this context she records:

There is an element of people who are coming at it [non-belief] from an intellectual point of view as very committed atheists. And, you know, yeah, this is me. And it's now become okay to stand up and say 'I'm an atheist' in a way that it definitely wasn't when I was in my late teens, and even in my early twenties you just didn't say that. Now, no problem. I think, for people now to be able to stand up and say 'I'm gay' or 'I'm an atheist' or whatever they want to say is absolutely fine, acceptable, if you like, to declare your beliefs and to stand up for them. So there's that angle on it. But ... in talking to people in conducting funerals and weddings, people come to us for their rites of passage, if you like because we're touching a nerve with people, no question. People want something that is personal, that doesn't bring God into it, but that is reflective of them as a family or as a couple that really concentrates on them as individuals, and it's that kind of personal element I think that appeals to people. The fact that we don't waste our time with the hymns and the prayers and the bible readings—that what we do, instead of all of that, is provide ceremonies that are properly reflective of who that person was in life, if it's a funeral, or who that couple are now, if it's a marriage, or who that baby might become if it's a baby naming. And I think that's massively appealing to people, and we definitely do ceremonies for people who believe in God, no question, but still want our style of ceremony, and are more than happy for it to be nonreligious in element because the other stuff means a lot more to them than the religious stuff.

This sensibility is expressed by others. Robin Wood (b. 1941; Worthing, Sussex, England) used to conduct all rites of passage for humanists, but gave up on weddings as not being morally 'core' to humanism: 'I think funerals are practical humanism', he said, and he speaks forcefully of the comfort and solace he can provide to those who have nowhere else to turn. This moral commitment to prioritize service over anti-religious rhetoric is to be found across many atheists and humanists. This takes many forms: acting as a humanist chaplain for marriages and funerals, chaplaincy in hospitals and hospices, or in daily service in teaching, overseas service, other caring activities, or fund-raising.

There is no question that there are aggressive encounters for atheistic movements in every Western nation and a need for campaigns to be 'good without god'. Most non-believers tend to acknowledge the philosophical strength of the new atheism, but at the heart of their vision is a powerful moral sensibility behind the intellectual conviction.

CONCLUSION

The twentieth century was the first in which atheism became demographically significant. In many nations, it was the first century in which it was legal and socially acceptable to deny the existence of a god. Nearly all of this change took place after 1960, when in most Western nations integrated cultural crises occurred for Christianity. The hold of the churches on social values, community organization and political rhetoric waned in a complex transition, much of it occurring as a movement from 1950s' traditionalism to 1960s' experimentation (Brown 2001). In many respects, the USA presents a contrasting picture, but even during the growth of conservative religion after 1970 the 'nones' rose markedly. As the testimony of those who have lost religion shows, the normalization of atheism in Western society depended on individuals making personal decisions in often traumatic and life-changing circumstances. In this, there was frequently bravery and gritty determination to overcome prejudice, family hostility, and an oppressive power of religious convention.

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CHAPTER 16

NEW ATHEISM

THOMAS ZENK

INTRODUCTION

ON a first approximation, the term ‘New Atheism’ can be characterized like so: it is an umbrella term, which has originated in the public discourse of the Western world during the first decade of the twenty-first century, and which has been, and still is, used to describe several social actors and phenomena. The most prominent ‘neo-atheistic’ authors, and their books, are: Richard Dawkins (*The God Delusion*, 2006), Daniel Dennett (*Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*, 2006), Sam Harris (*The End of Faith. Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason*, 2004; *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 2006), and Christopher Hitchens (*God Is Not Great: Religion Poisons Everything*, 2007).

In the first part of this article, I will introduce these authors and their core ideas, as laid out in the abovementioned books. In the second part, I shall turn to the reception of the four authors, the origins of the term ‘New Atheism’, and how it has been characterized in the print and broadcast media. I then intend to criticize and, to some extent, deconstruct the term. In particular, I argue that the term should not be used as an analytical category in an academic context. Being critical of the term, I consistently use quotation marks in this paper: ‘New Atheism’, ‘New Atheist’, and ‘neo-atheistic’. Finally, I outline possible further research.

THE FOUR MOST PROMINENT ‘NEW ATHEISTS’

Sam Harris’ *The End of Faith*—Comprehensive Criticism Instead Of Dogmatism

The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason (2004) was the debut book of the American philosopher and neuroscientist Sam Harris (born 1967).¹ Harris is the youngest of the four authors portrayed here, and—unlike the others—only became a public figure following *The End of Faith*’s becoming a surprise, and controversial, bestseller. He explains that his book is a reaction to the September 11 attacks by Islamist terrorists and the public debate on the danger of religion that followed (Harris 2004: 333). Accordingly, the allegedly violent character of the Muslim religion is a dominant theme in the book, and Harris quotes extensively from the Koran and the hadiths to substantiate the claim that Islam is an aggressive—and furthermore, the most aggressive—religion (2004: 111–23). Yet, the criticism of Islam is just one aspect of Harris’ more comprehensive criticism of religion. He elaborates, for example, on the religious foundations of the Inquisition and on the anti-Semitic roots of the Holocaust (2004: 79). Ultimately, he challenges not just the Abrahamic religions but religious faith itself—hence the title ‘The End of Faith’. Faith, to him, is dangerous. As illustrations, he lists numerous armed conflicts and wars in the past and in the present, all of which he

considers to be caused by religion (2004: 26–7). Due to the invention of weapons of mass destruction, the dangerousness of religion is increased to a global level and poses a threat not only to nations but to mankind or even life on earth (2004: 13–14, 26).

Harris points out that the harmfulness of religion is not coincidental but necessarily results from the fact that religion is faith-based. The crucial point in this structural criticism of religion is the conception of faith as irrational, absurd, non-empirical, unjustified, absolutist, intolerant, and dogmatic (2004: 48, 64–8, *passim*). These attributes invite religious conflict to arise and then make it downright impossible for religious conflict to be resolved by means of negotiation (2004: 27, 48, 212, 225). Consequently, Harris perceives faith as highly problematic and, thus, its criticism—if not its abolishment altogether—is mandatory. The title ‘The End of Faith’ must thus be understood as a demand and not just a description (2004: 14, 67).

Harris, concerned with faith itself, explicitly dismisses religion not only in its fundamentalist or extremist manifestations, but also in its moderate forms (2004: 14–23). While he recognizes the differences between religious moderation and extremism (for example, that religious moderates are less likely to resort to violence), he ultimately opposes religious moderation all the same. In his argumentation, moderates are contributing to the idea that religion is a virtue in itself and has to be respected; they are surrounding religion with a kind of protective layer, and thereby, unwittingly shielding the more extreme forms of religion. To Harris, the religious moderates are a part of the problem, and not its solution (2004: 45).

While Harris rejects faith in religions, he does not categorically object to all aspects of religion. Insofar as certain aspects of religion are not based on faith, he is either not concerned with them, or even affirms them, considering them an expression of legitimate human needs (2004: 16). He thus regards the positive side of religion to be spirituality or, using this term interchangeably, mysticism. While spirituality can be found in various religious traditions of the world, he emphasizes that Buddhist spirituality holds a superior position (2004: 215–17, 293). He holds that Buddhism, unlike all other religions, is not based on irrational and dogmatic faith but on evidence and rationality (2004: 43, 191, 234). Accordingly, he perceives it as a tolerant and peaceful religious tradition (2004: 221, 293–5). A practising Buddhist himself, Harris takes an affirmative stance towards Buddhism, as virtually the antithesis of all other religions.²

Harris concentrates on faith-based religions. Yet, faith signifies but one expression of dogmatism. Ultimately, Harris addresses the problem of dogma itself (2004: 231). In this regard, his argument resembles that of an extended version of Karl Popper’s criticism: not only scientific hypotheses and theories but *all* cultural phenomena—thus, religions as well—must be criticizable (2004: 66).³

Daniel Dennett’s *Breaking the Spell*—A Plea for the Scientific Investigation Of Religion

In *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), the American philosopher and cognitive scientist Daniel Dennett self-identifies as an atheist: ‘I am a godless philosopher’ (Dennett 2007: 21). Elsewhere, he more explicitly rejects certain aspects of religion: ‘I for one am not in awe of your faith. I am appalled by your arrogance, by your unreasonable certainty that you have all the answers’ (2007: 51). Another passage that occasionally is interpreted to contain criticism of religion is found in the first chapter of the book, where Dennett introduces the meme theory (cf. Dennett 1996: 335–68; Dawkins [1976] 2006: 189–201). He here makes the following comparison: just as a parasite infects an animal’s brain, manipulates its behaviour, and ultimately leads to its perishing, ideas can

take possession of human brains (Dennett 2007: 4). As illustration, Dennett gives examples from several different religious traditions as well as from the secular sphere (such as Democracy, Justice, Truth)—preventing a one-sided interpretation of the meme theory as anti-religious.⁴

Generally speaking, however, a categorical rejection of religion is not the point of Dennett's book.⁵ He acknowledges the enormous influence exerted by the various religious traditions on the lives of billions of people on the individual, national, and global level (2007: 14–15). It is thereby of utmost importance for us to *understand* religion (2007: 6–7). His book can therefore be regarded as a passionate plea for the scientific investigation of religion as a natural, rather than a supernatural, phenomenon: 'It is high time that we subject religion as a global phenomenon to the most intensive multidisciplinary research we can muster, calling on the best minds on the planet. Why? Because religion is too important for us to remain ignorant about' (2007: 14). Dennett, however, perceives that this kind of research faces resistance caused by 'belief in belief': the special status granted to religion among cultural phenomena. He argues that it is crucial to overcome this resistance or, apropos the book's title, to break this spell (2007: 17). According to Dennett, the theoretical approach best-suited to explaining religion is the cognitive science of religion (see Jonathan Lanman's 'Atheism and Cognitive Science').

In addition to this theoretical perspective, Dennett adopts a practical approach to religion, which might best be summarized as the 'policy-making of religion'. He advocates the strict observance of the separation of church and state in accordance with the First Amendment to the US Constitution, which he considers to have been violated during the presidency of George W. Bush (2007: 308, 334, 340). He promotes a mandatory school curriculum of comparative religious studies, which is based not upon a specific religion but current research (2007: 327–8). Finally, he proposes the establishment of an institution that he describes as a 'Buyer's Guide to Religions': The different religions shall be examined and evaluated with regard to their usefulness or deleteriousness for human coexistence on earth (2007: 39, 249–77).

Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion*—A Darwinian Criticism of Religion

The British ethologist and evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins was already well-known to the general public, due to both his numerous bestselling books and TV appearances. For decades, he has popularized the Darwinian theory of evolution. In *The Selfish Gene* (1976), the book that made him famous, he already openly expressed an atheistic view (e.g., [1976] 2006: 1, 193). While atheism here was secondary at most, Dawkins turned to religious topics more explicitly with his books *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) and *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996). By explaining Darwin's theory of evolution, he hints at the antagonism between Darwinism and creationism. Ultimately, he argues that the evolutionary theory is of superior explanatory value compared to religious creationism, and especially to 'intelligent design' (ID). In his works, he time and again has pointed out that Darwinism undermines religiously shaped anthropology and cosmology. *The God Delusion* (2006) in this regard is a continuation of Dawkins' previous works. His criticism of religion encompasses all those religions in which the concept of a personal God is a central tenet. He refutes the common proofs for God's existence (Dawkins 2006: 76–109) and, then, employs Darwinism as the main argument against theism and deism or, what he calls, the 'God hypothesis' (2006: 113–59)—an expression which stands in the tradition of Pierre-Simon Laplace ('*Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là*') and Carl Sagan's coining of the term in his book *The Demon Haunted World* (1996: 34). While Dawkins' critique is based on a scientific and naturalistic worldview, he also resorts to classical philosophical arguments taken from epistemology and theory of science. For example, he borrows Bertrand

Russell's famous thought experiment of the celestial teapot (Dawkins 2006: 51–5). Besides a critical examination of the validity of religious doctrines, Dawkins reflects on the effects of religion. He, like Harris, considers the religions of the world to be dangerous (2006: 281–308). This becomes especially evident when he describes religious upbringing as child abuse (2006: 315–40). Dawkins' argument against theism is at the same time an argument for positive atheism. For Dawkins, this is a central 'consciousness-raising' message of the book: 'You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled' (2006: 1).

Christopher Hitchens' *God Is Not Great*—Anecdotes Against Religion

The late Anglo-American author, columnist, and literary critic Christopher Hitchens (1949–2011) was a renowned public intellectual in the United Kingdom and the United States. Hitchens, who worked as a foreign correspondent in many parts of the world, often resorts to first-hand accounts and anecdotes in his *God Is Not Great: The Case Against Religion* (2007). While his criticism of religion is non-systematic, it is all-embracing: it includes not only the (Abrahamic) theistic religions and deism—as in Dawkins' case—but also Mormonism, Hinduism, and—unlike Harris—Buddhism (2007: 195–204). He had already articulated his rejection of religion six years before *God Is Not Great*: 'I'm not even an atheist so much as I am an antitheist' (Hitchens 2001: 55).

For Hitchens, while religious doctrines are indeed false (2007: 63–71), the primary motivation for his criticism of religion is its dangerousness: the US edition's subtitle 'religion poisons everything' is echoed several times in the book. Hitchens considers his book a completion of the criticism of religion in the Age of Enlightenment and calls for a 'New Enlightenment' (2007: 277–83). Moreover, he demands, like Dennett, the restoration of a strict separation between church and state. Similar to Dawkins' atheistic consciousness-raising, Hitchens emphasizes the positive side of an atheistic worldview:

We are not immune to the lure of wonder and mystery and awe: we have music and art and literature, and find that the serious ethical dilemmas are better handled by Shakespeare and Tolstoy and Schiller and Dostoyevsky and George Eliot than in the mythical morality tales of the holy books. Literature, not scripture, sustains the mind and [...] also the soul. [...] We are reconciled to living only once, except through our children, for whom we are perfectly happy to notice that we must make way, and room. [...] We believe with certainty that an ethical life can be lived without religion. (Hitchens 2007: 5–6)

Regarding the aphorism 'There are no atheists in foxholes'—already challenged by Dennett (2006)—it seems noteworthy that Hitchens, who was diagnosed with terminal cancer, remained true to his positive atheism even in the face of death (Hitchens 2011).

RECEPTION: THE MAKING OF 'NEW ATHEISM'

Having now, however briefly, considered the books of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens, the question of the common denominator of these four authors can—and indeed must—be asked: Why are these (very) *different* authors and books subsumed under the *one*, unity-implying label 'New Atheism'? In my answer to this question, I want to point to an external factor instead of seeking an intrinsic quality of 'New Atheism': the comprehensive media coverage. The phenomenon referred to as 'New Atheism' is the result of a discursive process in which several authors eventually were labelled 'New Atheists'.

When *The End of Faith* hit the shelves in August 2004 or *Breaking the Spell* in February 2006, none of the reviewers used the term ‘New Atheism’. It was only after Dawkins had published *The God Delusion* in August/September 2006 that these books were retrospectively—in the case of *The End of Faith*, with a two year delay—referred to as ‘neo-atheistic’. We shall here look at the invention of the term, and then its characterization, in more detail.

THE ORIGINS OF ‘NEW ATHEISM’

The term ‘New Atheism’ emerged between late summer and autumn of 2006. During this time, the three individual authors Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris—though not yet Hitchens—were grouped together, and thereby identified as *one* phenomenon. Possibly for the first time this had been done in a review of *The God Delusion* in the American trade magazine *Publishers Weekly*, dating from 21 August (Publishers Weekly 2006). Another such article, ‘The New Naysayers’, appeared in the 11 September issue of the American magazine *Newsweek*; here, for the first time, the adjective ‘new’ appeared (Adler 2006). On 23 October, the influential German weekly *Der Spiegel*—to quote an example from a non-English language context—printed an article, which was published in *Spiegel Online International* under the English title ‘The New Atheists: Researchers Crusade against American Fundamentalists’ on 26 October (Blech 2006). Around that time, the American journalist Gary Wolf (2006a) wrote the article ‘The Church of the Non-Believers’. The article appeared in lifestyle and technology magazine *Wired* and was available online on 23 October (Wolf 2006b). The cover title of the November issue declared ‘The New Atheism’.

The aforementioned articles mark the beginning of an intense public debate on the ‘New Atheism’. Once this label had been installed in the public discourse, it was reproduced again and again, not only in the USA but in several other countries as well. After its start in 2006, this debate reached its height between 2007 and 2009, but appears to have since calmed down. The phrase itself has been extensively used in hundreds of articles. It became a catchphrase, not only in the Anglosphere but also in translation: French (*Nouvel Athéisme*), Italian (*Nuovo Ateismo*), Spanish (*Nuevo Ateísmo*), Swedish (*Nya Ateism*), Polish (*Nowy Ateizm*), Finnish (*Uusateismi*), or German (*Neuer Atheismus*). In this process, not just our four authors, but many social actors from different cultural contexts were identified as ‘New Atheists’: the British philosopher A. C. Grayling (see ‘*Critiques of Theistic Arguments*’), the president of the British Humanist Association Polly Toynbee, the British writers Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, and Philip Pullman, the British-Indian writer Salman Rushdie, the Somali-Dutch Islam critic Ayaan Hirsi Ali, the American biologists Jerry Coyne, Larry Moran, and P. Z. Myers, the American physicists Robert L. Park, Victor J. Stenger (see ‘*Atheism and the Physical Sciences*’), and Steven Weinberg, the American comedian and TV host Bill Maher, the Canadian-American physicist Lawrence Krauss, the German philosophers Michael Schmidt-Salomon and Peter Sloterdijk, the German activist Philipp Möller, the Italian mathematician Piergiorgio Odifreddi, the French philosopher Michel Onfray, and the Slovenian philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek.⁶

CHARACTERIZATION OF ‘NEW ATHEISM’ IN THE PUBLIC DISCOURSE

In public discourse, this so-called New Atheism has been characterized by several *topoi*. Between the phrase’s coinage in 2006 and the present time, this characterization has been remarkably stable. I shall now describe only the most important of these *topoi*—though there are several others (see Zenk

2012a)—and, each time, illustrate them with typical examples.

First topos: ‘New Atheism’ as a Scientific and Naturalistic Criticism of Religion

A recurring trait of the public discourse consists in the assertion that the ‘New Atheists’ are scientists, or in Dawkins’ case more specifically that he is a biologist. ‘New Atheism’ is thus depicted as a scientific and naturalistic criticism of religion or, in regard to Dawkins, as a biological or Darwinian criticism of religion. For example, the November 2006 issue of *Wired*, which contained Gary Wolf’s article, was titled ‘The New Atheism: No Heaven. No Hell. Just Science. Inside the Crusade Against Religion’. Similarly, the cover of the 13 November, 2006, issue of *Time* magazine was titled ‘God vs. Science’. In the corresponding cover story, Dan Cray wrote that ‘the antireligion position is being promoted with increasing insistence by scientists’ and that Dawkins’ *The God Delusion* ‘attacks faith philosophically and historically as well as scientifically, but leans heavily on Darwinian theory’ (2006). *The Guardian*’s Andrew Brown portrayed ‘New Atheism’ through several propositions: ‘The cure for faith is science: The existence of God is a scientific question: either he exists or he doesn’t. [...] Science is the opposite of religion, and will lead people into the clear sunlit uplands of reason’ (2008). The same characterization can be found in the German context. The weekly *Der Spiegel* described the ‘New Atheists’ as such: ‘A new generation of sceptics and scientists has started out to free the world from religious faith. [...] The godless have launched their counterattack. [...] Their weapons are science and reason [...] They call themselves “Brights”. “A bright is a person who has a naturalistic worldview [...]”, as it is written in a manifesto. [...] In short, a pledge to the scientific explanation of the world, free of gods and idols’ (Smolczyk 2007; own translation).

Second topos: ‘New Atheism’ as Ideology or as Religion

Again and again, the ‘New Atheism’ is interpreted as a religious endeavour or as a phenomenon similar to religion. It is certainly striking how often metaphors from specifically religious contexts are employed to describe it. Wolf (2006a) described the ‘New Atheism’ as the ‘Church of the Non-Believers’ and as a ‘prophetic attack on prophecy’. He wrote that the ‘New Atheists’ were on a ‘crusade against belief in God’, that they were ‘pilgrims on the path of nonbelief’, ‘evangelizing’ nonbelievers, and ‘fundamentalists’. In 2007, Maurice Chittenden and Roger Waite expressed very similar views in *The Sunday Times*. Their article, titled ‘Dawkins to preach atheism to US’, states: ‘Richard Dawkins, the British scientist who has become the high priest of atheism, is launching a crusade in America to win new recruits to the church of nonbelievers’. John Gray in *The Guardian* (2008) spoke of a ‘proselytizing atheism’, of an ‘evangelical type of atheism’, and of ‘apostles of unbelief’. David Sloan Wilson described the ‘New Atheism’ as a ‘stealth religion’ (Wilson 2007). In 2009, Chris Hedges wrote a book titled *When Atheism Becomes Religion: America’s New Fundamentalists*. Vox Day, in his book *The Irrational Atheist*, addresses Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens as the ‘Unholy Trinity’ that he wants to ‘exorcise’ (2008: 3). In the second topos, the scientific aspect of ‘New Atheism’ (first topos) is morphed, specifically from biology to biologism or, more generally, from science to scientism. According to this logic, the science at the bottom of the ‘neo-atheist’ criticism of religion is no longer regarded as science but rather as an (unacknowledged) ideology or religion. A similar approach is the identification of ‘New Atheism’ with fundamentalism or dogmatism (Wolf 2006a; Gray 2008; Corlett 2010: 79–82).

Third Topos: ‘New Atheists’ as Aggressive and Militant Towards Religion, and Therefore a Menace

By picturing the ‘New Atheism’ as disrespectful or aggressive towards religion, it is identified as antitheism or anti-religion. Depicting the ‘New Atheists’ as militant further allows for their depiction as a menace. In his opening remarks, Wolf introduced the ‘New Atheists’ by contrasting them with ‘lax agnostics’, ‘noncommittal nonbelievers’, or ‘vague deists’. He then further described ‘New Atheism’: ‘Three writers [i.e., Dawkins, Harris, and Dennett] have sounded this call to arms. [...] I set out to talk with them. I wanted to find out what it would mean to enlist in the war against faith.’ In his concluding remarks, he wrote: ‘Where does this leave us, we who have been called upon to join this uncompromising war against faith? What shall we do, we potential enlistees? Myself, I’ve decided to refuse the call. The irony of the New Atheism—this prophetic attack on prophecy, this extremism in opposition to extremism—is too much for me’ (2006a). The language of war used by Wolf is no exception but must be considered a typical trait of the public discourse on ‘New Atheism’. An interview with Dawkins, for example, was published in *The Scotsman* under the title ‘Unholy Warrior’ (Gilchrist 2008). An 2007 article addressed not only the scientific character of the ‘New Atheism’ (topos one) but also its the militant character: ‘[A] large majority of scientists now believe that God does not exist. These scientists feel that they should militantly spread their ideas of atheism and evolution as far and wide as possible’; Dawkins, specifically, is described as ‘one of the most militant atheists’ (Lyons and Butt 2007). The alleged menace posed by the ‘New Atheists’ sometimes is even stressed by linking them to varying extremes in the human history: the Reign of Terror during the French Revolution (Wolf 2006a; Smolczyk 2007; Day 2008: 197–207), Stalinism/Maoism (Day 2008: 233–50), Nazism/anti-Semitism (Berlinski 2008: 19–31; Day 2008: 209–31), or the devil (Chittenden and Waite 2007; Berlinski 2008; Day 2008: 207).

Intermezzo: The Curious Case of the ‘Four Horsemen’

On 30 September, 2007, Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens all gathered in person for a round table discussion. Here, they exchanged stories of the public’s reaction to their books and debated their ideas. A recording of the two-hour debate has been released under the title ‘The Four Horsemen’.

The incident demonstrates that these authors have themselves been influenced by the public discourse surrounding their works. If they had not previously been labelled as ‘New Atheists’ and, thus, had not been *conceived* as a unity, then—as can reasonably be assumed—their actual gathering would not have taken place. Similarly, the provocative title ‘Four Horsemen’—an allusion to the biblical Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse in the Book of Revelation—can be considered a result of the discourse. It is not a self-identification but rather an ironical reflection of their continuous characterization as religious (second topos) and as aggressive and dangerous (third topos). Interestingly, the label ‘New Atheism’ as such was completely ignored.

CONCEPTUAL PROBLEMS OF THE LABEL ‘NEW ATHEISM’

Undoubtedly, the term ‘New Atheism’ has become a catchphrase that frequently is used in the public discourse and—let us not forget—academia. It must, however, be regarded as a mere name or, more precisely, as a journalistic label. In that regard, the often observed capitalization of the letters N and A

appears symptomatic. I shall now argue that the label ‘New Atheism’ as well as its characterization is problematic in several regards. By doing so, I abandon my earlier descriptive stance in favour of a critical approach towards the term and its usage.

A Uniform Phenomenon, a Consistent Entity, a Movement?

By using the label ‘New Atheism’, several individuals are subsumed under *one unifying* concept, thereby implying a uniform phenomenon. At the same time, this phenomenon is differentiated from other, similar phenomena. Yet, even a cursory inspection of the four most prominent ‘New Atheists’ has revealed differences in several significant regards. Dawkins is a biologist, Dennett a philosopher, Harris a philosopher and neuroscientist, Hitchens a journalist and a cultural critic. While a Darwinian reasoning can be found in all four books, Darwinism only plays a central role in Dawkins’ criticism of religion. He is also the only author who criticizes the classic arguments for the existence of God. However comprehensively Harris’ structural criticism of faith-based religions is conceived, he actually concentrates on Islam and Christianity, and approves of Buddhism. Dawkins’ argumentation is directed against theistic religions and deism, but he is not concerned with Buddhism or Confucianism. A categorical rejection of religion, which, unlike Harris, includes Buddhism, is articulated by Hitchens (‘religion poisons everything’). Dennett pursues an entirely different objective: the scientific *examination* of the religions (and not their eradication). Regarding the four ‘New Atheists’, therefore, I see more differences than similarities. These differences are very likely to increase if the very many other people—physicists, journalists, TV hosts, novelists—sometimes identified as ‘New Atheists’ were examined. Especially, the idea of a ‘New Atheist’ *movement*, which sometimes can be found in the public discourse, seems more than questionable. There simply is no programme or manifesto of ‘New Atheism’ and there is no all-embracing organization, in which all, or even most, of the so-labelled persons are united.

Difference Between ‘New’ and ‘Old’ Atheism?

Furthermore, the term ‘New Atheism’—unless we want to consider the adjective ‘new’ an empty signifier—implies a historical dimension: ‘New Atheism’ is differentiated from an ‘old’, ‘traditional’, or ‘classical’ atheism. In other words, the neologism suggests a break with tradition—a claim that is hard to substantiate. At which historical moment did the caesura happen? What, actually, constitutes this alleged newness? Unless these questions are satisfactorily answered or, in other words, if the criteria for ‘old’ and ‘new’ remain obscure, then we are confronted with problems of classification. For example, what about Dawkins’ earlier books *The Blind Watchmaker* (1986) and *Climbing Mount Improbable* (1996)? What about his later book *The Greatest Show on Earth* (2009)? In these books, he already has articulated a criticism of religion, or still does respectively; *The God Delusion* undoubtedly stands in this tradition. Was Dawkins at the time of *The Blind Watchmaker* still an ‘old’ atheist or was he already some kind of a ‘proto-neo-atheist’? Is *The Greatest Show* still part of ‘New Atheism’ or is it already a ‘post-neo-atheistic’ book? Questions of this kind emerge easily in the face of Wolf’s comment on Dawkins’ atheism: ‘Dawkins has been talking this way for years, and his best comebacks are decades old’ (2006a). If Dawkins says nothing new, why label him a ‘New Atheist’?

Difference between the External Labelling and the Self-conception

The label ‘New Atheist’ is an external attribution which does *not* conform with the self-identification of the actors who are labelled as such.⁷ They do call themselves ‘unbeliever’, ‘non-believer’, ‘infidel’, ‘atheist’, ‘godless’, ‘antitheist’, ‘critic of religion’—however, they neither call themselves ‘New Atheists’ nor have they ever claimed to have presented an especially innovative kind of criticism of religion. In the course of the public debate, some of them even have criticized the label. Harris, in particular, has even argued for abandoning the wider term ‘atheist’ (Harris 2007).

‘New Atheism’ as a Scientific Criticism of Religion?

As demonstrated above, the ‘New Atheism’ is often characterized by its scientific foundation. It certainly is true that the natural sciences constitute an important basis of the ‘neo-atheistic’ criticism of religion. However, the scientific method and the scientific and naturalistic worldview are not the only basis of the criticism of religion of the ‘New Atheists’. Besides science, the ‘New Atheists’ also base their argumentations on philosophical, epistemological, political, and moral reflections. In their evaluations of religions in regard to their usefulness or dangerousness, the ‘New Atheists’ do not deduce their value judgements from science. Hitchens unmistakably says: ‘We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason’ (2009: 15). Above all, it is not convincing to try to define the specifically *new* of the ‘New Atheism’ by referring to science. For centuries, religious teachings were undermined by scientific findings, for example in cosmology (Copernicus, Galilei), in geology (Lyell), or in biology (Darwin).

Aggressiveness, Militancy, Menace?

Undoubtedly, the formulation of a positive atheistic position can be perceived as a more articulate, explicit, or—in terms of the public discourse—‘more aggressive’ statement than a ‘lax’ (Wolf 2006a) agnostic one. Yet, the difference between positive atheism and agnosticism in general cannot constitute the specific newness of ‘New Atheism’. The categorical attribution of ‘aggressiveness’ ignores not only Harris’ praise for Buddhism but also Dennett’s intention of investigating, not abolishing, religion. Even *if* it could be demonstrated beyond doubt that Dawkins and Hitchens really were aggressive or militant, the aggressiveness of ‘New Atheism’ as a whole would still not have been demonstrated. Adopting a historical perspective, I cannot understand how the ‘New Atheists’ can be regarded as *particularly* disrespectful or aggressive. For example, in 1887 John Most wrote a pamphlet *The God Pestilence*, in which he called for an ‘[i]mplacable war to the knife’ against priests ([1887] 1983), and in 1888 Nietzsche issued a *Decree against Christianity*, in which he wrote: ‘Against the priest one doesn’t use arguments, but prison’ (Nietzsche, quoted in Shapiro 1988: 212–13). Furthermore, the (alleged or factual) disrespect and aggressiveness on the part of the ‘New Atheists’ must be compared to the language used by their critics: ‘Unholy Trinity’ (Day), ‘Devil’s Delusion’ (Berlinski), or ‘Dawkins Delusion’ (McGrath). To describe the ‘New Atheists’ as militant (by comparing them to the Reign of Terror, Hitler, or Stalin) is far-fetched and more than questionable. It need hardly be said that none of the ‘New Atheists’ has resorted to physical violence himself or has advocated the eradication of the world’s religions by force.

Ideology, Religion, or Religious Fundamentalism?

If the ‘New Atheism’ is interpreted as a religion or a religion-like phenomenon, this contradicts the self-concept of the ‘New Atheists’, who do not regard themselves as religious. Dawkins is very clear about this: ‘We believe in evolution because the evidence supports it, and we would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to disprove it. No real fundamentalist would ever say anything like that. [...] But my belief in evolution is not fundamentalism, and it is not faith, because I know what it would take to change my mind, and I would gladly do so if the necessary evidence were forthcoming’ (Dawkins 2006: 283). Hitchens, too, is explicit: ‘And here is the point, about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. [...] We do not hold our convictions dogmatically’ (Hitchens 2007: 15).

RESEARCHING ‘NEW ATHEISM’: CONCLUDING THOUGHTS AND PERSPECTIVES

I have tried to show that the term ‘New Atheism’ has several conceptual weaknesses. Clearly, it is not exactly defined: the criteria for determining who is and who is not a ‘New Atheist’ remain obscure, and it must be assumed that it is ultimately a matter of discursive politics. Furthermore, the label ‘New Atheist’ differs from the self-identification of those labelled as such. Finally, the characterization of ‘New Atheism’ in the public discourse, at least in some aspects, has negative connotations that cannot be subtracted from the label. From the perspective of study of religion, the label ‘New Atheism’ in this regard resembles other terms like ‘cult’ or ‘sect’. I acknowledge that the neologism ‘New Atheism’ is a catchphrase and that, by journalistic standards, it has been very successful. Other standards, however, prevail in academia, and my criticism only applies to this specific context. I think that scholars should not uncritically adopt and reproduce a disputable journalistic label. Concretely, I propose to *not* use the term ‘New Atheism’ as an analytic category in an academic context but, instead, to examine the how the label is used. Who uses the term, with which intention, to what end?

Following these very general explanations, I want to outline some perspectives for further research. The ‘neo-atheistic’ books have provoked countless articles and over one hundred books specifically aimed at refuting Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and—much less frequently—Dennett (Zenk 2012b). Almost all of these apologetic books are written by Christians. Despite the sustained criticism of Islam on the part of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens, only one book by a Muslim author has appeared: *Sam Harris and The End of Faith: A Muslim’s Critical Response* (2009) by Bill Whitehouse. Given the fact that *The God Delusion* exists in unofficial electronic versions in Arabic (*wahm al”ilāh bi-qalam*) and Farsi (*Pendar-e Khod ā*) and as such is distributed on the internet, what is the reception of Dawkins in countries where Islam is the predominant religion? How do non-Christian religious apologists fend off the ‘neo-atheistic’ criticism of their religion? In which regard—if any—does Christian apologetics differ from Muslim or Jewish apologetics? Does a specific Hindu, Mormon, or Scientologist reception of ‘New Atheism’ exist at all, and what is it like? Considering Harris’ praise of Buddhist spirituality, is there a specific reception of the ‘New Atheism’ among (Western) Buddhists? The ‘New Atheism’ has not only been received by various religious actors but also among other contemporary nonreligious actors. What, then, has been the reception of the ‘New Atheists’ among other atheists, agnostics, sceptics, secular humanists? Generally, I think, much more research on the topics of nonreligion and secularity—of which the so-called ‘New Atheism’ is but one part—is very much to be welcomed.

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PART III

WORLDVIEWS AND SYSTEMS

CHAPTER 17

HUMANISM

STEPHEN LAW

WHAT IS HUMANISM?

‘HUMANISM’ is a word that has had and continues to have a number of meanings. The focus here is on the kind of atheistic world-view espoused by those who organize and campaign under that banner in the UK and abroad.

We should acknowledge that there remain other uses of term. In one of the loosest senses of the expression, a ‘Humanist’ is someone whose world-view gives special importance to human concerns, values, and dignity. If that is what a Humanist is, then of course most of us qualify as Humanists, including many religious theists. But the fact remains that, around the world, those who organize under the label ‘Humanism’ tend to sign up to a narrower, atheistic view.

What does Humanism, understood in this narrower way, involve? The boundaries of the concept remain somewhat vague and ambiguous. However, most of those who organize under the banner of Humanism would accept the following minimal seven-point characterization of their world-view:

One. Humanists place particular emphasis on the role of *science and reason*. They believe that, if we want to know what is true, reasons and science are invaluable tools—tools we should apply without limit. No beliefs should be placed beyond rational, critical scrutiny.

Two. Humanists are *atheists*. That is not to say that they must be atheists in the positive sense, however. Humanists need not deny there is a God or gods. But they do not sign up to belief in a God or gods. Humanists tend to be similarly sceptical about the existence of other supernatural agents of the sort that many religions suppose exist, such as angels and demons.

Three. Humanists suppose that this is very probably *the only life we have*. There is no heaven or hell awaiting us. Nor are we reincarnated.

Four. Humanists usually believe in the *existence and importance of moral value*. Humanists tend to have a particular interest and concern with moral and ethical issues. Most Humanists believe that actions can be objectively morally right or wrong. They therefore deny that the existence of objective moral values entails the existence of God. So far as knowledge of right and wrong is concerned, Humanists place strong emphasis on the role of science and/or reason. In particular, they usually suppose that our ethical framework should be strongly informed and shaped by an empirically grounded understanding of what human beings are actually like, and of what enables them to flourish. Obviously, when a Humanist offers moral justifications, they will utilize justifications rooted in something other than religious authority and scripture.

Humanists emphasize our *individual moral autonomy and responsibility*. They insist each individual must ultimately take responsibility for making moral judgements, even if that judgement is that that individual *ought* to stick with the moral framework handed to them by a tradition or community. They suppose that, convenient though it might be if individuals could hand over responsibility for making tough moral decisions to some external religious, political or other leader or authority, we cannot do so (except perhaps in some very special cases). A good moral education will be one that avoids encouraging passive, uncritical acceptance of a particular moral and religious or other world-view (including Humanism itself), and will instead focus on developing the intellectual, emotional, and other skills individuals will need to discharge that responsibility properly.

Humanists are *secularists* in the sense that they favour an open, democratic society, and believe the State should take a *neutral* stance on religion. The State should not privilege religious over atheist views, but neither should it privilege atheist views over those of the religious. Humanists believe the State should protect equally the freedom of individuals to hold and promote both religious and atheist points of view. A Humanist would obviously be profoundly opposed to the kind of theocracies that coerce people into accepting a particular religious belief, but they are no less opposed to totalitarian states in which citizens are obliged to accept atheism. Humanists want a level playing field so far as religion and nonreligion are concerned. This is not the case in, for example, the United Kingdom, where twenty-six Bishops are automatically allocated seats in the House of Lords and where the State funds increasing numbers of various religious, but not Humanist, schools. These are two important campaign issues for the British Humanist Association (the leading Humanist organization in the UK).

Humanists believe that we can enjoy significant, meaningful lives even if there is not a God, and whether or not we happen to be religious. Many Humanists would go further and insist that, in some respects, our lives may become rather *more* meaningful in the absence of gods and/or religion (see, e.g., Law 2011; and Norman 2004). Some argue that religions can sometimes act as an impediment to our leading meaningful lives by, for example, leading us *not* to think hard about the ‘big questions’; forcing us to live a certain way out of fear of cosmic punishment; and/or wasting our lives promoting false beliefs because of a mistaken expectation of a life to come.

WHAT HUMANISM IS NOT

The above sketch of Humanism does not include certain features that are nevertheless often associated with it. These include:

Speciesism. Humanists, as defined above, are not obliged to believe that *only* human beings matter, morally speaking. Nor should Humanism be taken to require the view that it is *by virtue of* being a member of a particular species—the human species—that subjects are deserving of special moral consideration (which is not to say that humans are not, as a rule, deserving of special consideration). Many Humanists would condemn such an attitude as a form of ‘speciesism’—a form of prejudice against other species. This is not to say that Humanists are necessarily immune to speciesism, as the philosopher Peter Singer notes: ‘... despite many individual exceptions, Humanists have on the whole been unable to free themselves from one of the most central of these Christian

dogmas: the prejudice of speciesism' (Singer 2004: 19).

Utilitarianism. Many Humanists are drawn to some form of consequentialism, and some would probably describe themselves as utilitarians. True, almost all Humanists believe that happiness and suffering matter, morally speaking, and should certainly be taken into account when weighing up ethical questions. However, utilitarianism is not obligatory for Humanists. There is a wide variety of ethical theories open to Humanists, including for example, virtue ethicism and non-theistic versions of Kantianism.

Utopianism. Some Humanists are highly optimistic. Often they are supposed to be naively so, believing that science and reason must ultimately triumph over the forces of superstition and unreason, ushering in a Brave New World of peace and prosperity. However, there is no requirement that Humanists be utopian, and in fact many are rather pessimistic.

Scientism. Some Humanists embrace *scientism*—the view that every meaningful question can in principle be answered by application of the scientific method. However, Humanists are not obliged to accept scientism and many reject it. Certainly, the view that moral questions are ultimately answerable by scientific means is not accepted by all Humanists. Many of them are persuaded that the problem of the is/ought gap raised by Hume (the problem that empirical observation reveals only what is the case, not what ought to be, and one cannot one legitimately infer an 'ought' from an 'is') means that while our moral judgements should be scientifically informed, and while science certainly has a very important role to play in establishing what is morally right or wrong, moral judgement cannot be justified wholly in scientific terms. (Note, however, that the Humanist Sam Harris, in his book *The Moral Landscape* [Harris 2011] argues that science can, in fact, answer moral questions, once morality is understood as those values that lead to human flourishing). Humanists can, and often do, also take the view that metaphysical questions such as why the universe exists, or why there is anything at all, are questions that science cannot answer. Some Humanists reject these particular questions as meaningless (asking 'Why is there anything at all?' they may suggest, is akin to asking 'What's North of the North Pole?'), while others, while not denying the question is legitimate, take the view that, while they may not know what the answer is, they can nevertheless justifiably rule certain answers out, and indeed, can even rule some out on the basis of observation of the world around us (for example, they may suppose that the suggestion that the universe is the creation of an all-powerful, all-evil deity can be ruled out on the basis of observation, for doesn't the universe contain far too much good for it plausibly to be the creation of such an evil god?). Those Humanists who are positive atheists may suppose that 'Why is there anything at all?' is a *bona fide* question to which they do not, and perhaps cannot, know the answer, yet may also quite consistently suppose they can nevertheless reasonably rule certain answers out—such as that the universe was created by the Judeo-Christian God.

Naturalism. Humanists are not obliged to embrace naturalism, the view that the natural/physical reality is the only reality there is, and/or that the natural/physical facts are the only facts that there are. Many Humanists do accept naturalism. Some Humanists even define Humanism so that, by definition, Humanists sign up to naturalism. However, plenty of those who describe themselves as Humanists would certainly question, and many would reject, naturalism. Some may reject naturalism on the grounds that it is a vacuous or confused concept. It might be defined as a denial of the supernatural. But if the supernatural is then defined as the non-natural, both concepts remain empty. Other Humanists may reject naturalism because, for example, they are mathematical Platonists. Many mathematicians suppose mathematics describes a transcendent, non-natural reality. Such a mathematician could still be an atheist, of course—even a positive atheist. They may reject belief in God, gods, and/or supernatural agents. They can also be a Humanist, for they are still free to

subscribe to the seven views outlined above. Humanists may also reject naturalism because they suppose there exist moral facts and that moral facts are non-natural facts, or because they suppose there are facts about minds that are non-natural facts. Again, such views do not, or do not obviously, require that one sign up to any sort of theism. A global survey of professional philosophers and graduate students carried out by [philpapers.org](http://philpapers.org/surveys/) in 2009, found that just under half of them are wedded to naturalism, yet only 14.6 per cent accept some form of theism (<http://philpapers.org/surveys/>). So a significant proportion fail to accept either theism or naturalism. Yet they may still be Humanists, as characterized here.

Materialism and physicalism. Materialism is the view that the only reality is material and physicalism the view that the only reality is physical. Neither is a philosophy that Humanists are obliged to accept, for much the same reasons that they are not obliged to accept naturalism. That charge that Humanists are ‘materialists’ is often doubly misleading because ‘materialist’ is also used to denote a shallow person preoccupied with the acquisition of material possessions. An ambiguous charge of ‘materialism’ against Humanists therefore does them a disservice twice over.

Given that neither Humanism (nor positive atheism) requires that adherents accept scientism, naturalism, utilitarianism, utopianism, materialism, or physicalism, it is not sufficient to refute Humanism (or positive atheism) that one refute one, or even all, of these views. While some Humanists may sign up to some, even all, of these various positions, they are free to abandon all of them without abandoning their Humanism.

Critics of Humanism often assume Humanists are wedded to at least some of the above views. Popular attempted refutations of Humanism—and also attempted refutations of positive atheism—often involve no more than attempts to refute, say, materialism or naturalism. A refutation of materialism or naturalism leaves Humanism entirely unscathed.

IS HUMANISM WHOLLY NEGATIVE?

It is sometimes said that Humanists are not ‘for’ anything. Humanism is defined entirely in terms of what it rejects. It should be clear why this particular charge does not stick, given how Humanism is characterized above.

It is true that atheism is defined in a negative fashion—in terms of a non-acceptance or denial of a belief. However, Humanism involves more than just atheism. All Humanists are atheists, but not all atheists are Humanists. Stalin and Mao were atheists, but were not Humanists. That is because Stalin and Mao failed to sign up to certain key Humanist views on secularism, freedom, and moral autonomy. Indeed, atheists like Stalin and Mao would persecute those who qualify as Humanists in the above sense. They were very much opposed to free thought on moral, religious, and other important questions. Humanists, by contrast, are for freedom of thought and expression. They are for an open, democratic society. They are also for encouraging and helping children to think critically and independently on moral, religious, political, and other ‘big questions’. Humanists do not just reject approaches to answering such questions based on religious scripture and dogma, they are also for positive alternatives to such approaches, including (as far as is possible) the application of science and reason.

What of another charge also sometimes levelled at Humanism—that it is merely an arbitrary collection of disparate ideas rather than a coherent world-view? Humanism, like religion, focuses on certain ‘big questions’ of the sort that have been of concern to humanity since before the dawn of civilization—questions about how we should live, how society should be organized, about what is

right and wrong, about what is of ultimate importance, and so on. Religions too have focused on such questions, but they are not the exclusive preserve of religion. There is a long tradition of nonreligious *philosophical* thought on such questions running back to antiquity. It is on this nonreligious intellectual tradition that Humanism draws. What pulls together the seven threads outlined above into something like a system of thought is their shared focus on ‘big questions’, a degree of interconnection (for example, scepticism about gods will lead to scepticism about the suggestion that our moral sense derives from a god), and the pivotal role played by the first thread—Humanists try to answer these questions through the application of science and reason, rather than relying on revelation, scripture, etc. Rightly or wrongly, Humanists believe Humanism is the most *reasonable* world-view to adopt. They would (or should) discourage acceptance of Humanism as some sort of dogma.

ENLIGHTENMENT ROOTS, AND THE ROLE OF TRADITION

Clearly, Humanist thinking draws heavily on, and has much in common with, Enlightenment thought. During the Enlightenment, individuals were encouraged to throw off reliance on tradition—particularly religious tradition—and think for themselves. Denis Diderot’s eighteenth-century *Encyclopédia* defines the Enlightened thinker as one who: ‘trampling on prejudice, tradition, universal consent, authority, in a word, all that enslaves most minds, dares to think for himself’ (quoted in Porter 2001: 3).

Probably the most familiar definition of Enlightenment comes from the philosopher Immanuel Kant. In a magazine article, Kant characterized Enlightenment as the:

[E]mergence of man from his self-imposed infancy. Infancy is the inability to use one’s reason without the guidance of another. It is self-imposed, when it depends on a deficiency, not of reason, but of the resolve and courage to use it without external guidance. Thus the watchword of the Enlightenment is *Sapere Aude!* Have the courage to use one’s own reason! (Quoted in Honderich 1995: 253)

Sapere Aude could easily be a slogan of the modern Humanist movement.

However, some critics of the Enlightenment suggest that what Kant encouraged individuals to do, to apply their own powers of reason independently of any tradition, cannot be done. Even in applying reason we are drawing on some tradition or other. Whatever forms of reasoning we employ are born of and dependent on some tradition or other, as the contemporary philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre notes: ‘all reasoning takes place within the context of some traditional mode of thought’ (1985: 222). We can never achieve a tradition-free perspective. Hence what Diderot suggests we do—cast aside all tradition and think for ourselves—cannot be done.

Given modern Humanism’s Enlightenment roots, has MacIntyre also raised a significant problem for Humanism? I cannot see that he has. Humanists are not obliged to accept that the application of reason should be tradition-free. Indeed, Humanists themselves typically point out that they are drawing on a long intellectual tradition that runs back to antiquity. True Humanists say that nothing should be deemed off-limits so far as critical scrutiny is concerned. Certain beliefs should not be considered immune, certainly not because they happen to be traditional religious beliefs, for example. However, that is a point with which MacIntyre himself concurs. He insists: ‘[n]othing can claim exemption from reflective critique’ (1994: 289). It is one thing to say that, in applying reason, we can’t help but draw on a tradition. It is quite another to say that we shouldn’t subject traditional beliefs to critical scrutiny.

MacIntyre also suggests that the Enlightenment thinkers made a mistake in supposing that morality can be given a *wholly* rational foundation. That was certainly Kant's view—he supposed that the rabbit of morality could be conjured out of the hat of reason without appeal to tradition. However, it is now widely supposed that Kant was mistaken about that. But then, because the Enlightenment thinkers had kicked away the old moral foundations of (largely religious) tradition, they left morality without any foundation at all. As a consequence, across the post-Enlightenment West, morality is in a state of collapse. The only cure, it is sometimes suggested, is a return to the kind of religious tradition that previously underpinned Western morality.

Notice however, Kant's characterization of Enlightenment does not entail that followers of Enlightenment thought sign up to the view that morality can be given a *wholly* rational foundation. That morality can be given such a foundation may have been Kant's view, but it was not a view universally shared by Enlightenment thinkers (it was not David Hume's view, for example), and it is, more relevantly, not generally the view of Humanists. Humanists believe we should apply reason as far as we are able. In particular, they believe we should apply reason in attempting to answer moral questions. And there's no doubt that the application of reason within the moral sphere can be a valuable exercise—in, for example, revealing unacknowledged consequences of our most basic moral convictions, revealing internal tensions or inconsistencies in our moral positions, exposing how our moral reasoning is based on faulty logic or false empirical assumptions, and so on. But that is not necessarily to suppose that morality can be founded on reason alone.

HUMANISM AND MORAL RELATIVISM

Humanists are sometimes accused of taking a relativist position, particularly with regard to moral value. While a few Humanists may knowingly embrace relativism, many quite explicitly reject the relativist view. Still, it is often suggested by critics of Humanism that moral relativism is an unavoidable consequence of Humanism. The kind of moral relativism to which Humanists are typically accused of having committed themselves (even if unwittingly) is that the truth about what is morally right or wrong is relative to individuals or communities. There is no truth with a capital 'T' so far as the wrongness of female circumcision, polygamy, or even murder, is concerned. What is true for one individual or community may be false for another. This is because moral value is a subjectively-rooted property, like deliciousness.

Why suppose Humanism entails relativism? Some theists maintain that God is the only possible source and foundation of objective moral value. So, they argue, if there is no God, then judgements about moral value can boil down to nothing more than an expression of subjective taste or preference. Those Humanists who are positive atheists, then, cannot avoid the slide into moral relativism.

However, the principle that God is the only possible foundation of objective moral value is, to say the least, contentious (see Erik Wielenberg's 'Atheism and Morality'). The principle is not widely accepted among professional philosophers. Arguments for the principle often turn on dubious assumptions, such as the assumption that positive atheism entails naturalism, which is untrue.

Even if the principle that God is the only possible foundation of objective moral value could be established, and that some such foundation is required if there are to be such values at all, a positive atheist Humanist might maintain that such is the strength of the case against the existence of a God capable of grounding such values that belief in objective moral values must, then, also be abandoned. However, instead of embracing moral relativism, such a positive atheist might instead adopt moral

nihilism, insisting not that moral value is relative, but that it is non-existent. If a Humanist is, by definition, someone who accepts the reality of moral value, then someone who came to adopt a nihilist position would no longer be a Humanist. However, some of those who maintain that moral value is an illusion, but nevertheless want to organize to help other human beings flourish, etc. do indeed describe themselves as 'Humanists'. Whether such an individual should be classed as a Humanist is debatable. Perhaps the requirement that Humanists accept the existence of moral value is too strong (which is why it is not built into my seven point characterization above).

Whether or not such a moral nihilist can rightly be called a Humanist, moral relativism is certainly a difficult position to square with Humanism, for a number of reasons. Note, for example, that the Humanist view that we ought to apply reason in trying to figure out what is morally right or wrong sits uncomfortably with moral relativism. If relativism is true, the moral position you arrive at after careful, rational reflection will be no more or less true than the one you start with. In which case there is no point in engaging in such reflection—at least not so far as discovering what is true is concerned. Those Humanists who are committed to the view that the application of reason can help reveal what is true, morally speaking, in effect reject moral relativism. And in fact many do so quite explicitly (see, e.g., Blackburn 2001).

What kind of justification do Humanists give for their most basic moral principles? There is no single, official Humanist justification that Humanists are obliged to endorse. However, many Humanists are drawn to something like the following pragmatic justification. Moral norms serve certain purposes, such as allowing us to live together in relative harmony and facilitating cooperation. If we want to pursue these goals, certain core norms must be adhered to—which helps to explain why certain basic norms are found in almost every culture, such as prohibitions on stealing, lying, and breaking promises.

A Humanist justification along such lines is offered by the writer and broadcaster Margaret Knight:

Why should I consider others? These ultimate moral questions, like all ultimate questions, can be desperately difficult to answer, as every philosophy student knows. Myself, I think the only possible answer to this question is the Humanist one—because we are naturally social beings; we live in communities; and life in any community, from the family outwards, is much happier, and fuller, and richer if the members are friendly and co-operative than if they are hostile and resentful. (Knight 1955)

Such a pragmatic answer sidesteps the thorny philosophical question of ultimate moral foundations (a question to which, according to Humanists, even theism does not offer a satisfactory answer) by beginning with the assumption that we do at least share certain goals. Once it is acknowledged that morality is essentially tied up with the promotion of human flourishing, the relativistic view that what is morally right or wrong is nothing more than a matter of personal subjective taste or preference is no longer tenable (what I might subjectively prefer need not be what will allow myself and others to flourish).

WILL WE BE GOOD WITHOUT RELIGION?

It is often suggested that if religion is undermined, morality will collapse and the fabric of society will unravel. In so far as Humanism stands in opposition to, and tends to undermine, religious belief, then, it is a threat to civilization. But what is the evidence for the view that moral behaviour requires a religious underpinning?

One popular line of argument is to point to, say, declining levels of religiosity and (it is alleged) declining levels of moral behaviour over the last half-century or so, and to conclude that the former

is the primary *cause* of the latter. However, such an argument would, as it stands, commit the *post hoc* fallacy. The observation that two events happen one after the other or simultaneously does not, in isolation, provide much support to the claim that the events are causally related.

But in any case, while religiosity does indeed appear to be declining across much of the West, is moral behaviour also in decline? Invited to attend a conference at which various people—mostly religious leaders—were gathered to consider Britain’s ‘post-Christian’ future, I was not overly surprised to find the conference beginning with much collective hand-wringing about the morally awful state of the nation. However, after two days of reflection, a majority of attendees came to the conclusion that Britain was actually morally better than it was a half century ago, not least because it is no longer as racist, sexist, and homophobic as it once was. It is true that some indicators of morality, such as criminality, do reveal a decline in moral behaviour, but that does not establish that the country is, on balance, less moral than it used to be.

Even supposing that Britain is less moral than it used to be, it does not follow that decline in religious belief is the primary cause. There may be more vandalism and petty street crime and burglary. But there are other explanations for an increase in crimes of that sort, such as: people no longer know their neighbours well, homes stand empty for much of each day. Tightly knit communities are effective at controlling local crime. Communities are certainly less tightly knit than they used to be, and that has at least as much to do with changing economic and other circumstances as it has to do with decline in religious belief.

Assuming a rise in levels of crime, delinquency, sexually transmitted disease, etc. over the last half-century or so, does the evidence support the view that the primary cause is decline in religious belief? If a decline in religiosity were the primary cause, then we would expect those countries that have seen the greatest decline to have the most serious problems. But that is not the case. Countries in which levels of religious belief are comparatively low, such as Canada, Japan, and the Scandinavian nations, do not have-greater-than average levels of crime, delinquency, and sexually transmitted disease (see Phil Zuckerman’s ‘Atheism and Societal Health’).

Also note that while violent crime may be up in many countries since the 1950s, levels are dramatically lower than they were three or four centuries ago, when those same countries were very religious indeed (see Roth 2001). High levels of criminality can and clearly do have causes other than loss of religious belief. The thought that religion is a necessary underpinning for morality is also contradicted by history. Chinese history provides a straightforward counter-example to the thesis that, without a religiously-grounded morality, civilizations cannot survive. Francis Fukuyama points out that:

[T]he dominant cultural force in traditional Chinese society was, of course, Confucianism, which is not a religion at all but rather a rational, secular ethical doctrine. The history of China is replete with instances of moral decline and moral renewal, but none of these is linked particularly to anything a Westerner would call religion. And it is hard to make the case that levels of ordinary morality are lower in Asia than in parts of the world dominated by transcendental religion. (Fukuyama 2004: 108)

We find much the same levels of moral behaviour, and also much the same kind of basic moral code, in China as we do in Europe over the same period—despite a lack of religious foundation for moral behaviour in China. Indeed, the Golden Rule was formulated by Confucius before it was embraced by Christianity. From the perspective of other cultures, the assumption that people won’t be good without belief in God is baffling, as the Chinese writer Lin Yu Tang points out:

To the West, it seems hardly imaginable that the relationship between man and man (morality) could be maintained without reference to a Supreme Being, while to the Chinese it is equally amazing that men should not, or could not, behave toward one another as decent beings without thinking of their indirect relationship through a third party. (Lin 1938: 106)

In short, the thought that a nonreligious, Humanist society cannot be a stable, moral society is not well-supported by the available evidence, and in fact appears to be undermined by much of that evidence.

Given that many atheists continue to behave at least as morally as their religious counterparts, and that the least religious developed democracies appear to be as morally healthy as the most religious, some religious critics of Humanism maintain that while Humanism/atheism may not have brought about the moral collapse of these societies *yet*—that collapse is nevertheless coming. Such irreligious individuals and societies are living off the accumulated ‘moral capital’ previously built up by religion, capital that will eventually run out. The US neoconservative thinker Irving Kristol warns:

For well over 150 years now, social critics have been warning us that bourgeois society was living off the accumulated moral capital of traditional religion and traditional moral philosophy. (Kristol 1999: 101)

This warning continues to be echoed by, for example, Bishop Michael Nazir Ali. Interviewed on the BBC Radio 4 *Today* programme on 6 November 2006, Ali said:

British society is based on a Christian vision and Christian values ... Unless people know what the springs are that feed our values, the whole thing will dry up ... We may already be living on past capital.

Richard Harries, Bishop of Oxford, has also used the phrase:

... many people who have strong moral commitments without any religious foundation were shaped by parents or grandparents for whom morality and religion were fundamentally bound up How far are we living on moral capital? (Harries 2007)

The appeal to moral capital provides an explanation for why we aren’t looking at moral collapse yet. But the prediction, or concern, is that collapse is nevertheless coming.

But what evidence is there to support this view that moral collapse is in the pipeline? There appears to be little. Indeed, the fact that, for two millennia, Chinese society exhibited much the same levels and kind of moral behaviour as Christian Europe, despite Chinese morality lacking roots in anything a Westerner would recognize as a religion, suggests that predictions of delayed doom are mistaken.

RELIGION AS A ‘NECESSARY SOCIAL ADHESIVE’

It is true that religion can function as a powerful social adhesive, binding individuals together into communities. As the Humanist philosopher Simon Blackburn acknowledges,

One of the more depressing findings of social anthropology is that societies professing a religion are more stable, and last longer, than those that do not. It is estimated that breakaway groups like communes or new age communities last some four times longer if they profess a common religion than if they do not. (Blackburn 2004: 18)

Should we then reject Humanism on the grounds that it is likely to unravel the social bonds—in particular, the *religious* bonds—that hold us together? The suggestion that applying reason without limits is likely to have such catastrophic consequences has a long pedigree. John Gray says about Count Joseph de Maistre, a staunch defender of the Church and Pope and one of the Enlightenment’s most vigorous critics, that:

When he represents reason and analysis as corrosive and destructive, solvents of custom and allegiance that cannot replace the bonds of sentiment and tradition which they weaken and demolish, he illuminates, better perhaps than any subsequent writer, the absurdity of the Enlightenment faith (for such it undoubtedly was) that human society can have a rational foundation. If to reason is

to question, then questioning will have no end, until it has wrought the dissolution of the civilization that gave it birth. (Gray 1995: 125–6)

But of course it does not follow that beliefs subjected to critical scrutiny will be abandoned. Often we find ourselves all the more passionately committed to principles that have successfully withstood such close scrutiny. Even if reason cannot underpin our most basic moral convictions, it does not follow that the application of reason must, then, lead us to abandon them, or show them to be false.

Moreover, while religious belief may be a powerful social adhesive, it comes with risks attached. Michael Ignatieff suggests that: '[t]he more strongly you feel the bonds of belonging to your own group, the more violent will be your feelings towards outsiders' (1993: 88). As we bind the members of religious communities together more tightly, we may well end up deepening the rifts between such communities.

But perhaps there is another way of building a sense of community that does not have such a toxic potential side-effect? As I explain below, many Humanists insist that there is.

EXAMPLE OF A HUMANIST APPROACH TO RAISING GOOD CITIZENS

While there can be benefits to religious belief, and there are plenty of anecdotes about people whose lives have been dramatically 'turned around' by religion, there would also appear to be benefits to a more Humanist approach to moral education and raising moral citizens.

While there is no official Humanist approach *per se* to moral education, most Humanists would endorse the use of, for example, *communities of inquiry* and 'Philosophy for Children' programmes in the classroom, in which children collectively discuss, in a broadly philosophical way, moral, religious, and other 'big questions'. Such programmes have been trialled with success in a number of countries, where they have produced not only measurable increases in IQ, but also improved behaviour and ethos within the schools. There's growing evidence that such an approach helps build self-esteem and confidence, engender respect for others, improve behaviour, reduce bullying, and so on (see, for example, Trickey and Topping 2004). An Ofsted (the UK agency responsible for inspecting schools) report into one school running such a programme said:

The thought provoking and exciting curriculum the school has developed over the last two years is an outstanding component of the school's success [... This includes] the development of 'Philosophy for Children', a powerful tool which both excites the pupils and gives them the confidence to explore stimulating and challenging ideas and concepts. It not only strengthens their academic learning, but also encourages their empathy for others and gives them insights into the adult world. (Ofsted 2007)

Perhaps such an approach cannot create the kind of tightly bound community that religion often produces, but it does engender a sense of empathy, connection, and respect for, and encourages respectful dialogue with others, and, so many Humanists would argue, creates a sense of community that is healthier and less divisive than the kind that tends to be produced by religion.

Interestingly, there is some evidence that this kind of approach to moral education might also provide us with an effective defence against the kind of moral catastrophes than blighted the twentieth century.

In his book *Humanity, A Moral History of the Twentieth Century*, Professor Jonathan Glover, Director of the Centre for Medical Law and Ethics at King's College, London, reports his research into the backgrounds of both those who engaged in mass killings in places like Nazi Germany, Rwanda, and Bosnia, and also those who were rescuers. Glover said in a related newspaper interview,

If you look at the people who shelter Jews under the Nazis, you find a number of things about them. One is that they tended to have a different kind of upbringing from the average person, they tended to be brought up in a non-authoritarian way, bought up to have sympathy with other people and to discuss things rather than just do what they were told. (Glover 1999)

In their book *The Altruistic Personality*, Pearl and Samuel Oliner concur that the ‘parents of rescuers depended significantly less on physical punishment and significantly more on reasoning’ (1992: 179). The Oliners add that ‘reasoning communicates a message of respect for and trust in children that allows them to feel a sense of personal efficacy and warmth toward others’. Non-rescuers, by contrast, tended to feel ‘mere pawns, subject to the power of external authorities’ (Oliners 1992: 177). The Oliners also found that, by contrast, ‘religiosity was only weakly related to rescue’ (Oliners 1992: 156).

If we want to avoid the kind of moral catastrophes that blighted the twentieth century, there is evidence to support the view that our best protection is provided, not by religion, but by the kind of approach to moral education advocated by Humanists (an approach which can also be applied within religious schools).

HUMANIST ORGANIZATIONS

Humanist ideas have been around for millennia. Indeed, some philosophers of antiquity, such as Epicurus, probably qualify as Humanists (see David Sedley’s ‘From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age’). However, it is only comparatively recently that the term ‘Humanism’ has been used in the way described here, and only recently that people have organized themselves as Humanists in this sense. Humanist organizations can now be found around the world. Most Humanist organizations are affiliated to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU). They engage in a variety of activities. They campaign for secular societies and for equal rights for the nonreligious. They also engage in educational and awareness-raising work to counter common and sometimes pernicious misunderstandings of what atheism and Humanism involve (in the United States, for example, atheists are widely assumed to be amoral, and are one of the least trusted minorities). Humanist organizations often also provide alternative marriage, funeral, and other ceremonies for those who want to mark important events in a nonreligious way.

CONCLUSION

Humanism is a world-view that is regularly misunderstood, misrepresented, and even caricatured, particularly by its opponents. I hope here to have at least clarified what Humanism does and does not involve. I have also sketched out some reasons for thinking that, far from constituting a threat to civilization and moral values, a Humanist approach to raising new citizens might actually provide the best defence against future moral calamities.

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CHAPTER 18

EXISTENTIALISM

ALISON STONE

INTRODUCTION

THE existentialist philosophical movement originated in France in the 1930s and 1940s, above all in the work of Jean-Paul Sartre, but also in that of Simone de Beauvoir and, despite his denial that he was an existentialist, Albert Camus.¹ At the height of its popularity in the later 1940s, existentialism expanded into a broader movement in art and culture, aided by Sartre, de Beauvoir, and Camus all writing plays and novels as well as philosophical works. Central to existentialism is the idea that human existence differs fundamentally from the being of natural objects. For Sartre, human existents are unique in that we are radically free, self-creating individuals. Yet this freedom brings with it a daunting level of responsibility, which we try to avoid by deceiving ourselves that we are not free, thereby falling into 'bad faith'. In examining these and other aspects of human existence, Sartre and his co-workers intend to offer not a traditional account of human nature but an analysis of what it is concretely like to have no given nature, to be radically self-creating—an analysis carried out as much in literature, by tracing how fictional individuals respond to the burdens of freedom, as in philosophical theory. This analysis is intended to have lived practical consequences, disclosing to us how our freedom is at work in our lives so that we can incorporate this existentialist insight and live more authentically (Oaklander 1996: 8).

Sartre is a positive atheist: he affirms that there is no God. For Sartre, this affirmation is crucial to existentialism: to appreciate how completely we are abandoned to our own freedom and responsibility, we must deny that God exists. Yet the relations between atheism and existentialism as a whole are complicated and multi-faceted. In the twentieth century there have been Christian as well as atheist existentialists, and of the main nineteenth-century authors whose ideas prefigure existentialism—Friedrich Nietzsche, Fyodor Dostoevsky, and Søren Kierkegaard—the last two are, explicitly, Christians (see below). For Kierkegaard, we realize and acknowledge the radical character of our freedom most fully not by repugning God but by making the leap into religious and Christian faith, affirming God's existence on a basis of passionate decision that is continually renewed.

Even positive atheists such as Sartre and Camus struggle to extricate their existentialism from the legacy of Christianity. Because Sartre and Camus reject traditional European moral frameworks on the grounds that these depend upon belief in God, they have difficulty establishing positive ethical frameworks to guide human action and politics, as they nonetheless wish to do. They both sought to furnish moral grounds for participating in the French Resistance (in which Camus was particularly active, writing for its newspaper *Combat*) and in emancipatory political movements (Sartre supported communism although he never joined the French Communist Party, while Camus championed liberal socialism). Insofar as Sartre and Camus derive these ethical-political prescriptions from their versions of existentialism, arguably they achieve this only by falling back upon aspects of the

traditional Christian morality whose framework and foundations they reject.² As we will explore, the problem of how to formulate a completely atheist ethics continues to engage contemporary existentialists.

Before proceeding, we should note that the label ‘existentialism’ is problematic. The French philosopher Gabriel Marcel coined the term to describe the emerging outlook of Sartre and Beauvoir, a description that they initially resisted but then appropriated (de Beauvoir [1963] 1975: 45). Camus, however, denied that he was an existentialist, and Nietzsche, Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard wrote before the term was invented. Nevertheless, we may classify these last four authors as existentialists to the extent that they share the ideas, preoccupations and literary-philosophical approach of the most unambiguous existentialist, Sartre. This is true only of parts of Nietzsche’s and Kierkegaard’s work, though; in regarding them as prefiguring existentialism, we should remember that we are concentrating upon only one dimension of their thought.

ATHEISM AND NINETEENTH-CENTURY PRECURSORS OF EXISTENTIALISM

(i) Nietzsche

Nietzsche is often numbered amongst nineteenth-century precursors of existentialism. This is partly because of the style and tone of his philosophizing, which he offered not merely as abstract theorizing but as embodying a way of life in which conceptual problems are lived through with great intensity and experiential difficulty, in a way that transforms the self. Moreover, in his late work Nietzsche endeavours to draw out the full consequences of atheism, anticipating Sartre’s statement in *Existentialism and Humanism* that ‘Existentialism is nothing else but an attempt to draw the full conclusions from a consistently atheistic position’ (Sartre [1946] 2001b: 45).

Famously, Nietzsche writes in *The Gay Science* that modern Europeans live after ‘the event that “God is dead”’, defined as the event ‘that the belief in the Christian God has become unbelievable’ (Nietzsche [1887] 2001: 199). That is, modernity has been marked by diminishing belief in God, induced by the Enlightenment rejection of authority, faith, revelation, scripture, and tradition as sources of knowledge. The death of God, Nietzsche holds, has left our traditional moral frameworks and values in disarray—values of pity, compassion, kindness, altruism, humility, charity; moral precepts to turn the other cheek, love thy neighbour, do as you would be done by; the ten commandments; and so on. We are left, Nietzsche concludes, in a time marked by the end of absolutes and certainty, and in a condition of ethical emptiness that he calls nihilism.

Nietzsche believed that few if any of his contemporaries appreciated the full extent of the religious and moral crisis of their times. He dramatizes this in *The Gay Science* in his parable of the madman who rushes around a marketplace declaring with horror that God is dead ([1887] 2001: 119–20). Those around him are nonplussed: in their view, we all know nowadays that God doesn’t exist; what is the madman so upset about? For Nietzsche, these people have failed to grasp that without God, their traditional moral framework—by which they continue to live—has actually lost its basis. Like those who went on venerating the Buddha’s shadow after his death (*ibid.*: 109), these people adhere to a residual Christian moral framework although its religious foundations have slipped away.

In contrast, Nietzsche insists that the hollowness of these inherited values must be exposed and their residues rooted out and destroyed. This destructive effort clears the ground for the creation of *new*

values for which Nietzsche hopes. He regards nihilism as not only the greatest danger, then, but also the greatest opportunity, potentially liberating us from Christian restrictions to exercise our creative agency. Here he prefigures Sartre, who stresses in *Existentialism and Humanism* that human individuals must create values through their own choices, in the absence of God. But while Nietzsche, like Sartre, is a positive atheist, Nietzsche emphasizes the *difficulty* of consistently being an atheist. Consistent atheism requires the destruction of the entire ethical edifice deriving from Christianity and the creation of an entire new table of evaluations in its place. Until these highly demanding tasks are completed, we remain amidst the remains of Christian morality, so that in practice no Europeans yet *can* be complete, consistent atheists.

Central amongst the residues of Christian morality, Nietzsche contends, is the assumption that *truth* is of absolute value, an assumption that pervades modern societies because it is fundamental to modern science: ‘science, too, rests on a faith;... The question whether *truth* is necessary must get an answer in advance, the answer “yes”’ ([1887] 2001: 200). Scientists aim to discover the truth about the world for its own sake; illusions might well be more useful for human beings than truth, but nonetheless scientists value the latter. This assumption that truth has absolute value is a legacy of Christianity, Nietzsche claims (*ibid.*: 201; see also 1994: 118–19). In the Christian world-view, spiritual realities—God, the afterlife, our immortal souls—lie beyond the earthly, everyday, perceptible world, and spiritual reality is ultimately *more* real than the everyday physical world (Nietzsche [1889] 1990: 50). This Christian worldview incorporates and builds on the Platonic view that ideal forms, and ultimately the form of the Good, lie beyond, underpin, and are more ultimately real than the changing perceptible world. Because the spiritual world is ultimately real, we should seek knowledge about it—both for Plato and in the traditional Christian worldview—so as to learn the ultimate purpose of our lives and therefore how to live virtuously. Thus, in this worldview, we have a moral duty to seek the truth about the spiritual world. Modern scientists have inherited from this earlier worldview the idea that things appear one way to our senses but that there is also an underlying real structure to the world which differs from appearances (Nietzsche [1887] 2001: 201), a real structure about which we need to know—but this is not, any longer, because this structure specifies the purpose of our lives; rather, in the project of modern science it is simply assumed that knowledge of underlying reality has value. For Nietzsche, this exemplifies how Christian values, in this case truth, live on in modernity despite having lost their original underpinnings.

(ii) Dostoevsky and Kierkegaard

Two other nineteenth-century authors who are often regarded as proto-existentialists are the Russian novelist Dostoevsky and the Danish religious thinker Kierkegaard. Unlike Nietzsche, they ally their forms of proto-existentialism with defences of Christianity, although not as abstract doctrine but as a lived form of experience.

Dostoevsky asks: if we no longer believe in the Christian God, then what grounds do we have for acting morally? None, he concludes in a note from 1880; ‘we are *all nihilists*’ today (quoted in Frank 2010: 914). Famously, in his 1879 novel *The Brothers Karamazov*, the self-professed nihilist and atheist Ivan Karamazov states (or more accurately, is reported to have stated) that ‘if you were to destroy in mankind the belief in immortality [and its faith], not only love but every living force maintaining the life of the world would at once be dried up. Moreover, nothing then would be immoral, everything would be lawful, even cannibalism’ (Dostoevsky [1879] 2009: 81). Since there is indeed no God, Ivan continues, we must actively violate Christian moral teachings, for instance by always acting egoistically. These teachings, appropriated by Ivan’s half-brother Smerdyakov,

apparently legitimate him in murdering their father (ibid.: 813). Here Dostoevsky dramatizes what he saw as the disastrous moral consequences of the atheism that was widespread in radical political circles in mid-nineteenth-century Russia.

To escape these consequences, Dostoevsky believes, we must return to Christian faith with its values of humility, selflessness, and compassion and love for all humanity (qualities personified by Ivan's brother Alyosha). Yet we find it difficult, in the wake of the Enlightenment emphasis upon reason, to make this return. Once we allow ourselves to believe only in what we understand rationally, then intellectual difficulties with the Christian God become insuperable (such as the problem of evil: surely an all-powerful and supremely good God cannot exist, for he would not tolerate so much evil and suffering). To regain faith, Dostoevsky concludes, we must set reason aside and acknowledge, in feeling, the divinity on which we depend. By doing so, we can reconnect with our spontaneous, felt moral responses to others—responses of kindness, compassion, and selflessness—all rooted in felt Christian acknowledgement of the dependency and limited nature of the individual self.

Dostoevsky prefigures existentialism in several ways. He shares in the existentialist recognition that the ‘death of God’ has undermined our accepted moral framework, although in response Dostoevsky advocates not creating new, non-Christian values (as Nietzsche does) but returning to Christianity. Also prefiguring the existentialist emphasis on free decision, Dostoevsky suggests that to make this return we must set reason aside, committing ourselves to God on an uncertain and passionate basis. Dostoevsky explores these ideas in literary form, by tracing in his novels how his characters wrestle with the religious and moral difficulties of the modern age. This, again, prefigures the existentialist use of literature (by Sartre, Beauvoir, and Camus) to explore the diverse ways in which fictional characters respond to their existential situation.

In the 1840s, Kierkegaard elaborated similar ideas to Dostoevsky’s in more philosophical depth. In Kierkegaard’s view, each human individual is passionately concerned about his or her own life; as such human individuals do not merely have being but exist in ‘the essential meaning of existing’ ([1846] 1992: 204). The verb ‘exist’ derives from the Latin *existere*, to stand out from; thus, to exist is to stand back from, be concerned about and evaluate the state of one’s self. With existence, then, comes the freedom continually to re-evaluate and re-orient oneself: to decide how to live. This freedom of decision, for Kierkegaard, is most fully realized in religious faith, described as ‘the contradiction between the infinite passion of inwardness and [...] objective uncertainty’ (ibid.: 204). To have faith is to continually renew the movement of passionately committing oneself to belief in God despite being uncertain of his existence from the perspective of objective truth. The uncertainty is ‘precisely what intensifies the daring passion of inwardness’ (ibid.: 203): genuine faith depends upon objective uncertainty. In religious faith one most fully realizes one’s existential freedom, then, because faith involves constant felt awareness of *committing* oneself in the face of uncertainty.

For Kierkegaard, Christian faith most fully realizes this feature of all religious faith because Christianity rests on a paradox: it holds that God came into the world in the person of Jesus Christ, yet that God is beyond time, embodiment, and death, so that no-one can rationally understand how God entered the world (ibid.: 213). To be a genuine Christian (something Kierkegaard thought was beyond him and his contemporaries) one can only choose to believe that God became Christ, *against* reason—acknowledging not merely the objective uncertainty but the objective irrationality of this belief, which intensifies further the passion of this religious commitment.

Already in the nineteenth century, then, existentialism was emerging in atheistic and Christian forms. In the twentieth century, when existentialism crystallized as a definite and distinctive philosophical approach, it again assumed both atheistic and Christian forms: Gabriel Marcel, for instance, was a Christian existentialist. But it was the atheist existentialists—Sartre and, to a lesser

extent, Camus—who most captured the twentieth-century imagination, and to whom I now turn.

(iii) Twentieth-Century Atheist Existentialists: Sartre and Camus

Sartre makes (positive) atheism central to existentialism in *Existentialism and Humanism*, an essay that originated as a public lecture given in 1945 and which has become the defining statement of Sartrean existentialism. Although Sartre came to regret this, the essay remains an important and influential statement of his position, including the links between existentialism and atheism, which we cannot ignore.

Human individuals, Sartre maintains in this essay, are radically free: throughout our lives we are continually making choices, even though we are often unaware of doing so. For example, Mathieu Delarue in Sartre's novel *The Age of Reason* ([1945] 2001a) strives desperately to obtain money for his pregnant mistress Marcelle to have an abortion, only belatedly realizing that he is doing so because he has been making an ongoing *commitment* (*engagement*), a choice, not to marry her: 'In all this affair I have been nothing but refusal and negation' (ibid.: 299). One might think that we generally make particular choices in light of deeper-held values—for instance, that Mathieu has been choosing not to marry Marcelle because he does not love her. This is what she insists. Sartre, and Mathieu, construe matters differently. For Sartre, we choose our deepest-held values *by* committing ourselves to them over time, which in turn we do by making the many particular choices that embody this commitment. Thus, Mathieu has over time been choosing not to love Marcelle by his everyday activities, above all that of seeking the money for her abortion. It is this deeper level of free commitment—his 'prior and more spontaneous decision [*choix plus originel*]' (ibid.: 29)—of which Mathieu only retrospectively becomes aware, finally reflecting that everything he has done, he has 'done for nothing' (ibid.: 299). Most fundamentally, he has acted 'for nothing' in that he has even chosen what values are to govern his everyday choices, as Sartre famously illustrates with the student who must choose whether to care for his infirm mother or fight for the French resistance, and who cannot choose on the basis of any higher-level values since he has simultaneously to choose *which* values—family or political activity—he ranks as decisive and highest (Sartre [1946] 2001b: 33–4).

For Sartre, we are radically free because our 'existence precedes our essence' (ibid.: 27): we have no inherent nature determining what choices and valuations we make. But since we have no nature, Sartre argues, we cannot have been created by God in light of any divine plan, in the way that a knife is created by a craftsman in light of her idea of its function, for then that plan would specify our nature. Since we are radically free, we cannot be God's creations. Furthermore, since we do not make choices on the basis of pre-existing values but assign values only *by* making choices, we are *creating* value through these choices (Sartre argues), introducing value where it was previously absent. This would be impossible if the world were divinely created or infused with value by God, for then values would pre-exist us as God's creations. Therefore, since we are radically free, the world cannot be divinely created: 'there is no God and no design' (ibid.: 35). Sartre therefore believes that once we recognize our radical freedom, we must, consistently, endorse positive atheism—hence existentialism, if it is thought through coherently, must be atheistic (ibid.: 28).

Moreover, Sartre claims, existentialism *is* atheism taken to its full consequences: if there is no God then human individuals cannot have essences and must be radically free to create themselves, and they must be the creators of value since without God no divinely created values can objectively exist in the world (ibid.: 28; see also Sartre [1947–8] 1992: 12–13, 17). However, we might wonder why Sartre thinks that values and essences could only exist independently of human choice if God created them. Why could they not exist objectively in the world independently of human choice *and* of divine

creation?³ An answer is provided in Sartre's previous writings, especially his major early work *Being and Nothingness* (Sartre [1943] 1956).

In *Being and Nothingness* Sartre elaborates an ontology (an account of the fundamental make-up of reality) that leaves no room for God or for a cosmos ordered or invested with meaning and value by God or, indeed, for a world populated by objective values or essences. In this ontology, there is an exhaustive divide between two regions of being: being-for-itself (*l'être-pour-soi*)—namely, free human existence—and being-in-itself (*l'être-en-soi*)—reality as it is independently of human existence, as brute being, an undifferentiated continuum with no intrinsic structure or qualities. But the concept of God, Sartre claims, is that of an 'in-itself-for-itself', the first cause or prime mover that brings itself into being, and which thus at the same time absolutely is *and* exercises pure creativity. Sartre insists, though, that being-in-itself and being-for-itself are antithetical and cannot be combined, so that 'the idea of God is contradictory' and he cannot exist (Sartre 1956: 615).

How does Sartre reach these conclusions? His root notion is that of intentionality, namely that all consciousness (*conscience*) is directed upon objects—which, Sartre insists, are not intra-mental ideas but are really in the world outside consciousness (ibid.: xxvii). Consequently, consciousness is entirely empty and translucent, a pure openness onto objects outside it. It consists merely in a series of intentional acts, ways of directing itself upon outer reality, with no substantial core or essence. As a pure series of acts, consciousness is an absolute 'spontaneity' (ibid.: xxxv): each of its acts is absolutely free, for it has no essence to cause these acts to occur.

Moreover, whatever objects a consciousness intends, it necessarily has some immediate, pre-reflective awareness of carrying out this intentional act and thus also of itself as distinct from its objects (ibid.: xxviii). Insofar as consciousness is always immediately self-aware, it never coincides with but always differs, however minimally, from itself (the aware self from the self of which it is aware). This again renders consciousness radically free: whatever actual features it has, whatever current situation it is in, it always is-not those features and situation. Consequently, they never determine or exhaust what consciousness is. I may feel depressed, but I must decide what attitude to adopt towards this mood: to succumb, resist, even embrace it. Even a slave, Sartre controversially claims, remains free to decide what attitude to take to their condition and slave-master (ibid.: 550). This is because human freedom, being rooted in the fundamental structure of our existence, does not and cannot come in degrees: 'Man cannot be sometimes slave and sometimes free; he is wholly and forever free or he is not free at all' (ibid.: 441). So we each have 'infinite possibilities of choice' in every situation (ibid.: 522): even though some of these situations are *prima facie* oppressive, they can never diminish anyone's freedom but merely provide varying contexts in which freedom is exercised.

Turning to being-in-itself, consciousness's relation to the outer objects of its awareness is a relation of negativity (or nothingness, *le néant*), in that consciousness is always tacitly aware of not-being these objects. Because it is consciousness that brings negativity to the world, the world just in itself, independent of consciousness, can contain no negativity, Sartre (rather dubiously) reasons. The outer reality upon which consciousness directs itself must therefore be pure, brute being. It can have no internal joints, divisions or structure, because distinctions between kinds of thing depend upon things not-being one another, but not-being is possible only through consciousness, the '*being by which nothingness [le néant] comes to things*' (ibid.: 22). Distinctions and order are brought to being-in-itself by consciousness and do not pre-exist it.

Brute being *versus* radically free consciousness: this ontology leaves no room for the Christian God. Having no divisions, order or structure, being-in-itself cannot have been created, designed or ordered by God. How then has belief in God arisen? For Sartre, human individuals cannot attain lasting happiness, for we can never simply be what we are but inevitably exist beyond our present

states, thus being condemned to perpetual restlessness. We therefore form an ideal of being ‘in-itself-for-itself’, of attaining an imagined (and impossible, self-contradictory) mode of being in which we would retain our freedom yet also enjoy the tranquil inertia of being-in-itself. Unable to achieve this impossible condition, we project it outside ourselves as an external ideal: God. For Sartre, God is merely a human projection that encapsulates our deepest existential longings (ibid.: 90, 724).

Camus sketches a related picture of the human condition in his essay the *Myth of Sisyphus*. For Camus, the human condition is absurd insofar as we invariably seek meaning in the cosmos where none is to be found: ‘The world in itself is not reasonable, that is all that can be said. But what is absurd is the confrontation of the irrational and the passionate longing for clarity whose call reaches to the depths of the human heart’ (Camus [1942] 1975: 26). In itself, the world outside us has no meaning or value and yields no answer to our question ‘Why?’. In constantly asking that question nonetheless, we are ‘condemned without reprieve to the lot of Sisyphus, hopelessly rolling a stone that always falls back to its starting point’ (Jeanson [1965] 1980: 25). Like Sartre, then, Camus rejects traditional Christian views of a meaningful and ordered cosmos and asserts that value and meaning can arise only insofar as we create them. We may react to the discovery that the world is intrinsically meaningless by committing suicide. But ideally, Camus claims, we will instead choose to create value and meaning in a spirit of revolt: defiantly acknowledging that, indifferent as the world is, *I shall* introduce value into it anyway, without losing sight of its real indifference.

Have Sartre or Camus conclusively established that existentialism must be atheistic? I think not. Kierkegaard could still reply that our existential, creative freedom can be fully realized only if we embrace rather than reject the Christian God. Moreover, insofar as Sartre and Camus seek to establish an ethics on the basis of their existentialism, they are pushed back towards elements of the Christian moral framework that they profess to reject—or so I will now suggest.

THE PROBLEM OF EXISTENTIALIST ETHICS

Sartre insists that traditional moral frameworks deriving from Christianity cannot honestly be retained without their religious underpinnings. He therefore confronts the problem: what moral framework is available to Europeans today? It might seem that, for Sartre, we may act however we choose. For if we each choose the values by which we live, and if no prior values objectively exist to guide our choices, then it seems that any and every choice must be equally legitimate. No choice may be judged better or worse than any other, for there is no external standard by which to make such judgements. Indeed, Sartre appears at times to embrace this conclusion. In *Being and Nothingness* he declares that ‘all human activities are equivalent [...] it amounts to the same thing whether one gets drunk alone or is a leader of nations’ (1956: 627), and in *Existentialism and Humanism* he endorses Karamazov’s statement that since God is dead, everything is permitted ([1946] 2001b: 32).

Camus appears, at first sight, to endorse a similar moral relativism in *The Outsider* (*L’Étranger*), his novel published in 1942 with *The Myth of Sisyphus* and the play *Caligula* as a trilogy of the absurd. The protagonist Meursault admits the indifference of the world around him. Refusing to pretend that any events or objects in it have inherent value or disvalue, he constantly describes them as bare, brute occurrences and items without emotional significance—as in the novel’s well-known opening lines: ‘Mother died today. Or maybe yesterday. I don’t know. I had a telegram from the home: “Mother passed away. Funeral tomorrow. Yours sincerely.” That doesn’t mean anything. It may have been yesterday’ ([1942] 1982: 9). Meursault is often morally neutral about events that we might expect to arouse his moral repugnance or remorse. He shoots an Arab man whom he perceives to have been

threatening him and his friends, committing the murder apparently without motive: his only explanation is that he did it because of the glare and heat of the sun. He then fires four more times at the dead body; after all, this does not have the intrinsic meaning of desecrating the corpse, for no intrinsic meanings exist.

Meursault's actions might seem to illustrate the dangerous consequences of the existentialist idea that values depend entirely upon creative human choice. For Meursault recognizes that objects, people and events in the world have value only insofar as he chooses to project value onto them. Yet he refuses to make any such projections, and lets the world remain valueless—leaving him apparently free to do whatever he pleases, even to commit murder at whim, for there are no objective moral grounds on which to condemn him. Indeed, when he is condemned to death as punishment for the murder, Meursault greets his own impending death with the same indifference, feeling profound calm in his awareness of the ultimate insignificance of his death.

In fact, though, Camus was concerned—and became increasingly so during and after the Second World War—to avoid the position that anything goes. This concern culminated in his 1951 essay *The Rebel* (*L'Homme révolté*), in which he distances himself from his earlier view that 'The sense of the absurd, when one first undertakes to deduce a rule of action from it, makes murder a matter of indifference, hence, permissible' ([1951] 1971: 13). Camus now argues that if one revolts against the absurd and affirms life anyway, then one is tacitly affirming that one's own life is good. But 'the moment life is recognized as a necessary good, it becomes so for all men' (ibid.: 14). In recognizing that life has value for each person, we also apprehend that murder is wrong (ibid.: 15). Moreover, anyone who rebels against her oppression does so in recognition of the value of her life, and here she is recognizing this *universal* value—life. Thus rebels are always, more or less explicitly, pursuing the universal, common human good, not acting merely egoistically (ibid.: 22–3).

Sartre, too, seeks to defend existentialism against the charge that it legitimates any and every course of action and to generate an existentialist account of human solidarity in the struggle against oppression. Although he produced extensive notes towards a treatise on ethics in the later 1940s, posthumously published as *Notebooks for an Ethics* ([1947–8] 1992), his best-known published statement of an existentialist ethics is in *Existentialism and Humanism*. Here he argues that there is one thing on which each of us ought to choose to confer value, namely one's own freedom (on this basis he subsequently argues that we each ought to value the freedom of others as well). Whatever else I choose to value, I must first *be* free to be able to confer value upon it; I must therefore value my freedom. 'Freedom [...] can have no other aim but that of willing itself; and when once a man has seen that he creates values ... he can will only one thing, and that is freedom [*la liberté*] as the foundation [*fondement*] of all values' ([1946] 2001b: 43). The detail of this argument is uncertain and much debated by Sartre scholars (Bell 1989; Anderson 1993). But, however it is construed, Sartre's argument appears to presuppose that being consistent has value: whatever I choose to value, I must be free to value it; therefore I should, *to be consistent*, also value my freedom.

But why ought I to be consistent? Sartre presumes that consistency—or more broadly reason—has inherent value, rather than having value only if I choose to confer value upon it.

Perhaps we can construe Sartre's argument differently, such that freedom is the reality of the human condition and the real source from which we create value; this being human reality, one ought to recognize and admit it. To fail to recognize the reality of one's freedom, in contrast, is to fall into bad faith (*mauvaise foi*). In bad faith, I deny my freedom, pretending that my actions are determined by my nature or role or that I am akin to a non-conscious object, as in Sartre's famous example of the cafe waiter who acts out his role as if it really determined his every move ([1943] 1956: 59). Sartre objects that bad faith is self-deception or lying to oneself (ibid.: 48): I pretend I am not free even though,

necessarily, I am immediately aware of my spontaneous activity (as we saw earlier). Why should I not lie to myself? Is this, again, because it is inconsistent to do so, insofar as ‘I must know as deceiver the truth which is hidden from me as deceived’ (*ibid.*: 49)? But ‘in Sartre’s ontology, one may freely choose to value irrationality and inconsistency, for neither they nor their opposites possess any intrinsic or objective value’ (Anderson 1993: 62). Indeed, in *Existentialism and Humanism* Sartre claims that self-deception is a logical but not a moral error ([1946] 2002b: 42). However, he then immediately claims that this logical fault is also a moral fault because it rests on a cowardly retreat from the reality of freedom (*ibid.*: 43).

Ultimately, then, Sartre appears to presuppose that truth has value, so that even if illusion or self-deception is more useful to us we ought nonetheless to admit the truth (of our fundamental freedom) and orient our actions by this truth. This recalls the Christian view of truth as Nietzsche identified it, on which the ultimate reality is that of spirit, lying beyond the physical world—likewise, for Sartre, the ultimate human reality is that of the fundamental spontaneity of consciousness. Moreover, because spiritual reality is ultimately real, we must know about it and orientate our lives by it (on the Christian view)—or, for Sartre, we must admit our freedom and orientate our actions around it by recognizing its overriding value. Sartre’s ethical argument thus relies on presuppositions that are a Christian inheritance. The same remains true if we read Sartre as presupposing that reason and consistency, instead of truth, have intrinsic value.⁴ In the traditional Christian-Platonic worldview that Nietzsche describes, reason was valued as the way to gain knowledge about spiritual reality *qua* spiritual. If Sartre presupposes that rational consistency has value in itself, this is presumably because he has inherited this traditional Christian evaluation of reason.

This hidden reliance on evaluative presuppositions inherited from Christianity continues in *Existentialism and Humanism*’s subsequent arguments. Sartre maintains that if I value my own freedom then I must also value and defend the freedom of others, and so must act to further universal human liberation. Here Sartre anticipates Camus’s argument in *The Rebel* that, since I value my own life, I must also value the lives of others and must fight against their oppression. In *Existentialism and Humanism*, Sartre argues:

Obviously, freedom as the definition of a man does not depend upon others, but as soon as there is a commitment, I am obliged to will at the same time as my liberty the liberty of others [W]hen I recognise ... that man is a ... free being who cannot, in any circumstances, but will his freedom, at the same time I recognise that I cannot but will the freedom of others. ([1946] 2002b: 43)

Various reconstructions of this argument are possible. One is that, whatever I choose to value, I thereby assert its value not only in my eyes but absolutely, so that I am effectively asserting that everyone ought to recognize the same value (*ibid.*: 30). But since I need others to be free to embrace this value, I must therefore value their freedom. An alternative reconstruction is that, when I value my own freedom, nothing about this freedom is peculiar to me, for freedom is (in Sartre’s ontology) a purely impersonal spontaneity; thus I am actually valuing freedom *per se*. I therefore ought to value freedom universally, for there is no relevant difference between my freedom and anyone else’s. However we interpret him, Sartre again appears to presuppose that there is intrinsic value either in being consistent—consistently, if I value my freedom then I must also value yours—or in recognizing truth—since freedom in reality is impersonal, to be true to my freedom I must recognize and value it *qua* impersonal and universal. Once again, following Nietzsche, these presuppositions are plausibly seen as a Christian legacy.

Insofar as Sartre goes some way to deriving a moral framework from his existentialism—a framework centred on universal human emancipation—he achieves this only by relying upon the assumption that truth and/or reason have value independently of individual choices. But this

assumption has Christian roots. To escape moral relativism, Sartre has had to reintroduce elements of Christian tradition.

The same is true of Camus, despite his hostility to Christianity. In *The Outsider*, Meursault is tried and condemned to death for killing the unnamed Arab. Throughout his trial Meursault's allegedly heartless, callous state of mind, shown in his failure to cry at his mother's funeral and his lack of remorse for the murder, is used as evidence against him. Nonetheless, Meursault refuses to help his case by professing emotions he lacks. For this Camus praises him as a hero in a 1955 interview. Meursault, he writes, is 'driven by a tenacious and ... profound passion, the passion for the absolute and for truth'; he 'agrees to die for the truth' (Camus 1982: 118–9). This truth is that no objective, God-given meanings and values await our discovery: the world is a godless, indifferent place. Insofar as he recognizes this truth, Meursault also recognizes that there is nothing inherently, objectively wrong in his feeling neither sadness about his mother nor remorse about his crime.

Even as Camus and Meursault affirm that no absolute values exist, Camus and Meursault identify *truth* as an absolute value. For Camus, Meursault is morally superior to those around him—despite his crime—because he recognizes the truth of the human condition and insists on this truth despite the punishment he thereby incurs. In elevating truth to the supreme value, more valuable even than his life, Meursault acts heroically in Camus's eyes. But why does Camus think that truth has such value? He has inherited the Christian assumption that (spiritual) truth has greater value than (physical) life. Camus wishes to reject this worldview that counts truth and spirit as more enduring, real, and valuable than the finite material world, declaring that the truth for which Meursault dies is purely this-worldly, a 'truth of living and feeling'. Even so, Camus's praise for Meursault, and the moral message of *The Outsider*, remain indebted to key elements of the Christian worldview that elevates spiritual truth over material appearances.

EXISTENTIALISM AND ATHEISM TODAY

From the 1960s onwards existentialism declined in popularity. Camus died prematurely in 1960, while Sartre moved away from his classic existentialism to synthesize it with Marxism, above all in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason* of 1960. Sartre turned to Marxism in the effort to conceptualize how social structures and institutions constrain and limit individual freedom. The rise of French post-structuralism (in Foucault, Derrida, Lacan and others) in the 1960s reinforced this intellectual turn away from individual subjectivity towards social structures that precondition individuals. These developments have inclined many recent continental philosophers away from existentialism, whilst Anglo-American philosophers have often regarded existentialism, especially that of Sartre, as unnecessarily obscure and metaphysically excessive.

Nonetheless, some contemporary thinkers pursue lines of thought opened up by Sartre and his co-workers. Amongst them, Ronald Aronson, a leading interpreter of Sartre, has intervened into the New Atheism debates with his *Living Without God* (2008). Aronson aims to provide a coherent secular account of how we ought to live, based—apparently contrary to Sartre—not on our autonomy but on our *dependence* on others. We today, Aronson holds, depend upon and enjoy the inherited benefits of a long historical and ongoing process of human self-development. We therefore owe gratitude to past and present generations and their labours, and to the natural ecosystemic and evolutionary preconditions of these labours (Aronson 2008: 63). Yet the benefits of this vast historical process are very unequally distributed. This obligates me to try to distribute its benefits more fully to those who currently share unequally in them, and to work for institutional social changes that would further

equality. Although I have not chosen to benefit disproportionately from history, if this is my situation it nonetheless generates obligations that I ought to take up, Aronson argues—agreeing with Sartre that, unchosen as my situation invariably is, I cannot evade my responsibility for what I make of it (ibid.: 111–13). But what hope can I have, with no God to guarantee that justice will eventually be realized at the end of history, to think that universal human equality can ever be achieved? Insofar as I do act with others in pursuit of social justice, Aronson argues, I gain increased confidence in our collective powers to advance equality and I can legitimately hope that we—humanity unaided by God—will eventually achieve collective emancipation (to which Sartre also aspired; see Sartre [1947–8] 1992: 207).

Aronson hopes to have greater success than Sartre in establishing this wholly secular ethic of human emancipation by starting from dependency rather than autonomy. But it is not clear that Aronson’s ethic can be disentangled, any more than Sartre’s could, from Christian moral sources. A hidden reliance on these sources surfaces in not only Aronson’s explicit commitment to the absolute value of truth (Aronson 2008: 125) but also his fundamental commitment to equality. If I recognize that I benefit disproportionately from the historical process, why should I not simply feel fortunate and cling on to my benefits? Aronson’s answer is that I have obligations to share these benefits more equally with others because human beings are all equal (ibid.: 80–2). But this principle that we are all equal is arguably a Christian legacy—as Hegel maintained in his lectures on world history of the 1820s:

The Germanic [northern European] nations, with the rise of Christianity, were the first to recognise that humanity is by nature free [...] This consciousness first dawned in religion [...] but to incorporate the same principle into secular existence was a further problem, [fundamental to] the long process of [...] history itself. (Hegel [1820s] 1975: 54)

For Hegel, the principle expressed in Christianity (although not only Christianity) that all souls are equal before God is the ultimate source of the reigning European principle of universal moral and political equality—and so, ultimately, of the collective human emancipation and equality championed by Aronson and, before him, by Camus and Sartre.

In pointing out how Sartre’s, Camus’s and Aronson’s existentialist ethics depend on assumptions inherited from Christianity, I mean not to discredit existentialist ethics but to suggest that existentialists could best proceed by openly acknowledging their dependency on Christian ethical sources. Acknowledging dependency need not mean uncritical acceptance, but can form a starting-point for re-evaluating and re-interpreting these sources—deciding how to take forward our moral-religious inheritance. To recognize our dependency on the collective historical process as Aronson recommends, we should also recognize our ethical dependency on the evaluative horizons of Christianity.

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CHAPTER 19

MARXISM

PETER THOMPSON

INTRODUCTION

WE are all aware of Marx's famous saying that religion is the 'opium of the people'. However, as with all partial quotations, this does as little to explain Marx's view of religion as 'God is dead' helps to explain Nietzsche's. Behind such sloganeering is a wealth of nuanced analysis which needs bringing out. If we look at the five definitions of atheism which Stephen Bullivant gives us in his 'Defining "Atheism"', then it is clear that Marxist atheism does not really fit into any of them. If atheism is at base 'an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods' then for Marxist atheists at least that question is still framed within the parameters laid down by belief. It is the theological equivalent of asking when one stopped beating one's wife. Of course Marx opposed religion from a 'scientific' perspective which allowed only for the reality of nature and opposed all supernatural interpretations. Yet the fact that people continued to believe in God or gods against all the rational evidence to the contrary was a question which needed to be addressed socially rather than just in naturalistic terms. In attempting to unravel this conundrum Marx went beyond his first philosophical mentor, Ludwig Feuerbach, to point out that rather than man having simply misunderstood its 'true nature', the nature of man itself was a mutable and ever-changing reality which depended on given social circumstances rather than being something fixed and given. Overcoming the restrictions and oppressions of society as well as overcoming the restrictions of the self was therefore essentially a practical and secular process. In the 'Eighth Thesis on Feuerbach' Marx says: 'All social life is essentially **practical**. All mysteries which lead theory to mysticism find their rational solution in human practice and in the comprehension of this practice' ([1888] 1990: 157).

We can see from this that Marx and Marxists essentially see religion as a secondary contradiction inherent in the social context of the society which produces it, and not a primary contradiction based in any sort of ontological definition of truth or reality. For Marxists it is therefore not a question of whether God exists or not, but what particular social conditions give rise to the particular God in which the people of that society believe. To the extent that Marxists today deal with religion, they point to the various gods who exist around the world and analyse the way in which there is always a close fit between given social conditions and theistic apparition. At its most basic level, for example, the shift from polytheistic to monotheistic belief is seen as an expression of the move away from particularist pre-modern societies to larger but more complex aggregated empires. Rome would be the perfect example of this. Indeed, within Marxism, the use of the Hegelian dialectic—of which more later—can be applied here to show how the belief in saints within the Christian tradition is clearly a means by which polytheistic and pagan beliefs in individual spirits were both transcended by and taken up into (*aufgehoben*) the monotheistic belief in one God.

OPIUM OF THE PEOPLE?

The first thing to note in any discussion of Marxism and atheism, therefore, is that Marx was not an atheist in any sense of the word we would understand today. For Marx the question of belief itself was so rooted in a static religious worldview that to remain within that discussion was to limit the possibility of the sort of real social change that would actually remove the basis for belief. As Marx wrote in a letter to Arnold Ruge in November 1842: 'finally I wished that, if philosophy were to be spoken of, there should be less trifling with the slogan "atheism" (like children who assure anyone who will listen to them that they are not afraid of an ogre), and more presenting its content to the people' ([1842] 1990: 23). This was not because he did not see religion as something worth criticizing. Indeed he said that it was the basis of all philosophical criticism, but that by 1842 he had already moved beyond religious to radical social criticism which had relatively little space for atheism. In contradistinction to later, more mechanistic Marxists, Marx believed that religion would only 'wither away' once the social conditions which created it had disappeared. In no sense was Marx of the opinion that religion could—any more than could the state—simply be abolished as an abstraction but only as a central part of the positive and concrete abolition of the relations of human alienation. But those relations were primarily social rather than ideological or indeed theological. It is from this demand that the content of philosophy be seen as more important than its form that we can see the reason that Marx's philosophy is described as an 'anti-philosophy'. In the same way his atheism is therefore actually anti-atheism.

The first step in understanding this is to quote the whole of the section from Marx's critique of Hegel's *Philosophy of Right* which contains the words 'opium of the people':

The foundation of irreligious criticism is: man makes religion, religion does not make man. Religion is indeed the self-consciousness and self-esteem of man who has either not yet attained himself or has already lost himself again. But man is no abstract being squatting outside the world. Man is the world of man, state, society. This state, this society produces religion's inverted consciousness of the world, because they are an inverted world. Religion is the general theory of this world, [...] its moral sanction, its solemn complement, its universal basis of consolation and justification. It is the imaginary realization of the human essence, because the human essence possesses no true reality. Thus the struggle against religion is indirectly the struggle against the world whose spiritual aroma is religion.

Religious suffering is at one and the same time the expression of real suffering and a protest against real suffering. Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world and the soul of soulless conditions. It is the opium of the people. ([1844] 1990: 64)

Within this contention that religion is made by man rather than the other way around we can see that Marx puts the actual form that religion takes down to its socio-economic base and this is what is often seen as the reductionist basis of Marx's atheism. But that is not the end of the story. The phrase that man is 'no abstract being squatting outside the world' is there to make it clear that the true interaction between the world and man is a dialectical one, in which each works on the other. As Andrew McKinnon points out, to read this famous section as merely a way of condemning religion as an opiate-derived delusion 'ironed out the dialectic' and reduces Marx to a minor follower of Feuerbach (2009: 11–29).

Within the phrase 'It is the imaginary realization of the human essence, because the human essence possesses no true reality', we see something at once acknowledged and rejected: Everywhere it is acknowledged that man apparently has an essence or a soul which is owed to God, but Marx not only rejects this idea of the human essence as spiritual but rejects the concept of the human essence per se. It is this leap which puts Marxism beyond both theism and materialist atheism by accepting fully man's position as simply one species amongst all the others, albeit one which had developed a higher

form of consciousness through the process of evolution. What is important from Marx is to understand this form of consciousness and analyse what place there is within it for the idea of a supernatural consciousness which exists outside of reality. What is the mechanism that leads our social being to determine our consciousness and how does religion function within that relationship by masking the link between social being and consciousness?

This becomes an explicitly political question to do with the nature of ‘false consciousness’ and the ways in which people can come to believe the things which are neither true nor in their own interests. This is why Marx says in this same critique: ‘For Germany, the *criticism of religion* has been essentially completed, and the criticism of religion is the prerequisite of all criticism’ ([1844] 1990: 63). The reason he says that Germany no longer needs to deal with religion is because he saw the atheist left-wing of the French Revolution—with whom he explicitly aligned himself (Jean Meslier, Julien La Mettrie, Denis Diderot, Baron d’Holbach, Anarchasis Cloots, Jacques Hébert, and later Cabet and Babeuf)—as already having done the basic materialist work of unseating God and the divine right of Kings from the centre of political considerations. But, Marx maintained, they had not gone far enough and had merely replaced God with a form of Natural Law in which—in an early form of reductionist Darwinism—the way people were was fixed now by natural genetic forces rather than supernatural certainties. This may well be a step forward, Marx said, but it was a step into a sort of pantheistic dogmatism which obscured the fact that the human being was not a fixed thing, but a socially based labouring and creating animal which also changes its world.

In this way the Hegelian dialectic of constant two-way and interpenetrating change as the unfolding of history was injected into the basic materialism of the dogmatic atheist perspective. As he put it in the ‘Third Thesis on Feuerbach’:

The materialist doctrine concerning the changing of circumstances and upbringing forgets that circumstances are changed by men and that it is essential to educate the educator himself. The doctrine must therefore divide society into two parts one of which is superior to society.

The coincidence of the changing of circumstances and of human activity or self changing can be conceived and rationally understood only as revolutionary practice. ([1888] 1990: 156)

His famous ‘Eleventh Thesis on Feuerbach’ expresses this very concisely when he states that ‘The philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point is to change it’. For Marx, concentrating on religion as an abstraction therefore approaches the social problem from the wrong end. In the less frequently quoted ‘Seventh Thesis’ we read that ‘Feuerbach, consequently, does not see that the “religious sentiment” is itself a social product, and that the abstract individual whom he analyses belongs to a particular social form’ ([1888] 1990: 157).

For Marx, the French revolution had successfully brought to an end the rule of the aristocracy and with it their need to maintain religious control over a largely rural, illiterate, and uneducated population. The shift to bourgeois rule, based in industrialized urban society together with the proletarianization of the population, meant that the hold that religion had would inevitably diminish. He took as his model the process which Britain had long since undergone of the functional secularization of society. Once this process was underway, then atheism as a doctrine became an anachronism, and one which diverted attention and political activity away from the new priority, which was the move to the mobilization of the proletariat not against gods, but against the political rule of the bourgeoisie. The fulfilment of the promise of the French Revolution lay not primarily in philosophical enlightenment but in seeing through its political and economic trajectory towards socialism based on proletarian revolution. Thus, though his political and philosophical roots lay in the left-wing of the French Revolution and the philosophical materialism of Ludwig Feuerbach, he very soon moved beyond what he saw as their anachronistic philosophical views.

However, the atheist Left of that revolution were indeed his logical and philosophical precursors. As he puts it in the *Holy Family*:

As Cartesian materialism merges into natural science proper, the other branch of French materialism leads directly to socialism and communism. There is no need for any great penetration to see from the teaching of materialism on the original goodness and equal intellectual endowment of men, the omnipotence of experience, habit, and education, and the influence of environment on man, the great significance of industry, the justification of enjoyment, etc., how necessarily materialism is connected with communism and socialism. ([1845] 1990: 154)

Already at this stage we can see that he was well aware of the limitations of atheism as an abstract concept if it were not to be linked to a political programme for change. Indeed he turned against precisely the figures whom he had most admired over precisely this point; i.e., their inability to see the logic of atheism through to its political consequences.

Religion is thus explained not as some fundamental, eternal verity and unchanging human characteristic 'because the human essence possesses no true reality' but as an expression of the interactions between individual humans and their social context. Differences and developments in religion and religious expression are thus seen as expressions of different social circumstances in different historical ages. Central to this socio-economic contextualization of religious expression is the concept of class. In a society in which religion is the 'sigh of the oppressed creature' and is, as a consequence, only a symptom of a form of exploitative social organization, then who is doing the oppressing becomes the central question. The particular form that religion takes will, according to Marx, roughly follow the class interests of those in charge. As he says in *The German Ideology*, the ruling ideology is always the ideology of the ruling class and an official state religion is, for Marx, the supreme form of ideology in any society and the glue which holds it together.

IDEOLOGY AND OPPRESSION

Equally, however, ideology should not be seen as something which is simply imposed from above. It would be wrong to say that Marx sees religion simply as the imposition of class rule in a direct way through oppressive state institutions. Of course his hostility to the church and its practitioners as tools of social oppression and repression knows no bounds but he was equally opposed to those who would seek to complement socialist analysis with Christian ethics, which he saw as a way of covering up the reality of bourgeois class rule with appeals to a patrician pre-capitalist order. As he said in the *Communist Manifesto*: 'Christian Socialism is but the holy water with which the priest consecrates the heart-burnings of the aristocrat' ([1848] 1990: 239). But his understanding of religion takes him beyond the reductionist and mechanistic viewpoint which he sees as having emerged from the materialism which developed around the radical rationalism of the French Revolution in another way too. Namely what can be taken from the history of religious feeling and expression that does make sense and contribute to the further development of mankind. What is important in a consideration of religion is, therefore, the separation out of the repressive state structures and church institutions from the potential message of exodus and liberation which inheres within the religious impetus.

In that context we can see how, in another letter to Arnold Ruge in 1843, he considers that religious expression itself carries clues to the ways in which a post-oppressive society might actually be a fulfilment of the old religious desires rather than a denial of them:

Hence, our motto must be: reform of consciousness not through dogmas, but by analysing the mystical consciousness that is unintelligible to itself, whether it manifests itself in a religious or a political form. It will then become evident that the world has

long dreamed of possessing something of which it has only to be conscious in order to possess it in reality. It will become evident that it is not a question of drawing a great mental dividing line between past and future, but of *realising* the thoughts of the past. Lastly, it will become evident that mankind is not beginning a *new* work, but is consciously carrying into effect its old work. (1843)

As Engels later put it in relation to the nature of the state, religion can only be abolished through its gradual withering away and not by attacking it as a problem in its own right. It was precisely over this question of the way in which social transformation comes about that Marx and Marxism differentiates itself from both the anarchists, the Blanquists and utopian communists, all of whom—from a Marxist perspective—wish to abolish church and state and jump straight to an abstract communism by force of will, education or good intentions.

The abstract atheism which these utopian communists and proto-anarchists propounded was, as far as Marx was concerned, not only surplus to requirements but a positive brake on true revolutionary practice, which required the self-realization of the proletariat as an active class and not their philosophical education by a politically aware elite. Indeed, they often argued, it may well be that religion itself would be an important part of the revolutionary uprising. For example, Engels, Karl Kautsky (the so-called Pope of Marxism) and later Ernst Bloch pointed to the role of Thomas Müntzer in the Peasants' Uprising of 1525 as an important forerunner of the socialist and communist movement. By the same token, liberation theology in the 1960s integrated many of the social analyses of Marxism into a predominantly Catholic revolutionary movement which had—and indeed continues to have—a significant impact in Latin America.

It is from this second concern of early Marx; namely, to understand the forms that religion itself takes and what can be garnered from them, rather than the socio-economic conditions underpinning them to which I wish to turn now because it is around the question of human consciousness and ideology that we can perhaps discern a separation between early and late Marx (though there is much disagreement about this). What we can certainly discern is a difference between two sorts of Marxists in their attitude to religion. Ernst Bloch divided them into what he called 'cold stream' and 'warm stream' Marxism. The cold stream being an orthodox and economicistic Marxism which largely characterizes the Second and Third Internationals,¹ and the warm stream being that strand of Marxism which looked towards the humanist legacy of early Marx and also trying to bring Hegelian dialectics more explicitly back in to a consideration of Marxism and religion.

MARXISM AND ATHEISM TODAY

Since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1992 and China's apparent shift to an aggressively capitalist road, widespread disillusionment about the desirability or even possibility of socialism or communism—whatever one thought of the Soviet experiment—has set in. Francis Fukuyama argued in 1989 that we had, in a Hegelian sense, reached the end of history and that all that could now function universally was liberal democracy based on a market economy. There would still be crises and problems, but they would be resolved within the capitalist paradigm, rather than beyond it. This also means that not only is Marxism relegated to irrelevance, but religion too becomes marginalized and privatized in its social impact. As Fukuyama's crypto-Hegelian approach is one based on *Thymos* or recognition of the individual, then in his model religion itself becomes merely a support mechanism for the definition and support of the individual.

Christianity, for Hegel and consequently for Marx, is an essentially proto-bourgeois religion as it abandons the search for an external law laid down in codes and laws of dress and diet for an internal

law based on the search for the personal relationship with God. In doing so it becomes the only truly universal religion and for that reason Marxist thinkers from Badiou to Žižek have fixed on the relevance of St Paul. Seen in this context, the end of history and indeed the increasing secularization of Western societies are actually the fulfilment of the Christian tradition. Whereas Oswald Spengler said that ‘Christianity is the grandmother of Bolshevism’ we might rephrase that to say that Christianity is also the grandmother of secular capitalism. The universalization of capitalism, its globalization, requires a universalized secular religion and it could be argued only Christianity can play that role in the long run.

It is my contention here that it is precisely this double contradiction of the triumph of capitalism over socialism and its fulfilment of the Christian message which has paradoxically led many Marxist thinkers back to a consideration of religion as the carrier of a potential universal social message of exodus and liberation and the locus of a new grand narrative in religious form. This is why contemporary Western Marxism tends to ignore the economic in favour of questions about human existence per se. The concentration in most of these warm stream forms of Marxism is therefore on alienation or estrangement and this then brings them back to the ways in which we create for ourselves means of overcoming our own self-and social alienation. Historically, Marxist engagement with religion and theology after Marx can be divided into three linked sections.

THE FRANKFURT SCHOOL

The first of these—and still the most dominant—is the Frankfurt School (Erich Fromm, Leo Löwenthal, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Max Horkheimer, and Johann Baptist Metz) of critical theory which sought to marry psychoanalysis and Marxism in an analysis of consciousness in the age of a dominant capitalism (see Mendieta 2004). In some cases it is possible to say that they worked from within an explicitly—albeit negative—theological framework. This is particularly the case with Walter Benjamin, who said that all of his work on the dialectic and materialism stemmed from his Judaic upbringing and background. Indeed it could be argued that the Frankfurt School is actually a movement founded in a mixture of Jewish Messianism and Hegelian dialectics in which, as Walter Benjamin argues, the messianic idea of God’s realm shifts from one of being a *Telos* pre-existing at the end of history to one in which history creates its own outcome. As Benjamin famously says at the beginning of his *On the Concept of History*,

It is well-known that an automaton once existed, which was so constructed that it could counter any move of a chess-player with a counter-move, and thereby assure itself of victory in the match. A puppet in Turkish attire, water-pipe in mouth, sat before the chessboard, which rested on a broad table. Through a system of mirrors, the illusion was created that this table was transparent from all sides. In truth, a hunchbacked dwarf who was a master chess-player sat inside, controlling the hands of the puppet with strings. One can envision a corresponding object to this apparatus in philosophy. The puppet called ‘historical materialism’ is always supposed to win. It can do this with no further ado against any opponent, so long as it employs the services of theology, which as everyone knows is small and ugly and must be kept out of sight. ([1940] 2005)

What Benjamin means by this, is that any mechanistic and dogmatic approach to the study of history (hence the quotation marks around ‘historical materialism’) misses both much of what is valuable within religion but also its power as an historical agent. Again, and Benjamin was a close friend and collaborator with Bloch, the cold stream has to be complemented by the warm stream of human dreams. Much of the Frankfurt School’s work on religion, theology and the critique of ideology essentially deals with the Marxist problem of ‘false consciousness’, i.e. how people come to believe things that are demonstrably not in their material interests. It asks how ideology is transmitted and

what its role is. It takes from Marxism the idea that socio-economic exploitation is part of the root of false consciousness—including a belief in God—but that it cannot be mechanistically derived purely from social exploitation, nor would it necessarily disappear with the removal of negative socio-economic conditions. For these thinkers the drive behind and within human beings is real while it is only religious tradition that tells us that it is located outside of us (see Žižek 2013). The truth would be a reconciliation of these two strands, located firmly on earth but without losing the dimension of future material transcendence.

Today we see this as the founding movement of Western or Cultural Marxism which looks predominantly at the epiphenomena of capitalist cultural production for two purposes: firstly as a way of unravelling the ‘true’ nature of capitalist social relations by analyzing its cultural expression; secondly, to search within cultural production to try to differentiate between that which contributed to social exploitation and that which carried within it the seeds of resistance and opposition to exploitation and alienation.

ERNST BLOCH

Secondly, and related to, though never officially a part of, the Frankfurt School, comes the work of Ernst Bloch, another Jewish, Hegelian Marxist, who—though much neglected today—had a significant impact on the Frankfurt School, and in particular Theodor Adorno and Walter Benjamin, over issues of religion, theology and the link between those categories and history. His *magnum opus*, *The Principle of Hope* (Bloch [1959] 1986),² is a three volume investigation of the ways in which hope functions not as a bland and banal optimism but as the central operator of the human character and the thing which drives us on against the certainty of death and entropy. The religious overtones of this are obvious and in his 1972 book *Atheism in Christianity: The Religion of the Exodus and the Kingdom* (Bloch [1972] 2009): he developed his critique of religion further, pointing out that the word religion in its established Constantinian form means binding back (re-ligio). This traditional Marxist attack on the repressive role of a state church was complemented, however, by the recognition that the original Christian message was one of exodus and liberation and a challenge to authority. For Bloch the best thing about Christ was that he was the son of man rather than the son of God and the best thing about religion was that it created heretics who constantly sought to take up the liberation struggle against both earthly authority and the instrumentalization of the Christian message. It was these heretical figures, from the serpent to Job, Christ and the later messianic figures such as Joachim di Fiore and Thomas Müntzer who represented the flickering beacons of the principle of hope against all attempts to hold people down in the name of religion.

Jürgen Moltmann took the Marxist message of Bloch’s *Principle of Hope* directly into liberation theology in his influential work *The Theology of Hope* (Moltmann [1964] 1967). In 1965 he also stated that:

The Christ of God was executed in the name of religiopolitical authority, and authority established ‘from above’. Therefore, any justification of authority ‘from above’ is no longer convincing to Christians. Political authority can only receive its justification ‘from below’. Before the time of Christianity, all political theory sought to confirm the status quo. Since Christianity all political theory should seek to criticise the nature, limits and purpose of the state. ([1965] 1974: 40)

ŽIŽEK AND BADIOU

Thirdly—and here Bloch represents a bridge between the Frankfurt School and contemporary Marxist thought on religion—there has been a clear reinvigoration of a religious dimension in Marxist and post-Marxist thought. There are, of course, multiple reasons for this to do with the collapse of communism, an ongoing crisis of capitalist legitimacy, the rise of Islam as a serious political force, and the deepening of religious fundamentalism in various different areas of the world. However, I would argue that these conjunctural events are secondary to the continuing relevance of theology to social debate.

As Slavoj Žižek—a Lacanian, Hegelian, Marxist, and atheist thinker for whom religion and theology are central philosophical operators—reminds us, we are apparently stuck in a situation where it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine a different and better one.³ This means that some thinkers are (re)turning to the eschatological and messianic attractions of religion and theology as a way of understanding the world. It is also probably the case that Marxists and Christians now have one thing in common; they both have to believe in something which is apparently impossible: the Kingdom of God and communism. The two are not necessarily so far apart according to Bloch, who said that the withering away of the state is a highly Christian notion in which real social conditions make it possible for the first time to actually love one's neighbour (see Traub and Wieser 1977: 166).

This means that the apparent 'return of religion' is not simply a reaction to the vagaries of capitalist modernity but an attempt to use theology as a means of continuing the Hegelian attempt to reconcile religion and reason by seeing religion as a necessary stage in the coming to itself of reason. As John Roberts has pointed out, the reinsertion of Hegel and the dialectic into recent Marxist theory has brought with it an almost ineluctable reconsideration of the 'ethical demands of Christianity'. Roberts quotes Hegel:

Freedom in the State is preserved and established by Religion [liberal Protestantism], since moral rectitude in the State is only the carrying out of that which constitutes the fundamental principle of Religion. The process displayed in History is only the manifestation of Religion as Human Reason—the production of the religious principle, which dwells in the heart of man, under the form of Secular Freedom. Thus the discord between the inner life of the heart and the actual world is removed. (Hegel [1821–31] 1956: 335; quoted in Roberts 2008)

A separate Marxist dimension is also introduced with Alain Badiou's concept of 'fidelity to an event' and his promotion of St Paul as the founding father not only of Christianity but of universalism itself (Badiou 2003). The end result of the universalism propagated by Žižek and Badiou is, however, not a pre-existing one but one which is still in the process of development. This means that history itself will be full of mistakes, dead ends and failures but that the end result of this history will be the product of its own attainment. This returns us to the very Blochian idea of history as an open 'ontology of Not-Yet-Being' to which one must maintain fidelity in order to shape its outcome. In *The Privatization of Hope*, Žižek quotes Walter Benjamin's *On the Concept of History* on the weak messianic power that each generation carries with it and which therefore requires a retroactive redemption of the past and all its failures in order to be ultimately successful:

The past carries with it a temporal index by which it is referred to redemption. There is a secret agreement between past generations and the present one. Our coming was expected on earth. Like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak Messianic power, a power to which the past has a claim. (Benjamin [1940] 2007: 254; quoted in Žižek 2013)

As Alasdair MacIntyre points out 'Marxism does not stand to Christianity in any relationship of straightforward antagonism, but rather, just because it is the transformation of Hegel's secularized version of Christian theology, has many of the characteristics of a Christian heresy rather than of

non-Christian unbelief' (MacIntyre 2001: vi). Religion, particularly in its Christian eschatological form as understood by Bloch, is therefore an openness to the future. One of the reasons that contemporary Marxism is again taking religion and theology seriously is because it too needs to move away from dogma to openness in which the mistakes of the past are not simply ignored or even denied but are transcended and taken up (*aufgehoben*) into the process of the creation of a better future. As Walter Benjamin puts it 'it is only the Messiah himself who can end all historical events but only in the sense that his own relationship to the messianic is itself redeemed, completed, created [...] That is why the kingdom of God cannot be the Telos of the historical dynamic. It cannot be made into history's goal. Looked at historically it is not the goal but the endpoint' (2011: 338).

It could of course be argued that this form of non-dogmatic openness changes Marxism into a radical form of post modern theory or even Rortian pragmatism. Indeed late Derrida came to a position quite close to that of Bloch in his theological deconstruction which, as John D. Caputo points out, 'is described in terms not the endless display of signifiers but of an affirmation of the impossible, of a desire beyond desire for the deconstructible, so that deconstruction is structured like a certain faith or religion without religion' (2007: 277–8). Bloch too spoke of transcendence without the transcendental and it is this proposition, that history is an active process of creating the future rather than just an endless display of signifiers that restores Marxism to the equation but now shorn of its mechanistic dogmatism. This too demonstrates its closeness to the Christian idea of a commitment to a truth which is larger than just the images on display in any particular historical epoch and which adds up to an inconceivable certainty.

This correlation of Marxism and Christianity therefore also seeks to restore the grand narrative to history but in its secularized and non-reductionist form as outlined above. It removes a fixed and pre-existing teleology from the equation and replaces it with an autopoietic Telos that is constantly under construction as the ontology of not-yet-being. At the end of his *Principle of Hope* Bloch famously described this process in the following way:

Humanity lives everywhere still in pre-history, indeed each and everything is waiting for the creation of a just world. *The true genesis is not at the beginning, but at the end*, [italics in original] and it will only start to come about when society and existence [*Dasein*] become radical, i.e. take themselves by their own roots. The root of history, however, is the labouring, creative human, engaged in reshaping and overcoming given conditions. Once he has grasped himself and that which is his, without alienation and based in real democracy, so there will arise in the world something that shines into everyone's childhood, but where no one has yet been: *Heimat* (home). (Bloch [1959] 1986: 1375–6)

MARXISM AND ATHEISM

If we now return at the end of this essay to our own genesis and look again at Marx's contention that religion 'is the imaginary realization of the human essence, because the human essence possesses no true reality' and subject it to scrutiny then we can see that what Marx and Marxists have actually been arguing is that the only true reality that human essence possesses is the reality that there is a human essence. Marx himself called this a *Gattungswesen* or species-being and in the Hegelian context we can see this as the ever unfolding desire for freedom, exodus and liberation from want. Bloch called this the 'invariant of direction' present in all human striving.

Whereas mechanistic atheism dismisses religious belief as a delusion, as so much junk DNA irrelevant to the human essence, what Marxist atheism does is to recognize that the religious expressions of the human essence are an essential code for understanding the desire for freedom. What the mechanistic Marxist approach tends to do is to remove the religious content from the cell

and to attempt to replace it with the DNA of a scientific socialism so that the dialectic functions now as a means by which we move from alienation to fulfilment through social methodology and political revolution. What open or warm stream Marxism does, by contrast, is to say that the stuff that is removed in this process is not junk DNA, but that the religious content is itself a part of the form of the dialectic. Bloch, for example, searches through what mechanistic materialism rejects as mere delusion and uses the evidence he finds within it to demonstrate that our religious and utopian longings were always already merely self-misunderstood forms of a socialist consciousness. In this way he seeks to reunite Feuerbach and Marx in a more productive way, which locates theology in anthropology but, at the same time, recognizes that anthropology also has a metaphysical dimension which deals with questions of what it is to be human in non-reductionist terms.

In this way history is transformed from being simply the shell which contains human activity into the active construction of the human being through her own activity. It has a transcendental ontology but it is a materialist one in which both ontology and matter are not yet complete and the process of their completion also contains, as with the crucifixion of Christ, elements of creative destruction. Just as with religion, the basic premises of a Marxist world view can only be achieved once the conditions which gave rise to it have been both destroyed and transcended. Where for Christians Christ is the transcendental subject whose disappearance is a precondition for the realization of his promise, so for Marx the international proletariat is the transcendental subject which can only be liberated through its own self-abolition. For François Laruelle, as well as Bloch and Žižek, this can only happen through struggle. As Laruelle puts it: 'we are right to make war, this is the thesis of the philosophers; to rebel against the master, this is the watchword of the Gnostics; to struggle in an immanent way with the World, this is the theorem of the Future Christ. In the beginning was the struggle, and the struggle was with the World and the World did not know it ...' (2010: 4).

For Marx and much contemporary Marxism, therefore, atheism and religion—and in particular Christianity—are not polar opposites but unrealized contradictions within the dialectical unfolding of human reason. As Slavoj Žižek puts it:

This approach reaches its climax in Bloch's insight that 'only an atheist can be a good Christian and only a Christian can be a good atheist.' One should take this insight quite literally: in order to be a true atheist, one has to go through the Christian experience of the death of God—of God as the transcendent Master who steers and regulates the universe—and of resurrection in the Holy Spirit—in the collective of those who fight for emancipation. (2013)

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CHAPTER 20

ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

CHARLES PIGDEN

My views on religion remain those that I acquired at the age of 16. I consider all forms of religion not only false but harmful. My published works record my views.

—Bertrand Russell, letter to *The Humanist*, October 1968 (2002: 410)

None of us would seriously consider the possibility that all the gods of Homer really exist, and yet if you were to set to work to give a logical demonstration that [they] did not exist you would find it an awful job. You could not get such proof.

Therefore, in regard to the Olympic gods, speaking to a purely philosophical audience, I would say that I am an Agnostic. But speaking popularly, I think that all of us would say in regard to those gods that we were Atheists. In regard to the Christian God, I should, I think, take exactly the same line.

—Bertrand Russell, ‘Am I an Atheist or an Agnostic?’ (1949: 91-2)

INTRODUCTION

BERTRAND Russell (1872–1970) was famous as an atheist and famous as an analytic philosopher, indeed famous as one of the founding fathers of the analytic tradition in philosophy. But did his atheism depend on his analytic philosophy or his analytic philosophy on his atheism? More generally, is there some kind of intellectual connection between analytic philosophy and atheism? After all, most analytic philosophers are atheists, and would probably agree with the Cambridge philosopher F. P. Ramsey (the brother of a future Archbishop of Canterbury) that ‘Theology is a famous subject which we have realized to have no real object’ ([1925] 1990: 247). Furthermore, the critique of religion was very much part of the ideological agenda for a number of early analytic philosophers, including Russell himself (who lost at least two jobs and missed out on a chance of getting into Parliament because of his public godlessness), the logical positivists of the Vienna Circle (who, reasonably enough, regarded organized religion, especially in Austria, as a prop to fascism and reaction)¹ and Antony Flew (who, at least until his eighties, was equally opposed to the dogmas of religion and the politics of the Labour party). On the other hand, a substantial minority of analytic philosophers, including some very distinguished names (such as Anscombe, Geach, Dummett) are, or have been, religious believers, and ‘analytical theism’, as represented by the likes of Swinburne, Plantinga, and the Adams family,² is very much a going concern. Thus godlessness and godliness both seem to be compatible with a commitment to analytic philosophy. In this the analytic tradition does not differ that much from some other philosophical schools or movements. There have been theistic empiricists such as Berkeley and irreligious empiricists such as Hume, Christian existentialists such as Kierkegaard and atheistic existentialists such as Sartre (see Alison Stone’s ‘Existentialism’). The diversity of religious opinions within a single philosophical tradition is partly due to the fact that philosophers on the whole are not disposed to buy suits of opinions off-the-peg (so to speak) but prefer to mix and match. (Indeed the tendency to do this is one of the things that disposes them to

become philosophers in the first place.) But with analytic philosophy this sort of diversity is all the more likely because analytic philosophy nowadays is not so much a bundle of doctrines as a *tradition*, bound together by a loose bunch of techniques and preoccupations and some shared value judgments about what good philosophy tends to look like. Thus you can combine a taste for formal methods in philosophy and a lively respect for the achievements of the early analytic philosophers (including Russell's activities as one of the co-inventors of modern logic) with a wholesale rejection of Russell's naturalism and atheism. And it is the techniques and the preoccupations that make you an analytic philosopher rather than the specific doctrines, even if (as is *not* the case with Russell's atheism) those doctrines were central to analytic philosophy in the days of the founding giants.

GOD—NON-EXISTENT OR NONSENSICAL?

That the techniques of analytic philosophy might be used to defend religion was a worry for the logical positivist Otto Neurath (1882–1945), whose own brand of analytic philosophy was devised on purpose to do down metaphysics and religion in the name of science, modernity and socialism. He thought that an undue obsession with logic and semantics on the part of his philosophical comrades might allow religion and metaphysics to creep in by the back door. In a letter to his buddy, the philosopher Rudolf Carnap (1891–1970), he darkly hints at the religious, and specifically Catholic, tendencies lurking in the writings of the great Polish logician, Alfred Tarski (1901–83):

I am really depressed to see here all the Aristotelian metaphysics in full glint and glamour, bewitching my dear friend Carnap. As often, a formalistic drapery and hangings seduce logically-minded people as you are very much [...] It is really stimulating to see how the Roman Catholic Scholasticism finds its way into our logical studies which have been devoted to empiricism [...] Brentano and the Polish philosophers] begot now Tarski etc and they are God fathers of OUR Carnap too; in this way Thomas Aquinas enters from another door Chicago [where Carnap was working at the time]. (Neurath to Carnap, 15 January 1945, quoted in Mancosu 2008: 196)³

Neurath's fears have been amply fulfilled.⁴ For a start, many analytic philosophers nowadays (myself included) take a keen interest in the scholastic philosophers of the Middle Ages and think that the study of their logic and semantics can pay big philosophical dividends. Analytic metaphysics is a major philosophical industry and it is indeed characterized by a free and easy use of logical tools, including tools derived from Tarski and the other Polish logicians such as mereology (Google it!). As for religion, as I have stated already, analytic theism is a big philosophical business, complete with books, journals, conferences and star professors. Furthermore analytic theism isn't just a ghetto affair, an activity pursued in private between consenting theistic adults. It is rather more mainstream than that. Analytic atheists (or at least analytic philosophers who are atheists) draw on the work of analytic theists and analytic theists draw on the work of analytic atheists. To pick a text from my shelves almost at random, William Hasker, author of *God, Time and Knowledge* (1989), defends the view that it is impossible to reconcile Human Freedom and full-on Foreknowledge, and argues, in consequence, for 'Open Theism'. This is the idea that God himself is in Time and that although he knows everything that can be known, he does not know future contingent singulars—propositions about what free individuals will do—because if their decisions are genuinely free, there is no fact of the matter about what they will do. (If I am genuinely free with respect to my breakfast, then it may be true that I am *likely* to have mussels rather than eggs for breakfast tomorrow, but it is not yet true that I *will* have mussels rather than eggs. And if it isn't yet true, not even God can know it.) Hasker draws on atheistic philosophers such as David Lewis for his theory of conditionals as well as a logical

apparatus developed by mostly godless philosophers such as Tarski and Russell.

Neurath would have been deeply disappointed to discover that seventy-odd years down the track this sort of stuff is not only getting published but is held in high regard, even by philosophers such as myself who think that it is founded on falsehoods. He would have been even more shocked to learn that an atheistic philosopher like me, with a strong attachment to the scientific worldview, not only owns and has read such a book but that I actually think that it is *right*, though in a hypothetical sort of way. (I think Hasker is correct. *If God exists*, then He does not have full-on Foreknowledge and is therefore the God of the open theists rather than the timeless creator favoured by traditional theology.) According to Neurath, I should not even have *opinions* about such topics since there are, in a sense, no genuine opinions to be had. For Neurath believed that talk about God is cognitively or factually *meaningless* and hence incapable of truth or falsity (though it may possess some non-factual kind of meaning). Now this is indeed a brand of atheism that was characteristic of early analytic philosophy. It can be derived from verificationism, an idea that was at least *widespread* amongst analytic philosophers from the twenties through to the fifties and maybe even beyond, namely that *synthetic sentences are only factually meaningful if they can be verified (or perhaps falsified) by experience*. Since theological claims *cannot* be verified or falsified, (so the story goes) it follows that they are not cognitively or factually meaningful, and hence that they are neither true nor false.

It might at first appear that this is not a form of atheism at all, since traditional (positive) atheists think it *false* that God exists and *true* that he does not. Thus positive atheism presupposes that ‘God exists’ is factually meaningful and that it has a truth-value (namely *false*), and that ‘God does not exist’ is *also* factually meaningful and has the *opposite* truth-value (namely *true*). All this is denied by the logical positivists in their critique of theology. Russell makes the point in his review of A.J Ayer’s famous book *Language, Truth and Logic* ([1936] 1946), the English manifesto for logical positivism:

[Ayer’s] condemnation of ‘metaphysics’ leads to some very sweeping conclusions. For example, the proposition ‘God exists’ is condemned as meaningless; from this follows not only a rejection of theism, but also of atheism, which maintains the equally meaningless proposition ‘God does not exist,’ and of agnosticism, which asserts ‘whether God exists is doubtful.’ This view is maintained on the double ground that there can be no empirical evidence either for or against the theistic hypothesis, and that the hypothesis is neither logically necessary nor logically impossible [...] Mr. Ayer is thus led to a view which is opposed equally to the assertions of the orthodox and to the doubts or denials of the sceptics. (Russell 1936: 331)

But is Mr Ayer’s view *equally* opposed to the assertions of the orthodox and to the doubts or denials of the sceptics? Surely not. To the godly, the positivist thesis just looks like a particularly insulting form of atheism (‘Your claim that God exists is not just false—it doesn’t even make sense!’). And the logical positivists and their allies were at least committed to *one* claim that looks very like atheism:

The sentence ‘God exists’ (as usually understood) cannot be used to express a truth.

This is atheism transposed from the material mode (where we talk about things) to the formal mode (where we talk about words) but it still looks pretty atheistic to me. You are no less an unbeliever if your unbelief is due to the opinion that the beliefs of the orthodox are devoid of cognitive content (and are therefore untrue) than if it is due to the opinion that they *do* have cognitive content but are nonetheless false.

The point is reinforced if we look at Ayer’s intellectual autobiography. As was often the case with the early analytic philosophers, Ayer was a teenage atheist long before he became a professional philosopher, and therefore long before his conversion to logical positivism. At Eton he had to take communion, and, as he explains, after taking the sacrament two or three times, ‘I began to ask what the performance implied. It was not long before I decided that not only the theory of the Eucharist, but

the doctrine of the Trinity, the assumption that Jesus had been divine, and indeed the hypothesis that the universe had been divinely created were all intellectually untenable. I became a militant atheist and annoyed my school fellows, who took little interest in the subject, by haranguing them about such things as the contradictions in the Book of Genesis and the inconsistencies in the Gospels' (1992: 9). G. E. Moore, Russell, Broad, and Carnap (big names in the early history of analytic philosophy) all tell much the same tale, except that in their cases the Eucharist wasn't the issue, and that, lacking Ayer's rather flamboyant personality, they apparently managed to become teenage atheists without unduly annoying their school fellows (see Moore 1942: 11–12; Russell 1944: 7–8; Broad 1959: 43–4; and Carnap 1963: 7–9). They were not moved by verificationism or by any other tenet peculiar to analytic philosophy (which in the days of their youth was either non-existent or just being invented) but by the kinds of arguments accessible to clever but philosophically untrained adolescents in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Thus the clincher for Russell was an argument derived from John Stuart Mill (1806–73), who, unbeknownst to him, had consented to act as his secular godfather just a year before his death (see Reeves 2007: 478): 'I believed in God until I was just eighteen, when I found in Mill's *Autobiography* the sentence: "My father taught me that the question 'Who made me?' cannot be answered, since it immediately suggests the further question 'Who made God?'" In that moment I decided that the First-Cause argument is fallacious' (Russell 1944: 8). In the cases of Russell, Broad, and Carnap they were also moved by a keen interest in science and the growing conviction that it is difficult to reconcile Christianity with the scientific outlook. (Moore and Ayer, by contrast, were classicists who knew next to nothing about science.) But of course, Ayer *did* become an analytic philosopher, and a verificationist to boot, which means that according to his *official* view 'the atheist's assertion that there is no god is equally [as] nonsensical' as the theist's view that there is one (Ayer 1946: 115). Did this mean that he had ceased to be an atheist? Whatever he may have thought at the time, this is not how he felt about things when looking back in later life. 'In the sixty years since I first became an atheist, I have never yet discovered any good reason to believe in the existence of a deity' (1992: 9)—which rather suggests that in his mature opinion he *remained* an atheist throughout the intervening sixty years, including the period when he was a gung-ho verificationist.

Thus verificationist atheism may be a deviant kind of atheism, but it, it is a variant of atheism nonetheless. For the verificationist atheist, it remains the case that the great theistic religions—Judaism, Christianity and Islam—are based on a mistake, though the mistake is *linguistic* rather than factual or metaphysical: it is not (as the old-fashioned atheists supposed) the mistake of believing in a non-existent of God but that of believing a set of claims to be factually meaningful and true when in reality they are factually meaningless and *incapable* of truth. Of course they are not false either, but this not being false is hardly a plus—a false statement loses out in the true/false game but a cognitively meaningless statement has not got what it takes to get into the game in the first place. Priests and rabbis, pastors and mullahs are still profoundly wrong, but what they are wrong about is no longer the existence of a Deity but the content of their own pronouncements. Religious believers fail to understand what they themselves are saying, for if they did, they would see that they are not saying anything that can be genuinely believed. At best, they are expressing an emotion or registering a moral commitment.

It is common to offer a consolation prize. Though they are not very clear about it and tend to wrap it up in a lot of double-talk about language games, Wittgenstein and his disciples sometimes seem to be propounding a sort of hush-voiced version of analytic atheism, which earnestly congratulates religion on its lack of cognitive content ('It's not that kind of language game. It has a different and more profound kind of significance ... yadda, yadda, yadda'). But with the exception of a few 'Honest to God' theologians, believers on the whole don't seem to have appreciated the compliment despite

the reverential tone in which it is commonly proffered.⁵ After all, they are most of them still in error, the error being that of misunderstanding their own beliefs.

Verificationist or falsificationist atheism, it appears, is a brand of atheism that is unique to analytic philosophy. I shall be arguing in the second section that it is false, and indeed absurd. But though it was at one time popular it has now been largely abandoned and was probably never the dominant view even amongst analytic philosophers. It was certainly not the view of Bertrand Russell who rejected verificationism, and as the epigraph reveals, believed all forms of religion to be *false* (and indeed harmful) rather than nonsensical or lacking in cognitive content. Moreover, Russell was an atheist long before he became one of the co-inventors of analytic philosophy, and the analytic philosophy that he invented did not have much impact on his atheism. Though he was a twentieth-century atheist his atheism was largely a nineteenth-century affair. From an intellectual point of view there is not much difference between the arguments in ‘Why I am Not a Christian’ (1957) and his other atheistical works and the arguments to be found in Mill, Huxley, or Clifford, except that Russell has much more of a sense of humour and a more knock-about polemical style.⁶ Thus Russell’s atheism was not due to his analytic philosophy.

But was his analytic philosophy due to his atheism? The answer is a qualified ‘yes’. Analytic philosophy (at least in Britain) arose as a response to the Absolute Idealism of the British Hegelians, Bradley, Green, and McTaggart, to which Russell and Moore were briefly converts, and which was then the house philosophy of the British Empire. But Absolute Idealism was itself a response to the Victorian crisis of faith. It functioned as a sort methadone programme, helping high-minded Victorian intellectuals to get off the hard stuff of official Christianity without the usual withdrawal symptoms of ‘Death of God’ despair. Its key tenet is that although we may *seem* to be material boys and girls living in a material world, this is an Appearance only. In Reality the universe is a sort of unified spiritual whole of which our separate selves are delusory aspects. As Bradley put it, ‘the Absolute is one system, and ... its contents are nothing but sentient experience. It will hence be a single and all-inclusive experience, which embraces every partial diversity in concord. For it cannot be less than appearance, and hence no feeling or thought, of any kind, can fall outside its limits’ ([1893] 1930: 146–7).

Russell abandoned Absolute Idealism (and went on to invent analytic philosophy) in part because he realized that it could not deliver the goods: it could not provide any consolation for life’s disasters nor could it show (as Russell had once hoped) that even in a godless world it still is *more* rational to be moral than to be selfish. This is the theme of the final section.

ATHEISM, VERIFICATION, AND FALSIFIABILITY

The argument for verificationist atheism (or the verificationist argument for atheism) goes something like this.

- (1) Cognitively or factually meaningful propositions are either analytic and true, self-contradictory and false, or synthetic and *verifiable*. (Call this the *verificationist criterion of meaningfulness* or the VCM for short.)
- (2) Theological propositions such as ‘God exists’, if they are propositions at all, are (or are supposed to be) synthetic.
- (3) But theological propositions are not verifiable.

Therefore

(4) Theological propositions such as ‘God exists’ are not cognitively or factually meaningful.

Roughly speaking, a proposition is supposed to be verifiable if we can specify possible observations or experiences that would (tend to) confirm it. But though the general idea of the VCM *seems* clear enough, endless difficulties arose in the attempt to make it really precise. (Does ‘confirm’ mean *prove* or merely *provide evidence for*? Are the ‘possible’ observations *practically* possible or merely *imaginable*?) Successive formulations either included what its proponents meant to *exclude*—such as metaphysical propositions—or excluded what they meant to *include*—such as scientific laws and findings. (See Soames 2003: 271–99 for a potted history.) Worse, the VCM seems to be self-refuting however it is formulated. For it divides significant truths into two classes, the analytic and the empirically verifiable, into neither of which it falls. Thus if it is true, it is factually meaningless, which means that it is incapable of truth or falsity, and therefore not true. Finally, even if we can get around these difficulties there is a further problem. Premise (3) appears to be false. If, after my death, I were to find myself restored to life in a new body to witness and participate in a scene similar to the Last Judgment as depicted by Michelangelo in the Sistine Chapel, then I would be very surprised indeed, but I would certainly take it as a strong confirmation of the doctrines of the Christian religion. Some theological propositions, it appears, are verifiable after all.

But mid-century analytic philosophers had a passion for dismissing their opponents’ views as senseless,⁷ and in a (then) much-discussed, paper Antony Flew decided to give it another go (Flew [1950] 1955). The reason that ‘God exists’ is factually meaningless is not that it cannot be *verified* but that it cannot be *falsified*. The argument for falsificationist atheism (or the falsificationist argument for atheism) goes something like this:

- (1) Cognitively or factually meaningful propositions are either analytic and true, self-contradictory and false, or synthetic and *falsifiable*. (Call this the *falsificationist criterion of meaningfulness* or the FCM for short.)
- (2) Theological propositions such as ‘God exists’, if they are propositions at all, are (or are supposed to be) synthetic.
- (3) But theological propositions are not falsifiable.

Therefore

(4) Theological propositions such as ‘God exists’ are not cognitively or factually meaningful.

The argument trades on a certain asymmetry between verification and falsification. ‘I will be resurrected on Judgment Day’ is a thesis that I can, in principle, verify. But it is not a thesis that anyone can directly falsify. For after the last human being dies there will be nobody around to experience the non-resurrection.

There are several things wrong with Flew’s argument. To begin with he borrows the idea of falsification from Popper without due acknowledgement and then misapplies it. For Popper falsifiability provides the demarcation criterion between science and *non-science* not (factual) sense and *nonsense*. In his view unfalsifiable claims can be perfectly meaningful and even true—it’s just that they can’t be scientific (Popper 1963, 1992).

Secondly Flew’s key argument for Premise (1) rests on an equivocation. He argues that a synthetic

proposition can't be factually meaningful unless it is falsifiable in the sense that there is a specifiable state of affairs that would render it false. Maybe so, but by this criterion 'God exists' is perfectly falsifiable since there is indeed a specifiable state of affairs that would render it false, namely the non-existence of God. Flew then goes on to conclude that a synthetic proposition can't be factually meaningful unless there is a *detectable* state of affairs that would render it false. But it is one thing to say that a synthetic proposition must rule some things out, but quite another to say that the things it rules out must be things that we can detect. You can't infer the one from the other.

Thirdly, most interesting propositions are not absolutely falsifiable in the sense that Flew's argument requires. Typically, whether or not a given piece of evidence falsifies a proposition depends on what else we assume. (This point is known as the Quine-Duhem thesis.) The fact that I *seem* to see a dagger before me only falsifies the thesis that *there is no dagger in front of me* on the (plausible) assumption that I would not seem to see a dagger unless there really were a dagger to see. But if I know myself to be discombobulated by the thought of murdering Duncan and consequently prone to hallucinations, the fact that I *seem* to see a dagger does not disconfirm the thesis that there is no real dagger in front of me. As Macbeth realizes, it might just be 'a dagger of the mind, a false creation/Proceeding from the heat-oppressed brain' (*Macbeth* 2.1). Falsifiability, it seems, is an assumption-relative affair.

This is important in the theological case. For on certain assumptions, evidence in favour of the Special Theory of Relativity can falsify the claim that God exists. Suppose you think that if God is to get off the hook from the Problem of Evil, then he needs the Free Will Defence, which, in turn presupposes Human Freedom. But suppose you agree with Hasker that Human Freedom is incompatible with full-on Divine Foreknowledge. Then it follows that if God exists, the future must be open. But God, if he exists, is omnipresent. So for the future to be open *for him* then it must be the *same past* that is fixed and the *same future* that is open *all over the universe*. This requires absolute simultaneity. But according to Einstein's Special Theory of Relativity (the STR), there is no such thing as absolute simultaneity (since what is in the present from one point of view can be in the past or in the future from another). So if the Special Theory of Relativity is true, God does not exist. Hence evidence that tends to confirm the STR tends to falsify 'God exists'. This means that *on certain assumptions*—assumptions about the need for Human Freedom if the existence of God is to be compatible with the existence of evil and assumptions about the incompatibility Free Will and Foreknowledge—evidence for a physical theory can falsify the claim that God exists.

I think the argument I have just sketched is quite a good one. But if it is, it is an argument for old-fashioned 'positive' atheism—the claim that 'God exists' is factually meaningful but false—not for the new-fangled atheism of Flew which denies that it even makes sense. Indeed we can go further. Even if this argument fails as a disproof of God's existence it succeeds as a disproof of Flew's brand of falsificationist atheism. For what it shows is that 'God exists' is not absolutely unfalsifiable but only unfalsifiable under certain assumptions. And it has to be absolutely unfalsifiable if Flew's argument is to work.

We can put the point like this. Propositions are either factually meaningful or factually meaningless. They are not factually meaningful given one set of assumptions and factually meaningless given another. But they are often *falsifiable* given one set of assumptions but *not* falsifiable given another. Hence to be factually meaningful or meaningless is not to be falsifiable or unfalsifiable.

But there is a more fundamental problem with the FCM. It is both falsifiable and false. A theory of meaning should explain what it is about meaningful propositions that makes them meaningful and about meaningless strings of words that makes them meaningless. Furthermore it should (help) explain why words and sentences have the meanings that they do. In other words it should 'save the

appearances' by 'predicting' that what we normally take to be meaningful *is* meaningful and that our utterances mean (roughly) what we take them to mean. The FCM as applied by Flew spectacularly fails to meet this test. What it says about religious propositions is either that they have no meaning at all or that they mean something radically different from what everyone has hitherto supposed them to mean. In other words, it implies that we have been misunderstanding our own utterances for centuries. And the very fact that it *has* this implication is evidence that it is false. Revisionist theories of meaning, simply because they *are* revisionist are false to the facts of linguistic usage that it is their business to explain. And theories that fail to fit the facts are false (see Pigden 2010).

Thus premise 1) is false and Flew's argument a failure. If we are going to be atheists at all, we should be old-fashioned rather than new-fangled atheists. We ought to concede that God-talk is factually meaningful. We simply deny—as Bertrand Russell did—that it corresponds to anything real. God-talk makes sense all right—it is just that it lacks a referent.

THE DEATH OF GOD AND THE BIRTH OF ANALYTIC PHILOSOPHY

'We called him "old Sidg" and regarded him as merely out of date' (Russell 1959: 38). So said Russell of his teacher, the great Victorian moral philosopher, Henry Sidgwick (1838–1900). But the young Russell was much exercised by a problem that also bothered Sidgwick: the Dualism of Practical Reason. According to Sidgwick, it is rational to do what is morally right (by maximizing pleasurable consciousness for all sentient beings) and rational to do what is prudentially right (by maximizing pleasurable consciousness for oneself), but, when the two come into conflict, the one does not seem to be any more rational than the other. If God exists, then He can ensure that it will pay in the long term to promote the public interest by rewarding the righteous in the life to come. But if, as Sidgwick was reluctantly inclined to think, there is no God, what is morally right and what is prudentially right will sometimes come apart, in which case it is not clear that is *more* rational to be good than to be bad, a conclusion that Sidgwick found deeply disturbing (Sidgwick [1907] 1982: 496–516). Russell was bothered by the problem too as he did not believe in God either, but as a fashionable young philosopher of the 1890s he thought he had something that would do nearly as well, namely, the Absolute. Since we are all aspects of the Absolute, a sort of timeless super-self which is the only thing that is really real, there is essentially the same objection to indulging my desires at your expense as there is to indulging one of my own passions at the expense of others: I am hurting, if not myself, at least a larger whole of which we are both parts (Russell [1894] 1999a: 57–68). But before long this solution ceased to satisfy. In 'Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is', a paper read to the Apostles (an elite Cambridge discussion group of which he was a member), Russell argued (as he put it to Moore) that 'for all purposes that are not *purely* intellectual, the world of Appearance is the real world'. In particular, the hypothesis that there is a timeless and harmonious Reality provides no consolation for our present pains since it is a Reality that we never get to experience. If 'the world of daily life remains wholly unaffected by [Reality], and goes on its way just as if there were no world of Reality at all', and if this world of Reality is a world that we not only *do not* but *cannot* experience (since experience is necessarily temporal), how can its alleged existence afford us any consolation for what seems to be (and therefore *is*) evil in the world of Appearance? (Russell [1897] 1999a: 79–86.) Now this argument has an interesting corollary, which Russell does not explicitly draw. It may be that *in Reality* the pains I inflict on you affect me—or at least a larger mind-like thing in which we both participate—but if I never *experience* those pains, how can this give me a motive to do or forbear if my interests conflict with yours? If Absolute Idealism can provide no consolation for life's disasters

—which is what Russell is explicitly arguing—then it seems that it cannot supply me with a reason not to visit those disasters on someone else, if doing so is likely to benefit me. Thus the Dualism of Practical Reason reasserts itself. Sometimes what is morally right is at odds with what is prudentially right and when it is, there seems no reason to prefer the one to the other.

Whether Russell realized this is not entirely clear. But ‘Seems, Madam? Nay, It Is’ marks the beginning of the end for Russell’s Absolute Idealism. Once he realized that ‘for all purposes that are not *purely* intellectual [including perhaps the purpose of providing moral uplift] the world of Appearance is the real world’, Russell came to feel that the world of Reality was no use for purely intellectual purposes either and soon resolved to do without it. A big ‘R’ Reality, that could neither console us for life’s troubles nor reconcile duty and self-interest, was a big ‘R’ Reality that might as well not exist. It was but a short step to the conclusion that it *does not* exist, since the arguments in its favour are not very compelling. The methadone of the Absolute having proved to be ineffective, Russell went on to develop a new kind of philosophy where the object of the exercise was not to reconcile duty and self-interest or to console us for life’s tragedies, but to understand the world as it is. Thus the birth of analytic philosophy was not due directly to the Death of God but to the perceived uselessness and ultimate death of a popular God-substitute, namely the Absolute. In its absence, Russell thought, we have to face up to a universe which is fundamentally indifferent to us: ‘only on the firm foundation of unyielding despair, can the soul’s habitation henceforth be safely built’ (Russell [1903] 1999b: 32)—though, as he subsequently came to realize, it is possible to erect a cheerfully godless habitation on these rather unpromising foundations.

CONCLUSION

So is there a connection between atheism and analytic philosophy (apart from the fact that analytic philosophy promotes clear thinking and that clear thinking leads to atheism)? There is a historical link. The founding fathers of analytic philosophy were, for the most part, atheists and were often obsessed with science which they deemed to be incompatible with orthodox Christianity. In England, analytic philosophy arose as response to Absolute Idealism which seemed to afford some consolations to earnest Victorian intellectuals in search of a replacement for the dying God. But for Russell, the Absolute lost its appeal once he realized that it could not cut the mustard as a God-substitute, thus opening the way for the new philosophy which he went on to co-invent. However, analytic philosophy soon developed an unhealthy obsession with meaninglessness which led to a new kind of atheism that dismissed theistic talk as lacking in cognitive content. But this brand of atheism did not last, since the theories of meaning on which it relied are (and have been recognized to be) false. Analytic philosophy remains a predominantly atheistic movement, but the atheism it professes is of the old-fashioned kind. Whilst a minority believes that it is meaningful but true, for most analytic philosophers, it is not meaningless but *false* to claim that God exists.

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CHAPTER 21

JEWISH ATHEISM

JACQUES BERLINERBLAU

‘God ain’t never spoken to you?’
‘I don’t believe in God.’
‘You’re a rabbi, how can you not believe in God?’
‘It’s what’s so great about being Jewish. You don’t have to believe in a God per se, just in being Jewish.’

—Paul Beatty, *Tuff*

INTRODUCTION: THE FIVE PERILS OF SCHOLARSHIP ON ATHEISM

HISTORIANS who study atheism are confronted by five occupational hazards: (1) a dearth of historical documents attesting to the existence of atheists, (2) chroniclers whose revulsion for nonbelief leads to highly tendentious and inaccurate claims, (3) nomenclatural confusion (or chaos, actually) in which the term ‘atheism’ as used by a source connotes something different, like heresy, or apostasy, or a religious belief that someone does not approve of, (4) self-professed ‘atheists’ in the historical record whose views and behaviour veer into un-atheistic places, and, (5) modern scholars who find atheism appalling and let that assessment colour their analysis of the subject (of late, similar indiscretions are observed among popularizing champions of nonbelief).

To varying degrees all of these difficulties assail those who study the specific problematic of Jewish atheism. Yet an even more fundamental difficulty stands in their path: a surprising lack of scholarly interest in the subject. The study of atheism within the context of Judaism, unlike its study within the context of Christianity, is an undeveloped and dodgy affair. Whereas there are many fine and detailed investigations of atheism and its diverse manifestations across Christian time and space, bewilderingly little has been written about its Judaic counterpart. Canonical accounts, comprehensive analyses, or even reliable scholarly overviews, of nonbelief in Judaism are few and far between.

The aforementioned nomenclatural chaos tends to obscure this fact. What scholars and analysts have studied in depth is Jewish *secularism* as well as the effects of *secularization* on Judaism (see, e.g., Kogel and Katz 1995; Zumoff and Zukerman 2006; Feiner 2010; Biale 2011). Occasionally workers in this area follow colloquial usage, and equate secularism with nonbelief. This leads not only to the false impression that the field of Jewish atheism is well canvassed, but that secularism and atheism are the same thing. This is an imprecise equation; though there is overlap between the two, they are not identical.

A secular Jew, after all, could be one who self-identifies as religiously moderate, or modernizing, or sceptical, or anti-clerical. In twentieth-century America, a secular Jew was often a person who was passionately supportive of Church/State separation (Berlinerblau 2012). The types of secular Jews just mentioned need not necessarily deny the existence of God (see Berlinerblau 2005: 3; Itzhaki 2011:

Nor does research indicate that Jews themselves view atheism and secularism as the same thing. An important demographic survey found that 44 per cent of 'Jews by religion' consider themselves 'secular' or 'somewhat secular'. The same study, however, found that only 14 per cent of 'Jews by religion' disagreed (strongly or somewhat) with the existence of God. (Mayer et al. 2001: 35, 37). Atheism and secularism are not synonyms nor are they always perceived as such by laypersons.

In accordance with the usage adopted in this publication a Jewish atheist will be understood as a Jew who demonstrates 'an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods'. Defined accordingly, and disarticulated from the more freighted problematic of Jewish secularism, this definition will permit us to engage rudimentary questions about Jewish atheism which remain relatively unscrutinized. Who are the first Jews that we can identify as proponents of nonbelief? What are the terms used to describe atheists throughout Jewish history? When and where does atheist Judaism arise? What is the relation between nonbelief as it develops in Christianity and as it develops in Judaism?

What follows then is a general scholarly overview of an area of inquiry about which far less is known than is commonly thought. In order to engage our problematic we will need to lean heavily on research about atheism in Christendom where far more work has been undertaken. Once this has been done we can try to re-solder the traditions of Jewish atheism and secularism that we have pried apart for purposes of analysis.

THE FIRST JEWISH ATHEIST?

In his mammoth *A Secular Age*, Charles Taylor argues that a primary characteristic of this age is 'a move from a society where belief in God is unchallenged and indeed, unproblematic, to one in which it is understood to be one option among others, and frequently not the easiest to embrace' (Taylor 2007: 3).

Taylor's surmise is problematic in at least two respects. First, I would prefer to read the secular concept *politically*, as opposed to theologically. As it developed in Christian political philosophy, from Paul to Augustine to Luther to Locke, the concept was less an idea about God's existence or lack thereof than it was a meditation on the hazards of coupling governmental and religious power (Berlinerblau 2012). Second, the claim that belief in God has remained 'unchallenged' until only recently is incorrect. For more than two millennia Jewish and Christian societies have expressed grave fears that belief in God is being challenged. What makes those concerns so intriguing and complicated for the historian is that they are often exaggerated, biased, and, at any rate, extraordinarily difficult to substantiate.

Challenges, real or perceived, to the existence of God are fretted over as early as the Hebrew Bible. Psalm 14.1 which may or may not be evidence of the first recorded Jewish—or more precisely, Judean—atheist reads as follows: 'The fool says in his heart, "There is no God"'.¹ Exegetes discussing this verse almost unanimously conclude that it depicts an instance of 'practical' as opposed to 'theoretical' atheism. The latter would entail a position of well thought-out, philosophical nonbelief in God. Biblicalists usually argue, plausibly, that such an approach was unknown in ancient Israel (e.g., Alter 2007: 40; Limburg 2000: 42; though see Goldingay 2006: 213).

Instead, scholarly consensus maintains that the fool reproached in Psalm 14.1 was a practical atheist. This would refer to individuals who simply go about their lives *as if* God did not exist. Such negligence, exegetes often argue, is due to imbecility, or depravity, or vanity, or thoughtlessness (e.g., Weiser 1962: 165; Kraus 1988: 221) but not a cogent and thoroughgoing atheist worldview.

Many who comment on Psalm 14.1 have gone the extra mile in opining that either form of atheism is ‘the climax of imbecility’ (Delitzsch 1892: 203). As one theologian put it in a 1955 commentary: ‘A useful study could be made of the scriptural conception of atheism, and of its related idea of the fool ... We might do worse than adopt the O.T. attitude of declaring the successful godless to be subnormal, the morons of society’ (Scalter 1955: 75).

In any case, it is important to get beyond the question of what kind of atheist the character in question was. For starters, we can’t be sure an atheist of any sort is being discussed in this scripture. The Hebrew simply conveys that he does not believe in *elohim*. Insofar as the rigorous monotheism of later centuries seems not to have been constitutive of the ancient Israelite world, perhaps the person described believed in gods *other than elohim* (Maillet and Lelièvre 1961: 90). For all we know, what drove the psalmist to distraction was the fact that fool was a devotee of Baal, or Anat, or the Queen of Heaven, or some other deity but not The One beloved to the biblical author(s).

Of course, even if the author(s) intended to depict a nonbeliever in Psalm 14.1, there is little reason to trust that accurate historical information is being relayed. Just because the Bible says something happened or existed, professional historians are not required to accept the verisimilitude of that assertion (Berlinerblau 2005). Evidence is still lacking for the existence of theoretical atheists during this epoch and until it surfaces we must retain a hermeneutic of scepticism towards this scriptural claim.

If the possibility that this biblical verse posits an atheist even though atheists did not exist in biblical times seems odd, we should recall that parallel occurrences in other societies have been conjectured. In his *Atheism in France, 1650–1729, Volume I: The Orthodox Sources of Disbelief*, Alan Charles Kors chronicles the existence of a perfervid dialogue about godlessness among seventeenth-century French intellectuals. It might not be an exaggeration to say that thinkers in this period were obsessed with this danger. The atheist ‘was almost everywhere in early-modern France but,’ Kors cautions, ‘strictly speaking, did not exist’ (Kors 1990: 17). The author ponders the paradox of a discursive universe in which there was ‘atheism without atheists’ (*ibid*: 81; see also his essay ‘The Age of Enlightenment’).

Returning to our example from the Psalms, it should be noted that subsequent generations had a difficult time pinpointing precisely what it was this fool believed (or didn’t believe). Eusebius of Caesarea (263–339 CE) brings to the fore many of the terminological concerns about atheism that we have mentioned above in this fascinating gloss on Psalm 14.1:

Some have denied that there is a divine spirit altogether. They have openly professed that God is not the ruler of everything, that his name is nothing but empty and that he is of no substance. Others worship gods who do not exist, denying him who is God alone. Some suggest that indeed there is a God in name, but they contend that he does not oversee earthly matters or look on human affairs. In summary, therefore, all these people have come together into the single position of atheism (godlessness), believing that there is no God. (A natural understanding about God and the innate seeds of the instinct drive all of them to confess a recognition of God; they are not so bold to deny this fact with their lips, so they pretend to recognize him not as the only God, but as an innumerable plurality). (Quoted in Blaising and Hardin 2008: 109)

Eusebius cannot quite specify what atheism entails. Is the atheist one who imagines that God is not sovereign over all? Is he one who maintains God has no substance? Is he a polytheist who posits the existence of many deities? For the ancients—and even some moderns—godlessness is a very hard thing to comprehend. Though it is not, *pace* Taylor, a possibility that only troubles societies in some putative ‘secular age’.

TERMS AND AMBIGUITIES

But our problems have only just begun. The instability and semantic drift of the word ‘atheist’ across its millennial run is a recurring snare for researchers. Since at least Classical antiquity the Greek language has featured the noun, adjectival, and adverbial forms of the term ‘atheist’ in its lexicon (Liddell and Scott 1996: 31). Some examples are attested in the writings of Pindar (with the connotation of ‘impiety’; *Pythian* 4, 162), Sophocles (with the connotation of ‘godlessness’; *Trachiniae*, 1036), and Aeschylus (with the connotation of ‘godlessness’ again; *Eumenides* 151; see also David Sedley’s ‘From The Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age’).

An *atheos* for the Greeks and Romans, as the Danish classicist A. B. Drachmann phrased it more than a century ago, was often a person who ‘*denie[d] the existence of the ancient gods*’ ([1922] 1977: 1; emphasis in original). What types of people were wont to do that? Jews and Christians played that role to perfection (Walsh 1991: 262–4). As such, those who believed in just one God are described as *atheoi* in pagan Graeco-Roman literature (Drachmann [1922] 1977: 10; see also Mark Edwards’ ‘The First Millennium’). If denying the ancient gods made one an atheist, then those who worshipped just one God were the extreme atheists of the Graeco-Roman world!

The first-century historian Flavius Josephus complains that a certain Apollonius labels Jews such as himself as ‘atheists and misanthropes’ (*Against Apion* 2. 148). The Christian martyr Polycarp, we are told, was taunted with cries of ‘away with the atheists’ (Polycarp [c. 155] 1948: 92–4). His tormentors were a pagan mob in the coliseum. One of the most memorable lines in the history of atheism—certainly a headscratcher for moderns—was allegedly uttered by Justin Martyr in the second century ad: ‘Hence we are called atheists. And we confess that we are atheists, so far as gods of this sort are concerned, but not with respect to the most true God’ (Justin Martyr [c. 155] 1885: 164; *The First Apology of Justin*, I.6).

In light of contemporary usage, all of this is confusing enough. Yet in the Jewish context even more confusion prevails. This is because ancient Hebrew and Aramaic contained no word neatly corresponding to the Greek usage. As Samuel Cohon noted in 1948 ‘no exact Hebrew equivalent for “atheist” is found either in the Bible or in post-Biblical literature’ (Cohon 1948: 578; see also Wigoder 1993: 29).

The words that might be used to connote atheism in Hebrew and Palestinian Aramaic usually have primary meanings that signify completely different ideas. Let’s take three commonly used forms in Hebrew and Aramaic whose meaning sometimes implied nonbelief. The first and perhaps the most widely attested of all is *epikoros* (derived from the Greek ‘epicurean’). In contemporary Hebrew this word has become a ‘common denominator’ term for everything that deviates from orthodoxy, including atheism (Cohn 2000: 48). It is often used in modern Israeli Hebrew as a term for atheism (otherwise Israelis use the cognate of ‘atheist’ borrowed from the Greek—see Alcalay 1990: 226–7; the same occurred in Yiddish—Weinreich 1968: 21).

When we encounter the word in the rabbinic corpus of the early first millennia ad an *epikoros* is defined in many ways. He—he always seems to be a he—could be a person who rejects the Torah, or ‘despised the word of the Lord’ while giving scriptural interpretations not in accordance with *halachah* or normative Jewish law (B. *Sanhedrin*, 99a; also see *Kiddushin* 66a).

In the Jerusalem Talmud the *epikoros* is the arrogant one who proclaims: ‘The Torah does not come from Heaven’ (JT X.1; Neusner 1984: 309). Well versed in polemics, he likes to insult people. Rabbi Joseph described *epikorsim* as ‘those who gibe “Of what use are the Rabbis to us?”’ (B. *Sanhedrin* 99b; Kellner 2006: 34). We also learn in B. *Sanhedrin* 38b that an *epikoros* can be a gentile or a Jew. None of this remotely suggests nonbelief. Interestingly though, in the writings of Josephus the epicureans are described far more atheistically as those who ‘exclude Providence from human life and refuse to believe that God governs its affairs’ (*Antiquities*, X. 278).

A second word found in rabbinic discussions of problematic individuals is *min* (Marcus 2009; Miller 1993). In B. Sanhedrin 38b Adam is described as a *min* and the implication according to Rabbi Nahman is that he denied God (also see B. Avodah Zarah 27b; B. Berakoth 29a). Another text lashes out at the *minim*, referring to them as ‘scoffers, who rejected the Torah, denied the resurrection of the dead, and who abandoned the ways of the community’ (B. Rosh Hashanah 17a). Like the *epikorsim* they exult in insulting the rabbinic authorities (B. Sanhedrin 39a). That the *minim* were sectarians may be indicated by that fact that they had their own books—which were to be burned according to the rabbis (B. Shabbath 116a).

A third term is *kofer be’ikkar*, referring to the person who ‘denies the first principle’ (B. Sanhedrin 38b; Jastrow 2005: 661). The text B. Sotah 4b speaks of the *kofer*’s haughtiness of spirit and idol worship—qualities subsequently correlated to rejecting the principle of God’s existence. Biblical figures such as Esau are said to have denied God (B. Baba Bathra, 16b; also see B. Baba Mez’ia 71a).

The connection between the term *epikoros* and atheist becomes a smidgen less blurry in the writings of the great rabbinic sage Moses Maimonides. In order to track this connection let us start with Mishnah Sanhedrin 10:1 of the Jerusalem Talmud. In this well-known text which was probably compiled somewhere in the third-century AD we read: ‘*But the following have no share in the world to come: He who says that there is no resurrection of the dead, and [he who says] that the Torah is not from Heaven, and an epikoros*’ (Rosner 1981: 134).²

Now let’s fast forward to the twelfth century. In his commentary on this passage, Maimonides would add an intriguing nuance. An *epikoros*, he decreed, was one who ‘does not believe in the fundamental principles of the Torah’ (Rosner 1981: 150). A few paragraphs later he describes the first of the Torah’s 13 principles thusly: ‘*The first fundamental principle is the existence of the Creator, praised be He; that is to say there is an existent Being which is perfect in all aspects of existence. He is the cause of the existence of all existent things*’ (Rosner 1981: 151). It would appear that for Maimonides—as opposed to the Mishnah—an *epikoros* who denies that first principle is equivalent to what we would call an atheist (Kellner 2006: 36; see also Davidson 2005: 111–12). Though this is not, by any stretch of the imagination, a certainty.

When Maimonides engages the word *minim* he again shades it into nonbelief. In his ‘Laws of Repentance’ (3:7) the codifier discussed five types of *minim* or heretics. One of these categories is described as ‘he who says that there is no God and the world has no Ruler’ (Birnbaum 1974: 38). Indirectly, then, the terms *epikoros* and *min* are associated with what we would call atheism. Though the texts at our disposal are sufficiently elliptical to leave doubts as to what Maimonides meant and whether what he was lamenting had a basis in reality.

Another way of illustrating the havoc that the Hebrew terms create for us might be gleaned by looking at the legendary heretic, Elisha ben Abuya. The shadowy rabbi who flits about the Talmud might aptly be dubbed Jewish historiography’s ‘second’ First Jewish Atheist after the fool of the Psalms. Although he is feted as a proto-atheist by some contemporary Jewish writers (Seid 2001: 17) a glance at the texts about him does not warrant that conclusion.

In some sources it is suggested that Elisha Ben Abuya was an apostate (B. Hagigah 14b) and tinctured by heathen defilement (JT Hagigah 2:1; Neusner 1986: 49). In accord with his standing as ‘the heretic *par excellence*’ (Segal 1977: 62) he, in one interpretation of B. Hagigah 14b, murders young Torah students (see Goshen-Gottstein 2000: 83). Still elsewhere he is depicted as a Sabbath desecrator—and a horse-bound Yom Kippur Sabbath desecrator at that! (JT Hagigah 2:1; Neusner 1986: 48).

Elisha’s grave was consumed by fire (JT Hagigah 2:1: Neusner 1986: 49) and similarly igniting the post-modern imagination has been this rabbi’s moniker: he was known as ‘*aher*’, or ‘other’ in

rabbinic lore. Though as a scholar noted in a comprehensive study of Elisha Ben Abuya: ‘the collective nature of tradition does not allow his unique face to emerge through the veil of tradition’ (Goshen-Gottstein 2000: 229).

While attempting to confirm the atheist status of pre-modern Jews it is important to bear in mind another insight gleaned from the study of atheism in gentile cultures. Calling someone an atheist, for much of the history of Western civilization, was no value-neutral assessment. Rather, as early as Graeco-Roman times it was a slander intended to discredit one’s adversary (Bremmer 2007: 11). In the early-modern period ‘atheist’ served as a sort of libel, ‘a majestic term of reproach and condemnation’ (Allen 1964: 1). In sixteenth-century polemics this accusation was, in Lucien Febvre’s words, ‘the supreme insult’, and ‘the most terrible scandal one could decry’ (Febvre 1982: 135, 146; see also Denis Robichaud’s ‘Renaissance and Reformation’). A historical reference or allusion to an atheist does not necessarily indicate the existence of an actual atheist, but more likely the existence of a person whose religious views do not sit well with the accuser.

The preceding suggests that it is very hard to positively identify atheists in pre-modern and, as we shall see, early modern Jewish history. It suggests that references to atheists by Jewish authorities are always to be seen as the opposite of disinterested sourcing. It suggests that nearly everything we read about alleged Jewish atheists in the historical record must be assessed very carefully. These considerations should always be borne in mind as we engage speculation about, let’s say, an icon like Spinoza being a nonbeliever. The charge was frequently made, but seems groundless (Schwarcz 1977: 133; Biale 2011: 29).

Maybe the fool of the Psalms, or Elisha Ben Abuya, were truly nonbelievers. Maybe the same holds true for others proposed as atheists such as the ninth-century Persian Jew Khivi (Itzhaki 2011: 54, 239) or Uriel da Costa (1585–1640). Maybe such figures were more than just heretics or sceptics or apostates and drifted into full-blown atheism (or possibly they drifted in and out of atheism; see below). But we are presently incapable of verifying any of this by the canons of historical inquiry. In the study of atheism, credulity is the greatest sin.

PRELUDES TO (JEWISH) ATHEISM: THE EIGHTEENTH CENTURY

If the mist-enveloped pre-modern period refuses to relinquish an unambiguous case of a Jewish nonbeliever, then surely we can find one in the Enlightenment?

Perhaps, but here again the quest to discover the first Jewish atheist is riddled with complications. Even in the generally much better documented domain of Christian religious history there is no consensus candidate for this designation. Various figures in mid-to-late eighteenth-century France and England have been nominated for the distinction. Yet the nominations are hard to verify. The complexities that confront historians there are germane to those who study Jewish nonbelief in the same period.

Definitively identifying a Christian atheist in the eighteenth century is very difficult to do. For starters, the putative atheists are reluctant to come out of the closet. They employ ingenious means of revealing their alleged godlessness. One ingenious means of doing this was by dying. Take the case of the priest Jean Meslier (1664–1733). Michel Onfray in his *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* deems Meslier as ‘our first atheist’ (Onfray 2007: 28–9). But the document of this ‘*athée intrépide*’, entitled *Mon Testament*, was published after his death and seems more a deist tract than an atheist one (Wade 1967: 65–96).

In fact, most works of godlessness in this period go to great lengths to mask their authors’

identities. Some were written under pseudonyms, some were written anonymously.³ Some professions of atheism were circulated privately among colleagues, as in the case of Denis Diderot's (1713–84) *D'Alembert's Dream* of 1769 (Kors 1976: 47). Still other writers used their real names but disguised their arguments or hedged their bets. There may be atheists in the eighteenth century, but few felt comfortable unambiguously exposing their nonbelief to their contemporaries (*ibid.*: 41–91).

Which brings us to another obstacle in championing 'first atheists' in the eighteenth century. Many of the candidates seem to straddle the line between deism, scepticism, and atheism.⁴ If the boundaries between nonbelievers, sceptics, and deists are often blurred, then critics certainly did their level best to blur those lines. The case of the spectacular Voltaire is instructive. The author of *Candide* was unambiguously a deist (Gliozzo 1971). By now the reader will not be surprised to learn that in his lifetime and well after he was often tarred as an atheist by his sundry detractors. Thomas Paine, another deist, despised atheism even though he was repeatedly accused of subscribing to its tenets (Paine 1974: 498, 86).

But sometimes the blur exists because the 'atheist' in question fluctuates in his belief or nonbelief. Read through the biographies of those nominated by historians for the 'First Atheist' honour and you will note a good degree of existential and theological flip flop. Sometimes a deist became an atheist or vice versa.⁵ Meslier wavers between these positions (Wade 1967: 65–93). Diderot, considered an atheist by many, vacillated 'between deism, materialist atheism, and skepticism' (Adams 2007: 262–4).

Few people have ever been born into non-believing societies and hence few are inculcated into theoretical atheism in childhood. Save exceptions like the USSR, or maybe the officially atheistic Albania in the 1960s, one has traditionally had to journey far and against social inertia in order to *not* believe in God. Coming to atheism—like coming to Jesus—always involves a transformation, a moving away and towards. Atheists are non-spiritual pilgrims. It is not surprising that the figures just discussed and so many other atheists reverse course, or idle, or simply get confused on their way to godlessness (and back again).

These considerations provide us with guidelines and markers to think through Jewish nonbelief in the eighteenth century. In comparison to the Christian context, we have far fewer 'subversive sources' (Feiner 2010: 19) and very little helpful scholarship. Alleviating this problem is Shmuel Feiner's 2010 *The Origins of Jewish Secularization in Eighteenth-Century Europe*. The monograph is not an inquiry into nonbelief, but an examination of increasing 'religious laxity' (*ibid.*: xiii) witnessed mostly among urban, acculturated and wealthy Jews of the Enlightenment (see also Katz 1973; Endelman 2002: 55–60). Yet this work suggests clear parallels between the discourse on atheism among Jews and their Christian hosts.

Feiner notes that 'the great debate about disbelief in Europe also resonated in various parts of early modern Jewry' (2010: 19). All of which raises the methodological truism that Jewish atheism must always be contextualized. It would be absurd to view it as some sort of conceptual monad; to understand Jewish nonbelief a researcher must understand its gentile surroundings.

Many of Feiner's observations fit snugly into that hazy narrative of Enlightenment atheism we sketched above. What Feiner discovers, alongside a plethora of freethinkers, acculturated heretics, urban backsliders—and, of course, outraged and panting rabbis—are Jews who either embrace deism or are accused of such (Feiner 2010: 119–41). Naturally, and in accordance with Christian practices mentioned above, that reproach was blended in with accusations of atheism. As such, even a harsh critic of atheism such as Moses Mendelssohn was accused of being a nonbeliever (*ibid.*: 165). A deist, and proto-Secular Jew, like Salomon Maimon was branded as everything from an epicurean to a nonbeliever, by the rabbis (*ibid.*: 234–5). The latter like their Christian counterparts, seem not to be overly concerned about the distinctions between heretics, apostates, deists, modernizers or the ever-

elusive atheist.

But were the rabbis ever correct in making the charge of atheism? Those who want to find atheists in the Enlightenment era should never forget how uncommon such individuals were in Christendom. By one estimate there were but a few dozen nonbelievers in both Europe and America prior to and immediately after the French Revolution (Turner 1985: 44). Non-believing Jews—at least ones who will unambiguously profess their atheism—are exceedingly rare as well (Feiner 2010: 11).

IN SEARCH OF THE FIRST ATHEISTS

Instead of searching for a ‘first’ atheist, Jewish or otherwise, it might be more fruitful to ask: when and where do we see self-conscious *classes* of nonbelievers? In other words, we must be sensitive to the difference between nonbelief as the purview of the courageously idiosyncratic and nonbelief as a group phenomenon.

In this more sociological light, let us posit the following tripartite division for thinking about our problematic. Societies—even premodern ones—will probably *always* offer up cases of *lone wolf atheists*. These would be highly unusual people, non-conformists who buck socially dominant norms of religious belief often at great personal risk. Maybe these eccentric souls provided the source material for the portraits of the fool of the Psalms or the legends surrounding Elisha ben Abuya. Though that cannot be said with certainty.

Next, we might speak of *atheist aggregates*. There seem to be eras in which historians can identify the presence of a handful of nonbelievers, especially in high-culture circles. These atheists live in roughly the same time and space, but have little public visibility, awareness of one another, or coordination. Social pressures prevent them from uniting or even rendering their own thoughts on God in a coherent manner. Their biographies are *collated* retrospectively by modern historians.

Finally, there are *atheist cohorts*—collections of individuals who self-consciously espouse atheism and acknowledge sharing that trait with others. Such groups criticize religion (usually, at first, the religion of their birth) and tend to unite their members in common cause against dogma, clergy, a theocratic state, and so forth.

Once again, parallels from Christian host societies are instructive. Although the subject is strenuously debated, we would seem to have atheist aggregates in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe (see, e.g., Wootton 1985; Davidson 1992). These individuals appear to inhabit some quadrant of the realm of nonbelief, though social convention typically prevents them from making too much explicit noise about their identity.

The French Radical Enlightenment of the late eighteenth century provides us with atheist aggregates. They were very small in number and limited to the intellectual elite. They grow into a more self-aware, albeit relatively tiny, cohort as we draw closer to the French revolution. It might be promising to look at the thought of a group like the *coterie d’Holbach* (see Kors 1976) and other French radicals as the ‘gateway drug’ for the more socially organized and explicit strains of godlessness that would appear in the next century.

In fact, the Gallic provocations of the late-eighteenth century fast made their way across the Channel (Royle 1974: 25). One such example of an atheist cohort can be found in Victorian England (1837–1901). The writings of the inimitable Thomas Paine—who spent quality time in France and her prisons—also played an immense role in the firing up of English radicalism (Royle 1974: 26–9).⁶

England is where nonbelief became democratized. No longer are radical forms of freethought the unique purview of an intellectual elite. Rather, with each passing decade various forms of infidelity

drew more and more followers, many from the working classes. Whereas scepticism about religion and the gods had, since Roman times, been the penchant of the well-to-do, similar sentiments now start to emerge from the less privileged orders (Thrower [1971] 2000: 45).

The expression of nonbelief in Victorian England is not only more widespread, but it is publicly articulated. Gone are the ventriloquists, misdirection, and sock puppets of the pre-revolutionary French theatre. An infidel could now declare one's infidelities in broad daylight (and could be promptly thrown in prison for that too, as many Victorian infidels were!).⁷

Instead of looking for first Jewish atheists, specialists might look for the emergence of self-conscious groups of Jews who espouse atheism or something close to it. That is to say, researchers will need to identify a parallel to a 'Jewish radical Enlightenment' (where we would spot an influential aggregate) and subsequently a 'Victorian' generation (where we find a cohort).

Easier said than done, but we will offer some orienting suggestions nevertheless. Tentatively I would submit that we can profitably search for these types of self-conscious Jewish atheists in various late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century European contexts, particularly Russia and Poland which one scholar referred to as 'a greenhouse of secular Judaism' (Seltzer 1995: 3). What renders matters complex is that much nonbelief of the period is mediated though, and enfolded within, at least two social movements which proved to be highly attractive to Jews of the era: Socialism and to a lesser extent Zionism (see Herberg 1997). The Jewish atheist cohort, apparently, emerges within a larger Jewish cohort.

We should note that this was a period of ferment and tumult in Jewish history. What Irving Howe wrote of Eastern European Judaism can be generalized to the entire Jewish Occidental experience: 'the decades between ... 1800 and 1940 [are] marked by a brimming tension between tradition and modernity, belief and skepticism, folk and sophistication, ritual and individuality' (1995: 3). Europe of the nineteenth century with its combustive mix of Enlightenment, Emancipation, and anti-Semitism provided the setting in which many Jews channelled their energies towards materialist philosophies or nationalist aspirations (or in the case of socialist Zionism, a combination of the two).

It seems that the final decades of the nineteenth century were a particularly fertile moment for large-scale Jewish attraction to post-Marxist ideas. As Emanuel Patt observed '1897 was our Jewish "1776"', referring to the fact that this fateful year saw the First Zionist Congress in Basel and the founding of the General Jewish Workers Bund (Patt 2006: 148).

The relation of atheist Judaism to Zionism is more complex, seeing as how it was mediated by secular and/or socialist ideologies. Many of these were critical of traditional and *galut* (i.e., diaspora) Judaism. Still, many secular Zionists valued aspects of traditional Jewish life such as Biblical prophecy (over and against the Talmud) or the Hebrew language (over and against Yiddish). Nonbelievers are certainly to be found in the heterogeneous Zionist Movement, though teasing them out from the larger secular column will require patience and specialist scrutiny (see Shimoni 1995: 269–332).

As for the Bund, one author describes its personnel as 'a group of young assimilated Jews who, in the late 1880s, first embraced the revolutionary philosophy of Marxism' (Bloom 1984: 479); Bundists were often anti-religious and atheist, though the group's leadership constantly negotiated with potential conscripts who were religious (see Gitelman 2003: 4; Fishman 2003: 118; Jacobs 2009: 11, 41–2).

Some have seen the Jewish embrace of socialist movements such as this one as a gesture toward assimilation, or a 'withdrawal from Jewish ethnicity to join the Russian socialist movement as *Russians*' (Silver 1998: 42). Other scholars have noticed something of an elective affinity between socialism and Jewish (secularized) messianism (Weisberger 1997). Not all Jewish Socialists, of

course, were nonbelievers, and among those who were one found ‘a carnival of internal arguments’ (Wine 2007: 454). Still, in accord with the various forms materialist philosophy many of them ‘found in atheism a personal liberation’ (*ibid.*: 78).

Moving into the twentieth century we see that the Russian Revolution at first generated great excitement among Leftist Jews in both Eastern Europe and the United States (Feingold 1995: 105). Prior to the Roosevelt administration, socialism was a very reasonable ideological option for many American Jews (Glazer 1995: 136). Some estimates indicate that between 30–40 per cent of the membership of the Communist Party in America was Jewish in the 1930s (*ibid.*: 106)! And with this, as readers of a work like Philip Roth’s *I Married a Communist* (1998) know, often came a thoroughgoing and politically perilous atheism. Nervous American Jewish leaders of the era did all within their power to distance themselves from their epicurean brethren (see Cohen 1992: 165, 170).

Our hunch then, is that the period roughly between 1880 and 1940 in Europe and the United States is the most fertile ground for a cohort of Jewish atheists to emerge. Of course, not all Jews who embraced variants of Socialism or Communism or Zionism or Anarchism were full-blown atheists. Here as well we are bound to find beguiling challenges and puzzles for modern historians. Moreover, we should recall that in this period most Jews were not atheists—in fact, *very few Jews were atheists*.

Yet it is here, most likely for the first time in Jewish history, where we will find self-conscious, fairly unambiguous groups of nonbelievers who conform to the definition of atheism as we understand it today. Interestingly, while Jews are popularly assumed to have a proclivity, talent and genius for atheism, the findings above suggest that European Christians played a much more significant role in the genesis and development of modern nonbelief.

CONCLUSION: THE DOUBLE AFFIRMATION

The Jewish atheist of today may have a commitment to Zionism. It is becoming increasingly rare, however, for such a person to subscribe to post-Marxist worldviews. Most likely, today’s Jewish nonbeliever self-identifies as a ‘secular Jew’. Yet again, Jewish atheists are swallowed into a larger movement. Jews who do not believe tend to channel their energies into another ‘ism’, be it Socialism, Anarchism, Communism, Zionism, Secularism or some combination of these, or something else. That they tend to Jewishly inflect the ‘isms’ they embrace, is a point we shall return to momentarily.

Nowadays, it is in Secularism where Jewish nonbelievers seem most comfortable. The secular Jewish atheist of, let’s say, the Woody Allen or Philip Roth variety, is firmly positioned in the diaspora not Israel, in liberalism not Left radicalism, in social justice not messianism. The contemporary Jewish nonbeliever is far less likely to be an anarchist of the order of Emma Goldman, than an urban intellectual holding an advanced degree.

The taproots of contemporary Jewish atheism certainly extend back to many of the Jewish (and Christian) figures discussed above, as well as others. That being said the 1960s could aptly be described as a turning point. This was the decade that witnessed two significant, public declarations of nonbelief from within the Jewish fold, each exemplifying the peculiar nature of Judaism’s relation with atheism.

One of the most intriguing exponents was the theologian Richard Rubenstein who created a minor outrage with his 1966 *After Auschwitz*. Managing to combine rapid-fire prose with deep existential brooding the author strikes the theme that ‘we live in the time of the death of God’ (1966: 246). For Rubenstein God died in the Nazi killing camps and for this reason. He ‘is totally unavailable as a source of meaning and value’ (*ibid.*: 205). Lest his audience not be shocked enough he refers to God

as ‘the Holy Nothingness’ and laments ‘we are alone in a silent, unfeeling cosmos’ (ibid.: 205, 225). Rubenstein, naturally, was a believer and an ordained Rabbi.

At roughly the same time, Rabbi Sherwin Wine accepted an invitation to lead the Birmingham Temple located in the suburbs of Detroit. The charismatic Reform Rabbi quickly made waves. He and his board introduced existentialist philosophy into the liturgy. They crafted new prayers and increasingly eliminated mention of the word ‘God’ in synagogue materials. This being the sixties many were scandalized by all these innovations. Even *Time* magazine came down in 1965 to report on the ‘atheist rabbi’ (see Mirsky 1978: 112–25). The Rabbi was not a believer though he would later stress the tactical importance for his movement of stressing a humanistic, as opposed to an unbelieving, stance (Wine 1995: 227). ‘We are not Atheistic Judaism’, he averred nearly half a century later, ‘We are Humanistic Judaism’ (Wine 2003: 284).

What binds the two thinkers is not Marxist ideology or a central commitment to the Jewish State. Rather, both contemplated God’s (non-) existence in light of Jewish history, particularly the recent catastrophe in Europe. Rabbi Wine for his part, referred to the divine as ‘a *schlemazel* god who is too weak and incompetent to defend the people he promised to defend’ (1995: 96). This type of Jewish humanism has atheist and agnostic elements, to be sure. But more than anything and somewhat paradoxically it evinces a sort of simmering frustration with the God of Israel. The Lord has, again and again, let his people down.

This sense of betrayal has pushed some Jews to re-direct their energy away from the divine and towards Jewish community and culture. Here is where we see overlap between secular and atheist Jews. Both may feel more of a bond with other Jews and Jewish traditions, than with the Holy One. Jonathan Sarna refers to the ‘critical postulate’ of secular Judaism as ‘the idea that the bonds of peoplehood, rather than faith, can preserve Jewish life’ (2007:8).

This brings us to the last of the innumerable challenges of our subject matter we will examine here. In most faith traditions when one proclaims oneself an atheist, one willingly abandons that tradition and is promptly abandoned by co-religionists. Hence the incongruity of the phrase ‘atheist Evangelical’ or ‘atheist Muslim’. ‘Atheist Jew’, however, does not seem incongruous and this merits further scrutiny. What must be stressed here is that there is a distinction between those Jews who profess atheism and decamp from Judaism and those who insist that they are both Jews *and* atheists.

The latter case presents an instance of the ‘double affirmation’, to borrow a phrase from the secular Jewish intellectual Albert Memmi (1988: 77). The questions for future research centre around why nowadays so many more Jews gravitate to this position than in other religions and why Judaism, at least in its populous liberal varieties, is at peace with their existence. Such toleration for the nonbeliever within a religious community has rarely been extended previously. This complex identity—perennially beguiling to gentiles—comprises yet another mystery of Jewish atheism that scholars will need to unpuzzle.

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CHAPTER 22

BUDDHISM

ANDREW SKILTON

INTRODUCTION

SINCE we are working with an operating definition of atheism as ‘the absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’, one can assert from the start, with little equivocation, that Buddhism is a theistic religion and leave it at that. The equivocation must lie in two areas: positions held by Buddhists regarding a particular concept of god; and positions held by reformist ‘modernized’ Buddhists, including some Western convert Buddhists who come to Buddhism from a monotheistic and post-Enlightenment cultural context.¹ For the most part I will draw for this discussion on authoritative statements from the Buddhist canon of scripture and the works of Buddhist scholastics from South Asia.

Asserting that Buddhism is theistic would appear to contradict the special role assigned for Buddhism in the teaching of Religious Studies as the anomalous ‘religion without a god’. This characterization regularly challenges students who come armed with the assumption that religion is quintessentially about the relationship of humankind with a deity, and finds expression elsewhere in other popular characterizations of Buddhism as ‘a philosophy’ or ‘a way of life’, rather than ‘a religion’. These labels can be seen as an attempt to re-categorize Buddhism in order to reduce the tension of the apparent conflict between the categories ‘religion’ and ‘atheism’.²

BUDDHIST THEISM

It is an incontrovertible fact that, in all Asian cultures where Buddhism has been established, Buddhism co-exists alongside cults of gods and supernatural entities of all kinds. Visitors to many Asian Buddhist temples regularly find some space within the temple shared with a shrine to a local or trans-local deity, or indeed one or another of a variety of non-human entities with which the visitor might interact.³ Such interaction is instrumental, insofar as the figure thus honoured is so with the intention of gaining benefits that are within its disposal.

Moreover, Buddhist scriptures of various kinds and times regularly mention non-human entities, describe their interactions with the Buddha and his disciples, and in some cases, such as the later Vajrayāna tantras, assign roles and functions to some figures within the spiritual environment. We can turn to the Pali Canon as an easily accessible representative of one strand of earlier scriptural literature where we find numerous texts (*suttas*) which tell us about deities. Most prominent among these is Sakka, the ruler of a heavenly realm occupied by 33 deities (lit. ‘heaven of the 33’).⁴ Sakka shows a deep interest in the activities and teachings of the Buddha whom he visits on a number of occasions to question him about various points of interest.

Sakka's interest is essentially and explicitly a selfish one: he is himself a transient being, subject like all others to death and rebirth. Like all others in this early Buddhist cosmology he has been reborn as Sakka having previously led a different life elsewhere. Deities such as Sakka enjoy lives characterized by great length, power and sensory pleasure—they are privileged creatures of light and pleasure. They achieve such fortunate rebirth as a result of previous lifetime(s) characterized by positive ethical behaviour, steeped in generosity and compassion and free from negative emotions such as greed and hatred. In this cosmological context, the deities notice that the Buddha's disciples, following his teachings, increasingly achieve such heavenly rebirth on death, and this is of great potential benefit to the deities.⁵ Their own ranks are swollen and thus tip the cosmic balance in favour of their virtuous temperament, but also, being subject to rebirth themselves, they are very keen to learn the teachings and modes of conduct that might assure them another rebirth in heaven and save them from a degrading and painful 'fall' into a lower realm when their current 'life span' (*āyus*) is depleted. In this respect we should also understand that this cosmology is multi-layered, the deities (of whom, in the scholastic literature, there are several types) occupying the upper layers characterized by greater length of life, autonomy and pleasure, and the lower layers occupied by animals, ghosts and hell beings, whose lifespans are shorter and filled with downright pain, lack of control and terror. The human realm is positioned in the middle, its occupants enjoying a rough mixture of pleasure and pain, and lifetimes longer than those of animals, but shorter than the very long-lived gods.

Sakka and his ilk are depicted as creatures subject to the universal fact of impermanence—the liberating truth that could be said to lie at the heart of all forms of Buddhism and to characterize the Buddha's teachings at all periods. In this existential sense then they are little different from human beings who are also subject to death and rebirth, the quality of the latter likewise determined by the quality of their deeds in life. The Buddha is aware of this self-interested curiosity on the part of deities and compassionately shares advice that will help them lead ethical lives.

The narrative structure of such stories alone tells us that the Buddha is depicted as in a superior position to Sakka, but such inferences aside, we should understand that the attainment of a better rebirth is not the primary function of Buddhist religion as presented in these texts. The soteriological core of Buddhism rests on the claim that the Buddha won insights into the character of existence that constitute a kind of liberation from the existential conditions of life and rebirth, aka *samsāra*.⁶ Buddhism is thus a wisdom tradition, asserting that 'release' is something attained through a kind of liberating and transformative understanding (*prajñā*). This is the goal of Buddhist practice, as formulated in Buddhist scripture and regularly the subject of Buddhist treatises and sermons into the present day. Therefore, modulating the tenor of experience within *samsāra*, creating a better lifetime while still subject to the existential constraints of unenlightened life, is a kind of second best. It makes this world better, which is certainly seen as a desirable outcome, but nevertheless sidesteps the soteriological challenge at the core of Buddhist ideology. Of course, this is a normative view of Buddhist practice, and anthropologists have long observed that Buddhist communities recognize these two orientations of Buddhist activity as alternatives or perhaps complements: soteriologically oriented monastic practice is available for some, while the majority opt for improving their lot within *samsāra*, in the hope that they can engage in the more demanding soteriologically oriented activities in another, 'better' lifetime.⁷ The latter option is oriented around the accumulation of 'merit' (*puñña*), a form of intangible benefit that can be acquired by good actions, including moral behaviour, especially generosity, support of the Buddhist tradition and worship of the Buddha!⁸

Returning to our earlier observations about 'non-Buddhist' shrines on Buddhist premises, it may be that a deity connected with protection from disease may have a small shrine within a temple in order for visitors simultaneously to solicit some of that protection, while also offering reverence and

respect for the Buddha and his tradition. In this sense the two co-exist in the same space but the reasons for their worship may be quite divergent—on the one hand the visitor might worship the Buddha in connection with soteriological motivations, but equally might also worship the Buddha and other entities for the purpose of protection and benefit within this and future lives.

So, in the light of this evidence and by the terms of our working definition, there can be no serious objection to the observation that Buddhism is ‘theistic’ since even ‘early’ scripture, but also contemporary practice, recognizes the existence of deities—from the high or supposedly universal to the local. Indeed, we should truly see it as polytheistic. Buddhism in almost all of its manifestations accepts a belief in the existence of supernatural entities, including high deities, but at the same time it assigns no soteriological significance or role to such figures, while at the same time still teaching a soteriological trajectory that is recommended for human beings, as well as other entities including deities.

BUDDHIST ATHEISM

If we have so far established that Buddhism is theistic then we must now establish how it is atheistic. In other words, we must now expand upon our primary point of equivocation. For, as doubtless as Buddhism traditionally admits the existence of non-human beings including deities, it has also traditionally invested considerable energy in refuting the existence of a particular concept of deity. The distinction is neatly summarized by the observation that Buddhists acknowledge the existence of *devas* but refute that of *īvara*, in other words, the object of the Buddhist critique is designated by a distinct Indic term—the distinction can be neatly mirrored by the typographic convention of translating *deva* as ‘god’, but *īvara* as ‘God’.⁹ In *īvara*, i.e., the Indic concept(s) of God, we come to an ultimate transcendental entity bearing characteristics recognizable in the ultimate deities of the Abrahamic monotheistic faiths. Thus *īvara* is attributed variously with unity, omniscience, omnipotence, permanence, benevolence, the power of creation, etc.—and we should also understand that in refuting such an entity Buddhist tradition was thus disputing the ultimate entity of a range of theistic traditions native to South Asia, especially the major theistic strands of classical Hinduism.

The major gods of Classical Hinduism emerged from the early brahmanical mainstream which appears to have proposed that the real or ultimate in existence was either one or another form of ultimate irreducible individual essence, *ātman*, or the irreducible cosmic essence, *brahman*. An upanisadic innovation was to take a further step and identify the two, *ātman* and *brahman*, with each other (see Jessica Frazier’s ‘Hinduism’ essay). The identity of the two constituted a liberating knowledge in this early milieu which seems to have been roughly contemporary with the historical Buddha. By contrast, the Buddha taught a non-brahmanical position which rejected not just this identity but also the existence of either kind of permanent, unchanging essence—in persons or in the cosmos. One might even claim that the single most frequently iterated teaching in early Buddhist scripture is the denial of the *ātman*. This denial is supported by a reductive analysis of experience. These analyses are both synchronic and diachronic: the meditator is encouraged, on the one hand, to reduce the experienced world to a discrete number of further irreducible components employing formulae such as the *khandha*, *dhātu* or *āyatana*;¹⁰ or on the other hand, to discern the full causal ‘links’ (*nidāna*)¹¹ that account for the arising and ceasing of all phenomena. Both result in an experienced full and sufficient account of reality that leaves no space or role for an individual essence (*ātman*), or indeed by implication a cosmic one.

By way of demonstration we can examine the application of the *khandha* analysis to experience.

This formula, which appears from a very early period in Buddhist canonical literature, is ubiquitous in Buddhist teaching and appears to be a distinctively Buddhist formulation. It assigns all experienced phenomena to one of five categories: form (*rūpa*), sensation (*vedanā*), apperception (*saññā*), impulses (*samkhāra*), and awareness (*viññāna*). In the context of meditation the practitioner can analyse their experience and see that these categories are comprehensive. Thus ‘form’ constitutes the primary or underived objective content of experience and consists of earth, water, fire and air, these being metaphorical terms for resistance, cohesion, heat and motion. The primary elements are not experienced directly but only through secondary derived characteristics, and being themselves underived cannot be analysed or subdivided—they are irreducible. They are present in all experience in different degrees and mutually condition one another. Sensation, also sometimes translated as ‘feeling’, accounts for one’s affective response to experience, and is the feeling tone of pleasure, displeasure or indifference that accompanies all experience. Apperception is the simple recognition of objects, entities or ideas as objects, entities or ideas. Impulses, or volitions, are the ideas, habits or decisions that are prompted by experience (causally accounted for by the *nidāna* sequence mentioned above). Awareness, also translated as ‘consciousness’, is the basic capacity to cognize and is mutually dependent on the five bodily senses and the mind as a sixth sense. Crucially, awareness is not conceived as an entity but as a simple capacity that is mutually conditioned by and dependent on the other four *khandha*, and has no independent existence aside of them. It is thus defended from being taken as a form of inner essence or ‘controller’. These categories are considered an exhaustive and sufficient account of experience and thereby the basis for the demonstration of the absence of and lack of need for any kind of further inner essence. This of course should not be confused with the denial of the ‘everyday’ self or personality that undoubtedly exists and functions on the surface of these deep level operations which are visible only through meditative reflection.

BUDDHISM AND GOD

We should see this primary thrust of Buddhist teaching as being an implicitly atheist position in that it denies the very possibility of any permanent entity—both God and the individual entities to which he/it/she might relate. While this core doctrinal assertion, endlessly repeated in Buddhist teaching, is sufficient in itself to establish the Buddhist critique of various conceptions of God (as distinct from ‘god(s)’), nevertheless Buddhist scholastics went on to develop a variety of responses to specific claims about the nature and function of God, and indeed it seems more than likely that they were obliged to do this in a lively intellectual and theological environment created by competing religious traditions as classical Hindu theology evolved during the first millennium of the common era, reaching their full development in the Gupta Period (c.fourth-sixth century ce), and Buddhists were thereby obliged to stand their ground and refute often sophisticated theological argumentation.

These arguments take place on a variety of grounds: epistemology, responsibility for actions and their outcomes, design, creation, the problem of evil, God as experienced, God’s omniscience and the soteriological dangers of belief in God. These refutations employ argument and sometimes satire, sometimes rest on assumed first principles that are specific to Indic religio-philosophical argument, and occasionally draw on an epistemological taxonomy that is usually only implicit. By the last I refer to the Indian theory of the ‘measures (of knowledge)’, *pramāṇa*, that proposes a limited number of such ‘measures’ and ranks them in their efficacy. The *pramāṇa* became the focus of epistemological discussion between competing religious traditions. Most such debate acknowledged four *pramāṇa* (although subdivisions of these four and others altogether were occasionally proposed):

direct experience (*pratyakṣa*), inference (*anumāna*), analogy (*upamāna*), and testimony, lit. ‘word’ (*sabda*). *sabda* was sometimes replaced by its functional equivalent, ‘tradition’ (*āgama*), both of them indicating the possibility of epistemologically binding authoritative statements. These last, invariably specific to the religious tradition within which an author was located, tended *in extremis* to be used to trump all other epistemological criteria. An author could always call upon authoritative scripture to affirm amongst co-religionists the point being made, even if thereby failing to silence antagonists who drew on a different source of ‘authority’. Buddhist anti-theistic argument also employs rhetorical devices and inferential argument, depending on context, while implicitly acknowledging that Buddhist scripture endorses the anti-theist positions developed.

An important assumed first principle that emerges within this debate concerns the characteristics of anything that is to be deemed ‘real’ or ‘ultimately real’ (and with an implicit or explicit soteriologically significant status). In the debates of the scholastics it becomes clear that, that which is real (*dravysat*) has to have a number of qualities which guarantee the certainty of its ontological status: namely, it should have unity, simplicity, and permanence—if it is an agent then its agency must be unimpeded or unqualified. Possessing these means that it is not contingent, as are we and the frail world that we occupy. With these in mind we can turn to the arguments of Buddhist atheism.

God is variously attributed with a number of characteristics, including being eternal, having simplicity, necessity, omniscience and omnipotence, and finally embodying goodness or benevolence. These are all refuted by a variety of means.¹²

A BUDDHIST CRITIQUE OF ‘GOD’

The quality of permanence or eternality is clearly incompatible with the primary insight of the Buddha that everything is impermanent. At a fundamental level this quality of God is deemed impossible, and the authority for this is the founder of the Buddhist tradition, although analytic meditation is thought also to bear out this same truth. A number of sophisticated arguments were developed and rehearsed in Buddhist intellectual circles, and a concise summary of the most cogent of these (from a *Prāsangika-Mādhyamika* point of view) can be found in Śāntideva’s *Bodhicaryāvatāra*, a *Mahāyāna* treatise on the Buddhist spiritual path written at Nālandā, the premier monastic university in India in the eighth century CE, and widely used since especially in the Tibetan Buddhist traditions.¹³ Śāntideva presents his anti-theistic arguments in chapter nine (vv. 118–125), which deals with understanding (*prajñā*) or wisdom. Śāntideva situates his refutation of God near the start of a lengthy discussion of causality, and initiates it by querying God’s identity:

‘God is the cause of the world.’ Tell us, what is God? If [you claim] he is the same as the elements, then that’s OK, but what a fuss you’re making about what’s really just a label! (9.118)

His opening point, aimed at the *Nyāya-Vaiśeṣikas*,¹⁴ confirms that the equation of God with the elements, i.e. pantheism, is entirely acceptable as it reduces God to the elements, the existence of which Buddhists admit. The term ‘God’ is thus just a redundant label. In the next verse he moves on to point out that the elements themselves simply do not partake of a number of crucial characteristics that are definitive of God: they are many, while God is supposedly unitary; they are contingent, when God is supposed to be permanent; they are also inactive, whereas God is supposed to be the ultimate agent.

Anyway, earth and the other elements can’t be God because they are multiple, impermanent, inert and not divine.

Worst of all in the context of Indian religion (and here he raises a somewhat emotive argument) the elements—being all around us—are demeaned beneath our feet and are ‘impure’—the sense of the latter being a ritual impurity rather than simply ‘soiled’. This is simply and viscerally inappropriate for any concept of high divinity in Indian religion.

We can walk on them, and they’re ‘dirty’. (9.119)

Even space, he goes on in the next verse, while being unitary and permanent, is disqualified from being equated with God, because it too is inert and therefore has no agency.

Nor can God be space, because space is inert.

Those who want to identify God with the *ātman* have already lost because that is definitively deconstructed by Buddhist analysis, something he has already done earlier in his chapter.

Nor can God be the ‘personal inner essence’ (*ātman*), which, as has already been demonstrated, does not exist.

His final shot in this discussion of God’s identity, is to dismiss those who want to assert that God is inconceivable—discussion, or indeed any meaningful assertion, about something that is inconceivable is impossible and pointless.

If [you say] the creative act belongs to [a God] that is unknowable, what meaningful discourse can be had about what is unknowable? (9.120)

These points made, Śāntideva moves on to examine various perspectives on God’s creative role. He starts by addressing the issue of immutability. The personal inner essence (*ātman*), is supposedly unchanging but this is incompatible with the transmutation involved in being created. Similarly, the fundamental character (*svabhāva*) of the elements is unchanging, as indeed, supposedly, is God himself. Here Śāntideva teases out the contradiction inherent in claiming that an immutable agent creates immutable creations—how can immutable objects be created; how can God himself be unchanged by the act of creation?

And what is it that God seeks to create? If [you say that] it is the personal inner essence (*ātman*), surely that is supposed to be unchanging, as also is God himself and the fundamental character of earth and the other elements.

Śāntideva then changes tack. Even the act of knowing (*jñāna*) cannot be assigned a ‘start point’ since cognition arises in conjunction with the thing that is cognized (*jñeya*) and necessarily (in Buddhist eyes) has done so without beginning. (It is therefore not sustainable to maintain that God is a primary intelligence who sets things in motion—as a ‘knower’ there had to have been a co-existent ‘known’.) The same goes for the consequences of actions—the functioning of karma in Buddhism is an impersonal process that has also run through time without beginning and does not require the intervention or administrative support of God.

Likewise, without any beginning, cognition [of anything] has been dependent on that thing which is known; (9.121)

As also both pleasure and pain have arisen from actions. Explain what it is that is made by him? If there is no beginning to causation, where can a beginning to any results come in? (9.122)

Śāntideva’s critique then turns to the nature of God’s agency. If God is creative then he should be creative all the time and his creative action be continuous and a part of his unchanging nature. The alternative could only be that he is in some way ‘deferring’ or ‘keeping an eye on’ (*apekṣ*) some factor external to himself. This would mean that his agency is qualified. But this alternative is not

viable anyway as by definition every other existent is his creation, so he would hardly need to defer to his own creation.

For what reason is he not always doing things on his own behalf, if he's not deferring to anything else? If there is nothing else that is not made by him, to what does he need to defer? (9.123)

At this point Śāntideva moves on to address the theistic scenario in which God creates by acting upon, or in conjunction with, pre-existent raw materials (*creatio ex materia*), a theological perspective that has been quite widely held in India. If, he argues, God's power operates in conjunction with independent factors, his own agency is qualified. He is just part of a system of some sort. He presumably has no choice but to act if all other conditions are present and cannot perform his creation if they are not.

If he defers to the totality of conditions [in some way] then God is not 'the' cause. God cannot act when there is the totality of relevant conditions, and is unable to act when the totality of such conditions is absent. (9.124)

In his final verse in the sequence dealing with God, Śāntideva turns to God's will. If God created the world without desiring that outcome, then he was not acting at his own behest but must have done at the behest of some external influence. He would thus not be independent. However, the alternative would be that he acted under the force of desire. Desire is transient and thus God's immutability is once again destroyed. It also means that God himself is subject to the power of something transient, which means that he is not omnipotent.

If God takes action while not desiring some outcome, then he must be at the disposal of something other than himself. On the other hand, if he acts while desiring something, then he would be at the disposal of desire. Where's his Divinity in that? (9.125)

One might reasonably query the role of texts such as this in Buddhist intellectual life, and Griffiths (1999) makes a credible case that the primary objective of rehearsing arguments in this way was not the conversion of theistic opponents so much as the training of the monks in the doctrinal ramifications of Buddhist teaching.

NON-PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUES OF GOD

While inferential debate has historically been a key strategy in Buddhist atheism, satire has also been employed in the debate possibly with greater success. Humour is well-used in Buddhist discourse to deliver teachings and critique and is a generally neglected feature of the literature. However, exemplary samples of humour in the service of Buddhist atheism are found in both the canon and commentaries. We can look at three, each of which undermines the status of the 'great' Gods—i.e. either Brahma or, in one case, one of the Gods of Classical Hinduism. Each depends on the implicit acceptance of rebirth and of the layered cosmology of early Buddhism.

In the first case, a satire of divine omniscience from the Dīgha Nikaya of the Pali canon and placed in the mouth of the historical Buddha, there is a monk who is intrigued by a metaphysical question, 'Where do these four great elements ... cease without remainder?' By engaging in a profound bout of meditation he is able to perceive the lowest level of the divine realms and asks its occupants his question. They demur and pass him on up the chain of the multi-layered heavenly realms. Eventually he 'arrives' in the highest divine realm of all, that occupied by a Great Brahma, i.e. the most refined and powerful deity possible in this cosmology. He asks his question of Great Brahma, who declares, 'I, monk, am Brahma, the Great Brahma, the Conqueror, the Unconquered, the All-Seeing, All-

Powerful, the Sovereign Lord, the Maker, Creator, Chief, Appointer and Ruler, Father of All That Have Been and Shall Be' (Thanissaro 2012).¹⁵ When the monk repeats his question, Great Brahma takes him by the elbow and ushers him to one side where he explains that his retinue thinks he is omniscient so he cannot admit publicly that he cannot answer it. He sends him back to the human realm to ask the Buddha. Thus the greatest god is humiliated by a curious monk to whom he is forced to explain his inferiority to the Buddha.

In the second case, from the *Brahmajāla Sutta*, the idea of divine creation of the cosmos is parodied.¹⁶ The context is one of immense and impersonal cosmic cycles of devolution and evolution. The 'high deity' or Brahma is depicted as slightly pitiful, deluded by his circumstances (as are we all). The belief of divine creation is presented as a collective delusion based on incomplete understanding of the way things truly are.

During the cyclic contraction of the universe, all beings are reborn in a highly subtle state where they are sustained for a long time. Eventually the universe begins to expand at which point the Brahma world re-emerges, and eventually that being with the shortest lifespan in the subtle state dies and is reborn as Brahmā. He lives alone for a long time but eventually becomes bored and lonely and wishes for company. When other beings, their former lives exhausted, also emerge in his lower world, both he and they think that they are his creation. The myth of Brahma as the creator is born!

The final example comes from a *Jātaka*, i.e. a story concerning a former birth of the Buddha. It is called 'the birth story of "Big Blackie"' (*Mahākāṇha Jātaka*, Jātaka no. 469). Long in the past, in the time of a former Buddha, the world had 'gone to pot'. Everyone behaved badly, even Buddhist monks and nuns, and as a result Sakka's heaven realm was becoming underpopulated and the cosmic balance of good and evil was being affected. Sakka decided to take some action and so popped down to the human realm disguised as a hunter with a huge and savage hunting dog called 'Big Blackie'. Terrifying the human populace, Sakka and Big Blackie herded all the humans into the royal palace, where Big Blackie stood on his back legs, his forepaws on the royal balcony and bayed intolerably. All the royal comestibles were tossed to the beast, who simply scoffed them up and then bayed some more. The humans pitifully asked the hunter, Sakka, in quavering voices what it was the dog was after, and he cheerfully explained that Big Blackie is the type of dog that eats bad people! Some time was spent with Sakka explaining what makes bad people, after which he disclosed his disguise and returned to heaven with his dog. The humans have been terrified into good behaviour by the threat of further visits from Big Blackie. The cosmic balance is restored.

The humorous intent is evident but the satire comes into focus when one understands that 'Big Blackie', in Pali *mahākāṇha*, is a pun. This is more recognizable when the name is transposed to Sanskrit—Big Blackie is Mahā Krishna, i.e., he has the same name as one of the great Gods of classical Hinduism. Here God is reduced to a rather insulting dog caricature and is just a device employed by a lower god to ensure good behaviour and the security of his own realm.¹⁷

Satire is not the only rhetorical strategy employed, and a more serious tone is displayed in another *jātaka* which addresses the problem of evil (not discussed by Śāntideva). In the *Bhūridatta Jātaka*, in the midst of the lengthy passage of critique of the Indian class system we find the following verses.

He who has eyes can see the sickening sight;
Why does not Brahma set his creatures right?
If his wide power no limit can restrain,
Why is his hand so rarely spread to bless?
Why are all his creatures condemned to pain?
Why does he not to all give happiness?
Why do fraud, lies, and ignorance prevail?

Why triumphs falsehood—truth and justice fail?
I count your Brahma one th' injust among
Who made a world in which to shelter wrong.
(Jātaka 543; trans. from Cowell and Rouse 1907: 110)

The *Jātaka* book is attributed to Buddhaghosa (c.fifth century CE), around one millennium after the time of the Buddha, and these verses are representative of an established anti-theistic rhetoric that had developed during this period.

ATHEISM VERSUS AGNOSTICISM

Having thus far discussed Buddhist anti-theism as a unitary intellectual agenda, we need also to take account of the tendency in the early canon (at least as represented by the Pali textual tradition) to take what Hayes calls ‘a cautious epistemological stand’ over the existence of God (1998: 7). This perhaps surprisingly inverts the expectation that the more atheist representative of Buddhism is the Theravada, since the most vehement and focused anti-theistic argumentation emerges in the continental mainland of South Asia in the voice of non-Theravada authors. Thus, in the *Tevijja Suttanta*, a scripture in the Pali canon that explores brahmanical belief, the Buddha merely argues that claims of brahmanical teaching about the highest good—union with Brahma—are non-verifiable. Similarly the *Brahmajāla Suttanta*, a text that sets out Buddhist critiques of numerous other religious and world views, the tone ‘is more anti-speculative than specifically atheistic’ (Hayes 1988: 9).

QUASI-THEISM IN BUDDHISM

Less significant, even though seemingly at odds with the atheism of Buddhist tradition, are several Buddhist aspects that outsiders deem ‘theistic’ on first sight. Amongst these we can mention the archetypal bodhisattvas of Mahāyāna Buddhism, the deities invoked in tantric Buddhism and the Buddha as object of worship.

The archetypal bodhisattvas of the Mahāyāna—Avalokiteśvara, Mañjuśrī, etc—who are the focus of meditation practice and of devotional activity, are nevertheless always characterized by ‘emptiness’ (*śūnyatā*), a more radically articulated version of the *anātman* teaching. This is always explicit in the doctrinal context of Mahāyāna practice concerning bodhisattvas, and is symbolized by the clear blue sky against which they are portrayed in their iconography. Likewise, the supernatural agents invoked in Vajrayāna practice are themselves impermanent occupants of *samsāra* like ourselves, and are present for instrumental aid that they can offer the practitioner—all in keeping with the tantric methodology of Vajrayāna Buddhism that harnesses the principles and practices of instrumental magic to Buddhist liberation. Finally, there is also an argument that in functional terms the Buddha fulfills the same role as God as ‘the greatest possible being’. Griffiths explores this in terms of ‘maximal greatness’ and demonstrates that even in the developed ideology of the Mahayana the Buddha is characterized by qualities of greatness that diverge from and are irreconcilable with those qualities of greatness attributed to God in the Christian traditions, and that these emerge inevitably from the fundamental metaphysical differences between the two traditions (Griffiths 1989).

CONCLUSION

While Indian culture at large encourages worship in many contexts outside of the religious, whereas worship is jealously restricted to a monotheistic deity alone in the Abrahamic traditions, we need to take care not to adopt an orientalist stance that argues that, despite the evidence marshalled above, despite what Buddhism itself repeatedly says about itself, Buddhism is nevertheless a closet theistic tradition. It should be clear that Buddhist teaching implicitly requires the non-existence of a certain type of deity, and the Buddhist tradition drew out this implication with some rhetorical panache but also with a close forensic detail. Thus while accepting the existence of non-human but anthropomorphic subtle/supra-sensory entities of various kinds, it was and remains bound to deny a solitary presiding God with managerial, judiciary and quasi-parental obligations towards a world which 'he' has created and for which he is solely responsible, and through whom salvation is possible.

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CHAPTER 23

JAINISM

ANNE VALLEY

INTRODUCTION

RADIANT, exquisitely carved temples perch atop mountains, their gleaming white marble towers straining to merge with the clouds. Sublimity in marble, Jain temples are among the most magnificent in India. Even at a distance, they evoke wonder, but to enter the temple is to be confronted by a multi-sensory aesthetic that communicates experientially that one has entered a space that is exceptional. But because Jainism vehemently rejects the idea of a creator God, dispenses with the concept of grace, and above all else, valorizes self-reliance, one wonders as to the temples' purpose: to whom and for what do Jains pray?

Jainism presents us with a fascinating exploration of divinity that challenges in important ways some of the narrow definitions now dominating the debates over atheism. That Jains would not hesitate to dismiss as delusional the belief in a grace-bestowing creator God, and yet approach each day reverentially and prayerfully, raises some intriguing questions about what we mean by 'God', 'atheism', and 'theism'. I will present here the diverse understandings of 'god' that we find in Jainism and seek to explain this ancient devotional structure, which rests upon, not a creator God, but a meaningful cosmos.

OUT FROM THE SOIL OF THEISM

The soil out of which Jainism makes its first historical appearance¹ was one of a deeply and densely rooted theism (in the sense of the presupposition of, if not an articulated belief in, a God upon whom all else depends). North India between the ninth and sixth centuries BCE (the time of the Jain teachers, Parshva and Mahavira) was dominated by Vedic-Brahmanism, which holds as fundamental the existence of an omnipotent creative entity, Brahman, from which the world emanates, including the diverse set of powerful elemental gods at the centre of daily life and ritual practice. Though Brahmanism was dominant, India was never religiously homogeneous, and a great many smaller religious cults existed alongside it. The mutual influences between Brahmanism and these cults eventually gave rise to a set of traditions that today are subsumed under the label of Hinduism.

The 'theist' label is too general to be of much help in elucidating for the student of Hinduism its dizzying diversity of religious expression and its paradoxical conceptualizations of divinity (see Jessica Frazier's 'Hinduism'). Nevertheless it serves to underpin a fundamental premise shared by nearly all, namely that a cosmogonic agency underpins the phenomenal world. Whether knowable or unknowable, whether immanent in or transcendent over the material world, whether residing hidden in the soul or external to it, God is author of the Hindu cosmos. It is from within this God-given

religious landscape that Jainism² carved out its distinctiveness. It did this by, amongst other things, rejecting the idea of a God of all things. Jainism weighed the teachings of its early theist interlocutors, and unequivocally rejected them as nonsensical. Its reasons for doing so evince a dramatically distinct worldview in which an omnipotent grace-bestowing God has no place.

Jainism emerged as part of a world-renouncing (*shramana*) movement that also gave rise to Buddhism. This movement arose at a time of social and economic upheaval in India, concurrent with the development of cities, commerce and increased trade. The sciences of logic, physics, the establishment of rules for empirical observation, and the systematization of the Indian philosophical tradition likewise found expression between the ninth and sixth centuries. These developments reflect new understandings of the self and of the material world and, especially among the early *shramana* groups, the natures of each were seen as opposing. The self came to be seen as estranged in the material, incarnate world, in a suffering state of karmic bondage and yearning for spiritual release (*moksha*).³

In keeping with this understanding, the most fundamental existential quandary shared by all worldly beings is the entanglement of the soul and matter (i.e., of *jiva* and *ajiva*). That soul (*jiva*) and matter (*ajiva*) are utterly enmeshed is what prevents the soul from achieving a state of bliss; a bliss only experienced in a state of purity and separation from all that is matter. Jains do not posit an original state when the *jiva* was uncontaminated by karma; instead they assert that the *jiva-ajiva* entangled state is eternal, ‘without beginning’.

Jainism depicts the *jiva* as on a solitary sojourn through endless time within a cosmos indifferent to its operations; no hand of God extends to assist those in need. Instead, the *jiva* moves continuously, one life after another, in and out of birth categories, inhabiting diverse sensory expressions. And it alone, on its own efforts, must meticulously extricate itself out of the worldly mess. This would be a hopeless plight if it were not for the teachings of the Spiritual Victors—the Jinas⁴—those perfected human beings who attained enlightenment by their own might, and then taught the way to escape the cycle of birth and death (*samsara*). Their teachings, which constitute the foundation of the tradition of Jainism, are all that is left of them. Dwelling in a detached state of bliss in the realm of liberated beings (*siddhaloka*) they are no longer accessible to us.⁵

SUPERFLUOUS AT BEST, SINISTER AT WORST: REJECTING ‘A GOD OF ALL THINGS’

Suffering is the *sine qua non* of life itself, and plays a pivotal role in Jain understandings of the cosmos, human existence, and the idea of God. Of the millions of life forms, humans are privileged in our capacity to be aware of, and to put an end to, our suffering. But beyond this, our distinctiveness from other life forms blurs, and Jainism emphasizes instead the unmistakably familiar in all living beings: a yearning for life, struggle, and suffering.

The earliest of Jain scriptures, the *Acaranga Sutra*,⁶ expresses aphoristically Jainism’s fundamental concern with all life:

... as sorrow or pain is not desirable to you, so it is to all which breath, exist, live or have any essence of life. To you and all, it is undesirable, and painful, and repugnant.

That which you consider worth destroying is (like) yourself.

That which you consider worth disciplining is (like) yourself.

That which you consider worth subjugating is (like) yourself.

That which you consider worth killing is (like) yourself.

The result of actions by you has to be borne by you, so do not destroy anything.

(Quoted in Bothra 1988: iv)

The refusal to consider human existence in isolation from the multitudes of animate life is a crucial ingredient in Jainism's rejection of theism. Above all else, it is our shared plight that effectively precludes for Jainism the possibility of an omnipotent creator God. 'Why would a God create such a world as this?', Jains ask. While one could persuasively argue that the human alchemy of compassion, empathy, and courage depends in some measure on the existence of pain and suffering to be ignited, is this true too for nonhumans? What meaning could suffering have for them? Might their suffering exist to ignite our compassion and sense of justice, as Kant argued (see Kant [1785] 1993)? Such a response rests on a deeply rooted anthropocentrism that strikes Jains as perverse, as well as mistaken: rationality—the possession of which Kant considered determinative of morality—is for Jains a capacity humans share with other five-sensed beings.

To accept theism—in whatever expression—would be to accept the cosmos as purposefully, meaningfully created. For Jains, such an idea is untenable, if not sinister, given that unrelenting anguish is part and parcel of the cosmos itself.

Not only does the Jain understanding of reality vehemently reject the idea of a creator deity on what might be understood as ethical grounds, its understandings of how the cosmos works makes a creator God superfluous.

The universe (*loka*) is a massive but finite structure in which the whole of existence unfolds. It was never called forth, nor will it ever be destroyed, intentionally or unintentionally, by any divine being. Instead it is a never-ending self-contained and self-regulating system of continents, planets, oceans, and distinct realms of existence. Though it is an ordered structure that operates according to immutable laws, it is hardly worthy of celebration. Jainism⁷ refers to the whole thing as a misfortune; a wretched space of endless affliction for an infinite number of living beings. But to depict Jainism's understanding of the cosmos as singularly scathing would be misleading. Instead it is marked by ambivalence. The cosmos is a structure which furnishes the tools for escape, and from which escape is possible.

Employing Jain logic, Paul Dundas discusses the tradition's rationale for dispensing with a God concept that it is at variance with its distinctive ontology. He explains:

Jainism is an atheist religion inasmuch as it regards it as an illegitimate conclusion that there is a conscious creator who can intervene in or control the affairs of living creatures. Such a being, it is argued, would have to be either without a body, in which case a locus for the intention and effort of creation would be lacking or, alternatively, if embodied, unable to fulfill the necessary requirement of being all-pervading, since in that case the ontological categories would not find any room in the *loka*; alternatively, if non-pervading, such a god would have to be an entity possessing component parts and thus non-eternal. (1992: 77)

Such a hermetically sealed system has no place for a creator deity.

The bulk of Jain philosophical contemplation is reserved for sentient life and karma, the union of which is the cause of all the suffering and pain in the world. Karmic matter is an inert substance wholly alien to sentience but capable of deforming it through contact. In and of itself, it seeks nothing. Like dust that is attracted to dampness, it is drawn involuntarily toward sentient life that is 'moist' with passion.

Karma plays a central role in virtually every aspect of Jain philosophy, and effectively replaces the need for a creator God. Understood within Jainism to be a material reality (with a sticky composition), its association with sentience has given rise to the world. Everything that exists—trees,

oceans, animals, atmosphere, insects, human beings, microscopic, and even invisible beings—are all products of the union of sentience and karma. And each new action that we perform produces more karma, which in turn shapes our future, including our future births in the cycle of *samsara*. Although the lamentable union between karma and sentience is ‘beginning-less’, the situation is not utterly hopeless because there are established ways to tear it asunder. Indeed, the entire Jain *dharma* (path) rests upon the optimistic claim that escape is possible for those who strive. In this context, escape is understood as freedom from karma, a state in which the *jiva* is restored from contamination, and thereby able to enjoy its intrinsic bliss, energy, and omniscience. Attaining this state of salvation (called *moksha*) depends both on an understanding of the reality of spiritual bondage and, resultantly, on a resolve to break free of it.

The mechanisms of karmic bondage and the process of escape constitute the overwhelming focus of Jain philosophy and ascetic discipline. The entire cosmic quandary behind our karmic bondage turns on seven fundamental truths, namely the (1) existence of sentient beings, (2) the existence of karmic matter, (3) of the inflow of karmic particles, (4) the binding of karmic particles, (5) the possibility of stopping the inflow of karma, (6) the falling away of karma, and (7) the possibility of final liberation from karmic bondage (Tattvarthasutra 1994: 6).

Jainism is the path of living in the awareness of these harsh realities.⁸ Every action performed—whether by thought, spoken, or enacted—leads to future-shaping karmic inflow. Harm to any living being produces karma. Certainly, good action draws in good karma, which then bears its fruit in good fortune and bad action draws in bad karma (leading to misfortune). But all karma must eventually be purified for liberation to be attained.

THE GOD-SATURATED ATHEISM OF JAINISM

As we have seen, Jainism treats the world as something from which we must ultimately escape, and dismisses as ludicrous the idea of a divine intentionality behind the ubiquitous suffering inherent in it. Interestingly, the same unwillingness to see human life as singular and exceptional is what underpins Jainism’s easy acceptance of a cosmos animated with beings far more varied than anything the biological sciences have thus far catalogued. Jains understand themselves to be participants in a world that contains beings knowable and unknowable, visible and invisible. All living beings belong to one of four general states of existence or ‘birth categories’, called *gatis*. These *gatis*, symbolized by the four squares of the swastika, are humans (*manushya*), celestial beings (*deva*), hell beings (*naraki*), and the composite category of animals, plants, insects and microorganisms (grouped together as *tiryanca*).

Of importance is the *devagati*; the birth category comprising celestial beings or gods (*deva* or *devata*). Jainism’s rejection of a transcosmic God—that is, a God who stands above or outside of the cosmos,⁹ clearly tells us nothing about the state of affairs within the cosmos: we live in a world filled with *devas*. Gods, understood as five sensed beings endowed with rationality, are part of the animate landscape. I must re-emphasize here that Jainism’s refusal to treat human life as the only form of conscious, rational life underpins both its rejection of a transcosmic God and its presumption of a universe literally filled with conscious beings, some of whom are gods. Beings of the *devagati* are not the only beings designated as ‘god’. Indeed, the term ‘god’ (or *deva*, *devata*, *bhagwan*) is broadly deployed in Jainism to denote a variety of beings and phenomena. In what follows, I will outline its main references in Jainism, and highlight the important differences in its understandings.

‘God’ is used in at least three distinct ways: (1) to denote one of the beings whose birth category is

the *devagati* (god species); (2) to designate the *jiva*, the eternal quality of the Self that seeks liberation from *samsara*, (3) as an honorific term designating worship-worthy beings, most perfectly represented by the Jina. Each of these three types is honoured differently.

DEVAGATI DEVAS

As mentioned above, deva can refer to a type of being, or ‘species’ (*gati*), into which a soul in *samsara* can incarnate. In this understanding, a *deva* is a being of the *devagati*, a luminous and powerful entity,¹⁰ but one who is still within the jaws of *samsara*. There are four main types of devas (namely: mansion-dwelling, forest, luminous, empyrean), and an abundance of sub-categories. According to Jain cosmography, most devas reside in realms above our world, though some are free to move between realms, and can interact with us here. Of these, male and female protector deities (*yaksha* and *yakshi*, respectively) play a role of considerable importance in Jainism (as they do in Hinduism and Buddhism). Long associated with natural settings, they may be the oldest cult entities in the subcontinent. Certainly, their temple images are the most ancient yet recovered.

Yakshas and *yakshis* are sometimes referred to as ‘inferior’¹¹ gods because they dwell within the human realm and because they are often caught up in worldly matters. With time, their worship became fully integrated into Jain religious practice, as worldly beings independent of, though sympathetic to, Jainism’s world-renouncing ideals. By the fifth century CE, for instance, it became customary for Jina temple statues to be carved with these guardian deities flanking their sides (*yaksha* to the right of the Jina; *yakshi* to the left). Each of the twenty-four Jinas soon became associated with a distinctive pair of such deities. Of course, the Jinas, in a state of *moksha*, are completely outside of worldly struggles, and have absolutely no need for protection. But that doesn’t prevent the guardian deities from remaining ‘by their side’ (metaphorically and literally, in their artistic representation). The loyalty of the guardian deities appears eternal, and harks back to the pre-enlightened period in the lives of the Jinas. They adore the Jina they ‘guard’ and, it is said, look favourably upon his devotees,¹² often taking sympathy upon them. Even though their worldly character has always been their predominant feature, their tacit endorsement of the world-renouncing path was necessary for them to be fully incorporated into the Jain tradition.

In some cases, the popularity of the *devas* parallels, if not exceeds, that of the Jinas. The *yakshi* Padmavati is a case in point. Her compassion and willingness to intercede in the lives of devotees is legendary, and has given rise to her own vibrant cult following. Temples have been erected in her name where she is not venerated as a helper-deity merely, but as the main locus of devotion. That *devas* such as Padmavati willingly assist us is fortunate, but not surprising. The expression of compassion (*karuna*) is considered a fundamental feature of conscious life, and is enshrined in Jainism’s celebrated Sanskrit axiom: ‘*Parasparopagraho jivanam*’ (Tattvarthasutra 5:21), which glosses as: ‘Souls render service to one another’.

Within a renunciatory discourse, this sutra is understood to mean the absence of harm. The greatest service we can do for all other beings is to cause them no harm; to let them live without fear. But the axiom is also the basis for Jains’s well-known charitable activities and acts of kindness, to humans and nonhumans alike. It also informs the practice of deva worship as they too are believed to feel the tug of empathy and desire to help others. Powerful incarnations, *devas* can be asked to intercede on our behalf, and can be compared to worldly monarchs who are empowered to bestow favours upon their subjects. And like kings, *devas* help out in strictly worldly affairs.

Jain *devagati* devas play an important role in Jain religious life for the support they provide to

devotees. And as loyal champions of the Jina, they can be seen to endorse the renouncer path. But they are first and foremost worldly beings and therefore are approached for help in worldly matters (e.g., health, business, etc.). *Devas* are not in a position to help attain Jainism's ultimate goal, *moksha*: that is something, Jains insist, we must do alone. Indeed, as *devas*, they are less capable than humans to work toward spiritual release; *moksha* is possible only from the human form. Deva veneration is certainly not a required component of religious life, and many Jains dispense with it altogether, focusing on the ultimate goal of *moksha*, and on the God that is the Self, and on the God that shows the path.

DIVIDED SELVES, DEFILED GODS

The terms 'God' (*bhagwan*) and 'soul' (*jiva*) are used interchangeably to denote the eternal element of the self. All living beings possess this eternal element which, in its natural state, unsullied by karma, is luminous, rational, omniscient, full of energy and bliss. Therefore, on one level, the cosmos can be understood to be an assembly of gods, each one defiled to varying degrees. Significantly, most have no awareness of their innate godliness.

The experience of dualism or of 'dividedness'—of being a non-material self as distinct from possessing a material body—is, for Jainism, the crucial first step to self-awareness, without which spiritual progress is utterly impossible. The awareness is referred to as *samyak darshana* (spiritual awakening). Animals, by and large, lack this although there are some accounts of animals having attained it. Spiritual awakening remains elusive to the vast majority of life forms, as these exist in ignorance of their condition. Though such beings possess a distinct, eternal soul (*jiva*), it is buried within their karma-laden bodies, so they are unaware of it. Yet, for a human being to lack the experience of a soul-body distinction is tragic, since it is from the human incarnation alone that spiritual progress can be achieved.

Jainism believes that our eternal element (*jiva*) transcends the transient clutter of worldly existence as it travels from one birth to the next, existing as a detached witness to the activities of worldly life. The *jiva* inhabits an organic form only because it is not yet free, and death does nothing to alleviate this. At the moment of the body's physical death, the *jiva* immediately takes rebirth, propelled forth by the karmic baggage it still carries to create a new incarnation. This karmic residue determines the *jiva*'s next incarnation (whether human, animal, *deva*, etc.). Godliness, therefore, is something that we are already in possession of. But, like luminous diamonds buried deep within the earth's mantle, the *jiva* remains buried beneath layers of karmic crust.

To fully realize our god natures, we need to purge every remaining remnant of karmic matter that clings so tenaciously to our *jiva*. To do so requires tremendous efforts of purification through fasting, meditation, and other austerities that effectively 'burn off' the karmic residue, a process Jains call *nirjara*. In addition, supreme vigilance in our actions, words, and thoughts is required so as to prevent new karma from forming, called *bandha*. Perhaps it is obvious that although a god, the *jiva*, is not the recipient of devotion or prayer. It is better honoured through ascetic practices aimed at removing the karmic grime blocking the *jiva*'s innate luminosity. All Jain ascetic acts (fasting, walking barefoot, observing periods of silence, meditating, etc.) have this as their end.

Of all life forms, we humans suffer the most existential agony as we have the greatest capacity to be aware of our captivity. We struggle in worldly existence as defiled gods, yearning for release. Indeed, the spiritual awakening (*samyak darshana*) mentioned above is fundamentally a painful realization of being trapped and the path to eventual release amounts to a via dolorosa. But our angst and suffering are not without meaning; they act as our great agent provocateur, making us uneasy and restless in the

world, stimulating us to seek alleviation. Jains assert that the suffering of ‘dividedness’, though painful, can be overcome. It is within our capacity to succeed and attain the exalted state of wholeness, as the example of the Jinas has shown. By taking the practical steps necessary to activate our release, we can become, not ‘like’ gods, but gods indeed: eternal, blissful, omniscient, and free.

JINA AS DEVA

One who is omniscient, who has conquered the passions and other defects and who tells what reality is, such a person is a god, an arhat, a supreme lord (Hemacandra; cited in Zydenbos 2000: 80).

Jainism’s renowned eleventh century philosopher, Hemacandra, defines ‘god’ in Olympian terms: as an individual who has achieved the extraordinary. That god is an ‘achieved status’—not an ascribed one—is vital to understanding Jain conceptions of the divine. god in Jainism is decidedly not a superior Wholly Other, whose nature is mysterious to us, provoking in us awe and submission. Though heroic for having persisted where most falter, god is fundamentally like us, having had to confront the same struggles we do and, by virtue of his achievement, pointing the way to our own possible deification.

The central prayer in Jainism, called the Namaskar Mantra, singles out five beings called *parameshtis* (supreme personalities or gods) as especially deserving of emulation and praise. It is Jainism’s most esteemed hymn, invoked in song, silent repetition (*japa*), and meditation.

I bow before the worthy ones (the Jina);
I bow before the perfected beings (*siddhas*), those who have attained *Moksha*
I bow before the (mendicant) leaders (*acharya*) of the Jain order;
I bow before the (mendicant) preceptors (*upadhyaya*)
I bow before all (the Jain) mendicants (*sadhu*) in the world.

The mantra honours as ‘gods’ those who, through their own efforts, have reached the highest level of spiritual development, but special veneration is reserved for the Jina, the first to be invoked in the mantra. ‘Jina’ is a human being who has gained freedom from the shackles of *samsara*, and who has taught the path of release to others. Conquerors of worldly existence, Jinas are also called ‘Tirthankaras’, which translates as those who create a ford or river crossing, in acknowledgment of their salvific acts. But equally commonly, they are simply, affectionately, and with devotion, called Bhagwan.

Devotion in Jainism presents us with a conundrum: the tradition unequivocally denies the possibility of grace or the existence of a creator God, and defines itself as a path of self-effort (*shramana*). As discussed above, Jainism identifies the soul’s entanglement in matter as the most fundamental existential problem (a problem shared by all beings), and the religious path is conceived of as a dis-entangling; a deliberate, difficult and gradual disengagement from the sources of bondage, a process that takes many lifetimes and presents nearly insurmountable challenges. Jains conceive of this path as a necessarily solitary one, undertaken alone in the absence of an omnipresent benevolent God. And yet, despite all of this, prayer, ritual, and other devotional structures remain central features of Jain religious life. In particular, Jains worship as Bhagwan those human beings who have attained liberation and transmitted the true *dharma* for the benefit of all, though the Jinas are neither involved with our lives, nor concerned in any way with them. In his book entitled, *Absent Lord*, Lawrence Babb puts it this way: ‘From the standpoint of transactional logic, the Tirthankara is absent. He responds to

no prayers or petitions, and dispenses no saving grace' (1996: 92). The question that naturally follows (arising for Babb, as much as it does for us), is: 'What does it mean to worship beings that one believes are completely indifferent to, and entirely beyond the reach, of any form of worship whatsoever?' (ibid.: 1). This question gets at the heart of Jain religiosity and forces us to expand our conventional understandings of what we mean by devotion, God, theism, and atheism.

It should be mentioned that the some influential minoritarian sects—e.g., the Sthankavasi (originating in the fifteenth century) and Terapanthi (eighteenth century)—reject the material worship of the Jinas (or, for that matter, any beings) on the grounds that their veneration (due to emotional attachment) and physical construction (digging earth, etc., thereby killing one-sensed beings) constitute violence. Meditation and prayer are deemed more appropriate means of worship. Despite these important distinctions within the tradition (and many more besides), the worship-worthiness of the Jinas remains the steadfast, indisputable core of Jain religious life.

Focused for the most part on the Jina figure, Jain *bhakti* (devotionalism) is a well-established and vibrant dimension of Jainism, and remains at the centre of Jain life. Recitations of poignant poetry, heartfelt solitary prayer, as well as exuberant rituals replete with music, dance, and singing—all praising the Jina—are regular features of Jain religiosity. And yet, despite all this, the Jinas are utterly removed from samsaric concerns and do not interfere in the lives of worldly beings. That they remain utterly indifferent to the lively (and often costly) devotional practices centred on them, should give us pause. How are we to understand this? Why call as 'god' a being who is simply a tiny part of the cosmos, and makes no claims to being its creator? Why pray to one who will never respond? An explanation given in response to such questions, often offered by Jains themselves, identifies Jina worship as a rationalized activity that fosters detachment, focuses the mind, and reminds the practitioner of his or her own divine potential. For instance, Babb describes how during *puja*, offerings are understood not as gifts given to the Jinas, but as gifts given up in emulation of them, serving as pedagogical models for ideal practice (1996: 174). This explanation certainly contributes to an understanding of the Jain ritual and devotional apparatus, as it speaks directly to the Jain valorization of the rational detached self, as well as of the esteemed path of personal effort.

Nevertheless, such an intellectualist interpretation is hard to reconcile with the poignancy of the poetry, the exuberance of the music, and the ardency of the praise dedicated to the Jinas in much of daily Jain life. It appears too conceptually finessed to be the genuine source of what is fervent, spirited devotion. 'Ethical mimesis'¹³ or emulating the Jina's life as the proper way to venerate the Jina, is certainly a well-established discipline within Jainism, but it is also a conceptual 'working over' or 'containing' of the strong emotional connections that give rise to worship in the first place.

This explanation fails precisely for the same reason the others fail: it seeks too earnestly to provide a rational response to what is fundamentally a non-rational impetus. If we take Jain devotion seriously, we are forced to consider 'god' and 'reverence' and 'prayer' as terms that relate to experiences that stand prior to conceptualization, and that emerge directly from the experience of living in a meaningful world. In the final section, I shall explore the phenomenology of prayer as reflective of a life lived meaningfully.

THE MEANINGFUL COSMOS

Jain devotional practices emerge from something more fundamental than ethical mimesis could ever inspire. Instead, Jain devotion may be seen to express a powerful embodied response to the experience of a meaningful, independent, transpersonal cosmos (*lokapurush*), encapsulated in the

phenomenon of the Jina. Although the world for Jains is not understood as having been purposefully created, neither is it arbitrary or purposeless. Perceived as the site of wretched bondage that must be transcended, the material world can never be the source of the sublime or ‘numinous’. Nevertheless it summons a response.

From the early aphoristic teachings of Mahavira on the nature of existence and on the suffering of life in *samsara*, Jain philosophers spun elaborate teachings about the structure of the cosmos and the nature of reality, producing an impenetrably intricate system. A glimpse will suffice to get a sense of its complexity:

The structure of the cosmos resembles an hourglass topped by a pyramid, and is often represented by a human being standing with hands on hips, and legs slightly apart. The middle realm, the belly of the man, is comprised of islands and oceans in concentric circles. The enormous and perfectly round innermost island is called Jambu ('apple'), which comprises seven continents (including what we understand to be our own world) and six jewel encrusted mountains. Atop the mountains are deep lakes, each supporting an enormous lotus flower, which contains palaces where nymphs reside (e.g., Fortune [*sri*], Modesty, [*hri*], Patience [*dhrti*] etc). Human beings reside in all seven continents, and subject to the varying conditions of each.

In our continent (Bharata), we are subject to vast time cycles affecting our longevity, wellbeing, and ability to attain *moksha*. The commentator of the *Tattvarthasutra* explains:

The cycles of prosperity and suffering peculiar to Bharata and Airavata [another continent] affect the lifespan, height (number of spinal joints), pleasures and pains, morality, spirituality, and so on, of the human inhabitants of these continents. In the descending half of the cycle, a state of supreme plenty gradually dwindles to a state of extreme privation.¹⁴ (1994: 81)

Infernal beings suffer in the region below the middle realm, in one of seven descending ‘nightmarish’ lands. These lands possess distinctive colours, from gem-hued (first land) to pitch dark (seventh land). Of the beings who dwell in these lands, the *Tattvarthasutra* states:

The infernal beings in those lands are constantly subject to increasingly inauspicious colouring, poor metabolism, ugly bodies, horrible experiences and awful shapes, all of which multiply their miseries (1994: 70–1)

The many celestial lands that exist above the middle realm are the abodes of *devas*, of which there are four major types, each with distinctive colourings and traits. For instance, the constellations exist in the celestial realms, therefore planets are understood to be luminous celestial beings who move around Mount Meru. Many sub-groups exist within type, but as a general category, they pass their time in leisure.

Jainism’s cosmological elaborations are obviously far beyond the domain of empirical science, and cannot easily be made to fit within it (though some do indeed try—see, e.g., Gelra 2002). Nevertheless it is a rational system: the cosmological structure, the heights and widths of its many continents, oceans, and mountains have all been worked out with great mathematical precision, and remain internally coherent. Some Jains hold these descriptions to be an accurate and literal description of the cosmos, revealed to us by the Jinas in the process of their attainment of omniscience. But very few Jains are well versed in this cosmology; for most, this arcane knowledge exists in reserve, waiting to be drawn upon during the enactment of a ritual or celebration of a festival. Jains are not called upon to assent to its truth status in the way, for instance, Christians are when they recite the Nicene creed. Jain cosmology describes our worldly circumstances, expressing in mythic terms what Jains hold to be true: namely that the path to *moksha* is a treacherous but rewarding one.

It would be a mistake to consider this explanation as a form of apologetics; Jainism itself is adamant about distinguishing the conceptual (philosophy, ideology, rationality) from lived experience, always prioritizing the latter. Jains have devoted considerable attention to the field of

epistemology, and it has always played a subservient role to being. The late Dr Nathal Tatia, esteemed translator of Umasvati's *Tattvarthasutra*, writes:

Within Jainism, the insistence on life is superior to the insistence on truth because the nature of truth varies from thinker to thinker but life is an invariable constant that is dear to all. (1994: xxi)

Not only does Jainism prioritize lived experience ('life') over conceptualizations of it ('truth'), Jainism considers our capacity for accessing truth to be fairly modest. It insists (in a language that anticipates Kant) that living beings do not have access to reality, only to phenomena that present themselves to our embodied consciousness (Saman Suttam 1993: 257). Existence is, therefore, in large measure unconscious because the foundation of existence cannot be fully reflected upon and therefore can never be fully aware of itself. Given this, our knowledge of the world can only ever be partial. Jains call this '*anekantavada*', a central doctrine of Jain epistemology, and an important indigenous reflection on the limits of rationalism. *Anekantavada* literally translates as 'the doctrine of not-one-sidedness', and glosses as 'pluralist thought'. It asserts that worldly beings—those still in *samsara*—can only ever grasp 'one side' of the phenomenon we are exploring. Convincing ourselves otherwise is obduracy, which for Jains, is a form of violence.¹⁶

The questions of truth, rationality and empiricism are important ones today in debates over religion. For many critics, religion is retrograde and dangerous precisely because it undermines—or sidesteps—rational, materialist science with its untestable truth claims.

While Jainism does consider itself to be a rational, empirically grounded tradition, it is cautious about establishing truth claims on the basis of reason alone. It warns that such knowledge is insufficient for explaining lived experience as it marginalizes the vital non-rational, non-discursive elements of existence. The very quest for truth (or justice, or nonviolence) is a nonmaterial, transcendent, or spiritual, longing; for Jains, it is the voice of the *jiva* in a state of bondage. Only through strife does the soul come to know itself.

Jainism's valorization of 'life over truth' has meant that its myriad conceptualizations (its elaborate system of reflections on the nature of existence) do not eclipse the knowledge that is immanent in experience itself, that is, the basic felt impulse to respond devotionally to the world. Indeed, these conceptualizations possess latent value; it is only by experiencing life in a relational way—as a being-with—that Jainism's seemingly arcane cosmological elaborations come to be vitalized and come to acquire empirical relevance.

CONCLUSION

Oh the conqueror of all attachments: Oh, the world teacher: Oh the blessed one: through your grace may I develop detachment to the mundane world, continue to follow the path of Salvation and attain fulfillment. (Saman Suttam 22; 1993: 9)¹⁷

Jainism is an intriguing tradition in part because its devotional apparatus thrives in the absence of any transactional relationship with a God. As is widely observed, Jains do not worship Jinas in order to please them, nor with the hope of getting something from the gods in return. Nevertheless, Jains do worship. For the critics of religion, removing God (or some form of transactional entity) from the equation should effectively remove the *raison d'être* for religiosity itself. And yet, of course, it doesn't: Jains fervently worship the Jinas.

Our discussion began by describing a Jain temple. I wrote that to enter the temple is to be

confronted by a multi-sensory aesthetic that communicates experientially that one has entered a space that is exceptional. The entire Jain cosmos, in its dizzying complexity, is painstakingly represented on the carved walls of the temple—the cascading heaven and hells and planetary systems. Long before one seeks after the specific ‘meaning’ of a particular idol (*murti*) or a ritual being fervently performed, one already knows that one is inhabiting a space of meaningfulness. What it all ‘means’ conceptually is secondary. That it *means* something (for Jains) is beyond doubt; the confrontation with the meaningful is unavoidable. Perhaps an analogy can be made between the temple and the religious life: neither has meaning other than that which can be discovered through engagement and experience. The meaning of existence is not theoretical or rational, it is experiential.

So why, for a tradition without the concept of a creator God and grace, do Jain temples exist? To whom do Jains pray? I have approached these questions by considering the devotional structures at work in Jainism as primarily expressions of life lived responsively to an independent realm of meaning. Devotion is an intentional activity, directed towards or in response to a world that puts claims upon us.¹⁸

The Jain example suggests that devotional life in no sense necessitates the ontological existence of an entity who creates, destroys and cares for us. When a cognitive relationship to the world reigns, experience is objectified in reflection before being validated, and when no rationale is found, its validity is undermined. Because in Jainism, due to its embodied epistemology (‘life over truth’), the cognitive relationship to the world does not eclipse experience, so that we see life lived in response is not so much about belief systems or other rationalizations, but is a way of inhabiting a prior-given domain of meaning.

The Jinas in temples, at the centre of devotion, condense and encapsulate the Jain dharma; their life narratives, well known to Jains, recount the hardships of embodied existence, with which all who stand before them can relate. But they also represent serenity and wellbeing in the midst of hardship, and the eventual triumph over strife, to which all can aspire. The Jinas thus provide the meaningful horizon, the link, as it were, that keeps the earth chained to the sun,¹⁹ and for which expressions of devotion and prayer naturally arise. Devotion then, emerges not from gratitude to a supreme creator, but from the felt sense that one is being called to respond to a world that, though full of potentially treacherous obstacles, invites participation.

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CHAPTER 24

HINDUISM

JESSICA FRAZIER

The mass of men, in accordance with the manuals of politics and enjoyment, considering wealth and pleasure the only goals of humanity, and denying the existence of any object belonging to a future world, are found to follow only the doctrine of the atheist school.

—*Sarvadarśana Saṅgraha*, Madhava (1978: 2)

UNRAVELLING GLOBAL ‘ATHEISMS’

WHERE Western debates about the existence of God have historically been bitter and often violent, Hinduism has a thriving tradition of atheism that spans more than 2000 years and a range of different forms.¹ Indeed, the plurality of Hindu atheisms, each emphasizing a different metaphysics and a different focus for protest, prompts us to ask whether the term should imply ‘anti-theism’, a rejection only of theism, the belief in *personal forms of divinity* (as its name suggests), or whether it is more broadly opposed to all notions of a *supernatural reality* beyond the natural order? Or by contrast with both, is ‘atheism’ essentially a term of *sociological critique*, opposed to the moral, social, and institutional authority that religions often possess? Can there be a ‘*religious atheism*’ in that it remains compatible with a religious way of life that draws on ritual, cosmology, narrative, religious specialists and affective arts? Or does an authentic atheism demand a value-neutral secular culture? Western uses of the term ‘atheism’ tends to conflate a range of concerns about traditional religion under a single title, but in order to assess the range of Indian alternatives to theism, one must become more precise about the nature of atheism itself.

THE EARLY ATHEIST CULTURE OF INDIA

The history of Hindu atheism covers a wide chronological span, from the materialist and non-theistic classical schools of the early centuries bce and ce, to the Marxist atheisms of modern Kerala and Bengal, and the secular rationalism of contemporary figures such as Amartya Sen. This long life-span reminds us that the Indian intellectual landscape enabled atheist positions to maintain an organic place *within* Indian theological discourse. In India atheism was not one polemically defined counter-movement that persevered despite the predominance of believers; rather it was a whole culture flourishing in the Indian religious world, exploring a nuanced range of meaningful ways of ‘not-believing’.

The early history of India presents a picture of both theistic and non-theistic cultures, interweaving from an early period into diverse trends.

On the one hand there were at least two sources of theistic thought: archaeological evidence suggests that from the prehistoric period the regions of the continent were filled with localized indigenous belief in spirits and deities. Not unlike the kind of spirit-filled world that we still see in Japanese Shinto, Indian animism entailed belief in spiritual beings, who probably functioned in some cases as the sort of protective spirits that we see in village Hinduism today (e.g., *grama* and *kula* deities) and in the Indus Valley civilization may have been symbols of fertility' (Thapar 1966: 43), 'regeneration' (Fairservis 1971: 19), as well as martial figures and tree spirits (Parpola 1994: 248–71). However, these beliefs did not necessarily entail the religious responsibilities and relationships that we find in the Abrahamic conceptions of God; such beings might or might not be creators, benefactors, desirous of worship, or indeed, have any interest in human destiny at all.

This came to be complemented by a smaller pantheon of deities shared throughout the subcontinent, showing considerable continuity with the polytheistic religions of the Mediterranean and Ancient Near East. In this Sanskritic theism found in the *Vedas*, the gods were powerful, characterized by great deeds and a capacity to bestow aid. They could be brought into relation with humans through ritual-exchanges and they were decidedly desirous of worship. Thus they looked far more similar to the theistic religions of the West. Yet they retained elements of the older indigenous animistic tradition, and in many cases seemed little more than a 'theomorphisation of the major elements of nature' (Mallory 1989: 129), or a totemic representation of Indic social partitions (Dumezil [1977] 1986).

But this was by no means the whole story of Indian religion. There were also indigenous centres of *non-theistic* thought possibly focused in the culture of the eastern Gangetic plain, around the territory of Greater Magadha, a kingdom that flourished in the middle of the first millennium BCE (see Bronkhorst 2007). Peoples in this area seem to have favoured a philosophy of reincarnation, a 'gnostic soteriology' and an ascetic 'counter-culture' (Gombrich 1988: 44, 57), that looked at the Vedic culture 'with the critical eye of someone who had not been brought up to take its presuppositions for granted' (Gombrich 1988: 49). Relatively coherent schools arose from non-theistic reflection concerning metaphysical, epistemological and moral topics. *Sāṃkhya* posited a dualistic metaphysics of worldly forms and pure consciousness, *Vaiśeṣika* pursued an atomistic metaphysical model of reality, Jainism emphasized the liberation of the pure conscious soul from the clutches of embodied life and rebirth, the Buddhists espoused an essentially atheistic disinterest in deities or an eternal 'soul'. Most such schools believed in the *existence* of personal deities, but simply did not believe them to be particularly important; more fundamental ontological beliefs took precedence.

These cultures were paralleled by a fourth strand of influence that later flourishes in 'tantric' texts. This complex of beliefs and practices probably emerged from shamanic, yogic and other sources of thought, which were spread throughout South and South-East Asia, utilizing a range of techniques for 'divinizing' places, objects, and persons. These practices of possession, energization, and magic were harnessed to theistic and non-theistic cultures alike: a divinized object might make theistic rituals more effective, or alternatively in a secular context, a divinized person might make a particularly effective adviser for the king— influencing people, seeing into the future, and affecting the outcomes of battles, for instance. Buddhist and Jain, as well as Hindu traditions developed 'tantric' elements and many of the goals prescribed for tantric and yogic practices—such as seeing through walls, becoming invisible, and flying—were thoroughly un-'religious'. Such practices introduced a dimension of Hindu religion that cut right across the 'theism'- 'atheism' divide.

Thus, just as early thought in the West included Platonic and Aristotelian philosophy, gnostic traditions, stoicism and a plethora of pre-Socratic metaphysics, so too India's intellectual culture contained a range of non-theistic elements that would come to compete with, complement, or pervade

popular theism. Contemporary sources suggest that atheistic ideas were a significant part of Indian society, representing not a marginal position, but rather a popular view. In the early centuries BCE the *Bhagavad Gītā* refers to a prominent contemporary world-view that denies the existence of ‘the Lord’ and recommends only pleasure, perhaps referring to an as-yet unsystematized atheist doctrine. The *Bhagavad Gītā* criticizes worldly sceptics in just the tone a modern church might use to bemoan its waning popularity, linking disbelief with immoral conduct: it speaks of those of an ‘ungodly’ (*asurika*) nature and depicts them as believing that ‘the universe is without truth, without foundation, without the Lord (*an-īśvara*), without anything beyond, with pleasure (*kāma*) for its goal; what else?’ (*Bhagavad Gītā* 16.8). The *Gītā*, which is one of the first and most explicitly monotheistic Hindu texts, claims that such a ‘lack of foundation’ arises from small intellect, and leads to fierce deeds and the destruction of the world, for people who believe such things do not know what to do and what not to do (*Bhagavad Gītā* 16.7-9).

Buddhist and Jain texts similarly report the existence of contemporary sceptics about the soul. The *Samannaphala Sutta* of the *Dīghanikāya* cites a character called Ajita Kesakambali who targets various facets of contemporary religion:

... there is nothing bestowed, offered in sacrifice, there is no fruit or result of good or bad deeds, there is not this world or the next... there are in the world no ascetics or brahmins who have attained, who have perfectly practised, and who proclaim this world and the next, having realized them by their own super-knowledge. This human being is composed of the four great elements, and when one dies the earth part reverts to earth, the fire part to fire, the air part to air, and the faculties pass away into space... the talk of those who preach a doctrine of survival is vain and false. Fools and wise, at the breaking up of the body, are destroyed and perish, they do not exist after death. (quoted from Bronkhorst 2007: 145).²

A slightly more specific reference is found in the epic tale of the *Ramayana*, in which Rama, the archetype of the good Hindu king, is tempted to respond to bereavement with a despairing materialistic dispassion. His tempter is a character called Javali who is described as a *nāstika* or sceptic, literally someone of the ‘there is not...’ perspective. He counsels Rama to:

Indulge in priceless royal pleasures and enjoy yourself... Daśaratha was nobody to you, and you were nobody to him. The King was just one person, you were another so do as I am urging... Accept the idea once and for all, high-minded prince, that there exists no world to come. Address yourself to what can be perceived and turn your back on what cannot. (*Ramayana* 2005: 2.109)

By the medieval period the general scepticism seems to have coalesced into a coherent philosophy. This atheist perspective appears to have flourished through its dialogues with Hindu, Buddhist and Jain thought, and in tandem with the growth of secular arts and sciences in the increasingly cosmopolitan urban culture of India’s kingdoms and empires.

THE ATHEIST SCHOOL: LOKĀYATAS OR ‘WORLDLY ONES’

In its most unambiguous form, atheism developed as a distinct and well-formed philosophical school of thought referred to from the sixth century BCE at least into the medieval periods, known as the Lokāyatas or ‘worldly ones’, which propounded the material nature of the world and the non-existence of the soul. As there is no further or higher reality from which to take our ethical cue, happiness (understood in terms of pleasure—*kāma*—the fulfilment of our desires) in this world is the only self-evident good, to which our efforts should be directed.

The thinkers who espoused these views seem to have adopted a fluid identity as members of a Lokāyata ‘movement’ participating in the shared epistemological discourses of the times. The

Lokayata doctrine was set out in a text called the *Bārhaspatya-Sūtras* of which no complete version now remains. As far as we know, the Lokāyatas were not persecuted, but they were certainly not popular with their Hindu opponents—no significant writings survive although scholars have sought to reconstruct their views by gleaning direct citations from secondary works.³ However there are relatively few such mentions and indeed, it is possible that the destruction of their writings was the subtle form that persecution took.

The *Sarvadarśana Saṃgraha* of Mādhava—a compendium of medieval schools of thought—is one of the main sources for knowledge of their views. It writes of the Lokāyatas, also known as the Carvakas, that:

The mass of men, in accordance with the manuals of politics and enjoyment, considering wealth and desire the only goals of humanity, and denying the existence of any object belonging to a future world, are found to follow only the doctrine of the Carvakas. (Madhava 1978: 2)

Mādhava, himself a believer that the divine takes an unqualifiedly abstract form, goes on to describe the Lokāyatas in strictly materialist terms as believing that the elements of air, earth, etc. are the sole constituents of reality, from which all things (including consciousness) are ultimately derived. This view is firmly grounded in a firmly empirical epistemological starting point: Lokāyatas are Humean empiricists who believe that perception is the only *pramaṇa*, or valid source of knowledge, and inference—generalizations about causal connections—is invalid.

From an ethical perspective, the Lokāyatas are characterized by Mādhava as hedonists: ‘While life remains let a man live happily; let him eat butter, though he falls into debt’ (Madhava 1978: 14). Pleasures are to be pursued despite any pain which may accompany them, a view which refers to the Buddhist concern with avoiding the pains of life. Instead the Lokāyatas counsel us to accept the necessary risk associated with pleasure, rather than rejecting both in pursuit of a sort of anaesthetized stoic equanimity. ‘If anyone were so timid as to give up a visible pleasure, he would indeed be as foolish as a beast’ (ibid.: 4). One can infer from this that the Lokāyatas are, at least in part, reacting to next-worldly traditions of asceticism, rather than primarily to the belief in deities.

In the *Sarvadarśana Saṃgraha* they are further depicted as what we today call epiphenomenalists: nothing exists but the material elements, and thus the phenomenon of consciousness can be attributed merely to a particular bodily combination of these elements which generates thought. This happens naturally, to borrow Mādhava’s analogy, in the way that sugar and fruit produce intoxication. By making this argument against the existence of a self which would survive physical death, the Lokāyatas liberated themselves from the moral narrative of karma and rebirth around which other groups formed a religious lifestyle, preferring a self-evident position that could appeal to all on the basis of their own observations.

The Lokāyatas also posed a critique of schools that claimed normative authority via scripture and divine mandate. Mādhava describes them as ridiculing the sacrifices of the priests, and dismissing the Vedic rituals as merely a source of income, otherwise to be considered a waste of money and energy. They also reject the scriptures as untrue, self-contradictory and tautologous, and leading to contradictions. They deny any future existence, and claim that the closest thing to a supreme being is the earthly monarch. Caste is deemed unimportant, and common rituals such as funerals are deemed ineffective. People are advised to give their religious donations to living people in need.

A particularly extreme form of radical scepticism is seen in the ideas of Jayarashi Bhatta, a thinker of the eighth to ninth centuries CE who went beyond the standard Lokāyata doctrine in rejecting not only inference but even direct perception as a valid source of knowledge (see Franco 1994). In his aptly

named text, *The Lion who Devours all Truths* (*Tattva-Upaplava Sinha*), Jayarashi Bhatta thus espouses a sort of metaphysical agnosticism and ethical stoicism that exceeds the materialist emphasis of most Lokayatas. Yet he shares their conclusion that theism should be rejected, and that pleasures must be the sole goal of life. Subsequently the Lokayatas are described in the *Ain i Akbari* as being still active in 1578 for a symposium of religions held by the Indian Muslim Emperor Akbar. Here they are, tellingly, mentioned not as marginal rebels, but as a popular or ‘peasant’ movement (from the literal translation of Lokayata as ‘worldly’) proposing a common-sense affirmation of pleasures—a kind of utilitarianism rather than a rampant hedonism.

NON-THEISM IN CLASSICAL HINDU THOUGHT

Interestingly, if one interprets atheism as rejection of a primary personal creator deity, then an array of atheist schools can be included *within* the range of Hindu orthodoxies. As with the pre-Socratics, it was found that questions about the origins of the universe, its ontological make-up, or the source of its natural order, could be answered by a range of philosophies. Reality could be explained in terms of a gnostic duality of matter and spirit (*Sāmkhya*),⁴ a semantic structure of sound and meaning (*Mīmāṃsā*), different constituents of consciousness (*Yoga*), various kinds of atom (*Vaiśeṣika*), ontological monism (*Advaita Vedānta*), or other metaphysical models. Theism was by no means central in the earliest texts of most of these schools.

The philosophical school of *Vedānta* had shifted its focus from the individual deities of the Vedic scriptures to *Brahman*—described in the *Brahma-Sutras* as being one, and without distinguishing characteristics. Like the *puruṣa* of the *Sāmkhya* school, this *Brahman* had no individual intelligence with which to watch humanity, and no will by which to direct its actions. Thus the narrative which governs Abrahamic theism—of humanity as created by God and thus intrinsically born into a relationship of love and or obedience, watched and instructed by the divine, and depending upon its judgement for salvation—is wholly lacking in a number of the Hindu theologies which grew out of *Vedānta* and *Sāmkhya*. Importantly, many early schools admitted the existence of gods, while nevertheless considering them a marginal concern, or a ‘lower’ route to liberation. For centuries it was the search for knowledge of reality, and an ameliorative transformation of human life, that drove early Hindu intellectual culture.

Vigorous scepticism often met theistic attempts to offer too-easy answers to the ‘big questions’ of cosmology. One of the most famous expressions of doubt speculates on the limitations of theism for explaining the beginning of the universe:

Then was not non-existent nor existent: there was no realm of air, no sky beyond it.

... Who really knows and who here can say it, whence it was born and whence flows this creation? The Gods are later than this world’s production. Who knows then whence it first came into being? (*Rg Veda*, 10:130)

This late hymn seems to have expressed a growing dissatisfaction with the philosophical viability of answers derived from the tenets of personal theism, which is seen again in late Vedic texts such as the *Kena Upaniṣad* in which the popular personal deities—such as Agni (Fire), Vāyu (wind), and Indra the warrior god—are depicted as arrogant, confused and ultimately exasperated by *Brahman*, the then-new *non-personal* form of divinity.

The mere personal gods, for all their powers and popularity, were clearly depicted as lower than the new conception of divinity. Medieval and early-modern Hindu poets also used their open textured

form of religious discourse to question the propitiatory rituals of popular theism:

Adorning a planted stone with a few flowers as if it were a god,
What is that mantra which you
mutter going round [it]?
When the God is within you, does the
stone ever speak...
Even if the four Vedas you recite till you get tired, Even if you smear the sacred
ash all over the body and babble
foolishly, The Supreme Being will not be there.

(Meenakshi 1996: 111–29)

Hindu texts such as the medieval Purāṇas, which formulated the style of popular theism that still predominates among most Hindus, promoted intensely anthropomorphic notions of deities who fought battles with demons, fell in love, had children, made occasional mistakes, and even learned from each other. But even in these Hindu theistic depictions the gods regularly reveal their underlying transcendent nature—as in the varied mythic accounts in which śiva manifests in the abstract form of the *lingam*—a column of light that stretches infinitely up and down, or Krishna, while incarnated as a human baby, swallows a toy only to accidentally reveal to his anxious mother that he has not only the toy inside of him, but also the whole vast universe. Later the incarnate Krishna disappears from the midst of his devotees so that they will remember to seek him in a less concrete form. The practices of the Tantric school of Kashmiri Śaivism sought to help the Tantric practitioner become ‘*a śiva*’—a sort of double of God, omniscient in his or her own right, and Tantric traditions often practised possession by the deity, welcoming the opportunity to ‘become’ God. Such ideas challenge Western understandings of belief in God as entailing a discrete ‘person’ who is independent from the believer.

HINDU CRITIQUE AND UNORTHODOXY

Of course the majority of Hindus in the regions of India and beyond have accepted a qualified form of theism. But these theisms existed in the context of a critical discourse on personalism, ritual, institutional authority, and ascetic proscriptions. Hindu culture contains no universal centre of orthodoxy, in the sense of a doctrine or institutional authority, that people were, by default, expected to follow. Punishment or direct pressure to conform was extremely rare. Indeed, cultures of debate and pedagogy encouraged thinkers to voice their doubts, and this became part of the dialectical character of almost all Indian cultural discourse; as Amartya Sen puts it, ‘it would be hard to understand the history of Indian culture if scepticism were to be jettisoned... the resilient reach of the tradition of dialectics can be found throughout Indian history’ (Sen 2005: xii).

Distinctly secular texts also existed at the heart of the courtly cultures of the first millennium BCE. Some of these texts pay lip-service to religion, many give little or no mention of religious ideas, and some tacitly ridicule it. While it begins with a salutation to the goddess Sarasvatī, the *Pāñcatantra*’s collection of political fables depicts religious mendicants who jealously amass wealth, control royal courts with their magic tricks, and savour the servitude of their disciples, while corrupt brahmins covet money and their unfaithful wives use their religious devotions as an opportunity for infidelity. Like the later Arabian nights and Canterbury tales, such stories cast a critical eye on the religious authorities of the time and place the practical well-being of everyday people at the centre of their moral priorities.

HINDU ATHEISM IN THE MODERN PERIOD

In the British colonial period, Indian thinkers were compelled to reformulate and reassert their religious identity. Some, such as Gandhi and Vivekananda promoted Hindu concepts of divinity, but others saw the Hindu atheist and rationalist heritage as the most appropriate philosophy for Indian modernity. Colonial education and mission brought access to a wide range of European ideas and in Calcutta, the heart of the Anglo administration and a centre of Bengali middle-class intellectual culture, a lecturer at Hindu College called Derozio introduced Scottish Enlightenment ideas to students (Hatcher 2008: 78). This led to a movement of young Bengalis who held to the motto: 'He who will not reason is a bigot, he who cannot is a fool, and he who does not is a slave'. The trend was taken up by thinkers such as Debendranath and Rabindranath Tagore, who sought each in their own way to craft a distinctively 'Hindu' alternative to Europe's brand of rationalism. Rabindranath Tagore, who was cautious of Gandhi's often explicitly religious discourse (Paranjape 2011), sought to steer a distinctively Asian path towards modernity path in his international lectures. He advocated a contemporary global culture rooted in what he called 'that wholeness of my humanity' supported by man's 'natural surroundings... [and] the fullness of communal life, with all its living associations of beauty and love and social obligations' (Tagore 1917: 50–51), and started Visva Bharati University, an institution that sought to develop different learning methods from that of the Western educational tradition, in Santiniketan on the proceeds of his 1913 Nobel Prize.

In his 1959 book *Lokayata; A Study in Ancient Indian Materialism*, Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya explored a genealogy of Indian modernity that was very different from the intrinsically spiritualized political arena that Gandhi had recently championed in his campaigns. Ambedkar had rejected Vivekananda's claim that Hinduism's destiny was to serve the world as a spiritual conscience choosing instead to convert to Buddhism with its atheist beliefs and rejection of caste. But Chattopadhyaya and other card-carrying Marxist thinkers preferred the full materialism of the Lokayata school. Only in this long-defunct school did they find the freedom necessary for an open and fluid humanism.

Elements of the atheist tradition were also championed by the fiercely Marxist sectors of Indian society; in Kerala, one of the world's first democratically elected communist governments, supporters depicted this not as a 'Europeanization' of their culture, but rather as an authentic continuous development of Indian trends. More recently, Amartya Sen has asked for the reinstatement of the Indian secular heritage, hoping to shatter the Orientalist image of a dogmatically credulous India (Sen 2005). The genealogy of Indian materialism, running from the earliest sceptical notions in Vedic thought, through the classical school of the Lokayatas to modern Marxist thought, has remained as a touchstone of Indian intellectual life. That it exists and flourishes in its own way, relatively unchallenged, is a measure of Hinduism's traditionally comfortable stance with regard to plurality (see also Johannes Quack's 'India').

DEFINING HINDU ATHEISM

Whereas Western forms of atheism have largely targeted the Abrahamic conception of a personal God, the Hindu context positions its critique around a collection of key Indian debates. These issues can be seen as providing an alternative axis of atheism from that of the West.

Critiques of Ascetic Lifestyle

One major focus of anti-religious sentiment was the ascetic life. Just as critics from Feuerbach to Foucault have questioned the anti-body bias of Christianity's frequent emphasis on the spirit, so too texts that are cautious about unreservedly advocating the ascetic lifestyle, such as the *Mahabharata* and the *dharma*, *kāma* or *artha* sutras and *śāstras*, or the writings of the *Lokāyatas* and non-theists, found the celebration of other-worldly dispassion and self-denial to be a questionable ethos for the mass of everyday people. Why deny ourselves the pleasures of this life, critics asked, if it might be the only one. And even if there is a God and a future world, surely this world, as a creation or emanation of the divine, must have some intrinsic value? While the famous monist Śankara held that the phenomenal world of everyday experience is only an illusion, other theologians believed that the world had a divine provenance, and for many this meant that it was worthy of enjoyment. Louis Dumont (Dumont [1966] 1970) argued that it was the life of the renunciant that acted as the main ideological counterpoint to 'worldly' social and human concerns, and over time the ideology of unworldliness became an object both of reverence and of resistance.

Critiques of moral duty

The moral and behavioural norms that were propagated by religious texts were also brought into question. Divine judgement plays little role in Hinduism; thus moral restrictions tended to emanate rather from the rules of *dharma* or duty, the fulfilling or flaunting of which determines one's *karma*. Hindu literature, even within the fold of orthodox texts, often expressed frustrations with *dharma*, demonstrating ways in which it ran counter to human intuitions about justice.

One of the most famous sites of ambivalence about *dharma* is in the *Mahābhārata*, a mainstream Hindu text (c.400BCE–300CE): in this epic drama the virtuous princess Draupadī and the brave prince Arjuna both bemoan the ethical paradoxes to which pursuit of one's apparent duty can lead (e.g., is it a warrior's duty to kill good people? Is it an honourable man's duty to accept a challenge regardless of the consequences for others? Is it a wife's duty to follow her husband even when he makes bad judgements?). In the final two chapters of the epic the righteous King Yudhiṣṭhira does not hesitate to question the rules and judgements laid down by the highest deities, even rejecting the offer of a place in heaven in order to express solidarity with his brothers, his wife, and his loyal dog. Standing at the gateway to heaven, Yudhiṣṭhira condemns the apparent injustice of the rules for entrance which have excluded his immediate family:

I wish not to stay here. I tell you the truth. Ye foremost ones among the deities, what is Heaven to me if I am dissociated from my brothers? That is Heaven where those brothers of mine are. This, in my opinion, is not Heaven... (*Mahābhārata* [Ganguli trans., 2003], Swargohanika Parva, 3)

On finding that his virtuous companions have apparently been consigned to hell for minor misdemeanours, Yudhiṣṭhira gives way to righteous anger:

The royal son of Dharma then gave way to great wrath. Indeed, Yudhiṣṭhira then censured the gods as also Dharma himself. Afflicted by the very foul odour [of hell], he addressed the celestial messenger, saying, 'Tell them that I shall not go back to where they are, but shall stay even here...' (*Mahābhārata* [Ganguli trans., 2003], Swargohanika Parva, 4–5)

The fact that he is subsequently rewarded by the gods for his single-minded pursuit of what seems to him to be right ('You are incapable... of being swerved from your nature or reason' observes

Dharma itself approvingly), shows that in such popular texts as the *Mahābhārata*, religious ethics was forced to make a pact with natural ethics. This was facilitated by the rarity of absolute divine commandments within Hindu scriptures.

Critiques of Personalism

One of the oldest Hindu debates—and surely the one which has received most attention in Western study—is the argument between, on one hand, the ‘personalist’ thinkers in all periods of Hindu thought from the Vedic period onwards, including narrative sources such as the Epics and *Purāṇas*, medieval and early-modern philosophical theologians such as Rāmānuja, Madhva, Vallabha, and the Gosvāmis, and a wide range of devotional poets from the early medieval to the eighteenth century, and, on the other hand, the ‘non-personalist’ strand of Hindu thought which included many sections of the Upanishads, certain non-dualist theologians such as Śāṅkara, and later advocates of a ‘*nirguna*’ or unqualified deity such as the Islam-influenced Sant poets of the early modern period. In this debate it was not the existence of divinity per se that came into question, but rather the specific ideas entailed by *theism*—the idea of a divine person. Rather than focusing on critiques of anthropomorphism (as in David Hume’s *Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*), this argument was conceived more philosophically in terms of whether the divine has particularistic defining qualities (*saguṇa*), or whether it is a wholly abstract reality without any such limiting qualities (*nirguna*). Extensive discussion refracted the debate into a wide range of nuanced positions, ranging from the intensely dualistic qualified personalism of Madhava’s *īśvara* or ‘Lord’, to the radically unqualified abstract *Brahman* of Śāṅkara and other monists.

Critiques of the Soul and the Afterlife

Finally, in a culture that found the idea of deities little more remarkable than that of humans and other creatures, it was the existence of the *soul* that drew prominent philosophical critique from a range of quarters. From the first appearance of texts describing a permanent self behind the ego (*ātman*), an inner vital energy (*prāṇa*), a seed of life (*jīva*), or centre of consciousness (*puruṣa*), already arguments against the existence of such a permanent core of the self were being made. The most famous such arguments came from the Buddhist fold, but other movements also questioned the belief in this unseen eternal reality, and further sought to reject the whole soteriological structure of an salvific after-life for which it provided a foundation.

THE AXIS OF HINDU ATHEISM

The Hindu tradition offers a thought-provoking model of an ‘a-theist’ tradition that became integral to the broader fabric of ‘Hindu’ culture, maintained not as an oppositional ‘other’, but as a valuable corrective to its own thinking. This non-confrontational Hindu axis of atheism reminds us to open up our treatment of these issues beyond the simplifications to which polemic is prone, inviting us to root debates in a more concise hermeneutic of the specific concepts and issues at stake. The debate between theism and atheism need not be hostile, and a range of options can aid reasoning individuals to make sincere and intellectually coherent choices; critique is a valuable corrective in any society that aims to

avoid the perils of fanaticism.

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PART IV

ATHEISM AND THE NATURAL SCIENCES

CHAPTER 25

NATURALISM AND THE SCIENTIFIC METHOD

MICHAEL RUSE

INTRODUCTION

WHAT do we mean by ‘naturalism’? I presume that it is something set off against ‘supernaturalism’, and that this latter refers to a God or gods and their intervention in this world of ours. The physical Jesus rising from the dead on the third day, I take to be a paradigmatic example of a supernatural event. So therefore I take it that naturalism means an approach to, or understanding of, our world that makes no reference to a God or gods. By ‘our world’ I will assume something fairly unproblematic, that would include not just the world of physical experience, but also consciousness and things like mathematics and love and hate and literature and art and so forth. Whatever the Euler identity may be, it is not supernatural, and neither is the *Mona Lisa* or my love of my wife or my sense that it is wrong to be unkind to small children.

It is usual to distinguish between ‘methodological naturalism’ and ‘metaphysical naturalism’, where by the latter we mean a complete denial of the supernatural—including ‘atheism’ as understood in the context of this publication—and by the former a conscious decision to act in inquiry and understanding, especially scientific inquiry and understanding, as if metaphysical naturalism were true. The intention is not to assume that metaphysical naturalism is true, but to act as if it were.

‘Atheists from Monday to Friday’, as one might say. In the light of this distinction, the intent of this paper is to explore methodological naturalism, particularly in the realm of science, and to see if in fact it has implications for metaphysical naturalism. In other words, can one be a methodological naturalist and not necessarily a metaphysical naturalist, or does the one truly imply the other? There is obviously the related question of whether or not one can be a methodological naturalist at all, or if it collapses within itself as contradictory or in some wise untenable.¹

METAPHOR

Let’s start at the beginning with what in fact it means in practice, especially in practice as a scientist, to be a methodological naturalist. No gods, and certainly no gods intervening, so what is the alternative? I presume it is explaining (and doing the rest of science, like predicting) on the basis of unbroken, unguided (blind) law. One assumes that the world runs according to certain regularities and that is it. So if you want to explain why the planets go in ellipses you appeal to Kepler’s laws, and then further back to Newton on the subject. If you want to explain why the pressure of the gas went up when you squashed it down, you appeal to Boyle’s law, and then on to gas theory. If you want to explain why the child of two blue-eyed parents is also blue eyed, you appeal to Mendel’s first law, and more recently you get into the DNA molecule and its structure. If you want to explain why some chap

is gay rather than straight, you point to his hostile father and domineering mother, and beyond that to issues like bisexuality and how it manifests itself in child development; although, obviously as we move towards Freud's theories of sexuality we are in very choppy water and I am certainly not assuming that his ideas are well taken. (In this particular case, at the most charitable, he got things backwards.)

Now notice, we are already going beyond the fact of the regularities, the laws. At least, we are if we are worth our salt as scientists. Sure, Kepler tells us that planets go in ellipses, but we want to know why. And this is where Newton comes in, telling us about the gravitational forces between bodies and the effects that they have. Likewise, with the gases. Boyle's law gives us a formula, but we want to know why. This is where gas theory, with its assumptions about gases being collections of buzzing elastic balls, comes into play. And so the story goes. But what are these bigger pictures, these theories or (as Thomas Kuhn called them) these paradigms? In one sense, they are collections of laws, but in another important and informative sense they are ways of looking at things. They are models or metaphors—thinking of the world 'as if'. Think of gases 'as if' they were collections of buzzing balls, bouncing off the sides of their containers. Think (to take the case of Darwinian evolutionary theory) as if the mechanism of change were some chap constantly selecting for one form rather than another. Think (to take cognitive science) as if the brain were a computer. It isn't, but pretend that it is.

Cutting to the quick, there has been one dominant metaphor—what is known in the lingo as a 'root' metaphor—that has dominated and guided science since the Scientific Revolution in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries (Hall 1983; Dijksterhuis 1961). This is the metaphor of the world as a machine, that is a mechanism. But note a machine without purpose, one that grinds endlessly on, simply following the laws of nature. It is true that the early mechanists were believers, to a person—Christians or deists. But they came to see that God or purposes or (what Aristotelians called) 'final causes' had no role in science. Francis Bacon, the philosopher of the Revolution, joked that final causes are like Vestal Virgins—decorative but sterile. In the words of one of the greatest of the historians of the Revolution, E. J. Dijksterhuis, God became 'a retired engineer' (1961: 40).

So, we see first that physics and chemistry were brought under or into the metaphor. As Robert Boyle ([1686] 1996) pointed out, the heavens circulating endlessly are like one of those clocks (his example was the clock made in the late sixteenth century and installed in the cathedral at Strasbourg) that not only tell time, but have phases of the moon showing appropriately and other celestial happenings all exhibiting themselves, literally by clockwork! Then, thanks to Darwin (1859), came biology. The purposes of organic parts—hands, teeth, eyes and so forth—were the products of the blind workings of natural selection brought on by the struggle for existence. Organisms, in the felicitous phrase of Richard Dawkins, were seen as 'survival machines' (1976: 2). Read Darwin (1862) on the contrivances of orchids for reproduction, if you want to see the metaphor in full flight. And finally, as noted just above, we humans fell before the metaphor. As it has been put, brains are nothing but computers made of meat (Ruse 2010).

UNASKED QUESTIONS

So, now, on a Monday morning, your hymn book and bible put away until next Sunday, you walk into the lab, thinking of the world as a machine. A machine without purpose, grinding endlessly on, according to blind laws of nature. Can you do this, without being false to yourself? Well, notice for a start that thanks to the metaphor there are some questions that you simply are not going to address. It is not that you are going to answer them badly, or that you will be stumped. You are not going to ask

them and so you are not going to answer them. As Kuhn pointed out, the great thing about metaphors (later in life, he identified paradigms with metaphors) is that they focus your attention (Kuhn 1993). I say my love is like a rose and at once you start thinking in terms of her beauty, her freshness, her bloom. She is not a wilted gladiolus. If I am known to be a joker, you might suspect she can be a bit prickly. But part of the focus is (to use another metaphor) that you are forced to put on blinkers. Some questions—some quite meaningful questions—are ruled out of court. I am not saying anything about my love's mathematical abilities or her religious affiliation. These are good questions, but these are not my questions.

Likewise with the machine metaphor. Here are four questions I don't think are asked by scientists, or at least should not be asked by scientists, because they simply cannot answer them—at least, not as scientists. First, what is known as the 'fundamental question' (Heidegger 1959: 1): Why is there something rather than nothing? It is all a bit like Hannah Glasse's recipe for jugged hare: 'take your hare'. You take the materials of your machine as given. Of course, you might ask where the copper or plastic of the machine came from, but ultimately it is a given. You have the stuff to make the machine, and then you make the machine and run it. So with the world. Of course you can ask about the Big Bang, and perhaps you can even go back before it to bubbles in space or some such thing. Perhaps you can even go back infinitely. But you are not asking what keeps the whole system in being, nor are you asking about such things as why the laws of mathematics exist and apply and so forth. In the context of science, these are givens. Someone who, on being told about the double helical nature of the DNA molecule, persisted in asking about where the molecules came from in the first place would either be told to shut up or (a far worse fate) be told to go over to the philosophy department!

There are similar issues with respect to morality. It was David Hume who pointed out that you cannot go legitimately straight from claims about matters of fact to claims about obligation, morality ([1739] 1940). There is a barrier between 'is' and 'ought'. Machines in themselves have no value. And this applies very much to the world considered as a machine. Karl Popper used to say that science is 'knowledge without a knowing subject' (1972: 109), meaning that science has no implications about feminism or religion or politics or anything of a value nature. The idea that there might be (a concern to a Jew in the 1930s) a Jewish science, in some sense infused with Jewish standards and ideals, is an oxymoron. Science is value-free. Machines only take on value when someone makes use of them. Take the gallows. I think it is a revolting machine. If Hitler's neck were in the noose, I suspect that many would think it the greatest invention of all time.

So science tells us nothing about right or wrong. I should say that I think matters are a bit more complex than this (Ruse 2009). I think now, thanks to modern evolutionary theory (fused with much understanding about the nature of culture), we can go some considerable way to realizing why we have the moral sentiments that we do and why they take the form that they do. I myself go so far as to say that I think these findings have (philosophical) implications about the foundations, or non-foundations, of morality. But ultimately in the cosmic scheme of things, whether there really is a right and wrong is a matter on which science is silent.

We come now to a more contentious topic, namely consciousness, meaning sentience. We humans (and almost certainly other animals at various degrees of awareness) are in possession of some ability to be knowledgeable of our surroundings and reflective upon and about them. We think, we dream, we have emotions and desires, hates and loves, and much more. We take in the world through our senses and we act accordingly. I see no reason why the methodological naturalist should think this other than entirely physical, natural, in some important sense. But I also see no reason to say that the methodological naturalist can provide a good explanation of consciousness or will ever provide such an explanation. Leibniz said that machines don't think, and I am inclined to agree with him.

Of course, one recognizes that brain science today can go much further than it could in Leibniz's day. We can say a lot about how parts of the brain function and cause sensations and thoughts and emotions and so forth. But that is not to explain the sentience as such. One knows also that some today think that naturalism has solved the problem of consciousness or will someday do so (Dennett 1992; Churchland 1995). Frankly, these claims read like bravado. They are along the lines of the good advice offered about Vietnam: 'Declare victory and get out!' There is an unbridged gap between the molecules of the brain going about their ways and the thoughts and emotions, the memories and the dreams, that are produced by these molecules. In the crudest Cartesian sense (and by no means endorsing his version of dualism), we have *res extensa* and *res cogitans*. Whether one thinks that the problem of consciousness will be forever insoluble or whether one thinks that someday a new root metaphor will arrive and consciousness will cease to be an issue is a matter of debate. I am simply saying that, given the machine metaphor, consciousness in some wise is beyond the scientist's grasp.

Another topic is that of ultimate meaning. The Nobel Prize winner Steven Weinberg has said: 'The more the universe seems comprehensible, the more it seems pointless' (1992: 255). Why am I not surprised? As explained above, the machine metaphor as understood and as used since the Scientific Revolution has no place for questions about purpose or meaning. God, remember, is a retired engineer. The methodological naturalist is not going to find meaning, because the methodological naturalist has ruled out questions like this before he or she starts work. Of course, especially in biology, one can ask questions about the meaning of specific features of organisms. Why does the dinosaur stegosaurus have funny diamond plates all along its back? (The usual answer given today is that they are for heat control.) But ultimately, why the stegosaurus? That, in the sense of purpose, has no answer. Nor do questions about why rocks or planets or chemical bonds or anything else.

One could keep going with the list. I don't offer it as one that is fixed for ever and a day. As I have admitted, perhaps some can or will be eliminated in the future. The whole issue of life itself was once considered as something beyond the machine metaphor, but today I suspect that most people think that we can give a fairly convincing physiological-cum-molecular explanation of what it is to be alive. There is no need of non-material forces like *entelechies* (the idea favoured by Hans Driesch) or *élans vitaux* (the idea favoured by Henri Bergson). I have also assumed that these are genuine issues. Some, for instance the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1965), have doubted whether the fundamental question is genuine. They are inclined to think it unanswerable and hence not a real question. I guess here ultimately it is a question of rival intuitions, and I can only say that I (and many others) don't think it a phony question like 'Why was Tuesday so tired last week?'

WHAT FOLLOWS FROM THE INCOMPLETENESS OF SCIENCE?

But grant that we do have some genuine issues and that these are not explained by the machine metaphor. Not even attempted by the machine metaphor. And so these escape the grasp of methodological naturalism. What follows? One response, and it would be mine, would be: 'I simply don't know'. I am a sceptic on these sorts of matters. I profess ignorance—although somewhat arrogantly I think others should do likewise! Is this a legitimate response for the methodological naturalist? I would argue that it is. Darwinian evolutionary theory is one of the triumphs of naturalistic science. It stresses that there are no absolutes. Organisms have adaptations to help them to survive and reproduce. But to retell the old joke: When escaping from a bear you don't need to be a great runner, just faster than the chap next to you! Brains are obviously great adaptations, but they come with a cost, namely particularly they need lots of energy (usually found in the form of protein,

meaning other animals) and sometimes this is not readily available. If you are living on grasslands, then in the immortal words of the palaeontologist Jack Sepkoski: ‘I see intelligence as just one of a variety of adaptations among tetrapods for survival. Running fast in a herd while being as dumb as shit, I think, is a very good adaptation for survival’ (quoted in Ruse 1996: 486). The point I am making is that there is nothing sacrosanct about brains and their computing power (to use the metaphor). And in particular, there is no reason why our brains should be able to peer into all of the mysteries of the universe. As Richard Dawkins has rightly said: ‘Modern physics teaches us that there is more to truth than meets the eye; or than meets the all too limited human mind, evolved as it was to cope with medium-sized objects moving at medium speeds through medium distances in Africa’ (Dawkins 2003: 19). So I am happy to remain with ‘I just don’t know’.

What I don’t think is justified is a jump to metaphysical naturalism, at least not in the sense that what has been shown means that one must jump to metaphysical naturalism. I think my scepticism already shows this. It is not that I think that a God or gods must exist, but rather that I am leaving a blank space here. What of the person who would fill it up, let us say with the Christian God? Obviously I don’t think you have to and for me there are good reasons why I would be unwilling to fill it in this fashion. If asked, I would start with the problem of evil. I don’t want any part of a God who let Anne Frank die at Bergen-Belsen. Moreover I would point out that anyone who does invoke the Christian God is still going to have major challenges. For example, if God is responsible for the very fact of existence—why is there something rather than nothing—then He (She or It) is going to have to exist necessarily. Otherwise one gets caught on sophomoric questions about ‘What caused God?’ I am not saying that the notion of necessary existence is impossible—Christian theologians like Aquinas have written extensively on the topic—but it is a tough one to give a fully convincing answer (see Brian Davies’ ‘Aquinas and Atheism’ and A. C. Grayling’s ‘Critiques of Theistic Arguments’). However, if you persist through all of this, then I do not see how the methodological naturalist can object if the Christian does try to explain existence and ethics and consciousness and meaning from his or her perspective. You cannot give a scientific answer, but if you want to talk about creations and meanings and purposes and so forth, then I don’t see that the methodological naturalist has ruled these out of court—that is, not in the role of methodological naturalist. This is not an argument against metaphysical naturalism, just not one in favour of it.

MIRACLES

This has been one line of argument. The questions that methodological naturalism does not attempt to answer. Let us turn now to another line of argument. Could it not be that because of the positive workings of or through methodological naturalism one is directed at least to the plausibility of metaphysical naturalism? Let us look at three issues here, starting with the tensions between understanding through law and invocation of miracles. Now in a sense you might say that this question has been decided before we start. The whole point of methodological naturalism is that we don’t allow miracles, certainly not in the sense of breaking or violating laws. So how can there be any tensions? However, surely at this point it is legitimate to raise matters of pragmatic significance and success. If methodological naturalism keeps getting stumped then surely one might think that something more is going on, and that something more is miraculous. This is the position of today’s so-called Intelligent Design Theorists. They argue that certain biological phenomena are ‘irreducibly complex’—they could not be explained by a slow, natural process like natural selection. Hence, one must invoke the agency of an intelligent designer (Behe 1996; Dembski and Ruse 2004). Admittedly

in theory this designer might be a natural superintelligence on Andromeda, but truly everyone is supposed to think that this designer is supernatural and in fact looks remarkably like the Christian God.

The obvious and true response at this point is that Intelligent Design Theory has been a spectacular flop. No genuine scientist—including some who are deeply religious—thinks it makes its case at all (Miller 1999). Its supposed examples of irreducible complexity, for instance the bacterial flagellum and the blood clotting cascade, are anything but. They can be given very conventional and convincing Darwinian explanations. Moreover, my suspicion is that other cases of supposed interventions will prove no less convincing to the methodological naturalist. One keeps always hearing David Hume's opinion on miracles, namely which is more convincing a miracle or some naturalistic explanation? Take the children who saw Our Lady of Fatima in Portugal in 1917. Did they really see her? Perhaps so. Perhaps not. But even if they did, is it not more likely that it was some form of natural group hysteria or deception? Things like this can happen when you very much want them to happen. And as for the supposed predictions that the Virgin made to the children, they are way too flabby to be meaningful—everything from assassinations of popes to nuclear holocausts.

Here then, methodological naturalism does surely point to metaphysical naturalism, if not full-blooded atheism then at least a scepticism or agnosticism. Does this then mean that methodological naturalism is proven and that the God hypothesis is ruled out of court? Perhaps not, although now do note that we have switched from the position argued above, where methodological naturalism can be said to open the way for the non-metaphysical naturalist, to arguing that methodological naturalism does not necessarily entail metaphysical naturalism. Suppose you do believe in (again let us say) the Christian God. A God of miracles. There are two traditional ways of looking at miracles. One is that they really do involve breaking the laws of nature. A dead Jesus rose on the third day. Or that they are somehow symbolic or find their being in their meaning, and do not involve breaking the laws of nature. The feeding of the five thousand did not require Jesus to be a high-scale grocer but rather his presence brought on a spontaneous mood of sharing among the crowd. Even the Resurrection was more a matter of the disciples, downcast at the horrible death of their leader, suddenly finding their hearts filled with hope and love—‘He lives!’ Bodies dead or otherwise are simply irrelevant.

Can you suppose real lawbreaking miracles? Obviously if the Christian God does exist, then he can break the laws as he will—he is immanent, he holds the whole world in his hands. Miracles are not contradictory, just not expected if methodological naturalism seems to work. Of course, the problem is (as people noted about Intelligent Design theory) that once God does start getting his hands dirty, when then does he stop? If he was prepared to turn water into wine, why didn't he save Anne Frank? Perhaps the best one can argue is that normally God does not intervene, but that at certain points necessary for our salvation, he had to get involved. Leave it at that. Although probably if you do take this strategy, you are better off if you do not get into the business of trying to buttress miracles with empirical evidence—that the Resurrection must be true because it was reported by women and no one making things up back then would have used women as the recipients. That way, you just lay yourself open to Humean scepticism. Better just appeal to faith and say no more. Certainly, follow the Protestant rather than the Catholic line and quit finding new miracles. If John Henry Newman is worthy of sainthood then he is worthy of sainthood because of who he was and what he did rather than because a couple of sick strangers suddenly found themselves cured.

What about miracles within law? Obviously there is no challenge here to methodological naturalism. But is this not so weak a position as not to be worthy of consideration? At some level, one simply has to ask Christians themselves. But do not underestimate this move. When I was a child, growing up in England after the Second World War, virtually everyone thought that Dunkirk was a

miracle. During that weekend, for some reason the Nazi forces held back and the British army was evacuated back home. It was possible only because the Channel, so often so rough and impassible, was like a mill pond—totally flat and unruffled. The smallest of ships could cross over and pick up troops. Everyone of my generation was convinced that this was the hand of God, making possible the regrouping of forces and renewed fight against the most evil cloud that had ever descended on planet Earth. Did they think that God had broken the laws of nature? Truly no one cared a jot or a tittle. Perhaps if challenged they would have thought that God used regular laws, and had somehow at the Creation foreseen the need of calm weather, but the question would have been irrelevant. It was the meaning that counted. God gave the English another chance—and they took it! That is all that mattered. It was a miracle!

FREE WILL

Turn to another worrisome problem, namely that of free will. I presume that in some sense the methodological naturalist is committed *a priori* to determinism. Things don't just happen. A white rabbit appears out of the hat, and you know that there has to be a lawbound answer. That after all is the whole point about machines. Like the Strasbourg clock, they just keep grinding on indefinitely and with enough information you can tell exactly what the time (or its equivalent) will be at any point in the future (or retrodicting backwards for that matter). Does this then mean that there is no such thing as free will? And if this is so, then what price God (the God of theism that is)?

There are those who answer affirmatively and conclude that any talk of free will is at best an illusion and at worst self deception (Coyne 2012). None of this proves metaphysical atheism obviously, and there are those who might say that indeed such a stance strengthens the case for the Calvinist claims about predestination. God knows exactly what is going to happen at any point in time and the reason is precisely because we are dealing with a machine situation. It goes without saying that not everyone, including believers, is entirely happy with this theology. It is felt that in order to get a sense of responsibility—a notion at the heart of faith—some real kind of freedom must be preserved. In any case, many (myself included) would be inclined to invoke some form of G. E. Moore's (1939) argument for common sense realism. He said he would throw out any argument that disproved the existence of his own hand before him! We feel that the sense that we have of free will is so overwhelming that we would throw out any argument that disproved its existence. It is about as basic as anything could be.

Those with slightly more philosophical sophistication, that is those like me (!), who think that free will is real, tend to divide into those known as 'libertarians' (not in the social sense) believing that even though determinism may hold true, this still leaves room for the exercise of a genuine sense of free will, and those known as 'compatibilists' believing that there are two dichotomies at work here—determinism vs. indeterminism, and freedom vs. restraint—and that not only is determinism compatible with free will but it is required for free will (Fischer et al. 2007). If indeterminism rules then our actions are random and not subject to evaluation, which is the very essence of freedom. Did he chose right or did he choose wrong? The point is that most who have thought on these issues believe that being a methodological naturalist does not preclude some kind of freedom.

Parenthetically, a point about quantum theory, something that is often invoked in contemporary discussions about free will. The consensus opinion is that ultimately it is not as significant as some seem to think that it is. If we have genuine random events (at least, from our perspective) then we have indeterminacy. At once the usual inferences apply. Randomness is not to be equated with free will. If I

suddenly start to tear off my clothes in public for no reason whatsoever, then I am a lunatic not a person showing free will. On the other hand, if it is pointed out that although individual events may be random, on a statistical basis we have very tightly controlled phenomena—the half lives of decaying substances are as exact and predictable as (let us say) the motions of the planets—then all of the arguments made in the previous paragraphs apply without need of further comment.

HUMANS: DID THEY APPEAR NECESSARILY?

We can conclude then that, with respect to the freedom issue, while methodological naturalism does not speak for or against the existence of a God or gods of some kind, it does not rule out the existence of the Christian God or indeed of any god of the theist. Let us turn now to one final topic of this ilk, remembering that we are concerned not with whether methodological naturalism opens up a way for the metaphysical non-naturalist, but whether there is that in the exercise of methodological naturalism that precludes the God or gods that people do actually believe in and so in some sense points to metaphysical naturalism. Thus far we have talked about the attributes of humans, like free will, but let us turn now to the very existence of humans. What does a methodological naturalistic approach have to say about this topic and what are the implications within the context of our discussion?

Let us stay with biology, specifically Darwinian evolutionary theory, recognizing that a full account of humankind would need an extensive discussion of culture also. I think it fair to say today that no evolutionary biologist, specifically those concerned with the evolution of humankind—‘paleoanthropologists’—thinks that our species offers insurmountable problems in explanation (Ruse 2012). Not everything is yet explained, but we have a large (and growing) amount of fossil evidence and this is backed by increasing understanding (thanks especially to new techniques) of the causal factors involved in our appearance. We split from the apes (in Africa) about five million years ago, came out from the jungle onto the plains, moved to our hind legs and our brains started their growth in size, accompanied obviously by ever greater social and intellectual skills. At some point in the not-too-distant past (a hundred or so thousand years ago) we moved out of Africa, spreading right across the globe and as we did so we developed the distinctive racial characteristics that are so obvious in our species. Agriculture and the like is a pretty recent invention of the past ten thousand years or so.

Obviously none of this is very compatible with a religion committed to a literalistic understanding of (what Thomas Carlyle called) ‘Jewish old clothes’. There was no miraculous creation of organisms, no unique Adam and Eve, no universal flood through which only one extended family survived. This of course puts greater or lesser constraints on God, depending on where one started from. If one has long taken Genesis in a metaphorical or allegorical fashion, then there are no great tensions. Although it should be understood that some fairly significant revisions in theology may be required. The Augustinian view of original sin has all humans tainted because of the actual actions of Adam and Eve. Like carriers of a bad gene, we all suffer because of what went before. This kind of thinking no longer holds water, a matter of serious concern for those in the Augustinian tradition (like Calvinists). There are available other theologies that fit more readily with the evolutionary story, for instance the views attributed to Irenaeus of Lyon, who argued (before Augustine) that original sin should be understood in terms of human incompleteness (Schneider 2010). Thus the coming of Jesus should not be seen an improvised ‘Plan B’, something that God did when things went wrong, but as an always-intended part of the completion of creation. The idea that we are incomplete,

a mixture of altruism and selfishness, fits well with the modern biological understanding of human nature. (Obviously biologists would not use the word ‘incomplete’, but they do stress our conflicting natures—altruistic to work well in the group and selfish to look after number one.)

What about the actual appearance of human beings? One thing we can say with certainty is that given Darwinian Theory—the relativism of the selective process and the non-guidedness of the variations (mutations)—no one would say that humans absolutely must have evolved. This was certainly the view of pre-Darwinian evolutionists like Erasmus Darwin (Charles’s grandfather) and Jean Baptiste de Lamarck—monad to man—but is simply no longer tenable (Ruse 1996; 2012). Not that this has stopped people from offering suggestions as to how our evolution was very probable. One, originating with Darwin but endorsed most recently by (of all people) Richard Dawkins, seizes on arms races, translated into biological terms. Lines of organisms compete and their adaptations improve. The prey gets faster and so the predator gets faster. Perhaps, as in military arms races, things turn electronic and the beings with the best on-board computers emerge and win. Referring to something known as an animal’s EQ, standing for ‘encephalization quotient’ (Jerison 1973)—a kind of cross-species measure of IQ that factors out the amount of brain power needed simply to get an organism to function (whales require much bigger brains than shrews because they need more computing power to get their bigger bodies to function), and that then scales according to the surplus left over, Dawkins writes: ‘The fact that humans have an EQ of 7 and hippos an EQ of 0.3 may not literally mean that humans are 23 times as clever as hippos! But the EQ as measured is probably telling us *something* about how much “computing power” an animal probably has in its head, over and above the irreducible amount of computing power needed for the routine running of its large or small body’ (1986: 189). No prizes for guessing the nature of that something!

Paleontologist Simon Conway Morris (echoing an argument of Stephen Jay Gould) seizes on the notion of convergence. Evolution does not happen randomly, but rather as a series of moves towards already-existing ecological niches, bringing on remarkable similarities in physical nature. The sabre-toothed tiger niche for instance was occupied by both marsupial and placental mammals. Conway Morris (a sincere Christian) draws a happy conclusion about the cultural niche:

If brains can get big independently and provide a neural machine capable of handling a highly complex environment, then perhaps there are other parallels, other convergences that drive some groups towards complexity. Could the story of sensory perception be one clue that, given time, evolution will inevitably lead not only to the emergence of such properties as intelligence, but also to other complexities, such as, say, agriculture and culture, that we tend to regard as the prerogative of the human? We may be unique, but paradoxically those properties that define our uniqueness can still be inherent in the evolutionary process. In other words, if we humans had not evolved then something more-or-less identical would have emerged sooner or later. (2003: 196)

There are other suggestions, including the somewhat non-Darwinian notion that complexity is bound to increase over time simply from random factors and that this could spell the prospect of humankind arriving to order (McShea and Brandon 2010). (Darwin does toy with some of these ideas in an early notebook, but the real author of such thinking was Darwin’s fellow Englishman, Herbert Spencer.) But the fact is that none of them actually guarantee the arrival of humans. This is surely a problem for theists for if such people claim anything it is that existence of humankind is not a contingent phenomenon. By this is meant not that we have necessary existence (as is presumed of God) but that our being here is necessary. Gould suggested that even if humans did not necessarily have to appear here on earth—joking about the asteroid that wiped out the dinosaurs and made possible the rise of the mammals, he said that literally we own our existence to our lucky stars!—given the vastness of the universe we might reasonably expect that somewhere, sometime, humanoids (beings with the necessary human features like intelligence) would have evolved. Perhaps so, although to be completely safe one might want to invoke the notion of multiverses, infinitely many of them, so that

(given that our existence shows that human evolution could have happened) without doubt the evolution of human beings would have happened.

IS NATURALISM SELF-REFUTING?

Let us conclude this part of the discussion. Miracles, free will, humankind and its inevitability—methodological naturalism has important things to say about all three. Probably nothing necessitates metaphysical naturalism, but it would be naïve simply to say that there is nothing in methodological naturalism and its pursuit that has implications for God (or gods) and his existence and nature. Yet there is still one more challenge we must consider. Are we being overly optimistic? Having let the genie of natural selection out of the bottle, as we must if we are to be sincere in our methodological naturalism, have we let loose a virus that will turn on naturalism itself (either form) and devour it? In other words, is the very idea of being a naturalist (for argument's sake let us stay with methodological naturalism) something self-refuting, collapsing into paradox if not outright contradiction?

This is the claim of the Calvinist philosopher Alvin Plantinga (1991, 2011; Ruse 2009). Seizing on a point made by Darwin himself, Plantinga stresses that Darwinism is not concerned with the truth, but with survival and reproduction. And if survival and reproduction can be better achieved by deception and illusion, then so be it. In an almost flamboyant example, Plantinga invites us to dinner at Oxford, where there are many courses and much conversation, including Richard Dawkins telling the philosopher A. J. Ayer the conditions under which one could be an atheist. (Coals to Newcastle one would have thought.) Perhaps our senses and reason deceive us so much that we could project being at this dinner to other, very different circumstances. We could be in the jungle fighting crocodiles but the features that lead to croc fighting also lead to illusions about what we are doing—illusions that we are putting Freddie Ayer right on matters of religious commitment. ‘Under this possibility ... beliefs wouldn’t have (or needn’t have) any purpose or function; they would be more like unintended by-products, and the likelihood that they are mostly true would be low’ (Plantinga 1991: 34).

Frankly, one doubts that any Darwinian evolutionist is going to find this argument very convincing. Evolution just does not work that way. It is true that sometimes we are systematically deceived (or open to being deceived) by our biology. As a Humean, I am inclined to think that this is something that happens when we think causally. We think that there is a necessary connection, whereas all we see is constant conjunction. But we only know about evolution’s deceptions because we are not deceived all of the time—we use the non-deceived instances as touchstones to judge difficult or problematic cases. And there have to be good reasons for the deception. The burnt child fears the fire because it has learnt that fire ‘causes’ pain, and that is a very good thing. The last thing that is needed is the child getting into philosophical discussions about the non-necessity of constant conjunction. But it is a big—too big—stretch from something like this to Plantinga’s example. There is nothing in evolutionary theory suggesting that such a radically mistaken notion as thinking you are at high table in Oxford when you are really in the jungle under threat of your life could possibly have an adaptive value, and it is so counterproductive that it is hardly possible that it could be a by-product of something that was working to our benefit. By-products have to be pretty minimal or selection will eliminate them. Fighting crocs needs speed, agility, strength, courage, not the ability to trade drinks and thoughts with aging philosophers.

Plantinga counters that perhaps we are deceived all of the time. It could be that there is systematic deception even of the supposed touchstones. Think of an analogy. Looking at an assembly line in a

factory, we think that the produced widgets are red. Then, taking off our rose-tinted protective glasses we realize that we were mistaken. Perhaps, however, we can never take off our glasses. This does not mean that the widgets in the factory are really red. The same could be true of the deceptions of evolution. Perhaps selection-based evolution deceives us all of the time, and so all of our thoughts, including our thoughts about evolution and its causes, collapse into meaningless jumbles. The methodologically naturalistic pursuit about human nature has led to irresolvable paradox.

But has it really? Suppose the naturalist, of whatever stripe, concedes the point to Plantinga. Yes, we could be viewing all of life's objects through rose-tinted glasses. We are in as bad a situation as the prisoners in Plato's cave. Yet, what does the concession mean? It does not mean that we do not have a coherent system of thought, including evolutionary thought. It means that we can never get outside our sensing and thinking to tell if the world is really as we think it is. We must accept that we are prisoners of our own, evolved selves. In other words, we cannot prove an ultimate correspondence between our seeing and thinking and absolute reality. However, many philosophers are dubious about absolute realities anyway (Rorty 1979; Putnam 1981). At the best, we can have a kind of coherence of our beliefs. It all hangs together, and at a pragmatic level, which is what really counts, it works. Within the system we can have correspondence. There is correspondence between our thinking that the plates of stegosaurus are for heat control and the nature of the plates themselves and the kind of functioning that they seem capable of. There is no correspondence between the thinking you are at the dinner but really being in the jungle.

In any case, as a *tu quoque*, most naturalists would argue that someone like Plantinga is really no better off. It is very doubtful that truth is coming from gazing on Plato's Forms, at least not as they are characterized in the *Republic*. Plantinga himself appeals to God as a guarantee of his beliefs. Somehow he seems to think that this awareness of the divinity is basic. But the rest of us might be forgiven for fearing that he is caught in the circle of Descartes' *Meditations*. How can we be certain that an evil demon is not deceiving us about God? We need God to guarantee our thoughts but cannot get to God to do this. Perhaps faced with this dilemma, we should not jettison methodological naturalism too quickly, too soon. As before, realizing that because a turn to God is not obligated, nothing here has been said to prevent such a naturalist from declining to take the extra step to metaphysical naturalism.

CONCLUSION

Many will disagree with the general tenor of this discussion, namely that one can be a methodological naturalist without being forced into metaphysical naturalism. The so-called New Atheists certainly feel that the one leads smoothly to the other. This is as it may be and one can only invite them to make their case and show this discussion wrong-headed if not outrightly mistaken.

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CHAPTER 26

ATHEISM AND THE RISE OF SCIENCE

TANER EDIS

THREE STORIES OF SCIENCE AND NONBELIEF

NATURAL science enjoys a reputation for success: for developing powerful explanations of how the world works. And so our social ideologies, which less easily command consensus in modern environments, try to lay claim to the success of science. Whether a theistic religion or a non-theistic alternative such as secular humanism, it never hurts to claim that a belief system is supported by the best of modern science. If a set of moral ideals seems consonant with the order of the universe as revealed in the laboratory, this can only make them more credible. Such claims often appeal to history, by suggesting that religion, or the lack of it, may have been instrumental in giving rise to science and nurturing its development to this day.

At the risk of some oversimplification, we can identify three broad competing narratives about religion and the rise of science, which compel significant public attention in debates over science and religion. Secular people usually favour a story in which science and nonbelief march together in close coordination. Conservative religious thinkers tell a story in which science is a sometimes wayward offspring of monotheistic culture, which still requires faith-based metaphysical foundations. And there is also a liberal religious story, in which historical misunderstandings between science and religion give way to an amicable parting of the ways, science and religion presiding over their separate, non-overlapping spheres.

The secular story is most congenial to atheists. The development of atheism as a serious intellectual option is an important part of the progress of Western modernity, reaching back to the Greek philosophers. And increasing doubts about religion have gone hand in hand with the rise of modern science. Today, it is easy to notice that science has been able to explain more and more without resorting to supernatural agency. Furthermore, natural scientists are a notoriously secular constituency. Prominent ‘New Atheist’ leaders such as Richard Dawkins come from a scientific background. It is only natural to think that the rise of science and the rise of atheism has been mutually reinforcing. And the success of science further supports an Enlightenment humanist outlook: atheists will often celebrate science as an illustration of the capabilities of human reason when not constrained by faith.

Conservative monotheists disagree. They direct attention to the religiosity of most prominent figures of the Scientific Revolution, and point out how devout scientists tended to be until well into the twentieth century. Science, in this account, is a development from *within* a theistic culture, nourished by the sense of a rationally designed universe imposed by the acknowledgment of a personal God. Secular, naturalistic philosophies have enjoyed an unfortunate degree of influence lately, distorting science into a scientism that stretches well beyond modest inferences from limited data. Nonetheless, conservatives hope for reform and recovery, since both historically and

intellectually, science requires theistic foundations.

There is also a story most in tune with liberal religious sensibilities. Modern science did not appear fully formed—there was a long process of negotiating institutional and intellectual boundaries while learning how to do science properly. Natural science eventually achieved autonomy from religion, while recognizing its limitations due to its essential method. Science cannot perform experiments on supernatural agency or deliver moral truths. Modern aberrations such as fundamentalism aside, science does not threaten faith. Our understanding of science progresses until we reach the present liberal consensus on the separate spheres belonging to science and religion.

The actual history of science looks a lot more complicated.

ANCIENT AND MEDIEVAL SCIENCE

Stories about science and stories about nonbelief both usually start with Greek and Roman antiquity. India or China might also deserve mention, with their developed philosophical traditions, even including occasional rejection of their gods (Hecht 2003). But Indian and Chinese supernaturalism is not Mediterranean monotheism, and modern atheism is marked most of all by its rejection of Hellenic and Near Eastern notions of deity. And the East Asians never quite developed sustained and wide-ranging natural sciences. The ancient Greeks also did not produce the modern juggernaut of institutionalized, technology-linked science driven by a mutual feedback of experiment and theory, but they came closer.

Some aspects of ancient Greek thought might support elements of our three rival stories. Though full-blown atheism remained practically unknown, the Greek philosophical tradition contains hints of materialism and doubts about the gods (Thrower [1971] 2000). Indeed, early Greek science can show a preference for naturalistic explanations of phenomena over references to the intentions of supernatural agents.

The overall evidence, however, is sparse and ambiguous. From Greek philosophy, we inherit a sense of tension between reason and revelation, of disdain for popular magic and superstition. There is much in this tradition to warm the heart of a modern philosophical atheist. Nonetheless, mature Hellenistic philosophy was no threat to supernatural belief, except of the most vulgar sort. Varieties of Platonism and Stoicism, much more intellectually dominant than any trace of materialism on the fringes, placed nature and human events in a context of cosmic purpose and design. The best of ancient science followed suit. Ptolemaic astronomy, for example, is impressive even today as a precursor to modern science, in the way it combined detailed observation with predictive mathematical modelling. And yet this astronomy was closely linked with astrology, with astral religions, with a view of the world that associated the order and permanence of the heavens with a spiritual realm superior to sublunar chaos and decay (Wright 2000).

The transformation of the Hellenistic and Roman world under Christianity further complicates this muddled picture. In the historical memory of Western Europe, which gave rise to both modern secularism and modern science, what follows are the long centuries of Western Christendom, which, whether treated with nostalgia for organic societies or dismissed as ‘Dark Ages’, were better known for socially dominant faith rather than vibrant intellectual life (Freeman 2003). Certainly the availability of education collapsed throughout medieval Europe.

In the secularist story, this is evidence that faith is not good for science. In response, defenders of religion point out that monasteries kept learning alive, and that twelfth century developments within religious institutions were at the root of later intellectual revivals.

It is misleading, however, to focus on Western Christendom. The Eastern Roman Empire survived for many centuries, and mystical theologies developed during that time can plausibly be seen as natural outgrowths of Hellenistic philosophy in a new religious context. Even more importantly, Islam soon became a force in the Eastern Mediterranean, incorporating both ancient philosophy and science into its intellectual environment. There were no ‘Dark Ages’ in the Muslim empires, which enjoyed comparative intellectual continuity even against a background of political change.

In fact, Muslim regions developed medieval science to its furthest extent. The philosophical tradition, with its potential for doubt about revelation, was treated cautiously, but sciences, especially sciences that promised practical benefits such as medicine, readily found patronage. Some examples, such as Ibn Haytham’s work on optics, show that some areas of Muslim science were poised on the verge of something similar to modern science, anticipating a fruitful coupling between formal experiments and mathematical modelling. Today, among Muslims, the dominant narrative about science and faith is a variation on the conservative theistic story, looking back toward a Golden Age when God-honouring Muslims led the world in science (Edis 2007).

And yet, Muslims did not produce a Scientific Revolution. The myth of a Golden Age is misleading, since medieval science is not just an underdeveloped version of modern science. Highlighting examples such as Ibn Haytham’s optics selectively emphasize what looks like modern physics in an ocean of mythical and occult ideas enjoying equal intellectual prominence, within a scientific enterprise that was an intellectual backwater and which never developed ambitious, broad theoretical frameworks beyond vague references to a divine purpose behind all creation.

So, until just a few centuries ago, the history of science contained very little that is useful for drawing connections between science and either nonbelief or faith. Atheism was practically non-existent—a very few possible exceptions are more likely due to a rejection of Abrahamic revelation in favour of a more purely metaphysical God of the philosophical tradition. And science was still medieval science, quite different from the powerful sciences of today that inspire a completely naturalistic description of our world.

THE SCIENTIFIC REVOLUTION

Science arose in Western Europe, along with modern secular ways of life, eventually including atheism as a noticeable social presence. But conservative theists can still argue that science is the product of a *Christian* culture, sustained by Christian assumptions such as divine design in the universe—a view that occasionally attracts some scholarly support (Stark 2003; Fuller 2008). The Muslim version of theism supported the best that medieval science could offer, but did not generate a Scientific Revolution. Perhaps Christianity, with its theology of incarnation, was more hospitable to notions of an orderly cosmos reflecting a rational, personal creator.

There have been arguments that Muslim science was held back by features of Islamic theology—such as the prominence of an occasionalism that denied the validity of natural causation in order not to limit the power of an omnipotent God. Or the Muslim coolness toward the philosophical tradition is held responsible for suppressing independent thinking in the lands of Islam. Influential theologians such as al-Ghazali, after all, denounced philosophy and banished it to the margins of Muslim intellectual life (Hoodbhoy 1991).

No doubt such events and intellectual features within Islam discouraged a degree of inventiveness that could have fuelled an improvement in science. But it is implausible that the fact that the Scientific Revolution took place in Western Christendom is due to deep religious reasons. There was no great

decline in the medieval science practised by Muslims; it developed in its own course for centuries, and produced some of its best long after the time of al-Ghazali. Muslim theology had resources to moderate occasionalism without straining orthodoxy. The details of how Europe happened to generate modern science while Muslim populations were left behind are very interesting, and subject to vigorous debate among historians of science. But it now appears that the events turn on many historical accidents rather than any fundamental difference between Christianity and Islam (Huff 1993; Edis 2007).

Our knowledge of the Muslim history of science, then, undercuts suggestions that the rise of science required theistic foundations. Both medieval Islam and Christianity were highly diverse and harboured various forms of religious and political authority. Both were capable of supporting investigation of nature, particularly applied sciences that promised tangible benefits for communities of the faithful; both could depict learning about nature as a glorification of the creator. Both supported astronomy in order to get their ritual calendars right. Both, on the other hand, structurally discouraged potential criticism of revelation, and could easily strangle attempts at inquiry that were independent of established religion. Monotheistic religious leaders can denigrate nature, calling for concentration on more spiritually profitable studies, or they can encourage engagement with the natural world. Selecting any view as representing an ahistorical essence of either Islam or Christianity is arbitrary.

Elaborate theological rationales for encouraging science are largely the product of hindsight, brought forth after modern science demonstrated its power. Indeed, Muslims did exactly this, starting to claim that Islam is the most friendly to science among all religions, after it became clear that Muslims needed to master modern technology to resist European dominance in commerce and on the battlefield (Edis 2007).

Nonetheless, it is also relevant that early modern practitioners of science are not notable for their dissent from the religious beliefs of their day. The story of the Scientific Revolution suggests that it is important that science should develop institutions and an intellectual apparatus that is independent of religion. The Galileo affair, for example, has plenty of significance for the separation of scientific and religious institutions, but very little for disagreement between supernatural belief systems and the emerging new science. By all accounts, Galileo remained a conventional believer, who might not have run into so much trouble if he had not impolitely challenged the authority of a Papacy deeply concerned about Protestant-style dissent.

Neither should we forget that the intellectual environment during the Scientific Revolution had little to do with much later debates concerning science and the reality of any gods. For example, Renaissance Europe rediscovering (more accurately, reinventing) its classical heritage also led to a revival in individualist spirituality, including occult sciences such as astrology and alchemy. These were serious intellectual options; Newton, for example, devoted most of his intellectual life to pursuits such as alchemy and Biblical prophecy. Orthodox religion responded to its occult rival by enlisting new modes of thinking linked to the emerging new science—in particular, the mechanical, dualist philosophy of thinkers such as Descartes (Olson 2004).

In hindsight, mechanical thinking appears to be a step toward the disenchantment of nature that eventually lent credibility to overtly materialist conceptions. But at the time, the mechanical philosophy was very useful for theistic religion. Acting against ‘natural magic’, occult views, and individualist spirituality that sought contact with the supernatural not mediated by official church structures, the mechanical philosophy deployed science in the service of orthodoxy. It would have been hard to think of any opposition between science and religion in that context. Indeed, the later history of science also exhibits three-way interactions and shifting alliances between monotheism,

individualist spirituality, and an increasingly independent science, manifested in episodes such as Mesmerism, the era of psychical research, and the perennially popular occult and New Age paranormalism of today. The cultural significance of science has developed a materialist, even atheist colouring, but this was not always the case (Edis 2006).

The irrelevance of atheism to the Scientific Revolution is also apparent in the intellectual development of nonbelief. Doubts about God could potentially be furthered by better knowledge of nature, through explaining the smaller-scale supernatural phenomena bound up in common theistic views of the world. But philosophical criticisms of the concept of God developed independently of science, which was not yet powerful enough to undermine belief in magic and miracles. Monotheism had absorbed the philosophical tradition, with its God of metaphysical perfection set at a distance from small-scale supernaturalism. Philosophical theologians both produced versions of classic metaphysical proofs of God and criticized conceptions offered by rivals. The God of the philosophers harboured a potential for doubt, which could be expressed when intellectual environments less constrained by religious institutions could flourish.

Consider, for example, Spinoza—who envisioned an impersonal God that could be identified with nature and necessity, and who would end up inspiring much outright nonbelief, especially among secularizing Jews centuries later (Biale 2011). Spinoza's work is, perhaps, a pinnacle of premodern metaphysical reasoning, showing little sign of what might be called a scientific outlook. Even his criticism of miracles was not so much empirical as driven by a sense that interfering with nature's established order did not sit well with metaphysical perfection—belief in miracles, he argued, is due to an ignorance of the true causes of marvellous phenomena (Nadler 2011). Vulgar religiosity was better represented by naïve beliefs in scripture, and it was here that Spinoza demonstrated a more modern sensibility, introducing a more critical historical view of the Bible.

What was most important about thinkers such as Spinoza for the history of religious nonbelief is that such work could be circulated and debated in new intellectual networks in Europe that were somewhat independent of religion. Weaknesses in traditional arguments for the existence of God could be exposed, and not immediately be papered over again by acts of theological finesse. Moral disaffection with established religions could also feed into occasional nonbelief, rather than the more usual heresies or reforming religious movements. And periods of cultural openness could make intellectuals more aware of other religions, introducing the possibility that the local sacred stories were no more credible than the fairy tales held sacred by others.

As Europe became modern, such sources of doubt fed back into one another. With hindsight, we begin to see some signs of what might even be atheism, in a small minority among elite, intellectual circles. At roughly the same times we can also see the precursors of modern science gaining strength. But there was very little connection at the beginning. Distrust in faith did not motivate the emerging science. And what little there was in the way of science did not much influence existing pockets of doubt.

SCIENCE AND NONBELIEF LINK UP

Motivations for doing science vary. Individual investigators may be driven by curiosity, compelled to address what their intellectual community considers an open question. But even early modern science was an enterprise demanding resources, requiring support. Eventually, the connection of the new science to new practical applications was to prove decisive. Science meant technology, which meant that science attracted patronage due to its military and commercial benefits.

The cultural implications of the sciences, however, are also significant to whether they are socially useful. As the new natural sciences acquired more prestige, they could also link up with nascent currents of religious doubt. After all, claims about supernatural beings also involve claims about how the world works. Science could offer another model of reasoned criticism of faith claims, acting in a secondary, supportive role besides doubts encouraged by the philosophical tradition.

So especially in the eighteenth century, the European Enlightenment added science-inspired elements to its collection of moral and philosophical suspicions about traditional religion. For example, La Mettrie pushed mechanistic thinking to its limits, imagining, however crudely, that humans were ultimately machines, including our ostensibly spiritual aspects (La Mettrie [1748] 1960). Science promised to move into religious territory, providing better-reasoned approaches to some fundamental questions. This need not have threatened supernatural belief; theistic thinkers could still expect that scientific investigation would independently confirm their expectations. Indeed, intellectual defences of religious belief began to take on a more empirical orientation, re-emphasizing the ancient argument that the order of nature demonstrated a supernatural design. Many religious reformers hoped that burning away some of the more magical elements of traditional faith would leave a purer religion behind (Olson 2004).

To Enlightenment critics of religion, however, science promised more than improved intellectual ammunition against the gods. The new learning also demonstrated the capabilities of human reason when unconstrained by religious dogmas and fears of supernatural retribution. Revealed religion was not just unacceptable because of its falsity—intellectually dubious notions might still be useful if they helped preserve social order. The traditional religion of European *ancien régimes* was unacceptable because maintaining established beliefs required a suppression of human reason and its potential for improving the world.

Enlightenment scepticism about revealed religion, therefore, added its distinctive moral colouring to its championing of science. For example, the French Encyclopédistes of the eighteenth century embarked on a grand project to make the best of the modern knowledge available. Their engagement with the science and technology of the time were as integral to their project as the critiques of established religion they ventured.

This gesture toward science and technology as a prime example of human capability was to become an enduring feature of secular moral perspectives, showing up in the liberal humanist ideal of progress, socialism, communism, and even the market fundamentalism of today. Once modern science took off, few thinkers, religious or non-believing, doubted that science was useful in modest efforts toward improving human lives. But meliorism also had a utopian side, allowing secular thinkers to let God fade away while keeping a version of hope for salvation alive.

Modern science and modern nonbelief rose more-or-less independently in changing circumstances that led to an intellectual culture independent of religious institutions. And dissenters from religion who hoped for a moral transformation of their societies readily embraced science, not just as a reliable form of knowledge but as an example of human emancipation, social progress, and even as an invitation to build heaven on earth.

CONFLICT AND HARMONY

Science enjoys broad social support for practical, technological reasons. And in the early nineteenth century, science was practised in the context of the Industrial Revolution. There was little distinction between science and engineering—much of the fundamentals of thermodynamics were constructed by

people we could call either scientists or engineers in today's terms—though there were, naturally, class differences between gentlemen scholars pursuing botany and engineers figuring out how to pump water out of mines.

In any case, working with science and technology was often associated with a measure of cultural conservatism. For European intellectual life, the early nineteenth century was a time of heightened perception of divine design in the universe. Enlightenment philosophers such as David Hume had criticized some aspects of the design argument for the existence of God, but they were unable to supply a naturalistic explanation for complex, functional order (Rachels 1991). For scientists, it remained easy to see the hand of God. Scientific figures participated in projects such as the Bridgewater Treatises, informing readers about a confident Christianity in control of progress and technological modernization. Enlightenment ideals of progress were taken on board by the modern forms of Christianity, with ambitions to civilize the inferior colonized races as well as improving the working classes at home.

This happy harmony did not last. Increasing knowledge about the natural world and world history contributed to the ongoing modernization of religious beliefs: it was, for example, no longer as easy to treat the stories in scripture as residing in a mythic time, functioning as ideal templates for ritual and for social order. The stories now had to be embedded in actual history, in the new, modern sense of time. God's creative acts could no longer be understood in a vague, mythical, barely coherent metaphorical way. They had to be manifest in complex designs apparent to a scientific investigator. Increased tendencies toward democracy and literacy also supported this turn to more concrete conceptions of divine action, as ordinary people assumed more authority in interpreting sacred writings.

But if science and tendencies to political equality led toward a clearer picture of divine action in the world, this also was an intellectually brittle position. Geologists discovering 'deep time', critical historians making sense of the Bible as ancient mythology, and the advent of Darwinian evolution would make any interpretation of scripture as a consistent description of real events problematic (Olson 2004). Indeed, the difficulty ran deeper. As the new sciences matured and addressed ambitious questions, it became clearer that the story of the universe might be told without referring to supernatural agents. Western intellectuals did not suddenly become atheists, but traditional faith among intellectuals receded, giving way to explorations of alternatives. Reliable numbers are impossible to come by, and there is no reason to think full-blown atheism among late nineteenth century thinkers was anything but a small minority position. Nonetheless, there was a sense that atheism had arrived, and that this arrival owed something to science.

Science certainly had a more important role in late nineteenth century nonbelief when compared to earlier versions of religious doubt. Indeed, as thinkers tried to achieve a broader framework to make sense of what the sciences were leading toward, a materialist current became very noticeable. This materialism made strong cultural claims, and it included an influential semipopular literature interpreting science for a broader audience (e.g., Büchner 1884).

The affinity of modern science to materialism was especially clear to Muslims who were concerned about modernizing their countries. Muslims needed to rapidly acquire modern technology to resist European colonial powers. Importing narrowly focused technical knowledge was not controversial, but Muslims tended to be much more wary about the cultural context and broad theoretical frameworks in which Western science was embedded. Even enthusiastic modernizers saw modern science as infected by a dangerous materialism. As a result, ideas such as Darwinian evolution never quite penetrated into Muslim intellectual life, and the desire to import knowledge while resisting materialist contamination remains an important theme in current devout Muslim thinking about

science (Edis 2007).

In the industrialized West, the materialism implicit in the state of science provoked its own reactions, such as efforts to scientifically establish the existence of a spiritual realm and survival of death by means of psychical research (Oppenheim 1985). The broader concern, however, was to negotiate some accommodation between science and faith. Science was just one worry for religious leaders—Western European working classes were increasingly disaffected with traditional religion, and a secularizing trend was noticeable even at the height of Victorian piety. This secularization was only indirectly connected to science, through technology and bureaucratic rationalization of industrial societies (Bruce 2002). Nonetheless, something had to be done. Whatever the intellectual conflicts that had developed between science and religion, both were important social institutions. And science did not seem to be all that useful in helping communities address questions about morality and meaning.

There are many ways to seek harmony between science and theistic faith. Even the kind of fundamentalism that denies evolution, for example, has ended up promoting a vision of harmony—both Christian and Islamic creationists today fashion a pseudoscientific alternative to mainstream science precisely because they are very enthusiastic about technology and grant science a high degree of cognitive authority. But at least in most technologically advanced countries, mainstream science is unrivalled in its prestige and influence over mass education. Since the late nineteenth century, affirming a liberal religion that minimizes its claims about divine action has been the most respectable option in the search for harmony.

INSEPARABLE SPHERES

The notion that science and religion have separate spheres is attractive. Even if sacred texts do not give an accurate history of the universe, or if the ordinary workings of nature need not proceed under supernatural supervision, a more distant, uninvolved God may still be viable. Furthermore, religion can forcefully claim morality and meaning as its home territory. Even in a fundamentalist bookstore, there is only a very small literature that directly conflicts with mainstream science—most religious concerns revolve around morality, salvation, cultural reproduction, and personal therapy.

Science, in contrast, does not seem to be able to generate moral ‘oughts’; even secular moral philosophy has typically proceeded without a close connection to the sciences. And scientists cannot set up a lab experiment to test God—friction with theistic religion tends to occur at a more abstract level involving broad, ambitious theoretical frameworks such as Darwinian evolution or fundamental physics. All of this is far removed from lived religious experience. Furthermore, atheism is traditionally a philosophical position. Metaphysical disputes about a perfect being can proceed completely independent of explanations of nature.

In that case, historical experience may suggest that science and God can coexist, as long as the proper boundaries between science and religion are recognized. When a conflict between science and fundamentalist religion surfaces today, a separate spheres approach comes to the fore as the preferred liberal position. Scientists propose ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ (Gould 1999); philosophers claim that science is characterized by a ‘methodological naturalism’ committed to explaining natural phenomena by natural causes (Pennock 2011). Supernatural claims are therefore beyond the ability of science to adjudicate. Hence both fundamentalists and those atheists who claim support from science are mistaken.

For all its plausibility, however, there is also something odd about proposals of separate spheres

and clear boundaries. Such proposals purport to identify essential characteristics of science and religion. The historical interactions between science and religion suggest instead that both are far more protean. Instead of manifesting essences or being limited by predetermined methods, both scientific and religious communities have been constantly creative—improvising as they go along.

Modern science has always addressed supernatural claims. Often these have concerned small-scale supernatural phenomena: investigations of miraculous healings, statistical studies of intercessory prayer, or critiques of the paranormal phenomena endorsed by occult and individualist spiritualities. But scientists have also addressed more significant supernatural notions. Scientific psychology, for example, started out with dualist conceptions about minds, which were congenial to beliefs in a nonmaterial soul. Today, a materialism that has no use for any soul is dominant in cognitive neuroscience. Physicists have always been interested in the fundamental structure of nature, including the origins and destiny of the universe.

The liberal religious retreat to a relatively inactive God should not obscure the religious significance of supernatural claims. Demonstrations of ostensible supernatural power have perhaps not been central to all religious ways of life, but they have generally served to validate claims to contact with divinity—for premodern saints and mystics as well as their more recent equivalents. Even today, Christianity's centre of gravity has shifted toward places like Africa (Jenkins 2007), where beliefs in spirit possession and exorcism drive Christianity. Muslims worldwide tend to reject human evolution, a rejection bound up with their view that the Quran is the supernatural word of God. Emphasizing practices embedded in religious ways of life can be a useful corrective to conceptions of religion that take Protestantism as the defining example, making too much of creeds and confessions. But the notion that theistic belief has no significant investment in the sphere belonging to science loses touch with actual religions.

Imposing a separate spheres view on historical disputes is especially misleading. Special creation, for nineteenth century natural historians, was not methodologically excluded from scientific consideration. It was a rival to Darwinian evolution, and the dispute was resolved with the help of evidence rather than invocations of demarcation rules. Setting special creation aside as an essentially 'religious' idea has a practical significance in the context of late twentieth century secular legal systems. It would be an anachronism if applied to the debate in Darwin's time.

It is also a mistake to interpret recent history as support for 'methodological naturalism' as a defining feature of science. Certainly, the history of science so far suggests that scientists should prefer naturalistic explanations. Natural explanations have been far more successful than supernatural rivals, and as a pragmatic principle, it is reasonable to expect that this should continue to be the case. Hardening this pragmatism into a rigid boundary for science is a far more dubious proposition (Boudry et al. 2010).

Consider, as a similar example, a popular conception in which discovering the *causes* of phenomena is the central feature of science. This emphasis on causality links up with traditional metaphysical notions of causation and lawful order; a nineteenth century materialist would insist that only natural causes exist. Indeed, this version of materialism portrayed nature as a closed system of natural causes subject to discovery by scientific methods. And yet, the present version of materialism—physicalism (Melynk 2003)—has to be different. In the twentieth century, quantum mechanics led to a view of fundamental physics where events happen at random, without an underlying causal pattern that can be inferred. Our everyday macroscopic notions of causality must emerge from a fundamentally different microscopic physics. Physicalism preserves the materialist view that nature is built up out of fundamentally mindless processes, but now uncaused randomness is an integral part of the picture (Edis 2002).

Figuring out quantum mechanics changed our concept of science. Similarly, methods of doing science are also constantly subject to criticism and revision. Scientists stumble upon double-blind protocols in psychology, and statistical triggering procedures in particle detection, all as part of the process of constructing successful research programs. After all, what methods will be successful depends on the nature of the world under investigation—if reading tea leaves produced reliable information, scientists would have to include tea leaves in their equipment. Methods are not prior philosophical constraints setting limits on science but part of what we learn about the world.

ONE DAMN THING AFTER ANOTHER

The relationship between the rise of atheism and the rise of science cannot be described by any story with a straightforward moral. It is precisely a sign of the secular nature of our present understanding of history that we do not expect to read the course of events as a manifestation of transcendent principles. We end up with masses of important details and connections at different scales. Historical accidents predominate. Often what happens is one damn thing after another.

The rise of science does not incorporate a thread of progress toward a peaceful accommodation between science and religion, any more than it is a tale of constant conflict (Brooke 1991). Today, science and religion are both practices embodied in powerful social institutions. These institutions keep negotiating their boundaries and their relative social positions. Regardless of intellectual frictions, achieving peaceful coexistence is to the mutual benefit of both scientific and faith-based institutions. The story of science and religion settling into separate spheres is not good history and an intellectually dubious hardening of pragmatic practices. And yet, it provides for legally enforceable and socially supported boundaries between science and religion. It is an invaluable institutional compromise. In many places—the Muslim world in particular—the scientific community would benefit immensely if a separate spheres narrative became more accepted, providing some insulation from religious pressures on scientific research and education.

The story about science being a child of religion that still requires theistic foundations is also not entirely accurate. *Some* intellectual subcultures within a theistic environment did support useful intellectual habits, and emphasized reliable order in nature as a sign of divine rationality. Moreover, a religious context could provide motivations for investigating nature that had more cultural depth than just a desire for technological power. But science has a life of its own now, even if the story of its godly origins were completely correct. Science does not need theistic foundations; indeed, modern philosophy should make us suspicious about any claim about the necessity of metaphysical foundations. Even the emphasis on lawful order in nature is misplaced: in the world of modern physics, where randomness is a fundamental aspect of nature, and where what we know as the laws of nature are often ‘frozen accidents’, order and randomness are two sides of the same coin. In that case, debates about metaphysical underpinnings for natural order are archaic at best (Edis 2010). Whatever its origins, science now does without God. Efforts to bring science back into the religious fold—attempts to construct a ‘theistic science’ or to ‘Islamize science’—have negligible prospects for success. They are invariably connected to failed research programs such as intelligent design creationism.

Today, science inspires a comprehensive naturalism as a very broad description of our world. But the rise of science does not conform to any atheistic morality tale either. The rise of atheism was much more closely linked to the revival of doubting currents within philosophy, coupled with moral and social discontent with traditional Christianity and Judaism in Europe. In the traumatic transition to

modernity, science and religious doubt ran on parallel tracks: both found opportunities for growth in changing circumstances where intellectual life had become more independent from religion. A connection between science and nonbelief was forged by Enlightenment humanism, which treated science as symbol of human reason and the promise of improved lives. But science could and does work without atheism, and atheism remains a position adopted largely for philosophical and ethical, rather than scientific reasons.

CONCLUSION: ATHEISM AND SCIENCE IN TENSION

Even if atheism and the rise of science are not closely connected, nonbelievers may still be tempted to read a triumphal note into the history of science since the Scientific Revolution. After all, the sciences today operate in a framework of uncompromising naturalism, much to the frustration of conservative religious thinkers (e.g., Johnson 1995). It appears that our world is best described without any supernatural agency. Atheists can claim considerable support from this naturalism (Edis 2002). In practice, however, atheism is more than the claim that we inhabit a godless world. Theism makes sense only within rich religious cultures that give meaning to the bare claim that there is a God. Atheism similarly comes alive in a richer web of beliefs and commitments, including moral ideals. Ideologies such as Enlightenment humanism, communism, libertarianism and so forth give definition to atheism, making it more than polished grouchiness directed toward monotheism. But non-supernatural commitments can also come into tension with science.

One example is the confidence in human capability that is at the heart of atheist celebrations of science. This has a utopian side. Consider economics, a social science—quite possibly a pseudoscience (Keen 2011)—that abounds with Enlightenment themes such as rationality, the greater social good, and human creativity. Mainstream economics is also given to fantasies about perpetual exponential growth, and expectations that any resource bottleneck can be overcome through human ingenuity. Such reckless optimism about human capability invites conflict with limitations imposed by physical science. And yet, as the prospect of catastrophic climate change challenges unconstrained capitalism, many libertarians sceptical of supernatural and paranormal claims have tended to favour their ideological commitments over mainstream science, sometimes even supporting global warming denial.¹

Libertarian and communist abuses of science are not inevitable for atheism, which need not get carried away with its utopian tendencies. Nonetheless, these abuses are useful reminders that the connection between science and atheism is historical and contingent. It can be broken.

A deeper source of tension with science comes from the transcendentalist tendencies that remain within atheism. Large-scale human societies have usually depended upon alleged transcendent facts beyond nature to legitimate their moral structures. Atheism, which has heavily depended on moral criticisms of religion, can end up proposing non-divine transcendent realities, which do not sit well with the naturalism of present-day science.

Since atheists have regularly been held morally suspect, an important part of atheist literature has been efforts to show that morality is possible without God (see Erik Wielenberg's 'Atheism and Morality'). Monotheistic concepts of morality often veer toward a kind of hard moral objectivity rooted in the nature of God. Theists often claim that there are objectively true moral facts, available to any sufficiently well-informed rational person, that are binding, universal, and motivating, and that are independent of human interests and agreements. There is a state of affairs that *ought to be*, that is not relative to existent human needs and human nature, and that can therefore be a basis for moral

criticism of present human nature. Such moral facts, if they exist, would seem not to be supervenient on facts about nature that science deals with—they gesture beyond nature. Atheists can be tempted to claim that such hard moral facts are still available in a world with no supernatural agency.

Secular moral philosophers usually settle for something less full-blooded in the realm of morality. But atheists who consider religion especially toxic often want nothing less than a complete substitute for what God was supposed to provide. Curiously, some think that science can discover the requisite hard moral facts (Harris 2010; Carrier 2011). In practice, such unconvincing efforts highlight the tension between a naturalism rooted in science and atheist ambitions to displace religious morality.

The history of atheism also brings out another source of tension with science. Atheism has been, even throughout the increasing dominance of naturalism linked to science, predominantly rooted in the ancient philosophical tradition. Grandiose metaphysical systems are out of fashion, but there still is a worn routine followed by arguments for atheism. The atheist philosopher of religion dismantles the classical proofs of God, addressing the latest variations provided by the current generation of theist philosophers of religion. He then makes a positive case against God, exploring arguments for the conceptual incoherence of divinity, inconsistencies contained in the classical properties of God, and so forth. And then he brings up the ancient problem of evil, perhaps in a new variation to satisfy requirements for academic originality (Smith [1979] 1989; Martin 1990). This sets the stage for his theistic colleagues to find the shortcomings of the latest versions of atheological arguments. As with the theistic arguments, such shortcomings are always there to be found.

The philosophy of religion—especially the neoscholasticism that is the analytic philosophy of religion—is characterized by this persistent stalemate. Indeed, the philosophy of religion remains very traditional and metaphysical in orientation. Hence it is only weakly connected to other areas in philosophy, and almost completely disconnected from scientific disciplines, including studies of religion.

This means that modern atheism risks becoming stagnant, due to its heavy investment in the traditional philosophy of religion. At the same time that a comprehensive naturalism has become entrenched in mainstream science and has deeply influenced most areas of philosophy, atheistic philosophy and science seem increasingly irrelevant to one another.

That tensions exist between science and atheism should not be surprising. Theists, perhaps, could have expected a God-given harmony between their moral and philosophical inclinations, human history, and the workings of nature. Atheists do not have any such pre-established harmony available to them, especially if they take the naturalist bent of modern science seriously. The history of science and atheism is not over; there is a lot that is ripe for change.

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CHAPTER 27

ATHEISM AND DARWINISM

DAVID P. BARASE

INTRODUCTION

ALLOW me, please, a personal disclosure: I am an evolutionary biologist *and* an atheist, with the two tightly connected. My atheism is reinforced by my training and commitment as an evolutionary biologist, and similarly, my evolutionism supports my atheism. But atheism and evolution are not necessarily entwined for everybody. Thus, it is possible for an atheist to neither understand nor approve of evolution, and—more to the present point—nothing prevents one from being a devout religious believer and an evolutionist, too. But the accommodation of religious faith and evolutionary science is difficult, more so than is consistent with the received wisdom from both liberal theologians and even the official position of the US National Academy of Sciences.

In short, it is *possible* for religion (by which I mean any of the traditional Abrahamic monotheistic belief systems) and evolutionary science to coexist, but only at significant cost. The believer must exercise her belief or embrace her science with substantially less confidence than otherwise, or the science adherent must follow a theology that differs considerably and perhaps irrevocably from the mainstream. Of course, there is simply no question that religious fundamentalism—belief in the literality of either the Old or New Testament or of the Qur'an—is utterly inconsistent with evolutionism, and *vice versa*; any religion that makes explicit, scientifically outrageous 'truth claims' (such as that Eve was created from Adam's rib, or that the world is approximately 6000 years old) necessarily precludes any pretence of real-world validity.¹

If one accepts the definition of atheism proposed for this publication—a failure or refusal to believe in God—then the impact of evolutionary science (aka Darwinism) is, on balance, to promote atheism. On the other hand, with a different, more active definition of atheism—a positive disbelief in God, rather than merely a passive absence of belief—evolution's impact is somewhat lessened, since evolution doesn't mandate disbelief so much as make traditional belief substantially more challenging.

Prior to Darwin and evolutionary science, Christianity in particular derived several potent supports from humanity's comparative ignorance about biology in general and about the place of *Homo sapiens* among other living things in particular. Among the most notable consequences of Darwinism with respect to religious belief has been the withdrawal (or at minimum, a substantial weakening) of at least two of these supports, which we might call the *Argument from Complexity* and the *Reassurance of Specialness*. In addition, evolutionary science predisposes its adherents toward a third perspective, here dubbed the *Reiteration of Theodicy*, which also negatively impacts religious belief. This unholy trinity captures much of the dynamic between evolutionary science² and atheism.

THE ARGUMENT FROM COMPLEXITY

The *Argument from Complexity* has been most closely associated with the Rev. William Paley, who famously articulated it in his metaphor of the watch and the watch-maker, more than two centuries ago. Paley asks us to imagine strolling on a heath and finding a watch. Unlike a pile of stones, for example, this complex object leads, according to Paley,

to the inference we think is inevitable, that the watch must have had a maker—that there must have existed, at some time and at some place or other, an artificer or artificers who formed it for the purpose which we find it actually to answer, who comprehended its construction and designed its use. ([1802] 1836: 388)

The *Argument from Complexity* resonated strongly with Paley's nineteenth-century audience, and still does today, playing upon the widely shared (but rarely stated) assumption that something complex couldn't have arisen 'on its own', but rather, must have been created by something or someone fancier yet. A house implies a carpenter; a watch, a watch-maker. So when we encounter things that are truly complex—other living things, our own bodies—we 'naturally' assume that they must have been crafted by something or someone yet more intelligent and complicated. This argument, however, is not dispositive, or even close, since it readily leads to the response that in the end, God hardly satisfies the presumed requirement that there must always be a higher-level designer, because one can always ask, 'Who designed God?' Thus, God is not so much an answer as a way of avoiding the question altogether. Even if one accepts that complexity can only be produced by yet higher-level of complexity, then positing God merely adds another 'explanation' to be explained. Insofar as there is a need to understand complexity (and there is!), it hardly suffices to posit the spontaneous and uncaused existence of something infinite orders of magnitude more complex.

Moreover, the *Argument from Complexity* is in fact inadequate even on its own terms, since complex things are made by simple things all the time: Organs from molecules, molecules from atoms, and atoms from subatomic particles. How much simpler, more basic, can you get than a quark, or whatever emerges as the simplest subatomic particle? If God is necessitated by a watch, then is he or she also required to explain atoms, molecules, and so forth? It is possible, of course, to answer this question in the affirmative, but in that case, God is simply necessitated by the very fact of the physical world's existence; accordingly, any discussion of science (or watches, or human beings) is unnecessary since the case for God is closed.

Moreover, it is emphatically not true that complex organization can only be achieved by a yet-more-complex organizer. This, specifically, goes to the heart of how evolution by natural selection functions: By its very nature—the combination of random variation with selective retention, iterated many times—natural selection creates extraordinary complexity in the absence of anything resembling a creator.

Natural selection is a process by which randomly generated diversity—via mutation, and, for most organisms, sexual recombination as well—is sifted and winnowed, such that by selective retention of more fit outcomes over those less fit, remarkably non-random outcomes are readily produced. No magic, no mysticism, no creator required. Natural selection—the differential reproduction of some genes and genotypes over others—is a wholly natural process whose effect is precisely to produce high levels of non-randomness, occurring inevitably as the laws of statistics and probability play themselves out.

Although not specifically arguing against the existence of God, evolution by natural selection thus provides a scientifically sound and intellectually coherent explanation for the organic world, thereby rendering God superfluous as an explanatory concept ... and not for the first time. It is said that

before the great mathematical astronomer, Laplace, presented Napoleon with his *magnum opus*,

Someone had told Napoleon that the book contained no mention of the name of God; Napoleon, who was fond of putting embarrassing questions, received it with the remark, ‘M. Laplace, they tell me you have written this large book on the system of the universe, and have never even mentioned its Creator.’ Laplace, who, though the most supple of politicians, was as stiff as a martyr on every point of his philosophy, drew himself up and answered bluntly, *Je n'avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là.* (‘I had no need of that hypothesis.’) (Rouse Ball [1908] 2010: 418)

This is not the appropriate forum to dilate upon the details of natural selection as currently understood, or to demonstrate the evolutionary explanations for such seemingly ‘irreducibly complex’ phenomena as the eye, the biochemistry of blood-clotting, or the origin of subcellular microstructure. Suffice it to note that the *Argument from Complexity* is utterly defunct among biologists (e.g., Coyne 2010), resurrected these days only by creationists whose reliance upon such an argument simply bespeaks their own ignorance of evolutionary science. Nonetheless, and despite the fact that this chestnut has had numerous scientific stakes driven through its heart, it keeps resurrecting itself like a cinematic version of the undead, staggering, zombie-like and covered with flies, back for more. Such is the appeal (more emotional than empirical) of the *Argument from Complexity*. As Richard Dawkins has written:

All appearances to the contrary the only watchmaker in nature is the blind forces of physics, albeit deployed in a very special way. A true watchmaker has foresight: he designs his cogs and springs, and plans their interconnections, with a future purpose in his mind’s eye. Natural selection, the blind, unconscious automatic process which Darwin discovered, and which we now know is the explanation for the existence and apparently purposeful form of all life, has no purpose in mind. It has no mind and no mind’s eye. It does not plan for the future. It has no vision, no foresight, no sight at all. If it can be said to play the role of watchmaker in nature, it is the *blind* watchmaker. (1986: 5)

The bottom line is that the *Argument from Complexity* no longer has any scientific legitimacy, since natural selection has been shown over and over to be extraordinarily potent as a generator of almost limitless complexity. As suggested above, although its demolition does not necessarily mandate disbelief (i.e., atheism), by rendering this particular argument untenable, evolutionary science deprives religious believers of what had been a potent prop for their faith.

THE REASSURANCE OF SPEOALNESS

Whereas the *Argument from Complexity* was essentially an appeal to the believers’ intellect, the *Reassurance of Specialness* has long found favour because of its emotional salience. Picture the comedy routine in which a number of youngsters are dutifully lined up, saying good-bye to their grandmother, who kisses them in turn while whispering in the ear of each: ‘You are my favourite!’

It is a powerful conceit, that we are an especially cherished favourite, particularly when the favouring entity is a highly regarded figure; hence, the widespread and comforting notion that human beings have not only been created in the image of God (a chip off the old divine block) but are also uniquely valued and preferred. People are thus prone to an illusion of their own centrality, an insistence that the world somehow revolves around human beings as a species, as well as themselves as individuals. Whereas infantile narcissism is something predictable and eventually outgrown, centrality remains fundamental—dare I say ‘central’?—to the way many adults think of themselves. But this doesn’t make it true.

Almost by definition, we each experience our private subjectivity, a personal relationship with the universe, in return for which it is widely assumed that the universe reciprocates, even though there is

no objective evidence supporting this latter assumption, as well as considerable logic (notably including but not limited to evolutionary biology) urging that it is untrue. Moreover, even as the illusion of centrality and its closely associated *Reassurance of Specialness* may be useful, if not necessary, to normal day-to-day functioning (in a sense, analogous to the denial of one's eventual death), religious faith has long benefitted from the seductive reassurance it typically offers: Even as he orchestrates the fall or flight of every sparrow, God cares for each of us, as demonstrated not least by the 'fact' that we are not the product of some mindless, unintentional process, but rather, were specially created.

The seductive appeal of perceived centrality and its resulting *Reassurance of Specialness* may explain much of the public resistance to evolution, as well as the challenge that biology poses to the religiously devout. Thus, according to Francis Bacon in *The Wisdom of the Ancients* (1609), 'Man, if we look to final causes, may be regarded as the centre of the world [...] for the whole world works together in the service of man. [...] All things seem to be going about man's business and not their own' (quoted in Wormald 2003: 44). Such a perspective, although deluded, is comforting, and not uncommon. It may therefore be that when it comes to the phrase 'special creation', most people emphasize the wrong word, stressing *creation* whereas in fact the key concept, and the one that devout believers in particular find so attractive—verging on essential—is that it is presumed to be *special*. As with the descendants of that mythical and deservedly comic grandmother, we long to be the favourite of God or nature, and so, not surprisingly, we insist upon the notion of *special-ness*. The centre of our own subjective universe, we insist on being its objective centre as well.

In his celebrated and influential book, *Natural Theology* (1802), Paley wrote not only about complexity but also the following paean to the specialness of *Homo sapiens*:

The hinges in the wings of an earwig, and the joints of its antennae, are as highly wrought, as if the Creator had had nothing else to finish. We see no signs of diminution of care by multiplication of objects, or of distraction of thought by variety. We have no reason to fear, therefore, our being forgotten, or overlooked, or neglected. ([1802] 1838: 486)

A few decades earlier, in 1785, Thomas Jefferson had reacted as follows to the discovery of mammoth bones in the newly independent colonies: 'Such is the economy of nature, that no instance can be produced of her having permitted any one race of animals to become extinct' (quoted in Boorstin [1948] 1981: 37). The moral? Don't lose heart, fellow human beings! Just as there are thirty different species of lice that make their homes in the feathers of a single species of Amazonian parrot, each of them doubtless put there with *Homo sapiens* in mind, we can be confident that our existence is so important that we would never be ignored or abandoned. An accomplished amateur palaeontologist, Jefferson therefore remained convinced that there must be mammoths lumbering about somewhere in the unexplored arctic regions; similarly with the giant ground sloths whose bones had been discovered in Virginia, and which evoked comparable consternation among Jefferson's contemporaries.

At one point in Douglas Adams's hilarious *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*, a sperm whale plaintively wonders 'Why am I here? What's my purpose in life?' as it plummets toward the fictional planet Magrathea. This appealing but doomed creature had just been 'called into existence' several miles above the planet's surface, when a nuclear missile, directed at our heroes' space ship, was inexplicably transformed into a sperm whale via an 'Infinite Improbability Generator' (Adams [1979] 1989: 133-4). Evolution, too, is an improbability generator, although its outcomes are considerably more finite. Here, then, is a potentially dispiriting message for *Homo sapiens*: Every human being—just as every hippo, halibut, or hemlock tree—is similarly called into existence by that particular improbability generator called natural selection, after which we have no more inherent purpose, no

more reason for being, no more central significance to the cosmos, than Douglas Adams's naive and ill-fated whale, whose blubber was soon to bespatter the Magrathean landscape.

Contra Mr Jefferson, many—indeed, most—species have in fact gone extinct, and despite Rev. Paley's reassurances, an understanding of evolution mandates that we have legitimate reason to fear our being forgotten, overlooked, and neglected, since such a perspective greatly diminishes—indeed, it altogether demolishes—any reassurance of human specialness. Of course, a greatly weakened case can still be made: There are many aspects of humanity that qualify as 'uniquely human', such as our remarkably large brains, extraordinary hairlessness (for a mammal), upright posture, and so forth. But every species is unique; that's part of how we identify them as species. There is little reason to think that *Homo sapiens* is, for want of a better phrase, uniquely unique.³

For a comically brilliant take-down of the *Reassurance of Specialness*, consider Rupert Brooke's poem 'Heaven', which imagines the after-life yearnings not of human beings, but of fish:

Fish, (fly-replete, in depth of June,
Dawdling away their wat'ry noon)
Ponder deep wisdom, dark or clear,
Each secret fishy hope or fear.
Fish say, they have their Stream and Pond;
But is there anything Beyond?
This life cannot be All, they swear,
For how unpleasant, if it were!
One may not doubt that, somehow, Good
Shall come of Water and of Mud;
And, sure, the reverent eye must see
A Purpose in Liquidity.
We darkly know, by Faith we cry,
The future is not Wholly Dry.
Mud unto mud!—Death eddies near—
Not here the appointed End, not here!
But somewhere, beyond Space and Time.
Is wetter water, slimier slime!
And there (they trust) there swimmeth One
Who swam ere rivers were begun,
Immense, of fishy form and mind,
Squamous, omnipotent, and kind;
And under that Almighty Fin,
The littlest fish may enter in.
Oh! never fly conceals a hook,
Fish say, in the Eternal Brook,
But more than mundane weeds are there,
And mud, celestially fair;
Fat caterpillars drift around,
And Paradisal grubs are found;
Unfading moths, immortal flies,
And the worm that never dies.
And in that Heaven of all their wish,
There shall be no more land, say fish.

(Brooke 1915: 27)

When Sigmund Freud chose to identify three great intellectual earthquakes, each of them body-blows to humanity's narcissism, his own contribution figured prominently: First, Freud listed replacement of the Ptolemaic, earth-centred universe by its Copernican rival; second, Darwin's insights into the natural, biological origin of all living things, *Homo sapiens* included; and third, Freud's own suggestion that much—indeed, most—of our mental activity goes on 'underground', in the

unconscious. (It is interesting to consider that even as he recounted a history of diminished human importance, Freud wasn't shy about his own!) In any event, many of *Homo sapiens*' most glorious scientific achievements, rather than expanding our self-image, have paradoxically diminished it, an emotional readjustment that many can be expected to resist and that adds to the tension between the objective, evidence-based science of evolutionary biology and the subjective attraction of religious belief, whether by human beings or fish.

In his famous discourse on the different kinds of causation, Aristotle distinguished, among other things, between 'final' and 'efficient' causes, the former being the goal or purpose of something, and the latter, the immediate mechanism responsible. We might accordingly refer to the 'sufficiency of efficient causes'. In other words, since Darwin, it is no longer useful to ask 'Why has a particular species been created?' It is not scientifically productive to assume that the huge panoply of millions of species—including every obscure soil micro-organism and each parasite in every deep-sea fish—exists with regard to and somehow because of human beings. Similarly, it is no longer useful to suppose that we, as individuals, are the centre of the universe, either. Efficient causes are enough ... enough, at least, to cast substantial doubt on the *Reassurance of Specialness* that has helped make religious belief so appealing.

The truth, as perceived by evolutionists, is more daunting: The natural world evolved as a result of mindless, purposeless material events, and human beings—not just as a species but each of us, as individuals—are equally without intrinsic meaning or purpose. 'We find no vestige of a beginning', wrote pioneering geologist James Hutton, in 1788, 'no prospect of an end' (quoted in Gould 1987: 65). For some, this prospect is bracing; for others, bleak, if not terrifying. Pascal, gazing similarly into a vastness devoid of human meaning or purpose, wrote that 'the eternal silence of these infinite spaces frightens me' ([1670] 2003: 61), just as Nietzsche noted that 'when we stare into the abyss, the abyss stares into us'.

Of course, maybe I am wrong, and Hutton too, and also Copernicus as well as Darwin. Maybe our lives are genuinely central to some cosmic design. Many people contend that they have a personal relationship with God; for all I know, maybe God reciprocates, tailoring His grace to every such individual, granting to each of us precisely the degree of centrality that so many crave. Maybe every individual has a role to play, and maybe—as so many people in distress like to assure themselves—we will never be given more than we are capable of bearing. Maybe we aren't Magrathean whales after all, flopping meaninglessly and doomed to fall. And maybe, even now, in some as yet undiscovered land, there are modern mastodons, joyously cavorting with giant sloths and their ilk, testimony to the unflagging concern of a deity or at minimum, a natural design that remains devoted to all creatures ... especially, of course, ourselves.

But anyone with the faintest understanding of evolution cannot help being sceptical, a scepticism that, in turn, is bound to discomfit those yearning for the *Reassurance of Specialness*.

THE REITERATION OF THEODICY

As noted earlier, neither evolutionary science's assault on the *Argument from Complexity* nor its comparable treatment of the *Reassurance of Specialness* necessarily mandates atheism, although these two acts of dismantlement unquestionably make religious belief more difficult. The impact is similar when it comes to the third of evolution's triadic encouragement of atheism, whose effect once again is not to *require* disbelief in a deity, but at minimum to strongly militate toward a theology significantly at odds with the currently regnant perspective.

Even if the biological world isn't evidence of God's existence by virtue of its presumed inexplicable intricacy (the *Argument from Complexity*), and even if we aren't the literal or even metaphoric centre of the universe (the *Reassurance of Specialness*), at least we and the rest of organic 'creation' are supposed to be wonderfully well designed, testimony both to God's beneficence and to her omnipotence. And so we come to the third component of evolution's triadic challenge to religious belief, the *Reiteration of Theodicy*.

In 1829, Francis Henry Egerton, the 8th Earl of Bridgewater, bequeathed £8000 to the Royal Society of London to support the publication of works 'On the Power, Wisdom, and Goodness of God, as Manifested in the Creation'. The resulting *Bridgewater Treatises*, published between 1833 and 1840, are classic statements of 'natural theology', seeking to demonstrate God's existence by examining the natural world's 'perfection'.

These days, biologists are often inclined to point, similarly, to the extraordinary adaptedness of living things, but as evidence of the power of natural selection, as manifested in evolution. Such gestures are understandable and perhaps even scientifically laudable, both contributing to and reflecting a healthy appreciation of the Darwinian process and of the organic world it has produced. But they obscure what is in fact an important distinction between evolution by natural selection and its premier alternative (at least among the biologically illiterate): Special Creation, or, in its barely disguised incarnation, 'intelligent design theory'.

The reality is that evolution does not invariably produce perfection nor, consequently, indications of an intelligent designer. Indeed, it doesn't even yield evidence of a benevolent one. It warrants emphasis that even though natural selection regularly generates marvels of improbability (a living thing is, above all else, tremendously non-random and low-entropy), it is necessarily a blundering, imperfect, and tremendously *unintelligent* engineer, as compared to any purportedly omniscient and omnipotent creator. Ironically, it may well be the stupidity and inefficiency of evolution—its manifold design-flaws—that argue most strongly for its material and wholly earth-bound nature, constituting the third major challenge that evolutionary science poses to religious belief: the *Reiteration of Theodicy*.

Even without evolution, theodicy has long persisted as a troublesome problem for theologians. The challenge, in brief, is to reconcile the existence of unmerited suffering with the presumption that God is both omnipotent and omnibenevolent. Imagine an equilateral triangle, one vertex labelled 'unmerited suffering', one 'God is omnipotent', and the other 'God is omnibenevolent'. The problem is how to justify including all three in the same conceptual space: Unmerited suffering could co-exist with an omnipotent God so long as that God wasn't completely benevolent. Similarly, such suffering is not inconsistent with a well-meaning God who lacks full control of all things. And finally, it is at least imaginable (although unlikely) that God is both good and all-powerful, but that suffering is either illusory or warranted.

In any event, the theodicy problem has long bedevilled religious belief, and if anything, evolutionary science adds to the devilry by making it increasingly clear that any purported divine creator and organizer of the universe is either incompetent or downright nasty, or both.

Natural selection is a mathematically precise process, whose outcome should be—and for the most part, is—a remarkable array of 'optimal' structures and systems. A naive view therefore assumes that the biological world is perfect and predictable, like a carefully orchestrated geometric proof or a billiard game in which a skilled player can be expected to employ the correct angles, inertia, force and momentum. Living things do reveal some pretty fancy shooting, such that specialists no less than biologically literate lay-people are inclined to applaud, and rightly so.

So it was that even David Hume—materialist and atheist—marvelled at how the parts of living

things ‘are adjusted to each other with an accuracy which ravishes into admiration all men who have ever contemplated them’ ([1779] 2007: 19).

But admiration is not always warranted. Gilbert and Sullivan’s ‘Mikado’ sings about ‘letting the punishment fit the crime’, gleefully announcing, for example, that the billiard sharp will be condemned to play ‘on a cloth untrue, with a twisted cue, and elliptical billiard balls’. To a degree not generally appreciated, the organic world contains all sorts of imperfections, and as a result, shots often go awry—not because the laws of physics and geometry aren’t valid, or because the player isn’t skilful, but because even Minnesota Fats was subject to the sting of reality.

Make no mistake, evolution—and thus, nature—is wonderful. The smooth-running complexity of physiological systems, anatomical structures, ecological interactions, and behavioural adjustments are powerful testimony to the effectiveness of natural selection in generating highly nonrandom systems such as the extraordinary complexity of the human brain, the remarkable lock-and-key fit between organism and environment, the myriad interconnecting details of how a cell reproduces itself, extracts energy from complex molecules, and so forth.

But imperfections intrude, and in many ways. Among evolution’s numerous constraints, one of the most vexing and unavoidable is history, the simple fact that living things have not been created *de novo*, but rather, have evolved from antecedents. If they were specially and intelligently designed in each case, there is no reason for the designer not to have invariably chosen the optimum pattern; insofar as they are constrained by their past, on the other hand, and are the products of small incremental steps altogether lacking in foresight, living things are necessarily jerry-built and more than a little ramshackle.

It might be optimal, for example, if elephants could fly. After all, because of local over-population in increasingly threatened game parks, many elephants are under-nourished, even starving, but for some reason they are unable to hover thirty feet above the ground and eat leaves currently beyond their reach. Walt Disney’s Dumbo notwithstanding, the evolutionary past of today’s pachyderms severely constrains their present and future. An all-powerful and all-benevolent creator, witnessing (or better yet, anticipating) the horrible spectacle of elephants starving to death could have been expected to ameliorate things by providing at least a few magical Dumbo-style flight feathers.

Next, ask yourself whether, if you were designing the optimum exit for a human foetus, you would engineer a route that passes through the narrow confines of the pelvic girdle. Add to this the tragic reality that childbirth in our species is not only painful but downright dangerous and sometimes lethal, owing to occasional cephalo-pelvic disproportion (literally, the baby’s head being too large for the mother’s birth canal), breech presentation, and so forth. This design flaw is all the more dramatic if you simply glance at a human skeleton: There is plenty of room for even the most stubbornly mis-oriented, bloat-brained foetus to be easily delivered, anywhere in that vast non-bony region below the ribs! And in fact, that is precisely what obstetricians do, when performing a Caesarean section.

It is notable that evolution has altogether neglected the simple, straight-forward solution, which would have been for the vagina to open anywhere in the lower abdomen. Instead, it stubbornly and stupidly insisted that the vaginal canal thread its way through that ridiculously narrow pelvic ring, thus requiring the poor foetus to do the same. Why? Because human beings are mammals, and therefore tetrapods by history. As such, our ancestors carried their spines parallel to the ground; it was only with our insistence on upright posture that the pelvic girdle had to be rotated, thereby making a tight fit out of what for other mammals is nearly always an easy birth passage. An engineer who designed such a system from scratch—i.e., who specially created it—would get a failing grade. But evolution didn’t have the luxury of intelligent design. Rather, it had to make do with the materials

available. (Admittedly, it can be argued that the dangers and discomforts of childbirth were pre-planned after all, since Genesis gives us God's judgment upon Eve that as punishment for her disobedience in Eden: 'in pain you shall bring forth children' [Gen 3.16]. Might this imply that if Eve had only restrained herself, her vagina would have been where every woman's belly-button currently resides?)

On to men. Let's note first that an especially awkward design flaw of the human body—male and female alike—results from the close anatomical association of the excretory and reproductive systems, a proximity attributable to a long-standing, primitive vertebrate connection, and one that isn't only troubling for those who are sexually fastidious. Moreover, although there is no obvious downside to the deplorable fact that the male urethra does double-duty, carrying both semen and urine, most elderly men have occasion to regret that the prostate gland is directly adjacent to the bladder, so that enlargement of the former impinges awkwardly on the latter. In addition, as human testicles descended—both in evolution and in embryology—from their position inside the body cavity, the vas deferens, which connects testis to urethra, became looped around the ureter (which carries urine from kidneys to bladder), resulting in an altogether ridiculous arrangement that would never have occurred if evolution could have anticipated the problem and, like an even minimally competent structural designer, created male tubing that ran in a direct line.

A final example, although many more are available: The primitive vertebrate system, still found among some of today's chordates, combined both feeding and respiration (just as excretion and reproduction used to overlap, and still do in many species). Water went in, food was filtered out, and passive diffusion sufficed for respiration. As body size increased, a separate respiratory system was added, but by piggy-backing onto the pre-existing digestive plumbing. By consequence, access to what became the lungs was achieved only by sharing a common ante-room with in-coming food. As a result, people are vulnerable to choking. The Heimlich manoeuvre is a wonderful innovation, but it wouldn't be needed if evolution had the simple foresight to design separate passages for food and air, instead of combining the two. But here as in other respects, natural selection operated by small, mindless increments, without any attention to any bigger picture or anything approaching a wise, benevolent over-view.

It must be emphasized that the preceding does not constitute an argument against evolution; in fact, quite the opposite! Thus, if living things (including human beings) *were* the products of special creation rather than of natural selection, then the flawed nature of biological systems, including ourselves, would pose some awkward questions, to say the least. If God created 'man' in his image, does this imply that he, too, has comparably ill-constructed knee joints, a poorly engineered lower back, dangerously narrow birth canal, and ridiculously ill-conceived urogenital plumbing? A novice engineer could have done better. The point is that these and other structural flaws aren't 'anti-evolutionary' arguments at all, but rather cogent demonstrations of the contingent, unplanned, entirely natural nature of natural selection. Evolution has had to make do with an array of constraints, including—but not limited to—those mandated by past history.

In short, we are profoundly imperfect, deep in our nature. And in these imperfections reside some of the best arguments for our equally profound naturalness, and part of the challenge posed by evolution to religious belief via what I am calling the *Reiteration of Theodicy*.

Thus far, I have expatiated upon the question of ostensibly divine competence, which leaves unmentioned the other supposed component of theodicy's conceptual triangle: divine benevolence. Consider this suggestion, by Alexander Pope, in his *Essay On Man*:

All nature is but art, unknown to thee;
All chance, direction which thou canst not see;

All discord, harmony not understood;
All partial evil, universal good;
And spite of pride, in erring reason's spite,
One truth is clear: whatever is is right.

(Pope [1734] 2006: 280)

This ‘rightness’, moreover, is presumably due to the work of an all-benevolent God. But what if—as biology so clearly reveals—much of the organic world isn’t at all right, with ‘right’ defined as adhering to basic ethical norms?

Evolution by natural selection is an extraordinary and endlessly fascinating subject. It has produced you and me and every other living creature. But good it isn’t! Physicists to my knowledge have never proposed that the law of gravity, the various electromagnetic ‘rules’ that hold sway among subatomic particles, and the increase in entropy should be consulted as a source of ethical good. (If so, then we ought to crawl on our bellies, hold fast to anyone different from ourselves—as positive adheres to negative—and never clean our rooms.) Evolution by natural selection—as opposed to special creation—is every bit as natural as Newton’s Laws, Planck’s constant, or relativity, and every bit as devoid of moral direction. Like the laws of physics, the laws of biology simply describe what is, not what should be.

If anything, the evolutionary process is more negative than neutral when it comes to humane values; it is likely to produce results that most ethicists should reject. Natural selection operates as a ratio, with the numerator reflecting the success of genes in projecting copies of themselves into the future and the denominator, the success of alternative alleles. Since a gene (or an individual, a population, even—in theory—a species) maximizes its success by producing the largest such ratio, it can do so either by reducing the denominator or increasing the numerator. Most creatures, most of the time, find it easier to do the latter than the former, which is why living things generally are more concerned with feathering their nests than with de-feathering those of others.

Taken by itself, such self-regard isn’t the stuff to gladden an ethicist’s heart. But to make matters worse, biological research has revealed a vast panoply of behaviour whereby living things have no hesitation in minimizing the denominator, trampling over others in pursuit of their own biological benefit. We have long known that the natural world is replete with grisly cases of predation, parasitism, a universe of ghastly horrors all generated by natural selection and unleavened by the slightest ethical qualms on the part of perpetrators.

In her stunning memoir, *Pilgrim at Tinker Creek* (1974), Annie Dillard described her horror at watching a frog whose innards were liquefied and then sucked dry by a giant water bug. Dillard also shared her puzzled outrage at the phenomenal wastefulness of an evolutionary process that generates hundreds, often thousands of tiny but perfect lives, only to snuff most of them out, relentlessly and heartlessly.

Worse yet, perhaps, are the cases of vicious intraspecific self-promotion at the expense of others. For example, biologists have documented infanticide in numerous species, including lions and many nonhuman primates such as langur monkeys and chimpanzees. The basic pattern is that when a dominant male is overthrown, his replacement often systematically kills those nursing infants unrelated to himself, thereby inducing the lactating mothers to resume their sexual cycling, whereupon they mate with their infant’s murderer. It is truly awful, such that even hard-eyed biologists had a difficult time accepting its ubiquity, and even—until recently—its ‘naturalness’. But natural it is, and a readily understood consequence of natural selection as a mindless, automatic and value-free process, whose driving principle is if anything not just amoral but—by any decent human standard—downright immoral.

Add cases of animal rape, deception, nepotism, siblicide, matricide and cannibalism, and it should be clear that natural selection has blindly, mechanically, yet effectively favoured self-betterment and self-promotion, unmitigated by any ethical considerations. I say this fully aware of an important recent trend in evolutionary research: The demonstration that animals often reconcile, make peace, and cooperate. No less than the morally repulsive examples just cited, however, these behaviours also reflect the profound self-centredness of the evolutionary process. If the outcome in certain cases is less reprehensible than outright slaughter, it is only because natural selection only sometimes works to reduce the denominator of the ‘fitness ratio’.

Most of the time, it increases the numerator. But *all* the time, the only outcome assessed by natural selection is whether a given tactic works—whether it enhances fitness—not whether it is good, right, just, admirable or in any sense moral. Evolution by natural selection, in short, is a wonderful thing to learn *about* ... but a terrible thing to learn *from*. And for those clinging to a belief in God as originator and/or driving force behind evolution, it poses a deep dilemma: Either God is ethically vacant (or, worse yet, downright nasty) or simply incompetent.

By the end of the nineteenth century, Thomas Huxley was perhaps the most famous living biologist, renowned in the English-speaking world as ‘Darwin’s bulldog’ for his fierce and determined defence of natural selection. But he defended evolution as a scientific explanation, not a moral touchstone. In 1893, Huxley made this especially clear in a lecture titled ‘Evolution and Ethics’, delivered to a packed house at Oxford University. ‘The practice of that which is ethically best’, he stated,

what we call goodness or virtue—involves a course of conduct which, in all respects, is opposed to that which leads to success in the cosmic struggle for existence. In place of ruthless self-assertion it demands self-restraint; in place of thrusting aside, or treading down, all competitors, it requires that the individual shall not merely respect, but shall help his fellows; its influence is directed, not so much to the survival of the fittest, as to the fitting of as many as possible to survive. ([1893] 2009: 81-2)

‘The ethical progress of society depends’, according to Huxley, ‘not on imitating the cosmic process, [that is, evolution by natural selection] still less in running away from it, but in combating it’ (*ibid.*: 83). It might well be similarly required of believers in both God and evolution to combat those alleged works of God, a presumably odious requirement that ‘evolutionary atheists’ are spared.

NON-OVERLAPPING MAGISTERIA?

The unholy evolutionary trinity just described unquestionably leaves believers in a difficult position, but not an impossible one. A popular response is to insist upon ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ or *noma*⁴ (Gould 2002), whereby it is claimed that science and religion do not conflict because the former is concerned with describing and understanding things as they are whereas the latter deals with what should be. If true, such a position would indeed be tenable, but it is only half-true: Science does in fact concern itself with describing and understanding the natural world, and it typically refrains from taking a normative stance. But religion does not reciprocate: The reality is that religions constantly foray into the natural world, including not just such obvious matters as the literal origin of the universe, of human beings and other organisms (e.g., the Book of Genesis), but also specific statements, many of which clearly contradict the teachings of science (e.g., revitalizing dead people, transmuting water into wine, etc.), as well as others that are scientifically vacant (e.g. the existence of the soul, as well as of anything ‘supernatural’). *Noma* is appealing to conflict-averse, devout believers who wish to have their religious cake and swallow evolution too, but it is intellectually inconsistent.

Nor does it work to claim, à la Spinoza, that God is essentially the laws that govern the physical and material universe. It is senseless to pray to the law of gravity, or, for that matter, to natural selection.

According to *noma* adherents, moreover, science cannot tell us fundamentally why we are here—but in fact, it can! Each of us exists as an individual precisely because a particular sperm met a particular egg; the rest was ontogeny. And as a species, we exist because of natural selection. If by ‘why’, *noma* supporters mean what were we put here to do?, the answer is equally clear: Whatever we choose. Or rather, there is simply no evidence for any purpose of any sort. In this regard, there is not simply an absence of evidence, but all the evidence we have strongly points to the fact that the cupboard of purpose is altogether bare, except for the morally vacant one of genes replicating themselves.

The notion of conflict, battle, struggle or war between science and religion is likely to be unappealing, especially for peace activists such as myself. I acknowledge, moreover, that *noma* is the official stance prescribed by the pro-evolution National Center for Science Education. But as appealing as it may be to say ‘You’re both right’, or ‘Each is correct in its own domain’, I believe that the very idea reeks of intellectual cowardice and dishonesty. (Fortunately, a ‘war’ between science and religion need not generate real casualties, and I for one refuse to be intimidated by the prospect of such intellectual ‘battles’.)

An alternative to *noma*’s overt denial of the incompatibilities between evolution and religion is simply to ignore them and to maintain that one is somehow incorporated within the other. Here, a model can be found in the curious case of Tycho Brahe, an influential Danish star-charter of the late 16th century who mentored the great German astronomer and mathematician, Johannes Kepler. In his own right, Brahe achieved remarkable accuracy in measuring the positions of planets as well. But Brahe’s greatest contribution (at least for my purpose) was one that he would doubtless prefer to leave forgotten.

Deep in his heart, Brahe rejected the newly proclaimed Copernican model of the universe, the heretical system that threatened to wrench the Earth from its privileged position at the centre of creation and relegate it to just one of many planets that circle the sun. But Brahe was also a careful scientist whose observations were undeniable, even as they made him uncomfortable: The five known planets of Brahe’s day (Mercury, Venus, Mars, Jupiter, and Saturn) unquestionably circled the sun. Copernicus, alas, was right, and nothing could be done about it. But Tycho Brahe, troubled of spirit yet inventive of mind, came up with a solution, an ingenious strategic intellectual retreat and regrouping that allowed him to accept what was irrefutably true while still clinging stubbornly to what he cherished even more: What he wanted to be true. And so Brahe proposed that whereas the five planets indeed circled the sun, that same sun and its planetary retinue obediently revolved around an immobile and central Earth!

Brahean solutions are not limited to astronomy. Rather, they can be found whenever evolutionary scientists proclaim that their science can be fully and readily incorporated into their religious belief, or when believers announce that their religion fits comfortably within a scientific worldview. But just as Tycho Brahe struggled (unsuccessfully) to avoid astronomical reality, there is no credible, consistent way to fold either perspective into the other without denying—or at least, substantially reformulating—fundamental tenets of one or the other, or of both.

Until roughly the sixteenth century, there was in fact very little conflict between science and Christianity, at least in part because the Church followed Augustine’s advice to refrain from counterpoising rationality and spirituality. For Augustine, this was because there could never be genuine conflict between these two—since both are the product of a benevolent God—and any apparent disagreement would only give aid and comfort to the heathen. Closer to the truth, I suspect,

is that Augustine recognized that disputes between God and the discoveries of human reason and empiricism would result in a diminution of the realm of faith, a situation sometimes described as ‘God of the gaps’, and one that is especially problematic to the faithful since as science expands, God necessarily shrinks.

For many, perhaps most, this is simply unacceptable. They respond to the inevitable discordance between science and religion by simply disavowing the former. Reacting to what he saw as the excesses of the Enlightenment, William Blake wrote his great poem, ‘Mock on, mock on, Voltaire, Rousseau’, which continued: ‘Mock on, mock on: ‘tis all in vain!/ You throw the sand against the wind,/ And the wind blows it back again’, and ends: ‘The Atoms of Democritus/ And Newton’s Particles of Light/ Are sands upon the Red Sea shore,/ Where Israel’s tents do shine so bright’ (Blake 2002: 105).

CONCLUSION

It has been said that the twentieth century was dominated by physics, and the nineteenth by chemistry and geology. The twenty-first—at least, so far—has showcased biology: Genomics, cloning, stem-cell research, neurobiology and evolutionary biology have replaced ‘rocket science’ as emblematic of that which is difficult and important. It is therefore notable—and not surprising—that biologists have been in the vanguard of a new and exciting inquiry, whereby scientists subject religious belief itself to scrutiny, seeking not so much to evaluate the truth or falsehood of religious claims as to assess the evolutionary origins, the adaptive significance of religious belief species-wide. Instead of those Atoms of Democritus and Newton’s Particles of Light, we have evolution by natural selection, which, unlike physics, offers the prospect of using its tools to search for the biological basis of religion, among other human mysteries (Barash 2012).

It is an exciting and important quest, one that might appear to hold the prospect of finalizing the defeat of religion by science. But for atheists to celebrate would be premature, in part because the biological evolution of religion has not (yet) been clarified, and may never be, since not only is religion itself multifactorial in its manifestations, but likely also in its evolutionary causation. Moreover, even if a clear case can eventually be made for ‘biologizing’ religion—identification of one or more specific alleles, brain regions, hormonal systems, adaptive values—evolutionary biology would then have made it yet more difficult for the religious to simultaneously accept evolutionary science ... but not impossible. To the *Argument from Complexity*, the *Reassurance of Specialness*, and the *Reiteration of Theodicy*, biology will have added a fourth, the *Naturalization of Religion*. True believers, however, will still be able to manoeuvre around such a finding, as they have the previous three: They will argue, for example, that rather than vitiate the legitimacy of religious belief, any *Naturalization of Religion* simply demonstrates how God has arranged to get things done, namely via the evolutionary process. In a sense, believers will likely pick up Blake’s mantle, pitching the bright, shining tents of their religious belief against the dry sands of biological and evolutionary science.

It may therefore seem that scientifically oriented atheists can never deliver a knock-out punch. And this may be the case. But efforts to naturalize religion will doubtless continue and the outcome, as with the previous three, will be to narrow yet more the argumentative space available to believers. This conjures the image of Zeno’s Paradox, in which an arrow never reaches its target (or Achilles never catches the tortoise, depending on the preferred version). But we all know that eventually, Achilles not only catches up but pulls ahead. And I would not want to be standing in front of the target once all the

arrows of evolutionary biology have been unleashed.

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CHAPTER 28

ATHEISM AND THE PHYSICAL SCIENCES

VICTOR J. STENGER

THALES AND THE ATOMISTS

BELIEF in gods was almost universal in the ancient world. Yet, some thinkers of the time envisaged a natural world in which gods and spirits play no role (see also David Sedley's 'From the Pre-Socratics to the Hellenistic Age').

Thales of Miletus (c.624–546 BCE) is regarded by many to have been the first scientist, as well as the first philosopher in the Western tradition (Russell 1945). Thales' innovation, which we now identify as pure science, was to explain observed phenomena by reference to natural forces rather than to imaginary, invisible spirits. For example, Thales explained earthquakes by hypothesizing that Earth floats on water and is rocked by waves. After all, the land we live on is surrounded by water.

Everyone can see that water is an important ingredient of nature, not some abstract or imagined entity. It appears in solid, liquid, and vapour forms and so is capable of change. All living things require water. Thales proposed that water was the sole ingredient from which everything else is assembled. Although this was wrong, as was his explanation of earthquakes, it represented a revolution in human thinking. Gods were no longer needed to understand the universe.

This was the first break between religion and science and illustrates why they are often in conflict—they have utterly opposing views about the nature of the world. Thales' view that everything can be reduced to an elementary substance became a fundamental principle of science, while, to this day, religion continues to assert the need for a reality beyond matter (Stenger 2013).

Following on the heels of Thales and similarly thinking Milesians, Leucippus (c.440 BCE) and Democritus (c.460 BCE–c.370 BCE) proposed that matter is composed of tiny indivisible particles. They called these particles *atoms*, meaning 'uncuttable'. This was a brilliant intuition, but, as we will see below, it was based on observation and not just the result of 'pure thought' as is sometimes asserted (Holt 2012). Today the atomic nature of matter is unquestioned.

The reduction of matter to an elementary level contrasts not only with the god-centered universe of traditional religions, it also clashes with the 'new spirituality' that claims a holistic universe bound to human consciousness. Once again, there is no sign of compatibility between religion and spirituality on the one side, and science and materialism on the other. Science as an alternative to religion was born in ancient Greece, although it would be millennia before the distinction between the two was clear in people's minds.

The atomists also introduced the notion that chance, or randomness, actually has creative power. This anticipated Darwinian evolution and modern cosmology, as well as some modern theologies in which God makes use of chance to effect change (Bartholomew 2008). The notion of creation by chance competes with that of intelligent causation.

The Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BCE) was a major proponent of atomism. His ideas were

immortalized by the Roman poet Lucretius (c.99–c.55 BCE), whose epic poem *De Rerum Natura—On the Nature of Things*—has reached us complete.

Epicurus's universe was eternal, and so lacked a creation, divine or otherwise. It was also boundless, with an unlimited number of atoms moving about in a void. There was no ruling mind or force and no life after death. Gods existed, but they were made of atoms like everything else (Lindberg 2007).

Epicurus rejected the idea that the gods punish the bad and reward the good. As philosopher David Sedley puts it, 'Belief in divine creation brings with it, according to Epicurus, intolerable religious consequences, compelling us to assume that our own lives are under divine surveillance, and to live in terror of the threat this poses' (Sedley 2007: 134). Atomism frees us from that threat by positing a universe that is a product of chance. The gods simply do not concern themselves with troublesome human beings.

In these quotations from Lucretius, we see that empirical observation played an important part in the thinking of ancient atomists (Stallings and Jenkyns 2007).

Just in case you start to think this theory [atoms] is a lie,
Because these atoms can't be made out by the naked eye,
You yourself have to admit there are particles
Which *are* but which cannot be seen ... (I, 165–9)

For example,

Thus clearly there are particles of wind you cannot spy
That sweep the ocean and the land and clouds up in the sky. (I, 277, 278)

Further, in Book II he adds

There's a model, you should realize,
A paradigm of this that's dancing right before your eyes—
For look well when you let the sun peep in a shuttered room
Pouring forth the brilliance of its beams into the gloom,
And you'll see myriads of motes all moving many ways
Throughout the void and intermingling in the golden rays. (II, 112–17)

...

Such turmoil means that there are secret motions, out of sight,
That lie concealed in matter. For you'll see the motes careen
Off course, and then bound back again, by means of blows unseen. (II, 126–8)

(Note that the translator has used modern terms, such as 'paradigm'). This remarkable passage precisely describes the Brownian motion that, as we will see later, Einstein and Jean Baptiste Perrin used in the early twentieth century to demonstrate conclusively the existence of atoms.

Not only did atomism foresee much of modern science, from Darwinian evolution to elementary particle physics, it also anticipated modern cosmology and the now commonly believed although unproved view that our universe is just one of many (Vilenkin 2006). The atomists figured that if our particular world was but a chance outcome, then many other worlds could also arise by chance. With an unlimited number of universes and chance, every permutation was allowed (Sedley 2007: 136–8). This explained how one world, ours, happened to be congenial to human life.

A related, supplementary mechanism is also suggested by both modern physics and biology: the capability of matter to assemble by itself, without an outside builder. The spontaneous generation of

complex systems from simpler systems can be seen in many physical situations, such as the phase transitions in which water goes spontaneously from gas to liquid to solid in the absence of external energy. In the physical and biological worlds, simplicity naturally begets complexity.

COPERNICUS TO NEWTON

By the thirteenth century, thanks mainly to Thomas Aquinas (1225–1274), the teachings of Aristotle and selected other Greek scientific writings, excluding atheistic atomism, became incorporated into Christian theology (Sedley 2007: 133). Most important was Aristotle's view that Earth is the centre of the universe and the heavens revolve around it, which conformed to Genesis.

Aristarchus of Samos (c.230 BCE) and Seleucus of Seleucia (c.190 BCE) had proposed that Earth revolves around the sun (Scott 1904: 462). Not only Aristotle but also the majority of thinkers in ancient Greece rejected the heliocentric view (al-Khalili 2011: 208). On the other hand, Lucretius informs us that Epicureans held that the universe has no centre and Earth and its sun was just one planet-star system out of countless many, each star in the sky being a distant sun with its own planets (Lucretius [c.50s BCE] 1992: 87–93, 177–81). This is precisely the picture of our galaxy known from modern astronomy.

Many Epicurean mathematicians and scientists were active in the period between Aristotle and the rise of Christianity, but being atheists, their writings were largely suppressed (Carrier 2008: 323). Greco-Roman scientists were aware of the heliocentric model, but it's likely that geocentrism prevailed because it agreed with Christian and Islamic beliefs.

In the Middle Ages, Aristotle's teachings, reconciled with Christian theology, became fixed dogma while science itself was continually evolving and challenging old assumptions (Bullough 2003: 129–38). As a result, Christian theology and academic scholasticism, as taught in the great new European universities founded by the Church, were unprepared for the scientific revolution that followed the rediscovery by Copernicus (1473–1543) that Earth was not the centre of the universe (Lindberg 2007: 133). The new science they created transformed the world and made alternatives to religious traditions tenable. If sacred revelations were so wrong about the structure of the universe, why should they have credence on any subject?

When Copernicus' *De Revolutionibus Orbium* (On the Revolutions of the Heavenly Spheres) first appeared in 1543 it was not immediately regarded as a threat to the faith. The publisher, Andreas Osiander (1498–1552), made it clear in his preface that astronomers 'cannot in any way attain to the true causes' of celestial motions but 'adopt whatever suppositions enable the motions to be computed correctly from the principles of geometry for the future as well as the past'. He added, 'These hypotheses need not be true nor even probable. On the contrary, if they provide a calculus consistent with the observations, that is enough' (as quoted in Crowe 2001: 74–5).

In 1616, Galileo (1564–1642) was ordered by the Church to cease teaching the Copernican picture as a true representation of reality but to present it only as a convenient mathematical formalism as Osiander had proposed. This was not unreasonable, because the broader implications of the Copernican model that followed from the moons of Jupiter and the imperfection of the celestial bodies, had not yet been realized.

But Galileo pushed forward anyway. In 1632, he published the *Dialogue on the Two Chief World Systems*, which argued that the tides provide evidence that Earth moves. He was dead wrong, and he should have known it. It disagreed with the facts: his theory predicted only one tide a day. Worse, Galileo used a foolish character, unwisely named Simplicio, to express some arguments that had been

advanced by Pope Urban VIII (1568–1644), a long-time friend and supporter. The pope must have said, ‘We are not pleased’.

In 1633, Galileo was tried by the Inquisition, found guilty, and sentenced to rather comfortable house arrest. Although he was technically forbidden to write further, his *Discourse on the Two New Sciences*, which laid the foundation of mechanics that would be built upon by Isaac Newton (1642–1727), was published in Holland in 1638.

Of all the great figures who contributed to the first stages of the scientific revolution—Bacon, Descartes, Kepler, Newton, and others—only Galileo attempted to separate science from religion. The others all viewed science as offering them glimpses of the Creator and his intentions. Galileo was not an avowed atheist, of course—it would be a bit longer before anyone in Christendom could make such an admission and not be tied to a post surrounded by firewood. He is often quoted as saying, ‘The Holy Spirit’s intention is to teach us how one goes to heaven, not how the heavens go’, although it is generally assumed that he was in turn quoting Cardinal Cesare Baronius (1538–1607).

NEWTON AND BEYOND

The greatest scientist of them all, Isaac Newton, was very much a believer. He was not, however, an orthodox Christian. Although holding the chair in mathematics at Trinity College in Cambridge (the same chair held by Stephen Hawking today), Newton was an Arian and rejected the Trinity. He also indulged in the ‘black art’ of alchemy.

Newton was not a deist. He believed that the coplanar orbits of the planets and their unidirectional motion could not be explained naturally. He thought that these orbits would collapse together because of the mutual gravitational attraction of the planets, so God had to step in continuously to adjust their orbits.

The scientists and mathematicians in the generations following Newton were able to fill in the gaps in Newton’s understanding, using the same physics he created. In 1734, the Swedish scientist and philosopher Emanuel Swedenborg (1688–1772) proposed the *nebular hypothesis* that is still used today to describe the origin of the solar system. According to this picture, a massive ball of gas condenses down into smaller clumps by gravitational attraction.

The philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and the French mathematician and astronomer Pierre-Simon, Marquis de Laplace (1749–1827) argued that the rotation of the gas will cause it to flatten into a disk and clumps would form that became the planets. Other, smaller objects would all rotate in the same direction and in the same plane around a central clump that became the sun. While this model has problems that are still not worked out in detail, it is most likely basically correct.

Laplace is remembered for his encounter with Napoleon in which he presented the emperor with a copy of his work. Napoleon had heard the book contained no mention of God, and said to Laplace, ‘M. Laplace, they tell me you have written this large book on the system of the universe, and have never mentioned its Creator’. Laplace answered, ‘*Je n’avais pas besoin de cette hypothèse-là*’ (‘I had no need of that hypothesis’; see Hahn 1986). I mark this as the place in modern times where religion and science began to part company.

Laplace and others elucidated a view that became known as the *Clockwork Universe* or the *Newtonian World Machine*. In this model, nature is a completely material, mechanical system fully determined by the laws of physics. The present state of the universe is the effect of its previous state and the cause of its following state. God created it all, of course, including the laws of physics. But once he set the initial conditions, he had no reason to interfere further. He didn’t need to. After all, he

is perfect so his laws would automatically lead to the purposes he had in mind.

This model of god is called *deism*, while the Judaic, Christian, Islamic model of a God who guides every leaf to the ground is called *theism*.

Humans were generally exempted from the deist scheme. They were regarded as special creations of God, having souls and free will that enabled them to decide their own actions. However, during the eighteenth century, this notion was challenged. In 1746 French physician Julien Offray de La Mettrie (1709–51) published *L'histoire naturelle de l'âme* (A *Natural History of the Soul*) in which he argued that since a physical phenomenon such as a fever affected mental activity, our minds are simply extensions of our bodies. Thus, there was no soul or afterlife. The book was condemned and burned by court order, and La Mettrie fled France for the Netherlands (Blom 2010: 32–3).

In 1748, La Mettrie published *L'homme machine* (*The Machine Man*), which rejected the dualism of matter and mind and argued that the human body is a purely material machine (La Mettrie 1748). This got him kicked out of the Netherlands (Blom 2010: 32–3). He became court physician to Frederick II of Prussia and died in Potsdam in 1751.

For a brief time during the French Enlightenment in the eighteenth century, atheism became intellectually, although somewhat covertly, respectable thanks to Denis Diderot (1713–84) and Paul-Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach (1723–89) (see Alan Charles Kors' 'The Age of Enlightenment'). In Great Britain, philosophers John Locke (1632–1704) and David Hume (1711–76) promoted empiricism and distrust of authority.

THERMOTHEOLOGY

In his unique study *Entropic Creation: Religious Contexts of Thermodynamics and Cosmology* published in 2008, Danish historian Helge S. Kragh describes how ancient thinkers debated whether the universe was eternal (Kragh 2008). Aristotle thought it was eternal while Stoic philosophers argued that the evidence for irreversible decay is all around us (Kragh 2008: 11).

Early Christian thinkers such as John Philoponus (490–570) systematically argued against the eternity of the universe, which challenged the doctrine of the creation. During the scientific revolution, it was widely believed that the universe was slowly deteriorating. This was consistent with theological notions. For example, Martin Luther said 'The world degenerates and grows worse and worse every day... [and] will perish shortly' (quoted in Kragh 2008: 13).

The mechanical theory of heat and work has been part of the ideological debate between religion and science since the 1840s. The concept of energy was regarded as evidence for a spirit world in opposition to materialism (and it still is). The first law of thermodynamics was interpreted as a sign of God's sovereignty. The second law was likewise given spiritual significance.

Until the twentieth century, both the first and second laws of thermodynamics provided good arguments for the existence of a creator. The first law comes in when you ask for the source of the energy in the universe. The second law enters when you ask how the universe first obtained order.

If the universe came from nothing, it should have zero energy. Thus, the argument goes, the first law of thermodynamics must have been violated at the creation of the universe. The creation was therefore a miracle.

Likewise, if the entropy of the universe is continually increasing with time, then entropy had to be lower in a more orderly past. That is, since the universe is orderly now it could not have grown out of chaos. So, the second law of thermodynamics was also apparently violated by a miraculous creation.

These two scientific arguments for the existence of a creator were good ones at the time because they were based on the best empirical knowledge of the day. They could not be defeated by reason absent from further empirical knowledge. That was to come in the twentieth century.

BIG BANG THEOLOGY

In 1927 the Belgian astronomer and Roman Catholic priest Georges-Henri Lemaître showed that an expanding (or contracting) universe was perfectly consistent with Einstein's 1916 theory of general relativity applied to cosmology (Lemaître 1927). Independent observations by Lemaître and Edwin Hubble indicated that the galaxies were moving away from one another as if from a giant explosion, where those galaxies with higher speeds have moved the farthest apart. This became known as the *big bang*, a derisive term introduced by astronomer Fred Hoyle who favoured a steady-state universe.

Referring to the big bang, in 1951 Pope Pius XII told the Pontifical Academy of Sciences, 'Creation took place in time, therefore there is a Creator, therefore God exists' ([1951] 1972). Lemaître wisely advised the pope not make this statement 'infallible'. Theists make much of the fact that Lemaître was a priest and that his belief in a creation may have given him the idea of the big bang. Perhaps it did, but he was a good scientist and had excellent scientific reasons for his theory.

Science-savvy believers were overjoyed when the big bang theory was confirmed in a whole series of astronomical observations, starting with the serendipitous discovery of the cosmic background radiation by radio astronomers Arno Penzias and Robert Wilson in 1964 (Silk 2001).

Of course, the big bang looks nothing like the story of creation found in the Bible or in any other religious scripture. Still, theologians continue to use the big bang to argue that the universe had a beginning. It shows no such thing.

Indeed, the big bang provides natural explanations for the apparent violations of the first and second laws of thermodynamics at the 'creation'. Late in the twentieth century, it was established empirically that the average energy density of the universe is an exact balance between the energy contained in the rest and kinetic energies of all matter, and the mutual gravitational potential energy of that matter. Gravitational potential energy is negative and cancels the other two, which are positive. Thus, the data show that the universe arose from a state of zero energy, just as expected if it came from nothing. No miracle was required. For more detailed discussion on the question of how a universe can come from nothing, see Atkatz and Pagels (1982), Vilenkin (2006), and Krauss (2012).

Additionally, big-bang cosmology explains why the second law of thermodynamics was not violated in bringing the universe into being. At its beginning 13.8 billion years ago, our universe was in complete chaos. That is, it had the maximum entropy possible for an object of its tiny size. So how could order ever arise without violating the second law, which requires that the entropy of a closed system cannot decrease with time?

The expansion of the universe does the trick. We can think of the visible universe as a sphere. For any spherical body, its maximum entropy is that of a black hole of the same size. Thus, as the universe expands its maximum entropy increases, leaving more and more room inside for local order to form. That is, open systems such as Earth can become more orderly as long as the rest of the universe becomes more disorderly. Note, by the way, that if the universe began in total chaos it can possess no memory of a creator, even if there had been one. Thus modern cosmology not only does not require a creator, it shows that the only possible creator consistent with science is one who simply tossed the dice and gave us a universe that was totally absent of any plan whatsoever. Such a creator might as well not exist since it has no effect on the world, as we know it.

THE SINGULAR UNIVERSE

For many years, the Christian apologist William Lane Craig has asserted that a theorem published in 1970 by famed Cambridge cosmologist Stephen Hawking and eminent Oxford mathematician Roger Penrose provides proof that the universe had a beginning (Craig 1979). Hawking and Penrose showed that according to Einstein's general theory of relativity a universe should begin with a *singularity*—an infinitesimal point in space of infinite density (Hawking and Penrose 1970). Craig concluded that time itself had to begin at that point, and so the universe must have had a beginning, too.

However, Hawking and Penrose long ago admitted that their 1970 theorem, while not mathematically erroneous, did not apply to the origin of our universe. General relativity is not a quantum theory and so is not valid within the very short distances, on the order of 10^{-35} meter, that existed at the beginning of the big bang. In his 1988 blockbuster bestseller *A Brief History of Time*, Hawking discusses the history of the singularity theorem. He concludes:

The final result was a joint paper by Penrose and myself in 1970, which at last proved that there must have been a big bang singularity provided only that general relativity is correct and the universe contains as much matter as we observe. So in the end our work became generally accepted and nowadays nearly everyone assumes that the universe started with a big bang singularity. It is perhaps ironic that, having changed my mind, I am now trying to convince other physicists that there was in fact no singularity at the beginning of the universe—as we shall see later, it can disappear once quantum effects are taken into account. (1988: 50)

This was written in 1988. Today it is universally accepted among cosmologists that no singularity occurred.

THE ETERNAL UNIVERSE

More recently, Craig and US Navy warfare analyst James Sinclair have argued that the universe cannot be eternal because that implies a beginning an infinite time ago, in which case we would never reach the present (Craig and Sinclair 2009).

Craig quotes the great mathematician David Hilbert as saying: 'The infinite is nowhere to be found in reality. It neither exists in nature nor provides a legitimate basis for rational thought. The role that remains for the infinite to play is solely that of an idea' (Hilbert 1964). Here, on this specific point but not on Craig's final conclusion, I agree with Craig. While it is true that the word 'infinity' appears often in scientific literature, it should be understood as meaning 'very big' or 'unlimited'.

However, note the inconsistency here. On the one hand, Craig claims the universe started as a singularity of *infinite* density. But then he turns around and says that nothing *infinite* can occur in reality. Only the second statement is correct.

An eternal universe, one with no beginning or end, is anathema to Judeo-Christian-Islamic belief. If there was no beginning, there was no creator. In 1600, the monk Giordano Bruno was burned at the stake for proposing that the universe was eternal, among other heresies. As historian John Hedley Brooke points out, Bruno's teaching deprived humanity of a privileged place in the cosmos (Brooke 1991).

In an eternal universe, time did not have a beginning an infinite time ago; it had no beginning at all. The time interval from any moment in the past to the present is finite.

THE ARGUMENT FROM FINE-TUNING

Theist literature also commonly claims that the existence of a creator is strongly implied by the *argument from fine-tuning*. This is based on the observation that the constants of physics are so delicately balanced that with any slight change in their values, life *as we know it* would not exist (Ross 1993; 1998; Swinburne 1996; and see T. J. Mawson's 'The Case Against Atheism'). Parameters that are said to be fine-tuned to exquisite precision include the relative strengths of gravity and the other forces, the expansion rate of the universe, the average mass density of the universe, and the masses of elementary particles.

For example, the electrical attraction between a proton and electron is thirty-nine orders of magnitude stronger than their gravitational attraction. If the relative strengths had been just of few orders of magnitude closer, the universe would have collapsed long before galaxies, stars, and planets could form.

Likewise, if the values of the expansion rate or mass density of the universe were slightly different than they are, the universe would not contain any conceivable form of life.

We can use established physics and cosmology to reject the argument from fine-tuning. The simplest explanation is that our universe is part of a super-universe of countless daughter universes such as our own, as the ancient atomists proposed. Our universe just happens to have the conditions suitable for our form of life to develop. Such a 'multiverse' is implied by modern cosmology and cannot be simply dismissed as 'unscientific' (Linde 1986; Vilenkin 2006). The existence of other universes is in principle detectable by their gravitational effects on our universe. This has not happened yet, but the multiverse scenario is at least plausible based on existing knowledge, while we have no reason to assume that only our universe exists.

In any case, we need not rely on multiple universes to refute the fine-tuning argument. Plausible explanations for the values of all the parameters claimed to be fine-tuned can be found within the existing highly successful models of particle physics and cosmology, with no need for divine intervention (Stenger 2011).

These models, which currently agree with all observations, have a certain number of parameters that are not specified but must be obtained from observations. Additionally, several parameters that are supposed to be fine-tuned are already specified. For example, the speed of light in a vacuum c and Planck's constant h are set by definition. Furthermore, there is no universal way to define the strength of gravity so that the gravitational constant G is not an adjustable parameter. The gravitational force between two bodies depends on the masses of the bodies. It is small relative to the electric force for a proton and electron since their masses are so small. In the standard model of elementary particles and forces, discussed below, the masses of all the elementary particles are inherently small.

Similarly, decades of marvellously precise astronomical observations from a whole array of space-borne and Earth-based instruments specify the values of several cosmological parameters that are supposedly fine-tuned. For example, the measured expansion rate and the mass density of the universe are exactly as predicted by several cosmological models (for example, Tegmark et al. 2000).

While our kind of life does indeed depend sensitively on the values of physical parameters, these parameters can be varied over a sufficiently wide range to allow *some* kind life to evolve in a universe different from ours.

The one parameter that remains in contention is the *cosmological constant*. Space (no pun intended) does not permit a detailed discussion of this complex issue here. Suffice it to say that several plausible explanations for the observed range of values have been proposed, although the issue is far from

settled.

Note that the argument from fine-tuning is yet another example of the *argument from ignorance*, which is a less polite but more descriptive name for the *God-of-the-gaps* argument: ‘We don’t know how to give a natural explanation for the values of the parameters of physics; therefore we conclude they must have been designed supernaturally’.

NATURAL ORIGINS

So where did the universe come from if it was not divinely created? We do not know. But that does not mean that a purely natural origin is beyond the reach of science. Reputable scientists have published a number of models for an uncreated origin of our universe in reputable, peer-reviewed journals (Atkatz and Pagels 1982; Linde 1982; Vilenkin 1986). All are presented in mathematical detail and are consistent with established physics and cosmology.

In one scenario, our universe appeared by a process called *quantum tunneling* from an earlier universe (Atkatz and Pagels 1982; Vilenkin 1982; 2006; Stenger 2006). Such a universe is not forbidden by any known principle and, furthermore, is accommodated by the same cosmological equations that we use to describe our universe. In this scenario, our universe arises from the contraction of a prior universe that is the temporal mirror image of ours. However, the mirror universe is only contracting relative to our sense of time. Since the arrow of time is defined by the direction in which the total entropy of the universe increases, time’s arrow in the mirror universe will point in the opposite direction to ours. Thus, we can view the two universes as emerging from the central chaos and expanding in opposite time directions.

Theologians have not come to grips with the fact that time can flow in either direction; the whole notion of a creator requires a unidirectional flow of time. Yet, nothing in physics forbids the reversibility of time and the phenomenon is prominent on the quantum scale (Stenger 2000).

So, in the tunnelling scenario, we do not have to explain how our universe came from ‘nothing’. From our point of view in this universe, it tunnelled from an earlier universe. Where did that universe come from? From its point of view, it tunnelled from our universe!

Now, we cannot prove that this is exactly how it all happened. But the fact that such a scenario can be fully formulated, with mathematical rigour based on existing knowledge, suffices to refute any claim —using the argument from ignorance—that a miraculous creation necessarily occurred.

THE TRIUMPH OF ATOMISM

From the time of the Greek atomists, the Epicureans, and Lucretius, through Newtonian physics to the current standard model of particles and forces, the natural sciences have been reductionist—everything is reduced to the sum of its parts. The physical world is hierarchical, going from elementary particles to atoms to molecules to cells and so on up to human brains, to human societies, and on further to the cosmos. The parts interact, of course, but no evidence exists for any ‘holistic’ processes coming into play at any level that cannot be explained reductively.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, chemists and physicists confirmed the fundamental particulate nature of matter first proposed by Democritus and Leucippus. In 1905, Einstein showed that light was composed of particles we now call *photons*. In 1911, Rutherford discovered that what

were called atoms at the time were not in fact ‘uncuttable’ but composed of electrons surrounding a tiny nucleus. Further experiments revealed that the nucleus was composed of protons and neutrons. And, in the 1970s, high-energy particle accelerators provided evidence that protons, neutrons, and a whole array of mostly short-lived particles called *hadrons* were composed of even smaller objects called *quarks*.

The standard model of particles and forces that was developed at the time also described how these quarks interact with each other and with other elementary particles called *leptons* that include the electron and neutrino. This model still agrees with all observations, pending results from particle collisions at much higher energy that are now underway. The report in July 2012 of the observation of a particle that looks very much like the Higgs boson predicted by the standard model represented one more triumph for atomism (ATLAS 2012; CMS 2012).

In the standard model, not only is the matter that makes up everything we can see with our eyes reducible to its parts; all familiar objects break down into to just four particles: the photon, electron, and two types of quarks. Even more remarkable, this matter comprises only 5 percent of the universe, only a tenth of which is luminous. The other 95 percent is composed of *dark matter* and *dark energy*. So far, they remain unidentified, but we have no reason to assume they are anything supernatural since they still gravitate.

QUANTUM CONSCIOUSNESS

The other area where physical science and atheism come together is in confronting the widespread claim that quantum mechanics plays a role in human consciousness. In 1975, physicist Fritjof Capra published a bestselling book called *The Tao of Physics* claiming that many of the ideas of modern physics, especially quantum mechanics, could be found in the teachings of Eastern mysticism (Capra 1975). This became a mantra for the movement known as the ‘New Age’ in which, in part, quantum physics is used to justify a new kind spirituality ostensibly based on science.

Quantum spiritualists argue that human consciousness can affect the outcome of events, indeed, control the nature of reality. This notion comes about from the so-called wave-particle duality in quantum mechanics in which it is mistakenly asserted in popular media that whether an entity is a wave or a particle depends on what you decide to measure. If you decide to measure a particle property such as position, then the entity is a particle. If instead you decide to measure a wave property such as wavelength, then the entity must be a wave. Gurus of quantum spirituality such as the bestselling authors Deepak Chopra (1989, 1993) and Rhonda Byrne (2008) have concluded from this that we can change reality—past, present, and future—just by thinking about it.

However, wave-particle duality, in which particles and waves are two separate realities, like matter and spirit, is a myth. In fact, particles and waves describe two aspects of the same reality. It does not matter whether you are trying to measure a particle property or a wave property. *You always measure particles*. The wave-like behaviour that is observed in interference experiments such as Young’s double slit is not associated with individual particles, whether they be photons or electrons, but with the statistical behaviour of an ensemble of particles.

In short, no incompatibility exists between the particle and wave picture. They are simply two different ways to describe the same phenomenon, namely a stream of particles. A single particle is always a particle, never a wave. And consciousness has nothing to do with it (Stenger 1995, 2009).

THE COSMIC INSIGNIFICANCE OF HUMANITY

Our religions have always told us that we humans were created with some cosmic purpose in mind. Science tells something quite different. Biology has proven that we are simply one of the countless ways complex arrays of matter naturally evolved certain characteristics that we identify as 'life'. Humans have the highest developed intelligence, on Earth at least, and so that is special. While they still do not have a conclusive theory of consciousness, neuroscientists have found no need to introduce any immaterial element to explain our thought processes. As best we can tell, we and our brains are just quarks and electrons, like rocks and trees.

Since Copernicus, humanity's conception of its place in the universe has steadily diminished from the biblical image that places us at the centre of the universe to one where we are but a minuscule speck in space and time. Once we built telescopes that enabled us to peer deep into the sky, our view of the universe has grown from that of a single star system and its planets to a galaxy of a 100 billion stars and on to a visible universe of 100 billion galaxies. And that's not the end of it. Since the 1980s, we have found good reasons to think that our visible universe is but a drop in an ocean of space beyond our light horizon, perhaps a hundred orders of magnitude larger, that resulted from the same original big bang. Furthermore, as already mentioned, this universe may be just one of countless others.

While a supreme being might still preside over all this, it becomes incredible to believe that he marooned his favourite creatures on a tiny planet for an infinitesimal period of time and built around us a vast multiverse with no possibility for human habitation.

TOWARD A HEALTHY FUTURE

Once we accept our true place in the cosmos, we can take a more realistic, and healthier, view of ourselves. Our naturally evolved brains have given us wonderful capacities for elaborate communication with our fellow humans. This has enabled us to create, without divine help, wonderful works of art, literature, music, architecture, philosophy, mathematics, and science. Our technologies have made all our lives immensely better than those of humans in the not-too-distant past. In developed countries at least, women now rarely die in childbirth and most children grow to adulthood. This was not the case just a few generations ago. Unlike our ancestors, we lead long, fulfilling lives largely free of pain and drudgery. The aged are so numerous now that their care is becoming a social challenge.

However, belief in ancient myths, joined with other negative forces in our society, hinders the world from advancing scientifically, economically and socially at a time when rapid advancement in these areas is essential for the survival of humanity (Stenger 2012). We may now be only a generation or two away from the catastrophic problems predicted from global warming, pollution and overpopulation. Our children and grandchildren could be faced with flooded coastal lowlands, severe climatic changes, epidemics fostered by overcrowding, and increased starvation for much of humanity. Such disasters could generate worldwide conflict on a scale that is likely to exceed that of the great twentieth-century wars, possibly with nuclear weapons in the hands of unstable nations and terrorist groups.

Surely, this finite planet cannot withstand a continuation of humanity's current exponential growth in population and exploitation of natural resources. Ten thousand years ago, a blink in time in the

history of life, there were just one million humans on Earth. Two hundred years ago, the population was one billion. Today we are almost at seven billion. The estimate for 2050 is nine billion.

This rate of growth is impossible to sustain. We are already consuming Earth's resources at 150 percent of its capacity. Something is going to give, and soon. Avoiding, or at least mitigating, these ill effects will require a clear-eyed and scientific understanding of what is really happening. From ancient times, the physical sciences have provided us with a picture of reality undistorted by supernatural filters. We do not need to rely on anything beyond reason and observation. If human civilization is to survive and thrive, faith in Bronze Age myths must yield to reasoning based on scientific evidence.

CONCLUSION

All scientific observations are consistent with a universe of matter and nothing else. This represents a philosophical triumph for the recognition by Thales and the ancient atomists that the world can be understood without calling upon any forces from outside the natural world—no wood sprites, no fairies, no angels, no devils, no gods or spirits of any sort.

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PART V

ATHEISM AND THE SOCIAL SCIENCES

CHAPTER 29

ATHEISM AND THE SECULARIZATION THESIS

FRANK L. PASQUALE AND BARRY A. KOSMIN

INTRODUCTION

At first glance, the brief for this essay—to consider the relationship between ‘atheism’ and the ‘secularization thesis’—seems straightforward enough. This is deceptive, however, for both of these constructs have had long, complex, and often contentious histories. As Stephen Bullivant observes in ‘Defining “Atheism”’, ‘atheism’ (together with its cognates and parallels in various languages) has had, and continues to have, many meanings. And the complexity of ‘secularization’ is indicated by the fact that it has been variously characterized as a theory, hypothesis, orienting concept, paradigm, thesis, research program, assumption, belief, conviction, ideology, doctrine, folklore, and myth. So, what is it that we are actually speaking about when we consider the relationship between atheism and secularization, and how is such a subject best approached?

In the broadest sense, secularization and atheism both concern the use and impact of supernatural constructs (or ideas, beliefs, perceived realities or phenomena) in human affairs. Secularization represents the assertion or observation that social phenomena organized around supernatural ideas—or the ideas themselves—have been, or are, in decline. It complements ‘religionization’,¹ or the use of supernatural ideas to authorize, motivate, or control human activity (at the individual, institutional, or societal levels).

Atheism, as defined throughout *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, represents (a) absence of belief in, or awareness of, ‘a God or gods’ (‘negative’) or (b) definitive rejection of their existence (‘positive’). Positive and negative, in these senses, should not be conflated with active, assertive, or public and passive, unassertive, or private forms. Negative atheism can be either a private, unassertive absence or unawareness of theistic ideas, or it can be an active, public, and definitive assertion of the impossibility of any knowledge of them. Similarly, positive rejection of the existence of God or gods may be a private, unvoiced attitude or an active, assertive, public (anti-theistic, -supernaturalist, or -religious) ideology. Passive measures of negative atheism (or reported lack of theistic belief) are among the principal indices of secularization. But in a consideration of the relationship between atheism and secularization, it is the active forms that are of equal if not greater interest, for these may function both as indices and, more importantly, causal agents of secularization.

It must also be kept in mind that ‘atheism’ represents a range of constructs with respect to focus or scope of meaning. Elaborating on a distinction made by Rowe (1979) and Martin (2007), we may distinguish among *very narrow* (focused on monotheisms), *narrow* (focused on any form of theism or overt supernaturalism), *broad* (focused on religion[s] in general—beliefs, practices, identity, institutions), and *very broad* forms (thoroughgoing philosophical naturalism or materialism and meta-empirical scepticism).

To make sense of the relationship between atheism(s) and secularization, no single definition or

meaning will do, for what we wish to understand is the ways atheism and its cognates, linguistic parallels, distinguishable senses, and related constructs have been used (in all their polysemic diversity) and the roles they (and the phenomena they signify) play in processes of secularization and religionization.

SECULARIZATION AS A STRUCTURAL THEORY

The roots of the secularization construct, as it has been debated for the past century or more, lay in an Enlightenment conviction that supernaturalism and superstition would inevitably wane as reason and scientific understanding grew (Hadden 1987). This found expression in Auguste Comte's expectation that humanity would pass from a theological through a metaphysical to a 'positive' (or rational empiricist) phase of intellectual development. Secularization as a sociological construct, however, became something more than mere conviction, despite the assertions of some critics (Hadden 1987; Stark 1999).

Some of the debate concerning secularization is attributable to differences of opinion about which aspects of religion may decline (authority, affiliation, identity, belief, social control) and at what levels (individual, institutional, and societal; Dobbelaere 2002). Steve Bruce, for example, defined it as:

- (a) the declining importance of religion for the operation of non-religious roles and institutions such as those of the state and the economy; (b) a decline in the social standing of religious roles and institutions and (c) a decline in the extent to which people engage in religious practices, display beliefs of a religious kind and conduct other aspects of their lives in a manner informed by such beliefs. (2002: 3)

Some, like Wilson (1966) and Bruce (2002), have held to a 'classic', 'orthodox', 'general', or 'strong' form of secularization-as-theory, particularly as it applies to Europe. This is perhaps better called 'modernization-secularization' theory.

It holds that economic and social development brings greater societal complexity, which results in secularization, or the transformation and decline of religion. Societal complexity involves the differentiation, fragmentation, or rationalization of social functions, structures, and institutions. Social processes previously dominated by religion (or conducted within a pervasive religious environment, such as 'Christendom') become bureaucratic functions of a secularizing civil state. Personal and institutional decisions are increasingly made on an instrumental or 'rational' basis. Individualism grows as economic activity, everyday life, and worldviews are increasingly subject to personal choice. Cultural pluralism further undermines the plausibility of any particular, pervasive 'sacred canopy' (Berger 1969). Religions and their various components become discretionary products in a marketplace of alternatives—a 'pick and mix counter' (Bruce 1996: 232)—rather than the environment.

Modernization-secularization theory does not argue that secularization is a smooth, linear, or unidirectional process. Nor does it occur at the same rate (or) at all levels. The forces of modernization interact with local history and culture to produce differential effects. 'Reversals' are possible. Bruce (1996) suggests that secularization generally accompanies modernization except where religion continues to have 'specific work to do' (as in, for example, Ireland or Poland). Others have presented evidence that around the globe religion continues to do a quite a bit of work at the societal, institutional, and individual levels (Martin 1978, 2002; Casanova 1994; Davie 1994).

There has been a ‘cultural turn’ in sociology as the Euro-American developed world has been joined by other industrializing countries, each with a distinctive historic-cultural path. The modernization-secularization thesis has been criticized as an overgeneralization of the European case. There are, instead, ‘multiple modernities’ (Eisenstadt 2000) in which economic, social structural, and cultural forces interactively yield different results with varying roles for religion. Martin (2002) points to the spread of Pentecostalism in South America and elsewhere. Casanova (1994) highlights the public (or ‘deprivatized’) institutional and societal roles played by religions in Brazil as well as Spain, Poland, and the United States. Islam’s resurgence presents yet more contrary evidence, prompting Peter Berger to ‘recant’ his prior endorsement of modernization-secularization, noting that, ‘the world today [...] is as furiously religious as it ever was’ (1999: 2).

Rodney Stark and his colleagues (Stark and Bainbridge 1985; Stark 1999) have presented an even sharper critique of the modernization-secularization thesis. Under the rubric of a ‘rational choice’ thesis, they argue that human beings pervasively depend upon the supernatural ‘compensators’ offered by salvational religion for unfulfilled worldly expectations and rewards. Applying an economic market model to religious choices, when free of monopolistic or governmental control, religious products naturally proliferate to satisfy this need and varying tastes. The religiosity of the United States (a challenge for the modernization-secularization thesis) is attributed to such a ‘supply-side’ proliferation of religious products in a comparatively free market.

Norris and Inglehart (2004) have offered an alternative view based on World Values Survey data which show that societies whose citizens enjoy strong economic, social, and medical security exhibit lower measures of religiosity. They theorize that where poverty, disease, poor sanitation, and limited education make life precarious, religion offers explanation, hope, or tangible assistance. Where life is more secure, religion has less of this work to do, and so, demand declines. The anomaly of strong religiosity in the United States is explained by the precariousness and variability of economic security in a highly individualistic meritocracy compared with, for example, the more economically homogeneous and personally secure social welfare states of Western Europe.

The modernization-secularization thesis remains a contested one. As Bryan Turner notes (2011), the ‘de-Christianization’ of Europe is one thing, but a global decline of religious sentiments and worldviews, quite another. Greater economic wealth, physical mobility, societal complexity, and the emergence of global communications media (and now the Internet) cannot help but have erosive or transformational effects on religion. At the same time, there are ‘counter-secular’ reactions to these forces that interact with local cultural and history to produce varied results (Berger 1999). Religions continue to play Durkheimian roles as reinforcements of identity and national solidarity in many parts of the world. At the individual level, most peoples’ worldviews remain ‘enchanted’ to varying degrees, yet for many, in increasingly informal, selective, and personalized ways.

Amid the range of sociological positions on secularization there is agreement on one point, even among its strongest advocates (Bruce 2002) and critics (Stark 1999): the world is increasingly becoming a competitive marketplace of worldviews—religious and otherwise. What roles do active forms of atheism play and with what effect?

SOCIOLOGICAL NEGLECT OF ACTIVE ATHEISM

Absence of theistic belief has been one of the principal survey measures of secularization (in historically or currently theistic contexts). Odd as it may seem, however, sociological work on secularization has virtually ignored active forms of atheism and other secularist constructs (or those

that share criticism or rejection of religious ideas, behaviour, or institutions, such as freethought, secular humanism, scepticism, positivism, and philosophical materialism or naturalism; Pasquale 2010). Colin Campbell offered one of the few explicit considerations of the subject under the rubric of ‘irreligion’, which he defined as hostility or deliberate indifference toward religion. As he observed, ‘[t]he fact that irreligious movements act as agents of secularization has strangely enough been overlooked by sociologists in their contribution to the continuing secularisation debate’ (1971: 7). And as Beckford summarized the matter:

[T]hey have tended to overlook, omit or deliberately ignore the significance of both organized and diffuse attacks on religion. It is as if the progress of secularisation could be adequately accounted for in terms of the effect of abstract cultural forces, such as class struggle or functional differentiation, without consideration of the agents and agencies that actively campaigned for secularism and secular societies. Given that a wide range of campaigns, movements and voluntary associations promoted secularism, rationalism, atheism and humanism in Britain and elsewhere, it is important to consider their direct and indirect contributions to secularisation *and* to interpretations of secularisation. (2003: 36)

Campbell endeavoured to rectify sociological neglect of the societal roles and impact of atheist and other secularist figures, movements, and organizations. Based on an analysis of the historical record in the United States and Great Britain, he concluded that ‘[t]he irreligious movements of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries assisted in the secularization of society in the sense that they promoted and accelerated the disengagement of various social institutions and activities from the legitimization and control of religion’ (1971: 121–2). Most sociologists who studied these phenomena characterized them as loose-knit or ideologically ‘diffuse’ (Budd 1967), organizationally ‘precarious’ (Demerath and Thiessen 1966), frequently short-lived, and of negligible significance overall. Campbell attributed this to a tendency to approach these phenomena with religious (read: Christian) organizations in mind. This, he argued, is inappropriate. It obscures the distinctive social forms and activities through which such constructs have played secularizing roles. These tend to be task-specific, educational, political, or associational (rather than communal). As such they have more in common with labour unions, political movements, or advocacy groups than with church congregations or communities. Campaigns against religious blasphemy laws, challenges to science, or moral legislation and for church-state separation or rights to privacy and alternative lifestyles have undoubtedly had some secularizing (and liberalizing or individualizing) effects.

More recently, Christian Smith (2003) has challenged the explanatory power of structural theories of secularization, such as institutional or functional differentiation, arguing that they fail to specify causal mechanisms. He points to intentional activity to explain a comparatively rapid decline of Protestant cultural dominance (at the macro-societal and institutional levels) in the United States from 1890 to 1930. He and his colleagues present evidence that this was the result of deliberate efforts by secular intellectuals to wrest cultural authority from the churches and clergy. The rise of this new intellectual class was, in part, a consequence of industrialization and its demand for researchers, educators, and other knowledge workers. Many in this intellectual cohort were educated in European universities where Enlightenment secularism held sway. People like Clarence Darrow, Robert Ingersoll, and H. L. Mencken contributed to the ‘modernization’ of American society by criticizing the irrationality, traditionalism, or personal oppressiveness of the Protestant establishment. Others like John Dewey, Oliver Wendell Holmes, Leo Pfeffer, and Walter Lippman, while not as aggressively atheistic or agnostic, nonetheless played critical roles in secularizing American education, law, and journalism.

We may, then, distinguish between structural and intentional models of secularization. In the former, secularization is held to be a by-product of broad changes in the structure (economic, political, institutional) and infrastructure (material culture, technology) of human activity. In the latter,

secularization is viewed as an outcome of purposeful activity on the part of individuals, movements, organizations, or states. In the former, atheism is a dependent variable; in the latter, an independent variable. Sociological focus on structural models has tended to treat active forms of atheism as 'minority footnotes among many secular aspects of society' (Pasquale 2007: 763). But atheism, as variously constructed, acts as both independent stimulus and dependent response.

ATHEISM AS RESPONSE AND STIMULUS

The appearance of this and other recent scholarly volumes on atheism and related constructs is, at least in part, in response to recent increases in measures of religious abandonment, criticism, or rejection and public (re-)assertion of atheism, particularly in Europe and the Anglophone world. Perhaps the most noticeable aspect of this development is the 'New Atheism' that has coalesced around the books and public comments of Sam Harris (2004), Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), Christopher Hitchens (2007), and others. The 'unabashed, even aggressive, and more than a little in-your-face' tone and content of these books (Eller 2010: 14) have stimulated discussion in the media and on the internet among sympathizers and both secular and religious critics. Their impact (at least in the USA and UK) has been characterized as a 'startling success' with 'vast sales' (Bullivant 2010: 110). Eller suggests that 'atheism entered an unprecedented period of confidence and enthusiasm with the publication of Sam Harris' best-selling 2004 offering, *The End of Faith*' (2010: 14).

Historical analyses by Marty (1961), Campbell (1971), Thrower (2000), Smith (2003), and others suggest that rather than 'an unprecedeted period of confidence and enthusiasm', the New Atheist wave is the latest in a series of 'atheist awakenings'. While the sales and stir occasioned by the New Atheists' appearance is, as some have noted, unusual in recent history for books touting atheist or secularist worldviews, this is not entirely without precedent. Atheistic, agnostic, deistic, irreligious, or sceptical advocacy by Enlightenment *philosophes*, Tom Paine, Robert Ingersoll, Charles Bradlaugh, and G. J. Holyoake, among many others, attracted attention, adherents, and controversy in their eras.

A closer look at recent developments in the United States and United Kingdom—the epicentre for the New Atheism—illustrates the interplay of structural and intentional processes, or atheism as response and stimulus, dependent and independent variable.

Table 29.1 Religious belief and self-description in the USA and UK

	1988 (%)	1990 (%)	1991 (%)	2000 (%)	2001 (%)	2002 (%)	2008 (%)	2010 (%)
USA—General Social Survey (GSS)								
No belief in God	1.5		2.1	2.9			3.1	3.3
No way to know	3.6		4.1	4.3			4.9	5.7
No (named) religion		7.7		14.1		13.8	16.8	18.0
USA—American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) (Unprompted self-description)								
Atheist + agnostic	0.7							
Atheist					0.4		0.7	
Agnostic						0.5		0.9
No (named) religion		8.2			14.1		15.0	
UK—British Social Attitudes Survey (BSA)								
No belief in God			10.4	12.7			18.3	
No way to know			14.0	15.1			18.9	
No (named) religion	34.4 (1989)	36.4	35.1	39.5	41.1	41.4	43.2	50.7
UK—World Values Survey (WVS)								
Convinced atheist	4.5		5.1 (1999)				10.4 (2006)	

Sources: GSS, ARIS, BSA, WVS.

In the United States, data from the General Social Survey (GSS) indicate a steady increase during

the past two decades in the percentage of Americans who report no belief in God (Table 29.1). While still small, when coupled with an increase in those who 'don't know and don't think there is any way to find out' the figure reached 9 per cent in 2010. Substantially fewer, however, voluntarily describe themselves as 'atheist' or 'agnostic', as indicated by American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) data (Keyser 2007; Kosmin et al. 2009). The social costs of publicly asserting an atheist identity or ideology remain comparatively high in the USA (Edgell, Gerteis, and Hartmann 2006). Moreover, even among those who are affirmatively nonreligious, atheism typically represents only one aspect of a full worldview. As an active self-description, 'atheist' is more than the mere absence or rejection of theistic belief. It is an ideological and identity construct.

The growth of 'nones' (no named religious identification or affiliation) in the 1990s reflected, in part, the fact that some religious adherents began to distance themselves from named religious identity or adherence in reaction to a public surge in conservative Christianity in the 1980s (Hout and Fischer 2002). Religious political and public involvement (in presidential campaigns and challenges to church-state separation, abortion rights, stem-cell research, and the validity of evolutionary theory) grew throughout the 1980s, 1990s, and the presidential administration of George W. Bush (2000–2008). By the time of the events of 11 September 2001, secularists were primed to react. Sam Harris began writing *The End of Faith* on 12 September (2004: 323). The resurgence of atheism reflected pent-up frustration and anger among secularists, particularly as this followed a period of presumed progress in straight-line secularization in the late twentieth century (Cimino and Smith 2007).

By contrast, Britain has been considerably less religious than the United States in recent decades and atheism has lost much of its edge or pariah status, as indicated by British Social Attitudes (BSA) and World Values Survey (WVS) data (Table 29.1), as well as politicians' willingness to publicly discuss or avow atheistic worldviews (Bullivant 2010). The character of British secularity is largely passive and indifferent (Bruce 2002; Baggini 2007; Voas 2009; Bagg and Voas 2010). Some wonder why New Atheist texts would resonate in a society already so indifferently secular. A pull toward scientific rationalism and philosophical naturalism may be involved. Even where formal religious adherence has declined, residual supernatural or 'spiritual' beliefs and weak or 'fuzzy fidelity' to religious traditions (Voas 2009) mean that most people still fall short of comprehensive philosophical naturalism or scientific empiricism. This said, acceptance of science, including evolutionary theory, is comparatively strong in Britain (Miller and Pennock 2008; Ipsos-MORI 2011). We think that a stronger push factor (away from religion) is involved. British response to the New Atheism, at least in part, seems attributable to its strong anti-Islamic theme, especially but not exclusively in Harris (2004) and Hitchens (2007).

Critical reactions to policies and realities of 'multiculturalism' in Europe have grown in recent decades as a result of both structural and intentional factors, such as European unification and political liberalism. These have given rise to increased cultural contact and mobility, particularly Muslim. Public discourse, historical events, and survey data indicate that 'Islamophobia' has been growing apace in Britain and elsewhere (Field 2007; Zúquete 2008). 'Perceptions of Islam and Muslims have been increasingly determined, and clouded, by a fear of Islamic fundamentalist extremism and Islamic-inspired terrorism directed at the West' (Field 2007: 465). In Britain, the 'furore over *The Satanic Verses* [involving a *fatwa* calling for Salman Rushdie's death in 1989] marked the first turning point in public perceptions of Islam and Muslims' (2007: 451). Another, more explosive, turning point was 11 September 2001, as were bombings in the London underground and buses. By the time of these events, Britons were primed for public criticism of Islam in particular, and by implication, religion in general. A *Guardian/ICM* poll in 2006 found that fully 82 per cent of British respondents viewed religion as a source of division and tension among people (Glover and Topping 2006).

There are, then, some ‘secularizing’ trends evident in both the USA and UK, albeit to markedly different degrees. It is difficult to tease possible causal effects of active atheism or secularism from larger sociological factors, but the latter seem dominant.

Secularists (like the American Humanist Association and Council for Secular Humanism) have been advocating secularization in the United States for decades, particularly as watchdogs regarding church-state separation. While this has triggered skirmishes with religious advocates along the way, incremental increases in *nones*, atheists, and agnostics seem more attributable to cultural, political, or demographic factors than to organized intentional activity. A surge of religious abandonment in the 1960s and 70s, for example, was largely attributable to developmental adolescent apostasy in the Baby Boom generation (Putnam and Campbell 2010). Some returned to religion but many did not, giving way to increasing proportions of ‘*nones*’ in succeeding cohorts. Hout and Fischer concluded that ‘change in the religious preferences of believers in the 1990s contributed more to the increase in no religious preference than disbelief did’ (2002: 178).

The emergence of digital technologies (internet, social media)—another structural (or infrastructural) factor—is likely playing a role, particularly among the young. Atheists are geographically dispersed minorities in most locations. Younger cohorts, in particular, who were weaned on the Web are creating ‘imagined communities’ and virtual movements through blogs, internet-organized ‘meet-ups’, ‘tweets’, and ‘open posts’ (Cimino and Smith 2011; Smith and Cimino 2012). These new media are enabling atheistic messages to reach larger audiences, no matter how remote or culturally insulated.

Religious conservatism, religion-related terrorism, the New Atheist texts, and increasing use of digital and ‘social’ media have energized and emboldened atheist advocates, networks, and organizations. Accelerated growth has been reported in recent years by the Freedom from Religion Foundation in the USA and the British Humanist Association (Freedom from Religion Foundation 2010; Bullivant 2010), for example. On the intentional side, public ad campaigns and events have been mounted in Britain and the United States. The new atheist surge has been framed, in part, as an identity politics issue and movement in the United States. Some present themselves as members of a marginalized and maligned minority (not unlike gays and lesbians) whose rights have been curtailed or denied (Cragun et al. 2012). Such efforts may be having an effect. References to atheists (or nonbelievers), even in the American ‘public square’, have become noticeably more frequent and prominent—such as, for example, President Barack Obama’s inclusion of nonbelievers in his augural address (Grossman 2009) and Yale professor Cornell West’s reference to ‘agnostic and atheist brothers and sisters’ in anti-capitalist rallies (Landsberg 2011).

Increasing scholarly attention to atheism and other secularist constructs may also play a part, much as Smith (2003) said of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. Brad Hirschfield has observed that ‘secularists, atheists really, are following other ethnic and religious identity groups in using academia to create and/or shore up a particular cultural identity’ (2011). Research institutes and an Internetwork of scholars interested in the subject have emerged in the past decade (Pasquale 2012). A flurry of academic articles, chapters, and books (including this one) has appeared in tandem with New Atheist texts. All of the scholars participating in this activity are by no means secular, but the emergence of such a field of inquiry has been stimulated both by the same factors that triggered the New Atheist surge and the books (and associated chatter) themselves. On the one hand, this reflects a shift of attention to a growing phenomenon. On the other, there is merit to Hirschfield’s suggestion that this signals an appeal to the academy for the authority of accumulated data and scholarly analysis as active atheists elbow their way into the fray of competing worldviews, identity politics, and culture wars. This has been true throughout the history of social scientific study of secularization—and

religion, as well. The authority of research data and ‘expert’ conclusions carry some weight. Atheist advocates actively disseminate academic data and conclusions that further the cause. In this way, otherwise passive measures of (growth in) atheist populations become intentional secularizing tools.

ATHEISM(S) IN PERSPECTIVE

Active atheists have assumed more strident roles in the worldview marketplace, but their scale, significance, and impact must be kept in perspective. As notable as these developments are, atheists (broad and narrow, active and passive) continue to be dwarfed by ‘fuzzy’ believers, ‘soft’ seculars, the ‘spiritual but not religious’, NRMs, ‘nones’, New Agers, and the substantially religious—in the USA and UK, albeit to different degrees, as in the world at large. Even in Britain, while roughly 40 percentage are positive or negative atheists (Table 29.1), this leaves 60 percentage who indicate belief in a higher power or God to one extent or another, per Grace Davie’s ‘believing without belonging’ (1994).

Despite accelerating growth in recent years, numbers of atheist and secularist group affiliates have always been, and remain, extremely small—not only with respect to the populations of the societies in which they emerge, but with respect to those who may be reasonably characterized as substantially or thoroughly nonreligious (Budd 1977; Campbell 1971). Even during periods of substantially declining religiosity, membership in such organizations has historically not capitalized on this with even remotely proportionate growth rates (Warren 1943; Demerath and Thiessen 1966). As Steve Bruce (2002: 42) has suggested, the natural resting state of secularity tends to be passive indifference to religion rather than active atheism or irreligion.

Moreover, the degree to which active atheism may have contrary effects—prompting religious backlash, promotion, and reactionary adherence—cannot be discounted (Bullivant 2010). As in the past, this prompts debate and disagreement even among secularists of varying stripes (e.g., Baggini 2007; Kurtz 2010; Uhl 2011). ‘Moderates’ complain that acerbic or absolutist ‘shock and awe tactics ... polarize identities’ and push otherwise moderate religious allies ‘into the arms of the extremists’ (Baggini 2007: 42, 44). ‘Atheism’ has historically been one of the ‘harder’ and more provocative of secularist constructs (Kosmin 2007). The volume of religious critiques of the New Atheism (in articles, blogposts, and books) is too substantial to cite here. Mutually reinforcing and inflammatory flurries of criticism between religious advocates and critics has long been a recurring feature of European and American history. Marty (1961) documented the many ways ‘infidels’ have been used for religious defence and promotion in the USA, from Paine to Ingersoll. This has continued through the Secular Humanist Manifestos and Madalyn Murray O’Hair to today’s New Atheists and their detractors on both sides of the Atlantic.

Alongside substantial growth in numbers of atheists and the nonreligious, there are signs of incremental growth in Britain within the past decade among those describing themselves as ‘very religious’ (from 3.5 percentage in 2002 to 4.7 in 2008; European Social Survey) or ‘extremely religious’ (from 0.37 percentage in 1998 to 1.42 percentage in 2008; British Social Attitudes Survey). In the United States, the ‘rise of the nones’ and increasingly active atheists has accompanied growth in strongly devotional, as well as politically active, forms of Christianity (in ARIS data from 1990 to 2001 to 2008; Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

From a broader vantage, there has been a hardening of positions at the religious and secular fringes coupled with an ideological (call this ‘seculous’ or ‘religular’) softening among many in between. Bullivant reasonably hypothesized that the New Atheism would likely yield even more ‘hard’

secularists and religionists (2010). But it is also possible that the spectacle of ardent atheists and theists, secularists and religionists battling in the ‘public square’ will push many toward a ‘fuzzy’, ‘liminal’ (Lim et al. 2010), indifferent, or personalized and post-ideological middle ground, much as Hout and Fischer (2002) suggested that aggressive religious conservatism pushed many in the USA to quietly back away from named religious identity, but not from religious (or ‘spiritual’) beliefs or behaviour entirely.

A BROADER VIEW

As we look elsewhere around the world, the dynamics of secularization and religionization are even more complex. The largest-scale experiments in secularization—state atheisms—have had mixed outcomes. In the former Soviet Union, as in China, Communist ‘scientific’, ‘militant’, or ‘practical’ atheism has unquestionably had some secularizing effect overall. But the story—or history—does not end there. As the former Soviet countries illustrate, long-term effects of the experiment are uneven. It took hold more profoundly in, for example, eastern Germany or the Czech Republic than in Poland, Armenia, Lithuania, Azerbaijan, or Uzbekistan, among others (Froese 2004; see Irena Borowik, Branko Ančić, and Radosław Tyrała’s ‘Central and Eastern Europe’). Moreover, closer scrutiny of beliefs and worldviews often discloses more meta-empiricism or supernaturalism than first meets the eye (or superficial survey measures). Hamplová and Nešpor, for example, note that ‘despite low levels of church membership and attendance, Czechs are not indifferent to religious and spiritual phenomena. On the contrary, a significantly high proportion of Czechs believe in some of the elements of so-called “alternative religiosity”’ (2009: 594). Similarly, close observation of China discloses signs of persistent or resurgent religiosity (Yang 2012; Yang and Hu 2012).

In India, ‘secularism’ has taken on the meaning of equal respect or tolerance for religions and cultures (Keysar and Kosmin 2008; Narisetti 2010), reflecting its distinctive national complexion and challenges. Atheisms, both indigenous and imported, play roles in a diverse and often contentious marketplace of worldviews. Active atheist exponents (very broadly defined) publicly combat religious or superstitious beliefs and practices at odds with scientific method, findings, education, and medicine. But these are small in number and of uncertain impact in the face of daunting historical, cultural, and religious forces (Narisetti 2010; Quack 2012).

In Western Europe, the distribution of atheists (positive and negative, active and passive) varies greatly from country to country (Zuckerman 2007). As in Britain, the challenge of multiculturalism raises questions about what it is to be Danish, Dutch, French, German, or, indeed, European. Increasing numbers of culturally distinct immigrants (particularly Muslim) have prompted both atheistic and ‘Christian’ nationalist reactions—yet another example of secularization (or ‘atheization’) and religionization occurring simultaneously (Dencik 2007).

Economic development, technological change, societal complexity, and cultural forces are making things more challenging (and interesting) for sociology. This is particularly true regarding grand theories of secularization. There is ample evidence that religions and religiosity are on the decline, on the rise, or ‘merely’ changing, depending upon where and when and how closely we look.

Is there a discernible grand trajectory? If so, it is not currently resulting in widespread adoption of very broad atheism (or thoroughgoing philosophical naturalism). This remains, as Rodney Stark notes (1999), a minority stance, if more assertive and showing modest growth in some places. Apart from the ‘hardening’ of some religious and atheistic forms (for cultural, political, ideological, and other reasons) there are noteworthy signs of growth in less definitively theistic/religious or

atheistic/secularist worldviews.

Where economic and existential security grows strongest, more aspects of life are subject to personal choice or control, including worldview formation, and traditional religious belief, belonging, behaviour, and institutional or societal significance tend to wane (Norris and Inglehart 2004). Close scrutiny indicates that at the individual level, the majority response does not tend to be ‘hard’ or broad atheism, but passive or tentative religious indifference, selective religious engagement, or personalized admixtures of ‘spiritual’ and this-worldly thinking. The cultural or ideological ‘looseness’ (Pelto 1968) of such tendencies, however, does not satisfy all. Some seek ‘thicker’, ‘purer’, more comprehensive or all-consuming experiences in ‘tighter’ formations—religious and otherwise. This is particularly (but by no means exclusively) true where hardship or turmoil persist. There, religiosity and religions continue to play more substantial roles at the individual, institutional, and societal levels.

Multinational corporations, global transport and mobility, migration and urbanization, the World Wide Web, social media, cell phones, cinema, tablets, and televisions present individuals and nations with both the opportunities and challenges of increasing information flow. These forces are not, of course, equally distributed around the world, but they seem to be advancing gradually and inexorably. Their most direct effect is not secularization so much as pluralism and individualization (Berger 1969; 1992). They afford increasing opportunities in more places for comparison, evaluation, and selective adoption of ideas and behaviour rather than unquestioned inheritance or social requirement of all-encompassing cultural packages or sacred canopies. They increasingly bring both the exhilaration and precariousness of creating one’s own ‘biography’—or worldview and way of life (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim 2002). (Active atheisms, it should be noted, tend to encourage individualization by emphasizing the right and responsibility of each person to draw conclusions and form worldviews through critical and autonomous thought.) Paradoxically, perhaps, such forces may drive *both* secularization and religionization.

If there is a grand trajectory, it would seem to be—at least at present and for the foreseeable future—toward increasing diversity spread across the religious-secular spectrum. There are innumerable signs of religious decline or dilution as well as revival, reassertion, and transformation around the world. Conservative, Evangelical, or Pentecostal Christianity and reactionary Islam, as well as (re)assertive atheism and other secularist constructs, are among the many responses to the challenges and opportunities presented by global development, mobility, media, and marketplace. But amid the assertions of strong religious and secularist ideologies, there is a substantial movement (particularly in more developed countries) toward the selective formation of worldviews, *à la bricolage*, that are neither rigidly religious nor broadly atheistic. And amid theistic and atheistic political regimes we see the emergence of various forms of political secularism that accommodate worldview pluralism and individualization (Stepan 2011). This, we suspect, is the trend to watch, for its implications may be more far-reaching than have been dreamt of in our atheistic or theistic philosophies.

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CHAPTER 30

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF ATHEISM

MIGUEL FARÍAS

INTRODUCTION

I was born in a time when the majority of young people had lost their belief in God, for the same reason their elders had had it: without knowing why. And then, since the human spirit naturally tends towards judgements based on feelings instead of reason, most of these young people chose Humanity to replace God.

Fernando Pessoa, *The Book of Disquiet* ([1998] 2001: 11)

THERE have been two major misconceptions in recent writings on the psychology of atheism. The trend was started by Beit-Hallahmi (2007) when he suggested that the psychology of religion was also the study of irreligion—one simply had to conceive of an atheist as scoring zero on a continuous religiosity scale (0–100). An earlier psychological analysis of atheism, denounces this position as conceptually untenable—for how can one elaborate a science of a negative phenomenon (Vergote 1996)?¹ Methodologically, his suggestion is no less suspicious: it confounds a zero score on a religiosity scale with denial of a supernatural dimension, and it completely obliterates the varieties of atheism. The second misconception is a general shortcoming of psychological studies, which have been criticized for an almost exclusive use of North American educated participants (Henrich et al. 2010). In what concerns atheism, the case is particularly severe because there is a paucity of research and most of the existing studies are from the USA. If one adds to this sampling bias the particularly negative image of atheists in that country and the prejudice or distrust they have to face (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012), the scientific value of the US studies on atheism count for little more than an anthropological vignette on the beliefs of an exotic group.² Other than culture, social learning factors, like parental beliefs, are crucial to understand the development of an individual's atheism. After all, religious people generally come from religious families, and atheists from nonreligious families.³

The psychology of atheism cannot be a mirror image of the psychology of religion for another reason: Atheists have beliefs that deserve to be studied in their own right. By this I don't simply mean that they hold strong moral values or different attitudes about their atheism (see Zuckerman 2009), but that they have distinct ontological, epistemological and ethical beliefs about reality. This is true for both positive and negative atheists, as they are defined in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. An individual who denies or lacks beliefs in gods will hold other, *meaningful*, types of beliefs, that can provide a basis to distinguish what is right and wrong, as well as offer emotional reassurance, very much like supernatural beliefs do for a religious individual.

In this essay, I will explore atheists' beliefs by looking at recent psychological experiments on belief in science and in progress. This topic is of special relevance for a psychology of atheism, for two reasons: first, beliefs work not only at the cognitive, but also at the motivational and emotional levels. This means they can, like Freud and Marx highlighted, have a comforting role in our lives by

alleviating uncertainty and anxiety (for recent evidence, see Kay et al. 2009; Norenzayan and Hansen 2006). Second, despite rational attempts to articulate why one is a Christian, an atheist or an agnostic, the causes of our beliefs (or lack of) are, as Pessoa wrote in the early 1920s, largely unknown to us. In other words, the process of believing is largely an implicit and automatic one, not only in the way beliefs are acquired, but also how they function in everyday life.

This claim is not a novel one. Whether looking at the roots of violence or developing neuro-cognitive models of decision-making, one of psychology's major accomplishments has been the discovery of how so many of our feelings, thoughts, and behaviours are driven by mental processes taking place beneath our conscious awareness. Along these lines, it has been suggested that religious belief is the outcome of a generally intuitive and non-reflective process (Barrett 2004). Can the same be said of atheism and the types of non-supernatural beliefs held by atheists? The 'deconversion' into atheism data are contradictory, with some research showing that this is preceded by rational doubt rather than emotional crisis (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011), and other studies reporting an underlying emotional process of losing one's religion (Exline and Rose 2005). Other data on deconversion favour the intuitive hypothesis; a greater proportion of individuals leave religion behind for motivational rather than rational reasons, and the majority of deconversions happen at adolescence and young adulthood, i.e., at a time when one is emotionally particularly volatile (Streib and Klein 2013).

Recent evidence from social-cognitive psychology has strengthened the case for the intuitiveness of religious beliefs. Religious people tend to make more errors in probability-reasoning tasks and to increase their belief in God when experimentally stimulated to value past intuitions (Shenhav et al. 2011). This conclusion has been confirmed by another study that found an association between lower performance on analytical tasks and religious beliefs. Unconventional views of God, agnosticism and atheism were, on the other hand, positively associated with analytical thinking (Pennycook et al. 2012). Yet another study, which used a variety of experimental techniques, found that stimulating analytical thinking decreased religious belief (Gervais and Norenzayan 2012). While these studies show atheists' higher reliance on analytical thinking, they do not imply that atheists are more conscious or reflective of their own beliefs, or that atheism is the outcome of a conscious refutation of previously held religious beliefs.⁴ They may simply be showing that analytical thinking inhibits the expression of one's intuitive beliefs—and while the focus of these studies was on religion, it is likely that they can be generalized to other kinds of beliefs, including naturalistic ones. The evidence I present in this essay, on the implicit compensatory role of belief in science and in progress, indirectly supports this idea.

Other than the propensity towards analytical thinking, there are other potentially distinctive psychological implications of being an atheist, particularly at the motivational level. In the second part of this essay, I propose that contemporary atheists are specifically driven by a Gnostic motivation, which seeks self-mastery through knowledge; secondarily, they also present a higher sensation seeking need to engage in intense and pleasurable activities.

THE BELIEF REPLACEMENT HYPOTHESIS: FAITH IN PROGRESS AND IN SCIENCE

In the second part of the opening quotation by Pessoa, he suggests that people are naturally predisposed to believe; and that those who reject religion, intuitively choose something else to replace it with. This can be briefly enunciated as the *belief replacement hypothesis*. Whether explicitly

or implicitly, atheists will espouse various types of naturalistic beliefs that are meaningful, help them to explain the world and, ultimately, can play a compensatory role in dealing with adverse circumstances. Existentialism, New Atheism, Humanism and Marxism are examples of beliefs systems associated with atheism.⁵ But even less structured beliefs, like conspiracy theories, can also appeal to atheists, echoing Popper's suggestion that when the gods are abandoned powerful men or groups take their place ([1945] 2003). Indeed, a study on Dan Brown's *Da Vinci Code* conspiracy novel suggests that atheists may be more inclined to believe in conspiracies (Newheiser et al. 2011). The novel claims that Jesus had been married to Mary Magdalene, that their descendants were protected throughout the centuries by a secret group called *The Priory of Sion*, and that the Catholic Church is aware of this and has tried to hide the truth from the public. The study found that the more anxious a person was about death the more they believed in the *Da Vinci Code* conspiracy, except if they were strongly religious. Furthermore, the atheist part of the sample (35 per cent) showed a higher belief in the conspiracy than religious participants.⁶

If the belief replacement hypothesis is true, that is, if atheists espouse naturalistic beliefs, whether explicitly or implicitly, that take the place of supernatural ones, then we'd expect these beliefs to be particularly relevant, not only at the cognitive, but motivational and emotional levels. In other words, if they are as meaningful as supernatural beliefs are for religious people, they should fulfil similar psychological functions to those observed for religious beliefs, such as emotional reassurance in the face of adversity.

In 2009 and 2010, Bastiaan Rutjens and his Dutch colleagues published two articles about the psychological role of belief in progress that provides support for the belief replacement hypothesis. They reported a series of studies where, using various procedures which included laboratory and field experiments, they showed how the humanist belief in moral progress helped secular individuals to cope better with existential anxiety and uncertainty (Rutjens et al. 2009; 2010). What Rutjens did was to put John Gray's (2004) suggestion to the test—that the idea of progress is, for atheists, what providence was for theists: that having faith in a progressive course of history (i.e. that we are progressing not just technologically and scientifically but also morally) provides people with emotional reassurance. Thus, secular people may use this sense of faith in humanity's moral progress to find comfort or security, in the same way religious people use their belief in God.

They tested this using two main paradigms that either stimulated lack of control or existential anxiety. To elicit existential anxiety the participants were asked to write about their feelings and thoughts concerning their own deaths. This popular social psychology task is based on the premise that human beings are terrified of death; and that one way of alleviating the anxiety provoked by our awareness of death is to affirm our beliefs or world-views (Greenberg et al. 1997). Typically, when stimulating anxiety in this way, people react by strengthening their beliefs.

In the first experiment of the 2009 paper, half of the participants filled in the mortality salience task while the rest wrote about an experience of dental pain. Then, participants read a short essay which argued that progress was an illusion, and had to rate how much they agreed with the author's views. This is an excerpt of the essay:

There's plenty of evidence that we haven't witnessed real progress since the Middle Ages: we fail to find answers to environmental problems, political systems do not function better than say 100 years ago, there is still poverty in the world and so on. We don't seem to learn from history and keep making the same mistakes over and over again ... People are people, and morally, politically, and socially, we simply do not make any progress. All in all, I think we have to face reality: progress is an illusion!

People stimulated with death thoughts agreed less with the author of the essay than those in the

control condition. In a second experiment, they found that showing this anti-progress essay made people more aware of death, supposedly because their belief in progress was being undermined. In a third—and crucial—experiment, they tested whether increased belief in progress alleviated death anxiety. To increase belief in progress, they asked half of the participants to read a text describing progress in society through human efforts; after this they had to think about ways in which they felt there had been progress in the last decade. As expected, participants whose belief in progress had been enhanced experienced fewer death related thoughts than those in a control condition. It is then likely, the authors conclude, that the belief in human progress can offer a secular version of faith that alleviates our fear of death.

In the 2010 paper, Rutjens and colleagues again looked at belief in progress, but now used a paradigm where they tested how a felt lack of control may lead to increased belief in progress. This paradigm is rooted in the concept of secondary control—when you can't directly control your environment, you will resort to your beliefs to ascertain a sense of subjective control and predictability over events (Kay et al. 2009; Rothbaum et al. 1982). They found that stimulating lack of control led people to more vigorously defend the concept of progress, as well as valuing more progressive scientific and environmental research (such as stem cell research and development of electric cars). Amongst the studies, there was a field experiment where they looked at people's faith in progress when they were aboard a plane—a situation where most of us would feel to have less control than in everyday life. When comparing this group of airplane participants with those of a grounded group, they again found increased belief in progress.⁷

One could say that belief in progress entails a kind of hope in a utopian society. In that sense, it is understandable that it brings about emotional comfort. Allegiance to science, on the other hand, doesn't necessarily involve any positive hope in the evolution of society and is in direct conflict with supernatural explanations. Science is, for many atheists, more than a method of acquiring knowledge about the world, the only legitimate way of ascertaining truth. As a belief system, science promotes not only a physical reductionist view of nature, but extends itself into the area of morality. For example, New Atheist philosopher Sam Harris claims that science can tell us what's objectively right and wrong, while traditional morality can't (Harris 2010). Ideas about science have permeated the whole fabric of modern culture and many atheists, explicit or implicitly, mention science as a belief system that replaces religion. In a recent sociological paper, which includes a profusion of statements from Scandinavian and US atheists about their views on God, some interviewees justify not believing in God because they are scientists, they have been 'convinced by science', or because they believe that 'everything is created by science' (Zuckerman 2012).

Recent social-cognitive evidence suggests that belief in science can, for atheists, replace religion as a provider of meaning and emotional reassurance. This hypothesis was recently tested by means of a field and a laboratory experiment (Farias et al. 2013). In the field study, rowers in two different stress conditions were assessed. They were either minutes away from competing (high stress condition) or simply about to start their usual training (low stress condition). Individuals in both conditions filled in a short questionnaire that included measures of stress and belief in science.⁸ We would expect people in the high stress condition to intuitively heighten their beliefs in order to alleviate the stress of the imminent competition. That is exactly what happened: competing rowers showed greater levels of stress and increased belief in science than the rowers that were having a usual training session. In a separate laboratory experiment, the death anxiety paradigm described above was used to increase anxiety in half of the participants. Again, it was found that people who had to write about their own deaths had a stronger belief in science. Further, amongst the participants who had been primed with thoughts about their deaths, those with higher beliefs in science also endorsed a particularly

deterministic view of how natural laws shape us (Paulhus and Carey 2011). So, perhaps belief in science is emotionally reassuring when an atheist faces adverse situations, because it provides a tightly ordered understanding of the world that eschews randomness—similar to what religion achieves through the idea of a governing deity (Kay et al. 2010).

These findings are supported by other experimental evidence. Another set of experiments, which explored preference for various types of scientific theories, suggests that when we feel threatened we prefer theories that describe an orderly sequence of stages, such as Freud or Piaget's theories of development, over discontinuous development (Rutjens et al. 2013). One of the experiments discloses that, when faced with unpredictability, we rather choose a theory of Alzheimer's disease which describes a straightforward decline, than one which stresses individual variability. We know that we are creatures of habit, and detest uncertainty. Can this also account for the survival and moderate success of Intelligent Design over Evolution theory? Apparently, yes, even amongst secular university students. Although generally preferring Darwin's theory, when students had their sense of control undermined, they were more likely to prefer Intelligent Design over Darwin's theory of evolution (Rutjen et al. 2010). This also is true when students were stimulated to think about their own deaths (Tracy et al. 2011).

The very notion of 'believing in science' is naturally open to criticism. Scientists and philosophers who claim the superiority, or even exclusivity, of scientific methods and results have been accused of dogmatism, or scientism (Stenmark 2001). After all, it is one thing to use science as a method, and another to grant it metaphysical status. The accusation of dogmatism, which is traditionally held against religious people, is probably less related to the content of belief than to its strength and resilience. That is, the more central beliefs are for one's structuring of the world, including meaning-making, the more likely they are to be inflexible to counter-evidence. Related to this, although atheists have been portrayed as more rational and open minded, in the very same study they also showed to be dogmatic about their beliefs and prejudiced against religious people (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006).

The social psychological studies reviewed above provide supporting evidence for the claim that atheists do have beliefs, albeit of a non-supernatural type, and that these beliefs are not dissimilar to religious ones in their psychological function. This clearly lends support to the belief replacement hypothesis. Further, this finding has a relevance which extends far beyond the study of atheism and religion. It tells us something about the nature and role of beliefs. It seems that it is not so much the content of the belief, but its meaningfulness and strength that truly matters. Despite the difficulty in deliberately choosing what we believe in, beliefs offer structure to our lives, and we cling on to them when facing trying and uncertain situations.

In this section, I have focused on psychological commonalities between atheist and religious people. I will now turn my attention to what differentiates them.

MOTIVATIONS IN ATHEISTS: SELF-MASTERY AND SENSATION SEEKING

If I were to use a single term to characterize what psychologically distinguishes modern atheists from other people, I would say: a *Gnostic* drive. By Gnostic, I refer both to the etymology of the word—knowledge—and the theological system that proposes a strong dualism between humankind and the world; the world being a place of ignorance created by a minor demiurge, which we can only be liberated from by knowledge. Rational knowledge is, of course, very different from the knowledge Gnostics were seeking, and I am also not implying that atheists believe in a wicked demiurge.

However, at a plain psychological level, both modern atheists and Gnostics are deeply driven by a desire for self-mastery—and knowledge acquisition is a privileged way of attaining mastery. But it represents something else: knowledge, as the Gnostics rightly argued, also allows for transcendence of the world, a transcendence which, for modern atheists, can be simple existentialist self-reflection, but can also be an attempt to break with or transform our biological nature—through the application of knowledge. In this context, modern atheists' reliance on science carries deeper layers of meaning; science can indeed work as a psychological crutch because it has an added metaphysical value. It is 'a candle in the dark', in Carl Sagan's statement, the knowledge that liberates us from ignorance and the threateningly void universe, once it has been emptied of deities.

In Hans Jonas' analysis of the parallels between Gnosticism and modern existentialism, he stresses how both movements are characterized by a dualistic mood: humans are inexorably separated from the universe (1952). The idea of a divine will at work behind nature has been replaced by rules of power and necessity. This inexorable rift between humankind and the universe makes self-mastery an absolute necessity. The Existentialist movement expressed this in a crystal-clear way: our autonomy from God means that we are free from all constraints, but at the same time utterly alone (see Camus [1942] 2000; Sartre 1946). We are left with no choice but to master ourselves. The somewhat introverted, or intellectual, expression of self-mastery in existentialism has become an extraverted one in twenty-first century atheism: self-reflective autonomy has given way to competitive individualism, the desire to master and portray oneself as distinct from the rest of humanity.⁹

There is a plethora of research on individualism in the social sciences, but little that focuses on atheism. Nevertheless, the available evidence is unambiguous: self-reported atheists and agnostics are more individualistic than religious individuals, and value more motivations of self-direction, hedonism, and stimulation (Houtman and Mascini 2002; Farias and Lalljee 2008). A psychological correlate of individualism and self-mastery, in particular, is the need to feel in control of your own life. Although perceived control has been heavily researched in social and health psychology (Levenson 1981), there is almost no investigation of this construct in atheists. In a recent analysis of individual differences in atheism, Caldwell-Harris references two articles which suggest that atheists have a higher internal locus of control, but neither of them actually present the data to support this view (2012). In my own doctoral thesis, I compared internal and external perceptions of control in atheists, Catholics, and New Agers (Farias 2005). As expected, atheists thought of themselves as more in control of their lives than the other groups, though Catholics did not score higher than atheists on external control (whether it was chance/fate or powerful others).¹⁰

There is another psychological literature of particular significance to the discussion of individualistic motivations, which finds its roots in psychoanalytical thought. Bakan proposed that individualism is a motivation towards separation and autonomy; the opposite pole being communion, which is characterized as a motivation towards union, cooperation and contact with other human beings (1966). Following Weber, he traces the modern Western emphasis on agency and individualism to the Protestant revolution, not only because of Protestantism's notion of a private and unmediated contact with God, but also due to its theological interest in the world, which gave rise to the expansion of science as a way of studying the manifested glory of God.¹¹

Bakan's dual model of motivations has been refined and extended by Dan McAdams, one of the leading authors in the narrative study of personality (McAdams et al. 1996). This model has been used to analyse autobiographical narratives of atheists, Catholics and New Age individuals (Farias and Lalljee 2006). When asked to write about a high point in their lives, people express agency or communion motivations. Self-mastery is the prototypical theme of agency as separation, as the individual seeks isolation to perfect and control the self. The following excerpt shows a narrative of

self-mastery:

Whilst reading a book my perspective on life and my place in it shifted ... I became more philosophical! I read the book in my room, on a bus and on a train journey, digesting each of the chapters and their wisdom over those days. I was the only person involved, I don't think that I spoke to anyone about the book for a few weeks afterwards. I arrived at a mindset, albeit a shaky one, where I realized that I dictated what I felt and how I reacted to certain situations and fundamentally I was able to, in small and large ways, control my feelings.

An atheist wrote this. By contrast, Catholics wrote significantly fewer narratives centred on self-mastery.¹² However, New Age participants had an even higher proportion of self-mastery stories, though not significantly different from atheists. Consider the following story by a New Age individual:

Last spring inspired by a book I drastically changed my diet which after about 15 years of existing rather than living left me with heaps of energy, my headaches stopped and my digestive problems literally disappeared. Because I also had emotional problems I started listening to self-help tapes, read more books, started to meditate and use affirmations/positive thinking.

The change in me was so profound that it's difficult to put into words. I couldn't recognize myself and neither could others. I became more confident, happy, efficient in every way and stopped isolating myself from others. Unlike a year ago now I really do accept and believe that we create our experiences and things don't just happen to us.

The similarity between the two stories is not a coincidence. Concerning motivations, atheists are practically indistinguishable from New Age individuals. The characterization of atheists as more individualistic, non-conformist, liberal and open to new experiences (Caldwell-Harris 2012) applies equally to individuals engaged in modern spirituality.¹³ Even more explicitly than atheists, they cultivate self-mastery and endeavour to acquire knowledge, either intellectual or experiential, in order to transcend the abyss between the self and the world (see Heelas 1996).

On the other pole of self-mastery through knowledge lies a different kind of motivation. As mentioned earlier, atheists were also found to adhere more strongly to hedonistic and stimulation motivations. The concept of stimulation simply means a search for novelty, excitement and challenge in life (Schwartz 1992). In addition, atheists score higher on openness to experience (Gallen 2009), a personality trait which is defined by a drive towards curiosity, engagement with various activities, and trying out new ideas and experiences. There is an intellectual—or rather imaginative—aspect in these various concepts, but they are predominantly sensorial, which is why I will refer to this as a *sensation seeking* motivation (adapted from Zuckerman 1990). This motivation entails a desire to express one's physical nature and can be characterized as a search for new, intense and pleasurable sensations and feelings. That atheism may lead to greater personal freedom and even hedonism is not a new idea. If the gods are out of the picture, if we are truly alone and free, why shouldn't we do as we please? Most atheists do not follow this to its nihilistic consequences; nevertheless, we would expect less behavioural constraints, especially if they are not associated with social sanctions.

In particular, if atheists are motivated by a desire for new and intense experiences this ought to be reflected in their sexual behaviour.¹⁴ This wouldn't translate necessarily in the frequency of sexual practice, but in its variety—including variety of partners. The available evidence, from US sources alone, confirms this hypothesis. An exhaustive report on a national US sample shows that people without religion are more likely to engage in uncommon heterosexual practices, like anal sex (35 per cent), and to have had a greater number of sexual partners than religious people (Laumann et al. 1994). Nonreligious men, but not women, also have twice as high a preference for sexual voyeurism (10 per cent) than religious men. Another US national survey reports that nonreligious people are the most likely to engage in extramarital sex (44 per cent) and to have had an earlier sexual initiation (82 per cent of men and 69 per cent of women before the age of 18) (Janus and Janus 1993).

Despite the limited nature of these data, it gives us a glimpse of how atheism may be linked with different sexual behaviours. It is quite possible that other factors may help account for these differences. A lower sense of guilt about sexual experimentation, for example, may influence atheists' behaviour. Future research can address this by assessing both feelings of guilt and sensation seeking motivations. Another possibility is to experimentally stimulate religious disbelief and assess to what an extent this has an impact on motivation.

CONCLUSION

Christ and progress are, for me, similar myths. I don't believe in the Virgin Mary or electricity. Fernando Pessoa, *The Education of a Stoic* (1999: 26)

It's very likely that no functioning human can live without beliefs. Old and new religions show a deep awareness of how difficult it is to break one's established beliefs, whether in the Old Testament the wrath of Jehovah upon the adoration of the golden calf, Jesus' admonition of the importance of believing without seeing, Zen Buddhism's use of physical and cognitive strategies to challenge one's beliefs of reality, or even Scientology's gadgets to assess and deprogram beliefs.

The benefits of beliefs, both cognitive and emotive, are not driven by their distinctive supernatural content but instead stem from the process of believing, which structures reality in a causal and meaningful form (Preston and Epley 2005). I have suggested that atheists, in shedding off the skin of supernatural beliefs, end up internalizing other types of beliefs. It is unclear how this process occurs, since it does not consist of a conscious replacement. One possibility is that the congruence, or proximity, between one's atheism and non-supernatural beliefs an individual is exposed to leads to an implicit endorsement of these beliefs. This process occurs regardless of one being a positive, God denying, atheist or a negative one, who simply lacks belief in gods.

This is a new field, poorly researched, and in dire need of cross-cultural research. Above, I suggested that atheists have a Gnostic drive. Some have indicated that this movement has provided a wealth of 'holy' iconoclastic inspiration throughout the centuries (Silva 1997). Perhaps modern atheists are, in some subtle and veiled manner, heirs of this tradition and are thus helping to illuminate biases in religious people's perceptions of God.

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CHAPTER 31

ATHEISM AND COGNITIVE SCIENCE

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INTRODUCTION

COGNITIVE Science (sometimes referred to collectively as the cognitive sciences) is the interdisciplinary study of the mind. Taking into account the relevant findings of psychology, anthropology, philosophy, computer science, artificial intelligence, and neuroscience, cognitive scientists attempt to ascertain how the mind works, both in general and in particular domains (e.g., numerical cognition, social cognition, emotional cognition). Its modern origins are rooted in the development of cybernetics in the 1940s and the rejection of behaviourist psychology (Holyoak 1999). To understand behaviour, many concluded, one could not simply examine a stimulus and response, but rather also the mental processes that take stimuli as input and produce particular responses as outputs. Decades of research on cognition have followed, yielding a wealth of insights and debates, including those concerning the relationship between mentalistic terms and neurological states and whether the mind is best conceived of as a processor of symbols or a distributed network of simple, neural connections.

Both in principle and in practice, cognitive science is relevant to our understanding of atheism. In principle, all beliefs are cognitive states, meaning that the cognitive study of beliefs in general can provide insight into the causes and effects of theistic beliefs in particular. In practice, the findings of the cognitive sciences: (i) complicate both our notion of what a ‘belief’ is and the model of the mind we frequently assume in discussing atheism, and (ii) provide us with an empirically grounded account of the mind we can utilize in our theorizing about a variety of relevant domains, including: the causes and effects of atheism, the moral rejection of religion that frequently accompanies atheism, and the nature of anti-atheist prejudice.

COGNITION AND THE COMPLICATIONS OF ATHEISM

Belief is most commonly thought of as an accessible cognitive state, meaning that, through introspection, one can establish whether or not one has a particular belief and communicate whether or not one has that particular belief to others. It is certainly the case that a great many theists and atheists seem to do this when they tell others of their beliefs concerning the existence of a God or gods. In the cognitive sciences, such beliefs are typically referred to as *explicit* or *reflective* beliefs (Barrett and Lanman 2008). They can be made explicit in the individual’s mind and can be expressed to others through propositions. They can be reflected upon consciously and can develop from reflection on a subject. We might reflectively believe that that we went to the dentist yesterday, that the claim from quantum physicists about particles spinning in multiple directions at the same time is true,

and that Michael Jordan is 6' 6" tall. Explicit, reflective beliefs, however, make up only a portion of our beliefs. A great many of our beliefs are in fact implicit and nonreflective. We hold them without always consciously realizing that they are at work or that we hold them at all. Some, in fact, are similar to the workings of our visual systems in that they are completely inaccessible to consciousness (Wilson 2002). We have implicit beliefs, for instance, that other human beings have minds of their own, that unsupported objects fall, and that a physical object can only be spinning in one direction at any given time. Such beliefs guide our actions continuously in the world and can be detected through our behaviour, such as our surprise responses to objects appearing to levitate or affect one another at a distance. In fact, because they can be detected through such behaviours, implicit beliefs can be examined in pre-linguistic infants based on how long they look at particular stimuli and what seems to surprise them (Spelke et al. 1992).

The existence of implicit beliefs does not, in and of itself, complicate our notion of atheism. It is quite possible, for instance, that we have implicit beliefs about physical objects, other minds, and a few other select domains, but not about God or gods. It might be the case that our thinking about the existence of God or gods operates solely at the explicit, reflective level and that we can largely ignore the science of our implicit beliefs. Evidence from the emerging cognitive science of religion, however, suggests that this is not the case and that, in fact, individuals can and sometimes do have implicit beliefs about the nature and existence of God or gods that differ from, or even contradict, their explicitly held beliefs.

Justin Barrett, for example, has demonstrated a divergence between the characteristics of God that participants explicitly believe God to have and the characteristics of God that participants assume God to have when they are reasoning quickly about how to interpret an ambiguous narrative. When asked explicitly about God, for example, participants reported that God was omniscient and not limited by time or space. When interpreting a narrative about God answering prayers in different parts of the world, however, participants interpreted the narrative not by utilizing their reported notion of God as omnipresent and unlimited, but by a much easier, 'theologically incorrect' notion of God as a limited agent existing in one place at a time who must answer one prayer in an initial location before travelling across the world to answer a second prayer (Barrett 1999).

A more contentious but intriguing claim has been put forward by Jesse Bering in relation to differing implicit and explicit beliefs concerning God or gods. Bering argues not just that explicit believers might actually implicitly believe that a supernatural agent has different properties, but that those who explicitly believe that no supernatural agents exist (in other words, positive atheists) actually have implicit beliefs in the existence of some non-culturally specific supernatural agency (2006). Bering supports this argument by citing the evolutionary logic of having an evolved, implicit belief in supernatural observance and through a small number of experiments that appear to show some level of implicit belief in the existence of some supernatural agency.

Bering argues that once human beings developed language, information about anti-social but individually beneficial acts, such as the murder of a rival, could suddenly spread throughout a group, resulting in the ostracism or even execution of the offender. A strong selection pressure existed, Bering argues, for cognitive mechanisms that could prevent individuals from performing reputation-damaging actions when they think they are unobserved (as they would be frequently mistaken about this and word of their misdeeds would make it back to the group, to their detriment). For Bering, one answer that natural selection found was an implicit belief that some agency was always watching and judging one's behaviour. Bering argues that this implicit belief is operating in our minds despite any reflective beliefs about the non-existence of any supernatural agents such as God or gods.

Besides this evolutionary logic, Bering offers evidence from a small number of empirical studies.

In one study, Bering found that individuals who explicitly claimed that the self ends at death frequently attributed epistemic and emotional states to dead characters and also took much longer to answer questions concerning whether the dead character still possessed epistemic and emotional states than questions concerning physical states (2002). Bering interprets these findings as evidence of an implicit belief in the continued existence of the self that is difficult to override, even for explicit extactivists. This would be an implicit belief in the supernatural despite explicit denials, but not necessarily belief in supernatural surveillance. A 2005 study, however, speaks more directly to the issue of supernatural surveillance. In this study, Bering and colleagues (2005) set up a competitive task (with monetary reward) for participants in which there was an easy opportunity to cheat. Participants in one subgroup proceeded immediately to the task. Participants in another subgroup heard that a graduate student working on the test had recently died. Participants in a third subgroup heard that the ghost of this graduate student had been seen recently in the testing area. Participants in the 'ghost story' subgroup were significantly less likely to cheat on the task than other participants. Bering interprets these findings as evidence that an underlying implicit belief in the existence of some supernatural agency only needs to be triggered by discourse about a supernatural agent to serve its function of inhibiting anti-social, potentially reputation damaging behaviour when individuals think that they are otherwise unobserved.

The findings of Barrett and Bering complicate our understanding of atheism. When we discuss atheism, for instance, as the absence of belief in God or gods, are we discussing explicit or implicit beliefs? Both may be consequential for individual thought and behaviour and it is debatable which type of belief should demand most of our attention. Almost all scholarship on atheism concerns itself with explicit beliefs and their ties to particular socio-cultural contexts, conscious reasoning, and social identities. And for historians, sociologists, social anthropologists, and most scholars of religion, explicit beliefs and the social identities they express are the more interesting phenomenon. Many psychologists, however—Bering among them—argue that explicit beliefs in supernatural agents and all of their cultural trimmings are largely epiphenomenal in relation to the causes of important, fitness relevant behaviour such as refraining from killing a rival (Bering 2010). Barrett's work on theological correctness supports this perspective to some extent, as the more complex explicit beliefs of individuals matter less than more basic implicit beliefs when people are reasoning quickly about events in the world.

The existence and relevance of implicit beliefs also raise interesting questions about the demographics of atheism. All of the demographic data on atheism concerns explicit atheism, as the data is gathered from self-report questionnaires and surveys. One can argue, as Bering and others have, that implicit theism is largely universal and that implicit atheism is extremely rare in human beings. This would mean that countries such as Sweden and Denmark, which have two of the highest proportions of explicit atheists in the world, do not differ from the United States or India or Nigeria in the proportions of their citizens who are implicit theists (Zuckerman 2007). Much work remains to be done on this matter, as Bering's ghost story study has not been replicated in environments with large numbers of atheists. Nor did Bering establish the number of his participants who were, in fact, atheists. Further, a study by Shariff and Norenzayan (2007) also examined the effects of religious primes on pro-social behaviour and found that, while university-aged atheists were just as affected by the primes as theists, adult atheists were not suggesting that implicit theism may well fade over time if not accompanied by explicit theism. While the question of implicit atheism is, consequently, an open one, it is also an important one for understanding human thought and behaviour.

In addition to complicating the central concepts of 'belief' and 'atheism', the cognitive sciences also complicate assumptions about the human mind frequently made in both popular and scholarly work on atheism and religion, including (i) the assumption that human thought is mostly rational and

(ii) the assumption that people have a tendency to believe comforting falsehoods.

(i) The Rational Animal?

In relation to the first assumption, many atheists hold that they arrive at their beliefs or lack of a beliefs always or mostly through a process of rational reflection. Indeed, since the Enlightenment, having one's beliefs result from rationality has become a virtue to be lauded (e.g., Taylor 2007). It has also been frequently argued that religious beliefs are irrational and must result from irrational thought processes. During my fieldwork with atheist groups in the USA, UK, and Denmark, for example, I would hear questions such as 'How can they possibly believe that stuff?', 'I just don't understand how you can read the Bible and think, "OK". How does that happen?' Such questions would be followed by a variety of answers, with one of the most common being emotions: 'I guess some people just can't face death, just can't be alone.'

Underneath such questioning and theorizing is the assumption that belief in the existence of supernatural agents is something that is not obvious and that needs to be explained, as opposed to other types of beliefs that are thought to result from the proper functioning of our sensory and cognitive faculties. The assumption is that something has clearly gone wrong in those individuals who believe in supernatural agents. Human beings sense the world and act on this information through the use of reason in order accomplish their ends. Since no sensory information directly concerning supernatural agents can be found, our rational capacities should rule out such beliefs. Yet there they are, all the same.

Atheists are not alone in making this assumption. In fact, they share it with many social scientists. From E. B. Tylor's notion of animism emerging from the puzzlement over dreams and death (1871), to Émile Durkheim's account of the totemic principle serving as a symbol of the otherwise incomprehensible 'social' ([1912] 1995), to Rodney Stark and William Sims Bainbridge's theory of religious compensators (1987), scholars of religion and culture have commonly held that human beings are rational animals and that only some powerful process, such as a drive to understand the universe or society or an existential fear of death, could overpower our rational faculties to produce supernatural beliefs.

Many social scientists attempting to explain religion, as well as those working in other domains such as economics, have held to similar assumptions about human rationality. These scholars operate under what philosopher Edward Stein calls the 'traditional', 'ideal', or 'standard' picture of rationality. Under the traditional account, people reason according to normative rational principles, except for the occasional 'momentary lapse' or 'performance error', and take action according to their best interests as they rationally weigh the means and ends of a given situation (Stein 1996).

This traditional account has come under sustained assault from studies in the cognitive sciences over the last forty years, with abundant evidence demonstrating that human beings in a variety of settings, even those with extensive education, do not reason according to normative principles. Rather, they systematically deviate from them (Kahneman et al. 1982; Gilovich 1993). Some notable examples of such heuristics and biases include framing effects (Kahneman and Tversky 1984), the conjunction fallacy (Stein 1996), confirmation bias, and the hot hand illusion (Gilovich 1993).

The implication of such work is that human beings do not merely deviate from their normal, rational thought processes under certain conditions. Rather, our cognitive architecture is not constructed in ways conducive to ideally rational thought in the first place. In fact, according to empirically grounded accounts of human rationality, the bulk of our reasoning can be characterized as a set of simple heuristics that work quite well in producing adaptive behaviours given the

limitations of time and information that we face.

Such evidence does not necessarily entail that we must label human beings as irrational, however, as several philosophers and psychologists argue for the notion of 'bounded rationality', not only as a descriptor of human thought but as a more realistic notion of what rationality itself entails (Stein 1996; Gigerenzer and Selten 2001). Nor does it necessarily entail the futility of philosophy and science. The argument is not that human beings are incapable of reasoning according to normative principles when evaluating evidence, but merely that our cognitive systems are not constructed so as to naturally reason in this way.

With this new, evidentially-supported view of human reasoning, we are led to re-evaluate explanations of both theism and atheism. We have no need to posit scenarios of traditionally rational, scientifically-oriented human beings butting their intellects up against the unknown or otherwise rational human beings merely being overcome by deep-seated desires for immortality and meaning. We have no need for such ambitious explanations because the rational mind that they assume must be overcome does not exist. With this view of human reasoning, the question shifts from how rational people actually believe in the existence of supernatural agents to what heuristic cognitive devices and strategies human beings possess that make such ideas believable.

(ii) The Comforting Falsehoods of Religion?

In addition to providing evidence against the standard or ideal notion of human rationality frequently assumed in both public and scholarly discourse on atheism, the cognitive sciences also call into question the notion that one of the most important causes of religious beliefs is the desire for those beliefs to be true; we might call this the *Comfort theory* of religion. According to the Comfort theory, people acquire and maintain religious beliefs because they alleviate anxiety and suffering by assuring believers that 'everything will turn out well, in this world or the next' (Norris and Inglehart 2004: 19).

The problems for the Comfort theory are both anthropological and psychological. Anthropologically, supernatural agent beliefs in places we might view as most in need of comfort, such as sub-Saharan Africa and Melanesia, are far from comforting. Instead of benevolent deities assuring people that 'everything will work out' we find capricious and vengeful ancestor and forest spirits as well as the constant threat of witchcraft (e.g., Boyer 2001). Further, we find the most comforting religious beliefs in the affluent West, where many denominations of Christianity have set aside supernatural punishment and where New Age discourse on personal importance and empowerment flourish (Heelas 1996).

Psychologically, while there is evidence for 'motivated reasoning' in the cognitive sciences, this evidence is limited to particular domains such as self-evaluations, outcomes, and seeking and noticing information in line with our already held views (Kunda 1990; Bar-Hillel and Budescu 1995). The evidence does not support the idea that we would come to believe in the existence of an entity simply because we would find it comforting if it existed. Consequently, while those holding the Comfort theory may be correct in arguing that many religious beliefs provide comfort for those holding them, they are unjustified in claiming that this comfort constitutes an explanation of why those beliefs are acquired in the first place.

AN EMPIRICAL ACCOUNT OF THE MIND

Utilizing the findings of the cognitive sciences to question and complicate common assumptions in

the study of atheism and theism is valuable. Fortunately, the cognitive sciences do not only call into question claims about the human mind in relation to theism and atheism, but they provide new, empirically grounded visions of the mind that can be used in accounts of atheism.

The cognitive sciences are yielding a wealth of data and theory on most aspects of human mental life, from relationships to the senses, from morality to identity. These findings are relevant to a great many topics under the broad category of atheism. The cognitive science of morality, for example, is generating an abundance of theories and evidence directly relevant to understanding the moral objections that many atheists have towards religion (e.g., Haidt 2008). Also, the psychological investigation of social judgment suggests that anti-atheist prejudice is driven psychologically by distrust of atheists, rather than disgust or other negative emotions (Gervais et al. 2011; see also Karen Hwang's 'Atheism, Health, and Well-Being' and Ryan Cragun, Joseph Hammer, and Jesse Smith's 'North America'). Most relevantly to understanding atheism as the absence of belief in the existence of God or gods, however, is the cognitive science of religion, which attempts to understand the psychological underpinnings of theism and, by extension, atheism.

THE COGNITIVE SCIENCE OF RELIGION

The cognitive science of religion (CSR) is a small but growing field of study involving psychologists, anthropologists, and scholars of religion seeking to apply the theories, findings, and methods of the cognitive sciences to the phenomenon of religion. The field has grown from a few intrepid scholars in the early 1990s, to a thriving scholarly community with dozens of scholars, books, articles, and even an association: The International Association for the Cognitive Science of Religion. While the main focus of the cognitive science of religion has been in explaining why supernatural agent beliefs are a near-ubiquitous feature of human life (e.g., Boyer 2001; Atran 2002; Barrett 2004), other foci include explaining patterns in ritual practices (e.g., Whitehouse 2000), creationist beliefs (e.g., Barrett 2004), spirit possession (e.g., Cohen 2007), and the connections between religion and prosociality (e.g., Bulbulia 2004).

After a cursory glance at this literature, one might be forgiven for concluding that the cognitive sciences raise more questions about atheism than they answer. The most dominant view in the cognitive science of religion has been that universal features of human psychology help explain why theism thrives in human minds. Unlike the adaptationist argument of Bering, however, which holds that an implicit theism is an evolved feature of human cognition, the dominant view in the cognitive science of religion holds that theism is a by-product of ordinary cognitive mechanisms that evolved for a variety of purposes, none of them having to do with religion.

This view, which is frequently labelled as the 'by-product' view in opposition to the 'adaptationist' view, builds on the epidemiological approach to explaining cultural phenomena developed by the French anthropologist Dan Sperber in the 1980s (1996). According to the cultural epidemiological view, just as medical epidemiologists examine local conditions that are more or less conducive to the spread of a disease, cultural epidemiologists view the local conditions provided by our evolved psychology as being more or less conducive to the spread of particular types of ideas. Because of our intuitive physics (Spelke et al. 1992), for example, acquiring the theories and concepts of quantum mechanics is quite difficult.

Cognitive scientists of religion such as Pascal Boyer, Scott Atran, and Justin Barrett have employed this approach in their explanation of theism. For these scholars, the local conditions provided by our intuitive ontologies (Boyer 2001), hypersensitive agency detectors (Barrett 2004), and our tendency

to engage in ‘promiscuous teleology’ (Kelemen 2004), are highly conducive to the acquisition of explicit beliefs in the existence of God or gods.

Pascal Boyer and colleagues, for instance, found evidence that concepts which minimally violate the inferences normally made in relation to particular ontological domains for which there is a dedicated cognitive system (such as physical objects, artefacts, living kinds, and minds) are more memorable than other types of concepts, including strange concepts and concepts which violate numerous inferences (Boyer and Ramble 2001). For instance, a statue that cries is counter-intuitive (since it takes a property from a biological domain and assigns it to an artefact) and enjoys a mnemonic advantage, while a statue made of cheese is only strange (no transfer of a property from one domain to another) and enjoys no such advantage. Further, because of the supposed ability of some counter-intuitive agents to observe your every move and potentially know the contents of your mind, such concepts generate an abundance of inferences from our social cognitive systems (about, for instance, socially strategic information said agent might possess and what that agent might do with that information). Boyer and others argue that, with both memorability and the ability to trigger rich and relevant inferences, supernatural agent concepts such as God or gods should linger in our minds.

Memory and relevance, however, do not equal belief. For belief, argues Barrett (2004; Barrett and Lanman 2008), we require additional cognitive mechanisms. One of the most important, Barrett argues, is the hypersensitive agency detection device or HADD, which can provide intuitive support for the existence of supernatural agents. Given the importance that other agents have to an individual animal’s survival, most species, including humans, have evolved an agency detection device, which picks out stimuli indicative of the presence of agency. Some cognitive scientists have made the argument that because of the low cost of false positives (one risks only embarrassment by thinking that a log is a tiger) and the high cost of false negatives (one risks one’s life by thinking that a tiger is a log), our agency detectors should be and are hypersensitive (Barrett 2004). As a result of this mechanism, we frequently detect the presence of agent when no agent is actually present. While many of these intuitions of agency can be easily dismissed with evidence (e.g., it was actually the wind knocking a branch against the house rather than someone knocking), others cannot. When we cannot dismiss an intuition of agency, we quickly and intuitively review the agents potentially at work. Because of their counter-intuitive properties, such as invisibility or omnipresence, supernatural agents such as God or gods cannot be ruled out as explanations for these events. Consequently, discourse about God or gods and the experiences of agency produced by our HADD can increase belief in the existence of God or gods (e.g., hearing a noise in a house someone has told you is haunted; having a sense of presence in a church).

According to the by-product account of theism, the memorability and inferential richness of concepts of God or gods keeps them in our minds and the intuitions of agency produced by our HADD, along with intuitions of the purposefulness of features of the world (Kelemen 2004), give intuitive support to the notion that such agents exist. This memorability, inferential richness, and tendency to detect agency are all products of cognitive mechanisms that, supposedly, all human beings share, and some (though by no means enough) cross-cultural evidence has been gathered supporting that claim (Boyer and Ramble 2001).

COGNITIVE SCIENCE AND ATHEISM

These cognitive explanations run into the problem of atheism. For while cognitive scientists of

religion do not argue that these mechanisms automatically produce explicit beliefs in God or gods, many do argue, if only by omission, that they are the primary factors. But if beliefs in God or gods were mostly a product of intuitive ontologies, HADD, and other pan-human cognitive mechanisms, how are we to explain the large national differences in percentages of people believing in God or gods documented by sociologists of religion (see Ariela Keysar and Juhem Navarro-Rivera's 'A World of Atheism: Global Demographics')? These accounts point to the role of environmental variables, such as existential security, in explaining the decline in theism in the latter half of the twentieth century.

While many cognitive scientists of religion have largely ignored the problem of atheism, some, including Barrett and Bering, have not. Barrett (2004, 2010) has argued that rather than lowering the need for the comforts of religion, modern life works to lower explicit theism by lowering our intuitions of agency. Throughout most of human history, Barrett argues, people lived in natural environments not made by human hands and with some degree of uncertainty and urgency, all of which kept their agency detectors vigilant. With large, human-constructed cities and less everyday urgency, our agency detectors become less vigilant and produce fewer intuitions of agency, thereby lowering the credence of discourse concerning God or gods. This is a plausible account, and has the advantage of involving both environmental and pan-human cognitive factors. However, urbanization appears to be less important than welfare spending in explaining cross-national differences (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004). It is unclear, then, how important the HADD is in explaining theism and atheism.

Bering has not denied the relevance of welfare spending and existential security in explaining explicit atheism. He has however, argued that such changes in explicit atheism do not translate to higher levels of implicit atheism (2010). Rather, the evolved implicit belief in some supernatural agency continues in the explicit atheist mind, triggering inferences and experiences despite an individual's explicit atheism. As discussed above, however, the evidence Bering utilizes to support this claim has not been replicated in environments with large numbers of atheists (such as Scandinavia) and has been complicated by some contrary evidence (Shariff and Norenzayan 2007). Only more systematic cross-cultural research will reveal whether Bering's argument for implicit theism among explicit atheists is supported.

The by-product account of religion has improved our understanding of how universal features of human psychology can help sustain explicit theistic beliefs across time and space, and potentially why atheism has had a harder time establishing itself in human minds. Bering's account of implicit theism reminds us that implicit and explicit beliefs are quite different and can even be in conflict with one another. Another account of cognition and religion emerging from the cognitive sciences, however, may well have the most direct relevance to our contemporary understanding of atheism, as it places significant importance on contextual factors and appears to provide a causal bridge between cross-national studies of existential security and the psychological phenomena of theism and atheism.

This account centres on the role of credibility enhancing displays (or CREDs) in generating explicit beliefs in supernatural agents such as God or gods (Henrich 2009). While many scholars have argued that witnessing and participating in religious displays signals commitment to the religious group and fosters cooperation (Durkheim [1912] 1995; Bulbulia 2004), Joseph Henrich has recently presented a *prima facie* case that such displays have a crucial role to play in the acquisition of explicit beliefs in supernatural agents (2009; Atran and Henrich 2010). Henrich and his collaborators argue that human beings possess an evolved cognitive predisposition to believe the propositions of others to the extent that they 'walk the walk' and not just 'talk the talk' in relation to those propositions. Contra Richard Dawkins' account of children being simply predisposed to believe what authority figures tell them (2006: 203), evidence from developmental and social psychology suggests that both children and

adults are more persuaded by verbalized claims in domains such as food preferences (Harper and Sanders 1975), altruistic behaviours (Rushton 1975), ontological beliefs (Harris and Koenig 2006), and social policy (Walster et al. 1966) when those making the claims perform actions that would be costly if they did not actually believe those claims.

The relevance of such evidence for atheism is that individuals receive a certain degree of exposure to CREDs of supernatural agent beliefs as they mature. Some individuals are surrounded by people praying, fasting, and building religious architecture. Others might hear about God or gods but witness few such CREDs. The implication of the CREDs account is that those who witness more of these displays will be more likely to become explicit theists and those who witness fewer of these displays will be more likely to be explicit atheists. Elsewhere, I have argued that there is a small but growing body of evidence supporting this account of theism, including Roger Dudley's longitudinal study of Seventh Day Adventists in the United States, which revealed that a key predictor of apostasy was the frequency of religious attendance and family worship by that individual's parents (1999), Hunsberger and Altemeyer's survey study of atheists and theists, which showed a dramatic difference in the emphasis placed on religion in the childhood homes of atheists and theists (2006), and my own initial research with theists and atheists (Lanman 2012).

Further, it is possible that this account of religious belief acquisition can provide an empirically based psychological theory that can bridge the sociological data concerning existential security provided by sociologists of religion with the psychological state of belief in God or gods (or absence thereof), though this theory requires further testing (Lanman 2012). Rather than stipulating that people have a deep psychological need for the comforts of religion and that religious beliefs become more convincing in trying times, we can stipulate that existentially insecure environments help trigger CREDs among believers and, consequently, help ensure the acquisition of beliefs in God or gods in each new generation. We have evidence that threatening circumstances, whether personal or social, encourages greater commitment to ingroup ideologies, including religions (Navarrete et al. 2004). We also have evidence that trying times lead many individuals to participate in religious services and perform other CREDs for the purpose of gaining the social insurance benefits of membership (Chen 2010). And finally, we have evidence that threatening environments lead to increased performance of prayer and superstitious actions (Sosis 2007). Increased commitment, increased participation, and increased superstition all serve as CREDs of theistic beliefs. If security is increased in an environment through socio-economic equality and ethnic homogeneity, both of which characterized Scandinavia in much of the second half of the 20th century, the performance of CREDs should decline and, in the span of a generation, so too should theism. This fits the data, though much further work on CREDs and particular environments should be carried out before this account is accepted.

To conclude, the cognitive sciences can enrich our understanding of some of our basic terms, such as beliefs, and quantitatively test some of the assumptions underlying our theorizing about atheism, such as rationality and comfort-seeking. Further, the cognitive sciences as a whole provide an empirically-grounded vision of the human mind and how it relates to beliefs in the existence of God or gods, as well as the absence of such beliefs. This work is ongoing and will continue to enrich our understanding of atheism.

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CHAPTER 32

ATHEISM AND SOCIETAL HEALTH

PHIL ZUCKERMAN

INTRODUCTION

IN 2011, during a televised debate with outspoken British atheist Richard Dawkins, the popular American pundit and successful Fox News talk-show host Bill O'Reilly declared his belief that religion acts as a buffer against humanity's worst tendencies. 'My hypothesis is that religion is a constraint on society.' Religious beliefs, O'Reilly continued, 'are constraints against bad behavior'.¹ During this exchange, O'Reilly gave voice to the commonly held notion—especially in the USA—that religion is essentially good for society, and that without it, societal depravity and ruin will result. An even more explicit example of this position comes from Larry Alex Taunton, author of *The Grace Effect* (2011). In a prominently-placed Op-Ed piece excerpted from his book and featured on cnn.com on 24 December 2011, Taunton declared that a nation lacking Christian faith is a nation in trouble, a nation in decay. Directly referencing the classic American film *It's a Wonderful Life* (1946), Taunton argued that a society strong in Christian faith will resemble 'Bedford Falls' (content, humane, and moral), while a society without such religious faith will resemble 'Pottersville' (corrupt, harsh, and immoral). This claim, of course, is quite old and frequently made. From the pleadings of the prophets of ancient Israel thousands of years ago, to the most widely-heard talk show hosts of Texas today, the assertion is clear: religion is good and necessary for society, while the absence of religion is bad and detrimental for society.

Some might reasonably argue that it is the specifically *social* aspects of religion that prove to be beneficial for society. To be sure, religions are unique and successful sources of communal bonding and social capital, which maintain the capacity to provide clear societal and psychological benefits (Putnam 2000; Putnam and Campbell 2010). For example, many studies have found that people who are members of religious congregations tend to report higher levels of subjective well-being and life satisfaction, greater marital satisfaction and family cohesion, and fewer symptoms of depression than the religiously unaffiliated (McCullough and Smith 2003). That said, it is usually the specifically *theistic* assumptions at the heart of religion that are seen as being of central social value, and as having the most important positive societal affects (McGrath 2009). In other words, it is often *theism* that is specifically championed as being societally beneficial by those who see religion as a necessary ingredient of social life (Redwood 1976). Belief in, faith in, and worship of God: these are understood as being at the essential driving core of religion's presumed positive influence in society. And this thesis—that theism is good for society—is usually coupled with the corollary thesis that atheism is bad for society. As Bill O'Reilly (2006: 176) has argued, secular or godless societies are inherently 'weak' and 'chaotic'. Indeed, the notion that atheism is socially deleterious is perhaps most famously articulated by one of the characters in Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, who is quoted as saying that if there is no God—that is, if atheism is correct or widely accepted—then everything

becomes permissible, and hence there can be no moral social order (see Lewy 2008). Even Voltaire, the celebrated Enlightenment philosopher, argued that without religious theism society could not function, and that it is necessary for people to have ‘profoundly engraved on their minds the idea of a Supreme being and creator’ in order to maintain a moral social order (ibid.: 13). Newt Gingrich, the former Republican congressman and presidential candidate, couldn’t agree more—he has publicly declared that contemporary social problems are the direct result of irreligion, and that a secular country is or would be a ‘nightmare’ (Benen 2011).

Is this true? Is theism necessary in order for a society to be successful? And is atheism detrimental to societal well-being?

The nice thing about this whole matter is that it is neat, clean, and testable. You’ve got a fairly straightforward independent variable (level of theism/atheism in a given society) and a fairly straightforward dependent variable (degree of societal health and well-being). All we need to do is measure the degree of theism/atheism in various societies, and then look and see how those societies are faring. We may in fact find that the most religious of societies—those highest in theism—are indeed the healthiest and most successful, while those lacking in theism are the most troubled and destitute. But maybe not. Perhaps in today’s world, it is actually the *least* theistic societies—those with the highest rates of atheism, agnosticism, or simple indifference—that are faring the best.

Let’s check it out.

THE MOST AND LEAST RELIGIOUS SOCIETIES

First off, I’m going to use countries as my unit of analysis, and I understand that this is problematic. Countries are not airtight societies or homogenous cultures. That is, ‘nation’ and ‘society’ are often, but not always necessarily analogous. Many countries contain numerous tribes, ethnicities, cultures, sub-cultures, and races (think Canada, Nigeria, or Singapore). Additionally, many tribes, ethnicities, cultures, and races lack countries (think of the Kurds, the Karen, or the Hmong). And in many cases, a given culture or social group is present in multiple countries simultaneously (think of the Saami, the Roma, or Jews). But while acknowledging these important problems, I will still focus on countries none-the-less because, quite frankly, that’s where that data is (O’Brien and Palmer 2007), and it is simply the most practical for comparative purposes at the global level (Inglehart et al. 2004).

Which, then, are the most and least theistic countries? That is, in establishing our independent variable, we must figure out which countries have the highest/strongest rates of belief in God. But this endeavour also isn’t without its complications. First off, God-belief isn’t simply a ‘yes/no/I don’t know’ enterprise. There is always a ‘deepness’ or ‘meaning’ component to be considered. For example, when Danes are asked: ‘Do you believe in God?’ a distinct majority will say yes (Bondeson 2003; Lüchau 2005). However, when also asked ‘How important is God in your life?’ only 21 per cent of Danes say ‘very’ (Inglehart et al 2004: F063). So what are we to make of theism in Denmark? It appears that while most Danes say that they do believe in God, the vast majority say that God isn’t a very important thing in their life. But wait, the plot thickens: extensive fieldwork and in-depth interviews further reveal that many, if not most Danes—even when they say ‘yes’ to belief in God—are actually much more passively deistic or even agnostic in orientation, rather than typically theistic in a traditional Christian sense (Zuckerman 2008; Rosen 2009; Iversen 2010). So, in short, there is a readily quantifiable aspect to belief in God (‘yes/no/I don’t know’), but an equally important and yet very difficult to quantify *qualitative* aspect to theism, involving nuanced meanings, cultural subtexts, locality, subjective interpretations, personal expressions, etc., all of which pose challenges when

attempting direct nation-to-nation comparisons and contrasts. Other problems inherent in trying to compare/contrast rates of religion/irreligion internationally have been broached elsewhere (Zuckerman 2007), including the reality of low response rates, the near-impossibility of translating certain key concepts cross-culturally, fear of governmental detection, reprisal, or punishment, etc.

But enough complaining. Social science is inevitably riddled with caveats and qualifications, and if we simply languish among them, we can never make any useful statements concerning social reality. So let's move forward, doing what we can with the data we have, imperfect and flawed though it unavoidably is (Putnam 2000: 23).

When we compare nations in terms of the percentage of their population that believes in God, places importance on having God in their lives, as well as frequency of prayer, religious self-designation, and church attendance—the last three being indirect and yet fairly safe indicators of theism (Bruce 2011)—we are able to get a rough, non-definitive and yet fairly good, reasonably accurate, and widely-agreed upon list of the most theistic nations, as well as the least. Drawing from Inglehart's (2004) international survey analyses, which include specific questions on God-belief, as well as Inglehart and Norris's (2003) multivariate 'Strength of Religiosity Scale', plus international-comparative data provided by the Gallup Poll (Crabtree and Pelham 2009), and also my own calculations of rates of theism worldwide based on numerous national and international surveys (Zuckerman 2007), it is safe to say that the twenty *least* theistic nations on earth—those countries with the highest levels of atheism, agnosticism, or theological indifference—and not in exact ranked order, are: Sweden, Denmark, Czech Republic, Norway, Finland, China, South Korea, Estonia, France, Vietnam, Russia, Bulgaria, Japan, Netherlands, Slovenia, Germany, Hungary, Great Britain, New Zealand, and Belgium. Of course, it is important to remember that of these twenty, not all are equally atheistic; there is a range. For example, according to Tom Smith (2012), over 50 per cent of Czechs say that they 'don't believe in God and never have', compared to 32 per cent of Swedes, 27 per cent of Japanese, 25 per cent of Dutch, 24 per cent of French, 21 per cent of New Zealanders, 20 per cent of British, and 14 per cent of Slovenians who say the same. That said, we must also acknowledge that there are many other relatively secular societies worth mentioning, such as Australia, Canada, and Azerbaijan. However, the previous twenty represent what might safely be considered as the 'core' least theistic nations in the world. As for the twenty *most* theistic nations—those with the highest rates of belief in God—we can include, although not in exact ranked order: Nigeria, Uganda, Philippines, Pakistan, Morocco, Egypt, Zimbabwe, Bangladesh, El Salvador, Colombia, Senegal, Malawi, Indonesia, Brazil, Peru, Jordan, Algeria, Malta, Mexico, and Sierra Leone. Of course, we could add another fifty or sixty countries that show very, very high rates of theism—God-belief is indeed widespread around the world. However, the top-twenty listed here include those nations where theism appears unambiguously strong and prevalent. For example, according to Inglehart et al. (2004: FO50), a full 100 per cent of those in Morocco, Pakistan, Egypt, Algeria, Jordan, Nigeria, Bangladesh, and Indonesia claim to believe in God, and 99 per cent of those in El Salvador, Colombia, Zimbabwe, Philippines, Brazil, and Uganda do so as well.

So which set of countries is faring the best, on average? As will be further discussed below, those nations with the lowest rates of theism tend to be the 'healthiest' in terms of prosperity, equality, freedom, democracy, women's rights, human rights, educational attainment, crime rates, life-expectancy, etc. (though not all, to be sure, such as Vietnam or China), and those nations with the highest rates of theism tend to be relatively unsuccessful in terms of any standard sociological measurements of societal health—from having high infant mortality rates to high poverty rates, from entrenched inequality to degrees of corruption, from the lack of women's rights to the absence of democracy.

But let's look deeper, and highlight some specific examples which serve to so powerfully illustrate the strong and significant correlation between low levels of theism and positive indicators of societal health, and conversely, high levels of theism and poor indicators of societal health.

BEST COUNTRIES FOR BEING A MOTHER

If there is any one single indicator of societal well-being, surely it is the experience of motherhood. So which countries are the best for mothers? The Save the Children Foundation publishes an annual 'Mothers' Index', wherein they explore and rank the best places on earth to be a mother, as well as the worst. Their rankings are based on a composite analysis which takes into account numerous factors and variables, such as the percentage of births attended to by skilled personnel, maternity leave benefits, etc. According to the 2011 report, of the top-10 best nations on earth in which to be a mother, *all* are highly secularized nations, and eight of the ten are among the top-20 least theistic nations on earth (Save the Children 2011). Of the bottom-10 worst places on earth in which to be a mother, *all* are highly religious nations such as Yemen, Mali, and Niger. Although none are among the top-20 most theistic nations, those specific nations none-the-less fare very poorly on this index. For example, with the exception of tiny Malta, not a single one of the top-20 most theistic nations ranks among the top-50 best nations on earth in which to be a mother, and many, like Bangladesh, Uganda, Sierra Leone, Senegal, and Nigeria, are among the bottom of the rankings. And these rankings of best/worst countries for mothers have been more or less consistent in previous years' reports.

PEACEFULNESS

Another fairly unambiguous indicator of societal well-being is the degree of peacefulness within a given country. All world religions preach/teach peace and the importance of loving one another and being kind, and many religions—specifically Christianity—emphasize non-violence (see, e.g., the Sermon on the Mount). So what countries today are the most peaceful? They are actually not the very religious ones with the highest rates of theism. Just the opposite: it is the least theistic nations that enjoy the greatest levels of peace, while the more theistic nations experience the lowest levels of peace. An organization called Vision of Humanity publishes an annual 'Global Peace Index', which they base on a variety of factors and variables, such as levels of safety and security in a given society, levels of violent crime, warfare, ease of access to dangerous weapons, etc. Taking such factors into account, this Index ranks 153 nations in terms of their overall peacefulness, providing a clear list of the most peaceful and least peaceful nations in the world. According to their ranking from 2011, among the top-10 most peaceful nations on earth, *all* are among the least religious/theistic nations in the world, and in fact, 8 of the ten are specifically among those core top-20 least theistic nations on earth (Vision of Humanity 2011). Conversely, of the bottom ten—that is, the least peaceful nations—most of them are very religious nations. Not all, to be sure (for example, Russia ranks in at #147). But how exactly do the top-20 most theistic nations fare? Quite poorly. For example, Mexico ranks #121, the Philippines rank #136, Colombia ranks #139, Zimbabwe ranks #140, and Pakistan ranks #146. And these rankings of the most/least peaceful nations have been more or less the same in previous years' reports.

HOMICIDE

Perhaps a most direct measure of societal health is the murder rate. How many people, per 100,000, are murdered each year? According to the United Nations' 2011 *Global Study on Homicide*, of the top-10 nations with the highest intentional homicide rates, all are very religious/theistic nations, and many—such as El Salvador (homicide rate of 71 per 100,000 inhabitants) Colombia (33 per 100,000 inhabitants), Brazil (26 per 100,000), and Mexico (18 per 100,000), are among the top-20 most theistic nations in the world (United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2011). And of those at bottom of the list—the nations on earth with the lowest homicide rates—nearly all are very secular nations, with seven being among the core top-20 least theistic nations, such as Sweden, Japan, Norway, and the Netherlands (all with homicide rates that are less than 1 per 100,000).

HUMAN DEVELOPMENT INDEX

Perhaps the broadest and most well-known index for ranking nations in terms of their overall health and well-being is the United Nations' *Human Development Report*. This multivariate index attempts to assess overall quality of life by taking into account a host of relevant factors, including average life expectancy, educational attainment, gender equality, national wealth, etc. According to the 2010 Report, of the top twenty nations in the world today that are faring the best, nearly all are very non-theistic nations—in fact, of the top twenty, over half are among the core top-20 least theistic nations in the world (United Nations Development Programme 2010). As for the low end of the Human Development Index, of the bottom 40 nations that are faring the worst, all are highly theistic societies. And of the top-20 most theistic nations, several are among the bottom 20 worst-faring nations in the world today. All previous Human Development Reports from earlier years show similar findings.

SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES SCALE

We could go on and on, looking at an almost endless array of indicators of societal well-being. For example, we could take into account levels of sexually transmitted diseases, teen pregnancy rates, literacy rates, quality of hospital care, quality of roads and highways, rates of aggravated assault, degree of freedom of speech and freedom of the press, environmental degradation, pollution, sanitation, access to clean drinking water, voter turnout, levels of corruption in government and business, etc., etc., and—with the outlying exception of suicide rates (Needleman and Lewis 1990)—the correlation remains strong and robust: the least religious/theistic nations tend to fare much better than the most religious/theistic nations. This has been confirmed specifically by the work Gregory Paul (2009), who has constructed a 'Successful Societies Scale' in which he takes into account numerous and differing measures of societal well-being, including life satisfaction, incarceration rates, fertility, alcohol consumption, per capita income, inequality, employment rates, etc., and the findings are unambiguously clear: the least religious nations with the highest rates of atheism and agnosticism fare markedly better, overall, than those more religious nations with higher rates of belief/theism.

WITHIN THE UNITED STATES

What happens if we look within one particular country—does the correlation still hold? Yes. For example, when we compare the most religious states within the United States in terms of belief in God with the least religious states—those with the lowest rates of belief in God—what do we find? Which states fare better in terms of standard measures of societal well-being? Once again, the most theistic states fare worse than the least theistic states.

The Pew Forum's 'U.S. Religious Landscape Survey' ranks the states within the USA in terms of the percentage of people in each state that believes in God (Pew Forum 2008). Those top-10 states that report the highest levels of theism are: Louisiana, Arkansas, Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, North Carolina, Kentucky, Tennessee, and Oklahoma (tied with Utah). The bottom-10 states with the lowest levels of theism are: Maine, Vermont, Connecticut, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Massachusetts, New York, Alaska, Oregon, and California. It is important to remember, of course, that the last ten states listed are not wholly atheistic—far from it. In all of them, a majority of residents still believe in God. But the rates of theism are simply much lower/weaker in the latter ten than in the former ten. So, for example, 91 per cent of people in Mississippi and 86 per cent of people in South Carolina claim to believe in God 'with absolute certainty', but only 54 per cent of people in Vermont and 59 per cent of people in Maine do so. And only 1 per cent of people in Kentucky explicitly claim to not believe in God, compared to 9 per cent in Oregon.

As expected by now, when it comes to nearly all standard measures of societal health, such as homicide rates, violent crime rates, poverty rates, obesity rates, educational attainment, funding for schools and hospitals, teen pregnancy rates, rates of sexually transmitted diseases, unemployment rates, domestic violence, etc., the correlation—though not as strong as with our international comparisons—is still robust among the states: the least theistic tend to fare much, much better than the most theistic (Zuckerman 2009). In fact, *Forbes* magazine recently ranked all fifty states in terms of the overall best and worst places to live, taking into account various national indexes and calculating numerous variables, such as self-reported levels of life satisfaction, physical health, job opportunities, economic opportunity, basic access to food and shelter, etc. The expected correlation is there again: the most theistic of states clustered towards the bottom of the rankings, being among the worst places to live, while the least theistic states clustered closer towards the top, being among the better places to live, overall (Ruiz 2009).

THEISM, ATHEISM, AND SOCIETAL WELL-BEING

Given all of the above, we can safely draw the following conclusions: theism does not necessarily create or promote societal well-being and atheism certainly does not create or promote societal degradation. The thesis that God-belief, as an independent variable, is beneficial for society is exceedingly difficult to sustain, given that those societies with the highest rates of theism are burdened by the most social problems. And conversely, the corollary thesis that atheism is dangerous or deleterious for society can be soundly refuted, given that those societies with the lowest levels of theism are faring the best, overall, in terms of just about every measure of societal health and well-being imaginable.

It is important to stress what is being argued here, and what is not. I am *not* arguing that theism is necessarily bad for society, or that, in and of itself, theism directly causes social problems. Such an argument could possibly be made—but it is not being made here, and it is certainly not supported by

the data presented above. I am also *not* arguing that atheism is necessarily good for society, or that, in and of itself, atheism ameliorates social problems or creates beneficial societal outcomes. Again, such an argument could possibly be made, but it is not being made here, and it is certainly not supported by the data presented above. All that we can safely declare for certain is this: atheism is clearly not a discernible source or direct cause of societal degradation, and theism is clearly not a protector or guarantor of societal success or a direct wellspring of societal well-being. If anything, the opposite correlation is abundantly clear: atheism tends to be most pronounced among the most successful and healthy societies, while theism tends to be most pronounced among the least successful, most problem-ridden societies.

CRITIQUES UNDER CONSIDERATION

Since the correlation between low/high levels of theism and society health/dysfunction was first brought forward (Paul 2005; Zuckerman 2008), I have been confronted with several important critiques, which I shall consider below.

First, there is the important, essential recognition that correlation is not necessarily causation. It is quite possible that theism or atheism do not directly *cause* societal success or dysfunction. For example, it is conceivable, if not quite likely, that the success, well-being, or unhealthiness of various nations today have nothing to do with theism/atheism at all, but are rather the result of a host of other disparate historical, political, and economic factors, perhaps related to colonialism, the exploitation of foreign labor, access to natural resources, resilience to disease, weather, etc. (Diamond 2005). And it is also possible that rates of theism/atheism themselves have little or even nothing to do with social environments or national cultures, but rather, are determined by varying rates of innate, genetically inheritable intelligence among given populations (Lynn, Harvey, and Nyborg 2008; Kanazawa 2010). Or, as a fair amount of data seems to suggest, maybe both atheism and societal success are caused by some third variable, such as rates of educational attainment in given nations (Albrecht and Heaton 1984; Ruiter and Tubergen 2009; Braun 2011). Or perhaps both levels of theism and societal well-being are causally linked to welfare expenditures (Gill and Lundsgaarde 2004). Or maybe even internet usage is at play in affecting both (Armfield and Holbert 2003). These are all interesting possibilities. However, the correlation/causation story that appears to make the most sense—and currently has the best data to support it—comes from the work of Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart (2004). In their important book *Sacred and Secular*, Norris and Inglehart show that it is not theism that causes societal disarray, nor atheism that causes societal well-being. Rather, it is just the opposite. According to their analysis, in countries characterized by high degrees of societal health, where most people live relatively secure lives, having easy access to food, shelter, healthcare and education, and experiencing peaceful, supported, and unthreatened lives—it is in just such countries where we tend to find the highest rates of secularity, atheism, agnosticism, and theistic indifference. Conversely, in those countries most beset with societal ills, where most people live relatively insecure lives, having limited access to food, shelter, healthcare or education, and experiencing an un-peaceful, precarious, and vulnerable existence—it is in just such countries where we generally find the highest rates of religiosity and theism. Thus, atheism and societal well-being are indeed most likely causally-linked, but it is the latter (societal well-being) which most likely causes the former (atheism), and not the other way around (McCleary and Barro 2006; Rees 2009).

A second critique of the atheism-societal-health correlation has to do with the role of religious theism in creating the very foundations of successful societies. In short, the argument goes like this:

sure, many of the most successful societies today exhibit low levels of theism, such as Sweden or the Netherlands, but their current societal success is a direct result of their Christian history and heritage. That is, Christian faith and centuries of theism are what helped make these nations so successful (Lejon and Agnafors 2011). This argument is not without its well-developed support (Stark 2006). There is no question that Christian faith helped pave the way for many societal improvements over the centuries in many nations, particularly those in Europe (obviously not in Japan). However, this argument, at root, suggests that the ‘best’ or most successful societies are those which once *were* strongly religious/Christian in the past, but are no longer, and in fact, have become highly secularized and relatively post-theistic (Bruce 2001). The logical conclusion would then be that societies achieve their best or highest levels of well-being once they have moved beyond theism, into a much more secular, atheistic or agnostic post-Christian Weltanschauung. This may very well be true.

A third criticism of the atheism/societal health correlation has to do with the obvious and nasty reality of certain atheist regimes of the 20th century, regimes that have been anything but models of societal health. Albania, the former Soviet Union, and North Korea stand out as obvious examples of officially atheist nations that have exhibited very low levels of societal health. This matter deserves serious consideration.

ATHEIST REGIMES

The first ever officially declared atheist nation in the world was Albania under the rule of communist dictator Enver Hoxha (1908–85). Article 37 of the Albanian Constitution of 1976 stipulated: ‘The State recognizes no religion, and supports atheistic propaganda in order to implant a scientific materialistic world outlook in people’ (Vickers 2001). For several decades, atheism was brutally enforced. All religions were outlawed, religiously-based city names were changed, religious names for all people were banned, religious leaders were forced to flee and those that remained were imprisoned, tortured, and killed, and religious buildings were destroyed or converted into secular buildings (Jacques 1995). Life in this atheist nation was wretched: no democracy, gross human rights violations, widespread poverty, lack of adequate health care, etc. Although literacy rates did skyrocket under Hoxha, atheist Albania was definitely not a model of societal health. It was an isolated, under-developed, poor nation held hostage by a paranoid, vindictive tyrant.

The former Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) was also explicitly atheistic. In the late 1920s, the communist regime of the USSR created the League of Militant Atheists, which had the explicit, decades-long, and governmentally-supported mandate of destroying religion, disseminating atheistic propaganda and education, and replacing religious rituals and holidays with secular versions. Simultaneously, the Soviets attempted to eradicate religion by arresting, torturing, and killing religious leaders and closing or demolishing religious buildings (Froese 2008). As is well-known, the USSR was a failure—economically, politically, and morally. The Soviets did not manage to create a free workers’ paradise. Rather, they created a totalitarian nation plagued by poverty, famines, surveillance, suspicion, gulags, and corruption. Hardly a model of societal health.

Finally, we must acknowledge North Korea, one of the worst nations on earth today in just about all respects—from the lack of freedom to the lack of electricity. Plagued with poverty and starvation, and characterized by the entrenched denial of basic human or civil rights, North Korea maintains a state-sanctioned and enforced atheism, with the only ‘religion’ permissible being that of the worship of the dictator.

The first response to the reality of the examples above is simply this: atheism plus totalitarianism

admittedly makes for an ugly, repressive combination. There is no question that some of the worst regimes of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries have been explicitly atheistic. But perhaps atheism isn't the main problem. Maybe totalitarianism is. After all, some of the world's worst tyrannical, corrupt, and bloody regimes during the same time period have also been explicitly theistic: Uganda under Idi Amin, Haiti under 'Baby Doc' Duvalier, Chile under Augusto Pinochet, Iran under the Ayatollahs, Spain under Francisco Franco, the Philippines under Ferdinand Marcos, etc. And there is strong evidence that Adolf Hitler was a theist; he declared in speeches that he considered himself a Christian, believed in God and Jesus as his Saviour, and he wrote in *Mein Kampf* that he felt that he was acting in accordance with the will of God (see Baynes 1969; Walker 2001; and Steigmann-Gall 2003).

But what good is tallying up corrupt dictators and noting if they were atheistic or theistic? Does it really matter? Not when we find plenty of gruesome tyrants in both camps. And when seeking to assess degrees of societal health and national well-being, we know that when power is held undemocratically, the result will always be negative. That is, *all* non-democratic, tyrannical regimes of the past 100 years have been corrupt, and have had deleterious societal effects. Fascism, totalitarianism, communism—all such forms of national dominance have been based on might and repression, rather than freedom and liberty. They have all squelched societal progress, and severely limited societal well-being, be they theistic or atheistic. So one way to control for this factor is to simply exclude non-democratic societies from our analysis, and only look at democracies in assessing the correlation between theism and atheism and social well-being. And this is exactly what Gregory S. Paul (2010, 2009, 2005) has done. And his research has consistently shown is that the correlation still holds: the least theistic democracies fare better on nearly all indicators of societal well-being than the more theistic democracies.

CONCLUSION

The exact determinants of societal health are surely complex, if not stubbornly obscure. There are so many factors at play that may account for why some nations fare better than others, from geography to gender norms, from homogeneity to heredity, from economics to education, from politics to population, that identifying the specific factors that help or hinder societal well-being across the globe is an extremely precarious endeavour. But we can say this with relative surety: theism doesn't seem to help, nor is atheism a detriment. All the fervent praying that has been going on in Jamaica and El Salvador these past hundred years has not produced much in the way of positive societal results, and all the lack of fervent praying that has characterized Denmark and Norway these past hundred years has not hindered these nations' enviable societal success. The world's most theistic nations tend to be among the worst in terms of standard measures of societal well-being, while the world's least theistic nations tend to be among the best. This fact renders suspect any proclamation that theism is a necessary element or condition of societal well-being, and it renders manifestly false the argument that atheism is somehow detrimental to society.

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CHAPTER 33

ATHEISM, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY

MELANIE ELYSE BREWSTER

INTRODUCTION

THIS article explores scholarship regarding links between atheism, gender, and sexuality. A review and analysis of available theory and research is presented through a social-scientific lens. Lastly, parallels between lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) and atheist movements are examined and critiqued.

ATHEIST WOMEN, CONSPICUOUS BY THEIR ABSENCE

Although relatively limited in quantity, research suggests a significant gender bias in nonreligious affiliations. Specifically, a greater proportion of atheist- or agnostic-identified individuals are men (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Zuckerman 2007) and more generally, ‘statistical evidence seems unequivocal that women are more religious than men’ (Francis 1997: 81). Sherkat (2008) reported that women have significantly more faithful stances regarding belief in a god than men; specifically, identifying as a woman increases the odds of having a confident belief in god by 72 per cent. Women pray and participate in religious ceremonies more than men and are also more likely to believe in a life force or spirit than men (Mahlamäki 2012). Within the social sciences, two primary theories have been put forth to account for gender differences in religiosity; first, theories that focus on social or contextual influences (e.g., gender role socialization theories) and second, theories that centre on individual psychological or biological differences between women and men (Francis 1997). More nuanced variants of the above theories, such as risk preference theory (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Roth and Kroll 2007) and feminist theories (Overall 2007) have also been posited. In the following section, extant theories will be discussed and critiqued.

Gender Role Socialization and Structural Location Theories

Gender role socialization theories posit that societal constructions of masculinity and femininity—supported through affirmations that traits such as aggressiveness; logical, rational, goal orientation; and competitiveness are indicative of ‘maleness’, whereas ‘femaleness’ is marked by an emphasis on nurturance, gentleness, submission, and community building—drive men to align with secular beliefs and women with religious ideologies (Francis 1997). From this standpoint, women who exhibit traditionally gendered traits would also be motivated to engage in religious practices, whereas men whose personality traits are congruent with traditional constructions of masculinity may be less likely

to identify as religious. When it comes to men, however, gender role socialization theories begin to unravel. Research suggests that men who are more liberal, hold less traditional gender roles, and endorse less right-wing authoritarian values are actually *more* likely to identify as atheist than their traditionally gendered male counterparts (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006). Thus, socialized personality traits alone do not appear to be sufficient in explaining the gender bias in atheist belief.

Structural Location Theories

Stemming from sociology, structural location theories draw from social roles and positions of women and men within larger systems (i.e., family, work, society; Francis 1997). It is important to present the following theoretical positions with a caveat: most of these arguments were posed in the 1960s and 1970s, and therefore are reflective of a time when gender roles within family systems were much more rigid. Moreover, as an increasing number of households have moved to models where both parents work outside the home, or households are single parent, or headed by couples of the same gender, the relevance of these dated models has begun to disintegrate.

Structural location theories set forth that, often as the chief caregivers, mothers are expected to be the primary socializers of children and instil moral values. One such method of instilling morality is through attending religious services (Nelsen and Nelsen 1975). Similarly, the fact that church attendance is higher for women than men may be a reflection of a traditional gendered division of labour within homes—for example, in gender traditional heterosexual couples, religious practice may be delegated to mothers as a part of typical household and child rearing practice (Nelsen and Nelsen 1975; Iannaccone 1990). Further, women's social lives have been historically more restricted than men's, leaving fewer opportunities to encounter beliefs that may be discrepant to the religious systems in which they operate; subsequently women may be placed in fewer situations that challenge them to think critically about or reevaluate their religious beliefs. And at a practical level, 'women's traditional roles as caretakers—giving birth and nursing babies, caring for sick and dying persons—put them in a more immediate relationship with the ultimate questions of life and death' (Mahlamäki 2012: 61), which may lead some women to turn to religion for solace from these existential issues.

Contradictory arguments regarding the position of women in the workforce have also emerged as a result of structural location theory. In some branches of this argument, women's levels of religiosity are related inversely to their participation in the workforce and modern secular world. Specifically, women's occupations outside of the home are thought to be linked with declines in religious belief (Stannard 1977). If this line of thought was accurate, one would expect to find support for women working outside of the home being less religious than women who work at home. However, such a finding is not supported (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Freese 2004; Woodhead 2007). Taken together, the validity of structural location theories in explaining gender differences in religiosity is 'eroded by social trends which may encourage providing similar opportunities for males and females' (Francis 1997: 85).

Secondary Compensation Model

A more recent interpretation of social role theories is the compensator model that posits that a person who had all the rewards she or he could ever want would have no need for compensators, or more informally, a lack of social obligations encourages atheism (Stark and Bainbridge 1987). From this model, religion is perceived as a costly investment and an individual would not be religious unless

they perceived it as rewarding to be so. Bainbridge (2005) later distinguished between primary and secondary compensation. *Primary compensation* substitutes a compensator for a reward that a person desires for themselves (e.g. religious compensators assuage fear when a person's life is at risk), whereas *secondary compensation* substitutes a compensatory for a reward that an individual is obligated to provide another person (e.g., obligations in relationships).

Secondary compensation is posited to be social, as it functions to sustain a relationship when one party is unable to provide an expected reward to the other. Traditionally, women are thought to be more nurturing, concerned with deep and intimate relationships, and bear most of the obligations for caregiving within families. Thus, women may have more reason to turn to methods of secondary compensation (e.g., religious beliefs) when they cannot provide the help or support to others that they are expected to give. When the theory of secondary compensation was rigorously evaluated by Hunter (2010), Bainbridge's hypotheses did not hold, as factors including race and geographic location were found to be stronger predictors of atheism than social obligations or gender.

Personality Theories

Although dated and largely unsupported by empirical research, some psychological theorists have speculated that personality differences between women and men account for differences in levels of religious belief. Such theories have posited that women experience greater levels of guilt, dependency, frustration, fear, and anxiety than men and therefore turn to religion to assuage their psychological distress (Argyle and Beit-Hallahmi 1975; Reed, 1978). While framing women's higher levels of religiosity as a means to cope with alleged gender-specific psychological pathology is both limited and sexist given the lack of empirical data to support this claim, such early theorists may have been unintentionally tapping a more nuanced explanation for differences in religiosity and atheism.

Unanimously, studies find that atheist identification is more infrequent for women and for people of colour, and that levels of religious involvement are higher for these individuals (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Zuckerman 2007; Hunter 2010). Therefore, religiosity may provide solace from feelings of frustration, fear, and anxiety, but these symptoms of distress stem from holding a marginalized position in society in which discrimination and prejudice are rampant, *not* from innate personality traits. Indeed, many studies have found that individuals from socially oppressed groups use their religious communities as systems of support in dealing with a 'one down' position in the world (Constantine et al. 2002). Reports of the demographic composition of nonreligious people consistently demonstrate that atheists tend to be white, men, well-educated, and of higher socioeconomic status—all identity statuses that occupy privilege in society. Therefore, men's privileged positions and subsequent lack of a 'need' to utilize religious beliefs, communities, or organizations as buffers against oppression may be one explanation for higher levels of atheism in men than in women.

Risk Preference and Evolutionary Theories

For many individuals, deciding to be religious may involve a rational decision-making process where rewards and costs are considered, with some perceived rewards of religiosity being a system to cope with grief and loss, a moral compass, community support, and potential access to an afterlife (Miller and Hoffman 1995). And bluntly, as captured by Pascal's Wager, atheism equals punishment after death if God exists (Roth and Kroll 2007). Drawing from this line of thought, a risk analysis

approach to religiosity conjectures that *not* believing in God is a risk, and that generally, men have evolved better physically and mentally to handle risks than women (Miller and Hoffman 1995; Freese 2004; Roth and Kroll 2007).

Beyond evolutionary perspectives, longstanding patterns of differential socialization across cultures may be another factor in shaping gender differences in risk taking and, subsequently, religiosity. Specifically, risk-taking behaviour is more culturally enforced among boys (e.g., encouraged to display physical activity, courage, adventurousness) than girls (e.g., encouraged to be passive, caring, and community-oriented). From this perspective, it follows that if women are the 'less risky' gender, they would also be more likely to opt to believe in a god than risk salvation for identifying as atheist. However, empirical examinations of risk preference theory suggest that while men may take more physical risks than women, difference in risk taking is non-significant for other types of risks (e.g., career, financial). Further holes in this theory are adeptly noted by Roth and Kroll (2007). First of all, a risk preference theory of religiosity assumes that all individuals calculate costs/rewards of religious belief, which is a very large (and unbacked) assumption contingent on individuals believing that the cost of atheism (posthumous punishment) is a very real possibility. Thus:

[T]aking belief into account, risk preference theory suggests that women *who perceive a risk of punishment after death* should be more religious than men *who perceive such risk*. Among nonbelievers (who perceive no risk), men and women should exhibit similarly low rates of religious participation because there is no risk of eternal damnation to motivate differences in their religiosity. (Roth and Kroll 2007: 207)

In a test of this hypothesis, the researchers examined General Social Survey (GSS) and World Values Survey data to test the effects of gender and belief in an afterlife on religiousness. They found that the gender gap in religiousness is larger for those individuals who do not believe in an afterlife than those who do—results that directly contradict risk preference theory. Similarly, using data from the World Values Survey, Freese (2004) found that risk preferences were related to religiousness, but no indication that the relationship between risk taking and religiousness was linked to gender. Taken together, such results call into question the extent to which the male bias in atheist identification can be explained by gender-specific risk orientation.

'I'M A FEMINIST, BUT...'

Some feminist scholars claim that women's participation in religion is a paradox; as women continue to make strides toward equality across work and social contexts, the gendered stereotypes of women offered by most religions seem increasingly disparate with feminist goals (Ozorak 1996). Links between religion and gender inequality are well established (Woodhead 2007). In an analysis of World and European Values Surveys, levels of gender inequality across different nations were most strongly linked to religiosity; therefore, religion matters deeply for cultural attitudes, opportunities and constraints placed on women's lives, the gender ratio in educational attainment, the female literacy rate, contraceptive use, paid opportunities in the workforce, and parliamentary representation (Inglehart and Norris, 2003). Plainly put, 'women are far more accepting of the [religious] institution than the institution is of them' (Conn 1995: 422). But institutionalized gender oppression itself does not appear to be a strong motivator for women to abandon their faiths. To understand the complex and sometimes incongruent relations between women and their religious beliefs, it is necessary to understand how many women shape and alter traditional religious practice to meet their individual

needs and values.

Outlined by Overall (2007), there are two primary and oppositional feminist lenses through which the relations of religiosity to women have been viewed. First, the anti-theist feminist argument in support of atheism (that monotheistic, patriarchal religions harm women) and second, the ‘faith plasticity’-argument (women can reconstruct the concept of god and faith to fit feminist goals and values, while still engaging in religious practice). Research suggests that most women do not leave their faiths. As such, the latter lens is one that may be helpful in explaining the gender disparity in atheist and religious identification. Specifically, an important nuance of belief patterns not often included in gender discourse is that men tend to be more fundamentalist, all-or-nothing, and resolute in their beliefs than women. As described by Mahlamäki (2012):

A tendency among men is to accept ‘the whole package,’ which means that they are more apt to embrace everything pertaining to their belief. Women are more selective; they believe in a loving God, but not in Hell, the Devil, or the Last Judgment. (Mahlamäki 2012: 60–1)

Ozorak (1996) discusses women’s practice of retranslating, reinterpreting, and integrating traditional texts in ways that are more aligned with feminist values as a way to cope with gender inequities present in many religions. To preserve self-esteem, a woman may take action to change her religious environment, or cognitively alter her private religious beliefs. As succinctly explained by one participant in Ozorak’s study, ‘I can look at [religious] readings and make them into what I want them to mean for me ... I don’t say “Our Father,” I say, “Our Being who art in Heaven”’ (Ozorak 1996: 23). The ability of many women to hold religious beliefs that contradict each other may help to explain how many women are able to retain their beliefs even when many religious organizations take very vocal stances against women’s rights issues (e.g., sexuality, workplace issues, birth control, gender roles, marriage).

In the mid-1990s, researchers began to tackle the phenomenon of Christian women *defecting in place*, or ‘pledging allegiance to a new paradigm of church’ in the context of struggling to be faithful to the old paradigms of religious practice while holding feminist values (Conn 1995: 422; Winter et al. 1995). In a study of 3746 women of mixed Christian identification, 73 per cent of whom attended church on a weekly basis, Winter and colleagues (1995) began to tackle issues of feminism and religiosity. Generally, the researchers found that many feminist women struggled to survive within organized religions and adapted their spirituality to include feminist symbols, acts of community-oriented social justice, rituals, and alternative liturgies. Specifically, women came to understand values purported by feminism such as equality, justice, and mutuality to be congruent with values preached in religious gospel. Taken together, it seems that many women are able to emphasize the centrality of caring and community within their religions, and reframe God as a friend or confidant, rather than a colluder in patriarchy (Ozorak 1996). Religions, therefore, are not perceived as one-dimensional evils to shed, but flawed systems in which women can operate and tailor to meet their individual needs.

ATHEISM AS A BOY’S CLUB

Two final barriers that may prevent some women from identifying as atheist are, ironically, (i) the number of men who identify as atheist and (ii) the qualities of the men who have become the focal points for ‘hardcore’ atheist movements. Specifically, some women perceive atheist communities to be exclusive clubs (for men who are white and upper-middle class) that do not openly welcome

women or other minority group members. Barry Kosmin describes that hard-secularist ‘New Atheist’ positions are increasingly held by men; illustratively, the Freedom From Religion Foundation (a positive atheist group) reports that 79 per cent of their members are men. Kosmin states that ‘a lot of women are turned off by what they call the “warlords of atheism” and what they interpret to be very aggressive attitudes held by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins and people like that’ (Mooney 2011: 44). For many women, painting all religious institutions as, in Christopher Hitchens’ words, ‘enemies with gnarled hands who would drag us back to the catacombs and reeking altars’ is unnecessarily filled with hubris and machismo (quoted in Curthoys 2008: 42). Thus, many women may agree with positive atheist beliefs, but they do not support the dogmatic mobilization efforts and violent animus of the male leaders in New Atheist movements. Resultantly, women may not openly identify as nonreligious because they cannot envision a place for themselves in atheist culture.

GENDER AND ATHEISM: CONCLUSIONS

Available literature assessing the conspicuous absence of women who identify as atheist remains unsatisfying. Although social, biological, feminist, evolutionary, and systemic explanations have all been set forth, not one of these theories has emerged as a clear predictor of gender role disparities in religious belief. Likely, an interplay of each of these theories can be traced back to the shaping of women’s beliefs. And, while higher levels of societal atheism are linked clearly to the promotion of egalitarianism, gender equality, and women’s empowerment across nations (Zuckerman 2007), it may be premature to overlook the individual benefits and supports that many women still experience from their religious communities.

SEXUAL MINORITIES AND ATHEISM

Links between atheism and identification as a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, or queer (LGBTQ) person have been widely discussed within sexual minority and religious scholarship (Linneman and Clendenen 2010). While many theorists adamantly profess that identifying as a sexual minority person while maintaining traditional monotheistic religious beliefs is impossible, clearly not all LGBTQ-identified people are apostates (Rodriguez and Ouellette 2000). Thus, the following section will discuss available literature surrounding sexual minority people’s decisions in navigating faith or becoming nonreligious.

KEEPING THE FAITH?

Religious affiliations can provide social, community, and familial support systems for LGBTQ people. Still, ‘religions in general, and Christianity in particular, are often perceived as anathema’ to LGBTQ identity (O’Brien 2004: 180). Countless studies have documented the persistence of heterosexist attitudes and policies within numerous religious groups including the Catholic Church (Buchanan et al. 2001), fundamentalist Christian sects (Barton 2010), conservative Jewish sects (Kahn 1989), the Mormon Church (Cooper and Pease 2009), and Islamic sects (Boellstorff 2005). For example, in a recent qualitative study, one woman reflected upon growing up as a lesbian youth in the Pentecostal church and stated ‘[t]he preacher would preach on homosexuality. He would always group

us in with the so-called perverts, you know, like child molesters and just awful people' (Barton 2010: 472). Such a traumatizing early experience is depicted frequently in research with religious LGBTQ people (Califia 2002; Gold 2008).

Not surprisingly, 'a flight from religious intolerance is a central aspect of personal "coming out" stories' for many sexual minority people (O'Brien 2004: 184). As such, some LGBTQ people who may try to maintain their ties to religious institutions may feel as though they will not be fully welcomed into some LGBTQ communities. Potentially confronting 'double stigma', religious LGBTQ individuals must often undergo a solo journey to forge a path of spiritual understanding and self-acceptance. A growing body of research suggests that many sexual minority people are able to (re)integrate their religious beliefs, overcome guilt and feelings of betrayal, and (if they choose to) find affirming spiritual groups and religious communities with whom they can (re)connect (Buchanan et al. 2001; Halderman 2004; O'Brien 2004). Other LGBTQ people may choose instead to explore expressions of spirituality that have not been affiliated historically with oppression such as Buddhism, Paganism, Wicca, and some Native American traditions (Buchanan et al. 2001). Finally, a large proportion of LGBTQ people may decide that they can be fulfilled without formal ties to an organized belief system and become atheist (Barret and Barzan 1996).

As reviewed previously, within many religious groups, LGBTQ identified persons are taught that their identities are unacceptable, immoral, and the expression of these identities is incompatible with being a good devotee (Barton 2010). Considering this open hostility from many religious organizations, it is no surprise that many sexual minority individuals make the decision to abandon their faith. Until recently, it was unclear how rates of religiosity differed between heterosexual and sexual minority populations, however through their analyses of GSS data, Linneman and Clendenen (2010) found that lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals are three times more likely to be agnostic or atheist than heterosexual people. Moreover, 62 per cent of gay and lesbian individuals in the USA feel that religion is not an important part of their lives (Singer and Deschamps 1994). It is important to note, however, that the direction of this relationship is not clear. It may be that sexual minority individuals feel cast out of religious organizations because of their orientations and subsequently become atheist, or, it could be that people who identify as atheist are free from religious oppression and more able to explore and acknowledge their LGBTQ identity.

ATHEISM'S WARM EMBRACE

With growing acceptance of LGBTQ issues across the world, some individuals have shifted away from conservative religious communities and toward atheism because some of 'the most vocal opposition to laws protecting gays has come from fundamentalists' (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006: 15). Plainly, incongruencies between the teachings of conservative religious organizations about LGBTQ populations, and the personal beliefs of more liberal congregation members, may inspire some individuals to begin to question their religious beliefs. Indeed, their groundbreaking research with self-identified atheist individuals, Hunsberger and Altemeyer illustrated that some people from very religious backgrounds became atheist due to disagreements with their church's attitudes toward LGBTQ people. A perfect example of this conflict was described by Zuckerman:

One man started to feel alienated from his religion when the words 'God Hates Fags' were spray-painted on a wall at the small Midwestern Christian college he was attending. Although not gay himself, such religious-inspired intolerance opened his eyes, causing him to look at the negative aspects of his religion, where before he had only seen the positive. (Zuckerman 2012: 153)

Countless studies affirm that atheist people are more supportive and tolerant of LGBTQ people than members of religious groups (e.g., Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Cimino and Smith 2011). Drawing further comparisons between religious people and atheists, atheist people also tend to support feminist values, and in general, ‘be nondogmatic and nonzealous’ (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006: 110). When taken together, it is no surprise that associating with atheist people may feel more comfortable and safe (when compared to members of religious groups) to some LGBTQ individuals.

THE OTHER CLOSET: COMING OUT AS ATHEIST

In November 2011, a controversial *New York Times* article began with the bold statement ‘Ronnelle Adams came out to his mother twice, first about his homosexuality, and then about his atheism’—indeed, the trend of discussing atheist identity as parallel to LGBTQ identity development is one that has permeated mainstream and academic discourse. As with LGBTQ identities, atheist identification can be considered a marginalized status, as to be nonreligious in most Western cultures relegates an individual to a minority identity status with associated oppression and prejudice (Edgell et al. 2006; Siner 2011). As such, the spaces for atheist individuals to openly exist in many cultures have been largely limited throughout history—resulting in many atheist people deciding to conceal their beliefs from friends, family, co-workers, and members of their religious congregations.

Recent calls from leaders in the New Atheist movement have encouraged atheist people to ‘come out’ of the closet and proudly identify as apostates (Dawkins 2006; Hitchens 2007). One notable example of this is the *Out Campaign* website, sponsored by Richard Dawkins, that encourages atheists to disclose their identities. However, not all atheists are supportive of this zealous movement to drag each other out of the proverbial closet and wage war against believers and agnostics (Curthoys 2008; Kurtz 2010). Parallel to coming out as LGBTQ, there are very real risks—job loss, trouble adopting children, child custody battles, and social exclusion—of outing oneself as atheist in some regions of the world (Edgell et al. 2006). Similar to the process of coming out as a member of any stigmatized group, atheist individuals should exert caution in assessing the safety of their environment before proudly proclaiming their godlessness from the rooftops.

Further similarities beyond references to closeting in the gay rights movement and the ‘atheist rights movement’ can be found through comparisons in the way both movements have altered common identity labels to be more affirming—specifically, changing the clinical term ‘homosexual’ to gay and the socially loaded term ‘atheist’ to Bright (Linneman and Clendenen 2010). In changing the language surrounding marginalized identities, the hope is that both of these groups will be viewed from a more positive and less pathologizing lens.

As described by Linneman and Clendenen (2010), there are some equivalent patterns in the coming out journeys for LGBTQ and atheist individuals. Notably, as with sexual minority identities, an individual’s atheism is not readily visible (as gender or racial minority status may be) and requires a formal disclosure by the atheist person to be recognized by others. Moreover, once a person reveals having an LGBTQ or atheist identity, other people are likely to react to these identities as if they are master statuses that dictate all aspects of the individual’s behaviour. As posited by Siner (2011), coming into an atheist identity requires people to undergo simultaneous challenges to development: first, figuring out how to define their own faith (or lack of faith) and second, how to establish connections with a particular faith group. Like LGBTQ identities, atheist identity development exists in both internal (personal, emotional, spiritual) contexts and external (social, community, familial)

contexts. Specifically, Siner (2011) draws from Fassinger's (1998) model of sexual minority identity development and overlays this framework to create a model for individuals who 'come out' as atheist from religious backgrounds. Four stages are posited:

1. *Awareness*: recognition that you are different from others if you are atheist and that other atheist people exist;
2. *Exploration*: figuring out what it means to be atheist; deciding if you would like membership of an atheist community;
3. *Deepening/Commitment*: learning more about and feeling more self-fulfilled by expressions of atheism; actively participating in atheist groups or communities, becoming aware of oppression;
4. *Internalization/Synthesis*: atheist beliefs interact with all dimensions of identity; begin to identify as a member of a minority group across contexts.

While an important first step in exploring patterns of atheist identity development and coming out, empirical validation with this model is necessary. Additionally, it is important to note that some atheist people never have a formal coming out. In more liberal regions of the world where atheists are a less stigmatized social group, there may be no need for processes of self-discovery, exploration, or commitment to atheist activism.

DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

At this point in the literature, discourse surrounding 'atheism and gender' appears to be more of a ruse for discussing the religiosity of women. While extant research about gender role socialization, risk analysis, and compensators that intends to explain why women are more religious than men is informative and engaging, a fruitful approach to deconstructing gender and atheism may also be to critically examine narratives of apostate women and men (e.g., Blackford and Schuklenk 2009) for patterns and trends. Moreover, available gender theories tend to approach the religious/atheist argument from a risk lens (e.g., Pascal's Wager) or a combative 'ills of religiosity' lens. Work by future authors should consider atheism from a positive psychology framework and investigate its links with egalitarianism, self-esteem, personal mastery, satisfaction with life, cognitive flexibility, and empowerment. In other words: less focus on why people reject religion and more focus on why people choose atheism. Indeed, if the potential benefits of atheism were vocalized through a less dogmatic and androcentric megaphone, it is possible that more women would participate in the atheist movement.

Finally, parallels are continually drawn between the LGBTQ rights movement and recent atheist movements. While utilizing models of sexual minority identity development to inform studies about atheist identity development may be a useful first step in furthering our understanding of the 'coming out' process, researchers should be mindful of notable differences between the two groups. First, to move from a heterosexual identity to a gay or lesbian identity presumably means that one will begin to have romantic relationships that are recognizably different than their prior relationships (e.g., same-gender partners as opposed to other-gender partners). Moving from religious to atheist may mean that one will stop going to church or praying, but atheism does not necessitate additive and/or visible behavioural changes. Further, research suggests that many LGBTQ people face near daily threats of violence and discrimination because of their sexual orientations or gender identities (Herek

2009). While prejudice toward atheists certainly exists, the intensity of such experience appears to be muted comparatively. Future research regarding atheist identity development should further explore the impact of environmental prejudice and stigma on atheists' coming out decisions.

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CHAPTER 34

ATHEISM, HEALTH, AND WELL-BEING

KAREN HWANG

INTRODUCTION

THE topic of religion and health has been the focus of much empirical research, particularly within the past two decades, but the health and well-being of actual atheists, and the nonreligious in general, have received much less attention (Hwang 2008a; Hwang et al. 2011). There are a few potential explanatory factors accounting for this: the relative infrequency of atheists in the general population, the relative lack of interest in atheists on the part of researchers, and the implicit stereotypes many people may hold about atheists.

CHALLENGES IN CONDUCTING RESEARCH WITH NONBELIEVERS

The exploration of the impact of religion and spirituality on physical and psychosocial well-being is an enduring area of professional interest. Numerous studies have reported an association between religion/spirituality and aspects of medical and psychological well-being. However, nonreligious individuals in these studies have largely been treated as a statistical outlier. The category of nonreligious persons encompasses a variety of beliefs, from hardcore atheists—who affirmatively deny the existence of any gods whatsoever—to believers who do not identify with any religion, and as a comparison group are too heterogeneous to draw any meaningful conclusions.

Like religion, atheism can be regarded as an orienting world view that is consciously chosen by its adherents (Whitley 2010). However, there has been relatively little to no research dealing with the impact of atheism—especially affirmative atheism—on physical and mental health (Hwang et al. 2011). The data that do exist is often fraught with biases and assumptions regarding secularity and seculars, such as assuming a direct and causal association between secularity and health deficits based on purely correlational findings, or interpreting an individual's atheism as indication of anger, rebellion, or spiritual conflict rather than as its own stable and cohesive worldview with potential effects in the atheist's social environment, including possible stresses associated with prejudice and stigma. Despite increasing acceptance of nearly all social minorities, about half the US population still remain deeply distrustful of atheists and harbour many false stereotypes about them.

Although there are many survey measures designed to assess religious or spiritual development, there is a marked lack of assessment measures that can accurately capture the range and depth of worldviews held by religious nonbelievers. Current measures of religious and spiritual well-being, which typically measure spirituality only in terms of 'high' to 'low' spirituality, do not provide an accurate enough picture of people at the low end of the scale to differentiate between the spiritually conflicted and the affirmatively atheist. This may be partly due to possible biases of the researchers

or simply because of difficulties in recruiting an adequate number of secular participants. There are also currently no assessment measures that describe a model of secular identity development. What does it mean to be secular in a highly religious society? How do people develop secularity over their lifetimes? How is secularity experienced by young versus old individuals, or between men and women? While there is much groundbreaking research being conducted at this time, at present, these remain uninvestigated questions. Therefore, much of the understanding about the health and well-being of atheists can only be inferred from the research on religion and well-being.

RELIGION AND HEALTH OUTCOMES

It has long been accepted as an article of faith that religion is associated with better health outcomes. While findings remain highly controversial, the majority of research studies on religion and health outcomes have reported a 'small, robust' association between religiosity and/or spirituality (R/S) and various indicators of physical and psychological well-being (Waite and Lehrer 2003). For instance, regular church goers were generally happier (Ferris 2002) and healthier (Waite and Lehrer 2003). Positive associations between religious practices and physical and mental health have been documented among population samples of adolescents (Wong et al. 2006), veterans (Chang et al. 2001), and medically compromised older adults (Koenig 2004; Yohannes et al. 2008). Religious practices are thought to enhance recovery from coronary transplant (Harris et al. 1995); cancer (Nairn and Merluzzi 2003; Laubmeier et al. 2004), vision loss (Brennan 2004), spinal cord injury (Matheis et al. 2006; Johnstone et al. 2007), stroke (Johnstone et al. 2008) and HIV (Ironson et al. 2006; Vance et al. 2008), among others.

And yet, this link has not received universal empirical support (e.g., Powell et al. 2003; Blumenthal et al. 2007). Sloan and Bagiella (2006) reviewed 266 studies gathered via MEDLINE search. Of the articles that related directly to religion and health, the majority contained significant inaccuracies in representation and methodology, including construct validity (using church attendance as a proxy variable for religiosity); sampling difficulty (non-equivalent subject samples or unequal treatment procedures); and problematic analyses (inferring causality from correlation, only reporting positive effects). Taken together, these findings severely compromise the validity of the claims.

Other studies have suggested that quality of life is not related to religiosity but to spirituality. Ho and Ho (2007) have argued that atheism does not exclude spirituality. Even in largely atheistic countries, such as mainland China, people still considered spirituality to be a positive, meaningful value. Although the word 'spiritual' is traditionally associated with religious experience (and for that reason objectionable to many non-believers), the word itself is difficult to define. Interpretations range from 'search for the sacred' (which may occur outside of an established religious tradition; see Pargament 1999) to 'subjective self-fulfillment' (Sheldrake 2007) and has often been conflated with elements of physical and mental health to the point where they are no longer separate and discrete domains (Koenig 2008). It is for this reason that conducting research in the area of spirituality and health research is difficult.

RELIGION AND HEALTH BEHAVIOURS

Religious involvement is believed to promote healthy lifestyles through moral guidance offered by religious teachings, and through mutual support offered by community members. Many surveys

indicate that religious individuals practise healthier behaviours than nonreligious individuals. For example, a 2010 Gallup poll reported that self-identified ‘very religious’ individuals practise healthier behaviours in relation to both ‘moderately’ and ‘nonreligious’ individuals (Newport et al. 2010). According to a random sample of 554,066 US adults contacted via telephone, individuals who identified religion as important in daily life and attended religious services at least once a week were more likely to smoke less, exercise more, and eat healthier diets than those who attended less frequently or never. This association was found even after controlling for demographic variables such as age, race, or geographical location. The Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (Gillum and Sempos 2005) found that people who attended religious services less than 24 times per year were much more likely to smoke than frequent attendees, and smoked 1–5 more cigarettes a day. Among young adults (age 20–32), individuals who attended religious services less than once per month or never had higher rates of smoking compared to individuals who attended religious services at least once per month. In addition, nonsmokers who reported little or no religious involvement had an increased risk of smoking initiation at a 3-year follow-up (Whooley et al. 2002).

There is also some evidence that some frequent attendees of religious services are more likely than infrequent attendees to engage in physical exercise. Data from the Third National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (Gillum and Ingram 2006) revealed that older women who attended services at least once per week had a higher likelihood of leisure time physical activity than those who attended less frequently, even after controlling for health status, although this association was not found for men or younger women. Among a sample of older Southern US-dwelling adults, greater leisure time physical activity was associated with organized religious activity but not with intrinsic religiosity (Roff et al. 2005).

With regard to healthy eating habits, the evidence is not so clear. While many surveys report that highly religious people tend to eat healthier foods (Newport et al. 2010), other research has found that nationwide, states with the highest concentration of church and temple goers also have the highest rates of obesity (Ferraro 1998). Cline and Ferraro (2006) found that nonreligious women had lower rates of obesity than women from Baptist or fundamentalist religions, particularly heavy consumers of religious media (the same relationship was not found among religious men). By contrast, in an investigation conducted by Kim et al. (2003), conservative Protestant *men* had higher body-mass indexes (BMIs) than individuals claiming no religious affiliation had. Kim and Sobal (2004) found that both conservative Protestant women *and* women reporting ‘no religion’ consumed higher percentage of dietary fats compared to Catholic women, but the association for nonreligious women became non-significant after controlling for social support. While these results are open to speculation, the evidence suggests that while religious communities and teachings can serve as effective mechanisms for delivering healthy eating advice (Ayers et al. 2010), other church functions—such as weekly potluck suppers—can actually contribute toward greater obesity among members. There may also be other, deeper factors contributing to the relationship.

Religious involvement also appears to have a negative correlation with other risky behaviours, i.e., problem drinking, substance use, and sexual behaviour. In one study, Sinha et al. (2007) surveyed a nationally representative sample of 2004 American adolescents regarding their attendance at religious services and engagement in diverse risk behaviours. Results revealed that adolescents who attended regular religious services and participated in congregationally related youth groups were less likely to drink alcohol, smoke marijuana or engage in sexual activity, relative to infrequent attendees and those who reported being religiously ‘nothing in particular’. However, there is some evidence that the protective effect of greater religiosity operates more strongly in some religions than in others (Marsiglia et al. 2005). Individuals with highly fundamentalist beliefs, for instance,

engage in the lowest frequency of risk behaviours (Barna 2004).

The protective effects of church involvement against risky behaviours may not be as simple to explain as might be expected. For instance, during adolescence the inverse relationship between church attendance and risky behaviour may be largely reflective of the individual's familial and social environment, while in adulthood high levels of church attendance may reflect genetically influenced temperamental factors that discourage risky behaviour (Kendler and Myers 2009). Therefore, one cannot simply infer based on correlational data that the negative relationship between religious involvement and risky behaviours is simple or direct.

IS ATHEISM PATHOLOGICAL?

If R/S has positive effects on well-being, does that mean atheism—or secularity in general—is bad for you? The results of the body of research linking religion/spirituality to more positive medical and psychosocial well-being has led at least one researcher to speculate that a corresponding 'small, robust health liability' must be associated with secularity (Hall et al. 2008). Specifically, existing measures of religiosity may be 'reverse coded' to demonstrate the detriments seen in exclusively secular individuals. While there may be some merit to the idea that higher scores on these measures indicate greater levels of R/S, one cannot by extension infer that low scores on religiosity or spirituality can automatically be reverse-coded to indicate greater secularity. For one thing, studies looking at the relationship between R/S and health often rely on self-report measures of religiosity or spirituality that measure the construct of R/S simply as global indices on a range from 'low' to 'high' religiosity or spirituality. These assessment methodologies, therefore, offer little or no information with regard to *affirmatively secular* individuals, and may lead researchers to assume that individuals who disavow religious or spiritual beliefs must be lacking in some essential dimension of human experience.

Of course, there is no empirical support for the implication that certain essential elements of human experience are limited exclusively to the religious or 'spiritual'. Norman describes five such distinct kinds of experiences: (1) the experience of the moral 'ought'; (2) the experience of beauty; (3) the experience of meaning conferred by stories; (4) the experience of otherness and transcendence; and (5) the experience of vulnerability and fragility (2006: 474). He argues that these are meaningful components of any human life, and contests claims by some theists that such experiences are by nature essentially religious and so the nonbeliever's participation in these experiences is in some way lacking. Such mistaken impression can result in misunderstandings by caregivers and hospital staff, who incorrectly assume that explicitly non-spiritual patients 'just want to be left alone, and demand not to be touched in any way ... who spurn anything having to do with affective resonance or human warmth ... and like it that way' (Flynn 2009: 4).

What research studies dealing with *explicitly* nonreligious individuals do not point to is greater pathology in nonreligious individuals. Koenig (1995) found no differences between religious and nonreligious men acutely hospitalized with medical illness regarding length or frequency of hospitalization, or mortality, over a period of 0-32 months (mean period 14 months), thus failing to find any evidence of benefit associated with religious coping in hospitalized men at a short term follow-up. Believers and unbelievers did not differ in intensity of fear of death or personal nearness to death, and used similar approaches toward fear of death (Feifel 1974). Makros and McCabe (2003) conducted two studies exploring the role of R/S in the psychological adjustment of people with multiple sclerosis and found no association between R/S and psychological adjustment or quality of

life. Moreover, they found that contrary to expectations, positive religious coping was negatively related to psychological adjustment, and intrinsic and quest orientations were related to poor psychological health.

There is one documented source of poorer self-reported health: religious switching, either from one religious group to another or leaving religion altogether, particularly switching from high-cost groups that are theologically and culturally exclusive such as Jehovah's Witnesses. Using data from the 1972–2006 General Social Surveys, Scheitle and Adamczyk (2010) examined the relationship between health and religious switching as moderated by the religious tradition of origin, and found that people who are raised and stay in high-cost sectarian groups have better self-reported health than those raised and staying in other religious traditions. However, people who leave such groups are more likely to report worse health than those who leave other groups.

ATHEISM AND MENTAL HEALTH

Only recently have atheism and secularity been the focus of professional interest. Weber et al. (2012) reviewed 14 published articles examining differences between religious believers and nonbelievers in levels of psychological distress and potential sources of distress among nonbelievers. They documented various forms of distress, including anger toward a hypothetical god (Exline and Martin 2005) and death anxiety (Lundh and Radon 1998; James and Wells 2002), although individuals recruited from atheist/agnostic and secular organizations actually showed *less* death anxiety relative to religious believers (James and Wells 2002). In studies comparing religious believers and *explicitly atheistic* individuals on measures of depression and adjustment, the evidence supports the idea that the relationship between R/S and psychological well-being is neither simple nor linear but actually curvilinear, with greater psychological adjustment among both the strongly religious *and* strongly atheistic. In one study investigating depression rates among atheists and religious believers in Germany (Buggle et al. 2001) *both* strong believers and strong atheists suffered the lowest rates of depression, compared to both wavering agnostics and half-hearted believers. This has been supported in many other studies as well (see Galen and Kloeta 2011, among others). A study of atheists living with spinal cord injuries (Hwang 2008b) found that all of the interviewees reported feeling 'moderately happy, or 'extremely happy' with their lives. In addition, all 10 atheists indicated that their atheism had either a positive effect or no effect on their ability to adjust to their injuries. Sociological studies show that some of the countries that report the greatest quality of life are also the least religious (see Phil Zuckerman's 'Atheism and Societal Health'). High rates of atheism in countries is generally correlated with greater levels of public health, education, gender equality, and economic equality, as well as higher IQ scores (Kanazawa 2010). While it may be tempting to conclude from this association that a secular ideology promotes economic equality and social comfort, it is just as likely that greater social comfort breeds greater secularity.

Hunsberger et al. (2001) conducted two studies investigating possible links between religious and nonreligious socialization and adjustment, comparing (a) 'no religion', (b) mainline Protestant, (c) conservative Protestant, and (d) Catholic families along 11 measures of mental health and adjustment. None of the scales revealed any significant differences among the four groups. This was replicated in samples of college undergraduates and high school students. In one study comparing atheists with Christians and Buddhists on various well-being and personality traits, Caldwell-Harris et al. (2011) found that all groups reported highly similar scores, further refuting the stereotype that atheists are particularly cynical or joyless. In sum, the evidence supports the idea that greater certainty in one's

belief system—regardless of belief—is associated with greater psychological health (Weber et al. 2012).

Two studies examined the impact of religion and atheism on well-being among older adults, comparing religious vs. explicitly atheistic individuals. Wilkinson and Coleman (2010) conducted a matched pairs study in England pairing individuals (age > 60) with strong atheistic beliefs and strong religious beliefs on the role of the belief system itself in coping with different negative aging related stresses. The analyses showed that all the study participants—regardless of their beliefs—were coping well, and suggested that a strong atheistic belief system can fulfill the same role as a strong religious belief system in providing support, explanation, consolation and inspiration. Horning et al. (2011) gathered data from a sample of 134 religious and nonreligious older adults (55 years old plus) who completed an online questionnaire assessing relationships between religiosity and well-being, social support, locus of control, and meaning in life. The religious groups did not significantly differ from self-described atheists and agnostics on well-being, satisfaction with social support, or locus of control. However, the high religiosity group did endorse higher levels of presence of meaning in life than the atheists and a greater number of social supports compared to the nonreligious groups. The religious participants were more likely to utilize religious coping ($p < .05$), while the atheists reported slightly greater use of humour and substances such as alcohol or antidepressants ($p = .07$).

One further complication is that the relationship between religion and psychological well-being appears to be largely culture dependent. Lavrič and Flere (2008) compared undergraduate university students from 5 different countries (Slovenia, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Serbia, the United States of America, and Japan) and found substantial differences in the correlation between religion and psychological well-being across different countries. According to the data, higher general levels of religiosity at the societal level were linked to more positive correlations between religiosity and psychological well-being. Generally speaking, more positive associations between religiosity and psychological well-being were linked to higher levels of religiosity at the societal level, whereas in more secular countries the association was minimal or nonexistent. These results provided empirical evidence that the cultural environment plays a crucial role in shaping the relationship between general measures of religiosity and psychological well-being. Thus, there is no culturally universal pattern in the relationship between measures of religiosity and psychological well-being, and emphasized that the role of societal context greatly influences the relationship between religion and well-being.

CONSEQUENCES OF ANTI-ATHEIST DISCRIMINATION

Current trends indicate that the US population is growing more accepting of major and minor religious faiths, but that acceptance has not been extended to atheists (Pew Center 2005; Edgell et al. 2006; Acaro 2010), and this lack of acceptance appears to have negative psychological consequences. In their meta-analysis of 14 studies Weber et al. (2012) found that negative perception by others was a significant source of distress for nonbelievers. A majority of the US atheists reported that they would face at least minor repercussions in their families, workplaces and local communities—most severely in the Midwest and the so-called ‘Bible belt’ region of the South—and at least some level of discomfort when religion is invoked (as in a group prayer) during intimate social situations or public settings. Atheistic individuals may be targeted for religious harassment, loss of child custody or job opportunities, or having personal property vandalized (Downey 2004; Ritchey 2009). Nonbelievers may also be subject to religious micro-aggressions, in which religious individuals either consciously

or unconsciously transmit messages that derogate or invalidate the psychological experiences of their target, such as aggressive proselytizing, pathologizing, or denying that prejudice exists (Sue 2010). Atheists also typically lack the social institutions akin to churches that offer affirmation and solidarity with like-minded people. As a result, individual atheists and other individuals without strong religious beliefs are more likely to report feeling lonely (Lauder et al. 2006).

There is evidence to support the idea that simply being a member of a socially marginalized minority group can in itself predispose its members to increased physical and psychological distress, a phenomenon identified as minority stress (Meyer 2003), whereby stigma, prejudice, and discrimination create a stressful social environment that can lead to physical and mental health problems in people who belong to stigmatized minority groups (Quinn and Chaudoir 2009). Minority stress has been observed among racial minorities and LGBT individuals. Of these groups, the most likely to serve as a model for atheist minority stress is the LGBT population, since LGBT individuals—like atheists—do not constitute a visually identifiable group (unlike racial or sexual minorities). As a consequence, LGBT individuals often feel ‘closeted’ and unable to fully express their own identity in anticipation of negative social repercussions (Silverman 2002). This can lead to social hyper-vigilance and internalized self-hatred (‘I’m not one of *those* gays ...’), substance abuse, affective disorders, and even suicide. On the other hand, membership within an atheist or secularist organization can help to foster a sense of belonging and collective affiliation (Ritchey 2009; Weber et al. 2012).

SUMMARY: RESEARCH FINDINGS ON WELL-BEING IN ATHEISTS

Popular assumptions about the health benefits of religion and spirituality (R/S) often infer that a lack of R/S must carry a corresponding health detriment. However, there is no empirical evidence to support this idea; in fact, there is some evidence that *affirmatively* atheistic individuals have levels of physical and psychological well-being comparable to those of strong religious believers. However, atheists in present US society still face social discrimination, and this has negative impact on psychological well-being.

IN CONCLUSION: WHY STUDY THE SECULAR?

As numerous published surveys indicate, Americans are becoming less religious. At the same time, people who identify themselves as *affirmatively* agnostic, atheist, non-religious or secular are becoming more visible in our society. Nevertheless, the effects of atheism or secularity on medical and psychological well-being are not well known and greatly understudied. Many people still hold stereotypical assumptions about atheistic or secular individuals that are outdated and pathological. Research with other stigmatized minorities supports the idea of minority stress, defined as the psychological distress brought on by daily experiences of social hostility. Therefore, many of the health or psychological detriments believed to be associated with a lack of religious or spiritual belief may be attributable to the social treatment of nonbelievers rather to the nonbelief itself.

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CHAPTER 35

CONVERSION AND DECONVERSION

RALPH W. HOOD JR. AND ZHUO CHEN

INTRODUCTION

CONVERSION is arguably the major topic that defined the emergence of an empirical psychology of religion in America. G. Stanley Hall delivered a series of lectures on conversion at Harvard in 1881 and incorporated much of that material into his two-volume study of adolescence (Hall 1904). Likewise, William James devoted two of his Gifford lectures to conversion ([1902] 1985), utilizing much of the materials gathered by Hall's students, James H. Leuba and Edwin Starbuck, both of whom published the earliest psychological journal articles on conversion, in 1896 and 1897 respectively. Leuba's interest in atheism among distinguished scientists can be argued to be the first linking the literatures on conversion with deconversion. Although Leuba did not use the latter term he did devote an entire book to the emergence of atheism among eminent scientists (Leuba 1916), an issue we shall confront later in this essay. However, the second generation of psychologists in America were decidedly less infatuated with issues of belief and unbelief so much so that as studies of conversion waned W. H. Clark bemoaned that conversion had become a 'kind of psychological slum' (1958: 188) to be avoided by psychologists of religion. Studies of deconversion and unbelief were even less noticeable as empirically oriented psychologists began to shy away from the study of religion (Hood 2000).

Much of the decline in the study of conversion noted by Clark can be attributed to the focus upon the framing of conversion in what has been described as the classic model of conversion (Hood et al. 2009: 211–13). It is rooted largely in the American Protestant tradition where the biblical story of Saul's experience on the road to Damascus is taken as paradigmatic of all conversion. Saul is transformed into Paul. Here powerful emotions accompany a sudden and dramatic change in belief that alters one's subsequent life-long behaviours. This model of an emotionally based sudden and dramatic conversion had always been challenged by psychologists who felt that less emotionally driven and more gradual processes governed at least some conversions. For instance, one of James's students at Harvard, Pratt (1920), focused upon gradual conversions that resulted more from intellectual reflection than emotional turmoil, and could characterize a wide diversity of religious seekers. Pratt's (1920) influence was largely ignored in favour of the more dramatic conversions that meshed nicely with American religious movements associated with the Great Awakenings (Taves 1999). However, as Clark was bemoaning the decline of the study of conversion, sociologists and socially oriented social psychologist were beginning to study gradual conversions, largely in field settings, and with dramatically empirical differences (Hood, 2011). What now dominates the study of conversion is what Hood et al. (2009: 215–16) have called the contemporary paradigm. Here the focus is upon gradual transformation in thought and behaviour based upon the intellectual seeking noted by Pratt. Conversion is an active process and need not result in any single life-long commitment to a particular set of beliefs. It is an interminable search for meaning and purpose that is more consistent

with the empirical evidence that even sudden and dramatic emotionally driven conversion do not alter basic personality characteristics (Paloutzian et al. 1999). Saul transformed is still Saul.

MODELS OF CONVERSION AND DECONVERSION

Definitional problems have long characterized the empirical literature on conversion. While most models of the conversion process overlap, much of their distinctiveness is based upon how conversion is defined and how sudden and gradual processes of conversion might operate independently or in interaction with one another. Gooren (2010: 19–42) has reviewed eleven of these models. Hood et al. (2009: 206–43) review many of the same models and note that the conceptual clarity of most models is compromised by their lack of any consistent empirical support. However, what is most relevant for our present concern is the possibility that the process of conversion is mirrored by what Streib et al. (2009) identify as deconversion. Deconverts can include apostates, and both secular and religious ‘nones’ who may identify as atheists or agnostics. However, if the focus is upon affirming or rejecting belief in God or gods, only a minority of deconverts can be identified as atheists. In their comparative study of deconverts in Germany and America Streib et al. (2009: 27) identified six types of deconversion with only one of these, ‘secularizing exit’ associated with atheism. Furthermore, among deconverts only a minority (12 per cent of the American and 17 per cent of the German samples) were secularizing exits (Streib et al. 2009: 71) or what we will term atheistically motivated deconversions. While Gooren (2010) prefers to identify deconverts as ‘disaffiliates’ he also notes that many disaffiliates are not atheists (Gooren 2010: 102–110). Thus, disaffiliation like deconversion may be assumed to be a complex process in which abandoning a previous belief in God is only one path taken and that by a minority of deconverts or disaffiliates. Both Streib and his colleagues and Gooren separate issues of institutional participation from issues of religious belief, especially belief in or denial of God. Thus, as a provisional hypothesis, insofar as conversion and deconversion are assumed to be two sides of the same coin (Gooren 2010: 10), we must be careful not to confuse issue of religious participation or lack thereof with issues of religious beliefs or lack thereof.

THE OBJECTIVIST FALLACY

Given this publication’s definition of atheism as focused upon *belief* we must acknowledge what has been called the objectivist fallacy, a uniquely Western view that equates religion with belief (Caporale 1971: 7). Our focus is upon atheistically motivated deconversion. We limit our focus on deconverts to those who no longer believe in God but once did. However, having said this, we caution the reader not to assume that (a) deconverts are solely those who once but no longer believe in God; or (b) that lack of belief in God is to be equated with institutional non-participation, whether religious or secular.

If we identify atheists as those without a belief in God or gods, it is clear that the loss of such belief is a factor in deconversion for only a minority of deconverts (Barbour 1994; Gooren 2010; Streib et al. 2009). We will identify this minority as atheistically motivated deconverts and assume that as with conversion research, the process may be sudden or gradual or mixed (Hood et al. 2009: 206–18). While there are many useful data sources from national and international surveys that show percentage of deconverts in various countries (Streib and Klein 2013), it is important to recognize

that rejection of institutional participation is not directly correlated with atheistically motivated deconversion. Most deconverts do not become atheists, nor is atheism the motivational basis for most deconverts whether the process of their deconversion is sudden or gradual.

This focus, whether upon positive or negative atheism, obscures the fact that religion need not be defined in terms of belief at all (Carse 2008). This publication does not restrict religion to matters of belief. However, for scholars who do define religion as belief in God or gods, atheism is its mirror image. These scholars, and the empirical researches influenced by them, look at conversion and deconversion through a very narrow lens. While, as Bullivant notes (see ‘Defining “Atheism”’), such a lens avoids the dilemma of a Tower of Babel approach with respect to atheism itself, when such an avoidance is applied to religion, we must not lose sight of how it is maintained and at what cost. Regardless of one’s proclivity for a particular definition, psychologists have long recognized that religion is a multidimensional construct in which belief is but one dimension. It may be that this is also the case for atheism.

While numerous multidimensional definitions of religion could be cited (see Hood et al. 2009: 21–53), virtually all identify religious belief and religious behaviour as separate dimensions. Furthermore, dimensions of religion, especially belief and behaviour may be orthogonal. For instance, Caldwell-Harris provides an excellent review of the empirical evidence for an individual difference approach to the study of religion. She avoids definitional issues by defining atheism as ‘non-belief in God and supernatural entities broadly construed’ (2012: 5). However, her clear focus on non-belief is blurred as we have argued (Hood 2012) when she unfortunately conjoins non-belief with ‘low involvements in religious institutions and traditions’ (Caldwell-Harris 2012: 5). Thus the group she wishes to explain in terms of individual difference variables is not really atheists but rather those whose non-belief includes behaviour avoidant of religious institutions and traditions. This is only a subsample of atheists.

There is substantial empirical data supporting the fact that atheistic non-believers can have high rates of participation in religious institutions, whether synagogue, mosque, or church. To cite but one study, Ecklund and Lee (2011) studied eminent scientists at top tier universities whose non-belief is often rooted in a naturalist ontology that stands as a positive atheism. However, they find other reasons than belief in God for valued participation in religious institutions. In addition, one of the earliest studies of atheists surveyed members of an atheist association (Vetter and Green 1932) setting a pattern for sample selection that continues today in which samples of atheists are regularly recruited from various atheistic associations or internet sites negating the claim that atheists are individualistically oriented and do not participate in groups (Pasquale, 2010). Acknowledging the belief fallacy serves to remind us that belief in God or its denial explains only a small part of the variance in conversion to and deconversion from religious groups.

ATHEISTICALLY MOTIVATED DECONVERSION

The objectivist fallacy must not be assumed to mean that belief is irrelevant to religion. If the focus is upon atheism as a matter of personal belief, whether positive or negative, the *International Social Survey Programme* (ISSP 2008) is the best data set for addressing self-identified loss of belief in God. A question that directly addresses this is: ‘I don’t believe in God but I used to’ (ISSP 2008 v34, Q1). While there are wide variations across countries of those who no longer believe in God but once did, the figure of 5 per cent for the United States matches several other data sets indicating the frequency of atheism in the United States (Pasquale 2010). Further, accepting the distinction between positive and

negative atheism, even the ISSP date set is limited by not allowing a distinction based upon a rejection of God or gods in terms of an alternative world view (positive atheists) as opposed to negative atheists who simply do not believe in or feel there is insufficient evidence to believe in God or gods even though they once did. The latter are best identified as agnostics. In the United States persons are reluctant to self-identify as atheists and are more likely to identify as agnostics with significant geographical variations. For instance, the Northeast has more atheists and agnostics than the South (Hood et al. 2009: 280–6). These distinctions are important as many negative atheists need not be deconverts but rather simply non-theists, or persons who have grown up with world views that frame reality in naturalistic terms (Walters 2010). This is especially true in countries that have significant histories of secularism that was not forcefully imposed (unlike the efforts in East Germany, the former Soviet Union, China, or Poland during World War II). Charles Taylor (2007) has made a persuasive case that what we are terming non-theism has always been a possibility for educated elites in the West, but only after 1500 became a possibility for masses in highly secularized cultures. The turn to an exclusive concern with human flourishing and the loss of a concern with a vertical transcendence provides for many the possibility of at best a horizontal transcendence and a self-identification as spiritual rather than religious with the accompanying relevance of language referring to a God or gods (Hood et al. 2009: 280-6; Streib and Hood 2011). Thus, while atheists can be often identified as nonreligious, this does not translate into being non-spiritual (Pasquale 2010).

SUDDEN AND GRADUAL DECONVERSION

The focus on negative atheism may entail strong emotional rejection of religion that as we will note below can belie emotional reasons for denying God or gods. Exline et al. (2011) have focused upon such emotional rejections that may but need not lead to a sudden deonversion as individuals continue to struggle with anger at God. However, this anger at God need not be anger at God as a supreme being *per se*, but anger at the concept of God, including the rejection of primary socialization that affirmed belief in God, something that atheistically motivated deconverts tend to deny. Thus the anger may be less at God than at the belief that one has been duped into believing in the existence of God. In response from participants in their study of apostates defined as those who once did but no longer believe in God, Hunsberger and Altemeyer (1997) found that many atheists, those we would identify as non-believers, rejected having to identify themselves as atheists. In the words of one respondent, ‘I find this insulting. I would maintain that atheism is simply a logical conclusion based upon the lack of any scientific evidence to the contrary’ (1997: 129). Thus, if deconversion mirrors conversion research, it is likely that sudden rejection of God may be associated with emotional factors while the gradual rejection of God is associated with more purely cognitive factors. Here is the framing that allows for some of the strongest predictors of atheism, as a gradual process that is associated with age, education, and the acceptance of a scientific worldview often framed in terms of a purely naturalist ontology having no need for God or gods. With a purely logical, empirical, and naturalistic understanding of the world characterizes such positive atheists who may nevertheless see themselves as deeply spiritual, and joyfully engaged in their commitment to a world in which vertical transcendence plays no role (Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011).

EMOTIONAL ATHEISM

If we accept that atheism is a multidimensional construct then it is unlikely that one can identify a moncausal explanation for deconversion motivated by a rejection of belief in God or gods (Gooren 2010: 18). Further, accepting the simple classification of sudden vs. gradual deconversion mirrored from the literature on conversion, it is likely that emotional factors play a greater role in sudden than they do in gradual deconversion. Sudden deconversion has been identified as a neurotic denial of God, assuming that God as a supreme being does in fact exist. For instance, Koster (1989) has made the case for a neurotic denial of God in his psycho-historical study of four great atheists (Charles Darwin, Aldous Huxley, Friedrich Nietzsche, and Sigmund Freud). He finds a consistent pattern of a weak submissive son, unsure of his goals and desires. He attempts to flee from his unhappy family situation and in so doing shakes off apathy and confusion in a neurotic denial of both his real and 'heavenly' father. Koster's speculative thesis has been supported by clinical studies of neurotic atheism associated with the theory of defective fathering (Vitz 2000). Vitz applies the theory of absent or defective fathering to numerous historical exemplars of atheism, thus, just as insecure attachment histories may characterize belief in God as a substitute father figure (Buxant and Saroglou 2008), they may also play a role in rejection of both the father and an ideal substitute. Novotini and Peterson (2001: 171) suggest a dynamic model in which an option in the recognition of difficult situations is to blame God, then to recognize that one must not blame God, followed by repression and emotional distancing resulting in the denial of God. Such models are empirically testable and suggest a form of 'emotional atheism' (Novotini and Peterson (2001: 38) as people struggle with God. The suddenness of deconversion based upon a neurotic denial of God is only apparent in that the process has likely gone on unconsciously for years until a 'breaking point' is reached.

While comparative studies of emotional processes involved in belief and denial of God are appropriate, we must remember that most current theories of an emotional or neurotic denial of God focus upon males and their fathers with little theoretical speculation concerning females. Furthermore, theories of emotional atheism are more advanced than empirical data that might support them, while empirical studies of emotional atheism lack a broad enough theoretical basis to truly advance our understanding of what is clearly only one path to atheism among those who formerly believed in God.

POSITIVE ATHEISM

Positive atheism entails a framing of an alternative to theism. There can be many positive atheisms depending on the theisms that are being refuted. However, a deconversion based upon positive theism is most likely to mirror gradual conversion in which the deconvert is an active seeker exploring various alternatives to vertical transcendence. This seeking has come to be a possibility for many persons in the West as documented by Taylor's (2007) study of the emergence of a secular age in the West. However, as Taylor persuasively argues, secularization is never historically or factually necessitated. The denial of a belief in a personal God may be a function of principled reason that simply finds no longer a need for a personal God.

Gradual deconversion to atheism is positively associated with education, especially focused upon a materialist ontology that characterizes much of modern science (Ecklund 2010; Walters 2010; Zuckerman 2008). The acceptance of a purely materialistic ontology need not imply a neurotic denial of God. However, for at least the Western world, the increasing rejection of any sense of vertical transcendence associated with a personal God (especially a creator God that characterizes the Abrahamic faith) has been the outcome of a gradual process of education or of socialization within a

culture in which secularism is dominant. This is well represented in parts of Western Europe such as Denmark which has been identified as being ‘without God’ (Zuckerman 2007).

Thus, as with conversion, deconversion need not at all involve a personal crisis resulting from an emotional or neurotic rejection of God (Hunsberger and Altemeyer 1997; Beit-Hallahmi 2007). Atheism may be a result of primary socialization in which the issue associated with belief in God or gods is simply not seriously considered (non-theism) or by secondary socialization that rejects a previous belief in God based upon what the atheist now sees as a logically complete and rationally based understanding of the sense-revealed material world without any need of a sense of vertical transcendence (Comte-Sponville 2007). For many, ‘science’ stands as an alternative to ‘religion’, and this translates into atheism as a positive denial of theism. Current debates often associated with ‘cultural wars’ pit metaphysical options against one another. However, we accept with Taylor (2007) that nothing is inevitable in these two contrasting options, and do not accept Gould’s (1999) effort to identify two ‘non-overlapping magisteria’ in which science speaks with authority to the world of fact and religion to that of value. Our narrow lens is on belief and whether a particular framing of the world leads inevitably to a positive atheism. The classic claim is associated with the work of Leuba, one of the first psychologists of religion in America to have focused upon atheistically motivated deconversion.

EMINENT SCIENTISTS’ ATHEISM

As noted above, early psychological commitment to the study of conversion overshadowed the study of deconversion, a term that does not occur in the early psychology of religion. However, Leuba (1916) was an exception, concerned with what he implied was an emerging positive atheism. In his now classic study, Leuba (1934) popularized his research by publishing a summary of his findings in *Harper’s* magazine. He presented data suggesting that the more successful biological and physical scientists (the latter included physics and mathematics) tended toward positive atheism. Using data randomly selected from *American Men of Science*, Leuba demonstrated that scientists had high rates of disbelief in God that he assumed resulted from their scientific understanding of the world. Furthermore, the more eminent or ‘greater’ scientists were more likely to be positive atheists than the ‘lesser’ ones. He gathered two sets of data, one in 1914 and another in 1933. Positive atheism increased from 53 per cent in 1914 to 68 per cent in 1933. In both data collection years a minority of scientist affirmed an agnostic position that nevertheless declined (21 per cent in 1914; 17 per cent in 1933).

Over sixty years later Larson and Witham (1997, 1998) in two separate reports replicated Leuba’s study using a sample of eminent scientists as operationalized by membership in the prestigious National Academy of Sciences. Their replication of Leuba’s work showed that 73 per cent of eminent scientists were positive atheists while 21 per cent were agnostics. What is striking about data reporting documenting positive atheism among eminent scientists is the way the data is interpreted. Clearly disbelief in a personal God is common among eminent scientists. However, two issues must be considered. First, if we define positive atheism as rejection of belief in a personal God, then eminent American scientists are outliers with respect to the American public. In fact they almost mirror each other with only 7 per cent eminent scientists affirming belief in God while only 5 per cent of the Americans deny the existence of God (Larson and Witham 1998: 313).

Second, the results of survey data are difficult to interpret without additional information, especially qualitative data. First, it would be interesting to look at the eminent scientists who do

believe in a personal God and compare them to those who do not. How have an admittedly minority of scientists in the West managed to maintain a belief in God? While the implication is that education, especially scientific education, may but need not necessarily foster a positive atheism, the issue is too complex to resolve with simply survey data. Finally, both scientific and theological understanding of God requires careful exploration by qualitative methods. Simple survey type questions present respondents with a psychologically loaded question. As one participant respondent to the Hunsberger and Altemeyer study commented, the denial of a belief in God may be no more than disillusionment with a naively theistically conceived God (1997: 136). Here there is no struggle with God as a supreme being, but as noted above, a refusal to accept a simplified ontology of how the being of God is to be understood and whether or not simply and finally as a matter of belief.

MIXED METHOD MODELS OF DECONVERSION

Assuming that deconversion has a variety of trajectories (Barbour 1994; Gooren 2010; Streib et al. 2009) and can occur suddenly or gradually and may not involve belief as a major factor, the study of atheism is rendered more complex. The focus upon atheistically motivated deconversion may be a sudden emotional reaction of a finalized struggle with and rejection of God or may simply be a gradual process of adoption of an alternative to a belief in God no longer found tenable. In their comparative study of deconversion in Germany and America using a mixture of qualitative and quantitative methods, Streib et al. (2009) identified five characteristics of deconversion, none of which is necessarily associated with the process of deconversion whether sudden or gradual. Instead the five characteristics can form a variety of family resemblances. However they do identify two characteristics, disagreement with specific beliefs, including belief in God and emotional suffering (2009: 22) as factors that may be involved in deconversion, which do have some empirical support. Their data suggest that cultural factors are relevant in assessing the effects of atheistically motivated deconversion. The relationship between the religious group and the larger culture is a factor in the way in which deconversion is experienced. Emotional atheism and positive atheism may overlap, with positive atheism perhaps an outcome of an emotionally motivated atheism that has been worked through.

Using earlier ISSP data from 1998, Streib et al were able to take advantage of replies from American and both East and West German samples to the question noted previously, 'I believe in God now, but I didn't use to.' Of interest are the comparable figures for positive answers to these questions for East and West Germany: 10.6 per cent (West Germany) and 7.3 per cent (East Germany). Given the effort in East Germany to impose a positive atheism prior to the recent unification, these data take on added clarity when one compares the answer to another ISPP question of the same year, 'I don't believe in God and I never have.' The affirmative response was 13.2 per cent for West Germans and for East Germans 57.5 per cent. Thus, one must attribute some success to historical efforts to impose an positive atheism that for East Germans, at least, suggest that many simply have been raised as nontheists and find no need or reason to seek God in a newly unified Germany.

In their study of deconverts from both Germany and America with matched controls that stayed within tradition Streib and his colleagues (2009) are among the first to document that deconversion trajectories have varying consequences based upon the different cultural religious markets available in Germany and America. While we cannot explore this fully in this essay, it is crucial to recognize that the psychological effects of deconversion, especially when atheistically motivated, depend upon the cultural context in which belief in God is or is not embedded. Several studies have suggested that

atheists suffer from various forms of rejection in cultures where belief in God is common contributing to emotional turmoil that is cultural not neurotically produced (Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Caldwell-Harris et al. 2011; see also Karen Hwang's *Atheism, Health, and Well-Being*).

REJECTION OF ATHEISTS

Atheists have long remained a marginalized group in societies that hold religion as an indispensable part of tradition (e.g., Zuckerman 2008). Evolutionary researchers, especially in the areas of anthropology and psychology, propose theories that may shed light on the psychological mechanisms underlying people's rejection of atheists. Foremost among these theories is an assumption that the human capacity for religious beliefs and behaviours are evolutionary adaptations to selective pressures (Sosis and Alcorta 2003). Such evolutionary value of religion is especially salient in sustaining large groups by maintaining intragroup solidarity with moral disciplining and monitoring (Wilson 2002). Some theories go further to argue that religion is a cultural byproduct of psychological tendencies that enables an individual to infer the content of other minds and detect agency in nature (i.e., theory of mind); the latter provides templates that support belief in transcendental or supernatural entities (Boyer 2001).

These theories converge on a hypothesis of altruism at the social level. That is, religion facilitates costly behaviours that benefit other people (Reynolds and Tanner 1995). Prosociality has, therefore, been studied as a potential benefit associated with religious beliefs (Norenzayen and Shariff 2008). By contrast, religious nones or atheists tend to be viewed as anti-social or free-riders, where antipathy against atheists arises. Recent empirical studies employing experimental methods reveal that rejection of atheists is largely due to distrust of them by other social members (Gervais et al. 2011). Gervais and his colleagues (2011) found that participants committed more conjunction fallacies when a criminally untrustworthy individual could be targeted as an atheist than as representative of other religious groups (e.g., Muslims or Jewish), feminists, or homosexuals. Using implicit measures, they found that participants associated atheists with words indicating distrust (e.g., lying) at a shorter responding latency than with words indicating disliking (e.g., hate). Finally, atheists were rated as unfavourable for jobs that require more trust (e.g., daycare).

Theories and empirical findings tend to suggest that atheists are distrusted because of their betrayal of the long-held tradition (i.e., religion). However, these models do not make conceptual distinctions between positive and negative atheism, and between disaffiliation from a religious institution and rejection of a traditional belief. As we have been arguing in this essay, many deconverts are positively seeking alternative social institutions in a sense that they do not alienate from the host society. Other deconverts reject belief in a vertical transcendence but remain active in communities that hold alternative interpretational systems. Indeed, reliable secular moral institutions or authorities are as effective in facilitating prosocial behaviours as notions of religion (Shariff and Norenzayen 2007). And there comes more societies that are not very religious but retain a great degree of morality and intragroup cooperation (Herrmann et al. 2008). At this point, it is premature to conclude that all atheists are apt to be distrusted. Instead, more studies are needed to illustrate if it is rejection of belief or switch of affiliation that places atheists in a suspicious status.

CONCLUSION

The study of deconversion is really in its infancy. Whether or not deconversion is simply the flip side of conversion remains to be seen. However, it would be curious if empirical studies of deconversion did not parallel some of the findings in conversion research. Certainly one can deconvert suddenly or gradually and the likelihood that emotional factors are more dominant in sudden deconversion as with sudden conversion seems more than tenable. Furthermore, it is clearly important not to confuse religious belief with religious participation. There are many reasons person affiliate with and leave religious institutions, often irrespective of belief. Likewise, positive atheism rooted in a secular world view remains a viable alternative to faith based beliefs, but one never simply necessitated. Nor is it the case that eminent scientists necessarily lack a belief in God. Finally, one cannot underestimate the role of culture in framing possible tensions between theists and atheists and the conditions under which conflicts may or may not occur between groups who for complex reasons needing further empirical study have opted for differing worldviews.

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PART VI

GLOBAL EXPRESSIONS

CHAPTER 36

A WORLD OF ATHEISM: GLOBAL DEMOGRAPHICS

ARIELA KEYSAR AND JUHEM NAVARRO-RIVERA

INTRODUCTION

THIS essay describes the demography of the nonbelieving population around the world. Demographers study populations, their size, age structure, and characteristics, such as gender, marital status, educational levels, and religiosity. These factors determine a population's natural growth, namely the balance between births and deaths. We find that nonbelievers are young, disproportionately male, and educated, and are most likely to live in Northern Europe, Japan, and communist or formerly communist nations. There are approximately 450 to 500 million nonbelievers worldwide, including both positive and negative atheists, or roughly 7 per cent of the global population.¹ For the purposes of this demographic analysis of nonbelievers in God, we focus on simple definitions: a positive atheist is a person who says, '*I don't believe in God*' and an agnostic is a person who says, '*I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out*' when asked to choose a statement closest to his or her belief in the existence of God. Agnosticism is, according to the definition adopted in this publication, one of the main types of 'negative' atheism (see Stephen Bullivant's 'Defining "Atheism"'), and so we will at times combine our positive atheist and agnostic categories into a 'combined atheist' one. We do not rely on surveys in which people identify themselves as atheists or agnostics, except for countries in which there are no surveys asking about belief in God.

WORLDWIDE POPULATIONS

How many nonbelievers are there in the world in the second decade of the twenty-first century? This question has no simple answer. For example, the 2010 CIA World Factbook counts (positive) atheists as 2.32 per cent of the world's population. Kosmin considers this number questionable: '[the] amazing precision to two decimal places is slightly undermined by the caveat that this statistic is an estimate' (2011: 8). The 2.32 per cent CIA estimate suggests that in a world population of 7 billion, 161 million people are atheists. In contrast, Phil Zuckerman estimated nonbelievers in God worldwide to be between 500 million and 750 million people (2007). Zuckerman's estimate is based on a meta-analysis of different sources utilizing different methodologies, survey questions, and definitions to capture people who identify as atheists, agnostics, or nonbelievers in God. Our attempt here is to produce estimates of the atheistic population, while drawing a basic distinction within this group between positive atheists and agnostics. In fact for each of these two groups of nonbelievers, we will present separate demographic analyses by country of their socio-economic characteristics.

Most countries do not collect systematic information on religious identification and belief of their

populations. Some governments are precluded from asking about religion in their decennial census due to separation between religion and state. For our estimate we rely on international surveys and the collaboration of scholars in different countries who administer the same questions across the globe. One of these surveys is the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP), which is a multinational project conducting annual social surveys since 1985. The estimates in this essay are derived from the ISSP 2008 survey, when 40 countries took part. These countries are mainly in Europe, North and South America and a few in Asia and Oceania. (This analysis does not include most African countries, Middle Eastern countries, and many countries in Asia.) Every year the survey includes a core questionnaire and a special focus area, with religion as the special focus area in the 1991, 1998, and 2008 studies. These three special questionnaires included questions regarding belief in God that were replicated and allow for cross-national comparisons and monitoring change over time.

To repeat, we define a positive atheist as someone who answers, '*I don't believe in God*' and an agnostic as someone who answers, '*I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out*' when asked to choose a statement closest to his or her belief about God.

This is the ISSP question: *Please indicate which statement below comes closest to expressing what you believe about God.*

- (1) I don't believe in God;
- (2) I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out;
- (3) I don't believe in a personal God, but I do believe in a Higher Power of some kind;
- (4) I find myself believing in God some of the time, but not at others;
- (5) While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God;
- (6) I know God really exists and I have no doubts about it;
- (7) Don't know.

The estimates of adult (positive) atheists and agnostics in the 40 countries participating in the ISSP 2008 religion module are shown side by side. The number of atheists and agnostics totals over 100 million each. While in many countries the number of atheists resembles closely the number of agnostics, interestingly there are many discrepancies. These adult population estimates are taken from the US Census International Database.

The largest numbers of atheists among the surveyed countries are in Germany and France, with over 16 million and 11 million respectively, followed by Russia and the United States. The smallest numbers of atheists are found in small countries such as Cyprus (under 20,000) and the Dominican Republic (about 70,000).

The largest number of agnostics among the surveyed countries is in Japan, which has over 20 million adult agnostics. The United States and Russia are trailing with about 11 million in each country followed by Germany and France with over 8 million in each country and the United Kingdom with just under 8 million in 2008. (See [Table 36.1](#)).

A count using just these 40 countries is certain to be an underestimate because the countries account for only about 1.2 billion of the roughly 4.5 billion adults worldwide. Countries in the Muslim world did not participate in the ISSP project. The most populous countries missing from the ISSP tally are China, India, Indonesia, Pakistan, Brazil, and Nigeria, which account for over 3 billion people, about half of the population in the world. Even a small fraction of atheists in these countries would change significantly the total number of atheists worldwide. See Appendix A for estimates of atheism in countries for which there is no belief data.

The share of atheists by belief varies greatly by nation. When asked to express their belief about God, those who firmly rejected a belief in God comprise small minorities in many countries, from only 1 per cent in the Dominican Republic, 2 per cent in Turkey, and 3 per cent in Poland, to one in every four adults in France and Germany and 40 per cent of the population in the Czech Republic.

Figure 36.1 shows clusters of countries according to the share of positive atheists in 2008. The ‘**very low**’ incidence cluster of such nonbelievers—less than 5 per cent—includes countries in East Asia (Philippines with 1 per cent), South America (for example, Chile at 2 per cent), and Eastern Europe. The United States is a rarity among Western countries with only 3 per cent of adults who said ‘I don’t believe in God’. The ‘**low**’ incidence cluster of atheists—5 per cent to 9 per cent—includes countries in many continents: South Africa, Western Europe (for example, Ireland with 5 per cent), Eastern Europe (Ukraine, for example, with 6 per cent), Asia (Japan, for example, with 9 per cent), and South America (Uruguay, 9 per cent).

Table 36.1 Number of adult atheists (positive atheists, agnostics, and combined) by country 2008 (weighted data)

Country	Positive atheists (aged 18+)	Agnostics (aged 18+)	Combined atheistic pop. (aged 18+)
Australia	2,642,884	2,415,888	5,058,772
Austria	616,035	682,995	1,299,030
Belgium	1,499,328	1,357,725	2,857,053
Chile	222,164	152,007	374,171
Croatia	191,987	152,140	344,127
Cyprus	15,788	28,252	44,040
Czech Republic	3,400,720	1,248,900	4,649,620
Denmark	785,016	584,496	1,369,512
Dominican Republic	72,289	114,457	186,746
Finland	534,049	638,355	1,172,404
France	11,750,346	8,215,284	19,965,630
Germany	16,103,215	8,461,011	24,564,226
Hungary	1,248,927	1,005,629	2,254,556
Ireland	179,587	190,362	369,949
Israel	291,014	233,766	524,780
Italy	2,949,114	3,698,889	6,648,003
Japan	9,248,832	20,517,524	29,766,356
Latvia	339,427	174,350	513,777

Mexico	2,480,660	1,204,892	3,685,552
Netherlands	2,563,829	1,739,281	4,303,110
New Zealand	404,964	461,036	866,000
Norway	634,138	512,326	1,146,464
Philippines	392,154	896,353	1,288,507
Poland	1,026,315	1,772,725	2,799,040
Portugal	436,379	367,927	804,306
Russia	7,818,446	11,152,783	18,971,229
Slovakia	522,438	269,926	792,364
Slovenia	227,301	95,266	322,527
South Africa	1,408,873	626,166	2,035,039
South Korea	6,782,398	3,637,487	10,419,885
Spain	3,665,924	3,968,268	7,633,561
Sweden	1,407,293	1,392,859	2,800,152
Switzerland	579,157	621,832	1,200,989
Taiwan	1,170,522	1,494,666	2,665,188
Turkey	965,303	406,443	1,371,746
Ukraine	2,308,949	1,816,878	4,125,827
United Kingdom	6,829,830	7,750,162	14,579,992
United States	7,128,299	11,497,257	18,625,556
Uruguay	203,214	106,333	309,547
Venezuela	116,009	116,009	232,018
TOTAL	101,163,116	101,778,908	202,942 024

Source: ISSP 2008.

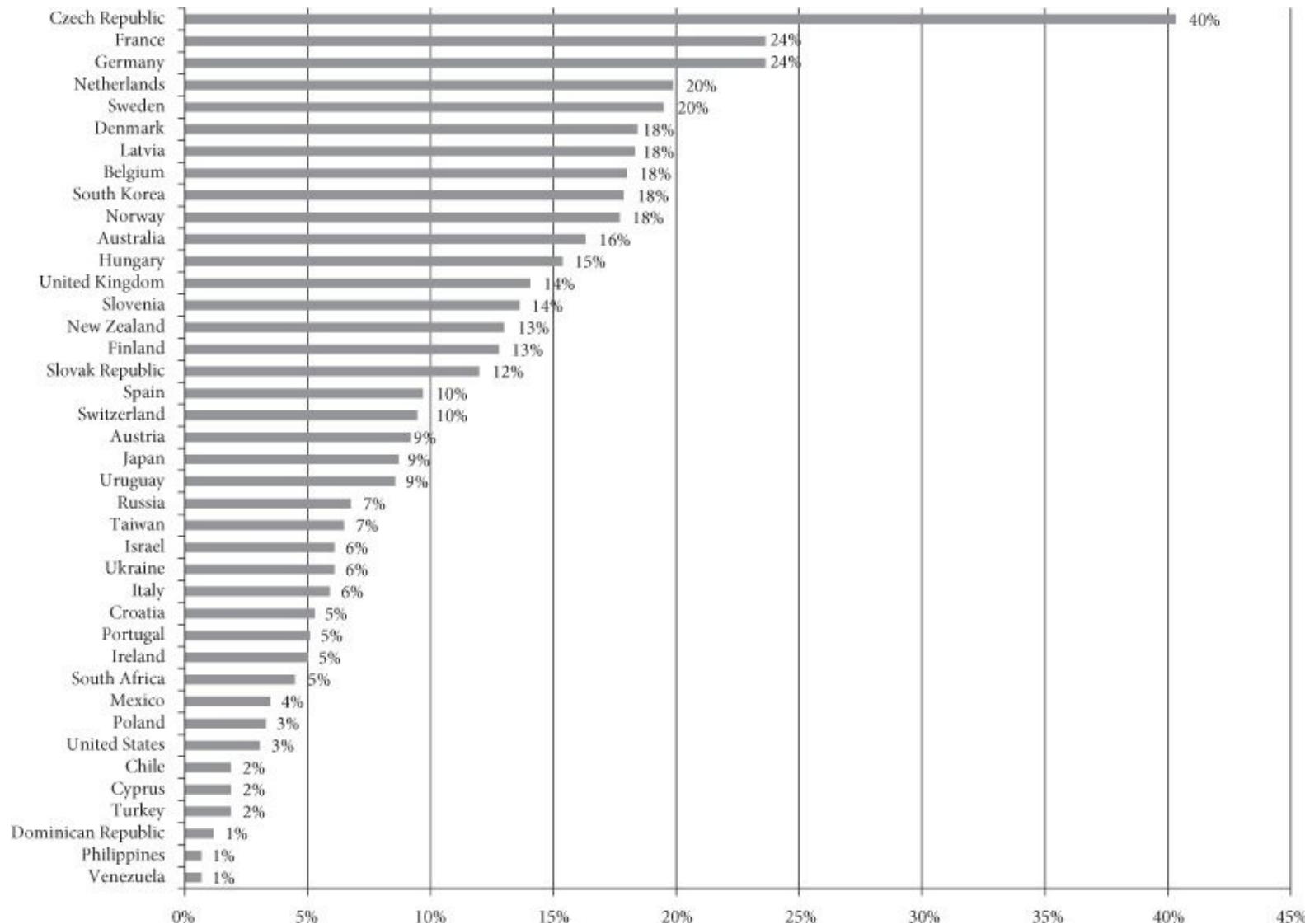


FIGURE 36.1 Percentage who say 'I don't believe in God' (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

The ISSP findings corroborate the American Religious Identification Survey (ARIS) 2008, in which many functional atheists did not describe themselves as such. When asked an open-ended question, '*what is your religion, if any?*' only 0.7 per cent of the US adult population called themselves atheists. When asked about the existence of God, however, 2.3 per cent said, 'there is no such thing', which amounts to over 5 million people (Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

The '**moderate**' incidence of positive atheists—10 per cent to 19 per cent—includes mostly countries in Eastern Europe (for example, Latvia with 18 per cent) and Western Europe (United Kingdom with 14 per cent), Scandinavia (Norway with 18 per cent), Oceania (New Zealand with 13 per cent), and South Asia (for example, South Korea with 18 per cent). Finally, the '**high**' incidence of positive atheists—20 per cent and over—include only five countries, all in Europe, with France, Germany, and Czech Republic at the top.

Some of these patterns echo historical secularization and secular culture as in *laïcité* in France (Caron 2007) and low scores on belief in God, an afterlife, heaven, hell and sin in Scandinavian countries (Lüchau 2010). Furthermore, atheism and belief elicit totally different meanings in a place like modern Japan where belief in supernatural beings is 'simply not very important to most Japanese' (Roemer 2010; see also Sarah Whylly's 'Japan').

Figure 36.2 shows the correlation between the two main types of atheism: positive atheism and agnosticism. The terms are defined as those in which a person answers, 'I don't believe in God' (positive atheism) or 'I don't know whether there is a God, and I don't believe there is a way to find out' (agnosticism). With the exception of a few outliers that tend to be the countries with the highest proportion of atheists, the relationship between positive atheism and agnosticism is strong.

CHANGES OVER TIME

According to Pew Global Trends (2002) the share of nonbelievers in the general population has increased worldwide. Overt, positive atheism is a rare phenomenon in many countries; when people fall away from the theism, it is generally into agnosticism rather than positive atheism (Beit-Hallahmi and Argyle 1997).

William Sims Bainbridge (2005) links high rates of atheism with low fertility rates. He argues that atheism correlates with 'a lack of interpersonal social obligations', which in turn is 'associated with a collapse of fertility'. Bainbridge considers European countries and Australia as examples of countries with below-replacement fertility levels and high percentages of atheists. He compares these developed countries with the United States and Mexico, which have high fertility rates and high levels of religiosity. High levels of fertility are associated with greater religiosity in Africa and with the high importance of God in people's lives in Muslim countries in the Mediterranean (Keysar 2009).

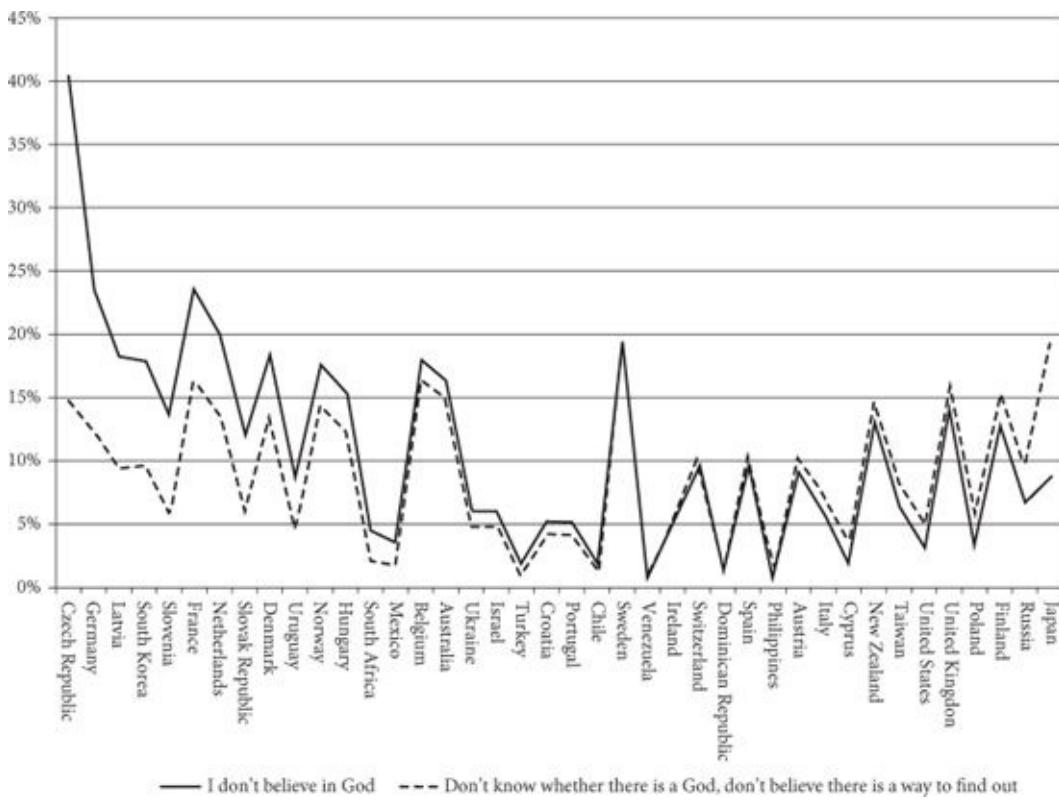


FIGURE 36.2 Relationship between positive atheism and agnosticism in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

During the last decade, public atheism has risen to prominence in many countries thanks to the publication of several best-selling English-language books and the increased usage of the internet as a means of connecting the wider non-theistic community. Atheism is today, arguably, less ideological than in the recent past as atheism becomes more public in countries without a history of communist rule, particularly in Western Europe.

For this reason it is important to understand how atheism, as defined throughout this publication as 'an absence of belief' in deities, has fared over time since the fall of the Berlin Wall. In the following analysis we explore the changes in the percentage of atheists in selected countries around the world. In order to do this comparison we will use data from the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP). Specifically, we will use two ISSP modules that asked the same questions about religious belief in 1998 and 2008. This provides a snapshot of selected countries at two pivotal points in time.

First, the 1998 snapshot captures the state of religious belief in many countries in the decade after the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Soviet Union and its satellite regimes. This period of rapid regime transitions and political changes included a religious revival of sorts as religious organizations scrambled to get their shares of the opening 'markets'.

Second, the 2008 snapshot captures the state of religious belief in several countries in the aftermath of the 11 September 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States. The attacks were decried in some quarters as the outgrowth of religious fundamentalism around the world. In response, some atheist spokespeople cried for some form of 'evangelical atheism'.

Of the 40 countries that were part of the 2008 ISSP religion module, 26 were also part of the 1998 module. Positive atheism increased in 21 of the 26 countries by an average of 4 percentage points in 10 years. The largest gains occurred in the Czech Republic (20 percentage points) where contemporary scholarship finds consistently high rates of nonreligion and unbelief in the population, even after the fall of communism (see Hamplová and Nespor 2009; Lužný and Navrátilová 2001).

Meanwhile the largest loss occurred in Russia (13 percentage points) (see [Table 36.2a](#)). In Western Europe, the region where most of the surveyed countries are located, positive atheism increased 3 percentage points. The share of positive atheists in France increased from 19 per cent to 24 per cent. When we separate between East and West Germany, large differences prevail in 2008 with a far higher level of disbelief in the East (53 per cent) than in the West (11 per cent).

Big changes occurred in the countries that were part of the former Soviet Union under state-imposed atheism (see Irena Borowik, Branko Ančić, and Radosław Tyrała's 'Central and Eastern Europe'). With the collapse of the Soviet Union some episodes of religious revival have been recorded among young generations (Greeley 2001). These countries spanning Europe and Asia have diverse cultures and different dominant religions (Russian Orthodox, Lutheranism, Islam, and others). That explains the complexity in the transitions in religious beliefs and disbelief they have experienced and the contradictory patterns between religious belief and practices (Hormel 2010). The ISSP data show that between 1998 and 2008 both Russia and Latvia experienced major shifts in religious beliefs, interestingly not in the same direction. While positive atheism increased sharply in Latvia, it decreased in Russia (See [Table 36.2a](#)). Other sources show similar levels of belief in God in Latvia but a different trend, namely decrease in the level of positive atheism (see Hormel 2010).

Table 36.2a Percentage of positive atheists in selected countries (1998 and 2008)

Country	% positive atheist 1998	% positive atheist 2008	Difference 1998–2008
Philippines	1%	1%	0
Chile	2%	2%	0
Cyprus	2%	2%	0
United States	3%	3%	0
Poland	2%	3%	+1
Ireland	2%	5%	+3
Portugal	2%	5%	+3
Italy	4%	6%	+2
Israel	8%	6%	-2
Russia	20%	7%	-13
Japan	11%	9%	-2
Austria	7%	9%	+2
Switzerland	4%	10%	+6
Spain	9%	10%	+1
Slovakia	11%	12%	+1
New Zealand	8%	13%	+5
Slovenia	14%	14%	0
Hungary	13%	15%	+2
Australia	10%	16%	+6
Norway	12%	18%	+6
Latvia	9%	18%	+9
Denmark	15%	18%	+3
Sweden	17%	20%	+3
Netherlands	17%	20%	+3
France	19%	24%	+5
Czech Republic	20%	40%	+20

Source: ISSP 2008.

More moderate changes occurred with agnosticism between 1998 and 2008. The leading country, Japan, with 19 per cent agnostics in 2008 and 21 per cent in 1998, is a good example. As are countries with far lower rates, for instance the United States or Ireland, whereby agnostics comprised 5 per cent of the adult population in both 1998 and 2008. Somewhat larger shifts in agnosticism are found in

Austria and Spain (5 percentage point and 4 percentage point increases) and Australia and Slovakia with a 4 percentage point decrease between 1998 and 2008.

Table 36.2b Percentage of agnostics in selected countries (1998 and 2008)

Country	% agnostic 1998	% agnostic 2008	Difference 1998–2008
Chile	1%	1%	0
Philippines	1%	2%	+1
Cyprus	3%	3%	0
Portugal	4%	4%	0
Ireland	5%	5%	0
United States	5%	5%	0
Israel	6%	5%	-1
Slovakia	10%	6%	-4
Poland	4%	6%	+2
Slovenia	9%	6%	-3
Italy	5%	7%	+2
Latvia	11%	9%	-2
Australia	14%	10%	-4
Switzerland	13%	10%	-3
Russia	11%	10%	-1
Spain	7%	11%	+4
Hungary	12%	12%	0
Norway	12%	14%	+2
Denmark	16%	14%	-2
Netherlands	12%	14%	+2
Austria	10%	15%	+5
Czech Republic	14%	15%	+1
New Zealand	12%	15%	+3
France	17%	17%	0
Japan	21%	19%	-2
Sweden	18%	19%	+1

Source: ISSP.

Combining the rates of positive atheists and agnostics, again, we find a wide range worldwide, from as few as 2 per cent in Venezuela or 3 per cent in Turkey and Philippines to one-third of adults in Scandinavia. The highest rates of combined nonbelievers are in the Czech Republic with over half of the adult population (55 per cent), France (41 per cent) and Sweden (39 per cent) (see [Table 36.3](#)). Total atheism (i.e., positive atheists and agnostics combined) in Japan (28 per cent) is quite high and is in sharp contrast with the high rates of religious beliefs exhibited in Japan in the period after World War II (see Reader 2012).

Table 36.3 Total atheist population (i.e., positive atheists and agnostics combined) in selected countries (2008)

Country	% positive atheist 2008	% agnostic 2008	% combined atheist population
Venezuela	1%	1%	2%
Philippines	1%	2%	3%
Dominican Republic	1%	2%	3%
Chile	2%	1%	3%
Turkey	2%	1%	3%
Cyprus	2%	3%	5%
Mexico	4%	2%	6%
South Africa	5%	2%	7%
United States	3%	5%	8%
Poland	3%	6%	9%
Portugal	5%	4%	9%
Croatia	5%	4%	9%
Ireland	5%	5%	10%
Israel	6%	5%	11%
Ukraine	6%	5%	11%
Italy	6%	7%	13%
Uruguay	9%	5%	14%
Taiwan	7%	8%	15%
Russia	7%	10%	17%
Slovakia	12%	6%	18%
Switzerland	10%	10%	20%
Slovenia	14%	6%	20%
Spain	10%	11%	21%
Austria	9%	15%	24%
Australia	16%	10%	26%
Hungary	15%	12%	27%
Latvia	18%	9%	27%
Japan	9%	19%	28%
Finland	13%	15%	28%
New Zealand	13%	15%	28%
South Korea	18%	10%	28%
United Kingdom	14%	16%	30%
Norway	18%	14%	32%
Denmark	18%	14%	32%
Belgium	18%	16%	34%
Netherlands	20%	14%	34%
Germany	24%	12%	36%
Sweden	20%	19%	39%
France	24%	17%	41%
Czech Republic	40%	15%	55%

Source: ISSP 2008.

DEMOGRAPHICS²

Gender

Atheists, both positive and negative (inc. agnostics), are predominantly males. This may reflect women's well-known higher levels of religiosity (Beit-Hallahmi 2013) as measured by frequent church attendance, and the importance they ascribe to their relationship to God (Wuthnow 1990). This gender disparity also possibly reflects men's greater tendency to disbelieve and reject authority. The

psychological research on gender worldviews reveals that in forming secular and religious beliefs women connect to family and life cycle events while men relate to truth and power (Furseth 2010; see Melanie Brewster's 'Atheism, Gender, and Sexuality').

Global comparisons reveal a wide spectrum of male dominance within the positive atheist sub-population, from 50–50 (males–females) in South Africa to 77 per cent males in the Ukraine. At first glance one might predict that the more prevalent the phenomenon of positive atheism in a particular society, the narrower its gender gap. This is the case in France and Germany (57 per cent males) whereby one-in-every-four adult claims nonbelief in God. Likewise on the other spectrum, in Portugal and Ireland with only 5 per cent positive atheists, 76 per cent and 73 per cent of them are males (see [Figure 36.3a](#)).

The gender balance is, however, not that easy to predict. Let us look at countries that have experienced major changes in the last decade in the atheist population. Has the change shifted the gender distributions? In the Czech Republic the percentage of positive atheists in society doubled and it seems to include both men and women. On the other hand, in Russia as the proportion of those who do not believe in God has dropped, gender gaps have widened from 64 per cent males among atheists in 1998 to 73 per cent in 2008.

East and West Germany are good examples to follow as they encountered major societal transitions at the end of the twentieth century. Both in the East and the West gender gaps exist. In 1998, almost a decade after the two parts of Germany were united, positive atheism was far more common in the East whereby 61 per cent of males and 50 per cent of females did not believe in the existence of God. In the former West Germany, non-belief characterized 15 per cent of males and 10 per cent of females. In comparison, in Sweden, where one in five adults was a positive atheist, gender gaps were wider: 23 per cent of males and 11 per cent of females were nonbelievers.

Gender gaps also exist among agnostics but not to such extremes ([Figure 36.3b](#)).

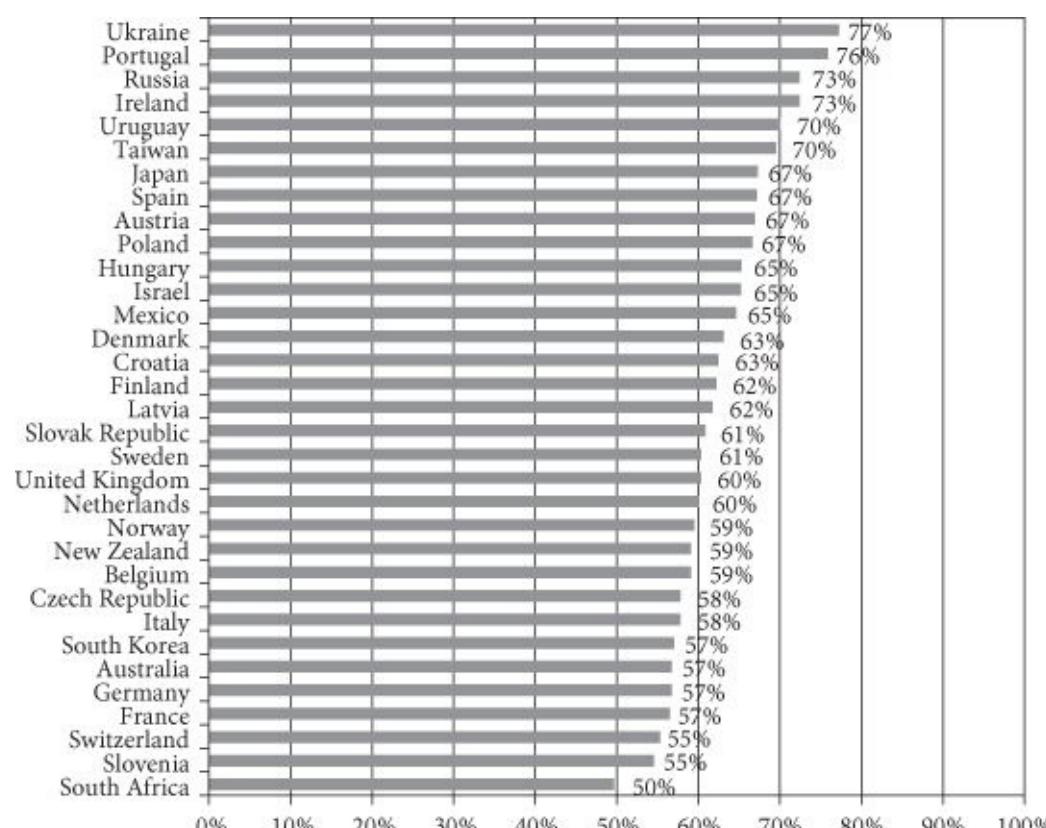


FIGURE 36.3a Percentage of males among positive atheists in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

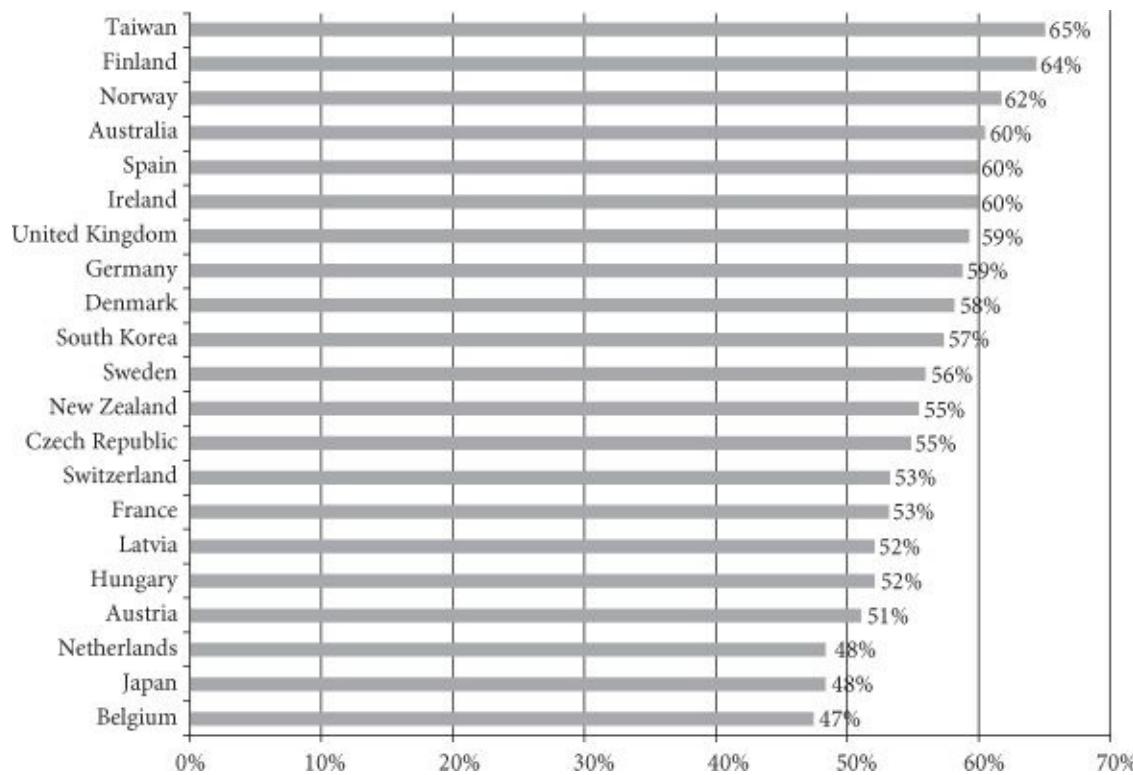


FIGURE 36.3b Percentage of males among agnostics in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

Most notably in Taiwan, Finland and Norway, male agnostics outnumber females. However in the Netherlands, Japan and Belgium the share of females are slightly higher than that of males. Interestingly, in both Japan and the Netherlands the share of agnostics in the population is higher than that of atheists (see [Figure 36.2](#)).

Age Structure³

Youth is another distinct characteristic of nonbelievers. Nevertheless, [Figure 36.4a](#) below illustrates that in countries with low incidence of atheism (for instance in the United States and the Dominican Republic) the distribution of atheists is quite uniform regardless of age. As atheists gain prominence in society, their age distribution becomes uneven and differences between age groups widen. In fact once the share of atheist surpasses 5 per cent, we observe divergent patterns among the young and the old.

Older people typically do not associate with either positive or negative atheism, exhibiting rates of nonbelief below the national level. There are exceptions, however. In Slovenia, Russia, and Israel, for example, older people are more likely than younger people to be nonbelievers, although only slightly. In South Korea, older people are much more likely to be nonbelievers.

Figure 36.4b illustrates that differences by age are evident in countries with 10 per cent or higher of agnostics, most notably in Japan where 19 per cent of adults said: 'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out'. Yet this is not the pattern in France whereby 17 per cent of adults exhibit agnostic beliefs and to a lesser extent in the United Kingdom with 16 per

cent agnostics.

Will people become believers as they age? Or have real transformations occurred in society and have more people shifted their belief patterns? These are challenging puzzles, which may differ from one society to another, and which require following up the cohorts and monitoring changes over time and are beyond the scope of this analysis. A disproportionately large share of young people among nonbelievers might, however, be a sign of transitional societal trends. Generational gaps could also point toward gaps in worldviews and behaviour which have further ramifications on society.

Where do we find the largest generational gaps? The Czech Republic, Sweden, Finland, France and Latvia clearly stand out, with differences between the young and old generations of positive atheists that range between 15 percentage points and 22 percentage points, as shown in [Figure 36.5a](#). Young people seem to lead the way in Scandinavia and Western Europe with one-quarter of them saying 'I do not believe in God'.

Among agnostics the largest generational gaps are found in Spain with 11 per cent differences between the younger and older generations and 8 per cent differences in Japan, Belgium and Hungary (see [Figure 36.5b](#)). Almost one-quarter of young people in Japan say that they do not know if there is a God, as 20 per cent of 15–34 years old in Sweden and 19 per cent in Australia.

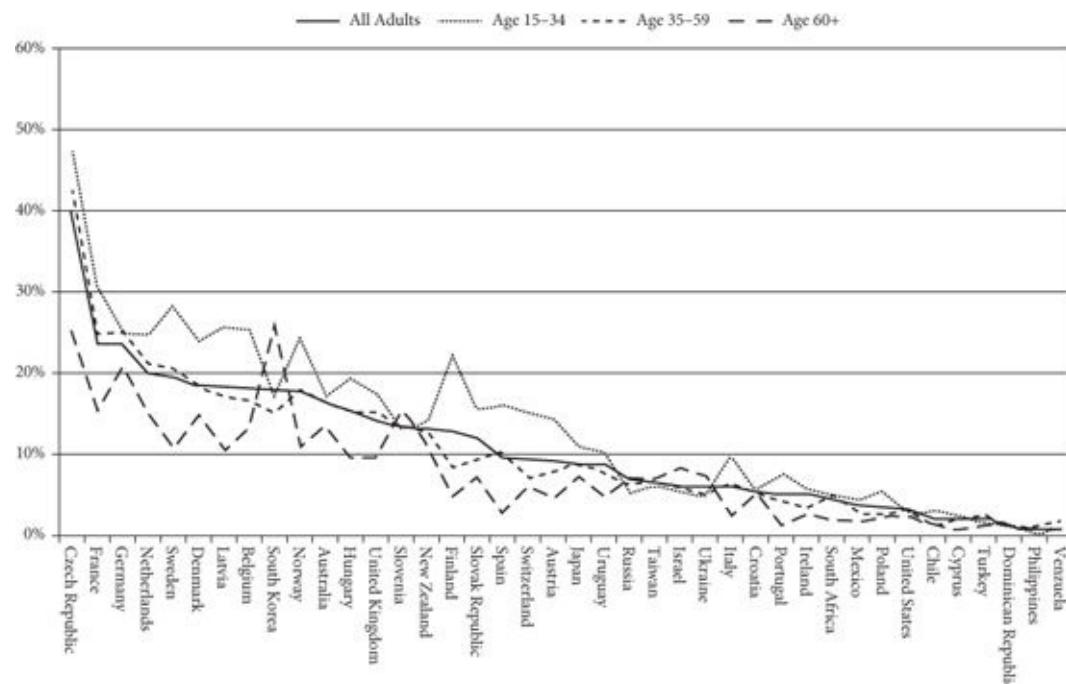


FIGURE 36.4a Percentage of positive atheists by age group (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

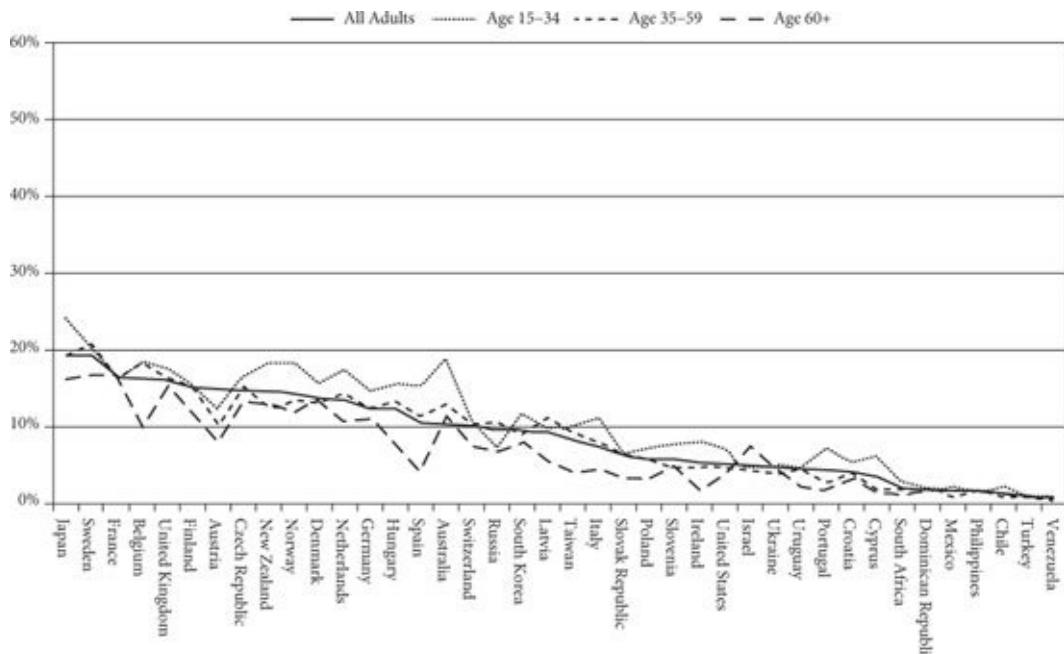


FIGURE 36.4b Percentage of agnostics by age group (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

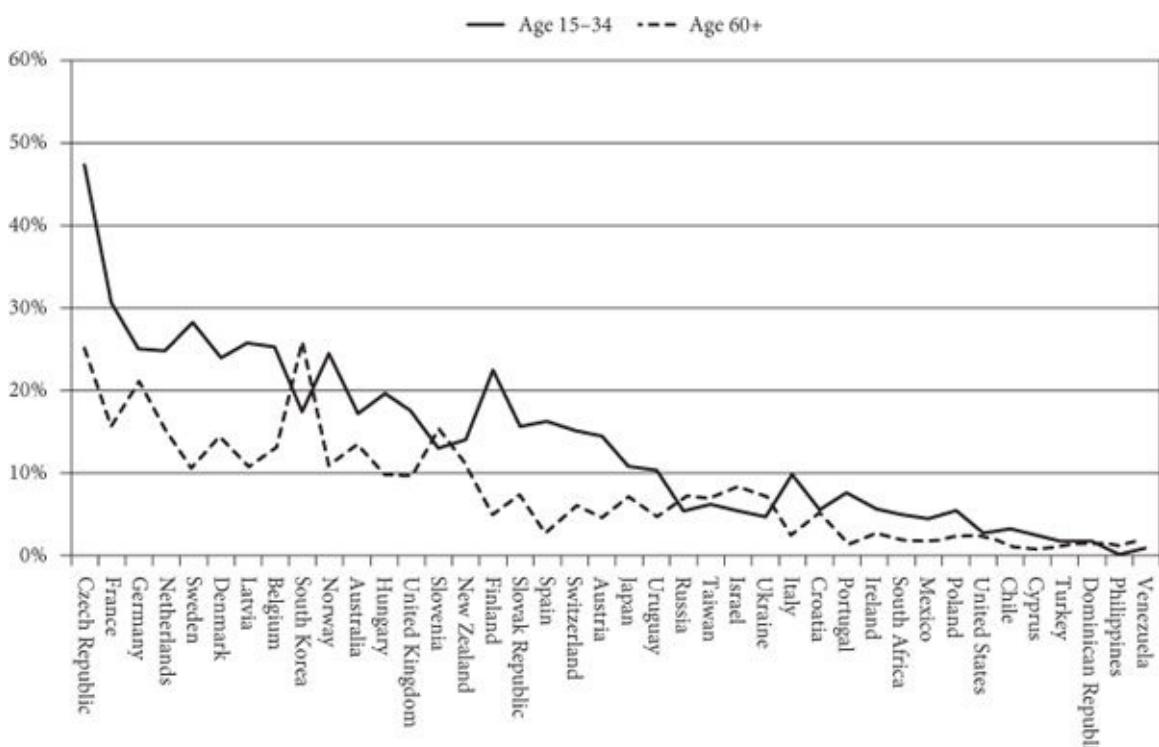


FIGURE 36.5a Generational gaps—positive atheists, young and old (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

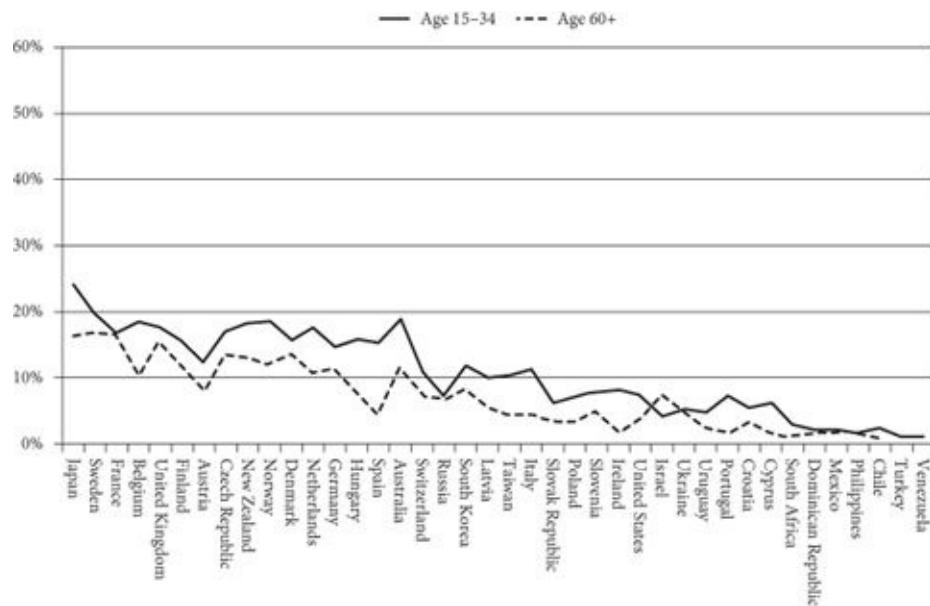


FIGURE 36.5b Generational gaps—agnostics, young and old (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

Education

Atheism is especially common among people with advanced education. One in every three adults in the Netherlands, 29 per cent in Denmark, and 28 per cent in France who have a university degree disbelieve in God. Yet, in a few cases those with high educational attainment have levels of positive atheism below the national average. Such is the case of South Korea and Germany. In the Czech Republic, which has experienced major growth in the nonbelieving population since 1998, education does not seem to play a major role. Large gaps in positive atheism are also notable in Uruguay, Italy, Ireland and Mexico with higher incidences among the educated segments of the population (see [Figure 36.6a](#)).

Agnosticism is more evenly distributed by educational attainment. There are no differences between those who completed a university degree and the general population in countries with high incidence, such as Japan or Sweden as well as in those with low incidence, such as Poland or South Africa (see [Figure 36.6b](#)). However, in Germany, Italy, Spain and Israel higher educational levels are associated with greater agnosticism.

Marital Status

Marital status patterns are influenced by both age structure and cultural factors. In young populations we expect to find more singles, who have never married. And in older populations, naturally, there will be more widows and widowers. At the same time, traditional and religious societies encourage nuptials and discourage divorces.

Age, as we have shown, is highly correlated with prevalence of atheistic belief. For example, the chart below illustrates that those who have never married are almost universally more likely to be a positive atheist. In the USA, the Ukraine, and New Zealand there are no differences in positive atheism between the various marital statuses although in New Zealand the rate of positive atheism is much higher. One would assume that the more common positive atheism in society the less distinct their

demographic characteristics are and the more they resemble believers in their own society. However the patterns presented in [Figure 36.7a](#) do not support this assumption. In fact people who cohabit in most cases tend to reject the existence of God.

Those who never married and those who cohabit are more likely to be agnostic, as shown in [Figure 36.7b](#). In Spain, New Zealand, Russia, Taiwan, Croatia and Turkey agnosticism stand out among those who cohabit—expressing doubts and non-commitment about both God and the institution of marriage.

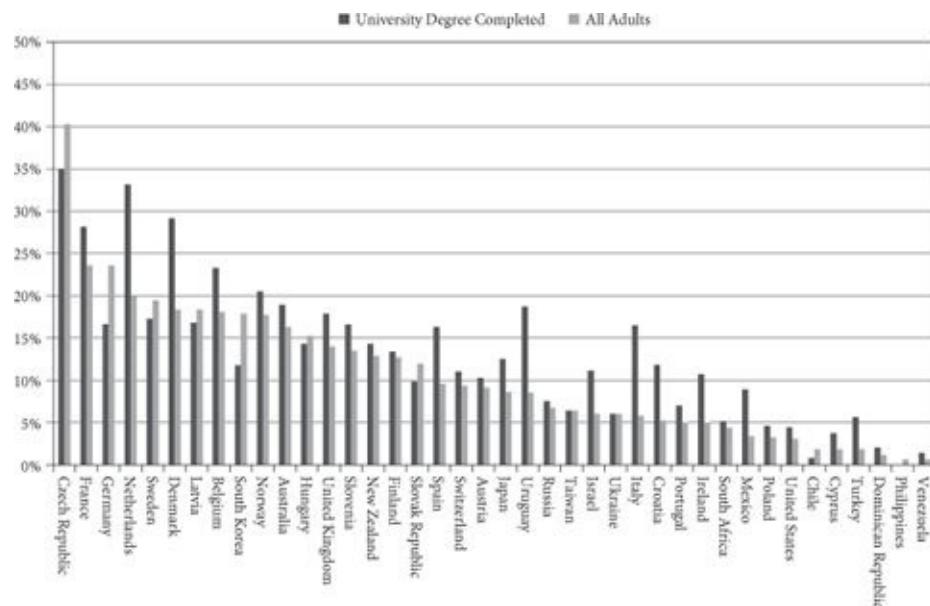


FIGURE 36.6a Percentage of positive atheists among general population and college graduates in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

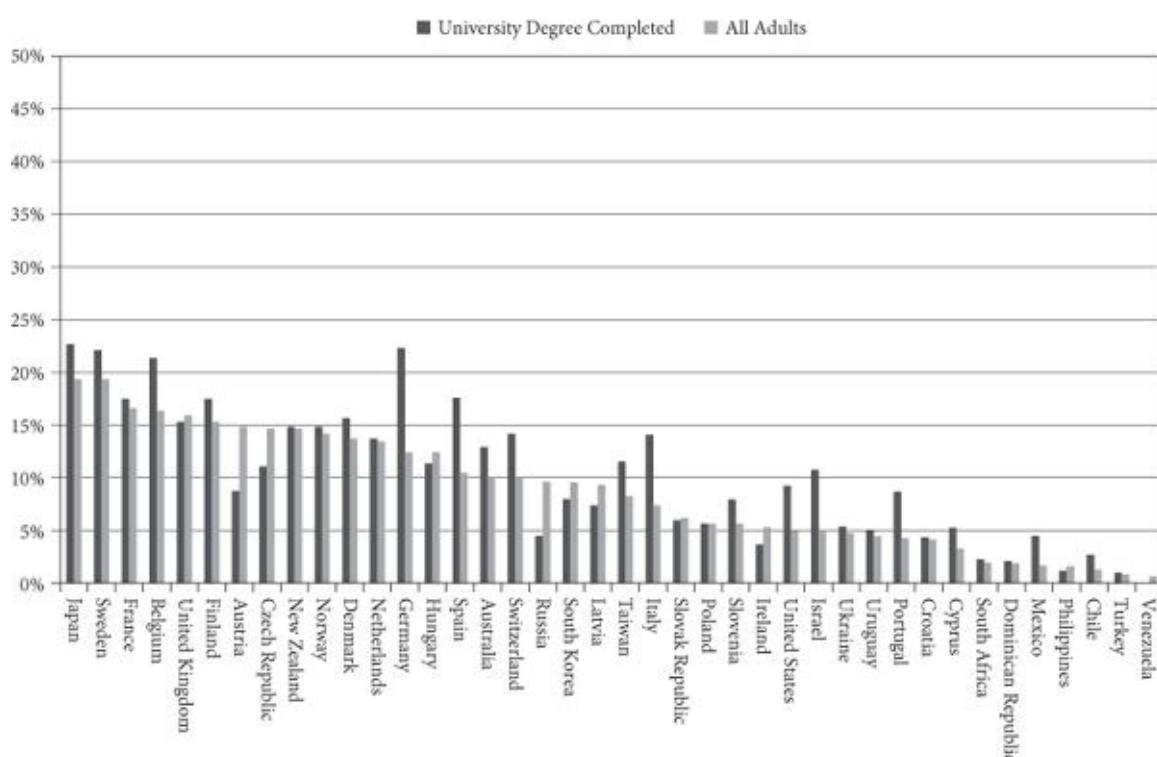


FIGURE 36.6b Percentage of agnostics among general population and college graduates in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

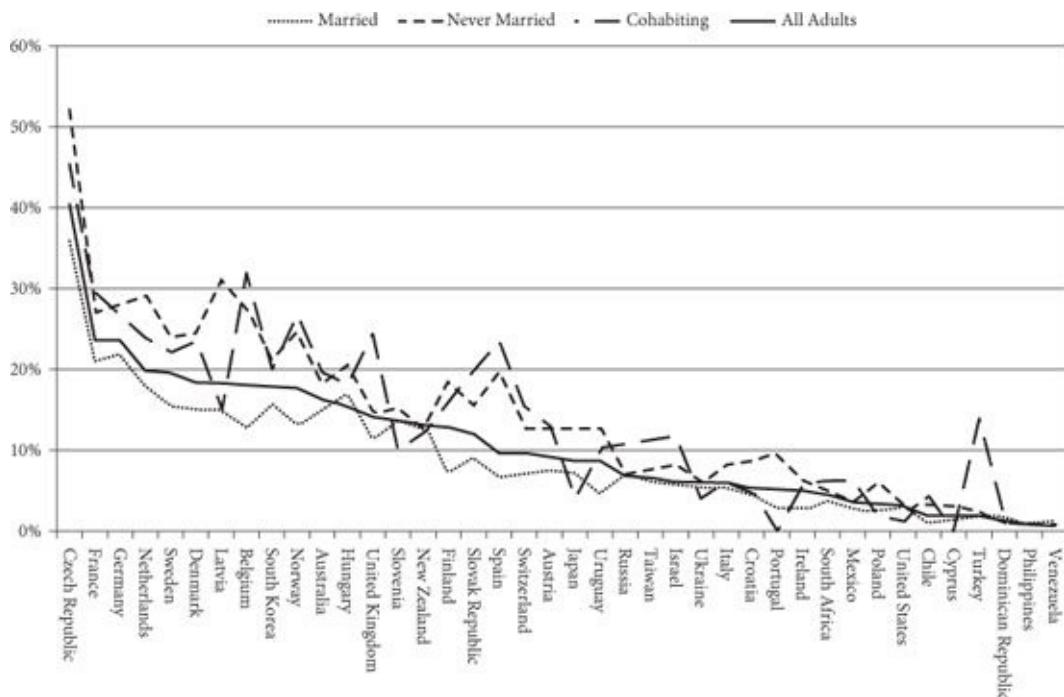


FIGURE 36.7a Percentage of atheists by marital status in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

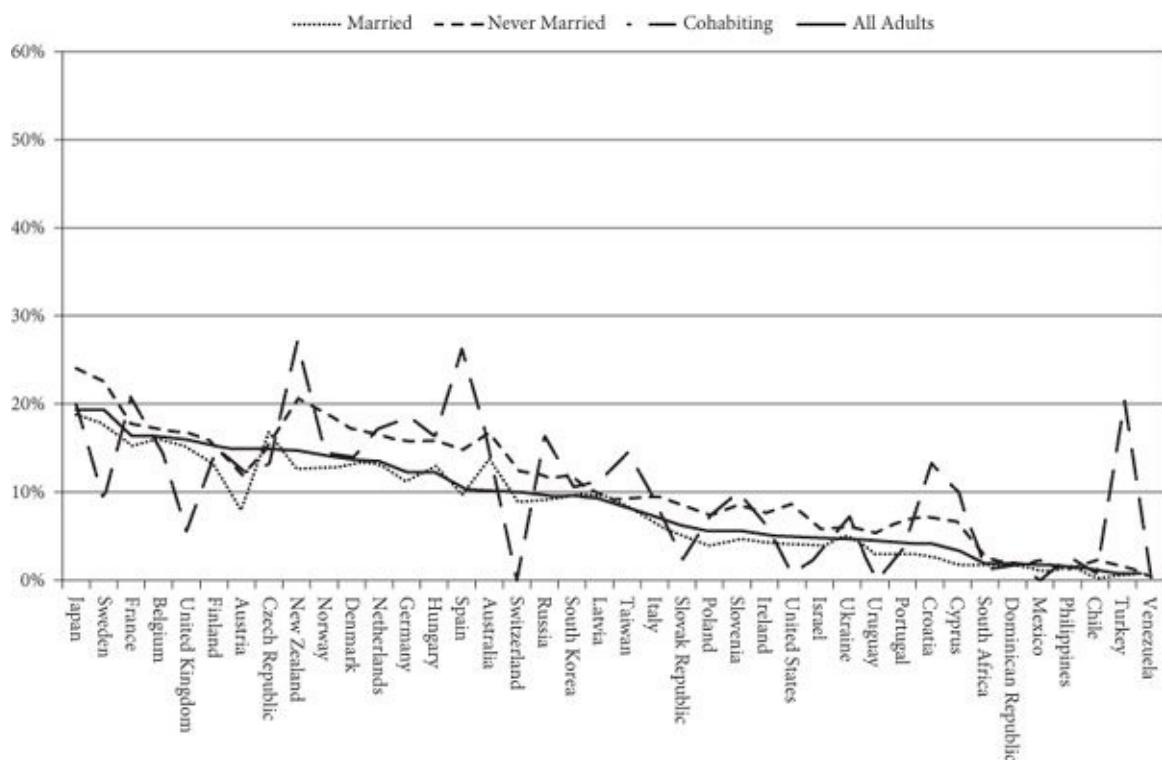


FIGURE 36.7b Percentage of agnostics by marital status in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

These differential patterns justify the demographic analyses for positive atheists separately from those of agnostics. As they illustrate the distinct prototype of each group of nonbelievers.

WHAT EXPLAINS ATHEISM? IS IT THE MIRROR IMAGE OF BELIEF? DO POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE ATHEISM GO HAND IN HAND WORLDWIDE?

Another way of exploring the state of atheism around the world is by looking at the ratio of believers to nonbelievers. [Figure 36.8](#) shows the percentage of people who believe there is no God and the percentage of people who believe in God without doubts using data from the ISSP 2008 survey. The data are sorted in order of the size of the belief gap. This means that the countries on the left hand have a larger percentage of nonbelievers than of believers. As the chart shows the majority of surveyed countries have far more believers than nonbelievers. The 10 most religious countries (on the far right) are diverse in terms of the dominant religion in the group. They include Catholic countries (Mexico, Chile, Dominican Republic, Poland, Venezuela, Philippines), Islam (Turkey), Judaism (Israel), and Christian pluralism (United States).

[Figure 36.9](#) shows the diversity of belief in the ISSP 2008 countries. The data are sorted by the belief gap, the ratio of believers to nonbelievers (see [Figure 36.8](#)). The most interesting pattern of these data is the relationship between doubt and atheism. The categories between the extremes are more closely correlated with atheism than with unquestioned belief. For example, the category closer to unquestioned belief, ‘While I have doubts, I feel that I do believe in God’ follows a similar pattern to that of atheism, rather than of belief.

The pattern mentioned above is confirmed in [Figure 36.9](#). Here, we removed the unquestioned belief category. This more clearly shows the relationship between positive atheism and other categories of doubt and deism. Countries with higher proportions of positive atheists also exhibit higher proportions of other kinds of doubters. In contrast, in countries with large percentages of believers, there is little room for doubt or outright unbelief.

Case Study: The United States (2008)

The United States has long been considered a nation of believers. Atheists are not only a small minority numerically, but also a distrusted part of society (Cragun et al. 2012). Sociologists of American religion have observed only slow changes in religious patterns over time despite rapid demographic changes in society, such as growth in the Hispanic and Asian populations and the decline of the traditional two-parent family. The consistencies in belief have been validated by the General Social Survey (GSS), which has monitored religious belief in the United States in the past four decades (see [Figure 36.10](#) below). As stated by Mark Chaves: ‘Many traditional religious beliefs are just as common among Americans today as they were in the 1970s’ (2011: 33).

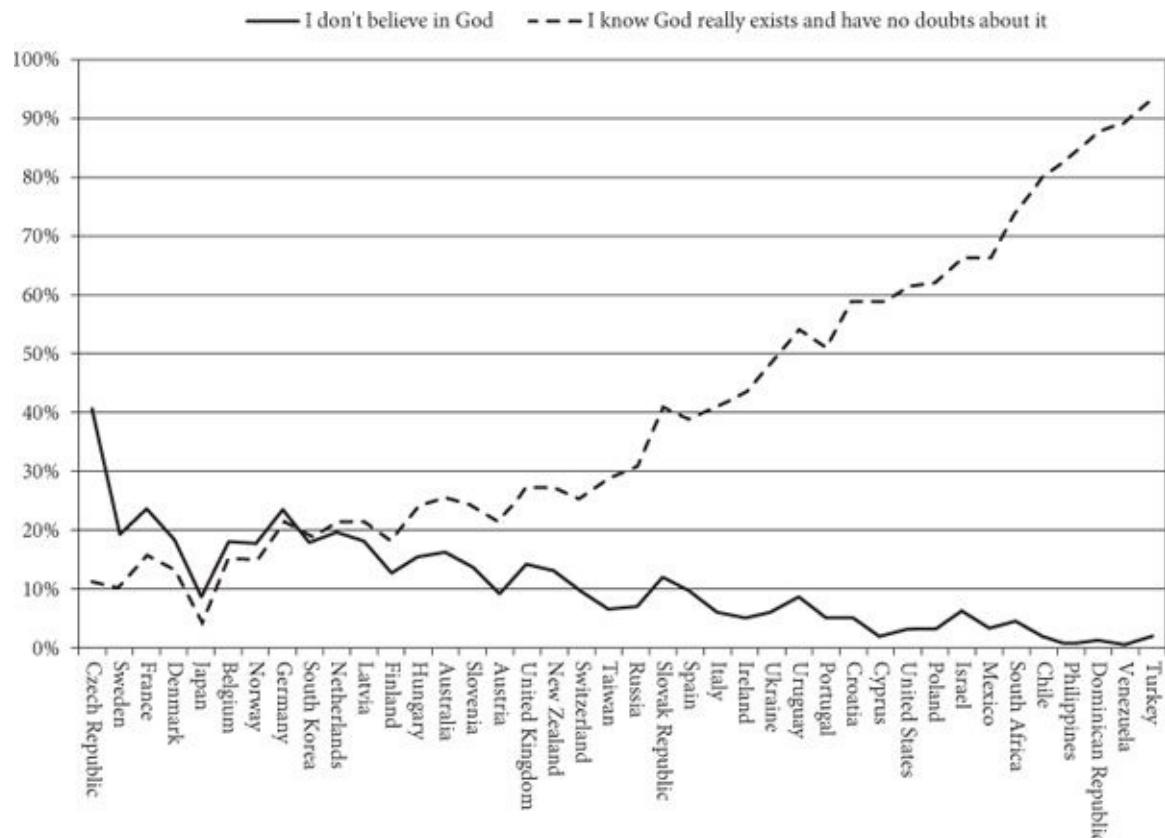


FIGURE 36.8 'Belief gap' in selected countries (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

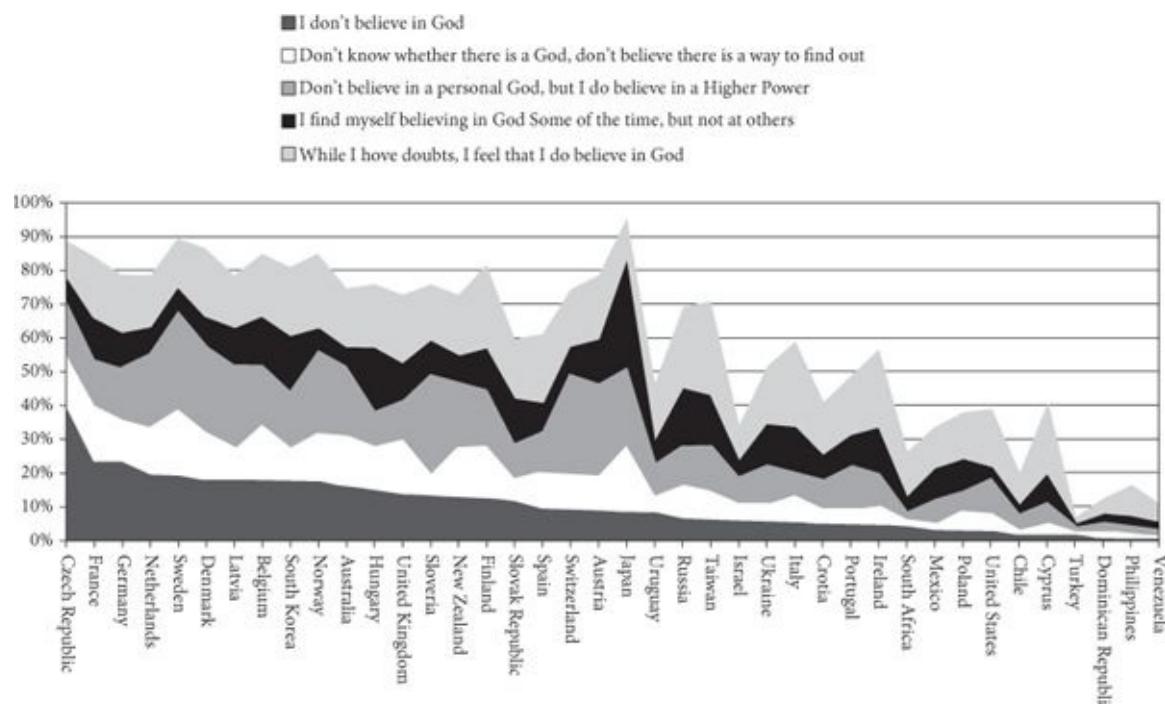


FIGURE 36.9 Share of the population stating some level of doubt about the existence of God (2008)

Source: ISSP 2008.

The American Religious Identification Survey of 2008 (ARIS)⁴ deepened the understanding of the demographics of atheism in America. The ARIS included questions about belief similar to those in the General Social Survey, including, 'Regarding the existence of God, do you think...?'⁵ In addition

to asking the question to a random sample of 1,105 adults from the general population, ARIS also asked the belief question to 1,106 people who professed no religion. These 'Nones' included not only self-identified atheists and agnostics, but a larger group who simply answered 'none' when asked, 'What is your religion, if any?' It is important to note that many 'Nones' believe in God. Yet ARIS 2008 showed that people who do not identify with any religion ('Nones') are by far more likely not to believe in God, 7 per cent compared with 2 per cent among US adults.

Similar to the atheist population in other countries, US nonbelievers are predominantly male, accounting for 75 per cent of positive atheists, 65 per cent of agnostics, and 60 per cent of the no-religion group. American positive atheists are also young, 48 per cent were under age 35 in 2008 and only 22 per cent were over the age of 50. For comparison sake, 40 per cent of all Americans were aged 50 and over, according to ARIS 2008 (Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

In the United States, there is another prominent difference between atheists and the rest of the population, namely politics. There are two major political parties in the United States, the Democratic Party and the Republican Party. In public opinion surveys the majority of voters state a preference or sympathy for either of these two since in the US partisan affiliation, rather than being a matter of membership, is a matter of psychological attachment that oftentimes is reinforced with economic ties with the party. These economic ties may be in kind (time volunteering) or monetary (donations). Because of the fluid nature of partisanship in the USA, a high proportion of people consider themselves political 'independents'. This 'independent' label contains a wide variety of individuals, including those who feel alienated by the major parties, those who sympathize with a political party but do not want to be identified as such, and those disengaged from the political system.

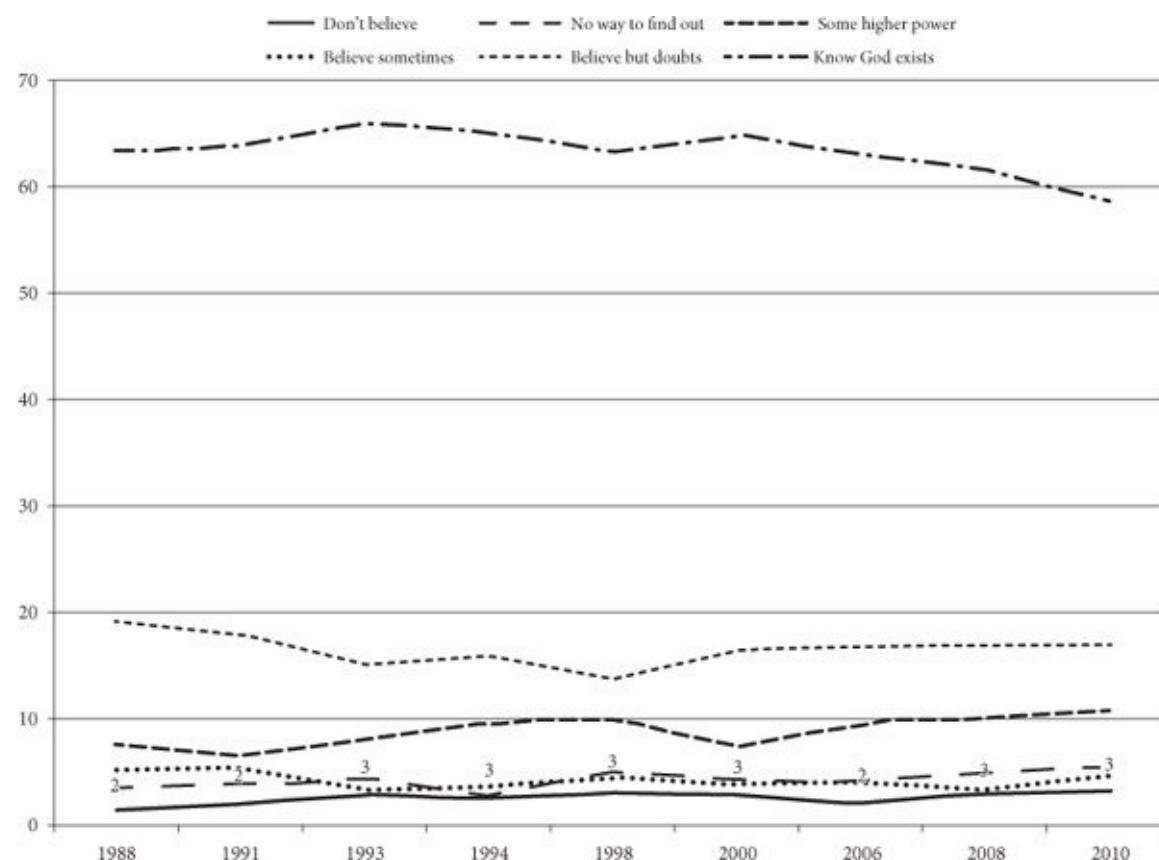


FIGURE 36.10 Patterns of Belief in the USA (1988-2010)

Source: GSS.

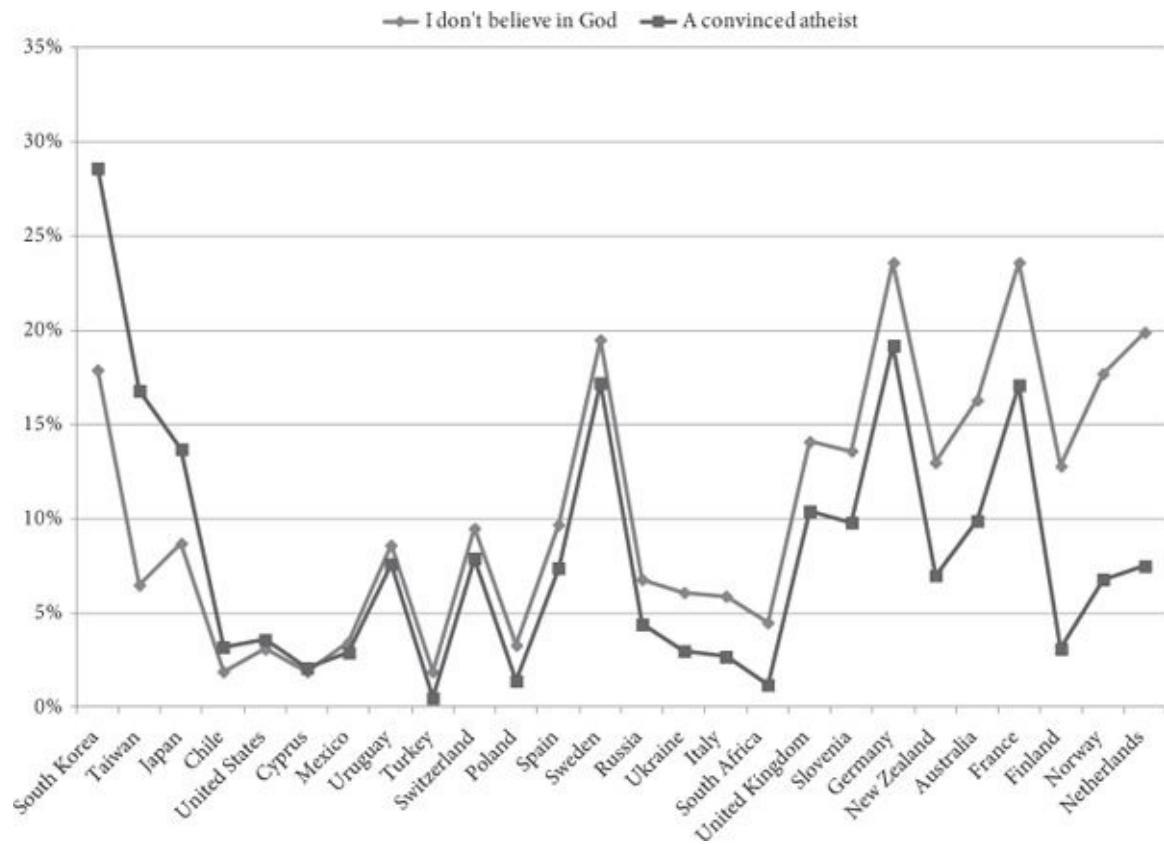


FIGURE 36.11 Percentage of the population stating ‘I don’t believe in God’ (ISSP 2008) and percentage who say they are ‘A convinced Atheist’ (WVS 2006–8)

Source: ISSP 2008 and WVS 2006–8.

Table 36.4 Estimated number of atheists in selected highly populated countries (2006–8)

Country	Percent ‘Convinced Atheist’	Number of Atheists
China	17.9%	234,595,000
India	2.5%	27,691,000
Indonesia	0.3%	695,000
Brazil	1.2%	2,298,000
Total		265,000,000

Source: WVS 2006–8.

According to ARIS 2008 40 per cent of all atheists (i.e., positive atheists and agnostics combined) self-identified as political independents, a figure that is significantly higher than among the general US adult population (31 per cent). Among those who are self-identified partisans, atheists were far less likely than the general public to be Republicans (8 per cent compared with 24 per cent in the general population). The percentage of positive atheists who were Democrats was similar (35 per cent) to the total US population (33 per cent) but lower than among agnostics (42 per cent). The political affiliation of positive atheists suggests that their higher level of independence is related to

disaffection with parties, particularly the Republican Party which, in the American political party system, is associated with anti-scientific stances such as climate change denialism and rejection of evolution (Kosmin and Navarro-Rivera 2008).

Agnostics (those who agree with the statement ‘there is no way to know’) clearly have the highest educational attainment, with 44 per cent being college graduates or having post-graduate education, compared with 36 per cent of positive atheists. The relatively low educational level of positive atheists may be simply a result of younger age. Some of them may not yet be old enough to have earned a college or postgraduate degree. Nevertheless, positive atheists’ educational attainment is higher than the general US population’s. The correlation with with a college degree is remarkable. Among American Nones, those with a college degree are the most likely to be atheists (11 per cent) compared with 7 per cent of all ‘Nones’ and, as mentioned above, 2 per cent of Americans in general.

Geographically, agnostics in the USA were concentrated in the West region. Almost four-in-ten (39 per cent) agnostics resided in the West in 2008 compared with 23 per cent of the total US adult population. In contrast, the South was home to just 25 per cent of agnostics and 32 per cent of positive atheists but 37 per cent of all Americans. At the same time, positive atheists have become more common in the Northeast (25 per cent), according to ARIS 2008. Frank L. Pasquale (2007) described a special group of religiously unaffiliated Americans, which includes, but is not restricted to, positive atheists and agnostics, who are common in the Northwest. The Northwest has been identified as the ‘none zone’ by Patricia O’Connell Killen and Mark Silk (2004).

Testing the claim that no one ever dies an atheist, ARIS 2008 tapped into religion, beliefs and people’s perceptions regarding life cycle events. Do people expect to have a religious funeral or service when they die? Overall 66 per cent of Americans expect to have a religious funeral but only 20 per cent of those who profess no religion expect so. Nones over the age of 25 with a college degree, where we are most likely to find nonbelievers, are even less inclined to envision religious rituals at death, and a mere 14 per cent said ‘yes’.

CONCLUSION

Atheism, both positive and negative (including agnosticism), varies greatly around the globe from as little as 2 per cent in Venezuela to 10 per cent in Ireland, 21 per cent in Spain, 41 per cent in France, and as high as 55 per cent in the Czech Republic. Positive atheism is gaining strength in many countries, with young and educated people, predominantly males, expressing sharp religious scepticism and breaking taboos against disbelief. Agnosticism is more stable. Positive atheists and agnostics account for 18 per cent to 24 per cent of the population in Western countries, up from 12 per cent to 19 per cent. Yet disbelief in God is still considered a sin in some parts of the world, particularly in Muslim societies where nonbelievers are considered ‘infidels’ (see Samuli Schielke’s ‘The Islamic World’). In the United States, where there are no legal barriers to atheism, atheists are still the least trusted members of society, lagging behind gays and Muslims. Although the trend is toward a growing tolerance, 43 per cent of people would not vote for a ‘well-qualified’ atheist for president according to a June 2012 Gallup poll.

Looking to the future, it is likely that increased education and socioeconomic status for women will narrow the gender gap among atheists. Moreover, the role of social media and the internet in spreading ideas of disbelief and connecting nonbelievers around the world is going to be critical for their future growth. On the other hand, atheism is likely to continue to wane in nations recently liberated from communism, where atheism was imposed by the state, and competes with religion in

the marketplace of beliefs and ideas. Two populous societies deserve special attention—China and India. Of these, China has the largest number of positive atheists in the world. The World Values Survey in 2007 estimated the population in China who claimed to be ‘convinced atheist’ to be 18 per cent. This translates to over 200 million people (see below). In India self-identified atheists are rare (only 2.5 per cent), yet a study of Indian scientists and academics revealed a far higher level of disbelief in that elite subpopulation with 12 per cent positive atheism and 13 per cent agnosticism (Keysar and Kosmin 2008). That is an indicator of the direction this emerging global country is heading with the rise of education level in the general population. Any shifts in patterns of belief in China and India will have major implications for the size of the atheist and agnostic population worldwide.

APPENDIX

‘I DON’T BELIEVE IN GOD’ VERSUS ‘A CONVINCED ATHEIST’

In the interest of producing an unmixed albeit incomplete count of the number of atheists using the ISSP’s belief question, we do not attempt to produce estimates for countries that do not take part in the ISSP project. However, it is instructive to note some rough proxies. One is the fourth wave of the World Values Survey, which included the question, ‘Independently of whether you go to church or not, would you say you are...?’ Among possible responses was ‘a convinced atheist’.

What is ‘a convinced atheist’? In this publication atheism is defined as ‘an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods’, but how does this definition of atheism compare to self-identification as an atheist? Is atheism as a response more socially acceptable than unbelief? Are there any patterns?

Figure 36.11 shows the percentage of people in countries surveyed in the ISSP and WVS studies. One line plots the proportion of people in a country that answered, ‘I don’t believe in God’ in the ISSP 2008 study. The other line plots those who answered ‘a convinced atheist’ in the 2005-2007 wave of the WVS. The data are sorted by the size of the difference of the percentage of those who answered, ‘I don’t believe in God’ and those who answered ‘a convinced atheist’. This means that the numbers of the left corner in the horizontal axis are negative because a higher percentage of people answered that they are ‘convinced atheists’ than there are people who ‘don’t believe in God’. A positive number means the contrary.

There are two patterns that catch the attention. The first pattern is that, for most of the countries that were sampled in both studies and asked these questions, there are no major differences. The lines are close to each other in most countries. The average difference in the responses is just 2 percentage points, which is lower than the margin of error of these surveys. The second pattern shows that outlier countries come from particular regions. Countries where adults are more likely to say that they are ‘convinced atheists’ than to say they don’t believe in God are from Asia, in particular, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan. It is possible that the word atheist loses some of its punch in translation into these languages. According to Webster’s Online Dictionary, the Korean word for atheist is also used to mean sceptic and freethinker. Perhaps that is how some of the respondents who believe in God interpret the word. On the other extreme are countries where the percentage of people who say ‘I don’t believe in God’ surpasses the percentage of ‘convinced atheists’. The three countries where this difference is notable are in Northern Europe: Finland, Norway, and the Netherlands.

Another source, for countries not covered by the World Values Survey, is the Arab Barometer. The

Arab Barometer of 2006 asked people in Jordan, Palestine, Algeria, Morocco, and Kuwait how important religion is in their lives. The percentage who answered ‘not at all important’ ranged from 5 per cent to 11 per cent. It is impossible to know how many of them would say that they do not believe in God, if such a question were even permitted. It is interesting to note that the World Values Survey asked how important God is in their lives. Only 1.8 per cent of Moroccans and 0.3 per cent of Jordanians gave the lowest rating on a scale of 1 to 10.

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CHAPTER 37

WESTERN EUROPE

LOIS LEE

INTRODUCTION

WESTERN Europe and atheism are often regarded as having a particular affinity with one another.¹ Indeed, Western Europe is frequently seen as the birthplace and/or natural home of atheist cultural traditions. An intellectual history of atheism typically looks, first, to ancient Europe—the claims and disputation of, say, Plato, Socrates, or Epicurus—and then jumps to the much later European work of Spinoza, Hume, Kant, Feuerbach, Nietzsche, Marx, Darwin, Mill, Freud, Russell, and many others. Europe is often discussed in two parts—the West and the post-Socialist East. ‘Western Europe’ is therefore inclusive of most of Northern and Southern Europe and has the history of the Reformation—and another proposed affinity between atheism and Western European culture—within its scope. Weber ([1905] 2003) provides the seminal account of this relationship. In his view, Protestantism gives rise to atheization via the rationalizing tendencies of Lutheranism and Calvinism, leading to rational capitalism and, in turn, the comprehensive rationalization, and ‘disenchantment’ of, culture. Elsewhere, the idea of atheism as distinctly Western or Western European is implicit—by focusing, for example, on the West in treatments of the topic, either overtly, as in Thrower’s *Western Atheism: A Short History* ([1971] 2000), or in practice, as in Baggini’s *Atheism: A Very Short Introduction* (2003: 73–90), which focuses its history of atheism on the West with little comment. In all of these ways, audiences are persistently confronted with the idea that there is something uniquely Western—and especially Western European—about atheism.²

In contemporary scholarship, however, the relationship between Western Europe and atheism is increasingly seen as an open and complex question. As well as a new impetus towards exploring atheism in non-Western contexts, researchers increasingly recognize the many mysteries which also surround Western European atheism itself. Alongside US-focused work, the empirical study of Western European forms is probably the most advanced of any regional study of atheism, but the cultural approach to atheism that regional studies are partly based on has only recently emerged and accumulated knowledge is still slight. The volume of work recently published in this area can be misleading. We might notice, for example, a burgeoning literature on the writings and broadcasts of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, and others associated with the New Atheism (e.g., Amarasingam 2010; Taira and Illman 2012), yet most of this work actually evaluates the New Atheist arguments themselves rather than the wider cultural discourses and social contexts that New Atheism might be a part of. Although we know that representations of atheism and nonreligion are increasing in some national media (e.g., Knott 2011), we currently do not know the extent to which such arguments and cultures reflect the tastes, interests, and principles of the Western Europeans who certainly do consume them.

If knowledge of explicit atheist cultures in Western Europe is limited, our understanding of

everyday or ‘lay’ atheism is weaker still. Arising from a social scientific tradition of treating unreligious positions as the natural and self-explanatory outcome of modernization processes (Campbell [1971] 2013: 9), the social sciences have only recently begun to take a serious interest in atheism and its close relation ‘nonreligion’ (Bullivant and Lee 2012).³ Hitherto, scholars have been interested in atheism merely as a measure of the (declining) pervasiveness and popularity of *theism*, rather than whether and how being an atheist directly shapes the individual’s experience of the world. This is true even of contemporary studies of ‘secularism’ and ‘secularity’: in this work the role of atheism and nonreligion is rarely discussed explicitly (Gutkowski 2010; Lee 2012b), though authors often assert that secularism/secularity has an anti-religious aspect. Another confusion is that ‘secularity’ and ‘secularism’ are frequently used as proxies for *liberalism*, making much of this material equally applicable to (liberal) theists as to (liberal) atheists. The relationship between secularity/ism and atheism has not, in short, received sustained or systematic attention and its contribution to the understanding of atheism is problematic as a result.

When atheism *has* been discussed explicitly—typically not by social scientists, but by historians, philosophers, and theologians—it is normally assumed that atheism is primarily an intellectual phenomenon. As Thrower puts it, ‘the history of atheism within the Western tradition is very much the history of an *idea*—the idea that the world, including the human world, might be other than that presupposed by traditional theism’ (Thrower [1971] 2000: ix; emphasis added). Whilst Durkheimian and other non-intellectualist approaches to *theist* cultures have been forceful in the study of religion, social scientists have maintained an intellectualist approach to atheism and this area of research is therefore only just beginning to experience a comparable ‘cultural turn’ (Lee 2012c).

In short, despite its being an aspect of life for significant portions of most national populations (discussed below), social-scientific knowledge of the nature and variety of atheist experiences in Western Europe is very limited. This essay attempts, therefore, to identify and step away from any *assumptions* we might have concerning Western European atheism and to use newly available empirical data to start (re)building its profile on this basis. The essay is organized around three questions. The first section deals with atheism in numbers: ‘how atheist is Western Europe?’ The second section reviews the first qualitative data available to understand how atheism is manifest in the lived lives of Western Europeans: ‘*how* are Western Europeans atheist?’ The final section returns to the issue we began with—the presumed relationship between Western Europe and atheism—and reconsiders this relationship in light of the empirical research discussed here. Alternatively put, ‘*how Western European* is atheism?’

HOW ATHEIST IS WESTERN EUROPE?

To consider how much atheism there is in Western Europe, various threads in Europe’s religious history need to be disaggregated. Western Europe has been viewed, traditionally, as the exemplar of global secularization processes and, more recently, as an exceptional case or a localized process of secularization (e.g., Davie 2006; Berger et al. 2008). These competing views agree on one point: there are relatively low levels of religion in Western Europe. Whether this implies high levels of *atheism*, however, is contested. Researchers have offered contradictory accounts—evidence in itself of the need for more empirical work. Relatively low levels of religious participation combined with relatively high levels of religious belief have led some sociologists to talk about the ‘*unchurching* of the European population’ (Casanova 2006: 65) or the phenomenon of ‘believing without belonging’ (Davie 1994). On the other hand, the relative popularity of religious *identities* in Western Europe and

especially a general identification with Christianity points to what José Casanova calls ‘an implicit, diffused, and submerged Christian cultural identity’ (Casanova 2006: 65–6), or what Danièle Hervieu-Léger has called ‘belonging without believing’ (2003, cited in Casanova 2006: 66). Against all of these interpretations, others argue that there is no consistent pattern of secularization or atheization in Western Europe at all (Voas 2009a: 155).

Finally, many researchers uphold the classic or ‘orthodox’ view, that all forms of theism and other aspects of religious cultures are intimately tied and that all aspects of theist religiosity are increasingly marginal in Western European society. For Voas and Crockett (2005), for example, ‘belief and belonging’ are tied together, so that the decline of theism (and rise of atheism) occurs steadily but subsequently to the decline of religious participation—that is, people cease to participate in religious cultures *before* they lose their belief in God(s) (Voas 2009a). Voas’ work with the ‘fuzzy faithful’ offers more support for this view (Voas 2009a). The ‘fuzzy faithful’ are those who show a casual loyalty to a theistic tradition: they might engage with religious culture (e.g., participating in church weddings, funerals or Christmas services), identify with a religious tradition or have a vague belief in ‘something out there’, but not all three (Voas 2009a: 161). There is some evidence that new forms of theism and alternative spirituality accounts for a part of this fuzzy population, for example, as much as 8 and 12.5 per cent in Northern European countries (Siegers 2010). However, this accounts for only a minority of Voas’ ‘fuzzy’ populations and does not undermine his longitudinal evidence that fuzzy religion is part of the process of decline, an expression of a ‘residual involvement’ in religion (Voas 2009a: 161). Simply put, ‘people stop being religious more quickly than they start being wholly secular’ (Voas 2009a: 165–6).

The extent to which the ‘fuzzy faithful’ should be categorized as atheist rather than theist, or nonreligious rather than religious, is a theoretically and demographically significant question. Demographically, it is noteworthy that a group similar to Voas’ ‘fuzzy faithful’ have been shown to be the modal group in Western Europe (Siegers 2010: 409).⁴ Theoretically, if one understands fuzzy fidelity as ‘indifference to religion’ as Siegers (2010) does in his study, this means that the group might be categorized as negatively atheist and that, consequently, the numbers of atheists in contemporary Europe are very large indeed. Already, atheist groups account for major shares in Northern Europe (e.g., from 27 per cent to 35 per cent in the UK, Denmark, the Netherlands, Norway, and Sweden) and sizeable populations in more religious countries (8 per cent in Italy and 9 per cent in Portugal) (Siegers 2010). The fuzzy or ‘indifferent’ set accounts, however, for larger populations still, even in the more religious countries: 23 per cent in Italy and 37 per cent in Portugal. In sum, therefore, even these apparently ‘religious’ countries may already have large atheist populations—of over a third in Italy’s case and nearly half in Portugal’s. For the less religious countries, including both overt and negative forms means that atheism accounts for large majorities in most cases: for example, 78 per cent in Sweden, 76 per cent in the Netherlands, 67 per cent in Belgium, and 65.5 per cent in the UK.⁵

There is, however, an important caveat to using this ‘fuzzy’ or ‘indifferent’ group to understand Western European atheism in particular. This group has already been used to identify what is unique about some European national cultures, as in Bagg and Voas’ (2010) attempt to define the British ‘religious’ landscape by the ‘triumph of indifference’. Indeed, large numbers of ‘indifferents’ found across Europe might appear to fit with the notion that Europe is particularly or uniquely secular, especially where indifference to religion is specified as the ideal typical form of secularity (e.g., Bruce 2002: 42 and Zuckerman 2008: 95; discussed in Lee 2012b). Contrary to this, however, it is striking that the number of people who are ‘indifferent to religion’ is remarkably consistent across European countries *regardless of whether the remainder of the population is primarily atheist or*

primarily theist. What is more, the number of ‘fuzzy faithful’ is precisely what does *not* explain the much commented on difference between the European and American ‘religious landscapes’ (for want of a better phrase). Voas and Ling’s (2010: 71) comparison of the UK and USA shows that the ‘fuzzy’ category is the most similar population between the two countries: it accounts for 36 per cent and 24 per cent of these populations respectively. What really differs is clear religiosity (26 per cent in the UK, 70 per cent in the USA) and clear ‘unreligiosity’ (31 per cent in the UK, 4 per cent in the USA). If ‘fuzzy fidelity’ is a form of atheism (why not ‘fuzzy *in*/fidelity’?),⁶ it is not one that can be used to identify anything *uniquely* atheist about Western Europe. Regardless of the fact that the category remains a fuzzy one,⁷ properly including it in studies of non-religion as well as of religion does at least demonstrate the notable, albeit varying, quantitative significance of atheism in Western European societies.

HOW ARE WESTERN EUROPEANS ATHEIST?

Whilst the number of people for whom a personal belief in God is not a forceful feature of daily life is quite large, this contrasts with the small number of people who self-identify as ‘atheist’—often less than a quarter of the number of people who do not believe in God (Zuckerman 2007). For example, some 5 per cent of Britons described themselves as ‘convinced atheists’ in 2000 (European Values Survey [EVS], cited in Bullivant 2010: 114) whereas 27 per cent expressed positive or negative atheist disbelief in the same year (Voas and Ling 2010: 71).⁸ Bruce highlights the methodological problems involved in asking atheists to self-identify as ‘convinced’ in their atheism, especially as this was not asked of any other religious orientation, for example, ‘a convinced Christian’ (Bruce 2002: 193). Low rates of people self-identifying with ‘atheism’ are widespread, however, and are consistent with the fact that atheism is conceptualized as an *anti*-phenomenon and is normally non-institutional. Under these circumstances, low incidence of affirmative atheist representation is unsurprising. Overall, the implication is that Western Europeans do not practise atheism—that their atheism involves the *absence* of a cultural experience (theist religion) rather than the presence of a new cultural experience. This understanding is challenged, however, by new qualitative research which, unlike the survey data presented above, makes atheism rather than theism the object of inquiry. These studies suggest that being atheist is not a purely negative or subtractive state and that, on the contrary, Western Europeans are, in an important sense, ‘practising atheists’.

Practising Atheists and Social Identification

One way of ‘practising atheism’ is, of course, to culturally represent oneself as such and this qualitative research reveals the variety of atheist identifications actually in use. For one, ‘atheism’ emerges as a mainstay in contemporary discourses, albeit one that is treated with ambivalence and used to differentiate particular types of atheist culture. To draw some examples from my own, UK-based work exploring secularity and non-religion (Lee 2012b), one participant (Hermione, 36, London) expressed reservations about calling herself atheist: ‘Atheism’, she said, can be perceived as implying that you are ‘out for yourself and yourself alone’. In rejecting the term, this participant illustrated an engagement with her atheist self-understanding and public persona—an engagement which gives the lie to the idea that identifying as ‘atheist’ is a reliable measure of active atheism. Similarly, several participants said that identifying as an ‘atheist’ could be perceived as aggressive or

even bullying, especially in the company of theists. Again, the act of not identifying was shown to be an active and often thoughtful socio-cultural practice.

On the other hand, some participants rejected ‘atheism’ as a self-representation precisely because they felt it suggests more engagement—with atheism and/or theism—than they displayed in reality. One woman (Victoria, 28, London) said she would prefer to call herself ‘not religious’ than ‘atheist’ because, she said, ‘if I was to say I was “atheist”, it sort of suggests I actively pursue that in a kind of formal way … whereas, I don’t really give it a huge amount of thought very often’. Victoria was, however, typical of people self-identifying as uninterested or indifferent to religion in that, over the course of the interview, she discussed a range of ways in which she engaged with theism and atheism in her life. For example, later on in the interview, she said:

I’m not probably keen on marriage, but were I to want to get married, there’s no way I would have a church wedding, and if someone was to [ask why], I would say, ‘because I’m an atheist’, I suppose.

Thus ‘atheism’ emerges here as an aspect of her self-understanding, albeit one that is more conceivable in practical rather than abstract situations. To take another example, elsewhere in the interview, Victoria discussed the shock of realizing or remembering that someone in her social circle was religious. She implied that shared atheism was normally assumed in such social settings and only noticeable when this assumption was disrupted. This is another case in which the invisibility of atheist representations can be seen, paradoxically, as evidence of a deep or established atheist commitment, rather than of indifference.

The importance of studying everyday situations and practices in order to understand atheism was demonstrated in this research repeatedly. In other interviews, shared atheism or nonreligion was often cited as a necessary condition of a successful marriage or other long-term romantic partnership. Others recounted emotional experiences of participating in both theist and atheist rituals. Qualitative studies of everyday, lived atheism are still rare (O’Brian Baker and Smith 2009: 730) but another major qualitative study of atheism in Western Europe—Phil Zuckerman’s (2008) study of Scandinavian godlessness—presents a similar picture. Despite Zuckerman’s emphasis on the casual or indifferent views towards religion and theism that his population express, his data also show the variety of ways in which his interviewees engage, discursively and culturally, with theistic religiosity whilst conceiving of themselves as apart from it (Lee 2012b). In my research, one man summarized the discrepancy between his self-understanding as indifferent and the range of practical engagements with atheism and theism that had emerged in the course of our long interview:

I tend to think that I don’t really care—you know, like I said before: I’m *such* an atheist that I don’t care. But obviously I do.

Perversely, he thinks, it is in fact the depth of his commitment to atheism that has led him to conceive of himself as uncommitted.

It is, then, by studying everyday encounters and actions that researchers can come to understand the extent to which people practise their atheism. The study of atheist self-representations or identities is not insignificant, but methods of analysis need to be more probing and awake to nuances. As we have seen, ‘atheism’ *does* have currency as a concept, but it is not applied in straightforward ways. In addition, alternative atheist identities may be more significant than previously thought. Other terms adopted by atheists include ‘humanism’, ‘scepticism’, ‘secularity’, ‘secularism’, ‘naturalism’, and ‘not religious’ or ‘nonreligious’. The popularity of terms varies between countries—‘humanism’, for example, is a mainstream concept in Norway, but was even less popular than ‘atheism’ in the 2001 Census for England and Wales. ‘Nonreligious’ and ‘not religious’ are not normally identified as

cultural markers, but were preferred labels for many people in the British sample in my research (Lee 2012b) and are being noticed in other cultural settings in research projects currently in progress. Reasons for this included an association between these general terms and, variously, a non-ideological position or ideological neutrality, rationality, non-partisanship, passive atheism, or, indeed, perceived indifference to theism or religion. That is, ‘not religious’ is used, in all of these roles, to make some kind of substantial nonreligious identity statement (see Lee 2012b for a fuller discussion).

Varieties of Atheist Culture

These examples show that it is not always, if ever, true to say that atheism is the same as godlessness: in this cultural context at least, atheists may live without a *belief* in God, but do not live without interacting with God at all. In this way, atheism can be seen as a relationship with theist cultures. People interact with ‘God’ and godliness in the theism and religious practice that they frequently encounter in their lives and in relation to which they are required to understand themselves. This leads to another probable feature of Western European atheism: theoretical and empirical indications are that it is a highly diverse phenomenon. On the discursive level, ‘theism’ and ‘religion’ are proxies for a whole range of beliefs and behaviours and, being culturally relative to these concepts, ‘atheism’ and ‘nonreligion’ are likewise understood and employed in diverse ways. Thus, Westerners can say things like, for example, ‘football is my religion’ when they want to indicate a profound personal and social commitment to something, or ‘theists are credulous’ or ‘theists are stupid’ when they want to say something about their own epistemological position (Lee 2012b). In the Western European case, atheist and theist cultures have also been shaped profoundly by a ‘religion versus science’ discourse, such that ‘atheism’ is invoked in discussions concerning the conduct of science or education policy, for example. Examining atheism as a cultural phenomenon moves beyond an exclusive focus on propositional and positive forms of atheism and points to these extremely diverse ways in which people can ‘do’ atheism.

Similarly, a relational and cultural understanding of atheism suggests the limitations of understanding atheism, as it sometimes has been understood, as a purely negative or anti-phenomenon. Research taking this alternative approach will necessarily emphasize the variety of ways in which atheists relate to theism. Certainly, active atheism might involve encounters with theism that give rise to acts of rejection or dismissal, but they might also give rise to non-hostile articulations or enactments of difference (Lee 2012a). Such expressions of difference do not necessarily suggest that there is any general *hierarchical* or *normative* difference between theism and atheism, only that there is a difference. If a hierarchical comparison is made, it is likewise not certain that atheists will regard their position as the superior one. On the contrary: atheists in my research sometimes expressed the view that theism is desirable or superior. This variety is especially significant for those interested in the sometimes tense encounters between religious and nonreligious communities in contemporary Europe.

There is also statistical evidence that Western European atheism is a heterogeneous phenomenon. Atheism has long been associated with liberal white, educated males but, recently, some of these correlations are disappearing or even reversing (e.g., Voas and McAndrew 2012). The most likely explanation is that earlier correlations did not relate to anything intrinsic to atheism but instead reflected the sociology of radicalism—that is, those groups most empowered to critique the status quo and articulate alternatives. As a culture becomes more mainstream, however, so its demographic profile will come to reflect the population more squarely (Campbell 1971, cited in Voas 2009b), and

this is what we are probably seeing in Western Europe today. This finding has important implications for prior arguments about the nature of atheism, for example, Thrower's observation that 'there has existed, at least in Europe, a close tie between positive atheism and progressive social and political thought' (Thrower [1971] 2000: ix). As atheization proceeds, it becomes possible to disentangle characteristics relating to radicalism and atheism.

Finally, we might notice that the diversity of ways of 'doing' atheism is consistent with the large number of atheists in Western Europe. When we consider that there must be several hundreds of millions of atheists in the region, it is simply implausible to think that they are all atheist in the same way. Rather, atheism will exist in an intersectional, mutually constitutive relationship with a range of local cultural phenomena and will therefore be manifest in a huge variety of forms.

Varieties of Atheist Practice

As well as demonstrating intellectual and cultural diversity, qualitative studies of atheism also emphasize the variety of practices associated even with negative forms. It is clear that atheism is a social phenomenon, woven into everyday encounters. It is probably not particularly meaningful to talk about a 'church of atheism' (as sometimes occurs in the journalistic discussions) but atheism does mediate between people in the way that theism has been recognized to. The following summary of one participant's range of theist and atheist identities illustrates how such representations are forged, not as the result of processes of philosophical reflection or moral indignation, but in interactions with other social actors and in the course of everyday, mundane encounters. Over the course of our long interview, Jane (34, London) told me that she would classify herself as a member of the Church of England on a census survey (as she falsely believed that funds are allocated to the Church on that basis); as an 'atheist' on any *other* survey, to make a general statement of her position; as a 'natural pantheist' to open more meaningful discussions with her personal acquaintances; as an 'atheist' again, if in discussion with her mother—the term chosen expressly, she said, to irritate her (Methodist) mother; and as being of a particular religion in order to close down conversations with proselytizing or missionary religious people: she would say, 'Very sorry, I'm just off to temple'. This summary shows the variety of encounters that atheism and theism mediate, and the range of associations that are shared—or assumed to be shared—between actors in such engagements.

This example also shows that atheism is not only social in general terms but associational—used to build in-group and out-group boundaries. Further evidence that atheism is associational includes Voas and McAndrew's study of British nonreligion in the UK (2009). This shows that the nonreligiousness of a region can be partly predicted on the basis of there being a neighbouring nonreligious community. Likewise, Gutkowski (2012) has shown how the actions of British policy-makers, officers, and other personnel involved with the Iraq war have been shaped by their particular perspectives about what it means to be theist and, in particular, Muslim; she develops the idea of a 'British secular habitus' to describe the distinction made between 'us' and 'them' that she encountered in this fieldwork. My own work in non-institutional domains suggests that atheism is also associated with informal social networks (Lee 2012b). Whether or not they were self-consciously interested in their own atheism, research participants frequently raised a shared a/theistic or non/religious position as significant to one or several relationships, and to long-term romantic partnerships in particular. The way in which atheism operated as a norm in Victoria's social circle, discussed above, provides an example of this. Recognition of associational aspects of atheism raises fascinating theoretical questions for scholars of theism and atheism. For example, for Durkheim ([1912] 2001), theism is an objectification of groupness. If atheism, both propositional and practical, might be implicated in

either the production or reproduction of groups, does this mean, therefore, that atheism functions as a form of Durkheimian theism?

Another feature of atheist culture in Western Europe is its more overtly religious-like practices. This wide-ranging category includes, most obviously, the use of both nonreligious and secular life-cycle rituals (e.g., Engelke 2012), popular in many parts of Europe. Just as rituals are important in other areas of human life—in our home, work, social, and family lives—so rituals that have commonly been performed by religious institutions and in reference to a theology have proved to be important in ‘post-theist’ atheist lives. Atheist cultures can also impact upon the development and articulation of moral and ethical codes (Lee 2012b; Campbell [1971] 2013: 97–103).

Another religious-like aspect of atheist culture is, of course, the practice of not believing in God, and of developing ‘atheologies’. By ‘atheologies’ I mean the broader assemblage of ideas that unbelief is one component of. As well as being philosophically important to some people, such atheologies are of more widespread cultural significance—when it comes to the development of secular and atheist responses to existential life events, for example, and to death in particular (see also Engelke 2012). Bereavement is hard to conceptualize and/or narrativize without some theory of what has happened to the body and mind of the deceased person (Lee 2012b). Atheism is theist-like rather than secular in that sense. There are few qualitative studies of the meaning-making systems of atheists anywhere in the world (O’Brian Baker and Smith 2009: 730), but those that are available are located in Western Europe (my study of the UK [Lee 2012b], Zuckerman’s [2008] study of Scandinavia, and others in development [e.g., Engelke 2012]). These suggest that, contra to theorists who provide functionalist accounts of theism, atheism does not seem to be a dysfunctional phenomenon but one that relies on a range of alternative practices to fulfill many of the same functions as religion.

Such alternatives sometimes function like theism (secular alternatives) but often function in reference to or contradistinction from theism (atheist alternatives). They are not therefore necessarily or intrinsically atheist or nonreligious. Rather, they may be ‘theist-like’ or ‘religious-like’ only to the extent that people have no other language or concepts available to articulate them. In the broader, negative sense, however, it is likely that large numbers of Western Europeans are *practising* atheists, even if they do not necessarily represent themselves as such, and this practice is social and cultural as much as it is cognitive or philosophical. The implications of this are that future researchers should recognize this domain of practice and not assume that the *types* of practice involved—congregating, ritualizing, developing meaning and philosophies of life—are exclusive to the theist population.

HOW WESTERN EUROPEAN IS ATHEISM?

Maybe because atheism is widespread in the region, much of the research discussed above focuses on Western Europe. Without cross-national and cross-continental comparison, however, the status of Western Europe as an exemplary or exceptional case in terms of its atheism remains an open question.

There are, however, some reasonable hypotheses that can be forwarded concerning what might be distinctively ‘Western European’ about Western European atheism. For one, some comparison can be made between the confident expressions of atheism noticed in Western-European research as compared to other parts of the world. A clear example of this is the interpretation of ‘atheism’ as an aggressive rather than a defensive identity; this contrasts with discussions of the deviant and defensive status of ‘atheism’ in places where atheists are a clear minority (see, e.g., Smith 2011). Similarly, the importance of ‘indifference to religion’ and ‘nonreligion’ in some Western European atheist

discourses might also be the result of the widespread and largely unchallenged position of atheism in some communities (Bagg and Voas 2010; Lee 2012b).

On the other hand, it is possible that the distinction is quantitative rather than qualitative, relating to how extensive atheism is within the population rather than to any particular features of Western Europe. Locating Western European atheism in global context is not as easy as it once was: the old idea of a causal relationship between industrialization and atheization has been challenged by the industrialization of America and then of the ‘BRIC’ nations (Brazil, Russia, India, and China), all powerful industrial economies with majority *theist* populations. However, new or refined general models have emerged to replace these. An important example is Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart’s theory of ‘existential security’ (Norris and Inglehart 2011). Norris and Inglehart notice a correlation between levels of (a)theism and economic or ‘existential’ security, defined as a certain degree of societal affluence coupled with a certain degree of welfarism or a restriction to wealth inequality. Norris and Inglehart argue that cultural factors do impact upon levels of atheism, but argue that the level of ‘existential security’ has a much greater impact. Their model fits the levels of atheism found in Western Europe, but also ‘similar developments in comparable postindustrial societies’: Australia, New Zealand, Japan, Canada (Norris and Inglehart 2011: 243). It also fits with places where levels of atheism are low, the USA included: with higher levels of wealth inequality than Western Europe, Norris and Inglehart’s model accurately predicts that it will be the more *theist* region. In addition, this model is consistent with data used to understand other areas of society—the mental and physical health of national populations or levels of anti-social or criminal behaviour (Wilkinson and Pickett 2009).

This suggests that a universal theory of atheization might be possible after all, and that relatively high levels of atheism in Western Europe are not necessarily or singularly cultural but are also related to general economic arrangements. Whilst we should be careful about returning to more naive theories which relate atheization to modernization, and be equally tentative about some of Norris and Inglehart’s more speculative comments (e.g., their theory that religion’s primary function is to provide comfort has not been established), it is still possible to explain some apparently Western European aspects of atheism in ahistorical terms.

On the other hand, the description of atheism as a socio-cultural as well as cognitive phenomenon implies that we take the cultural aspects of atheism seriously. Certainly, understanding Western European atheism in terms of general models of becoming and being atheist must be speculative until established by cross-cultural research. What is more, models such as Norris and Inglehart’s only explain levels of atheism in a general sense and do not explain the heterogeneity of atheist experiences in practice—the subtle local inflections of meaning, social norms, and tacit cultures; the different levels of nominally religious atheism compared to nonreligious atheism observed; or the different traditions of institutionalizing atheist cultures (as in Norwegian humanism, or the embedding of New Atheism in British, German, and other national discourses) compared to the non-institutionalized forms dominating in many other countries. Most qualitative studies of mainstream atheism have been conducted in Western Europe, but it is important to resist confusing these pictures of atheism in Western Europe with ‘Western European atheism’. It is similarly important to resist Western European atheism taking precedence in our theorizing over other empirical cases where atheism is similarly dominant (see Zuckerman’s [2007] ‘top 50’ for an indication of dominant atheism in other countries). If not necessarily an affinity, the relationship between Western Europe and atheism is clearly distinctive. Its precise nature cannot, however, be assumed; in fact, understanding the relationship between atheism and Western Europe in more specific terms is a question of great empirical and theoretical significance for the study of atheism in general.

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CHAPTER 38

NORTH AMERICA

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INTRODUCTION

MUCH if not most of the research on atheists and atheism over the last few decades has focused on atheists in the United States and Western Europe (though see Zuckerman 2010, and the other chapters in the Global Expressions section of the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, for some recent efforts to broaden this research). As a result, the picture many people have of atheists is really the picture of atheists in these regions. While this essay includes the USA in its coverage of North America, it also attempts to broaden that picture to the rest of North America, including Canada, Mexico, the Caribbean, and Central America. Unfortunately, there is very limited data on atheists in most of the countries in the Caribbean and in Central America. As a result, while we start with a brief description of rates of atheism (or nonreligion where atheism has not been enumerated), our focus in the bulk of this essay is on the three most populous countries in North America—Canada, the USA, and Mexico—as there are data on atheists for each of these countries.

We begin with a broad overview of the numbers of atheists in North America, then focus on the characteristics of atheists in the countries where such information is available. We then turn to issues of discrimination and identity development, before concluding the essay.

POPULATION ESTIMATES

Table 38.1 lists all of the sovereign nations in North America along with corresponding percentages of nonreligious people and atheists, where available. Due to data limitations, we were forced to use multiple approaches to determine whether or not someone was nonreligious. In some countries, this was based on the percentage who reported that religion is not an important part of their daily life, whereas in other countries it was based on reporting no religious affiliation (see the notes in [Table 38.1](#) for more details). We included the nonreligious because the percentages of twelve countries' populations of atheists are unavailable. The estimates in [Table 38.1](#) indicate that close to 30 per cent of people in North America either do not identify as religious or do not consider religion important in their lives. That is close to 164 million people. Atheists are a much smaller but not insignificant portion of the North American population, with 4 per cent indicating they are such. That translates into about 23 million people. The country with the highest percentage of atheists is Canada, with 10.8 per cent of the population reporting non-belief in the World Values Survey (WVS).

Given the large number of countries where the percentage of atheists is missing, we recalculated the numbers in [Table 38.1](#) assuming that less than 1 per cent of each of the missing countries' populations were atheists (based on the fact that most of these are Caribbean nations, and atheists make up about 1

per cent of the populations in those Caribbean nations for which we do have data). Even so, those estimates do not substantially change the numbers in [Table 38.1](#) as the largest countries (USA, Mexico, and Canada) are represented in the table. Adding estimates for the countries with no data increased the number of atheists in North America by less than 1 million. Thus, despite missing estimates for almost half of the countries, we believe the numbers in [Table 38.1](#) are a fairly accurate estimate of the number of atheists in North America.

SOCIODEMOGRAPHIC PROFILE

While we were able to find estimates of the number of atheists in eleven countries in North America, sufficient data to analyze the characteristics of those atheists is only available for the USA, Canada, and Mexico in the WVS. [Tables 38.2](#) and [38.3](#) present descriptive statistics comparing atheists to theists. Atheists—i.e., those answering ‘no’ to the question ‘Do you believe in God?’—are, on average, 4 to 6 years younger than non-atheists. The difference in the average number of children atheists have varies by country. The smallest difference is in Mexico, where atheists average 2.00 children and theists average 2.47. In Canada, atheists average 1.26 to theists’ 1.99. In the USA, atheists average just 0.93 kids to the theists’ 1.94. In all three countries atheists are substantially more likely to be male than are theists, averaging about 65 per cent male, to theists’ 47 per cent male.

Theists are more likely to be married (~55 per cent) in all three countries than are atheists (41 per cent in Canada; 38 per cent in the USA; 33 per cent in Mexico). Atheists are more likely to cohabit, though the differences are not as wide as one might imagine, with the biggest difference in Canada (theists 10 per cent; atheists 14 per cent) and the smallest in the USA (theists 5 per cent; atheists 6 per cent). Atheists are more likely to be single and never married in all countries by wide margins. Kosmin et al. (2009) noted that the difference in age accounts for a good portion of the differences in marital status, which is likely true here: atheists are younger and have had less time to marry and have children. However, not all of the differences are due to age, as indicated by another difference between atheists and theists: atheists are substantially more likely to say that marriage is an outdated institution. In Canada, 43 per cent of atheists say marriage is outdated, but only 19 per cent of theists do. The numbers are similar in Mexico, but both atheists and theists in the USA are more fond of the institution of marriage, with just 18 per cent of US atheists saying marriage is outdated and 19 per cent of theists.

Table 38.1 Percentage nonreligious and atheist by North American country

Country	Population	Nonreligious		Atheists	
		%	Number	%	Number
Antigua and Barbuda	86,754	5.8	5032 ^b	-	- ^e
Bahamas, The	330,000	2.9	9570 ^b	-	- ^e
Barbados	284,589	20.6	58,625 ^b	-	- ^e
Belize	321,115	9.4	30,185 ^b	-	- ^e
Canada	34,541,000	57.0	19,688,370 ^a	10.8	3,730,428 ^d
Costa Rica	4,468,000	19.0	848,920 ^a	0.5	22,340 ^c
Cuba	11,239,363	35.0	3,933,777 ^c	7.0	786,755 ^c
Dominica	72,660	6.1	4432 ^b	-	- ^e
Dominican Republic	10,090,000	13.0	1,311,700 ^a	7.3	736,570 ^d
El Salvador	6,857,000	16.0	1,097,120 ^a	0.6	38,399 ^d
Grenada	110,000	-	- ^e	-	- ^e
Guatemala	13,354,000	9.0	1,201,860 ^a	0.4	53,416 ^d
Haiti	9,719,932	1.0	97,199 ^b	-	- ^e
Honduras	7,106,000	15.0	1,065,900 ^a	0.5	35,530 ^c
Jamaica	2,847,232	20.9	595,071 ^b	-	- ^e
Mexico	112,322,757	25.0	28,080,689 ^a	4.4	4,942,201 ^d
Nicaragua	5,603,000	15.0	840,450 ^a	0.5	28,015 ^d
Panama	3,343,000	11.0	367,730 ^a	0.5	16,715 ^c
Saint Kitts and Nevis	51,300	-	- ^e	-	- ^e
Saint Lucia	173,765	4.5	7,819 ^b	-	- ^e
Saint Vincent and the Grenadines	120,000	-	- ^e	-	- ^e
Trinidad and Tobago	1,310,000	9.0	117,900 ^c	-	- ^e
USA	308,745,538	34.0	104,973,483 ^a	4.1	12,658,567 ^d
Total	533,097,005	30.8	164,335,834	4.3	23,048,937

Sources:

^a Gallup Reports, 2009–2010, <<http://www.gallup.com/poll/128210/Gallup-Global-Reports.aspx>>; per cent reporting 'no' to the question, 'Is religion an important part of your daily life?'

^b CIA World Factbook.

^c Zuckerman 2006.

^d World Values Survey—1999–2005; question, 'Do you believe in God?' (f050).

^e not available.

In all three countries atheists are more likely to be employed than are theists, but these differences are also largely due to age. Atheists are less likely to be retired and more likely to be students due to their youth. Atheist women are less likely to stay home to raise children. In Canada, atheist women are nearly as likely to be stay-at-home-moms (6.8 per cent) as are theistic women (8 per cent), but in the USA (atheists 0.9 per cent; theists 8.5 per cent) and in Mexico (atheists 8 per cent; theists 24 per cent), the differences are substantially larger.

Table 38.2 Averages for Atheists and Theists on Specific Characteristics in Canada, USA, and Mexico

	Canada		USA		Mexico	
	Atheist	Theist	Atheist	Theist	Atheist	Theist
Age	39.78	45.79	38.30	43.86	32.42	36.04
Number of children	1.26	1.99	0.93	1.94	2.00	2.47
Political views; 1=left, 10=right	5.12	5.60	4.98	5.83	5.21	6.48
Satisfaction with life; 1=dissatisfied, 10=satisfied	7.45*	7.88*	7.15*	7.69*	7.28	7.77
Religious attendance; 1=more than once a week; 8=never	7.29	4.58	6.81	3.72	6.19	3.18

* p < .01 (for all other values, p < .001)

Source: WVS 2008.

Subjective or self-evaluations of social class in all three countries suggest differences in social class between atheists and theists, but these differences are minor. The researchers who conduct the WVS use various criteria to create a more objective measure of social class but the differences are still relatively insubstantial, with just the difference in Canada being significant; atheists are more likely to be of higher social class in Canada than are theists. The differences in the USA and Mexico are not significant. However, there is a significant difference in country-adjusted educational attainment in all countries, with atheists being 10 per cent to 15 per cent more likely to have achieved upper levels of education than theists.

In all three countries, atheists are more likely to live in metropolitan locations than are theists. In Canada, 55 per cent of atheists live in cities with more than 500 000 people, while just 40 per cent of theists do. In the USA the comparable numbers are 38 per cent for atheists and 25 per cent for theists, and 50 per cent for atheists and 39 per cent for theists in Mexico. The urban landscape appears to be conducive to atheism across North America.

Politically, atheists are more liberal than theists, though not substantially so. On the 10 point scale used by the WVS (1=left/liberal; 10=right/conservative), atheists average about 0.50 points more liberal in Canada, about 0.90 points more liberal in the USA, and about 1.20 points more liberal in Mexico. We examined differences in views between atheists and theists on one political issue in the interest of seeing how the liberal/conservative divide influences attitudes regarding various topics. The question asked whether or not the government should actively work to reduce pollution. Differences between atheists and theists were significant, but not particularly large. Both groups are fairly evenly split, but generally favour government involvement in all three countries, with the exception being atheists in Mexico, who lean slightly against government involvement. In both Canada and the USA, more atheists strongly disagree with government involvement (in Mexico more atheists 'disagree'), suggesting atheists, while more liberal than theists, are also more libertarian. This is supportive of previous research describing atheists (Geissbühler 2002).

Table 38.3 Percentages of Atheists and Theists with Specific Characteristics in Canada, USA, and Mexico

	Canada				USA				Mexico			
	Atheists n=199	Theists n=1650	χ^2	p-value	Atheists n=111	Theists n=2577	χ^2	p-value	Atheists n=316	Theists n=6865	χ^2	p-value
Sex												
male	64.3	46.3			65.8	48.2			67.6	49.7		
female	35.7	53.7	23.17	.001	34.2	51.8	13.09	.000	32.4	50.3	33.48	.000
Marital status												
married	40.9	56.3			38.2	55.9			33.2	53.2		
cohabiting	14.1	10.3			6.4	5.3			10.9	6.0		
divorced	2.5	4.9			10.0	9.1			6.1	2.0		
single, never married	34.3	18.0	41.70	.001	41.8	21.0	30.61	.000	42.8	31.8	70.42	.000
Marriage outdated												
disagree	56.7	80.5			82.2	90.1			52.1	79.2		
agree	43.3	19.5	56.91	.000	17.8	9.9	6.89	.009	47.9	20.8	116.90	.000
Employment												
full time	50.0	45.2			51.8	50.4			40.3	34.9		
part time	8.9	9.6			15.2	10.6			16.8	11.3		
self employed	5.3	5.2			1.8	5.0			10.5	11.2		
retired	13.7	21.5			12.5	15.4			1.6	2.8		
housewife	6.8	8.0			0.9	8.5			8.3	23.8		
students	7.9	3.4			8.9	2.5			16.8	10.3		
unemployed	7.4	6.5	16.58	.020	8.9	6.3	31.56	.000	5.4	5.4	55.73	.000
Social class (subjective)												
upper class	0.0	1.1			2.7	1.8			2.4	1.8		
upper middle class	35.4	29.5			32.7	35.9			24.3	18.6		
lower middle class	29.7	34.0			30.9	27.9			40.2	41.8		
working class	29.2	31.8			30.9	31.7			18.3	15.9		
lower class	5.6	3.7	7.06	.133	2.7	2.8	1.16	.885	14.8	22.0	7.57	.109

Income											
low	24.9	32.9			36.7	37.9			19.2	35.8	
medium	29.3	32.0			36.7	35.0			34.6	33.8	
high	45.9	35.1	8.82	.012	26.5	27.1	0.06	.969	46.2	30.4	4.05
Education											.132
lower	18.8	25.8			15.2	18.7			26.0	43.1	
middle	42.6	48.6			25.0	35.5			42.4	40.3	
upper	38.6	25.7	15.59	.001	59.8	45.9	8.56	.014	31.6	16.6	33.89
Size of town											.000
<2000	9.1	14.6			1.0	4.8			5.8	10.3	
2000-5000	3.0	5.5			2.0	5.1			15.4	12.5	
5 000-10 000	6.1	9.8			3.9	5.0			2.3	5.7	
10 000-20 000	1.5	3.0			6.9	11.0			1.5	4.0	
20 000-50 000	6.1	7.7			13.7	17.7			2.7	5.5	
50 000-100 000	7.1	6.1			16.7	11.8			2.7	4.8	
100 000-500 000	12.1	13.2			17.6	19.7			19.2	22.2	
>500 000	55.1	40.1	20.33	.005	38.2	24.8	16.76	.019	50.4	35.0	39.15
Government reduce pollution											.000
Agree strongly	26.9	28.0			25.5	24.9			12.3	24.8	
Agree	33.5	35.3			25.5	32.0			33.8	31.6	
Disagree	29.9	32.0			37.3	37.7			45.4	32.6	
Strongly disagree	9.6	4.7	8.73	.033	11.8	5.5	4.05	.256	8.5	11.0	11.56
Men better politicians											.010
Agree strongly	4.3	4.7			2.9	5.7			19.0	15.0	
Agree	10.8	17.4			16.3	22.1			36.9	26.8	
Disagree	48.9	50.1			51.0	54.8			31.5	37.5	
Strongly disagree	36.0	27.8	8.40	.038	29.8	17.3	11.95	.008	12.5	20.6	14.48
Think about purpose of life											.010
often	45.5	53.3			30.3	52.5			35.3	37.1	
sometimes	31.8	31.4			46.8	34.3			35.0	34.0	
rarely	11.1	11.9			14.7	10.4			23.3	22.2	
never	11.6	3.3	30.76	.000	8.3	2.8	27.01	.000	6.5	6.7	.914
Raised religious											
no	-	-			56.7	16.3			42.2	15.2	
yes	-	-			43.3	83.7	64.07	.000	57.8	84.8	117.60
Confidence in churches											
a great deal	1.6	22.3			2.7	40.6			15.5	48.5	
quite a lot	12.4	43.6			9.1	38.1			19.3	29.3	
not very much	45.1	25.9			53.6	17.5			25.6	16.8	
none at all	40.9	8.1	261.60	.000	34.5	3.8	332.50	.000	39.6	5.4	601.50
Opinion on scientific advances											
will help	58.8	51.5			61.5	59.3			40.5	47.1	
will harm	14.4	20.7			14.7	17.2			24.2	22.7	
some of each	26.8	27.8	5.20	.074	23.9	23.5	0.47	.793	35.3	30.1	5.57
Life has no meaning											
Agree	-	-			-	-			12.9	10.5	
Disagree	-	-			-	-			86.1	87.2	
neither	-	-			-	-			1.0	2.3	1.25
Believe in reincarnation											.534
no	-	-			-	-			95.9	54.0	
yes	-	-			-	-			4.1	46.0	65.10
Belief in god/spirit											
personal god	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	15.7	59.3	
spirit or life force	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.0	33.2	
don't know	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	18.0	5.5	
no spirit or god	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	48.3	2.0	419.10
Pre-school child suffers with working mom											
Agree strongly	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	13.6	27.5	
Agree	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	41.7	51.8	
Disagree	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	39.8	18.7	
Strongly disagree	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	4.9	2.0	33.86
Women want a home and children											
Agree strongly	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	9.9	21.4	
Agree	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	28.7	41.4	
Disagree	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	48.5	32.6	
Strongly disagree	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	-	12.9	4.6	29.30

Source: WVS 2008.

We also examined differences in attitudes between atheists and theists towards gender equality. The question we used asked whether participants think men make better politicians than do women. Given the generally more liberal views of atheists, we thought atheists would be more likely to disagree with that statement than were theists in all three countries, but that was not the case. In Canada and the USA, atheists were more likely to disagree, and significantly so, but the differences were not particularly large. In Mexico, however, the reverse was the case as atheists in Mexico were more likely to agree that men make better politicians (55.9 per cent) than were theists (41.8 per cent).

In Canada and the USA, atheists think about purpose and meaning in life less frequently than do theists, but there is no difference in Mexico. Atheists also report slightly lower satisfaction in life than do theists in all three countries, about a 4 per cent difference on a 10 point scale. While the difference is significant, and the fact that it is uniform across all three countries suggests it is a real difference, the difference is quite small. Other research suggests that differences in happiness between the religious and nonreligious are typically only found in countries where nonreligious individuals are minorities (McClure and Loden 1982), which is the case in all three of these countries and in all of North America. Minorities are subject to heightened levels of discrimination, which can reduce life satisfaction and health. We address discrimination against atheists in greater detail later in this essay.

Finally, we examined a couple of items that explore religiosity. [Table 38.2](#) shows that atheists are substantially less likely to attend religious services than are theists. Atheists are also more likely to have been raised nonreligious than are theists, with 57 per cent of atheists in the USA saying they were, but just 16 per cent of theists saying they were. In Mexico, 42 per cent of atheists were raised nonreligious and 15 per cent of theists were. (This question was not asked of Canadian participants.) Atheists also report much less confidence in churches than do theists. Close to 40 per cent of atheists in all three countries report no confidence at all in churches, while just 4 per cent to 8 per cent of theists report no confidence. Previous research has suggested that declining confidence in religion may be a factor in declining religiosity. These data are consistent with that conclusion.

In summary, then, atheists in Canada, the USA, and Mexico are young, predominantly male, single or married, employed full-time or students, highly educated but not necessarily wealthier, live in large cities, are politically liberal, and are irreligious. These are characteristics of atheists that have been found in prior research (Hayes and Mcallister 1995; Hayes 2000; Caldwell-Harris 2010), though many of those studies focused on the USA and Western Europe. That the same is true in Canada and Mexico suggests these are likely characteristics of atheists in most countries in North America.

LIFE AS AN ATHEIST IN THE UNITED STATES

As this essay has suggested, a much clearer picture of the socio-demographic characteristics of atheists in North America has developed in recent years. Yet, considerably less research has concerned itself with the experiential dimensions of atheism. That is, there is not as clear a picture of the subjective and lived-experience of actual atheists—their lifestyles and perspectives, the nature of their interactions with theists and fellow atheists, the content of their daily social, cultural, and political concerns, their family dynamics and relationships with others, and the social psychological and emotional aspects of *being* an atheist. The balance of this essay discusses our current understanding of the qualitative aspects of life as an atheist. While we have thus far examined atheists in North America broadly, we now turn toward a focused discussion of the USA. We do so only because there is very limited research on atheists in North America outside of the USA. We begin with a brief historical sketch of atheism in US history. We then review some of the most recent qualitative studies of atheists, and elaborate on a few of the key social and psychological dimensions of the actual lives' and experiences of atheists. The ways in which people 'arrive' at atheism may vary, along with the influence and relationship that their atheism has on other aspects of life. As the process through which people come to claim atheism is important for the identity itself, and for the later experiences in life as an atheist, the identity formation process of becoming an atheist is treated first, followed by an identification and discussion of what seem to be some of the most salient social psychological aspects of life as an atheist in the United States, with a particular emphasis on the

discrimination perceived and experienced by atheists in the USA.

ATHEISTS IN US HISTORY (IN BRIEF)

Atheists do not figure prominently in the early history of the USA, but freethinkers—i.e., deists, agnostics, and otherwise sceptical individuals—certainly do. This is almost certainly because there were so few atheists prior to the mid 1800s (Cady 2010), when atheism became a much more defensible philosophical position. Even so, freethinkers were influential in the history of the USA. While many Americans today are unaware of the influential role such individuals played at key junctures in US history, more recent research has highlighted the influence of freethinkers (Jacoby 2005). Thomas Jefferson, Thomas Paine, and many other founding fathers were freethinkers who played prominent roles in the Revolutionary War and the creation of the USA government. Their perspectives guided the construction of a Constitution for the USA that does not draw upon divinity. Jefferson was also key in developing the idea of a ‘wall of separation’ between church and state that is enshrined in the First Amendment of the Bill of Rights. Freethinkers like William Lloyd Garrison led the charge toward emancipating slaves and ending slavery. Elizabeth Cady Stanton, Lucretia Mott, and Susan B. Anthony, who led the first wave of the feminist movement, were all freethinkers. Robert Ingersoll, one of the greatest orators of the 19th century, publicly identified as an agnostic and criticized religion regularly. Yet, throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, and possibly still today, labeling someone as an ‘atheist’—as was attempted with both Thomas Jefferson and Abraham Lincoln by their political foes—was an effort to malign someone’s character (Jacoby 2005).

Starting in the mid to late 1800s, individuals increasingly began to identify as atheists, as did Robert Owen—the founder of the Smithsonian Institution and an early advocate for birth control—and Ernestine Rose, a Polish Jewish atheist who worked tirelessly for women’s rights but who has largely been forgotten because of her atheism (Jacoby 2005). Even though a few individuals openly identified as atheists during this time period, atheism was not particularly popular—except perhaps among elite scientists in the early 20th century (Leuba 1916). However, the rise of communism and the Cold War—which was indelibly linked with atheism—substantially altered the landscape for atheists in the USA. To be an atheist between 1940 and 1990 in the USA was to invite criticism and, for a period during the 1950s, even prosecution as a communist sympathizer by ultra right-wing ideologues like Senator Joseph McCarthy. Some scholars have suggested that the view of atheist as ‘other’ (discussed in greater detail later in this essay) may be the result of the Cold War between the USA and the Soviet Union (Bullivant 2010). As two diametrically opposed super powers, every characteristic that made these nation-states distinct was emphasized. The USA had a capitalist economy; the Soviet Union had a communist one. The Soviet Union was atheist; the USA was Christian. As a result, self-identifying atheists during the Cold War, like Madalyn Murray O’Hair, were much maligned by the media.

At the conclusion of the Cold War in the late 1980s and early 1990s, the status of atheists in society appears to have changed somewhat. Statements by Presidents dovetailing the end of the Cold War and today illustrate this. George H. W. Bush said in 1987 that he didn’t think atheists ‘should be regarded as citizens’ of the USA (GALA Interim 1988), but by 2008, incoming President Barack Obama recognized the existence of nonreligious Americans in his inauguration speech. As the utility of ‘othering’ atheists and aligning them with communism has declined as an important aspect of American identity, there appears to have been a corresponding upsurge in the percentage of Americans who are leaving religions and identifying as atheists. The recent spate of books advocating atheism and criticizing religion as a result of terrorist attacks against the USA and other

Western countries in the early 2000s appears to have emboldened and organized atheists. The number of atheist-friendly secular groups on college and even high school campuses has seen a dramatic increase in the last few years, and conferences organized for the freethought community are increasing in size and frequency. Despite these changes, atheists in the USA remain a marginalized minority, and developing a coherent, affirming identity as an atheist remains a difficult task.

ATHEIST IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT

Scholars of multiple disciplines have for some time taken interest in studying what might broadly be called ‘apostasy’, and much of what we have known about the identities of the nonreligious has been framed within this literature. This has included examining the deconversion or disaffiliation processes people undergo as they leave behind a former religious identity. For example, Ebaugh (1988) wrote about Catholic nuns who left their convents, and a host of other studies have examined the process of disengaging with a variety of religious organizations and rejecting formerly held religious beliefs (see Smith 2011; Zuckerman 2011).

Although the relevance of the apostasy literature may broadly and inferentially apply to some within the category of nonreligious, there have fortunately been several more recent studies, often situated within this literature, that have examined explicitly the process by which individuals come not only to leave or eschew religion, but to positively reject religious beliefs and explanations of the world, and to self-identify as an *atheist* (see Smith 2011). A major theme from the interview-based research that addresses this question finds that many atheists simply could not make themselves believe in the supernatural or in the religious narratives that espouse this. Hunsberger and Altemeyer (2006) found that their subjects, despite their religious socialization, concluded they were unable to believe in a god or accept the idea of the supernatural.

Fitzgerald’s (2003) study analysed atheist identity formation from an identity-career path perspective. She argues that, in combination with important social environmental factors (religious/nonreligious socialization processes, peer networks, political environment) the intellectual and cognitive factors of individuals play a prominent role in their becoming atheists; that often claiming the identity results ultimately because it is seen as being most consistent with their intellectual commitments, view of reality, and critical views of theism and religion. When, where, and how people come to adopt an atheist identity has to do with the specific relationships between both the social environment and the cognitive-intellectual propensities of individuals.

Smith (2011) offers an identity model which describes the process of becoming an atheist. He found that persistent doubt and a penchant for scepticism and critical thought did indeed play an important role in the adoption of atheism. However, Smith emphasizes the socially acquired or even ‘achieved’ nature of an atheist identity. That is, rather than treating the identification with atheism as simply a ‘given’ for those whose worldviews happen to coincide definitionally and technically with the term ‘atheist,’ he illustrated the interactional processes one undergoes as they choose to voluntarily adopt the label ‘atheist’ despite the negative stigma against it. The generic identity model Smith offers includes four basic stages: (1) the starting point/the ubiquity of theism, (2) questioning theism, (3) rejecting theism, and, (4) coming out as an atheist. Each of these unfolds within the social psychological contexts of everyday social interaction. Like other researchers, Smith argues that a variety of environmental, social psychological, and cognitive factors combine, and are at play in the process of becoming an atheist. Early religious upbringing, regional setting, social networks and associations, and educational attainment are discussed as some of the most significant.

One problem with the incipient literature on atheist identity development is that studies have not yet adequately dealt with individuals who identify as atheist and were raised in secular or atheist families. There is the question, then, as to whether the current identity models, which are primarily based on data from subjects who were once religious or believed in a god, are applicable to these ‘always atheist’ individuals. It might be that those who have not undergone the same process described above, and whose atheism is not an ‘issue’ in the same sense that it is for the formerly religious, do not experience the same identity processes. This problem is partly methodological: the recruitment of self-identified atheists in the qualitative research is likely to bring in those with stronger motivation to share their stories of becoming atheist—stories that often involve their movement from theism to atheism. Additionally, since American surveys estimate that between 70 and 95 per cent of adults profess belief in a god or supreme being (Pew Forum 2008), and given what research suggests about religious socialization in the context of the USA, it is no accident that many of the atheists studied at some point in their lives held a belief in god, or came from some kind of religious background. In short, based on the currently available analyses of atheist identity development, we are not yet able to demonstrate empirically whether those who grew up without religion or belief in god undergo a fundamentally different identity process as they come to use the label ‘atheist’.

KEY DYNAMICS OF LIFE AS AN ATHEIST

Although the literature that can inform our understanding of life as an atheist in the USA is still in its infancy, there are a couple of salient themes that arise from, and crosscut the extant qualitative studies that can be identified as key social, psychological, and political dynamics of life as an atheist in America. First is the substantive issue of morality. The second is the experiential dimension of an important tension that exists for many atheists in the USA. Third is discrimination.

Morality

Morality has been a central theme of both the polemical/philosophical and social-scientific literature on atheists. It is of particular relevance in the US context. As Edgell et al. (2006) argue, there exists a socially constructed moral and cultural boundary between theists and atheists. Theist America does not accept atheists as full members of the moral community, viewing them as an essential ‘other’. As noted above, atheists are one of the most distrusted minority groups in the country. There is an assumption that atheists do not share the same moral outlooks as the rest of ‘believing’ society. This basic moral assumption no doubt plays a significant part in the heavily stigmatized status of atheism. But as suggested earlier, the view that atheists do not share in the moral vision of America is not based on people’s experience of, or interactions with, actual atheists (Edgell et al. 2006). It seems, rather, to be a collective assumption about the relationship and connection between religion and morality. The symbolic and moral boundaries—the essential ‘otherness’ of atheists in the USA—is more than just of topical relevance. As Smith (2011) argues, morality is often part and parcel of the construction of an atheist identity itself. That is, the ‘othering’ processes theists engage in with regard to atheists goes both ways. Atheists, in an effort to sustain a sense of moral identity, engage in symbolic and moral boundary construction. This often translates into atheists not only defending themselves as moral and good citizens, but in some sense being the carriers of a more genuine morality—one that is not based on assumptions about supernatural reward and punishment. Thus, one

particularly important aspect of life as an atheist in the USA involves constructing, defending, and defining morality vis-à-vis atheism.

Experiencing Both Freedom and Alienation

As researchers have begun to collect and analyse data from the accounts of atheists themselves, it is clear that many atheists in the US experience both a social and cognitive tension. This tension is suggested already by the morality issue, and the earlier discussion of the social stigma of atheism. The current qualitative research reveals a narrative among atheists which indicates an ambivalence regarding one's atheist identity. This is not an ambivalence between theism and atheism, or even about the meaning of atheism for its adherents, but a felt, or emotive ambivalence about experiencing, sometimes simultaneously, both a sense of intellectual/cognitive freedom on the one hand, and a sense of otherness, or alienation within one's own society on the other. All of the interview studies suggest that the adoption of the atheist label is usually not simply a statement about one's unbelief, but rather a meaningful, articulated, and important component of one's self-concept. As Smith (2011) argues, atheism can even come to occupy the upper stratum of an individual's identity hierarchy (Stryker 1968), becoming a critical aspect of the self.

For many, *proclaiming* atheism in the USA is not a decision one makes lightly. The social tension and/or possible alienation is not just an abstraction—something experienced within 'society'. Apparent in the accounts of atheists is the notion that it is experienced in concrete social situations, and in the context of everyday interaction. Indeed, as the research described throughout this essay suggests, atheists may experience a fractioning or even loss of important relationships with family and friends, or face discrimination in the workplace or in the political sphere (Hammer et al. 2012). Yet, the negative consequences of claiming atheism in American society do not prevent some from adopting the identity.

DISCRIMINATION AGAINST ATHEISTS

As noted above, atheists only make up 4 per cent of the US population. They are not a conspicuous, powerful, or well-organized social group. However, a brief review of the literature on people's perceptions of atheists would lead one to believe atheists are a deviant minority group that poses a threat to society. (On the subject of prejudice and discrimination, see also Karen Hwang's 'Atheism, Health, and Well-Being' chapter.)

In 2006, a national survey of United States residents indicated that 78.6 per cent believe that atheists do not share their vision of American society, and 47.6 per cent would discourage their children from marrying an atheist (Edgell et al. 2006). In fact, atheists were rated lower than all the other stigmatized groups assessed, including homosexuals, Muslims, and recent immigrants. In 2012, a Gallup poll found that 43 per cent of US residents would refuse to vote for an otherwise qualified atheist candidate for president (Gallup 2012). What is it about atheists that people find so troubling?

When asked to describe the characteristics of atheists, people volunteer adjectives such as elitist, pitiful, aggressive, judgmental, rebellious, joyless, ignorant, unstable, hedonistic, and immoral (e.g., Edgell et al. 2006; Harper 2007). Recently, a nationally-representative sample of US adults was asked to read a short description about a fellow participant ('Jordan'), and to rate Jordan along several dimensions (i.e., foolish—wise, cold—warm, immoral—moral, etc.). Jordan was given, on average, a

20 per cent lower score on the evaluation when identified as an atheist versus a theist (Swan and Heesacker 2011). Likewise, data from the National Survey of Black Americans found that respondents described nonreligious individuals as less open, less friendly, and more suspicious in comparison to religious individuals (Ellison 1992). In short, prejudice against atheists appears consistently across studies.

What Forms Does Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination Take?

As of this writing, almost all studies reporting data regarding perceived anti-atheist discrimination have taken a qualitative approach. In a study of end-of-life-preferences for atheists, several participants reported being subjected to unwanted prayers and proselytizing by hospital staff (Smith-Stoner 2007) which, while a ‘mild’ form of discrimination, is still perceived to be discriminatory by many atheists. Hunsberger and Altemeyer’s (2006) study of American atheists found that the majority of the 218 study participants reported some form of social exclusion or harassment on the basis of their atheism. Another study of freethinkers living in the southern USA revealed that most of the 10 participants had stories of discrimination, including accounts of shunning by family and harassment in the workplace (Heiner 1992). In her analysis of 36 in-depth interviews with atheists, Fitzgerald (2003) found that all of her participants felt personally stigmatized, recounting stories of denied employment, denigration from family members, and threats from community members, among other events. Lastly, the participants in Simonson’s investigation of how atheists make meaning of discrimination ‘identified a number of forms of discrimination including death threats, loss of dating relationships, loss of friendships, shunning by family, social media harassment, social ostracism, subjection to proselytizing, threat of divorce/losing child custody, and verbal harassment’ (2011: 9).

Building upon these qualitative investigations, Hammer et al. (2012) used a mixed-method design to systematically explore the forms and frequency of discrimination reported by 796 self-identified atheists living in the United States. Participants were asked to indicate how often in their lifetime they had experienced each of 29 different forms of discrimination because of their atheism. Ninety-five per cent of the sample reported experiencing slander (e.g., verbally harassed or disrespected) at least once, while 93 per cent reported coercion (e.g., asked to renounce their atheism), 56 per cent reported social ostracism (e.g., rejected, avoided, isolated, or ignored by family), 16 per cent reported being denied opportunities, goods, or services (e.g., denied employment, promotion, or education opportunities), and 14 per cent reported being the victim of a hate crime (e.g., physically assaulted).

In summarizing the findings of the study, Hammer and colleagues made note of the wide variety and considerable prevalence of discrimination reported by the atheists in the sample. However, they warned that their findings could not be assumed to generalize to all atheists living in the USA for two reasons. First, in recruiting only self-identified atheists, the findings cannot be assumed to reflect the experience of those who do not believe in a god but choose not to adopt the label ‘atheist’. Second, the self-reported frequencies of each form of discrimination were derived from a sample of atheists recruited via internet convenience sampling. Thus, without data derived from a nationally-representative study, it is not possible to determine the true prevalence of perceived anti-atheist discrimination.

How Prevalent is Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination?

Fortunately, such empirical data is available from the 2008 American Religious Identification Survey

(ARIS; Kosmin and Keysar 2009). Through the use of random digit dialled telephone interviews with 54,461 adult respondents, the ARIS assembled a nationally representative dataset which includes questions about belief in God and religious identification. The database also includes data from a silo (subset) of those who self-identify as having 'no religion' (n=1106). Respondents in this silo were asked an additional question about discrimination: 'In the past 5 years, have you personally experienced discrimination because of your lack of religious identification or affiliation in any of the following situations': in your family; in your workplace; at school or college; in the military; socially; in volunteer organizations or clubs.

Drawing upon ARIS data, Cragun et al. (2012) found that 25 per cent of those who report no belief in god and 41 per cent of self-identified atheists reported experiencing discrimination in at least one context. The researchers sought to explain self-identified atheists' higher rate of reported discrimination by suggesting that self-identifying as an atheist increases others' perception of one's outgroup status, which results in increased discrimination (Kaiser and Pratt-Hyatt 2009). In line with this reasoning, Hammer and colleagues (2012) found that the atheists in their sample who (a) reported that their atheism was an important part of their personal identity (b) were 'out' about their atheism to more people, and (c) grew up with stricter familial religious expectations reported experiencing more frequent discrimination. In combination, findings from these two studies suggest that perceived anti-atheist discrimination is both prevalent and diverse in its manifestation.

How do Atheists Cope with Perceived Anti-Atheist Discrimination?

Given the prevalence and variety of perceived anti-atheist discrimination, how do atheists cope? Through his analysis of interviews with 10 atheists, Simonson (2011) identified several cognitive and behavioural mechanisms atheists used to cope with discrimination: engaging in constructive dialogue to increase the awareness of the offender, empathizing with theists' perspective (e.g., feeling of obligation to save souls), practising non-resistance (e.g., choosing not to argue or fight), reclaiming words and stereotypes intended to inflict pain, perceiving events of discrimination as opportunities to grow and persevere, advocating for atheists by 'coming out' to combat negative stereotypes, becoming a more informed atheist through reading atheist literature, and drawing upon social support systems in times of difficulty. Likewise, many of the 40 atheists in Smith's (2011) study of atheist identity development noted that coming out publicly as atheists led to feelings of liberation, satisfaction, and confidence. Their responses suggested that these positive feelings made enduring any resultant stigmatization a worthwhile and meaningful task. Drawing from interviews with 36 atheists, Fitzgerald (2003) writes that atheists often use a stigma management strategy wherein they selectively decide whether to conceal or disclose their atheism to a given individual based on a number of factors such as the nature of their relationship with the individual, the individual's religious beliefs, and the valence and intensity of the individual's likely reaction. These atheists talked of 'passing' as theists, using alternative and less stigmatized labels, purposely disclosing to make a political statement or educate others, and openly disclosing then challenging theists to justify *their* beliefs, among other techniques. In summary, atheists appear to use a variety of strategies to cope with their stigmatized identity and make meaning of the discrimination directed towards them.

More qualitative research on American atheists is needed to better understand, not just the identity processes of those who reject religious/theist identities, but also those who had no religious identity or belief in God(s) to begin with. Zuckerman's (2008) analysis of Scandinavian atheists might offer some clues as to what the atheist identity processes of those who *never* had much interest in religion or god might look like, but until a similar analysis in the American context takes place, we must hold off on any empirical claims regarding this particular subset of atheists.

The identity formation models offered thus far have primarily emphasized *process*, rather than *structure*. That is, the focus has been on the social psychological and interactional processes one moves through as they come to claim atheism. This is one area which more quantitatively oriented studies may wish to address. What role do broader social structures and variables such as race, class, and gender have on individual atheist identities? Connecting the context and influence not just of the micro-socialization processes but of major institutions such as education, religion, family, the political structure, and economic forces would be an invaluable contribution to our understanding of atheist identity development and life as an atheist generally.

Another area of research that would further illuminate the identities and experiences of American atheists involves the collective identity construction and maintenance of the identity, as well as the relevant social movement elements involved in contemporary atheist organizations. We know from the extensive sociological and psychological literature on identity that neither personal nor social identities occur or persist without their social and interactional contexts. Thus, as Cimino and Smith (2007) and Smith (2011) argue, examining the organizational dynamics in which atheist identities are validated and find social support would help fill important gaps in the social scientific literature on atheists. For instance, what effect has the 'New Atheist movement' had on contemporary atheist identities? Has it offered a more concrete organizational structure in which atheists find identity validation and social support? Has it made atheism in America more socially acceptable? What is the role of the media, and of the political and economic structure on atheists and their organizations?

While the existing research illustrates that prejudicial attitudes toward atheists does sometimes translate into discrimination, there are a number of additional questions that warrant further investigation. How does perceived discrimination affect the physical and mental health of atheists, and what are the protective factors which moderate the impact of this discrimination? How do these dynamics differentially function for atheists of colour, gay and lesbian atheists, women atheists, and atheists with other intersecting identities? In regards to the ongoing religion-health debate (Sloan 2006; Hwang et al. 2011), how does anti-atheist discrimination relate to the differences in well-being between atheists and theists posited by some social scientists (e.g., Hall et al. 2008)? What interventions would be effective in reducing anti-atheist prejudice?

Finally, as more knowledge is accumulated about atheists in the USA, research should begin to address how atheist identity development and the lives of atheists are different from, and similar to, the identities and lives of atheists in other North American countries.

CONCLUSION

Unfortunately, data on atheists in North America outside the United States is quite limited. This essay presents data on rates of nonreligion and atheism for every country in North America where such data is available. It also presents more extensive data on the characteristics of atheists—and how they contrast with theists—in the USA, Canada, and Mexico. Data and research limitations restricted discussion of prejudice and discrimination against atheists, the lived experiences of atheists, and the

identity development of atheists to the USA. Future research should extend the above findings to other countries within North America, especially in light of the fact there are, as of 2011, over 20 million atheists in North America.

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CHAPTER 39

CENTRAL AND EASTERN EUROPE

IRENA BOROWIK, BRANKO ANČIĆ, AND RADOSŁAW TYRAŁA

INTRODUCTION

REFLECTION on atheism is of especial interest in relation to the Central and Eastern European region due to its past—empirical studies suggest that, for long periods in some countries, there have been more atheists than religious believers. Travelling through the post-communist countries of Europe today, however, one can come across many people changing their opinion about religion and atheism and personally converting, for instance from atheism to Orthodoxy or from atheism to Pentecostalism. Consider, for example, the case of Valentina,¹ who lives in the pleasant Ukrainian resort town of Alushta, at the southern end of the Crimean peninsula, right by the Black Sea. After the collapse of communism she became a very religious person, and began to ask the advice of her priest in all life decisions, even such banal ones as buying a washing machine (!). Everything that happened to her she interpreted in religious terms—for instance, construing a toothache, and her resulting swollen face, as a punishment for not having kept a strict enough fast the previous day. She prayed every day, long in the morning and long in the evening. Her nearby friends were religious and attached to the Church. Religion was now in the centre of her life and gave it a meaningful framework; undoubtedly it was a core issue for her new identity. More than once Valentina has been asked about the reasons for the popularity of atheism in the former Communist Bloc and, related to this, the reasons for its strong diminishing after the collapse of communism. Her unchanging answer—it was the same in 1997, in 2002, and then in 2009—is ‘I had to present myself as atheist but inside my heart I always believed in God. And others did the same.’

This short answer reflects a crucial problem we have with understanding both terms/notions: religion and atheism. How may sociologists gain access to the ‘inside of the hearts’ of their respondents? This example also helps to understand the problematic nature not only of the crucial concepts we use (e.g., terms such as ‘religion’, ‘atheism’, ‘nonreligion’, ‘irreligion’, or similar), but also of the social and cultural contexts in which they are applied. For that reason, it is very important to be sensitive to both the similarities *and* differences within and between the countries of Central and Eastern Europe. As such, we begin by delineating the main socio-cultural differences and commonalities which could have an impact on the appearance and disappearance of atheism.

THE CONTEXT: ATHEIZATION IN CEE

There are a range of different elements—historical, political, and social—that influence manifestations of atheism, its popularity in society, and individual trajectories of atheization. While there are undoubtedly many relevant factors, in our view the most important factors are: the length of

time a given country spent under communist control, the political importance of the particular country within the Eastern Bloc, and the power of anti-communist opposition, including the strength of religions and Churches.

The strength and duration of communist control corresponds to several important and interrelated issues. Firstly, it seems natural to suppose that State-imposed atheism can take root more deeply where communist governments last longer. In Russia, for example, where the impact of communism and atheization started immediately after the revolution in 1917, and lasted until 1991 (a period of 74 years), antireligious politics embraced at least three generations. In the majority of countries in the region, however, this period was almost three decades shorter—in most cases, from 1945 to 1989/1991. This fact is of the utmost importance, since it means that in some countries the continuity of religious transfer was completely interrupted, while in others it was not. By the time that communism fell in Russia, for instance, almost everyone who had been born and grew up before the revolution, and who had been socialized into religion at home and school, was already dead. Yet elsewhere, while generations of parents experienced intensive antireligious indoctrination, the surviving generation of grandparents represented the old world and values, and transmitted it to their grandchildren. It was not by chance that sociological research carried out in the 1950s and 1960s showed Russia to be a country of disbelief. Commenting in 1979 on religious differentiation within the Soviet Union, the prominent Russian sociologist of religion Igor Yablokov noticed that ‘in the Western Ukraine and Belorussia, in Bessarabia and in the Baltic Republics, the percentage of religious people is higher. People living in these regions entered into the way of building socialism and communism later, which has to have had an impact on the state of their religiosity’ (Yablokov 1979: 139).

Communist-era atheization had a number of expressions. For instance, the percentage of baptized children gradually decreased and sociological research showed an increasing number of atheists. The young, educated people, all those involved in the system, and those who aspired to make any sort of career, had to be members of the ruling party and ‘free from superstitions’. From an official perspective, they needed to be (as the scale used by sociologists named it) not merely positive atheists but ‘convinced’ ones. ‘Convinced’ was understood to mean those who not only believed there to be no God, but also were engaged in the promotion of atheistic views. The communist reality meant that, for the first time in history, lacking religion was at least as popular as having it.

Political factors are directly linked to this: it was felt that the country where the revolution started, and where Lenin and Stalin were rulers, had to be a leader in atheism. From the earliest days after the October Revolution, for instance, Lenin regarded the task of combating religion to be a high priority, and accordingly undertook a range of legal and political measures to ensure its swiftest possible disappearance ((Pospielovsky 1995; Stricker 1995; Borowik 2000). It would be worth narrating some of this specific history in detail, since many of the initiatives applied by Lenin were, with greater or lesser success, later implemented in other countries of the Eastern Bloc; due to space limitations, however, we are not able to do this here. In addition, persecution of religion and promoting of atheism in the past has rich literature, while reviews of reflection on atheism and sociological research on the phenomenon in Central and Eastern Europe are rarely the subject of systemic overview. For this reason it is to this subject that we now turn.

SOCIOLOGISTS ON ATHEISTS AND ATHEISM IN COMMUNIST AND POST-COMMUNIST EUROPE

One of the central issues in the analysis and research on atheism is a matter of terminology. In Central and Eastern Europe (CEE), among scholars of the subject the usage of ‘atheism’ is predominant (see Čimić 1971; Đorđević 1990; Adamski 1993; Zrinščak 2004; Smrke 2005), with ‘unbelief’ also regularly being used (see Mucha 1989; Tyrała 2008, Tyrała 2012). Authors working on large quantitative studies—such as the European Values Survey (EVS) and the International Social Survey Programme (ISSP)—most frequently regard an atheist as someone who gives a negative answer to the question about belief in God. One may find only a few attempts to define/conceptualize the term. One example is the work of Franciszek Adamski, considering atheism as ‘every kind of thinking or behaviour which expresses a lack of faith in God, regardless of its being manifested in an active or passive form, of being only verbally declared or actively realised in everyday life’ (1993: 17). By contrast, Radosław Tyrała in his research on nonreligious people used the term ‘nonbelievers’ as a key concept. He justifies this with reference to the greater semantic inclusiveness of this term (in Poland positive atheists, agnostics, and other categories of nonreligious people—all atheists, of one sort or another, according to the broad definition adopted in this publication—may recognize themselves as nonbelievers) and its lack of ideological associations.

The problem looks slightly different in the countries of the former Soviet Union and former Yugoslavia (see Kääriäinen 1999: 38; Borowik 2000: 170; Zrinščak 2004: 225–6), where the distinction between ‘atheist’ and ‘nonbeliever’ is clearer. There, atheists are treated as those who are firmly convinced of the nonexistence of God, and often harbour a negative attitude towards religion. Nonbelievers only reject religious dogma. So the main differentiating criterion is the level of intensity of a(anti)religious views.

We have already mentioned that the vast majority of studies on the issue of atheism in the CEE region are based on the results of quantitative research into religiosity, to which we will turn later. Meanwhile, an important source of in-depth knowledge about atheism is qualitative research. One of the few examples of such studies is Radosław Tyrała’s project ‘Nonbelievers in contemporary Poland as a cultural minority’, carried out in 2008–2009. This consists of two parts: quantitative (internet survey directed to non-believers; non-representative study; sample: 7500 respondents) and qualitative (28 in-depth interviews conducted with Polish nonbelievers).

The study brings some interesting findings. On the issue of self-descriptions it turns out that the understanding of concepts such as agnosticism or even atheism among nonbelievers is far from uniform. The interlocutors’ self-definition with reference to any of these concepts is often determined by accidental contact with it. Sometimes, however, it is the subject of their in-depth reflection. Speaking of motives for non-believing, both parts, qualitative and quantitative, show the dominance of those of an intellectual nature. There were, however, significant differences in how the consequences of unbelief were understood. Mostly, they say that it is unseemly for a nonbeliever to: attend masses, perform religious gestures, be a godparent, unthinkingly use concepts with religious connotations (e.g., the word ‘sin’), and be superstitious. Yet for others, unbelief does not imply any consequences or obligations, because of its extremely individualized character. Opinions in this regard split roughly half-and-half. Many respondents also emphasize the gradual nature of their unbelief. While most of the subjects stress the importance and centrality of their nonreligious identity, especially in comparison to other identities, they do not tend to think of themselves as nonbelievers in every moment. The tendency to emphasize the significance of the spiritual dimension of their lives is also noticeable. Some of them openly admit to believing in a kind of transcendent force or deity. All of them say that life without religion has a deep meaning. The worship of reason is also clearly visible. The study generally shows that although one should surely ascribe minority status to Polish nonbelievers, nonetheless, this status is relative. Their atheism is not always a source of difficulties/disadvantages for them, sometimes—although rarely—being a source of

facilities/advantages.

In the works of CEE sociologists one may also find the issue of the relationship between believers and nonbelievers in terms of sociologically defined minority/majority categories. Such an approach was first presented by Miklós Tomka (2005: 41–60), who used it to analyze the Hungarian society of the late 1970s, finding a strong polarization between the categories of religious and nonreligious people.

Similar findings can be seen in the qualitative research which has been done in Croatia, where the attitudes of nonreligious persons (the majority of them also claiming to be atheists) towards religious instruction in Croatian public schools were explored. Although respondents did not use the term ‘discrimination’, examples concerning their children and also concerning themselves were obvious cases of discrimination. Different forms of discrimination are detected, like physical and verbal violence, isolation, attitude and practice imposition, and demand for explaining their nonreligious position (Ančić and Puhovski 2011). This Croatian research also—in common with the studies by Tomka (Hungary) and Tyrała (Poland)—incorporated a socio-demographic profile of the atheist population, revealing disproportionate numbers of young, well-educated people, those from bigger cities, and men. This is yet further confirmation of results of various studies carried out in different parts of the world, consistently showing the same pattern of characteristics within the community of nonbelievers (see also Ariela Keysar and Juhem Navarro-Rivera’s ‘A World of Atheism: Global Demographics’).

There have been only a few comparative analyses of atheism carried out in the CEE region. One of the few attempts of this kind is that undertaken by Siniša Zrinščak (see 2004). Comparing different types of generational responses to atheism in several CEE countries, on the basis of studies carried out in these countries and based on data from the EVS, he distinguishes three groups of countries in the region. The first group comprises countries in which state atheism had the most severe consequences. There are in Zrinščak’s opinion two indicators of that: church attendance is higher now than when respondents were twelve years old (according to data from 1999), and religious self-identification is stronger than confessional identification. This group includes such countries as Estonia, Latvia, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Bulgaria. The second group is more Westernized and secularized countries. These are countries with a relatively high percentage of nonbelievers, where additionally the current level of respondents attending religious practices is lower than when they were twelve years old. Zrinščak predicts the probability of a continuing trend of secularization in this group, where he puts countries like Hungary, Czech Republic, and to some extent Slovenia and Slovakia. The third group comprises countries with the most stable indicators of religiosity. Self-identification, both religious and denominational, remains at a high level. There are also no significant differences between the respondents’ current and past frequency of attendance at religious services. The proportion of nonbelievers and atheists is relatively small, ranging between 5 and 15 per cent. The group includes the following countries: Lithuania, Poland, Romania, and Croatia. He also notices that these are countries in which the dominant Churches have played a crucial role in maintaining a separate national identity.

Interesting results were also provided by a comparative analysis of atheists from different European countries, relying on data from the EVS and ISSP, conducted by the Slovenian sociologist Marjan Smrke (2005; 2012). Smrke explores the extent to which certain widespread, negative stereotypes about atheists are true (he even quotes excerpts of public statements from Slovenian bishops, reproducing such stereotypes). He wonders whether atheists are really unhappy, unreflective, immoral, or do not feel solidarity with the members of other minorities. Focusing on answers to the questions about, *inter alia*, civil attitudes, nature preservation, attitudes to different moral issues

(abortion, failure to pay taxes), and moral rigour/permisiveness, he concludes that atheists are often to be found above the European average. These results coincide with the analyses made by Phil Zuckerman, who also finds a correlation between atheism and many indicators of welfare in the social and individual dimension (see Zuckerman's 'Atheism and Societal Health').

Relevant information on atheism and nonreligion in CEE countries also, of course, occurs in large-scale studies focusing primarily on religion. Loek Halman and Verlee Draulans' analysis of EVS data compares the relative percentages of four categories of people across a range of European countries, including CEE ones: churched religious ('standard' religiosity), churched nonreligious ('belonging without believing'), unchurched religious ('believing without belonging'), and unchurched nonreligious ('standard' nonreligiosity). The latter dominates in countries like the Czech Republic and Estonia, and to a lesser extent in the Netherlands, Russia, and Belarus (Halman and Draulans 2006). Research conducted by Irena Borowik and Tadeusz Doktór as part of the Religious and Moral Pluralism (RAMP) project in 1998, on a representative group of Poles, led the authors to conclude that religious nonbelievers and non-belongers are the most ideologically diverse and incoherent group (in comparison to both religious believers and religious belongers). While, on the one hand, they are characterized by not attending religious services, on the other, some of them share the eschatological assumptions of Christianity, for example associated with salvation and life after death. Some also believe in a personal god who is 'inside of man' (see Borowik and Doktór 2001: 122), which introduces to the study of nonreligiosity the category of spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005).

However, some of these comparative studies aim not only to present statistics, but also at developing more sophisticated theoretical considerations. These relate especially to the long-standing disputes between sociologists testing three theories: secularization, individualization, and the 'supply side'. Although these are primarily theories of religion, one may look at them somewhat differently—in the context of their power to explain the phenomenon of (non)religiosity. This is, however, only possible if the assumption is added that increasing religiosity is equivalent to a decline of nonreligion, and vice versa (which is not undisputed). In relation to secularization theory (see Pollack and Pickel 2007; Müller 2011; Wohlrab-Sahr 2011), Pippa Norris and Ronald Inglehart have arguably made the most significant contribution on this point (see 2005). Speaking of (non) religiosity in CEE, they apply their own theory of secularization based on the feeling of existential security. 'Supply side' theory has some proponents as well. The series of religious revivals in the CEE countries is often pointed to as a confirmation of this theory. These took place after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and are regarded as the effect of a 'free market of religious services' emerging in these countries (see Froese 2004; Greeley 1994; Stark and Iannaccone 1994). Proponents of the individualization thesis also have their arguments. This is applied to cases of Russia (see Belyaev 2012) or the Czech Republic (see Nešpor 2004; Nešporová and Nešpor 2009; Hamplová and Nešpor 2009). Debates over which one of them is the most suitable in the case of CEE (non)religiosity are still ongoing.

It should be mentioned, however, that the above is only one of a very few examples of new, theoretical work emerging from the sociological study of atheism in the region. Instead, publications on atheists in the CEE usually have a primarily factual and illustrative character, with the authors focusing on presenting a 'portrait' of a selected community of atheists, mainly using the results of quantitative research. This unwillingness to go beyond specific illustrations, and to use theory to explain the incidence and nature of atheism, has, however, also been a feature of the Western social-scientific literature on atheism. What few, encouraging exceptions there have been to this—see, e.g., William Sims Bainbridge's 'compensators theory' (2005), or the evolutionary psychology approach by Jonathan Lanman (2012)—have, as yet, not gained much of a reception in CEE.

ATHEISM IN THE POST-COMMUNIST TRANSFORMATION IN THE LIGHT OF EVS DATA²

The collapse of communism and the resulting political transformation brought a number of changes related to atheism to the region. First of all, it was no longer officially promoted state doctrine. Secondly, suppressed religions and Churches, under waves of freedom, gained new importance. What do we know about atheism in CEE in the past 20 years? The literature and results of research reported above show us a fragmented picture, and here we do nothing more than adding one modest brick to it, testing some selected hypotheses related to the spread of atheism and its manifestations. In line with the broad definition of atheism adopted in this publication (see Stephen Bullivant's 'Defining "Atheism"'), we have adopted here for the purpose of large-scale comparisons the understanding of atheism as a lack of belief in God. As an indicator of atheism we have used the question 'Do you believe in God?', where those who answered 'no' are treated as atheists.³

Furthermore, we assume that the particular religious tradition and religious structure of a given society can have an impact on the level of atheism. The assumption is made on the basis of several sources. First, the three dominant religious traditions in CEE survived the battle with communist indoctrination to various degrees (and for different reasons); briefly, Catholicism was more successful, while Orthodoxy and Protestantism suffered much higher losses ((Pollack and Müller 2006: 24–5; Tomka 2006: 51; Borowik 2007: 660). In addition, the denominational structure of a given society, such as religiously homogenous or pluralist, could be a factor of religious stabilization, vitality, or change. The tradition of sociological reflection on religion, from the classics to the newest theories of religion, supports the thesis that religion itself is not isolated, hence the changes in the religious field, as secularization, diminishing the role of religion, or the opposite, the rise of its importance, appear in a broader context, such as the type of society—traditional, modern, postmodern, communist, transforming, etc. We assume that the religious structure of a society, i.e., confessional homogeneity versus plurality and the forms in between, is an important factor in this broader context and can contribute to distribution of religious beliefs and atheism. In general our intent is to find out if these two elements, i.e. religious tradition combined with confessional structure of society, have an impact on the spread of atheism in CEE. Taking this into account, a typology of six groups out of the 17 post-communist countries is derived on the basis of data from the third (1999–2001) and fourth (2008–10) waves of EVS:⁴

- (1) Mono-confessional Catholic countries—a strong domination of the Roman Catholic Church, characterized by a high level of declared belonging to it (in the entire population not less than 70 per cent)—Croatia, Poland, and Lithuania.
- (2) Mono-confessional Orthodox—an equivalent high level of belonging to the Orthodox Church—Macedonia, Moldova and Romania.
- (3) Dominant Catholic—where between 50 per cent and 70 per cent of the entire population declare a religious affiliation to the Roman Catholic Church—Slovak Republic and Slovenia.
- (4) Dominant Orthodox—as above, belonging to the Orthodox Church in a given country—Belarus, Bulgaria, Russian Federation and Serbia.
- (5) Pluralist countries—meaning that no denomination has over 50 per cent of the entire population belonging to it and at least 20 per cent declare belonging to two or more other religious denominations and/or having no religious belonging—Hungary, Latvia, and Ukraine.

(6) Dominant un-churched countries—at least 60 per cent of the entire population claim not to belong to any religious denomination—Czech Republic and Estonia.

At first glance from [Table 39.1](#), it is quite obvious that the atheist landscape is diverse across CEE countries, with levels of atheism ranging from a clear majority in the Czech Republic to an almost invisible minority in Moldova. In mono-confessional countries the average levels of total atheism are significantly lower than in countries with a dominant religion and in the pluralist group, which have comparable portions of atheists. Mono-confessionality, going hand in hand with a strong position of either the Orthodox or the Roman Catholic Church, seems to support the homogeneity of society, strong cultural position of religion and lack of room for popularization of alternative world views. It is not surprising that in the dominantly un-churched group of countries the average level of atheism is the highest. Those not belonging to any domination there certainly build the corpus of atheists. A question of high importance here is how in the history of these societies developments were made to the formation of religious structure considered here, i.e. how and why it happens that some countries keep mono-confessionality, while others develop confessional differentiation. This question needs particular studies for each country. There are also significant differences if we look on a country-by-country basis. For instance, the level of atheism in pluralist Ukraine is much lower than in the two other countries from the group. Why is this so? If we take religious tradition into account, Ukraine is a dominantly Orthodox country, but there is strong and conflicting competition between the two mainstream Orthodox Churches (one subordinate to the Moscow Patriarchate and the other expressing the dream of having its own, Ukrainian independent national Church, of the Kyiv Patriarchate). Believers are disoriented and, feeling Orthodox, they do not indicate belonging to either of the two Churches, thus a high level of non-affiliation does not mean a comparably high level of atheism, as is the case in un-churched countries.

Table 39.1 Religious belonging and spread of atheism in CEE

EVS 2008-2010 %	Religious belonging						Atheism	Average level of atheism
	Roman Catholic	Protestant	Muslim	Orthodox	Other	Not belonging		
Mono-confessional Orthodox								
Romania	5.0	2.4	0.1	86.4	4.0	2.1	2.4	3.7
Moldova	0.5	0.3	0.0	89.6	3.1	6.5	2.2	
Macedonia	0.3	0.1	16.7	75.6	0.7	6.6	4.5	
Mono-confessional Catholic								
Poland	92.3	0.3	0.1	0.9	1.9	4.5	3.9	7.5
Croatia	79.5	0.1	0.2	2.8	0.6	16.8	10.5	
Lithuania	78.7	0.5	0.0	4.4	2.4	14.0	13.2	
Dominant Catholic								
Slovenia	65.9	0.4	1.5	1.8	1.5	28.8	34.1	27.4
Slovak Republic	67.9	7.4	0.0	0.3	1.2	23.1	19.1	
Dominant Orthodox								
Serbia	5.3	1.5	1.7	60.2	0.9	30.2	8.4	25.2
Belarus	8.7	0.9	0.1	61.4	0.4	28.4	14.4	
Bulgaria	0.3	0.2	12.4	59.6	1.3	26.1	24.5	
Russian Federation	0.3	0.3	4.4	55.2	1.6	38.1	23.1	
Pluralist countries								
Ukraine	9.6	2.1	0.9	49.0	14.9	23.4	9.6	24.0
Latvia	19.6	21.8	0.0	22.7	1.1	34.8	23.4	
Hungary	40.7	12.6	0.0	0.1	1.3	45.3	28.8	
Dominantly un-churched								
Estonia	1.3	11.4	0.1	16.3	2.0	68.8	52.1	59.5
Czech Republic	24.2	1.9	0.0	0.3	2.7	71.0	64.3	

Sources: Derived from the third (1999-2001) and fourth (2008-10) waves of EVS.

As we saw from the literature review, atheists as a group have differentiated world views. The results of research conducted in some CEE countries support the assumption that here, as elsewhere,

‘general atheists’, declaring disbelief in God, as a group are not coherent (see Borowik and Doktór 2001; Hamplová and Nešpor 2009; Belyaev 2010; Tyrała 2012).⁵ With the EVS data it would be possible to deepen the analysis by exploring their beliefs in so called super-natural powers.⁶ We assume that those respondents who answer ‘no’ to the question ‘Do you believe in God?’ and in the second choose the option ‘I don’t really think there is any sort of spirit, God, or life force’, could be seen as ‘hard atheists’, while those who select ‘there is some sort of spirit or life force’ could be seen as ‘soft’ ones. Figure 39.1 presents the distribution of answers to the second question among atheists.

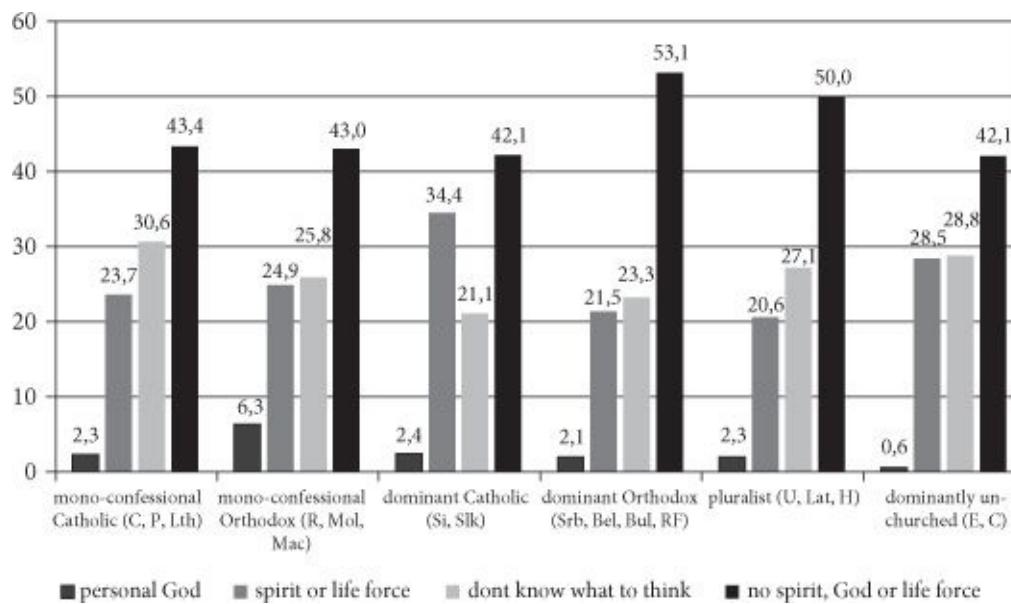


FIGURE 39.1 Atheism and personal God/spirit or life force (%)—3rd and 4th EVS wave

In all six groups of countries, the largest proportion of respondents seem to represent ‘hard atheism’, being consistent in answering both questions and not having doubts about the non-existence of supernatural forces, irrespective of their names. The portion of this category is more visible in dominant Orthodox (with the highest in the Russian Federation—62 per cent) and pluralist countries, while interestingly enough mono-confessional, dominant Catholic and dominantly un-churched countries represent quite similar results. Visible differences in these countries appear in the category of soft atheists, with the higher percentage in dominantly Catholic and un-churched ones.

Besides this, we can observe that there is a significant portion of those atheists who are uncertain (don’t know what to think). The higher level of interest towards spirit or life force among atheists in dominantly Catholic and un-churched groups might be seen as a sign of ‘spiritual revolution’ characteristic of Western societies (see Heelas and Woodhead (2005), but interpretation of why the distribution looks like this would require further analysis.

On the other hand, it is interesting that there are respondents who present apparently contradictory views, expressed in claiming lack of belief in God for the first question and in the second choosing the option of belief in a ‘personal God’. Only in the case of the mono-confessional Orthodox group does the percentage deserve attention. The crucial point here seems to be ‘personal’. What did this mean for the respondents? It may be that for the first question they assumed some concept of God which is religiously or socially desirable while at the same time having their own perception of God as something personal,⁷ individual, in their ‘own’ way of understanding (see Borowik and Doktór 2001; Halman and Draulans 2006; Tyrała 2012), or as something ‘inside’, that does not fit the other option offered in categorization of possible answers to the question.

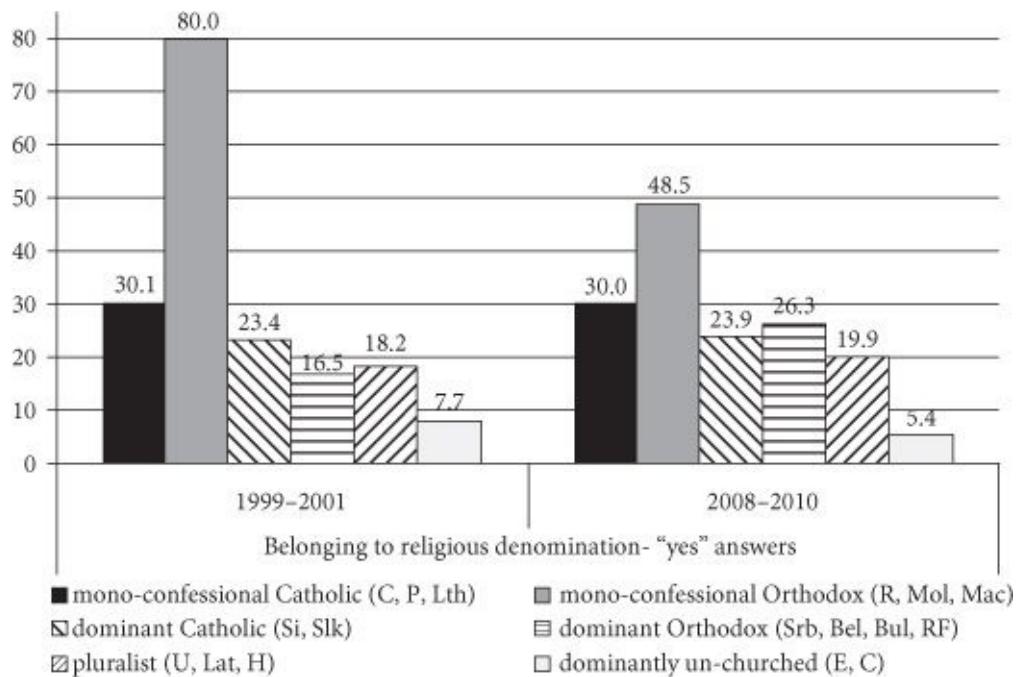


FIGURE 39.2 Belonging to religious denomination among atheists (%)—3rd and 4th EVS wave

This lack of coherence among atheists also appears if we look at their declarations concerning belonging to religious denominations. One could expect that atheists would not belong to Churches, as they do not share the belief in God that is central to Christianity.⁸ However, the results show different patterns of belonging. In the mono-confessional Orthodox group, the percentage was the highest in the 3rd EVS wave, reaching 80 per cent for Romania (Moldova, Macedonia, and Serbia did not participate in this EVS edition), while in the 4th EVS wave for all four included countries of the group the percentage reached 48.5 per cent, which is still high. In dominant Orthodox countries the change goes in the opposite direction—there is a rise in atheist declarations of belonging, while in the mono-confessional Catholic group no change is noted, also stable in the dominant Catholic group.

The phenomenon of atheists declaring a religious affiliation is interesting in itself, but even more interesting are the differences between types of the countries. One of the issues worth mentioning is that the high level of belonging characteristic of some Orthodox countries could be seen in the light of the phenomenon of the category of ‘Orthodox atheists’ (Borowik 2007), i.e., the significant portion of those for whom Orthodoxy is not important in personal terms as a source of life meaning but who refer to Orthodoxy as a symbol unifying presence with the great past, legitimating culture, societal memory, identity and statehood tradition.

TOWARDS A CONCLUSION AND ... SOME FURTHER DOUBTS

Our aim was to give an insight into the status of atheism in CEE within the context of atheist indoctrination of the past and in the background of a review of research on the topic. What is it important to point out? First, it seems that it is no accident that Russia has the highest level of ‘hard’ atheists. The communist indoctrination lasted the longest, and, as we noted above, it was addressed to three generations. It gave the opportunity not only for promotion of atheist ideas but also for implementing atheism to the process of socialization in families. On the other hand, the specific impact of communism on the present manifestations of atheism is very difficult to analyse, as it had different periods and degrees of violent imposition of atheism and the reaction of societies was also

differentiated (Tomka 1988; Zrinščak 1999; Zrinščak 2004).

Obviously, we take into account the fact that many other factors are also at play here: the level of religiosity usually rises with age, modernization brings its results (which, for instance, would partly explain the higher level of atheists in Slovenia and the Czech Republic), the religious history of given countries, especially the linkage between religious and national identity, has an effect (as in the case of Croatia and Poland, Serbia, Macedonia, Moldova, and Romania). We assume that the overlapping of religious and national identity can have a special importance in CEE, as communist ideology put pressure on overt national identity, treating both religion and nationhood as remnants of the past, to be replaced by unity of ‘the people’ working on the ‘bright future’ of societies freed of the divisions present in the capitalist world. This combination of forces at work could have modified the impact of modernization, in some countries counteracting the impact of communist ideology and complicating the dependencies that are even without these additional reasons complicated enough.

The figures also seem to imply a similarity between Catholic and Orthodox countries, with a lower level of atheism in both mono-confessional Catholic and Orthodox ones, and a higher level of atheism in dominantly Catholic or Orthodox ones. This similarity could suggest that the religious structure of society might have a higher importance than religious tradition. However, we should note that in the Orthodox countries at the starting point after the collapse of communism the level of religiosity was very low, while societal transformation supported religious revival. As a result there was no space for further popularization of atheism.

What seems to be the most general conclusion here is that on the basis of our short analysis we can see that in CEE confessional homogeneity supports the vitality of religion, while plurality or competition from other religions weaken religion and create a field for diversification of attitudes toward it, also supporting the spread of atheism. This would support one of the outcomes of analysis undertaken by Gert Pickel, Detlef Pollack, and Olaf Müller, who concluded that in Europe as a whole ‘religious denominations seem more likely to suffer from processes of religious pluralisation than to profit from them’ (2012: 249).

Again, though, it is worth underlining that in this kind of approach we do not know how the atheism as experienced by people living under the communist regime was understood. If we bear in mind Valentina’s reasoning introduced on the first pages of this essay, doubts lead to further questions: to what extent was declaration of atheism in Eastern Europe simply a way to avoid persecution, and thus were the high numbers of atheists the result of superficial production of uniformity typical of societies under totalitarian powers? This remark also leads us to wonder as to the content of the so-called ‘religious awakening’—signs of it could be, at least to some extent, similarly motivated to declarations of atheism in the past, i.e., by conforming to dominant trends and ‘fashions’.⁹

Religion has been known about and studied for centuries; atheism is a relatively new phenomenon, and much less recognized. All questions, contradictions, and doubts raised here should serve as evidence of the urgent need to prepare and conduct comparative research addressed specifically to atheism and based not only on theoretical distinctions concerning the concept of atheism, but also taking into account the heritage of the past, the roles of religious traditions and other forces in action that produce a space for it. What is said above could suggest that, in spite of the communist indoctrination, some social processes in CEE might be working in the same direction as in Western societies (Borowik 2002; Borowik 2006). This hypothesis would be worth testing in the future in order to better understand both religious belief and atheism.

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CHAPTER 40

THE ISLAMIC WORLD

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INTRODUCTION AND TERMINOLOGY

LOOKING at the history and present state of atheism in the Islamic world, two initial, important qualifications need to be made.¹ First, the Islamic world is highly diverse in geographical, cultural, and political terms, with a great variety of written languages, intellectual traditions, and political-economic conditions. Muslim-majority societies have been subject to both some of the most fundamentalist religious governments of our time (Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan under the Taliban) as well as the only state to have ever legally prohibited all religious practice in public (Albania under Enver Hoxha). Insofar as atheism in Muslim lands is characterized by a theological and moral rejection of Islam, it shows similar contours. The positive beliefs and demands of atheists and other non-believers, however, are much more specific with regard to time and place. This essay focuses primarily on two geographic locations: Iran and the eastern parts of the Arab world, connecting the present position of atheism in these regions with a historical perspective.

Second, the term atheism and its corresponding terms in languages of the Islamic world do not always have identical meanings. In some languages, the European term is used as a loan word, notably so in Turkish (*ateizm*) and Bahasa Indonesia (*ateisme*). In Arabic, Urdu, and (partly) Persian, key terminology of atheism and unbelief is derived from the Qur'an, and has a wider range of reference that includes but is not restricted to atheism.

The Arabic term for atheism and nonreligion is *ilhad* (from which also the Persian *elhad-gari* is derived).² An atheist is *mulhid* (female: *mulhida*). The term can be traced to the Qur'an where it is means deviation. It came to mean the rejection of religion and revelation some two centuries years later, used by Muslim scholars to lump together a vast variety of heretic and freethinking currents (Stroumsa 1999: 123). In the modern era, freethinkers and atheists have adapted the notion of *ilhad* as a positive self-description. Unlike in the Western etymology of atheism, *ilhad* does not have the word 'God' in it; its archaic meaning is 'deviation, rejection, rebellion' (Madelung 1993). It is primarily a theological and moral position, however, and while it today is usually used by Arabic speakers in the sense of atheism, it can go along with a variety of ontologies: atheist, agnostic, deist, dualist, or pantheist. As the ontological reference of *ilhad* has become more specific during the past century, it has also become paralleled by other notions that maintain its original metaphysical openness while avoiding its pejorative connotations. One such term is *la-dini* (nonreligious) that is a common self-description of Arab freethinkers today.³ Because of this ontological ambiguity of non-belief, I sometimes speak of atheists *and* non-believers in the following, reflecting the fact that in the contemporary Arab world at least, the dividing line between theism and atheism is often less important than one's stance towards other key issues of a religious worldview.

The Urdu term for atheism, *dahriyat*, carries a more clearly ontological reference. It goes back to a

Qur’anic verse that polemizes against people who deny the afterworld and God’s omnipotence: ‘And they say: “This worldly life of ours is all there is—we die and we live, and nothing but time (*dahr*) destroys us.” But they have no knowledge of it; they are only speculating’ (45: 24). In the following centuries the Qur’anic reference to *dahr*, the impersonal power of time/fate, became the template for *dahriyya*, a polemic catch-all term in Muslim scholarly literature for any non-creationist ontology, including pre-Islamic Arabian beliefs and Aristotelian metaphysics alike (Goldziher and Goichon 1965). What once may have been a sort of fatalist historicism (Mir 2004: 161), has thus eventually come to denote materialism and atheism in modern usage.

REJECTION OF REVELATION IN THE EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

While explicit atheism is a more recent phenomenon, a rationalist rejection of prophecy and revelation flourished for a relatively short time in the third and fourth centuries of the Islamic Era (ninth and tenth centuries of the Common Era) in the urban centres of the Arab East and Persia. The *ilhad* of this period is most centrally associated with the names of two intellectuals: Ibn al-Rawandi and Abu Bakr al-Razi who influenced less radical forms of freethinking within (rather than against) Islam in the following centuries, and continue to inspire atheists of Muslim origin in the present time.

Abu al-Husayn Ahmad ibn Yahya ibn Ishaq al-Rawandi (d. 245/860 or 298/912), born in Khorasan in Persia and active in Bagdad, was a supporter of the rationalist theology of the *Mu’tazila* at young age but later turned against Islam and revealed religions altogether (Stroumsa 1999: 40–6). He denied prophecy and religions, and described himself as a *mulhid*. He was infamous for his disrespectful and irreverent attitude, which appears to have been more scandalous than the substance of his arguments. He is reported to have called the miracles of Abraham, Jesus and Muhammad ‘fraudulent tricks’, and argued (in the words of one of his critics) ‘that the Qur’an is the speech of an unwise being’ (quoted in Stroumsa 1999: 47).

While Ibn al-Rawandi was as an eccentric rebel theologian who also faced persecution in his lifetime, Abu Bakr Muhammad ibn Zakariya al-Razi (251/865–313/925)⁴ lived a life of scholarly respect and recognition in his home town of Ray (today a suburb of Tehran). One of the foremost alchemists and physicians of his era, Razi produced a number of highly controversial philosophical critiques of prophecy and revelation. None of them is extant except in citations, but their titles alone make his programme clear: *Book on the Prophets’ Fraudulent Tricks*; *Book on the Ploys of the Impostors of Prophecy*; and *Book on the Refutation of Religions*.⁵ The Qur’an, according to Razi, is ‘full of contradictions and does not contain any useful information or explanation’ (Stroumsa 1999: 99). While Islam was the primary target of his criticism, all religions known to Razi—Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism, and Manicheanism—got their share of sharp critique.⁶ Razi’s opposition to prophecy is a primarily moral and political one. Prophecy, Razi argues, is a destructive folly unworthy of a wise God:

How come do you deem it necessary that God would single out some for prophecies and some not, and give them privilege over the people as their guides, and make people dependent on them? And how come do you deem it fitting the wisdom of the All-wise [God] to choose this for them, inciting one against another, enforcing enmities among them, increasing war among them, and thus bringing death upon the people? (Badawi 1945: 204–5)⁷

The views of Ibn al-Rawandi and al-Razi can be summarized as anti-prophetic rationalism.⁸ In the words of the Egyptian existentialist philosopher ‘Abd al-Rahman Badawi (1917–2002), their shared

premise is ‘that the intellect/reason (‘*aql*) is alone sufficient for the knowledge of the good and the evil, so that there is no need for sending a revelation to people assigned with this task by divine order’ (Badawi 1945: 202). Given the extreme centrality of prophecy for Islam, it was also the natural and sufficient target for anti-religious sentiment (Badawi 1945: 199; Stroumsa 1999: 130). This means that while the *ilhad* of the early Islamic era appears strikingly modern in its celebration of free thought, individualistic ethics, and tolerance, it shows no trace of an atheist ontology. Razi was an outspoken deist (Badawi 1945: 202). Ibn al-Rawandi, in turn, appears not so much an atheist as anti-God. The Muslim theologian Ibn al-Jawzi writes about Ibn al-Rawandi: ‘We have never heard anyone defame the Creator and make jest about him as much as this cursed one did [...] Had he denied the Creator altogether, it would have been better for him than to admit his existence, then to polemicize against Him and defame Him’ (cited in Stroumsa 1999: 125). The *mulhidun* of the early Islamic Era lived in a world where there were good and urgent reasons to question the validity of revealed religion, but little or no reason to doubt the intentionality of the universe. Not creation but revelation was the primary problem and cause of religious discontent in this time.

The *ilhad* of the early Islamic era emerged under the favourable conditions of a flourishing empire, a thriving intellectual life, and a highly plural and relatively tolerant religious landscape. This window of opportunity was a passing one, and while also the following centuries saw rationalist doubters of prophecy (such as the poet and philosopher Abu al-A’la al-Ma’arri (973–1058); see al-Ma’arri 1999; Nicholson [1907] 1993: 314–24), it became increasingly unlikely or impossible to express a straightforward rationalist rejection of revelation, at least in poems and scholarly treatises. However, this did not put an end to dissent against the legal and ritual aspects of Islam and their institutionalization in Islamic jurisprudence. From the fifth/eleventh century on, religious discontent came to be articulated more exclusively within an Islamic idiom, notably in the frameworks of Islamic mysticism (Sufism) and heterodox movements which took recourse to a spiritual sublimation of prophecy rather than its rejection.

ATHEISM AND RADICAL MODERNISM

From the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries on, a new wave of anti-religious dissent, this time explicitly including atheism, has gained currency in different parts of the Islamic world. While early Islamic *ilhad* grew in the heartlands of a thriving empire, the second coming of *ilhad*/atheism in the Islamic world took place under the very different conditions of European imperial expansion that cast serious doubts upon established traditions of knowledge, social organization, and religion. First freethinking and anticlerical circles emerged in Iran, India, the Ottoman Empire, and among Muslims in Russia during the second half of the nineteenth century—notably carried by both Christian and Muslim Arabs in the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire. In this time, tendencies of anti-clerical and anti-religious nationalism emerged within the wider framework of secularist modernism (Keddie 1962; al-Khatib 2005; Khalid 2007: 70; Elshakry 2007).

Secularism has rarely implied general opposition to religion in the Islamic world (Iran, the Soviet Union, and Albania being significant exceptions). Even the radical secularism of the Turkish Republic under Atatürk did not act outside the realm of religious discourses, but rather attempted to control and coopt Islam to serve the nation state (Asad 2003; Khalid 2006). In some cases, however, secularist nationalism has taken explicitly anti-religious forms, most notably so in Iran, which also after the Islamic revolution of 1979 remains one of the most important bases of atheism in the Middle East. The case of Iran also illustrates well that contemporary Muslim atheism is not simply an adaptation of

Western atheism, but also draws upon indigenous heretic traditions.

The history of anti-religious modernism in Iran begins with a series of heterodox messianic movements in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, culminating in the mid-nineteenth century in Babism, a militantly anti-clerical movement that declared that a new revelation has made the Qur'an obsolete, envisioned a progressive line of ever-improving revelations, advocated the equality of women, and had major political and military ambitions. The movement was crushed and its leader, the Bab ('door') executed in 1850. In the following decades, some of the Babists formed the politically quietist religion of Baha'ism, while others (Azalis) followed a politically radical course, investing their hopes in a modernist, progressive, and nationalistic programme (Keddie 1962: 267–74) Some Azalis gradually changed their views towards atheism or agnosticism, most notably Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani (1854–96) (Keddie 1962: 286; Rahnema 2011: 39). From a different direction, some Iranians in the Caucasus (in the Russian Empire) articulated a radical modernist programme in combination with a rejection of Islam, notably so Mirza Fath Ali Akhundov (Akhundzadeh) (1812–78), a 'violently anti-Islamic' Iranian nationalist (Keddie 1962: 275; see also Rahnema 2011: 39). Akhundzadeh and Kermani co-authored a classic work of Iranian anti-Islamic nationalism *Kamal od Dowleh and Jalal od Dowleh*⁹ that describes 'all religion as legendary nonsense' (Katouzian 1991: 7; see also Keddie 1962: 275, 286) and marks key points that were to become the canon of anti-religious nationalist modernism in Iran: 'rejection of Islam, anticlericalism, agnosticism, Westernism, anti-imperialism, glorification of the pre-Islamic past, and hatred of modern Iranian actuality' (Keddie 1962: 287).

This particular history of modernism in the idiom of an anti-religious nationalism lives on in Iran until the present. Despite the increasing popularity in post-revolutionary Iran of currents that unite Muslim religiosity with secularist politics (Mahdavi 2011), being secular continues to be associated with being not a Muslim more than anywhere else in the Middle East.

Anti-religious modernism in Iran has been far from united about the issue of God, even about Islam. Some, like the anti-clerical intellectual Ahmad Kasravi (1890–1946), sharply attacked clerical power and religious concepts in the name of a true, correct Islam (Keddie 1962: 287; Rahnema 2011: 41). Others, like the novelist Sadeq Hedayat (1903–1950), developed a more comprehensive social critique of Islam (Hedayat [1945] 1979; Katouzian 1991). In the course of the twentieth century, secularist modernism has found also explicitly positive-atheist voices, such as that of Ahmad Shamlou (1925–2000), a humanist, communist, and politically engaged poet. In contrast to the anti-clericalism of preceding generations, Shamlou presents a more metaphysical vision of humanity in the process of gaining independence from God(s), and becoming alone responsible for justice:

Is not man a miracle?
Man ... this devil who dragged God under, tamed the
world and shattered the prisons!—who tore apart
the mountains, broke the seas, drank the
fires and turned the waters into ash!
Man ... This just cruelty! This bewildering bewildered
thing!
Man ... This sultan of the greatest love and the most
dreadful loneliness.

(Shamlou 1957: 337; translated and cited in Alishan 1985: 382)

The Archimedean point of the modernist turn against religion was an almost Messianic belief in progress and science (Keddie 1962: 287; al-Khatib 2005). A good example is the autobiographical essay by Isma'il Adham (1911–40) published in Egypt in 1937 and titled 'Why I am an atheist' (al-Khatib 2005: 265–73). Son of a Muslim Egyptian father and a Protestant European mother, Adham

grew up and went to school in an elite milieu in Istanbul and Cairo, and studied mathematics and physics in Moscow. He received a conservative religious education from his father and attended the American College in Istanbul, and abandoned religious beliefs in favour of science at an early age. He reports that he was involved in the founding of the ‘Society for the promotion of atheism’ in Turkey in 1927, and claims that it had one thousand university and secondary school students among its members (al-Khatib 2005: 266–7). Adham’s account is exemplary in the way he presents science (physics, mathematics, and evolution theory in particular) as the new faith that replaces religious belief:¹⁰

I left religions, and abandoned all (religious) beliefs, and put my faith in science and scientific logic alone. To my great surprise and amazement, I found myself happier and more confident than I had been when I had struggled with myself in the attempt to maintain my religious belief. (Cited in al-Khatib 2005: 267–8)

Nowhere else did this faith in progress take as violent forms as in the Soviet Union where, starting in 1926 and lasting until the late 1930s, a campaign against Muslim institutions was unleashed in Central Asia, resulting in the destruction or dispossession of mosques and religious schools, the imprisonment, killing and exiling of clerics, and the effective marginalization of Islam as a public idiom of morality and politics. Importantly, this campaign was largely carried out by Central Asian and Tatar Muslims, many of whom had originally belonged to the milieu of the Jadidi Muslim reformism and had become radicalized by the Bolshevik ethos of creating new by destroying the old (Khalid 2007: 50–83; personal communication with Adeeb Khalid, 27 January 2012).

The scientist ethos of modernist atheism has later been carried on mainly by Marxism, which since mid-twentieth century has provided a key milieu for atheism. Communists and socialists in Muslim countries have rarely promoted atheism in public, however. On the contrary, they have usually tried to counter anti-communist propaganda by arguing that Islam, when properly understood, is perfectly in accordance with socialism. Far from being merely a tactical move, this argument is congruent with the beliefs of most communists in the Muslim world. A colleague working on the history of communism in Pakistan told me: ‘My grandfather was a devout Muslim all his life, and called himself a Marxist to his dying day’ (personal communication with Ali Raza, 27 January 2011). An Egyptian lawyer known to me, who was a member of the Egyptian Communist Party for two decades, is famous in his social circle for his irreverent jokes and provocative ideas about divine (in)justice, and yet he emphatically identifies with the Islamic mystical idea of a loving God. Rather than actively promoting atheism, communism in the Islamic world has privatized religion and offered a this-worldly ideology of salvation that may or may not go along with atheism (Rahnema 2011: 42).

In the 1950s and 60s, a time of great optimism vested in a progressive socialist future, religiosity was seen to be in retreat among highly educated urban populations of the Middle East and South Asia. The atheism and nonreligion in socialist and communist circles in particular were characterized by condescending vanguardism rather than the fierce anti-clericalism of the early-twentieth century (Rahnema 2011: 42). Different winds had already begun to blow, however. By the 1940s, nationalist intellectuals in the Arab East had turned to reinterpreting and accommodating religious heritage instead of marginalizing or abandoning it, and the first tendencies of Islamist politics were articulated by the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and the Jama’at-i Islami in India. Atheism, too, became attentive to heritage, as documented by works taking up the history of anti-prophetic rationalism (Badawi 1945; al-Tawil [1947] 1979; al-Khatib 2005: 19, 293–302) and the subversive potential of mystical Islam (al-’Azm 1969, 1993). Muhammad Kamil al-Khatib argues that grounding atheism in Islamic traditions reflected a general turn in the Arab world towards heritage as an attempt to solve modern problems (al-Khatib 2005: 20–1), a turn that has since the 1970s has reached its climax in the currently ongoing Islamic revival, a process of dramatically increased religiosity, keen interest in religious

knowledge, and the spread of political movements aiming to install a conservative and legalistic understanding of Islam as the prime or sole foundation of politics and morality.

ATHEISM IN THE TIME OF THE ISLAMIC REVIVAL

Islam has changed much in the past decades, and so has unbelief in Islam. In a time when fundamentalist religiosity and modern education go hand in hand, and religious movements speak in the name of progress and development, the secular modernist equation of religion with tradition has become obsolete (and probably never was accurate in the first place). In the Arab world, communism has lost most of its mobilizing power after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and atheists have become fewer even in the ranks of the nationalist intelligentsias. While religious indifference has become less likely, expressions of atheism and nonreligion have become more radical (Goetze 2011: 81). This has partly to do with new media that make it easier to communicate controversial views, and partly with the conditions of the Islamic revival that give atheism a different critical edge.

In biographic interviews that I have conducted with people in Egypt who describe themselves as being atheist (*mulhid*) and/or nonreligious (*la-dini*), two key themes emerged:

First is a general annoyance about hypocrisy, contradictions, and the unwillingness of people to have a ‘serious’ discussion about religion. Second, justice and injustice play key role in all of these accounts, be it in the form of gender equality, war and peace, social justice, the injustice of hell, or the inconsistent and contradictory behaviour of religious people. (Schielke 2012)

The ontologies my interview partners articulate range from positive-atheistic to agnostic to spiritual but anti-religious. The positive ideals they formulate include, in different combinations, scientist modernism, Marxism, Islamic mysticism, liberal humanism, human rights, feminism, and conventional notions about tolerance, honesty and justice. While the interviewees also emphasize the importance of knowledge, reading, free debate, and scientific rationality, their unbelief in Islam emerges first and foremost as a moral-political rejection of prophecy, religion, and the monotheistic God. Theirs is a counter-revivalist atheism/non-belief that reflects and critiques the fundamentalist modernity that has become hegemonic in their time.

In Egypt at least, this primarily moral focus of atheism contradicts the public image of atheism as a nihilistic, amoral vision of a life without purpose (see, e.g., Mosbah 2013). This common-sense vision of atheism’s radical moral alterity, corresponding with the Egyptian common-sense equation of ‘knowing God’ with having a moral sense, is a key reason why atheism is such a highly marginal and unlikely path, sanctioned by both social rejection as well as intuitive moral taboos. In most Muslim societies since the 1970s, the possibility of atheism is further marginalized by the systematic marginalization of political and scientific paradigms (such as Marxism and evolution theory) that could provide a positive ontological foundation to the moral unease with monotheistic religion.

The question, then, is why some people do follow such an unlikely and socially unrewarding path. In the case of Egypt, the individual motivations—different though they are—share some structural similarities. (Egyptian non-believers are too few and individualistic to fit into any clear typology, and statistical data are not available. However, on the basis of my ethnographic research among nonreligious Egyptians, some general observations can be made.) The social backgrounds and positions of non-believers in Egypt are often characterized by high education; intellectual, white-collar, or artistic professions; and an intensive engagement with literature, arts, philosophy, and religious traditions. Many of the men have or have had relationships with foreign women, and many men and women alike have lived with someone without being married, which is generally considered

completely out of bounds in Egypt. Others, however, live entirely conventional lives. In summary, it can be said that nonreligion and atheism in Egypt go well with high education, economic independence, urbanity, intellectual activity, alternative lifestyles, cosmopolitan connectedness, and left-wing politics, but even all these factors together are not sufficient to make atheism more than a possibility in a society so profoundly attached to the transcendent as Egypt. Therefore it is crucial to pay attention to the level of personal trajectories and formation. My atheistic interlocutors in Egypt all express a strong trust in their own judgement combined with a general unease with contradictions and inconsistency, making them more prone to adopt radical visions and willing to do away with the divine trust which most people in their social milieus are trying to maintain, be it by the means of revivalist piety or of alternative spiritual visions (Schielke 2012).

A significant split among present-day atheists and non-believers of Muslim origin worldwide has to do with the question of identification with or against the label ‘Muslim’. This issue is especially urgent in places like India and Western Europe where ‘Muslim’ is a politically loaded marker of ethno-racial difference.

One current, strongly visible in Western media, expresses sweeping opposition to Islam in a highly antagonistic tone that establishes a direct and inevitable causality between Islamic scripture, and injustice and backwardness (see, e.g., Ibn Warraq 1995, 2003; Hirsi Ali 2007, 2010). In Europe, some formerly Muslim atheists from this current have formed alliances with anti-Muslim right-wing populism. In the Netherlands, for example, the Dutch-Iranian Ehsan Jami joined forces with the right-wing populist Geert Wilders in a newspaper article that took issue with the prophet Muhammad’s life and person (Jami and Wilders 2007). Ayan Hirsi Ali, a Dutch politician of Somali origin played a major role in the anti-Islamic turn of public opinion and policy in the Netherlands. In a significant contrast to the anti-imperialist tradition of anti-religious modernism in the Middle East, Hirsi Ali strongly identifies with the Euro-American imperial heritage, supported the military campaign in Iraq, and despite her proclaimed atheism presents Christianity as a positive force against Islam (Hirsi Ali 2010; Alessandrini 2012). This current is heavily contested, however, by other atheists of Muslim origin who see themselves acting within rather than against Islam, and do not want to leave Islam to be monopolized by either the religious right or European new nationalism. A prominent academic voice of the latter position is the philosopher Sadiq Jalal al-’Azm (1934–) who articulates a fundamental critique of contemporary religious concepts, while at the same time arguing for the plurality of Islamic traditions and their capacity to nurture progressive and critical tendencies (al-’Azm 1969, 1992, 1993, 2005). This double move of identifying with Muslims while not believing in Islam is, in turn, often associated with leftist and anti-imperialist politics, and (in the context of Western Europe and India) with a support of Muslims’ minority rights.

In most Muslim-majority societies today, atheism and nonreligion are strongly scandalized, and often also criminalized (see Goetze 2011). In Egypt, for example, there is no legal option of being non-confessional. Believer or not, one must be legally a Muslim, Christian, or a Jew. The confessional nature of civil law makes it possible to forcibly divorce an apostate.¹¹ In Saudi Arabia and Iran, among other places, apostasy (and by implication, atheism) are considered capital crimes (Human Rights Watch 2012). Legal prosecution of atheism has usually not so much to do with atheism as such, but with public critique of religious leaders, core Muslim beliefs, and the prophet Muhammad. The most spectacular case has been the legal opinion (*fatwa*) by Iran’s spiritual leader Ruhollah Khomeini against the Indian-British novelist Salman Rushdie in 1989, where the call to kill Rushdie was based not on his beliefs, but on the unfavourable representation of Muhammad and the Qur’ān in his novel *The Satanic Verses* (Rushdie 1988; Pipes [1990] 2003: 27). The most massive event of state violence related to the accusation of atheism has been the genocide against communists

in Indonesia 1965–6, killing up to half a million people (Cribb 2002).

In most cases, non-believers and atheists have to fear social rejection more than state persecution. In Egypt, being openly not religious at all, or even worse not believing in God, can lead to loss of job, divorce or impossibility to marry, exclusion from the family, and in at least one case it has lead to assassination (of the secularist intellectual Farag Foda in 1992; see Soage 2007). This does not mean that non-believers would live in hiding, however. Much depends on family background, workplace, and social milieu. While some suffer from isolation, others move in social circles of like-minded people. Furthermore, non-believers are often socially well-positioned and intellectually and culturally influential. They do, however, commonly resort to tactics of duplicity or ambiguity whereby they avoid publicly criticizing core religious beliefs and personalities and instead focus on social, political, and moral problems that they deem urgent.

The public invisibility and/or ambiguity of atheists and non-believers in most of the Islamic world makes it very difficult to estimate their numbers. In any case, they are a small minority. In a survey on veiling in Turkey conducted in 2007, 0.9 per cent of respondents identified themselves as ‘someone with no religious conviction’, and 2.3 per cent as ‘someone who does not believe in religious obligations’, which due to Turkey’s radical secularist heritage is probably more than in most Muslim majority societies outside the former socialist block (Konda Research and Consultancy 2007: 26). Data from the World Values Survey on religiosity in Muslim-majority societies show the following figures on ‘not a religious person’ and ‘convinced atheist’, respectively: Turkey 16.9 per cent and 0.5 per cent; Indonesia 15.2 per cent and 0.3 per cent, Iran 16.2 per cent and 0.1 per cent; Morocco 8.2 per cent and nil; Jordan 7.7 per cent and 0.1 per cent, Egypt 7.5 per cent and nil. Such data are to be treated with caution because the categories of inquiry may not be congruent with emic categories. However, they do show that explicit atheism is a marginal choice, and that also being not a religious person is a clear minority position, albeit a significantly more popular one in Iran, Turkey and Indonesia than in the Arab world. Turkey and Iran also have the lowest attendance of religious services, with 32.9 per cent and 23.8 per cent respectively never attending religious services, as compared to 19.5 per cent in Egypt and 1.5 per cent in Indonesia (World Values Survey 2009).

CONCLUSION

In a final note, it is important to keep in mind the ambiguity and fluidity of atheism and nonreligion in the Islamic world, past and present. Critique of religion is usually a matter of morals and politics as much as it is one of metaphysics. Heresy is often more influential than unbelief. Atheism and agnosticism often go along with an identitarian attachment to Islam. Individual biographies show great shifts, with Marxist materialists turning into Islamic preachers (Aishima and Salvatore 2009; Rahnema 2011: 41) and Islamist activists becoming freethinkers (Wasella 1997; al-Birri 2006), while remembering their earlier experience and former comrades with fondness. Rather than a fixed position or ideology, atheism/*ilhad* in the Islamic world should therefore be perhaps best understood as a radical tradition (or rather, a conglomerate of traditions) within a wider landscape of moral-spiritual critique and dissent that is nearly as old as Islam. As such, it stands in a paradoxical tension with Islamist politics which have both marginalized and enforced atheism and nonreligion: Stripped of political conditions where it could flourish, atheism does not disappear under conditions of revivalist religious movements and religious governments, but rather shows its potential as a radical form of moral-political dissent.

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CHAPTER 41

INDIA

JOHANNES QUACK

INTRODUCTION

It is frequently argued that ‘modernity’ and ‘the West’ are the time and place to look for the roots of atheism (Berman 1988; Hyman 2007).¹ Charles Taylor postulated something along these lines by equating pre-modern Europe with the contemporary societies in the non-Western world, speaking of a (pre-modern) time and place where there were and are (non-Western) societies in which a certain form of ‘secularity’ was or is unthinkable and un-Experienceable (2007: 11, 38, 87). Well before Taylor there have been elaborate debates about whether one can speak of pre-Enlightenment atheism, unbelief or secularity (for a detailed summary, see Weltecke 2010: 23–99). At the same time, however, some scholars argue that the world’s first atheists are from ancient India (e.g., Hiorth 1995: vii; Laure 1996: 311–20; Minois 2000: 31; Cooke 2006; Flynn 2007). Two interrelated questions seem to be pivotal here: Whether it is ‘anachronistic’ to speak of pre-modern atheism and whether it is a form of ‘mental colonialism’ to refer to non-Western people as atheists. Taking these two questions together, it can be asked whether the contemporary atheist movement in India is merely a ‘global expression’ of post-Enlightenment Europe or whether its roots reach further back into Indian history, probably even to Vedic times.

In order to specify the charge of an ‘anachronism’ it is helpful to look at similar issues in other academic fields. The use of the mathematical notion of ‘statistics’ on the basis of probability theory is commonly dated to the correspondence between Blaise Pascal and Pierre de Fermat in the year 1654. It is unquestioned that there is no pre-modern probability theory comparable to the one developed at that time and therefore it would be anachronistic to speak of pre-modern statistics of this kind. On the other hand, the term ‘aesthetics’ in its contemporary understanding as ‘sense of beauty’ was coined (in German) by Alexander Baumgarten as late as 1735, but there has been a sense of beauty of many different kinds—although not labelled as aesthetics—in pre-modern times. Is ‘atheism’ more like ‘statistics’ or more like ‘aesthetics’ (see Daston 2001: 7–25, for the same problem in a different context)?

The charge of ‘mental colonialism’ (Nandy 1994: 6–7) poses similar questions along rather different lines: Post-colonial scholars argued that the implementation of concepts stemming from a certain ‘episteme’ (in Foucault’s [1970] sense as the conditions for the possibility of a discursive formation) can colonize or even violate other ways of knowing and other ways of being in the world that are constituted by different epistemes.² A related argument holds that the Western concept of ‘religion’ understood as a private decision to believe (or not to believe) in some supernatural entity was introduced and implemented in countries like India through colonialism (King 2003), as was its flipside in the form of secularism or atheism (Fitzgerald 2003).³ Accordingly, there are debates whether and to what degree the Western concepts of religion and atheism ‘colonized’ the Indian mind

even if these categories were and are not merely adapted but were always modified, transformed and re-configured (Nandy 2004).

In order to address these questions this article will, first, complement Stephen Bullivant's contribution (see 'Defining "Atheism"') by further problematizing his notion of atheism with respect to India's past (focusing primarily on Hindu traditions). The main part of this article then addresses the contemporary atheist movement in India by drawing on the (sparse) scientific literature on this topic. The central focus will be on the lived experiences of atheists in present-day India. At the end, the article returns to the questions raised in the introduction. In order to illustrate possible answers, a heuristic analogy between 'modern atheism' and 'linear perspective' in painting will be employed.

PROBLEMS OF 'ATHEISM' IN INDIA

The definition adopted in this publication understands 'atheism' as 'an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods'. One problem with this definition, addressed already by Bullivant, is the differentiation between God and gods on the one hand, and other supernatural beings, forces, and phenomena on the other. This opposition is particularly treacherous in the Hindu context. For example, one of the concepts often translated as 'god', *brahman*, can also refer to an a-cosmic, abstract, metaphysical Absolute 'without qualities' (*nirguna* as opposed to *saguna*). In addition, *brahman* can also denote liberation (*mokṣa*), truth, pure consciousness, and/or the innermost self of every being (*ātman*). Further, there are not only gods, but also half-gods and godlike ghosts and demons, some of which are referred to as *deva* or *devi*. In reference to the criticism of their existence Müller spoke of 'a-devism' since it cannot be equated with 'a-theism' (Goody 1996: 674). In classical Hindu traditions the term *deva* is also used for more or less 'deified' natural forces (*Agni*, *Indra*, *Sūriya*, etc.) or moral principles (*Āditya*, *Mitra*, *Varuna*, etc.). In contemporary forms of Hinduism a *baba*, *guru*, or *sādhu* can be considered to be 'divine human beings' or 'godmen'. Do all these examples fall under the definition adopted in this publication or not? In general, the worldly realm of human affairs is often not strictly separate from the realm of Hindu god(s). And vice versa, the mundane nature of many gods is made clear in their being 'fed' through devotional offerings (*pūjā*, *dāna*) and sacrifices (*yajna*), and to the extent that they can be considered dependent on the religious practices of the people (see Quack 2012c). Keeping this in mind, it is interesting to see the different ways in which religious beliefs and practices were criticized in India from very early on.

ATHEISM IN ANCIENT INDIA?

A. L. Basham notes that 'unbelief' must have been fairly widespread in ancient India (2003: 296) and Jan Gonda states that early *Upaniṣad* texts report on people who do not donate to the Brahmins and who do not believe or sacrifice (1960: 313–14). Outspoken criticism of religious beliefs and practices can further be found in the *Mahābhārata*, as well as in Pali and Prakrit canonical works of the Buddhists and the Jains and their commentaries, and for example in the *Jābāli* episode of the *Rāmāyaṇa*, and some of the *Purāṇa*-s (particularly the *Vishṇupurāṇa* and the *Padmapurāṇa*). Such challenges to religious systems raised variations of the theodicy problem and questioned conceptions of a personal God or gods, that God or gods created the universe, and that God or gods provide the basis of the moral order in the world. More central to such criticism was, however, the assumptions of divine

authorship of the *Vedas*, of the transmigration of the soul, of worship in form of sacrifices, and apparent logical inconsistencies in the doctrines (Joshi 1966: 192, 194; Thapar 2002: 164).

The school of thought for whom the notion of atheism is most often used by contemporary Indian atheists as well as some academics is called *Lokāyata* (or *Cārvāka*). *Lokāyata* is classified as one of the three ‘heterodox’ (*nāstika*) Indian thought systems (*darśana*),⁴ alongside Buddhism and Jainism. Heterodox schools of thought rejected and were rejected by the ‘orthodox’ (*āstika*) Hindu philosophies of *mīmāṃsā*, *nyāya*, *vaiśeṣika*, *sāṃkhya*, *yoga*, and *vedānta*. These orthodox *darśanas* defended the revelation of the *Veda* and the existence of a transcendent reality beyond the contingencies of the human condition (see Flood 1998: 225). Yet, scholars disagree about who or what the *Lokāyata* were and when they started to develop a coherent philosophical system (see for a summary Franco 2011). Unfortunately, many of the original texts of the *Lokāyata* have been destroyed and their content can only be reconstructed indirectly, primarily by studying the lampoons, libels and pasquils of those who rejected them (Chattopadhyaya 1964: 186).

Due to terminological and interpretational differences there are further candidates for ancient Indian atheism. Gonda understands ‘atheism’ as the denial of the existence of an eternal, personal god and argues that apart from the *Lokāyatas*, Jaina and the Buddhists, the *Ājīvikas*, the *Mīmāṃsā* and the classical *Sāṃkhya* were, in that sense, also atheists, since none of them ‘recognise any world-ruling, sovereign Lord’. But Gonda also adds—illustrating the problems addressed above—that the groups he lists do not deny ‘the existence of Devas, i.e., higher beings with great, but nonetheless limited power’ (1960: 313, translation by J. Quack, see on this debate also Klimkeit 1971: 41). Basham notes that the unorthodox sect of the *Ājīvikas*, consisting of a body of ascetics, ‘was certainly atheistic, and its main feature was strict determinism’ (2003: 295). He further argues, however, that Buddha, Mahāvīra, Gōśāla, and many lesser teachers of their period ignored the gods, but they were not thoroughgoing atheists and materialists (Basham 2003: 296). L. R. Joshi starts with a more narrow definition of ‘atheism’ as a system that is ‘opposed to all forms of spiritualism and religion’. On this basis he states that ‘the *Cārvāka* doctrine is the only true form of atheism’ (1966: 189).

GENEALOGY OF ATHEISM IN INDIA

The genealogy and further development of the positions attributed to *Lokāyata* and other ideas and groups critical of religion is not well researched. According to Basham, an undercurrent of materialism is traceable in India from the time of the *Lokāyatas* onwards (2003: 297). A similar point is made by Debiprasad Chattopadhyaya who, however, does not hide his sympathy for the atheist movement of the twentieth century and highlights his personal Marxist convictions (1969). In contrast to this, Hiorth argues that atheism was almost absent from Indian culture for more than 2000 years, even though the memory of the *Lokāyata* philosophy was kept alive. He holds that atheism in India only started to raise its head again in the nineteenth century, mostly as a result of Western influence (1998a: vi). This position is supported by the historian of religion Hans-Joachim Klimkeit who holds that it cannot be assumed that we can detect a significant relationship between schools like the *Lokāyatas* and the modern anti-religious movements (1971: 41).

The whole debate summarized so far is muddled rather than systematized through the use of the notion ‘atheism’. Some of the arguments attributed to the *Lokāyatas*, on the one hand, have a lot in common with the contemporary atheists’ position. Not only do both deny the existence of a ‘soul’ which can survive the death of a person or the existence of some supreme being who rules the world and intervenes in human affairs but both also make fun of the performance of many religious rites

and doctrines. It seems questionable, on the other hand, to equate criticism of certain beliefs and practices prevailing at that time with contemporary atheist positions that draw on modern science, Marxism, utilitarianism, a universal concept of religion and the division between ‘natural’ and ‘supernatural’ as well as many other discursive developments that form the ‘background conditions’ of common forms of nonreligion today (Taylor 2007: 14, 172–4, 323–5).

The idea of an unbroken genealogy reaching back to ancient Indian atheism plays an important role in debates about contemporary atheism in India because of this ambivalent assessment.

Representatives of atheist groups draw on the similarities to argue against those who accuse them of being ‘agents of the West’ as well as henchmen of ‘mental colonialism’ (Quack 2012a: 200, 245–6, 300–11). The former Vice-chancellor of Andhra University and retired High Court Justice, Avula Sambasiva Rao, for example, states that philosophy in India started with materialism and *svabhāvika* (naturalism) to challenge the argument that atheism was imported to India from the West (Rao 1990). Other representatives of atheist groups in India further claim, as for example Lakshmanshastrī Joshi, that the usual historical accounts of the intellectual history of India overlooked atheistic and rationalistic philosophers (Joshi 2007: 9). Today practically all contemporary Indian atheist and rationalist organizations argue that their roots are to be found in the early Vedic period (Quack 2012a: 52). In summary, just as it would be problematic to ignore the commonalities and the importance of this genealogy to contemporary atheism in India it would be questionable to argue that atheism existed in its contemporary form in ancient India. If we attempt to assess commonalities and differences we need a more dynamic approach. An attempt to illustrate what such an approach could look like will be made after taking a close look at the distinctive characteristics of contemporary atheist groups in India.

ORGANIZED ATHEISM IN INDIA

Most of the contemporary atheist organizations in India were founded in the middle of the twentieth century while their direct forerunners can be located in nineteenth-century England and the social reform and anti-caste movements in nineteenth and twentieth-century India (Quack 2012a: 57–78). Alongside their emphasis on indigenous roots the Indian atheists acknowledge their debt to the European enlightenment and specific anti-religious movements in Europe and the USA from the nineteenth century until today, as well as the influence of Marxist and socialist ideas in some parts of India. The historical context of such exchanges is best researched with respect to the so-called ‘Bengal Renaissance’ which featured, for example, a self-declared atheist group around the teacher and poet Derozio (see, e.g., Senagupta 2000). Lesser known are groups such as the Gujarat Vernacular Society (also Gujarat Vidya Sabha) founded in 1844 (see Chavda 1979) and the Dev Samaj, founded in 1887 (see for both Quack 2012b: 70). Besides the largest city of Bengal, Calcutta (Kolkata), archival material of virulent atheistic debates and activities are to be found in other centres of Indo-Western exchange of the nineteenth century, i.e., cities like Madras (Chennai) and Bombay (Mumbai), where ‘infidel literature’ from rationalist, secularist, and atheist groups from Great Britain was available (Klimkeit 1971: 119; Royle 1974: 171–2). Particularly influential Western atheists were Robert Green Ingersoll (Klimkeit 1971: 70, 82; Rajannan 1976), Charles Bradlaugh (Royle 1974: 171–2; Jahagirdar 1986), and Annie Wood Besant before her ‘conversion’ to Theosophy (see Royle 1985). While the term ‘freethinker’ was the most widespread self-identification at the end of the nineteenth century, this changed in the beginning of the twentieth century when the first ‘rationalist’ societies were founded. The latter term is the most common label in India until today but in most

cases it is interchangeable with labels such as atheist, (secular) humanist, secularist, freethinker, and sceptic (Hiorth 1998: v).

The four most influential atheist and rationalist organizations in twentieth century India were the Atheist Center, the Self-Respect Movement, the Radical Humanists and the Rationalist Association of India. The Atheist Centre was founded by Goparaju Ramachandra Rao (1902–75), generally known as Gora, and his wife Saraswathi Gora (1912–2006) in the year 1940 at Mudnur village and was shifted to Vijayawada, Andhra Pradesh in 1947. Ever since, it has advocated atheism and rationalism and promoted social reform through scientific education and social activities (Gora 1975; Shet 2000). After establishing contact with likeminded groups in the West, Gora organized the First World Atheist Conference in 1972. Subsequently, his children took over his legacy and they organized several further World Atheist Conferences in Vijayawada, the last one being in 2011.

Narendra Nath Bhattacharya (1887–1954), later known as M. N. Roy, founded with his wife Ellen Roy and colleagues (e.g., V. M. Tarkunde) the Indian Radical Humanist Movement, out of which the Indian Radical Humanist Association emerged. The radical humanist movement was particularly influential for the foundational years of the Indian atheist and rationalist movement in the twentieth century. Today the work is mainly confined to the publication of the journal *The Radical Humanist* and a few monographs, as well as to the organization of an annual M. N. Roy Memorial Lecture (Klimkeit 1971; Hiorth 1996: 127–46; Pant 2005; Talwar 2006; Ray 2007).

E. V. Ramasami Naicker (1879–1973),⁵ who dropped his surname because it indicated his caste, became known all over India as Periyar ('the great one'). Periyar was part of the independence movement in the Tamil-speaking south of India. While in prison he became the leader of the Justice Party, which was later renamed Dravidar Kazhagam (Dravidian Association) in 1944. Under the headings of atheism and rationalism Periyar and his followers initially fought for a utopian atheistic Dravidistan independent of the Hindi-speaking north and free of the caste system. Periyar summarized his 'mission' in the following words: 'I resolved to eradicate the evils of casteism. I decided to fight against god and superstitions' (2005: 68–9). His party split in 1949 in Dravidar Kazhagam (DK) and Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam (DMK) led by C. N. Annadurai who became the Chief Minister of the state now called Tamil Nadu in 1967. Due to Periyar's legacy, the reference to rationalism and atheism was at least rhetorically a central element within the political discourse of Tamil Nadu.

Finally, probably the oldest still active atheist and rationalist organization in India was the Rationalist Association of India (RAI) founded in the year 1930, initially as The Anti-Priestcraft Association, but renamed in 1931 as the RAI. One of the most influential figures behind the foundation of the RAI was former vice-chancellor of Bombay University, Raghunath Purushottam Paranjpye (also spelled Paranjape or Paranjpe; 1876–1966). The activities of the RAI were discontinued in Bombay after World War II, but many of its former members were involved in the foundation of a new organization in 1949 under the name Indian Rationalist Association (IRA). Paranjpye served as president of the IRA from 1949 to 1952 (with M. N. Roy and others as vice-presidents). In the 1990s the organization split again into RAI and IRA.

The majority of the people behind this emerging rationalist and atheist movement in twentieth century India were well-educated Indian intellectuals with strong affinities to Western education and culture. Some of them had direct connections to the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) in London (see Cooke 2006: 281) and Paranjpye, for example, was elected Honorary Associate of the RPA in 1931 (Indian Rationalist Association 1974: 10).⁶ Others had and continue to have contact to the International Humanist and Ethical Union (IHEU), currently the biggest umbrella organization embracing humanist, atheist, rationalists, secularist, laïque, freethinkers and similar organizations world-wide. M. N. Roy, for example, had participated in the foundation of the IHEU and was elected

its vice president in 1952. Today many of the contemporary Indian rationalist and atheist groups are connected through the umbrella organization Federation of Indian Rationalist Associations (FIRA). FIRA was founded by the Keralan rationalist Basava Premanand (1930–2009) in 1997 and is also affiliated with the IHEU. Premanand was also the formal spokesperson of the Indian CSICOP, Tamil Nadu, which is an off-spring of the US-based Committee for Skeptical Inquiry (CSI, formerly known as the Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, CSICOP).⁷

Starting with founder of the Hindutva movement, Vinayak Damodar Savarkar (1883–1966), up to recent ‘freethinker’ meetups in larger Indian cities organized via Facebook, there are quite a few atheists or agnostics in India who have never joined an atheist organization. The anti-colonial freedom fighter Bhagat Singh (1907–31) is arguably the most famous of them. He had studied European revolutionary movements, was attracted to communism and anarchism, became famous for his engagement in violent revolutionary activities and was hanged by the British Colonial powers for shooting a police officer. His death made him a martyr of the Indian freedom struggle. Singh wrote a pamphlet entitled *Why I am an Atheist* while in a condemned cell in 1931. This is re-printed and read by many rationalist and atheist organizations to date.⁸

Given the long history of exchange with likeminded groups in the West, it is not surprising to observe many similarities in the formal structures, activities, and ideologies between them. These include the arrangement and function of their meetings, the performance and explanation of alleged miracles, the tendering to win a large amount of money for the performance of a real miracle, but also the ridiculing rhetoric and the unequal distribution of the sexes (for such a comparison, see Quack 2012b; 2012a: 286–93). Also with respect to a more philosophical understanding of atheism, the Indian atheists’ discourse has distinct overlaps with that of Western atheist groups. In both cases atheism, rationalism, and naturalism are seen as feeding into one another and into a rejection of everything supernatural (Bandiste 1999: 11–17; Baggini 2003). In this view, the ‘supernatural’ includes virtually all beliefs and practices generally labelled ‘religious’ in the modern understanding of the term. Religion is to be separated from ‘secular’ social realms, such as that of politics. Secular politics are considered to provide the most just form of governance. Religion is further opposed to science. From the development and progress of modern sciences the Indian atheists and rationalists draw their most central conviction: there is nothing supernatural in the world; in principle, everything can be explained through science.

It is this ‘modern’ and ‘Western’ conceptualization of ‘religion’ that is criticized by scholars like Ashis Nandy. Nandy rejects what he calls the ‘hegemonic language of secularism’ that he sees popularized by members of the atheist and rationalist groups in India. According to him, religion in India is to be understood as less ‘ideological’ and as more of a ‘way of life’ (2004: 322, 333). In a reformulation of his charge of ‘mental colonialism’ he also turns Marx’s famous metaphor of religion as opium that is often quoted by Indian atheists against them: ‘To accept the ideology of secularism is to accept the ideologies of progress and modernity as the new justifications of domination and the use of violence to sustain these ideologies as the new opiates of the masses’ (2004: 343).

Independently of how one evaluates the position of Nandy one has to agree with him that the atheists and rationalists in India do indeed base their position on a specific understanding of ‘religion’ that also forms the basis of ‘modern atheism’ (see below). At the same time it has to be added that the Indian atheists feature the distinguishing characteristic of strong engagement with social and political activism, especially against the caste system. Atheism is actively proposed as an alternative ‘way of life’ in India (Gora [1941] 2007: 109). Being an atheist can have various influences on the private lives of the people. It may lead to problems within one’s family, as well as within to the wider

community in which one lives, since it touches on questions of how to raise one's children and how to celebrate and deal with the life-cycle rituals of birth, marriage and death, for which they propose secular alternatives (as do likeminded groups in other countries). However, atheist and rationalist organizations in India are usually not only geared to the criticism of religion(s). Their concerns may reach from the challenge of people who claim to have supernatural powers ('godmen') and a strong criticism of the caste-system to environmental issues, sex education in school, problems of alcohol addiction and activities against corruption. All criticism of religion, in their view, should lead to social reform as well.

Demographic data with respect to atheism in India hardly exists and there are methodological and interpretive difficulties with respect to the few figures available. The 2001 census of India divided a total of 1,028,610,328 Indians into 80.5 per cent Hindus, 13.4 per cent Muslims, 2.3 per cent Christians, 1.9 per cent Sikhs, 0.8 per cent Buddhists, 0.4 per cent Jains, and 0.6 per cent belonging to 'other religions & persuasions' (e.g., Jews, Zoroastrians and Baha'is) while 727,588 Indians (i.e., 0.1 per cent) did not state their religion. Are we to conclude that there were 727,588 atheists in India in 2001? Better not. Even if one accepts the scientific credibility of how the data was collected it is not at all clear why people did not choose to state their religion. Moreover, the label 'Hindu' does not necessarily signify a religious affiliation or a set of beliefs but can be expressive of a social, political, or cultural identity. As mentioned above, even the founder of the *hindutva* movement (Hindu nationalist movement), Vinayak Damodar Savarkaris considered to be an atheist or agnostic. In other words, while many of 727,588 Indians might not see themselves as atheists, some of the remaining 99.9 per cent do so.

Given that it is not unreasonable to assume that many atheists in India are Marxists, one could try to investigate atheism within Marxist or communist groups in India. This seems problematic as well, however, given the large regional differences and the fact that atheism is hardly an issue of political debate. The common reference to 'secularism' within Indian politics often has no connection to atheism. Also with respect to membership of the self-declared atheist or rationalist groups there is very little data available. Narisetti states on the legacy of the Periyar movement that 'currently, some 200,000 families are Periyarists, self-respecters, and/or secularists' (Narisetti 2009: 223), Sanal Edamaruku claimed that the Indian Rationalist Association (IRA) had more than 80,000 members in the 1990s (Hiorth 1998: 207), and there are many more such figures in journals and on homepages of the respective groups. Unfortunately, there is no evidence for any of these claims (see Hiorth 1998: 206–10, 212). There only is some socio-demographic data on the rationalist organization *Maharashtra Andhashraddha Nirmulan Samiti* (Organization for the Eradication of Superstition in Maharashtra) concluding that its average long-term member is 'middle-aged, not of the highest or lowest caste, has completed at least basic education, has a family with one, two or no children, lives in a city and belongs to the Indian middle class' (Quack 2012a: 156). Finally, it is obvious that atheist organizations in India are generally dominated by men, as are many likeminded organizations around the world (for a discussion see Quack 2012a: 291–2).

CONCLUSION: ATHEISM 3-D

In order to make sense of the different ways in which criticism of religious beliefs and practices with distinct Indian or Western roots merge into each other to form the contemporary atheist groups in India, this article concludes by heuristically proposing a three-dimensional perspective. The first two axes are constituted by debates that oppose good, correct, efficacious, legitimate, etc. beliefs and

practices to bad, wrong, inefficacious, illegitimate, etc. ones. The third axis questions the basis on which arguments on the other two axes are formulated. This approach helps to answer the questions raised in the introduction, i.e., whether ‘atheism’ is more like ‘statistics’ or more like ‘aesthetics’ and whether it should be considered a Western import to India. It does so by illustrating different conceptualizations of ‘atheism’.

The ways in which a position located in the third dimension challenges the debates that take place on the first two axes are manifold. The argument whether one or the other god is the more powerful one can be supplemented with the question as to whether gods exist at all. The question whether orthopraxis or devotion is the most efficacious way to leave the cycle of rebirth can be challenged by doubting the idea of an afterlife. The courting to join one or the other religious group can be rejected by denouncing the pecuniary interest of both. The third axis, however, does not necessarily consist of non-or anti-religious positions that subvert the intra- or inter-religious debates along the first two axes. There are many examples of religious debates on the first two axes where the very basis of the debate is questioned from a third perspective, that is itself based on other religious assumptions (e.g., the challenge of the belief in witches on theological grounds, see Berner 2012).

The discussion of ‘atheism’ in this publication follows Michael Martin’s differentiation between positive and negative varieties of atheism. It suggests the application of negative atheism, defined by the mere ‘absence’ rather than by the ‘rejection’ of a belief in God(s). Any one, two, or three dimensional realm that does not feature God(s) is atheistic in this understanding, including manuals of washing-machines, debates about tax-cuts, the challenge of relativity-theory to Newton’s physics, and many more issues. In most of these cases the observation that a belief in god(s) is absent is not very surprising and speaking of atheism might be irritating. Things become interesting, however, in realms where belief(s) in God(s) are expected to play an important role but where it turns out that this is not the case. Given a prototypical notion of ‘religion’ modelled along the lines of Latin Christianity (plus Judaism and Islam) on the one hand and the conceptualization of Hinduism as religion on the other, some people do expect that belief(s) in God(s) play an important role in Hindu systems of thought. It is therefore important and interesting to clarify in what respect this is not the case (see Jessica Frazier’s ‘Hinduism’). Contemporary atheistic groups in India, however, are not well described by focusing on the ‘absence’ of beliefs in God(s). More interesting are the different ways in which they challenge beliefs and practices attributed to religion (and debated on the first two axes), drawing thereby on Indian and Western traditions (i.e., various established challenges from a third axis).

Following the argument of Goody, it can be assumed that there has been a ‘kernel of doubt’ with respect to beliefs and practices categorized now as ‘religious’ from very early on in human history (Goody 1996). Following on from that, specific beliefs and practices were challenged more thoroughly at different points in time. Distinct ways in which such criticism proceeded were established, as for example the early forms of Indian logic and materialism focusing on epistemology and consistency. The arguments attributed to the *Lokayatas* are a good case in point. At one point in European history a systematic and theory-based perspective developed to challenge not only specific beliefs and practices but a distinctive realm called ‘religion’. The conceptualization of ‘religion’ as universal and singular, as consisting of various distinct religions (Christianity, Islam, Hinduism, etc.) and as opposed to other social realms (especially science) was crucially shaped by intensified exchanges with non-European cultures. A perspective one might call ‘modern atheism’ developed that understood itself as scientific and where the absence of a belief in God(s) became seen as being the strongest deviance to religion. This was not the case, as Weltecke elaborately argues, before a modern notion of atheism was established (2010: 368). A kernel of doubt, the challenge of certain beliefs and practices, and the challenge of ‘religion’ as a theoretical and scientific enterprise

are, however, three rather different points within a three-dimensional realm.

The different ways in which a third dimension can be introduced might be illustrated best by comparison with different ways in which this is done in painting.⁹ Art history tells us that you can use different colours, shades, and sizes to introduce a third dimension into a picture, or various forms of geometrical perspective, most famously and most importantly today being probably the linear perspective. Samuel Y. Edgerton describes the application of a linear perspective as ‘one of the most decisive yet unappreciated ideas in the history of Western civilization’ (Edgerton 2009: xiii). The establishment of a third dimension through a linear perspective can thereby allow comparison to what was called ‘modern atheism’ above. Even though we now see the vanishing point perspective in phenomenal nature all the time, Edgerton’s work shows that the notion of rendering it in pictures is not inherent. ‘No matter how obvious the optical illusion of perspective convergence and its generally taken-for granted assumption in the Western influenced world … it has rarely, and almost never outside this Western-influenced world, been of concern for artists before the Italian renaissance’ (Edgerton 2009: 3). In analogy, it seems natural for those who live in a culture with a long history of modern atheism to challenge religious beliefs and practices in such a way, but it would nevertheless be anachronistic and eurocentric to assume that such a perspective was as natural to all people at all times. Moreover, in both cases there is the problematic and deceptive assumption that modern atheism as well as linear perspective superseded more naive, childlike or even primitive views of the world:

Many Westerners are too certain that because perspective is so rooted in scientific geometry, the ‘realism’ it produces must be universally absolute. Its very ‘invention’ in the West is often and unfortunately taken for granted as but another example of Western scientific superiority. (Edgerton 2009: 5)

To employ this analogy even further: Edgerton claimed that the linear perspective—Independent of its use or misuse as a tool for Western political power—was a (medieval) Christian solution to a very (medieval) Christian problem (Edgerton 2009: xiv). It was argued above that the focus on the belief in God and gods can be misleading in the context of Hindu religious traditions. Finally, both the linear perspective and modern atheism were not discovered by one person alone but derived from an array of artistic, scientific or religious innovations and debates. While it is obvious that the two dimensions are the conditions for there to be a third one, it is also the case that the history of modern atheism and linear perspective shows how religious concerns and debates lead to the development of viewpoints that only later turned out to be useful for anti-religious perspectives (Taylor 2007; Edgerton 2009: 5, 11–20). To sum up: To the degree of which modern atheism is analogue to linear perspectivism in painting one is confronted with a concept similar to that of ‘statistics’ as well as with a ‘Western export’ to India. This does not mean, however, that there have not been other influential ways to establish a ‘third-dimension’, some of which reach back to Vedic India.

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CHAPTER 42

JAPAN

SARAH WHYLLY

INTRODUCTION

ATHEISM as a Japanese idea is intimately connected with Meiji Era history in Japan (a common way of referring to the period of years spanning 1868–1912 in Japanese history). As a time of great upheaval in Japanese history, the Meiji Era was the beginning of the modern period there. Reconnections with other countries, ideas, and cultures meant rapid shifts in the traditional modes of life for Japanese. The death of the samurai system, the simultaneous influx of new educational models, scientific study and technological advances, the reasserted presence of Christianity, and the growing influence of socialism, all acted as influential factors in the development of modernity. Interaction with Europe and the United States, led to confrontation with many concepts of Western interest, including atheism. It is during this period of history that Japanese thinkers first directly explore the concept of *mushinron*, 無神論, the Japanese rendering of atheism. Given the definition of atheism that is used as a lens in this publication, *mushinron* is the appropriate word considering its meaning in a Japanese context; a lack of belief in a God or gods it is the opposite of a theistic worldview. The story of *mushinron* is the story of intellectual modernity and its complex web of tributaries within nineteenth and twentieth century Japan. It is also a story about the rise of modern academia in Japan; a story of the views of scientists, philosophers, and socio-political thinkers as they confronted scientific discovery and questions of society during Japan's critical period of dawning modernity.

ATHEISM AND MUSHINRON

As a term 無神論 or *mushinron* literally means ‘no god’. The first kanji in the compound, 無, means non, not, nothing, or nothingness. Its kun reading is ない or ‘nai’. Its On reading is ム, or ‘mu’. It is often used as a prefix to other terms. It is the traditional Chinese character ‘wu’. The second character, 神, is more complex in terms of its definition. It has been translated as gods, hence its use as part of the compound to render atheism. However, it has also been translated as mind or soul. Its kun reading is かみ or *kami*, a Japanese term that many are familiar with as the term used for gods, divinities, and spirits. Kami comes from Old Japanese, the oldest known stage of the Japanese language.¹ The Han character itself means spirit, god, or supernatural being. The final character, 論, is translated as argument or discourse. 論齊 or *ronbun* is rendered as thesis into English and 博士論文 or *hakase ronbun* refers to a PhD thesis. 無神論 is a traditional Han character meaning debate, discuss, or discourse. This indicates that the term ‘argument’ is meant in a formal sense. In sum, 無神, *mushinron*, literally means ‘No-god thesis’, ‘No-god argument’, or ‘non-god argument’.

This detailed description of the compounds which make up the term ‘*mushinron*’ indicate a very specific meaning for which it is used.

In tracing the lineage of *mushinron* in Japan, one quickly realizes that the term itself has no presence in literature until after the Meiji Era begins. As a sustained period of intellectual contact with Judeo-Christian influence and scientific theory occurred, it began to appear as a topic of interest in literature. Cultural exchange led to queries regarding the place and extent of belief or lack thereof which further led to the identification of certain modes of thought or approaches to tradition which fell under the purview of atheism. Many scholars, including Robert Kisala and Toshimaru Ama, have noted that the way terms like atheism and religion itself are applied, in everyday usage, is slightly different from the way the term atheist is understood or used in scholarly discourse (Kisala 2006; Toshimaru 2005). Atheism is a term in religious studies used to denote a lack of belief in deities or the divine. More broadly, it can also be used to refer to scepticism with regard to the supernatural. *Mushinron* is a term which is used to refer to those who reject claims as to the reality of a God or gods; it has been used in Japan to refer to types of philosophical scepticism as well (Nakae [1901] 2011). This came about as a result of perceptions regarding kami worship after contact with theistic traditions, primarily Christianity, changed the way that Japanese viewed their own traditions. In contemporary usage the term *mushūkyo*, meaning lack of religious beliefs or nonreligious, is the term which is more commonly used in Japan. Someone could hold a belief in God or many gods, and therefore not be an atheist, but still be considered *mushūkyo*, because they do not subscribe to any particular religious group or subscribe to a particular belief set (Toshimaru 2005). However, the usage of these terms is not necessarily so clean. Robert Kisala makes the interesting point that, based on information from a 1998 survey on contemporary values conducted in Japan, some of those who profess to be atheists sometimes simultaneously express a belief in deities. The study showed that 19 per cent of the total respondents both claimed to be atheists or *mushinronsha*, 無神論者 and also claimed a belief in deities (Kisala 2006: 6). These sorts of contemporary complications are not the only area of interest in this topic, however. Historical considerations of atheism as an intellectual force of change upon the landscape of Japanese history are particularly fascinating due to their force upon modernism in Japan. There is a particular period of Japanese thought when the category of atheism in Japan was articulated with regard to the transmission of Western ideas having to do with science, education, and politics. Because the Japanese thinkers who took up consideration of these ideas offered a clear window into their thoughts on these matters, it provides an opportunity to become familiar with one of the important ways in which atheism in Japan can be understood.

Recent scholarship on Japanese religious affiliations attempts to construct explanations and offer historical reasons why the Japanese lack religious affiliation. Toshimaro, author of *Why are the Japanese Non-Religious?*, explains that, in his view, when Japanese identify themselves as nonreligious, most do not mean that they are atheists but rather that they don’t have affiliation with any particular individual tradition (Toshimaro 2005: 1). He notes that many who consider themselves to be *mushūkyo* or still nonreligious participate in many aspects of different traditions as they view these as cultural traditions rather than as religious activities *per se*. Toshimaro distinguishes between what he calls revealed and natural religions as a way to illustrate the differences between those traditions which have overt histories, agendas, social organizations, and texts and those which exist solely through customs and beliefs of generations. Self-identification as nonreligious in Japan has much to do with how the person being queried has understood the question being asked of them, and this can differ from tradition to tradition as well as within traditions. Thus the answers are not uniform even within groups, and so the matter of religious affiliation is a messy one in the Japanese context. Atheism, as *mushinron*, has a very specific story to tell in the history of Japanese modernism and it a story that may help to explain some of the messiness of religious affiliation there.

EDUCATION AND THE COALESCENCE OF IDEAS IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY JAPAN

Atheism in a Japanese context takes shape in the latter nineteenth century during a new flourishing interaction between Japanese and Western thought. This interaction occurred during a time when the old feudal system of Japan was dying away. The class structure which had long valued samurai and their masters near the top was in rapid decline. Seeking new opportunities, many of these former samurai chose to send their children away to school in foreign lands or went themselves. They returned with new philosophical, scientific, religious, educational, and economic ideas. This coupled with the growing presence of Japanese Christianity set the stage for interesting modes of engagement with Western ideas by Japanese thinkers. The interaction of those interested in Western scientific methods and discoveries were also heavily involved in contributions to the intellectual milieu of the time. The story of atheism is a story of the rise of scientific inquiry in Japan and the onset of a new public structure for education. This new structure became a place for the growth of intellectual curiosity and discovery. The university, in its infancy in Japan, attracted professors and intellectuals from all over the world. Disciplinary division being of little concern, philosophers attended lectures on evolutionary theory given by scientists and scientists actively participated in philosophical discourse on matters ranging from the metaphysical to the political. This interaction set a tone that was to persist well into the twentieth century in terms of the interdisciplinary concerns of Japanese academic life.

Prior to the Meiji Era, education in Japan came under the purview of the clan to which one belonged and to the feudal lords who were in charge of the various clans. Samurai were educated at schools operated specifically for and by the clan to which they belonged. There was no national education system and no set standards for what one learned while being educated at clan schools. Often Confucian and samurai values were stressed along with the learning of various languages. However, in the 1870s, national schools began to come into being, run by educated Japanese, and populated by students who would have likely previously become samurai themselves. These schools initially drew their faculty from the number of foreign professors coming from England and America primarily. These professors taught in a number of areas and were responsible for educating the burgeoning new generation of teachers and researchers in Japan.

The most influential idea to arrive in Japan during this period was evolution, in the form of Darwinism and Spencer's Social Darwinism, and encouraged by professors who made their way to Japanese universities from the West. Edward Sylvester Morse (1838–1925), an American zoologist, began giving public lectures at Tokyo University in 1877 on Darwinism (Piovesana 1997: 25). Herbert Spencer's work also had an avid following in Japan, far larger than Darwin's own, having been introduced by Ernest Fenollosa, a philosophy professor who came to Japan in 1878 from Harvard, at the behest of Morse, and subsequently taught at the University of Tokyo (Watanabe 1990:75; Piovesana 1997: 25). Many of the students who had gone off to pursue education in the West found themselves influenced heavily by Darwin and Spencer in their work. It was in conjunction with these ideas that atheism became a topic of discussion as well.

Physicist Yamagawa Kenjirō's life (1854–1931) was paradigmatic with regard to the changes sweeping Japanese life during this time and his attitude toward religion, and Christianity in particular, were reflective of his commitment to a materialistic viewpoint and the benefits which science could provide to Japan. Of the Aizu clan, Yamagawa was from a samurai family and spent his early

education in the Aizu clan military school studying Confucian and samurai ethics. As the Meiji Era began in 1868, civil war began between the Tokugawa shogunate and the Japanese emperor which engulfed the Aizu clan. Yamagawa's school was closed and he became a part of the White Tiger Corps, a group of young samurai trained to fight in the Boshin War (Watanabe 1990: 7). When the Meiji government decided to send members of different clans overseas for training into leadership roles after the conflict, Yamagawa was among those sent. In the USA, at the Sheffield Scientific School of Yale University, Yamagawa took up civil engineering as a means to learn physics as it was not a subject taught yet (Watanabe 1990: 8). He also took advanced mathematics and came into contact with the theories of Herbert Spencer for the first time through the magazine *Popular Scientific Monthly* which began publication in 1872, the same year Yamagawa began at Sheffield. The founder of the magazine, Edward Livingstone Youmans, was attempting to follow Spencer's lead in using evolutionary theory to explain human society and this had a profound influence upon Yamagawa (Watanabe 1990: 8–11). Because of this influence, Yamagawa perceived that the way to strengthen and advance Japan was through the sciences.

It was at this time that Yamagawa dedicated himself to the study of physics. Although he was recalled back to Japan before his studies were finished, a generous offer from an American benefactor allowed him to remain to finish a three-year course of study at Sheffield. He received his bachelor's degree and returned home to Japan in May of 1875. He became the first Japanese professor of physics in Japan when he was appointed as full professor at the College of Natural Science in the University of Tokyo. At this time the trend at the College was moving toward Japanese professors slowly replacing their foreign counterparts and Yamagawa was a part of this. Receiving a doctorate of science in 1888, Yamagawa was one of twenty-five of the first Japanese to receive this qualification (Watanabe 1990: 12). During his career he worked on a broad range of topics in physics, concentrating mainly on theoretical physics. His influence on the field of physics and the educational example he set persisted long into the twentieth century.

Yamagawa, like many of his fellow Japanese academics, was suspicious of Christianity, at first rejecting it, and then later ignoring it altogether (Watanabe 1990: 21–2). Yamagawa's commitment to the advancement of Japan through scientific learning and inquiry did not leave room for theories which attempted to explain the universe in anything other than naturalistic terms. His story is akin to many others of his time who left Japan to become scientists and came back to create what they saw as necessary change in order to promote the good of the Japanese nation. Although Yamagawa did not himself expressly cultivate written work on the subject of atheism, his story helps to explain how the Japanese academy itself became a place where atheism took hold. Part of this had to do with what many viewed as the deleterious effects of theistic traditions upon education and the advancement of science. This was, of course, helped along by foreign professors like Morse who lectured on the conflict between evolutionary theory and theology in the West. Theism, and in particular Christianity, was viewed as detrimental superstition by Morse and others.

Edward Morse himself often incorporated his own religious scepticism into his lectures. During the year 1877 he gave a series of lectures on evolutionary theory which were later published in a book called *Dōbutsu Shinkaron* or *The Evolution of Animals* (Watanabe 1990: 49–50). Although critics have observed that Morse's treatment of the topic of evolution is shallow in these lectures, there are other notable features of the lectures, namely Morse's anti-Christian sentiments. Masao Watanabe observes, in his historical overview, *The Japanese and Western Science*, 'it is noticeable how here examples from the title of the first lecture, "The Truth of Things is to Be Pursued, the Teachings of Religion Are Not to Be Presupposed", makes clear, an aggressive rejection of Christianity is a prominent characteristic of Morse's lectures on the theory of evolution' (Watanabe 1990: 67). Watanabe supposes that, given the conflict between evolutionary theory and Christianity in the West, and the fact

of the infancy of the theory in the Japanese context, Morse was unsure how evolution would be received by the Japanese. His approach was a simultaneous introduction of the theory coupled with a critique of unquestioning acceptance of religious doctrine. As a theory of biology, evolution took longer to be absorbed into the scientific discourses in Japan than it did in philosophical ones, however, thanks to the work of thinkers like Katō Hirokyuki who utilized it in their work against political and religious ideologies.

The sentiment of hostility toward Christianity was not new to Japan. However, the reasons for the hostility and the form that it took were different between the Tokugawa and Meiji Eras. In the sixteenth century, the Edo Period, Portuguese Catholicism arrived with the Franciscans and Nagasaki quickly became a staging ground for its influence. This was persistently controversial but the events of the Shimabara Rebellion, driven by Japanese Christian peasants and joined by master-less samurai, led to an enforcement of the ban on Christianity in Japan which had been in effect since 1591 and an increased zeal in persecuting Christians (Yoshiya 1978: 107–8; Atwell 1986: 228). There were a few rather explicit written critiques of Christianity at this time, in particular, Fukansai Habian's work, 'Deus Destroyed' of 1620, Arai Hakuseki's 'Against Christianity' written in 1725, and the *Samidare Shō* or *Musings During the Early Summer Rain*, written by Miura Baien in 1784. Fukansai's work subjects the claims of Christianity to Buddhist, Daoist, and Confucian scrutiny and finds it wanting. Ultimately, he calls the claims of Christianity sophistry and declares that those who worship God cannot surpass Confucius or Laozi in their ability to understand the universe (Fukansai [1620] 2011: 1046). Arai's 'Against Christianity' takes umbrage with Christianity's denial of the importance of filial piety with regard to anyone but God. Christianity's rejection of the Confucian means of serving heaven rendered it desppicable to Arai (Arai [1725] 2011: 388–9). Miura's translation of the *Samidare Shō* contained descriptions of the pernicious effects of Christianity as well as arguments that the superstitions of Christianity, like the superstitions of other traditions, were based upon misrepresentations of facts (Miura [1784] 1952: 291). During this period, Japanese Christians went underground and continued to practice their religion in secret. The opening of Japan in the 1850s also meant a reopening of the country to Christianity as well as other ideas. In 1871, after the Meiji Restoration, freedom of religion was instituted and Christianity could once again exist openly in Japan. In addition to Catholicism, Protestantism also began to establish a presence there. Japanese theologians of different Christian affiliations began to appear and independent Japanese denominations also arose (Yoshiya 1978).

Japanese Buddhist thinkers saw the need to distinguish between Japanese Buddhism as a tradition and Christianity, particularly with regard to the latter's theism. However, it was also an opportunity for reflection on the differences between Buddhism and other traditions. This led to Buddhist thinkers who published works in the nineteenth century which utilized *mushinron* as a concept to draw out differences in belief and to define concepts such as *kami*. Torio Koyata's 1887 work *Shinsei tetsugaku mushinron* or *Authentic Philosophical Atheism* is a good example of this.

It is unsurprising, in light of the increasing Christian presence in Japan, that there would be those who stood in varying positions of opposition to this new state of affairs. A number of these were intellectuals who saw Christianity as a threat to Japanese traditions and an ill-fit in Japanese culture. They also viewed theism as a challenge to the authority of scientific discovery; many felt as though the discoveries of science should be accepted even if they posed a direct challenge to theistic claims.

Of the intellectuals involved in this new era of scientific and intellectual inquiry in Japan, a few figures are notable as those who contributed to a discourse on atheism. This discourse took on different forms. These include an address of the differences between the discoveries of science and the claims of religion, including Christianity, Buddhism, and nationalistic Shinto. Other contributions

to the conversation took the form of demonstrating the irrationality of a belief in God. Some of these were motivated by a deep suspicion and dislike of Christianity while others had more to do with attempts to dispel myths in the light of scientific discovery. Writings dealing with the matter of atheism began to appear in the mid-nineteenth century and were produced by some influential thinkers. These thinkers were influential not only because of their views on atheism but also for their involvement in precipitating key social changes in Japan.

Perhaps the most integral figure in the narrative of atheistic thought at the time was Baron Katō Hiroyuki (1836–1916). Katō was a member of a samurai family and educated in military science as was the tradition of the day. However, his interests lay elsewhere. He was one of the very first to become interested in German thought and studied both Dutch and German. Heavily influenced by Herbert Spencer and Ernst Haeckel, Hiroyuki was an ardent Social Darwinist who utilized Darwinian ideas such as natural selection in devising his own theories of heredity, human rights, and the place of government (Davis 1996). Hiroyuki's vision for Japanese education was to strive for the German and French educational models where intellectuals taught students and passed along their research interests. It was his vision of education that led to the beginning of a national university system in Japan (Maraldo 2011: 565–6).

From 1860 to 1868 he was an instructor at a school for researching Western science and technology and there he learned German and German philosophy. In 1877 he was responsible for organizing a number of educational institutions into the new Tokyo University, thus beginning the development of the university system in Japan. In this same year, he began the tradition of philosophy as a formal academic discipline in Japan. Katō hired a number of foreign scholars to teach subjects such as political philosophy, logic, ethics, evolution, and applied science. Among these scholars were Edward Morse and Ernest Fenollosa. During much of Katō's time at the university it was known as *Daigaku Shinkaron* or University Evolutionism because of the centrality of the theory of evolution to its activities. Katō was a materialist who had an intense dislike of Christianity and what he viewed as its pernicious beliefs and effects (Piovesana 1997: 20–3; Davis 1996: 91–5; Maraldo 2011: 565–6).

Katō's dislike of Christianity in particular and religion in general had a great deal to do with what he viewed as its movement away from naturalistic explanations for the phenomena of the universe. He favoured materialist and naturalist explanations for everything and saw in the methods of evolutionary thinking the foundation for a modern approach to philosophical and socio-political inquiry. In responding to a lecture by Inoue Tetsujirō, Katō defends his theory that the mind is a development easily explainable by evolutionary means. In referring to himself and other naturalists he writes, 'Likewise, we see the idea of a great will at work behind the university as mere conjecture, a strange, mystical, supernatural phantom cooked up in the imagination. The universe is nothing of the sort. Rather, it is the progressive unfolding of a unity of matter and energy in an absolutely natural and causal manner' (cited in Maraldo 2011: 566).

Although Katō did not write solely on the matter of atheism, his political writings clearly outlined his views that religion generally, and Christianity specifically, were superstitious and a hindrance to the acceptance of scientific knowledge. In fact, Katō wrote three texts specifically on the topic of religion including: *Our Natural Essence and Christianity* in 1907, *A Mistaken Worldview* in 1908, and *The Perplexities of Christians* in 1909. These were eventually turned into a single volume in 1911, entitled *The Perniciousness of Christianity* (Davis 1996: 83). Throughout his career Katō wrote on what he saw as the error of religious belief and its potential deleterious effects upon education and the nation more generally. Science and religion could not co-exist because the notion of a supreme being who directed the events of the universe conflicted with his notion of a universe ordered on scientific principles. On his view, if one chose religion then one was choosing against scientific rationality;

there was no way to have both. Katō's atheistic and materialist views fueled his political and ethical ideas. Social Darwinism was a prominent feature of his social and political ethics. As he saw it, individual and social progress would be served far better if people accepted natural selection rather than continuing to promote artificial selection via social institutions.

It was toward the ends of promoting a scientific understanding of the world that Katō's vision of the educational system of Japan so heavily emphasized the integration of technology and scientific discovery. It was partially due to his guidance that the newly formed university system moved in the direction of heavily emphasizing scientific discovery and the invention of new technology.

Given Katō's extreme nationalism and the fact that he favoured a kind of Statism in his political views, he would likely have also been opposed to the socialist influences which had begun to find a footing in Japan via Christianity (Davis 1996). Socialism and materialism had both been introduced in the beginning of the Meiji Era. However, they had been introduced in differing streams of thought and this remained the case until around 1910. Socialism had been introduced via Christian influence in the areas of coping with social problems while materialism was a feature of scientific and philosophical study. It was not until the twentieth century that socialism and materialistic views were integrated. Regardless of Katō's views on socialism, it would be these views and materialism also which would survive and thrive in twentieth century Japanese scientific communities and lead them to focus on the material conditions of life, rather than on the afterlife.

Also nationalistic, and no less emphatic in his criticisms of Christianity, was Inoue Tetsujirō (1855–1944), the first Japanese to be appointed as professor of philosophy at Tokyo University. In between teaching appointments, Inoue traveled to Germany to study philosophy from 1884 to 1890 (Maraldo 2011: 567). His research and publications pertained mainly to Chinese and Japanese cultural and philosophy with a specialization in Japanese Confucianism. German idealism wielded a strong influence upon his thought as well. His was a strong voice against Christianity and religion in general and favour of national education. Inoue also viewed religion as an irrational influence on education. An incident involving the refusal of Christians to show what the Japanese viewed as proper deference to the emperor led Inoue to begin a campaign focused on the problem of the conflict between religion and education (Piovesana 1997). Inoue was deeply involved in political efforts to remove Christian influences from Japanese education, publishing *Collision Between Religion and Education* in 1893 declaring that Japanese national values and modern scientific thinking were incompatible with Christianity (Piovesana 1997: 31; Godart 2011: 611). This of course meant that the influences and presence of Christianity would have to be suppressed in public education. This was a topic of much debate in Japan at this time.

Particularly significant to the incorporation of atheism as a topic connected to the politics during this period was Nakae Chōmin (1847–1901). A materialist and atheist as well, he was nonetheless an opponent of many of the philosophical views of Katō on politics and human rights. Nakae became an influential voice in the political thought of his time. He was a liberal constitutional monarchist who became well-known for translating Rousseau's *Social Contract*. He visited France in 1871 and there became familiar with the social and political thought which would influence his writing (Piovesana 1997: 56). His dislike of Katō began with their disagreement over the existence of Japanese philosophy; Katō believed that Japan had a long history of philosophical dialogue in which he was a participant while Nakae lamented that no true philosophy yet existed in Japan (Maraldo 2011: 564). Nakae's most famous writing on atheism came within his last writing, *Ichinen yuhan* and *Zoku Ichinen Yūhan* or *A Year and a Half* and *The Continuation of One Year and a Half* written after his diagnosis of throat cancer in 1901. The second chapter is entitled 'Mushin Mureikon' or 'No God, No Soul'. This chapter is a refutation of theism and spiritualism via arguments confronting various important beliefs

including the belief in the soul. Nakae argues in this work that claims for the existence of God or the endurance of the soul after death, or any other sort of religiously motivated argument, while convenient for human beings, ultimately lead to illogical and un-philosophical beliefs (Nakae [1901] 2011: 605). He firmly believed that the truths of science and philosophy would prevail over those of theism and spirituality.

Another figure of significant importance is a man who became the foremost authority on the West in Japan in the 1870s. Fukuzawa Yukichi (1835–1901) established his own private university to teach Western Studies in 1858. In 1890 this private school became a university with its own faculty. Keio-Gijuku is the oldest institute of higher learning in Japan. Although it is not a national university, it is considered very prestigious, is ranked highly even in the world, and competes with regard to its research endeavours with the national universities of Japan. Fukuzawa was a lifelong advocate of education and of democratic governance. Although much of his work was practical in nature, he also wrote theoretical works. Fukuzawa developed a theory of history which postulated three stages of mankind which cultures passed through at different times: savagery, barbarism, and civilization. He theorized that the civilization phase, which Japan was moving toward, had features such as liberalism and scientific advance. He also insisted that stratified society did not exist in civilization and that it was created by middle-class intellectuals. Superstition and ignorance were left behind in civilization (Piovesana 1997: 19). In 1876, one year after publishing on this theory, Fukuzawa produced ‘In Praise of Methodic Doubt’ in which he considers the weight of his own doubt as well as his own prescription for making progress in civilization, ‘The progress of civilization lies in seeking the truth both in the area of physical facts and in the spiritual affairs of people’ (Fukuzawa [1876] 2011: 598). After recounting the role of doubt in some of the West’s greatest scientific discoveries including those of Galileo and Newton, Fukuzawa asserts that, ‘In all these cases, the truth was attained by following the road of doubt’ (Fukuzawa [1876] 2011: 598). He further advocates approaching spiritual belief from a position of doubt. He criticizes those who believe in the claims of others, rumours, the gods, and Buddhism and fortunetellers as stupid because of their tendency to act on superstition rather than turning to scientific truth. In his piece, ‘Virtue, Knowledge, and Wisdom’ written in 1875, Fukuzawa contemplates the difference between moral virtue and intelligence with regard to those who take metaphysical matters on faith,

Still, those who contemplate the Christian Bible or adhere to the Zen doctrine of non-teaching or venerate the feudal virtues or eliminate their physical emotions and desires, all have an unwavering faith in moral teachings. Now there is no reason to condemn as evil those people who have an unwavering faith in a teaching, no matter how ignorant they may be. To castigate their ignorance has to do with their intelligence and has nothing to do with morality. (Fukuzawa [1875] 2011: 596)

Fukuzawa’s position was that those who maintained faith in the face of evidence for reasonable doubt were foolish. His approach to religious belief was from the position of doubt and he favoured scientific methodologies with regard to the pursuit of knowledge. Fukuzawa’s advocacy of the education of all people, including women, in Japan had far-reaching effects and he is considered to be one of the most influential single figures in the modernization of Japan.

Such figures are important to a discussion of atheism in Japan because of their influence upon education, their role in public life in Japan, and also because of their intellectual place at the beginning of a new trend of materialism and atheism in Japanese history which sought to move away from, as they viewed it, detrimental superstition and toward scientific rigour. Even given its influence, this does not mean that Western influence and ideas were accepted wholesale. Anti-Western sentiment as a reaction against what some viewed as the preponderance of its permeation of Japanese life began around 1866. Much of this reaction centred on influences which were endangering what many viewed as native Japanese culture. Certain aspects of Japanese tradition were reemphasized via government

decree such as the place and importance of the emperor, education as a good for the nation, and national mythologies such as those collected under the auspices of state Shintoism and, to a lesser extent, Confucianism. Although the importance of Western Studies was still emphasized, this was seen as a vehicle to the improvement of Japan's standing in the world as a nation and its development into a fully modernized technological rival of the West. Katō and Nakae were both nationalists and their influence upon education was profound. Both had their own criticisms of Western thought, particularly its religious influence. Fukuzawa publicly declared his belief that Western education far surpassed Japan's own and this led to criticism of his stance on this amongst conservative nationalists. It is partly the controversy which surrounded these two figures which led to the continued influence. Their contributions to policy and literature on the subject of nationalism and education are impressive when considering the influence it has had. Part of this impact occurred upon those Japanese students who studied their thought or studied with them directly. Thus the consideration of the influence thinkers such as Katō, Nakae, and Fukuzawa had upon their students is important as well.

The presence of materialism and the privileging of scientific explanation over theistic ones became an enduring feature of the Japanese academy. However, the conversation involving atheism changed significantly as other concerns both political and social swept the country in the events leading up to and after World War II. This is not to say that atheism did not continue to grow in Japan, however, it became a part of other conversations. These conversations did not focus on the truth or falsity of specific beliefs and the notion of deities but rather on the social impact of religion in general. Atheism became a part of socialist and materialistic assumptions in the twentieth century. Many Japanese scientists endorsed socialism or Marxism because of their own prior materialist commitments.

SOCIALISM AND MATERIALISM ON THE RISE

The early days of socialist thought in Japan were affiliated with Christian as well as humanistic approaches to social ills. Socialist thought was seen as a way to solve the problems of the ordinary person and was not viewed as contradictory to nationalism. In 1890 a group was formed which attempted to address social problems via a socialist lens. Many of those involved early on were Christians. In the early twentieth century, however, Marxism began to wield a much more profound influence upon Japanese socialism and, as a consequence, socialism took on a much more materialist persona, leaving behind its Christian beginnings.

Kōtoku (1871–1911) was a student of Nakae's and an early source of the materialist influence upon socialism. Although he was Christian and favoured humanistic ideas with regard to socialism early in his life, it was not long before he moved into a development of evolutionary ideas on the topic. Kōtoku believed that man's instincts as animals led them into a struggle for life which took on the form of nationalism, militarism, and imperialism. He thought that eventually an ideal society would emerge in which capitalism was eliminated. A theistic worldview which disrupted this struggle and denied the influence of instincts was simply false. He was heavily influenced by French socialism and the Bushidō. Kōtoku developed deep-seated animosity toward Christianity, some felt as a result of the materialism he learned from Chōmin, culminating in his 1910 work *Kirisuto massatsuron* or the *Destruction of Christ* (Piovesana 1997: 58). This work denied the historical personage of Christ. Christian socialists in Japan had long viewed Christ as a social redeemer and Kōtoku actively worked to undermine this image. It is during this time that socialism moved toward Marxist and materialist influences and away from Christianity. It is also during this time that Marxism became more widely

studied and also influential amongst the general populace. Its connection to materialism and atheism was felt most profoundly at the academic level, however, these ideas also spread in the form of workers' organizations. It is within the Marxist schools that materialism as well as philosophy of science flourished. Here atheism found ground as well, as much of the materialism which flourished was of an atheistic tone.

By this time, socialism was beginning to spread beyond the confines of academic speculation, and at this point there were those scientists who were materialists and some were already Marxists. Much of this was hidden, though, due to the actions of Japanese politicians, military leaders, and the ruling class prior to and during World War II. However, socialism and particularly Marxism became very popular amongst scholars, the working class, and students. Socialism, in a few different incarnations, became more influential during the mid-twentieth century in Japan. Socialist thinkers were very concerned about the endurance of what they called superstition amongst the people. Historians of science had also adopted a Marxist theoretical approach to study and although great effort was put into attempting to suppress socialist movements and trends, they flourished nonetheless.

Despite the growth of Christianity in the country, the Meiji Era was a period of uncertainty with regard to relations between religious organizations and the government. Decisions about the relationship between religions and the state vacillated between a policy of freedom and a policy of eradication. One of the more influential decisions of this period, with direct bearing on the place of religion in the educational system, was the 1899 Ministry of Education's Directive 12 prohibiting all religious education and ceremonies in any public school. The directive included private schools who offered privileges to their students that were offered through public schools (Garon 1997: 64–5). Notably, it was Christianity and Buddhism that were most frequently targeted by these policies. Since the early part of the Meiji Era, government authorities had been moving to group together local Shinto shrines together into one unified system (Garon 1997: 65). The move was a way of using the shrines as political tools where patriotism to the emperor and social harmony were promulgated as values. The government side-stepped its own edicts by declaring that Shinto was not a religion but rather that shrines were secular spaces for honouring the emperor as well as their nation. Despite this, independent Shinto shrines continued to operate, although in 1900 the government banned the independent sects from hosting public worship as these sects were deemed religious. It was only through massive protest from Buddhists and Christians alike that these measures were overturned and the policies abandoned (Garon 1997: 65–6). Ultimately, this did not end government interference with religion which continued on in Japan throughout the twentieth century.

THE DECLINE OF INTELLECTUAL ATHEISM

Atheism, as a direct topic of concern for the scientists and intellectuals of Japan, retreated in importance, giving way to more pressing topics such as class structure and the role of materialism in the history of science. Prewar Marxists were persecuted in ways that their postwar contemporaries were not, thus concerns over the influence of superstition on social conditions and effects of religion on education became less pressing during the postwar years. Christianity never gained the foothold in Japan which might have precipitated a conflict between Japanese scientific theories and religious belief as it occurred in the USA. Additionally, many of the American scientists and scholars who were Christian and visited Japan, brought with them a willingness to pursue scientific inquiry as an important feature of human life and thus the lens of Christianity through which the Japanese viewed science was constructed far differently than it would have been in the USA. Japanese society was able

to integrate science and technology in ways that made them an important fixture of Japanese life from the late nineteenth century forward. This contributed to a much greater acceleration of the rate at which such changes were adopted into the social fabric. A nationalistic view of science as an accomplishment for the country, rather than an expression of personal achievement helped promote the importance of advancements in science and technology for the betterment of all.

As a result, atheism in Japan never really emerged as an individual perspective apart from the context of scholarly and scientific inquiry into other matters. The topic of atheism remained a part of views on naturalism and materialism but never fully emerged as an independent area of intellectual inquiry. Within the context of Japanese conversation on the topic of atheism, it is almost always related to other concerns such as the acceptance of scientific theories, the pernicious effects of superstition, and the reality of materialism. As a result, little emerges in Japanese philosophical or scientific circles on the topic of atheism during the mid to late twentieth century. Instead academic attention in religion in Japan began to turn to the topic of those who were unaffiliated with religious traditions or those who claimed to be nonreligious but still attended traditional events at temples and shrines.

Atheism does prompt discussion in relation to theological debates over the character of Buddhism. Although this is a topic often introduced and discussed by non-Japanese scholars, there have been those Japanese thinkers, such as Hisamatsu Shin'ichi, who adopted a view of atheism as a defining characteristic of Buddhism in a discussion of the differences between traditions such as Zen and Pure Land (Shin'ichi 1981). This was then used as a means of restricting the category of Buddhism, in this case to those groups lacking a belief in a God or gods. However, this discussion is not of atheism as a category of understanding the world but rather as a point of difference for claims of the authenticity of one group over another. Thus, a development of the topic of atheism in the area of theology or with regard to religious belief in Japan is lacking.

In understanding atheism in a Japanese context, one must understand how the Japanese used the term and understood it within the context of their cultural traditions and against the backdrop of massive changes in Japanese society. There has been much written on the question of whether or not the Japanese are religious and this question is bound up with the way one understands religion as a category. Although the question of the religious status of people in Japan is often settled by simply categorizing them as atheists, this does not reflect internal cultural dialogue on the meaning of the term. That conversation, as it has been relayed here, is tied to very particular events and trends in Japanese history. Its story is a product of change and of interest in the world outside of Japan. The story of atheism in Japan is a narrative of 'modernity' and science, of religion and state, and of education and political change.

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PART VII

ATHEISM AND THE ARTS

CHAPTER 43

LITERATURE

BERNARD SCHWEIZER

INTRODUCTION

GIVEN the traditional and highly symbiotic nexus between literature and religion, it is no surprise that one needs to look quite hard to find evidence of belief's opposite in literature, especially among older cultural productions. In fact, imaginative literature that explicitly treats atheism is not commonly found in Western texts that are much older than the mid-nineteenth century. Even in the European context, it would be challenging to find a literary work dating from before 1835 (i.e., the year Georg Büchner published his play *Danton's Death*) that makes atheism a central theme or that at least contains explicit references to unbelief. From this consideration, then, manifestations of atheism in Western literature need to be seen as a rather recent phenomenon, and one that can be traced back not much further than about 170 years.

Of course, there are fleeting references to atheism that pre-date *Danton's Death*, such as Jonathan Swift's attack on 'Atheists of the Age' in 'Ode to the Athenian Society' (1691), or Milton's use of 'atheist' as an epithet for pagan priests ('Eli's sons') in Book 1 of *Paradise Lost*. But we have to wait until the first half of the nineteenth century before we encounter a written work that qualifies as *both* a major piece of literature *and* as a text that centrally thematizes atheism. While it is certainly debatable what is the first instance that would conform to these two criteria (i.e., to be a major work and to elevate atheism to a central motif), one could do worse than posit *Danton's Death* by Georg Büchner as such a pioneering accomplishment. Another major milestone in the history of literary atheism was reached in 1880, when both Jens Peter Jacobsen's *Niels Lyhne* and Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Brother's Karamazov* were published—two works that established beyond a doubt the suitability of atheism to serve as a motif in literature.

After 1880 the flood-gates were opened. Two years later followed Nietzsche's *The Gay Science*, featuring the statement 'God is dead'; another landmark of atheistic literature is Thomas Hardy's poem 'God's Funeral' (1912); and then the modernists completely demolished any presumed barrier against considerations of atheism in literature. Read any major work by Virginia Woolf, H. G. Wells, or George Orwell and it won't be difficult to identify atheism, in at least its negative form, as a thematic element, especially in works such as *Mrs. Dalloway* (1925), *The Shape of Things to Come* (1933), and *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). The canon of atheistic literature was further expanded by surrealist writers like André Breton, by existentialists like Camus and Malraux, by socialists like Bertolt Brecht and Jean-Paul Sartre, and by absurdists like Samuel Beckett, whose *Waiting for Godot* has been one of the signal works defining a post-theistic awareness. Ayn Rand's two immensely popular and influential novels *The Fountainhead* (1943) and *Atlas Shrugged* (1957) are solidly atheist, a fact not mentioned by conservative American pundits who proselytize her work. In recent years, atheism has become an integral part of the literary imagination of novelists as diverse as Ian

ATHEISM VS. SATANISM AND MISOTHEISM

Some readers may want to include in this brief list of cornerstones of the atheist tradition certain works by William Blake, Mark Twain, Muhammad Iqbal, Anatole France, Mikhail Bulgakov, Elie Wiesel, Philip Pullman, and Peter Shaffer. But we need to be careful here. While it is true that all of the above writers voiced religiously subversive ideas, their religious rebellion takes a different complexion and is not, strictly speaking, atheistic. For one thing, stories manifesting literary Satanism are decidedly not atheistic. Texts with such a bent include Muhammad Iqbal's 'The Parliament of Satan', Mark Twain's *The Mysterious Stranger*, Mikhail Bulgakov's *The Master and Margarita*, and even Elie Wiesel's *The Trial of God*. These texts shift the focus of divinity from God to the devil. In such works, Satan plays the role of the principal deity and, not infrequently, we are presented with a Romantic rewriting of Satan, suggesting an inversion of traditional representations, as Satan appears as a redemptive culture hero, a messenger of God, or a catalyst of human creativity.

While Satanism in literature represents a minor motif of religious dissent, there is a bigger strain of religiously subversive literature that is also *not* atheist. Many authors, including Philip Pullman, Peter Shaffer, Elie Wiesel, Rebecca West, and Anatole France do not deny the existence of God, but they take issue with the moral character of God. Their works frame God as a murderous tyrant, a bumbling idiot, an indifferent enigma, a tottering senile, or a malevolent bully. Since these works posit God (or gods) as the antagonist, they are by definition not atheistic. To be sure, any of the authors mentioned above could be identified as blasphemous. But this is precisely the point: blasphemy is not the same as atheism. And so, it is important to state clearly what atheist literature is *not*, notably, it is not hostile to God. For people (or literary characters) to go on the warpath against God, to hate God, or to wrestle with God presupposes that they explicitly accept the existence of God. I have named this paradoxical position—a combination of belief and anti-worship—as misotheism. The word is derived from the Greek root *misos* misos (for 'hatred') and *theos* (for 'God'). Many people who have in the past been accused of atheism, even many individuals who self-identify as atheists, are in fact nothing else than misotheists because they still believe in God, a God that they need to attack and insult. As I have shown in *Hating God: The Untold Story of Misotheism* (2010), the rebellious stance of misotheism has been a strong, though often hidden, source of literary inspiration from the time of European Romanticism to the present. Stories need conflicts, and if the conflicts are not played out in clashes *between gods* and if they are also not animated by hostilities *between mortals*, but if instead they consist in a war between mortals and an almighty God, then the underlying conflict that animates such stories is based on a misotheistic, not an atheist, impulse.

In contrast to misotheism, which has furnished ample literary inspiration for stories of rebellion, resistance, and conquest, atheism does not play the same charismatic role as an engine of Promethean inspiration. Taken literally, atheism is concerned with a non-existence, an absence, a void. How can one make a compelling story based on the fact of a non-existence? The protagonist in *Niels Lyhne*, a seminal work of literary atheism, recognizes just this dilemma when he states 'How in the world can he be fanatical about something negative? Fanatical about the idea that there is *no* God!—and without fanaticism, no victory' (105). Surely, an atheistic character cannot try to make war on God or drive God away because he would thereby invoke the very existence of God. The history of literary atheism is by and large a history of various attempts to come to terms with this conundrum and to overcome this obstacle, i.e., to make atheism a compelling subject for literary treatments. The attempts to

integrate atheism into literature range from dramatizing arguments about the existence or non-existence of God, to mounting an anti-clerical offensive against the servants of the Church, to dramatizing conflicts of conscience in a protagonist, to representing an anti-theistic struggle against religion in general. Having said this, it becomes clear that we cannot limit ourselves to studying pro-atheistic treatments of unbelief in literature. Rather, I am going beyond strictly literary (pro-) atheism to explore atheism in literature in general, and that includes favourable as well as unfavourable depictions of atheism in the annals of literature.

IMPLICIT VERSUS EXPLICIT ATHEISM

At this point, another important distinction needs to be made, i.e., that between *implicit* and *explicit* treatments of atheism in literature. The first category (the *implicitly* atheistic texts) encompasses works that are wholly and entirely secular, i.e. works without any religious content whatsoever. Of course, this is easier said than done. References to spiritual symbols, to deities, or to faith of a religious nature would have to be cut out entirely in order to qualify as a specimen of this type of secular writing. And since religious thinking, imagery, and rhetoric are so ubiquitous in human discourse, it is almost impossible to produce a work that fits the criterion of this type of implicit atheist literature exactly. For example, in Douglas Adams's *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1979), atheism pervades the whole story without being directly invoked. But one could argue that the effect of eliminating any supernatural or divine agency from this story—while having characters criss-cross the universe and witness the creation of planets in gigantic extraterrestrial factories—is aimed at satirizing religious beliefs, thereby reintroducing religious theatics through the back-door. As is the case with many other secular writers like H. G. Wells, Samuel Beckett, or Jonathan Franzen, it is difficult, if not impossible, to purge religious implications or references entirely from their narrative creations. Thus, a pure form of implicitly atheist literature is hard to come by.

By contrast, the remainder of this essay will focus on texts that *explicitly* invoke atheism, elevating it to a prominent story element and to a central aspect of the characters' thoughts and dialogues. Included are texts that approach atheism in an approving (pro-atheist) or in a disapproving (anti-atheist) fashion. In the following, I will discuss exemplary instances of explicitly atheistic literature, beginning with Georg Büchner's *Danton's Death*, followed by three novels, i.e., Dostoevsky's *The Brothers Karamazov*, Albert Camus's *The Plague*, and Rebecca N. Goldstein's *36 Arguments for the Existence of God*. I chose these works because they are not only book-ends for the brief history of atheism in literature, but also because they exemplify paradigmatic approaches to this theme: Büchner's play broaches the subject of atheism in pioneering fashion and places this theme in the context of serious metaphysical speculations about the existence of God; Dostoevsky's masterpiece continues this inquiry into the theological basis of belief and unbelief, but it ultimately formulates a powerful critique of atheism based on moral arguments; in *The Plague* Camus inverts this position, showing that secular humanism is the only source of real good in a situation of existential crisis; Rebecca Newberger Goldstein, finally, moves beyond the serious moral frameworks of these predecessors to treat religious faith in a playful, humourous, and ironic fashion while almost off-handedly declaring atheism the winner in the contest between belief and unbelief.

BÜCHNER'S DANTON'S DEATH

As indicated above, 1835 can arguably be taken as a convenient starting point for extended treatments of atheism in Western literature. *Danton's Death* by Georg Büchner (1813–37) accords a place of prominence to the subject of godlessness, which is not surprising given that the play details events taking place during the heyday of the French Revolution. The centuries-long legacy of clerical privileges and the Church's complicity with the totalitarian monarchy made de-Christianization of France an objective almost universally shared among the revolutionary elite (some of whom were deists rather than atheists). Based on the historical implications of his story, Büchner could have easily turned Danton into a bogey man for atheism, a debauched scarecrow of an unbeliever who makes himself into a demi-god by overseeing the persecution and murder of thousands, only to end up falling victim to the flames fanned by his own irrational hatred. But Büchner does not go down that route. Although he holds the revolutionary zealots, including Danton, in contempt, calling them 'bandits of the Revolution' (quoted in Mueller 1963: xviii), he himself shared the atheism that Danton professes and thus refused to make non-belief the moral crux of Danton's 'banditry'. Instead, he presents us with a Danton who, although clearly a hedonist revolutionary firebrand, is at core a proto-existentialist, a passive commentator on man's absurd condition, as he recognizes the relentless force of the march of history. Thus, Büchner uses Danton as a screen on which to project his own doubts about the meaning of a world from which God has been banished. The turmoil of the French Revolution and the barbarity of the Terror are not the results of irreligiosity, but rather the results of a deeply flawed cosmos which actuates the terrible determinism of human history. Büchner suggests in a letter to his parents that anyone condemning his harsh depiction of an imperfect world 'should have to cry shame on God for having created a world which gives rise to so much dissoluteness' (ibid.: xix). This statement can be interpreted in one of two ways: either one should blame God for the botched creation that gives rise to the horrors of history—thereby venting a misotheistic sentiment—or one has to conclude that given the prevalence of suffering and error in this world, the cosmos cannot possibly be created by a deity presumed to be perfect—hence the atheistic implication.

The latter argument forms the basis of a lengthy debate over the non-existence of God in the play. In Act Three, a group of imprisoned revolutionaries, including Thomas Paine, are engaged in a theological disputation. Paine bases his 'proof' that '*there is no God*' (42) on a two-pronged approach: first, he advances a sophisticated ontological argument about the impossibility of something infinite (God) creating something finite (the world), without thereby being caught up in the finite element of his creation. He adds to this a moral argument, insisting that pain and death are the marks of imperfection and thus cannot be continuous with the perfect essence of divinity: 'Why do I suffer? That is the very bedrock of atheism. The least quiver of pain, in even the smallest of atoms, makes a rent in the curtain of your creation from top to bottom' (44). In thus turning the problem of evil (see Michael Peterson's 'The Problem of Evil') into ammunition against the existence of God, Paine anticipates Ivan Karamazov by several decades. And like Dostoevsky, Büchner explores the fate of morality in a godless universe. But he rather sides with the sceptics, in contrast to Dostoevsky. As one critic argued, 'almost every speech of Danton's can be traced to Büchner's letters or other personal statements' (quoted in Müller 1963: xiii). Thus, the following monologue by Danton comes with a good deal of authorial sanction: 'Peace is in nothingness ... and if the ultimate peace is God, then God must be nothingness. However, I'm an atheist' (56). This syllogism argues, paradoxically, that in order to be real, God would have to be non-existent. Like any other proofs for or against God's existence, this one is as spurious as the rest, but it shows that Büchner actually interrogated the theological grounds of belief in God, and that for him morality was not dependent on faith in God.

Büchner's *Danton's Death* sets the pattern of later literary treatments of atheism, insofar as the author's own stance on the matter determines whether atheism is presented in a favourable or unfavourable light. Being himself an atheist, Büchner made sure to lend considerable credence and even nobility to the theme. As we shall see, the contrasting religious sensibility of Fyodor Dostoevsky (1821–81) caused atheism to appear in a very different light. Commonly, religious commentaries on *The Brothers Karamazov* focus on the two crucial chapters 'Mutiny' (or 'Rebellion') and 'The Grand Inquisitor', the latter sometimes being treated as a book-within-the-book for its profound engagement with the problem of evil, specifically with the Free Will theodicy. However, I will pay relatively little attention to these common foci of religious analysis in *The Brothers Karamazov*, mainly because 'The Grand Inquisitor' is essentially a theological disquisition, and as such it is more relevant to discussions of God's theistic attributes, like benevolence and omnipotence, than it is to questions surrounding the existence or non-existence of God. A true atheist would need to preface any participation in such a theological debate with the disclaimer that what is being debated are the supposed attributes of a fictional character, not the characteristics of an actual, existing entity. No such disclaimer is made in 'The Grand Inquisitor', thus undermining Ivan's own claims to being a true atheist.

Ivan's atheist credentials are initially established when Ivan replies to his inebriated father's challenge 'tell us: does God exist or doesn't He?' with the simple words 'No, He doesn't' (179). The father, Fyodor Pavlovich, goes on to ask if Ivan's disbelief extends to God's adversary: 'And does the Devil exist?' to which again Ivan's answer is 'No, the Devil doesn't exist either' (179). This is the first of a series of religious dialogues in the novel where Ivan professes unbelief. But Ivan is not a straight-forward atheist. When Ivan's pious brother, Alyosha, repeats the question about God's existence to make sure that Ivan had been sincere in his earlier declaration of unbelief, Ivan hedges. He vacillates between Feuerbachian rationalism and an agnostic kind of scepticism. As for the rationalist position, Ivan asserts that 'indeed man has invented God. And the strange thing, the wonderful thing, is not that God really does exist, but that an idea like that—the idea of God's necessity, could find its way into the head of a savage and vicious animal such as man' (307). He gives this view an agnostic twist by admitting that 'I advise you never to think about that, Alyosha, and least of all concerning God and whether he exists or not. Those are all questions unsuited to a mind that has been created with an awareness of only three dimensions' (307). Interestingly Ivan not only backpedals from his earlier assertion of blank atheism, but he 'side-pedals' in his statement 'It isn't God I don't accept you see; it's the world created by Him, the world of God I don't accept and cannot agree to accept' (308). To be sure, no fully fledged atheist would be able to say this, since Ivan acknowledges that God has created the world, and that it is the botched nature of God's creation that is the problem. With such statements, Ivan really skirts misotheism, i.e. the hatred of God and the belief that God is an incompetent master-builder and a corrupt cosmic boss.

For Ivan Karamazov, the question about God's existence ultimately hinges on the existence of Satan. But on that score, the reader is led into a hall of mirrors. In a lengthy scene that dramatizes Ivan's supposed encounter with Satan, Ivan contradicts himself, at one point saying to Satan 'your aim is precisely to convince me that you exist in your own right, and are not one of my nightmares' (817), while also acknowledging that 'in yourself you [Satan] do not exist, you are *me*, all you are is *myself*, and nothing more! You are rubbish, you are my imagination!' (821). Only by denying Satan's existence independent of his own perception can Ivan also deny God's existence per se, an enterprise that has the Devil's full support: 'I am a hallucination you are having. ... I am merely a nightmare you are having' (817). Despite such disclaimers, the reader is by no means certain about the existence or non-existence of Satan because at the time of this encounter, Ivan is spiraling into madness and could indeed be hallucinating. The only thing that is certain is that Ivan and Satan seem to be mirroring each

other. Toward the end of Ivan's dream-encounter with the 'devil', Satan ventriloquizes Ivan's very own views on religious belief and morality: 'In my view it is not necessary to destroy anything, all that need be destroyed in mankind is the idea of God, that is what one must proceed from. ... Once mankind, each and individually, has repudiated God ... then of its own accord, and without the need of anthropology, the whole of the former world-outlook and, above all, the whole of the former morality, will collapse, and all will begin anew.... and the man-god will appear' (829). These are Ivan's own thoughts, but they are mouthed back to him by the emanation of Satan. In this charade, Dostoevsky is intent on showing that the atheist (or agnostic) Ivan is barely distinguishable from Satan—surely not a flattering representation of unbelief.

But it gets worse yet, if by 'worse' we understand the degradation of Ivan's lack of faith. In the final reckoning, Ivan Karamazov is a fallen character and not the repository of Dostoevsky's most dearly held convictions. In the novel's denouement, Ivan, although not guilty of committing the murder of his father, is nevertheless presented as an indirect accomplice, a corrupting force who had facilitated the crime. The actual murderer, a servant by the name of Smerdyakov, reports that Ivan had told him that in a world without God everything is permitted, after which he had felt no compunction to killing Fyodor. In other words, Ivan had turned Smerdyakov into a moral nihilist and the result was crime: 'if there is no infinite God, then there is no virtue, either, and there is no need of it whatever' (808). Such words, spoken by a repentant sinner, are a pointed reminder that *The Brothers Karamazov* was written by a pious Christian. Making Ivan the central character in his novel allows Dostoevsky to elevate questions of non-belief to a position of the utmost importance and to dramatize matters of morality in relation to religious piety. Clearly then, Dostoevsky is not in the business of advocating atheism. Even as he demonstrates that faith is not something a person can put on like a garment but something gained through spiritual struggle and considerable effort, he is intent on discrediting atheism as a force for human and moral betterment. For Dostoevsky, as for so many before and after him, doing away with the God-idea and moving toward a secular, rationalist world view means jettisoning traditional morality and putting up a 'man-god' in place of the Biblical God, with dire consequences.

Such reasoning caused Albert Camus, despite his own atheistic leanings, to warn in *The Rebel* (1951) against revolutionary movements that would replace God with a god-like human figure. Clearly, Camus was thinking of horrific 'man-gods' like Stalin and Hitler, and with good reason. However, it does not follow that destroying the God-idea leads inevitably to vile dictatorship and moral nihilism. When a secular culture quietly replaces an ecclesiastical culture, as is the case in many European democracies, from Denmark, to Norway, to Holland, then moral corrosion, political recklessness, and overall tyranny are not the results of widespread secularity (see also Phil Zuckerman's 'Atheism and Societal Health'). But for Dostoevsky, a dire outcome would indeed accompany atheism's triumph. And while he was prophetic in terms of predicting the pitfalls of endowing a political leader with the divine attribute of absolute power, he was wrong in suggesting that an atheist aspires to usurp God's prerogatives and, in doing so becomes 'a man god' (*Karamazov*, 830), who will be able to 'jump over, with a light heart, every former moral hurdle set by the former man-slave if need be. For God there exists no law!' (*Karamazov*, 830). Aside from the fact that certain laws (e.g., the laws of physics, mathematics, and biology) apply to everybody, including a self-declared 'man god', Dostoevsky's argument comes under pressure from another side. As evolutionary biologists and ethologists like David Barash and Frans de Waal have recently demonstrated, altruism (both in humans and generally in higher mammals) can overrule the selfish dictates of survival by conferring an evolutionary benefit upon groups who practice cooperation; this makes it a distinct possibility that certain kinds of morality are inherited, which, in turn, casts doubt on the view that anybody (including Dostoevsky's 'man god') can stand completely outside morality. But Dostoevsky could not conceive of natural moral mechanisms. Since God was the only basis of

virtue, Ivan's atheism, even in its hedging and quasi-agnostic rationalism, appeared to him a prelude to utter lawlessness and the mutual destruction of mankind, a type of self-inflicted apocalypse that reveals the supposed inhumanity of the nonreligious stance. *The Brothers Karamazov* shows that Dostoevsky meant to take atheism seriously but at the same time that he strove to affirm Christian piety and basic Biblical teachings in the face of mounting scepticism. Dostoevsky professes as much, writing to his publisher that the book was intended 'to depict the extreme of blasphemy and the core of the destructive idea of our age ... and, along with the blasphemy and anarchism, the refutation of them' (quoted in Coulson 1962: 219–20). Malcolm Muggeridge pointedly said that 'Dostoyevsky was a God-possessed man if ever there was one, as is clear in everything he wrote and in every character he created. All his life he was questing for God, and found Him only at the end of his days after passing through what he called "the hell-fire of doubt"' (1988: vi). Convinced of the spiritual significance of suffering and the redemptive power of faith, Dostoevsky in his later life assumed, in the words of Joseph Frank, 'the mantle' of a Christian 'prophet' (2002). Therefore, Ivan acts as a foil to Dostoevsky's own religious faith.

That an author's presentation of atheism tends to be strongly correlated with his religious outlook can be easily substantiated. For example, Danish writer Jens Peter Jacobsen's novel *Niels Lyhne* is one of the most explicitly favourable treatments of atheism in the nineteenth century. Not surprisingly, Jacobsen was a life-long secular humanist himself. Conversely, Georges Bernanos was a fervent Catholic, and his *Diary of a Country Priest* presents all atheist characters in an unflattering light, while focusing on a pastor's struggle of faith that ends with a reassuring affirmation of God's inescapable grace. Fellow Frenchman Albert Camus (1913–60) would not have stomached such a pious outcome. Himself a non-believer and a progressive thinker, Camus used literature as a canvas on which to paint an entirely different picture of atheism.

CAMUS'S *THE PLAGUE*

Camus's fictional masterpiece *The Plague* (1947) sheds a favourable light on atheism (on Camus, see also Alison Stone's 'Existentialism'). The story begins with the sudden outbreak of an epidemic in a North African town. As soon as the plague-like nature of the disease is confirmed, the whole city of Oran is shut off from the outside world, setting the stage for an existentialist drama of exile, powerlessness, and random suffering, with the main characters trying to wrest some dignity from their absurd and intolerable condition. It is a perfect setting for exploring the limits of human morality and for testing the power of God and the Church as mediators of hope and salvation. The existentialist theme comes through early, when the narrator informs us that the townspeople in the disease-stricken city 'came to know the incorrigible sorrow of all prisoners and exiles ... exile in one's own home' (73). Although Oran's case seems extreme, it is suggested that it merely epitomizes the human condition of solitude in a cold and uncaring universe: 'Each of us had to be content to live only for the day, alone under the vast indifference of the sky. This sense of being abandoned ... sapp[ed] them to the point of futility' (75). When the population felt most intensely 'at the mercy of the sky's caprices' (76), spiritual guidance and, indeed, divine comfort is more in demand than ever. At this point, the local priest steps up to deliver a dramatic sermon. Not surprisingly, the sermon turns on the theme of sin and guilt, and it depicts the plague as a sign of divine punishment: 'plague is the flail of God and the world His threshing-floor' (95) exclaims Father Paneloux, and he concludes with the hope that 'despite all the horrors of these dark days, despite the groans of men and women in agony, our fellow citizens would offer up to heaven that one prayer which is truly Christian, a prayer

of love. And God would see to the rest' (99). This pious response to the catastrophe contrasts with the pragmatic actions of Dr. Rieux, an atheist physician and indefatigable soldier against the plague, and by Tarrou, a journalist trapped in the city by mere bad luck. They are both secular humanists, and Tarrou insists that 'it is in the thick of calamity that one gets hardened to the truth—in other words, to silence' (116). That silence, of course, is code for the absence of God when he is most needed.

Rieux believes in man's power of preventing and, occasionally healing, sickness, rather than in seeking supernatural justifications for man's misfortunes. When asked 'Why do you yourself show such devotion, considering that you don't believe in God?' (126), the answer is that 'if he believed in an all-powerful God he would cease curing the sick and leave that to Him.... Rieux believed himself to be on the right road—in fighting against creation as he found it' (127). Here, we have a protagonist who is both an atheist and an agent of salvation. Moreover, his heroism contrasts favourably with the biblically conditioned, defensive reflexes of the priest. But although Camus's presentation of Rieux contrasts sharply with Dostoevsky's view of Ivan's unbelief or with Bernanos's attitude toward his atheist characters, Camus, too, stops short of endorsing strong atheism. Rieux, it turns out, is primarily an existentialist, and as such he allows a margin of possibility for God's existence, although if God does indeed exist, he is characterized by silence and indifference: 'since the order of the world is shaped by death, mightn't it be better for God if we refuse to believe in him and struggle with all our might against death, without raising our eyes toward the heaven where He sits in silence' (128)? This statement resonates strongly with Ivan Karamazov's views, a parallel that is even more pronounced when Rieux debates Father Paneloux, saying 'I've a very different view of love. And until my dying day, I shall refuse to love a scheme of things in which children are put to the torture' (218). This is a direct allusion to the chapter 'The Mutiny' in *The Brothers Karamazov* where Ivan mounts an elaborate argument against God's benevolence based on the problem of evil: Ivan argued that if even one innocent child is allowed to undergo hellish suffering without God intervening—especially if the suffering is inflicted in the name of God—then God is implicated in that child's agony. But whereas in Dostoevsky's tale, Ivan's position is ultimately disqualified (a disqualification that comes with Dostoevsky's approval), the same position is actually endorsed by Camus in *The Plague*. Moreover, when Camus's priest, Father Paneloux, succumbs to the plague, there is no sign of divine grace anywhere to be found: 'Even at the height of his fever Paneloux's eyes kept their blank serenity, and when, next morning, he was found dead, his body drooping over the bedside, they betrayed nothing. Against his name the index card recorded: "Doubtful case"' (233–4). This looks like a deliberate re-writing of the conclusion in Georges Bernanos' novel *Diary of a Country Priest*, where a doubting-Thomas kind of priest is reconciled with God on his deathbed by receiving spiritual assurance of divine grace. By contrast, the priest in Camus's novel dies without grace, epiphany, or redemption. He just fades away, literally labeled a 'doubtful case', and this after having steadfastly preached God's justice and love.

But it is important to note that the main focus in this novel is not so much on the contrast between atheism and piety, than it is on the contrast between secular humanism and religionism. In other words, the alternatives are not absence versus presence of belief in God, but rather a contest of two value systems or ideologies. Toward the end of the story, after the pestilence has finally subsided, 'Rieux was thinking it was only right that those whose desires are limited to man and his humble yet formidable love should enter, if only now and then, into their reward' (301). That reward is the simple affirmation of basic human decency and the experience of earthly love rather than any speculative metaphysical truths or divine rewards in the afterlife. Rieux writes a detailed chronicle of the plague 'so that some memorial of the injustice and outrage done them might endure; and to state quite simply what we learn in time of pestilence: that there are more things to admire in men than to despise' (308). By ending the novel on this note, Camus voices a resolutely secular, and a humbly rational,

nonreligious aspiration. This is the pioneering contribution of *The Plague* to the history of atheism in literature: here atheism is not associated with nihilism (*Danton's Death*), nor with anger and despair (*Niels Lyhne*) nor with immorality (*The Brothers Karamazov*) but with a wholly positive humanistic outlook.

GOLDSTEIN'S 36 ARGUMENTS FOR THE EXISTENCE OF GOD

So far, we have encountered highly serious, at times even ponderous, explorations of atheism in fictional contexts. There is hardly any humour in the theological debates and religious inquiries that punctuate the works of Büchner, Jacobsen, Dostoevsky, Bernanos, and Camus. But this need not be the default position as far as questions of atheism in literature are concerned. As an alternative, I am *not* thinking of overt buffoonery such as Monty Python's hilarious, irreverent *Life of Brian*. Instead, what I have in mind is simply a lighter and somewhat more humorous approach to unbelief. If proof is needed that the theme of belief and unbelief can be treated with a subtle comical sensibility, then Rebecca Newberger Goldstein's novel *36 Arguments for the Existence of God* (2010) furnishes it. Goldstein steers clear of both strident attacks against religion and sanctimonious pieties. Instead, she explores the reality of religious fervour and examines the merit of both religious and anti-religious stances with a gently mocking, comical air. For one thing, Goldstein has considerable fun with the nomenclature of God proofs, spoofing their wording in 36 chapter headings that include such absurdities as 'Argument from the Eternity of Irony' or the 'Argument from *The New York Times*'. But Goldstein takes religion and the religious impulse rather seriously, even as she flaunts the various obstacles to human flourishing that are built into fundamentalist aspects of religious life.

The specific fundamentalism that she explores in her story is the fictional Hasidic community of the Valdeners who are said to exist somewhere in the Hudson valley, near New York. Although specifically Jewish, I think that Goldstein's intention was to present the Valdener community as representative of some elements that attach to all religious fundamentalisms. These elements have their advantages, and the mystical transports during their meetings, as well as the tight-knit, cooperative structure of the Valdener community count for something. But there are also abject elements of sexism, superstition, and cultism built into this religious sect that the readers are clearly meant to resist. The linchpin for determining the relationship between the reactionary and the redeeming aspects of this Hasidic community is a boy by the name of Azarya Sheiner. This character is destined to become the new Rebbe of his community after the death of his father. But Azarya is no common heir to his ultra-conservative father's spiritual leadership. He happens to be a mathematical genius who, without the benefit of formal schooling, spews mathematical proofs at the tender age of six. Azarya is not only a child prodigy, he's obviously a rationalist who looks askance at the religious superstitions that flourish in his community. In short, he is a modern man who finds the separate sidewalks for men and women in his *shtetl*, or the fact that secular education is practically unavailable in his community, to be rather irksome. At the same time, he also respects the cultural integrity of his Jewish clan and reveres the religious traditions that give life and meaning to the orthodox community of the Valdeners.

Faced with the decision of either becoming the protégé of a star professor at MIT or becoming the new Rebbe of his archaic Jewish community, he chooses the latter, well knowing that thereby he chooses the existential loneliness of a genius who must let his talents lay fallow, while agreeing to perform such strange rituals as sitting at the communal dinner where food falling from his mouth or being left over on his plate is scavenged as a token of holiness by fellow clanspersons. Asked 'why

should the Valdeners continue with their superstitions and their insularity and their stubborn refusal to learn anything from outside? Why is that something to perpetuate?' (364) the future Rebbe answers: 'It's tragic, a diminishment, when a people goes out of existence, a way of life, a culture, a language' (364). Here lies the crux of Goldstein's respect for her subject. Indeed, the perpetuation of superstition and ignorance is worded in terms of a preservation effort, and the question *why do the Valdeners not deserve to go extinct?* is coded in similar terms as the question *why do spotted owls not deserve to go extinct?* It's a true dilemma, as the secular humanist's heart wants Azarya to pursue his calling as a math wizard, not as a super-orthodox preserver of his small community's archaic ways. But Goldstein's stance on this decision remains wholly implicit. It's up to the readers to support or critique Azarya's decision.

The same cannot be said about the theological key question that the novel poses: does God exist? The dramatic climax of the novel is a highly publicized debate between Cass Seltzer, dubbed the 'atheist with a soul', and a Christian apologist by the name of Felix Fidley. This debate reveals just how sophisticated of a thinker Goldstein is and how well informed she is about matters of theology. Fidley bases his arguments on the claim that morality derives from God, while Cass anchors his argument in the problem of evil. It is a titanic clash rehearsing all of the major positions that the other works discussed in this essay have also taken up vis-à-vis the conundrums of God, morality, and existence. Significantly, this debate actually has a winner: Cass. It is not an easy victory, but Cass Seltzer's arguments against God based on the problem of evil eventually carry the day. Again, there is no hauteur, no sneering righteousness attached to this outcome, but it is nevertheless a victory for secular humanism against pious theism.

While Cass's victory represents an explicit falsification of God, Goldstein uses a more subtle, implicit method to further subvert the claims of religion. She accomplishes this by the sustained use of metafiction in her narrative.¹ One common metafictional technique is insistent doubling. In this case, Cass is himself a writer, and his major claim to fame is a book titled *The Varieties of Religious Illusion*, a title that doubles for Rebecca Goldstein's own stance. Metafiction thrives on irony, and that is one of the sharpest weapons against religiosity. One can't be ironical about matters of faith. Faith relies on sincerity, and irony subverts that stance. Goldstein's metafictional narrative is incessantly ironic, beginning with the title: *36 Arguments for the Existence of God: A Work of Fiction*. This implies that all of the referenced pro-God arguments are equivalent to 'works of fiction'. And then, in the novel's appendix, we get a demolition of each of the 36 actual 'proofs' as advanced by St. Thomas Aquinas, St. Anselm, Hume, Kant, and others, yielding in effect 36 arguments *against* the existence of God. Similar metafictional devices are employed in another recent novel that centres on unbelief: James Wood's *Book Against God*. The story's protagonist, Thomas Bunting, is forever trying to finish his doctoral thesis which is a version of the titular 'Book Against God'. In tried-and-true metafictional manner, the book we are holding in our hands is mirrored in the book-within-the-book, just as the fictional writer is an alter ego of the actual author. This trend indicates a new, playful approach to atheism. It also demonstrates how far the stakes have been lowered, as atheism—and unbelief in general—has become a matter of personal taste that is largely unproblematic in a society that values diversity and promotes personal self-discovery. It is, of course, not a development to be regretted.

CONCLUSION

If there is an overarching trajectory to the development of atheism in literature since 1835, it is that—

just as with sexual themes—strict notions of propriety and self- or imposed censorship have undergone vast changes. Gone are the days when any expression of atheism would be accompanied by tortuous self-doubts, by fears of recriminations, and by copious self-exculpation. Gone, too, are the days when atheism was branded as a disease of cosmic proportions and associated with dire moral degradation and apocalyptic scenarios of cultural disintegration or, conversely, when it was seen as the harbinger of humanity's redemption. I am not aware of recent literary treatments of atheism that depict unbelief in a wholly negative light or, conversely, as the key to human emancipation. Rather, what is happening more frequently is that atheist perspectives are unspectacularly, almost casually, woven into the fabric of twenty-first century fiction. For example, most fictions identified as 'New Atheist novels' by Arthur Bradley and Andrew Tate fall under this category. Considering works written by Ian McEwan, Martin Amis, Philip Pullman, and Salman Rushdie, Bradley and Tate are mainly concerned with these authors' overarching secular ideology not with the fact that atheism is a *topos* in their works. These critics find fault with the 'New Atheist novel' because the authors of these novels place their faith in scientific rationality, prefer progressive liberalism to religious fundamentalism, and elevate literature to a new object of devotion: 'What unites all four novelists, though, is a kind of neo-Romantic belief in the potential of art—and particularly fiction—to replace a now untenable faith in the divine' (2010: 107). The four authors under the scrutiny of Bradley and Tate have not filled their fictions with lengthy debates over the merits or demerits of atheism, nor have they incorporated extended deconstructions of religious doctrines. Rather, Bradley and Tate object to the fact that the works of McEwan, Rushdie, Pullman, and Amis are pervaded by an ideological viewpoint that naturally encompasses a critique of religion and an affirmation of nonreligious values. It emerges that Rushdie, Amis, McEwan, and Pullman are more concerned with the ideological drawbacks, limitations, and dangers inherent in a religious world view than they are with the fine points of theological arguments over the existence or the nature of God. The Almighty is no longer worth the effort required to disprove him. These so-called 'New Atheist novels' are not principally concerned with questions of atheism *per se*, and they belong therefore mainly under the category of implicitly atheist literature. To compare McEwan's *Saturday* or Rushdie's *The Enchantress of Florence* to Niels Lyhne or *The Brothers Karamazov* means to compare the sober post-game assessment of a football match with the game's early, turbulent phase, as the teams find their strengths and test the opponent's weaknesses. Atheism in literature has ceased to be an arena for religious battles and is morphing into a more detached, even playful, exploration of psychological, social, and political themes.

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CHAPTER 44

THE VISUAL ARTS

J. SAGE ELWELL

INTRODUCTION

WHEN considering atheism and the visual arts, works like Andres Serrano's *Piss Christ*, the crucified cows of Damien Hirst's *Natural History*, or even Andy Warhol's celebrity screen prints might come to mind. These works, and those like them, figure as likely candidates because they seem to offend, or at least confound, religious sensibilities. This however is to conflate atheism with heresy or blasphemy. Rather, the deepest expression of atheism in the visual arts is God's complete irrelevance to the project of modern and contemporary art. And to understand this, the heart of atheism and the visual arts, means looking not to today's postmodern art trends but rather to the Renaissance origins of the split between art and religion.

There was a time when all art was religious, and yet today the visual arts are undeniably atheistic. As art historian James Elkins has observed, 'Contemporary art ... is as far from organized religion as Western art has ever been ...' (2004: 15). Sincere expressions of belief in God, if not entirely absent from the visual arts today, are largely irrelevant and ignored. Religion, if not wholly inaccessible to the visual arts, has at least become superfluous. This despite the fact that for most of their shared history, art and religion were wedded partners. How then did this transformation come about? How and why did the arts separate from religion? That is the question this essay proposes to address. To do so, I focus my attention on the period of the Renaissance as the moment in artistic and religious history when the programmatic split between the arts and religion first began and the foundations were laid for today's atheistic state of the visual arts.

This essay is divided into three sections. The first section presents preliminary issues of terminology, scope, and method. The second section looks to fifteenth and sixteenth century Europe and the important Renaissance precursors that foreshadowed, and in some cases, precipitated the rift between art and religion. This section focuses on economics, the progress of science, and humanism as programmatic themes that would set the trajectory for atheism and the visual arts. Section three concludes the essay by exploring central theoretical issues arising from the intersection of atheism and the visual arts.

PRELIMINARY REMARKS

When I say that all art was once religious, a claim I clarify below, I am aware that the terms art and religion, as conceptual categories of artefacts, actions, and belief, are relatively modern inventions. Therefore, to be clear, as I use the terms art and religion—as well as such corollary terms as aesthetics and God(s)—I appeal to them for their staid institutional connotations. I make no effort

here to address the issue of spirituality and the arts—a topic far too broad to be usefully presented in the present context. Thus the following is addressed almost exclusively to what was once referred to as ‘high art’ on the one hand, and recognized institutional religious belief on the other.¹ The reason for this is quite simple. Given the limits of space and time and the purpose of this essay as an introduction to atheism and the visual arts, it is justifiably prudent to attend to those elements of artistry and belief that are most typically recognized as such.²

To suggest that all art was once religious is to say two things. First, it is to point out, in the words of art theorist Thierry de Duve, that ‘art and religion were born together’ (Elkins and Morgan 2009: 114). By this de Duve means that it was at about the same time that humans first began to bury their dead and hence speculate on the afterlife that they also began to adorn the dead and decorate their graves. And as Elkins points out, ‘Eight thousand years ago Europe, Asia, and Africa were already full of sculpted gods, goddesses, and totemic animals’ (2004: 5). Thus it is not too much to say that from the beginning, art was wedded to those beliefs and practices that would later be called ‘religion’ as either helpmate or illustrator.

In a different register, to say that art and religion were ‘born together’ is also to point out that there is no history of atheism and the visual arts. That is, there is neither a historical record of primary documents tracing the relationship between atheism and the visual arts, nor is there a great reservoir of secondary material on the subject; there is in fact little to no sustained critical scholarship on the subject.³ There are two good reasons for this. First, as noted, for most of its history, art was religious; or at least in the service of religion. Western art only began to separate from religion during the Renaissance, and only truly divorced from religion after the Enlightenment. Second, atheism only matured as a clearly conceptualized position in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries (Hyman 2007; Beattie 2008; Walters 2010). Prior to this, disbelief was only vaguely articulated as a denunciation of the God(s), as in the Hellenic world, or as an unstated critique of the God of Western monotheism couched in the terms of science or philosophy. Ironically however, the relative historical co-incidence of the arts’ divorce from religion and the emergence of atheism as a fully articulated position would seem to speak to the need for just such a history and critical appraisal.

What is offered here therefore largely marks a first effort at both. For this reason I begin historically with the Renaissance rather than, for example, diving into the ocean of atheism and modern and contemporary art. The current state of atheism in the visual arts is after all a product of this first moment in the separation of art from religion. To appreciate how and why ‘the most innovative and interesting art separated itself from religious themes’ (Elkins 2004: 12) it is necessary to anchor a first consideration of atheism and the visual arts such as this in the earliest schism between the two.

That being said, it may admittedly seem odd to focus on the Renaissance in an essay considering atheism and the visual arts. The Renaissance was after all the period of the Sistine Chapel and the *Pietá*. It would in fact seem to be a high point in the relationship between religion and art. And in many ways it was. However, a key reason the Renaissance is prized in the history of religious art is precisely because the artistry became so accomplished. Consequently, the arts began to flourish independent of their religious content and obligations. This is the pivotal moment for any appreciation of atheism and the arts, and thus an introduction to the subject must begin here.

Finally, one last preliminary point is in order. It is tempting to begin a consideration of atheism and the visual arts by appealing to blasphemous or intentionally anti-religious works, as they may appear the most obvious candidates for consideration. Blasphemy however is not atheism. Atheism, as it is applied in the *Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, refers most generally to the absence of belief in the existence of God(s). While blasphemous works of art might also be atheistic (though they needn’t be),

their atheism would lie not in their anti-theism, but rather in the absence of belief that is its ground.

THE RENAISSANCE ORIGINS OF THE SEPARATION OF ART FROM RELIGION

The separation of art from religion began in earnest in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Europe. Three things happened during this Renaissance period that foreshadowed and contributed to the wholesale divorce of art from religion. First, commerce-based economic prosperity gave rise to a wealthy middle-class of patrons who commissioned new genres of secular art and whose patronage was propaedeutic to the founding of art as art—as no longer the indentured servant of religion. Second, the progress of science lent an air of naturalism and a pursuit of realism to the arts, whereas in the past religious content as determined by theological orthodoxy had once dominated artistic creation. Third, the birth of classical humanism foregrounded the dignity and value of the individual (in body and mind) over the nameless collective of the Church. The result was a gradual withdrawal of God from the visual arts and a progressive solidification of the arts as an autonomous endeavour.

Economics

The commercial capitals of Europe in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were the Netherlands to the north and Italy to the south. Families like the Medicis in Florence and the Arnolfinis in Bruges (who represented the Medici bank in that northern city) supported the arts, at least in part, as a way to tangibly demonstrate their material success and social influence and immortalize themselves and their families for posterity. The implications for art's separation from religion were twofold. Firstly, it fostered the revival and development of secular genres such as portraiture and genre painting that would rival in beauty and import the commissions of the Church. Secondly, and more importantly, middle-class patronage generated heightened cultural capital for the creative artist and validated 'art' as an ideal that was separate from the purposes of organized religion.

There is debate (Nagel and Wood 2005; Dempsey 2005; Cole 2005; Farago 2005; Farago 2008; Williams 2008) over the so-called Renaissance 'origins of art' in relation to the rise of middle-class patronage. And while I agree with Elkins (2008: 10) that the broadening of the field of art history to encompass all of visual culture arguably renders the debate moot for those engaged in art historical work, it nonetheless remains relevant for the present context. This is because the origins of 'art' during the Renaissance speaks to how this new mode of middle-class patronage fomented a conceptualization of 'the arts' as an *autonomous* enterprise. As Gombrich observed 'a deliberate patronage of "art"... is impossible without the idea of "art"' (1966: 35). The importance of this shift in patronage for the present consideration of atheism and the arts thus lies in the fact that the wealthy art patron was not merely purchasing a crafted artefact, but was contributing to the founding and cultivation of 'the arts' and 'the artist' as reified concepts that not only stood apart from religion, but would eventually come to define themselves through opposition to religion.

Tellingly, it was at this time that Giorgio Vasari canonized hundreds of Renaissance artists in his *Lives of the Most Excellent Painters, Architects, and Sculptors* wherein he celebrated their lives and achievements in grandiose fashion. And as Stockstad observes, 'More names of artists were recorded during the fifteenth century ... than in the entire span from the beginning of the common era to the year 1400' (1995: 614). Thus the Renaissance saw the first movement toward broad cultural

recognition of the work of art as the uniquely valuable product of the creative genius, and not merely the illustrator or handmaiden of religion fabricated by nameless workmen.

Eventually this would result in the wholesale commodification of the work of art as, for example, quintessentially figured in the life and work of Warhol. This commodification would in turn promote the cult of the artist, the ideal of originality (in form and content), and the value of personal expression over mimesis or illustration. Combined, this would culminate in the ultimate prize of the uniquely styled expression of the artist's own private subjectivity. All of this, rooted as it is in the economics of the Renaissance 'artworld', would further remove the visual arts from religion and serve as the foundation for a thoroughgoing atheism of the visual arts wherein sincere expressions of religious faith would simply have no place.

Science

For artists like da Vinci, Michelangelo, Brunelleschi, Verrocchio and others, the Church remained a principal provider of commissions. However, the Renaissance turn to classical Greek and Roman thought ushered in a new theological vision of the natural world. Whereas the theological *Weltanschauung* of the Middle Ages regarded the material world as something of a prison for the soul and thus not fit for serious, protracted inquiry, the classical writings of the ancients inspired Renaissance thinkers and artists to investigate and understand the material world in a rational and scientific way. Thus, while artists continued to work for the Church and execute religious pieces, they increasingly brought a studied realism to their renderings of Mary or the Christ that transformed the works into more than mere illustrations of sacred scenes or visual aids to worship. Indeed their beauty began to rival their religious import to the point of usurping it.

For example, around 1413 the Italian artist Filippo Brunelleschi devised a method for rendering three-dimensional pictorial space in two-dimensions. Linear perspective, as it would be called, describes the way in which all parallel lines in a visual field appear to converge at a single point on the distant horizon. This empirical study of the natural world led artists to new systems of rendering perspective that gave depth to two-dimensional space and affirmed their ability to know and represent the material world with accuracy. The universe was no longer knowable exclusively through the lens of religion and religion no longer constituted the criterion by which that universe could be represented. Rather, the natural world itself was the ideal and fidelity to it, not Church dogma, was the standard.

The invention of linear perspective and other Renaissance-era techniques such as foreshortening and chiaroscuro,⁴ attest to the advancement of visual art as a form of rational inquiry. As such, these new scientific methods of inquiry and rendering imposed a rigid order on the relationship between viewer and image, such that the viewer was the lone point of reference within the visual field, which thereby positioned the individual at the centre of a scrutable universe. In coordination with the emerging sciences, the arts developed a set of principles and techniques that would serve as artistic 'laws' directing the evolution of visual representation. Like scaffolding, these principles and techniques gave the arts an internal strength and authority that allowed them to develop according to their own unique aesthetic logic. Thus, even when rendering religious content, the authority of technique and form vied with the authority of religious orthodoxy.

Science posited the universe as finite materiality worthy of investigation for its own sake. Likewise the artist fashioned reflections of the world using his or her own materials—paints, stone, bronze—and thereby stood in the place of God as world-creator. Thus as the mysteries of the universe

succumbed to science, so too did the mysteries of artistic creation. There were knowable rules and techniques that if mastered could be used to create faithful reflections of a world likewise governed by knowable laws. We see this today in Damien Hirst's vivisected cows and sheep, cut open and preserved like a postmodern science experiment. The role of the scientist thus paralleled the role of the artist as both shifted further from religion in the pursuit of knowledge and creativity.

Humanism

The visual arts, like Renaissance humanism generally, embraced the ideas and images of ancient Greece and Rome. In so doing they affirmed the dignity, complexity, and beauty of the unique individual in mind and body. This was manifest in the revival of portraiture and the return of the classical nude, both of which, at least implicitly if not overtly, challenged religious assumptions about the value of the redeeming collective of the Church over the sinful and fallen individual.

During the Middle Ages the prevailing theological anthropology was decidedly Augustinian and held that humanity was stained by sin and salvation lay only through the Church. As such, the lone individual was nothing to be celebrated yet alone immortalized in portraiture. By contrast, in 1435 Alberti would advise portrait artists to *improve* the appearance of their sitters, noting that 'It will please [the artist] to not only make all parts true to his model but also to add beauty there ...' ([1435] 1966: 92). In a reversal then, the ideal of external physical beauty supplanted concern over interior spiritual sinfulness as the artist is charged with fashioning the real into the ideal, which is framed here according to the values of material beauty. Moreover, Renaissance portraits were carefully crafted to convey the unique personalities and worldly accomplishments and interests of the sitter by surrounding them with possessions such as books, weapons, or jewellery that spoke to their social, political, or economic status. This emphasis on external beauty, material possessions, and individuality attests to the visual arts' gradual shift away from the condemnatory and collectivizing tendencies of organized religion. Rather, the arts embraced and celebrated the individual as redeemed not by the Church, but through the worldly accomplishments of an independent will as expressed by the artist charged with realizing the ideal of outward beauty.

The value afforded formal beauty and individuality converged most evocatively in the Renaissance revival of the nude. Historically, Western Christendom did not shy away from representing the naked body. More often than not modesty of some sort prevailed (a fig leaf, for example), but the naked human form is not uncommon in the canons of Christian art. However, while nakedness occurs, prior to the Renaissance, the nude was scarce. The nude, as a celebration of the classical ideal of the beauty and dignity of the human form, virtually vanished from the oeuvre of Western art following the decline of pre-Christian Greco-Roman culture.

The revival of the nude signaled an embrace of the human body in a way that would have been theologically untenable in the centuries preceding the Renaissance. Prior to the 15th century, much prevailing religious thought depicted the body as the seat of sin and lust, a fleshy prison of the soul, and thus to be overcome, not celebrated. Thus the revival of the nude spoke to a secular redemption of the body. This is perhaps best seen in the way the nude was constructed; that is, though the careful and scrupulous study of human anatomy as a worthy object of scientific analysis pursuant to idealized artistic ends. Alberti advises the artist, writing, 'Just as for a clothed figure we first have to draw the naked body beneath and then cover it with clothes, so in painting a nude the bones and muscles must be arranged first, and then covered with appropriate flesh and skin in such a way that it is not difficult to perceive the positions of the muscles' (*ibid.*: 91). Not only is the unclothed human form a worthy artistic subject, but importantly, it is constructed through an objectification of the body that eschews

modesty and moralizing in favour of a kind of accuracy that blends naturalism and idealism. The result is a vision of what the human being can be that is grounded in what the human being is. Implicitly then, salvation lies not in the other-worldly redemption proffered by religion, but in the cultivation of the unique and natural capacities of the human being. This model of self-salvation, or even salvation through the creative (artistic) capacities of the individual, would be programmatic in the arts, final divorce from religion and the establishment of the atheistic state of the arts today.

Summary

Between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries the visual arts developed into an autonomous, liberal (as opposed to manual) enterprise bearing its own internal artistic rules, independent authority, and mythology of creative genius. As patronage shifted away from the old aristocracy and toward a new commerce-based middle class, the importance of ‘taste’ and the demands of the market would gradually overshadow the call to religious service. And in the wake of the scientific revolution and classical humanism, the arts would turn to worldly vistas of representation.

ISSUES AND QUESTIONS

The intersection of atheism and the visual arts raises several important questions. From the side of the creator, there is the question of whether or not an atheist artist can truly execute a religious work of art. From the side of the audience, there is the question of whether or not an atheist can truly appreciate a religious work of art. There is also the question of whether or not, in divorcing itself from religion, the arts lost their most powerful subject. And finally, is post-Renaissance art inherently inclined toward atheism? The following briefly considers each of these in turn, taking the first two together.

The dual questions of whether an atheist can truly create or genuinely appreciate a religious work of art represent two sides of the same coin. Both questions hinge on the role of religious belief in the creative and appreciative acts. At the 2006 Beyond Belief symposia the atheist scientist Richard Dawkins suggested that works of art on religious subjects like Bach’s *Mass in B Minor* and *St. Matthew Passion* ‘happen to be on a religious theme, but they might as well not be’ (Beyond Belief 2006). Dawkins’ point is that as works of art, their beauty has nothing to do with their religious subject matter and neither their creation nor their appreciation are in any way contingent upon accepting the faith claims they purport to embody or substantiate. He concludes that ‘They’re beautiful music on a great poetic theme, but we could still go on enjoying them without believing in any of that supernatural rubbish’ (*ibid.*). And presumably, to focus in on the issue of artistic creation, Dawkins would likewise insist that an artist could compose or paint a work on a religious theme similarly ‘without believing in any of that supernatural rubbish’. In point of fact it is a well-known truism in art history that many ‘religious’ artists were far from religious. Moreover, as Wimsatt and Beardsley (1954) and later Roland Barthes (1977) persuasively argued, the intentions of the artist are not sufficient in themselves for determining the meaning of a work.⁵ Inasmuch as the intentions or beliefs of the artist cannot determine the meaning of a work, it follows then that there is no reason an atheist could not create a religiously significant work of art. This is because the religious significance of a work of art is largely, if not entirely, bestowed by the viewer as a response to the work itself with minimal interpretative obligation to the beliefs of the artist, even when such beliefs can be known—

which often they cannot. Even if the atheist artist protests against a religious interpretation of their work, as Donald Kuspit (1996) has persuasively argued, the interpretative act itself bears an independent and creative authority that the artist, while free to challenge, cannot simply dismiss. Thus, on the side of creation, there appears to be no reason an atheist cannot create a religious work of art. The matter however is not yet fully resolved as there remains the issue of appreciation.

Citing another comment by Dawkins wherein he claimed that 'you might as well say how you can enjoy *Wuthering Heights* when you know that Cathy and Heathcliffe never really existed', Beattie rejoins that, 'Our capacity to enjoy *Wuthering Heights*, as with any other great work of literature, is not dependent upon our belief that Cathy and Heathcliffe actually existed, but it is dependent upon the capacity of their characters to communicate something truthful about the human condition' (2008: 156). Unlike Dawkins, for Beattie the aesthetic dimension of a work of art, that is, its purely sensual character, cannot be divorced from its religious associations without diminishing the experience of the work as a whole. She explains that, 'We might not share Bach's Christian faith, but can we really appreciate his music without having at least some sense of what it means to praise the glory of God ...?' (ibid.).

It is tempting to read Beattie as claiming something along the lines of the more general point that art appreciation requires familiarity with the ideas and histories relevant to a given work, style, or period. That is, in the same way that appreciating Cubism requires an understanding of the work of Cézanne, to appreciate Michelangelo's *Pieta* requires a sense of the salvific act of Christ's death. There is however a qualitative difference between the two.

In both the case of creation and appreciation, the pivotal point is whether or not it is necessary to have a sincere and authentic religious sense or experience in order to claim the complete repertoire of creative or appreciative capacities necessary to fully appreciate, or genuinely create, a work of religious art. If we answer in the affirmative, it follows that an atheist can neither truly appreciate nor create a religious work of art. This, however, seems counter to experience. On one hand, as stated, the beliefs of the artist cannot absolutely determine the religious or irreligious content (or meaning) of a work. Part of the inheritance of the Renaissance is the integrity and autonomy of the work of art *qua* art. The work thus finally stands on its own, apart from its creator. Its religious (or atheistic) character is in turn largely a reflection of its reception, which, naturally, will rest in no small part on the validity of the arguments mounted in favour of one interpretation or another. And while such arguments should take into account the circumstances of the work's creation, those circumstances should not be absolutely determinative.

On the other hand, precisely because Renaissance art marked a break from the exclusivity of religious obligations and thus exclusively religious modes of appreciation, it is entirely plausible that a religious work of art could be appreciated on purely aesthetic grounds just as a purely secular work might be appreciated as a window onto transcendence. In the case of the atheist then, nothing is lost in creating or appreciating a work of art pursuant to purely aesthetic or historical ends because the '[truths] of the human condition' that Beattie extols, while perhaps powerfully *conveyed* in the visual language of the myths of the gods, are nonetheless rooted in the human experience amidst godless immanence. Thus, whereas the atheist can study Cézanne's influence on the Cubism of Picasso and Braque, he or she cannot acquire an experience of God, as God does not exist.

This however raises an important point: In breaking from religion, did the visual arts lose one of its most powerful subjects? The answer, I believe, must be an overwhelming yes. Regardless of the veracity of religion or belief in God(s) generally, the sacred stories and compelling characters that constitute the narrative core of most religious traditions nonetheless form and elicit a shared sense of identity and common worldview for believers. Stories about the origins of the cosmos and the

meaning and destiny of humankind constitute a constellation of meanings that shore up individual and communal identity in a way unrivaled by any other source. Artists in turn could draw on those sacred symbols, mythologies, and characters to evoke and inspire emotions and ideas that resonated with viewers who were versed in a given tradition. A single image could convey an entire story and a single symbol could invoke an entire metaphysical system. Religion then served as a repository of emotionally (and often visually) compelling stories with trusted cultural resonance. Moreover, this visual language was powerful precisely because religion's stories are powerful. From the Passion of Christ to Yahweh's wrath, the mythologies of the world's religions contain some of the greatest tales of love and hate and joy and sorrow ever told. Alain Besançon succinctly captures the implications of the divorce of art from religion, noting that the absence of God 'deprives [the artist] of the supreme image' (2000: 307). Separated from religion, modern and contemporary art lost the ability to reference the supreme image and the tales that accompanied it with sincerity and conviction.

Of course sincere religious art continued to be produced after the Renaissance and is still made today. Nonetheless, the Renaissance marked the point when works of art were first viewed and valued for the beauty of their form, independent of their religious relevance. This is *the* critical moment for understanding atheism and the visual arts because what followed would render even the most sincere religious work of art a didactic and thus qualified example of genuine artistic creation. As the arts embraced beauty, creativity, innovation, and expression over any and all external obligations, the most innovative visual art moved further and further away from religion. This in turn defined the trajectory of the arts according to an implicit principle of divergence from religion. Thus we encounter the final question, is post-Renaissance art, specifically modern and contemporary art, inherently inclined away from religion and toward atheism?

In his book *Farwell to an Idea* (1999), T. J. Clark made a compelling case that modern art signals an abandonment of spirituality. Conversely, Gablik (1984, 1995), Fried (2002), and to a lesser extent Morgan (2005), offer varying articulations of the contrary view that modern art bears a deep and abiding spirituality. However, both sides of the debate agree that in the wake, first, of the Renaissance, and second, the Enlightenment, the arts largely, if not completely, abandoned *religion*. That is, the arts may be 'spiritual' in that they embody or convey a sense of the Other or the transcendent, but they lack any discernible attachment to or endorsement of the defining doctrines and practices of organized religion in the West. Indeed, as public piety began to wane in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Europe, creeds and tenants were supplanted by evocations of the beautiful and the sublime and the arts were often looked to as a replacement for religion. And the birth of the avant-garde in early twentieth-century Paris further removed art from religion as the arts increasingly assumed a position of defiant opposition to the strictures of sanctioned religiosity. As David Morgan writes, 'Avant-gardism ... harbors a suspicion of religion, a belief that it is vestigial, and a corresponding conviction that modernity is secular at heart' (Elkins and Morgan 2009: 39). Thus, following a course first set during the Renaissance, the modern advancement of the arts is likewise secular and the relevance of religion to the arts is not only negligible but religion actually becomes an obstacle to the arts. There is then a decidedly atheistic tendency in modern and contemporary art that inclines it away from religion, if not the more nebulous category of spirituality.

CONCLUSION

Warhol, Serrano, or Hirst may appear to be natural candidates for a consideration of atheism and the visual arts, but they are inheritors of a tradition of the progressive separation of art from religion that

began in the Renaissance. Thus I began this essay by asking how it came about that the arts, once wedded to religion, are now largely atheistic. To answer this, I sought to lay the foundations, historical and theoretical, for any consideration of atheism and the visual arts. As such, I focused my attention on the Renaissance and the economic, scientific, and philosophical changes that signaled the origins of the split between religion and the arts. Together these factors constitute a threefold rubric of forces that would continue to define the arts, steering them evermore away from religion and toward atheism.

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CHAPTER 45

MUSIC

PAUL A. BERTAGNOLLI

INTRODUCTION

WESTERN classical music manifests atheism in multiple historical periods and in assorted musical genres. Prominent composers, librettists, music theorists, and patrons were self-admitted atheists, agnostics, or sceptics, or their contemporaries verified their unbelief. These self-described or peer-identified nonbelievers expressed atheism in various ways. Some composers merely avoided writing religious music and may accordingly be deemed ‘negative atheists’ whose *oeuvre*, as a whole, evinces an absence of belief. Others, however, were ‘positive atheists’ who asserted specific beliefs by adopting diverse approaches to texts: veiling convictions in allegories; altering sacred texts; selecting overtly atheistic poetry; using particular musical techniques to intensify pointedly atheistic excerpts within longer texts; and appropriating religious subjects to serve other causes, especially musical drama and nationalism. Additional, long-lived issues include the ability of atheists to compose ‘sincere’ religious music and the reactions of Soviet composers to State-imposed atheism. Popular and ethnographic music likewise evince virulent atheism, though this essay focuses primarily on the Western art tradition.

Atheism’s appearance in such varied musical contexts may initially seem surprising. Music, after all, is normally performed in public or domestic venues where irreligion was banned, censored, or deemed inappropriate. Nor is music typically amenable to anonymous or pseudonymous dissemination, unlike some atheistic literature. Despite such obstacles, examples of musical atheism often congregate in ‘clusters’ within historical periods and national or geographic areas. My discussion accordingly proceeds chronologically from the Middle Ages to post-modernity and is further subdivided along national lines. The ensuing survey thus seeks to reveal the generally unrecognized extent and depth of atheistic musical thought.

EARLY MUSIC

Most European medieval music, intended for Christian liturgical use or monastic consumption, provides scant opportunity to evaluate atheism. A smaller yet robust body of secular songs likewise eschews atheism, instead cultivating subjects such as courtly love, pastoral life, history, mythology, satire, politics, laments, and commemorative occasions. Perhaps the era’s nearest approximation of atheism occurs in the *Carmina burana*, a thirteenth-century manuscript preserving licentious drinking, gambling, and love songs. Other songs blaspheme the Church and its corrupt leaders, one (*Deduc Sion*) even comparing the Church to ‘a cave of robbers of corpses’. But genuine unbelief is avoided in a manuscript whose poet-composer clerics had failed to obtain or had left Church

appointments. Similar generalizations apply to Renaissance secular music, which addresses chivalrous, historical, witty, nostalgic, erotic, moralistic, satirical, epic, narrative, and descriptive subjects, but not atheism.

Explicit references to musical atheism arise in seventeenth-century England, a hotbed of freethought. In 1678 London's first concert series was founded by Thomas Britton, who was probably deemed an atheist because his occupation as a 'small-coal man' involved alchemy or because his large Aylesbury-Street musical gatherings were considered seditious venues (Hawkins [1776] 1853: 791). Baselessly branded an atheist, Britton apparently never promulgated unbelief among his audiences. Equally noteworthy is that the first surviving full-length, continuously sung, English-language opera, *Albion and Albanius* (1685), includes the role of Asebia ('Atheism' or 'Ungodliness') in its undisguised allegory of the troubled reign of Charles II. *Albion*'s librettist, John Dryden, claimed he was 'naturally inclined to skepticism', and, according to Bishop Burnet, he had no religious convictions whatsoever (Van Doren 1946: 142).¹ But Asebia expresses no atheistic views, admitting instead to never valuing right or wrong, bribing lawyers to destroy the law, advocating anarchy, subverting virtue, and praising Tyranny for making the monarch 'sick at heart' (Act III, i, ii). Asebia's music, composed by the Catalan-born Luis Grabu, occupies the highest range of all the allegorical characters, but its dance-like rhythms and scalewise contours scarcely distinguish Atheism from other villains. Two years earlier Simon Pack had embellished Thomas Otway's play, *The Atheist*, with decorative songs, though they lacked irreligious sentiments and the title character, the antiauthoritarian Daredevil, ultimately professes true belief (Hume 1976: 103–10).

Across the Channel, the most flamboyant seventeenth-century French musical atheist was the lutenist and poet-composer Charles Dassoucy. A disciple of the freethinker Pierre Gassendi (see Alan Charles Kors' 'The Age of Enlightenment') by 1642, Dassoucy was arrested as a 'libertine' in 1656, imprisoned at the Vatican in 1668 for writing heretical poetry, acquitted in 1669, and even received by the Pope in 1673, when he was absolved of religious unorthodoxy following another arrest in Paris (Scruggs 1984: 33, 37, 50–4). Another Continental musician, the obscure German music theorist Johann Philipp Treiber, was likewise repeatedly indicted for atheism before he embraced Catholicism in 1706. After studying law, medicine, and theology in Jena, Treiber explained his controversial religious stance in arcane Latin treatises, not in several eccentric musical writings (Horn 2007: 49).

NINETEENTH-CENTURY CONTINENTAL ATHEISTS

Thus far musical atheism has appeared in colorful or historically important contexts, but has rarely achieved specifically musical realization. This situation changed after eighteenth-century social upheavals established a milieu more tolerant of irreligion, a trend first evident among illustrious German-speaking composers. Indeed, no less a figure than Ludwig van Beethoven was reportedly called an atheist by his teacher Franz Joseph Haydn (Marx 1901: 24). Haydn's assessment reconciled with contemporaneous perceptions of Beethoven's Kantian rationalism, whereas it is now usually judged a sign of 'Haydn's resentment at his pupil's reluctance to acknowledge a musical rather than a heavenly deity' (Solomon 1998: 54, 89). Nevertheless, Beethoven was probably a 'negative' atheist until he turned thirty: no source indicates he received religious instruction, practised Catholicism, composed liturgical music, or even held religious beliefs. Only after 1800, when facing inevitable deafness, did Beethoven invoke an almighty God's protection in his correspondence. Only then did he compose *Christus am Ölberge*, an oratorio narrating Christ's anguish in the Garden of Gethsemane, and Six Songs, op. 48, based on C. F. Gellert's consolatory religious texts. After Beethoven's personal

crisis subsided, his religious impulses remained dormant for a decade (Solomon 1988: 218–23). Later his spirituality absorbed Classical, Eastern, and Judeo-Christian elements.

Beethoven's younger Viennese contemporary, Franz Schubert, expressed anti-religious, though not avowedly atheistic, ideas in his correspondence and music. While Schubert's letters divulge belief in an omnipotent, sometimes unmerciful God, they also reveal disgust with the Church, especially its 'bigoted', 'stupid', and 'boorish' priests (Deutsch 1946: 279, 467, 138). Schubert's friend Ferdinand Walcher insightfully declared that the composer rejected the Credo's professions (Deutsch 1946: 597). In his masses, Schubert frequently edited the text, crucially omitting the phrase near the Credo's ending, *Et unam sanctam catholicam et apostolicam Ecclesiam* ('And [in] one holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church'). Schubert scholars believe this omission evinces Schubert's opposition to the Church (e.g., Newbould 1997: 128), though others counter that Schubert's contemporaries occasionally observed the same practice, simply to shorten the lengthy Credo (e.g., Hoorickx 1979: 249–55). Schubert, however, always excluded the phrase from his masses, suggesting an intentional repudiation of Church doctrine.

Richard Wagner—Beethoven's self-appointed musical heir—embraced atheism during the 1840s after reading Ludwig Feuerbach's incendiary writings. Two Feuerbachian precepts were especially appealing: 'the love of God' is 'merely the everlasting human love that finds supreme confirmation in suffering'; and 'sensuality is the key to firsthand knowledge' (Gregor-Dellin 1983: 133). Parallels to Feuerbach's concepts occur in Wagner's librettos of the late 1840s and 1850s. The *Ring* cycle's hero and heroine, Siegfried and Brünnhilde, separately narrate their earthly and psychological sufferings immediately before each realizes the true nature of their transfiguring, 'everlasting' love (*Götterdämmerung*, Act III, ii, iii). Sensuality reaches an infamous pinnacle in *Tristan und Isolde*, offering not 'the key to firsthand knowledge', but instead leading the title characters into oblivion—a reflection of the influence of Arthur Schopenhauer, whose renunciative, Buddhist-inspired philosophy Wagner encountered in 1854. Like Beethoven, Wagner synthesized Eastern and Western religions later in life, as his final opera, *Parsifal*, affirms.

Wagner's Italian operatic counterpart, Giuseppe Verdi, held lifelong irreligious attitudes. Upon receiving a priest's blow as an altar boy, Verdi invoked God to strike his assailant with lightning. A bolt fulfilled the curse in 1828, killing the priest and several parishioners (Phillips-Matz 2004: 4). The mature Verdi rarely expressed anticlericalism publicly, but conspicuously avoided attending services with Giuseppina Strepponi, his second wife. As Strepponi nonetheless lamented in 1872, Verdi 'permits himself to be an *atheist* with an obstinacy and calm that make one want to beat him' (quoted in Walker 1962: 280). His unbelief stemmed from incompatibilities between Church and State: he found the coexistence of a parliament and the College of Cardinals, a free press and the Inquisition, an Italian king and a pope 'unimaginable' (Martin 1983: 454). Equally odious were the Syllabus of Errors, issued in 1864, and the longstanding doctrine of papal infallibility, codified during the First Vatican Council (1869–70).

Don Carlos (Paris, 1867) acerbically voices Verdi's anti-papist convictions. In a scene that Verdi specifically asked his librettists to add to a scenario based on Schiller's poem, the aged, blind, and decrepit Grand Inquisitor orders Philip II, King of Spain, to further the Church's political agenda by surrendering his confidant, Rodrigue, to the Inquisition. When Philip hesitates, the Inquisitor threatens him with immediate indictment before the tribunal (Act IV, i). Verdi's serpentine music aptly characterizes the Inquisitor as the embodiment of decay and corruption: the wizened priest sings halting, speech-like phrases as the low strings play a laboured, slithering melody punctuated by sighing, sacral trombones. But when the Inquisitor demands Rodrigue's surrender and threatens Philip, his more sinuous music tempestuously rises to the scene's commanding climax, leaving no

question regarding the encounter's outcome. Thus Verdi expressed anticlericalism in two ways: shaping the libretto, and creating sonorous images that mirror the Inquisitor's corruption and power.

Verdi's anticlericalism and atheism, though controversial in pre-unification, Catholic Italy, were commonly espoused by leading French composers, especially following the liberal July Revolution of 1830. Nine years earlier, Hector Berlioz left his native La Côte-Saint-André for Paris, having renounced his childhood Catholicism, which he later sardonically characterized as a 'charming religion (so attractive since it gave up burning people)' (Berlioz [1870] 1975: 31). Familiar with rationalist and materialist literature in his physician father's library (Cairns 1999: 552), Berlioz frequently disclosed irreligious sentiments in letters and once described himself as an atheist, in marginalia in his copy of Saint-Pierre's naturalist novel *Paul et Virginie* (Barzun 1969: vol. 2, 100). Berlioz's quip about Catholicism's 'charm' suggests he wore his beliefs more lightly than Verdi, as his seemingly cavalier treatment of sacred texts illustrates. In his Requiem, for example, the *Dies irae* sequence elides some normally separate sections, divides several at unorthodox junctures, and reorders lines of text within or among others—liberties his devout predecessors and contemporaries shunned (Cairns 2003: 171). Consequently, pleas for mercy to an awe-inspiring God (*Rex tremendae*) and for salvation to sweet Jesus (*Jesu pie*) are dramatically juxtaposed with images of repentant sinners entering flames (*Confutatis*) and requests for deliverance from the lion's mouth of hell, the latter imported, most unusually, from the Offertory. Berlioz thereby restructured a religious text to fashion, as Edward Cone observed, 'a libretto, so to speak, of a special kind of music drama' (Cone 1980: 4), a practice his *Te Deum* likewise illustrates. Thus Berlioz's primary concern was dramatic, not religious, expression.

Georges Bizet appreciated Berlioz's aesthetic, but resisted composing sacred music. For *Carmen*'s famed composer, religion was a 'cloak of ambition, of injustice, of vice', and the Bible was 'a sublime absurdity' (quoted in Curtiss 1958: 178–9). Bizet detected divine inspiration in nature, historical relics, and the poorest village church choir's singing—not in 'ridiculous' religious ceremonies (Curtiss 1958: 61, 71). But in 1857, the nineteen-year-old *Prix de Rome* winner was required to submit religious compositions to judges for evaluation. Conceding his first effort, a *Te Deum*, was 'feeble', Bizet balked at writing a compulsory mass: 'How can they oblige me, a non-Christian, to do a work that would be uninspired and insincere?' (quoted in Curtiss 1958: 71). The Credo nonetheless offered possibilities because 'this portion of the mass includes drama and action besides religious sentiments'. Indeed, certain textual passages would allow Bizet 'to abandon Christian sentiment a little and substitute action, drama' (quoted in Dean 1975: 26). Like Berlioz, Bizet valued drama over religion.

Bizet's pantheism, concern for sincerity, and dramatic inclinations embroiled Claude Debussy in controversy. An avowed nonbeliever, France's foremost Impressionist composer eschewed religious music until 1911, when he provided incidental music for Gabriele D'Annunzio's play, *Le martyre de Saint Sébastien*. Debussy's involvement in a pseudo-sacral enterprise—and a male saint's portrayal by a Jewish woman (Ida Rubinstein)—elicited archiepiscopal instructions for the faithful to boycott the production. In an interview, Debussy declared he practised no religion 'in accordance with the sacred rites', but instead 'made mysterious Nature [his] religion'. 'A man who sees mystery in everything', he continued, 'will be inevitably attracted to a religious subject'. Moreover, although he was neither 'a practising Catholic nor a believer, it did not cost [him] much effort to rise to the mystical heights which the poet's drama attains'. Finally, having written his music 'as though [he] had been asked to do it for a church', he claimed he had 'expressed all the feelings aroused in [him]' by Sébastien's ascension (quoted in Vallas [1933] 1973: 225–7). Debussy accordingly believed a dramatically motivated pantheist could write 'sincere' religious music.

Debussy's younger contemporary Maurice Ravel eluded such contention, rarely mentioning religion and shunning sacred music, except for several mildly spiritual vocal works. Patriotism, not religion, probably motivated unrealized plans for an opera-oratorio based on Joan of Arc. Irreligion was instead a biographical matter. Like his mother and brother he practised no faith, and he refused the Last Rites. He asserted he was an atheist, a claim his colleague Claude Roland-Manuel denied: Ravel 'could not fully understand the workings of his own mind', so he 'found it impossible to accept or reject the existence of a Supreme Being' (quoted in Orenstein 1990: 196–97). Ravel accordingly qualifies as a sceptic whose unbelief hardly affected his music.

A final nineteenth-century Frenchman, Vincent d'Indy, courted controversy, though he was no atheist. Instead he fervently practised his native Ardèche province's regional Roman Catholicism and promoted it in founding the Schola Cantorum, a school dedicated to reforming church music. His ambitious scores cultivated systematic associations among recurrent Gregorian chant melodies, their attendant theological concepts, and musical tonalities. While his progressive Catholicism reconciled with his notion of art as an agent of social progress, d'Indy harboured increasingly reactionary opinions as liberal capitalism and scientific materialism dominated the Third Republic: his conservative politics moved to the far right; his regionalism evolved into Chauvinistic nationalism; his anti-Semitism intensified during the Dreyfus Affair; and he abhorred early twentieth-century musical decadence (Thomson 1996: 160–78). Atheists accordingly comprised just one of several enemy factions d'Indy vanquished in his allegorical 'sacred drama', *La légende de Saint-Christophe* (1908–15). Late in Act I, a metrically irregular cortege, which vulgarly parodies Debussy and Stravinsky, begins as a chorus of 'false thinkers' delivers a message in angular, overlapping phrases: 'Down with fanaticism! Down with priests! Down with all religion! We alone know how to think freely! Down, down, down with all religion!' Scientists and artists join the parade, uniting in their hatred of Christ, only to be subdued by an offstage angelic chorus that proclaims the glory of the True Cross. Though crude, the allegory and music emphatically convey d'Indy's reactionary ideas, including a loathing for atheism.

RUSSIA, BRITAIN, AUSTRALIA

Atheism intertwined more closely with nationalism in Russia, where five nineteenth-century composers and the critic who dubbed them the *Moguchaya Kuchka* (Mighty Handful) were avowed atheists. But in 1871, their leader, Mily Balakirev, concealed his newly adopted Orthodox mysticism from his followers, fearing their derision. They were concerned, however, not scornful. Aleksandr Borodin, a chemist-physician who 'serenely expressed' an atheism typical of nineteenth-century scientists 'without disdain for traditional religion' (Levašev 1998: 91), considered Balakirev's mysticism a symptom of madness instigated by an earlier brain inflammation (Garden 1967: 98). The avid Darwinian and rationalist Modest Musorgsky mourned the cooling of Balakirev's 'artistic embers' and disenchantment with the *Kuchka*'s artistic goals (Brown 2002: 203). Musorgsky's sympathy may reflect his own brush with mysticism, though he was relieved when this 'terrible illness' passed (Leyda 1947: 21). Rimsky-Korsakov, who once evaded Leo Tolstoy's religious proselytizing, thought Balakirev 'believed not in God, but in the devil' (quoted in Abraham 1939: 247). César Cui, in contrast, merely lamented Balakirev's disinterest in *Kuchkist* activities. Only the Handful's critic, Vladimir Stasov, ridiculed Balakirev's conversion, perhaps exacerbating the composer's reclusiveness.

Though staunchly atheistic, the *Kuchka* appreciated religion's cultural and historical importance

and accordingly utilized Orthodox music in forging identifiably Russian musical idioms. Liturgical hymns supplied a ‘monastery style’ of harmonization featuring parallel motion between individual parts at the ‘perfect’ intervals of the octave, fourth, and fifth, which Western music had avoided since the Renaissance. Dactylic rhythms, certain repetitive melodic formulas, and bell-like evocations also derived from Orthodox music (Frolova-Walker 2007: 174–82). *Kuchkist* operas frequently reveal these traits: in the abduction song that opens Borodin’s *Prince Igor*; in prayers in Rimsky-Korsakov’s *The Maid of Pskov*; and throughout Musorgsky’s *Boris Godunov*, where they surface in Boris’s Church-supervised coronation scene, an offstage monastic chorus, a procession of pilgrims, a scene outside Saint Basil’s Cathedral, a hymn sung as Boris dies, and even secular situations. Musorgsky exploited religion in the service of nationalism so effectively that *glasnost*-era scholars attempted to sacralize him and his compositions, a proposition lacking documentary support (Taruskin 1993: 403–4).

For the resolute atheist Rimsky-Korsakov, his penultimate opera’s subject seems incongruous. *The Legend of the Invisible City of Kitezh* portrays both a divinely effected miracle, whereby a Tartar invasion is foiled when Kitezh is rendered invisible, and the transfiguration of Saint Fevroniya of Murom. As Richard Taruskin has observed, however, several factors tempered the libretto’s religious orientation: Rimsky-Korsakov vetoed a preliminary scenario based exclusively on Fevroniya’s hagiography; he doubtless fancied the story’s folkloric elements, namely, Slavonic mythology’s bird-prophets, Sirin and Alkonost; and Fevroniya’s revelation that ‘the forest is a great church’ where the Eucharist is celebrated plainly resonated with pantheistic streaks evident throughout his compositions and writings (Taruskin 1992: 1124). Ostensibly Rimsky-Korsakov reconciled his atheism with *dvoyeveriye*, the ‘double faith’ of Russian folk religion that admits Christian and Slavonic pagan elements, or, as a positivist, he considered Christianity part of a rich national mythology (Taruskin 2009: 179–83).

Ralph Vaughan Williams would again fuse nationalism and atheism, though two earlier British composers approached irreligion differently. Hubert Parry, ironically known for Anglican church music and the anthem-like *Jerusalem*, devoured atheistic literature from the time he studied at Oxford, including rationalist and Christian socialist works by Ruskin, Hume, Butler, Arnold, Spencer, and Darwin. He also vociferously expressed unbelief in diaries and letters, especially one his sternly religious father received in 1873. Confessing he had ‘thrown his religion overboard’, he repudiated religious authority without recourse to reason, the concepts of original sin, hell, and divine creation, and the story of Noah. Elsewhere he castigated all organized religion, particularly scorning Romanism (Bertagnolli 2007: 254–8).

Parry also expressed atheism in a cantata based on one of British atheism’s central documents: Percy Shelley’s *Prometheus Unbound*. In the third of five scenes that Parry extracted from Shelley’s lyric drama, specific musical techniques highlight pointedly atheistic sentiments. The tyrant Jupiter first gloats at having ‘subdued’ all except man’s soul, which, ‘like an unextinguished fire’, burns with ‘fierce reproach and doubt’. Spiritual insurrection, Jupiter then exclaims, has rendered his ‘antique empire insecure, though built on eldest faith, and hell’s coeval, fear’. Shelley’s unequivocal indictment, that England and its Church maintain power through fear, accords with Parry’s antiauthoritarianism. Closing the monologue, Jupiter bemoans humanity’s perseverance. The first and third of these sections sporadically punctuate halting, static vocal lines with nondescript pizzicato chords in the strings or fragmentary woodwind scales. To indict the ‘antique empire’ and ‘eldest faith’, however, Parry’s music grows animated (see [Example 45.1](#)): expanding vocal arcs adopt regular, decisive rhythms; woodwinds systematically exchange ascending scale fragments; and strings play a resolute march in dotted rhythms. Text of special importance to Parry thus elicited a more intense musical setting. In other passages, equally vivid contrasts emphasize the rejection of

hell, assorted ‘scriptural fallacies’, and Jupiter again subjugating worshippers (Bertagnolli 2007: 267–74).

Frederick Delius similarly chose texts that embodied his rejection of a concept of God in favour of a materialist reevaluation of humanity’s place in the universe, which left mankind exclusively responsible for its development (Palmer 1976: 4). This outlook reached its acme in *A Mass of Life*, a setting of portions of *Also sprach Zarathustra* by Friedrich Nietzsche, whose philosophy Delius indefatigably promulgated. Rather than emphasizing specific passages as Parry had, Delius devised music that suited the moods of broad swathes of text. The opening chorus, for example, single-mindedly cultivates powerful heroism with monolithic, eight-part choral textures, energetic string tremolos, and a fanfare-like, low-brass melody—a virile evocation of Zarathustra’s plea for the Will to preserve him from petty victories and instead grant him a great destiny. Other movements, notably the epiphanic setting of Zarathustra’s *Night Song*, also effectively match musical effects with Nietzsche-derived metaphysical principles.

Vaughan Williams was ‘a most determined atheist’ as a Cambridge student (Kennedy 1964: 42). He later left an organ position rather than take Communion, considered prayers mere projections of hopes and fears, and never professed Christianity. Instead, as his second wife Ursula Wood observed, he ‘drifted into a cheerful agnosticism’, deeming spirituality a private pursuit (Vaughan Williams 1964: 29). Familiar textual strategies helped him express his views: he altered sacred texts such as the Magnificat, hoping to ‘lift [it] out of the smug atmosphere which had settled down on it from being sung at evening service for so long’ (Lew 2003: 197); and he chose personally appealing subjects, as in *Riders to the Sea*, an opera whose characters find no consolation in religion (Clark 2003: 56). Nevertheless, he regarded biblical texts, religious poetry, the Anglican liturgy, and English hymnody as components of a national heritage that had declined into Victorian sentimentality (Adams 1996: 99–103). He consequently employed native folksong and Renaissance liturgical music in reviving moribund sacred traditions. Satisfied with blending folkloric, historical, and modern musical idioms, he asserted, ‘there is no reason why an atheist could not write a good mass’ (Vaughan Williams 1964: 138). Atheists and agnostics could accordingly compose ‘sincere’ religious music, as his *oeuvre’s* pervasively ‘mystical’ quality attests.

EXAMPLE 45.1

Jupiter

mf *poco più moto*

All else had been sub - dued to me, a - lone The soul of

C

man, like un - ex - tin - guish'd fire Yet burns towards heav'n with fierce re-

proach, and doubt, Hurl - ing up in - sur - rec - tion,

which might make Our an - tique em - pire in - se -

cresc. *f* *cresc.* *ff* *sosten.*

cure, though built On eld - est faith, and hell's co-e - val, fear;

Australian-born composer Percy Grainger stridently expressed atheistic views: religion was 'the ruination of all life' (Grainger 2006: 153); the Catholic Church exemplified the 'tyrannic' influence of 'mob-religiosity'; and he was 'hostile to the whole gamut of Christian thought' (Gillies 1994: 47, 215). Musical manifestations of such pronouncements, especially in his nationalistic English folksong settings, are nonetheless elusive. Perhaps his religious antiauthoritarianism correlates with his democratic conception of music. He advocated singing hymns slowly so that choristers could ornament their parts freely in what he termed 'democratic polyphony'. Some experimental pieces allow players to choose parts from a limited number of musical lines depending on which instruments happen to be available, not on what a score prescribes. Otherwise his gruff atheism went unrealized in his music.

MODERNISTS AND POST-MODERNISTS

Of three musical modernists, only one reconciled atheism and nationalism musically. Leoš Janáček, though educated by Augustinian monks, thereafter refused to ‘step into a church even to shelter from the rain’ (Zemanová 2002: 13). His wife confirmed he never attended services or prayed, and he declined the Last Rites (Janáčková 1998: 83, 223). Denying his *Glagolitic Mass* (1927) reflected his religious conversion, Janáček explained in an interview that the score commemorated ten years of Czech independence and the millennium of Moravia’s Christianization. He consequently ‘wanted to portray faith in the certainty of the nation, not on a religious basis, but on a strong moral foundation which calls God as a witness’ (quoted in Wingfield 1992: 120). Janáček reinforced the mass’s nationalism by adopting Old Church Slavonic and stylizing the language’s rhythms and intonation patterns to shape melodies.

Ferruccio Busoni entered nationalist debates on the future of Italian and German music during the Great War. He adopted lifelong atheism, however, before age twenty, as his pious mother learned in 1886. A committed socialist, he thought Catholicism’s ‘old-fashioned philosophical doctrines’ were inapplicable to modern society and should be ‘swept away’ (Dent 1974: 63, 310). His opera *Doktor Faust* (1916–24) imparts a philosophical alternative. In the last scene, Mephistopheles presents Faust with the body of his dead son, whose mother urges Faust to finish his work. A soldierly apparition blocks Faust’s path into a church. Attempting to pray, he forgets the words. Faust then defies Mephistopheles and God, drawing a magical circle, entering it, and passing his life-force to his son, who revives and steps into darkness. The scene’s music largely comprises reminiscences of other parts of the opera, but Busoni died before setting Faust’s final actions, confining his mystical irreligion to his libretto.

Hungarian nationalist Béla Bartók experienced irreligious stirrings in 1895, at age fourteen. Eight years later, after studying Kierkegaard and astronomy, he nevertheless boasted, ‘I was a new man—an atheist’ (Demény 1971: 77). A broadly rationalist unbeliever, he specifically rejected the Trinity, the soul’s immortality, and Catholicism’s distortion of Christianity. Little of Bartók’s music bears religious connotations, though he quoted J. S. Bach’s *St. Matthew Passion* in his *Cantata profana*, a choral composition based on the Romanian *colind*, a ritual song for conveying good wishes or exorcising evil spirits. In Bartók’s Hungarian libretto, a hunter’s sons are transformed into stags, cannot return home, and happily become forest dwellers—a story Romanians possibly understood as a parable of national awakening. For Bartók, however, it exalted paganism over civilization, and the *Passion*’s quotation likely paid homage to narrative techniques employed in Bach’s choral works (Griffiths 1984: 140–1).

Atheism was one manifestation of a rationalism governing the abstract music of three radical modernists or postmodernists. Edgard Varèse, whose wife repeatedly called him a pagan and Nietzschean (Varèse 1972: 32, 69, 95), applied his engineering education by experimenting with electronic music, expanding conventional instrumental resources with machines, and writing about music as an ‘art-science’. His lone remotely religious composition, *Ecuatorial*, features a text drawn from the pre-Mayan creation book, the *Popol vuh*. Iannis Xenakis, another trained engineer, derived his atheism from Plato, Marx, and Lenin (Bois 1980: 22), but his musical *œuvre* cultivates mathematical processes, not unbelief. Pierre Boulez was ‘skeptical about religion’ at age fifteen, repudiated Catholicism at eighteen, is a self-described Darwinian, and reviles his childhood devotions as signs of weakness before authority (Peyser 1976: 22–5). Boulez, a musical serialist, orders pitches and other compositional elements according to predetermined numerical sequences. His music lacks explicitly atheistic content.

Three contemporary English-speaking composers of less technically cerebral music espouse humanistic ideologies. Sir Michael Tippett, who ‘cannot find satisfaction in the security of a traditional faith’, rejects fundamentalist literalities regarding Christ’s paternity, the Quran’s revelatory origin, and the miracles of the Buddha’s life. For Tippett, diverse religious mysticisms embody ‘a spiritual reality’ and reflect Jungian archetypes that the ‘artist-creator’ must express (Tippett 1980: 49–55). *The Vision of St. Augustine* accordingly portrays the title character’s rejection of Christianity, reconversion, and mystical visions, the latter aided by *glossolalia*, an ancient practice of singing ecstatic vocalises on wordless vowel sounds (Tippett 1980: 59). A *Child of our Time* likewise distinctively employs Negro spirituals to depict ‘not so much the record of an individual or personally peculiar experience, but of a common, or folk-experience. What our fore-fathers might have called even, a mythological experience’ (Tippett 1980: 188).

Peter Maxwell Davies ‘eschews all formal religious faith’, judging its authoritarianism ‘deeply repugnant’ (Seabrook 1994: 130). He nonetheless frequently grapples with religious thought, ceremony, and music. His opera *Taverner*, for example, excoriates Roman and Anglican authority in fictionalized episodes from the life of John Taverner, an Oxford choirmaster who was implicated for heresy in 1528. Davies portrayed Taverner’s plight by juxtaposing dissonant tone clusters and clashing chords with imitations of sixteenth-century viol music and quotations from a Taverner mass. Ned Rorem’s harmonies, in contrast, remain traditionally tonal. His culturally insightful writings often profess atheism, which attracts critical attention whenever he fluently sets religious texts.

A final issue involving musical modernists concerns not atheistic expression, but reactions to Soviet-imposed atheism. Sergey Prokofiev sought relief from depression in Christian Science’s distinction between the unreality and powerlessness of material being and the true reality of the human spirit—a faith he publicly broached carefully enough to avoid State censure (Schipperges 2003: 7–8). Dmitry Shostakovich’s music endured withering censure starting in the late 1920s, but not because of religious content. As an atheist, he purportedly was ‘far from God’, thought belief was superstition, and reviled ‘false religiosity’ (Volkov 1979: 187–88). He nonetheless deplored State religious suppression, a topic perhaps cryptically addressed in his ‘Jewish-style’ works. Sofya Gubaydulina concealed childhood religious inclinations when her parents feared State retribution (Kurtz 2001: 14). Her experimental works of the late, post-Stalinist 1960s were still censured, but with the advent of *perestroika* she cautiously asserted religion’s centrality in her music, composing, for example, instrumental works that she conceived as wordless movements of the mass. Residing in Germany since 1992, she writes overtly mystical, internationally celebrated scores. Arvo Pärt likewise composed State-censured experimental music until 1968, when he heard Russian chant and converted from his nominal Estonian Protestantism to Orthodoxy (Wright 2002: 359). After a six-year compositional hiatus, he began writing explicitly religious or abstractly spiritual music in the minimalist *tintinnabuli* (Latin for bells) style that has achieved cult-like recognition.

POPULAR AND ETHNOGRAPHIC MUSIC

Concluding remarks may be briefly deferred to mention atheism in popular and ethnographic music, topics that could easily support full-length studies. Sampling just three quintessentially American types of vernacular and popular music adequately evinces an extraordinary diversity. The blues, practised as a folk tradition at least since the twentieth century’s first decade, was both demonized and celebrated as ‘the devil’s music’, a label Old South black religious society and later whites used to stereotype African-American performers and consumers of the blues as ‘amoral and sexually

promiscuous' or 'atheistic' (Oliver 1963: 95, 118; Oakley 1976: 50). But traditional blues subjects—the singer's personal worries, disappointments, hopes, and acceptance—have been rehabilitated as expressions of a spirituality that is both sacred and profane (Spencer 1996: 38–39).²

American musical theater offers an agonized depiction of atheism in Marc Blitzstein's *The Condemned*, based on the imprisonment and execution of Nicola Sacco and Bartolomeo Vanzetti. Each of its four 'characters' is a chorus, with a male choir representing both 'condemned' anarchists. In the fourth scene, 'the condemned' claims to have no need for 'the priest' and repeatedly states 'he' does not believe in God when 'the priest' tries to console and convert him (Pace 1997: 104). Blitzstein returned to the subject for his valedictory *Sacco and Vanzetti*, which drew right-wing condemnation and remained unfinished at his death.

Of numerous atheist rock musicians, Frank Zappa ranks among the most outspoken. His autobiography castigates Christianity as a cause of American anti-intellectualism (Zappa 1989: 298), and his songs pillory religious intolerance (*Billy the Mountain*), Catholic hypocrisy (*Catholic Girls*), New Age mysticism and Scientology (*Tush, Tush, Tush [A Token of My Extreme]*), organized religion's involvement in war (*Song Dumb All Over*), 1980s televangelists (*Jesus Thinks You're A Jerk*), and the religious right's influence on the Reagan administration's AIDS policies (*Mudd Club*) (Lowe 2006: 99, 151, 155, 192, 203). Thus social conditions inform atheism in three disparate American non-classical contexts.

Recent ethnomusicological studies have focused on two familiar topics: Soviet repression of religious practices in traditional cultures and atheist popular musicians. From the 1930s through the Cold War, anti-Semitism and communism in Romania accounted for suppressing Jewish vernacular and religious music (Nixon 2001: 105–6) as well as adolescent Christian choirs, the latter experiencing a resurgence during the 1990s (Anca 1998: 198–220). Podgorani Croatian immigrants transplanted their religious rituals to New Zealand, where they flourished while the communists occupied Yugoslavia (Šunde 2008: 273–301). And Soviet policies sought to fuse Russian urban popular music with the highly embellished, modal, and microtonal secular and sacred music of Central Asian Uzbeks (Levin 2002: 190–203). Lounès Matoub, considered a martyr to Berber and secularist causes in northern Algeria, is despised by most of the country's Arabs for his atheism and blasphemous rock songs (Vidal-Hall 1999: 117–20). And the Taiwanese pop star Chen Sheng expresses vehemently irreligious views in songs such as *Elegy for an Atheist* (Goeth 1994: 188–91).

CONCLUSION

From Asebia to Zappa, atheism played significant roles in the lives, activities, and compositions of musicians of diverse nationalities beginning in the seventeenth century. A generic array of atheistic scores encompasses songs, operas, incidental music, cantatas, oratorios, and even masses. Beyond establishing atheistic music's prevalence and diversity, the foregoing survey elucidates attitudes that musical creators and consumers held toward the subject. Allegories disparaged atheism and atheists as immoral or seditious. Notions that atheists could not produce 'sincere' religious music, or were presumably believers if they did, were likewise pejorative, implying an incompetence or deficiency. Unsurprisingly, some composers reticently articulated unbelief, though most were candid or outspoken. While several 'negative atheists' avoided religious music, many others actively promulgated their views: they composed overtly atheistic, anticlerical, pantheistic, mystical, pagan, rationalist, and humanist works; they rejected specific doctrines or castigated common beliefs; and they subverted religion to achieve dramatic ends or bolster nationalism. Sometimes they appeared in

‘clusters’ formed by the rise of modernity, French revolutionary liberalism, Russian artistic goals, English rationalist educations, or broad philosophical outlooks. Thus, through various means—selecting, altering, and subverting texts; writing and shaping librettos; democratizing musical processes; and devising sonorous imagery—musicians joined the atheistic ‘family’ in exploring and contributing to the ‘diverse range of stances and worldviews’ that comprise atheism.

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CHAPTER 46

FILM

NINA POWER

INTRODUCTION

SURPRISINGLY little has been written about the relationship between atheism and film at the formal or conceptual level, despite the historical temptation to make parallels between the cinema auditorium and the church, both darkened, hushed rooms of reverence, with the former perhaps making the latter a thing of the past: from the worship of a transcendent being to silent awe before the silver screen. Cinema's capacity to revel in, explore or celebrate life lived without a belief in the existence of God and gods is immediately apparent, from the grit of kitchen-sink, realist or neo-realist cinema to films that actively depict 'godless' ways of life (cinema is clearly capable of presenting the whole range of positions that run from 'negative' to 'positive' atheism), yet apart from what the cinema can (and does) represent, what can we say about the formal relation between cinema (conceived of as film in the broadest sense, including newsreel, factual and fiction films, experimental cinema, television series and so on) and atheism (understood as an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods)?

This essay will first of all outline some formal resonances between the two, where, despite the possibility of understanding cinema as in some sense capable of emulating or replacing religious practice and belief (cinema as Plato's cave, cinema as Freudian dream), its potential as a vehicle for atheist critique is central. The second part of the article will examine the capacity of cinema to depict an atheist worldview via the work of an explicitly atheist (and anti-religious) film director, Dziga Vertov, before summing up the contemporary situation of the relationship between film and atheism.

FROM RELIGION TO CINEMA?

Many commentators have noted the way in which the senses are involved in the practice of religion (Hill et al. 1989: 179). In a typical Christian ceremony, for example, there may be stained glass windows and the architecture of the church appealing to sight, chanted prayer or singing to soothe the ears, Holy Communion (bread and wine) and the blessing of a priest to appeal to taste and touch. Some churches burn incense. In this way the practice of religion invokes the whole body, even if at the same time often disparages the mortal frame in favour of holier desires. Even as we might associate the cinema with a modernity that would become increasingly atheist in practice and ideological orientation, there is a continuity of form that is worth noting: to enter the cinema is to give oneself over to an experience that shares some curious parallels with religious ritual: a darkened, specifically designed room that demands reverence, a sensory experience, albeit at one remove in comparison with the church's comparatively complex apparatus of smell, touch, sound and taste—although sitting in a darkened, collective space eating popcorn, sipping soft drinks whilst the

soundtrack and special effects dazzle you is, in the end, not so very different at a material level. It would be too easy to say that cinema has simply replaced religion as hallowed architectural site of worship, but, at the same time, the modernity represented by the picture-house and all the visual developments that follow from it—so that it is now possible to watch film and television on hand-held devices—mark a significant shift in behaviour regarding the practice of ‘worship’. While people may be devotees of particular TV shows or film stars, these are mortal gods and as such, completely fallible: the crueler dimensions of celebrity ‘adoration’ are often as far removed from religious reverence as humanly possible.

Although Plato is often seen as a proto-Christian philosopher due to his emphasis on the Forms which subsist in a perfect realm, when it comes to cinematic metaphors, his equally famous analogy of the cave has been a frequent reference-point for film theorists for many years. Gabriele Pedullà notes that ‘There are, in fact, some impressive similarities between the cinema experience and Plato’s story and it is easy to see how the myth immediately became popular among early-twentieth-century film enthusiasts in a society where Latin and Greek classics still constituted a universal cultural reference’ (Pedullà 2012: 8). The parallels between the cinematic experience and Plato’s ancient story are indeed immediate and obvious, so long as Plato’s story becomes merely descriptive and not a stand-in for a philosophical description of transcendence towards true knowledge—the men in the cave shackled in a dark room, bewitched by shadows moving on a wall: but Plato’s analogy would seem to imply then that cinema was a lie (we could reverse Jean-Luc Godard’s formula—The cinema is truth twenty-four times per second—into a Platonic reverse formula—the cinema is only ever a lie, behind which, who knows?). Plato’s cave analogy is itself cinematic, and many have followed the image: cinema is thus a nonreligious practice of mesmerizing audiences, of distracting them from the world outside, which is no longer Plato’s realm of the Forms but perhaps what we would call ‘real life’.

This rather contemporary idea of cinema as distraction finds its best description in Walter Benjamin’s famous 1936 essay ‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’ where Benjamin, although keen to avoid the glib suggestion that ‘the masses seek distraction whereas art demands concentration’ ([1936] 1982: 241), nevertheless proposes that film induces ‘reception in a state of distraction’. This state of distraction is politically important and profoundly modern—indeed, Benjamin explicitly opposed the kind of distraction associated with the cinema with a move away from a theological mode of ‘contemplation’: the cinema, with its twin modes of distraction and shock are continuous with the bustle and chaos of the streets, railways and contemporary existence. Cinema thus helps destroy both the form and content of religious life, and, at the same time, inherits its mantle as the practice of everyday life. Benjamin’s point about technology was made even earlier, by a thinker recognized as one of the great humanists and critics of religion, Ludwig Feuerbach in the mid-nineteenth century. Feuerbach was not talking about cinema (how could he?), but his words are eerily prescient in this regard:

But certainly for the present age, which prefers the sign to the thing signified, the copy to the original, fancy to reality, the appearance to the essence ... for in these days *illusion* only is *sacred, truth profane*. Nay, sacredness is held to be enhanced in proportion as truth decreases and illusion increases, so that the highest degree of illusion comes to be the highest degree of sacredness (Feuerbach [1843] 1957: xxxix)

Feuerbach seems to pre-emptively identify the transition from sacred existence to the (secular) worship of signs: here we are partly back in Plato’s cave, with shadows flickering on the wall taken for reality, but we are also pushed forward into the age of cinematic ‘illusion’, where film (and the way in which film, unlike a painting, can be copied in such a way as the original no longer has any particular significance, as Walter Benjamin pointed out in his essay). Feuerbach’s claim about modern

life, with its references to ‘sign’, ‘copy’, ‘representation’ and ‘appearance’ is almost an exact description of the cinematic mode, and the fact that Feuerbach’s work focused simultaneously on the critique of Christianity as a form of hidden anthropology is no coincidence. The ‘alienation’ that Feuerbach identified as a central feature of religion, where the positive features of mankind (goodness, knowledge, etc.) are ‘projected’ onto a transcendent being (so God becomes all-good, all-knowing and so on) carry over to his analysis of representation and reality more broadly. Feuerbach is not, it should be noted, arguing that religion or the sacred should be restored: on the contrary, it is only by identifying the modern desire for illusion and representation that we can understand why it is that religion no longer has the power it once had—and, we could say, cinema steps into the space left open by the replacement of contemplation with distraction, and of old truths by new appearances. The cinema itself starts to look like a church that has nevertheless abolished religious modes of being and behaviour and replaced them with something altogether more fleeting and uncertain.

CINEMA, ATHEISM, AND MODERNITY

Beyond Plato’s cave, the other main metaphor for cinema comes from psychoanalysis. Here we enter the world of the dream (although Plato’s cave-dwellers are themselves already ‘dreaming’). The parallels between the cinematic experience and the oneiric one are obvious to some extent—the images are fleeting, immaterial, and possess the ability to tell strange stories—but placing cinema in a psychoanalytic context serves further to reinforce its modernist and atheist trajectory: by opening up the continent of the unconscious, psychoanalysis creates a range of explanatory tools that previously would have been attributed to evils (or the ability to refuse evil), that had previously belonged to religion. No more would it be possible to go without at least attempting to understand someone who behaved in ‘perverse’ or incomprehensible ways. No longer would there be any need to rely on religious images of devils and angels on shoulders: all ‘demons’ became internalized, for one thing, as repressions that would emerge in dreams and linguistic slips, and rather than praying for a release, one could simply talk one’s way to recovery. Dream-analysis is obviously a central feature of Freud’s new science, and the coincidence of this turn to what was previously left relatively unthought with the birth of cinema should be noted—as indeed Pedullà does: ‘Sigmund Freud’s book on the interpretation of dreams, not by chance, had come out in 1900’ (2002: 11).

But is cinema very much like a dream? Certainly many directors have attempted to capture the uncanny experience of the dream using the similarly strange effect of cinema—the ghost-like quality of the images that seem real but possess no substance—and some directors, Alfred Hitchcock for one, have constructed entire oeuvres from the exploration of unconscious drives, desires and dream-sequences (the surrealist, Salvador Dali, designed the dream sequence for 1945’s *Spellbound*).

Religion itself can be explained using psychoanalytic tools and concepts: the repression and self-denial that features strongly in many religious faiths can be re-described in terms of ‘drives’ turned inwards against the ego (Freud took a lot from Nietzsche’s critique of Christianity in 1887’s *On the Genealogy of Morality*). The twin rise of psychoanalysis and cinema can be seen as a further confirmation of the latter’s modernizing and secularizing qualities. Perhaps ironically, films with ostensibly religious content, such as Carl Dreyer’s 1928 *The Passion of Joan of Arc*, or Pasolini’s 1964 *The Gospel According to St. Matthew*, can equally and easily be read as meditations on the very humanity of their subjects: The portrayal of Joan’s fervent godliness and Jesus’ earthliness undermine more obviously ‘religious’ and mystical portrayals and bring these two figures back into contemporary debates (the question of censorship and mental illness perhaps in Dreyer’s case; the

tension between communism and Catholicism in Pasolini's). Cinema is arguably much better at recreating dream-states than it is at recalling religious ones: cinema may potentially possess certain 'surreal' qualities, but these are far more likely to relate to the inner life of mankind than to the heavens beyond. What need do cinema audiences have for religion when immersion in dream-like reveries is so much closer? At the other end of cinematic possibility, the demystifying qualities of film in the form of newsreels and documentary footage prevent the possibility of being able to prolong the 'dream' that, for example, war isn't so bad or that a certain massacre did not take place. Cinema demystifies at the same time as it emulates dream and illusion. The parodic and religion-mocking capabilities of cinema have been put to good use by, among other people, Monty Python in 1979's *The Life of Brian* and Kevin Smith in 1999's *Dogma*, where loopholes in Christianity, and the fundamentally absurd nature of faith, are played for (critical) laughs. Some film directors have also used cinema to pick apart the damaging nature of religion as an institutional force—for example, Pedro Almodovar in 2004's *Bad Education* highlights the systemic and highly damaging nature of sexual abuse in the Catholic church through a personal revenge-fantasy of the main character. Where religion often depends upon repeated affirmation of doctrine, cinema can mock both the form and content of this mode of thinking. Groups dedicated to 'atheist cinema' have sprung up—and there are blogs (such as AtheistNexus and Atheist Movies) dedicated to discussing and listing such cinematic efforts.

DZIGA VERTOV: SOVIET CINEMA AND THE CRITIQUE OF RELIGION

Not surprisingly, cinema played a key role in the dissemination of communist ideas and the critique of religion in the early years of the Soviet Union. Chief among the producers of this kind of cinematic material in the form of documentary, newsreel, and other everyday images was David Abelevich Kaufman, better known as Dziga Vertov, who, alongside his brothers and wife, produced technologically extraordinary footage of life driven by machines and rhythm. While Vertov's films—among them, *Man With a Movie Camera* (1929), *A Sixth Part of the World* (1926), *Enthusiasm* (1930) and *Three Songs About Lenin* (1934)—are a celebration of modernity, production, geography and Soviet politics, they are also, in part, explicitly anti-religious films, designed to inform and promote life without the Orthodox church. In *Enthusiasm* in particular, a famous sequence shows revolutionaries pulling down crosses from the roofs of churches, taking out religious paintings and images of Christ on the cross from inside churches and replacing these icons and relics with red stars and symbols of the new anti-religious, communist order. The footage is indeed real rather than staged (Mackay 2005: 5–6), with Vertov's film collective spending much of 1929 taking footage from around the country.

As with much of Vertov's production, the aim was to both celebrate and propagate images of the new order, and to use newsreel and technological developments in the cinema to both reflect and promote Soviet values. In the footage from *Enthusiasm*, camera techniques morph and make strange images of Russian orthodox architecture, signalling the end of an old world by highlighting its fleeting and unstable qualities, and replacing old beliefs with new convictions. Enthusiasm for politics replaces reverence for icons. In *A Sixth Part of the World*, Vertov and his team race around the country bringing cinema to the furthest reaches of the landmass. One sequence suggests that the mixed economic program of the USSR is the 'cure' for certain notions of patriarchy and the religious oppression of women that still permeates remoter parts of the country ('here and there there are still women with veiled faces'), while *Three Songs About Lenin* shows women throwing off their veils in

celebration of their new-found secularism. Vertov's presentation of the cultural diversity of the USSR in *A Sixth Part of the World* strives to unite the audience, who are both its subject and its intended recipient: here cinema is used propagandistically as a form of social inclusion, replacing religious modes of behaviour and practice. Some Russians may still worship *Menkva* (spirit beings believed in by Siberian shamans) but 'slowly the old is disappearing' in favour of the new. Cinema, by its very nature, and can both undermine religion by way of presenting technology as a far more dynamic force, can represent the decline of religion and hasten its demise by literally taking the place of church-worship (*A Sixth Part of the World* was designed to be shown in as many parts of the USSR as possible). Vertov's use of cinema as a modernizing, anti-religious mechanism was a real attempt to bring the Soviet people into 'closer kinship with machines' as his group's 1923 manifesto had it. But what has happened to the futuristic potentiality for cinema, and for its modernizing possibilities since Vertov?

THE PRESENT AND FUTURE OF ATHEIST CINEMA

While Vertov attempted to mobilize cinema in a war against the past, contemporary cinema often seems much less radical, despite advanced technological capabilities. The desire to replace old myths (religion) with new universes (think of the strength of particular franchises—*Star Wars*, for example—that depend upon a set of co-ordinates and backstories that can be endlessly retold) has not led to the cinematic destruction of faith as such. Indeed, the new myths of cinema, and of the image of cinema as a kind of 'distraction' from everyday life has led it to perhaps take on some of the comforting qualities of religious practice. Cinema-goers do not of course believe that there is anything 'behind' the screen, or that the projected images have any kind of 'reality' beyond what is seen, yet much of the language used to describe the cinematic experience—'I was swept away'—has a quasi-religious quality. On the other hand, documentary cinema has increasingly attempted to expose religious fraud, not only by mockery and parody, but by revealing to the viewer the 'truth' of extreme religious practices. Despite the apparent intentions of its directors, Rachel Grady and Heidi Ewing, the 2006 documentary *Jesus Camp*, which documents the operations of an evangelical Christian summer camp, eventually led, following protests, to the camp's closure. Documentary cinema, whether in a deliberately anti-religious mode or not, increasingly takes on the quality of an enlightenment tool: recent mainstream efforts include the exposing of the fast food industry (*Super Size Me*, 2004), of America's gun laws (*Bowling for Columbine*, 2002), and the horrors of America's foreign policy (*The Fog of War*, 2003). Contemporary cinema thus seems split between two rather familiar genres—fact and fiction, with the former perhaps more often taking on the role of shining a light on religion's fusty superstitions and archaic and evangelical practices, while the latter presents stories and myths that may not have particularly religious content, and sometimes may present anti-religious content, but still depend upon a commitment, however shallow, to illusion and the power of the image.

So what future for atheist cinema? Beyond films that seek to expose, critique and parody religion and religious practice, and the possibility of presenting other, atheist universes (and particularly the possibility of life existing elsewhere in the universe), there remains a question of the formal capacities of cinema. Does cinema merely celebrate an illusion that pretends to some kind of reality? Does the seemingly unshakeable power of the story—the love-story, the redemption story, the journey—mean that cinema has not yet broken with the teleology of religious thinking, even as it presents itself as deeply modern and secular? The experimental possibilities of cinema presented in

the work of Vertov, to return to his example for a moment, hinted at a world and a method that would transform mankind itself, to move beyond the human eye in the name of a ‘Kino-eye’ (a cinema-eye). Human vision has not yet become completely cinematized or mechanized, nor, we could argue, has it broken with ideals that are fundamentally humanist. To return to Feuerbach for a moment, he saw that by the middle of the nineteenth century that religion had disappeared ‘and for it has been substituted, even among Protestants, the *appearance* of religion—the Church—in order at least that “the faith” may be imparted to the ignorant and indiscriminating multitude’ (Feuerbach [1843] 1957: xxxix). If cinema has materially replaced to some extent the domination of the church, has it truly broken with the belief in itself *as* cinema? We are willing participants in the practical belief in the form of cinema *and* in its content—we *want* to believe in the truth and value of narrative. But wouldn’t a truly atheist cinema force the viewer to break with the new illusions of cinema itself? Cinematography that graphically and insistently reminds the viewer that she is watching a film and not sinking into a story (think of Bertolt Brecht’s stage-sign that read ‘don’t stare so romantically!’), may be understood as cinema that is atheistic about its *own* possibilities.

We live in a world utterly saturated with images, many of them moving. We tend to believe reportage and footage because we think that the camera never lies, and we sometimes tend to forget that images are shaped and chosen in the name of a particular agenda. At the same time, fiction films offer a kind of desirable escape from the drudgeries of work—not to mention the worship of actors and actresses who often appear as a set of contemporary gods and goddesses, though more in the Greek mode than the Christian, with their fallibilities and sex-lives up for exposure and discussion. There is cinema that is explicitly anti-religious (often ‘factual’ or documentary) and there is cinema (often ‘fictional’) that is a-religious or secular. But very little cinema that is perhaps truly atheist in both form and content, in the sense that it breaks with both the need to ‘believe’ (in a story, in a character) or the desire to forget about the apparatus and technology of cinema itself (would we be happy to watch a film that constantly drew attention to the fact that it was a film, that it was being played over a projector, that it involved a certain number of crew-members, and so on? Of course many films have drawn attention to their conditions of production, but only on rare occasions). One may easily be an atheist in the sense of not believing in God or gods, but one may have harder time denying one’s faith in the moving image.

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¹ Evidence and bibliographical details for all these claims may be found, in abundance, throughout this Handbook.

² The *reason(s)* for the relative lack of attention given by scholars to atheism, and its myriad manifestations and implications, is itself an interesting question. However, it is the study of atheism, and not ‘the study of the study of atheism’, that is our concern here. For some theories concerning atheism’s comparative neglect (at least within the social sciences), see Stark 1999 and Bullivant and Lee 2012.

³ Ethnocentric though this may seem (and indeed is), it would be fair to say that resources for constructing a truly global history of atheism are not yet available. Those interested in the non-Western history/ies of atheism will, though, find much of value elsewhere in the Handbook, especially in the chapters on ‘Buddhism’, ‘Jainism’, ‘Hinduism’, ‘The Islamic World’, ‘Japan’, and ‘India’. Our focus here on the *Western* history of atheism may also be justified on positive grounds, since this sets the primary backdrop to so many of the other topics dealt with in this volume. It is also worth pointing out that, such is the nature of things, ‘Western’ and ‘non-Western’ histories of atheism cannot be neatly disentangled. For example, the Arabic world features prominently in Dorothea Weltecke’s chapter on the ‘Medieval World’ (as does Byzantium in Mark Edwards’ ‘The First Millennium’), and the chapters on ‘The Islamic World’, ‘Japan’, and ‘India’ all highlight the influence of (originally) Western ideas within these contexts.

¹ On a small scale, the problem can be seen in attempts to discuss the closely related phenomena of disbelief and agnosticism in, say, Victorian Britain together under the awkward headings of ‘doubt’ or ‘freethought’.

² I am grateful to Joseph Hammer for prompting me to refine my thoughts—and, especially, for arguing me out of my predilection for ‘lack’—on this important issue.

³ And besides, even Pseudo-Dionysius would presumably admit that God ‘falls outside the predicate of being’ in a different way than does, say, Hamlet, or the one-eyed, one-horned, flying purple people-eater.

⁴ That said, the term ‘practical atheism’—‘a lifestyle in which no (discernible) conclusions are drawn from the (theoretical) recognition of the existence of God’ (Rahner 1957: 983)—relating primarily to the latter sense has some currency within Christian literature. This is an interesting topic in its own right, but concerns Christian believers, rather than atheists proper. Since practical atheists, by definition, are *not* ‘without a belief in the existence of God or gods’, the topic is not included in this Handbook (though see, at length, Bullivant 2012a: 22–6).

⁵ There is a persistent tradition within Christian theology of pointing out that *its* God is not ‘a god’. Thus in the words of the second-century saint, Justin Martyr: ‘We do proclaim ourselves atheists as regards those whom you call gods, but not with respect to the Most True God’ (Falls 1948: 38–9). On this, see Bullivant 2012b.

⁶ Some of the issues—and difficulties—surrounding the cross-cultural applicability of the Western-influenced terms ‘God’ and ‘god’, and thus of the concept of atheism itself, are well brought out in several of the later chapters in this volume. (See, for example, Andrew Skilton’s chapter on ‘Buddhism’, and Johannes Quack’s on ‘India’.)

⁷ Of course, given the above adoption of a ‘family resemblance’ model of defining ‘god’, it may well be that a belief in some of these things either is, or implies, a form of theism. This is an interesting question to consider on a case-by-case basis, but does not affect the main point.

¹ I presented an elongated version of this argument as a lecture to the Royal Institute of Philosophy; it is reprinted in *Philosophy* and available from my webpage: <http://www.philosophy.ox.ac.uk/members/tim_mawson>. The notes and bibliography appended to that version naturally give more details of the people to whom I am indebted for their work.

¹ For clarity and continuity, this essay throughout imposes its own numbering system for propositions regardless of how they are numbered in the original source.

² It is of historical importance that Madden and Hare first called for leaving the logical problem and engaging the evidential problem, and first clarified that the most important evidence is the apparent gratuity, rather than the sheer existence, of evil.

³ Work by other theists on chance and contingency supports this point (Peterson 1982; van Inwagen 1988).

⁴ ‘Defeat’ here means: an intrinsically bad state of affairs is defeated when it contributes to a state of affairs that is very good and outweighs the bad but whose goodness depends on the badness of the bad for its greater goodness (Chisholm 1968; Adams 1999).

¹ I thank Matt Jordan, Jeff Kenney, Christian Miller, and Danny Piedmonte for their helpful comments.

² Paul's work has been the object of substantial criticism; for a careful investigation of Paul's claims based on data about the United States, see Delamontagne 2010.

³ For a more detailed explanation of the sort of objectivity involved here, see Huemer 2005: 2–4.

⁴ For a useful discussion of this distinction, as well as two interesting will formulations of theological voluntarism, see Murphy 1998.

⁵ Another important theistic approach to ethics is Linda Zagzebski's (2004) divine motivation theory, which has a structure quite different from that of the theories discussed here. I lack the space for an adequate treatment of this theory here.

⁶ The sort of view I favour has made something of a comeback in recent years. For recent sympathetic discussions, see McGinn 1997; Shafer-Landau 2005; and Morriston 2012.

¹ They re-launched the campaign in September 2011 (*Buffalo News*, 26 August 2011). This advertisement campaign mimicked the largest such campaign supported in part by Richard Dawkins in London, England. In January 2009, 800 buses across Britain carried the following message: 'There's probably no God. Now stop worrying and enjoy your life.'

² Cottingham refers to Wittgenstein (1988: 61) and Glock (1996); see also Rudolf Carnap's view of 'statements of metaphysics' as 'expressions of the general attitude of life' ([1932] 1966: 78–9).

³ For a good overview of these various points of view offered by objective naturalists, see Metz 2002.

¹ The Ontological Argument is usually said to have been first proposed by St Anselm of Canterbury (1033–1109). The version of it rejected by Aquinas (and Kant) is not, I think, that offered by Anselm (see Davies 2004).

² For an English translation of the crucial parts of *De Aeternitate Mundi*, see Baldner and Carroll 1997: 114 ff. See also *Summa Theologiae*, 1a,46,2 where Aquinas also maintains that philosophy cannot establish that the universe had a beginning.

³ Following Aristotle, Aquinas distinguishes between four kinds of cause: material, formal, agent (or efficient), and final. These correspond to answers to questions of the form (1) ‘What in the physical composition of X accounts for the fact that X fared thus and so in such and such circumstances?’, (2) ‘What is it about the nature of X than accounts for such and such being true of it in such and such circumstances, (3) ‘What brought it about that X exists, or that X undergoes such and such changes?’, and (4) ‘With what purpose is such and such happening?’. The notion of final causation is at work in Aquinas’s Fifth Way in the *Summa Theologiae*, and in some comparable texts (notably *Summa Contra Gentiles*, I,13). When it comes to arguing that ‘God exists’ is true, however, Aquinas is chiefly concerned with God as an agent cause—as accounting for, as bringing it about that, the universe exists (at any time).

⁴ Here I am drawing on a sentence from Peter Geach (see Anscombe and Geach 1961: 112).

⁵ I have noted how Aquinas distinguishes between *entia per se* and *entia per accidens*. But he takes all such things to have *esse* in that he thinks that to describe them does not commit one to supposing that they exist. In his thinking as I am reporting on it at this point, however, his focus is on naturally occurring things, without which (he presumes) there would be no *entia per accidens*.

⁶ For a crisp presentation of Aquinas's basic case for it being true that 'God exists', see McCabe 1987. In this chapter McCabe does not at all try to expound Aquinas. But he does, I think, successfully paraphrase what Aquinas writes in a way that might be understood by people who know nothing of him.

⁷ It is not surprising that Aquinas never says that God is a person since the formula ‘God is a person’ is not a biblical one. Its first occurrence in English, so far as I can determine, comes in a report of the trial of one John Biddle, who in 1644 was arraigned on a charge of heresy by a court in Gloucester, UK. The heresy ascribed to Biddle was the claim ‘God is a person’, which came chiefly to birth in Unitarian attacks on classical Trinitarian theology (for more on which, see Dixon 2003). When he talks about the doctrine of the Trinity Aquinas certainly uses the word *persona* to say what God the Father is, what God the Son is, and what God the Holy Spirit is. But Aquinas’s use of *persona* in his Trinitarian discussions is far removed from what ‘person’ tends to mean in contemporary English (‘a human being’, or a ‘center of consciousness’). And he certainly never suggests that God is three persons in one person. He would have taken such a suggestion to be completely unorthodox.

⁸ In many ways Aquinas's account of God resembles what the late D. Z. Phillips called 'the grammar of God'. Phillips has often been criticized (by Richard Swinburne, for example), for presenting an account of God which is basically atheistic. Here, though, I would say that if Phillips's understanding of God is atheistic, then so is that of Aquinas (which seems a curious conclusion to arrive at). For more on this topic, see Phillips 2008.

¹ Within this essay the word ‘atheism’ is used to characterize a close selection of world views in keeping with the nomenclature used in the rest of this publication. Where there is an obvious ideological difference in position this is mentioned in the text. In places ‘secularism’ is distinguished from atheism since it was a position which argued about the validity of Christianity’s position in public life rather than the truth of its claims—a position itself not incompatible with various species of fringe Christianity.

² Deism as a philosophical position excepted the probability of a creator but denied the value or authority of the Church on earth which claimed to represent the supreme being on earth.

³ Secularism is defined later in this essay. Freethinking is an allied position that emphasizes independence in the manner of acquiring and implementing ideas. In most instances this is linked to dissent from religion and in many respects can be regarded as an updated version of the mechanick tradition.

⁴ Vernon Lushington was a Positivist lecturer whilst Godfrey Lushington was a civil servant charged with giving advice to the Home Secretary, Sir William Harcourt, during the tumultuous G. W. Foote blasphemy case/affair in the 1880s.

¹ Data available online at: <<http://www.britsocat.com>> (last accessed on 22 October 2012).

² With one exception, the data come from the census or US data for each nation already referred to. The 1965 datum comes from Gorer (1965: 161 n).

³ The interviews have been conducted by the author, started in 2009, and continue. The results will be published as a book, and the interviews deposited in the University of Glasgow Archive. The authors' names and birth details are given.

¹ Harris has responded to some reactions stirred by *The End of Faith* with a second book, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (2006). As this follow-up is a continuation and a clarification of certain aspects of his first book I need not summarize it here.

² Harris' conception of Buddhism as laid out in the sections 'The Wisdom of the East' and 'Meditation' appears downright paradigmatic for the Western world (Faure 2009: 27–28, 93–95, 104).

³ Popper, who self-identified as an agnostic and rejected some forms of positive atheism as arrogant and ignorant, very rarely commented on religion. In an 1969 interview, he said: ‘So far as religion is testable, it seems to be false. This is not an accusation because religion is not science. [...] I have introduced the falsification criterion in order to distinguish science from what is not science. Because something isn’t science, however, does not mean that it is meaningless’ (quoted in Zerin 1998: 47–48). Hans Albert, the most prominent critical rationalist in Germany, however, has taken a different stance: an atheist himself, he explicitly considers critical rationalism a challenge to religious faith and, self-identifying as an atheist, he has openly and repeatedly criticized religion (Franco 2006: 55–56).

⁴ Despite the balanced illustration, which includes religious and nonreligious examples, this passage is occasionally—yet selectively—quoted to substantiate the claim that Dennett’s criticism of religion is offensive or insulting (e.g., Schlieter 2012).

⁵ This fact has been noticed by critics of ‘New Atheism’, for example by the evangelical Christian author Vox Day (AKA Theodore Beale): ‘Dennett’s call for an open spirit of inquiry into religion is worthwhile and should be welcomed by Christians and other religious individuals’ (Day 2008: 193).

⁶ See Beattie (2007), Smolczyk (2007), Brown (2008), Gray (2008), Jäger (2008), Frerk (2009), Garhammer (2009), Hoff (2009), Bradley and Tate (2010), and
[<www.newatheistmovement.com/wantedforblasphemy.htm>](http://www.newatheistmovement.com/wantedforblasphemy.htm).

⁷ A notable exception is the American physicist Victor J. Stenger (*The New Atheism—Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*, 2009) who embraces the label ‘New Atheist’ as a self-description. While he is not the most prominent ‘New Atheist’, his case might indicate a trend. For example, a Google search for the expression ‘I am a new atheist’ yields quite a few results.

¹ Thanks to Graham Smith for his helpful comments on an earlier draft. Translations are sometimes modified in light of the original French texts without special notice.

² I am not suggesting that Christian beliefs are logically necessary conditions of morality; clearly, moral frameworks exist in various social and cultural settings. But in every case moral frameworks are part of broader frameworks of comprehensive belief, which are often religious and sometimes theistic. In the European context in which existentialism arose and—as in the USA—retains currency, the frameworks of belief underpinning morality have, historically, been overwhelmingly Christian. This context shapes how the existentialists frame the issues around religion and morality.

³ Glenn Braddock (2006: esp. 93, 96) objects that although atheism follows from Sartre's existentialism, his existentialism does not directly follow from atheism, because even if there is no creator God there could still be objective essences (such as natural kinds) and values (as for some moral realists).

⁴ The idea that Sartre seeks to ground an ethics on reason is surprising, since existentialism is often identified by its *rejection* of reason as the ground of ethics in favour of free choice. Anderson (1993: 63–4) therefore suggests that, for Sartre, reason can only guide our choices if we first choose to value reason. But this would again leave Sartre unable to condemn those who choose the inconsistent course of advancing their own freedom while violating that of others. Without taking reason as an absolute value, Sartre cannot avoid moral relativism.

¹ The former dominated by German social democracy from the late-nineteenth century onwards and the latter by a Stalinized Soviet Union after Lenin's death in 1924.

² Although finally published in its entirety in 1959, the text was written while he was in exile in the USA from 1934–49.

³ From the video by Astra Taylor (2005) *Žižek!* (New York: Zeitgeist Films).

¹ For the cultural and historical background, see Hacohen 2000: 71–97, 171–213.

² I.e., Marilyn McCord Adams and Robert Merrihew Adams.

³ The oddities of Neurath's style are due to the fact that he was writing to Carnap in English, which was not his first language. A German missive between these two refugees might have aroused the suspicions of the war-time censor who would probably have been keeping an eye on the trans-Atlantic correspondence of two people with such obviously Teutonic names as Carnap and Neurath.

⁴ Though in the case of Tarski, Neurath's fears were somewhat overblown. So far from being a partisan of St Thomas, Tarski was a nominalist and a materialist, an atheistic Jew whose juvenile conversion to Catholicism had been a purely political gesture. See Fefferman and Fefferman 2004 and Frost-Arnold 2008 for details.

⁵ For a forthright version of this sort of thing, see Braithwaite 1955. For a characteristically unctuous, cagey and obscure formulation, see Phillips 1970.

⁶ This is not true of more recent champions of atheism within the analytic tradition, such as Mackie (1982), Gale (1991), Sobel (2004), and Howson (2011), who often deploy a range of technical devices—modal logic, Bayesian probability theory, and decision theory—to counter the arguments of the analytic theists such as Swinburne and Plantinga, whose work displays a similar level of technological sophistication. What we have here is an intellectual arms race: fun for analytic philosophers but less so for other folk.

⁷ Russell did not share this mania for meaninglessness but he helped to precipitate it and to make it respectable. His early work on logic was plagued by two sets of paradoxes typified by Russell's Paradox and the Paradox of the Liar. Consider the 'Russell class', the class of all classes that are not members of themselves. If it is member of itself, it is not a member of itself, and if it is not a member of itself, it is. Or consider The Liar sentence 'This statement is false.' If it is true, it is false and if it is false, it is true. To defuse these paradoxes Russell developed a Theory of Types according to which 'the class of classes that are not members of themselves' and 'This statement is false' are (despite appearances) not really meaningful (see Russell 1919: [ch. 13](#)). This is how the Serpent of Meaninglessness got into the analytic Garden of Eden, giving rise to Wittgenstein's pernicious idea that finding nonsense in what is apparently meaningful is what philosophy ought to be about (see, e.g., Wittgenstein 1922: 6.53–4).

¹ The sentiment is repeated in Psalm 53.2 and 10.4.

² That *epikoros* is sometimes translated as ‘atheist’ or ‘nonbeliever’ is confirmed by Rosner (1981: 165 fn. 7x).

³ Researchers have called attention to the 1782 *Answer to Dr. Priestley's Letters to a Philosophical Unbeliever, Part I* as one of the first instances of avowed atheism in England. Perhaps, but the author of the piece was a certain 'Hammon' who may or may not have been a Liverpool doctor by the name of Matthew Turner (see Berman 1988: 110–33; Priestman 1999: 12–43).

⁴ One scholar refers to D'Holbach, author of the audacious *The System of Nature*, as 'probably the first unequivocally professed atheist in the Western Tradition' (Thrower [1971] 2000: 106).

⁵ Interesting in this regard are figures like La Mettrie, Diderot, and d'Holbach (Fabro 1968).

⁶ What Paine imbibed in France, among other things, was a hatred of priests as well as Christianity. Of the latter he said: ‘the Christian system of faith ... appears to me a species of atheism —a sort of religious denial of God’ (Paine 1974: 486).

⁷ A fate which befell titans of Victorian infidelity such as George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh. For their history of incarceration, see Berlinerblau 2012.

¹ I will not deal further with the second category, except to remark that for some converts it is an important part of their Buddhism to deny, in some cases quite vehemently, the existence of God, gods and supernatural entities.

² A simple search of the web demonstrates how widely these characterizations are held and debated.

³ Temples in Asia and in the Buddhist diaspora reflect a dichotomy between traditional layouts with multiple shrines to various figures and temples either of a modernized tradition or that are serving converts and/or middle class congregations that have a single shrine to the Buddha.

⁴ The Pali canon is the scriptural collection of Theravada Buddhism of South and Southeast Asia. I shall reference specific *suttas* in the following discussion. Readers wishing to explore some of this material can read modern translations at <www.accesstoinsight.org/tipitaka/> or browse the volumes of translation produced by the Pali Text Society (<www.palitext.com/palitext/tran.htm>). The entry for ‘Sakka’ in Malalasekara 1960 will give the reader many points of reference.

⁵ See for example the *Mahāgovinda Sutta* of the Dīgha Nikāya.

⁶ Despite its etymological implication that the religious goal involves salvation, by a saviour, I shall use the term soteriology and its cognate forms to refer to the normative goal of liberation or awakening. These implications are inappropriate for Buddhism which generally promotes a liberation that is ‘won’ by the ideal practitioner.

⁷ This has included the wish to be reborn with or even as Sakka.

⁸ For the reader who wishes to explore further these basic Buddhist concepts I recommend Harvey 1990 and Buswell 2003.

⁹ I thank my colleague Kate Crosby for pointing out this neat verbal distinction.

¹⁰ *Dhātu* are the six senses plus their objects: eye, ear, nose, tongue, touch, thought; *āyatana* are the same along with the corresponding ‘awareness’ (*viññāna*) of each.

¹¹ The *nidāna* are the individual components employed to illustrate in its most elaborate form the principle of ‘dependent origination’ *paticca-samuppāda*: ignorance (*avijjā*); formations (*samkhāra*); awareness (*vijñāna*); mind and body (*nāma-rūpa*); the six sense bases (*salāyatana*); contact (*phassa*); feeling (*vedanā*); craving (*tanhā*); clinging (*upādāna*); becoming (*bhava*); birth (*jāti*); old age and death (*jarā-marana*). Variously interpreted as spreading over three lifetimes or one, or indeed over individual moments of consciousness, this analysis is taken to account fully for the arising, decline and re-emergence of phenomena.

¹² The anti-theist arguments of a number of Buddhist scholiasts have been explored in secondary literature: Vasubandhu, Buddhaghosa, Śāntarakṣita, and Kamalaśīla (Hayes 1988), Dharmakīrti (Hayes 1988; Jackson 1994) and Mokṣākaragupta (Griffiths 1999). Material from the Theravada tradition, from the canon through to the commentarial period exemplified by Buddhaghosa (fifth century), is explored and situated in a Christian theological context in Dharmasiri 1988.

¹³ See Crosby and Skilton 1996. The following is a new translation of the relevant verses. I will work through them in sequence.

¹⁴ The Nyāya (logicians) and Vaiśeṣikas (empiricist atomists) are theistic religio-philosophical positions that constitute two of the six classical systems (*darśanas*) of Hindu thought.

¹⁵ The date of the Dīgha Nikāya texts is not known, although they are all attributed by tradition to the Buddha. As a compilation its existence is inferred from the first century BCE. Individual texts show evidence of considerable editorial activity.

¹⁶ This is the first *sutta* of the Dīgha Nikāya collection.

¹⁷ The same strategy was still in play in the eighteenth century when Buddhist authors reacted to the impact of Christian missionaries in Sri Lanka, and composed a satirical *Jātaka* concerning ‘the carpenter preta’, a story about the ghost of a carpenter (Jesus) who was killed but did not die, and who was an emanation of Māra, the embodiment of obstruction on the Buddhist path (Fox Young 1995).

¹ I write ‘historical appearance’ to make a distinction between what is known historically and what may have pre-existed it to allow for Jainism’s possible pre-historical origins. Jains themselves believe that Jain teachings have always existed, i.e., are eternal.

² Along with Buddhism and other *shramana* or world-renouncing movements.

³ Jainism is the oldest of humanity's still extant world-renouncing traditions. The mendicant-ascetics continue to serve as the tradition's ideal, even if they represent a small fraction of the community (only about two of every thousand Jains are mendicants). Indeed, in South Asia, the minority Jain community (approximately 5 million) is probably better known for its business acumen than its asceticism, but the renunciatory ethos of traditional Jainism continues to inform virtually all aspects of the tradition.

⁴ Also called Ford-Makers, *Tirthankaras*.

⁵ The Jain cosmos contains a vast array of living beings, all of which possess between one to five senses. One sensed beings make up the air, water, fire, and earth, as well as some plants. They possess the sense of touch and therefore, crucially for Jains, are capable of feeling pain. Two sensed beings, such as worms, have touch and taste; three sensed beings, such as ants, possess touch, taste, and smell. Four sensed, such as butterflies, have capacities for touch, taste, smell, and sight. Five sensed beings possess touch, taste, smell, sight, and hearing. Only they are endowed with 'mind' or psychic activity, and alone are capable of deliberative intelligence and rationality. These include most animals, fish, birds, quadrupeds, infernal beings, celestial beings and humans. Beings without mind experience the world through their senses alone. Five-sensed beings perceive their existence in *samsara* through their senses and rational minds. And finally, those beings who have attained enlightenment (*moksha*) no longer exist sensorially, and have no need for instrumental rationality. Instead, they experience unobstructed perception and inimitable bliss through the *jiva* itself, which is its nature.

⁶ Jainism is divided into two major groups, the Shvetambara and Digamabara. Neither group recognizes as legitimate the scriptures of the other. The *Acaranga Sutra* is the most ancient Shvetambara Jain text, dated around the third century BCE.

⁷ It is important to make a distinction between the textual tradition which represents, in distilled form, the central and distinctive teachings of Jainism from Jains themselves who inhabit these teachings differently and to varying degrees.

⁸ Fully inhabiting the *shramana* (renouncer) path is obviously a momentous challenge and the vast majority of Jains do not pursue it, living instead as ‘householders’ and striving to balance their worldly lives with the ideals of nonviolence and non-attachment. Nevertheless, over the last 2600 years since the time of Mahavira, there have always been Jaina mendicant orders. Today, the total number of mendicants (from all Jain sects) is conservatively estimated at about 12 000 (see Flügel, 2012). Although they are a tiny minority within the overall Jain population, the mendicants most fully embody Jainism’s traditional ideals of self-effort (from which the word *shramana* is derived). Jainism is adamant that liberation depends entirely on the courage and heroic determination to live a nonviolent life, and has nothing to do with grace, faith, or with the mysterious compassion of an external omnipotent being.

⁹ The rejection a cosmogenic omnipotent God in no way results in the reign of an ‘exclusive humanism’ (Taylor 2007: 19) or ‘Subjectivism’ (Crowe 2008: 30), as many argue it does in the West (at least since the eighteenth century). Such an outcome would only be possible if humans had previously conceived of themselves as God’s only serious conversational partner. To remove God then would be to be left with nothing but the sounds of human voices. The cacophony of the Jain world makes such a scenario inconceivable.

¹⁰ Given the beginning-less nature of cyclical time, it is surmised that we have all previously enjoyed luminous *devagati* incarnations.

¹¹ Though powerful, they are often referred to as ‘lesser’ or ‘inferior’ gods because they dwell within the human realm and because they are often caught up in worldly concerns.

¹² According to the Shvetambara, all but one of the Jinas are male. Only the nineteenth, Mallinath, is female. The Digambaras reject as impossible a female Jina on the grounds that liberation is not possible from a female body.

¹³ I borrow the term from Patricia Cox Miller's discussion of Augustine's consternation over the cult of relics in early Christianity (2000). Afraid that actual worship rather than simple veneration was taking over the martyr's shrines, Augustine proposed ethical mimesis as the proper way to understand the function of relics.

¹⁴ We are now in the miserable fifth stage of the descending cycle, inching toward a state of even greater suffering before the cycle will move into its ascending half-cycle of increasing prosperity.

¹⁵ Mahavira's teachings are principally concerned with the path to liberation with a focus on the condition of suffering shared by all living beings, on non-violence, karma, and self-restraint. It fell to the philosophers to elaborate on the nature and structure of the cosmos.

¹⁶ It must be stated that Anekantavada is not a form of radical relativism. Jainism does hold that reality is knowable by those no longer impeded by karma. Omniscience is the capacity of an unfettered soul. Mahavira's teachings, for instance, which constitute the basis of the tradition, are believed to be perfect. But even here, our capacity to understand the teachings of the Jina is partial.

¹⁸ See Benjamin Crowe's *Heidegger's Phenomenology of Religion: Realism and Cultural Criticism* (2008) for an elaboration of an understanding of religion that is, first and foremost, responsive.

¹⁹ To paraphrase Nietzsche's famous pronouncements of the death of God in his 1882 book, *The Gay Science*. For Nietzsche, with God's death comes the loss of orientation. The 'horizon' has been 'wiped away' and the earth 'unchained' from the Sun ([1882] 1974: 181).

¹ My thanks goes to the library of the Indian International Centre in New Delhi, and to Mr Gautam Philip, for their aid in researching this article.

² See the full chapter from which this is taken for a rich resource of citations of sceptical views of the period.

³ Dakshinaranjan Shastri tried to reconstruct the Barhaspatya Sutras (1967), and R. Bhattacharya later attempted a further collection of authentic Lokāyata citations (2002: 597–640).

⁴ Larson argues that the notion of spirit in Sāṃkhya was always linked to the personal notion of a person—the same word, ‘*puruṣa*’, is used interchangeably for both (Larson 1969: 85–8), but much early Sāṃkhya seems far from personal theism in its descriptions of the eternal inactive and unchanging *puruṣa*.

¹ I have written on naturalism in a number of places, especially as it relates to matters of religion (see Ruse 1986, 2001, 2008, 2010).

¹ See, for example, Sheaffer 2010 and letters to the editor following it in the same issue of the *Skeptical Inquirer*.

¹ In addition to foregoing any discussion of fundamentalism, I shall omit further consideration of Darwin's personal theology, which is well known and not directly germane to the question of atheism and evolutionary biology as such. Essentially, Darwin was a believer in his youth, having even studied to join the Anglican clergy, and became increasingly a doubter—verging on atheism—as he matured. My concern at present isn't the beliefs of Charles Darwin, the individual, but how the science he wrought currently impacts atheism.

² In what follows, I shall use ‘evolution’, ‘evolutionism’, ‘evolutionary biology’, ‘evolution by natural selection’, and ‘Darwinism’ as essentially synonyms, notwithstanding that it is possible to identify subtle distinctions among these terms.

³ At this point, believers would likely point to the presumed existence of a human soul, but since there is no objective evidence for such an entity, I—like Laplace—have no need for this hypothesis. Moreover, as Carl Sagan so memorably pointed out, extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence, whereas with respect to the soul there is no evidence whatever.

⁴ I note with interest that 'noma' is defined medically as a gangrenous disease leading to tissue destruction of the face, also known as *cancrum oris* or *gangrenous stomatitis*.

¹ ‘Religionization’ is preferable to ‘sacralization’. The latter signifies a much broader concept and domain (‘the sacred’ in contrast to ‘the profane’) and, as such, brings with it a host of definitional, theoretical, and empirical issues.

¹ There is, of course, a negative theology in Hinduism and Christianity where God is defined by what he is *not*. I don't think Beit-Hallahmi (2007) had in mind suggesting a link between mysticism and atheism; however, this link exists, and with considerable force, in the Jewish followers of the prophetic figure of Sabbatai Zevi (1626–76). Within the space of a few generations, mystical beliefs were transformed, first into disillusionment, and then into a nihilistic movement (see Scholem [1944] 1995: 287–324).

² To give an example of the difficulties of generalizing from the US studies, let us consider the positive association between atheism and level of education, which is often quoted in review articles of atheism (Beit-Hallahmi 2007; Zuckerman 2009; Streib and Klein 2013). A cursory look at the references shows that these data come almost entirely from US studies, going as far back as the early 20th century (Leuba, 1934). Now, if we look at the UK, which at the cultural level is the closest to the USA in Europe, such correlation becomes ambiguous: the older group (>35) shows a U pattern between religiosity and education; that is, both the highly secular and highly religious have had more years of education. But for younger people (<35), the data from the same national survey indicates that the highly religious are the best educated (Voas and McAndrew 2012). An earlier study using a British large sample (>16,000) of young people (aged 13–15) reported that 38% of atheists came from working class homes, as opposed to 32% of theists. Atheist youngsters also felt considerably more alienated from their school than theists (Kay and Francis 1995).

³ The 2001 Census in England and Wales shows that 88% of infants whose parents are Christian are also reported being Christian. In contrast, when both parents have no religion, only 5% of their offspring are identified as Christian (Voas and McAndrew 2012).

⁴ The same applies to religious people who can be highly analytical, and still hold largely non-rational supernatural beliefs. There is, of course, a rationalization of belief through theology and philosophy; however, generally, this merely strengthens a previously held belief system rather than lead to its initial endorsement.

⁵ That psychologists have neglected the variety of atheistic belief systems is of no great surprise, since they have also generally turned a blind way to differences between religious faiths (for exceptions at the motivational, social-cognitive and perceptual levels, see Schwartz and Huismans 1995; Li et al. 2012; Colzato et al. 2010).

⁶ This was not reported in the original paper. Atheists ($M = 49.38$, $SD = 15.51$) had significantly stronger beliefs in the *Da Vinci Code* conspiracy than religious participants ($M = 40.01$, $SD = 18.83$), $t(130) = 2.99$, $p = .003$.

⁷ This was assessed via a short questionnaire that included items like ‘In two decades, we will live in a better world than that of today’.

⁸ Some of the items for belief in science were: 'Science tells us everything there is to know about what reality consists of', 'All the tasks human beings face are soluble by science', and 'The scientific method is the only reliable path to knowledge'.

⁹ Individualism is not the only possible outcome of atheism, as collectivist Marxist regimes have shown.

¹⁰ Atheists ($M = 36.22$, $SD = 4.98$) were significantly higher on internal control than Catholics ($M = 31.25$, $SD = 5.22$) and New Agers ($M = 30.80$, $SD = 6.31$), $F(2, 138) = 10.62$, $p < .001$).

¹¹ Since Bakan, other authors have analysed the relationship between the Protestant Reformation and science (Brooke 1991), and with modern individualism (Lukes 1973).

¹² Atheists ($M = .20$, $SD = .41$) had significantly more narratives of self-mastery than Catholics ($M = .02$, $SD = .14$), $F(1, 138) = 5.87$, $p = .017$). The original article compares the results for the three groups only (Farias and Lalljee 2006).

¹³ Openness to experience is also positively associated with modern spirituality, and negatively with traditional religiosity (Saucier and Skrzypinska 2006).

¹⁴ One interesting historical anecdote connecting atheism and sex concerns the early French atheist pamphlets. These used to be distributed together with pornographic pamphlets (Haug et al. 2011). See also the recent issue of *Philosophical Forum* on early modern libertinism and atheism (Lackey and Nematollahy 2011).

¹ See: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qVWxo3fspew>> (last accessed on 4 October 2012).

¹ A 2012 Gallup International survey claims that 13 per cent of people worldwide think of themselves as ‘convinced atheists’ (WIN-Gallup International 2012). The wording of Gallup’s question is the same as the question from the World Values Survey referenced throughout this essay: ‘Irrespective of whether you attend a place of worship or not, would you say you are a religious person, not a religious person or a convinced atheist?’ yet the results from both surveys are quite different. The most striking of these differences is Gallup’s estimate of 47 per cent ‘convinced atheists’ in China, which is based on only 500 online respondents in 2012 with no prior baseline survey for comparison. The 2007 WVS in China found 18 per cent ‘convinced atheists’ based on 1,969 cases. Given the anecdotal evidence of increased religiosity in China, it should be expected that the percentage of atheists would have shrunk rather than increased. We recommend caution with these numbers since an overestimate of China’s atheist population drastically inflates the global number.

² The analysis of the demographics of positive atheists and agnostics presented here is limited to 33 countries with over 40 respondents of the ISSP who said, 'I don't believe in God' and 21 countries with sufficient number of respondents who said 'I don't know whether there is a God and I don't believe there is any way to find out'.

³ To overcome different age structures in the various countries, we present the percentage of atheists within each age group in each country (rather than % atheist who are young or old in each country).

⁴ With its sample of 54,461 adult respondents, ARIS 2008 utilized an open-ended survey question, ‘*What is your religion, if any?*’ which yielded three distinct groups: self-identified atheists, self-identified agnostics, and those who answered ‘none’. The first two groups were quite small, together amounting to less than 2 per cent of the US adult population. The third group, termed the no-religion group, was about 13 per cent of the population. Together, the three groups increased significantly from about 14 million in 1990 to over 34 million in 2008 (Kosmin and Keysar 2009).

⁵ The response options were: There is no such thing (atheist); There is no way to know (hard agnostic); I am not sure (soft agnostic); There is a higher power but no personal God (deist); There is definitely a personal God (theist).

¹ I would like to thank the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) and the Blackham Fellowship for funding the research into atheism and nonreligion discussed in this essay and enabling my contribution to *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. I would also like to thank the editors for their invitation to contribute and their editorial support.

² Where other areas of social commentary and social science are often able to treat Western Europe and North America together—as the West—a perceived distinction between ‘religious America and secular Europe’ (Berger et al. 2008) means that, in the case of atheism, Western Europe has a very distinctive identity.

³ Here, ‘nonreligion’ is used in the sense given in Lee (2012a), meaning something which is defined by how it differs from religion, whether this sense of difference is primarily hostile, dismissive, or curious. As such, ‘nonreligion’ subsumes earlier definitions of irreligion, but includes relationships with religion that are broadly positive or supportive in nature.

Colin Campbell ([1971] 2013) and Bullivant (see Defining ‘Atheism’) rightly point out that atheism is not necessarily nonreligious in nature, but can, on the contrary, be associated with religious traditions (e.g., some forms of Buddhism) or as a component part of *religious* experience (see, e.g., Bullivant 2008 on the role of atheism as an aspect of what he calls, following Campbell, ‘irreligious experiences’). Campbell also notes, however, that nonreligious activity responds to local religions and, in the Western European case, these have been largely theistic in nature. Without denying the increasing role of atheistic religions in Western Europe, the most common forms of both positive and negative atheism in Western Europe are nonreligious in nature, and a general association between the two is therefore appropriate in this context.

⁴ Siegers' work uses RAMP (Religious and Moral Pluralism Project) data from 1999; his figures are, however, comparable to more recent data. For example, his study finds that 65.5 per cent of Britons are unreligious or 'indifferent' to religion, where Voas and Ling (2010) find that 67 per cent of Britons are unreligious or 'fuzzily faithful' using World Values Survey (WVS) data from 2008. Older studies are still useful because, as Keysar and Navarro-Rivera show (see 'A World of Atheism: Global Demographics'), Western Europe has experienced only a modest increase in its atheist population in the past decade—3 per cent between 1998 and 2008.

⁵ These numbers are comparable to some included in Zuckerman's (2007) survey and to those produced by combining Voas' 'fuzzy faithful' group with his 'unreligious group' (Voas and Ling 2010: 71).

⁶ Cf. Cotter's ideas about extending the notion of 'nominal religion' or 'nominal Christianity' to 'nominal atheism' and 'nominal nonreligion' (Cotter 2011: 6).

⁷ See Storm (2009) for a pioneering contribution to the question of the ‘fuzzy middle’.

⁸ This figure combines the 12 per cent who said they 'don't believe in God' and the 15 per cent who said they 'don't know if there's a God and there's no way to find out'; i.e., a combination of what can be called propositional and practical atheisms.

¹ Valentina, a 50-year-old woman, was interviewed by Irena Borowik in 1997 as a convert from atheism to Orthodoxy. The research concerned religious changes in Central and Eastern Europe after the collapse of communism (Borowik 2000). Later on Valentina became friends with Borowik, visiting regularly and serving as a source of important information on changes going on in the Crimean peninsula.

² The European Values Study (EVS) is a cross-national, large-scale and longitudinal survey with the goal of exploring value orientations in various fields of human actions such as family, work, religion, politics, society and life in general. It has four research waves (1981, 1990, 1999, and 2008).

3 The scale of answers is dichotomous—‘yes’ and ‘no’.

⁴ We used the questions 'Do you belong to a religious denomination' (answers available 'yes' and 'no') and 'Which religious denomination do you belong to?', where each country could use country-specific categories, but a derived variable is made for the purpose of comparison between countries. Since the EVS database has only data on religious belonging for those who answered 'yes' on the question on belonging to a religious denomination, we recalculated the answers with the purpose of representing populations (presented in [Table 39.1](#)).

⁵ An inspiring attempt in respect to this was made by Jagodzinski and Greely (1991). They distinguish three groups—‘hard-core’ atheists, ‘soft-core’ atheists, and ‘softest-core atheists’ on the basis of the combination of the two questions used in the ISSP—belief in God and belief in life after death.

⁶ We cross-tabulated the data and presented the results of those who to the question 'Do you believe in God?' answered 'no' and their answers to the question 'Which of these statements comes closest to your beliefs?', where the possible answers are: (1) there is a personal God; (2) there is some sort of spirit or life force; (3) I don't really know what to think; (4) I don't really think there is any sort of spirit, God, or life force.

⁷ In addition we should bear in mind that this category ‘there is a personal God’ could also be confusing. In the countries where religious socialization under communism was well organized (most frequently in those dominated by Catholicism) at the mass level, understanding of it fits to the teaching and doctrines of the Churches, while in the others (particularly in the Orthodox ones) religious socialization was broken, and this could be one of the reasons for more frequent choices of ‘personal God’ which might be understood in the more privatized way.

⁸ We cross-tabulated data using the questions ‘Do you believe in God’ and ‘Do you belong to a religious denomination’ and presented the percentage of answers for those saying ‘no’ to the first question (atheists) and saying ‘yes’ to the second one.

⁹ The observations made by Irena Borowik during her last study trip to Ukraine (summer 2012) may raise uncertainty as to how to interpret such elements as the spectacular crosses on men's necks on the beaches of the Crimean peninsula, religious instructions in the newspaper *Komsomolskaya Pravda* explaining the meaning of the pilgrimage or popular sins, frequent references to God in popular songs transmitted on TV, and the same allusions in the speeches of leftist and communist politicians. One may have the impression that the past references to Lenin, Stalin, and the priorities of the communist ideology and the present references to the religious field have something in common.

¹ I am greatly indebted to Fatemeh Masjedi, Ali Raza, Benjamin Zacharia, and Adeeb Khaled for their assistance in expanding my very limited knowledge of the Islamic world beyond the Arab countries, and my anonymous interlocutors in Egypt.

² In Persian, two different words for atheism are in use: *elhad-gari* derived from the Arabic, and *bi-khodayi*, literally ‘godlessness’.

³ Not to be confused with Urdu *la-diniyat* ('secularism').

⁴ According to some reports, he died ten years later, in 323/935 (see Stroumsa 1999: 90).

⁵ Sarah Stroumsa notes that the three titles probably refer to one and the same book, or to different 'reworkings of the same theme' (1999: 93 n. 45).

⁶ Razi did, however, make some sympathetic gestures towards Manicheanism (as did also Ibn al-Rawandi), the dualism of which offered an interesting solution to the problem of evil (see Stroumsa 1999).

⁷ For a different translation of the same passage, see Stroumsa 1999: 95–6.

⁸ Rationalism should be understood here not in opposition to empiricism but to traditionalism, following the binary of ‘*aql* (intellect/reason) and *naql* (transmission/tradition) in theological debates of the time.

⁹ The book, a fictitious correspondence, was distributed in manuscript copies from 1906 onwards but was not allowed to be published in print.

¹⁰ Adham uses the word *iman* (faith, trust) for his scientific beliefs, and ‘*aqida, mu’taqad* (belief, creed) for religious beliefs.

¹¹ This legal possibility has rarely been employed, but it was famously used against Nasr Hamid Abu Zayd whose hermeneutical interpretation of Islamic scripture was attacked as disbelief by his Islamist adversaries (Dupret and Berger 1998).

¹ I would like to thank Stephen Bullivant and Adrian Hermann for their helpful remarks and Ahmed Nabil for his proof-reading.

² See also Gayatri Spivak's related notion of 'epistemic violence' (1999: 205).

³ The history of the term Hinduism is nicely summarized by the Indologist Fuller (1992: 10).

⁴ On the question of whether one should speak of ‘philosophies’, ‘theologies’ or use the Sanskrit term *darsana*, see Flood (1998: 224).

⁵ For further information see Klimkeit 1971; Anaimuthu 1980; Gopalakrishnan 1996; Veermani 1998, [1979] 1998; Perumal 1999; Velusamy 1999; Bandiste 2004.

⁶ For a general discussion on the formation of the Rationalist Press Association in 1899, see Royle (1974: 126–30), Budd (1977: 133–5, 161), and McTaggart (1994: 51–52).

⁷ For the emergence of atheist groups in South India consult Klimkeit (1971). The contemporary spectrum of atheist groups is summarized in Hiorth (1998: 254–266), Narisetti (2007, 2009), and Quack (2012a: 79–99, 166–71).

⁸ The atheist internet-platform Nirmukta compiled two Youtube videos showcasing ‘great Indian atheists’ from the fields of politics, economics, sports, art etc., as part of their efforts towards the ‘out campaign’ in India, urging Atheists from all walks of life to declare their non-belief publicly. See <<http://nirmukta.com/2010/11/17/tribute-to-indian-atheists-part-1-2/>>, accessed 19 November 2010.

⁹ This is not an analytic statement but an illustrative analogy. Differentiations between doubt, scepticism, disbelief, unbelief, critique, criticism, etc. would be helpful for any thorough attempt to clarify the third axis. Further, there is no intention to suggest that a third dimension in religious matters is somehow more complex, profound, and precise or in any way ‘deeper’ than what are described here as two-dimensional debates.

¹ This has been controversial.

¹ Metafiction is fiction about fiction. It is a type of self-reflexive writing that dramatizes the psychological, cognitive, and artistic principles that underlie fiction itself.

¹ I should also point out that, inasmuch as I restrict my focus to Western art and Western religion, my comments almost exclusively concern Christianity.

² There is no question that much of modern and contemporary art contains a ‘spiritual’ element and much has been written on the subject (see, e.g., Taylor 1992; Elkins 2004). However, to speculate on the presence or absence of ‘spirituality’ in the visual arts is beyond the scope of the present essay. What is offered here therefore is a sustained critical reflection on the origins of the separation of art and religion in their most recognizable forms.

³ No comprehensive history of atheism and the arts has been written to date. A few minor contributions have been made, however nothing substantial (see, e.g., Wicker 1970). S. Brent Plate's more recent contribution *Blasphemy: Art that Offends* is a fantastic offering, its focus however is (obviously) on blasphemy and not atheism per se and, as I point out in this essay, there are important differences between blasphemy and atheism. Perhaps the most useful resource on the subject is Anthony Julius' volume *Transgressions: The Offences of Art*. Not only does Julius offer a valuable classification of modes of transgression, but he also details the artistic strategies of Manet, Cezanne, and 'modernist' painters that marked an aesthetic break with prior modes of representing religious themes. Even here though, Julius' intention is to understand transgression in the arts—not atheism, and as indicated with respect to Plate's similarly helpful work, there is a difference between transgression/blasphemy and atheism.

⁴ Foreshortening is an artistic technique used to represent objects in three-dimensional space by distorting their relative size so as to give them an appearance of depth. Chiaroscuro (literally 'light-dark') describes the use of contrasting light and dark shading to represent volume and mass on a two-dimensional picture plane and give an image a strong emotional affect.

⁵ Although Wimsatt and Beardsley's (1954) and Roland Barthes' (1977) arguments pertained to literary works the substance of their arguments equally applies to works of visual art.

¹ After attending *Albion*'s rehearsals in 1684, King Charles died in February 1685, postponing the premiere until June. Dryden embraced Catholicism in 1685.

² During the soul era singers such as Mahalia Jackson infused the blues with gospel elements, returning to one of the tributaries that formed the blues, the gospel songs of early twentieth-century street evangelists.