



*Routledge Studies in American Philosophy*

# **CHALLENGING THE NEW ATHEISM**

**PRAGMATIC CONFRONTATIONS IN THE  
PHILOSOPHY OF RELIGION**

Aaron Pratt Shepherd



“This remarkable book supplies a metaphilosophical analysis of dominant trends in modern western religious thought, using certain ‘challenges’ posed by the New Atheists as an organizing rubric for the account. The upshot is a compelling case for the re-evaluation of philosophical pragmatism, especially Josiah Royce’s ‘more than pragmatist’ perspective, as the most promising option for philosophers to explore moving forward. It should prove to be of great interest to any contemporary reader concerned with the ‘meaning of faith.’”

—*Michael L. Raposa, Lehigh University, USA*

“Shepherd contextualizes the challenge to religion by the New Atheists. This systematic inquiry holds together disparate styles from the breadth of philosophy of religion, from reformed epistemology to continental atheology. Pragmatism, and principally Royce, emerges as the most cogent approach to the puzzle of making sense of God and religion.”

—*Roger Ward, Georgetown College, USA*



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# Challenging the New Atheism

This book presents a pragmatic response to arguments against religion made by the New Atheism movement. The author argues that analytic and empirical philosophies of religion—the mainstream approaches in contemporary philosophy of religion—are methodologically unequipped to address the “Threefold Challenge” made by popular New Atheist thinkers such as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett.

The book has three primary motivations. First, it provides an interpretation of the New Atheist movement that treats their claims as philosophical arguments and not just rhetorical exercises or demagoguery. Second, it assesses and responds to these claims by elaborating four distinct contemporary philosophical perspectives—analytic philosophy, empirical philosophy, continental philosophy, and pragmatism—as well as contextualizing these perspectives in the history of the philosophy of religion. Finally, the book offers a metaphilosophical critique, returning again and again to the question of method. In the end, the author settles upon a modified version of pragmatism that he concludes is best suited for articulating the terms and stakes of the God Debate.

*Challenging the New Atheism* will be of interest to scholars and students of American philosophy and philosophy of religion.

**Aaron Lawrence Breiter Pratt Shepherd** is an Assistant Teaching Professor of Philosophy at University of Massachusetts Lowell and an ordained Minister of Word and Sacrament in the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). Rev. Dr. Shepherd currently serves as Pastor of Union Congregational Church (East Walpole, Massachusetts).

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# Challenging the New Atheism

## Pragmatic Confrontations in the Philosophy of Religion

Aaron Pratt Shepherd

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# Preface

The red brick walls of Marsh Hall were rough, and did not make for a comfortable place to rest one's head. But I was an inveterate leaner, a fixture in the back row of a class called "Unbelief," taught by Pacific University Distinguished Professor Dr. Michael Steele. It was the spring term of 2008, and the syllabus for the course focused on works by the so-called New Atheists, including books by Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins with titles like *god Is Not Great* and *The God Delusion*. The course was an upper-division literature seminar, but it was the closest I had come to a genuine discussion of religion in my academic career to that point. I was hungry for such a discussion; I had grown up attending presbyterian churches, and at the time was contemplating a future in ministry. Needless to say, the brick wall isn't the only thing I remember that made me uncomfortable during that class.

My final paper from the course is quite telling about its effect upon me. In that essay I wrote,

I do not like having faith...Mental oscillations from staunch materialist to empty-headed spiritualism contort my mind on a near daily basis. Faith, it would seem, is a curse that will torment me as long as it finds itself housed in the recesses of my soul.

For better or worse, these dark sentiments are an important starting place for the inquiry into the nature and meaning of religion that unfolds in this book.

Years later, during my PhD studies in philosophy and theology at Emory University, I was having coffee with a pastor friend of mine, and chatting about my idea for a philosophical treatment and response to the New Atheists. He shared my enthusiasm, remarking that many people our age and older had been exposed to those books. People of faith often didn't know quite what to make of them, finding themselves both curious and unsettled, much as I had been in that Marsh Hall classroom. Buoyed by the realization that the effect of the New Atheism upon me was not unique, I assured my friend that one day, I would write the book that churchgoers could use to make sense of those who believed that religion is a vicious and unnecessary lie.

This is not that book. Somewhere along the way, it became clear to me that the specific challenges raised by the New Atheists in their polemical works were deeper and more complex than I had initially imagined. In my search for answers, I found no handy, ready-made solutions. There were theologians who only cared to reassure fellow believers, and philosophers whose concerns with matters of religion were missing the bigger picture. Behind all this was an extensive network of intersecting and diverging genealogies of thought that needed untangling if that larger perspective was to come into view.

The New Atheism emerged as a popular literary and social movement concomitant with a statistical increase in atheism and religious disaffection, even in the hyper-religious context<sup>1</sup> of the United States. There has been a persistent and well-documented trend of “disaffiliation” from organized religion in the United States for the past 40-plus years, but the trend has become more pronounced since the turn of the century. The Pew Research Center’s 2014 Religious Landscape Study indicated that the number of Americans who claim “no religious affiliation” had increased during the previous seven years from around 16% to 23% of the population. This pattern of disaffiliation was sharpest in the younger generation (those born between 1981 and 1996 commonly identified as “Millennials”), 35% of whom claimed no religious affiliation in 2014. There are now more Americans (statistically speaking) who identify as “nones” than there are Catholics (21%) or mainline Protestants (15%), and Protestants (including both mainline denominations and evangelical Protestants) have lost their slim majority in the population, falling from 51.3% in 2007 to 46.5% in 2014.<sup>2</sup>

In addition, the “nones” have become more secular in their reported beliefs and practices. According to Pew’s findings, the number of non-affiliated Americans who believe in the existence of God dropped from 70% to 61% between 2007 and 2014. The number of “nones” claiming that religion has little or no importance in their life also increased from 57% to 65%.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, the number of “nones” who claim “a deep sense of spiritual peace and well-being” has increased from 35% to 40%.<sup>4</sup> These “spiritual, but not religious,” folks are a vexing case when it comes to addressing questions about the future of religion.<sup>5</sup>

Much has been made of these findings, particularly when compared with the historical results of other Pew surveys. Modern polling has provided data on the disaffiliation trend since 1972. The National Religious Identification Survey, conducted in 1989–90, for example, indicated that “nones” made up just 8% of the total adult population of the United States.<sup>6</sup> In the past quarter century, the 15% increase indicated in this research has been steadily picking up its pace, with the largest gains coming as Millennials have entered adulthood. Those who do profess some religious affiliation still make up the vast majority of the U.S. population, but the growing number of “nones” can no longer be considered

statistically insignificant. Perhaps most significant, however, is the effect this rapid increase has had on diminishing the social and political capital of traditionally influential religious communities (such as white, main-line protestants) in America.<sup>7</sup>

These data point to a long-standing but accelerating shift in the way Americans understand the significance and meaningfulness of religious beliefs and religious practice, in particular. While the actual number of Americans who openly identify as “atheists” has only increased slightly over the past two decades, the downward trend of religious affiliation and the increasing number of people who claim that religion has little or no importance contribute to growing uncertainty among those for whom religion plays a role in their lives.

I have tarried over these statistical findings to provide some sense of the context in which the New Atheism movement emerged. My intention is not to present a causal link between the two, but rather to indicate the cultural climate that enabled books like *The God Delusion* and *god Is Not Great* to sell hundreds of thousands of copies, and to find their way into university classrooms. Say what you will about the quality of the New Atheists’ writing or thinking, it cannot be denied that their challenges to religion found a receptive audience in the United States and wider Anglophone world. It found a receptive audience in college classrooms, surely, but it also found readership in religious communities as well. Why were people so drawn to these books? Why were so many unsettled by them? Whatever this experience indicates in general about the changing significance of religion is ultimately what fascinates me in this book.

My more particular concern, however, is how *philosophy* is responsive to these changing cultural conditions. The challenges articulated by the New Atheists and represented in these changing demographics could be answered with a kind of philosophical apology—the traditional role of philosophy as “handmaiden” to theology. Such books do in fact exist;<sup>8</sup> however, as I will argue, these sorts of apologetic endeavors are constrained by the terms of the discourse in which they operate. It is not enough to engage in an uncritical apologetic for religion, as many of the popular literary writers and theologians who crossed rhetorical swords with the New Atheists did. What’s called for is a philosophical attitude that can make sense of the space between religion and non-religion: the pluralistic frontier into which American culture has wandered in the 21st century.

Unfortunately, most of the “off the shelf” approaches to the philosophy of religion at this moment are not well suited to the task. As I will show, the dominant paradigms of analytic and empirical philosophies of religion are hamstrung in their ability to articulate a rejoinder to the concerns articulated by the New Atheism—concerns that go to the heart of religion’s place in contemporary American society. This shortcoming

is no accident; it is an outgrowth of a way of understanding religion that stretches back hundreds of years. To truly understand and respond to the concerns of the New Atheists in a philosophical sense, a meta-analysis of that discursive space (i.e., the philosophy of religion) is required in which the meaning and place of religion is contested.

The impetus for this metaphilosophical approach was born of a pragmatic impulse to view philosophy as generative of conceptual tools for the critique of culture and the articulation of experience. Put simply, I think that philosophers of religion should speak to the concerns of those who wrestle with the meaning of their and their neighbor's faith (or lack thereof). There are a lot of us out there.

What follows, then, is an attempt to take seriously the challenges of the New Atheism: to treat them as articulating a genuine indeterminacy about the truth, morality, and meaning of religion in the experience of 21st century people. This is not to say that it is an exhaustive account, either in its applicability beyond the immediate context of the Anglophone, Euro-Modern world, or in its attention to *every* challenge facing those who reflect critically upon religious matters. Nonetheless, I do hope that it provides a fair and fulsome treatment of the questions raised by the New Atheists of religious folks, and of the philosophers whose task it is to examine and interpret their experience in light of those challenges.

In Chapter 1, I lay out what I call the "Three Challenges" of the New Atheists: that religion is untrue (the "Truth Challenge"), immoral (the "Consequences Challenge"), and unnecessary (the "Meaning Challenge"). Through my interpretation of the literature and counter-literature generated in the so-called God Debate over the past decade or so, I conclude that of the Three Challenges, the Meaning Challenge is the most significant and important for understanding the indeterminacy of our present cultural moment. What becomes clear is that the terms of the debate over these challenges were set in such a way that never was any possibility of coming to a meaningful resolution. In the end, both parties ended up mostly addressing their own constituencies, and failing to actually engage in any meaningful dialogue on the merits of the concerns raised by the New Atheists.

In Chapter 2, I turn to philosophy of religion with the presumption that philosophers may be better equipped to provide meaningful rejoinders to the Three Challenges than religious authorities or lay people adopting a theological/apologetical approach. I survey the development of analytic and empirical philosophy of religion, and explore the complex relationship between these philosophical approaches and the challenges brought by the New Atheists. The most important legacy of these approaches is their capacity for description; their key shortcoming is their avoidance of the Meaning Challenge.

In Chapter 3, I step back and survey the origins of today's dominant approaches to the philosophy of religion in the modern period. By examining what I describe as the "dialectic of essentialism and skepticism" that emerged during this period, I clarify both the basis for the Challenges as they are formulated, and the source of the constraints philosophers experience in trying to refute them.

In Chapter 4, I turn to postmodern, continental philosophy of religion, which emerges as an important corrective and rejoinder to the Three Challenges in the context of 20th-century analytic philosophy of religion. Examining the thought of Derrida, Marion, Vattimo, and Caputo, I provide an interpretation of this philosophical methodology that indicates a crack in the foundation of the Meaning Challenge in particular. By deconstructing the inherited assumptions of modern philosophy of religion, it becomes clear that justifications for the *necessity* of religion cannot and ought not to take the traditional form of an apologetic, deductive argument. A different sort of rejoinder to the Meaning Challenge especially is required.

Chapter 5 zeroes in on the metaphilosophical questions lingering in the background of the preceding four chapters: what ought a philosophy of religion do? What is a philosophy of religion capable of doing in response to the Three Challenges (but especially the Meaning Challenge)? I argue in this chapter that this pragmatic concern with the capacity of philosophical methods can best be addressed by turning to pragmatist philosophy of religion itself. In this chapter, I introduce pragmatist philosophy of religion, and lay the groundwork for a philosophical interpretation of religion that avoids the methodological faults of the previous approaches. Rather than coming to an out-and-out justification for the *necessity* of religion, I conclude with a description of the capacity of philosophy to *alert* individuals to the genuine *meaning* of religion. I describe this meaning more fully in Chapter 6, where I offer a reading of William James, John Dewey, and Josiah Royce. While James and Dewey are often seen as fairly consistent and central figures in the tradition of pragmatism, Royce is often treated as a contrast case. In fact, up until fairly recently Royce was often excluded from the canon of classical American pragmatism, and dismissed as an "absolutist" and a Hegelian, despite Royce having received Peirce's endorsement as a pragmatist, and his own self-identification as such in a number of works.<sup>9</sup> A specific focus upon philosophy of religion, however, yields many more points of continuity and similarity between James, Dewey, and Royce than are visible in other aspects of their philosophical works. In this chapter, I argue that all three figures share a common emphasis upon what I call "religious *integration*," and that this is the basis for a pragmatist philosophy of religion best able to articulate religion's role and function in our present cultural moment.

All those years ago, I concluded my term paper in “Unbelief” with a stirring-if-melodramatic indictment of the conflict born of critically reflecting upon my own religious experience:

This gift is my torture; faith gives me purpose but snatches it away with every disappearance behind the veil of harsh and unforgiving rationality. Intellectuality be damned for its repressive control of this horrible circumstance! Spirituality be blasted for its tantalizing, yet soul-twisting glimpses into the infinite!

But then, there was this incongruous supplication in the essay’s final sentence: “Let God be praised for these gifts, that I may *know* their respective values in *the fullness of time!*”

Had I had the diligence and wherewithal to spend an afternoon or two reading this book, I like to think that 20-year-old-me would have been alerted that there was, in fact, a path to understanding yet to be trod, one that would lend meaning, clarity, and significance to my life. I walked that path for the next decade, meandering through courses of study in philosophy and theology, from Oregon to Atlanta and finally now to Massachusetts—a journey from confused and indecisive but obstinately religious student to Reverend Doctor Aaron Shepherd, professor and pastor. I’d like to think that this book may have provided a useful attitude adjustment at the beginning of this journey; perhaps it would have heightened my enthusiasm for ultimacy, even as it chastened my exuberance for certainty. Perhaps others who find themselves on a similar journey may yet benefit from some of the insights I’ve gleaned along the way.

The pragmatic confrontations in the philosophy of religion that follow speak authentically, even empathetically to the indeterminacy of my life then. But they also speak to the indeterminacy of my life now, of the persistently felt need for a religious integration that can only come about by an act of profound grace, received in a spirit of humility and gratitude. As I reread the closing pages of this book, I am reminded that the meaningfulness of this life lays not in the outward show of authority and power conveyed in the honorifics of religious institutions or those three little letters ‘PhD.’ These are merely symbols, merit badges reflecting a facility in certain discourses and traditions. The true test of philosophy’s worth in this age is not found in the adept use of conceptual tools and skillful navigation of various philosophical methodologies. Its value isn’t taken for granted with the authority and cultural caché of institutions (the mainline protestant church; the academic philosophy department) that are increasingly marginalized in the work of cultural creation and critique. No, in this day and age, the true worth of philosophy is its capacity for integration into the inquiries that matter most. For better or worse, the meaning and place of religion in human experience is such an

inquiry, one that remains unsettled, and in perennial need of philosophical attention and pragmatic confrontation.

## Notes

- 1 According to recent polling data, as well as the historical accounts of social scientists like Alexis de Tocqueville, the United States stands out from its counterparts in the developed world in having a higher percentage that considers religion an important feature of one's life. See George Gao, "How do Americans Stand Out from the Rest of the World?" *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (March 12, 2015). Accessed January 30, 2017 <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/03/12/how-do-americans-stand-out-from-the-rest-of-the-world/)>.
- 2 See Michael Lipka, "10 Facts About Religion in America," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (August 27, 2015). Accessed May 5, 2016 <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/27/10-facts-about-religion-in-america/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/08/27/10-facts-about-religion-in-america/)>. For the full study results, see Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape" (May 12, 2015). Accessed May 5, 2016 <[www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf](http://www.pewforum.org/files/2015/05/RLS-08-26-full-report.pdf)>. Robert Jones declares these statistics indicate a fundamental shift in the political and cultural landscape of the United States. See Robert P. Jones, *The End of White Christian America* (New York: Simon & Shuster, 2016).
- 3 See Michael Lipka, "Religious 'Nones' Are Not Only Growing, They're Becoming More Secular," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (November 11, 2015). Accessed May 5, 2016 <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/11/11/religious-nones-are-not-only-growing-theyre-becoming-more-secular/)>.
- 4 David Maschi and Michael Lipka, "Americans May Be Getting Less Religious, But Feelings of Spirituality Are on the Rise," *FactTank: News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center (January 21, 2016). Accessed May 5, 2016 <[www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/01/21/americans-spirituality/)>.
- 5 Some, including Diana Butler Bass, for example, claim that SBNR folks represent the future of religion in America, and that religious institutions should reorganize to reflect this changing paradigm of what it means to be religious. See Diana Butler Bass, *Christianity after Religion: The End of Church and the Birth of a New Spiritual Awakening* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012).
- 6 Pew Research Center, "America's Changing Religious Landscape," p. 112.
- 7 Robert Jones declares these statistics indicate a fundamental shift in the political landscape of the United States, caused by the dissolution of what was once a widely shared white Protestant basis for American culture. See Jones, *The End of White Christian America*.
- 8 See, e.g., Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, & Naturalism* (New York: Oxford UP, 2011).
- 9 See Josiah Royce, "The Principles of Logic," *Encyclopaedia of the Philosophical Sciences*, Vol. 1 (1913), pp. 121–2; cf. Douglas Anderson, "Who's a Pragmatist? Royce and Peirce at the Turn of the Century," *Transactions of the Charles S. Peirce Society*, Vol. 41, No. 3 (Summer, 2005), pp. 467–81.





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# 1 The New Atheism

## A Threefold Challenge

A decade and a half has passed since Richard Dawkins published *The God Delusion*, a 400-page polemic against the Abrahamic religions and in defense of scientific rationalism and evolutionary theory. In two months after its release in October 2006, *The God Delusion* rose to number four on the *New York Times* Non-Fiction Best Sellers list; millions of copies were sold in the succeeding years.<sup>1</sup>

Sam Harris, a neuroscientist still completing his doctorate at UCLA at the time, had published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* two years prior. Harris had anticipated many of Dawkins' arguments, arguing that the consequences of religious fundamentalism were dire enough to warrant an end to religion in the Western world altogether. Both Harris and Dawkins primarily sought to address religious moderates and those "on the fence" about matters of faith. "It is imperative that we begin speaking plainly about the absurdity of most of our religious beliefs," Harris wrote in *End of Faith*. Dawkins states in his preface to *The God Delusion* that "If this book works as I intend, religious readers who open it will be atheists when they put it down."<sup>2</sup>

This aspect of their projects caught the attention of columnist Gary Wolf, who dubbed these writers "The New Atheists." Wolf wrote in *Wired* magazine shortly after the publication of *The God Delusion* that "the New Atheists...condemn not just belief in God but respect for belief in God. Religion is not only wrong; it's evil. Now that the battle has been joined, there's no excuse for shirking."<sup>3</sup> Wolf's hyperbolic declaration of war on religion may or may not have been warranted at the time, but his comments do seem somewhat prophetic in light of the subsequent popularity of the intellectual movement that wholeheartedly adopted Wolf's moniker.

In the years following the publication of *The God Delusion*, choruses of commentators sounded off both in support and condemnation of the New Atheists. Daniel Dennett, whose book *Breaking the Spell: Religion as Natural Phenomenon* had come out earlier in 2006, was an early ally of Dawkins and Harris, and lent intellectual credibility to their views by virtue of his academic pedigree (Harvard BA, Oxford PhD) and position (professor of Philosophy at Tufts University). Journalist Christopher

## 2 *The New Atheism: A Threefold Challenge*

Hitchens joined the fray with *god Is Not Great: Why Religion Poisons Everything* in 2007, which received a popular reception that was *God Delusion*-esque. Dawkins, Hitchens, Harris, and Dennett, the self-proclaimed “Four Horsemen” heralding the end of Western religion,<sup>4</sup> were joined by Victor Stenger in 2007, whose book *God: The Failed Hypothesis* received substantially less popular acclaim, but was described by Hitchens as “a huge addition to the arsenal of argument” for the New Atheism.<sup>5</sup>

Stenger’s most important contribution, however, came two years later in his systematic treatment of the movement, entitled *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason*. In that book, Stenger endeavored to “review and expand upon the principles of New Atheism,”<sup>6</sup> as well as respond to the first round of opposition literature that had been produced by theologians Alister McGrath, Keith Ward, Thomas Crean, Scott Hahn, and John Haught, as well as scientists Francis Collins and Jerry Coyne.<sup>7</sup> As more counter-literature was produced by the likes of fellow physicist John C. Lennox,<sup>8</sup> Stenger continued to fire back in public lectures and publications, including *The Fallacy of Fine Tuning* and *God and the Folly of Faith*.<sup>9</sup> Alongside Stenger and the rest of the self-identified “New Atheists,” a small cottage industry of publications sprang up as the rising tide of the New Atheist writers’ appeal lifted more anti-religious and secular humanist boats. If nothing else, the New Atheism succeeded in animating a conversation about how religion is treated in the 21st century as well as opening a space for secular humanists to articulate a positive vision of a religion-less society.

### The Three Challenges of the New Atheism

In what follows, I will articulate what I see as the problem constellation introduced in the New Atheism’s challenges to the place and significance of religion in contemporary America. To read professional commentary (particularly professional *academic* commentary), the New Atheist movement was all thunder and no lightning, a blustering collection of angry, Islamophobic, occasionally eloquent writers and speakers trotting out not-so-new arguments against the existence of God while vociferously evangelizing scientific materialism and a dogmatic Darwinism. Most commentators (even sympathetic ones) argued that it was less *what* the New Atheists had to say that characterized the movement than the *way* they said it: bluntly, publicly, and agonistically.<sup>10</sup>

David B. Hart’s 2010 article “Believe It or Not” was particularly dismissive; he described the New Atheism a “passing fad” that will “inevitably go the way of pet rocks, disco, prime-time soaps, and *The Bridges of Madison County*.”<sup>11</sup> Hart argued that the New Atheists are guilty of making scarecrows out of religious ideas. Most of all, Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens in particular were doing a disservice to the

noble traditions of skepticism and atheism that have helped advance Western civilization over the past three centuries with their vigorous-yet-often-fallacious arguments. Similarly, Teemu Taira argued in 2016 that the New Atheism was less motivated by the desire to “get it right” about religion than it was by identity politics, “in which atheists demand recognition as atheists.” The New Atheists, on this account, aimed to win religious people and “nones” (those who claim no religious affiliation) to their cause.<sup>12</sup>

For both Hart and Taira, the actual substance of the New Atheism’s claims lack credibility as critiques of religion. However, this dismissive focus upon tone and tactics, rather than the actual content of the New Atheism as an intellectual movement, has led many to overlook the philosophical significance of the New Atheists’ challenges. Because of this oversight, those who have tilted with the New Atheists in the so-called God Debate of the past decade have largely failed to unseat the “Four Horsemen” as cultural imprimaturs. In fact, this debate has done little to assuage the fears of religious folk that the age of religion is coming to an end.

What, then, is the substance of the New Atheism that is worth considering? In this chapter, I offer an interpretation of the New Atheism’s core ideas, formulated as three challenges to religious belief and practice: the “truth challenge,” the “consequences challenge,” and “the meaning challenge.” The last of these, I hold, is the most important and unique aspect of the New Atheism for philosophers of religion. While none of these three challenges may be “new” *per se*, they can and have been interpreted as live, substantive threats by those worried about the erosion of religious belief and practice in the early 21st century.

This sense of crisis among some theists is evident in the direct responses to the work of the New Atheists. I intend to show, however, that this counter-literature is methodologically hamstrung, particularly in its response to the meaning challenge, by some of the presumptions governing contemporary theological discourse, and the way in which the terms of the God Debate were set by the New Atheists. Furthermore, as I will argue in the next chapter, the presumptions constraining theological thinking are also often at work in the dominant modes of contemporary philosophy of religion as well. The mutual reinforcement of assumptions about the nature of religious categories, truth, and morality in mainstream philosophical and theological thinking contributes to a situation in which the most fundamental challenge of the New Atheism—the meaning challenge—cannot be adequately addressed.

If we take the New Atheist’s challenges as genuine problems (and indeed, an existential threat) to religion as it is currently understood and systematically articulated by philosophers—as I believe we should—it will be necessary to expand our philosophical horizons and explore both the history and the wider contemporary landscape of philosophy

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of religion in order to come to a clearer understanding of the meaning challenge and how it may be addressed. This is not a mere thought experiment either; at stake is the very meaning of religion and the philosophical project of articulating the permanent place of religion in experience itself. If there is no philosophy up to the task, the prophetic critiques of the New Atheists may yet be realized in an end to religion as we know it.

#### What's "New" about the New Atheism?

*Not Much.* A strong case can be made that there is very little that is "new" about the New Atheism; even the phrase "New Atheism" is not all that new.<sup>13</sup> The title "New Atheism" may be helpful only insofar as it points out that atheism is not a single, monolithic ideology, but rather an intellectual position that has stood in for different things in different historical moments. In Michael Buckley's *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, he argues that 'atheism' names a situation in which dominant theistic paradigms in Western thinking are called into question. Atheism is not necessarily a "problem" for thinking, but rather indicates "a situation, an atmosphere, a confused history" in which "assertions can be identical in expression and positively contradictory in sense."<sup>14</sup> According to Buckley, in such cases, the first step toward clarifying the disagreement is the recognition of mutually shared concepts. "Atheism is essentially parasitic...The assertions of the theist provide the state of the question for the atheist, whether that question bears upon the words, the meaning, or the religious subject."<sup>15</sup> The meaning of atheism is thus dependent upon the theological and religious ideas, which it opposes at any given historical moment. Adopting an overtly Hegelian tone, Buckley concludes that "Atheism is essentially a transition, a movement from the affirmation of the divine into its negation, perhaps a negation awaiting its own negation."<sup>16</sup>

Gavin Hyman, in his *A Short History of Atheism*, echoes Buckley in linking the kind of atheism recognized today to the Enlightenment and the dawn of the modern period of Western thought. Prior to the Enlightenment, the denial of theological paradigms was always internal, denoted by "heresy." "The real revolutionary turn," Hyman writes, "was the one that allowed for the taking of an external viewpoint, casting judgement on the theological tradition as a whole from a position *outside* it."<sup>17</sup> This external position—the "secular"—is unique to the modern period, Hyman claims. Prior to this, the closest approximation was the "profane," understood as the absence of the holy and the opposite of the sacred. The profane, however, is still a space within the theological worldview (albeit a negative one). The secular, Hyman claims, is not "profane" per se, because it stands outside of and against any theological paradigm.

The secular worldview, Hyman goes on to explain, became institutionalized during the American and French revolutions, but in very different ways. In France, the Revolution and its attendant anti-clericalism led to a republic that actively opposed religion in the political sphere. In America, on the other hand, the separation of church and state was based upon an assumed foundation of “natural religion.”

The religious foundations of the state should be ones that could be shared by everyone, while the absence of an established church meant that everyone was also individually free to ‘supplement’ this natural religion with their own denominationally-specific religious beliefs and practices.<sup>18</sup>

From this perspective, secularism is understood to not have been associated with atheism or irreligion in early America; rather, this connection gradually emerged, coming to fruition only in the latter half of the 20th century. “Atheism developed as an intellectual phenomenon, increasing in respectability and wider incidence as modernity itself developed,” Hyman concludes.<sup>19</sup> This is evident in the transition from the controversial atheism of Spinoza<sup>20</sup> to the outspoken atheism of Nietzsche.

Hyman’s conflation of secularism with an underlying assumption about “natural” religion is a particularly modern phenomenon, characteristic of the period in which thinkers throughout the Western world were endeavoring to articulate the “first principles” and “essential qualities” of religion *per se*. In the context of the diminishing influence of religious institutions and an increasing fervor for secularism in the public sphere, such inquiries in some ways lent themselves to a kind of violence in the treatment of religious phenomena—a violence reflected in Bacon’s famous metaphor for describing science as “putting nature on the rack.”

“Both modernity and atheism seem to reach their ‘high noon’ in the mid/late twentieth century,” Hyman goes on to say, “before they begin to crumble, giving way to something more nebulous and variegated as the twentieth century turns into the twenty-first.”<sup>21</sup> As modernity has given way to postmodernity, so too, Hyman asserts, must modern atheism give way to something new. According to Hyman, however, the New Atheism of Dawkins *et al.* is *not* this “something new.” Rather, the New Atheists are a “vociferous” example of “full-blown modern” atheism that is, perhaps, “not atheistic enough” because it remains parasitic upon a modern conception of God that Nietzsche declared dead well over a century ago.<sup>22</sup>

J. David Eller agrees with Hyman’s assessment, writing that

The poorly named new atheism may actually prove to be the last shots of the old atheism—the last arguments, the last struggles against someone else’s god(s), the last nay-saying. The future of

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atheism is not in disproving god(s) but, as with the nontheistic and pretheistic religions, in not talking about god(s) at all.<sup>23</sup>

What is called for now is to move past the polemical tone of the New Atheists, and even past “the God Argument,” as A.C. Grayling calls it,<sup>24</sup> altogether, and instead focuses upon the promotion of a positive secular humanist philosophy.<sup>25</sup>

In the end, the New Atheism may not amount to much more than a footnote in the history of Anglophone culture, remembered only as “a well-timed reaction against religious fundamentalism”<sup>26</sup> in the wake of the religiously motivated attacks of September 11, 2001. As a form of hyper-modern atheism, a kind of dialectical mirror image of the fundamentalist forms of modern religion, the ideas of the New Atheism may be inexorably linked to a historical moment that burned bright but exhausted itself quickly.

Then again, the statistical measures highlighted in the preface about religious disaffiliation and dissatisfaction in the United States have only been trending upward in the intervening decade.<sup>27</sup> Sociologists, economists, and other social scientists may have much to say about the myriad contributory factors behind these statistical trends. But for the philosopher, there must remain a basic presumption that whatever institutional, economic, political, or cultural factors may be at play, there are *reasons* that religion continues to play a diminishing role in people’s lives. The three challenges may offer some clues into these reasons.

### **The Three Challenges: A Critical Exposition**

It is important at the outset to emphasize the extent to which the New Atheists seek to challenge the beliefs and practices of the Abrahamic religions, focusing their most sustained critiques upon Christianity and Islam in particular.<sup>28</sup> The New Atheism, despite its predilection for making very general claims, is very much a product of its times and arises in part as a response to the political victories of Christian conservatives in America and England in the 1980s and 1990s as well as in response to the terrorist attacks of 9/11 in the United States and 7/7 in the United Kingdom. The New Atheism’s challenges target a very specific set of religious claims and norms, which, in turn, set the terms of debate for religious apologists in their counter-literature. This creates the conditions for what I consider to be a rather unfruitful discussion of some very important questions about the place and role of religion in contemporary American society.

#### *The Truth Challenge*

The first thematic challenge of the New Atheism is the most predictable: the claims of religion are simply not true; religious propositions about