

ABSTRACT

Rejecting the Definitive: A Contextual Examination of Three Historical Stages of Atheism and the Legality of an American Freedom from Religion

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The trouble with “definitions” is they leave no room for evolution. When a word is concretely defined, it is done so in a particular time and place. Contextual interpretations permit a better understanding of certain heavy words; Atheism as a prime example. In the post-modern world Atheism has become more accepted and popular, especially as a reaction to global terrorism. However, the current definition of Atheism is terribly inaccurate. It cannot be stated properly that pagan Atheism is the same as New Atheism. By interpreting the Atheisms from four stages in the term’s history a clearer picture of its meaning will come out, hopefully alleviating the stereotypical biases weighed upon it. In the interpretation of the Atheisms from Pagan Antiquity, the Enlightenment, the New Atheist Movement, and the American Judicial and Civil Religious system, a defense of the theory of elastic contextual interpretations, rather than concrete definitions, shall be made.

Rejecting the Definitive: A Contextual Examination of Three Historical Stages of
Atheism and the Legality of an American Freedom from Religion

by

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I have spent two years at Baylor University, the first earning a Master of Arts in American Studies, the second earning this degree in Church-State Studies. In that time I have experienced both sides of expected assumptions. Once, a young girl, more likely than not concerned for the well-being of her eternal soul, refused to ride in an elevator with me on it. She sort of looked at me curiously as the doors shut between us. Those who were content with riding the three flights to the ground floor of the Carroll Library Building with me on board shared an amusing anecdote; apparently during the 1920s a guest lecturer—“like you” they said—was lynched after giving a paper on evolution. I never really found out if the story was true or not, but it didn’t matter all that much. I got the point. I was told, at least as many as once every two weeks—most passively aggressive I might add—that I would be going to hell. At the close of a meeting about the department’s fate a prayer was requested; a nod in my direction and the suggestion of uttering “abracadabra” on my behalf was a telling moment of stereotypical misunderstanding. I simply smiled it away. I am also not ashamed to say on certain days I felt a little anxious walking across campus, and on some occasions allowed my imagination to run wild with dramas involving “secret campus police” ushering me off to some dark part of campus where I would mysteriously disappear. In all honesty, these daydreams truly were the product of imagination, never becoming a sliver of reality.

On the opposite side I can also easily recall a great number of wonderful experiences I have had in those two years. I can look fondly back on memorable moments, such as debating and discussing issues most people refuse to acknowledge with

students and faculty as diverse as one could imagine on any university campus. There were also the mandatory excursions every Tuesday to Dr. Pepper hour, the incredibly rewarding, albeit challenging, short-courses taken under the tutelage of Professor Peter Berger, and long talks with colleagues in parking lots during the most bizarre of indecisive Texas weather.

Yet, aside from the two assumptions of either good or bad outcomes, there have been many trying times for all of us in Church-State. Besides the constant reminders that I did not belong there, the strange experience of watching one's department slowly chip away as degree granting privileges inevitably became redundant was painful for the lot of us. Being promised a future that had no foundation by an advisor who so desperately wanted to hold on to his department despite the odds heavily balanced against him was extremely disappointing. Realizing one's isolation in a progressing social environment made us feel exceptional, but not in the way we had before. In a positive light, the experience seemed to have bonded us like academic soldiers. We were a team, facing a common enemy: administration. Of course, most of us did come to realize the enemy was not so much an outside entity as we originally thought. To this end I must acknowledge the friendship and support I found in my fellow students.

I am grateful to Stephen for always being the smartest guy in the room, a distinction he made obvious every class session we had together. He was not just knowledgeable in the subjects we would be debating, seemingly amassing a working-knowledge of every facet and detail, but also for providing a perspective that not only reminded us to see things from different points of view, but also to remind ourselves that not all people, regardless of every human condition possible, are as lucky as we are to be

where we are. I am indebted to Matt for his amazing humor, his ability to make just about everything—including idiocy—look cool, and his support in making Brittany think a little less Texan. I am grateful to Brittany for being a good friend, having a good heart, and for reminding me that not all is lost, even when it seems so much to be so. In the same way I must acknowledge the friendship and guidance of Jason—and Lily to be fair—for being our big brother, for giving us yet another perspective to see things from, and for being the mature leader he so easily has become. Importantly I must acknowledge the fortitude of Sasha, whose own suffering within the confines of Waco provided comic relief and a pleasure to watch as she so spiritedly embraced her passions outside the department in order to find a balance. If any of us, she is most likely going to end up running the world. Lastly, I must acknowledge Ken for being a wonderful debater, a good friend, and a voice of harsh honesty when many of us found ourselves leaning toward “woe-is-me” status.

I must acknowledge Suzanne for running our department, even in its most dire moments, with a professionalism and respect we so desperately needed. Without her we—and especially I—would have been lost. Also, I am indebted to Janice for greeting me every day with a smile, reminding me that southern women are first and foremost polite and sweet. I am thankful to Dr. Kimberly Kellison for graciously reading my thesis and participating in my thesis committee. Her recommendations have inspired at least one route I had not considered before and which I hope to remedy in my future endeavors. Without Fr. Dr. Daniel Payne I would not have found Church-State, and therefore not be in the exciting and adventurous situation I am in now. He has been terribly missed since taking his position in Houston, but is fulfilling a vocation that suits

him perfectly. I wish him nothing but the best. To Dr. Michal Parrish I have more to thank than I could possibly submit here. He has willingly offered his time and assistance to so many of us in our times of need and has provided amazing support and guidance. He is the advisor many of us sorely need, and have been looking for for some time now. I would be remiss to leave out Dr. Chris Marsh who has taught me, more than anything else, how to be an academic, and how to be an advisor. I hope to remember him when I take up the mantle of Professor and am responsible for the future, livelihood, and academic well-being of students who look up to me for advice and with respect. I hope for him a wonderful life, filled with happy memories, wherever he may be.

Lastly, without Dr. Marsh I would not have been inspired to consider studying in Europe. To this end I am again in great thanks to two great advisors and models of academic repute, Dr. Jon R. Stone and Dr. Bradley K. Hawkins. To Dr. Hawkins I am thankful for his continual guidance and simple suggestion of “go to Scotland,” three words that made the decision instantly easier. To Dr. Stone I owe my future. It was his suggestion to contact Dr. Stephen Sutcliffe at the University of Edinburgh before I applied, his advice on how to form my application and my post graduate proposal, and his blunt honesty about the differences between European and American education systems that got me accepted to New College. I will always be thankful for, and always remember his willingness to sit on the phone with me from California while perusing University websites for a suitable fit, a responsibility that was not his, and a privilege I was without in Waco.

If the thesis is to be a representation of one’s work during the time of his or her degree I hope that the following properly represents my understanding not just of the

subject at hand, but also of the way I attempted to present it. In the heart of central Texas, surrounded by devout Baptists and proudly religious Americans I have tried to present a study of a religiously controversial subject in a manner of respect and unbiased interpretation. After reading and experiencing first-hand so many polemical arguments for and against religion, I hope this thesis will be a step in a direction that will lead me—as well as others—toward a courteous, polite, and intellectual acknowledgment of irreligion. To this end, I am especially thankful to Baylor University for allowing it to be researched, written, defended, and published through their graduate program.

Lastly, I could not, in good conscious, fail to mention the continual support, love, and encouragement of my darling wife, Andrea. Not only has she endured my time at Baylor—especially as it meant living in Texas—but she has also stood by me during the hard times and the good. Once more she will be making another sudden move; but she is doing so as faithful and supportive as ever. She is—if I may—the source of my religion.

To

Jack, Jim, Jose, Don, Tito, Gordon, Morgan, Jerry, and, of course, Louis XII

CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

No, I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.

—Vice President George H.W. Bush to Robert I. Sherman, Chicago O'Hare Airport, 27 August 1987¹

Elastic Contextual Interpretations vs. Concrete Definitions

In late August of 1987 George H.W. Bush, soon to be the forty-first President of the United States and father of the man who would become the forty-third, allegedly responded to a question concerning what his campaign would do to win the votes of Atheist-Americans. His response, though a source of contention as he has both denied, and in some ways confirmed its accuracy, was nothing short of shocking for many Atheist thinking citizens. The statement drew a distinct line between what the Vice President thought constituted an American citizen—and patriot—and what did not. In responding to the question, “Surely you recognize the equal citizenship and patriotism of Americans who are Atheists,” Mr. Bush stated, “No, I don't know that Atheists should be considered as citizens, nor should they be considered patriots. This is one nation under God.” Following this statement, the reporter, Robert I. Sherman of *American Atheist*

¹ The debate over whether or not Vice President—soon to be president—Bush made these particular statements is heavily weighted by the unfortunate lack of modern technology at the time. With the modern invention of twenty-four hour news channels, as well as social media playing a major role in broadcasting the news of the day, gathering facts prior to the internet was not always the most efficient. Case in point, the conversation between Robert I. Sherman and the President-to-be has been refuted because there seems to be no actual recording of it, giving it the reputation of biased fiction. After all, Robert I. Sherman was a news correspondent for *American Atheist Press*, and the situation was mostly only published by Atheistic organizations. Sherman has tried to put a final stamp on the controversy by stating his assertion of its accuracy on his website. See <http://www.robsherman.com/information/liberalnews/2002/0303.htm> (Accessed 22 June 2011).

Press, asked if the Vice President supported the constitutional principle of separation of church and state, to which he responded in the affirmative.

If this statement was in fact given as recorded by Sherman, it speaks directly to the issue of concrete definitions. The “definition” of Atheism to Vice President Bush was a starkly negative amalgamation of his experiences in American politics between the 1960s and 1990s. His contextual view of Atheism was a mix of Communist and heathen religious—and thus moral—abandonment. Domestically, Madalyn Murray O’Hair helped contribute to that quite nicely.²

That being said, and to his credit, the Vice President’s definition is incorrect. More importantly, any “definition” is incorrect. What definitions serve to do is solidify an idea in the hope it will transcend history. Sadly, that just is not possible. Definitions put a finality to an idea, solidifying it in one particular place and time. If one were to define religion, even in the most vague and cosmopolitan manner, he would still place inside that definition his contextual viewpoint regardless of any effort not to. The religion of Socrates, though pagan, was not the religion of Cicero. The religion of Martin Luther, though Christian, was not the religion of Pope Leo X or Holy Roman Emperor Charles V. The religion of Jesus was not the religion of modern Christianity. In fact, to think laterally rather than historically, the religion of the West is different from that of the East.

As a contextual viewpoint, the Vice President’s statement is a prime example. For him, the definition of Atheism sponsored his answer that Atheists could not be American citizens because he more than likely was associating the “definition” of Atheism with Communism. As the Vice President to the man who became known as the

² See footnotes 42 and 43 in Chapter Four.

victor of the Cold War, Ronald Reagan, it would not be surprising that he would believe communists would make poor patriots. Contextually he was not incorrect to connect the two; he just focused on one particular context rather than on every other one that existed at the same time. Likewise, to criticize him for his beliefs would also be an incorrect act. His perspective, his context, must be understood before he is condemned for it.³

In an effort to resolve this issue, the following study will briefly evaluate different contexts of Atheism over different stages of time in an attempt to further the theory that there are in fact “Atheisms” rather than a singular all-encompassing definition. By seeking out an elastic contextual interpretation, rather than a concrete definition, “Atheism” might be better understood. While it may be easy to assume Atheism is to mean “without god” as its etymology would suggest, it would only complete half the job. Words are organic and privy to context. This pattern will be seen later in this study when discussing the New Atheists Richard Dawkins and Daniel Dennett as they pursue the term “Bright” as an alternative to “Atheist” and the justification Dennett uses by arguing that “gay” did not always mean “homosexual.”⁴

The four contexts chosen for this study are not random. They will be examined for their place in both religious and irreligious history. Additionally, rather than a haphazard evaluation of the contextual time period, as this will be a religious study, the focus will be on certain doubters or rejecters who famously made names for themselves for their heretical thoughts, teachings, and writings. However, rather than simple biographies, the analysis of these characters will be done as if looking through a lens of

³ Richard Dawkins does this very thing in his *God Delusion*. Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 43.

⁴ See footnote 65 and 66 in Chapter Three.

their contextual place in their particular history. This will be done in order not just to see what it was they were rejecting or doubting, but how they went about doing so.

The second chapter will evaluate the “Atheisms” of pagan antiquity, specifically focusing on those Greek and Roman philosophers whose adoration of inquisitive thought created schools of doubt that still echo through to the modern day. These players will show a vast difference, even in this first stage, of contextually different Atheisms, ranging from early philosophers like Anaxagoras and Diogenes of Sinope, to Socrates, Cicero, and the Christian martyrs who died at the hands of the Romans. As well, the question as to what the Atheisms of this period pertained to, either a denial of the gods or a denial of worshipping the gods, will be explored.

The third chapter, as it will encompass the massive contextual period of doubt and rejection of the Enlightenment, will break the evaluation down into three genres: natural reason, identity, and functional reductionism. The characters in these stages are as equally famous for their doubt and rejection as those of the first chapter, with the exception that their contexts were privy to more freedom of inquiry and expression. What’s more, the level of doubt and rejection within and between each genre will fluctuate according to the time and place of he who is carrying out the doubt and rejection. The lives and work of enlightened philosophers from Lord Herbert of Cherbury to John Locke, David Hume, Denis Diderot, Thomas Henry Huxley, Sigmund Freud, Ludwig Feuerbach, and Karl Marx will paint a picture of a progressively more free allowance and acceptance of “Atheism.”

In the fourth chapter the study will progress beyond the turn of the twentieth century to investigate the post-modern stage of Atheism predominately made not just

available, but popular, through the bestselling works of the “New Atheists” Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens. By interpreting this stage of “Atheism” as a reaction to the terrorist attacks in New York City, Washington, D.C., and Pennsylvania on September 11, 2001, New Atheism will be seen as conditional to its surrounding environment, specifically the United States and England. As well, an interpretation of the modern context in which these authors have successfully sold their wares will better assess their accomplishments.

The fifth chapter will veer slightly away from the strictly historical-stage-paradigm in order to interpret the context of an American Atheism. As the United States has built itself a reputation for being the most religious nation in the world, regardless of its constitutionally-based legal disestablishment of religion, the idea of an Atheist-American can be tricky. By interpreting the judicial cases brought before the Supreme Court concerning the freedom from religion Atheists request under the First Amendment’s allowance of a freedom of religion, the contextual understanding of Atheism in religious America will hopefully be made more clear. Furthermore, as the United States is not, legally, a religious nation, the curious placement of the Atheist-American within the sacred canopy of the American Civil Religion will be interpreted as well.

As a whole—and to reiterate the point—this study will attempt to rid the academic world of the term “definition” in order to supplant it with the better examination of elastic contextual interpretations. As “definition” connotes only a partial appreciation of any particular noun, be it Atheism, religion, love, sex, hate, and so on and so forth, it merely completes a portion of the job, allowing researchers the easy job of

labeling and stereotyping, rather than acknowledging or understanding. To say that an Atheist is a person who “believes that there is no God,”⁵ is a statement made in an effort to resolve an issue before attempting to understand it. To appreciate the difference will hopefully alleviate statements such as that made by the Vice President above.

⁵ Webster’s Seventh New College Dictionary, s.v. “Atheist.”

CHAPTER TWO

Antiquus

He said the gods dwell there where he—by placing them there—could frighten human beings most, whence, as he knew, fears come to mortals and troubles for their wretched life; that is, from the vault on high, where they beheld the lightnings and fearful blows of thunder and heaven with its starry eyes, the beautiful, brilliantly decorated building of Time, the wise craftsmen. Whence too the brilliant mass of the sun strides and the liquid rain falls on the earth. It was thus, I think, that someone first persuaded mortals to believe that there exists a race of gods.

— Critias, *Sisyphus*.

First, A Brief on Etymology

Semantically, “religion” stems from the Latin *religio*, *religionis*. This term roughly means “respect for what is sacred.”¹ A deeper, more root-based meaning stems from the Latin *religo*, *religare*, which translates as “to tie” or “fasten behind.”² These definitions have no validity out of context. When they were first uttered they defined different meanings in relation to today’s understanding of the term “religious.” For example, in an ode quilled by the ancient Roman, Quintus Horatius Flaccus—better known as Horace—in which he entreats the deceptive woman, Pyrrha as to for whom she is beguiling, the second person singular use of *religare*: *religas*, is used in the most

¹ *Cassell’s Latin Dictionary* (New York: Wiley Publishing, Inc., 1968), s.v. “*religio*, *religionis*.”

² *Ibid.*

secular of forms: *cui flavam religas comam*.³ In this sense it describes the sexual enticement of a woman “binding” or “braiding” her hair up. Pyrrha, the woman in question, has done so in order to appear more attractive, an action Horace perceives is done for another man.⁴ This use of the term *religas* is greatly disconnected from the modern sense of the term “religious” as it holds no sacred purpose.

This does not entirely dismiss the modern use of the word *religare* or *religionis* to mean the practice of worshipping something sacred. For example, Cicero—credited for first using this term—writes of *religionem* in his *de Natura Deorum* as a process of “religious” practice: *ad moderandam religionem necessaria* (fundamentally important for the regulation of religion).⁵ As this reference comes from Cicero’s *de Natura Deorum* (on the nature of the gods) the use of the term “religion” can become equally shared by the sacred and the profane as it pertains, etymologically, to both practice and piety.

Modern scholars have attempted to use the term *religio* in order to define religion for their own contexts. For example, in arguing against what he refers to as a “myth” of religious violence, William T. Cavanaugh cites that the term could carry both sacred and secular purposes and obligations, such as “cultic observances” and “civic oaths and

³ The first four lines of Ode 1.5:

<i>Quis multa gracilis te puer in rosa</i>	<i>What slender youth, besprinkled with perfume</i>
<i>perfusus liquidis urget odoribus</i>	<i>Courts you on roses in some grotto’s shade</i>
<i>grato, Pyrrha, sub antro?</i>	<i>Fair Pyrrha, say for whom</i>
<i>cui flavam religas comam</i>	<i>Your yellow hair you braid</i>

See Quintus Horatius Flaccus, *The Odes and Carmen Saeculare of Horace*, trans. John Conington (London: George Bell and Sons. 1882).

⁴ See Jerrold C. Brown, “The Verbal Art of Horace’s Ode to Pyrrha,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 111 (June 1981): 17-22

⁵ M. Tullius Cicero, *de Natura Deorum*, trans. H. Rackham (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

family rituals.”⁶ Cavanaugh even cites to the fact that Wilfred Cantwell Smith wished to do away with the term “religion” as it was used to describe the “religious,” and thus sacred beliefs and practices of humanity, because he recognized the confusion that came from adhering to definitions within plural contexts.⁷

In all of these cases the use of the word and the actual practice of what it condones are greatly different. Language is organic and it travels the same evolutionary corridors as culture. What one day is defined as A, could the next be defined as Z. The same can be said for the term Atheist which, just like “religion,” has made a similar transition from Alpha to Omega. The contexts, again, are what shape the use and “definition” of the term. To seek out the genesis of these contextual interpretations, and in order to make sense of them in modern connotations, one must unearth the kernel from which they have grown.

Classical—Pre-Socratic to Socratic

The kernel of “Atheism” comes from the Greek pre-Socratic and Socratic age. Really, the thanks falls to the spirit of early Greek philosophy that caused man to question his own existence and to, for what seemed to be the first time, look beyond himself, to take in the surrounding world, and to ask questions about the earth and heavens rather than continue to accept “truth” as it had been for his ancestors. This

⁶ Cavanaugh references Wilfred Cantwell Smith’s theory that the term religion was invented, or rather assigned, in the modern west. More accurately, both Cavanaugh and Smith are arguing that the west was unique in its use of the term religion as it describes the sacred acts and beliefs of “religious people. See, Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *The Meaning and End of Religion* (New York: Macmillan, 1963), 18-21; and William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 60-63.

⁷ William T. Cavanaugh, *The Myth of Religious Violence*, 101-102.

period refers to the “kernel” of Atheism because it is the root from which all (Western)⁸ Atheistic thought stems; it was a period of time which brought with it the sudden need no longer to accept any preconceived notions about life, and instead to question, to analyze, and—most importantly—to doubt.

As mentioned, this classical stage is broken into two sections: pre-Socratic and Socratic, distinguished by two different philosophical schools: Ionian and Atomist vs. Socratic and Epicurean. These sections are uniquely different yet come from similar time periods, speaking to very different ideologies. They act, in many ways, as two unique types of philosophy from one perspective of time and context.

W.K.C. Guthrie, lionized by the great researcher of Atheism, James Thrower, described in a few words the perfect statement as to why this period was essential during this nascent stage of doubt. As Guthrie puts it, this philosophy commenced when “the conviction began to take shape in men’s minds that the apparent chaos of events must conceal underlying order, and that this order is the product of impersonal forces.”⁹ As Thrower points out, this statement means a great deal to the budding form of Greek doubt, as it gave “rise to a form of explanation of events in the world in sharp contrast to that offered by the traditional polytheistic religion.”¹⁰

⁸ It is import to note, at the outset, that this work will be dealing specifically and predominately with Western Atheism. Studies of Eastern Atheism, outside the context of USSR and Communist China are somewhat difficult to find, and are of a completely different animal. While the field of Communist Atheism has been plowed for many seasons now, a direct study of the differences between Eastern and Western Atheism, to be compared to Eastern and Western religion, is not quite available just yet. Atheism is a growing academic field, so one may arrive soon. Thus far, the closest one may get to a solid source on eastern Atheism can be found in Phil Zuckerman, ed. *Atheism and Secularity*, 2 volumes. (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010). Specifically see Volume 2, *Global Expressions*.

⁹ W.R.C. Guthrie, quoted in James Thrower, *Western Atheism: A Short History* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2000), 9.

¹⁰ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 9.

Furthermore, the idea that the “chaos of events” was actually controlled by “impersonal forces” meant a great break from the traditional idea that stated, as the gods do, so does man. Thrower, once again relying on Guthrie’s perspective—who himself was channeling Socrates—continues, “under the influence of the earliest philosophical thinking, the “Father of the Gods and men” and his divine family were dissolved into an impersonal “necessity,” an affair of natural laws and the interaction of “airs, ethers, waters and other strange things.””¹¹

This statement speaks both to the fact that while these stages appear from two different contexts—one a somewhat isolated culture of early humanism, and the other from the innocent act of considering the world without the gods controlling every aspect of human life—it also speaks to the overall idea that perhaps not everything perceived through the lens of religious structure is completely clear, introducing a new focus brought about through a philosophical cognitive clarity.

Ionian and Atomist

In order to describe the first stage of Greek doubt, James Thrower sets up a debate between what modern analyses has developed about a certain group of philosophers from the Ionian, or Milesian school of “physical philosophers,” so named because they hailed from the colony of Miletus, a culture described by Guthrie as being “humanistic and materialistic in tendency.”¹² Guthrie further describes the Milesians, but more importantly their social structure, as a culture of people unperturbed by a dependence on the gods, because their “high standard of living was too obviously the product of human

¹¹ W.R.C. Guthrie quoting Socrates in James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 9.

¹² *Ibid.*

energy, resource, and initiative for it to acknowledge any great debt to the gods.”¹³ Because of this religious aloofness, their “primary concern was with the nature of what they called “becoming”—that is, with the way in which the world works.”¹⁴ Thrower takes this period and debates between modern philosophers such as John Burnet, who saw “Ionian science” as he called it, as a supplanting of the idea of “god” or the “divine” by the natural works of nature.¹⁵ Burnet’s view of the pre-Socratic “Atheism” is that of a culture that is merely using the empty shell of a term to describe what is naturally occurring. To this he writes, “We must not be misled by the use of the word “theos” in the remains that have come down to us. It is quite true that the Ionians applied it to the “primary substance” and to the world or worlds, but this means no more and no less than the use of divine epithets “ageless” and “deathless.”¹⁶ To counter this opinion, Thrower then describes the opinion of Werner Jaeger pertaining to these same Ionians. Jaeger sees them not as “Atheists” as Burnet does, but rather as natural theologians, citing Burnett’s bias toward late nineteenth-century physics as the culprit behind his interpretation.¹⁷ Nonetheless, this stage of doubt was remarkable not because Ionians such as Thales (d. 546 BCE) or Anaximander (d. 546 BCE) were the world’s first western Atheists, or rather natural theologians, but because it marked a period when certain accepted religious necessities were being doubted as wholly important outside of any separate form of explanation.

¹³ Ibid., 8.

¹⁴ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 7.

¹⁵ Ibid., 12

¹⁶ John Burnett as quoted in Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 12-13.

¹⁷ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 713-14.

As mentioned, this first stage was distinguished by natural philosophy, that is, a philosophical treatment of the natural world that significantly diminished the significance of the gods within the natural occurrences of the Greek day to day. As Greek religion did not perceive of the gods creating the world in the same sense as that found in the Judeo-Christian-Muslim traditions, the place for the gods was in natural phenomena. For instance, it was Zeus who sent lightning from the heavens and rattled the sky with thunder. Poseidon oversaw the sea and both the sun and moon were gods themselves. The Atheism of this pre-Socratic period was not, as Burnet believed, an abandonment of any belief in the power—or even mere existence—of the gods. It was, instead, a curious consideration that perhaps the gods were not responsible for every natural phenomena which occurred. If anything, it seems more akin to scientific agnosticism,¹⁸ a philosophy to be discussed in more detail later. Furthermore, it could also be considered a mere transitory period from complete polytheism to a weakened pantheism. A.B. Drachmann cites the philosophy of Thales to this ideology in that he “identified God with the mind of the universe and believed the universe to be animated, and filled with “demons.”¹⁹ This is not the type of statement made by a modern dyed-in-the-wool Atheist.

Instead, this transition was one of doubt, of speculation, and of progressive religious thinking; thinking which placed the power of the gods under scrutiny as men such as Democritus (d. 370 BCE) excluded the idea of personal deities after Ionian naturalism revealed to him a world in which natural phenomena were caused by atomic

¹⁸ For this study the term “agnostic” will remain un-capitalized. Atheism and agnosticism are not the same. More on this will be discussed in the Third Chapter.

¹⁹ A.B.Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (Chicago: Ares Publishing, 1922), 24.

movements within empty space.²⁰ To him, certain natural phenomena such as “thunder and lightning, comets and eclipses, which were generally ascribed to the gods,” were actions of exclusive temporal power.²¹ To drive the nail even further into his philosophies, Democritus also declared that the reason the gods were given the powers and responsibilities they had was due to the fearful speculations of the aged who, upon viewing the frightful displays of the heavens, looked up and saw instead of lightning and thunder, Zeus, the great omniscient and powerful god.²² Again, however, while it cannot be said that the “Atheism” of Democritus’ inquisitive mind could be matched to that of a certain type of a modern scientist’s absolute contempt of any form of religious faith, it still made waves.

In a society centered on the everyday actions of a pantheon of gods, the ancient Greeks were obligated to worship in a particular way. Socially the gods were to be revered. Before atomists such as Democritus posited a universe of atoms moving about in detailed order, the gods were the means by which man lived his life. Man adored the gods and thus the gods took on the straits of man. They were jealous and angry and carried vices. Politically, the gods were not just the bones and organs of man’s political structures, but the model for them as well. As it were, the church and state of Ancient Greece was one amalgamation.²³ Therefore, when the philosopher Anaxagoras

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Jennifer Micheal Hecht, *Doubt, A History* (New York: Harper One, 2003), 8-10.

²³ Alister McGrath, writing from the perspective of an Atheist turned back to God—as well as from Oxford University—explains that Protagoras’ reaction to the god’s nonsensical bickering in the *Iliad* helped inspire his writing of the Constitution of Thurioi in 444 BCE, where his agnostic views “insisted on public accountability.” He did not want the people to become like the gods as so many other cities had done. From this one sees that while he did not wish to emulate the god’s, Protagoras still believed

(d.428 BCE)²⁴ proclaimed the sun to be “a red hot mass of metal”²⁵ that foundation was in jeopardy. Likewise, those waves began to crest higher when the philosopher Protagoras (d.420 BCE) began his *On The Gods* by stating, “As to the gods, I have no means of knowing either that they exist or that they do not exist. For many are the obstacles that impede knowledge, both the obscurity of the question and the shortness of human life.”²⁶ Along with Democritus, and even Thales and Anaximander, these seemingly small drops in the religious bucket caused ripple effects, arousing not just unrest in pagan antiquity, but an anxiety and agitation between religious faith and doubt still felt today.

The pre-Socratic, Ionian/Atomist “Atheos” period started out not as a means by which a non-believer identified himself but as a title of someone who questioned the established roles of the gods, by analyzing the “science” of nature, and perceiving that which seemed logical, rather than mystical.

To this ideology, R.G. Collingwood rightly distinguishes the advent of western doubt to the process of man’s cognitive abilities. Collingwood sees the Greek perception

in them. The Atheism to come in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries evolved from very simple beginnings. See Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Double Day, 2006), 4-9.

²⁴ Anaxagoras of Clazomenae got himself in a bit of trouble for being an antiquity-style naturalist. Specifically he believed that the heavenly bodies were “natural objects.” The sun was molten metal and the moon was earth. No more evidence to assert him as an “Atheist” exists. His doubt, though, was enough to accuse him of impiety. See A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (Chicago: Ares Publishing, INC, 1922), 25-29; and Jan M. Bremmer, “Atheism in Antiquity,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, Michael Martin, ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 11-26.

²⁵ Jan M. Brenner, “Atheism in Antiquity,” 11-26.

²⁶ Protagoras found himself in trouble for the opening line of his “On The Gods” where he was unable to “discover whether they exist or not,” among other decrees. *On The Gods* is only referenced to by other philosophers because the original copies were burned for their blasphemous material. See Diogenes Laertius, *The Eminent Lives of the Philosophers*, trans.R.D. Hicks (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972); See also, Jan M. Brenner, “Atheism in Antiquity” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 12-13; and W.K.C. Guthrie, *A History of Greek Philosophy: The Fifth-Century Enlightenment* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 226-235.

of nature as something alive and intelligent, ordered, and a form of regularity greatly “saturated and permeated by mind.”²⁷ To answer the question as to what these Ionians and Atomists perceived in nature, and as a contrast to the established ideas of the divine, Collingwood adds that “Greek thinkers regarded the presence of mind in nature as the source of that regularity and orderliness in the natural world whose presence made a science of nature possible.”²⁸ In the modern vernacular, these Ionian and atomist philosophers relied on common sense, removing the divine from natural phenomena. However, they did not abandon themselves entirely to what would be perceived as modern Atheism. Theirs was not a rejection of faith or of the gods, but rather a new way of viewing the world about them. Nevertheless, the consequences they faced were dire, the most famous of which fell upon the philosopher Socrates in 399 BCE.

Socrates

Socrates was convicted of “corrupting” the youth. He was tried, found guilty, and after washing himself in order not to burden anyone after his death, knocked back a cocktail of hemlock, his chosen method of execution. The man who claimed to know nothing left a great legacy of philosophical treatises on political, social, and religious subjects, thanks in great part to the works of Plato, works that immortalized his rhetorical manner and humorous wit. He was, after his death, described as an “atheos,” a title he earned for his contributing to the rising form of naturalistic philosophy, built upon the Ionian, Atomist and Sophist schools within Greece during his life. The temperaments of the gods, as well as of the great philosophers was becoming a swirling whirlwind of

²⁷ Jan M. Bremmer, “Atheism in Antiquity,” 16.

²⁸ R.G. Collingwood as quoted in James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 16.

philosophical debate in which the former glory of the pantheon of the heavens was waning in comparison to a dependence not on myth and mystic, but on common sense.

This philosophy was made quite clear by the sophist Prodicus of Keos (d. 395BCE) who, as a contemporary of Socrates, demonstrates the growing irreverence being espoused at the time. Jan M. Bremmer points out the influence Prodicus had on the artistic, or rather, “popular” artists of the time such as Aristophanes and Euripides, whose works, *Birds* and *Bacchae*, respectively, parodied many of the ideas put forth by him, by citing his ideas as themes represented in both works.²⁹ These ideas reflect a very early natural humanist stage of Atheism, wherein the conventional fealty to the polytheistic order of the gods took a back seat to an analytical survey of the innate processes of nature. Unfortunately, with textual analysis on Prodicus being thin due to a lack of his personal works surviving time, assumptions become the most accurate source of understanding certain statements that direct Prodicus toward the modern “definition” of “Atheist,” such as, “the gods of popular belief do not exist nor do they know.”³⁰ Bremmer does her best by citing that Prodicus’ Atheism—which is actually demonstrated by his theory on the origin of the polytheism of ancient Greece, and at least as much as modern research can produce—is two-fold. First, due to the early agrarian society that made up the cultural foundation of this time period, man’s dependence on the natural elements at hand, such as the soil, weather, etc., led to an involuntary dependency on a mystical aspect just under the surface of the profane world. As farming is contingent upon the perfect marriage of earth and sky, in soil quality and weather patterns, man’s necessary and detailed respect—and even reverence—to these conditions builds the

²⁹ Jan M. Bremmer, “Atheism in Antiquity,” 15.

³⁰ See footnote 22 in Jan M. Bremmer, “Atheism in Antiquity.”

perfect canvas on which religion can be painted. This condition leads directly to the second aspect of Prodicus' theory: as men called "god" what was naturally revered for his survival, then the men "who had been the main benefactors as inventors of the proper usage of the fruits of the earth, namely, bread and wine, Demeter and Dionysus, were likewise called "gods" and worshipped as such."³¹

Prodicus' Atheism is based largely in what would become the later reductionist school marked by doubters such as Feuerbach and Freud,³² wherein one scrutinizes certain aspects of religion in order to find its origin in the imaginative and inventive spirit within mankind's cognitive creativity. Prodicus was a single voice within a chorus of Greek philosophers, especially orators, whose frequent visits and habitations in Athens were inspired by that city's liberal and cosmopolitan spirit, a spirit that spelled the fate of Socrates for teaching "Atheistic" theories far less drastic than those of his contemporaries.

In fact, the "Atheism," or rather "Atheos" that became a title bestowed upon him, was done so merely as a gesture of rhetorical comedy or analogy.³³ The writer Aristophanes, for example, wrote in his *The Clouds* of a philosopher named Socrates who challenges a neighboring farmer to consider the heavens for what they truly were, clouds and thunder and rain, not powerful deities. The farmer is eventually persuaded to realize that the mighty Zeus could make it rain without the clouds being involved, thus dismissing traditional religion with common sense scientia. Of course, the farmer

³¹ Jan M. Bremmer, "Atheism in Antiquity," 15.

³² See Chapter Three.

³³ *Ibid.*, 18.

eventually returns to his beliefs and burns the philosopher Socrates, along with his fellow Atheists to death, perhaps a metaphor for the fate of the real Socrates.³⁴

Possibly the greatest account of Socrates' "Atheism" comes to us from Plato, specifically a section of his *Apology* that has Socrates cross examining his accusers, namely Meletus, about the outrageous accusation that he is in fact Atheistic. This account is considered great because it represents what Socrates' most loyal followers recorded about his irreligious beliefs, a necessary distinction that sums up nicely the Atheos of the Socratic period, and which better defines the context from which it comes.

The rhetorical battle between Meletus and Socrates in the second part of Socrates' cross examination is a beautiful example of Socrates' style, pitting the knowledgeable—and therefore better equipped—philosopher against a fool intent on achieving a goal of some selfish sort. Socrates begins by drawing out the foundation of Meletus' accusation, specifically that he is corrupting the minds of the youth by promoting their worship of deities outside those accepted by the state, to which Meletus agrees. Socrates then wisely points out the ridiculousness of this accusation as he is being tried for Atheism, an impossible claim if he is teaching the youth of Athens to worship deities in general. Meletus revises his accusation back to that of Atheism by stating, "Yes: I say that you disbelieve in gods altogether," and that, like Anaxagoras, Socrates believes "the sun is a stone and the moon a mass of earth."³⁵

Bringing into the trial of Socrates the Ionian/Atomist argument draws together both stages of the Classical period of Atheism: the naturalist with rhetorical philosophy.

³⁴ See Aristophanes, *The Clouds*, G.P. Goode, editor (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1998); as well as Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 12.

³⁵ Plato, *The Last Days of Socrates* trans. Hugh Tredennick (New York: Penguin Classics, 2003), 49.

By combining these two elements the charges made against Socrates place him in a transcending category, bestowing upon him—albeit against his will—the glory of being one of the western world’s first “Atheists.” Yet, the arguments he utilizes to counter the idea that he is, in fact, an Atheos, should dispel any belief that this title is accurate.

Socrates acts to dispel this accusation by making comparisons between believing in the existence of something and believing in things pertaining to that belief. For instance, he asks if there is “anyone who does not believe in horses, but believes in equine matters,” or if there is anyone who “does not believe in musicians, but believes in musical matters?”³⁶ In the same way, he argues, “is there anyone who believes in supernatural matters and not in supernatural beings,” to which Meletus says “no.”³⁷ From this response, Socrates sums up his argument, and by doing so, sums up his denial of being Atheistic. He states, that by believing in supernatural matters, and by honoring or worshipping deities, even those lesser “bastard” children of the gods, he must, by the process of common sense, naturally believe in the gods themselves, and thus not be condemned for denying the god’s existence.³⁸ This argument is further demonstrated in Plato’s *Laws*, specifically those arguments in Book X pertaining to the existence of the gods, and what constitutes the difference between believing and worshipping.³⁹

³⁶ Ibid., 50.

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid; See also Curtis Johnson, “Socrates on Obedience and Justice,” *The Western Political Quarterly*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (Dec., 1990).

³⁹ Plato’s argument toward the necessity and goodness of the gods in Book X of his *Laws* is an essential element to the “Atheism” of the pre and post-Socratic period as it describes not just the use of the gods for Greek antiquity, but why a reverence to them is a good thing for those people, at least in Plato’s opinion. See J. Tate, “Greek for ‘Atheism,’” *The Classical Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Feb., 1936), pp.3-5; J. Tate, “More Greek for ‘Atheism,’” *The Classical Review*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (Feb., 1937), pp.3-6; and Plato, *The Laws of Plato*, translated by Thomas L. Pangle (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988).

Despite his arguments and his rhetoric, Socrates was condemned to death for his teachings. Strangely he was not nearly as fundamental, or even as devout in his “Atheism” as some of his contemporaries, such as Prodicus or Democritus, yet he was still singled out for his beliefs. Specifically, the execution of Socrates reveals the importance placed on religion in the building and sustainability of political societies and structures. It is not so much his “Atheism,” but rather his selective denial of the gods acknowledged by the polis, that brings about his downfall. As Jan M. Bremmer states, he was not so much spreading corruption by denying the existence of the gods, but that he “had moved too close to those who questioned the traditional gods” like the Ionians, atomists, and sophists before him.⁴⁰

Nonetheless, Atheism had appeared in the natural intellectualism of these two periods, a trait not unlike the two major stages of Atheism to be examined below. However, this Atheism is purely unique to the antiquated idea of order. That is, the Atheism that appeared during this time was that of a curious experimentation with the denial of the gods, curious because it acted to challenge the idea that the gods had any control over the everyday survival of man, a curiosity that did, in fact, kill. From this point, ancient Atheism moved into four specific schools during the Hellenistic period, building off this curiosity, but each with a unique stance on doubt and what Atheism looked like before it was taken as a mantle of pride by certain Christian martyrs during the Roman period.

⁴⁰ Jan M. Bremmer, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 18.

Hellenistic—Four Schools

These four schools of doubt—technically, philosophical reason—represent the ideologies as expressed by certain philosophers who carried on the implications of the Ionian/atomist naturalism and the rhetorical curiosity of Socrates and even, in small ways, the republicanism of Plato.⁴¹ Each school represents an ideology of doubt—degrees perhaps would be the better word—about how much power the gods carried, and importantly, how much relied on man’s worshipping them toward the aim of survival and ethical success.

It should also be noted that the Hellenistic age was distinguished by massive cultural change throughout the Mediterranean as the conquests of Alexander of Macedon fostered a broad cosmopolitan view. While these four schools are religiously still predominately polytheistic or pantheistic, stoicism especially so in the latter,⁴² they reflect somewhat different means of rejection, or rather, different means of rational thought superseding religious thought. Stoicism and Cynicism are combined in this short survey due to their shared interests in pantheism, while the philosophies of the Epicureans and Skeptics are combined for their shared interests in humanism and secularism as founding principles of each.⁴³

⁴¹ Though Book X of *Laws* suggests Plato was a devout believer, there are some who would argue he, like his mentor Socrates, did indeed doubt not just the power of the gods, but their existence as well. As such, and knowing the necessity for the divine in order to keep society from collapsing, he argued in favor of a belief in the gods. See specifically, A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (Chicago: Ares Publishing, 1922), 76-82.

⁴² James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 35.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 36.

Stoic—Zeno of Citium

Stoicism came into being shortly after the death of Aristotle and therefore after the close of what some have viewed as the era of “constructive Greek thought.”⁴⁴ Zeno of Citium, the founder of the school, was an advocate of Socrates who taught his followers an almost exclusive form of pantheism in that everything was divine. While this may not seem like something akin to an Atheistic context, consider that when everything becomes divine, nothing becomes divine, a tenant of the early stoic philosophy.⁴⁵

The Stoic school can be divided between three stages: Early Stoicism, the time from its founding by Zeno wherein the basic foundation of the school was laid; Middle Stoicism, the intermediary period between the rise and fall of the Hellenistic empire; and Roman Stoicism, a period marked by the adaptation of Stoic principles to the Roman empire. It is the first stage that this survey will deal with, predominately for its initial Atheistic undertones.⁴⁶

At its foundation Stoicism, so named for the terrace where Zeno would congregate his students—ή ποικίλη στοά—was the predominant school of the Hellenistic age.⁴⁷ Furthermore, and with a sense of pride, the early Stoics were known as somewhat advanced Socratics in that “their ethical system, characterized by its intellectualist

⁴⁴ St. George William Joseph Stock, *Guide to Stoicism*, edited by E. Haldeman-Julius (New York: Hard Press, 2006), 4.

⁴⁵ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, a History*, 33.

⁴⁶ David Sedley, “The School, from Zeno to Arius Didymus,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Stoicism*, edited by Brad Inwood (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 7.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 10.

identification of goodness with wisdom and the consequent elimination of non-moral ‘good’ as indifferent, was thoroughly Socratic in inspiration.”⁴⁸ Essentially, this meant that the Stoics were building off the already discussed philosophies of the philosophers from the Socratic period, especially of the Atomist school of religious reason. To this end, the structure of the Stoic philosophy, demonstrated by Zeno’s tripartite perception of the world—ethics, physics, and logic⁴⁹—was uniquely Atomist, in that he, as well as his Stoic contemporaries, viewed the universe through a pantheistic lens. This lens revealed to them a fire-like deity, yet somehow greater than the natural element, which “permeated the entire world” and which was also “reason, and as such the cause of the harmony of the world-order.”⁵⁰ There was also a selective Atheism. While they believed in the “heavenly bodies,” just as Aristotle had, they dismissed the existence of any anthropomorphic gods.⁵¹ Furthermore, in a Socratic way—and inspired by the sophism of Prodicus—they viewed the mythology of the gods as essential to the foundation of society; human inventions of misconstrued concepts of nature, “partly of ethical and metaphysical truths,” created in order to justify and sustain society as a “hypostasis of the benefits of civilization.”⁵² Popular belief, being equally essential to the survival of a civilization, seemed to convey a great deal of influence on their belief structure. While they dismissed the great religious mythologies pertaining to gods they did not believe existed, they still retained the sacred monikers when describing their theories of public

⁴⁸ Ibid., 11.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 12.

⁵⁰ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 103-104.

⁵¹ Ibid., 104.

⁵² Ibid.

worship—which they promoted—such as labeling their deity of “universal reason,” Zeus.⁵³

The Stoics, even at the beginning, garnered a certain reputation that still persists in the study of them today. They appear somewhat disconnected, or unattached to emotion. However, what seems on the surface a sense of emotional detachment, was in fact a dependence on the idea of order and morality, based on the belief that a harmonious life would be akin to perfection. It almost appears as if these stoics, while denying the physical existence of contemporary deities, envisioned a fated existence under the auspices of a natural order providing a “providence” of “material determinism.”⁵⁴

Cynic—Diogenes of Sinope

In somewhat comparison to the curious pantheism of Stoicism is the school of Cynicism, made famous by the Cynic ascetic Diogenes of Sinope, another contemporary of Aristotle.⁵⁵ Cynicism, as the modern designation of the word would imply, has been defined as “indifference,” an indifference especially toward “religious matters,” and therefore could be arguably “described as practically Atheistic though theoretically agnostic.”⁵⁶ Part of this “Atheistic/agnostic” description comes from the important difference between belief and practice in pagan antiquity. As mentioned briefly before, this issue was dealt with not only in the trial of Socrates, but also in Plato’s *Laws*. J. Tate

⁵³ Ibid., 105.

⁵⁴ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, a History*, 34.

⁵⁵ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 35.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 35-36.

discusses this distinction in finite detail in his short “Greek for ‘Atheism,’” by drawing out the differences between denying the existence of the gods and choosing not to worship them according to the laws of the polis. It is due to these differences that Tate says Socrates was condemned not for impiety through denial of the god’s existence—Atheos—but because he chose not to conform to the necessities of the state—νομιζόμεν, to acknowledge, worship, recognize.⁵⁷

Diogenes, as we know, “did not take part in the worship of the gods.”⁵⁸ His Atheism though, like those in this historical stage, is not that simple. While he rejected the worship of the gods as established by the polis, it is unsure if he rejected their existence. Unfortunately his biography is heavily burdened by myth, so that knowing for sure where he stood on the scale from devout believer to devout rejecter will remain a mystery.⁵⁹ What we can derive from his life, though, will assist in making some sense of “Cynic Atheism.”

The word Cynic translates to English as “dog.” Just as the stoics took their name from the porch from which they taught, the Cynics were so known because they believed the most appropriate and correct way of life would be that of a dog, without “shame or convention,” and so rejecting “all possessions and social forms” while living and sleeping in the streets.⁶⁰ They further believed that by abandoning all conventions and rejecting all possessions, they would be set free of the restricting concerns of society which, to

⁵⁷ J. Tate, “Greek for ‘Atheism,’” in *The Classical Review*, Vol. 50, No. 1 (Feb., 1936), 3.

⁵⁸ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, 109.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

⁶⁰ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, A History*, 30.

them, was “full of falsehood, emotional discomfort, and pointless striving.”⁶¹ Part of this rejection was of course religious piety and practice. Of the rules set forth by Diogenes and his fellow Cynics, the most paramount was that “things conventionally deemed necessary for happiness, such as wealth, fame, and political power, have no value in nature,” and were therefore anchors about the necks of men unwilling or unable to weigh them.⁶² Religious piety, to a Cynic, was unnecessary as the god’s were “in need of nothing.”⁶³

The Atheism that stems from the Cynic school is two-fold. Primarily it stems from the mythical life of Diogenes. Though he was not the founder of the school itself, his outrageous lifestyle and rejection of all forms of social mores under the framework of Cynicism place him within a realm of Atheism—that is, an Atheism based in religious rejection. Furthermore, his “Atheism” is based in the accounts of his odd and ecstatic behavior, either done so, or recorded, as a means by which the central beliefs of Cynicism could be described. Three myths pertaining to his mysterious actions are worth relaying. The first tells the story of Diogenes being turned away from an expected lodging and his willingness to permanently reside within one of the large earthen tubs near the Athenian marketplace. Second, there is the story that finds him carrying a lighted lamp through the city during midday in search of a “man.” The third finds him lying on the ground sunning himself when, after being greeted by Alexander of Macedon who introduced

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² R. Bracht Branham and Marie-Odile Goulet-Caze, editors, *The Cynics: The Cynic Movement in Antiquity and its Legacy* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1996), 30.

⁶³ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, 109.

himself as “Alexander the great king,” he responded with “and I am Diogenes the dog.”⁶⁴ These romantic tales paint a biographical picture of a man who lived outside the established norms, in search of some enlightened truth, a process carried over by Atheists of all ages.

Moreover, there remain the basic tenets of Cynicism itself, namely the pantheistic views of the universe coupled with Diogenes’ dismissal of the gods as neither necessary nor influential. Cynicism can be labeled “Atheistic” if that definition were to include the decision not to practice or worship the gods, either as prescribed by the state, or in general, as the Cynics chose. This again is benefitted by the description of νομιζόμεν as discussed by J. Tate concerning the condemnation of Socrates. Yet, this again is where issues with general definitions occur, as differing contexts can always provide new ways to define that which describes an ideal within stages of time. This issue, as it is at the heart of this study, will be discussed throughout this historiography, and especially at the conclusion. For now, the Cynics can be loosely defined as Atheistic mainly because, like Diogenes, they chose to live outside the arranged social roles set out for them, roles Atheists throughout every stage of history have known all too well.

Epicurean—Epicurus

Epicurus, in his own time, did not think himself an Atheist. Point of fact, he was a believer of the gods, having “admitted the existence of the gods of the traditional religion.”⁶⁵ Yet his belief system was also quite unique. His theism, as opposed to any

⁶⁴ Luis E. Navia, *Diogenes of Sinope: The Man in the Tub* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1998.)

⁶⁵ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 36.

form of Atheism, was a curious mix of humanism with the Atomism of Democritus, and the Ionian interest in nature.⁶⁶

For Epicurus the gods were ideally detached from humanity, free from any cares, and apart from the workings of nature. They were, in the poetic words of Lucretius, one of his contemporaries and students, adrift in the “empty spaces between the infinite number of spherical worlds” he assumed.⁶⁷ As well, Epicurus viewed the gods, though distant, as an “expression of the respect man owed to beings whose existence expressed the human ideal.” For this reason, his placing them within spherical worlds, mimicking Olympus, justified worshipping them, regardless if the act had no “practical aim.”⁶⁸ His was not a complete theism, however. While he may have spoken of the gods in dulcet tones, describing their existence as distant, yet still valid, he also followed the school of Atomism, believing that man and god alike were made up of atoms, an element that was eternal and that which would outlive the bodies they made up. Critiques of hypocrisy were of course leveled at him for these beliefs as man and god, made of the same material, would therefore perish equally. The gods, then, could not be eternal, if man could not. It would seem that by promoting these ideals Epicurus was painting himself into a philosophical corner. He could not, and was not, able to maintain his ideas while promoting the already established popular beliefs concerning the gods. Further, in his attempt to reconcile atomic philosophy with popular religious practice, he again found himself a hypocrite as gods who are detached from humanity are in no need of that

⁶⁶ Ibid., 37.

⁶⁷ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity*, 106.

⁶⁸ Ibid.

humanity's fealty. Nonetheless, he was later deemed an "Atheos."⁶⁹ Yet his philosophies are more complicated than that, and deserve a bit more service, especially concerning doubt and Atheism.

Jennifer Michael Hecht points out that Epicurus was mostly concerned with the happiness of mankind, a condition possible even within a "chaotic, unsupervised world."⁷⁰ It is no mistake that the modern derivation of his name means precisely that. To be an epicure is to enjoy the sweetness in life, especially pertaining to food and drink. Hecht points out further that the largest obstacles to achieving this happiness are all due to fear; fear of death, of pain, and fear of the gods. Epicurus' answers to these obstacles help define his religious philosophies, particularly concerning the question as to how Atheistic he truly was.

First, the fear of death was not something to concern one's life. As Hecht describes, Epicurus saw death as a non issue for, when we are dead, we won't know it. In his words:

Whatsoever causes no annoyance when it is present, causes only a groundless pain in the expectation. Death, therefore, the most awful of evils, is nothing to us, seeing that, when we are, death is not come, and, when death is come, we are not. It is nothing, then, either to the living or to the dead, for with the living it is not and the dead exist no longer.⁷¹

This dismissal of death as an issue to contend with in life seems oddly comfortable in the pantheon of Atheistic beliefs throughout time. By rejecting the idea of a sacred existence beyond death, whether it involves Hades or Heaven and Hell, Epicurus

⁶⁹ Ibid., 105.

⁷⁰ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, A History*, 34.

⁷¹ Epicurus, "Letter to Menoeceus," in Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Robert Drew Hicks, trans (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1972), 651.

was essentially denying the existence of a divine system in place governing humanity. While this theory aligns itself with his Atomistic beliefs, it also helps the argument in favor of his “Atheism.” Lastly, his dismissal of death as it is a precursor to not only the invention, but also the need of religion,⁷² places Epicurus’ theory in favor of doubt.

Secondly, Epicurus taught that pain was not something to fear as it was exclusively an element of mental panic, rather than physical agony. For Epicurus “fear of pain is worse than pain itself,”⁷³ and that, in the course of seeking out pleasure, the “real goal of a wise life is indeed simply to avoid pain.”⁷⁴ To avoid pain, it appears, is the most pleasurable experience.⁷⁵

As for fearing the gods, Epicurus places more interest. More or less, Epicurus answers the question as to how to resolve a fear of the gods by referring back to his belief structure pertaining to their existence within a separate and disconnected plane. To delve slightly further, the experience he envisioned people had of the gods was based on images, visions that permeated the mind through the passage of the atomic substance given off by the gods from their distant realms. It was these images, Epicurus taught, that came to man in his sleep and whilst under a trance state.⁷⁶ To further solidify his theory that man need not fear the gods, Epicurus’ celestial placement of the gods as being elements within an innumerable series of cosmic spaces, first made them “immortal

⁷² The relationship between death and religion has been a long and complicated one. Theories abound on the subject of death inspiring theodicy and giving hope to billions of human beings through legitimation of religious belief and practices. See specifically Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy*. (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 53-80.

⁷³ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt, A History*, 35.

⁷⁴ Lorraine Smith Pangle, *Aristotle and the Philosophy of Friendship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 110.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 3.

image-beings,” and second, put them in the service of example.⁷⁷ He believed that the gods were eternal and blissful entities and, upon their image transferring into the mind’s eye, transferred onto man the example by which they could achieve similar happiness. For an Epicurean, then, life is to be a blissful imitation of these celestial beings. In a strange twist of ideology, this dependence upon the idea that the gods were not to be feared performs a slight Atheistic back flip. The gods of the Hellenistic age were predominately anthropomorphic. That is, they were larger-than-life caricatures of humanity. As man grew angry, so did the gods, except in a more destructive and violent capacity. Oddly, when Epicurus declared the gods to be blissful, happy entities, he Atheistically denied the image of the gods as generally accepted by the public at large. Epicureanism, at its genesis, was a strange critique of Greek religion that required knowledge and doubt to find pleasure, a trait it shared closely with Skepticism.

Skeptic—Pyrrho of Elis

Skepticism as a theoretical treatise transcended much of the Hellenistic age, from the last days of Aristotle to the death of Carneades of Cyrene in 129 BCE.⁷⁸ It has its origins with Pyrrho of Elis, a contemporary of Aristotle who, through a clever means of philosophical criticism, came to conclude that nothing could be truly determined as truth or fact. Pyrrho—appropriately it should be added—left behind no writings or physical representations of his theories. In fact, it is through his disciple, Timon of Phlius where information of his life is derived.⁷⁹ Regardless of the lack of primary source-work,

⁷⁷ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 36-37.

⁷⁸ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 38-39.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

Pyrrho's life is remarkably filled to the brim with philosophical intelligence and geographical adventure. Aside from physically enacting his own brand of philosophical detachment from corporeal vanity, he also traveled with Alexander of Macedon to India before the great king's mysterious death, learning all he could from the ascetics of that foreign land.⁸⁰

His was an interesting combination of philosophical detachment and critique. This form of early Skepticism came to be known as Pyrrhonism as, mentioned above, the school of thought eventually evolved beyond his theories. For this study though, Pyrrho's expertise is more than sufficient.

It would seem that his theoretical "Atheism" stems from frustration, aimed mostly at the vast array of philosophical dogma being espoused during his tenure. After closely considering each philosophical position pertaining to life, the gods, and humanity, he concluded, almost cynically—pun intended—that nothing could truly be known; neither the gods, nor their role in humanity, nor their elements, nor their true intentions. Rhetorical spin-doctoring seemed to counteract every theory and opinion to the point that any philosophical belief could be plausible in contrast to another, and so on and so on.⁸¹ In other words, Pyrrho was Skeptic to believe anything as absolute truth. In refusing to believe anything as truth, he settled for having no opinions, behaving as he saw appropriate, as if he knew nothing.⁸² This proved difficult at times. His theoretical agnosticism "with regard to religious belief," stemming from his unwillingness to accept

⁸⁰ Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of the Eminent Philosophers*, Volume One, Books 1-6, R.D. Hicks, trans. (Cambridge: Loeb Classical Library, 1925), 402; and Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 41-42.

⁸¹ James Thrower, *The Alternative Tradition: A Study of Unbelief in the Ancient World* (London: Walter de Gruyter, 1979), 195.

⁸² Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 41.

with absolute certainty that mankind could properly “neither affirm nor deny anything” found him amidst intriguing experimentations with knowledge of oneself.⁸³ It is known that he would challenge himself to fetes of self-realization, much in the same extraordinary ways Diogenes of Sinope would challenge the status quo. These myth-like experiences ranged from an apology to his contemporaries for instinctively fleeing from an attacking dog, to pointing out the mood of serenity in the actions of pigs quietly eating their food amidst a tumultuous storm at sea; both of which were pointed out in order to prescribe examples for others to follow.⁸⁴

His Skepticism was motivated as well by his “search for tranquility” which he “believed would follow from realizing perfect suspension of judgment,” a theory that would later be picked up by philosophers in the first and second century CE.⁸⁵ The Atheistic qualities of his theories are found in his abandonment of all generally accepted truths. His retreat into not knowing anything is reminiscent of a nihilistic approach to religious domination, in which even the existence of the gods becomes something to debate or ponder inquisitively. His acceptance of an ascetic abandonment of humanity, as well as his teachings concerning a moderate life, reflect the lifestyle of a philosopher who longed for answers and found them in the act of forgetting the questions.

Four Schools Concluded

The Classical and Hellenistic stage of doubt spotlighted many different players, all with characteristics and traits as unique as the philosophies they espoused. Both

⁸³ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 38.

⁸⁴ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 42.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*

stages watched as cultural change came in gentle lulls and cresting waves. The doubters, rejecters, theists and Atheists who made up the tapestry of this stage of doubt progressed from the earliest forms of curiosity to the most experimental attempts at moderation and abandonment. Moving forward, the progression continues still as the term Atheist is redefined once again to become a moniker bestowed upon those who refuse to worship according to the dictates of the state, as well as a term of pride of one's fealty toward what he or she believed to be the one, true God.

Roman—Roman/Christian Atheism

It has been said that when Rome conquered Greece militaristically, Greece conquered Rome intellectually.⁸⁶ With the rise of the Roman Empire, western religion began to evolve, and with it, the western system of doubt.

Toward the end of the Punic Wars Rome's ego was booming with an influx of military successes, and thus spoils of "unimagined wealth."⁸⁷ The "old civic virtue" of the glory of Rome was quickly being undermined by a new sense of materialism and arrogance.⁸⁸ Moreover, the arrival of new forms of religious practice was creating a divine flooded market place, somewhat decreasing the public's interest in general religion-as-it-was. Into this maelstrom flowed the "full tide of Hellenistic skepticism and individualism," the source of the classical and Greek doubt described already. A period of Roman doubt, inspired greatly by carried-over traditions through the great orators of the time, made way for two defining periods. The first is marked by the many literary

⁸⁶ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 127.

⁸⁷ C. Warren Hollister and Guy MacLean Rogers, *Roots of the Western Tradition: A Short History of the Ancient World*, seventh ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2005), 179.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*

works produced in order to make sense of the power of Rome amidst an adaptively changing religious populace. Two of those will be discussed below. Secondly, the Roman acceptance of foreign religion into the pantheon created an opportunity for a particular group of Roman religious doubt that would redefine western religion in a drastically different way. It is this second period that will deal with early Christian Atheism.

Lucretius

A study of the foundations of Western Atheism/doubt—no matter how large or small—would be remiss without a short discussion of the poet and epicurean, Titus Lucretius Carus (d. 55 BCE). Known shortly as Lucretius, this Epicurean left a legacy that comes to us from his only text, *De Rerum Natura—On the Nature of Things (Universe)*. This epic poem was penned in honor of Epicurus and the Epicurean lifestyle Lucretius promoted as an opposite to the religion practiced throughout ancient Rome; a religion that, before delving into the content of *De Rerum Natura*, needs a brief explanation.

The Romans believed Greek culture articulated the ideal for society, law, and religion, and they were not shy about adopting many elements into their own infrastructure. This trait continued as, with the expansion of the empire, Roman religion became more and more pluralistic. To begin with, it had already taken on the form of pantheism, building upon the polytheism of the conquered Greeks. Divination, the use of augers, as well as the prescription of general civic deities—gods necessary to the survival of mankind, such as Jupiter and Juno, Minerva and Mars, etc—were part and parcel to

Roman religion.⁸⁹ Additionally, the Roman system of religion began to take on what were known as “mystery cults,” religious groups devoted to particular lesser deities, as well as acknowledge the Greek polytheistic deities as their own.⁹⁰ Add to this the growing size of the empire as it spread its reach farther into the northern and eastern unknown, sweeping under its jurisdiction more and more foreign bodies, the religion of Rome began to take the shape of a mass of differing ideologies, permitted under the rule of the Emperor, as long as the Roman gods—and later Roman Emperors—were honored as well.

Furthermore, while the human reason, rationalism, and humanism made popular by the Greek philosophers discussed above began to wane in the mystical—and soon to become monotheistic—mysteries of the Roman religious hodge-podge,⁹¹ a regression of sorts began to take shape. It should also be noted that the regression as seen by Lucretius would otherwise appear as a religious revival of sorts to a non humanist.

This transition is exemplified in Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura*, as it places the Epicurean—and thus very Greek—lifestyle dependent on pleasure under the theory of distant celestial and atomic gods, within a Roman context. By melding these two cultural entities, his work provides an insight into his fear that the people-at-large would dissolve into god-fearing lunatics, devoid of the simple intelligence necessary for a blissful life. His great work not only brought Epicureanism to the Roman world, but also created an environment in need of rationality. For him, the reasoning behind the necessity of his work was to describe, through the eyes of Epicurus, how “religion”

⁸⁹ Ibid., 207.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Ibid., 209

functioned because “he thought mystery and fear kept driving otherwise intelligent people back to their old beliefs.”⁹²

A regression from rational thought might be expected amidst the crashing together of not just Greek and Roman culture, but of those conquered in the process, and to a rationalist spelled devastation. As the rise of new religious convictions filled the Roman marketplace, shuttled along the aqueducts and Roman transnational winding roads, Lucretius needed to remind the intelligentsia that superstitious fears of obvious natural genesis are just that. With an edge of finality, Lucretius challenged the power of the gods—not necessarily their existence, it should be added—by asking how it would be possible, given their Epicurean distance, as well as their atomic makeup, for them to be in control of the millions and millions of finite details contained within the natural world? What Hecht describes as a “big moment in the history of doubt,”⁹³ is a text recorded by a popular philosopher, read by the public-at-large, that states the ridiculousness of the world being conceived by an “intelligent, powerful force.”⁹⁴ The Atheism of this statement, and of Lucretius’ stance on Greco/Roman religion, is found in his belief and support of a world so complex that it could only be self-propelled.

De Rerum Natura was a reaction. It was a reaction to the rising regression of a once rational and intelligent people back to the ridiculousness of superstition. It is also important to the history of doubt simply because it was a reaction; an Atheistic trait to appear continuously throughout the history of religious doubt. It was a combination of the old ways trying to find a place within the new—though ironically backward, as it was

⁹² Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 150.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 151.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 152.

an the abandonment of religion losing power here—and it was also essential because of its attempt to find a place in an environment poised to descend into what will become the greatest religious tradition of all time. Lastly, Lucretius’ work leads us toward another essential doubter, whose own treatise on the nature of certain things was not just inspired by the theories of Lucretius, but because it also made him a lasting legacy of Roman philosophy and thought.

Cicero

Marcus Tullius Cicero (d. 43 BCE) was extremely talented at rhetoric and philosophical argumentation. He was educated in the Academy and thus carried the distinction of being a Skeptic, yet his devotion was not entirely determined by that one school of thought. In fact, his was a philosophy of choice, dependant on what reason told him was appropriate to the given time and place.⁹⁵ For instance, if his convictions at the conclusion of his great work, *De Natura Deorum* are any inclination of his preferred school of thought, it would be Stoicism.⁹⁶ Furthermore, religiously, he had “no other religion than philosophy” as he looked to philosophy to answer questions of ethical import.⁹⁷ In fact, in all his works left to us, outside of *De Natura Deorum*, he rarely spoke to the gods’ playing any ethical role in Roman society, conveying a somewhat indifferent stance on the subject.⁹⁸ For this reason, and though his body of work is quite vast given the historical significance his timeline provided western culture, the basis of his *Nature of the Gods* is efficient enough for this study.

⁹⁵ Hollister and Rogers, *Roots of the Western Tradition*, 190-191.

⁹⁶ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 130-131.

⁹⁷ A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 115.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

Much like Lucretius, Cicero's work carried over the Greek philosophies made famous by men like Epicurus, Diogenes, Pyrrho and Zeno. In fact, his artful prose in *Nature of the Gods* brings these schools together quite literally. He tells the story of a dinner party where four men, Cicero included, sit together to discuss their perspectives on the nature of the gods. As predicted, each man hails from a particular school of philosophy. C. Cotta, the host, was a Skeptic. C. Velleius an Epicurean. Q. Balbus, a Stoic. Cicero played the inquisitive intermediary between the men, guiding their arguments toward his preferred conclusions.

In three books Cicero winds his argument around the responses of all four men toward questions pertaining to the divine. His argument, as he states in the introduction prior to entering the home of C. Cotta, concerns the importance of "philosophical speculation upon things divine and of the reflection of such speculation in man's daily relations to his gods and his fellow men."⁹⁹ At the heart of *De Natura Deorum* floats a raft to support what Edward Gibbon described as "the best clue we have to guide us through the dark and profound abyss"¹⁰⁰ of ancient theological speculation.¹⁰¹ Accordingly, the ancient Greeks speculated on the ethical conundrums that appeared when they questioned the importance and power of the divine, deducing their morals "from the nature of man rather than from that of God."¹⁰² In their speculation they found

⁹⁹ Arthur Stanley Pease, "The Conclusion of Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*," *Transactions and Proceedings of the American Philological Association*, Vol. 44 (1913), 25.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Gibbon as quoted in M.L. Clarke, "Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*," *The Classical Review*, New Series, Vol. 7, No. 3/4 (Dec., 1957), 220.

¹⁰¹ M.L. Clarke, "Cicero's *De Natura Deorum*," 220.

¹⁰² Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, Volume 1. (New York: Cosimo, Inc., 2008), 30.

themselves adrift. By decreeing either the distance or uselessness, or even complete absence of the gods, on philosophy they depended for answers to questions that now had no foundation in the sacred or divine. This was even more the case during the period from which *De Natura Deorum* came to be.

It should be noted that at the time of writing *De Natura Deorum*, Cicero had bared witness to the utter collapse of the Roman Republic. A gifted literati, Cicero was not much of a politician. His attempts at reconciling relationships between the senate and the equestrian classes failed miserably.¹⁰³ In the race for absolute control of what would become the Roman Empire, he backed the wrong horse and was murdered for it. Before his death he watched the downfall of some of ancient history's greatest players. He witnessed the betrayal and murder of Julius Caesar at the hands of Brutus and Cassius, the battle for superiority between Mark Antony and those same conspirators, as well as their own defeat to Octavian, later Caesar Augustus.¹⁰⁴ It is no great surprise to find in one of his most lasting works a lively discussion on the nature of—and really role played by—the gods, especially in light of the ethical and moral gray-area's blurring the line between right and wrong that he witnessed toward the end of his life.

Again, like Lucretius, Cicero was reacting to the environment around him. Only, instead of reacting to the backsliding of intelligence toward superstition, he was reacting to the utter collapse of the glory that was Rome. The arguments and debates between Cotta, Velleius, and Balbus were arguments based in the greater discussion as to man's place in life, his own nature, and from where that nature is derived. By combining the ethical arguments between three of the great philosophical schools from the Hellenistic

¹⁰³ Hollister and Rogers, *Roots of the Western Tradition*, 184.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

era, Cicero attempted to use his religion—philosophy—in order to make sense of the chaos that was a pluralistic and ethically deprived state. His “Atheism” was that of a speculative rational, whose Stoic conclusion to *De Natura Deorum*, desires a harmonious and ordered lifestyle, free of the fetters of religious restrictions,¹⁰⁵ a condition made all the more centrally publically when the role of Emperor began to build itself upon hallowed ground.

Christian Martyrs

In a correspondence between the Roman administrator Pliny and the Roman Emperor Trajan around 112 CE, the crimes the first Christians were finding themselves condemned to death for were labeled as “incest,” “cannibalism,” and “Atheism.” Incest and cannibalism were listed because the Christians were marrying their “brothers and sisters in Christ” while consuming the “flesh and blood” of their savior. Atheism was listed because they “refused to pay the proper respect or share in the public sacrificial meals dedicated to the Roman Gods.”¹⁰⁶ “Ungodly” was a term used for a criminally punished sin for those whom believing in the state-appointed gods was against their consciousness.¹⁰⁷ Martyrdom became a mark of pride of the “Christian Atheist.”

Once again, a characteristic of Atheism in antiquity dealt directly with the Atheist in questions refusal to worship according to the dictates of the state. Until now, though, the refusal to worship had been made by doubters or rationalists unable or unwilling to accept a “truth” as it had been perceived through religious or spiritual means. The

¹⁰⁵ Arthur Stanley Pease, “The Conclusion of Cicero’s *De Natura Deorum*,” 37.

¹⁰⁶ David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global Perspective* (New York: Harper Collins, 2001), 43-44.

¹⁰⁷ See A.B. Drachmann, *Atheism in Pagan Antiquity* (New York: Dodo Press, 2009).

Christians were proudly denying the Roman religion in favor of their new-found revelation and monotheism. Yet, theirs was not the only use of the term “Atheist” during this time. While the Atheism of the Classical, Hellenistic and Early Roman periods was a term of distinction drawing out the differences between those who believed and those who questioned the religious origins of morality, the role of the gods, or status quo—or at least the accepted ideas of religion-at-large—the Christian era Atheism was almost unique unto itself. At some point, a turn of phrase occurred.

Jan M. Bremmer points out the use of the term “Atheist” as a term used during this period as a condemnation of religious beliefs or practices in opposition to that of the person hurling the insult. As an example, she refers to the use of the term by Philo of Alexandria, a Jewish historian writing around the turn of the millennium, who chastised the Egyptians for their “veneration of the Nile, and the worship of irrational animals.”¹⁰⁸ Philo spoke of the Egyptian religion as the “worst form of idolatry” calling it “Egyptian Atheism.”¹⁰⁹ This variety of “Atheism” took on the form of differentiation. The person bestowing the title to another was marking him or her as different from himself. The “A-theos,” literally without god, was really making the statement that the Atheist was without “my God.” The term itself bounced from theist to theist, ricocheting back and forth. Philo, a Jewish historian used it to distinguish himself—monotheist—from the Egyptians—polytheists. When writing to the Ephesians around 62 CE, Paul reminded

¹⁰⁸ Sarah J. K. Pearce, *The Land of the Body: Studies in Philo’s Representation of Egypt* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2007), 215.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid; see also Daniel R. Schwartz, “Philo, His Family, and His Times,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Philo* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 9-32.

them that as “gentiles” they were once “without God:” αθεοι.¹¹⁰ As the Romans put to death Christian after Christian they did so in order to purge the empire of Atheists.

Famously, Polycarp, the Bishop of Smyrna, who was martyred in 155 CE by fire, went to his death a proud martyr and, according to his accusers, an Atheist. He, like his Christian brothers and sisters—like those executed in Lyon in 177 CE—were executed for their “Atheism,” by not swearing an oath of allegiance to the divinity of the Roman Emperor.¹¹¹ Even the on-looking crowds got in on the taunting when, finding disappointment at the willing sacrifice of martyrs such as Germanicus, cried out in their fury, “Away with the Atheists.”¹¹²

When brought before the governor sitting at the head of his trial, Polycarp refused to recant, disassociate himself from his Christian brothers and sisters, or swear by the genius of the Emperor. When forced to say, “away with the Atheists,” meaning Christians, he turned to the crowd of cheering pagans and called to them, “Away with the Atheists!”¹¹³ Ricochet.

Any reader of Polycarp’s—let alone any of the early Christian martyr’s—religious fervor would argue that the title of Atheism was wrongly applied to him. Yet, the same could be said of the religious fervor of the Egyptians, or even of the Roman Pagans baying for Christian blood. Each side seems justified in the condemnation of the

¹¹⁰ Ephesians 2:12 (The New Greek-English Interlinear NT)

¹¹¹ Jan M. Bremmer, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 21.

¹¹² Henry Bettenson and Chris Maunder, eds., *Documents of the Christian Church* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 9-13; and David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 75-78.

¹¹³ Nels M. Bailkey and Richard Lim, *Readings in Ancient History: Thought and Experience from Gilgamesh to St. Augustine*, Sixth ed. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002), 534.

other as “Atheistic” for not believing in their god, or gods. Context often makes for strange definitions.

Christians eventually took on the habit of using the term as a statement of offense themselves. Early church fathers used the term to rebuke both friend and foe, such as Justinus, who referred to Christians with whom he did not agree as “Atheists” and “impious heretics.” Then there was the use by Origen, who referred to pagans as practicing “polytheistic Atheism.”¹¹⁴ It would seem the closest any of them got to the modern use of the term was Clement of Alexandria, who stated that the “real Atheists were those who did not believe in God or his providence,”¹¹⁵ citing for example Epicurus and the Epicureans.¹¹⁶ Ironically, as pointed out by Bremmer, he permitted the philosophies of pagan doubters like Diagoras, Euhemerus, and Theodorus because, as they were fairly convinced Greek Atheists, they had at least “recognized the foolishness of the pagan ideas.”¹¹⁷

Whither Atheism?

With the exception of the Christian martyrs, is the Atheism from these three stages merely just speculative agnosticism? From a modern viewpoint looking back over thousands of years of religious history can a definition, at least pertaining to this one particular time period, be made? Probably not. However, before delving into intellectual despair, what can be made from these short histories is a better appreciation of contextual—rather than definitive—Atheism. The standard definition of the term as cited

¹¹⁴ Jan M. Bremmer, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 21.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ Ibid, 22.

¹¹⁷ Ibid.

in the introduction is incorrect. It is mostly incorrect because it is made within the wrong context. Clearly we see a progression of the term as it evolves from classical pagan antiquity toward the reign of Christianity. Furthermore, regardless of the diplomacy of Webster's definition, the "Atheist" defined in 1969 as "a person that believes that there is no God," or even a person who "rejects all religious belief and denies the existence of God,"¹¹⁸ is not exactly the same as the Atheism of Diogenes of Sinope, or of Anaxagoras or Protagoras. It is especially not the same as that which condemned Socrates and Polycarp to death.

Yet, the 1969 definition—chosen specifically for its place in American history—should not be dismissed entirely. There are aspects of this Atheism in the arguments made by the men just mentioned. They did deny certain characteristics and preconceived notions of the gods of their time. They denied the established role the gods played in the function of humanity, and challenged the establishment. As far as believing in God—the God of Judeo-Christian-Muslim history, discerned by the capital G—they were Atheists. After all, before the monotheism of Abraham made its way into the hearts of the Greeks (Orthodox) and Italians (Catholic), the God of Polycarp and the martyrs of Lyon did not exist in the religious psyche of Protagoras, Anaxagoras, Diogenes, Zeno, Epicurus, or even Socrates. From 1964 we can look back to the doubt/rejection of these ancient philosophers and state, with full conviction, that they were Atheists—without God, capital G. Of course, given the opportunity, they could return the favor.

Returning to the question of agnosticism, Thrower, in the conclusion to his chapter on Atheism in the Roman period, discusses the importance of the Roman philosopher Sextus Empiricus, not only as a source of Skepticism but also as an

¹¹⁸ See Footnote 5 in Chapter One.

inspiration for later “Atheists” to come. Sextus promoted a lifestyle of Epicurean Skepticism in that he longed for a “freedom from mental excitement which” in the proper practice would “secure him piece of mind.”¹¹⁹ Referring to his two important works, *The Pyrrhonic Institutes* and *Against the Dogmatists*, Thrower alludes to the idea that it is from Sextus that later—and especially European—doubt and rejection found its inspiration, such as David Hume and Michel de Montaigne. Quoting Robert Flint from his “monumental” *Study of Agnosticism*, Thrower states that all the great agnostic ideologies to come, “from about the beginning of the sixteenth century” will draw its “inspiration, its principles, its methods, and indeed its arguments largely from his writings.”¹²⁰ Yet, the “Atheism” of Sextus, is not really Atheistic. In his time he professed “his faith in the gods and in their providential concern for mankind,”¹²¹ a practice not conducive to Atheism. Furthermore, it would seem that while he was “acknowledging the gods according to the customs of his country,” whilst doing “everything that tends to their proper worship and reverence,” he was also philosophically speculating alongside those more willing to abandon these actions as trivial or absurd.¹²² Is this to say he was merely agnostic, one who questions the existence of God—or gods—but who is also unwilling to deny whether that God—or gods—exist? Probably not. The agnosticism as used to describe these philosophers politely—and safely—places their philosophies and theories into a category of benign curiosity, where they can do no harm. Though an essential part of rationalizing and

¹¹⁹ Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 48.

¹²⁰ Ibid.

¹²¹ Ibid.

¹²² Ibid.

coping with disappointment, agnosticism merely produces a grey area between two commitments, providing safe passage from one ideal to another.¹²³ It would seem, especially to those men who died for their convictions, that they were fully committed.

Lastly, and in conclusion to this chapter, Jan M. Bremmer points out three important factors to consider in the origins of Atheism and doubt during these three ancient periods. By, first, discovering “theoretical Atheism,” the Greeks, second, created the word *Atheos*, later to become the French “*Atheiste*,” giving title to a peculiar system of curious rejection of the norm. Lastly, by creating the word and the basic understanding of the term—for this period predominately meaning the rejection or unwillingness to worship or support the gods as assigned by the state—they also created the use of the word as a labeling agent toward opponents.¹²⁴ From its origins, “Atheism” has grown from doubt, to rejection, to slander. The early Atheists veered off the beaten religious path and instigated a newfound interest in humanistic development, enabling mankind to evaluate himself in the cosmos, finding not just his own image reflected back, but the realization that it was nothing more than simply an image. As if Narcissus

¹²³ Agnosticism will be described in greater detail in the next chapter, especially its genesis within the writings of the Atheist “bulldog” Thomas Henry Huxley. As it pertains to disappointment, agnosticism provides a safe passage for individuals progressing from one belief to another. Disappointment is a common phenomenon and in the wake of disappointment individuals evolve toward one of three processes: Atheism, Fundamentalism, or a New Religious Movement. What agnosticism provides is an easing of the stress that comes in challenging one’s preconceived ideas about something as essential and important as religion. See Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment* (master’s thesis, Baylor University, 2010).

¹²⁴ Jan M. Bremmer, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 22.

suddenly realized the beauty staring back was merely himself, the early Atheists saw the universe as something else, agnostically, Atheistically, and sometimes painfully. As Bremmer poignantly concludes, “progress rarely comes without a cost.”¹²⁵

¹²⁵ Ibid.

CHAPTER THREE

Inlustrare

Any Christian could look out of his kitchen window and behold a demonstration of God's marvelous design. Sun and clouds, trees and grass, seeds, cows, dogs, and insects—even manure—were all harmoniously interacting for man's well being! But after Darwin, what did the backyard reveal but a relentless struggle for existence, a war of all against all, with blood dripping from every bough, and man involved in the struggle not only against the locusts, but against other men, even other races of men, with victory for the fittest.

—Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People*, 231.

A Study in Genres

A study of the historical period that came to be known as the “Enlightenment” cannot properly—nor fully—be represented herein. The players, acts, and even stage are far too large for this medium. That being said, what follows is a brief evaluation of three genres of the Enlightenment period and its aftermath, especially concerning the progression of Atheism from antiquity toward modernity. In order to do this appropriately some of the great philosophers of this time will unfortunately not make an appearance. Those chosen, however, will be done so because the mark they left on Enlightenment history is exemplar of the time. Furthermore, because of these limitations some time traveling is necessary, and therefore the research below will not be presented in chronological order of occurrence, as was done in the previous chapter, but rather by relation to the genre heading.

The first genre will encompass the origins of the Enlightenment period, focusing on those doubters who, though not Atheists under the twenty-first century context, as they believed—strongly at times—in the existence of the Christian God, provided the

foundation for later Atheists by challenging the presupposed notions of ecclesiastical power and control. These men speak from historically enlightened England and Scotland and compliment and counteract each other's theories. They also speak to three main elements of the Enlightenment period: autonomy, reason, and nature, as their philosophies apply these three elements to their convictions.

Secondly, and continuing from where the chapter on Atheism in Antiquity concluded, the next genre will follow the term Atheism as it continued to be used as a term of opposition, insult, or condemnation. In this genre the term will be represented by certain players who either took to the title proudly, such as Denis Diderot, in order to dispel the myth that Atheists were victims of a "malevolent or frivolous mind;"¹ Thomas Henry Huxley, who disagreed with the "too dogmatic" term "Atheism" as it "made a definitive metaphysical claim about the nonexistence of God," an issue Huxley took to because he believed "there was insufficient evidence" to warrant the "theism" in Atheism;² and somewhat more modern players who both shied away from, and promoted the acceptance of, the term, such as George Jacob Holyoake, who preferred to refer to his beliefs as "secularism,"³ and Charles Bradlaugh, the first openly Atheist member of the British Parliament who fought for equal political rights between believers and non-believers.⁴

The last genre will focus on a certain number of religious reductionist theorists who, in the process of theorizing how religion came into being, found themselves

¹ Gavin Hyman, "Atheism in Modern History," in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 30.

² Ibid.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 31.

reducing it down to simple humanistic explanations. These theories range from psychosomatic to sociological, anthropological, and political.

Hopefully by evaluating these three genres—a reduced form of research—the context of the Enlightenment “Atheist,” from moderate re-evaluation of the religious orthodox to the devout rejection of the divine, will make clear the progression that doubt/rejection has, and will continue to, follow. First, though, a few words on the period itself are necessary.

Certain Unobtrusive Words

To begin his massive two-volume expose, *Modern Christian Thought*, James C. Livingston takes the advice of the historian Carl Becker who suggests that in order to best understand the “inner spirit of any age” an analysis of “certain unobtrusive words” is essential.⁵ Of the six “unobtrusive words” highlighted by Livingston, three will be efficient for this study. They are: Autonomy, Reason, and Nature.

Autonomy

The eighteenth-century Enlightenment did not appear ex nihilo as if summoned by a sudden urge to revolutionize. It was, in fact, the resulting evolution of the previous century’s battle between scientific reason and religious authoritarianism. The “scientific transformation” that appeared throughout the works of men such as Copernicus, Galileo, and Newton, enabled humanity to see itself free of its “traditional place and value in the world” making it aware of both the splendor, as well as the despair, of life.⁶ The

⁵ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought: The Enlightenment and the Nineteenth Century*, Volume One (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2006), 6.

⁶ Ibid.

Enlightenment set free and loosed the intellectual and spiritual bonds of both religious and irreligious man. Modern philosophers like Rene Descartes left lasting legacies by making doubt the “first principle of philosophy and the model for all the sciences,” an action that inspired generations of thinkers, both believers and non-believers, to think rationally, and thus outside conventional and established “wisdom.”⁷ Doubt was not the only theoretical entity to feel this progression though. For Christianity these few centuries witnessed the solution of fifteen-hundred years of authoritarian religious control, a severing of oppressed believers from administrative biblical revelation and church authority toward a philosophy of Christian sola fide.

Underscoring this philosophy of freedom and the “growing separation of Western civilization from the authority of the Church and theological dogma”⁸ was a rising sense of autonomy. The Autonomy felt during this period encapsulated the overall consensus of modern man, wherein humanity was breaking free of the heteronymous control levied by the Church and state. Thinking for himself, enlightened man began to apply the same reasoning directed toward scientific discovery to his religious convictions, making the “ideal of the Enlightenment” a sense of duty that did not entertain any belief that was not “warranted by rational evidence.”⁹

It should be noted that this autonomous freedom did not confer upon man the right to “do as one pleases,” and thus have him fall victim to what was “merely particular and immediate,” but instead proposed a liberty achieved “only when the individual

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid., 7

reason and will are in accord with universal laws of reason.”¹⁰ A sense of individualism began to surface under these convictions, an individualism that climbed out of arbitrary imposition to a summit of “rational conviction.”¹¹

Reason

It is conventionally agreed upon that with modernization comes a growing interest in doubt.¹² Modern sociologists have made careers out of the simple idea that “modern” really spelled “Atheism,” and that “Secularization” was indeed the result of both.¹³

While the former has evidence in the modernist turn toward enlightenment, the latter is more complex. Secularism, at least the meaning of the word that speaks to the eventual abandonment of all religious—and therefore spiritual/superstitious—beliefs, as compared to the political derivation meaning the separation of church and state, is not entirely valid. Though an interesting argument, this study means not to focus on the details that debase the theory of secularization, but rather will focus on the argument that modernization leads to doubt and, at times, rejection.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Specifically, this theory was made famous by Peter L. Berger who, along with his sociologist colleagues in the 1960’s predicted that the further modernization of the world spelled endangerment, and eventual extinction, of religion-in-general. It was the contention of these sociological theorists that with the rise of science came the fall of religious convictions and “superstitions.” Berger would, wisely, eventually recant his support of the Secularization Thesis. See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990); and Peter L. Berger, ed. *The Desecularization of the World: Resurgent Religion and World Politics* (Grand Rapids: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1999).

¹³ For good examples see Steve Bruce, *God is Dead: Secularization in the West* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Steve Bruce, *Secularization: In Defense of an Unfashionable Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011); Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994); David Martin, *On Secularization: Towards a Revised General Theory* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2005); Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University, 2007); and Peter Berger, Grace Davie, and Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe?* (Burlington: Ashgate, 2008).

Therefore, while the foundational idea of secularization is quite essential in understanding the “reason” that grew out of the Enlightenment stage, “modern” or “modernity” here applies to the genesis of that reason. Gavin Hyman alludes to this phenomenon while discussing the history of western—to him, modern—Atheism when he states that “modernity itself is, at its heart, an Atheistic edifice,” the central thesis to his argument of the origins of modern Atheist thought.¹⁴ Hyman continues to argue that the term Atheism, as it appeared between the seventeenth-century Age of Science and eighteenth-century Age of Reason, was “coined at precisely the moment that the birth pangs of modernity began to be felt.”¹⁵ Furthermore, this birth of Atheism—albeit incorrectly stated—appeared as a “direct and external challenge” to the superstitious ineptitude of church authority.¹⁶ As Atheism developed as an “intellectual phenomenon”¹⁷ it endorsed the seventeenth-century carry-over of scientific reason. Expressed ideally by Alister McGrath, Atheism was “the religion of the autonomous and rational human being,” a person who believed that reason was able to “uncover and express the deepest truths of the universe, from the mechanics of the rising of the sun to the nature and final destiny of humanity.”¹⁸

¹⁴ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism* (London: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd, 2010), 18.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Alister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World* (New York: Double Day, 2006), 220.

Reason, in the form of rationality, served a “critical function according to the model of contemporary natural science,”¹⁹ and relates to the modern-age “birth” of Atheism, as it points out the change from authoritarian definitions of causality, to a rational empiricism that is “inimical to the religious mentality.”²⁰ This reason was not just simple rational thinking, not the “abstract reason of classical rationalism,” but rather a specific empirical and experimental “examination of the fact of experience.”²¹ Instead of making “hypotheses,” as Voltaire proclaimed, the age would be better equipped to apply an “analysis” to the questions once monopolized by religion.²² By analyzing, rather than hypothesizing, humanity could “examine, weigh, sift, and compare the facts again and again until it could discern the true from the false, the contingent and particular from the necessary and universal.”²³

The rational brought enlightened humanity out of the dark ages, through an age of scientific theoretical experimentation, and into a period of academically piqued study where reason provided the inspiration, and nature, “the book everyone can read,” the universal text.²⁴

¹⁹ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 7.

²⁰ Graeme Smith cites three conditions as stated by Steve Bruce that lead to a “modern,” and thus “Atheistic” state. These are: 1. Social Fragmentation—a shift from “tightly knit, closed communities, the villages, to diverse fragmented society, the nation state. 2. End of the Community—a change in the “relationship between the religious beliefs and the society in which they are dominant,” providing “religious freedom and choice.” 3. Rationalization—referring to the “process and systems by which society makes its decisions. Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 45.

²¹ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 7.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ William J. Buckley, S.J. *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 41.

Nature

For the rationalist philosophers of the Enlightenment, and especially for the French rationalist philosophes, what was “reasonable was also natural.”²⁵ For them reason was a scientific process wherein the knowledge one accrued through scientific analysis was clearer than that dictated to by means of religious dogma or discourse. Nature was perfect and clean and ordered and untouched by the corrupted hand of religious opposition. The new science of the seventeenth-century made appreciating the natural elements of religion and life more elegant and more severe. If there was a quintessential character that assisted in providing the Age of Reason with Age of Science philosophies, it was in the person of Isaac Newton.

Newtonian physics viewed the laws of nature as “orderly and uniform, always and everywhere the same.”²⁶ By a very young age Newton had attained an amazing number of achievements, discovering aspects of the Universe as yet to be found, whilst building upon the great scientific discoveries of Galileo, Descartes, and Kepler. He brought together light, inertia, gravity, mathematics, acceleration, and weaved them into a “mathematical expressed synthesis that made the world strangely intelligible.”²⁷ Newton stands out as an exemplary character for this stage for two specific reasons. The first concerns his balance between empirical science and a steady belief in the supernatural and mystical, in God. The second concerns his influence on the perception of nature his works provided future generations of creativity, imagination, and doubt.

²⁵ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 7.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 7-8.

²⁷ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 326.

Hecht states that Newton was known as the “first physicist and last magician” for his impeccably well groomed balance between a belief in the supernatural and a scientific method that presupposed that first belief as the result of natural human curiosity and creativity.²⁸ His “celestial mechanics,” a diagram used to depict the working of the “heavens” was “widely regarded” during the developing “synergy between religion and sciences” as “at worst consistent with, and at best a glorious confirmation of, the Christian view of God as creator of a harmonious universe.”²⁹ Newton had developed a “mechanical view” of the universe by, first, discovering the “regularities of the planetary motions” and, second, with his explanation of “the colors of the rainbow.”³⁰ This mechanical view helped shift his theories from religion to science, as he envisioned a system that functioned devoid of a supernatural ignition switch. The science he had created found the universe to be steered naturally, without the need of a pilot, as if nature itself was in truth a “vast mechanical device,”³¹ a view Newton himself did not hold personally.

Newton was a man of God; that is, his beliefs in a divine “substance” led him to study nature empirically and cautiously in order to decipher the code by which God had created it. He did not view a war between science and theology, and in fact, more than likely never considered there to be a conflict between the two.³² He looked at his work, and especially his discoveries, as producing an “amity” between the two ideologies, a

²⁸ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 326.

²⁹ Alistair McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, 85.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 116.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*, 102.

“harmonious” balance between what was believed, and what was viewed, about the nature of God.³³ In his study of nature, and subsequent discoveries of the processes by which the natural world functions in detailed, mechanical ways, such as the way in which a prism, held against white light will produce a colored spectrum, exposed “the rules by which God decreed that the world should be governed,” constructing a sense of “awe and wonder with which the faithful worshipped God.”³⁴ Newton bridged a gap and created a “fundamental continuity” between his science and his religion.³⁵ By sharing a “common object,” God, Newton saw his studies of the natural world as a guide to the divine, to better understand the miraculous wonder of God’s creation.

This would not be read as such in future generations. Even a century later, as philosophes and religious skeptics gathered their wits to find evidence against the existence of God, they used Newton’s discoveries to debase the idea that the perfect and mechanical world was created by God. Under the influence of empirical analysis, “unhindered by extraneous presuppositions and beliefs,” these natural scientists were led to their “Atheism as a consequence” of the Newtonian inspired “disinterested quest for truth, undertaken with intellectual integrity,” and built upon by “furthering and intensifying the insights” of men like Newton.³⁶ Perhaps the most famous of these men was Denis Diderot, who brought the “universal mechanics of Newton to their logical conclusions,” by urging it to “a point beyond itself to non-mechanical principles.”³⁷ To

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid., 7

³⁷ Gavin Hyman, *Atheism in Modern History*, 31.

this point, Diderot founded his Atheism on a certain principle that “everything is creative nature, matter in its self-activity eternally productive of all changes and all design.”³⁸

The “creative nature” utilized by Diderot manifested itself during the Enlightenment in a concept dependent upon “the excision of all the beliefs and practices that had taken hold as a result of humanity’s deviation from nature.”³⁹ There was also a call for natural integrity. The Enlightenment thinkers viewed the controlling influence of heteronomous structures such as the church, the monarch, and even society as driving humanity toward a dim artificiality.⁴⁰ Nature, for them, was an uncorrupted heady day, a time before religion, politics, and society distorted humanity’s true destiny, attainable only by rationally interpreting the nature of the world without the influence of those corruptible elements. By delving into the scientific analyses of nature and by scrutinizing every finite detail once abandoned to the wonderment of God, the Enlightenment thinkers felt they could “unmask the hypocrisy and artificiality of the times” by retreating into the “simplicity of nature.”⁴¹

³⁸ William J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 250.

³⁹ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, I, 8.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

Natural Reason

Lord Herbert's Deism

There is a painting of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury by Isaac Oliver⁴² (d. 1617) that beautifully reflects the deistic approach to “natural religion” that later became the foundation upon which the Enlightenment was built. Lord Herbert is lying upon a grassy hill, his head rested gingerly upon a folded arm. His armor has been removed and hangs from a tree behind him. His shield is draped across his left arm, swaddling him like a blanket, inscribed with the epithet “magica sympathia,” sympathetic magic. His sword is present, but remains safely within its scabbard. One can almost smell the soil and leaves of the forest, hear the birds gently chirping, and feel the cool and damp English wind. Lord Herbert smiles enigmatically to the viewer. He is inviting us to see the world as he does. He invites us into the forest, to rest comfortably upon his eternal resting place of “universal” and “ambidextrous” natural religion. He implores us to shake off the violent longings of our religious beliefs, to break free of our own heteronymous armor, and join him in a belief in the austerity of a natural God, whose doctrine speaks volumes in the still, small voice of the wind in the trees, the soft bed of soil, and the simplicity of nature.

Lord Herbert's “natural religion” was indeed a reaction. A member of the “landed gentry,” of Eighteenth-Century England, Edward appeared to be fighting

⁴² Dr. Ivan Strenski chose this artist's rendering of Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury to grace the cover of his book, *Thinking About Religion*, for the same reason that it is described here. Lord Herbert was an exemplary member of a class of noble Englishmen who took to the forests for deep philosophical and analytical religious thought. In nature they found a wonderfully coherent world acting on its own accord in a system that proved the existence of God's hand in all life on earth. Of course, the same system of naturalism ironically helped argue against the existence of God with the advent of Darwinian evolutionary theory, which found nature to be a bloody battle-ground of creatures striving merely just to survive.

multiple battles on just as many fronts.⁴³ At home he was embroiled in the English Civil War, a conflict which pitted royalists against parliamentarians. Abroad he was victim of the religious conflicts of the Thirty Years War, a holy war between European Catholics and Protestants. Both conflicts centered on an argument based upon religious ideologies. In England it was rooted in the sovereignty of the king versus the temporal power of the people. In Europe it was found within the obvious battles between two opposing forms of Christianity. European religion was muddling itself into a chaotic and misrepresenting civilization. It was in dire need of reform.

While Edward, Lord Herbert was by no means Atheistic in his writing or opinions, his early associations with certain “free-thinking intellectuals” in France during his royal service there veered him toward “philosophical skepticism.”⁴⁴ Natural religion for Edward was a “catholic” adoption of both Catholic and Protestant theology, a universal approach to reaching the divine. More definitively though, it was founded on the inherent and rational elements he saw in nature. If his “Atheism” is to be attained at all it would be in his natural approach—and really rational view—of acknowledging not just other faith systems and possible paths to the divine but that Christianity may not be the best one. His two-handed reaction to the religious violence surrounding his world-view hinged on two specific things. First, he pointed out the fact that an “absolute knowledge” of God, even by Christians, was unattainable. Second, he hypothesized a “common denominator” religion that spanned the great pantheon of man’s belief

⁴³ The influence of these inter-war periods caused many religious philosophers to re-evaluate the ways in which religion was being justified in causing such horrific damage to European society. Reacting to these disappointments found ideal fodder in the enlightenment ideas of natural religious consent. See Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 22-26.

⁴⁴ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 25.

systems—though cut in different shapes—wherein all the same elements, regardless of context, were of the same cloth.⁴⁵

He is regarded as the “Father of Deism” because he began the process of seeking out a common element in every religious ideology.⁴⁶ By evaluating, questioning, testing, and doubting the religious elements that had led the whole of Europe to war with itself, he sought to find a better, more peaceful solution. Little did he know that the philosophy he created, the process of finding different paths to the divine, would lead to a revolutionary war for freedom. The deism of Herbert was a nascent form of what would later express the politically religious views of the authors of the American government, and also what would be articulated by the other natural rationalists in this category. They, like the religious revolutionaries that came before them, challenged the orthodox and standard processes of religion, perceiving of a future religion that separated the “wheat from the chaff” in order to form a more perfect relationship with the divine.

His first attempt at reconciling peaceful resolutions to Europe’s religious strife hypothesized a religious viewpoint that accepted, analyzed, and interpreted a wide range of opposing—at least to Christianity—religious ideas, contributing to the “Atheistic” doubt of the Enlightenment age. He helped, in his way, give birth to the Enlightenment Deism and rational thought processes of the eighteenth-century; a thought process that would later feed an already internal worm of doubt, the basis for the modern definition of Atheism.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 16.

John Locke's Secularization

Herbert of Cherbury and John Locke epitomized the early deist school of thought in an opposite form of that of the third actor on this stage of doubt, David Hume, in that they were both, counter to Hume's skepticism, strong believers. Though Locke disagreed greatly with the "rational" approach to Herbert's natural religion as opposed to his "empirical" form,⁴⁷ they relate in their early deistic attempts to combine the "natural" with the "supernatural."⁴⁸ Theirs was a negotiation, or balancing act, between reactionary religious progression, and the belief that God, nature, and the divine were all relatable subjects under the same heading. They appear as standing on the side of religious enlightenment that supports the existence of God, holding their ground against those enlightened philosophers—to be discussed below—who equally took the rational and empirical teachings of science and applied them to their own contextual religious paradigms in order to substantiate the dubious existence of God.

That is why, concerning the subject at hand—either ancient or modern—Locke and Lord Herbert both also seem oddly placed in a study of Western Atheisms, especially considering Locke's opinion on the "Atheism" of his own time. He states, toward the end of his *Letter Concerning Toleration*, that an Atheist is not a person—ironically—to be tolerated, as there appears no separation in his mind between religious belief and the successful function of society. His opinion, best made in full, states:

Those are not at all to be tolerated who deny the Being of a God. Promises, Covenants, and Oaths, which are the Bonds of Humane Society, can have no hold upon an Atheist. The taking away of God, tho but even in thought, dissolves all. Besides also, those that by their Atheism undermine and destroy all religion, can have no pretence of Religion whereupon to challenge the Privelege of Toleration.

⁴⁷ Gavin Hyman, *Atheism in Modern History*, 35.

⁴⁸ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 26.

As for other Practical Opinions, tho not absolutely free from all Error, if they do not tend to establish Domination over others, or Civil Impunity to the Church in which they are taught, there can be no Reason why they should not be tolerated.⁴⁹

These are heavy words, thrown mightily toward the intolerable state of Atheism in Locke's time, an Atheism that will reveal itself more clearly come the second and third genres of this particular stage. For now, Locke's consensus of the intoleration necessary toward "Atheism" provides a polite glimpse into the early natural and rationalistic take of the Enlightenment. It also makes clear the different forms that doubt, skepticism, etc. took during this Enlightenment period, making further clear some muddled assumptions about the age. As such, it is not certain that the Enlightenment spelled an immediate danger to the belief in a supernatural or divine spirit, but instead brokered a progression from blind faith, to alert analysis.

Even misplaced, Locke's and Lord Herbert's attempts at religious reconciliation with natural reason—as opposed to religion by divine revelation—are important to the history of doubt and rejection, just as the ancient philosopher's contextual denial of some gods over others, because they contribute to the progressive contextual definition of Atheism. Just like Lord Herbert, the new religious functionalism of Locke's toleration was enacted as a reaction to the horrors of war witnessed by his English context. The wars of religion aside, both Locke and Lord Herbert had the privilege of viewing their own government's assault on religious toleration, stemming back to the great divorce of King Henry VIII, and the Great Compromise of his daughter, Queen Elizabeth I.

If there is to be any form of "Atheism" in John Locke's ideologies it would be found in his influence on the idea of political secularism as he, rather than "espousing Atheism," instead promoted "setting limits to the extent to which religion can be involved

⁴⁹ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 51.

in public life.”⁵⁰ Building heavily off the Enlightenment sense of autonomy, the political ideologies of Locke, especially those pertaining to the use, practice, and regulation of religion by the state are coeval with the secularist ideologies adopted by the establishers of the American church-state system. One can see quite easily the influence Locke’s theories had on the future of church-state, especially in works such as *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, which he needed to publish anonymously while safely exiled in Amsterdam.⁵¹ His was not a toleration for absolute religious freedom, though. It is obvious in parts that Locke’s toleration was limited to acting members of the Anglican Church under the chokehold of a powerful magistrate and, as quoted in full above, he saw no place for Atheistic ideologies in a “humane society.” Yet his call for a separation between what was mandated by the state, and what ascended from the consciences of the citizenry at large—especially concerning individual rights of freedom—spoke directly to the ideologies espoused by earlier, and later, religious progressives. Locke also stands out as a character of necessity for the sustainability and future of Atheism because he promoted a somewhat broad idea of political religious freedom with statements such as, “the Magistrate ought not to forbid the Preaching or Professing of any Speculative Opinions in any Church, because they have no manner of relation to the Civil Rights of the Subjects.”⁵² This freedom to consider different paths to the divine—even if they lead

⁵⁰ Alistair McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, 15.

⁵¹ Locke had to flee to Amsterdam, live under a false name, and essentially hide himself from extradition and prosecution for his revolutionary actions towards the aim of religious toleration in England. The letter, *Epistola de Tolerantia*, was written in Latin and published without his knowledge under a false name. See James H. Tully, “Introduction” to *A Letter Concerning Toleration* (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1983), 1

⁵² John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 46. The statements Locke made shortly after this one seems to echo through time and find themselves at the desk of Thomas Jefferson whilst the latter was penning his *Notes on the State of Virginia*. Locke makes the statement that allowing different religious

away—produced a somewhat interpretive loophole wherein the right to “Life, Liberty, Health, Indolence of Body,”⁵³ and perhaps freedom from religion, could perfectly slide. Locke’s attempt to resolve religious conflict aided a future religious skepticism, seen in the century after his death through the enigmatic religious skepticism emanating from Edinburgh, Scotland.

David Hume’s Sense Impressions

Resting at the base of Calton Hill, looking down upon the divide made by Edinburgh’s Waverly Station between the monolithic and black-stained antiquated magnificence of Old Town and the bustling and opulent contemporary New Town, is laid to rest David Hume. Hume has come through time an enigmatic empiricist, accused of Atheistic teachings, successor to Locke’s ideologies, and advocate of both the “skeptical tradition’s suspicion of revealed religious sources of knowledge, such as biblical or ecclesiastical authority,” as well as an interest in assuring the “reliability of sense experience through the method of controlled experiment.”⁵⁴ Hume was also an advocate for “natural religion,” evidenced by his *Natural History of Religion*, a text which

beliefs to equally coexist, such as, “If a Roman Catholick believe that to be really the Body of Christ, which another man calls bread, he does no injury thereby to his neighbor.” Confer this statement with Thomas Jefferson’s, “But it does me no injury for my neighbor to say there are twenty Gods, or no God. It neither picks my pocket nor breaks my leg.” See Thomas Jefferson, *Notes on the State of Virginia* (Charleston: Bibliolife, 2011), 170. Both men sought religious freedom, and tilted slightly toward the allowance of Atheism. Thomas Jefferson’s acknowledgment that a man who believes in “twenty Gods, or no God” points out his at least surface recognition of the existence of Atheism. Locke, though openly states his lack of toleration toward Atheism also stated, “If a Heathen doubt of both Testaments, he is not therefore to be punished as a pernicious Citizen.” This debate concerning American Atheists is to be discussed in a later chapter.

⁵³ John Locke, *A Letter Concerning Toleration*, 26.

⁵⁴ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking about Religion*, 29.

examined, for the first time, the history of religion based on “naturalist, and thus empiricist, principles.”⁵⁵

His naturalism also found him in a position of debate against deism as he did not, on empirical principle, accept the deist “belief in the God-given nature of reason,” in that he challenged the idea—especially the ideas of Herbert—that there was indeed a natural religion to which man could return.⁵⁶ In fact, in his *Natural History of Religion*, Hume alluded to the idea that the only true natural religion, if one existed, would be that which lay at the foundation of all great societies: polytheism.⁵⁷

The basic thesis of Hume’s ideologies, and really where he found himself in trouble for thinking Atheistically, is based on his severe empiricism. For him, religion stemmed from sensual experiences, feelings, and emotions that relate to the divine because that is how the mind perceives them to be. For Hume, religion appeared as polytheistic because it grew out of an innate ignorance toward the natural world. As such, when certain humanity was unable to understand the causation of certain events, it resorted to “projecting human models onto the unknown,” producing a polytheistic world-view.⁵⁸ This polytheistic ideology flowed into the political realm as well, as this same humanity mistakenly raised human authorities, leaders, and heroes—really any awe-inspiring individual or group—to a “heavenly realm,” evolving them from temporal to sacred.⁵⁹ Hume stood apart from Lord Herbert and John Locke in that he disagreed

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 29-30.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 30.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 31.

with the former's theory which found religion to be an inborn human trait, and the latter's less commanding empiricism.⁶⁰ Furthermore, Hume's skepticism, allotted him the distinction of not just Atheistic, but also one of the first to view religion "anthropologically" a trait to be taken up by certain reductionist Atheists to be discussed below.⁶¹

Hume's own personal beliefs are somewhat debatable as they come merely from his deciphered works. Hyman suggests that while he conceived of "religion as fantasy" under his "sense impressions" paradigm, Hume was really an "agnostic before his time" because he believed the theist-Atheist question was "in principle undecidable."⁶² J.C.A. Gaskin points out that while neither Hume, nor any other European Enlightenment thinker could openly "express Atheistical or antireligious views without the threat of or actual prosecution or social penalties of a very nasty sort," and while his attack on miracles, the existence of God, and the foundation of social morals, put him in a category of possible non believer, he was not capable of an absolute commitment to Atheism.⁶³ Hume's context could not permit him the capacity to deny the fact that the more he examined the "defects of the design argument" the more he found that "something of it remained unrefuted," a feeling he expressed toward the end of his final work—published

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*, 34.

⁶³ See J.C.A. Gaskin, "Hume on Religion," in *The Cambridge Companion to Hume*, 2nd edition, edited by David Fane Norton and Jacqueline Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), specifically pages 480 and 488-490.

posthumously—*Dialogues Concerning Natural Religion*.⁶⁴ Hecht proceeds even further and describes him as a pioneer of Atheistic humanism, stating that his philosophy encompasses the idea that “everyday morality is based on the simple fact that doing good brings you peace of mind and praise from others and doing evil brings rejection and sorrow.” Because of these simple, humanistic actions, Hecht concludes that Hume’s conclusion is to say, “we don’t need religion for morality, and what is more: religion itself got its morality from everyday morality in the first place.”⁶⁵

His context further examined, it is said that Hume commented once that he had yet to meet an Atheist.⁶⁶ Presumably this statement was made regarding his tenure in England and Scotland, and did not pertain to his travels to France during the high days of that country’s Enlightenment.⁶⁷ In point of fact, the event occurred at a dinner party in Paris a few years before Hume’s death, as was recorded most famously by Denise Diderot.⁶⁸ More to the point it has been debated to be both a refutation of Hume’s Atheism, as well as a verification of it. Nonetheless, whether Hume sits upon the foundation of the definition of Western Atheism to mean a rejection of the belief in God—as opposed to the rejection of the worship of God—he appears a rationalist skeptic, intent on reconciling the reconciliation made by the deists Lord Herbert and Locke. To conclude, Hume was a European paragon of Atheist thinking, unique to his Scottish context and especially to the French philosophes—as will be seen in the study of Diderot

⁶⁴ Ibid., 489.

⁶⁵ Hecht makes this assumption from her interpretation of Hume’s *An Enquiry Concerning Human Understanding: A Letter from a Gentleman to His Friend in Edinburgh*. See Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 348.

⁶⁶ Alistair Mcgrath, *The Twilight of Atheism*, 15.

⁶⁷ Though of extreme importance to the study of Western Atheism, unfortunately this study will look specifically to the “Atheism” of mostly British philosophers.

⁶⁸ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 352.

below. Either Atheist, agnostic, or humanist, he stands out for his early appreciation of rational logic; a sense of logic which inspired him, and those inspired by him, to examine the religious world in such a way that would cause God to appear unnecessary, providing future philosophers the option of either questioning the significance and power of God, or dismiss the idea altogether.

Natural Reason Concluded

The three men analyzed above mark three different perspectives, or even scenes, within the first act of natural reason. The First, Edward, Lord Herbert of Cherbury, marks a distinctive shift concerning religious skepticism, doubt, and evaluation coming out of the dark ages and into the Enlightenment. His reaction toward the wars of religion plaguing Europe, and especially England, drew his inquisitive eye toward a natural foundation of religious belief, uncorrupted and plagued by the elements that caused the chaotic fights concerning temporal and sacred power.

Both John Locke and David Hume arise from this foundation by reinterpreting the philosophies of Lord Herbert, critiquing his Enlightenment genesis, and concluding with their own interpretations. Locke attempts to balance the inevitable progression from heteronymous religious belief to complete autonomy, a reaction that could, if given the opportunity, evolve into a complete political and social secularity. Hume, critiquing Locke's attempt to place God in an environment not conducive to religious belief, placed himself in Western Atheist history by concluding that "religion" was merely a source of sense impressions of the natural world. His somewhat anthropological interpretation reveals a humanistic approach that would later adapt itself to a larger following both in Europe and abroad.

These three interpretations sum up the first genre of Enlightenment Atheism by contextually placing it in an environment of change, interpretation, and reaction to religious authority. By delving into the natural origins of “religion,” these three men contributed to the overall definition of “Atheism” by inferring a source of doubt, and by initiating a process by which speculation can lead to a God-light or even God-less humanity. From here, the contextual issue in defining Enlightenment Atheism will progress to a designation of identity.

A Rose by Any Other Name

As discussed already, the different forms of Atheism between Pagan Antiquity and the Enlightenment are dissimilar quilts cut from the same cloth. The transition from antiquity—refusal to worship as prescribed by the state—toward Enlightenment—deist and anthropological/reductionist—“Atheism” brought with it a shift in the public and even political allowance of Atheist thinking. Socrates and Polycarp met their deaths because they challenged the religion-at-large with disparate ideas of the sacred, a fate not bestowed upon Lord Herbert, John Locke, or David Hume. While the philosophies espoused by these men are entirely different from one another, they relate in their common interest of re-thinking, re-evaluating, and re-constructing humanity’s use, as well as perception, of the divine.

Bremmer cites that the greatest differences between these two stages is that antiquity Atheism is “soft” in that rather than a “resolute denial of a transcendent realm” it was instead a “form of free thinking that ultimately sought to save the existence of the

gods.”⁶⁹ This distinction is clear, as the Enlightenment philosophies, especially those stemming from France, were significantly “harder.”

The distinction of the word “Atheism” is vitally important in the contextual understanding of the phenomenon that carries that title, mostly because of its uses. It does not appear that those philosophers of Pagan Antiquity referred to themselves as Atheistic, but rather shook off the title as if it would burn their skin to the touch. The Enlightenment seemed quite different. As a wave of autonomy swept over the European continent, humanity began to take on individual characteristics. Certain philosophers spoke dearly to this subject, their interpretations of individual rights becoming not just identifiable traits to their own contexts, but also to those of later nations—such as the United States—that thrive on the idea of individuality.⁷⁰ Individuality here is, of course, related to the contextual understanding of words such as “Atheist.”

Michael J. Buckley maps the first use of the term “Atheist” in England to the English Greek scholar Sir John Cheke, a route that produced a “promiscuity” of the definition as he used it. Sir John illustrated the Atheism drawn out in his translation of Plutarch’s *On Superstition* as meaning a “form of accusation directed against those who think there are no gods.”⁷¹ In his own commentary on the text, however, Sir John uses the term to describe the “denial of the specific doctrine of divine providence.”⁷² The usage of these terms was indeed promiscuous, even to those who identified with their meanings. To this point the following stage will deal with how certain Enlightenment

⁶⁹ Jan M. Bremmer, *Atheism in Antiquity*, 11.

⁷⁰ See especially Brian Tierney, *The Idea of Natural Rights: Studies on Natural Rights, Natural Law, and Church Law, 1150-1625* (Grand Rapids: Willaim B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1997).

⁷¹ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*, 3.

⁷² *Ibid.*

age thinkers identified themselves, or the term itself, and under what contexts they defined either their own, or the public at large's, Atheism. To do so, a bit of a chronological leap will be applied. Starting with an evaluation of the French Enlightenment under the guise of Diderot, this leap will traverse the Atheist timeline toward the mid nineteenth-century. By doing so, perhaps the evolution of the term, and the context for which it stands, will assist in better appreciating what the term truly means.

Diderot's Transformation

In his grand opus on the subject of western Atheism, William J. Buckley devotes fifty-six pages to the "Atheistic transformation" of Denis Diderot. Hyman contributes to this description by stating that, in fact, Diderot's beliefs were quite plastic, for "his thought was constantly evolving, and at certain periods of his life he would more accurately be described as a theist, a deist, and at other times a pantheist."⁷³ Such is the life of an inquisitive doubter. Regardless of his evolutionary thinking, Diderot carries with him the label of being the first "Atheist" to proudly wear the title as a mark of identity. Buckley remarks that Diderot "in many ways" was the first of the Enlightenment philosophers to acknowledge his Atheism not just "chronologically," but as an "initial and premier advocate and influence" as well.⁷⁴ Being the first was not his greatest distinction however. Aside from his ability to re-evaluate the "mathematical physics of Descartes and the universal mechanics of Newton to their logical conclusions," Diderot was able to announce his Atheism without the opposite reaction of

⁷³ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*, 7.

⁷⁴ Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 249.

accusations of having a “malevolent” or “frivolous” mindset.⁷⁵ Because he was using—successfully—the accepted sciences of the time to substantiate his claim, the same sciences used by Christians to defend their faith, he was providing his justifications with evidence believers could not discredit for the sake of their own validations.⁷⁶

The title itself is an intriguing aspect of not just Diderot’s usage, but of the context as well. For the Enlightenment stage the proud display of being an “Atheist” was not too popular, and would not be so until the twentieth-century. Enlightenment Atheism was still dependent on breaking free from heteronymous control and sanctioned religious authority, and while it did this using scientific discovery, it had yet to entirely dismiss the divine as mere fiction. Even David Hume was nervous about fully devoting himself to an anthropological view of religion without God, either by defending his faith or masking his Atheism in the fictional characters of his works. Additionally, the carry-over from the antiquity use of abuse was still strong as “Atheism” came also to be associated with “immorality and lawlessness,” apparently two of the “great fears of the nineteenth-century mind.”⁷⁷ Diderot’s proud association, demonstrated especially in his works, shows the uniqueness of the French Enlightenment context as compared to that discussed in England and Scotland, creating a somewhat identifiably different perspective on the term and its usage at this time.

The Enlightenment, as well as any real transformative stage in history, is difficult to pin down. Just as described in the introduction to this study, stages of time have a lot of bleeding over between what may be construed as a beginning or end. Bravely

⁷⁵ Gavin Hyman, *Atheism in Modern History*, 30.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*

attempting to bracket the Enlightenment, Peter Gay places the beginning at the Glorious Revolution in England in 1688, and the French Revolution of 1789 at the end.⁷⁸ His assessment is not far off, yet he is also not making the statement that “Enlightenment ideas were unknown before 1688” and then ceased after the French Revolution.⁷⁹ To further corroborate his claim, Gay identifies three “generations of writers” within this stage, key figures to the core of Enlightenment. Of these Voltaire and Diderot fall into the first and second generations, respectively, alongside Montesquieu, Franklin and Hume.⁸⁰ These two French Enlightenment philosophers did great works toward the evolution of Atheism from a curious and benign inquisitiveness toward its future distinction, cultivating the title of “Atheist” from inane and dangerous to intellectual rational.

While the Enlightenment stage has come to be known as the “age of reason,” Gay develops this distinction concerning the French aspect by referring to it instead as the “age of criticism,” as the philosophes—French Enlighteners—believed that “reason was not the only tool of enlightenment,” adding as well that to criticize, the better tool, there needed also to be a sense of autonomy.⁸¹ The longing for freedom was great during this stage, and very much so in France. The philosophes came together in a unified spirit, united on a “vastly ambitious program, a program of secularism, humanity, cosmopolitanism, and freedom, above all, freedom in its many forms—freedom from arbitrary power, freedom of speech, freedom of trade, freedom to realize one’s talents,

⁷⁸ Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism*, 137.

⁷⁹ Ibid.

⁸⁰ Ibid.

⁸¹ Peter Gay, *The Enlightenment: An Interpretation, The Rise of Modern Paganism*, Vol. I. (New York: W.W. Norton, 1977), 141.

freedom of aesthetic response, freedom, in a word, of moral man to make his own way in the world.”⁸² It is not hard to see how these calls for freedom translated for many Enlightenment philosophers into a freedom from religion. Smith describes the temperament of the time as that of a child growing out of its puerile adolescence into adulthood. The prepubescent time of dependence on religion had past. No longer did the people need the “myths and superstitions of the Church to comfort them and explain their lives,” nor did they need the “guardianship of oppressive political regimes.”⁸³ Science was marching humanity toward a glorious future.⁸⁴

At least that was the intent. While the long for freedom manifested itself in a wide range of political evolutions worldwide, some extremely violent, it would not be until the twentieth-century that such an openly proud application of “Atheism” would appear. Even Voltaire, whilst asserting the need to “*écrasez l’infame*,”⁸⁵ and Diderot whose *Encyclopaedia* provided an outlet for predominately Atheist texts, could not—or perhaps chose not—to commit openly. It is even said of Diderot to this affect that he was a “deist in the country and an Atheist in Paris.”⁸⁶ Thus was evident the wonderful enigma of context. In fact, as the next act in this stage will show, the employ of “Atheism” seemed too light for the properties the term represented, a context that found itself under the influence of a remarkably influential scientific discovery.

⁸² Ibid., 3.

⁸³ Graeme Smith, *A Short History of Secularism*, 141.

⁸⁴ Ibid.

⁸⁵ See James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 25-28.

⁸⁶ James Thrower, *Western Atheism*, 106.

Huxley's "Agnosticism"

In 1925, in a small courthouse in Dayton, Tennessee, John Thomas Scopes was found guilty for violating the *Butler Act*, a piece of legislature passed earlier that same year. The trial to condemn Scopes was massive. At least two million words of “newspaper reportage” were telegraphed out. Radio recordings broadcast the trial from state to state. At the center of the commotion were two immensely popular and nationally famous lawyers, fighting head to head. On one side defending Scopes was the Atheist Clarence Darrow;⁸⁷ on the other, the political and religious “great commoner,” William Jennings Bryan. It was a battle of metaphorical pomp and circumstance, and realistic twaddle. Scopes, a young, recent college graduate had broken the law in Tennessee for teaching Darwin’s theory of evolution in a public school. Contextually, with the dominance in the South of Fundamentalist Christianity, his bold affront to Tennessee law was tantamount to the ballyhoo afforded the trial that forever bears his—and a monkey’s—name.⁸⁸

⁸⁷ Clarence Darrow preferred, in many ways, to be associated with the term “agnostic” over “Atheist.” See Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2006).

⁸⁸ It has been argued that the Scopes-Monkey trial was a “ridiculousness” display of power, brokered on two sides of a country struggling with its own progression. Fundamentalist Christians—having been designated a title around the same time as the trial—were seeking a stay of execution for what they were convinced would be the end not just of their faith in the United States, but of God’s chosen nation as well. The battle for religious superiority between two devout men, Christian and Atheist, became a metaphor for the future of religious America. At the announcement of the verdict it appeared Christianity had won out over scientific heathenism. Fundamental Christians were victorious and proud and celebratory. Sadly for them, though, the bubble burst as not only did the Tennessee Supreme Court throw out the ruling on a technicality, but America progressed regardless of the trial or its outcome. Evolutionary Biology has become a standard in public schools—though the debate still continues over it and Intelligent Design. Scientific Atheism has risen in numbers, and Fundamental Christianity retreated, for a time, into the wilderness from whence it emerged, only to return in the mid to late 1960s. It would seem that the issues dealt with by Thomas H. Huxley were not unique to his own context, but have carried through time. For more on the Scopes-Monkey Trial and its aftermath, see Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People, 2 Volumes* (New Haven, Image Books, 1975), 397-399; Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in Their Own Land: 500 Years of Religion in America* (New York: Penguin Books, 1985), 380-381; Peter W. Williams, *America’s Religions: From Their Origins to the Twenty-First Century* (Chicago: University of

The cause of this religious stir in quiet southern America was published by Charles Darwin in 1859, but conceived of twenty-eight years earlier. In short, Scopes had challenged the Christian notion that God had not just ordained life into existence, but also controlled it, by teaching Darwin's theory of evolution, founded on the principle that special change occurs genetically in order to perpetuate life. Darwin's theory, influenced greatly by his examinations of wildlife within the Galapagos archipelago off the coast of South America, found that species compete for survival, the fittest prolonging its existence, evolving when necessary to do so.⁸⁹ Two things further came about with this theory. Beyond the sense that scientific reasoning—the same autonomous reasoning that propelled the Enlightenment into a fury—had replaced in many ways the religious authority reigning over humanity, Darwin's theory implanted the idea that man was an animal the same as every other species vying for survival in a dark and violent world. To speak of humanity, post Darwinian evolution, came to mean a species of creature competing for survival and evolving over millions of years. Not since Galileo had there been such a drastic interpretation of a universe seen through a different lens. As described by Stephen Jay Gould, “no issue...had so challenged traditional views about the deepest meaning of human life, and therefore so contacted a domain of religious

Illinois Press, 2002), 244-348; and especially Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2006); and Edward J. Larson, *Trial and Error: The American Controversy over Creation and Evolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁸⁹ For more on Darwin's fateful journey see, Charles Darwin, *The Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection, or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, edited by J.W. Burrow (New York: Penguin Books, 1985); Daniel C. Dennet, *Darwin's Dangerous Idea: Evolution and the Meaning of Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Edward J. Larson, *Evolution: The Remarkable History of a Scientific Theory* (New York: Modern Library, 2006); Edward J. Larson, *Evolution's Workshop: God and Science on the Galapagos Islands* (New York: Basic Books, 2002); and David Lack, *Darwin's Finches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

inquiry as well.”⁹⁰ Not surprisingly, the reaction to Darwin’s “dangerous idea” was intense. It was presumed that with the introduction of an evolutionary answer to life’s greatest questions, the “implication would be that nothing could be sacred.”⁹¹ In other words, by removing the mystery of God’s great work and supplanting it with an empirical and detailed summation of life in simplistic terms of survival and genetic innovation, “nothing could have any point,” descending humanity into a pit of nihilistic disconnection.⁹²

Many debates, arguments, and all-out fights took place shortly after Darwin permitted his findings to be published, one of the most famous of which took place between Samuel Wilberforce, the Bishop of Oxford, and “Darwin’s bulldog,” Thomas Henry Huxley. Huxley wrote a letter to Darwin shortly before the publication of *Origin of Species* in which he assured the naturalist that he was preparing himself for the inevitable battle between religion and science by “sharpening” his “claws” and “beak in readiness.”⁹³ Ready he was. The tale of the confrontation between the man of God and the man of science at Oxford’s Museum of Natural History in 1860 forecast the courtroom drama in Dayton as two men, each holding a line, fought for the right to believe that which his conscience told him was right. The ballyhoo found between Huxley and Wilberforce’s debate was as piqued as it was between Bryan and Darrow. Women fainted. Tempers raged. Thinking he could corner Huxley, Wilberforce

⁹⁰ Stephen Jay Gould, *Rock of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of life* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 122.

⁹¹ Daniel C. Dennett, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 18.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Huxley as quoted in Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, 17.

famously asked from which side of his family he was descended from an ape, only to receive the disappointing response that he—Huxley—would prefer being descended from a primate rather than to be “connected with a man who used great gifts to obscure the truth.”⁹⁴

Huxley’s famous rhetorical temper and willingness to embattle whosoever felt the inane necessity to challenge Darwin’s evolutionary theory garnered him a reputation of devout Atheist, curiously a title he shirked away. He did not care to be called an “Atheist,” longed for a new title, and through his own progression between theism, pantheism, and Atheism, found no soluble answer. In exploring the meanings behind each term he surmised that the exponents of these distinctions had come to a shared and “common assumption,” an assumption with which he disagreed.⁹⁵ He found that these people shared a common knowledge, albeit unique from one another, as if they were “quite sure they had attained a certain “gnosis,”” and had, more or less successfully, “solved the problem of existence.”⁹⁶

Seeing a need for a clearer way to describe his beliefs, Huxley formed the term “agnostic.” Modern derivations have adjusted his label to suit different contexts, exactly as has been the case for “Atheism.” In fact, his appellation of “agnostic” was meant as “somewhat of a joke.”⁹⁷ He had inspired his new title on the religious sect of Gnostics,

⁹⁴ Huxley as quoted in Daniel C. Dennet, *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea*, 336.

⁹⁵ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1989), 9.

⁹⁶ Thomas Henry Huxley, *Agnosticism and Christianity and Other Essays* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1992), 162.

⁹⁷ George H. Smith, *Atheism: The Case Against God*, 9.

so named because they claimed “knowledge of the supernatural without justification.”⁹⁸ By referring to himself as an “a-gnostic,” he was making the statement that he was unable to know something without reason involved, especially concerning the supernatural, which he deemed “beyond the scope of human knowledge.”⁹⁹ Rather than claiming absolute knowledge about a presumably unattainable entity, he offered the better path of suspended judgment.

Agnosticism for Huxley was not an entity delineating between theism and Atheism, but rather a third process that could, depending on the person espousing the ideology, involve either theistic or Atheistic belief structures.¹⁰⁰ In fact, Huxley constructed agnosticism as a method rather than belief, an important distinction when one considers that it is, rather than a “middle position,” not a position “at all and therefore not a position about belief” and “certainly not about religious belief in particular.”¹⁰¹ In essence, Huxley’s agnosticism could be translated as “caution.” It was a process of admitting one’s own inability to fully apprehend that which is untouchable, and in so doing, the ability to not blindly accept the unknown.¹⁰²

As far as the title “Atheism” is concerned, Huxley’s addition added a different take. Agnosticism has popularly been recognized as a condition of lesser extreme to

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ In the context of the Great Disappointment Theory, agnosticism serves the role of intermediary between the three processes of Atheism, Fundamentalism, and New Religious Movements. Under this category an agnostic is someone in the midst of evolving from one belief to another, arguing the use as described by its creator. See Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment* (master’s thesis, Baylor University, 2010).

¹⁰¹ Jack David Eller, “What is Atheism?” in *Atheism and Secularity, Volume I: Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, edited by Phil Zuckerman (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 9.

¹⁰² Ibid.

Atheism, as well as a noncommittal stance. In the end, though, agnosticism was not meant, nor has it taken on, the mantle of new religious ideology. Rather than becoming a path of religious belief, it properly amassed the spirit of Enlightenment Atheism, a condition of caution, rational thought, empirical analysis of the unknown, and inability to accept the heteronomous perception of religious authority. As a process of autonomous self-interest, agnosticism, as an Enlightened Atheistic process—the inability to accept, and even rejection of, religious authoritative ideology—was, and continues to be, a means by which doubters have found freedom from religion.

Holyoake's "Secularism" and Bradlaugh's "Atheism"

From the modernization brought on by the ascendancy of Darwin's theory, to the readjustment of social and political culture, especially in England where evolution was mixing with the astronomical and physical sciences, came new ways to express one's doubt and rejection. George Jacob Holyoake for instance promoted the new process of "free thought," listing the many historical times that could counter the contemporary opinion that people were free to think for themselves.¹⁰³ Among the right to think truly freely, Holyoake further promoted three factors as conditions of truth, "free inquiry," "free publicity," and the "free discussion of convictions," each providing a pathway, encouragement, and verification of "truth."¹⁰⁴

¹⁰³ George Jacob Holyoake, "English Secularism," in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, edited by Gordon Stein (New York: Prometheus Books, 1980), 300.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 301.

This longing for truth served a bit difficult for Holyoake whose strong commitment to a public admission of Atheism landed him in prison in 1842.¹⁰⁵ Free thought was not an individual endeavor, however, and ten years after his imprisonment Holyoake founded the Secular Society, forming a social group around his preferred term of Atheism, “Secularism.” Secularism spreads its shadow to encompass a great number of social issues, including the autonomous freedom of education, the press, political reform, and even the “enfranchisement of women.”¹⁰⁶ It also distinguished Holyoake and his followers as being different than those “Atheists” who were still thought of as immoral because of their being “without God.”¹⁰⁷ Holyoake’s term was meant to represent the temporal importance rational man bestowed upon the importance in life. For the “Secularists,” rather than focusing a necessity of attention on the celestial heavens, humanity would be better suited to focus its attention upon this life, and that which was attainable in secular, mortal, and moral terms. As put forth by Holyoake himself, he endeavored to “show that Secularism seeks the development of the physical, moral, and intellectual nature of man to the highest possible point, as the immediate duty of this life.”¹⁰⁸ “Science,” which he associated directly to “reason” was “revealing to men the operation of the natural world, and the contemporary systems of scientific

¹⁰⁵ Jeaneane Fowler, *Humanism: Beliefs and Practices* (Brighton: Sussex Academic Press, 1999), 26.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Michael J. Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 10.

¹⁰⁸ George Jacob Holyoake, *The Reasoner*, Volume 26, Issues 763-788, Universal Community Society of Rational Religionists.

morals,” by means of the “science of personality of phrenology” would ultimately “reveal the science of social life.”¹⁰⁹

There are two important distinctions to be made concerning Holyoake’s term, both dependent on the context of his beliefs. First, the secularism Holyoake promoted, while somewhat similar in kind to the American political ideology that separated church and state, is not the same animal. Holyoake’s “Secularism” was akin to an Atheistic separation of man from God and the restrictions of religion, not “secularization,” the separation of religion from political practice, a truly autonomous action.¹¹⁰ The second concerns the influence his “Secularism” had over the burgeoning notion of “Humanism, seen also in the “thorough” Atheism¹¹¹ of Charles Bradlaugh.¹¹² Furthermore, to the influence of “Humanism” and essentially to “Atheism” Holyoake contributed significantly to the process by which Atheistic thinking became synonymous to social movements and eventually Socialism. By the time he moved to London, Holyoake had become an active member in many social groups which existed to promote the ideals of irreligious social progress. The London scene of irreligion at the time revealed in a

¹⁰⁹ Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977), 27.

¹¹⁰ George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* (Chicago: The Open Court Publishing Company, 1896), 303.

¹¹¹ Samuel Bagg and David Voas, “The Triumph of Indifference: Irreligion in British Society,” *Atheism and Secularity, Volume 2, Global Expressions*, edited by Phil Zuckerman (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 92.

¹¹² An also important aspect of Bradlaugh, though too extensive for this short study, is his relationship with Annie Besant. Besant, who would be remembered best for her role in leading the Theosophical movement after the death of Helena P. Blavatsky, was a strong confidant of Bradlaugh, writing together with him on social issues pertaining to women’s rights, the tract on birth control landing them both in court for blasphemy. For more, see Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief: Atheists and Agnostics in English Society 1850-1960* (London: Heinemann, 1977); and Annie Besant, “Why I do not Believe in God,” in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, edited by Gordon Stein (New York: Prometheus Books, 1980).

blurred soft-focus of “mass movements” of like-minded “secularists,” “freethinkers,” and “Atheists,” all vying for freedom and acceptance.¹¹³

The secular movement, begun by Holyoake and eventually led by the successful politician Charles Bradlaugh, underwent ironically similar issues and evolution as that of its denominational counterparts. Susan Budd paints a picture of the secular movement under the argumentative leadership between Holyoake and Bradlaugh as ones similar to denominational debates concerning music, liturgy, etc., yet in an anti-clerical capacity. At the core of their debates—and really the central concern of their intellectual differences—is a focus on principles, specifically the form of “Atheism” that would best support their claims.¹¹⁴ While the “Secularism” of Holyoake was a tactile affront to the religious authority of the time, Bradlaugh’s public affirmation of “Atheism” was more “militant and radical.”¹¹⁵ Bradlaugh presented this militancy both orally and physically, striking a memorable chord with statements which declared that human improvement and happiness was obstructed by religion “when the intellect is impeded by childish and absurd superstition.”¹¹⁶

The debates over the importance and/or use of militant Atheism aside, Bradlaugh is perhaps most famously remembered for his role in the legal permission of Atheism in the British House of Parliament, an event that would presage the American court cases discussed in chapter four. Bradlaugh, having amassed a reputation for pomp and hopeful audacity, led campaigns up to his first election to Parliament on subjects of democracy,

¹¹³ Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 32-34.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 35.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 42.

¹¹⁶ Charles Bradlaugh as quoted in Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 42.

freedom of rights, and especially the right of Atheists to “affirm” rather than swear when it came time for oath-taking.¹¹⁷ Unfortunately, though Parliament had undergone a drastic evolution of pluralism throughout the nineteenth-century, permitting the election of Catholics in 1829, and Jewish members in 1858, there was no precedence for an Atheist in 1880.¹¹⁸ Bradlaugh was denied his seat. When he won again in 1882 he was denied once more, both times for his inability to swear an oath to the Queen, “affirming” having been decided to be too weak of a commitment. When he was re-elected a third time in 1886, after his seat remained open during court appeals, he was swiftly sworn in and took his seat. It was a tremendous victory for the Secular/Humanist/Atheists of Britain, followed quickly by Bradlaugh’s introduction of the 1888 Oaths Act that fought for the right of all Atheists to take part in the political process.¹¹⁹

The Secularism of Holyoake and Atheism of Bradlaugh combined to inspire the Atheistic thinking of British society, as well as the Humanist movement that was inspired by, and incorporated, both ideologies. Their attempts to entitle the process by which man rejected or doubted the divine made for new forms of “Atheism”—essentially new denominations of the same ideology. Their contribution, among those of Diderot and Huxley, to the Atheism that was taking shape assisted in the rights, privileges, and equality of Atheists, regardless if at the time their convictions were necessarily “legal.” Furthermore, these interpretations provide a flowing evolution from antiquity through Enlightenment, helping better define what it was—and is—to be a contextual “Atheist.”

¹¹⁷ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 415.

¹¹⁸ Gavin Hyman, *A Short History of Atheism*, 12.

¹¹⁹ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: a History*, 415.

Before breaking into the modern age—perhaps better defined as the post-modern age—the final genre, reductionism, must be evaluated.

Reductionist Thinkers

Thus far Enlightenment Atheism has been sorted as both a natural process and an identity of mark. The Enlightenment, as has been represented by the histories of its more famous contributors, provided the backdrop for philosophers to freely challenge established ideas. It furthermore set the stage for a break away from the restrictions and rulings of absolute religious authority. By using scientific analysis, that is, by applying an empirical study to the wholly other, the unattainable, the sacred and divine, and by studying the data found in the nature of humanity, Enlightenment thinkers were able to bring God to trial.

Already established is the science of nature—the deism of Lord Herbert and Locke and Hume, as well as the contributions to identity toward the end of the Enlightenment and beyond with the additions of Huxley, Diderot, Holyoake, and Bradlaugh. The next genre, reductionism, used the science of functional socialism to break down the process of belief into categories of humanitarian necessity. Reductionist philosophy essentially reduces religion of its layers, revealing the true purpose by peeling away the unnecessary chaff. In order to do this properly, the layers peeled away more often than not represent the sacred elements necessary to make something religious, such as the true purpose of rituals or the process of biblical criticism—analyzing the true authors, time period, etc. of religious texts attributed to ancient religious characters.

Reductionism acts to reveal the “truth” behind religious ideologies. For a reductionist, religion serves a particular function, more than likely secular, but masked as

a sacred entity. The three reductionists briefly represented below served their field by drawing out the functional aspect they believed religion served, and thus drawing out what they feel is the purpose of religion, and how it was created in the first place.

Feuerbach's Anthropology

To speak of Humanism is to place man at the center of himself. In Humanism, man, the earth, the temporal, are sacred. Ludwig Feuerbach's philosophy of religion steered fairly close to this ideology. In essence, Feuerbach saw theology as anthropology, that is to say, that man found himself in God, and vice versa. However, to fully understand Feuerbach's anthropology, first one must appreciate that he was also promoting the antithesis to Hegelian philosophy.

Feuerbach was an eminent student of G.W.F. Hegel, whose massive body of work—at least concerning Feuerbach—can be summed up by finding that the “human subject is conceived as God in his self-alienation.”¹²⁰ In other, slightly less confusing terms, “man is the revealed God,” in that man “knows God,” because “in him God finds and knows himself, feels himself as God.”¹²¹ For Hegel, God existed because he was in man. For Feuerbach, God existed because man was God. It is because humanity is a thoughtful entity that “humans project their own being into objectivity (God), and hence a person's religion is the self and activity externalized and objectified.” God, in this sense, is “his (a person's) relinquished self.”¹²² Feuerbach was not only reducing religion—and

¹²⁰ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 222.

¹²¹ Ludwig Feuerbach quoted in James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 222.

¹²² James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought*, 222.

as such “God”—into anthropology, but he was also relinquishing the process of religion to humanity’s subconscious.

In fact, Feuerbach saw religion not just as an aspect of man’s consciousness, but rather as the “first form of consciousness.”¹²³ He made religion personal, but not in the way American religion has become individual. Rather, the sacredness of Feuerbach’s religion is found in “the traditions of the primitive self-consciousness.”¹²⁴ As for God this same transference occurs wherein “feeling makes God a man, and man a God.”¹²⁵ The “feeling” he refers to here is essentially human emotion which, when engendered, causes a “religious” experience akin to a sacred event. In this way the “purely” and “truly human emotions are religious.” Conversely, for the same reason, “religious emotions are purely human.”¹²⁶

To reduce this into simple language, Feuerbach—envisioning himself a second Luther—saw his transference of theology to anthropology as the “birth” of a “new religion of humanity.”¹²⁷ For him God is “nothing else than man,” and the “outward projection of man’s inward nature.”¹²⁸ Does this religion of humanity mark Feuerbach as an Atheist though? He is definitely a reductionist, but as he argues in his own defense against any idea that he wishes to destroy or do away with religion or especially God, he

¹²³ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, trans. George Eliot (New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 2008), 222.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 229.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

¹²⁷ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 223.

¹²⁸ Christopher Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (New York: The Continuum International Publishing Group, 2011), 23.

states that while “reducing theology to anthropology,” he also exalts “anthropology into theology, very much as Christianity, while lowering God into man, made man into God.”¹²⁹ To rebuke any further speculation about his possible Atheism, he answers:

He who says no more than that I am an Atheist, says and knows nothing of me. The question as to the existence or non-existence of God, the opposition between theism and Atheism, belongs to the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries but not the nineteenth. I deny God. But that means for me that I deny the negation of man... The question concerning the existence or non-existence of God is for me nothing but the question concerning the existence or non-existence of man.¹³⁰

Sadly for Feuerbach, his reductionism is still akin to this study’s contextual application of “Atheism.” As he reduces religion from the sacred to the profane, by inclining one to “smile” at his christening “eating and drinking religious acts, because they are common everyday acts, and are therefore performed by multitudes without thought, without emotion,”¹³¹ he reveals the function of religion, of faith, and of God. From a natural, to a political, and now a philosophical perspective, with Feuerbach, Atheism advanced.

Marx’s Opium

Utilizing the social functionalism of religion in a uniquely different way, Karl Marx, more famous in the modern age as the bearded man who inspired socialism, equally contributed to the reduction of religion by famously referring to it as the “opium of the people,”¹³² a drug prescribed to keep the poor in check and the rich in power.

¹²⁹ Feuerbach, *Essence of Christianity*, xxxviii.

¹³⁰ Ludwig Feuerbach as quoted in James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 223.

¹³¹ Ludwig Feuerbach, *The Essence of Christianity*, 228.

¹³² Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, *Collected Works* (London: Lawrence & Wishart, 1975), 38.

Marx carries with him the socialist Atheist distinction similar to that of Holyoake, Bradlaugh, and Besant, but in a far more drastic application. Those in the west perceive him as a great enemy, the producer of modern Socialism. Those in the west who lived through World War II and the Cold War will more than likely remember the ideas of Karl Marx as the foundation of the great red menace. Those descriptions are not essential to this study—even though they represent the contexts which evolved from his own—as they symbolize the result of his Atheism, not the genesis or justification of it.

Marx presaged the view of Freud that religion was an “illusion,” that it served a functional purpose and acted as a “cloak of deception hiding the real material economic forces that made the world what it was.”¹³³ More than that though, religion to Marx was much more a detriment to society than Freud would conceive it to be. Whilst for Freud, religion is a carried-over repressed sense of guilt, Marx saw religion as a weapon, a fetter, injurious, oppressive, and an invention of social class regimentation.¹³⁴ These are all elements reflected in his later writings, especially found in his statement of religion as a drug. However, prior to that scene in his story, Marx was an “old-school Atheist” before anything else.¹³⁵

Interestingly enough, Marx seems to transcend the reductionist genre—and perhaps further than that—as his work in Atheology begins with his dissertation, given in 1841, a critique of Democritus and Epicurus, two characters looked at in the previous chapter of this study. His critiques of ancient Atheism developed his own philosophies as

¹³³ Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 207.

¹³⁴ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 136-138.

¹³⁵ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 389.

he, echoing the ideologies of Epicurus, as summarized by Hecht, find blasphemy not in “the one who scorns the God of the masses,” but the one “who blindly embraces him.”¹³⁶

It was shortly after this that Marx discovered the humanism of Feuerbach and, like that reductionist philosopher, abandoned his Hegelian idealism for the theory that religion was a human creation. In Feuerbach, Marx found that religion was not something to be swept away, but that it was in fact a “symptom of a cruel economic world.”¹³⁷ His most famous line was published in 1844 in the introduction of *Contribution to the Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Right*, in which he prescribed social revolution, not empirical and scientific philosophy, as that which could dissolve religion. He stated:

Religion is the sigh of the oppressed creature, the heart of a heartless world, just as it is the spirit of a spiritless situation. It is the opium of the people. The abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions of the people is required for their real happiness. The demand to give up the illusions about its condition is the demand to give up a condition which needs illusions. The criticism of religion is therefore in embryo the criticism of the vale of woe, the halo of which is religion.¹³⁸

Marx’s Atheistic response to religion was more unique than that of the Enlightened philosophers who came before him, and even unique to the reductionists who shared the stage with him toward the end of the nineteenth-century. The socialism that amassed from his ideologies would provide an eventual civic Atheism, unique in itself as being a religious Atheism, ironically serving the same oppressive role as the

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid., 390.

¹³⁸ Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel’s ‘Philosophy of Right,’* trans. and edited by Joseph O’Malley (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 131.

religion it replaced.¹³⁹ Nonetheless, Marx's designation of religion as a tool of the upper class bourgeoisie to control the working men of the world painted a picture of religion as a wholly humanistic entity, reducing it to a finite element and, as will be seen through a Freudian lens, a socially influenced psychosis of control.

Freud's Illusion

It would appear that Feuerbach was using the art of augury when he penned his reduction of religion down to the "self's alienation and repression,"¹⁴⁰ as it emulates the psychological religious formulations as expressed by Sigmund Freud. Freud went even further than Feuerbach with his complete commission of Atheism, referring to religion in one of his greatest works as an "illusion." In his *The Future of an Illusion*, he developed his reduction of religion by explaining man's need for God—an adult, male, authority figure—away as another infantile need for "protection through love."¹⁴¹ After all, for Freud, religion was nothing more than repression. In fact, his reductionism is best represented by a retreat to antiquity, to a play by the great Sophocles, a story that perfectly reflects his theory of the origins of religion.

Religion—in Freudian terms—comes from guilt; it is a special type of guilt, the type of guilt which derives from a terribly horrific act. This horrific act must, for purposes of future understanding, fall into an historical context. That context is found in

¹³⁹ See Chris Marsh, *Religion and the State in Russia and China: Suppression, Survival, and Revival* (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2011).

¹⁴⁰ James C. Livingston, *Modern Christian Thought, I*, 224.

¹⁴¹ Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, trans. James Strachey (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1961), 38-71.

the earliest forms of humanity's social constructions: the primitive tribe.¹⁴² The young men of this ancient tribe became jealous of their father's power, and especially of his harem. In an almost Darwinian fashion they took up arms against him, killing him, and then celebrated by satisfying the "sexual appetites which had so long been frustrated."¹⁴³ Using the road map of psychosis, Freud navigated the mind of religious man and found that his religion, the practice of worshipping a set God, was truly a simple repressive trait, ingrained on the subconscious of a guilt-ridden humanity. Freud recognized this storyline in the play *Oedipus Rex*, which tells a similar plot. Oedipus, unbeknownst to him for reasons of poetic purpose, kills his father and marries his mother. All three parties are ignorant of the actions they have taken and the consequences are drastic. The father is killed, the mother kills herself, and Oedipus plucks out his own eyes in shame.

Freud's "Oedipus complex" becomes the foundation of his theory of religion. Like Feuerbach, Freud reduces religion—and thus God—down to humanism. Tracing the genesis of religion to the actions of early man, religion is neurosis, a repressed action, an unshakable guilt, and entirely profane. It is later when man applies the sacred to his repressive guilt, as found in the works of James Frazer and Robertson Smith, whose studies of totemism¹⁴⁴ became the source of Freud's outlet in his *Totem and Taboo*.¹⁴⁵ Furthermore, religion acts as a psychotic mechanism in binding man together under

¹⁴² Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 247.

¹⁴³ Ibid.

¹⁴⁴ *Totem and Taboo* also deals with what Freud envisioned—along with E.B. Tylor—was the first of man's religions, Animism. This Animism explains the religious need for man to make sacred that which is profane, in order to make sense of, according to Freud, feelings of guilt due to inadequacy or sexual repression. Man created the totem, a sacred relic, in order to pacify and alleviate the taboo. See Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, A.A. Brill, trans. (New York: Barnes & Noble Publishing, Inc., 2005); for more on Animism, see Edward Burnett Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches Into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Language, Art, and Custom*, 2 vols. (New York: Cornell University Press, 2009).

shared guilt. Neurosis is the genesis for Freud; it is the “beginnings of religion, ethics, society, and art,” met together “in the Oedipus Complex.”¹⁴⁶

The Atheism of Freud is privy to the freedom of the twentieth-century permission to doubt openly. He set out to answer the question as to why religion, wrung through the empirical analyses of the Enlightenment, continued to persist. If one wished to know how religion managed to survive having been “discredited by science or better philosophy,” Freud could answer that the “ultimate source of religion’s appeal is not the rational mind but the subconscious.”¹⁴⁷ In his way, Freud both critiqued the Enlightenment, as well as answered its most pressing questions.

Curious Atheism

Was Martin Luther an Atheist? Of course he believed in God—passionately—but he also argued and fought with the Catholic Church over infallible dogma. If the Catholic Church in 1517 was the voice of God on earth, was Luther not rejecting that voice for his own—at the time—rational thinking? By promoting a religious body of sola scriptura, sola fides, sola gratias, was Luther not also promoting a religious ideology counter to the universally accepted beliefs of God? Was his God not a Catholic God? Like the Emperor Trajan condemning countless Christians to death for their refusal to accept the Roman pantheon—or even himself—as divine, Luther was judging the Catholic Church and condemning it as incorrect in comparison to his own views. Was

¹⁴⁵ Ivan Strenski speaks to this connection in his *Thinking About Religion*, as well does Susan Budd, but Freud draws it out best in his own work. See Ivan Strenski, *Thinking About Religion*, 246-242; Susan Budd, *Varieties of Unbelief*, 160-165.

¹⁴⁶ Sigmund Freud, *Totem and Taboo*, 148.

¹⁴⁷ Daniel L. Pals, *Seven Theories of Religion*, 78.

his context enough to mark him as being “Atheistic?” What if instead of Protestantism, the results of Luther’s theses resulted in a religion that venerated a golden calf, or a series of gods, or, even worse, an anthropocentric and humanistic rendering of the natural world and universe?

These questions, while fun to ponder, are not entirely useful. Contexts exist in stages of time and are unchangeable. Luther was a Christian, and an angry one at that. Yet, he was still a doubter. He challenged the complete authority of the Catholic Church, rejected the dogma for which it stood, and opted for *fides ex auditu*—faith through hearing.¹⁴⁸ From the view atop Mons Vaticanus, Luther was a heretic. He outwardly rejected the rituals of the church, casting aside all the sacraments save baptism and the Eucharist. He refused to recant. He was excommunicated. He irreversibly reformed Christianity, in many ways diminishing the power of God’s church on earth. Considering the death sentences of Socrates and Polycarp, and the natural religion sought by Lord Herbert and John Locke, was Luther not an “Atheist: just as they were?”¹⁴⁹

The term “Atheist” is a wide spreading umbrella, casting an even wider shadow. It has evolved alongside religious beliefs of equal but opposite cultural importance, and has, like those religious beliefs, adapted itself to the people for whom it helped define. Therefore, to speak of an “Enlightenment Atheist” is distinctly not the same as speaking of a pagan “Atheos,” or twenty-first century “New Atheist.”

The Enlightenment stage is a perfect second act to this three-part story of western Atheism. The second act is always darker, sadder; the challenges weighed on the

¹⁴⁸ David Chidester, *Christianity: A Global History* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2000), 321.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*

characters are always heavier than they were in the first act.¹⁵⁰ The second act does not necessarily end happily, but it also does not end in despair. The tragedy and anguish of the second act prepares the characters for the third. Just at the dark, closing moments of the second act, light is seen. Paulo Coelho's young Santiago reminds himself, just as the journey becomes its most difficult, that the "darkest hour of the night came just before the dawn."¹⁵¹ Perhaps it is truly appropriate that this stage is known as the "Enlightenment," a period of intellectual, as well as spiritual, light.

¹⁵⁰ Consider Luke Skywalker and his sister—though neither he, nor the audience is aware of this at the time—watching the Millennium Falcon soaring off to rescue Han Solo at the end of *Empire Strikes Back*, or the journey still ahead of Frodo and Sam at the conclusion of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Two Towers*.

¹⁵¹ Paulo Coelho, *The Alchemist: A Fable about Following Your Dream* (New York: Harper Collins, 1998), 134.

CHAPTER FOUR

Nova

As a biological phenomenon, religion is the product of cognitive processes that have deep roots in our evolutionary past. Some researchers have speculated that religion itself may have played an important role in getting large groups of prehistoric humans to socially cohere. If this is true, we can say that religion has served an important purpose. This does not suggest, however, that it serves an important purpose now. There is, after all, nothing more natural than rape. But no one would argue that rape is good, or compatible with a civil society, because it may have had evolutionary advantages for our ancestors. That religion may have served some necessary function for us in the past does not preclude the possibility that it is now the greatest impediment to our building a global civilization.

—Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 90-91

Too Many

The Enlightenment—and in many ways Pagan Antiquity—was distinguished as a period of investigation, of exploration, and a stage of doubt inundated with an increasing interest in seeking out some empirically or rationally-based truth to coincide with humanity's unshakable and intrinsically religious connotations. Twentieth to twenty-first century Atheism, the latter known affectionately—albeit arguably inaccurately—as New Atheism, is a movement that no longer feels the need to search or explore.

For these modern Atheists science has evolved beyond the Newtonian view of a physical universe in need of a creator and intervener, and pushed into the realm of chemical and biological mechanics void of a super-imposing entity responsible for its inception. These Atheists no longer ask questions unless done so to garner a particular response for means of debate. What is more, in what has been described as a form of militancy—a ridiculous title when compared to the Atheism of Russia during the mid to

late twentieth-century¹—the New Atheist finds himself on one side of a battlefield for the supremacy of rationality and common sense against an enemy of fundamentalist regressive and socially damaging religious nonsense. Atheism in this stage has grown wings.

The sad reality of a study of this size is that the Atheisms of the twentieth century as a whole are too many to discuss in the pages herein. In fact, the religious transformations of the twentieth century, from American Prohibition in the 1920s to the rise of new age religious ideologies worldwide in the 1960s run the gamut of a vast religious plurality.² American Christian fundamentalism, for example, rose, receded, then rose again in the course of fifty years. In the one hundred years from the turn the of the century to the new millennium the idea of an American “Christian nation” became a multi-layered religious nation, much to the chagrin of those who longed for the old days.³ Yet, while one may argue that American citizens are able to change their cultural distinctions and not their ethnicities—a somewhat prickly racist ideology⁴—religion has nonetheless amalgamated throughout the world.

¹ See William B. Husband, *“Godless Communists:” Atheism and Society in Soviet Russia, 1917-1932* (Dekalb: Northern Illinois University Press, 2000).

² An interesting subject of study concerning religious pluralism that was not able to fit into this particular study, but should be evaluated further, is that of “virtual plurality.” Virtual plurality, a theory of the author’s creation, consists of the results of media being the catalyst for religious pluralism. Essentially, it asks the question as to whether or not the media’s usage of opposing religious ideologies to that of the viewer has any affect on said viewer’s personal religious ideologies. For instance, when a television show or sitcom displays a religious act, does that viewing “teach” the viewer about that religion? Does the public-at-large benefit, plurally, when it views, say, a Bar Mitzvah, a Muslim man or woman reciting the Bismillah, or a Christian participating in the Eucharist? Does *A Charley Brown Christmas* do more than just teach children the true meaning of Christmas? Hopefully through further studies these questions can be better examined.

³ Specifically see Samuel P. Huntington, *Who Are We?: The Challenges to America’s National Identity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005).

⁴ *Ibid.*, 130.

Atheism, and its many deviations thereof, translated plurally during this century, both in and outside the United States. Atheisms from many fields and many backgrounds—contexts—popped up as the stigma of ridicule and immorality subtly, and continually, wore off. These Atheisms show a diversity of people, such as that of Clarence Darrow, Douglas Adams, Carl Sagan, Woody Allen, Isaac Asimov, Dan Barker, Salman Rushdie, Paul Bettany, Stieg Larson, George Orwell, Daniel Radcliffe, Bertrand Russell, Katherine Hepburn, Madalyn Murray O’Hair, Jean-Paul Sartre, Ricky Gervais, Theo van Gogh, Mark Zuckerberg, and the list goes on.⁵ This diversity, in turn, has produced many denominations of Atheism, secularism, and humanism depending on the level of disbelief held by each one.

If there is an Atheism that stands out during this stage of irreligious thought it would be that of the early twenty-first century New Atheism. In order to concisely evaluate the translation of Pagan, Enlightenment, and modern Atheism, this chapter will devote itself exclusively to that movement and its four most prominent advocates. Doing so will hopefully administer a proper evaluation of the direction in which Atheism has led during the modern and post-modern cultural waves. First, though is a brief examination of the creativity adopted by these Atheists, a creativity that has proved to be a decent foundation for Atheist evangelism.

⁵ Lists such as this exist in abundance on the internet. It would seem they pop up in order to help Atheists feel less alone in a world of theism. Some helpfully come with quotes or explanations as to the Atheists listed. A good one for this is a New Atheist blog by Michael Nugent which can be accessed at: <http://www.michaelnugent.com/resources/famous-Atheists/> (accessed 20 June 2011).

Of Teapots and Spaghetti Monsters

In order to properly appreciate the 1960s one must first come to an understanding of the 1950s.⁶ In the same way that colors look clearer just after the lights are turned back on, the precursor to any moment in history, or historical significance in general, is essential in building a foundation. The soul of this particular study is dependent upon the thesis that a complete definition is inappropriate for as heavily laden a word as “Atheist,” vying instead for a contextual comparison across Atheist stages. Therefore, a brief examination of the modern Atheist mentality is needed here.

The twentieth century gave birth to an amazing run of invention, social progress, and both religious cultivation and deterioration. In the United States especially, religious plurality was never more prevalent. Two world wars, a Korean “conflict,” the Cold War, and the undeclared war in Vietnam brought knowledge of the world back to the states—all this by the 1970s. Each excursion into the West or East brought home some new form of religious thinking. This was especially the case in the 1960s. However, the lack of religious convictions was ever high as well. Citing the trouble of modernization—as discussed in further detail in the first chapter—a theory of secularization had religious and social theorists convinced the end of religion was at hand. Yet, then came the 1980s, the election of Ronald Reagan and the rise of the Religious Right. America began to take on the mantle of religious nation as counter to the rest of the world’s still declining interest in faith—or perhaps just disinterest in public practice.⁷ Furthermore, America

⁶ David Farber’s impressively readable history of the 1960’s begins with an introductory first chapter that argues this exact point. Without the understanding of Eisenhower’s 1950s, the political, social, and religious upheaval of the 1960s seems out context. See David Farber, *The Age of Great Dream: America in the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1994), 7-25; as well as Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment* (master’s thesis, Baylor University, 2010), 88-101.

⁷ See the opening of Chapter Four.

began to take on the notion of itself as a Christian nation. The excursions in the Middle East and interests in the development and importation of abundant fossil fuels brought Islam, and especially the militant or fundamentalist forms of Islam, to the minds of religious Americans.

With religious plurality, and even with the inevitable sense of religious decline, the freedom to think outside the context of religious—or even Christian—America still prevailed. As religion took on new forms, evolved, so too did its counterpart.

Early in the century an intriguing form of Atheism appeared in the work of Bertrand Russell, eminent Atheist and winner of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1950.⁸ Russell's contribution to the rising acceptance of Atheism came in the form of a curious uncertainty, or rather problem he saw in the "first cause" of God's existence. He postulated, for arguments sake, that there is in existence a china teapot "between the Earth and Mars" that is "revolving about the sun in an elliptical orbit."⁹ Russell's teapot was also too small to be seen by even the best of humanity's telescopes. It was there, and people would just have to believe him. "Nobody would be able to disprove my assertion," he added, because "since my assertion cannot be disproved, it is intolerable presumption on the part of human reason to doubt it, I should rightly be thought to be talking nonsense."¹⁰ He further demonstrates the metaphor for which the teapot stands by asserting that if the teapot had been written of in ancient books, taught to children, and

⁸ Jennifer Michael Hecht, *Doubt: A History*, 453.

⁹ Russell's "celestial teapot" was first written for *Illustrated Magazine* in 1952 but was not published. It has since been used by many sociologists and philosophers, and notably Richard Dawkins to justify their opinions. In full, the article is also available on line. http://www.cfpf.org.uk/articles/religion/br/br_god.html (accessed 20 June 2011).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

preached of on Sundays, the idea would be irrevocably instilled into society. This is how religion has persisted, he counters, for if “a belief is widespread, there must be something reasonable about it.”¹¹ Furthermore, as “all the beliefs of savages are absurd,” and as time has progressed forward, and the beliefs that replaced those absurd savage beliefs have since themselves become absurd, and so on and so forth, then eventually even the beliefs held now (1952) will inevitably, by order of the flow of time, become absurd as well.¹² He concludes then that “there is no reason to believe any of the dogmas of traditional theology and, further, that there is no reason to wish that they were true.”¹³ Russell’s Atheism here is dependent on first, that the teapot paradigm is as provable and disprovable as God and therefore condemns both, and second, it is this exact logic that leads to the absurdity of religion.

This Atheism by sarcastic and creative logic is not lost on the modern Atheists, and even smacks of something possibly uttered by Anaxagoras or Diogenes of Sinope. It also inspired not just the New Atheism of Richard Dawkins, whose use of it at the outset of his *God Delusion*¹⁴ to argue the irrationality of still holding to one’s religious beliefs, but modern creations of similar provable/disprovable sacred entities. The most popular, at least in the popular sense of media attention and internet traffic, is the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, created by Bobby Henderson in 2005 as a protest to the

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 51-53.

Kansas State Board of Education permitting the teaching of Intelligent Design.¹⁵ The Flying Spaghetti Monster is as provable as Russell's teapot, and therefore as provable as God, at least according to the logic espoused by both Henderson and Russell. In this way both men share the same ideals. Except, Pastafarianism goes one step further.

Joyful humor aside the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is culturally impressive. As a cultural phenomenon it either attests to the growing number of Atheistic people in the world, or those whose senses of humor enjoy sarcastic religious undertones. Scanning through the website reveals a creatively interested group of people.¹⁶ As a companion to the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster*, though started before its publication, is the *Loose Canon*, a compilation of religious ideologies akin to the Gospels, or the Hebrew and Christian Scriptures.¹⁷

Should the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster be taken seriously? Henderson's letter to the Kansas State Board of Education, though amusing, raises good questions. At what point do we limit what is considered sacred and not? The logical answer would be to accept those religious doctrines that popularly and historically have been essential to the lives of mankind. Yet, Henderson would argue, along with Bertrand Russell and every New Atheist, that what has been popularly and historically essential has not maintained its same shape over the millennia of man's religious documentation.

¹⁵ While the *Gospel of the Flying Spaghetti Monster* was published in 2006, the main source of FSM material comes from the blog begun by the "church's" founder Bobby Henderson. This website is a wonderfully nourishing source of information on the church and its actions, etc. <http://www.venganza.org/about/> (accessed 21 June 2011).

¹⁶ The gallery section is predominately, and creatively, humorous.

¹⁷ The *Loose Canon*, in its massive size, is available online for free. <http://loose-canon.fsm-consortium.com/the-loose-canon/> (accessed 21 June 2011).

Borrowing from Dawkins' *Selfish Gene*, the memetic properties of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster carry-over as equally as any other religious identity.¹⁸ However, the Church is not unique. Hordes of "authentic fakes" have arisen in the last century, mostly for the same reasons as the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster, for the sake of humor and to point out what the inventors see as the continual ridiculousness of religion.¹⁹

While both Russell's teapot and Henderson's Spaghetti Monster act to provide a satirical critique of absolute belief and irrelevant first causes, the Spaghetti Monster has created an outlet for Atheistic leaning people to return to a group of like-minded individuals. Referring to it as a "church" is not inaccurate because the belief in the Spaghetti Monster, even if it is done out of spite, binds individuals back to a humanity. It is here where the threat of the "Church" becoming a religion of absolute believers comes in. Henderson claims on the website that the Church is not an "Atheists club," and offers a welcome to people of all faiths, but he also vocalizes a fear that, like the once new religious movements of Scientology and Mormonism, and like Christians who adamantly believe in their faith but have no knowledge of its inner workings, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster could become genuinely mainstream.²⁰

The creative satirizing of religion through the employment of a celestial teapot or Flying Spaghetti Monster displays a mimetic transference of Atheistic ideals through

¹⁸ See Carole M. Cusack, *Invented Religions: Imagination, Fiction, and Faith* (Surrey: Ashgate Publishing, 2010), 113-141.

¹⁹ David Chidester's *Authentic Fakes* discusses many of these popular culture religions, such as the Church of the Subgenius and Church of the Twinkie, and serves as an excellent source. David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²⁰ In response to the question "In 1000 years will FSM be a mainstream religion?" on the "About" page. <http://www.venganza.org/about/> (accessed 21 June 2011).

time. While the basic tenets of Atheism, a rejection of the publically accepted forms of religious belief and practice, have carried through from pagan antiquity and Enlightenment, the contexts have changed. With the new Atheists the context evolves again.

The Four Horsemen

The four men who have gracefully consented to the nickname “four horsemen” have produced a sweet little cabal against religion,²¹ not always attacking it, or religionists, but more tactically aiming their assaults at violent fundamentalism, especially that of Islam. Christopher Hitchens growled this perspective poignantly during an un-moderated discussion between he and his fellow New Atheists. He commented that though he has heard Hamas provides social services in Gaza, and that Louis Farrakhan and the Nation of Islam—in its modern stance—has helped get young black men in prison off drugs, he countered that good deeds do not alter the fact that one is a “militarized terrorist organization with a fanatical anti-Semitic ideology” and the other is a “racist crackpot cult.”²² The indifference, or even purposeful un-acceptance, to separate religion from violence of New Atheism is shown in this statement. If there is to be a major critique of these men and their ideologies it would be found in their inability to separate all religious conviction from those that misuse religion in the name of violence, hatred, and anger.

²¹ The four horsemen, as they like to be called, at least on youtube, sat down for an immensely intriguing and entertaining discussion of religion and Atheism. The whole two-hour series can be purchased with all proceeds going to charity, or can be viewed for free on the youtube website. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DKhc1pcDFM&feature=related> (accessed 19 June 2011)

²² Christopher Hitchens quoted from *The Four Horsemen HD: Hour 1 of 2 – Discussions with Richard Dawkins, ep.1*. Found at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9DKhc1pcDFM&feature=related> (accessed 19 June 2011).

Sam Harris is appropriately given credit for inaugurating the New Atheist movement as he was the first of the notorious four New Atheists discussed herein to publish his opinions on the horrific adherence to religion modern man has ascribed to himself. His *The End of Faith* does not shy away from the fact that it is a reactionary text. Islam in particular—though the western religions are not wholly innocent in his eyes—finds itself on the stand as Harris interrogates the bloody history of western religion—out of context, albeit—and finds the justification for his call for man to release himself from the violent bonds of faith.

His colleagues enact similar prosecutions, ranging from full on affronts to religion,²³ to passive and slightly respectful discussions of religion in a modern world of science and reason.²⁴ These texts represent a viewpoint of modern men who have found religion to be irrational and antiquated. Their main assault seems to focus on ethics and morality and how the antiquated faiths as used by man to justify current conditions of both, have turned to violence and hatred.

They are essentially post modern Enlightenment thinkers, using reason—especially based in a science-laden modern world—as a mechanism for their beliefs in non-belief. As researchers they are not phenomenologists; they merely seek out sound bites that validate their critiques and gather out-of-context ammunition to use against the religions they tend not to fully understand. Regardless of this, though, they have inspired

²³ For the three texts outside of Harris' *End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, which all share a common theme of anger toward religion, see Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006); Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis, How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2008); and Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

²⁴ Daniel C. Dennet avoids the urge to attack religion as the problem. Yet his text is still considered part of the New Atheist anthology. See Daniel C. Dennet, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

a growing sense of free thought in the modern religious public and have contributed to the growing number of Atheist admissions.²⁵ Yet it should also be remembered that while they may write bestselling texts, they are merely a part of this stage of Atheism, not the whole.

As a whole, what is most intriguing about this emerging stage's Atheism is how it has formed itself into two distinct categories. Outside of the five texts that make up the current New Atheist literature,²⁶ modern-stage Atheists—especially so in the United States—have one of two distinctions in which to align themselves: science and civic.²⁷

For some, for whom religion is only seen as a negative byproduct of society, the argument is hinged on something akin to the “opium” theory of the Atheist prophet Karl Marx, or the psychological balancing act of Freudian psychology. These Atheists are unable to disengage the use of religion—a manmade phenomenon—as a justification for violent actions, from a more mainstream and personal practice of faith or belief.

Religion, to them, is not just a drug, but an addiction to that drug; it is a drug prescribed

²⁵ Almost anything can be justified using statistics. Current measurements of “Atheist” and “Atheist thinking” show a world growing more and more un-religious. However, the questions asked in these certain surveys are so horribly out of context that the answers are truly void before they are even uttered. For instance, Phil Zuckerman, a sociologist working in the field of Atheism, has found that of the top fifty countries that show high percentages of Atheism the top two are Sweden (46-85) and Vietnam (81). One could look at these percentages and think that the world is becoming more Atheistic, as the percentages reflect “percentage Atheist/agnostic/nonbeliever in “personal” God.” Or, one could look at these two percentages and conclude that of course Vietnam is high in “Atheist” percentages as Buddhism, the predominant religion in that country, does not adhere to the western idea of a “personal” God, and therefore could be viewed from the west as being “Atheistic.” This does not mean it is an 85 percent “Atheist country.” It simply means that there is no good, or efficient, working definition of the term Atheism to apply to these countries as a whole. It all reduces down to context. See Phil Zuckerman, “Contemporary Numbers and Patterns,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (England: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 56-57. Sweden, however, is its own animal. Dr. Zuckerman has done extensive research on this particular country. See Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God: What the Least Religious Nations Can Tell Us About Contentment* (New York: New York University Press, 2008).

²⁶ Writing a text on Atheism post 11 September 2001 seems to be a popular pastime. The texts cited herein as New Atheist texts are isolated to those four authors who make up, in this study's opinion, the first contributors to New Atheism.

²⁷ This dichotomy will be discussed in greater amount toward the end of this study.

to them by the leaders in whom they entrusted their health and happiness. Breaking the habit, as it were, takes a complete “cold turkey” disconnection from any aspect of a mystical world. This disconnection, then, leaves quite a hole. The gaping wound that is left by the wrenching of religion out of society must be patched in order for that society to survive. The first type of Atheist has no trouble filling that void. They do so by embracing the explanatory realm of science and reason. Utilizing the scientific method in order to research the audacity of faith, these particular Atheists fill the void by relying on the natural world to provide the facts which prove God does not exist. In this rehabilitation metaphor, this reliance on science is akin to taking certain drugs to counteract the withdrawals that come from breaking an addiction, such as ingesting methadone in order to kick an opiate addiction. This is not unlike the Enlightened philosophers spoken of in the previous chapter, although in this context the embrace of science is a sterile one, void of any religious conviction such as those of Newton, Lord Herbert, or Locke.

The other side of Atheism is one that balances functional social constructs with the Atheistic ideology of a lack of higher power, or God. This civic Atheist is a product of the circumstance from which he grows up. This Atheism, in contrast to the science Atheist, is contextual. A civic Atheist differs from his scientific brothers because he develops his philosophy outside a scientific element. He also differs from his brothers outside his own culture. For instance, an Atheist coming of age in England is not the same as an Atheist growing up in America. The English Atheist is both a non-believer in God, etc., as well as a member of the Anglican Church, as it is the civil religion of that nation. The American Atheist is a member of the American Civil Religion—essentially a

pluralistic blend of Judeo-Christianity with other elements thrown in depending on the evolving generation he comes out of. This phenomenon is not uncommon to more classical and God-based religions. An American Catholic and British Catholic share the same religious background, they attend mass, live by the same liturgical calendar, and follow the precepts of the church, such as the sacraments, but they look at their faiths differently because of their civil upbringings. The science aspect of Atheism works much like this Catholic metaphor as science can be standard throughout the world, much like mathematical equations and scientific formulas. The civic Atheist must then balance these two elements together, a belief in no God as well as a realistic understanding of his place in a society that is in deference to a particular religious foundation. These two conditions reflect the dire need of more research and study on the phenomenon of Atheisms, or denominations of Atheism, within the Atheist religion.

Another major characteristic of New Atheism, as opposed to “old Atheism,” is the way in which empirical science, that which is testable and practicable, provides answers to the mysterious questions of universal thought with an intent on furthering the gulf between religion and science rather than reconciling it.

Of the books that make up the New Atheist doctrine Sam Harris led the charge in 2004 with *The End of Faith*.²⁸ He soon followed up his bestseller in 2006 with *Letter to a Christian Nation*.²⁹ In that same year renowned Oxford biologist and Charles Simonyi Professor of the Public Understanding of Science, Richard Dawkins published *The God*

²⁸ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2004).

²⁹ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2006).

Delusion,³⁰ the most religion-oriented book in his scientific repertoire. After Dawkins came *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*,³¹ by the American science philosopher Daniel C. Dennet. Lastly, from the sardonically apt Christopher Hitchens came *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*.³²

These texts argue a position where religion is not just a problem for society, but that society would in fact be better suited without it. The reductionism practiced by these authors as science Atheists is one that mysteriously sweeps away “religion” with one hand while sliding in science with the other. While the old Atheists were reacting to the European Enlightenment, to a study of nature, autonomy, and reason, these new Atheists are reacting to fundamentalism, both eastern and western. Unable to differentiate zealotry from moderation, as they see it “constitutes the essence and core of all religion,”³³ they strike out to rid society of its religious prison.

Harris' End of Faith

The United States reacted intensely to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. For some Americans the appropriate reaction was one of camaraderie within a global brotherhood of reconciliation. For others it was a retreat into fundamentalism. This fundamentalism—though based on—is not identical to the religious movement begun in the early American twentieth-century “whose concern was to conserve and defend the

³⁰ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006).

³¹ Daniel C. Dennet, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Penguin Books, 2007).

³² Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007).

³³ Karen Armstrong, *The Case for God* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2009), xvi.

integrity of the Christian faith.”³⁴ Though Curtis Lee Law’s term has prevailed and evolved to express any group which vehemently fights for its convictions, regardless of the process or purpose, it is no longer exclusive to conservative American Christianity. Both sides of the religious spectrum seem to have adopted it for their own usage.

Harris’ *The End of Faith*³⁵ is a long entreaty both in reaction to September 11th and as a warning to reasonable and rational thinkers. His two main targets—though Islam takes a major brunt of the attack—are the many historical instances of religiously inspired violence and the religious moderation that turns a blind eye to these atrocities. His book is peppered with anecdotes of the horrendous acts religious people have perpetrated in the name of God or their sacred doctrine. *The End of Faith* is a simple polemic aimed narrowly at only the negative and never the positive, a distinction it is unable to make. What is most noteworthy of this text is his admiration for the “wisdom of the East” and the great philosophers that came out of those religions who “have no equivalents in the West.”³⁶ This quasi-neo-orientalism is a curious distinction as it both encompasses a hatred of Islam as well as a misunderstanding of Eastern Philosophy.³⁷ Harris casually intertwines his scientific Atheism amid a mystical realm of mental science. His undergraduate focus was in philosophy, and having just received his PhD in

³⁴ Winthrop S. Hudson, *Religion in America*, 4th ed. (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1987), 340.

³⁵ In such a short work it is necessary to focus mainly on just one text. Just as it was with Ludwig Feuerbach’s *Essence of Christianity*, Harris’ work will be exclusively—yet still briefly—evaluated here.

³⁶ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 215.

³⁷ For more on “orientalism” the best source would be its most original—and therefore popular—advocate, Edward Said, who used it in order to point out the obsession, and assimilation, of Eastern influences on a Western academic world. See Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1994).

neuroscience at the University of California, Los Angeles,³⁸ it seems more that he is attempting to assimilate his religious disbelief alongside the mystical abilities of meditation and mental acuity within the science of the brain. This is not to say however that he has turned away from his Atheist brothers and accepted faith or “betrayed their cause.”³⁹ Instead, it can be better argued that he is simply practicing his religious Atheism, a practice not in need of “God” or “faith,” but which has the freedom to borrow willingly from whatever religious tradition that suits him, such as a civic Atheist would.

For Harris, spirituality “can be—indeed, *must* be—deeply rational, even as it elucidates the limits of reason.” (emphasis in original)⁴⁰ This reason, as part of the technical construct of the mind, will one day be rationalized by “neuroscientists” and “psychologists” in an effort to “bring even the most rarefied mystical experience within the purview of open, scientific inquiry.”⁴¹ God—at least the irrational belief of God—will one day be replaced by the systematic knowledge of synapses,⁴² and thus be rendered “unnecessary.”⁴³

³⁸ Ibid., 193.

³⁹ Harris speaks to this phenomenon in his Afterword in an attempt to quell issues before they take off. He explains that meditation centers the mind in a way that can lead to particular “insights” that reveal the “self.” See Sam Harris, *The End of Faith*, 234-236.

⁴⁰ Ibid., 43.

⁴¹ Ibid.

⁴² Sam Harris recently followed up his promise that neuroscientists would soon approach mysticism through the science of the mind with his book, *The Moral Landscape*. He attempts to reduce mysticism and the sacred values of religion into a series of scientific explanations by means of the mind’s power to fulfill the omniscience of God and God’s religion. See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape: How Science Can Determine Human Values* (New York: Free Press, 2010).

⁴³ Though he has always been somewhat ambiguous about the existence of God, Stephen Hawking, writing alongside Leonard Mlodinow, recently stated that God was not necessary for the creation of the Earth. This, of course, caused a stir. However, his actual phrase reflects more his trademark ambiguity than a decree of Atheistic scientism. He states: “Spontaneous creation is the reason there is something rather than nothing, why the universe exists, why we exist. It is not necessary to invoke God to

In his short polemic *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris unleashes his fury toward the violent convictions of Christianity in the United States, especially toward the myth of moderate religious convictions or tolerance, two philosophies he claims do not exist. Like drawing battle lines, at the very start he easily commits himself to the idea that “in the fullness of time, one side is really going to win this argument, and the other side is really going to lose.”⁴⁴ Though sarcastically referring to the end of every battle, death, his seemingly vitriolic response that there is no middle-ground between Atheism and theism points out his belief that there can only be two extremes, no moderation.

Running through a list of atrocities, Harris’ *Letter* reads like a man angry with the convictions of the religious world. He hits upon ethics, morality, freedom, violence, science, and uses statistics to prove his points. All without citations. He brilliantly shapes his arguments around brief examples, some good, and some atrociously bad. As a one sided argument the *Letter* works, but he leaves himself open to easy refutation. His inability to appreciate context voids most of his debate. For example, he cites that “it is important to realize that much of the developed world has nearly accomplished,” bringing an end to religion.⁴⁵ While pointing out that western countries such as Norway, Iceland, and Sweden have lost their religion, he fails to appreciate the context of their “Atheism.” He has established a definition of the term “Atheism” and is convinced that it applies in an umbrella fashion, covering all feelings of doubt. He comfortably stands in America,

light the blue torch paper and set the universe going.” Though Professor Hawking refers to the unnecessary need of God to create the universe, he does not, in any way, say that God does not exist. This still reflects the Atheistic ideology of God that will soon cease to be needed by man. See Stephen Hawking and Leonard Mlodinow, *The Grand Design* (New York: Bantam Books, 2010), 180.

⁴⁴ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation*, 5.

⁴⁵ *Ibid*, 43.

points to a foreign nation, reads bad statistics, and concludes it must be “Atheistic.” He seems unable to understand that on the ground, individually, the picture is far less clear.⁴⁶

Critiques aside—there are many—Harris’ *Letter*, and really his body of work, including the recently published *Moral Landscape* wherein he reconciles his studies of neuroscience with the accomplishments of meditation and the power of the mind to create morality,⁴⁷ are tragically skewed because of his vehemence.

As the inaugural New Atheist he provides the theme to the movement, sadly painting the picture of Atheism in the twenty-first century as fed up with having to contend with religion. He prescribes his science of mind as a purer form of morality to that of religion while applying the heartbreak of September 11th as fuel to a fire he hopes will cleanse the world of its religious convictions.

Dawkins’ Delusion

Unlike Harris, the next three New Atheists have been writing and arguing their perspectives for years. However, like Harris, it was not until Islamic-based terrorism appeared on a massively violent scale that they turned to religion as a problem of morality. Richard Dawkins, for example has produced material on the benefits of scientific discovery and philosophy over religion for almost four decades. His first book of prominence, *The Selfish Gene*, while small in appearance, is heavily laden with Atheistic ideology, but not in an evangelical way. As a Darwinian biologist it is correctly assumed, even by the first page, that Dawkins’ *Selfish Gene* is not meant to support

⁴⁶ Again, see Phil Zuckerman, *Society Without God*. Zuckerman’s foray into secular Scandinavia is an interesting source of the necessity of contextual appreciation over definitions, even if he too, at times, makes the same mistakes as Harris.

⁴⁷ See Sam Harris, *The Moral Landscape*.

religious ideologies as correct, or even necessary, but that is not his concern. In fact, the main cultural reference coming out of *Selfish Gene* is the idea of memetics, or memes, replicating systems akin to human genetics that assist in cultural evolution.⁴⁸ Memes act as memories, prolonging cultural ideas and evolving them into new forms of social ideology. Religion too can be placed into this category, a good explanation for the different forms religion has taken over the years. In his description of the meme, Dawkins takes the idea of God and applies it as a propagated idea, “parasitizing” the brain. Likening God to a placebo, and stating that “God exists, if only in the form of a meme with high survival value, or infective power, in the environment provided by human culture,” is not the sort of invective to come out of his *God Delusion*.⁴⁹

That is not to say that Dawkins shied away from critiquing religion entirely prior to *God Delusion*. In his *Blind Watchmaker*, published in 1986, he expressly critiqued the theory of Intelligent Design popularly used at the time as a valid counterargument to Biological evolution. Again, this was merely a reaction to the rising tide of creationist teaching. The year after *Blind Watchmaker* was published the United States Supreme Court ruled in the case of *Edwards v. Aguillard* that a balanced teaching of “evolution-science” with “creation-science” was unconstitutional and a really just a “thinly veiled attempt to import religious teachings into the public school curriculum, and precisely at a place where religion was least appropriate—the science classroom.”⁵⁰ In order to counter the idea that religion, in the guise of “Intelligent Design,” belonged next to biological

⁴⁸ Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 192-193.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 193.

⁵⁰ John Witte, Jr. and Joael A. Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment, 3rd Edition* (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 196. The promotion of Intelligent Design seems an attempt to compete with the ever increasing rise of modernity. Books such as *Pandas and People* appear as pathetic attempts to insert religion into a “scientific” realm.

evolution as an empirically tested explanation of the origins of life on the planet, Dawkins was merely defending his stance.

His foray into the critique of religion steadily continued from this point, but always as a counterargument to his promotion of evolutionary science. Acting as a modern T.H. Huxley, he served to attack religion only by means of defending Darwin's theory. Perhaps the best source of his early condemnation of religion comes from his *Devil's Chaplain*, a collection of essays and letters ranging from issues on science, Darwin, Africa, morality, and religion. In one particular essay, "The Great Convergence," Dawkins takes religion head on, arguing the case for better clarity concerning the definitions of Atheism, theism, and agnosticism, as well as pointing out the ridiculousness of converging religion with science. Toward the end of the essay he refers to Russell's celestial teapot for the purposes of promoting the idea that all of humanity is truly agnostic, as it is unable to state, definitively, that the teapot either exists or not. Furthermore, he states that all humanity is also "Atheistic" because it has ceased believing in—and worshipping—gods such as Baal, Thor, Poseidon, and others, and that "we are all Atheists about most of the gods that humanity has ever believed in," concluding that "some of us just go one god further."⁵¹ Contextually, Dawkins is not incorrect.

This is a telling admission from Dawkins for two reasons. First, "The Great Convergence" as originally published in *Forbes ASAP* in October of 1999 under the title "Snake Oil and Holy Water," represents his pre-September 11th opinion of religion as that of a skeptical, Atheist scientist. On his own scale from one to seven, from absolute

⁵¹ Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2003), 151.

certainty and belief in God and every religious aspect possible, to the opposite absolute certainty there is no God, he places himself as a six.⁵² He has the presence of mind to accept that it is practically impossible—and improbable—to disbelieve in absolutely everything, as pointed out by his use of the celestial teapot. Secondly, this admission finds itself on the border of his thesis in *The God Delusion* that religion is equal to child-abuse, and where he accepts the same notion of Sam Harris that there is no difference between zealotry and moderation.

About a month after September 11th *The Guardian* published a series of responses from prominent citizens as to whether or not the world had changed as a result of the terrorist attacks. Dawkins' contribution stated:

Many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack all supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where's the harm? September 11th changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. Dangerous because it teaches enmity to others labeled only by a difference of inherited tradition. And dangerous because we have all bought into a weird respect, which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism. Let's now stop being so damned respectful!⁵³

Dawkins put away the inquisitive and skeptical scientist and unleashed his inner Atheist with this comment, clearly laden with anti-religious reaction to the images broadcast throughout the world that morning in September. *The God Delusion*, a book devoted entirely to debunking religion, was published in 2006. It was completely unlike his early works in that it no longer attacked religion as a means of defending science, but did so instead in order to defend humanity. The comparison between Dawkins and

⁵² Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 51.

⁵³ <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2001/oct/11/afghanistan.terrorism2> (accessed 20 June 2011).

Huxley is spot on, only their contexts are different. The difference between the end-of-Enlightenment “agnosticism” and post-September 11th “Atheism” is contextual, though both speak to the same ideal of religion being supplanted by science. A more extreme form of the Enlightenment, it seems, lives on.

Dennett's Spell

Daniel Dennett and Richard Dawkins are both promoters of the Bright Movement, an organization founded in 2003 by two California teachers, Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert.⁵⁴ A Bright is an individual who lives by a “naturalistic worldview” which is defined as being “free of mystical and supernatural elements.”⁵⁵ In other words, a “Bright” must, by definition, be an Atheist, according to the Bright web page.⁵⁶ However, the Bright Movement would argue that it is not “Atheistic,” stating firmly that, “This movement is not an Atheist movement, nor a humanist, freethinker, skeptical, rationalist, objectivist, igtheist, materialist, or secular humanist movement, nor any other manifestation of extant organizations and philosophies.”⁵⁷ Furthermore, the Bright Movement argues the idea that “Bright” is a synonym for “Atheist,” claiming to be a movement “not associated with any defined beliefs.”⁵⁸ As well, the movement contends that the “Brights' constituency is inclusive of varied naturalistic perspectives and

⁵⁴ Thomas J. Linneman and Margaret A. Clendenen, “Sexuality and the Secular,” in *Atheism and Secularity, Volume 1, Issues Concepts, and Definitions*, edited by Phil Zuckerman (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 99.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 100.

⁵⁶ <http://www.the-brights.net/> (accessed 20 June 2011).

⁵⁷ Found under the “principles” headline on the Bright webpage, <http://www.the-brights.net/> (accessed 20 June 2011).

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

categories. We are not Atheist, or humanist, etc., but we offer a generic civic umbrella for individuals who have a naturalistic worldview, along with means for their association and action.”⁵⁹ If this seems confusing, that is because it is. Beyond the confusion though, it shows a further attempt at trying to understand just what Atheism is and where in society it belongs. The installation of groups such as the Brights reveals also the newness of Atheism, not as a literary group of religious polemicists, but as a religious identity with a population that for the first time is not only large, but vocal and assimilated to contemporary culture. The rapidity of its growth and persistence demonstrate a further reality that Atheism, whether admitted or not, is becoming more and more accepted, especially when it is promoted by prominent philosophers such as Dawkins and Dennett

Like Dawkins, a fellow Bright, Daniel Dennett’s successful career long preceded his addition to the New Atheist club. Also like Dawkins, his works rarely touched on religion—in fact less so than any of Dawkins’ works. For the most part Dennett had always focused predominately on discussions of consciousness, the target of debate in his *Brainstorms* (1981), *Elbow Room* (1984), *The Mind’s I* (1985), which he edited with Douglas Hofstadter, and *Consciousness Explained* (1992). In *Darwin’s Dangerous Idea* (1995) he veered more toward the religion discussion by presenting a philosophical—as opposed to scientific—examination of Darwinian biology. Yet he still did not descend into the full polemical like Dawkins or Harris.

In fact, Dennett’s place among the three other New Atheists is slightly incorrect as his contribution to the library of New Atheism, *Breaking the Spell*, neither argues the case for Atheism, nor suggests religion as being a negative or dangerous aspect of humanity. It is conveniently misunderstood that the “spell” needing to be broken is

⁵⁹ Ibid.

religion, linking it with magic, and the religious as being under a sort of enchantment. The “spell” Dennett wants broken is actually the “taboo against a forthright, scientific, no-holds-barred investigation of religion as one natural phenomenon among many.”⁶⁰ However, as he even points out himself, the process of putting religion under the “bright lights and the microscope” could lead to a dispelling of the romanticism of religion, robbing humanity of its innocence and utterly disabling its heart in the “guise of expanding” its mind.⁶¹ Dennett shakes off this issue, comforting the believer that by scientifically analyzing religion, as never done before—according to Dennett—perhaps he will “learn something important.”⁶²

Perhaps the most controversial aspect of *Breaking the Spell*, aside from applying scientific experimentation to religion, is Dennett’s further support and application of Richard Dawkins’ memetic cultural replication to religious evolution. It is this application that appears as disabling to religion, both when he ascribes the progression of religious transmission as equal to the shared “idiosyncrasies in pronunciation” of the Romance languages,⁶³ and when he points out the replicating fitness of the term “faith” to have become another way of saying “religion.”⁶⁴ In the end though, regardless of whether he “attacks” religion or not, by using science to interpret religion—an Enlightenment trait borrowed from the philosophers described in the genres from the previous chapter, thus not unique—Dennett becomes victim to disagreeable critiques.

⁶⁰ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 17.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁶² *Ibid.*

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 78.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 231.

Lastly, Dennett's endorsement of the term "Bright" has caused some controversy from believers and Atheists alike. Victor J. Stenger—who attempted to place himself into the New Atheist club by including his own best seller, *God: The Failed Hypothesis*, in his aptly titled *New Atheism*—points out that the misappropriated opposite of a Bright, a believer, is not to be referred to as a "dim" in comparison.⁶⁵ Dennett defends his term of endearment by comparing it to the "highly successful hijacking" of the word "gay" by the homosexual community. Accordingly, as a non-gay person calls himself "straight," rather than "glum," Dennett recommends the use of "super" to describe he who is not a "bright."⁶⁶

Of course, it seems that with all his education and intellect it fails to reach his consciousness that by calling himself, an Atheist, "Bright," it is inevitable that those who are not Atheistic would be considered dim. In the argument of Christopher Hitchens, the annoyance of "Bright" as an identifying distinction is a "cringe making proposal."⁶⁷

Hitchens' Greatness

The last addition to the annals of New Atheism came in 2007 in the form of Christopher Hitchens, *god is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. By the title alone, it endorses the idea that, one, the book will be a religious polemic, and two, like Harris' *End of Faith*, the main target will be violent Islamic-based fundamentalism. A testament to Hitchens' brilliant humor and fork-tongued scrutiny of subjects near to his heart, *god is not Great* does not disappoint on both accounts.

⁶⁵ Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2009.), 37.

⁶⁶ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 21.

⁶⁷ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great*, 5.

To begin, Hitchens, unlike the three other New Atheists is not a lettered academic. He of course attended Oxford as many proper British young men do, but unlike the three other New Atheists he does not hold a doctorate in any field. His expertise comes in the form of his years of journalism witnessed by his massive body of work, and close friendships with recent history's more active players.

What's more, while his contribution to New Atheism is a reaction in the same way as his colleagues, it really does not veer away from his earlier work like that of Dawkins and Dennett. He began his lucid critiques of all things sacred at a young age, his Atheism a product of his youth. He cites, at the beginning of *god is not Great* four "irreducible objections to religious faith" that came to him "before my boyish voice had broken." These objections consist of his belief that religion "wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking."⁶⁸

He weaves a justification for his Atheism as not being a "faith," nor does he rely "solely upon science and reason," because he finds them "necessary rather than sufficient factors." Bottom line, he distrusts "anything that contradicts science or outrages reason."⁶⁹

In his disagreement with Dawkins and Dennett over the use of "Bright" to denote a person who lives by a "natural worldview," whatever that may be, he applies his own

⁶⁸ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁹ Ibid., 5.

term. Dissatisfied with “Atheist,” and especially with the “generalized agnosticism of our culture,” he applies the title “antitheist” to his convictions, stating in his *Letters to a Young Contrarian*:

I not only maintain that all religions are versions of the same untruth, but I hold that the influences of churches, and the effect of religious belief, is positively harmful. Reviewing the false claims of religion I do not wish, as some sentimental materialists affect to wish, that they were true. I do not envy believers their faith. I am relieved to think that the whole story is a sinister fairy tale; life would be miserable if what the faithful affirmed was actually the case.⁷⁰

Further justifying this opinion, he holds dear to the New Atheist critique that religion has done too much bad for the good it has done to hold any merit. This, above all else, appears the central thesis of New Atheism. It is not so much new in that it is a philosophy that denies God or religion, as its critics have pointed out, but it does address religion in a novel way. This is entirely thanks to the world New Atheists address *with* their Atheism. The Atheists, freethinkers, doubters, and rejecters from any other section of the twentieth century, either American or British, do not face the evil of religion, but rather the heteronymous authority of it—a throwback to the Enlightenment. In the twenty-first century New Atheism is applying a new source of condemnation, the evil of religion which, to a New Atheist, is all religion. By revealing the truth of these facts they seem to feel it will peel away the scales over humanity’s eyes, allowing the world to free itself from a religious tyranny they cannot seem to break from on their own. It is not so much that New Atheists, Hitchens especially, feel they hold the keys to humanity’s salvation in their scientific hands, but that they know that the truth behind humanity’s collapse toward despair is based in religion.

⁷⁰ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (New York: Perseus Books Group, 2001), 55.

Lastly, the outcry from the New Atheist camp supports their defense of being “new” in the first place. The main aim of their attacks are focused on the fundamentalist-based violence found in predominately Muslim countries and the atrocious attacks served out by confused Muslim citizens in order to honor deluded and despotic leaders. New Atheists are not alone in their consternation. A quick search in the Amazon.com engine with the key-words “anti Islam” reveal a flood of texts penned by academics and laity alike, each published after September 11th, and most with a negative bias. Titles such as *Islamic Activists: The Anti-Enlightenment Democrats*;⁷¹ *Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't*;⁷² *The Legacy of Islamic Anti-Semitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History*;⁷³ *Extreme Islam: Anti-American Propaganda of Muslim Fundamentalism*;⁷⁴ *The Islamic Antichrist: The Shocking Truth about the Real Nature of the Beast*;⁷⁵ and *Unholy Alliance: Radical Islam and the American Left*⁷⁶ stand out as immediate examples. While not truly a fair analysis of these texts, judging them literally by their covers, the point here is that during wartime, societies make general enemies of the citizens of nations with whom their soldiers are fighting. One merely needs to recall

⁷¹ Deina Ali Abdelkader, *Islamic Activists: The Anti-Enlightenment Democrats* (New York: Pluto Press, 2011)

⁷² Robert Spencer, *Religion of Peace?: Why Christianity Is and Islam Isn't* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2007).

⁷³ Andrew G. Bostom, editor, *The Legacy of Islamic Antisemitism: From Sacred Texts to Solemn History* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2008).

⁷⁴ Adam Parfrey, *Extreme Islam: Anti-American Propaganda of Muslim Fundamentalism* (New York: Feral House, 2002).

⁷⁵ Joel Richardson, *The Islamic Antichrist: The Shocking Truth about the Real Nature of the Beast* (Los Angeles: WND Books, 2009).

⁷⁶ David Horowitz, *Unholy Alliance: Radical Islam And the American Left* (Washington, DC: Regnery Publishing, 2004).

the atrocities of the domestic American internment of Japanese-Americans during World War II to bring the point home.⁷⁷

New Atheists are merely continuing the traditions set forth by their pagan and enlightened predecessors, while adhering to the social and cultural trends of their context; thus providing further necessity for contextual interpretations over concrete definitions. We must speak of Atheisms, regardless if the central idea stays the same, because the context in which it exists is always changing.

Context, Again

Atheism provides these characters the possibility to ask not just “why” questions, but “how” questions as well. Rather than passively accept the mollified answers religion provides, they seek further. Ironically, their acceptance of Atheism as a personal religious identity causes most of these questions to begin with. By letting loose the comfort and protection of religion they begin the arduous practice of asking why things are the way they are in the world, and how they evolved. Rather than “God” providing the answer they prefer a life devoted to the mysterious and unknown.

New Atheists have the answers. They preach a gospel of science and reason, taking a stand, as Victor J. Stenger’s subtitle to *The New Atheism* attests. New Atheists are the next generation of Enlightenment thinkers. They are the grandsons⁷⁸ of Epicurus,

⁷⁷ As a good general source on this subject, see Roger Daniels, *Prisoners Without Trial: Japanese Americans in World War II* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1993).

⁷⁸ Interestingly, it seems the public profile of New Atheism is male. While women play as equal a role in promoting Atheism, there is yet to be a female perspective in the annals of New Atheism. Madalyn Murray O’Hair served an important—and loud—role in 1960s Atheism, but the closest to a twenty-first century New Atheist treatise so far would be the “Atheist” S.E. Cupp’s *Losing Our Religion*, but as it reads like a “fair and balance” Fox News apologetic it does not come even slightly close to similar with the books of Harris, Dawkins, Dennett, and Hitchens. See S.E. Cupp, *Losing Our Religion: The Liberal Media’s Attack on Christianity* (New York: Threshold Editions, 2010); for a look into the role of women in

Diogenes of Sinope, Zeno, Socrates, Anaxagoras, and Polycarp. They are the sons of Lord Herbert, Locke, Hume, Diderot, Huxley, Holyoake, and Bradlaugh. They are playing into Bryan Wilson's theory⁷⁹ that younger generations rebel against the religions of their parents to revert to that of their grandparents by holding true to an energetic and youthful doubting of the mystical by interpreting nature and science in wholly new ways. They are also, however, playing into the excitement of making noise and making money.

It seems, aside from Harris, the New Atheists stumbled from talented and successful backgrounds into a club of popular and topical interest. There is no real understanding of what makes something commercially popular—for instance, Dan Brown's solecistic *Da Vinci Code*, but the New Atheists discovered a successful niche market. Just assuming by the sheer success of each of these books commercially, it seems even those who abhor Atheism and those who promote it, have been spending time in bookstores around the world. Monetarily, New Atheism is a hit.

Still, it is troubling to speak of a "New Atheism" as one could easily protest, "what is so new about it?" As we have seen, Atheism has persisted as long as theism. When the first human conceived of some sacred other more likely than not his neighbor scoffed and thus was born the first Atheist. This paradigm humorously brings to mind the early scene in the comedy genius Mel Brook's *History of the World Part I* in which a caveman is summarily taken aback by his fellow caveman's urinating on his new artistic

Atheism, see Inger Furseth, "Atheism, Secularity, and Gender" in *Atheism and Secularity, Volume 1, Issues, Concepts, and Definitions* (Santa Barbara: Prager 2010); and Christine Overall, "Feminism and Atheism" in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

⁷⁹ See Bryan Wilson, *Religious Sects: A Sociological Study* (New York: World University Library, 1970).

rendering, followed by the mellow-toned narration of Orson Welles, “Of course with the birth of the artist came the inevitable afterbirth...the critic.”⁸⁰

For some, New Atheism is criticized as being a repackaging of nineteenth-century “real Atheism,” as is the case in John Haught’s critical “Amateur Atheists,”⁸¹ or the “last arguments” of nineteenth-century Atheism as raised by Jack David Eller in his “What is Atheism.”⁸² Eller’s critique further finds New Atheism as merely re-evaluating freedom, rather than destroying or killing God as Nietzsche’s madman had done. Eller states that the future of Atheism is found in the fight to take back what theism took from humanity, “time, space, nature, even our very bodies.”⁸³ In this way he sees Atheism as nothing new or different, but just another form of a familiar struggle.⁸⁴

New Atheist critiques are quite abundant, far surpassing the number of New Atheist texts themselves. Unfortunately what these texts seem to overlook, as much as the New Atheists do, is context. New Atheism may not be superficially new, but it is. The context has changed. While it may mimic the “real Atheism” of Marx, Nietzsche, or Camus, the New Atheists Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens do not have the same concerns as those men, just as their concerns were in no way connected to the concerns of Socrates, Anaxagoras, or Diogenes. The Enlightenment Atheists did not have car bombs, body bombs, hijackings, and especially September 11th. The New Atheist worldview

⁸⁰ *History of the World Part 1*, directed by Mel Brooks, 20th Century Fox, 1999.

⁸¹ John F. Haught, “Amateur Atheists: Why the New Atheism Isn’t Serious,” *Christian Century*, February 26, 2008.

⁸² Jack David Eller, “What is Atheism,” in *Atheism and Secularity, Volume 1, Issues, Concepts, and Definitions*, edited by Phil Zuckerman (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 17.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

looks to the Enlightenment and asks what is taking so long. They trace the same history the last three chapters have and angrily wonder what the hold-up is. The militant attack of theism is the accumulation of anger, shock, frustration, and especially disappointment. Under the influence of the Great Disappointment Theory,⁸⁵ they have ironically retreated fundamentally into their Atheism, holding strong the line between themselves—rational—and the enemy—religion.

⁸⁵ The Great Disappointment Theory sees that the evolution of Atheism, in the disappointment of seeing religion on the rise again, is retreating into itself more fundamentally, rather than Atheistically. The New Atheists are becoming more Atheistic because their disappointment is shaping their convictions. Who's to know the outcome when Atheism becomes increasingly more accepted? Perhaps one day Atheists will reject the worship and practice of Atheism, completing a full circle.

CHAPTER FIVE

Fas Lex

No religious test shall ever be required as a qualification to any office, or public trust, in this state; nor shall anyone be excluded from holding office on account of his religious sentiments, provided he acknowledge the existence of a Supreme Being.

—Texas State Constitution, Article 1, Section 4.

A Tricky Conundrum

The theory of there being a “religious America” and “secular Europe”¹ exists mostly out of a misunderstanding of basic American law. When the First Amendment was drafted it permitted the free exercise of religion, essentially making possible two religiously important edicts: an American freedom to worship according to ones’ conscience, as well as a legal disestablishment of one particular religion.² What has been misconstrued by this is found in the latter. By disestablishing the United States, the builders of the United States Constitution—Bill of Rights—were not creating a secular state, devoid of any religious ideologies. In fact, they were doing the opposite. The theory of a religious America and secular Europe exists in the minds of theorists who do not realize that America was always intended to be “religious.” In fact, it was intended to be very religious; permitting a freedom of conscience produced a blank canvas, while at

¹ For a concise and well surveyed example of this ideology see Peter L. Berger, Grace Davie & Effie Fokas, *Religious America, Secular Europe? A Theme and Variations* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2008).

² U.S. Constitution, amend. 1. “Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances.”

the same time made the American religious citizenry a palette of reasonably inestimable colors.

Once again this becomes an issue of context.

The contextual backdrop of the American legal system provides a window onto the ever evolving relationship between religious ideologies and cultural progress. As America proceeded along the revolutionary timeline, social allowances chipped away, year after year, opening door after door, permitting opportunities for people of all races, colors, and creeds. Yet, even in this bastion of free will, restrictions still applied. It was not a smooth, nor swift transition for many cultural improvements. American citizens fought, died, and killed one another over the idea of freedom. In the end though—that is to say the present time—there stands an America of pluralism, a “melting pot,” “salad bowl,” melding together and picked apart, amalgamation of race, religion, and irreligion.

The modern image of an all-inclusive, pluralized, United States—particularly concerning Atheism—exists in two parts. The first is more socially-enabling. The second is more legal. The consequence of disestablishing the American religious station creates a religious nation with no real compass. Without a bearing, without a guiding principle, or principles, the nation would float along chaotically, bouncing from majority to majority, irresolute and indecisive about what existed as the religious soul beating away beneath the surface. The introduction of a civil religion, and a legal system to guide that civil religion, engendered a purpose. Where Atheism fits in to these two processes is a tricky conundrum.

This chapter will veer slightly away from the previous three in that instead of examining a certain act of Atheist history, it will focus more on the American legal, and

civil, context. As the United States is unique to the rest of the world because of its axiom of freedom of religion, and in fact has found itself being emulated by other nations longing to free themselves of religious strife, the context of an American Atheism is an intriguing situation. While the First Amendment creates that freedom of religion it does not speak, in any real terms, to a freedom from religion, specifically because the contexts of those inaugurating the idea of religious freedom were privy to a different Atheist context than that of the 1960s, or even New Atheism. For evidence of this, see the previous three chapters.

Because this is a tricky conundrum the American Atheist's place in both the American Civil Religion and the American Legal system that shapes it, seems worth investigating. Discussing how—or if—Atheism thrives in “religious America” should assist in appreciating both the theory that elastic contextual interpretations, rather than concrete definitions, serve understanding Atheism as a whole better, as well as produce a stronger handle on where that Atheism may be heading.

*Enlightened by a Benign Religion*³

So far the etymology and history of Atheism has briefly been drawn out. However, before delving into the American legal definition of Atheism, the question as to what exactly constitutes an Atheist definition of Atheism within a civil religious context must be considered. This is a tricky answer as Atheists—true Atheists, that is—deny the belief in any such entity which naturally leads to a definitive practice of worshipping that entity; nihilism at its most absolute; as well, this argues the idea of Atheism being a

³ The American Civil Religion and Atheism was discussed in finer detail in Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment* (master's thesis, Baylor University, 2010), 154-183; so in order to avoid overlap, a brief description concerning contextual balance will be done herein.

“religion.” Yet, perhaps the best definition would be just that. The belief in not believing is in turn a belief. In this way Atheists are “religious” for being devoutly “irreligious.” In denying the belief in an entity they believe in that disbelief. Circular thinking at its best, it perhaps serves as the perfect explanation for why an Atheist is able to function within a society in general. Combine this with the ability to adapt himself to a society that has roots in a religious foundation and a definition begins to form. The Atheist uses Darwin’s theory of evolution to evolve himself into a process of social evolution, amending certain traits of his own while assimilating to traits of the society-at-large. This is seen in the Harris dichotomy of science/mystical mind analysis and more familiarly in the trading of gifts between Atheists on otherwise religious holidays such as Christmas.⁴ The Atheist, despite his God/religious rejection, still participates in the secular functions of society, binding himself to a system of “religious” procedure and progression.

In addition, the ingrained curiosity that man is born with, that undying love to inspect the mysterious, much like the way an infant passionately insists on putting everything in his mouth—avoiding Freudian analysis—creates a mindset wherein a belief in disbelief is merely a “carried-over” concept of that original curiosity.

The American civic Atheist is the perfect example of this. It is in no way arguable to assert that the United States was not founded by Christian men intent on creating a democratic state based on religious convictions. While the ambiguity of

⁴ Members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster celebrate “Holiday.” It randomly—and ironically—takes places between the start of Chanukah and the end of Kwanzaa.

Jefferson, Adams and Madison’s religious beliefs has created a trafficked highway⁵ of debate on the role of religion in the United States it is possible to assert that American religion is—to an extent—permitted to exercise freely. There is, therefore, a tensely beautiful balancing act between the U.S. Constitution’s First Amendment and the American Civil Religion, as the latter defends a strict disestablishment of any one religion while the former stands upon a foundation of a general Judeo-Christianity-at-large.

The American Civil Religion⁶ has evolved through the short time that the country has been in existence, usually mirroring the church-state relationship of the president,⁷ and guided along by the decisions cascading down the marble steps of the Supreme Court. This will be dealt with in more detail below. For now though, it is important to briefly discuss three essentials that make Atheism in America not just possible but perfect. First, The Atheist is not a non-believer. While the etymology of the term has been distinguished as “without God” and the later usage of it has become a person who “denies” the existence of God, it is a slight misnomer. Because an Atheist does not believe in anything, he does. Second, consider the environment, the context. The Atheist is much like one of Darwin’s finches, the sprite little birds he studied on the Galapagos to

⁵ Currently a popular source of literary work, see Frank Lambert, *The Founding Fathers and the Place of Religion in America* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003); David L. Holmes, *The Faiths of the Founding Fathers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006); and Steven Waldman, *Founding Faith: How Our Founding Fathers Forged a Radical New Approach to Religious Liberty* (New York: Random House, 2008).

⁶ For a beautifully written account of the history behind the idea of “civil religion,” see Ethan Gjerret Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment*, 159-163.

⁷ An excellent source—though in need of newer editions—of the relationship between the American Civil Religion and the Presidency can be found in Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency* (Grand Rapids: Academie Books, 1988).

distinguish special change of identical creatures in differing environments.⁸ Both the finch and the Atheist seem at once ensnared by Darwin's ideas while victims of his adaptation at the same time. They both separate themselves from the original source—the finch from the mainland and the Atheist from the Judeo-Christian foundations of America. Yet, even in this separation, they are still connected to that source. The finch is still a bird, and really still a member of his particular species. The Atheist, as he believes in non-belief, is still a member of the American “church” as he is still a citizen. He is an Atheist-American in the same way there exist Protestant-, Catholic-, and Jewish-Americans. This hyphenation gathers him from outside and places him into the American congregation, permitting him the same religious freedoms to celebrate religious holidays like Christmas; he simply celebrates the Atheist-American Christmas rather than the Christian-American one.⁹ While this may seem a bit like a secularizing effect on religious celebrations, it is in fact the opposite.¹⁰ We must remember that culture evolves, and what may appear as an abandonment of an idea is most likely the evolution of it. Religion in America is ideally individual and as such, though an Atheist may celebrate Christmas and a Christian may display religious art on his property, neither

⁸ In fact, these delightful little birds miraculously make up “thirteen species distributed among four genera,” that is, they comprise an evolutionary process of “adaptive radiation.” They are unique to themselves and wholly different from their relatives on the mainland and make up their own unique “tribe” or “subfamily.” See Frank J. Sulloway, “Darwin and His Finches: The Evolution of a Legend,” *Journal of the History of Biology* 15, no. 1 (1982): 1-53; David Lack, *Darwin's Finches* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983); and Peter R. Grant, *Ecology and Evolution of Darwin's Finches* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1999).

⁹ This hyphenation system will be discussed further below, and was elaborated upon in more detail in Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment*, 163-168.

¹⁰ It can be argued though, that the “secularization” of religious images in the United States in order to fairly stick to the laws set forth by the First Amendment are stripping religion from religious representations. The Supreme Court recently decided on *Salazar v. Buono*, a case dealing with a religious symbol on federal land and found that a cross being displayed on public land was not counter to the First Amendment as it no longer held just religious symbolism, but secular symbolism as well. See *Salazar v. Buono*, 130 S.Ct. 1803 (2010).

are truly interfering with each other's practices. Thirdly, as social structures, religions are privy to all sorts of differentiation. More accepted religions, either those which worship God or not, are made up of the same dimensions, which appear in a myriad of ways. Each adhere to a specific *doctrine*, practice sacred *rituals*, trust in a code of *ethics*, take stock in a process of *experience*, express themselves *artistically*, study their history through *myths*, and connect themselves *socially*.¹¹ All of these traits cultivate the heart of any religious body and when adapted to Atheism they have evolved to include Atheists, both science and state, in a way that helps further define American Atheism.¹²

The American Civil Religion was never truly affixed to one set of ideals. Even at its inauguration, it encompassed more than one specific Christian ideology. While in truth freedom of religion was enacted to permit all forms of Christianity but, to do even that, opened a religious Pandora's Box. The context of this is found in the admonition of one of the founders of both the United States, as well as its system of religious freedom.

Thomas Jefferson, inspired in many ways by European Enlightenment thinking, was himself rebuked for his "Atheism" concerning the importance of separating the church from the state.¹³ Inspired by John Locke's idea of "secularization," a true

¹¹ These seven dimensions make up a definition of religion as espoused by Ninian Smart. See Ninian Smart, *Dimensions of the Sacred: An Anatomy of the World's Beliefs* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996).

¹² See Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment*, 51-73.

¹³ A wonderfully ironic analysis of Jefferson's "Atheism" can be found in Christopher Hitchens, *Thomas Jefferson: Author of America* (San Francisco: Harper Collins, 2005), 108, 119, 182. Hitchens affirms that Jefferson was such an Atheist, an assumption he makes through Jefferson's constant fight for a "secular" government. This opinion is admired and upheld in Hitchen's Atheist colleague Richard Dawkins' book, *The God Delusion*, where he asserts that Jefferson was beyond just agnosticism in his thinking. Just don't expect textual references to that affect; apparently Professor Dawkins chose to leave those out of his tome. See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006), 41-44. The irony here is that Hitchens is correct in his assertion that Jefferson was Atheistic, except that he misses the forest for the trees. Jefferson's "Atheism" is contextually a form of that stage in time's reaction to the disappointment of doubt, a distinction discussed in more detail below.

autonomous break from the strangle-hold of religious authority,¹⁴ Jefferson hoped that man, given the right conditions, such as a free government in which he was permitted to practice the religion of his own conscience, would eventually come to the realization—or rather revelation—that the right religion was one of rational Unitarianism. The “wall of separation” Jefferson wrote of in his letter to the Danbury Baptist Association in 1801 was intended to separate the American people from the oppressive monarchy of the British Crown, not from their religious creeds.¹⁵ If nothing else, the monarchy was a strong symbol of religious power, especially as King George III still carried the distinction bestowed upon Henry VIII as *defensor fides*, essentially placing all those under his rule as privy to the doctrine of *eius regio, cuius religio*. Jefferson, and in him the spirit of a conscience revolution, was wholly averse to living under a model of “the religion of the king is the religion of his people.” Additionally, as he believed ethics and morality could only stem from a Deistic Enlightenment evaluation of his own Christianity, void of the magical myths that argued in contrary to the importance of the facts at hand, Jefferson truly longed for a religiously ethical democracy, but only under its own admission.¹⁶

Moralistically speaking, the American Civil Religion has provided a secular state with a foundation in religious moral standards. Again, the dream of Jefferson’s Unitarian and universal American religious system has been realized, in part, by the adherence to a national moral code which guides the morality of the American citizenry, but not in an

¹⁴ See Chapter Two.

¹⁵ Many people have cited to this letter, or at least its use of the “wall” metaphor, from academics to presidents. In its short entirety, see <http://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/9806/danpre.html> (accessed 21 June 2011).

¹⁶ See Garret Ward Sheldon, *The Political Philosophy of Thomas Jefferson* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1993), 103-111.

identifiably denominational way. The deistic approach—especially of Jefferson, Adams, and Franklin—to an encompassing American moral code was founded on the Enlightenment ideologies of reason and virtue as well as through “revelation.”¹⁷ A combination of Enlightenment-styled “reason and Christian morality” provided the new American nation with a unique “theistic perspectivism.”¹⁸ In creating the idea that different religious perspectives could “share common ideals,” the genesis of an American civil religious morality created a sacred canopy under which American citizens could find shelter from the storm of religious sovereignty.¹⁹

This discussion of American morality within the context of its Civil Religion prompts the question as to where the Atheist fits. A simple answer can be found in the two hyphenation system of American public and religious practice. This system states that each citizen identifies him or herself in two different ways; the first distinguishes the “independence of the individual,” while the second “binds these individuals to one another.”²⁰ The first also deals with the individual’s ethnic background, which can, and does, play to both ethnicity and culture, tying the two together. Thus, an American citizen can be both “African-American, Native-American, European-American, Chilean-American, etc.,” as well as “Protestant-American, Catholic-American, Jewish-American,

¹⁷ Robert Wuthnow, *America and the Challenges of Religious Diversity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 17.

¹⁸ Ibid; also, for more on “theistic perspectivism,” see Kerry S. Walters, *Benjamin Franklin and His Gods* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

¹⁹ Peter Berger speaks socially to the idea that morality can be both externalized as well as internalized. Citing for example the role of a husband and his duties, he takes his morality and law from replications in and outside his consciousness. This relates to the American Civil Religion as man, the husband, can be replaced with American, the citizen. See Peter L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (New York: Anchor Books, 1990), 84.

²⁰ Ethan Gjerset Quillen, *The Great American Disappointment*, 165.

Buddhist-American, Atheist-American, Muslim-American, etc.”²¹ The second hyphenation transcends the first in that it is American-American. This hyphenation “makes possible the inclusion of the cultural or religious-American into the American church, where all members are American-American.”²² Moreover, the second hyphenation, in its ability to bind individuals into a citizenry also “creates a family—a congregation—and turns an immigrant nation into a citizen nation.”²³ As to the morality question, especially in consideration of the Atheist-American, the core of the American-American hyphenate—again shared by all American citizens—is based on the ethical and moral foundation of the American founder’s “theistic perspectivism” and universal “benign religion.”²⁴ In this way, the Christian-American and Atheist-American share the same moral codes.

Because the second hyphenation transcends the American citizen’s ethical and cultural—including religious—individualism, it eliminates the problem of there existing an Atheist-American. It is important to note here also that as the second hyphenation is not a process of assimilation, whereby it would subtract or eliminate every aspect of the first hyphenation, but rather a means by which Americans from multiple backgrounds incorporate themselves into the whole, it opens the opportunity for people of all religion/irreligion to take part in the American saga.

²¹ Ibid., 165-166.

²² Ibid., 166.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Thomas Jefferson spoke romantically of his universal religion in his first inaugural address, referring to the citizens of the new nation as being “enlightened by a benign religion.” He envisioned a nation of like-minded citizens, as erudite as himself, coming to his conclusions, and acting under the guides of “honesty, truth, temperance, gratitude, and the love of man.” Ever an enlightened romantic if there was one. See Thomas Jefferson, “First Inaugural Address,” in Conrad Cherry, ed., *God’s New Israel: Religious Interpretations of American Destiny, rev., ed.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1998), 106-109.

As a short detour, and as a digression from the easy answer concerning the question of Atheist morality, the social aspect of an Atheist-American still seems questionable to some. To this, the context of a dying old woman comes into play.²⁵

Consider for a moment that there is a dying old woman lying peacefully on a bed. She has merely minutes to gasp her last few breaths before the light of the world drifts to darkness. She is at peace, for she is a Christian and knows in her heart that death is merely a passage from this world to that of the glories of heaven beyond. She knows the suffering and pain she suffers now is fleeting because, in God's hands, she will no longer know pain. Consider then that with her sits an Atheist, holding her hand and watching the light fade from her eyes. Does that Atheist tell her, in her last few seconds of life, how trivial and laughable her beliefs in an afterlife, or a heaven, let alone a God are; especially when one considers all the scientific evidence to the contrary of these silly theories of puerile fantasy? Or does that Atheist hold her hand in silence, watching as she drifts happily—albeit deluded—into the nothingness he knows exists after death, permitting her a last moment of insobriety before her body breaths its last?

The answer one gives to this anecdote places him or her on one side of a single line. While any particular answer may sway closer to the line itself, or divulge itself entirely to one side or the other, the distinction is always made on either side. For example, a fundamentalist Atheist, that is an Atheist who emphatically knows there is no possible chance for any existence of God, not even within the context of an historical idea of that God, will likely answer on the side that rebukes the old woman for her irrationality toward what he perceives to be the truth. On the contrary, the more

²⁵ This question was posed to the students of CHS 5341 at Baylor University on 16 November 2010 by Professor Chris Marsh. It was done so as a polemical argument against Atheism. Here it will be used to support the opposite.

understanding and respectful Atheist, an Atheist who is also a phenomenologist, will sit with her quietly, comforting her with his presence and touch; and though he may perhaps internally pity her delusion, he will not voice it. These are two sides of the same coin; one side displays an inward reflecting Atheist, the other an outward, evangelistic Atheism. For the sake of argument, change the old woman to an old man, and instead of being a Christian, he is a devout Muslim. Now, instead of an Atheist, consider with him sits a fundamentalist Christian. How would one answer that question? If we were to use assumption as our guide, few of us would more than likely imagine the fundamentalist Christian would inwardly reflect in that situation. After all, would it not be irresponsible for him not to save the infidel Muslim before it is too late? Is it not his duty to witness to the Muslim?

Parables like this are useful mostly for argument's sake, and exist in an almost strictly evangelical capacity.²⁶ As the two individuals involved can easily be swapped for whatever one's imagination desires, the credibility of the parable flies right out the window. As it is so flexible, it becomes an *a priori* argument; the results are known by the person asking the question before he or she asks it. It is necessary to point it out here as an example of poor scholarship.

The American Atheist is a civil religious and Jeffersonian universal Unitarian who does not believe in God; the same statement can be made about the Christian-, Muslim-, Buddhist-, Hindu-, Pagan-, Jewish-, etc., American as well. Theoretically the Atheist-American may stand beside the adherents of these religious distinctions as a

²⁶ This is not to say that it could, or would, be used strictly by Evangelical Christians. As stated, the two individuals involved can become anyone or anything for the sake of the person making the argument.

fellow member of an American religious family. He can fight and die for his country,²⁷ and celebrate his patriotic belonging in American society. Socially he is no less a citizen than his religious brothers and sisters. Because of the system put forth by the architects of America's freedom of religion—even though Atheism was not a major issue in that context—the organic quality of the system itself has socially permitted the allowance of a freedom from religion. Legally though, the inclusion of Atheism and a freedom from religion, at least according to the First Amendment, is an altogether different can of worms.

Legal Two-Step

Initial Examination

As a religious ideology that believes in nothing—which itself can be a belief system—and which adheres to an American Judeo-Christian morality, how does Atheism constitute a legal role in American society? If the American Atheist denies the same beliefs that he upholds as a U.S. citizen how does he exist? What was touched on briefly above will be better answered below.

In America citizens are bound to one another in an effort to uphold and contribute to the livelihood of the state through religious practices that range from the banal to the

²⁷ Currently the United States military permits 48 symbols of belief on military grave markers. These range from Jewish to Christian, Muslim, Hindu, Buddhist, Wiccan, Messianic Jewish, Kohen, Farohar and two symbols for non-belief. One is the Humanist Emblem of Spirit, commemorating those who believe in “secular humanism.” The other is for Atheists. For this symbol the military went with an image commemorating the science Atheist. It encompasses the symbol of an atom with a capital letter A in the center. It is unfortunate that they have used this symbol, mostly because it shows, while they acknowledge Atheism as a religious affiliation, at the same time they wholly misunderstand Atheism-in-general. The United States Military also borrowed this emblem from Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s *American Atheists* organization, furthering the American stereotype that all Atheists are like her. One also wonders if an Atheist would want an emblem at all. These emblems are available for viewing at The United States Department of Veteran Affairs Website under Available Emblems of Belief for Placement on Government Headstones and Markers, <http://www.cem.va.gov/hm/hmemb.asp> (accessed 22 June 2011).

ultra-sacred, depending on perspective. Americans are obligated to celebrate the Fourth of July by either reading the Declaration of Independence to their children, or by drinking beer, eating barbecued meats and watching fireworks. Either are appropriate rituals within the American church. This *religare* of the profane to the secular sacred connects individuals of extreme diversity under the faith of being an American citizen. This faith has also undergone immense contextual evolution over the two and a half centuries that it has existed. What constituted a sacred event one-hundred years ago, for example, may be too fundamental for even the most moderate of modern citizens.

The evolution of the American Civil Religion has fluctuated and molded itself around national necessity, usually following the example of the President,²⁸ as well as how the first sixteen words to the First Amendment are interpreted. Without delving further into First Amendment constitutionality, what those words mean politically is that under the First Amendment “neither a state nor the Federal Government can set up a church,” nor can any person “be punished for entertaining or professing religious beliefs or disbeliefs.”²⁹ The two elements found within those first sixteen words have shifted over time, accommodating to the contemporary contextual need of American society. A clear example here is the outright unconstitutionality of the words “under God” which were slipped into the American Pledge of Allegiance in 1954 during the administration of President Dwight D. Eisenhower.³⁰ The conditions under which this event took place

²⁸ A wonderful source on this American Civil Religious phenomenon can be found in Richard V. Pierard and Robert D. Linder, *Civil Religion and the Presidency*. This text covers nine presidents and their religious influence on America, as well as a few other chapters on the phenomenon of civil religion historically.

²⁹ *Torcaso v. Watkins* 367 U.S. 488 (1961).

³⁰ Sydney E. Ahlstrom, *A Religious History of the American People, II* (Garden City: Image Books, 1975), 450.

were piqued perfectly. The United States had come out of the Second World War victorious but with a few new enemies in the east. As the Cold War got into full swing, the differences between the God-less soviets and the chosen, God fearing (and loving) Americans needed to be obvious. Under this condition of “piety on the Potomac”³¹ God took on a form of national identity. Invoking God in the pledge or even evoking trust in Him as the official American motto was deemed right for the time. In the modern, pluralized, and somewhat secularized nation that heard the case of *Elk Grove Unified School District v. Newdow* (2004) in which the “God language” within the pledge was indeed ruled unconstitutional by the Ninth Circuit Court of Appeals, it was not. Though there was an immediate backlash toward the ruling, and though the Supreme Court was unable to rule officially on the matter—opinions were still drafted—due to a custody issue where Michael Newdow did not have legal guardianship of his daughter, the case remained obsolete. However, it does bring into play the importance of understanding and appreciating history and context that people like Michael Newdow seem to gloss over. Justice Sandra Day O’Connor, in her opinion on the “God language” being unconstitutional reminds us that the language itself was “principally historical” and existed more to “acknowledge the role of religion in American history rather than to inspire faith or to be an expression of worship.”³²

The *Newdow* case, and really the subject of it, is important to the argument of contextual definitions because it not only brings up the condition wherein Atheists as a group become excluded within the Pledge of Allegiance, but also the role the American

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court: Supreme Court Decisions on Church-State Relationships*, 2nd ed. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 127.

Civil Religion plays in the contextual history of the nation. A great irony, which is not hard to see, and which is important to note, is that the case hinged upon an Atheistic argument against the legality of the “God language” in the pledge when it was instituted as a way to combat the God-less Atheists of Communism. This again shows a degree of social evolution.³³

When it comes to the First Amendment, the issue of establishment is equally important as that of the difference between belief and practice within any American religious body. While the free exercise clause sounds as if it permits the wanton practice of any and all religious beliefs, it does not. At certain intervals a line is drawn to bar certain actions which are deemed unsafe or inappropriate for the survival of the state.³⁴ These exceptions are where the United States Supreme Court comes into play.

Theoretical definitions can take us only so far. In a nation with a proud history molded around the practice and usage of the First Amendment’s clauses of religious liberty—to a degree—and disestablishment, perhaps a political contextualization is better suited toward a solid acceptance of Atheism’s legality. This political context, stemming from a seemingly secular, though otherwise religiously based—as far as the concerns of the court have been aimed toward—institution will help also not only define American Atheism, but at least shed some light on the religious Atheism growing out of societies all over the world.

³³ It appears that Newdow was even more foolish expecting the removal of the “God language” to be easily undergone. It was placed there to combat Godless communism. Ironically, modern America seems less concerned with Godless communists (except for the fringe who believe President Obama is secretly one of them) and more concerned with fundamental Islam. As it was in the 1950’s God is once again becoming part of American identity in reaction to terrorism and Liberal politics.

³⁴ See Ted G. Jelen, “Religion and the American Public Opinion: Social Issues,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and American Politics*, edited by Corwin E. Smidt, Lyman A. Kellstedt, and James L. Guth (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 217-242.

The first real case to deal directly with the rights of an Atheist, and which was decided in her favor, is *McCollum v. Board of Education* (1948). This simple case dealt with the idea of Atheism at a time in American history when Christian Evangelicalism was gaining significant muster through revivals like those of Billy Graham.³⁵ It also gives a glimpse into the American legal acceptance of Atheism as a viable religious path for American citizens. Mrs. Vashti McCollum was an Atheist and mother of a student at a grade school in Champaign, Illinois which assigned its students a thirty or forty-five minute—depending on grade—study session on school grounds on religious studies. The students could choose between Catholic, Protestant, or Jewish education and were taught by professionals in the fields of each. If the parents of a child wished not to have their children partake, the child would be separated from the other children and receive no regular schoolwork in order to keep the students in the religious studies from falling behind.³⁶ The Supreme Court easily ruled in favor of Mrs. McCollum because of the obvious breach between church and state within the case.

The *McCollum* case, though decided in favor of an Atheist, is not a direct admission or acceptance of Atheism's legality. It is however a step in a direction that was further made in *Torcaso v. Watkins* and *Abington v. Schempp*. Both these cases were heard in the early 1960's—1961 and 1963 to be more exact—an era in American

³⁵ Billy Graham made a name for himself during a time in American history after the boys had returned from war and were settling in to playing house. Especially so in the 1950s, suburban America was distinguishing itself as one of three devout categories: Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish. This occurrence was summed up nicely—though dated—in Will Herberg, *Protestant, Catholic, Jew* (New York: Anchor Books, 1960). Billy Graham was also known as the “preacher to the presidents” for his relationship—sometimes close and sometimes distant—with every U.S. president since Lyndon Johnson. Though he was hurt politically and emotionally with the downfall of his closest president, Richard Nixon, he remained a voice for American Christianity for decades. See Martin E. Marty, *Pilgrims in the Own Land* (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 405-417.

³⁶ Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court*, 100.

history of radical, and sometimes violent politically religious upheaval. The year prior to the *Torcaso* decision, America elected its first Catholic President. As a testament to the decade, it would end with the resignation of a predominately supported conservative Christian president. The time between Kennedy's presidency beginning in 1960 and the end of Nixon's in 1973 saw a massive shift in what constituted American religion.³⁷

This shift provided a wonderful backdrop for American religion to be turned on its head. Suddenly, religious ideologies flooded the American religious marketplace ranging from neo-conservatism to neo-eastern philosophies, to straight up new age.³⁸ Within that paradigm the decisions of *Torcaso* and *Abington* contributed to the quiet minority of Atheism. In *Torcaso v. Watkins* the court decided on a case where a government appointed employee, Roy Torcaso, was denied the position of Notary Public because as an Atheist he was unable to swear an oath to God.³⁹ The court found in his favor. An essential element to the *Torcaso* case—as well as to the thesis of this study as a whole—is found in a footnote at the end of the opinion. Having decided that both “theists and nontheists alike should be included within the ambit of the First Amendment”⁴⁰ Justice Hugo Black wrote within footnote 11: “Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taosim, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others.”⁴¹

³⁷ See David Farber, *The Age of Great Dreams*, 188-189.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Compare this with the issue concerning Charles Bradlaugh and the British Parliament in the previous chapter.

⁴⁰ John Witte, Jr. and Joel A. Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, 3rd ed. (Boulder: Westview Press, 2011), 134.

⁴¹ *Torcaso v. Watkins* 367 U.S. 488, note 11 (1961).

Cleverly skirting the term Atheist, Justice Black stepped the United States one foot closer toward an American acceptance of American God-less-ness by acknowledging “Ethical Culture” and “Secular Humanism,” an issue to be further examined below.

If nothing else, the Supreme Court is extremely talented at skirting issues that require it to fully define specificity in religion, as that would be unconstitutional in the sense of American separation between church and state. In acknowledging ethical culture and secular humanism the court permitted the free exercise of non-religion but it did not exclusively speak directly to the acceptance of Atheism. Even in the significant case of *Abington v. Schempp*, from which the most outspoken evangelical Atheist in American history received her title of “most hated woman in America,” the court decided for an Atheist but not particularly for her cause. The Atheist in question, Madalyn Murray O’Hair did an impressive job from 1963 until her disappearance just before the new millennium, alienating Atheists from believers and creating a stereotype of Atheists as angry, violent, and vulgar.⁴² In many ways the stigma of Atheism being somehow a derivation of, or membership in, a communist party is in thanks to people like Madalyn Murray O’Hair, who was a terrible human being, and an even worse Atheist. She was outspoken, brash and entirely unpleasant to be around. Atheism seemed her outlet. She mysteriously disappeared with her granddaughter and son with a good amount of money from her Austin, Texas organization, *American Atheists* in 1995. In 2001 her body was discovered in a shallow grave south of Austin with those of her granddaughter, son, and

⁴² Madalyn Murray received her infamous nickname, “the most hated woman in America” from a June, 1964 article in *Life Magazine*. See Jane Howard, “The Most Hated Woman in America,” *Life*, June 19, 1964, 91-94; for a wonderfully “candid” interview see Madalyn Murray, interview by Playboy, *Playboy Magazine*, October 1965, 61-74; as well as Ann Rowe Seaman, *America’s Most Hated Woman: The Life and Gruesome Death of Madalyn Murray O’Hair* (New York: Continuum, 2005); and Bruce J. Dierenfield, ““The Most Hated Woman in America:” Madalyn Murray and the Crusade against School Prayer” in the *Journal of Supreme Court History*, 32, no 2. (2007): 62-84.

the head and hands of a fourth victim, who turned out to be one of her killers. She evidently had been tortured, strangled, dismembered, and burned by a disgruntled and deranged employee from *American Atheists*. Her legacy will always remain within the *Abington* decision and in the fact that though she did not, by any means, deserve the death she received, she was still a very unpleasant and unhappy woman who misrepresented Atheists for decades.

Atheist Inclusion

American Atheists have long benefited from the United States disestablishment of religion as it permits them the freedom to co-exist amongst those who believe in some form of deity. While *McCullum v. Board of Education* and *Abington v. Schempp* dealt with Atheists confronting an admission of God in order to allow their children inclusion in the society of grade school, *Torcaso v. Watkins* is the only case which approaches the legality of American Atheism. That is until *United States v. Seeger* and *Welsh v. United States* in 1965 and 1970 respectfully. These two cases dealt almost exclusively with the legality of Atheism—though Atheism would thinly describe the four men involved in the two cases.

As the war in Vietnam progressed further into the decade, more and more young men found themselves facing the reality of a draft pull. One possible way out of being sent to war was to apply for conscientious objector status. As it was at the time, an accepted religious background was needed to qualify.⁴³ This, as it was in *Abington v. Schempp* and *McCullum v. Board of Education*, left those who did not believe in a deity of sorts out of the American loop. Of particular interest in the *Seeger* case is the Supreme

⁴³ Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court*, 63-66.

Court's decision in amending section 6 (j) of the then current Selective Service Act in order to accommodate conscientious objectors who did not have an established religious foundation for their beliefs.⁴⁴

Because *United States v. Seeger* revealed an issue within the American system, the Supreme Court, as it does so well, created a test in order to help simplify these sorts of decisions.⁴⁵ This test, however, made decision-making seem more difficult. The “Double Sincerity Test,” as it was named, essentially looked at the convictions of people applying for conscientious objection and measured them next to the ethics as cited by accepted religiously-based objectors. In order to combat the idea that the Supreme Court would be making assumptions on one person in order to decide the case for another, the justices made clear that they would merely be evaluating the “sincerity” of the person, not comparing their beliefs to another applicant.⁴⁶ An ideal candidate for this test appeared five years later in *Welsh v. United States*.

Elliot A. Welsh was far more irreligious than the applicants at the heart of the *Seeger* case. On the application form for his objection he actually marked out the word “religion.” When asked where his ethical convictions stemmed from he replied, “by reading in the fields of history and sociology.”⁴⁷ According to the current law, and under the rigors of the “Double Sincerity Test,” his options seemed thin. In 1970 the Court decided, however, in his favor. According to Justice Black, Welsh was more religious than he thought as “few people knew of the broad interpretation given to the word

⁴⁴ Witte and Nichols, *Religion and the American Constitutional Experiment*, 321.

⁴⁵ Cf. “The Sherbert Test” *Sherbert v. Verner*, (1963) “The Lemon Test” *Lemon v. Kutzman* (1971)

⁴⁶ Ronald B. Flowers, *That Godless Court*, 65.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

“religious” in *Seeger*.”⁴⁸ Under the test in the *Seeger* case one’s objections could not be based on “political,” “sociological,” “philosophical,” or “personal morality” viewpoints. As Welsh cited “history” and “sociology,” his convictions were not qualified.⁴⁹ The Court disagreed. For these two cases, a lack of religious practice, or even the outright denial of them, did not constitute a lack of religious convictions.

Probably the closest decision which speaks to an admission of Atheism’s legality comes from the United States District Court of Wisconsin. *Kaufman v. McCaughtry* dealt with an inmate, James J. Kaufman, under the custody of the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, who was denied the right to form an Atheist-based religious group. The Waupun Correctional Institute in Waupun, Wisconsin had permitted religious groups of more accepted faiths, but denied his request. He brought the case in defense of his First Amendment rights. Originally the case was found in favor of the defendants, but upon reconsideration to the Court of Appeals for the Seventh Circuit, the original decision was reversed. Atheism was held to be Kaufman’s religion.⁵⁰

Kaufman’s “religion,” according to his own definition, comprised a “communal type thing” where ethics are “derived from society, history and personal experience that helps believers determine what is right and wrong.”⁵¹ Kaufman wished to communicate with fellow inmates his religious convictions of being irreligious. He stated his reasoning behind the request, in full:

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ *Kaufman v. McCaughtry*, 422 F. Supp. 2d 1016 (2006); as well as Derek H. Davis, “Is Atheism a Religion? Recent Judicial Perspectives on the Constitutional Meaning of ‘Religion,’” *Journal of Church & State*, 47 (Autumn 2005): 707-723.

⁵¹ Ibid.

I request that a group be formed for Atheists within the institution, for the purpose of study and education. Every Atheist has the right to determine his own ideas; to express his beliefs in teaching and practice; to assemble for purposes of learning and instructions; to educate others interested in Atheism; and to promote a more thorough understanding of all religions, their origins, and their histories. The proposed group should meet once each week, for discussion and learning about the principles and practices which Atheism is based upon. Even Atheism falls under this right [of free exercise]. Atheists are entitled to the same freedoms of movement, assembly, and speech, as those inmates who profess a religion.⁵²

Because his request was initially denied, Kaufman saw himself as being persecuted. The Court of Appeals agreed. After weighing the many circumstances concerning the formation of “umbrella” religious groups in the Wisconsin Department of Corrections—especially as these groups needed, by law, a professional in the religious field to lead the groups, not an inmate—Atheism, as far as the state of Wisconsin was concerned, was a religion, and thus legal.⁵³

This case is particularly interesting in consideration of the idea of rehabilitation and whether or not a religion based on God is necessary to fully rehabilitate a man or women in prison. Alcohol and drug rehabilitation centers base their twelve-step programs on the belief that there is a higher power controlling the actions of man and that only through God is he able to reconcile his “demons.”⁵⁴ Atheism alleviates these steps and replaces them with a secular ethical system. It is interesting to consider if that is possible.

Placing Atheism under the rubric of legality—and even referring to it as a religion—at last positions it within the confines of the American legal system where it

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ The Twelve Steps invoke God personally five times. Without God, this program could not work. Cases to this effect have been issued, particularly those which have dealt with court ordered rehabilitation. See Derek P. Apanovitch, “Religion and Rehabilitation: The Requisition of God by the State.” *47 Duke L. J.* 785-852.

falls under the same jurisdictions as every other religious American. It not only aligns the Atheist with his religious brothers, it also includes him where he was once excluded. These cases have weighed Atheism as a religious entity and found it to be an equal in the modern day. As a belief system it has evolved into the realm of American civil morality and embraced those citizens finding themselves questioning their beliefs but unwilling or unable to release themselves from complete religious practice.

Issues Again with “Definitions”

The rise in the number of American people openly admitting some form of religious doubt, be it extreme to one side or the other—ultra Atheist or early stage agnostic—has the Supreme Court stumbling into the awkward situation of deciding whether or not irreligion, or the practices of those who hold to no religion, can be protected by the First Amendment’s freedom of religion clause, or, more accurately, by the freedom of speech also granted by that Amendment.

One of the major issues at hand in this new paradigm of deciding religion cases for people who claim none, is the definitions used to make sense of either side. The most difficult definitions at the front of these cases are those of “religion” and “Atheist.” Neither have solid definitions, regardless of those used by the court over the years. For example, to return to *United States v. Seeger* the United States Supreme Court defined religion by means of Paul Tillich as something which has an “ultimate concern,” Dr. Tillich’s long held definition of religion. Additionally, in describing the issue of “superior being” as it pertained to the case itself, a longer definition was provided:

I have written of the God above the God of theism In such a state [of self-affirmation] the God of both religious and theological language disappears. But something remains, namely, the seriousness of that doubt in which meaning within meaninglessness is affirmed. The source of this affirmation of meaning within meaninglessness, of certitude within doubt, is not the God of traditional theism but the 'God above God,' the power of being, which works through those who have no name for it, not even the name God.⁵⁵

The Supreme Court's attempt here at defining what theorists and theologians have been working at for thousands of years was done so in order to make a decision based on a moderate non-theist's wish to conscientiously object from fighting in the Vietnam War. As stated earlier, under the Universal Military Training and Service Act's section 6(j), no conscientious objector could be granted such status unless they were doing so under the restrictions of a particular orthodox faith. This distinction is further made by embracing the idea that these moral restrictions were found within relation to "a Supreme Being involving duties beyond a human relationship but not essentially political, sociological, or philosophical views or a merely personal moral code."⁵⁶

At the heart of this case lay three men who filed for conscientious objector status but not under the conditions as set forth by section 6(j) as they did not cite an orthodox relation to a Supreme Being as the inspiration for their ethical reasoning behind refusing to go to war. Seeger, the namesake of the case, cited "personages such as Plato, Aristotle, and Spinoza for support of his ethical belief in intellectual and moral integrity."⁵⁷ Further, he cited his belief system stemmed from a "belief in and devotion to goodness and virtue for their own sakes, and a religious faith in a purely ethical creed," which he followed up with, concerning God, that he held these convictions "without

⁵⁵ *United States v. Seeger*, 380 U.S. 163 (1965).

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*

belief in God, except in the remotest sense.”⁵⁸ It may have possibly been this last distinction that kept him from going to Vietnam as it was the definition of God, more than religion, which the Supreme Court tried to reconcile as an “ultimate concern.”

The broad consensus used by the court in Paul Tillich’s encompassing definition of God also appeared as a means by which to address section 6(j)’s requirement of a relation to a Supreme Being, that moniker used in order not to offend the great myriad of American religions—except that it fails to appreciate those religions that do not adhere to a Supreme Being, namely Buddhism, which holds to a series of secular ethical moral codes.

United States v. Seeger addressed an issue in which the definition of “God” as expressed through man’s “religion” or, as used by the Court and section 6(j), “relation” to that God, was a slippery definition at best. The overall consensus definition channeled through the writing of Paul Tillich made just about any moral code acceptable, as long as the person objecting could somehow apply himself to this ideology. As mentioned earlier, this was a fact made relevant in *Welsh v. United States* wherein a conscientious objector who openly “struck the words “my religious training””⁵⁹ from section 6(j) was granted objector status. This was due in great part to the overall consensus definition which found his moral code, void of a Supreme Being, valid. As stated by the court, “conscientious objection to all war is “religious” within the meaning of S 6(j) if this opposition stems from the registrant’s moral, ethical, or religious beliefs about what is

⁵⁸ Ibid.

⁵⁹ *Welsh v. United States*, 398 U.S. 333 (1970).

right and wrong and these beliefs are held with the strength of traditional religious convictions.”⁶⁰

Essentially, these two cases opened the United State’s legal definition of “religion” to any possible opinion as long as it held to its moral and ethical beliefs as strongly as one would to more orthodox religious ideals. This also swept in the possibility of permitting the idea of non-religion equal status, legalizing the idea of irreligion alongside long historically held religious definitions. From these two cases the definition of religion, pertaining either to those who believed in a relation to a Supreme Being or not, was definitely viewed through a “broad scope” as “a registrant’s characterization of his beliefs as “nonreligious” is not a reliable guide to those administering the exemption.”⁶¹

As far as defining the term Atheism goes, the court is as equally wonderfully vague. One of the closest examples of the Court ever coming to a definition of irreligion, or non belief, outside the aforementioned cases of *United States v. Seeger* and *Welsh v. United States*, was in *Torcaso v. Watkins* (1961), but not directly. The *Torcaso* case dealt with a problem concerning the permissions of Atheistic legal exceptions and the possible unconstitutional process of swearing religious oaths by a person who does not believe in the religious ideals upholding the oath. The case also reminded the United States legal system that state religious oaths, under the application of the Fourteenth Amendment, were unconstitutional in consideration of the religious clauses of the First Amendment.⁶²

⁶⁰ Ibid.

⁶¹ Ibid.

⁶² See *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961).

The appellant, Roy Torcaso, was appointed by the Governor of Maryland to serve the office of Notary Public, a position that at the time required an oath under the Maryland state constitution that understood a belief in God. Torcaso refused to take the oath for Atheistic reasons. Taking the issue to court the case was decided in his favor under the conditions set forth in *Cantwell v. Connecticut* and the Fourteenth and First Amendments, as the oath was indeed found to be unconstitutional. While this case is simply about the reaffirmation of the First Amendment's application through the Fourteenth, sweeping state legality under national legality, the Supreme Court inevitably had to tackle the question of Atheism and its place in the American religious pantheon.

Though dicta, the words used by Justice Black under footnote eleven in his opinion of the case construed of an umbrella-like definition of religions which did not harbor certain beliefs in a Supreme Being. Citing in his opinion where he states that “neither (State nor Federal Government) can aid those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against those religions founded on different beliefs”⁶³ he followed up with a short list of these particular religions founded on “different beliefs.” As cited earlier, “Ethical Culture,” and “Secular Humanism” made the list.⁶⁴ These distinctions are helpful in the process of appreciating the context, or at least understanding the practical context of irreligion by “Atheist” thinking people; but it also causes two distinct problems. First, it does not fully embrace an attempt at a definition and second, as dicta it is not of the opinion of the Court, and therefore not legal precedence. While it may be a step in a direction concerning the American legality of “Atheism,” it sadly is a step that does not exactly lead anywhere.

⁶³ Ibid.

⁶⁴ Ibid., footnote 11.

In the earlier cases mentioned above in which the issue of Atheism has appeared, the relationship between non-belief and irreligion was not a strange one. However, the question still remains whether or not the United States Constitution protects irreligion and non-belief under the First Amendment's free exercise of religion clause, rather than freedom of speech. It would seem more appropriate, contextually and semantically, for Atheism to be protected under the aspect of free speech, rather than free religion, but that again causes trouble in distinctions. Atheism can be argued as a religious practice as it encompasses a particular process of doubt, as well as the functionality of the belief itself in the lives of those who define themselves as Atheists. Yet, to do so could appear as an insult—or even assault—on already legally established ideas of “religion” in America.

In the cases of *McCollum v. Board of Education* and *Abington v. Schempp* the role of Atheist participation unavoidably dealt with the decision of the court pertaining to religious ideas being addressed in public schools. In both, the appellant Atheists won out because they were challenging occurrences of unconstitutionality that were part of the accepted forms of disestablishment as set forth in the First Amendment, not because the Court had decided in their favor as freely practicing their “faith” under the First Amendment's free exercise clause.⁶⁵ Because the Court was merely upholding the restrictions that came with separating American church from state, it was not, by any means, supporting the belief systems of those Atheist participants. Regardless of what

⁶⁵ In *McCollum v. Board of Education* the Court decided in favor of appellant Vashti McCollum, an Atheist mother who did not wish her child to participate in a school sanctioned “released time” program where students could elect to receive religious teaching in the Protestant, Catholic, or Jewish faiths. The Court decided as a way to promote the idea of the separation of church and state. Miss McCollum's Atheism was merely part of the story, not the purpose. See *McCollum v. Board of Education* 333 U.S. 203 (1948). In *Abington v. Schempp* the Court decided in favor of the appellants Edward Schempp, a Unitarian, and Madalyn Murray, an Atheist because the case dealt with the reading of Biblical texts on school grounds, during school hours, and by school children. The case was again decided not because of the faiths of those involved but in order to uphold the United State's separation of church and state. See *Abington v. Schempp* 374 U.S. 203 (1963).

may be construed from these decisions, the Court did not directly shown itself promoting Atheistic ideas or setting up a system of freedom “from” religion permissions.

However, the basis of these cases is essential in arguing the idea that the United States has at most considered a freedom from religion clause. If Atheism were to be defined as an accepted American religious practice, then it would inevitably fall under the purview of the First Amendment’s free exercise clause. However, again, as the Court seems to be steering toward most all religious cases falling under the category of free speech rather than free religion,⁶⁶ it would make sense that Atheism follows suit.

However, to play devil’s advocate, if the court were to return to making decisions based on free exercise rather than free speech, there remains the issue of Atheistic public practice, specifically dealing with the American system of education. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Atheism has divested itself into two forms, science and state. If the court were to accept Atheism into Justice Black’s list of accepted religious forms, the Science Atheist would cause a problem with earlier case decisions concerning the teaching of religion in public schools, such as *Edwards v. Aguillard* (1987)⁶⁷ where the Court dealt with the teaching of, and differences between, evolution (science) and intelligent design (creationism). If science Atheism were to be legally accepted, neither could be taught as they both would be the basis of religious ideology.

A re-evaluation of the definition of religion is a good thing—and necessary for society to evolve further into the future. Context is ever changing and the Court

⁶⁶ See *Good News Club v. Milford Central School*, 533 U.S. 98 (2001); and *Christian Legal Society v. Martinez*, 561 U.S. ___, 130 S.Ct. 2971, 177 L.Ed.2d 838 (2010).

⁶⁷ *Edwards v. Aguillard* dealt with the state of Louisiana creating and trying to apply a “creationism act” that would have made public school curriculum fairly teach creationism alongside evolution in science classes. The Court decided against the Louisiana act as it clearly acted against the disestablishment clause of the First Amendment. See *Edwards v. Aguillard*, 482 U.S. 578 (1987).

decisions which defined particular religious elements forty to fifty years ago—or even farther—are difficult to apply to the modern day. This is partly seen in the fact that the Court has shifted into the free speech bracket of the First Amendment, depending no longer on the idea of free religious exercise as it is becoming more and more difficult to apply out-of-context case decisions to modern issues. As to the question whether or not the Court is respecting a freedom “from religion,” there is truth to be found in the evidence of the cases mentioned herein, yet only because the system is successfully and appropriately evolving to make sense of the ever-changing and pluralizing religious paradigm that comes from America’s freedom to do so.

Unique, Not Exceptional

In a religious state, the man without faith seems detached, outside, separate. When that religious state is founded upon certain guiding principles, governing the morality of the people and inspired predominantly by a system of religious codes and measures, the man without faith is even more removed. By denying the religious ideologies used in order to establish a religious state, the man without faith alienates himself from his fellow citizens. To deny the existence of God, within this paradigm, is akin to denying the existence of the state itself. After all, a building with no foundation cannot stand.

However, when a religious state is established in such a way that it utilizes those same certain guiding principles in a somewhat vague, yet delicately respectful way, it allows for a great number of possible outcomes. When a religious state acknowledges its foundation, but does not lean upon it completely, it makes room for change and

interpretation. When a religious state is religiously disestablished the man without faith can reattach himself.

While standing on a solid foundation, the United States of America did just that. By creating a system of government which based its moral code on the Enlightened biblical beliefs of those who created the founding documents—and thus the political system itself—yet with a respect toward religious freedoms, the American system of government made for an ever evolving religious body. The architects of the American political structure made for a state which could accommodate a future of religious plurality, even when at the time the many faiths represented were essentially of the same foundation.

What this system has built is a state which accommodates a growing and evolving religious body, where even the most foreign of religious belief can integrate into the American structure of freedom of religion. It is here where the Atheist-American remains a citizen.

The civil and legal context of American Atheism is indeed a tricky conundrum. In the grand scheme of this study as a whole, the introduction of Atheism into the American system of belief is genuinely unique. It not only follows the lineage set forth by the three stages examined through chapters one and three, it also—quite American-like—takes those previous contexts and makes them its own. The United States is unique to the rest of the world, not exceptional, but unique nonetheless. In the dreams of Jefferson, Adams, Franklin, and those mythical American heroes from Lincoln to FDR to Martin Luther King, Jr., an inimitable sense of freedom has been actualized through the American church of civil religion and the complex, organic, and cautiously admired legal

system actuated by the nation's judicial system. This examination, more than anything else, has helped serve to further promote the idea that a "definition" of religion, and especially of Atheism, is an inept process. The Atheism making its way through the court decisions examined above, and which is curiously finding itself a part of the American Civil Religion, cannot contextually be compared to that of pagan antiquity or the Enlightenment, thus making a "definition" impossible. The progress of the American legal, and thus religious, history makes that fact all the more clear.

CHAPTER SIX

Conclusion

When I became convinced that the universe is natural, that all the ghosts and gods are myths, there entered into my brain, into my soul, into every drop of my blood the sense, the feeling, the joy of freedom. The walls of my prison crumbled and fell. The dungeon was flooded with light and all the bolts and bars and manacles became dust. I was no longer a servant, a serf, or a slave. There was for me no master in all the wide world—not even in infinite space.

—Robert G. Ingersoll, *Ingersoll's Vow*.

Atheists speak fondly of freedom. Those characters just reviewed have seen themselves unfettered of the restrictions and binding imprisonment of religious faith and belief. They have seen themselves awakened to a reality without the need of the gods. This, they feel, has set them free. They are no longer choked by the exhaustive Eucharist of faith. Once the scales have dropped from their eyes, after the exhilarating realization of God's non-existence washes over them, they see themselves clean, liberated, baptized by truth. In many ways they feel “enlightened,” both in knowledge and weight.

The nineteenth century American lawyer Robert G. Ingersoll, asserted this ideal quite succinctly in his aptly titled, *Ingersoll's Vow*. It is a mantra shared by advocates of “free thought” as it encompasses a lyrical enlightenment where releasing ones commitment to God in turn shakes off the restricting grasp God has on freethinking men. In his vow, Ingersoll speaks of a conscious autonomy—taking inspiration from the Enlightenment—where the “universe” becomes “natural,” and where a realization that the mythical elements of God are false creates “the sense, the feeling, the joy of

freedom.”¹ For Ingersoll this realization breaks down and “crumbles” the walls of religious tyranny that have entangled him in grief and fear. From there his vow mentions “free” or “freedom” nineteen times.² In his “agnosticism” he has become free of such atrocities as “ignorant and cruel creeds,” the “books that savages have produced,” all the “barbarous legends of the past,” from “popes and priests,” from “sanctified mistakes and holy lies,” from “the fear of eternal pain,” from “the winged monsters of the night,” and from “devils, ghosts, and Gods.”³ He has, in accepting his consciousness as nothing more than the inventive properties of his mind, finally become “free to spread imagination’s wings.”⁴ Ingersoll, as he speaks for those who have equally felt this wash of liberation in the realization of the non-existence of God, has reunited with himself; for, without God, an Atheist is left with only that. Anthropocentrism comes with a price. Once the initial and heady phase of elation has passed, there comes the crushing weight of solitude. No more is God there to receive prayer or to send His love through assurance. No more can the Atheist whisper in his mind for help, pray for safety, pray for the protection of loved ones, ask for guidance, seek dependence in God’s will. No longer is there a set plan for his life. No more does he look forward to an afterlife. No more are his deceased loved ones awaiting him in a wonderful existence free of pain and suffering. For him death is truly the end. He is totally alone. Without religion he is isolated. Without religion he has disconnected from the matrix of social connectivity. Without religion he is separate and alone.

¹ Robert G. Ingersoll as quoted in Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism*, 9

² Ibid., 9-10.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid., 9

The context of freeing oneself from the binding social condition of religion has proven difficult—even deadly—for the characters evaluated in the four contextual milieux represented herein. This is especially so when one considers the role religion has played in the make-up and support of society. Emile Durkheim, one of the early functional reductionists, theorized that religion was merely the construction of man’s need for society.⁵ Durkheim, the father of social science, saw within society a dichotomy between two realms, the sacred and the profane. Society was based on the control of these two elements. Religion then became “a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and surrounded by prohibitions—beliefs and practices that unite its adherents in a single moral community called a church.”⁶ By denying those elements set apart, the Atheist is no longer unified by any system of beliefs, he is no longer bound to the moral community. Though Durkheim was using his theory to reduce the elements of religion in search of a definition, he was equally pointing out the difficulty of the Atheist in separating himself from religion without severing his ties to the state. This was seen in the four Greek schools of philosophical reason, the “Atheism” of the Christian martyrs, the natural and autonomous religion of Lord Herbert and John Locke, the seeking of alternative identities by Huxley, Holyoake, and Bradlaugh, the commitment to a return from individualism to humanity in *Kaufman v. McCaughey*,⁷ and especially by those New Atheist-inspired members of the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster.

⁵ See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Carol Cosman, ab. Mark S Cladis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.

⁷ Recently, in an attempt at reconciling the Humanist with the socially religious, A.C. Grayling published a remarkable feat of secular religious history by creating a “Humanist Bible.” His bible is made

These contexts speak beyond the prison of “definitions,” to the better-suited evaluation of elastic contextual interpretation. In pagan antiquity the contexts of the great philosophers, the Roman poets, and the Christian martyrs revealed a genesis of thinking outside the complexities of paganism, and thus religion-in-general. In the genres of the Enlightenment, the men who inadvertently produced an enlightened break from religion in an attempt to free themselves from the supremacy of religion founded a school of rational thinking that inspired the Atheist movements of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. While the kernel of doubt, of Atheism, existed at the base of each stage, the context in which it thrived and grew affected its total outlook and identity. In the fourth context, in the United States that Vice President Bush saw no place for Atheism, it adopted itself not just to the legally sanctioned Civil Religion, but also to the unique Sheilaism⁸ of American individualism.

These four Atheisms argue the basis of defining any social construction privy to the organic and evolutionary trait of humanity. They reveal a social process dependent on the issues affecting mankind at different intervals and call into necessity the conscious acceptance of alternative means by which we define not just ourselves, but each other. In the end they assist in re-identifying those elements of society that rather than be “defined” are better understood by interpreting the elastic contexts in which they flourish.

up of history, morality, advice, and guidance, all in the name of secular humanism, focused only on man, and without the need, nor mention, of God. See A.C. Grayling, *The Good Book: A Humanist Bible* (New York: Waller and Co., 2011).

⁸ Sheila Larson was a nurse who made her given name synonymous with American individualism in the book *Habits of the Heart* by Robert N. Bellah, et al. Sheila, when asked what religion she belonged to responded, “I believe in God. I’m not a religious fanatic. I can’t remember the last time I went to church. My faith has carried me a long way. It’s Sheilaism. Just my own little voice.” Furthermore her individual religion essentially required her to be good to others, as God would have intended. It is a dynamic response to the Americanist idea of individualism where an immensely social-dependent entity like religion can exist exclusively within the mind of a single person. See Robert N. Bellah, et al., *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 220-222.

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