

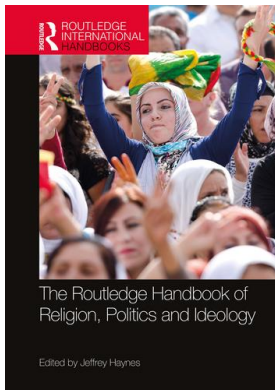
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3

ATHEISM AND RELIGION

Stuart McAnulla

Introduction

The relationship between atheism and religion is a complex one, but there has often been a great deal at stake in their interplay. This chapter explores some important contours in how atheistic worldviews have been both threatened by theistic contexts but have also challenged dominant types of religion through their role within broader ideological frameworks. The discussion begins by first considering what is meant by atheism, arguing for a broad understanding of the term and questioning the common tendency to designate it as the ‘opposite’ of religion. This is followed by consideration upon the issue of whether atheism as we now understand it is a wholly modern phenomenon through highlighting some of the historical ways in which godless attitudes have manifested themselves within heavily religious societies. The chapter then explores why atheism is still, to a great extent, a ‘silent’ influence in contemporary society before then examining its more vocal forms. It is demonstrated that atheism has featured strongly in both optimistic and pessimistic ideological narratives before analysing the key features of the highly visible ‘new atheism’ and responses to it. The discussion concludes with reflections on how debates concerning atheism and its relationship with religion may develop.

What is atheism?

What is an atheist? This chapter follows the tendency in much recent academic work to define atheism primarily as the *absence of belief in God (or gods)* (Bullivant and Ruse, 2013). It does not limit the use of the term, as some surveys do, to apply only to those who readily describe themselves as atheists. Atheism is not taken to equate with total personal certainty that God does not exist, or, necessarily, a belief that no gods exist. Even some of the most globally famous atheists do not include themselves in the former category. Atheism indicates a *lack* of belief in God – the atheist has found no reason to take on any belief in deities, and this may, or may not, involve a conscious rejection of specific claims regarding God’s existence. Thus many people who identify more with labels such as agnostic, non-theist, freethinker or humanist could legitimately be counted as atheists if atheism is understood in this way. Historically the term has been used in innumerable other ways, often being applied to those feared to be resistant to the dominant religious-political order of the time. In contemporary discussions, atheism is often unhelpfully

conflated with the wider category of the ‘non-religious’ or what is often referred to now as the religious ‘Nones’. However, ‘Nones’ refer to those who, when asked to name their religious identity or affiliation, reply that they do not have one. Such people are often not atheists – they may believe in God but choose not to link themselves to any particular established religious group.

Indeed discussions of atheism are often rather bedevilled by treating religion as its ‘opposite’. Lois Lee notes that even scholars who have sought to avoid reducing discussions of religion to theism or belief-based approaches have tended to do this (2015: 62), and one might argue that even some sophisticated atheists have tended to fall back on such contrasts (Gray, 2018a). Lee argues that pairing atheism and religion can be a category error ‘like comparing masculinity and feminism, for example, rather than femininity’ (2015: 38).

Atheists lack belief in God but may or may not identify with practices that could be described as religious. This may strike some readers as a rather academic distinction since monotheistic claims lie at the heart of the world’s biggest categories of religion: Christianity and Islam. Claims made in relation to God or Allah provide subsequent grounds for further beliefs in the religion concerning morality and duty. It is therefore perfectly true that atheism stands in profound tension with much within such religions. However, religions do not reduce simply to belief in surrounding deities and, of course, they involve varied cultural and material practices. Furthermore, there are other religions that do not make claims concerning God as such or within which belief in God is not a prerequisite for membership or participation.

Indeed to be ‘against religion’ in an absolutist sense (or to speak as if one is) can arguably be a problem for some atheists as it commits them to oppose beliefs and practices of huge diversity, many of which may not entail belief in God as such. When Christopher Hitchens argued that ‘religion poisons everything’ he seemed to pitch himself against anyone identifying with any kind of religious commitment (2007). Yet this may partly have been a case of careless (or perhaps effective!) book promotion, as when pushed on the point, it was clear that Hitchens meant that *theism* has the potential to poison action. Hitchens argue that if God is invoked to justify actions, good or bad, it thereby undermines the idea of personal responsibility. Nonetheless, as is discussed below, atheism is often articulated *within* a wider set of ideological beliefs that do set themselves against religion in a direct manner.

However, is the contrast between atheist and theist a straightforward one? It can appear a very simple distinction – people either believe that there is a God (or gods), or they don’t. God either exists, or s/he doesn’t. However, some have questioned whether a clear distinction is actually possible or desirable (Caputo, 2007). If we assume that the basic distinction does generally hold, there are still more complicated stances that can be taken. For example, some have argued that God *did* exist in the past but later died – the so-called ‘death of God’ literature. Indeed, some have argued that Jesus Christ’s apparent abandonment by God whilst being crucified signals that there is now no deity overlooking human experience (Altizer and Hamilton, 1966). Others suggest that the fate of Jews during the Holocaust indicates the effective ‘death of God’ (Rubenstein, 1992). On the other hand, the atheist philosopher Quentin Meillassoux (2008) argues that although God does not exist, it is possible that a God could exist in future and hence he has a ‘belief’ in God, of a sort.

These perspectives are uncommon, but a question that does arise more often is that of what kind of God are atheists rejecting? Rather than atheism simply indicating an absence of belief, in practice, it may often invoke some positive notion of what kind of God it thinks others are endorsing. Indeed atheists often reject the idea of a God who is seen as in some way to have created the world and who has an active interest in and influence over how humans behave in that world. This may include what can be called a ‘personal God’ who is considered to judge human

actions and perhaps even to intervene to affect the direction of affairs. Many arguments between atheists and theists can be conducted on shaky grounds – they are not necessarily debating the existence or otherwise of the same sorts of gods. Theists themselves can be as vehemently opposed to certain notions of God as atheists are. Indeed theologians sometimes sympathise with atheist arguments as they view them as means through which more refined and non-naïve understandings of God can be reached. Against what they see as anthropomorphic ideas of God, some stress that God cannot be understood as an agent in the regular sense of the term, and indeed apophatic perspectives suggest that we cannot say much about God in language. Thus theists will often reject the arguments of atheists on the basis that the former simply aren't rejecting a God which they recognise. For example, David Bentley Hart opposes what he sees as the crudely materialistic outlook of prominent public atheists and suggests that God can be understood through ideas of 'being, consciousness, bliss' (2013). At the same time, such perspectives can seem removed from much everyday exposure to teaching about God. Schoolchildren are routinely taught about what God may think, what he wants, how he has secured food and resources and so on. The idea of God as an agent that witnesses and punishes transgressions from moral positions is commonplace, and it is this kind of God that many contemporary atheists find themselves rejecting.

One can concur with Jeanine Diller (2016) that there may be no 'global atheism' as such, i.e., a form of atheism that denies *all* possible formulations and definitions of gods or God. But this need not mean we are limited to articulating atheism in only specifically local ways. For example, a non-belief in an omnipotent, omniscient, omnibenevolent (OOO) God arguably entails a rejection of the dominant traditions in Jewish, Christian and Islamic theology over many centuries (Diller, 2016: 16).

This kind of refusal of monotheistic worldviews can sometimes be understood as necessarily committing the atheist to some kind of alternative worldview. To deny God is to reject the ontological claims about the character of being, and arguably, to commit to an ontology making different assumptions about reality. Indeed as discussed below, atheism does *link* to a wide variety of ontological and ideological perspectives, many of which challenge religious beliefs and practices directly.

Is atheism a purely modern phenomenon?

It is widely agreed that atheism has a long history, but there is less consensus about how long it has had particular relevance and in which contexts. One difficulty is that it is unclear whether an apparent lack of atheism during a historical period reflects either silence on behalf of atheists concerning their godlessness or simply a total lack of atheist thought. Arguments are sometimes made that atheism as we now tend to understand it only became a phenomenon in the modern era and is a product of the specific ideological, scientific, religious and political contexts that emerged during the Enlightenment. However, this view is disputed by scholars such as Tim Whitmarsh, who argue that modern-day discourse surrounding atheism is not so different from arguments that could be found in antiquity. What is apparent within the history of atheism is that it has consistently faced physical and ideological repression, meaning that it has frequently been a silent phenomenon.

Whitmarsh records that despite the reputation of Classical Greece for developing democracy, high culture and even atheistic thinking amongst philosophers, there were periods of brutal repression. It was around this time that the word '*atheos*' appears, implying the absence of a God, in turn denoting a wild or lawless personality, but then later used to describe someone without a belief in the gods (2016: 116). He draws upon the work of the 5th-century BC historian

Plutarch who documents how Diopeithes successfully proposed a bill to the Athens assembly which sought to publicly impeach those who did not worship or believe in gods (2016: 74, 117–121). Rubel argues that the awful effects of a plague on Athens (as well as military causalities) provided members of the religious establishment with an argument that the Demos had damaged relations with the gods (2014: 31–38). It appears that both religious fervour and political manipulation played a role in establishing what may have been the first anti-atheist text of this kind. Several trials ensued, including that of the playwright Diagoras of Melos, who had a strong reputation for atheism. He was banished from Athens after being found guilty of ‘impiety’ (Whitmarsh, 2016: 122). The much later trial of Theodorus, who publicly denied the existence of gods, emphasised how attacks on religion were now capable of being seen (or conveniently presented as) threats to the state itself (*ibid.*: 123). Yet the most famous trial of antiquity was that of Socrates, who was accused of believing in no gods or false gods, and subsequently was sentenced to death, having also been found guilty of corrupting the youth of Athens through his questioning of authority. Bremmer notes that Socrates’ death was an important moment as most philosophers ‘got the message’ and were subsequently cautious in articulating their views (Bremmer, 2007: 19).

According to some interpretations, atheism simply did not appear in medieval Europe, given that ‘enchanted’ modes of thinking existed, which may have been quite different from modern types of rationalism and logic. Yet a difficulty with this claim is that records from the period are often written by clergy whose interpretation of heresies they witnessed may not do justice to the thinking of those who would question aspects of religious practice. Also, Susan Reynolds has noted that ‘most dissidents in a persecuting society will keep their heads down’, and the limited direct evidence of disbelief during the period does not itself demonstrate that doubts were not quietly entertained (1991: 33). Indeed there do appear to have been specific instances of overt atheism being expressed in 13th-/14th-century Italy and 15th-century Spain (*ibid.*: 27). It was also alleged that the Peasants Revolt in England in 1381 was motivated by the sins of lords, some of whom believed there was no God (*ibid.*: 33).

Certainly in late-16th-/early-17th-century Britain, God could not be avoided. In 1639, John Virgin commented that ‘God is always in one like a cuckoo’ (Haigh, 2007: 180). Churches played a central role in daily life, with people being baptised and taught morals through Christian instruction. Attendance at church on Sundays was legally required, and the teachings of the Church were considered essential for ensuring appropriate behaviour. Numerous people were burned at the stake for holding heretical beliefs during the period (Thomas, 2003: 203). At the same time, many people would flout Christian ethics in practice, and clergy would often be mocked or satirised in everyday conversation. Heretical comments featured, but these tended not to express doubt about God existing. Indeed detecting genuine historical expressions of what we might now agree to be an atheistic worldview is not straightforward as the term ‘atheist’ was initially much more deployed as a term of abuse or a smear against those accused of holding some kind of heterodox belief or who were deemed to be living in a debauched or ungodly way (*ibid.*: 4, 6).

The theological and political dimensions of expressions of atheism are also of key importance when examining how efforts were made to silence those challenging belief in God in the modern West. The importance of Christianity in underpinning many social and political structures in the century was such that expressions of atheism were understood to present a profound threat. Nick Spencer argues:

Wherever you went, to deny God was not simply to deny God. It was to deny the emperor, or the King who ruled you, the social structures that ordered your life, the

ethical ties that regulated it, the hopes that inspired it and the judgement that reassured it.

(Spencer, 2014: xvii)

Turner comments that in the medieval period, doubts about God probably crossed some minds at points but 'such questioning could only sustain itself and grow into lasting disbelief only if nourished by social and intellectual sustenance', which was not available, leading him to doubt that any people in the period took a permanently atheistic perspective.

However, court cases in this period suggest that atheistic attitudes were held by some in a context where some conventional religious beliefs were becoming more doubted. For example, in 1635, a defendant, Brian Walker, stated, 'I do not believe there is either God or Devil; neither will I believe anything but what I see' (Thomas 2003: 202). Thomas suggests that the fact such evidence appears against a background of severe threat to heretics means it may be reasonably surmised that many thought what they dared not say aloud (ibid.: 204). Clergy sometimes reported that they had encountered people who directly argued that there was no God. Yet even if some allegations made against 'atheism' were false, the complaints themselves suggested that the idea that there might be no God (and that things emerge by nature or chance) was at least 'thinkable' in the period (Haigh, 2007: 169). The Calvinist defender of the Church of England, Henry Smith, published the relatively popular book, *God's Arrow Against Atheists*. Alymer raises the question of whether such works were addressed to 'an assumed but silent body' of people, more vocal atheists or instead served as a means for Christians to persuade themselves of the truth or their religion (1978: 23).

A frequently commented upon irony is that the development of some key strands of atheist thought in Europe originated in theological and philosophical efforts to theorise about the nature of God. Gavin Hyman argues 'atheism in its founding moment was constituted by a revolution *within theology itself*' (Hyman, 2010: 67). He suggests the work of Duns Scotus in the 13th century was important in departing from the assumption that being was something created by God to argue that being is something which God and humanity share on a 'single ontological plane' (2010: 70). This arguably helped change the dominant understanding of theism, in which the world is no longer perceived as participating in a higher ontological order but is self-sufficient and self-explanatory (2010: 79). God was thus not seen as transcending the world but as part of it, something that has to be accommodated to a single reality. In Hyman's view, this helped lay the groundwork for later atheist perspectives to emerge to argue God was not needed at all to account for the world.

Atheism would subsequently make an appearance in political discussion as philosophers such as Thomas Hobbes questioned using God as the key justification for maintaining sovereign political power (Berman, 1988). These authors became accused by some of advocating atheism despite professions of theism. However, as philosophers such as Rene Descartes sought to provide intellectual groundings for the existence of God, so they helped create space in which atheistic arguments could at least theoretically be posited (1993).

It can therefore be argued that atheism, as we now understand it, did not depend for its development on the scientific and philosophical upheavals that arose during the transition to the modern period and the 'Age of Reason'. However, it is also clear that atheist thought rarely had the space to be heard or shared without fear of severe repression, and hence there was a limited textual articulation of arguments challenging theism. Atheism only became a sustained challenger to theistic belief when the intellectual context became transformed by modes of thinking which challenged traditional theological assumptions and profoundly questioned the existence of political and religious orders (see discussion of atheistic ideological narratives below).

Contemporary atheism: still largely silent?

However, it is important to first highlight that in many ways atheism remains a largely silent phenomenon, even in contexts such as the contemporary UK and much of Europe, where non-belief is common. Indeed, the dramatic decline of traditional Christian practice in much of Europe since World War II owes much to people silently abandoning their religious heritage and belief in God. This process is often not a consequence of particularly conscious reflection and relatively rarely comes from engaging with campaigning secularist or atheist literature. Historian Callum Brown reflects:

Silence grips 90% of atheists. They don't speak of being without god, they don't argue with religionists at parties, they don't campaign in the street and they don't join an organisation which expresses their position. For centuries they have been pretty noiseless or inaudible.

(2017: 70)

Yet we should not assume that silence will mean non-communication. Depending on the context, silence can express and reveal a great deal. For instance, refusal to participate in religious rituals such as singing or prayer can serve as a way of marking dissent from faith. But even quiet disengagement from theistic practices can paradoxically 'speak' powerfully and, when it becomes widespread, can threaten the authority of religious institutions.

It is only in more recent times that one can speak of 'mass atheism' in parts of the world, and as such, there tends not to be many familial or communal traditions of unbelief for non-theists to draw upon (ibid.: 71). Thus, such atheism is often not outwardly expressed or strategically reflected upon. However, this lack of being heard can hold certain advantages for atheism. For one thing, such silence means this form of atheism cannot easily be included in either denunciations or even celebrations of atheism. It refuses to play in the game if it is even particularly aware of the game. It thus has no declared content for the theist to challenge.

Even some of the most famously vocal atheists can have doubts about discussing atheism as atheism. Sam Harris (2007) reflects thus:

Attaching a label to something carries real liabilities, especially if the thing you are naming isn't really a thing at all. And atheism, I would argue, is not a thing. It is not a philosophy, just as 'non-racism' is not one. Atheism is not a worldview – and yet most people imagine it to be one and attack it as such. We who do not believe in God are collaborating in this misunderstanding by consenting to be named and by even naming ourselves.

Harris himself did not use the term 'atheism' at all in his best-selling book, *The End of Faith* (2004), even though this publication led to him being anointed as a leader of the new atheism (see discussion below). He fears that the issues people raise against types of religion risk being 'marginalised under the banner of atheism' (2007) rather than being confronted on their own merits. In other words, the concerns of non-believers may be dismissed, however unconvincingly, by the deployment of standard anti-atheist arguments rather than efforts to defend the specific religious beliefs or practices that may be being questioned. Better, he argues, to focus efforts on using reason, logic and intellectual honesty to challenge the religious beliefs that are identified as particularly dangerous.

However, it is unclear that a decision not to use the term 'atheism' brings the strategic benefits to atheists, which Harris hopes for. For one thing, the history of atheism suggests that the

term is often deployed to categorise people regardless of the language they themselves choose – people may be no less stuck with a label being used to dismiss their position. Indeed they may be sacrificing the opportunity to contest the meanings that become attached to it by hostile groups. Also, Harris tends to assume a starting position in which the contestation of religion is the priority, rather than a defence of atheism itself. He appears to think it possible, if not likely, that monotheism may erode to the point ‘when atheism is scarcely intelligible as a concept’ (2007). However, with no clear prospect of theism disappearing in the foreseeable future, other public atheists tend to embrace the term itself more.

A dilemma for the contemporary atheist concerns how far it is worth speaking out regarding this perspective. To the extent that atheism represents an absence or lack of theism, it might be considered unnecessary within relatively liberal political contexts whilst remaining dangerous in many theocratic environments. Most atheists may be largely mute regarding their atheism, seeing little need to think about their practical godlessness, let alone express it in any particular way. The decline of traditional practices of Christian monotheism has helped create the space for atheism to be tolerated, and this has been the result of much wider social change rather than the public expression of atheism. Indeed at times, to be vocal about atheism may be viewed as unnecessarily antagonistic, in some contexts even raising the risk that the atheist will come to be defined in terms of a social ‘out-group’. There is certainly evidence that prejudice against atheism can result from the perception that atheists violate ‘the very foundations of religious belief’ (Kossowska, Czenatowicz-Kukuczka and Sekerdej, 2017: 136). However, if the aim is to defend the acceptability of atheism and protect atheists against discrimination, it is unclear that an approach where all keep quiet is optimal. In a study of 54 countries, Gervais (2011) finds that prejudice against atheists decreases where atheism is more prevalent. Follow-up studies in the US suggest that the more people are aware of atheist prevalence, the more distrust towards atheism decreases (Gervais, 2011: 548). This does not appear to merely be an effect of inter-group contact with atheists, but rather about knowledge or information regarding atheist presence. In a UK study, Giddings and Dunn (2016) find that distrust of atheists is deeply culturally ingrained even amongst non-religious people. They consider that this is perhaps because of uncertainty as to the moral stance of atheists (2016: 133, 134). Simpson and Rios (2017) suggest that challenging atheists’ perceived lack of kindness and caring may be an important consideration if seeking to challenge prejudice against atheists (2016: 506). Those experiencing social rejection due to their atheism may benefit from expressing an atheist identity, which can sometimes reduce the negative effects of discrimination on well-being (Doane and Elliot, 2015: 136).

Also, evidence suggests that ‘pluralistic ignorance’ can be a problem for atheists. During the American Civil Rights Movement, white people were found to overestimate support amongst other white people for a racially segregated society (Strosser et al., 2016: 151). Many more individuals were privately in favour of a racially mixed society than was generally realised. Similarly, it appears that where religious people perceive the prevailing social norm to be against atheists, they are more likely to themselves express negative behavioural intentions towards atheists, or mimic this assumed more general disapproval. However, in private, individual attitudes towards atheists can be more positive and, unlike with many other stigmatised groups, there does not appear to be greater negativity towards atheists in private than in public. This is suggestive of the possibility that greater public awareness of atheists and atheism may aid the process of greater acceptance (ibid., 2016: 159, 161). Research in the US also indicates that when theists are simply prompted to *imagine* coming in to contact with actual atheists, their distrust may lessen and the level of comfort with the idea increase (LaBouff and LeDoux, 2016: 337).

However, despite the prejudice that can still exist against atheists, we are now living in an era where the frequency and acceptability of non-belief is historically remarkable. Not only

is atheism often socially acceptable in many contexts; it is now regarded as almost yawningly mundane. So much so that those who have no belief in God scarcely feel the need to articulate or justify this at length, nor do they usually come under particular pressure to do so. When asked about how they came to have no faith in God, respondents in places such as the UK often have little to say (Sheard, 2014). In parts of Europe, abandoning any notions of belief in God is sometimes understood simply as an aspect of growing up (Zuckerman, 2010: 94). Wider secularising trends have removed the centrality of belief in God as a foundation of everyday life for many people, even where Churches and Christian teaching still play a role in national affairs.

According to a World Values Survey of 57 countries conducted between 2010 and 2014, 11% of those surveyed population said they had no belief in God (quoted in Keysar, 2015: 137). One-third of adults in the UK are reported to have no belief in God (Jordan, 2015). In the still heavily religious United States, the number of people answering 'No' when asked if they believe in God has risen from 1% in 1944 to 12% in 2017 (Gallup, 2017). The phenomenon of apparently growing levels of atheism in parts of the world has arisen over just a few short decades, in some senses indicating a dramatic transformation in cultures within which public endorsement of atheism was only recently regarded as a scandal. And over the last two centuries in the West, there have been episodic and influential expressions of atheism from minorities even as they endured much social contempt and exclusion. But there is little doubt that major change has occurred to the point wherein much of Europe and the Anglosphere, people can be openly atheist without concern that this will count against them in most aspects of life. Indeed, at times atheists justifiably feel less judged for their non-belief than their neighbours may be for enthusiastic advocacy of a religious faith in God or Allah.

Historically then, these societies are only in the early stages of accepting overt atheism, and in large parts of the world matters there is no such acceptance. Even in these atheism-accepting nations, atheism coexists alongside multiple theistic faiths and confronts an institutional and cultural context strongly shaped by monotheism, alongside many more secular influences. Atheists may suffer no oppression but may find that their children are discriminated against for entry to a popular local school that has a faith-based selection criteria. They may happily participate as 'cultural Christians' in Christmas and Easter celebrations but be bemused by the political influence of the Church of England in the legislature. Importantly, the 21st-century influence of forms of religious fundamentalist ideology, both Islamic and Christian, has proven an important factor in inspiring some of the more vocal and controversial expressions of atheism over the last couple of decades.

Atheism and ideological narratives

A striking feature of prominent forms of atheism is how they have become entangled in variants of wider ideological narratives. Atheism has often been expressed as a component of types of both liberal and revolutionary/socialist/Marxist assumptions regarding societal progress and claims that increased godlessness may be part of a transcendent 'arc of history'. It has often been attached to optimistic narratives about how 'backward' ways of thinking are in decline, and new forms of social, political and economic progress are being enabled by the sweeping away of superstitious beliefs and belief in God.

A spectacular early example of this came with the 'Cult of Reason' established by several French revolutionaries in the late 18th century. The French Revolution itself was greatly concerned with removing the political and economic power of the Roman Catholic Church, as Enlightenment ideals of equality and liberty gained salience. Key figures such as Jacques Hebert sought to replace the worship of God with the worship of human reason, in effect establishing

a new civic religion (McGrath, 2004). Although the Cult of Reason lasted only months before being replaced by Robespierre's deistic 'Cult of the Supreme Being', the idea that belief in God and traditional religious faith should be eliminated in the cause of greater human prosperity was to recur in multiple ways over the following two centuries. In the mid-19th century, Auguste Comte proposed a 'religion of humanity' that he conceived would represent a higher stage in human development in which society would be guided by science instead of theology or metaphysics (Wernick, 2001). Karl Marx later also theorised that whilst belief in deities and religion provided an escape for working people exploited by capitalism, they were ultimately an obstacle to material advance and a product of unequal class relations (McKown 1975, McLennan 1987). Following the Russian Revolution in 1917, leaders sought to repress religion, persecuting many believers and promoting the 'scientific atheism', which they argued was integral to liberating working people. However, as matters transpired, religion eventually survived the experience of the Soviet Union – despite the Gulag, theistic belief endured for many in a way which Marxist-Leninism ultimately did not.

However, the historic failure of such projects has not dissuaded contemporary atheists working within ideologically more liberal frameworks from embracing positions both that predict and encourage abandonment of theistic belief. Indeed, further scholarly developments in science, philosophy, archaeology, textual analysis and other academic disciplines are considered to mount insurmountable challenges to monotheism. Atheist authors such as Steven Pinker (2018) provide optimistic global narratives arguing that despite our exposure to depressing daily media coverage, in fact, problems such as global violence and war are in decline. Scientific and empirically focused approaches to dealing with societal challenges are considered much likely to produce positive outcomes for people than worldviews saturated with religious assumptions. Secular enquiry is argued to have eliminated deadly diseases, increased life expectancy and led to the abolition of human sacrifice and slavery. Material and economic progress is considered to have massively reduced poverty levels, and moral progress has produced advances in human rights and equality for many minority groups. Similarly, the renowned atheist scientist Richard Dawkins (2006) has spoken of gradual progress in the 'moral zeitgeist' and the benefits gained from a naturalistic worldview in contrast to those offered by monotheistic religion. Such atheist writers are regularly presented as believing that the long-term decline of belief in God and religious faith are near inevitabilities, and thus atheism is believed to have the tide of history on its side, especially when tied to the championing of reason and science.

However, such optimism seriously jars with many observers. With political systems recently being jolted by events such as the US Presidency of Donald Trump (2017–2021), the rise of authoritarian-populist movements and the UK's vote to 'Brexit' from the European Union, a pervasive sense of instability and insecurity is palpable within ideologically liberal circles. Intellectual critics such as John Gray detect what they see as measures of statistical sorcery in the way the data of people such as Pinker are used to defend a story of the triumph of enlightened values (2018b). Worse, he argues that the type of atheism and liberal secularism that Pinker advocates avoids facing up to the global violence that flows from particular uses of science and military defences of liberalism. Just as atheists in the past (such as many Jacobins or Bolsheviks) perceived themselves as bringing in a new, better world by battling theism, so Gray argues contemporary militant atheists are willfully blind to the potential for disaster within their own worldview. Critics such as Terry Eagleton (2009) argue such atheism can too easily become the handmaiden for war and violence against peoples viewed as unenlightened. This kind of atheism thus becomes portrayed as smug and elitist, yet also rather deluded and historically myopic.

On the other hand, atheism is frequently tied to more pessimistic ideological narratives. Many theists are happy enough to portray the growth of atheism as a symptom of the decline

of moral standards and the turn away from God as producing all kinds of idolatry, selfish concern, hedonism and nihilism (e.g., Haught, 2008; Lennox, 2011; Hitchens, 2010). However, it is also the arguments of some atheists themselves which are used to paint a very bleak picture of the likely future of human beings. Friedrich Nietzsche's madman argued that God had been killed but that people had not faced up to the consequences of the 'murder' (2001). Such had been the dependence of social, political and legal systems in the West on the idea of the Judeo-Christian God that without any effort to properly cement this foundation, Nietzsche thought that catastrophe could emerge. Indeed some have argued his words were accurately predictive, with atheistic Communism resulting in the murder of many millions of people a few decades after his death. Branches of existentialist philosophy have advocated atheism as part of a view that the cosmos itself is absurd, a view eagerly leapt upon by theistic evangelists who insist God is needed to secure a meaningful, purposive life. John Gray's own atheism is frequently described as pessimistic, with humans being understood as inconsistent, internally divided, rapacious, flawed creatures who cannot achieve more than temporary remedies to recurring human evils (2008a; 2008b; 2009; 2015a; 2015b; 2018a; 2018b). Practices like slavery and torture may be banned in apparently enlightened societies yet reappear in new forms under different names such as human trafficking or 'enhanced interrogation techniques'. For Gray, these are truths which humans are often too weak to bear and hence the attraction to either religious myths of salvation in the after-life or more secular myths of human progress, which he takes to be ironically and unwittingly influenced by the Christian idea that there is progress in time. He argues that all too often, these secular myths end extraordinarily badly, with hubristic decisions such as the US-UK intervention in Iraq in 2003 leading to large-scale human disaster.

However, the highest-profile form of vocal atheism in recent years has undoubtedly been the 'new atheism', associated with the work of public intellectual figures such as Sam Harris (2004; 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Richard Dawkins (2006) and Ayaan Hirsi Ali (see also Stenger, 2008; Grayling, 2011; Boghossian, 2013). Publication of the famous new atheist books in the mid-noughties was prompted in significant part in reaction against the role of monotheism in world affairs following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in New York and Washington. The perceived threats to societies posed by both Islamism and the influence of groups such as the Christian right in the US were viewed as sufficiently alarming to warrant hard-hitting polemical attacks on Christianity, Islam and Judaism and to champion atheism as an alternative to these movements and ideologies. The new atheist texts and related videos, public debates, blogs and media coverage have inspired many atheists and others to engage with such arguments and to voice or amplify their own non-belief. At the same time, many texts and other materials were authored seeking to debunk new atheist arguments, which were felt to distort, misunderstand or misrepresent what religious faith means to many believers. Some active secularist, humanist and atheist groups felt the new atheism was unnecessarily hostile to religion. However, whilst we may now be well past 'peak' new atheism, it has not disappeared as a cultural influence and indeed, it is still commonly referenced in public debates concerning religion, theism, secularism and atheism. Nor have we seen the end of polemical attacks on the perceived threats posed to humanity by religion.

Key aspects of new atheism include its political dimensions – it poses direct challenges to forms of religious authority. Smith argues that there are three crucial elements:

- 1) Challenging the public role of religion through secularist calls for church and state separation and removal of perceived unfair privileges granted to religious groups

- 2) Challenging the social conventions that arguably prevent due criticism of religion in public and private life
- 3) Promoting an atheist identity–politics – encouraging atheists to be open about lack of faith in God, in the hope of helping and encouraging other atheists (see also Taira, 2012)

Critics of the new atheism have tended to focus less on the above aspects and more on the controversial way in which new atheists attack monotheistic religions. Calls from key figures such as Richard Dawkins to mock and ridicule those who believe in religious miracles stand alongside efforts to portray holy texts as fundamentally immoral. They have not spared the more ‘moderate’ branches of monotheistic religion from strong criticism but instead attacked them for giving legitimacy to the more fundamentalist kinds. The argument here is that once you grant special status and protections to holy books, you thereby grant more legitimacy to those groups who may use literal or extreme interpretations of those texts. The new atheist believes that too much respect for traditional custom and/or excessive political correctness results in a lack of sufficient scrutiny of religious practices that can be oppressive, particularly to women, children and minority groups. Indeed, part of the appeal of the new atheists for many has been their flamboyant willingness to challenge taboos surrounding the discussion of religion. Yet numerous authors have argued their portrayal of religious traditions is reductionist and inadequate, providing dubious grounds for their aggressive polemical attacks.

Some new atheist sympathisers have made concessions on this point. In 2015, Hector Avalos and Andre Gange set out a manifesto for a ‘second wave’ of new atheism to encompass experts in the study of religion and sacred scriptures. They argued that Dawkins et al. have made claims that were ‘rightly viewed as simplistic or inaccurate in some cases’, but maintained the new atheist commitment to seek to stop the use of sacred scripture as a source of moral authority in the contemporary world and highlight the role of religion in sustaining violence. Others have argued that to progress further, then campaigning atheists in places such as the US need to tie their cause more to wider anti-discriminatory and pro-equality political stances (Bekiempis, 2011; Benson, 2014).

There have been other ‘mini-waves’ of atheist writing in the wake of new atheism. Most have argued that atheists should adopt a somewhat more engaging attitude towards religion or instead take seriously the need to provide atheists with a meaningful alternative to theism. Philosophers such as Julian Baggini (2009) argued there was a need to ‘turn down the volume’ on new atheist attacks on religion, whilst Alain de Botton argued there were positive ideas and practices atheists could usefully learn from religious traditions (2013). De Botton has even proposed the building of atheist temples (Booth, 2012). Tim Crane has argued that the claims religions may make concerning God and the cosmos are an important part of their outlook, but that religions combine a sense of the transcendent with a sense of belonging to a historical tradition (2017: x). He argues these wider meanings of religion suggest that scientific and philosophical arguments are most unlikely to lead to the removal of religion (ibid.: xi).

In his book *Life After Faith* (2015), Philip Kitcher argues that new atheists rather treat religion as a ‘mass of rubbish’ (3) without paying attention to what could replace its role if abandoned. He argues for the need for an ethically-grounded secular humanist substitute to prospectively replace the loss of meaning that might come from converting to atheism. In *Religion Without God* (2013: 9–11), Ronald Dworkin argues for ‘religious atheism’, claiming that the value aspects of religion, e.g., the assertion of the intrinsic value of life, does not depend on God’s existence and therefore available to the atheist. Indeed, he argues that religion has a deeper meaning than God, denoting a ‘deep, distinct and comprehensive worldview’ (ibid.: 1). Todd May (2015) confronts the question of what may be meaningful in a silent (i.e.,

godless) universe. He suggests people have been presented with a false alternative, i.e., there is either meaning in the universe itself, or there is no such thing. Instead, he proposes that *narrative values* (e.g., steadfastness, intensity) may give meaningfulness to lives in the way they unfold (2015: 73–76).

Conclusion

Therefore, we see that much atheist writing following new atheism has argued for a more sophisticated perspective on religion and/or for a more developed view on what can supply people with an integrated and moral worldview in the absence of God. However, atheists continue to face considerable dilemmas in their relations with both theism and religion. This chapter has highlighted that atheism continues to be a silent phenomenon in much of practical life and that in many religious contexts, there is still a price that may be paid for overt forms of atheist expression. This cost can be anywhere in a spectrum between minor inconveniences or limitations through to more impactful types of social exclusion. Certainly, atheists may still easily find themselves cast as an ‘out’ group or to be suspected of lacking deep moral foundations. When placed in the context of the domination of monotheistic religion over many centuries, it is perhaps unsurprising to see the legacies of a period when atheism was considered an unconscionable stance. We cannot be sure of the prevalence or depth of atheistic thought in medieval eras, where an embrace of godlessness posed a threat to life and limb. However, we can trace threads of apparent resistances to theism that existed prior to the radical developments in theological, philosophical and scientific thought, which paved the way for both modern atheism itself and the far-reaching ideological movements in which it has often found a place. It is through association with these ideological projects that atheism has at times posed serious threats to the survival of religion, particularly when the removal of belief in God has been presented as a necessary part of human advancement. Contemporary public atheists tend to emphasise science and naturalism over promoting particular political frameworks, yet they still tend to be entangled with liberal assumptions regarding social progress. Both the contemporary crisis of liberal ideology and persistence, indeed growth, of religion in many parts of the world present challenges to such perspectives. These global trends are likely to shape the developments in the more vocal forms of atheism as we move beyond the early 21st century.

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