New Atheism as a Case of Competitive Postsecular Worldviews

Alan G. Nixon
98061264

A dissertation submitted to the
School of Social Sciences and Psychology
The University of Western Sydney

In part fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
Social Sciences
2014
Acknowledgements

I would firstly like to thank my interview participants for their time, as I would not have been able to have a well-rounded thesis without their views. Secondly, my family and friends for their support throughout this long process. I would especially like to thank my mother Kim for her tireless editing. I would also like to thank my primary supervisor Adam Possamai for his efforts in helping this project to come to completion. Last, but certainly not least, my partner Megan, who supported me through all the ups and downs that such a large project entails. I could not have done it without all of you.
Statement of Authorship

The work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original except as acknowledged in the text. I hereby declare that I have not submitted this material, either in full or in part for a degree at this or any other institution.

Alan Nixon

Date: ..................................................

Signature: .........................................
Table of Contents

LIST OF TABLES ........................................................................................................................................... V
LIST OF FIGURES ........................................................................................................................................ VI
ABBREVIATIONS ......................................................................................................................................... VII

I. PERSONAL INTEREST ............................................................................................................................... VIII

II. ABSTRACT ................................................................................................................................................ XI

CHAPTER 1. BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW ......................................................................... 1

INTRODUCING THE NEW ATHEISM ........................................................................................................ 2
LITERATURE REVIEW ................................................................................................................................. 6
  Post-Secular Paradigms and the Non-Religious ....................................................................................... 6
  Our Diminishing Ignorance of Non-Religion/Irreligion ........................................................................ 14
  The Terminology of the Emerging Field ................................................................................................ 17
  Non-Religion ........................................................................................................................................... 19
    A Growing Demographic ......................................................................................................................... 19
    Heterogeneous Structure of the Non-Religious Group and Typologies of Non-Religion .................... 22
Irreligion ....................................................................................................................................................... 24
  Diversity in Irreligion ............................................................................................................................... 28
  Covert/Public ........................................................................................................................................ 38
  Accommodation/Confrontation ................................................................................................................. 40
  Substitution/Elimination .......................................................................................................................... 42
  Humanist/Scientific to Empathetic/Intellectual ...................................................................................... 44
CONCLUSION .............................................................................................................................................. 46
AIMS ............................................................................................................................................................. 47
CHAPTER OVERVIEW ............................................................................................................................... 48

CHAPTER 2. METHODOLOGY .................................................................................................................. 49

ETHNOGRAPHY .......................................................................................................................................... 50
DATA ANALYSIS ....................................................................................................................................... 52
METHODS ................................................................................................................................................... 54
  Interviews ................................................................................................................................................ 54
    Sampling Method and Selection Criteria ............................................................................................ 54
    Interview Process ................................................................................................................................. 56
    Data Analysis ..................................................................................................................................... 57
  Internet Participant Observation ........................................................................................................... 57
    Web 2.0 and Religion/Irreligion ............................................................................................................. 57
    Are Online Demographics Representative? ....................................................................................... 59
    Real World and Cyber World Connections ......................................................................................... 60
    Private and Public Space on the Internet ............................................................................................. 63
CHAPTER 3. WHAT IS THE NEW ATHEISM? ............................................................. 86

A COMPETITIVE POSTSECULAR WORLDVIEW ........................................... 87
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS .................................................................................. 88

Influences on the Rise of the New Atheism ......................................................... 89
- Post-Communist: Ejection of ‘Humanist’ Views and Consumer Society .......... 91
- Postmodern: Multiple Modernities .................................................................. 95
- Postsecular: Religious Resurgence ................................................................... 102

Dimensional Characteristics of the New Atheism .............................................. 108
- Public .................................................................................................................. 109
- Confrontation ................................................................................................... 111
- Elimination ......................................................................................................... 113
- Intellectual ......................................................................................................... 116

INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION .................................................... 121

Sites of Analysis .................................................................................................. 121
Definitions of Atheism ......................................................................................... 121
- Agnostic Atheism ............................................................................................... 122
- Dictionary or Plus ............................................................................................... 128

Views on the New Atheism ................................................................................ 136
- New Atheism as an Ambiguous Term .............................................................. 136
- Global Rather than Local Focus ....................................................................... 137

Dimensional Characteristics of the New Atheism .............................................. 139
- Public .................................................................................................................. 139
- Confrontation ................................................................................................... 141
- Elimination ......................................................................................................... 142
- Intellectual ......................................................................................................... 144

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA ................................................................... 146
Demographics ...................................................................................................... 146
Definitions of Atheism ......................................................................................... 149
Dictionary or Plus ................................................................................................. 152
Views on the New Atheism ................................................................................ 153
New Atheism as an Ambiguous Term ................................................................. 154
CHAPTER 7. EMPATHETIC/INTELLECTUAL

IS IT ALL IN THE HEAD? ................................................................. 260
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS .................................................................. 263
INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION ...................................... 268
  Elevatorgate and Fallen New Atheist Heroes .................................. 268
  Politics ...................................................................................... 279
  Atheism Plus ............................................................................ 285
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA .................................................... 293
  Elevatorgate and Fallen New Atheist Heroes .................................. 293
  Politics ...................................................................................... 294
DISCUSSION ................................................................................ 298

CHAPTER 8. CONCLUSIONS .............................................................. 301

HISTORICAL DEPENDENCIES ...................................................... 302
THE NEW ATHEISM ..................................................................... 308
VISIBILITY OF 'UNDESIRABLES' AND CHANGE ................................. 313
A COMPETITIVE AND EVOLVING POSTSECULAR SPHERE ............... 319
FURTHER RESEARCH .................................................................. 320

REFERENCES .............................................................................. 322
GLOSSARY ..................................................................................... 354
APPENDICES ................................................................................ 355

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET ........... 356
APPENDIX B: ORIGINAL QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS .... 357
APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL QUESTIONS FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS .... 360
APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT STATEMENT OF INFORMED CONSENT .... 361
List of Tables

TABLE 1: PERCENTAGE OF AUSTRALIANS REPORTING NO RELIGION IN THE 2011 CENSUS .......................... 22
TABLE 2: THE FOUR DIMENSIONS OF THE IRRELIGIOUS FIELD ......................................................... 46
TABLE 3: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS ........................................................................... 148
TABLE 4: THE MEANING OF ATHEISM TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ............................................... 149
TABLE 5: WHAT INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS THINK OF WHEN THEY HEAR THE TERM ‘NEW ATHEISM’? 154
TABLE 6: WHAT TYPE OF NEGATIVITY TOWARDS ATHEISM IN AUSTRALIA HAVE INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS EXPERIENCED? ......................................................................................... 157
TABLE 7: POPULAR FIGURES AND WEBSITES FOR AUSTRALIAN INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ........ 160
TABLE 8: IMPORTANT THINGS TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS ............................................................... 252
TABLE 9: WHAT IS LOVE TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS? ....................................................................... 252
TABLE 10: WHAT IS THE MEANING OF LIFE TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS? ...................................... 253
TABLE 11: WHERE DO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ MORALS COME FROM? .................................... 254
TABLE 12: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS VIEW ON ‘SPIRITUALITY’ AND WHETHER IT CAN BE PART OF ATHEISM ........................................................................................................................................................................ 255
TABLE 13: WHAT CAUSES AWE AND WONDER FOR INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS? ............................. 256
TABLE 14: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS’ POLITICAL VIEWS AND STANCES ........................................... 295
TABLE 15: THINGS THAT ARE IMPORTANT TO INTERVIEW PARTICIPANTS .......................................... 297
TABLE 16: THE DIMENSIONS OF IRRELIGION ......................................................................................... 303
TABLE 17: AHISTORICAL INTERPRETATIONS OF IRRELIGION ............................................................... 307
TABLE 18: DIMENSIONS OF THE NEW ATHEISM .................................................................................... 313
TABLE 19: DIVISIONS IN THE NEW ATHEISM ....................................................................................... 315
List of Figures

Figure 1: The Percentage of Australians Reporting No Religion from 1911 to 2011 ............ 21
Figure 2: The Percentage of Australians Reporting No Religion from 1971 to 2011 .......... 21
Figure 3: Twitter Network – Connections of Groups around Atheism .............................. 75
Figure 4: Agnostic versus Gnostic Diagram ......................................................................... 123
Figure 5: Google Trends – Interest over Time for ‘Agnostic Atheism’ from 2004 to 2013 .. 128
Figure 6: Atheism – Associated Meanings and Identity Terms ........................................ 129
Figure 7: Atheism Needs More ............................................................................................ 135
Figure 8: Difference between the Old Atheists and the New Atheists ............................... 139
Figure 9: Google Ngram – Interest over Time for the Terms Atheism, Humanism, Rationalism and Secularism from 1800 to 2000 .............................................................................. 167
Figure 10: Google Trends – Interest over Time for the Terms Atheist, Humanist, Agnostic, Socialist and Secular from 2004 to 2014 .................................................................................................. 169
Figure 11: Google Ngram – Interest over Time for Irreligious Terms and Socialism from 1800 to 2000 .................................................................................................................................................. 170
Figure 12: Google Trends – Interest over Time for the Terms Humanist and Atheist from 2004 to 2014 ................................................................................................................................................... 172
Figure 13: Vocal and Aggressive Atheism, Early 20th Century ........................................... 199
Figure 14: Google Trends – Interest over Time for the Term Accommodationist from 2004 to 2013 .................................................................................................................................................. 203
Figure 15: Ricky Gervais Meme – Everything to Live For .................................................. 235
Figure 16: Sunday Assembly Logo ....................................................................................... 241
Figure 17: Twitter Network – Resistance to Substitution around Sunday Assembly .......... 246
Figure 18: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Rebecca Watson from 2004 to 2013 ... 274
Figure 19: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Rebecca Watson, PZ Myers, Elevatorgate, Atheism Plus and New Atheism from 2004 to 2013 ................................................................................. 275
Figure 20: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Pharyngula from 2004 to 2013 .......... 276
Figure 21: Google Trends – Interest over Time for FreeThoughtBlogs, PZ Myers and Elevatorgate from 2004 to 2014 ...................................................................................................................... 277
Figure 22: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Atheism Plus and Slymepit from 2004 to 2014 ................................................................................................................................................... 279
Figure 23: Proposed Atheism Plus Symbols ....................................................................... 287
Figure 24: Atheism Plus Symbol – More than Disbelief ...................................................... 287
Abbreviations

**AFA** – Australian Foundation for Atheists.

**FTB** – FreeThoughtBlogs Network

**GAC** – Global Atheist Convention – Held in Melbourne, Australia in 2010 and 2012

**IHEU** – International Humanist and Ethical Union.

**NSRN** – Non-religion and Secularity Research Network.

**RDFRS** – Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science.
i. Personal Interest

This has been a difficult journey for me. One that has taken me from complete ignorance about the internal workings of the irreligious community, to an understanding of the complexity that lies just below the surface. I began not knowing much about organisational atheism, I had never been involved in it and I had never had much desire, despite being a strong atheist for over half of my life. Like many others in my research, I was prompted into paying attention to public atheism by the publication of *The God Delusion* in 2006. The public attention that atheism gained from this text made me aware that there was in fact a public movement around atheism. I had just arrived back in Australia after over a year in Morocco and Lebanon with a brief stop in Saudi Arabia. For a lifelong atheist this was an eye opening experience to say the least. I had never been so aware of the influence that religion could have on the life of a particular country. This impression is inevitably stronger when coming from an Australian background, where religion had been fairly distant from politics and was not highly influential in public life until the events of the Lyons forum and 9/11 (Maddox 2005).

I grew up in a fairly irreligious family with vague notions of a God and afterlife. The focus was always on this world and how we can solve the problems in it. My mother was a social worker; feminism and equality were always topics of interest. God and heaven seemed more like the poetry, art or culture that helps to soften the harshness of life, rather than a set of rules or a threat of hell. My mother could be described as spiritual, but she was always suspicious of organised religion and made this clear in her discussions about the topic. My father was religious by default rather than decision for most of this period. He would tell stories that would help to maintain belief in Christian traditions while adapting them to modern science. I always felt like the more important thing was the science and that evidence was an important part of knowing. It was an integral part of the thought processes of both of my parents; my mother spruiked evidence based practice in social work and my father constantly talked about the evidence for scientific ideas.
Much of the scholarship around the new atheism has contained inherent negative value judgments about the worth or validity of the movement (Amarasingam (ed.) 2010; Stahl 2010; Fiala 2009; De Lashmutt 2009; Falcioni 2010; Peterson 2010). On occasion I have been both surprised and disappointed when talking to academics and sitting through lectures in my own field where I have been told that my topic of choice was ‘wrong’, ‘evil’, ‘not worth researching’ and ‘not a thing’. I wholeheartedly disagree, and I hope to show this through my research. The new atheism may not be a thing in the way some people wish to see it, but it is certainly a thing with ramifications which are yet to be fully played out. Other researchers have wholeheartedly embraced the idea of new atheism but appear to have focused primarily on the positives in the movement, appearing apologetic and biased in favour of the (new) atheists (Eller 2010; Paul 2009a, 2009b, 2010). I do not believe that either of these is a valid approach to any subject and I will refrain from prejudging the worth or validity of this movement. There are some researchers that have taken the path of putting evidentiary data before values (Bullivant 2010; Campbell 1972; Cimino and Smith 2007, 2010; Lee 2012; Bullivant and Lee 2012; Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Manning 2010; Pasquale 2010; Furseth 2010; Demerath 2010; Borer 2010; Nall 2010) and the results seem far more promising. All of these works are included in the literature search conducted for this research. In response to the existing literature, this research will attempt to see the movement as a manifestation of social forces, adding to this the views of insiders to the movement, allowing the data to speak for itself in most cases. Throughout the thesis, where I am making a value judgment I will be explicit about it and let the reader know that my own thoughts are colouring the situation. It is difficult to be completely objective in such matters as the very core beliefs of a researcher can be challenged through the research process, especially in the case of worldviews and beliefs research. My encounter with the emergence of Atheism Plus is one such case. I had always thought of atheism and feminism as being connected and therefore my core view of a situation was challenged.

The pervasive nature of the new atheist movement and its recent growth make it imperative to understand its makeup and dispel stereotypes. This is especially
important as the new atheism begins to manifest itself in countries less known for their tolerance of irreligious views. Lives and identities are now more obviously under threat due to this intolerance (e.g. there have been recent cases in Indonesia, Pakistan, Egypt, Bangladesh and Morocco). Understanding the possible demographic makeup and consequences of various irreligious views and tactics could be useful for the movement itself and the pursuit of the academic discussion.

5 Iheuadmin, 2013. "*Why must I be killed?*” asks Moroccan atheist, viewed 21 November 2013: http://iheu.org/why-must-i-be-killed-asks-moroccan-atheist/
ii. Abstract

The term ‘new atheism’ was first used in 2006 by Gary Wolf, who was describing the wave of irreligious publishing that was sweeping the world at the time and the social group that was growing alongside it. Since this time there has been an increased scholarly interest in non-religion and irreligion and more articles have been produced on the new atheists themselves. However, this literature has still been in the early stages and has been limited in its use of empirical sources, with only a small number of exceptions (Cimino and Smith 2007, 2010; Bullivant 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Pasquale 2010; Manning 2010; Kosmin and Keysar 2007; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006).

Due to this lack of empirical data in the literature on the new atheism, it was an imperative to confirm current literature observations with participant data. This research set out to achieve this, using Grounded Theory in which the empirical field itself guided theory formation. This allowed the insider views of participants to inform the investigations within the field, to create categories relevant to irreligious individuals and groups. Using a constant comparison approach, I included the literature and history of the irreligious movement as part of my data after initial participant categories had been discovered. Via this comparison of Historical, Interview and Internet Participant Observation data with the literature, eight sociological categories of the irreligious were discovered along four structural organising dimensions. They were found to have consistent structuring affects throughout irreligious history and continuing into the new atheism itself. They were found to cause continuing division within the new atheism via a number of empirical case studies that show the emergence of sub-groups within the new atheism along these dimensions. These dimensions are covert/public, accommodation/confrontation, substitution/elimination and empathetic/intellectual.

The irreligious field is an evolving construct, but many of its changes are driven by the four dimensions described. This will add to continuing academic discussions and critiques of the secularisation thesis and the concept of
postsecularity. It will do this by highlighting secularisation as an evolving social process without a teleological endpoint. The new atheism is a particularly poignant example for making this argument, because as has been argued by Borer (2010), the movement is reacting to the perceived failure of the thesis itself. The new atheists feel a need to put forward a public form of irreligion in order to compete with religious views in the postsecular public sphere. It is a world that is still steeped in religious practices and in which the new atheists feel a need for public representation in order to validate their views. This validation can also involve the creation and appropriation of concepts often connected to religion, such as community structures, rituals and moral prescriptions. The mixing of religious and secular practices discovered within the new atheist group helps to highlight the idea that even the most irreligious groups are currently involved in appropriation of religious or religious-like ideas for public use. Moreover, as will be argued, irreligion is not the end point of worldview evolution, even if it is eventually decided that gods or the supernatural do not exist, there will still be continuing divisions within the groups that agree on that idea. This analysis serves to support a version of postsecularity in which dialectical evolution is continuous and religious/secular worldviews are mixing together in a competitive public sphere.
CHAPTER 1. Background and Literature Review
INTRODUCING THE NEW ATHEISM

The 21st century witnessed the emergence of an anti-religious group who became known as the ‘new atheism’. It was, at least at the start, primarily an American, British and Australasian publishing phenomenon. It was confined mainly to the English speaking world and started with popular journalistic and academic texts which were published from 2004 to 2007 (Amarasingam (ed.) 2010; De Lashmutt 2009; Geertz and Markússan 2010; Peterson 2007; Hay 2007; Zuckerman (ed.) 2010a). The most common books cited as part of the movement are Sam Harris’ The End of Faith (2004), Richard Dawkins’ The God Delusion (2006), Daniel Dennett’s Breaking the Spell (2006) and Christopher Hitchens’ God is Not Great (2007). Others have openly embraced the new atheism and have been endorsed as part of the new atheists’ cannon. They include the American physicist and astronomer, Victor Stenger, who authored two books regarding atheism: God: The Failed Hypothesis – How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist (2007) and The New Atheism: Taking a Stand for Science and Reason (2009); British philosopher, A. C. Grayling, who wrote several popular works advocating atheism, in particular his Life, Sex and Ideas: The Good Life without God (2003), Against All Gods: Six Polemics on Religion and an Essay on Kindness (2007) and his alternative non-religious Bible, The Good Book: A Secular Bible (2011); and the French philosophers, André Comte-Sponville, author of The Book of Atheist Spirituality (2008) and Michael Onfray, author of Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism and Islam (2005).

Alongside these scientific and philosophical authors, are the writers of four contemporary novels, Martin Amis, Ian McEwan, Philip Pullman and Salman Rushdie. These authors have also joined the movement and been endorsed by the original authors (Bradley 2009). Pullman and Grayling have published appreciative essays on Dawkins (Grafen and Ridley (eds.) 2006). Rushdie has come out in public support for Hitchens and contributed an essay titled, Imagine There’s No Heaven to Hitchens’ book The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever ((ed.) 2007). McEwan and Amis have written and spoken admiringly of Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris on many occasions and much of McEwan’s recent novels, Saturday (2005) and On Chesil Beach (2007),
have even been argued to be inspired by new atheist thought (Bradley 2009). These authors have been endorsement from members of the original movement. Dennett, in Darwin’s Dangerous Idea (1995), spoke out in support of Salman Rushdie when the latter’s Satanic Verses drew forth a fatwa against him by Ayatollah Khomeini; Hitchens sheltered Rushdie when his life was under threat (Hitchens 2011), and Hitchens’ memoir, Hitch-22 (2010) has a long chapter dealing with his friendship with Rushdie. Hitchens is also close to Amis as evidenced by a dedication to Amis in his collection Love, Poverty, and War (2004).

A number of ex-Muslim atheists have also entered the discussion. Ibn Warraq, the nom de plume of a Muslim born in India, is the author or editor of several highly critical works on Islam: The Quest for the Historical Muhammad (2000), What the Koran Really Says (2002), and his wide-ranging essay collection Virgins? What Virgins? And Other Essays (2010). Two of Warraq’s books have a particularly irreligious agenda, notably Why I Am Not a Muslim (2003a), a book once described by Hitchens as his favourite book on Islam and Leaving Islam: apostates speak out (2003b) a collection of personal testimonies by Muslims who have abandoned their faith. In an essay titled On Becoming English (2010) Warraq explains that it was the Rushdie affair that finally persuaded him to leave Islam and to write the book. Another ex-Muslim is Taslima Nasrin, Bangladeshi Physician and author of Shame (1993), who also spoke at the Global Atheist Convention (GAC 2010). After the publication of her novel, she had a fatwa placed on her head and has been expelled from her homeland. A last ex-Muslim figure is Ayaan Hirsi Ali, she is a Somalian author of the two-part memoir Infidel (2007) and Nomad (2010). Her move from Islam to atheism was due to the assassination of her friend, the Dutch film-maker Theo van Gogh. She spoke at GAC (2012) as part of a panel on Hitchens and she was introduced as the intended Fifth Horseperson of the Apocalypse6. These individuals have

---

6 In 2008, four prominent atheist authors (Dawkins, Dennett, Hitchens and Harris) got together to discuss religion and their positions on the subject. The DVD was entitled “The Four Horsemen” (in reference to the “Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse”) and ever since they have been referred to by this title. Godless World, 2008. The Four Horsemen of New Atheism, viewed 13 January 2010: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vZ-xK_PEDgc
started and become the figureheads of a popular movement that has been coined the ‘new atheism’.

The uprising of public atheism at this time has led to a newly visible player in the marketplace of popular worldviews (Cimino and Smith 2010; Eller 2010; Manning 2010; Nall 2010; Pasquale 2010). Books and personalities, promoting atheism and arguing against religion have made best-sellers’ lists (Amarasingam (ed.) 2010; Geertz and Markússan 2010; Peterson 2007; Zuckerman (ed.) 2010a). The large sales indicate a broad public interest in such issues, yet we have very little data on the impacts of this group. Due to a lack of empirical data in the literature on the new atheism, I decided that it was an imperative to confirm current literature observations with participant data. Just as assuming that all religious people are fundamentalists is erroneous, we may find the beliefs of the new atheists to be equally diverse. In line with this observation, the overall problem being addressed in this research concerns the types of internal sociological divisions in the irreligious field and the real world structures that arise from such divisions.

Overall the research involves looking into the issues that unite and divide the irreligious and how they have been expressed throughout history and in the current movement. Thus, the main objective is to investigate internal changes within the new atheism in relation to history and the current Western social environment. The data collected will thus add to continuing academic discussions and critiques of the secularisation thesis. The argument will be moved forward by highlighting secularisation as an evolving social process without a teleological endpoint via an example from the non-religious field. The new atheism, in this perspective can be viewed as the majority public manifestation of irreligion in a postsecular sphere. The postsecular sphere will be shown as a space where religious voices have re-joined the public conversation about our collective future (Knott 2005); and in which different versions of modernity (including secularism) compete (Eisenstadt 2000). It is a competitive field in which a number of tactics are available to the irreligious in achieving their goals. The tactics that are appropriate or possible depend on the individual viewing them and the available support. As will be seen, some
alternative tactics can gain a following and new groups emerge from within the irreligious milieu due to contestations over how ‘religious’ or ‘religiously involved’ an irreligious individual should be.
LITERATURE REVIEW

Post-Secular Paradigms and the Non-Religious

If there is one thing we have learned at the beginning of the 21st century it is that the world never stands still. The failure of modernist attempts to create ultimate utopias (perhaps dystopias) that would forever stand as perfect societies or perfect theories (functional-structuralism) seems naive in the face of an ever changing society and the universe in which we now know we live (Smith and Jenks 2006). The teleology in such views denied the fact that all social systems are embedded in an environment that changes and therefore there can be no ‘final solution’ to social ills. The emergence of the environmental crisis from the development activities around modernity is one such example and as Beck (1992) points out, such societally created change seems to be on the rise. The failure of such ‘final solutions’ is particularly evident post 1942 with the technological horrors of the Holocaust (postmodernism; after ethnocentrism), post 1989 when the promise of political social utopias seems less realistic (post-Communism; consumer society) and post September 11, 2001 when the promise of the strong Secularisation Thesis seems more distant than ever (postsecularity; after the teleological Secularisation Thesis). Nothing ever stands still and in fact for many systems standing still, never changing, would mean the end of their vitality. Economies go through cycles of boom and bust, species evolve; climates change; stars churn with atomic reactions and currents of heat; forests with nutrient cycles; and bodies never truly hit homeostasis. In the case of this thesis, the irreligious system changes with the environment of its time. Life is flux. Change is a continuous part of the universe. Society, embedded in this continuous change, is a seething mass of ideas and behaviours. This is what makes it so fascinating and frustrating.

In recognition of continuous change and the teleology in the Secularisation Thesis, ideas of the ‘postsecular’ have become more common in the Sociology of Religion. Beckford (2012) argues that discourse around the idea of the postsecular has been increasing in scholarly circles despite a lack of coherence.
and consistency in descriptions of the concept. He suggests that the late 1990's saw interest in the concept of the postsecular rise and quickly acquire diverse and complex meanings (Beckford 2012). The range of meanings of the postsecular draw on and cuts across academic disciplines, but he argues, it is strongest in theology, religious studies, philosophy, literature theory, postcolonial studies, sociology, anthropology, political science, international relations and geography. Beckford (2012: 2) groups these different usages into six clusters, to provide a “general structuring of positions and arguments.” These clusters of meaning are:

1. Secularisation deniers and doubters.
2. Building on the secular.
3. Re-enchantment of culture.
5. Politics, philosophy and theology (inclusion of religious voices in public debate).
6. A plague on all your houses (critical and negative views of the concept).

Beckford (2012: 12) highlights this variety of meanings attached to the postsecular, stating that in his opinion they fail to shed light on “the most pressing issues concerning religion in public life today.” He cites the variety of interpretations and tensions between such meanings as a key issue:

> It is not easy to reconcile the idea that the secular has somehow come to an end with the idea that postsecularity represents a refinement – or a more productive phase – of secularity. Again, there is tension between the claim that postsecularity enables a return to presecular forms of religion and the contrary claim that any forms of religion that emerge in postsecularity must be new and nondogmatic or “spiritual” (Beckford 2012: 12).

Secondly, Beckford (2012: 13) suggests that while talk of the postsecular may have increased, across disciplines, it would be wrong to conclude from this discussion that “a phenomenon of postsecularity must therefore exist”. He suggests that arguments about the postsecular are often “normative and speculative” and are underdeveloped in relation to empirical evidence and
analysis (Beckford 2012: 13). Adding to this, the discourse of negotiations around key terms such as ‘religion’, ‘secular’ and ‘postsecular’ has been limited. Although definitions are discussed continuously, their use in social settings is discussed only weakly.

Rosati and Stoeckl (eds. 2012) have taken up the challenge of investigating the postsecular with empirical data in the book *Multiple Modernities and Postsecular Societies (Global Connections)*. They bring forward examples that highlight both the multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2000) present in the world and their relation to notions of the postsecular through empirical evidence. Country examples such as Turkey, Iran, Russia, Nigeria, South Africa and Brazil are given, where integration of secular and religious perspectives is more obvious. Ferrara (2012) opens a discussion on the role of religion in modernity, citing Eisenstadt (1968), Weber (1975) and Jaspers (1953) in support of his arguments, as each sees religion as integral to the reconstructions of modernity. He identifies three elements of the spirit of democracy as being orientation to:

1. The common good.
2. Equality.
3. The intrinsic value of the individual.

The cultural resources he cites as being supportive of modernity and democracy are all religious in nature, being found in the dominant religious traditions of the world. He demonstrates the idea that religious traditions can be used to support democracy with their own semantic resources, without the need for modern or secular perspectives. He also points out that these multiple sources for the Western modern liberal democratic model cause dissonances to exist in the project. These dissonances can also trigger a self-reflective process from the side of the Western liberal mainstream, who feel more obligation to allow space for such alternative resources. Religious language is therefore, in his view, part of the reflective learning process of a postsecular society and self-critical reflection on the fundamentals of Western liberal democracy. Thus, multiple modernities, in Ferrara’s analysis, are a necessary condition for the emergence of postsecular societies.
For Kömeçoğlu (2012) and Rosati (2012), it is highly plausible that there is a close connection between the ideas of multiple modernities and the postsecular, in a similar way to the intertwinement of theories of modernisation and secularisation in previous periods. Kömeçoğlu (2012) offers a wide range of examples of how the secular and the religious are being intertwined in both Turkey and Iran. Both countries have multifaceted and fragmented public spheres in which an alleged homogeneity of social space is questioned by ‘postsecular social practices’ such as the wearing of the Hijab in a public space (seen differently in these opposing examples). In such spaces, secular and religious practices co-exist.

Through Knott’s (2005) ideas on postsecularity he suggests that in these spaces, the religious and the secular are part of the same field, rather than simply opposing each other (Kömeçoğlu 2012), thus there are large areas of ‘interpenetration’ (see Göle 2005). This represents the blurring of traditional lines between secular and religious fields. It represents an increasing awareness on the part of social actors of the need to accommodate their identities within a modern horizon. Such postsecular social practices can be a tool of resistance to authoritarian ideologies, a means of transformation that may utilise emancipatory understandings of modernity.

Looking at these examples, Stoeckl (2012) concludes that when we draw together the insight of multiple modernities with a potential redefinition of Western modernity in one framework, we are moving from a comparative-civilisation understanding of multiple modernities (Eisenstadt 2003) to a postsecular understanding. Once a process of ‘self-reflectivity’ sets in on both sides of the religious and secular divide, we can then talk about a postsecular learning process (Rosati and Stoeckl 2012). These examples aid in a more empirical exploration of the concept of the postsecular. By focusing down, as is suggested by Beckford (2012) above, they are able to look at the negotiations around key terms and put them in the context of their particular social settings.

A last, and important point is found in Beckford’s (2012: 13) analysis that is highly relevant to the arguments of this thesis:
The literature on the postsecular seems to be largely unaware of – or uninterested in – current debates about nonreligion. Vice versa, the flourishing interest in secularity and nonreligion seems to show little attention to the debates about postsecularity.

The present research wishes to undertake this process within the part of the postsecular field that Beckford (2012) argues has been ignored by scholars of postsecularity; the non-religious field. It will specifically focus on those who have actively taken up the cause of secularism/secularity in the public sphere as an example of those most vested in the secular interpretation of modernity. Knott’s (2005) suggestion that postsecular spaces arise where the religious and the secular are part of the same field, rather than simply opposing each other, is helpful in understanding the need to interrogate secular and non-religious perspectives. This group will be utilised to show that even in those most interested in the secularist cause, there appears to be a mixing of secular and religious practices occurring at the level of interaction. These interactions have emerged at a different level of analysis as a number of sub-networks within the overall non-religious side of the postsecular field.

Part of the difficulty in this type of research comes from trying to find the appropriate levels of analysis and the most poignant factors in interaction with the system in question at that level (Sawyer 2005; Giddens 1991). After all, every breakdown of a system is artificial due to the hyper-connectivity and heterogeneity of components within complex systems (Smith and Jenks 2006). Sociological terms represent a social grouping along a continuum of socially related terms. It is often of utility to represent them in couplets, though in reality there is rarely ever a true two body system in a social milieu. Social systems contain items, constructs and linguistic terms that interact with each other in a multidimensional way. This complexity must inevitably be simplified for the sake of analysis. The idea is demonstrated via computer models; both limits on floating point numbers and variables; and the general reductionist tendencies of science. Social complexity must be represented, but it must be represented in a way that can be modelled and tested. Due to this, couplets such as modernity/ postmodernity, secularism/postsecularism and many others
have become common in sociology. However, my couplets are of a different kind in that they do not represent a linear progression of ideas. Instead they represent a strategy or social stance that has been drawn on throughout various periods, in a non-linear fashion. They represent non-teleological rather than sequential, teleological versions of the sociological couplet. In this way they try to take on the postmodern critique, and avoid the trappings of false teleology. Dimensional analysis can also capture dynamic evolution of groups by tracking how a group moves along, circumvents or synchronises a dimension in its further construction and splitting, while remaining within a sociological frame. In the particular example from this research, the irreligious system evolves over time through the continuous movement of people through the system and their contributions/ additions to it. Their contributions are limited in time but influence the system by the recursive injection of ideas that occurs with learning and imitation in social systems, as discussed in more detail below (Eisenstadt 2000; Smith and Jenks 2006; Sawyer 2005). Evolutionary, event driven models, as used in this research, are inherently historically oriented, due to the recognition that all systems are influenced by their history, at least to some degree (Eisenstadt 2000; Smith and Jenks 2006; Sawyer 2005).

In accordance with this recognition, the version of postsecularity that I will support and critique in this research (Knott 2005) moves away from the progressive evolutionary versions of the term. This is the 'postsecular' in the way of post teleology, where the false telos of the thesis has been removed to reveal the ongoing evolution that actually occurs within the sphere of worldviews. The teleology of the secularisation thesis seems antiquated in a world in which evolution is recognised. We now know that all systems sit in an overall environment where they are interlocked and contained within other systems. In such a world, evolution of a system occurs in co-evolution with other systems and at a number of levels of analysis (Sawyer 2005; Byrne 1998; Smith and Jenks 2006). This version of postsecularity, could perhaps more appropriately be called the non-teleological Secularisation Thesis. In this version, (re)secularisation/de-secularisation are environmentally driven processes that emerge from the interactions and changing needs of billions of people at different scales of interaction (Robertson 1992; Eisenstadt 2000).
In their discussion of postsecularity, Pace (2012) draws attention to the power of historical religions in shaping our view of both the religious and the secular. He does this by pointing out the association of religion with practices such as rituals, symbols, the body and communication in verbal and non-verbal manifestations. This in turn is an issue for the ‘secular’, ‘non-religious’ or ‘irreligious’ who have struggled to create new versions of such things due to the strong semantic and cultural attachment to religion that they are often viewed as having. Wagner (2012) makes an observation that conflict, human creativity, and the human capacity for the recreation of socio-political arrangements are more connected to modernisation than cultural continuity and commonality which are often cited in debates around postsecularity. From his perspective neither religion nor secularisation play any important part in the emergence of the multiple programs found in modernity. Whether one agrees with this assessment or not, his analysis again brings our attention back to the provincial and particular in the micro interactions of the everyday world. It is from such interactions and disputes that the various programs are able to emerge from the interactions of billions. By including the processes of structural emergence in my analysis, I hope to show that while Wagner (2012) is right in identifying conflict and micro interactions as more important than cultural continuity at one level; it is clear that there is an overall distribution of concepts such as ‘religion’ and ‘secularity’ within the community. This distribution means that some form of continuity and commonality is almost inevitable within networks of people, even if re- or mis-interpreted through the multitude of interactions and their differentiating actions. Although distributed and democratised, as Wagner (2012) points out, historical and cultural notions of religion and secularity do indeed play a part in the emergence of the multiple programs of modernity. I hope to show that this also holds within the secular part of the field. They will be viewed as the holders of Western modernism, including secularism. Therefore we can see that the version of postsecularity that these authors utilise is useful for understanding the non-religious groups that have become a prominent feature of the early 21st century. It is the global mix of different modernities, including secularism, that this version allows, which will be useful in the analysis of such movements.
As will be evidenced, the new atheist group are concerned about the space being allowed for religious resources in the postsecular world. They see this as a form of ‘accommodationism’, in which liberal Westerners are allowing activities, ideas and actions which lead to suppression of individual rights due to concerns about Western colonisation of other cultures. Thus the self-reflective process that allows such views to be expressed in the public sphere can be problematic from their viewpoint. The new atheists represent those who are opposed to self-critical evaluation of Western modernity. Thus they can be viewed as part of a re-secularisation process within postsecular societies. However, as will be shown, there are also parts of this group involved in exactly such a self-critical assessment. These groups are often opposed by those holding the new atheist viewpoint and represent alternative versions of the Western secular project, which have taken on critiques about the efficacy of their particular form of modernity. Thus, there are also multiple modernities present in the non-religious part of the postsecular field. Both can be viewed as part of the emergence of postsecular societies.
Our Diminishing Ignorance of Non-Religion/Irreligion

When I began my academic journey in 2010, it was common to pronounce that the subject of non-religion had been all but neglected apart from pioneering efforts by Campbell (1972) and a few others. In some ways this is true, there were few studies over the years and big gaps in periods between studies. However, over time, a number of scholars have put a concerted effort into research in this area, the corpus has grown, both in terms of new publications and discovery of past gems. Zuckerman (2010a) cites some early examples of social scientific study on the non-religious. He suggests that Demerath and Thiessen (1966), a study on a small Wisconsin (US state) based free thought movement known as Freie Gemeinde, was the first ever research on the irreligious. However, Bullivant and Lee (2012) later discovered an earlier ‘first’ in Vetter and Green’s (1932) study titled Personality and Group Factors in the Making of Atheists published in the Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology. As the title of the journal indicates, this was a rather biased take on what an atheist represented. This negative characterisation would also be taken up by the Catholic Church, at least until the Vatican conference of 1969, where it appeared to take on the subject more broadly. As Bullivant and Lee (2012) discuss, the conference was held at a time when the general social scientific community was also taking an interest in non-religion. They cite Vernon's (1968) pioneering article Religious Nones: A Neglected Category, as evidence of the change. Non-religion was losing the negative interpretation and was coming to be seen as a positive subject in its own right. In attendance at the Vatican conference were some of the biggest minds in Sociology and Sociology of Religion at that time (Bullivant and Lee 2012). After this, there were a number of tentative investigations such as Demerath (1969) on The Rise of the Religion-less Church; Maclntyre and Ricoeur (1969) on The Religious Significance of Atheism; Mauss (1969) on Mormon apostasy, Caporale and Gumelli (1971) on The Culture of Unbelief; and Campbell (1972) Toward a Sociology of Irreligion. Apart from this, Zuckerman (2010a) argues that publications have been few and far between, listing ten since Campbell’s 1972 call for a sociology of the
irreligious. In fact, some authors have suggested that the entire phenomenon of non-religion or irreligion has been mostly ignored by the social sciences (Eller 2010; Pasquale 2010). The reasons for this neglect are argued by Bullivant and Lee (2012) to have their roots in the secularisation thesis, low non-religious numbers in the past, and the individual nature of the non-religious. In short, it was believed in the recent past that non-religion was not worthy of study in its own right. However, as Bainbridge (2005: 22) points out, “any wide ranging theory of religion needs to be tested not only with evidence about religion itself, but also about its absence.” Thus this is an important endeavour for scholars of religion, even if their primary interest is religion itself.

By the mid 2000’s the field of irreligious study had begun to change, as scholars joined the field in increasing numbers and post-graduate students began to research the issue (Bullivant and Lee 2012). Literature has begun to emerge which looks directly at contemporary non-religion. This effort has been particularly evident over the period of my thesis and thus I have had to integrate many new findings. The new body of literature treats non-religious phenomena as “positive and concrete subjects in their own right” rather than as secular phenomena attached directly to and relying on religion (Bullivant and Lee 2012: 19). Thus there is increasing evidence that Campbell’s (1972) call to produce a Sociology of Irreligion, may finally be on the move. Non-religion, secularism and atheism are being set up as valid study topics with significant long term prospects. These contributions to a growing field include a two Volume book set; Atheism and Secularity, edited by Zuckerman (2010a, 2010b); the book Religion and the New Atheism: A Critical Appraisal, edited by Amarasingam (2010); and a number of individual articles published in journals (e.g. De Lashmutt 2009; Hunsberger and Altemeyer 2006; Kosmin and Keysar 2007; Martin 2007; Sherkat 2008; Zuckerman 2008; Geertz and Markússan 2010; Bullivant 2012; Bullivant and Lee 2012). A number of organisations have also become active in the effort to research non-religious views. Bullivant and Lee (2012) cite the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture
founded in 2005 by non-religious scholars Barry Kosmin and Ariela Keysar and the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) set up by Stephen Bullivant, Lois Lee, Stacey Gutkowsk and Nicholas Gibson. I would add to these groups Phil Zuckerman’s degree in Secularism offered at Pitzer college in California, US. Pushing forward the agenda of these groups, the Non-religion and Secularity Research Network (NSRN) held what they claim as the first conference on non-religious studies since the Vatican conference of 1969. Out of this meeting, a special issue on ‘Non-religion and Secularity’ was produced by the *Journal of Contemporary Religion* (volume 27, issue 1, January 2012), in which a variety of scholars of both Sociology of Religion and Non-religion contributed (e.g. Bullivant, Lee, Voas, McAndrew, Lanman, Quack, Gutkowsk, Cragun, Kosmin, Keysar, Hammer and Nielsen). What is clear, is that since the beginning of the 21st century there has been an increased scholarly interest in non-religion. However, as pointed out in the first section, there has been a mutual lack of interaction between nonreligious scholarship and scholarship around the postsecular. This research hopes to fill that gap by putting forward the new atheism as an example of nonreligious postsecular processes. During the research I will confirm and critique the ideas of Knott (2005) on the shape of the postsecular field. The new atheism will be analysed as a part of the postsecular field, where religious and secular voices are present, but also interacting in both oppositional and conciliatory ways.

---

7 Trinity College. *Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC)*, viewed 15 November 2013: [http://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/isssc/Pages/default.aspx](http://www.trincoll.edu/Academics/centers/isssc/Pages/default.aspx)
9 Pitzer College. *Secular Studies*, viewed 15 January 2013: [https://www.pitzer.edu/academics/field_groups/secular_studies/index.asp](https://www.pitzer.edu/academics/field_groups/secular_studies/index.asp)
The Terminology of the Emerging Field

The two concepts of ‘non-religion’ and ‘secularity’ are intended to summarise all positions which are necessarily defined in reference to religion but which are considered to be other than religious. [This encapsulates] a range of perspectives and experiences, including the atheistic, agnostic, religiously indifferent or areligious, as well as some forms or aspects of secularism, humanism and, indeed, religion itself.10

As this field has rapidly expanded over the last decade, the terminology used within the field has remained largely ungoverned and this had led to terms being employed in a variety of ways. According to Pasquale (2010: 43):

There are [also] other windows into this domain, each with a distinctive slant, such as irreligion, religious doubt, unbelief or nonbelief, freethought, agnosticism, (secular) humanism, rationalism, materialism, philosophical naturalism, and (religious) scepticism.

Even this fairly comprehensive list leaves out some of the terms used in the field. A survey of the relevant literature quickly demonstrates that there are many key terms which receive usage: agnostic, atheist, bright, freethinker, Humanist, materialist, naturalist, non-religious, Rationalist, skeptic and Secularist. There are many inconsistencies in the definition of these terms, as Cotter (2011: 21) points out:

The terms ‘freethinker’, ‘humanist’, ‘materialist’, ‘rationalist’, ‘skeptic’ and ‘secularist’ can be considered together because none of these terms is inherently nonreligious. As Colin Campbell notes, in his study on ‘irreligion’, these terms... are used in both a religious and an irreligious context... although the general sense may be the same... Hence, ‘rationalism’ is used in both religious and irreligious contexts to refer to the treatment of reason as the ultimate authority, but in

---

the irreligious context it has the additional connotation of implying the use of reason for the destruction of religious belief.

This same variation is encountered with each of the other terms; cultural context shifts the meaning of each term and their definitions seem to come from particular forms of these self-descriptors. For example, the term ‘secularist’ can be understood in a number of ways, from an ‘anti-religious’ position to simply positing a differentiation between the religious and the secular realms. It can be understood as a stealth form of atheism or can also just mean the ‘profane’ things within a religion, from non-priests to material goods. Thus the separation between the sacred and secular is not straightforward and secularism is not necessarily atheistic (Eller 2010). In another example, ‘agnosticism’, the term originally proposed in modern times by Huxley in the nineteenth century (1869) contains no reference to ‘religion’ or the ‘supernatural’:

Positively the principle may be expressed: In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable (cited in Vernon 2008: 7).

When related to religion, ‘agnostic’ can imply that it is impossible to know whether God(s) exist (Dawkins 2006; Russell 1952), or applied to a person who says that they “do not know whether God exists” (Campbell 1972: 18). It can be perceived to suggest an openness to religion (Vernon 2008) or a vague position equivalent to a weak atheism (Eller 2010) or a technical qualification of epistemology (Russell 1952; Dawkins 2006). These examples illustrate the complexity of such associations and the need to examine them critically. Without qualification, none of these terms necessarily imply that a person is ‘non-religious’, and give little information as to how these terms manifest in the lives of the person employing them. As Lee (2012) points out, there are issues with using all of these terms, but we must come to some sort of agreement on their meanings and specificity in order to avoid confusion. Lee breaks her discussion into three types of terminology:
1. Those which take religion as their root (non-religion, irreligion, a-religion).
2. Those which take theism as their root (atheism, non-theism).
3. Those that take secular as their root (secular, secularity, secularism).

As Lee (2012) states, non-religion is necessarily defined in reference to religion, where the atheist is defined with relation to Western theism and the Secularist could be religious or non-religious. Lee (2012) argues that the term ‘non-religious’ might encompass atheism, Humanism, agnosticism and some forms of secularism, it would include “anti-religious action and ‘irreligious experiences’” (Lee 2012: 131; see Bullivant 2008a for irreligious experiences), and it could also include those people that are ‘indifferent’ to religion. This definition takes in the greatest number of people that may fit into the new field, while specifying the field to those without religion, and still maintaining the connection with religion that defines such movements. Thus, in line with this idea, Lee (2012) suggests ‘non-religion’ as the master concept for the field, and I am inclined to agree. Lee (2012) also excludes ideas such as rational, secular, naturalism and humanism from her definition, because, as discussed earlier, these phenomenon can be philosophically separated from religion and referred to on their own; one can be religious or non-religious and still hold these philosophical ideas. Lee provided a succinct definition of ‘non-religion’ which met with widespread approval at the NSRN’s recent terminology conference in 2011. Accordingly, non-religion is presented by Lee (2012: 131) as:

   Anything which is primarily defined by a relationship of difference to religion.

Thus when referring to the general population of people that do not see themselves as religious, I will use the term ‘non-religious’.

Non-Religion

A Growing Demographic

Zuckerman (2007) places a rough estimate, based on a survey of some 50 countries, of approximately 500–750 million people in the world who do not
believe in God, which he points out would make non-belief the fourth-largest persuasion, after Christianity (2 billion), Islam (1.2 billion) and Hinduism (900 million). The discussion below on non-religious diversity indicates that Zuckerman (2007) may be slightly overestimating the population that ‘do not believe in God’, as many of the non-religious group may still hold a belief in some Gods or supernatural forces. However, his figures could be applied to the whole non-religious population, with the caveat that we cannot be sure that all of these individuals are in fact atheists in Zuckerman’s sense. Geertz and Markússan (2010) argue that all the more nuanced polls seem to indicate a decline in religious affiliation in the 20th century, whereas there is a clear and dramatic increase in irreligion. This fact raises anew the questions that secularisation theorists have been struggling with and which, many have claimed, have been disproven by the new religiosity of recent decades (Casanova 1994; Berger 1999; Davie 1994; Davies 2010; Turner 2010). The question is whether there has been a significant increase in religiosity in the West. Paul and Zuckerman (2007) have argued that such an increase has not occurred. But, Zuckerman also argues that worldwide atheism may be in decline “due to the demographic fact that highly religious nations have the highest birth rates in the world, and highly irreligious nations have the lowest birth rates in the world” (2007: 59). As an alternative, Bullivant (2010) and separately Possamai (2011), suggest that the new visibility of both the religious and irreligious could have a polarising effect on society, increasing both the number of believers and non-believers. Bullivant (2010) does however suggest that the increase in non-believers will be greater and that irreligion should gain acceptance through visibility, particularly in America.

Many polls have found that in Great Britain, France and Germany, the majority of the population are either agnostics or atheists (Zuckerman 2007). In Spain agnostics and atheists are almost as numerous as believers in any form of God or any type of supreme being (Zuckerman 2007), likewise in New Zealand with 37.6% of the population being 'non-religious' (SNZ 2013). The 2009 British Social Attitudes Survey found that 48% of British claim no religion (Bullivant and Lee 2012). In Italy, believers form a substantial majority, but still not to the extent seen in the US (Zuckerman 2007). Despite this, the 18% of the American
population that claim to be non-religious is not insignificant (Zuckerman 2010a; Geertz and Markússan 2010). Adding to this, recent birth cohorts of Americans are more likely than previous cohorts to be raised outside of a religious tradition and those raised with no religion are increasingly likely to have no religion as adults (Merino 2012). This proposition could easily be extended to other countries such Australia, New Zealand, Canada, the UK and many in Europe. In my own area, Australia, there appears to have been a clear growth in non-religion, increasing from 15.5% in the 2001 census (ABS 2007) to 23.5% in 2011 (ABS 2013a). The information below, taken from the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS 2013b; Figure 1 and 2 and Table 1) clearly illustrates the growth in those identifying as non-religious. Though Australians are given a chance to clarify their stance, before the non-religion option (ABS 2011), only a small number clarified their position. Most respondents gave no specific label to their non-religious identity, and the number of people identifying specifically as an ‘atheist’ is relatively small (Table 1).

Figure 1: The Percentage of Australians Reporting No Religion from 1911 to 2011

![Figure 1](ABS 2013b)

Figure 2: The Percentage of Australians Reporting No Religion from 1971 to 2011

![Figure 2](ABS 2013b)
Table 1: Percentage of Australians Reporting No Religion in the 2011 Census

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>58 899</td>
<td>1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Agnostic</td>
<td>34 632</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humanist</td>
<td>7 663</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationalist</td>
<td>2 435</td>
<td>0.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No Religion, not further defined</td>
<td>4 693 162</td>
<td>97.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>4 796 791</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(HABS 2013b)

Heterogeneous Structure of the Non-Religious Group and Typologies of Non-Religion

As seen above, recent survey research has acknowledged a marked increase in the number of people claiming to be ‘non-religious’ in the West. However, the ‘non-religious’ group has been found to have a heterogeneous demographic structure when analysed. Trying to lump all non-religious people into the anti-religious category is not supported by the empirical evidence. It encompasses individuals that are not technically ‘irreligious’ or ‘atheist’ in orientation and therefore who are not a part of the participant base for this research. The evidence suggests that many of the non-religious are not free of supernatural beliefs at all, but continue to hold to some form of supernatural view or private religiosity. As Beckford (1999: 25) states, “religion serves as a language in which many people who may no longer be associated with any religious organisations still choose to express their strongest fears, sorrows, aspirations, joys and wishes.” Therefore, individuals who identify as non-religious on census forms may have a variety of beliefs. Non-religious views could range from believing without belonging (Davie 1994), to those with alternative spirituality (Heelas and Woodhead 2005), postmodern forms of traditional religion¹¹ (Till 2006; Jennings 2010; Lau 2006; De Groot 2006; Drane 2006; Bader-Saye 2006), hyper-real religions¹² (Possamai 2007), agnostics, and the irreligious¹³ (Amarasingam (ed.) 2010; Zuckerman (ed.) 2010a; Martin 2007). What is clear is that not all of the non-religious completely remove religion or the

¹¹ Emergent Church and Next Church.
¹² Based in popular culture.
¹³ Atheists, Rationalists and Humanists for example.
supernatural from their lives, and a rise in the non-religious does not necessarily indicate a rise in numbers of those with anti-religious views. Thus the term non-religion may be seen as an umbrella term for those who leave ‘religion’ behind, but who may hold a number of other beliefs. Kosmin (2007) has made a distinction between ‘soft’ and ‘hard’ seculars. Lim et al. (2010) have added ‘liminals’, those who are neither completely religious nor non-religious, as a distinctive type, similar to the ‘fuzzy fidelity’ discussed by Voas (2009). Lüchau (2010) distinguishes between ‘atheists’ and the ‘a-religious’ – the former actively care about religion and seek to curb its influence, while the latter simply do not care about religion one way or another; a distinction between ‘explicit’ and ‘implicit’ non-religion. Demerath (2001) and Zuckerman (2008) have discussed the non-believing, culturally religious – those who identify with a religion, even while simultaneously rejecting its actual creeds and supernatural assumptions, an orientation very similar to what Rosen (2009) calls ‘religion-as-heritage’. Due to the variation being indicated by such research and the lack of direct empirical studies on the non-religious, Cotter (2011) took on the task of qualitatively analysing the worldviews of those labelling themselves as ‘non-religious’. He set forward to study non-religion as it is lived, experienced and expressed, seeking to avoid imposing the researcher’s preconceived category onto informants (Cotter 2011). Cotter (2011) analysed the narratives of his student participants and found five types of non-religious individual, Humanistic, Spiritual, Familial, Philosophical and Naturalistic. Many of these types can also be found in the dimensions presented in this study. In short, the diversity of secular orientations is significant, and this significance is becoming more and more recognised (Pasquale, Galen and Zuckerman 2013). Given that there exist different forms or types of secular orientations, Zuckerman (2012a) posits the question; what might account for these differences? As shown here, this question is being addressed with regard to non-religion by a variety of authors. However, typological investigations of the specifically anti-religious have been sparser and the present study wishes to fill this gap while adding to the debate on postsecularity. As is discussed in the next sections, this research will be confined to areas that fall within the secularist and anti-religious or irreligious part of this non-religious milieu.
Irreligion

The present study wishes to address the question of diversity with regards to those who specifically reject religion. Though the question of anti-religious diversity has been addressed at an earlier time by Campbell (1972), the empirical studies since this time have been sparse. Many theoretical and speculative studies have been produced over the last 10 years. However, there has been a lack of studies using primary data. Though there are some exceptions (Bullivant 2008a, 2008b, 2010; Campbell 1972; Cimino and Smith 2007, 2010; Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Manning 2010; Pasquale 2010; Furseth 2010; Demerath 2010; Borer 2010; Nall 2010), this lack of empirical study since Campbell (1972) leaves the field open to investigations.

In this research the focus is on the part of the non-religious field that actually consider themselves to have separated from religion and religious beliefs. In order to capture the feelings of these anti-supernatural/anti-religious groups of the 'non-religious', a more specific term than 'non-religion' must be employed. Lee (2012) puts forward the term 'atheism' as the term that should indicate that someone does not believe in God. Indeed, this has become a common way to denote this group in recent periods due to the mostly Western nature of atheism, and due to the popularity of this word at the beginning of the 21st century. There are currently three main understandings of the term atheist which are prevalent in contemporary academic and lay discussions:

1. A person who does not believe in God – a principled and informed decision to reject belief in God (McGrath 2004: 175).

2. A person who believes that there is no God (distinction between not believing in God and believing that God does not exist (Shermer 1999: 256).

3. A person who simply lack[s] Gods (Eller 2010: 3) – where 'lack' should be interpreted in a strictly neutral and descriptive sense.

Each of these definitions demonstrates variations on the theme of the non-existence of a deity (or deities). Generally these definitions show a difference between positive and negative atheism, where positive atheists reject belief in
God, and negative atheists simply see no reason to believe. The positive
definition is unpopular in the new atheist movement, as will be discussed in
Chapter 3, and this definition is often employed by the religious opposition, to
indicate that the new atheism is actually a form of religion or belief. Atheism has
also been ascribed a number of qualities by various authors, adding to the
confusion around the term. For instance it can be:

1. Immutably ‘inscribed’ with theism (Hyman 2010: xviii).
2. Not parasitic on religion (Baggini 2003: 9-10).
3. Or, through acknowledging the Western, theistic origins of the term
‘atheism’, which when removed from these Western roots is ‘the most
common form of religion’, due to the fact that most religions do not focus
on a God (Eller 2010: 3).

Furthering this confusion, atheism is attached to a number of phenomena,
including:

1. Some attempts to remove ‘fairy-tale’ elements from Christianity, which
are termed ‘Christian Atheism’ (Dennett 2006: 206; Robbins and Rodkey
2010).
2. A host of other scholarly idiosyncrasies such as ‘strong atheism’ (Lanman
2011) ‘true atheism’ (Cady 2010: 230), or ‘potential atheism’ (Latent
Atheism; Cimino and Smith 2007: 416).
3. A contemporary ‘fundamentalist’ or ‘militant’ strand of atheism,
sometimes referred to, internally and externally, as ‘new atheism’ (Wolf
2006; Beattie 2007; Stenger 2009; Amarasingam 2010a).

Part of this confusion could arise from the fact that the anti-religious have taken
on many labels over the last several centuries and there is some continuity and
change within and between group labels. The particular label used for a group
changes through time, as old labels are discarded for those considered more
appropriate in that period, though labels rarely disappear completely (Campbell
1972; Dahlitz 1994). These changes occur for sociological reasons as is
discussed by Campbell (1972), Bullivant (2010) and Hyman (2010). As an
example, Hyman (2007: 29) argues that “there will be as many varieties of
atheism as there are varieties of theism. For atheism will always be a rejection, negation, or denial of a particular form of theism.” Hyman (2007) outlines this on the macro level seeing modernist atheism arising out of and rejecting a modernist theism, and postmodernist atheism as requiring a different atheist approach due to differences in postmodern theism (also see Hyman 2010). For example, postmodern Christianity is often more fluid and less organised than modernist versions of Christianity, and often also has a problem with modernist styles of ‘religious’ organisations. In postmodern Christianity, you have a personal relationship with God or Jesus, not a religion (Hyman 2010; Martin 2000). Thus attacks on the restrictive nature of religious organisation will generally have little effect on such groups, as they do not believe they are part of an ‘organised religion’. In summary, society changes, God and religion change and thus the irreligious must change with it or risk irrelevance. Campbell (1972) likewise takes the position that the irreligious response is an ever-present one in society and even if it takes on different labels, it will always be there. As will be demonstrated in my historical sections, labels in this group could include Secularists, Atheists, Socialists, Rationalists, Humanists, New Atheists and Atheists Plus. The term ‘atheism’ has been used by an earlier group of irreligious under Bradlaugh (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994) and has again been taken up by the latest crop of Western irreligious groups. Therefore it could now be argued to refer to specific time periods. Though atheism is a preferred term in the movement right now, I think ‘irreligion’ is more appropriate for the entire historical movement. It has not been applied to any particular time period or specific movement and yet it implies a group that rejects religion.

Lee (2012) argues against Campbell’s (1972) use of the term irreligion, however she does this in the context of defining the field of study for non-religious scholars, in that Campbell’s concept is not broad enough. He defines ‘irreligion as “those beliefs and actions which are expressive of attitudes of hostility or indifference toward the prevailing religion, together with indications of the rejection of its demands” (1972: 21). Campbell’s focus was on those who specifically reject religion and he has a tendency to define forms of non-religion in a way that puts all non-religious people into the irreligious
category and makes them seem like atheists that have not ‘come out’. Thus his concept covers those who are indifferent to, or hostile to religion. He referred to these groups as the ‘a-religious’ or ‘un-religious’ (Campbell 1972). The a-religious are aware of religion but are indifferent to it, the unreligious are simply unaware of religion and thus cannot hold an opinion either way. This equation of indifference with implicit rejection is problematic, it forces individuals who wish to maintain an image of neutrality, into a distinctly anti-religious category, making them a legitimate object of study for the irreligious scholar. However, to align with the nuances of the non-religious typology outlined earlier, I will use a distinction between implicit/explicit forms of non-religion (Lüchau 2010). Using this structure, I propose that until an individual’s irreligion becomes explicit (recognised by the individual), they remain in the non-religious category generally, as an implicit form of non-religion.

Campbell (1972: 28) states that religion/irreligion is closer to a continuum than a dichotomy, as in-between we have the “religiously sympathising non-believer” (covert, accommodationist, substitutionist and empathetic in this research). Thus, one could be aware of their rejection of religion, but have no hostile feelings towards religion, making them neither indifferent in Campbell’s sense nor irreligious in the sense of being hostile to religion. These people could be properly categorised as explicitly non-religious. One particularly interesting notion which Campbell introduces is the range of irreligiousness, which he suggests could contribute to the formation of an ideal-type of irreligion that might help distinguish “irreligion from its various associated phenomena of religious reform, religious prejudice, quasi-religions and secularity” (Campbell 1972: 35). Campbell (1972) puts forward that an ideal type (in Weberian terms) of irreligion would involve rejection of all religions and all components of religious phenomenon. He frames irreligion in terms of rejection rather than absence, arguing that absence is a difficult basis on which to start research. He suggests that the absence view of irreligious groups may actually be a legacy of past negative views of the irreligious, rather than a true evaluation of the culture on its own terms. He puts forward the idea that comparisons with religious organisations may be one of the mistakes made by such scholars, when they perhaps should have been looking to political or social reform groups for
more appropriate models for comparison. Indeed, I agree with Campbell’s (1972) analysis, which uses historical examples to show the agendas and types of activism that grow from rejection rather than absence of religion. This suggests that irreligion can be conceptualised as one specific way in which people can be ‘non-religious’. My participants are a part of this category as will be shown in Chapter 3. The term explicit non-religion does not make the distinction between those who are hostile to religion and those who are not. Thus when referring to explicit forms of non-religion, which are hostile to religion, I will follow Campbell (1972) in using the term ‘irreligion’. I will subtract from this the ‘indifferent’ category originally included in Campbell’s employment, which will now be referred to as ‘implicit non-religion’. Thus, in summary, I think the term irreligion as used by Campbell (1972) is more appropriately used to describe those individuals who are explicitly against religion and supernatural explanations. I will label the individuals within this sub-group of the non-religious field as ‘irreligious’ rather than ‘atheist’. This employment will avoid confusion with the current movement’s use of the atheist label and the many uses of that term in comparison to the word irreligion. The investigations in this thesis may help to shed light on the newer groups and their structural interactions. In this way, Campbell’s (1972) typology must be tested with the newest data from irreligious groups to ascertain its relevance to the current milieu.

Diversity in Irreligion

Don’t generalize from something one atheist writer has said to all atheists. We aren’t a monolithic block with authority imposed from above.14

Someone who resembles us in so many ways and differs from us in but one characteristic threatens us much more than the totally other or alien.15

---

I will begin the exploration of irreligious divisions with two excerpts from popular culture. These are a *Monty Python* sketch known as ‘the People’s Front of Judea (PFJ)’ (Jones 1979) and a *South Park* episode ‘Go God Go: the Atheist Wars’ (Parker 2006). Both of these pieces provide both similarities and points of departure for the analysis that will follow, and help to highlight both the superficial and deeper differences that occur within the field of irreligion. The PFJ skit by *Monty Python* became an often cited video in the disputes that are discussed within this thesis as shown in the quote below, which is also related to case studies of divergence found within this thesis.

Atheism, in its public, online life, has started exchanging internet anathemas – perhaps we should call them inathemas – in little more than a decade... People are being told to wipe the spittle off their chins, take their heads out of their asses. The Life of Brian’s lines about the various fronts for the liberation of Judea are being oft-recycled. 140 character brickbats are being thrown on Twitter under #atheismplus... Fellow Freethought blogger Richard Carrier goes further. When one commentator suggests “atheism does not have the luxury of kicking people out of its movement”, Carrier gives him a rare old quilting in most splendid prose:

"Yes, it does. Atheism+ is our movement. We will not consider you a part of it, we will not work with you, we will not befriend you. We will heretofore denounce you as the irrational or immoral scum you are (if such you are). If you reject these values, then you are no longer one of us. And we will now say so, publicly and repeatedly. You are hereby disowned."

---

16 Thunderf00t, 2012. *A+ (atheism plus), For A Third Glorious Age of Total Agreement*, viewed 26 August 2013: http://thunderf00tdotorg.wordpress.com/tag/peoples-front-of-judea/
17 R/Atheism, 2013. *Top 200 comments*, 29 June 2013: http://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fy1gq/36_hours_ago_the_mod_of_ratheism_asked_for_a_vote/
How like Pope Leo’s letter to the patriarch of Constantinople in 1053.\textsuperscript{20}

The frequent citation of this video justifies it as representing a common thought within the new atheist community and thus its connection to my thesis. It also relates the events to the Catholic Church’s East-West schism and the internal divergence that this historical event symbolises. The skit is clearly being related to the schisms emerging within the new atheism and being used to question the necessity of this divergence.

The PFJ skit is set in Judea during the time of Jesus. The story begins while Brian, our protagonist, is attending Jesus’ ‘Sermon on the Mount’. Brian becomes infatuated with a female rebel, Judith. His desire for her and hatred of the Romans lead him into trying to join the PFJ. The PFJ are one of a number of bickering independence movements, who spend more time fighting each other than the Romans. In this scene we get a sense of these factures and their semantic and social nature. I have transcribed the sections relevant to my discussion below:

\textsuperscript{20} McGrath, P, 2012. Is American atheism heading for a schism? The guardian, viewed 2 September: \url{http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2012/sep/02/american-atheism-schism-spit-venom}
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Brian</th>
<th>Are you the Judean People’s Front?</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>Fuck off!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>Judean People’s Front. We’re the People’s Front of Judea! Judean People’s Front. Cawk.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>Wankers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Can I join your group?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>No. Piss off.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>I didn’t want to sell this stuff. It’s only a job. I hate the Romans as much as anybody.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>Umm.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>Are you sure?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>Oh, dead sure. I hate the Romans already.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>Listen. If you wanted to join the P.F.J., you’d have to really hate the Romans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>I do!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>Oh, yeah? How much?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brian</td>
<td>A lot!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>Right. You’re in. Listen. The only people we hate more than the Romans are the fucking Judean People’s Front.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFJ</td>
<td>Yeah...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Judith</td>
<td>Splitters</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFJ</td>
<td>Splitters...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>And the Judean Popular People’s Front.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFJ</td>
<td>Yeah. Oh, yeah. Splitters. Splitters...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loretta</td>
<td>And the People’s Front of Judea.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFJ</td>
<td>Yeah. Splitters. Splitters...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>What?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loretta</td>
<td>The People’s Front of Judea. Splitters.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>We’re the People’s Front of Judea!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loretta</td>
<td>Oh. I thought we were the Popular Front.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>People’s Front! C-huh.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francis</td>
<td>Whatever happened to the Popular Front, Reg?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reg</td>
<td>He’s over there.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PFJ</td>
<td>Splitter!</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The use of this scene by new atheists in reference to internal disputes shows that many within the community thought the arguments being presented were semantic rather than substantive. However, the scene also points to the inevitable differentiation that is the subject of this thesis. A similar feeling is found in the more directly related scene taken from the *South Park* episode, in which new atheist Richard Dawkins appears. Cartman (one of the lead characters) finds himself in the future 500 years after having been frozen in ice.
In this future there are no more religions and the world is ruled by three atheist groups who are at war over the ‘Great Question’. Cartman is told that their inspiring leader from the past, Richard Dawkins, showed them the way, but it was his ‘beautiful wife’, Mrs Garrison, who showed how one “must be a dick to people they do not agree with.” I find this image interesting, as it indicates that it is Dawkins’ converts (represented by Garrison) that had made atheism dogmatic. This episode was described by the makers of South Park, Trey Stone and Matt Parker as arising from conversations they had with atheist friend and performer Penne Jillette after it was revealed that they did not consider themselves to be atheists. Penne was apparently disappointed that they were not on the atheist team.\textsuperscript{21} Again the following scene transcribed from the show, points to the frivolous and semantic nature of the dispute. It begins on the outskirts of the Unified Atheist Alliance (UAA) city, where the Unified Atheist League (UAL) and the Allied Atheist Alliance (AAA) are preparing to attack the UAA.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Character</th>
<th>Dialogue</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>UAA Leader</td>
<td>What?! Three-way phone channel onscreen! [The main screen lights up with two windows. On the left window appear the UAL leader and the UAL, on the right window appear Blavius and the otters]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shvek</td>
<td>[from UAL headquarters] What are you otters doing?! This is our attack!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blavius</td>
<td>[from AAA headquarters] Yes. And we’re attacking both of you!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAA Leader</td>
<td>You fools! This will be the end of us all!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blavius</td>
<td>Then accept our answer to the Great Question, and we will withdraw.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UAA Leader</td>
<td>Your answer to the Great Question is illogical!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cartman</td>
<td>What is the Great Question?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIT-9</td>
<td>What atheists should call themselves.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shvek</td>
<td>Unified Atheist League is the most logical name.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unified Atheist</td>
<td>Unified Atheist Alliance makes more sense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blavius</td>
<td>No! Allied Atheist Alliance! That way it has three A’s! That is the logical choice!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shvek</td>
<td>So be it. We cannot agree; prepare to die.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Again, the semantic nature of the dispute is emphasised, however, as both scenes also indicate, there are deeper issue at play too. These are differences that manifest themselves in new distributions of capitals (all types) and the creation and divergence of structures. Even if we all decide on one ideology, it

will inevitably split as it grows and encounters internal and external barriers. The caricature of irreligion as a monolith has been an issue in much of the public and academic discussion around the new atheism. Many have wanted to view the new atheists as a single group, when an examination of the empirical evidence would quickly make a researcher aware of the vast diversity within irreligion. Despite the caricature, inevitable differentiation is at the heart of the critiques that both of these scenes put forward. It is not only a difference in name, there are sociological reasons for these splits, and reasons to think that they will be persistent throughout history, even if there is more focus on a particular set of issues within a certain period. As with any other human phenomenon, irreligion is both old and complex. As Campbell (1972: 29-31) points out:

Irreligion can only be specified within a given social and cultural context, and this process of specification is crucial if we are ever to identify examples of irreligious belief and behaviour... Even where there is no ideology... there will be a popular conception of irreligion which could be treated as a conventional norm. Thus in very general terms, irreligion would be Deism in the late eighteenth century, but atheism in the nineteenth.

Likewise, Pasquale (2010) argues that atheism and secularity and all other words associated with the phenomenon of unbelief in supernatural beings or forces, represent what Thrower (1980 cited in Pasquale 2010) has called an ‘alternative tradition’ in human thought about the nature of what exists; a naturalistic or this worldly tradition. Atheism itself is certainly not new, the new atheists are inheritors of a long history of atheist philosophy running from Hume through Mill to Russell and now Dawkins et al. (De Lashmutt 2009; Hay 2007). As with the non-religious category overall, there is more than one strand of irreligious thought included in the milieu, and not all of the irreligious will agree with all of the tactics, labels and organisational structures being employed in the movement.

I agree with Campbell (1972) in his assertion that most of the characteristics that divide the irreligious are derived from the rejection of the religious and
religious things. The break with tradition leaves all organisational forms open, but also leaves many suspicious of organisation and behaviour that resembles the church or religious structure in any way. Thus arguments appear in these spaces and negotiations over community norms must occur. Such negotiations may lead to reform of the movement or potentially a schism. As Campbell (1972: 39) states:

Those who are unorthodox in their irreligion may find themselves condemned as ‘religious’ by the ‘official’ representatives of irreligion.

In my own analysis, a scan of the recent atheist writings can identify three streams of attack used to achieve new atheist goals:


The first two tactics have generally been employed by the Four Horsemen of atheism and the third tactic is being employed by a new group of atheists who are interested in the utility of religious tolerance, ideas and practices for atheists. Thus even in this brief survey of the movement’s authors, it becomes clear that the new atheism may not be a monolithic block. As described in the above sections, an irreligious individual can be overtly hostile to religion, and actively seek its demise or conversely, another non-religious individual can simply be uninterested in religion, not hostile. We can easily imagine many other such irreligious orientations, with their own important differences.

Due to its often public nature, irreligion not only brings the wider public into contact with the irreligious, but also allows more direct contact between the irreligious themselves. Direct contact between the irreligious will be shown to

---

22 Sunday Assembly: an atheist organisation that uses church worship structures to celebrate atheist life
cause internal friction due to the exposure of other ideological views within the irreligious population. For example, liberal oriented irreligious people may become aware of conservative irreligious people causing a fracture on the political dimension. This can and often has started a discussion about appropriate political views for the irreligious, as will be seen in the case of Elevatorgate for the new atheism in Chapter 7. Throughout my research I have found that this type of contact has caused internal differentiation due to differing visions of what the movement should be. In recognition of this idea Lee\textsuperscript{23} writes:

> Although it is unusually coherent and vocal, new atheism is only one kind of atheist culture – or one way of “doing” atheism. Alain De Botton’s churchy atheism or the “atheism+” movement discussed recently in GiF Belief are other examples. Given that best estimates suggest that atheism is the fourth biggest “religion” in the world (so to speak), it really shouldn’t be surprising to think that atheism might have a variety of cultural expressions.

Thus in a preliminary way, Lee outlines the idea that the new atheism may have internal divisions. This comment is found in the UK’s Guardian Newspaper in 2012, rather than a piece of extant study, and shows that this area is still in need of research. Lee is simply outlining the groups that she thinks are indicative of such divisions, she has not undertaken the research itself. Lee’s impression is reinforced by quotes within the milieu, as seen in this quote from PolySkepti:

> For a while, say around 2007, it looked like the atheist community was going to be a tribe of its own; breaking away from the tribes of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, etc and creating a space for those who were interested in science, reality, and who were skeptics... Quickly, it began to fall apart a bit at a time. From the fall of the Rational Response Squad, through #Elevatorgate, and to the “deep rift” which

---

still causes trembling in the blogosphere today, there are a number of tribes within the larger community of reason.  

It makes sense to identify the potential paths of organisational structuring within the irreligious milieu as this will dispel monolithic stereotypes about the nonreligious part of the postsecular field. It will thus expose the potential diversity within the irreligious and the postsecular field overall. As shown through the popular culture pieces above, there is inevitable differentiation within any social system, symbolic struggle is a continuous and endless process, there is no homeostasis or harmonious state to attain (i.e. Weber, Nietzsche, Bourdieu cited in Collins 1993; Rahkonen 2011). As expressed by Richard Carrier in a discussion about the emergence of Atheism Plus (discussed in Chapter 7):

Where did this more wanton sexism and more subtle racism come from? I don’t think it’s because atheism has grown these people, or that atheism especially attracts them. I think it’s just the inevitable mathematics of growth. The movement of organized atheism has grown so amazingly over the last ten years that amoral minorities once invisible are now visible.

This is of great importance to this research as these distinctions become structuralised and evolve through the interaction of the particular tastes of individuals and how these impact interactions and group formation within the field. In the case of the new atheism, it will be shown that irreligious structural tendencies have a history prior to the movement, that the new atheism is associated with certain types of behaviour and that even within the contemporary atheist milieu these structural tendencies are having a differentiating effect. Following Campbell (1972), these tendencies will be seen as arising in the irreligious scene due to negotiations around the place of post-religious organisation and its relationship with religious and/or religion-like structures and ideas. These tendencies will be described as a continuum

---

between two extreme points or ideal types of behaviour or organisation. Themes and dimensions that were found in data analysis often represent the areas of taste that are under negotiation and how they impact the structural distribution of labels, ideas, leaders and resources within the irreligious field and thus the postsecular field. The processes of group creation and differentiation that are seen in these disputes are central to the sociological discipline. Such divisions are sociological in nature, in that they define appropriate labels, tactics and organisational structures for the movement and its sub-branches. They attempt to define the appropriate internal and external relationships for those within the milieu.

I will start, in the following sections by giving brief descriptions of the structuring dimensions of the irreligious field discovered during the literature review for this research. Discussion of the dimensions found in the literature and the place of the new atheists in relation to these dimensions begins to bring the different divisions in the milieu into light (Chapter 3). During the data presentation, I will look mostly at new atheism and its relation to these other stances and groups, both historically and from a participant perspective. This will help to establish the place of the new atheism in relation to the irreligious field and current social organisation. In the following chapters (4-7), I will investigate the potential continued effects of these dimensions within the new atheism itself. Thus, the last four data chapters will present living, empirical cases of schisms within the new atheist field. Case studies presented will also highlight the mixing of secular and religious perspectives that is occurring in the irreligious part of the postsecular field. The dimensional analysis will give support to the idea that these actors could actually be considered as part of such a field, as both strict secularist views and more compromising views are found within the milieu along with interpenetration of secular and religious views.

The dimensions confirmed in this research are especially important in a postsecular world where the secular part of the secular/religious field must negotiate with the wants of people in their society who do not share their views. They are also poignant to highlight a postmodern world where the views of other irreligious people may also be more visible and thus more open to
negotiation. Four structuring dimensions of irreligion were discovered in my literature review. These dimensions are covert/public, accommodation/confrontation, substitution/elimination and humanist/scientific.

**Covert/Public**

In order to influence public debate, many of the irreligious have felt that they must be open with their irreligion in public spaces. On the contrary others have felt that being public about their irreligion is either too dangerous or too confrontational. Therefore the covert/public structuring dimension of irreligion concerns the overtness and consciousness of an individual or group’s decision to publicly display or deliberately hide their irreligion. There are three parts of this category in Campbell’s original employment, covert, latent and public. However, I will argue for a dual covert/public interpretation due to seeing the latent category as a liminal category of transition that is applied in hindsight and thus not a living category of the irreligious.

Campbell (1972) defines covert irreligion as any situation in which a person knows in themselves that they do not believe, but they keep that disbelief hidden from those around them. Due to the stigma around being an atheist in most societies, it would be safe to hypothesise that this group made up the largest proportion of atheists, at least up until now. However this group is not necessarily categorised easily, as with latent atheists they may also represent those people who hold some form of alternative belief or alternative organising structure for their beliefs (Davie 1994; Heelas and Woodhead 2005; Possamai 2005). Their covert nature means that we cannot be sure they are actually irreligious. Holyoake’s use of ‘Secularism’ in 1851 (Holyoake 1896) and Huxley’s (1869)26 coining of the phrase ‘agnostic’, both represent instances where some groups have attempted to sidestep the social or intellectual consequences of being openly irreligious.

Campbell (1972) introduces the concept of latent irreligion in order to explore the idea that some people may not overtly reject religion but may be largely

---

26 Huxley was not the first to hold agnostic views but he is the popular Western genesis of the term.
irreligious none-the-less. He suggests that one ideal type of the secularised person would find religion to be so irrelevant to their everyday life that they are not even conscious of the fact that they have rejected it, the category I am now calling ‘implicitly non-religious’. The individual is labelled as ‘latent’ in hindsight, due to coming out publicly as ‘irreligious’ or ‘explicitly non-religious’. Thus the term is more a description of a liminal state than an actual type of non-religious individual. It is a category of transition and can only be applied in hindsight. Latent irreligion may be an increasing category due to the growing presence of ‘nones’ in Western countries (Martin 2007). It is worth exploring the possible effects of the latent category, as it may take some of the surprise out of the current surge in irreligion. In this vein, it is worth noting that according to Campbell (1972), the latent response may become manifest if an individual is forced to come face-to-face with religion in the form of a social or cultural reality. The resurgence of public religion can be viewed as one of the triggers by which a latent atheism may have become activated. As an example, it could be argued that 9/11 cut across generational divides and that the trauma has unlocked the latent irreligion of many of the implicitly non-religious, who up until recently have been indifferent (see Edmunds and Turner 2002 for a discussion of the ‘traumatic genesis of generational differences’). However, as discussed, this category will not be included in my typology, as I believe it is a term of transition, applied only in hindsight, to people who have become irreligious or explicitly non-religious. It is the designation of a transition, not a living sociological category.

The publicly irreligious are those individuals who have openly accepted their irreligious status. This includes members of irreligious organisations and individuals who are active in opposing religion (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994). Campbell (1972) suggests that despite the stereotype of irreligious individuality, there have actually been many irreligious organisations since the 18th century (including Deism in his schema). Most, if not all of these organisations, have been publicly irreligious simply through their nature as a reform or political movement. Even cases in which the group has attempted to hide their irreligiosity, such as the Secularists, the group is often labelled as such by the surrounding society, or exposed publicly as irreligious during their
active period. Thus public and organised irreligion is not new with the new atheism, even if this is a major characteristic being claimed for the movement. This is particularly interesting when viewed from the new atheist perspective, where the ‘old atheism’ and ‘Humanism’ are considered to be covert forms of irreligion in relation to the newer movement. As will be discussed later, the perception of these two groups allows the new atheist group to separate itself from the older groups and thus provides a unique identity for the new movement, even if based in ahistorical interpretations.

Though the internet provides a safer space for new atheists, like past movements the need for anonymity, at least in some life-spaces, is still a factor for the contemporary movement. Chapter 4 outlines the call from the new atheists to ‘come out’ as public atheists, the attempts of some atheists to remain ‘semi-public’, and the anonymity breaking tactics (‘doxing’) being employed against such semi-public personalities by their opponents (both outside and inside the irreligious field). The need for public expression of irreligious identity is an area of debate within the irreligious field and thus the covert/public dimension can be identified as one of the sociological structuring dimensions of the field. The new atheism and its covert/public negotiations will provide a case study to explore the need for public expression of irreligious views within the postsecular, postmodern field, defined earlier as a space in which secular and religious voices are presented together.

*Accommodation/Confrontation*

The attempts throughout history to either accept or reject the atheist label have generally been at least partly to do with relations with the religious, the accommodation/confrontation dimension (Campbell 1972). Le Drew (2012) sees the split between scientific and Humanist atheism, as being played out in the conflict between ‘confrontationists’ (or new atheists) and ‘accommodationists’ (or those who are more concerned with the human side of religion). He believes that through this lens it becomes clearer as to where this dispute stems from. Those who are empathetic with the religious needs of some people are more likely to fall into the Humanist camp in Le Drew’s analysis thus taking a more accommodationist stance. On the contrary those who put a strong
emphasis on correct knowledge and belief, an intellectual emphasis, tend to fall into the scientific atheist category and may be inclined to confrontational tactics. Despite Le Drew’s connection of these characteristics, the examples in this research indicate that some atheists may be both empathetic in their orientation to conversion, yet confrontational in dealing with the religious (Atheism Plus – Chapter 7), or conversely, intellectual in their approach to conversion, but accommodative in their dealings with the religious (Ruse and Mooney – Chapter 5). Thus I believe that accommodation/confrontation can be seen as a structuring dimension in its own right. This dimension may be seen as fractal in that it would exist independently and differentially in any opposition group, while still maintaining its base sociological structure. The actual words used to label may vary, but the structure remains. Those who have sympathy with the ‘other side’ will be labelled as accommodationists, while those who directly attack them will be labelled as confrontationalists.

The dispute is seen in nearly every era of irreligion (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994; Hecht 2010) and also has close ties to the covert/public dimension through the willingness of most confrontationalists to be public about their disbelief in religion (Charles Bradlaugh is an early example; Campbell 1972; Hecht 2010; Dahlitz 1994). As Le Drew (2012) has suggested, this dimension is clearly still a feature of the new atheism. Not all members of the movement think that confrontational tactics are effective and other atheists have labelled them as accommodationists in a derogatory way. Thus the dispute is being put forward in the contemporary community as being between ‘new atheists’ and ‘accommodationists’, as will be shown in Chapter 5. The perceived need for confrontational tactics will be shown to arise from an increased awareness that the irreligious may now be competing more directly with the religious in the public sphere. Accommodationist ideas often also stem from a similar position. They believe they must bring the religious into the conversation to avoid losing potential allies in maintaining support of science in a competitive postsecular field.


**Substitution/Elimination**

Once a group forms there is the matter of how that group will organise themselves. Campbell (1972) suggests that there is an identifiable split between those atheists who wish to organise along communal lines and those inclined to more associational organisation. He argues that there is a long history of antagonism between these two schools of the irreligious tradition (now seen as the new atheists vs. De Botton and the *Sunday Assembly* see Chapter 6). The history of irreligious organisations is affected by the perceived need of the non-religious to separate themselves from religion and religion-like structures. This has been a particular issue due to the fact that they have emerged out of religious or quasi-religious organisations such as Comte’s *Religion of Humanity*, the Owenite movement and early US Humanism (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994; Hecht 2010). Part of this process has been a Nietzschean search for morality and principles for living that break with the traditional religious structures of organisation and morality, such as many of the early experiments in social utopias.

The ‘substitutionists’, in this schema, are still attracted to the religious organisational model. On the other end we have the ‘eliminationists’ who are “deeply suspicious of elaborate formal organisations which in any way resemble a church pattern” (Campbell 1972: 38). Campbell (1972) suggests that eliminationists are more likely to explicitly reject the traditional religious model as inappropriate for irreligious organisations. He believes that a clash between those with a positive attitude towards religion and those with a negative is a feature of all irreligious movements. Substitutionists, or those who think that religious rituals must be replaced with atheist/secular versions have generally been more attracted to the communal model. On the other end of the spectrum, we have eliminationists, or those who think that religious ritual and organisation should be abolished. They have generally been attracted to the associational form according to Campbell (1972).

Secular morality is connected to the substitution dimension due to the types of efforts that many have made to institutionalise morality within irreligious circles. Some of these efforts involve religion like or religion derived products.
Comte’s *Religion of Humanity* contained many such structures (Campbell 1972), as did some early Humanism (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994) and some of the social utopian movements (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994; Donnachie 2005). Research has found that many atheists have their own (non-religious) ideas on what makes life worth living, often interpreted via the worldviews of science, arts and popular culture (Manning 2010; Pasquale 2010). For example, Pasquale (2010) found that the values of affiliates were similar to religious ‘moderates’ and that they found meaning through friends, family, experiences, productive work and positive contributions.

The word spirituality is of special relevance to this dimension as it is an area of dispute in the irreligious field and its meaning can shift depending on the context and who it is directed at. When using the word in irreligious circles, one must be extremely cautious, as many Western atheists take issue with the term ‘spirituality’ due to the supernatural loading that it often entails (Comte-Sponville 2008; Hay 2007; Nixon 2012). Some wish to avoid the term, while others feel that secular utility can be extracted from the ideas and behaviours attached to the term. Pasquale’s (2010) research gathered data on secular group affiliates to identify the shared and distinctive characteristics of people involved in such groups. There is evidence of increasing diversity in secular existential and metaphysical worldviews. The majority of the secular individuals interviewed in Pasquale’s (2010) research rejected the ideas of a transcendent God and spirituality. However, a significant minority (38%) were willing to see spirituality in a psychological and ‘this worldly’ way. This spirituality can be described as a naturalistic enchantment of this world (Nixon 2012). The break with traditional religious structures has often caused divisions within irreligious circles, as groups choose to take a stance on the applicability of using such religious structures or terms in irreligious organisation. It is a dispute has arisen in the new atheist milieu during the last years of my research. In the contemporary milieu it is constructed as a dispute between the ‘new atheists’ and Alain de Botton’s ‘churchy atheism’, represented in the community by the Sunday Assembly, as will be described in Chapter 6. Thus this dimension will be shown as one of the spaces of postsecular negotiation and mixing of ‘religious’ concepts in the secular milieu. I will argue
that this is a strategy of tapping into the less intellectual, and in contrast more ritual (memetic) and communal aspects of human nature, by providing communal rituals, morality and spirituality.

**Humanist/Scientific to Empathetic/Intellectual**

Le Drew (2012) argues that the 19th century saw a split in atheism that led to two forms in the modern era which he dubs ‘scientific atheism’ and ‘Humanistic atheism’. He argues that they are not mutually exclusive in that Humanistic atheism takes on many of the assumptions of scientific atheism, thus it may be seen as a branch of this original movement. In scientific atheism non-believers focused their engagement with religion on science, explanation and knowledge versus ignorance. In this view, religion could be eradicated with scientific critique and education. Humanistic atheism focused on religion as a social phenomenon and a symptom of alienation and oppression. In this view the answer to the social problem of religion was to be found in the broader problem of human suffering. If these could be eradicated religion would disappear. The distinction between scientific atheism and Humanistic atheism is thus necessary because the term ‘atheism’ does not precisely identify the nature of the epistemological and political orientations that characterise various formations of non-belief. This is because atheism is ordinarily defined in terms of a position on nature. For example, Ruse (2010) claims that atheism is equivalent to metaphysical naturalism rather than defining it in terms of a Humanist philosophy or a sociological position. In order to make this argument Le Drew (2012) first outlines the process that saw atheism emerge out of early modern society, suggesting, like others, that it was theism itself that gave rise to atheism, as God became an object of scientific study. As Le Drew (2012: 74) states via Thrower (2000: 100), the enlightenment attitude to religion was that “religion which could not be established by reason was no religion at all – it was superstition”. He then outlined the process by which 19th century atheism was split into the two currents, one mostly concerned with the existence of God and the other with the humanitarian reasons that lead to people becoming religious. He draws attention to the Humanist tradition, which he represented through Feuerbach, Freud, Marx and Nietzsche. Le Drew (2012) argues that the point for
humanitarian atheists became, not enlightenment, but social transformation, moving from rational-scientific refutation of theology to considering religion as a social phenomenon. I argue for renaming this category from scientific/humanistic to empathetic/intellectual. This renaming will recognise the higher level structure of the dimension removed from the in-vivo language of the irreligious field. The main concern of this dimension will be shown as between those who have an intellectual focus and those who have a more empathetic focus to their activism and conversion tactics. This dimension began to affect the new atheism during the course of my research with the Elevatorgate scandal and the emergence of a new group Atheism Plus, as will be described in Chapter 7. This group emerges out of the micro interactions of individual atheists and small groups, as is suggested as a mechanism by Wagner (2012). However, it is also connected to distributed concept interpretations of 'religion', 'secularism', 'secularisation' and 'social justice' as suggested by Pace (2012). Atheism Plus is attempting to inject empathetic and sociological understandings of the need for religion back into the new atheist field and they see social change, social justice and social activism as ways to covert the religious to their cause. In their view, by making the world a better place for all people (at least in a liberal communal sense in this case), less people will feel the need to turn to religion.
CONCLUSION

These four dimensions interact to filter people into various formations within the irreligious field (see Table 2 for a summary). They also represent tactics by which the irreligious field interacts with the postsecular field at a macro level. Individuals, by condoning or engaging in such tactics become part of the macro level system. This could involve social, informational and material restraints on their behaviour, in such a way that they become combined with others in a sociological category due to similar choice and consumption patterns. Thus these dimensions are dually sociological, they negotiate patterns of engagement in the postsecular field both inside and outside the movement. The following chapter will explain where the new atheism fits in this scheme. The data chapters after that will look more deeply into the new atheism at a more micro level, revealing diversity within the system itself via showing other side of the dimension within the irreligious milieu.

Table 2: The Four Dimensions of the Irreligious Field

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Covert / Public</td>
<td>The decision to be public about irreligion as an individual or group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation / Confrontation</td>
<td>The stance taken towards the religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitution / Elimination</td>
<td>The stance taken towards religious structures</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Empathetic / Intellectual</td>
<td>The best tactics to bring the world towards an irreligious state</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
AIMS

The aim of this thesis is to examine the new atheist field as an example of non-religious voices and diversity within the postsecular field. The idea of a potential change to a non-teleological postsecular field will be discussed in the process. The postsecular field that will be tested is described in earlier discussions using empirical data on mixed secular and religious fields in countries where such mixing has become more apparent. It is a postsecularism in which secular and religious voices, ideas and rituals are now interacting in a public field. Through this research and the non-religious examples within it, I evidence the idea that we may have in fact entered such a field.
CHAPTER OVERVIEW

CHAPTER 2: Methodology
This chapter will outline the qualitative methodology of the research and justify the methods used in the research.

CHAPTER 3: What is the New Atheism?
This chapter presents the data on participant and historical perspectives about the new atheism. The first part of this chapter will contextualise the new atheism with respect to history. The later parts will explore definitional issues around the term atheism and participant views of the new atheism.

CHAPTER 4: Covert/Public
This chapter presents the data on the covert/public dimension both historically and within the new atheism from a participant perspective. The new atheist call to ‘come out’ publicly as an atheist and the ramifications that surround this call will be discussed.

CHAPTER 5: Accommodation/Confrontation
This chapter presents the data on the accommodation/confrontation dimension both historically and from a participant perspective within the new atheism. The need for a variety of tactics to push forward the irreligious and scientific agenda will be discussed.

CHAPTER 6: Substitution/Elimination
This chapter presents the data on the substitution/elimination dimension both historically and from a participant perspective within the new atheism. The use of religious and religion-like structures and their replacement by secular alternatives will be discussed.

CHAPTER 7: Empathetic/Intellectual
This chapter presents the data on the empathetic/intellectual dimension both historically and from a participant perspective within the new atheism. The place of social justice in irreligious activism will be discussed.

CHAPTER 8: Conclusion
This chapter will bring the data chapters together with a discussion of the overall data on these structuring dimensions, their relationship to the irreligious and postsecular fields.
CHAPTER 2. Methodology
ETHNOGRAPHY

Ethnographic research involves a focus on the patterns of everyday life such as the beliefs, values, rituals and behaviour underlying social relationships. It is a description and interpretation of everyday culture and its meaning, where culture is considered as the web of individual and collective learned behaviours (Cohen 1993; Geertz 1973). Ethnographic methods describe the setting, the actors, the activities, and the meanings attributed to them. The ethnographic researcher is faced with complexity, diversity and an interconnectedness of action and meaning (Cohen 1993; Geertz 1973; Kozinets 2002; Hine 2000). They deal with a matrix of complex conceptual structures, many of them knotted into one another. Organisations are viewed as being made up of interacting individuals, groups and technologies that adapt to changing contexts. Ethnographic methods attend to diversity, difference and the interconnectedness of culture and its contextual influences. Ethnographers focus on the emergence of new events and the self-organisation that result from the interactions in the organisation. Therefore, ethnographic research grapples with the emergent systemic properties manifesting from interactions or relationships within the system and between the system and its environment. The emergent properties of a system under investigation stem from the relationships between the multiple parts within it (Byrne 1998; Sawyer 2005; Smith and Jenks 2006). As part of this environment, the webs of relations that create knowledge also extend to include the non-human realms such as technological artefacts for example the internet (Najmanovich 2007) and the natural environment, for example resource limits and climate change (Smith and Jenks 2006).

My understanding of ethnography is that it is the production of a dialogue that consists of a number of voices, and a process of co-operative story making, in which no one voice is given the last say. Ethnographic research is embedded in the co-construction of ethnographic knowledge with participants. This is expressed on a participation-observation continuum where researchers partake in different roles in the field from full participation to detached observation, which then generates different types of knowledge (Geertz 1973). Knowledge
creation is constituted through the web of relationships with others and the world. Thus it is the researcher's job to draw out and synthesise the components present in a particular social system. They must first grasp and then render these structures (Geertz 1973). Ethnography has been increasingly seen as the exploration and description of the practices of locating, connecting, sitting, and binding through which culture is constituted. According to Hine (2000) this involves:

- Engaging intensively in the media or ‘sites’ they are exploring.
- Sensitivity to heterogeneous practices and resources.
- Drawing on a variety of media.
- Drawing on a variety of forms of interaction and representation.
- A re-evaluation of ‘sites of analysis’ as not located in a particular place but in events and interactions.

These practices are put forward because sites are now distributed, multiple and cross cyber-real world divides. The boundaries of such sites cannot assumed a priori but must be explored through the course of the ethnography and the researcher renders the negotiations of such boundaries. Asymmetrical interactions also lead to temporal dislocation with interactions being more time limited and sporadic and therefore informants can be both present and absent, due to the persistence of text comments and responses. In this research, it is the dimensions that sociologically structure the irreligious scene which I have ‘grasped and rendered’, in order to give more visibility to the structures inherent in less traditionally structured field (Campbell 1972). Through these conceptual relationships I hope to better understand the structure, myths and ideologies of the new atheist movement from the perspective of participants, and how these interact and affect each other, causing stability or divergence within the system. These observations will help to establish the irreligious as one of the players in the competitive postsecular field and show the micro interactions that lead to differentiation and interaction in the sub-parts of that field.
DATA ANALYSIS

The study began with an open data gathering and analysis structure. I took in the data from spaces that I had already discovered in the wider irreligious scene from historical analysis of literature, feeds, sites and personalities. A Grounded Theory approach was used, in which data was constantly compared in order to discover theoretical categories and structures (Glaser 1978, 1992). A saturation model of comparison was used in which past data was revisited in light of the current data, until no new data was being found in any area.

Grounded Theory has the goal of generating concepts that explain the way that people resolve their central concerns regardless of time and place. I take the approach that the theories I discover should be useful outside of the irreligious field, as they are connected to wider societal and social behaviour (Glaser 1978, 1992). I maintained a commitment to being open to ideas as proposed by Strauss and Corbin (1990) and Charmaz (2006). Linking to this I also took the Glaserian (1978, 1992) approach that ‘all is data’ in that I chose to draw my data from a variety of sources. I then analysed this data for themes and coded it for later reference. Questions such as - What is going on? What are people doing? What do their actions and statements take for granted? - were useful when determining appropriate coding (Charmaz 2003). Data was then constantly compared with other data that had been coded in the same way. I was looking for other ways to code the data by refining the coding within a category with further similarities and differences. In Grounded Theory the unit of analysis is the incident. Typically several hundred incidents are analysed in a Grounded Theory study since usually every participant reports many incidents.

However, I acknowledge the constructivist and postmodern critiques that suggest such investigations of ‘incidents’ are never free of subjective interpretations and that the interpretations I create are actually constructed between myself, the research participants (Bryant 2002; Charmaz 2000, 2008, 2009; Mills, Bonner and Francis 2006) and the knowledge that has come before this research in the form of a literature review and comparison to concepts in that literature. It is a multi-vocal construction that cannot be totally without biases, despite the researcher’s intent. Thus methods must be employed to help
alleviate such bias. Ryan and Bernard (2003) suggest a number of ways to identify legitimate themes in ethnographic data:

- Repetitions.
- Indigenous typology (in vivo words used by participants).
- Metaphors and analogies.
- Transitions (pauses/sections).
- Similarities and differences (constant comparison).
- Linguistic connectors.

In my research all of these indicators were used to decide on the applicability of a piece of data for representing a view or set of views within the observed population.

The following will be a description and justification of the methods I employed throughout my ethnographic investigation and data analysis. My ethnography consists of three components that combine to provide the data for the investigation:

1. Semi-structured interviews with 'atheists'.
2. Internet participant observation in the irreligious field.
3. A historical analysis of the irreligious field, including academic literature.

This study sought to gain access to subjective articulations of the different ways of being irreligious in the real world. Co-construction of such views can be aided by internet participant observations and the use of in-depth interviews through which the voices of participants will become part of the research (Sarantakos 2005; Denzin and Lincoln 1998a, 1998b). This research attempts to organise itself independently of traditional ‘religious’ categories, with a theoretical approach in which the views of participants guide theory formation. The methods described below helped to achieve these research goals.
METHODS

My investigation took place through an ethnography with methods which included a literature review, semi-structured interviews, internet participant observation and historical analysis.

Interviews

As part of my investigation, I originally intended to conduct up to 50 semi-structured interviews with Australian atheists. I initially made the decision to focus on Australia because a review of the literature found little on atheism in the Oceanic region. I planned to find participants by posting advertisements on Twitter, Facebook, the Australian Foundation for Atheists (AFA) website and sending emails to organised irreligious groups in Australia. I asked for participants that self-described as ‘atheists’ as this was found in the literature review to be the most commonly used identity term for the irreligious at the time the research was designed. An outline of questions would be sent to each participant with the information pack, which would include information on the interview process, an informed consent form and an outline of the interview questions; which could be elaborated on due to the semi-structured nature of the process (see Appendix A, B, C and D for questions and interview pack). I had intended to do most interviews face-to-face at this time. However, a number of factors came together to change the course of my interviews and thus adjustments were made along the way, as outlined below.

Sampling Method and Selection Criteria

I used a purposive self-selecting sampling method with snowballing as is common in qualitative investigations (Atkinson and Flint 2001; Heckathorn 2011). The only criteria for selection was that the participant must identify as an ‘Australian atheist’. Participants were found by posting advertisements on Twitter, Facebook, AFA website and sending an email to the Rationalist Society of Australia and the Australian Humanists. Following my original posting, my request was forwarded to a number of blogs and other sites, where I picked up a number of additional participants. Word of mouth also helped and I gathered a number of extra participants through online discussion and interest in my
research. I collected 41 willing participants and sent them the information pack and documents. A request to contact me with any questions or when they had made a decision was also included. I then organised the signing of the informed consent forms and asked the participants to nominate a suitable time for the interview. Out of the initial 41 participants two volunteers were rejected, one because they identified primarily as a Buddhist and the other due to overly short answers in the questionnaire once accepted. Therefore, I analysed 39 semi-structured interviews with people who identified as Australian atheists, conducted from October until December 2011.

Most (94%) interviews were conducted via Skype\textsuperscript{27} a free internet telephone service commonly used at the time of research) or email (James and Busher 2006) to allow interviews with people in the parts of the country less accessible to the researcher (see Sturges and Hanrahan 2004 for a discussion around distance and telephone interviewing). These methods were also utilised due to requests from participants to undertake them in a less face-to-face (FTF) way. Two interviews were undertaken FTF at the request of the participants. These interviews provided more insight into the emotional attachments of certain ideas due to physical co-presence and the extra body language available to the researcher. However, the limited number means that I will not include this data in my findings. I will instead take the lack of FTF interviews as a limitation of the study, seeing all of my interviews as similar to internet participant interaction where language and symbols (e.g. emoticons – Park et al. 2013) must be used to infer emotional content. I will treat my notes from the verbal interviews in a similar way, taking them as indicators of the emotional content of a text under analysis.

Duffy (2002) also points out that many people willing to take part in online studies represent a certain type of personality or what Buchanan and Smith (1999: 126) describe as “true volunteers”. These people again do not represent the whole demographic and thus this idea should be considered by the researcher. While this may be true it seems equally true of ‘offline’ research in which the people would also be likely to be ‘true volunteers’ (Walther 2002).

\textsuperscript{27}Microsoft, 2011. Skype, viewed 22 November 2011: \url{http://www.skype.com/en/}
There is also the issue of people using multiple identities to deceive the researcher either deliberately or accidently. However, this is also likely to be a problem for FTF, mail or telephone research. Walther (2002) also claims that there is little actual evidence of such deception in research in general. However, precautions were taken, with email addresses of written responses checked for uniqueness and Skype usernames and the interviewer's voice recognition in the case of verbal interviews.

**Interview Process**

Respondents were asked 40 open ended questions, including 8 demographic questions (see Appendix B and C). The questions were grouped into those exploring:

1. Demographics.
2. Worldview and religious/spiritual background including their path towards atheism.
3. Living with atheism.
4. Their perception of the new atheism and its leaders.

The participants were given the choice to remain anonymous in the final report and where they chose to do so, a pseudonym has been selected for the participant. Where necessary additional questions were asked to qualify answers and expand on responses. A second short set of questions was sent to participants in January 2012 (see Appendix C for questions). These questions were designed to further clarify the question on spirituality, and worldviews, which were found to be too broad in the initial interviews. However, the response rate for these questions was much lower, with only 28% of the participants responding. Despite the low response, the questions did provide some needed clarity around these questions and thus they have been utilised in my data. A number of questions about internet activity were also part of my interview set (see Appendix B for questions). These questions gave data on the popular sites and internet personalities within my sample. The responses to these questions further guided the internet ethnography after the interviews had been undertaken (see Chapter 3).
Data Analysis

The interview data was analysed for major themes. The data collected was then put through a relational analysis to provide an understanding of the meaning construction of participants. A relational analysis includes the thematic analysis of the data to draw out important concepts and an analysis of the relationships between these concepts. The focus of relational analysis is on discovery of semantic or meaningful relationships between concepts (Walter 2006). This data was then triangulated with the literature, web and historical data to further support or reject themes found. Following the analysis process, data was triangulated with academic theory and trend data to provide further support for inclusion or rejection of interview outcomes. The interview sample also helped guide me in focusing on appropriate internet sources, as I included a number of questions on internet use, sites most frequently visited and popular personalities (see Chapter 3).

Internet Participant Observation

Web 2.0 and Religion/Irreligion

The internet, particularly since the advent of Web 2.0\textsuperscript{28} has provided a voice to the masses. Some of this change will make little difference to academic processes, but to this mix now comes the more interactive and at times more ephemeral and temporary media changes.\textsuperscript{29} For the internet ethnographer the shift to Web 2.0 has opened up a world of opportunities for the social sciences. A multitude of sites for ethnographic investigation have emerged, presenting the chance for new types of practice and re-evaluation of methods for internet ethnography. The social media environment also invites us to reconsider academic theories of internet studies and their applicability in this new environment.

The developments of Web 2.0 have done a lot to change society. Dawson and Cohen (2004) argue that there are tens of thousands of websites dedicated to religious expression. It is clear that the internet helps bring the irreligious

\textsuperscript{28}Web 2.0 is generally viewed as social media platforms with many-to-many connectivity and egocentric networks.

\textsuperscript{29}Twitter, Facebook and blogs for example.
together too. Pasquale (2010: 77) describes the internet as a “marketing sorting and assembling mechanism” seeing potential in it as “a medium for the formation of new secularist groups and recruitment into existing organisations, particularly since there is an overrepresentation of young ‘nones’ among internet users.” The internet has several potential implications for religious and irreligious groups:

1. Offers anonymity, so people can express their views without risking social exclusion.
2. Offers instantaneous contact between groups worldwide, thus helps bring globally dispersed groups closer together.
3. ‘Virality’ provides connected, affordable and quick access to a large body of resources.
4. Ability to create specialist groups in an affordable way.
5. Less censorship potential, many views can be communicated without interference.

Thus in the internet world voices are now particularly multiple and heterogeneous, due to the sheer number of voices that are accessible on every topic. The world is now awash with opinions on all types of issues. The big picture view now becomes necessary again to make sense of the multi-vocal state brought about by the internet and its various social extensions. Where before our data on such ephemeral every day communications was limited, it is now in an overabundance that requires sorting, filtering and analysing. Therefore, online methodology will become more necessary as we advance into the future due to the increasingly digital nature of information storage and retrieval. This is an important time for the expert as public intellectual who must join the fray in order to influence debate with scholarly opinions and make sense of the multiple voices present. The postmodern critique taught us to listen to the voice of the everyday person, to particular and provincial concerns, and we must continue to listen to this voice, even in the new massively open state. Therefore the decision was made to use the multi-vocal resource of the internet
to gather socially constructed opinions on the new atheism. This decision was reinforced by my observations and interviews in which it became clear that the internet has played a major role in the global spread and uptake of the new atheism. Therefore the internet would provide a useful sample space for this research. There are a number of factors in current social media that influence the collection of data and its use in current internet ethnographies, which I will discuss below.

Are Online Demographics Representative?

Rather than accepting face-to-face communication as inherently better in ethnography, a more sceptical and symmetrical approach suggests that it should be used with caution, and with a sensitivity to the ways in which informants use it (Hine 2000: 49).

Duffy (2002) points out that an internet sample may not accurately represent the desired demographic. This was confirmed by the Pew Internet and Life Project in 2007 which found that most people on the internet are white, college educated and aged between 18 and 29 (Zickuhr and Smith 2012). The findings indicate that people from lower economic strata make less use of the internet. However, this may have changed significantly since that time as social media has become prominent since 2007 and smart phones have allowed more ready access to those in lower economic strata (Mossberger, Tolbert and Franko 2012; Zickuhr and Smith 2012). This has also become evident in the developing world since the Arab Springs of 2011, in which citizens used social media technologies via smartphones to rise in protest against autocratic governments (Duffy 2011). After saying this, it is crucial to point out that the subjects of my study are part of the elite that has had internet access for an extended period of time due to their general placement in developed countries and their socio-economic profile (see demographics in Chapter 3).

These factors are enhanced by the parallel development of social media and the new atheism; both emerged around 2004-2009 and grew together. There is a lot of mixing between online and offline worlds in the current irreligious community as the community has grown alongside such technologies during
their pervasive uptake by the West. Thus while my sample may be largely restricted to Western countries and the population that mostly inhabits them, this may be seen as an appropriate sample for my particular research. The new atheism, while spreading to other places in the world, has had its leadership and organisational focus in the West. Therefore, the new atheism will be considered as one of the demographics that is well represented on the internet at the time of research. This was further confirmed by cross reference with interview data in which nearly all participants suggested that they were involved, at least tangentially, and in many cases mostly, in online irreligion (77%). Moreover, even very internal issues within the atheist community appear on trend graphs created by Google Trends, where other more studied but smaller religious groups do not, suggesting that the new atheism is not only very present on the internet, but interest in it may be very high.

Real World and Cyber World Connections

We need to treat Internet media as continuous with and embedded in other social spaces, that they happen within mundane social structures and relations that they may transform but that they cannot escape into a self-enclosed cyberian apartness (Miller and Slater 2000: 5).

For Poster (2001) the self in the era of the internet is truly a postmodern self, a representation of self as one node in a networked society. Likewise, Castells (2000) sees the core of the changes going on in the global political economy as the ‘network society’ made possible by information technologies. However, there were also other theorists who considered the internet as a destroyer of real world networks and a problem for social action. This polarisation into utopian and dystopian views of the internet led to the tendency to draw a sharp line between online and offline worlds; there was real and virtual ethnography and they were separate. As empires collapsed and Capitalism globalised throughout the 1990’s the circumstance of people and the ways they connected have changed. This required a rethinking of ethnography, just as it had led to the virtual and physical binary originally. Thus, this binary would shift as the 21st century progressed.
As the internet has become an increasingly integrated part of the social world (especially post-Web 2.0), it has become easier to talk about a hybrid virtual/physical world (Shumar and Madison 2013; Jordan 2009; Pasek, More and Romer 2009). Wilson and Atkinson (2005: 1) discuss the intersection between ‘real’ and ‘cyber’ subcultures, stating that sub-cultural capital is “continuous across the virtual-real divide.” They (also see Thornton 1996) suggest that within forums, chat rooms and blogs, people use technology to express their real world symbolic sub-cultural capital within the cyber environment. Shumar and Madison (2013) have taken this further, claiming that all ethnography is virtual, as all communities are now networked and virtual, consisting of symbolic ties over time and distance. This is most likely true in the West, where social media connection has become pervasive; in 2012 the number of people using the internet was 81.03% in the US, 82.35% in Australia and 63.5% in the European Union (ITU 2013). Thus a field site in this sense is no longer a specific site or location, but a network of interconnected individuals and sites that interact for a particular reason. There are still some theorists who see the online and offline worlds as separate, such as Kozinets (2010), who views ‘netnography’ as a separate field with its own methods. Despite this view, even Kozinets (2010) recognises that the online community has offline ties. I am inclined to see these zones as relatively continuous, especially in the social media world of Web 2.0. People inhabit both online and offline worlds and they often intersect, with real world connections and events being posted and discussed online and vice-versa (Boellstorff 2008; Garcia et al. 2009).

The media of the internet does bring about new opportunities for communication and interaction not possible in the real world, and provides persistent conversations in textual form as resources and evidence of past events and thoughts. Anonymity is also much easier on the internet and this changes the social dynamic in interesting ways, especially from the researcher’s viewpoint (Shumar and Madison 2013). Boyd (2006: 30) argues for four architectural properties of new media:

1. Persistence.
2. Searchability.
3. Replicability.

4. Invisible audiences.

*Persistence* is an arguable quality of internet sources as has become more evident since Boyd (2006) published his article. Throughout my study I have encountered both sources that are persistent and others that have proved to be less so. Though internet sources may last forever, there is always the contingency that someone may choose to delete the content for a number of reasons. I have encountered deletions due to site movement (*Pharyngula* moved from *scienceblogs* to *FreeThoughtBlogs*; *OldRichardDawkinsFoundation* to *RDFRS*), site closure and personal decision. Thus, while the nature of the internet can mean a site stays persistent, in some cases this can be overridden by contingency. *Google* archives can help to overcome this, but in some cases the comments section is not visible or the static picture of the site is much less informative. Despite these issues, the internet still provides the most persistent source of information so far available and much content has now lasted over a decade. With Web 2.0 and comment sections, we also now have the persistence of anonymous responses (possibly less filtered), transitory responses (traces of changes in view) and reactive discussions (reveal unconscious or ‘gut’ reactions, innate social attitudes that exist within a community). This relative persistence and the textual nature of the web leads to another important quality for researchers, *searchability*. I have taken full advantage of this, using *Google Alerts*, *RSS* feeds, *Twitter* search, *YouTube* search and alerts and *NodeXL* to search through data for themes of interest. The third quality, *replicability* has aided in this process by suggesting the articles that are of interest to the observed community. Using the replicability property, one can see if an article, tweet or *Facebook* like ‘goes viral’. By this it is generally implied that the post gets numerous comments, retweets or re-blogs. I have taken my prime examples from comments that have ‘gone viral’ in this way. They can be seen as representative of a view or group of views within the observed community. The last property, *invisible audiences*, stems from the public and open nature of the internet and links back to the other properties. Due to the persistent, searchable and replicable nature of the internet, audiences may lurk on the margins,
becoming invisible audiences to the information and interaction unfolding online. In my research, the ‘silent atheists’ and the ‘public’ who may be interested in atheism, but less vocal in their expression of this fact, represent such invisible audiences. These groups have an impact on larger trends, such as Google searches and public perception of the observed group, thus though difficult to calculate, the effect of such groups will be discussed when such effects are suspected.

Private and Public Space on the Internet

One of the central issues with privacy concerning the internet is the blurring of the public and private experience. Elgesem (2002: 202) points out that “it is a characteristic feature of many forms of online communication... that quite sensitive information is allowed to flow in these channel, despite being accessible to a much wider audience than normally have access to private channels.” While information may be published in public data banks there may still be some individuals that see this data as private. This is especially important if the ‘public’ information requires an account or password to access it (Bruckman 2002). Due to this, I will not use data in this research that requires me to have a password to access it. This decision has been made due to the large amount of publically available data and the difficulty of contacting all participants or sites in such a large survey. Although Facebook has been utilised for public groups, the more private nature of Facebook has inclined me to steer away from using it in any in-depth way. I will however use it to provide supporting data where appropriate from public groups that are accessible without a password.

The online environment provides a certain amount of anonymity (Paech 2009), thus a person may have many alter identities and in some cases these identities may be kept intentionally separate. This has become especially common on Web 2.0 platforms like Twitter and blogging where a person may use as many alters as they can maintain. As Wesch (2008) discusses, anonymity can be seen as an important part of internet life as revolutionary acts, sometimes, require anonymity. Anonymity and parallel privacy concerns are an issue in internet research as the private and multiple identities of participants must be
protected. The researcher has an obligation to protect these multiple identities and maintain distance between them as is being done by the subject (Beddows 2008). I will make all attempts to avoid exposing such hidden multiple identities in the course of this thesis. However, as Paech (2009) points out, this anonymity also has an underbelly. Lack of consequence fuels trolls, sockpuppets and serial pests who target virtual communities. The scale of their activities is vast and causes many problems in virtual communities (Paech 2009). Thus anonymity allows the emergence of constructive and destructive forces.

Every effort has been made to confirm the various identities encountered in my field work, cross referencing their responses and checking connections. If a persona could not be identified as legitimate, it has been removed from analysis unless playing a crucial role, I will note the possibility of the persona being an alternative pseudonym or sockpuppet in cases where they do play such a role.

**Blogs, Citizens Journalism and Produsage**

Lang and Benbunan-Fich (2010 cited in Postill and Pink 2012: 1) provide a technological definition of social media as “web applications that process, store and retrieve user-generated content”. Thus the prime part of the definition must be seen as the fact that the content is generated by users themselves. The emergence of collaborative information and citizen’s journalism sites like Wikipedia, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Storify and other blog networks, has changed the face of consumer journalism. The mainstream media are no longer the only places that people can gather news and opinion. Alternative sources in the form of these websites have been increasing, and are very popular amongst activists for causes that the mainstream media may be seen as neglecting, biasing or framing in an ignorant way (Bruns 2010). Thus, according to Bruns (2010) citizens journalism is meant to fill the spaces abandoned or skewed by the mainstream media.

---

30 In internet terminology a troll is an individual that thrives on the negative reactions of others. They often use pseudonyms to invade open internet spaces and deliberately provoke controversy and disrupt the flow of arguments.
31 A pseudonym used to say things with which the main identity does not wish to be associated, whether praise or insults: Wikipedia, 2014. Sockpuppet (Internet), viewed 10 January 2014: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sockpuppet_(Internet)
However, in critique, it can be argued that over the last few years the mainstream media has become increasingly savvy with social media. Many shows have live Twitter feeds that bring in watcher opinions as the show progresses.\textsuperscript{32} Online print media has embraced the comment section, allowing its readers to contribute to the story.\textsuperscript{33} Thus increasingly the mainstream media is becoming part of the social media milieu. This may be significantly different from 2010, when Bruns wrote his article. The mainstream media is now coming to understand social media and take advantage of it. This also indicates that social media spaces are becoming much more mainstream and thus more representative of at least the Western population. Even with the uptake of social media by the mainstream, this is still a space that allows a place for less mainstream activists, who may not always be openly welcomed in such mainstream spaces.

Citizen’s journalism may differ significantly from its mainstream counterparts. For one, though commentary may be offered, the citizen journalist may also just play the job of aggregator, pulling together the interesting parts of a story and presenting them in one place. Bruns (2010) suggests that this moves them into the role of ‘gatewatcher’ rather than ‘gatekeeper’. They watch the outputs of key institutions and sites and gather together the news worthy parts of the story, publicising the availability of important information in a field. The citizen journalist may then rely on their readers to draw their own conclusions and to add to the story via its comments section and commentary on their own platforms (often linked by tags or hyperlinks to the original article; Bruns 2010). Adding to the story may come in the form of critique and thus the commenters often decide whether a story is valid or not, rather than an editor as in traditional journalism. This commentary can be far more extensive and detailed than the original article and thus becomes in essence a part of the article itself. It may include more information, links, debates and alternative viewpoints (Bruns 2010). Therefore users in these environments are also invited to be producers as they add to the story themselves. The line between

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{32} Biddle, D, 2013. Twitter at the heart of UK autumn TV shows, viewed 14 December 2013: https://blog.twitter.com/en-gb/2013/twitter-at-the-heart-of-uk-autumn-tv-shows
\textsuperscript{33} Sawhorse Media, 2013. Best Integration of Social Media with Live Television, viewed 14 December 2013: http://industry.shortyawards.com/category/4th_annual/live_television
\end{footnotesize}
the two roles is increasingly blurred in what Bruns (2008) denotes as the role of producer-user, the *Produser*. In this model, thoughts and opinions do not exist prior to public deliberation, they emerge in the process of public debate as the frames are publicly shared and critiqued. This allows for the emergence of a multi-perspective view on the topic, the original frames being supported, dissected and re-constructed from the various viewpoints, creating new frames with which to view the topic. *Produsage* practices exhibit four characteristics according to Bruns (2010):

1. Open participation, communal evaluation.
2. Fluid heterarchy, ad hoc meritocracy.
3. Unfinished artefacts, continuing process.

*Open participation, communal evaluation* involves the embracing of inclusivity in the production of stories. In this model commenters can add to the information, evaluate and criticise the story. Thus as stated above, the commenters become part of the narrative produced by the story, adding to the frames through which the subject of the article can be viewed. *Fluid heterarchy, ad hoc meritocracy* means that everyone can contribute no matter what their position or abilities. It is the community that evaluates these contributions, and thus leadership is usually based on accumulated merit. *Unfinished artefacts, continuing process* means that articles can be continually updated and remain in a state of unfinished evolution. This model aims at a gradual improvement of resources through the update processes. *Common property, individual rewards* indicates that articles come to be seen as common property to be edited by all and should be available to all. Merit is gained by individuals for their contributions to the shared article. This merit can translate into various forms of capital for the rewarded individual.

Such interactive sites provide active research sites for social scientific research, as the processes of group formation and differentiation are on display in their macro manifestations and micro details. Thus with social media spaces, social scientists have a new and extensive data source to draw on in investigations of social interaction. I have used such sources extensively in my research as part of
my internet participant observation, such as blogs, Twitter and YouTube and their comment sections.

Not all platforms are completely open and thus instances of editorial oversight are varied, depending on the setup of the particular platform in question (Bruns 2010). Oversight may also change over time as a site grows and encounters internal community problems. An example of this has occurred in the data for this thesis, where the FreeThoughtBlogs network began as relatively open, however, in response to the events of Elevatorgate, the network has increased its oversight of both comments and blogger contributions as will be seen in Chapter 7.

There is a lack of finality to online journalism in general, stories may be updated and thus can evolve over time. There is less distance between processes of editing and printing, because digital print is potentially infinitely editable, though the platform can generally restrict this option if deemed desirable. Bruns (2010) points to four models of editorial oversight:

1. Supervised or editor-assisted gatewatching:
   - Oversight by professional editors.
   - Most controlled.
   - Close to mainstream media practice.

2. Gatewatching and community-based administration:
   - Oversight by registered community members.
   - More open.
   - May support a limited set of opinions due to moderator’s stances.

3. Open publishing:
   - Totally open content generation.
   - No editorial oversight of content.
   - Content is controlled by author.
   - Allows trolls and extremists.

4. Open editing:
   - Totally open content generation.
   - Content is open for editing by outsiders.
Arguably provides editorial oversight of content to users.

Allows trolls and extremists.

In this list we see a general trend from platforms with high levels of oversight, to those with a much more open editorial structure. The list exposes a payoff between restrictions due to oversight and the ability of ‘trolls’ and ‘extremists’ to de-rail or destroy a conversation. More oversight means less freedom, less oversight means more ‘trolls’. Control of such personalities has become a major concern for online community managers, thus different levels of editorial oversight are being experimented with in online spaces (Bruns 2010). The level of editorial oversight for a particular platform must be considered by the researcher, as it may influence the content and comments that appear on that platform. Editorial oversight that has influenced the potential perceptions of that site or the conversation being held there has come up in a number of cases during my research. I have been careful to discuss such issues where they have arisen.

**Egocentric Networks**

In more recent social media technologies ‘community’ is an egocentric notion where individuals construct their social world through links and attention (Boyd 2006). Each node’s (person’s) view reveals an entirely different set of assumptions as the egocentric network is constructed via the tastes of the individual. However, sociologically it must be recognised that these individual tastes have been shaped by socialisation, and will most likely reflect the social positioning of the individual and the ideas and people that they have come into contact with. Doing research on social media in this egocentric environment involves bringing together disparate, but relevant online materials. Social reality in general has been characterised as messy (Law 2004), as has the process of ethnography (O’Reilly 2005). Likewise, it could be easily argued that social media are part of the messy web created by Web 2.0, perhaps reflecting the normal messiness of the social world. In this web, cross platform many-to-many connection and multi-platform discussions of events or ideas have become the norm. There is an equally messy social media ethnographic process (Postill and Pink 2012; Pink 2008; Postill 2011; Kozinets 2010; Hine 2009). This
may involve following or participating in blogs, social media platforms, online news sites and face-to-face events in order to follow the emergence of events within a networked community. This is a world that I have been heavily imbedded in throughout this research, both in being in my own egocentric space and from observing others in their spaces and the events that have emerged within them. Postmodern groups have been shown to exhibit at least some of the following traits (Foucault 1988; Lyotard 1984; Sawyer 2005; Smith and Jenks 2006):

- Distributed knowledge – This means that knowledge is not centrally located in a command centre (limited set of agents) but distributed amongst many different agents.
- Distributed power – Due to the distribution of knowledge, power is also distributed throughout the network, although this does not completely avoid concentrations of power.
- Redundancy in formal positions and leadership – Redundancy also leads to a less idealistic view or important role for leaders, in other words, a loose leadership model. This also makes the network more resilient to the loss of individual members.
- An arguable increase in the importance of Charisma, no matter what the formal position – It is the ability of the individual to keep the attention of their followers that is the driver of leader creation.
- An enhancement of all of these by internet and its egocentric nature – Isolation within egocentric networks can be suggested as one mechanism that promotes differentiation in social spheres. Conversely, keyword and social media networks also cause overlap and contact between groups.

Connectedness in the postmodern world is often constituted via distributed networks and knowledge. This means that knowledge is not centrally located in a command centre (limited set of agents) but distributed amongst many different agents. It is dispersed and shared amongst the ‘members’ with multiple connections linking them. Such structures have been emphasised with each advance in communications technology, as the potential for networked
styles of communication is enhanced (Giddens 2000). Networks are often associational or even neo-tribal (connected via linking consumption; Maffesoli 1996), in that it is the agent that chooses to pay attention and thus to connect themselves to the system.

Redundancy also leads to a less idealistic view or important role for leaders, in other words, a loose leadership model. Leaders may be openly critiqued on their faults and the associational model makes reprisals less likely. Weber’s (1947) ideas on bureaucracy show that having positions that are more important than the individual occupying them allows a system to display a trait of redundancy and thus resilience against the loss of people from the system. This is the same concept that allows messages to be transmitted successfully across the ad-hoc network that is a TCP/IP network, aka, the internet. Even if a single node goes down, TCP/IP networks have the capacity to route the data around the broken nodes, thus maintaining stability despite the missing nodes. The disappearance of one connection is unlikely to effect the whole network (Christopher Hitchens death in 2011 can be used as an example here). Postmodern social groups work in the same way for a number of reasons, an important one being the redundancy built into our communications technologies and the ‘weak ties’ of late Capitalist society (Jameson 1991; Law 2004).

Charisma (Weber 1947; Bourdieu cited in Collins 1993) becomes a major factor in these egocentric networks and their differentiation, as it is the ability of the individual to keep the attention of their followers that is the driver of leader creation. Leaders are now elected democratically by those willing to follow them. The producer of culture is now rewarded directly by comments, likes or follows. Such leaders also have the ability to influence the tastes of their followers. Thus there is a two way interaction between leaders and the wider group that requires the leader to legitimise their status in the group. They do this by complying with the wants of that group, while at the same time continuing to influence the milieu themselves. Power runs both ways in a connected and interactive world. The authority of a leader will often (though not always) be confirmed by the capability of the leader to provide health,
wealth and political success to followers. In a struggle, charismatic leaders seek social legitimation from followers. In short, in order to understand Charisma, we must appreciate its manifestation in social relationships (Susen and Turner 2011). In this view there is a consistent social pressure for “pure Charisma to become mundane or practical Charisma as a consequence of the conflicting interests of leader and followers” (Susen and Turner 2011: 233). The reception of Charisma can often transform its content in response to the audience. In Weber’s (1947) view, the competition between charismatic figures only serves to intensify this process as the figures are in competition for an audience.

Space is a condensed, egocentric and keyword driven thing on the internet. While it is easy to find most pieces of knowledge, its abundance and the use of search engines mean that one may never see something unless you are looking for it (e.g. Hansen, Shneiderman and Smith 2010). The relationship between people’s political views and their networks is a co-evolutionary, dynamic process. Actors in a community are likely to gather followers that agree with their stance and be less likely to come in contact with those who disagree. One could easily surf the internet without ever coming across some material, purely because you have no interest in it and therefore never type in the correct keywords. This attribute of the internet enables the (accidental or otherwise) creation of exclusive groups who may not view each other. There can be exceptions if a certain issue becomes salient to two or more groups in some way (in either direction – as happened in the Elevatorgate case discussed in Chapter 7). Thus relative isolation within egocentric networks can be suggested as one mechanism that promotes differentiation in social spheres (Lazer et al. 2008).

This idea is well described by the general concepts of Universal Evolution (Dawkins 1976; Wilson 2002; Smith and Jenks 2006; Sawyer 2005). As isolated populations in nature only breed with each other (at a statistical population level, there can be exceptions), so too do humans isolate at the population level. Language, culture and conceptual barriers all come into play at this level, consciously and unconsciously directing or veering people away from ideas that do not fit with their current cultural and intellectual architecture (Bourdieu 1977; Giddens 1991; Smith and Jenks 2006; Wilson 2002). When it comes to Habitus, people like things to stay relatively constant (Wilson 2002; Smith and
It could be suggested that reactions like confirmation bias (Koehler 1993) and feelings like ontological insecurity (Giddens 1991) arise from these habits of thought and the effort to maintain Habitus against contradicting forces (Bourdieu 1977).

There are some exceptions to this isolation, in that a keyword that is used by two topic communities will cause overlap (like a land bridge or common feeding source in genetic populations). Therefore, the internet can also make things salient to many groups if they happen to share a common point of reference, such as a keyword, site or tag of some kind. As a society/group opens its umbrella, people will encounter the ‘other’ within the group. This visibility of ‘undesirables’ in the umbrella or connecting group, moves the larger group closer to the edge of chaos and the chances of differentiation increase as individuals form smaller groups to restabilise their world. According to Bourdieu (1990), the conflict over good taste is a symbolic struggle for power. Similarly to Weber (1947), he posits that it is everlasting and that there can be no reconciliation. In this way Bourdieu’s (1990) theory questions the possibility of a universal judgement of taste as it shows that taste is always shifting in an attempt to maintain distinctions. An analogy can be made to more concrete examples in culture such as the vowel shifts that occur as an accent changes, so that vowels may still be distinguished from each other in everyday speech. The distinctions become structuralised and evolve through the interaction of the particular tastes of individuals and how these impact interactions and group formation. I have used internet case studies (participant observations), Google Trends and social network analysis to demonstrate this structural reorganisation within my research.

Emergence of Online Trends

The social media environment’s structure makes it perfect for trend and social network analysis. The ability to search for and visualise the emergence of trends and social networks allows the confirmation of hand gathered trends and networks discovered in ethnography and smaller interview investigations. This technology does not negate the need for a researcher’s eye, but can be seen as a
complimentary technology which provides visual confirmation of trends discovered.

**Search Trends, Interest over Time and Google Trends**

*Google Trends* has become a useful source of information for the social sciences. Using *Google Trends* (2010-2012), I attempted to gauge the interest in the labels, ideas, events and groups I had come in contact with, get a sense of their popularity through time, connections to leaders and wider community issues. At a basic level trend data was used to show a continued relevance of the groups, ideas and events I was researching. Such graphs are a normalised graph which is an indicator of people ‘interested’ in such issues and labels over time and the fluctuations in such interest. I knew, through my interactions with the scene, approximately when each event or group interaction had started to become visible, so I used that to test whether the trend data showed any correlation with my knowledge of these events, groups and my participant’s views. I had spoken to people, in interviews and online, about their thoughts on the interest in these ideas, events and people. I used these conversations to check if the *Google Trends* (2010-2012) and trends graphs were anything like the perceptions of my participants and my ethnography. The graphs show an overall pattern similar to participant expectations and my ethnographic observations. I will present and explain the relevant parts of the graphs I used throughout the data chapters of the thesis. By comparing various keywords on the same graph it is possible to draw connections between events, ideas and personalities. These graphs provide a visual and replicable source of data which can be analysed more closely by other researchers, qualitative or quantitative. Thus I think it adds testability and validity to the ethnographic findings put forth by qualitative ethnographers. This may be the first time that such confirmation of ethnography has been available and persistent. I think this is a large step forward for qualitative research as it may allow wider replication and confirmation of ethnographic results.

**Hashtags and NodeXL**

In the ceaseless torrent of *Twitter*, *Instagram* and *Facebook* messages going out into the web there is a new form of connection strategy evolving. It involves the
use of what have become known as ‘Hashtags’. Hashtags allow the user to connect their message to another stream of messages by using a word with the hash (#) symbol in front of it. After this tag is added, anyone searching for or archiving messages with that tag will see their message as part of the stream connected to the tag (Postill and Pink 2012). If a community decides on a common tag, this can provide a way for community members to talk to and share information with others in the community with whom they may not have a direct social media connection. In my own research the tags #Atheism, #Atheist, #AtheismPlus and #FTBullies all played big parts in my ability to aggregate data on the various events I was following, as well as providing an overview of the atheist field on Twitter. Hashtags help to organise debate, set moods and make ironic statements about topics (Postill and Pink 2012). As an example, using ‘Atheism’ or ‘#Atheism’ as my search allowed me to get an overview of the irreligious field (atheism being the most common word in use at the moment). Likewise, by using these tags I would become part of the collective conversation on atheism. Social networking software allows the researcher to check the results of the researchers hand gathered data on network/social structures. Using Twitter Visualisation tools I was able to further investigate these tags, the people using them and the interactions between such individuals. I used a tool called NodeXL developed by the Social Media Research Foundation to aggregate and visualise Twitter networks over a number of hours, around a particular topic. I will show one overview graph below (Figure 3) for illustration and I’ll explain what it demonstrates below.
Figure 3: Twitter Network – Connections of Groups around Atheism

Figure 3: Purple = Religion Discussing Atheism; Light Blue = Science and Atheism; Dark Blue = Confrontation – New Atheism; Green = Atheism Plus; Orange = Anti-atheism plus or ‘Dictionary Atheism’ or Slymepit; Pink = Conservative Atheism; Grey-Blue = Using ‘Atheism’ for political or other purposes; Grey = Not Relevant. There are 1299 nodes, with 740 nodes shown, the countries most represented are the US, Canada, UK, Australia; approximately 24 hour period.

It represents less than 24 hours in the Twitter sphere around the topic of ‘atheism’. It contains many players; some are religious, most are atheists, some are using the term ‘atheism’ for other purposes. The large nature of the graph means that it should be read in clusters as is indicated by the coloured groupings. However, even the irreligious field is broken up into sub-groups, not all of whom agree with each other. I collected many of these types of samples over the three years of field work I undertook and they gave me extra insight into many topics, new leads and copious amounts of qualitative data. I will use and discuss specific graphs throughout my data presentation in the next chapters.
Event Based Model

At every stage it was a question of using an ethnographic sensitivity to follow up leads which looked interesting (Hine 2000: 71).

Social media ethnography entails digital practices, compilation, sharing and openness that depart from traditional ideas of an ethnographic site (Postill and Pink 2012). Researchers are usually advised to find a small sample population and try to figure out who they know and observe the culture that forms among them; to try to understand the worldview of the participants and compare it with others within the broader cultural system. However, the egocentric nature of current social media means that focusing on one site is unlikely to capture all of an event or all of the interactions of an individual, as they are now happening across media platforms and in the real and cyber worlds. However, in the current internet era, the ‘internet event’ may also involve particular physical locations, individuals and internet sites; both the online and offline. In line with this observation, Hine (2000 cited in Postill and Pink 2012) has argued that undertaking internet ethnography may not necessarily entail travelling to a particular field site. Hine (2009) rejects the notion that one could study bounded units online. Instead the internet ethnography must be focused around a certain media event, what Hine (2000 cited in Postill and Pink 2012) calls an internet event. For example, the events of Elevatorgate occurred across a number of conferences in the real world, blogs, Twitter, YouTube, Storify and others. Should a researcher stick to one medium while researching these events, they would miss half of the story (Postill and Pink 2012). It seems that Hine’s (2000) call to see the internet as having two analytical dimensions, a technological medium and the discursive practices on such mediums, was good advice, as now, no discourse is restricted to one particular platform, although the platform may restrict the type of discourse available (Medium theory - Bullivant 2010). However, it is possible to identify a core set of individuals and sites involved in such cross platform communication. Kozinets (2010: 10) states that the term “community appears appropriate if it is used in the most fundamental sense to refer to a group of people who share social interaction, social ties, and a common interactional format, location or ‘space’” – even if a
cyber space. Pink (2008) and Postill (2011) argue that the term community is best understood in terms of its meaning to participants, rather than an empirical social unit, and suggest replacing the term ‘online communities’ with ‘digital socialities’.

Thus, following this, the ‘scenes’ or ‘sites’ in this research consist of networks of individuals, real world events and the sites where these events were mostly discussed online. It consists of a cluster of digital socialities that form a ‘community’ of heterogeneous individuals at a higher level of analysis; in this case the irreligious field. This field is constructed at least in part by the ethnographer’s narrative, aided by empirical sources, as some parts of the field may not be visible to particular participants in normal interactions and thus some connections cannot be directly inferred from individual accounts (Hine 2009). As mentioned earlier, Grounded Theory sees the unit of analysis as the ‘incident’ or event, rather than a particular site or group, and this is a model that fits well with the event driven nature of current egocentric social networks.

Internet Participant Observation Process

The life of a social media (Web 2.0) ethnographer involves living a large portion of one’s day online. It involves a number processes that help keep the researcher up-to-date with current events in the online community of interest. This involves reading, commenting on and sharing sources of information on the topic, such as blog posts, news links, Twitter posts, Facebook links, pictures, videos and events. If a researcher is to keep up with all of these sources they must find ways to search out, filter and sort the appropriate information into useful categories for archiving. Postill and Pink (2012) suggest five stages to this process: catching up, sharing, exploring, interacting and archiving. I agree that these represent the main daily processes, though each researcher may approach them with different tools and platforms.

As part of my investigation, I spent three years online (January 2010 to December 2012) connected to various irreligious feeds and sites. I achieved this by finding various information feeds (those I found most useful at the time, as they changed and died frequently in this early stage of development) that would
lead me to new content on the irreligious, in the media, on irreligious sites and from people and organisations that often oppose irreligion. I also shared and discussed this information online via my Twitter feed (@alangnixon), which gathered 1800 followers by the end of the 2013. Google Alerts, Google Reader (later Feedly) and Twitter have allowed me to keep on top of the latest major developments and events in the field as identified by my various sources. At September 2013 my blogroll included 81 blogs in Feedly from which I gathered daily news. I used a container program for data collection and archiving as it allowed the quick dropping of various forms of media into named sections for easy tagging and retrieval, this archiving also avoided the loss of some data when a site closed for whatever reason. It meant I had a copy of the website, even if not a live version. This initial data was then sorted into more refined groups and codes.

**Historical Analysis**

I decided to do a historical analysis after reviewing literature, conducting interviews and carrying out initial internet observations, as I realised that dimensions discovered in the process appeared to have a distinguishable history of their own, though not clearly shown in the original documents analysed. There are a number of more comprehensive histories of non-religion/secularity available (Armstrong 1999; Buckley 1987; Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994; Hyman 2010; Martin (ed.) 2007; Hecht 2010; Wilson and Cresswell (eds.) 1999; McGrath 2004: 112-143) and I will draw on these works to construct my history. In line with the views of Hyman (2010), Campbell (1972) and Hecht (2010), irreligion itself is certainly not new. In some accounts, the new atheists are inheritors of a long history of irreligious philosophy in the West, from the ancient Indian Cārvāka school (~600 BCE), to ancient Greek atheism (disputed as an irreligious philosophy ~500 BCE) to Hume (1711-76), Feuerbach (1804-72), Mill (1806-73), Marx (1818-83), Freud (1856-1939), Camus (1913-60), Russell (1872-1970), Sartre (1905-80) and now Dawkins et al. (De Lashmutt 2009; Hay 2007). Adding to this is the history of irreligious individuals and organisations stretching from the middle of the 17th century to the present day, who bring their own sociological, philosophical and
methodological differences to the milieu (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994; Le Drew 2012). Irreligion is hard to pin down before modernity and seems to emerge from within religion itself through various reform and purification movements (Bruce 2010). As Bruce (2010: 125) points out “when the clergy of the middle ages complained of irreligion, their target was not secularity but the persistence of pre-Christian superstition or the use of the Church's ritual's in an instrumental manner”.

However, when discussing history I will attempt to contextualise the 21st century irreligious movement (new atheists and subgroups) rather than give an in-depth history of the whole non-religious movement. My historical analysis of irreligion is a history that focuses on the emergence of differences between groups over time and the motivations for such group divergence and emergence. It links the dimensions I have discovered throughout my research with the longer history of the irreligious movement. It does this through presenting cases that exhibit splits along the dimensions described herein. Doing this gives longitudinal support to these dimensions and shows the persistence of these sociologically structuring factors through time. I have attempted to present such issues through the lens of the time rather than retrofitting the history to 21st century dimensions. I have also tried to indicate the particular and provincial concerns of each case, as the dimensions may manifest themselves in different ways depending on the concerns of the people and groups of that era.

There are multiple views in each era too, my dimensions inherently capture this due to their sociological differentiating nature, but I have still made attempts to show the multiple views present in a period, even if not directly related to a dimension. Thus I have also attempted to avoid viewing past cultures as monolithic. I make no claim to being a historian, but have attempted to address some of the concerns of historians. I think it may be up to the reader to decide how successful those attempts have been. I will follow Humanist chaplain Greg Epstein (2009) in seeing labels within irreligion as less important than the historical connections between such labels. While taking this view I will be critical of how labels have been used in particular eras, by whom and the
sociological consequences of such use. I will focus on the philosophical, methodological and sociological threads leading to the new atheism.
SUMMARY

This research has involved a number of methods employed within an overall ethnography. A literature review, interviews, internet participant observation and trend data were combined using a Grounded Theory approach. The Grounded Theory approach was employed in order to remain empirically grounded in the production of my sociological categories. Through this approach I hope to keep my theories in touch with the realities of the field and the perspectives of participants and test past ideas about the new atheists, particularly when no data has been presented. These perspectives are important as social systems often consist of a number of contradictory tendencies which cause the differentiation and emergence of sub-cultures and groups within the overall system. Due to this, assuming that an idea or behaviour is monolithically present in a system will almost always be in error.

I conducted most of my interviews using online technologies such as email and Skype. These online based interviews were sufficient for the research purposes, especially when combined with the international and internet based nature of the new atheism. The decision to focus on the international internet community was made due to finding that the new atheists have an international scope, at least in the Western world as will be seen in Chapter 3. The low number of FTF interviews may be seen as a limitation of the study, in future it might be fruitful to analyse body language and language tone in a more specific way. The responses to the interview questions further guided the internet ethnography after the interviews had been undertaken. After the analysis of the interviews and attempts at further questions, it was decided that I had already conducted sufficient interviews and that the knowledge present was already enough to move forward in connection with the internet participant observations. The data collected was then put through a relational analysis to provide an understanding of the meaning construction of participants. It was then triangulated with the literature, web and historical data collected up until that point to further support or reject themes found. Following the analysis process, data was triangulated with academic theory and trend data to provide further support for inclusion or rejection of interview outcomes.
The second part of my investigation involved spending three years observing and interacting with irreligious participants online (January 2010 to December 2012). As discussed the new atheism will be considered as one of the demographics that is well represented on the internet at the time of research, although I am inclined to see online and offline zones as relatively continuous, especially in the social media world of Web 2.0. People inhabit both online and offline worlds and they often intersect, with real world connections and events being posted and discussed online and vice-versa. In this event driven model, the 'scenes' or 'sites' in this research consist of networks of individuals, real world events and the sites where these events were mostly discussed online. It consists of a cluster of digital socialities that form a community of heterogeneous individuals at a higher level of analysis; in this case the irreligious field. Grounded Theory sees the unit of analysis as the incident or event, rather than a particular site or group, and this is a model that fits well with the event driven nature of current egocentric social networks.

The anonymity provided by the internet can be an issue from a researcher’s perspective, as it allows one person to take on multiple and separate identities that may be mistaken as separate individuals. Every effort has been made to confirm the various identities encountered in my field work, cross referencing their responses and checking connections. The level of editorial oversight for a particular platform must also be considered by the researcher, as it may influence the content and comments that appear on that platform. Editorial oversight that has influenced the potential perceptions of that site or the conversation being held there have come up in a number of cases during my research. I have been careful to discuss such issues where they have arisen.

The social media environment’s structure makes it perfect for trend and social network analysis. The ability to search for and visualise the emergence of trends and social networks allows the confirmation of hand gathered trends and networks discovered in ethnography and smaller interview investigations. This technology does not negate the need for a researcher’s eye, but can be seen as a complimentary technology which provides visual confirmation of trends discovered. NodeXL and Google Trends will be used for this purpose.
Lastly, I decided to do a historical analysis after reviewing my literature, interviews and initial internet observations, as I realised that dimensions discovered in the process appeared to have a distinguishable history of their own which was not clearly articulated in the original documents analysed.

Through this methodology, I was able to identify eight clear examples of how irreligion can move towards one position or another along four dimensions of the field. The following data chapters will examine these structuring dimensions of irreligion in order to investigate diversity within the new atheist category itself. Thus, these dimensions will be discussed throughout the data presentation, showing the real changes and fractures that they have created in the contemporary irreligious milieu. These dimensions are covert/public, accommodation/confrontation, substitution/elimination and empathetic/intellectual. In Chapter 3 I will outline the specific terminology and views of the new atheism that have been found in this research. After that I will outline the data within the current movement which supports the continuing structural relevance of these dimensions to the new atheist field itself (Chapters 4-7). I will end with a discussion of the theoretical implications of this research in relation to current postsecular and sociological paradigms (Chapter 8).
LIMITATIONS

There are a number of limitations to this thesis including the synthesising nature of ethnography, its limitation to qualitative data and the insider researcher dilemma.

The synthesising nature of the ethnography sacrifices some clarity on particular cultures, in order to gain an understanding of the common components of a system (Carroll 2009). Thus this research will not focus directly on any one neo-tribe within the atheist scene. However, the introduction of participant voices ensures that the system will not be represented as a monolithic block.

The focus of this study was on identifying and evaluating support for the dimensions described, using qualitative data. Thus quantitative study using the dimensions will not be undertaken for this thesis and will be recommended for further research. Longitudinal quantitative methods are useful to investigate changes in atheist cultures over time in order to establish cultural evolution within these settings. Thus historical sources, trend data and Social Network Analysis will be used to provide preliminary support for cultural change. In future it would be fruitful to set a scheduled collection of survey and social networking data to capture longitudinal change more directly.

Interviews are generally used to gain a sense of the other (Cummings 2007). In the context of this thesis however, the interview was used to study my own culture rather than the exotic other. Thus the dilemma in this research is that of being a cultural insider and researcher at the same time, rather than the normal issues of gaining entry and acceptance in an unknown community. However, this is tempered by the fact that I have never been heavily involved in any irreligious movements prior to the research and thus I have come into the movement as a relative outsider. However, Bennett (2002) suggests that the position of researcher/fan must be deconstructed so that a critical distance can be obtained. This is because the researcher/fan may, through being immersed, take certain elements of the culture for granted and thus fail to explain or miss important details (Bennett 2002). Therefore, this critique will be taken on
board in this research and attempts will be made to deconstruct my ‘native’ views on atheist culture.

I give three examples here to illustrate where such an issue could arise. In the early part of my research I was using the term new atheism. I partly did this through naivety, as I was not part of any atheist groups or organisations and I did not know that the term was not commonly used as a form of identity. I quickly discovered my mistake when one of my calls for participants was met with statements like “What is this ‘New Atheism’ you speak of?” New atheism is rarely used as an identity term, but even as a partial insider I was not entirely aware of this fact. A second example shows the danger with taking the words used by one part of the group as being the accepted term. Accommodationist is not a term often used by those who are designated as such. It is generally applied as derogatory term from someone who sees accommodation as a problem. However, it has become a part of the common vernacular and can be appropriately used. If one wasn’t aware of the stigma attached, directly calling someone an accommodationist could lead to a very awkward moment for a naïve interviewer. My last example is more personal. I have always been a feminist, I was brought up by a feminist Social Worker and taught that feminism was a good way of thinking. Therefore the events of Elevatorgate and Atheism Plus were quite personally shocking. It took me a while to work through my feelings on the matter and decide how I could approach the presentation of some of the people I so strongly disagreed with (on all sides) without painting them in a biased way. I believe I have done my utmost to achieve this, possibly remaining too neutral in some places in my attempts. Again the reader must evaluate my success.
CHAPTER 3. What is the New Atheism?
A COMPETITIVE POSTSECULAR WORLDVIEW

Through the books and articles that have been produced on atheism, historical examples and an analysis of recent activity in the new atheist community (via interviews and online participant observation), I was able to get a sense of the complex web of possible stances and practices that are present within the irreligious milieu. The historical and sociological factors present in Western society at the beginning of the 21st century called for a renewed irreligious response, which was put forward in the form of the new atheism. The new atheism has been characterised in the literature as a public, confrontational and intellectually focused form of irreligion, a view which is generally put forward through the opinions of the Four Horsemen themselves (Bullivant 2010; Amarasingam (ed.) 2010, Zuckerman (ed.) 2010a). However, a review of history begins to make it clear that the new atheism is not entirely new in relation to these attributes and that they may be seen as much more long term in their structuring influence. Understanding these attributes can help to highlight the contemporary changes occurring around the new atheism and the range of atheist views surrounding the phenomena. Through this analysis I will bring to light the postsecular attributes of the new atheism and the reasons it has displayed the traits it has become known for. I will begin the exploration of the new atheism with historical analysis, which brings the macro-sociological structures at that level of analysis into focus.
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The “New Atheism movement” originated, or at least gained wide currency, with a 2006 article by Gary Wolf in Wired the technology/cyberspace magazine (whose innovative founding editor Kevin Kelly happens to be a devout Christian).34

The labelling of prominent contemporary atheists as new appears to be a perennial theme amongst atheism’s critics. In fact, there are other incidents where a person has used the term new atheism or new atheist predating Wolf’s (2006) Wired article as described above. A search through history for the term new atheism itself reveals that this is not the first time the term has been employed to describe an atheist movement. In 1966, Read published Whose God is Dead: The Challenge of the New Atheism, which attacked the atheists of the 1960s who wanted to build up the wall of separation between church and state and create a more secular society. The book claimed atheists and theists were in an equal position, since neither could conclusively prove that there is or is not a God. In 1981, Azkoul published Anti-Christianity: the New Atheism which opposes 19th century atheistic Humanism from an Eastern Orthodox Christian perspective. In 1986, Morey published The New Atheism and the Erosion of Freedom in which he launches an attack against the outspoken atheists of the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s all of which discusses the same arguments used against atheists today. In 2001, Weinstein published New Atheist Majick, a philosophy book that is a self-help course on atheist metaphysics. Thus these examples show that the attribution of the term ‘new’ to the atheist group is not historically new with Wolf’s (2006) article. However, this article does represent the first time it was applied to this particular movement of the irreligious. It is also the title that has persisted with this movement through popular culture, unlike the earlier examples.

There may be a number of ahistorical myths about past irreligious groups within the new atheism itself, which have sometimes passed into the academic

literature. Two particular examples help to illustrate the point. The first is the new atheist view of the ‘old’ atheism (this chapter) and the second is the Atheist Plus view of the Humanists (see Chapter 7). To the new atheists the main difference between the ‘new’ and the ‘old’ atheism is the very public and vocal nature of the new movement. Thus new atheism is public instead of covert and confrontational instead of accommodative. However, taking a look at history, this is not actually the case, nearly all previous movements were public (secularist and agnostic attempts to avoid ‘atheism’ as a term may be the exceptions; Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994) and most were confrontational (early US Humanists may be the exception here; Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994).

The same can be seen in the Atheism Plus perception of ‘Humanism’. Atheism Plus adherents have deliberately separated themselves from the Humanists due to the similarity of their goals (combining social justice with irreligion; see Chapter 7). The Atheist Plus adherents also define Humanism as a covert and accommodative form of irreligion despite the historical examples to the contrary. Thus it can be seen that past movements are sometimes interpreted through the lens of the present in order to provide the distinction that the newer group deems necessary to make their separation. These examples help to highlight the hysteresis (connections to the past) present in irreligious movements. The social influences present in their period may help to explain the particular characteristics that the movement was attempting to claim. The new atheism occurs at the turn of the 21st century when a number of social changes had occurred or were in the process of becoming. These changes included the globalisation of Capitalism (post-Communist consumer society), the internet and associated communications leaps (postmodern visibility of the ‘other’), and the resurgence of religion as a personal and political identity marker (postsecularity).

Influences on the Rise of the New Atheism

Beyond these psychological, individualistic, or familial factors influencing the form of people's secularity or atheism, there undoubtedly exists the social or cultural level of influence. That is to
say, the culture/society in which a person lives will greatly shape his or her secular orientation. As Colin Campbell (1971: 29) succinctly argued, ‘Irreligion can only be specified within a given social and cultural context’ (Zuckerman 2012a).

Change was underway in the irreligious milieu at the start of the 21st century. The Irreligious were dealing with a number of changes that had come to fruition in Western societies. Bullivant (2010: 115) states that the explanations currently provided for the rise of the new atheism have focused on the motivations of the new atheist authors themselves. These are usually cited responses to:

- The impact of Islamic terrorism
- The growing influence of creationism or Intelligent Design Theory.

Adding to the motivations of the authors, Borer (2010) points to the influence of the secularisation thesis. The new atheists are carriers of the ‘strong secularisation thesis’ in that they expected religion to disappear as modernity progressed. The first two points mentioned by Bullivant (2010) make the secularisation thesis seem less certain and have moved the new atheists to action. If we did live in a religion free world, their arguments would seem “trite or unnecessary” (Borer 2010: 125). These reasons are clearly present in the new atheist literature (Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007; Dennett 2006), with all figures lamenting the public resurgence of religion and calling for a renewed fight for reason and science. This is a pattern that was emerging before the new atheism came about, with Dawkins increasing his attacks on anti-science and evolution groups throughout the 1990’s and early 2000’s (The Blind Watchmaker 1986; River Out of Eden 1995; Climbing Mount Improbable 1996; Unweaving the Rainbow 1998; Militant Atheism Speech 2002; The Ancestor’s Tale 2004) and The Humanist Manifesto 2000 (Kurtz 2000) already discussing the resurgence of fundamentalist religion before 9/11. All of these ideas point to a move to a postsecular field, in which the certainties of the secularisation thesis are being questioned by the irreligious, who feel they must make their voice heard in a new type of public sphere.
However, Bullivant (2010) posits that the more interesting question is not what motivated the new atheist authors, but why they have received unprecedented media and popular attention, a much more sociological question. Bullivant (2010) suggests that the following ideas are important to the media and popular reception of the new atheists, rather than the intentions of the new atheist authors themselves:

- An abatement in Cold War rhetoric and a new ‘religious’ enemy has allowed room for atheists (US; post-Communism).
- A widespread distrust in all authorities and institutions in the Western world, including a diffused societal cynicism concerning organised religion. This has led to a general receptivity to witnessing religion being attacked and ridiculed (postmodernism).
- A mutual visibility of atheists and the religious due to the mass media and internet (postmodernism).
- The public resurgence of religion since the 1980's (UK and US; postsecularism).
- 9/11 allowed room for patriotic atheism (US; post-Communism/postsecularism).

In summary, these changes include the perceived fall of Communist ideology in 1989 (Hecht 2010; Bullivant 2010; Zrinščak 2011; Hyman 2012), the rise of postmodernism (Hecht 2010; Caputo 2007), and a resurgence in political and diffuse manifestations of religion against secularisation predictions (postsecularism). Bullivant (2010) discusses these ideas briefly as part of his argument. However, there is a wider literature that agrees with these ideas, which will be discussed in detail below.

**Post-Communist: Ejection of ‘Humanism’ and Consumer Society**

Though certainly not the biggest driver of the current irreligious surge, the atheist connection to Socialism/Communism was questioned at the end of the 20th century and continued to be shunned by the new atheist authors. This happened first via the irreligious themselves (Hecht 2010), and then by the fall
of Communist Russia, and China’s move towards Capitalism (Coase and Wang 2013). The animosity towards ‘Communism’ in all Western countries discussed in this thesis is well known (US – Evans 2007; Australia – Duncan 2001; UK – Defty 2004: McCarthyism). This tainted the word atheism with Communism throughout the Cold War period, where in all of these countries, ‘atheist’ was often equivalent to ‘Communist’. For example, when the motto of the United States was changed from _E Pluribus Unum_ (out of many, one) to ‘In God We Trust’ in 1954 and ‘Under God’ was added to the pledge of allegiance in 1956, Congressman Charles G. Oakman (Hecht 2010: Kindle Edition) supported the laws because as he stated:

> Our belief in God highlights one of the fundamental differences between us and the communists.

Thus in late 20th century Cold War America (likewise in Australia and the UK) ‘atheist’ meant ‘Communist’. There are two prominent examples from 20th century irreligious history of people who were working to end the connection between atheism and Communism; in Britain, Margaret Knight and the American Madalyne Murray O’Hair. In Britain, at the time, Margaret Knight was considered one of the most famous atheists. The texts of Knights (1955) BBC broadcasts on atheism and secular living were published in and Hecht (2010: Kindle Edition) puts forward that the difference between secular and religious morality in this text shows her project as separating atheist and Communist views. Knight (1955) states that the...

> Fundamental opposition is between dogma and the scientific outlook. On the one side, Christianity and communism, the two great rival dogmatic systems; on the other, Scientific Humanism.

She equates Communism with religion in that it is a set of dogmas rather than a scientific or realistic endeavour. Thus she removes Communism from the corpus of viable worldviews that an atheist may hold.

A similar project had been undertaken by O’Hair, who was founder of _American Atheists_ and President of the group from 1963 to 1986. She claimed to have separated the word Communist from atheist in America through her promotion
of atheism on its own terms. Before her disappearance in 1995, O’Hair was asked by a journalist about her greatest accomplishment, to which she replied:

One of the things I’m most proud of is that people can say, ‘I am an Atheist,’ in the United States today, without being called a Communist atheist or an atheist Communist. I separated the two words, I think that that’s probably the best thing that I did (O’Hair 1989).

Thus, the connection between Communism and atheism was being questioned in at least two Western countries in the later part of the 20th century. By 1989 with the fall of Communist Russia, the connection between the two weakened again (Bullivant 2010; Hecht 2010). The great Communist experiment was declared (perhaps prematurely) over and the era of imperialist neo-liberal democracies had begun (Giddens 1991).

Bullivant (2010) suggests that the legacy of anti-Communist Cold War rhetoric and the links between religion and American culture can explain the stigmatisation of atheists in America during this period and until today. He argues that the abatement of this rhetoric has allowed more room for atheism in the US. As the Cold War rhetoric subsided the connection between atheism and Communism weakened and more space was created to allow the emergence of irreligion as a legitimate identity (Bullivant 2010).

From the opposite side, the connection between late Capitalism and atheism has been explicitly made by Eagleton (2009), when he comments that:

[T]he advanced capitalist system is inherently atheistic. It is godless in its actual material practices, and in the values and beliefs implicit in them, whatever some of its apologists may piously aver. As such, it is atheistic in all the wrong ways, whereas Marx and Nietzsche are atheistic in what are by and large the right kinds of ways. A society of packaged fulfilment, administered desire, managerialized politics, and consumerist economics is unlikely to cut to the kind of depth where theological questions can even be properly raised, just as it rules out political and moral questions of a certain profundity (Eagleton 2009: 39).
For Eagleton (2009), intellectual atheism would appear to be both wedded to
the liberal Democratic-Capitalist political configuration and also deaf to a more
profound form of political thought that would put it into question. Political
structures that were once thought to be ideologically neutral or ‘empty’ are
exposed as embodying a still deeper ideology in turn. It is an ideology of
monadic atomism, wilful assertion, relentless acquisition and shallow
materialism. Thus the new atheist connection with Capitalism is made
philosophically clear by Eagleton (2009). Similarly, Martinson (2012) suggests
that just as God has been unmasked as a projection, so too a political order
based on transcendent norms is unmasked as a naive illusion, a fictional
appearance. He argues that secular democracy and free market Capitalism is the
sophisticated, clear-sighted, realistic exposure of political life as it really is,
purged of all sentimental illusion. As such, it is also the political accomplice of
modern atheism or secular Humanism. Both are aspects of the same antithesis,
the reaction against the thesis of pre-modern theism and its accompanying
politico-theological vision (Martinson 2012). If this is so, says Martinson (2012),
then it is entirely to be expected that Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens
and others within the new atheism, would be enthusiastic proponents of liberal
democracy and free market Capitalism. These authors make clear the
connections they see between the new atheism, Communism and Capitalism.
They argue that the connection has been emphasised via the abatement of
prejudice against atheists or the connection between the new atheists and
Capitalism itself. This is confirmed in new atheist literature, where the
connections between atheism and Communism are either played down or
ignored all-together. What is clear is that the new atheists have ignored or
ejected earlier empathetic Humanistic forms of atheism from their cannon, and
have focused on intellectual arguments that they mostly see as clipped of value
judgements.

One of the other defining characteristics of the new atheism has been its
connection to consumption practices via the sales of books and other
merchandise. Its adherents do not necessarily consume blindly. However, they

35 Via an argument similar to Margaret Knights in which Communism is a dogma separate from
atheism.
do live in a group of societies that are largely defined through consumption practices and their social interpretations (Possamai 2007; Turner 2009). The new atheist authors are asking their readers to stop consuming religious products, using what can be seen as a form of hypo-consumption restricted to nonreligious goods (Possamai 2007). Adding to this, the means by which the positions of the new atheists have been articulated (ranging from popular books and films to public transport advertisements) are quite innovative in terms of using public channels. New atheism appears to now apply a similar degree of media savvy and rhetoric to the proclamation of its message, as we are more accustomed to seeing by those promoting evangelical religion (De Lashmutt 2009; Hay 2007; Martin 2000). This again clearly places them in the consumer field of post-Communist late Capitalism, in which they consume products to form an identity within a consumer society (Possamai 2007). Many authors have argued that such consumerism is part of the logic of this period (i.e. Jameson 1991), and it should not be highly surprising that this group follows the practices of its time.

Postmodern: Multiple Modernities

Hecht (2010: Kindle Edition) claims that the 20th century had “qualities of the peak cosmopolitan moments throughout history: the Hellenistic, Rome, the Tang, the golden age of Baghdad, and the Renaissance.” It contained “a deep skepticism about our ability to know the world, to say anything true, to find a universal value” (Hecht 2010: Kindle Edition). Beginning with the recognition of nihilism and metaphysics of ideology in Nietzsche’s works, the century proceeded in a way that would end up bringing the foundations of modernism themselves into question.

This change in modernity came about due to the ideological excesses of the late 19th and earlier 20th centuries and the two World Wars that arose from them. In relation to irreligion, from the 1890’s and continuing up until the Holocaust (1945), non-religion, science and Darwinism had taken on a darker chapter of ideology, in the form of Social Darwinism and Eugenics (Evans and Evans 2010). This ideology arose by applying Francis Galton’s (1883) systemic ideas about human reproduction and ‘purity’, with Herbert Spencer’s (1860) interpretation
of Darwinism as ‘survival of the fittest’ at a social level. Early American Eugenics drew on three authors (Galton, Spencer and Darwin) to justify forced sterilisations of those considered ‘undesirable’ to prevent the genetic propagation of their ‘bad traits’. By 1930 half of the US states had a Eugenics sterilisation law on the books (Currell and Cogdell 2006). Hofstadter (1944; cited in Evans and Evans 2010) suggests that at the time Social Darwinism was one of the most influential trends in American public life. Adding to the cruelty of the practice, degenerate often meant non-white or immigrant, as this fit with the ‘hierarchy of races’ supported by Social Darwinism and much social science of the time. American and Australian immigration laws were based on this concept (Wyndham 2003). Two unelaborated and well known examples outside the specifically irreligious milieu also helped to turn our reflections on the political/human aspects of science. First was the mass killings carried out with scientific precision in and around death camps in the name of Eugenics infused Nazi ethic. In a complex cultural way, Social Darwinism can be argued to have been a cause of the Holocaust, which saw many ‘degenerates’ systematically executed for the cause of ‘racial purity’. It also caused many other social injustices, while propping up the ideological prejudices of those employing it. This represented one of the clearest and most extreme cases of scientists making claims about the moral order (Evans and Evans 2010). The second was the nuclear bombs that Robert J. Oppenheimer (1965) understood made us become the new gods, ‘Death’, ‘the destroyers of worlds’. Thus World War II was poignant in showing the horrors that could come from uncontrolled science.\(^{36}\)

Following the disasters of the two World Wars and the nervous tension of the Cold War, many believed that the value systems of our civilisations could no longer be trusted and the critique of modernity and certainty of control accelerated. In this way Post WWII was a time of critical reflection on the political and ideological driven aspects of science. The *International Humanist and Ethical Union* (IHEU) was set up as a way to find non-religious ethical solutions to these disasters (Campbell 1972). The following period also saw an increase in the creation of science ethics boards in universities and government

\(^{36}\)Mary Shelley's (1797-1851) *Frankenstein* (1818) and others warned much earlier than that in reaction to medicine and science in the late 19\(^{th}\) century.
Thus, the mid to late 20th century saw a proliferation of art, architecture and philosophies that reflected on modernism and criticised it, which though extremely variable in nature have been given the name ‘postmodernism’ (Caputo 2007).

Postmodernist literature suggests that claims to universal truth or knowledge are confounded by our embodiment and embedding in the world (Caputo 2007). We are compelled to see through genetically and socially constructed viewpoints due to this embodiment and we find it hard (if not impossible) to take a universal view due to embedding. Thus we do not have an objective, perspective-neutral view of the world with which to compare our views, and we cannot step out of our limited perspective to see things ‘as they actually are’ (Caputo 2007; cf Smith and Jenks 2006). In popular postmodernist views it cannot be said that one particular perspective is ‘right’, only that they belong to a different perspective, living out a different interpretation of the known. Postmodernism was a view derived from the West’s colonising heritage, an anti-colonialism that was a necessary critique of ethnocentric ideas (Saïd 1978).

Bruce (2010) argues that due to this postmodern turn, if people are to be religious in the modern world, they are more likely to be attracted to individualised forms of religion such as the ‘New Age’ or as Possamai (2005) calls it ‘perrenism’. These interpretations emphasise the individual nature of postmodern religions and spirituality. However, to some of the religious, postmodernism seems like an extension of Nietzsche’s ‘Death of God’ and the freedom that this allows. Thus the 1960’s saw many Christian theologians taking on this critique in the form of ‘Death of God’ theology, as another reaction to the horrors of the two World Wars (Altizer 1967; Altizer and Hamilton 1966; Ice and Carey (eds.) 1967; Tillich 1952). However, at the same time, another section of the Christian milieu was reacting against relativist ideas and had been growing in power (Ballmer 2010). The emergence of fundamentalisms and other social enclaves, counter-forces that reject the syncretism of modernity are certainly present in contemporary society (Possamai 2005; Turner 2010). Thus postmodernism was being attacked by the Christian right as relativism, which in their eyes allows no absolutes and thus undercuts the possibility of God, truth or morality (Williams 2010).
Due to the postmodern turn, Islamic doubters also caught the attention of the world in the late 20th century, and this led to criticisms of the postmodern multicultural atmosphere which had grown in the preceding years (Hecht 2010). The first figure of interest in this period was Salman Rushdie. Rushdie (1988) wrote *The Satanic Verses* as a work of fictitious magical realism which he claimed was meant to represent the highly polytheistic world of Indian believers and reflect chaotic cosmopolitan uncertainty. In this way Rushdie’s novel had much in common with postmodernism. Though it was not an attack on Islam or religion, it was loosely based on a story in which Mohammed, in his early years, accepts the thought that some local female Gods can be included in the pantheon with Allah. He later revokes the verses that made the deal acceptable and states that they came from Satan, not from God, hence the title *The Satanic Verses*. These verses are cited as evidence against revelation and in Rushdie’s book they are shown by the narrator to come from the mouth of the Archangel Gabriel (the voice of God in the Bible) and thus retain their validity, questioning the anti-feminist pronouncement of them as satanic verses. Figures of the Koran are parodied within the book, and most relevant to the events that followed its publication was an unflattering caricature of Iran’s religious leader at the time, Ayatollah Khomeini. The release of the book was met with often violent protests from Muslims around the world, bookstores were firebombed, rallies held where copies of the book were burnt and death threats were made to Rushdie, his family and many others involved in publication of the book. On the 14 February 1989 Ayatollah Khomeini went on *Radio Tehran* to proclaim that a *fatwa* had been placed on Rushdie for writings that were blasphemous against Islam and a bounty was being offered for his death. With this *fatwa* the rise of fundamentalist forms of Islam would be more salient in the wider world (Hecht 2010).

The second relevant figure was Taslima Nasrin. Like Rushdie, the call for her execution came after the publication of her novel *Shame* (1993). The novel depicted the suffering of a Hindu family after they were attacked by Muslims. Her crime again was blasphemy against Islam, and with the *fatwa* on her it became clear that fundamentalism had come to Bangladesh. Nasrin commented in a later interview (1998; cited in Hecht 2010: Kindle Edition) that her
criticisms of Islam had been prompted by the thought that “religious injustices were only increasing, especially in Muslim countries.” In the interview Nasrin maligned the seeming inability or lack of courage of the ‘multicultural West’ in giving cultural legitimacy to acts that they would simply see as wrong in their own cultures. She argued that the liberals in the West were failing to apply the same human rights standards for those outside the West.

According to these doubters of Islam, cultural relativity was creating a double standard. The fact that the new atheists have a more direct focus on Islam is recognised by Emilsen (2012). While this may be true compared to earlier irreligious movements, largely due to the Eurocentric Christian opposing nature of these irreligious movements, the new atheists equally focus on Christianity and other religions as suggested by Bullivant (2010). In fact, many commentators have accused the new atheists of focussing too much on Christianity, due to a fear of reprisals from Islamic circles.37 38 The lack of interference may have been an attempt to avoid cultural imperialism and colonialism, which was being heavily critiqued at the time (Caputo 2007). However, for some observers it seemed like liberal cultural relativism had gone too far, and as a result the West was now allowing atrocities in order to remain respectful of other cultures.

This undercutting of foundations or anti-foundationalism became a threat to many in the irreligious milieu. From their perspective, it undercuts the right of science to make conclusions and brings into doubt notions such as human nature, progress and human rights (Caputo 2007). Without the goal of an end social destiny (the main goal of religions and earlier 20th century social movements) or the viewpoint of a transcendental subject (the view that supports ‘objective’ science), the irreligious would be left with only their shared preferences to decide on what they needed and desired and this seemingly put them in a similar position to the religious. To correct ethnocentrism, the postmodernists envisioned a world in which there is no final state of perfection,

no teleology towards which we are moving, there is only the current state of affairs, biological and cultural; the dreams, preferences, values and beliefs that define us at a moment in time. Cultural relativism as espoused by postmodernism makes it hard to criticise the social practices of other societies and religions as these are now viewed as equally acceptable in a relativist world (Caputo 2007).

The effects of postmodernism and religious resurgence can be illustrated in relation to irreligion by reviewing changes in the Secular Humanist and irreligious milieu over the same period. Cimino and Smith (2007) undertake this task showing that the first two takes of the Humanist Manifesto (Bragg 1933) are confident in the idea that religion will disappear as society progresses, whereas the version created in 2000 is far less optimistic stating that:

> The world is now divided, as fundamentalisms have rekindled, contesting the principles of humanism and secularism and demanding a return to the religiosity of a pre-modern era (Cimino and Smith 2007: 412-413).

The same year as the release of the latest, more pessimistic Humanist Manifesto, Secular Humanist Paul Kurtz would call for a broader global coalition of Humanist groups to act as a political front for the irreligious (Kurtz 2000). So it seems even just before 9/11 and the emergence of the new atheism, there was a feeling that a more direct political approach was needed.

In an ironically postmodern paradox, postmodernism was shunned by the religious and irreligious for its implications; while still aiding in the growth and public resurgence of religion and irreligion, now with equally valid public voices. Staying silent in a competitive and religion saturated identity field would have left the atheist milieu at a major disadvantage. Moreover, nuance was not the norm in the ideologically religious landscape at the beginning of the 21st century (Maddox 2005; Turner 2010). Particularly after 9/11, extreme statements came from all sides and one has to wonder if softer, more nuanced voices were getting lost in the noise (Maddox 2005; Turner 2007, 2010). As noted by Turner (2007, 2010) everyone seems to have been fortifying and
defending their cultural and geographical borders in a new period of 'protectionism' or 'securitisation'. Bruce (2010) argues that historically modernisation caused the powerful in society to become more visible to the less powerful. The periphery became more aware of the ideas and behaviours of the centre. This caused the centre to missionise by offering 'respectable' beliefs to the periphery, who were motivated by the want for upward mobility. Thus modernisation and industrialisation gave rise to reform movements. I think the same could be argued for the move to postmodernism, postsecularity and the information society. In the postmodern, society, the voices of multiple modernities are competing with each other in a postsecular field. In the particular case of this thesis, attempts to missionise have become present in irreligious and secular groups. As the 'uneducated' (in this case because they still believe in the supernatural) wider world became more visible to the Western secularists. This is further evidenced in this thesis by the fact that rhetorical techniques and evangelical discussion have become a staple of the new atheist movement. As Ghiselin (2009) discusses, Dawkins and the new atheists are not changing the way the community of professional biologists, sociologists or theologians think. Instead they are 'educating' those who come to the subjects of evolution and God as students and lay persons. Dawkins and his followers are creating a body of atheist mythology that may be referenced by non-believers (Geertz and Markússan 2010; Ghiselin 2009; Stahl 2010). This idea is also supported by the work of Bullivant (2008) who has demonstrated that the new atheist's message is having a conversion effect. Bullivant analysed the Positiveatheism.org and Richarddawkins.net forums looking at the atheist conversion experience in which the individual has a sudden realisation that there is no God. The reactions to this experience can be elating or anxiety ridden but Bullivant argues that these are indeed conversion experiences and that the new atheist message is winning adherents.

The new atheists find themselves in a structurally fluid world where there are few obligations to ideas, leaders or organisations besides what they choose to give. The irreligious field is thus subject to the cultural logic of late Capitalism (Jameson 1991) with its postmodern proliferation of cultures, discourses, organisations and social roles often via networked consumer channels. This is a
postsecular field, where the new atheists are equal with and competing with multiple versions of modernity present in postmodern culture for a limited number of adherents. Thus rhetorical and conversion techniques are more necessary to gain and retain adherents. The postmodern, postsecular, consumer world demands that they add the irreligious perspective to the public discussion, or alternatively be lost in the noise. Throughout this thesis I will evidence the idea that the new atheists have taken on public, confrontational stances in order to make their voice heard in a postmodern environment containing multiple interpretations of modernity. Thus it can be argued that atheism as a transnational identity is simply adding another option to the milieu of possible public identities in the postmodern world. This identity is sometimes articulated in a similar manner to religious identity, in order to capture those who find academic discussion alone less compelling.

Postsecular: Religious Resurgence

The most obvious statement about the new atheism is that it was ignited by the shattering events of September 11, 2001. One might even say that ‘the post 9/11 atheist movement’ is more accurate than ‘new atheism’ (Bullivant 2010; De Lashmutt 2009; Geertz and Markússan 2010; Hay 2007; Peterson 2007). However, this is not the whole story. While 9/11 may have triggered Dawkins to write *The God Delusion*, the book is also the culmination of his long-standing opposition to religion and religion’s place in society; a critique predating 9/11 by decades. Furthermore, 9/11 can only be cited as a major event rather than a continuing reason for the presence of the new atheism (Geertz and Markússan 2010). Religion in general had begun resurging since the late 1970’s and irreligious groups were feeling the pinch. The Iranian revolution (Moaddel 1992), a rising religious right in the US (Bullivant 2010; Ellis 2010) and the Intelligent Design movement (Laats 2010) were becoming the new face of public religion. As Obadia (2010; citing Beyer 2004) points out, religion had not disappeared from the public or political scenes, in fact it had in many cases become a major player in local and international political relationships. As Casanova would discuss in 1994, religion was de-privatising and we could no longer see all parts of the secularisation thesis as equally inevitable. Casanova
(1994) argued that privatisation of religion is not a necessary consequence of the secularisation thesis, an idea that can be confirmed by the resurgence of public religions for the last 30 years and the emergence of the new atheism. Even in ‘exceptional’ Europe (see Davie 1994) the rest of the world had arrived, bringing religion back with them due to immigration from more religious regions of the world (Davie 2010).

Religion has come crashing back into the public sphere and the consequences of this move are still being felt, as seen in the recent Arab Awakenings (Ramadan 2012). Where religion no longer holds a monopoly on the state, it must gain its influence through social channels (like social media) and this is achieved via pressure groups like the Tea Party in the US (Skocpol and Williamson 2012) and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt (Ramadan 2012). Thus, there has been a recent salience of religion in the West due to the perception of growing religious extremism and public religious voices. These religious return movements are argued to be at least partly due to globalisation and diaspora communities in which religion became the marker of difference rather than the ethnic/national identity of the immigrant (Davies 2010). As Davies (2010) puts it, there has been a shift in understandings of global politics, from ideology (Cold War and Utopian movements) to one based on identity, a space easily filled by religion. In resonance, Rosati (2010) suggests that religion retains its influence at the political level because it acts as a transnational carrier of public identities. Similar to the period of the European reformation, the need for negotiations over the power and place of religious voices in politics and public decision making have come back onto the agenda (Bruce 2010; Turner 2011; Davie 2010).

Davie (2010) believes that the secularisation thesis and the wilful ignorance of social scientists themselves are partly to blame for the failure of social science overall to predict the return of religion. She feels that the false teleology of the secularisation thesis – that religion would necessarily disappear as modernisation continued – was a big part of this issue. In her view this is because there has been a tendency among European academics to either dismiss religion as unimportant or to frame it as a social problem. As Martin
(2000) relays, it was previously difficult to get the social scientific establishment to take Pentecostalism seriously, an attitude that now seems antiquated when faced with the obvious social shift towards Pentecostalism in the global South (particularly Asia, South America and Africa) and its re-emergence in the West (mega-churches and experiential worship). Martin (1965) can in fact be credited with one of the earlier explorations of the empirical issues with the secularisation thesis via various cases as shown in his texts, *Towards Eliminating the Concept of Secularisation* (1965), and the now most famous, *A General Theory of Secularization* (1978). Davie (2010) thinks that in order for sociology of religion to evolve we must re-evaluate the teleology of the thesis where necessary and get past these biases. When discussing the supply side Rational Choice Theory (RCT) model, Bruce (2010) points out that the balance of evidence still suggests that more diversity leads to more secularity and that the secularisation thesis is far from dead theoretically. However, even if the RCT models do seem to work in fields where general demand for religious goods is high and brand loyalty is low, these are the circumstances of the West. The rest of the world is still often strongly governed by obligatory religious membership (Bruce 2010; Davie 2010; Berger 1999). Norris and Inglehart (2004) argue, that while secularisation is still occurring in developed nations, the world overall is more religious than ever and religious populations in these areas are growing much faster than the secular in developed nations.

Obadia (2010) suggests that modernisation theorists had missed religion in the rest of the world, because their central issue was secularisation in the West. On the other hand, he argues, globalisation theorists have a focus on the world wide religious takeover due to their wider view outside of secularising territories. Taking this idea further, Turner (2010) believes that the current proximity of societies is amplifying the view of the religious other and as he (Turner 2007) points out, there are now clearly societies that intend to sidestep the Western modernist project. However, even if they do sidestep it, Beyer (1998) suggests that the world religious system has been infused by Western Christian ideas of a separation of secular and religious spheres. Certainly this appears to be the case with Islam and Hinduism (Beyer 2006). The effect can
also be seen in discussions around the ‘secular’ in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh (Solihu 2013) and in the countries and events since the Arab Awakenings (Ramadan 2012). Whatever the case, the secularisation thesis began to seem less certain at that time (Cimino and Smith 2007; Borer 2010), and it had started long before September 11, 2001. Democratic politics has become infused with religious views from below, so while the state may (and often does not; Turner 2011) remain neutral with regards to religion, it can make inroads through the social public sphere.

Turner (2010) and Possamai (2009) discuss the idea that increasing access to information provided by the information revolution of the last 30 years has led to the democratisation and commercialisation of traditional religions and worldviews, thus opening up niches for new religious movements. Turner (2010) suggests that the real effect of globalisation on religion has been the triumph of heterodox, commercial, hybrid religions over orthodox, authoritative, professional versions of the religious life. In Weber’s terms it is the triumph of mass over virtuoso religion (Turner 2010). According to Turner, the characteristics of religion in modern society are individualism, the decline in traditional institutions, a willingness to experiment and awareness that religious symbols are constructs. If global fundamentalism involves modernisation through discipline, the global post-institutional religions are typical of postmodernism (Turner 2010). Thus a combination of self-help systems, subjectivity, devolved authority structures, iconic discourses and personal theology are often present in what Turner coins ‘low intensity religion’ (Turner 2010). From this perspective, popular culture is the place where deeply held values are expressed and discussed within the late-modern world (De Lashmutt 2009; Possamai 2009). Thus more diffuse spiritual and religious lifestyles including those designated postmodern, such as New Age, hyper-real religions and emergent Christian church movements also entered the mix. These more diffuse post-modern religions can be argued to have influenced the irreligious milieu, in a way similar to the spiritualists affecting the 19th century secularists in the US (Campbell 1972; Possamai 2005; Heelas and Woodhead 2005). The critiques and possibilities offered by the diffuse milieu have been in competition for air space with atheists. Possamai (2009) and Turner (2010)
suggest that the new spirituality in the postmodern world is genuinely a consumerist religion and while fundamentalism appears to challenge consumer Western values, it is also selling a lifestyle bounded by particular consumer preferences (allowances and restrictions on appropriate holy books, or clothing for example). Religion and irreligion can be viewed as a part of this popular cultural milieu. In a differentiated global religious market, segments of the market compete with each other and overlap (Turner 2010). This ‘low temperature’ religious economy potentially places religion and irreligion on the same footing due to their commercialised and democratised nature. Due to both of these trends, religion has become a major player in public culture and the politics of identity. As Grace Davie (2010: 160) states “religion is indeed resurgent in many parts of the world (that is clear), but it is also more readily recognised as a continuing and powerful force in both individual and social lives.” Thus religion, in diffuse and political forms, comes to compete for consumers with secular alternatives such as the ‘new atheism’ in a postsecular field as described earlier (Turner 2009; Zuckerman (ed.) 2010a). In this way, the theoretical stance on the ultimate demise of religion had also begun to have an effect on the irreligious movement of that time. Pasquale (2010) and Borer (2010) separately argue that the narrative of the new atheists partly stems from the secularisation thesis itself, as it has manifested in public thought. The failure of the thesis to play out through the disappearance of religion had many mid-century atheists questioning the utility of passive irreligion and looking for a more active solution.

Religion thus became the ideological driving force behind many new social movements including fundamentalisms, post-modern churches, alternative spiritualities, consumption neo-tribes, hyper-real religions (Stahl 2010; Possamai 2005; Maffesoli 1996; Heelas and Woodhead 2005) and as I will argue, the new atheism. In terms of the new atheism, the religious/spiritual landscape of a society restricts or enables the possibility of holding atheist or non-religious views, and is composed of religious systems which may impact on an individual’s right to be religion free. Thus the recent uprising of popular, science based irreligion will be seen as a competitor against ‘religion’, which is perceived as encroaching on ‘secular society’ from the viewpoint of the new
atheists. This group are attempting to continue the process of secularisation and maintain the gains they perceive the process to have achieved in society. Thus, despite the justifiable criticisms of secularisation, much change and reform is still occurring in this regard and has become increasingly visible since the new atheism and the Arab Awakenings (Ramadan 2012). Groups previously suppressed by dictatorships have been forced to negotiate for democratic power (for example via constitution in Egypt) between the interests of a number of different religious and secular groups (Ramadan 2012). Indeed, globalisation has also been considered as the worldwide expansion of secularism, rationalism and scientism (Obadia 2010).

Acknowledging the idea that many groups exist within the public sphere and that they are competitors, Eisenstadt’s (2000) *multiple modernities* theory implicitly critiques Bruce’s (2010 and others) *monolithic secularisation*. It achieves this by suggesting that modernism and secularisation will evolve differently depending on the local cultural context. In this view, modernity is a continual constitution of a multiplicity of cultural programs, and history matters. Thus the world is a space filled with multiple modernities, as different cultural groups negotiate modernisation. This is an intensely sensible suggestion in light of the many groups now competing for attention in the public sphere and if one takes cultural evolution seriously (as I do). In this view every culture has a different history that will affect its modernisation direction and potential. Likewise, different interpretations of modernity are more publicly accessible and visible in the postmodern world due to the transnational identity status of religion. The multiple modernities paradigm also makes sense in the light of Robertson’s (1992) suggestion that the tension between religion and globalisation is one between particularism and universalism; between the attempts to integrate religious groups into the world system and the resistance of these groups to the cultural project that comes with it (hence ‘Glocalization’).

Religion was clearly becoming visible in the Western public sphere at the turn of the 21st century due to the postmodern turn. Adding to this, the return of public religious voices to the public sphere was also making the basic assumption of the secularisation thesis seem less certain. Science and
secularisation seemed to be losing the public battle. Society therefore appeared to be a postsecular public battlefield for the irreligious, where their right to be free from religion was perceived as being under attack. Due to this, the last 10 years have seen a rise in secular and non-religious responses to religious and anti-science groups and a number of current solutions to the resurgence of religion are being tested by the irreligious system, within this newly recognised, competitive postsecular field.

**Dimensional Characteristics of the New Atheism**

As suggested above, the pressures caused by a post-Communist, postmodern, postsecular world quickly caused change, growth and new differentiation in the irreligious system of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. These changes were labelled as ‘new atheism’ in 2006 after the publication of a *Wired* magazine article on the movement (Wolf 2006). According to Lee, when a conference was organised on the topic of the new atheism, there was some consensus in support of a common sense definition of new atheism:

> Most identified new atheism with a particular and identifiable cultural movement, necessarily associated with the work of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Christopher Hitchens. Despite the notable differences in their approaches and interests, the combined work of these authors describe the cultural movement as a whole: a movement that is critical of “religion” and “theism”, promotes radical secularism and takes a view which is particularly informed by contemporary science (especially genetics and cognitive science) and scientism.\(^{39}\)

Lee goes on to suggest that:

> This general definition makes it possible to use the label as a measure of other things, not merely as a way of identifying a body of literature and broadcasts by these particular people.\(^{40}\)

---


\(^{40}\) Ibid
As Lee suggests, keeping a clear view of the new atheism in mind makes it possible to distinguish between types of irreligion. I will outline the descriptions of the new atheism found in the literature below, to provide a starting point for the investigations of the movement.

Public

According to Davies (2010), the new atheism seems to have a political dimension lacking in the writings of ‘old atheists’. In his vision of the old atheists, they tended to be happy to argue that there is no God and to leave matters at that. By contrast, in his view, new atheists want us to rid ourselves of religious belief and to become active members of what we might call an ‘atheist liberation movement’ devoted to the extermination of religion. It can be compared with movements active in promoting causes such as racial equality, feminism, and gay rights. In fact, within the new atheist literature reference has been made to the ‘gay revolution’ as a model for the new movement, suggesting that like this movement atheists should be ‘loud and proud’ in asserting their identity and equal rights (Linneman and Clendenen 2010; Pasquale 2010; Eller 2010).

The movement has also been described as ‘new’ due to its popularity in the media (Emilsen 2012). As Emilsen (2012) points out, the new atheists are like rock-stars: over two thousand delegates attended the 2010 Global Atheist Convention (GAC) in Melbourne, Australia to hear Dawkins, Grayling, Peter Singer, Tamas Pataki and many other prominent atheists speak. Two years later over 4500 attended the 2012 GAC (also in Melbourne, Australia), to see the ‘Four Horsemen’ (minus the late Hitchens who died of cancer complications shortly before the conference and was honoured at the meeting). These events show the drawing power of such speakers and therefore illustrates their popularity. Flynn, in a 2010 column entitled Why I Don’t Believe in the New Atheism, stated that all that is ‘new’ is that major publishers have agreed to publish their radical and blistering attacks on religion. Others (Blackford 2012) have also noted this as a major feature of the new atheist movement. As supported by the best-seller status of the literature, these factors could mean that a larger proportion of the public are willing to accept a more extreme
stance on the validity of religion, and conversely, to value scientific and atheistic views. It is the accessibility of the information and its public visibility that is truly new. Atheism is here and not over there as Taylor (2007) points out: it is a choice in the 21st century and a plausible one.

The idea in the public activities of the new atheists seems to be to a ‘normalisation’ of the atheist image in the public eye via various social channels. They can be viewed as providing reasoning and pathways towards atheism (Cimino and Smith 2010). Cimino and Smith (2010) argue that the new atheism has opened up space for American Freethinkers who have historically been incredibly limited in scope. American atheists have lacked the pathways towards atheism available to those in other spaces such as Europe and I would suggest, Australia. ‘Coming out’ as an atheist in the US has historically been difficult due to stigma (World Values Survey 1999; cited in Bullivant 2010). However, Cimino and Smith (2010) see a weakening in this stigma both prior to and as a result of the new atheism. This was recently illustrated through President Obama’s speech in which he stated “we are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus and non-believers” (January 2009). Many atheists commented on this speech as it indicated a change in attitudes towards the non-religious in a country traditionally known for high levels of religion. The speech was made shortly after the rise of the new atheism, indicating that non-religion had entered US public perceptions, potentially due to the movement itself. The new atheists’ success in the US was a shock to most, including the new atheists themselves as demonstrated via an interview with Hitchens in which he expresses joy and surprise at his appearance on a mainstream US television program (Bullivant 2010). According to Bullivant (2010), the feeling that the new atheism is ‘new’ may come more from this place and visibility within the public sphere, than the arguments in the books themselves. Even if not the only form of public irreligion, the new atheists do appear to be a particularly public and popular irreligious movement. Their recognised public nature reinforces earlier discussions about the need for public visibility in a postsecular world. However, there are also irreligious individuals who feel that the public irreligion being promoted by the new atheists is either too dangerous to expose
or too aggressive. They thus choose to remain covert or semi-public (via the use of pseudonyms) as will be evidenced in Chapter 4.

Confrontation

Many have discussed the confrontational nature of the new atheists. In McGrath’s (2009: 121) opinion, all that is ‘new’ is “the aggressiveness of the rhetoric, which often seems to degenerate into bullying and hectoring”. John Gray, Professor of European Thought at the London School of Economics takes a more negative stance. He says bluntly in *Black Mass* (2007), that what distinguishes the new atheism from earlier varieties of non-belief is little more than its ‘intellectual crudity’, which is put down to a lack of knowledge in theological matters and the aggressive tone that many perceive the new atheists to employ. Emilsen (2012: 523) argues, it is possible to identify two premises running throughout new atheist writings:

1. That belief in God is irrational in an age of science.
2. That religion is dangerous, poisonous and evil (‘religion poisons everything’, says Christopher Hitchens).

Thus to Emilsen (2012) the emphasis is on rhetorically destroying ‘religion’. Amarasingam (2010a) agrees, arguing that though much of the content of the new atheism has past precedents, it is only the urgency and aggressiveness of the message that is quite new. In other words, the new atheism is not entirely about new ideas, but takes the form of a kind of evangelical revival and repackaging of old ideas. As Emilsen (2012) suggests, certainly new atheists do not pretend to be neutral observers; they vigorously try to persuade their readers that not only are the central claims of religion false but that the respect given to religion in Western culture is misguided. It is clear that fear of ‘religious’ irrationality is a significant theme shared by the Four Horsemen of atheism, and they wish to do all they can to curtail ‘religion’ (De Lashmutt 2009; Hay 2007). They each argue that irrationality is part of *all* religions and so all religions can potentially gestate harmful and violent adherents. From this perspective, religion should be eradicated to prevent further growth of the radicalised (De Lashmutt 2009). The narrative of the new atheists’ states that
religions may have helped to bring primitive peoples together in our ancestral past, but their usefulness has long since expired.

Many authors have suggested that the strong points of view in the new atheist works are more likely to turn religious people off, rather than convert them (Geertz 2009; Fiala 2009; De Lashmutt 2009; Peterson 2007; Koch 2008). The dispute between new atheists and accommodationists represents one of the earliest splits in the movement and one of the earliest critiques of new atheists’ confrontational methods. One example of this kind of reaction comes from Koch (2008):

What we need is not knee-jerk atheism but serious grappling with the issues—neither of you [Dennett and Dawkins] are willing to study Christianity seriously and to engage with the ideas—it is just plain silly and grotesquely immoral to claim that Christianity is simply a force for evil, as Richard claims—more than this, we are in a fight, and we need to make allies in the fight, not simply alienate everyone of good will (Ruse 2006; cited in Koch 2008: 41).

Koch (2008) took the above quote from an e-mail exchange between atheist and philosopher of biology Michael Ruse and new atheist Daniel Dennett. Madeleine Bunting also related the matter as part of a piece entitled Why the intelligent design lobby thanks God for Richard Dawkins (2006), agreeing with Ruse (2006; cited in Koch 2008) that both Dawkins and Dennett provide unintentional aid to Intelligent Design (see Laats 2010 for descriptions) proponents because of their ferocity and frank atheism (Koch 2008). The strident assertiveness of the new atheism can make it appear to be merely the dialectical opposite of religious fundamentalism to many people (Fiala 2009; Stahl 2010). Borer (2010) argues that the new atheists’ style of confrontation and coercion can be understood by Christian Smith’s ‘sub-cultural identity theory’. This theory suggests that the worldview of a movement is likely to be strengthened by purposefully maintaining a tension with society. The one sided aggressiveness of the new atheism could also be seen as a wedge that is opening up space for atheist discourse as Cimino and Smith (2010) argue in the American case. Thus, it should be judged at least partly on that level as a movement that does not have
Chapter 3: What is the New Atheism?

to conform to “civility, nor to the dictates of general interest” (Cimino and Smith 2010: 152). They can be expressed for what they are: “particular, regional, one sided and for that reason, politically alive” (Carpignano et al. 1993; cited in Cimino and Smith 2010: 152). Due to postmodernism, public visibility issues now run in both directions (religious and non-religious) and one could argue that at least part of the reason for atheists being considered aggressive and outspoken could simply be their new visibility as a public group (Cimino and Smith 2010).

Whatever the case, the emphasis is on the confrontational aggressiveness that these commentators see as a hallmark of the movement. All of these analyses, no matter what their level of value judgement, point to the confrontational nature of the new atheists. Confrontation is a way of asserting a position against opposition in a competitive environment. Meekly accommodating religious views out of sense of respect is unlikely to be productive if your competitor already appears to be aggressive and increasingly influencing public opinions. Thus, if the postsecular field consists of a field containing both the religious and the irreligious, it seems bound to give rise to competition. However, there are also those atheists who believe that compromise can be a useful tool in preserving science and belief in science, as will be seen with the ‘accommodationists’ in Chapter 5.

Elimination

It appears that the new atheists are mostly associated with the elimination of religious ritual and practices and with believing in no particular practice. However, this may actually come down to Campbell’s (1972) observation, that researchers and society have often treated irreligious views as if they only exist in a negative form. In this vein, Eller (2010) sees the new atheism as only the first step, noting that atheism currently sits at Nietzsche’s second metamorphosis, the nay-sayer, lion or egoist; attacking and criticising theism. He suggests that it will be hard for the new atheists to move on to the ‘creation’ stage while they are still preoccupied with destroying ‘theism’ (Eller 2010). A truly new atheism must move beyond the nay-saying to Nietzsche’s third metamorphosis, the child, the yes-sayer and creator. Thus the new atheism may
be the last gasps of the ‘old atheism’. The future of atheism may not be in disproving Gods but in moving forward without them, in creating things that do not include them. To Eller (2010) future atheism is the freedom to establish new norms and institutions and to tear them down and establish new ones again. In a similar vein, Fuller (2010) draws a distinction between ‘atheism’ and ‘Atheism’, suggesting like Eller (2010) that the new atheism is stuck in a cycle of critique and will only move on to become Atheism once it gives up critique and becomes a ‘positive philosophy’, creating a new society, based on Atheist principles, without the image of God.

However, the way that new atheists present science, nature and morality leads to a less clear picture of the new atheists as complete eliminationists. Compared to Dostoevsky’s ‘no rules’ atheist (Campbell 1972), the new atheists seem to think that we must have rules and they must emerge from somewhere (Bullivant 2010; Harris 2004, 2011; Dawkins 2006; Dennett 2006). They have provided many examples of secular or irreligious morality, rituals and texts that could be used in replacement of the religious kind. In resonance with this evidence, Bradley (2009: 20) suggests that “a certain mythopoeia persists in the writings of the new atheists themselves” (referring to the Four Horsemen in this case). For the new atheists it is not enough that evolution is scientifically true, it must also now be “universally acknowledged as beautiful, awe inspiring, even poetic” (Bradley 2009: 20). The possibility of finding grandeur in science has, by the new atheists, been turned into a necessity. As pointed out by Bradley (2009: 20), in Taylor’s *A Secular Age* he detects a piety in the new atheism, as the attacks on religion are pushed forward in the name of a “neo-Lucretian reverence for the natural world from which we came and which we will return.” This mythopoeic turn would certainly help to explain the popularity of the new works; linking to narrative can be powerful, as Bellah (2011) argues in his *Religion in Human Evolution*. Narrative mythology is a strong part of our cognitive past and one of the four types of cognition he proposes we use to think about society (Episodic, Memetic, Mythic and Theoretical). The connection of science and atheism to cosmic meanings to provide an ontological support structure is a large part of the move towards providing substitutes for religious practices (Nixon 2012). New atheism presents triumphalist hyper-real
narratives of scientific superiority and progress, while also presenting as a minority under attack, in order to enchant science and support the moral/ontological views of atheists. This in turn could allow atheists to feel that their worldview is as full, if not more full, than those of the religious (Nixon 2012). Similarly, Blum (2012) argues that Richard Dawkins’s portrayal of science in *The God Delusion* serves protective ends similar to apologetics. According to Blum (2012: 200), Dawkins (2006) construes science as “an indefeasible explanatory framework with unlimited scope, both insulating it from the possibility of disconfirmation and expanding its boundaries far beyond common notions of ‘science.’” These rhetorical strategies are invoked to protect certain forms of discourse.

The term ‘spirituality’ also brings the eliminationist nature of the new atheists into question. Spirituality is a term that is avoided by many of the irreligious due to its supernatural loading in normal discourse, but others show signs of a softening in this regard, (Comte-Sponville 2008; Hay 2007; Harris 2004; Dawkins 2006) with some such as Harris (2004) even suggesting that some forms of eastern mysticism are compatible with atheism (his presentation at the GAC 2012 consisted of leading a mindfulness meditation session). On the sidelines of the movement, figures such as Wilson (2002), De Botton (2012), Comte-Sponville (2008), Stedman (2012) and Harris (2004, 2011, forthcoming 2014 – *Waking Up: A Guide to Spirituality Without Religion*), have begun to explore the secular utility of religious practices. Stedman’s approach is more diplomatic (a process of sharing ideas, ritual and empathy), whereas Wilson’s quite scientific (the social survival capacity of enclaves created by religious connections), Comte-Sponville outlines the utility of ‘spirituality’ and ‘faith’ for atheists, De Botton (2012) can be seen as picking and mixing parts of religion for atheist use and Harris (2004, 2011, 2014 forthcoming) explores the utility of spirituality for irreligious brains. The examples found in the literature outline the difficulty of definitively categorising new atheists as eliminationists, even if this is their outward projection. Adding to this, new atheists Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins and A. C. Grayling have begun utilising the word spirituality in recent discourse as will be elaborated in Chapter 6. The emergence of the *Sunday Assembly* an atheist organisation that uses church worship structures to
celebrate atheist life can be seen as an upcoming example of this kind of exploration in the public arena as also evidenced in Chapter 6. All of these groups and individuals explore these ideas (accommodation, evolutionary utility, social utility and utility of spirituality) while staying publicly in the atheist camp. The suspicion of religious ritual in mainstream representations of the new atheism seems contradicted by the efforts of the irreligious both in and outside the movement. In many ways the current milieu seems engaged in a re-evaluation of religious and spiritual ideas. This again reinforces earlier discussions on the postsecular, as many of the irreligious do appear to be in the process of interpenetrating secular and religious ideas within a public and potentially postsecular field.

Intellectual

Stenger (2009) gives a reason for the newness of the movement. He thinks that its central proponents write mainly from a scientific perspective. Dawkins is a biologist and Stenger, himself, a physicist and astronomer. Harris is a neuroscientist and Dennett is a philosopher of science who has written almost exclusively on scientific topics. While Hitchens was not a scientist but a journalist, his approach to religion, according to Stenger (2009), is empirical. In resonance, Davies (2010) suggests that unlike many ‘old atheists’, the new ones tend to lay stress on science as positively disproving what theists believe. As Le Drew (2012) suggests, the new atheists tend to ignore sociological perspectives on religion, favouring a reductionist approach in which religion is put down to by-products of evolutionary and psychological mechanisms. Le Drew's (2012) analysis draws attention to the fact that such a split may have historical roots, a point which enabled the further historical interrogation of the idea. It is possible to see that the new atheists have indeed ejected some earlier material in the form of the tragic Humanistic philosophies that attempt to understand religion at a social level. So while the new atheists do take on what Campbell (1972) describes as 20th century Humanism; an ontological form of Humanism that uses evolution and materialism as its foundation; the idea is different from Le Drew’s (2012) empathetic or tragic Humanism, represented by the Socialist and Anarchist (postmodern) movements of the 20th century. Indeed, Feuerbach,
Freud, Marx and Nietzsche are conspicuously missing from new atheist accounts or played down through various arguments (Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007; Dennett 2006). Le Drew (2012) outlines the new atheist’s connection with these two traditions, suggesting that it is based more squarely in the intellectual atheist camp. The new atheists wield the Victorian discourse of an eternal conflict between religion and science for the polemical purpose of advancing the view that religion is a lingering feature of the pre-modern world. This is the essence of what Le Drew (2012) has called scientific atheism, and according to him, their thought can be placed in this category.

Even though the new atheists have claimed to be writing from a scientific perspective, there has been much criticism of the methods and ideas they have used in their arguments around religion. Sociological and empathetic notions of why people are religious are missing from the new atheist books (Le Drew 2012). ‘Religion’ is generally treated as an intellectual issue, it is caused by a ‘deficit’ in the knowledge of the religious individual, incorrect belief or an ability to compartmentalise their secular and religious thoughts (Evans and Evans 2010; Dawkins 2006; Zuckerman 2010a). This contrasts with more empathetic treatments such as Feuerbach, Marx, Nietzsche and Camus, who clearly understand that there are human needs behind the drive to religion (Evans and Evans 2010). These ideas emphasise the scientific and intellectual of the new atheists rather than empathetic, philosophical or Humanist leanings (see Le Drew 2012). Their general treatment of ‘religion’ has also brought doubt to the scientific nature of their endeavour, pointing towards the movement being more about rhetoric than science.

Davies (2010: 20) states that “they often talk about something called ‘religion’ and (especially in the case of Dawkins and Hitchens), they focus on what they call ‘belief in God’. But, we might ask, ‘Which religion?’ and ‘Whose God?’” His impression is that the new atheists have not studied the fathers of ‘old atheism’ or the fathers of theism in its classical Christian form. To Davies (2010: 20), new atheists (Dawkins and Hitchens anyway) seem to identify belief in God with “what is commonly called ‘creationism’.” Amarasingam (2010b) also believes that it is likely new atheists believe fundamentalists to be the best
representation of religion as a whole. Amarasingam (2010b) takes the argument further, showing that the new atheists are employing the Fundamental Attribution Bias described by Social Psychologists. This means that all positive in-group behaviour is attributed to the individual, while negative in-group behaviours are attributed to wider issues. This in direct opposition to how out-groups are viewed. Extreme individual examples of bad religion are used to dismiss the whole project, while individually bad atheists are dismissed as an anomaly. This reinforces the idea of new atheists’ works as being rhetorical rather than scientific. Martinson (2012) explains this by suggesting that the arguments put forward by the new atheists, while coated in scientific rhetoric, are in fact value judgments based on taste.

Linscott (2012: 39) argues that “the most rhetorically compelling claim of new atheism, that religion is at odds with the basic values of humanity, is also the point of their greatest philosophical deficiency.” Haught (2008) is frustrated with the fact that the new atheists have dismissed theology as a whole, without, in his view, really engaging with it. This strategy, Haught (2008: 63) believes, is unfortunate because “a well-thought-out military strategy sooner or later has to confront the enemy at its strongest point, but each of our critics has avoided any such confrontation. Unlike the great leaders in war, these generals have decided to aim their assaults exclusively at the softest points in the wide world of faith.” This point by Haught (2008) is an important one, and has frustrated many scholars of religion. Agreeing, Martinson (2012: 75) claims that “it cannot be denied that some of the most high profile intellectual atheist critics of religion are curiously arrogant, and their own arguments do not always live up to the academic standards they put forward against religion.”

Interestingly, especially for the purposes of this study, such reactions are not confined to religious intellectuals. An atheist philosopher, Liedman (2008) has attacked the new atheists for being exclusively antagonistic in their lack of tolerance and blindness to the aesthetics and cultural values of religious individuals. Another atheist, Ruse (2009), has confessed that he feels deeply embarrassed to be an atheist when he confronts the kind of intellectual sloppiness that is typical of Dawkins’ book *The God Delusion* (2006). Eagleton
What, one wonders, are Dawkins’s views on the epistemological differences between Aquinas and Duns Scotus? Has he read Eriugena on subjectivity, Rahner on grace, or Moltmann on hope? Has he even heard of them? Or does he imagine like a bumptious young barrister that you can defeat the opposition while being complacently ignorant of its toughest case?

These authors suggest that new atheist exponents largely write with little reference to the history of theology. It is unclear whether the writings of the new atheists are aimed at religious fundamentalists or religion en bloc.

Having carefully reviewed these texts I entirely agree with this proposition, from the position of a religious scholar, the new atheists are prone to confrontational and unjustified generalisations about religion and the actions of religious people (Dawkins 2006; Harris 2004; Hitchens 2007). While the negative characterisations of religion may be correct in some cases, there is an ironic confirmation bias in the new atheist writings, which makes their assessments of religion less scientific than they apparently desire. Negative characterisations and actions are ‘cherry picked’ (a popular term of derision in the new atheist milieu, hence there is some irony here) to make religion into a negative caricature. In connection with the accusation of sociological and theological ignorance, the new atheists are also often accused of scientism (Fuller 2010; Lee 2012). Scientism is the belief that the methods of science are a supervening mode of knowing that can be imposed on other disciplines whose methods have had a different organic evolution. Most of the concrete results in historical studies, biblical studies, history of religion, textual studies (paleography), linguistics and assorted disciplines have been based on methods specific to their objects. The new atheists’ authors deny the authority and validity of specific methods without knowing them. The scientistic worldview favoured by them has relied heavily on the trivialisation of appropriate methods for understanding religion (Fuller 2010). In summary, the new atheism has
ejected the early empathetic versions of Humanism for more intellectually based versions; they ignore many of the historical (empathetically oriented) arguments for the human drive to God; and they downplay methods for studying religion that have been developed by other disciplines, leading to scientism. Thus, it seems that the new atheists are most certainly on the intellectual side of the empathetic/intellectual dimension. However, as is discussed in Chapter 7, new movements have emerged from the new atheist milieu that show signs of empathetic tendencies in both their activism and understandings of the need for religion.
INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Sites of Analysis

Because of the high number of sites accessed for this research, I will not show a table of sites but reference them in footnotes for the reader’s convenience. The sites used are popular in nature and connected to other sites in the new atheist network as discovered through ethnographic observations, interviews and social network analysis. Internet participant observations allow access to the meso-sociological level, where the interaction of individuals, leaders and their worldviews can lead to shifts in public meanings and understandings of such worldviews.

Definitions of Atheism

The definition of atheism given on the internet are exhibit a negative, agnostic form of atheism, with a split between those who wish to use the dictionary definition alone and those who would like to add more meaning to the term.41 42

The broader, and more common, understanding of atheism among atheists is quite simply “not believing in any gods.” No claims or denials are made — an atheist is just a person who does not happen to be a theist. Sometimes this broader understanding is called “weak” or “implicit” atheism. Most good, complete dictionaries readily support this.43

Simply put, atheism means the absence of theistic belief. That’s it. It doesn’t mean anything else. Atheism is not a religion, a philosophy, a worldview, or anything similar. It is not the conviction that there are no gods, ghosts, angels, etc. Rather, it is the absence of a belief that these things are real... Atheism is nothing more than the lack of belief

in a god or gods... Atheism does not require absolute certainty that
god(s) do not or cannot exist. Some atheists may indeed claim such
certainty. These individuals are sometimes described as "strong
atheists." Nobody disputes the existence of such atheists. The point is
that certainty is not a necessary condition of atheism. One who
asserts that there "probably" is no god is still an atheist. In fact,
one need not assert anything to be an atheist. One need only refuse
to accept the theistic belief claim.44

It is used in corrections to the accusation that atheists are arrogant or
overstretching their claims and has become a major part of the evidenced based
worldview that this group claims.

For the most part, atheists have presumed that the most reasonable
conclusions are the ones that have the best evidential support. And
they have argued that the evidence in favor of God’s existence is too
weak, or the arguments in favor of concluding there is no God are
more compelling.45

Atheism does not require absolute certainty that god(s) do not or
cannot exist. Some atheists may indeed claim such certainty. These
individuals are sometimes described as "strong atheists." Nobody
disputes the existence of such atheists. The point is that certainty is
not a necessary condition of atheism. One who asserts that there
"probably" is no god is still an atheist. In fact, one need not assert
anything to be an atheist. One need only refuse to accept the theistic
belief claim.46

Agnostic Atheism
The negative definition of atheism being employed by atheists on the internet
leads to the use of the technical identity term ‘agnostic atheist’. Figure 4 from

44 Atheist Revolution, 2009. What is Atheism? viewed 1 October 2013:
http://www.atheistrev.com/2009/04/what-is-atheism.html#ixzz2qhyZBcLId
45 McCormick, M. Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy: Atheism, viewed 1 October 2013:
http://www.iep.utm.edu/atheism/
46 Atheist Revolution, 2009. What is Atheism? viewed 1 October 2013:
http://www.atheistrev.com/2009/04/what-is-atheism.html#ixzz2gcqUQ11f
Godless Business (2010) illustrates how the relationships between the different stances are being viewed by the modern irreligious community. The figure has two dimensions with an extreme on either end of a continuum; atheist/theist and gnostic/agnostic. The atheist/theist dimension indicates the extent to which a person believes in the existence of a deity. The gnostic/agnostic dimension indicates the ability to know that such a thing exists. Gnostic means someone who knows and agnostic means someone who does not know. Thus a ‘gnostic theist’ would be 100% certain that there is a God, whereas an ‘agnostic theist’ would be uncertain about the ability to know anything about God but choose to believe anyway. A ‘gnostic atheist’ is 100% certain there is no God, whereas the ‘agnostic atheist’ is uncertain about the ability to know anything about God, but chooses to disbelieve anyway.

Figure 4: Agnostic versus Gnostic Diagram

My ethnography and reading of the new atheist books confirms that this is the idea behind the agnostic atheist term. It relates to what has become known as Hitchens’ Razor, a translation of the Latin proverb *Quod gratis asseritur, gratis negatur* - what can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence. Hitchens made it more accessible through translation in a Slate article called Mommie Dearest in 2003 and then in his book *God Is Not Great: How*

---

*Religion Poisons Everything* in 2007. Dawkins used his version in *The God Delusion* to argue against agnosticism, which he described as ‘poor’ in comparison to atheism, because it refuses to judge on claims that are, even though not falsifiable, very unlikely to be true. This comment could be seen as one point of genesis for the claims of my interview participants. This idea, agnostic atheism is extremely common online, showing just how effective this argument has been. Richard Dawkins has used a seven point *spectrum of theistic probability* to help people describe themselves with regard to their level of conviction about theism and atheism, based on probabilities. Dawkins (2006: 50) describes it as:

1. Strong theist. 100 per cent probability of God. In the words of C.G. Jung: “I do not believe, I know.”
2. De facto theist. Very high probability but short of 100 per cent. “I don’t know for certain, but I strongly believe in God and live my life on the assumption that he is there.”
3. Leaning towards theism. Higher than 50 per cent but not very high. “I am very uncertain, but I am inclined to believe in God.”
4. Completely impartial. Exactly 50 per cent. “God’s existence and non-existence are exactly equiprobable.”
5. Leaning towards atheism. Lower than 50 per cent but not very low. “I do not know whether God exists but I’m inclined to be sceptical.”
6. De facto atheist. Very low probability, but short of zero. “I don’t know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there.”
7. Strong atheist. “I know there is no God, with the same conviction as Jung knows there is one.”

This scale relies on the idea of probabilities because it acknowledges the impossibility of definitively knowing that God does not exist. Such knowledge is an epistemological impossibility because of the way God is defined. Thus it implicitly contains the agnostic epistemological element, while suggesting that one can still decide that the evidence on hand is not convincing and become an atheist (the ontological element), one who does not ‘believe’ that there is a God.
Dawkins self-identified as a ‘6’ in *The God Delusion*, though when interviewed by Bill Maher\(^48\) and later by Anthony Kenny,\(^49\) he suggested that a 6.9 might be more accurate. Jerry Coyne\(^50\) also labels himself as a 6.9. The use of these very high numbers indicates that these two are extremely confident in their ‘belief’ because the probability of God’s existence is so low. Even at this point they shy away from complete certainty, sticking to the described split between ontology and epistemology.

The term ‘agnostic atheist’, which has become associated with this line of thinking originates with Bertrand Russell (1952), and he can be seen as the genesis of this viewpoint from the new atheist perspective. Russell uses the example of the celestial teapot to illustrate the validity of the position and that the *Burden of Proof* is on the claimant, a story relayed in *The God Delusion* (2006: 52). To illustrate the idea, Russell puts forward a scenario where someone claims there is a teapot orbiting the sun. It is invisible and impervious to normal methods of discovery. It would be impossible to know that the teapot does not exist and most people would not believe in it, but because they cannot know whether the object exists they must remain a technical agnostic. Therefore, one’s view with respect to the teapot would be an ‘agnostic ateapotist’, because while they don’t believe in the existence of the teapot, they don’t claim to know for certain. As the following quotes show, the Burden of Proof is another common term associated with arguments around the validity of atheist stances:

> We can keep this brief: defining atheism accurately reduces epistemological confusion and reminds us where the burden of proof rests.\(^51\)


\(^{50}\) Coyne, J.A. *Why Evolution is True*, viewed 20 January 2014: [http://jerrycoyne.uchicago.edu/about.html](http://jerrycoyne.uchicago.edu/about.html)

“Burden of proof” is the obligation that somebody presenting a new or remarkable idea has to provide evidence to support it. Often, someone will present a new idea and say that it must be accepted because it cannot be disproved. This is insufficient because without evidence there is no reason to accept an idea, even if there is no contrary evidence.52

Extraordinary claims require extraordinary evidence (Sagan 1980).

The argument suggests that the onus is on those claiming knowledge to provide evidence that supports the claim, thus Sagan’s (1980) comment about ‘extraordinary evidence’ is another illustration of the concept. If such a claim is made it will require evidence that is similarly extraordinary. This is the same view that an agnostic atheist, according to my participants, would hold with respect to God. In this model agnosticism and atheism occupy two different spaces, with agnosticism being an epistemic term, as in what is possible to know for sure, and atheism representing the belief component, as in ‘I believe on the balance of evidence I have that God is improbable, therefore I choose not to believe’. This argument is often put in terms of fairies and dragons in order to illustrate the point, that is, ‘do you believe in fairies simply because you cannot show for certain that they do not exist?’ The tactic of using the technical term agnostic atheism often leads to outcries of ‘Dawkins admits he is an agnostic’ when Dawkins or another atheist uses the term agnostic atheist or someone discovers the use of the term.53 Though the term agnostic atheism has existed since the early years of the new atheism, it seems to have increased in popularity in the last few years and is now showing up in Google Trends (Figure 5) searches. This is even more interesting when one considers that atheists do not use this as term of self-identification in general discourse. This is a technical term employed in argument or defence. Thus its appearance in trends indicates that atheists are using this term more often in self-defence, reinforcing the idea

that this was the purpose of its creation and that in atheist eyes at least, it has been successful.
Dictionary or Plus

I will begin my exploration of the dictionary or plus discussion with a case from 2011 that arguably (as in any complex system due to originary complexity) initiated the split between new atheists and Atheism Plus. In a post called Why Are You an Atheist? in February 2011, popular blogger and scientist PZ Myers set off a storm by pointing to a type of atheist that he considered detrimental to the atheist cause.

Dictionary Atheists. Boy, I really do hate these guys. You’ve got a discussion going, talking about why you’re an atheist, or what atheism should mean to the community, or some such topic that is dealing with our ideas and society, and some smug wanker comes along and announces that “Atheism means you lack a belief in gods. Nothing more. Quit trying to add meaning to the term.” As if atheism can only be some platonic ideal floating in virtual space with no connections to anything else; as if atheists are people who have attained a zen-like ideal, their minds a void, containing nothing but atheism, which itself is nothing. Dumbasses. If I ask you to explain to me why you are an atheist, reciting the dictionary at me, you are saying nothing: asking why you are a person who does not believe in god is not answered when you reply, “Because I am a person who does not believe in god.” And if you protest when I say that there is
more to the practice of atheism than that, insisting that there isn’t just makes you dogmatic and blind.

Myers point here is that no one comes to atheism without reasons and that to therefore define yourself by the dictionary definition seems pointless. The comic below (Figure 6), found in the same article, illustrates the point that atheism comes with other attachments:

![Comic Illustrating Atheism and Other Attachments](image)

**Figure 6: Atheism – Associated Meanings and Identity Terms**

Myers also illustrates the point via an anecdote about what it is to be human, which he points out is rarely done by negation:

---

“I am a human because I am not a squirrel, or a hyena, or a fish, or broccoli,” some said, “and I resent the fact that you think there’s more to me than being a not-squirrel!”

The dictionary atheist side the argument is that adding more meaning to atheism is not productive, as it stretches the meaning of atheism to exclude those who do not hold certain political or philosophical positions. This is because they feel that Myers is attempting to attach notions such as liberal politics, feminism and social justice to the definition of atheism. For example, an atheist could be conservative (and I have evidence that these atheists exist, see Chapter 7) and therefore not hold the values that Myers is attempting to add to the term. Atheism as a broad umbrella term can encompass all atheists. Whereas under Myers’ definition, atheism would become a small umbrella term that only includes those atheists who agree with certain ideals, or potentially, create a number of internal factions.

On the web and blogospheres, some people embraced Myers’ critique of dictionary atheism, even after an initially negative reaction. To these atheists the dictionary definition tells us nothing about the other stances of the atheist. One must go beyond this definition in some way to gain any insight:

In my (privative) view, if there were no religious believers, there would of course be no atheists. The label would have never been invented, and would have no meaning. We are all, right now, aflagists, because none of us are flargists. We are all amulxists, because none of us are mulxists. I could make up dozens of undefined things we are not. But I prefer it when words actually have meaning, and give useful information. It makes no sense to call my baby flightless, although she is “dictionary flightless”. Since no babies are (I have asked them) active believers in any particular religion, it makes no sense at all to call them atheists. It is simply a dimension which is undefined with regard to babies.  


There are also those who give qualified support. They think Myers’ criticism is warranted while still wanting to make use of the dictionary definition. This perspective is congruent with the later clarifications made by Myers, as Atheist Revolution describes:

In a follow-up post, PZ clarified that he is not attempting to expand the definition of atheism and was merely railing against those who insist that it is sufficient to describe them. 57

To these people, the dictionary definition can be useful to identify those who do not believe in Gods, but more descriptors are necessary to understand the particular stances of individuals. Again, from Atheist Revolution:

Those who have been criticizing “dictionary atheism” are absolutely correct to point out that no atheists actually define themselves in the limited way described above. If I am permitted to use myself as an example, I’d say that I meet the above definition but that many additional concepts are needed to fill out my worldview (e.g., skeptic, etc.)... Unfortunately, this is also where much of the confusion enters. Some have suggested that the definition of atheism itself should be expanded to include many additional constructs. Others insist that the definition of atheism should be left alone, recognized as incomplete, and that we should instead view it as one of many building blocks supporting our worldviews. I count myself in this second group.58

In a slightly different tactic, the post below from Flyborg emphasises the idea that atheist is in fact a loaded word which inherently has multiple meanings attached to it. As an identifier, atheist does refer to particular types of individuals, as a word, it also has the dictionary definition. It is difficult to separate the two, despite the fact that the dictionary definition and the identity term have different uses which is where the confusion lies. Thus both must be maintained, but it may cause confusion over what an atheist entails.

58 Ibid
I initially disagreed with him [Myers] characterizing the word "atheist" as meaning more than "lack of belief in gods", but then he said it was a "loaded word", which is quite true. Words have multiple meanings, and sometimes the dictionary definition differs from actual usage of the word. The word atheist means "without belief in gods", but in it's USAGE, it refers to skeptical freethinkers who care about truth. Which can, unfortunately, create confusion and enable equivocation.59

Conversely, in any article or thread that discusses the dictionary atheist issue, even in recent years, examples of what Myers is flagging as an issue can be found, such as the following:

Let's try it this way: "Hi, my name is Shaun. I'm an atheist." tells you nothing other than what I don't believe. It tells you nothing about what I do believe (besides that I believe that my name is Shaun, which is immaterial here). If the word atheist meant anything besides this lack of belief, then I could not say that because it would necessarily imply another belief I have because it would be built into the word 'atheist.' But this is not the case, ergo atheist is nothing more than a lack of belief in any gods.60

Comments like this began to appear more frequently in the community from the time of Myers' article. Many people are keen to protect the dictionary definition of atheism against what they perceive as being an attack by Myers and others that followed. This is because there are atheists who believe that the dictionary definition does have its uses, and that extending the definition could have detrimental effects on the atheist cause. As discussed in this quote from blogger The Barefoot Bum:

Dictionary atheism has its uses: for one, it establishes atheism in the most broadest sense as a diverse group about whom it is difficult to draw generalizations. Thus, if you want to criticize specific atheist

ideas, it’s probably better to criticize the ideas directly, rather than using specific ideas to draw generalizations about “atheists.” 61

As the above quote indicates, there are some atheists that think the dictionary version of atheism can be used to the advantage of atheists. There were two main concerns with ejecting the dictionary definition as valid. Firstly, maintaining the dictionary definition as the core of the concept, without attachments, allows atheism to designate all atheists, no matter what their particular political leanings. This makes atheism a big canopy concept instead of restricting it to certain types of atheists, as shown in the quotes below:

People become atheists because of certain values, but these values don’t necessitate atheism. Following this, it doesn’t make sense to try to conflate them with atheism itself.62

I hate the guys who say non stamp collecting is not a hobby... they are dictionary non stamp collectors. I hate them... non stamp collecting means much more, it says how your brain works and how you use reason... I think Myers is going on a red herring there... atheism nowhere it alludes to using logic, reason and science. You can be an atheist just because you hate god, and be TOTALLY irrational and believe in wicca or some crap like that. 63

Secondly, there is concern about the way that those who believe in religion often tie atheism to certain life stances and ideologies. If the definition of atheism is allowed to extend to take on political factors, then this also leaves atheists open to criticism on these fronts. Thus atheists can be criticised as, for example, Socialists, Libertarians and Feminists.

It’s not easy being a PZed. What I think though is that the “dictionary atheist” argument is very important and valid in many cases, because

63 OXirix, 2013. PZ Myers on Science and Atheism: Natural Allies 2010, viewed 1 October 2013: http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=3U0MnBmSlhE
you have theists equating atheism with liberalism, socialism etc - there ARE certain fundamental values all honest atheists will exhibit, but with the amount of junk that is thrown on our heads, one has to make sure the base position for an argument is “I’m an atheist I don’t believe in gods - ask me about the rest”.\textsuperscript{64}

I like PZ and I agree with some of the things he says, but I have issue with his comments on “dictionary atheists” defining atheism as just the non belief in Gods. I don’t see why we have to attach positives to a negative position against someone else’s spooky positive claim! It just muddles the rest of the argument leaving the conversation wide open for theists to attach their messed up views on what atheism “means” to them: you’ve all heard them many times before... atheism = Hitler, Stalin. \textsuperscript{65}

Some even went so far as to accuse Myers of moving atheism in the direction of becoming a ‘religion’. The concern arises from the perception that Myers is trying to restrict the types of people that can be atheists, through prescribing the types of beliefs that an atheist must hold outside of their atheism:

Maybe I’m misunderstanding him, but it sounds like PZ is trying to turn atheism into this pseudoreligious cult where to be a true card-carrying member of Club Atheist, you have to agree with PZ on everything about religion and if you disagree with what PZ considers to be a core value, you’re not a real atheist and you should be mocked for being an idiot.\textsuperscript{66}

As the following quote shows this issue also carries forward into the disputes about \textit{Atheism Plus} that would emerge over the next few years:

\textit{Atheism+} seems like a religion to me. If Atheism is more than addressing the issue of the existence of God, then it becomes a

\textsuperscript{64}8DX, 2011. \textit{PZ Myers on Science and Atheism: Natural Allies 2010}, viewed 1 October 2013: \url{http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=3U0MnBmSlhE}
\textsuperscript{65}SupaShang, 2011. \textit{PZ Myers on Science and Atheism: Natural Allies 2010}, viewed 1 October 2013: \url{http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=3U0MnBmSlhE}
religion. The best thing about being a skeptic/freethinker atheist is to have different opinions on stuff. By trapping yourself with labels and ideologies arbitrarily, it becomes a creed, a renewal of beliefs, a religion. Just stick with Atheism.67

Figure 768 was posted by Friendly Atheist in response to Jen McCreight’s call for a new wave of atheism one year after a feminist controversy in 2011. This controversy, known as Elevatorgate, led to the emergence of Atheism Plus out of the main new atheist group. Thus the dictionary atheism discussion is directly related to the emergence of Atheism Plus and can be seen as part of the discourse that led to the split in the movement, as will be discussed in Chapter 7.

![Figure 7: Atheism Needs More](image)

The majority of comments on the Friendly Atheist’s post are negative, and most people at this point still argue against extending atheism’s definition. Atheism Plus is directly opposed by dictionary atheists who, following Elevatorgate, feel that Atheism Plus is attempting to attach feminism to atheism, a move which

67 Briggs, S, 2013. PZ Myers on Science and Atheism: Natural Allies 2010, viewed 1 October 2013: http://www.youtube.com/all_comments?v=3UJ0MnBmSlhE
dictionary atheists have opposed in the past as demonstrated in Myers’ article. Thus the dictionary/plus argument is tied to the emergence of *Atheism Plus*. There existed, even at this time, prior to *Elevatorgate*, a fear that splitting up the atheist community like this would undo the work of the new atheists and see the atheist community lose its united front against religion. Myers’ critique of dictionary atheism and the events of *Elevatorgate* can be seen as the main events leading to the more formal schism of *Atheism Plus*.

**Views on the New Atheism**

**New Atheism as an Ambiguous Term**

There are many in the online community who do not think of the term new atheism in a positive way. It is often seen as a derogatory term employed by the religious to insult atheists. Many note that the descriptions of the term are laced with negative adjectives such as ‘militant’, ‘aggressive’ or ‘narrow-minded’ as seen in the example below. This also resonates with Zenk’s (2012) discussion of the negative words surrounding the new atheism in the German media. It seems that this was also being felt outside of Germany, as illustrated in Cline’s discussion below:

A number of qualities are attributed to “new atheists” and “new atheism.” Here are a few which seem most popular: Militant, Fundamentalist, Rude, Intolerant, Dogmatic, Narrow-Minded, Confrontational. These attributes all have one thing in common: they are all negative. None of them are even neutral, never mind positive. It is thus no surprise that the people most likely to use the label “new atheist” are probably the least likely to count themselves as member of that group. They don’t use the label as a neutral, objective, or fair designation; it is, instead, a label designed solely to convey a negative evaluation and criticism. By hiding all that in just a label, however, the person making the criticism hopes to avoid being called upon to support it.⁶⁹

---

Others worry that the term is being used to stereotype movement members as a monolith. They feel that the term will be used to prejudge and discriminate against atheists. By using the term in this way all atheists can be dismissed using the negative vocabulary cited above.

The term sometimes acts as a straw-man, as it can be used to define the tactics or personal beliefs of non-believers en masse, ignoring internal differences and tensions within the movement.  

The term can however be viewed as both positive and negative. Though many online participants take issue with the term itself and its potentially negative employment, most seem to understand the movement itself, and the activities arising out of it, as positive.

New atheism is defined in both positive and negative ways. The positive definition of new atheism is a modern, 21st century movement in atheism which is openly critical of theism and religion and which is less willing to be accommodating to religious beliefs, traditions, or institutions. The negative definition of new atheism is a militant, fundamentalist movement dedicated to the eradication of religion. Either way, the concept of new atheism tends to overlap more established labels like strong atheism, explicit atheism, critical atheism, positive atheism, and antitheism.

Thus despite the issues, the term is acting as a rallying point for the contemporary irreligious community.

Global Rather than Local Focus

By combining my earlier observations with data gained from my interviews I was able to narrow the number of blog and other sites that appeared worthy of attention. This is surely not an exhaustive list but more of an averaged picture of the popular sites at the time of research. These sites are always dying and being created. Many of the blogs and personalities listed in my interviews are

---


included and I have used the original discoveries to find other blogs by reference from the originals, thus organically growing my blog list over time. Like in my interviews, what becomes clear is that the online scene is international in scope, including sites from around the world. My sample focuses on sites and personalities within the English speaking milieu and thus most of the sites will be based in the US, UK, Australia and Canada.

After the initial internet search and including my interview observations, I began looking for other resources that would back up the popularity of the sites I had discovered so far. One resource was About.com’s Reader’s Choice Awards, which included an atheism/agnosticism category. The rules for the awards state that:

To be eligible, a site must have been active for most of [2010]2011, still be active now, and be focused on providing a community for atheists, agnostics, skeptics, freethinkers, etc. It can include just about any sort of forum or social networking site. It can’t simply be a blog with comments.72

The awards were run in both 2010 and 2011, after which it seems to have been stopped due to a controversy in the community over diversity; many of the top named blogs from the previous years refused to take part in the poll.73 The number one most popular blog site in both polling years was Pharyngula (54% and 71%), second place in 2010 was the Friendly Atheist (20%) and in 2011 Greta Christina’s Blog (10%). The most popular Twitter account for 2010 was Religulous (28%), followed by PZ Myers Pharyngula (27%). In 2011 the Twitter winner was Ricky Gervais (52%), followed by Monicks (22%). These blogs and Twitter personalities, along with others in their networks, became major sources of information for my internet participant observation, and all were also mentioned in my interviews as being influential. This internet survey made it clear that the new atheism was international in scope and combined with the


insights from my interviews, these observations convinced the researcher that research on a global scale would be relevant and would provide a truer representation of the new atheism.

DimenSional Characteristics of the New Atheism

Taking quotes from this milieu, it can be seen that there was a feeling in the early new atheist milieu of connecting to others of like mind and that a united front was being formed against ‘the religious’ or those who were ‘anti-science’. An exploration of the definitions of the new atheism on the internet reveals a particular vision of what the new atheism represents. This view largely agrees with those discovered in my interview sample and the literature.

Public

Figure 8: Difference between the Old Atheists and the New Atheists

Turning to old atheism: Certainly Anglo-American universities and book publishers have long featured articulate thinkers who oppose religion. In terms of organizations, however, the atheistic cause has generally seemed marginal if not cranky.74

Figure 8 is a popular comic that portrays the difference between the old and the new atheists. The difference in this case is seen as being the difference in open public expression of atheist views. Unlike the ‘old atheists’, the ‘new atheists’ are not content to stay quiet about their views, they are asked to ‘come out’ as an atheist and normalise atheism through their presence. Using the popular view of the new atheism found on Wikipedia, it is seen as a growing, public form of irreligion that may actually be having effects on religious and irreligious demographics.

New Atheism is a social and political movement in favour of atheism and secularism promoted by a collection of modern atheist writers... There is uncertainty about how much influence the movement has had on religious demographics, but the increase in atheist groups, student societies, publications and public appearances has coincided with the non-religious being the largest growing demographic, closely followed by Islam and evangelicalism in the US and UK.75

Blackford76 discusses the explosion of publisher interest in atheist ideas at the beginning of the 21st century, unlike previous times when he thinks they were less accessible and rarely aimed at the general public. He suggests that the interest of publishers increased in 2004 and that, irreligious ideas were then available from major publishers. Others discuss the issue from the other side, suggesting that the public themselves were interested in the ideas being discussed by the new atheist authors and some such as Stenger (2009) openly adopting the term. He discusses both the publisher phenomenon and its uptake by the public:

The New Atheism is the name that was attached, often pejoratively, to the series of six best-selling books by five authors including myself that appeared in the period 2004-2008. Since then many have joined the movement, with an upsurge in books, freethinker

organizations and an exponential expansion on the blogosphere, spreading the word on atheism to thousands.\footnote{Stenger, V, 2014. \textit{What's New About The New Atheism?} viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://philosophynow.org/issues/78/Whats_New_About_The_New_Atheism}}

Whether it was publisher interest, or interest from the public themselves, the new atheism is most certainly viewed as a public form of atheism.

Confrontation

On the internet, a debate between the new atheists and those they call accommodationists has been ongoing for a number of years. The new atheists believe that religious ideas must be countered at every opportunity and that they cannot be ignored in interactions with other people no matter what the consequence to the interaction. As discussed again in the popular medium of \textit{Wikipedia}:

\begin{quote}
[The new atheists] have advocated the view that “religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises”.\footnote{Wikipedia, 2013. \textit{New Atheism}, viewed 1 January 2013: \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/New_Atheism}}
\end{quote}

This means that new atheists are often reluctant to work with the religious, even if they have common cause. On the other hand accommodationists feel that the core beliefs of people are less important than the goals they may share. A popular view from \textit{RationalWiki} describes this trait of the new atheism, providing the contrast with the accommodationists.

New Atheists may be contrasted with accommodationists, who argue that common ground may be found between the non-religious and those who have more moderate religious beliefs.\footnote{RationalWiki, 2013. \textit{New Atheism}, viewed 1 January 2013: \url{http://rationalwiki.org/wiki/New_Atheism}}

Accommodationists are often described as the ‘old atheists’ and the relationship also goes the other way as seen in the quote from Stenger below. This view ties in with the ahistorical interpretation of the ‘old atheists’ being employed by the new atheists as discussed in the history section of this chapter:

\begin{quote}
The old atheists criticize these positions as too uncompromising. They say we need to be more accommodating, be careful not to offend “deeply held beliefs,” and to work together with moderate
\end{quote}
religious groups if (for example) we are to keep creationism out of the schools.\textsuperscript{80}

The link between this dimension and the public dimension is a common theme, in order to be effective in the public domain, the new atheists seem to feel that they must employ confrontational tactics.

New Atheism currently refers most often to atheists who confront and challenge religious arguments and religious practices. This can be done in print through published works, online through digital publications and social media, and in person often through atheist organizations and meetings.\textsuperscript{81}

These tactics are mostly media based, consisting of face-to-face interaction and publishing both in print and online. Thus in terms of the internet population of atheists, it seems that the new atheism is seen as uncompromisingly confrontational on this dimension.

Elimination

Coyne of \textit{WhyEvolutionIsTrue} puts forward that one criticism of new atheism is that it does not provide any substitutes for the religion it is trying to remove.

New Atheists attack the evidence supporting religious belief, but of course atheists have been doing that for centuries. The real problem with New Atheism is that while it attacks religion, it fails to provide a substitute.\textsuperscript{82}

He also points out that some atheists do indeed concern themselves with the problem of replacing the needs of faith with secular alternatives. He points out Alain De Botton as one such figure, though seeing little merit in his solutions. His analysis is indicative of the more eliminationist tendencies of the new atheist camp, being contrasted here to substitutionist De Botton (2012). Though Coyne\textsuperscript{83} may not like De Botton’s particular solution he does not think that eliminates all possibilities in the domain. He puts forward philosopher Philip

\textsuperscript{82} Coyne, JA, 2012. \textit{Why Evolution is True: Why New Atheism is supposedly worse than the Old}, viewed 29 December 2013: https://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2012/10/24/why-new-atheism-is-supposedly-worse-than-the-old/
\textsuperscript{83} Ibid
Kitcher as having a more successful approach which sees the sense of community engendered by faith as something essential. After praising this aspect of religion, Coyne then goes on to suggest that there is a more important reason that religion remains strong in many places. He puts forward the ‘social insecurity’ hypothesis for religion, drawn from sociology (e.g. Zuckerman 2009). So he suggests, the substitute for religion may not be ‘atheist cathedrals’ or places where we can meet and discuss Hume every Sunday, but simply societies that make people more secure. These insights indicate a more empathetic understanding of the need for religion. Coyne is acknowledging that there may be social and personal security reasons that lead someone to believe in religious ideas. However, his solution is not the implementation of religion derived structures, but rather a continuation of the projects of modernity. This aligns with comments made by Dawkins where he disagrees with De Botton’s proposal to build a *Temple to Atheism* in London, saying:

> I think there are better things to spend this kind of money on. If you are going to spend money on atheism you could improve secular education and build non-religious schools which teach rational, sceptical critical thinking.\(^84\)

Thus it can be seen that new atheists have generally presented themselves as eliminationists. However, as will be shown in Chapter 6, there are negotiations occurring within the irreligious milieu over the place of religious-like rituals and words such as spirituality. Thus it becomes less clear that new atheists are, in fact, eliminationists. Though their spirituality appears to be of a distinctly anti-supernatural and this worldly kind, negotiations over such practices appear to be underway. There may be a mixing of secular and religious/spiritual like practices occurring in the irreligious milieu.

---

Intellectual

The intellectual dimension is illustrated through the connections between science, ‘scientism’ and the new atheism, which are clear on the internet. As Stenger states the new atheism:

Presupposes the validity of scientific theories and reason, and
applies them to religious phenomena in an attempt to disprove that
God exists and that religion is dangerous.85

The factor of presupposition of scientific theories is taken up by another definition found on the Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy. The description here shows the depth of the new atheist connections to intellectual ideas and science. It also hints at what some authors interpret as scientism, in that the new atheists feel that science is the only genuine basis for knowledge.

The New Atheists make substantial use of the natural sciences in both their criticisms of theistic belief and in their proposed explanations of its origin and evolution. They draw on science for recommended alternatives to religion. They believe empirical science is the only (or at least the best) basis for genuine knowledge of the world, and they insist that a belief can be epistemically justified only if it is based on adequate evidence. Their conclusion is that science fails to show that there is a God and even supports the claim that such a being probably does not exist. What science will show about religious belief, they claim, is that this belief can be explained as a product of biological evolution. Moreover, they think that it is possible to live a satisfying non-religious life on the basis of secular morals and scientific discoveries.86

Many online participants see the new atheists as inheritors of the same line of arguments used by older groups. To most in this group there is really nothing new in the intellectual arguments put forward by the new atheist authors.

85 Slick, M. What is the New Atheism? The Christian Apologetics & Research Ministry, viewed 1 January 2013: http://carm.org/new-atheism
However, the intellectual dimension of the new atheism is often linked with the public and confrontational dimensions as seen in the quote below:

New Atheism is a contemporary intellectual movement uniting outspoken atheists. The New Atheists' philosophies and arguments are generally consistent with those of their predecessors; what's "New" is a difference in style and intensity.\(^7\)

Many online participants suggest that the new atheists have abandoned the more Humanistic (empathetic) side of the irreligious tradition. They rarely mention figures such as Nietzsche, Sartre or Camus, who are generally associated with empathetic and social understanding of the need for religion and who were cautious of the possibility of objective, scientifically based morality. Instead they focus on intellectual discussions and actions designed to correct the deficit in knowledge that they feel causes religion.

---

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA

Participant interviews allowed the research to access the individual opinions of irreligious individuals with less direct influence from the public opinions surrounding them. Unlike the internet content above these conversations are not publicly visible and replicable. Thus the private nature of the interview process means that personal views expressed can be taken as less influenced by tendencies to conform to group level opinions. They also give the researcher insights into which particular public ideas are having an impact on the milieu. Thus via participant interviews I hope to capture a more objective picture of the influence of the new atheism from the individual standpoint.

Demographics

My interview sample consisted of Australians that had answered an advertisement calling for ‘Australian Atheists’ to undertake interviews about their atheism. In Australia ‘no-religion’ is the favoured category used to describe those who do not hold religion or one of the listed religions in the Australian census. It does not necessarily contain only atheists (ABS 2011). However, though their declared numbers are small, the main focus of my study was on the irreligious, who in Australia, go by a variety of labels (Table 1). The largest group is the non-specific ‘non-religious’ with 22.3% (ABS 2013a), followed by ‘atheist’ with 1.2% (ABS 2013b). To attain demographic data from my interviews, participants were asked for their age, gender, country, state, birthplace, educational attainment, occupation and how they discovered the research. All Australian states except the Northern Territory (NT) are represented in my sample. New South Wales (NSW) is over-represented in the sample (NSW holds one third (34.5%; ABS 2012) of the population of Australia), with over half of my respondents coming from this state (51% Table 3). Although there was no specific call for people from NSW, this discrepancy may be explained by my University being located in NSW and the tendency of people to assume they would have to meet me face-to-face (despite indicating to the contrary in the advertising and documentation provided). Of the respondents, 64% held a tertiary qualification of Bachelor Degree or higher, which is higher than the Australian average where 25% are in this category (ABS 2013d). Based
on past research (Barber 2012; Lynn, Harvey and Nyborg 2009), this higher level of education would be expected in the irreligious population. The occupation sample is varied, however, it mainly consists of students (15%), professionals (56%) and the retired (23%). The occupations present in the sample also indicate a higher level of education in general. These three categories (state, education and occupation) are the only categories that did not match the Australian profile as closely as the other categories, yet they reinforce the image provided of the irreligious in literature (Pasquale 2010; Barber 2012; Lynn, Harvey and Nyborg 2009).

In my sample (Table 3) 33% were female, which is representative of the proportion of females in the Australian non-religious population (ABS 2013c). People who were non-religious from birth made up 31%. 59% were from Christian backgrounds and the remainder were spiritual (5%) or New Age (2.5%). This is fairly representative of the Australian population with 61% of Australians claiming Christian backgrounds and 22.3% claiming to be non-religious (ABS 2013a). Therefore slightly less of my sample began as Christians and slightly more began as non-religious. I did not get any volunteers who previously held any of the minority religious views that have been growing in recent census data such as Buddhism, Islam or Hinduism (ABS 2013a). These populations make up small numbers at this point, and many are newer immigrants (ABS 2013a). However, it may also indicate a lack of diversity in the backgrounds of the irreligious Australian population. The word ‘default’ was provided to allow participants to indicate a loose affiliation with the family traditional religion and it generally indicates that the family were not practicing that religion (21%). Due to ethical considerations my respondents were restricted to those above 18 years of age. The majority of respondents were in the 36-45 age bracket (38%). Thus this profile can be seen to be mostly representative of the adult Australian population, although the inconsistencies (education, background and occupation) indicate that my sample is closer to representing the adult Australian atheist population.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>M/F</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Education Attainment</th>
<th>Occupation</th>
<th>Original Religion</th>
<th>State</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Beatrice</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>BHons</td>
<td>Unemployed</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hariot</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>Dip</td>
<td>Student/Mother</td>
<td>Anglican</td>
<td>TAS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>18-25</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Housekeeping Supervisor</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anya</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Unemployed/Volunteer</td>
<td>Christian*</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rodriguez</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Christian*</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Noel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Civil Engineer</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>QLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charlene</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>BHons</td>
<td>Self Employed- Pest Control</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sally</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Dip</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>QLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brody</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>Dip</td>
<td>Financial Advisor</td>
<td>Church of England*</td>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morgan</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>26-35</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Student/Private English Tutor</td>
<td>Russian Orthodox*</td>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Addison</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kerry</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Student/Mother</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Civil Design Engineer</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michelle</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Technical Writer</td>
<td>Christian*</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Data Centre Engineer</td>
<td>New Age</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taneal</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>BHons</td>
<td>President of AAI/Investment Banker</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darren</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Dip</td>
<td>Analytic Chemist</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dean</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Dip</td>
<td>Electrical Engineer</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Darrel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Journalist</td>
<td>Church of England*</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ally</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Librarian</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>ACT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Deidre</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Early Intervention- Autism</td>
<td>Spiritual</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Krissie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Teacher- Religion Philosophy &amp; Ethics</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sing</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Research Scientist</td>
<td>Atheist</td>
<td>QLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nigel</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>TC</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Pentecostal</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>36-45</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>Administration Officer - Tertiary</td>
<td>Christian*</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karla</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Retired- Law Librarian</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fredrick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Public Servant</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>SA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Manager IT Business Services</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jim</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Philosopher of Science</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>VIC</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mr Black</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>46-55</td>
<td>SC</td>
<td>Invalid Pensioner/Carer/Forum</td>
<td>Assemblies of God</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doug</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Non-Religious</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reese</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Semi-Retired Tutor</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>WA</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reave</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>BHons</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gareth</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>HSC</td>
<td>Software Developer</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>QLD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dominick</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Medical Doctor</td>
<td>Baptist</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artie</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Annie</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>56-65</td>
<td>TC</td>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>Christian</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gary</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>Bachelor</td>
<td>Retired- Teacher</td>
<td>Catholic</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kale</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>66-75</td>
<td>Master</td>
<td>Retired- Lecturer Biological &amp; Envir. Science</td>
<td>Anglican*</td>
<td>NSW</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**KEY**

EDUCATION: SC = School Certificate; TC = Tertiary Certificate; HSC = Higher School
Definitions of Atheism

Throughout the remainder of this section I will be providing direct quotes from my interview participants to illustrate my findings from discussions. The following questions were used in gathering the data for the sections below. These questions were designed to give the participant the opportunity to express their feelings about the concept of atheism and how it influences their lives.

1. What does Atheism mean to you?
2. What do you feel the atheist identity is for you in everyday life?
3. How much time and energy do you feel you put into atheism or discussing atheism?
4. Do you buy any atheist merchandise and if so what?
5. What is your earliest experience with atheism?
6. Do you have a story or idea about how you came to be an atheist?

Table 4 shows the themes from the resulting answers to the question: What does atheism mean to you? Combined with insights from the other questions asked above:

Table 4: The Meaning of Atheism to Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Meaning of Atheism</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Negative definition of ‘atheism’ and ‘agnostic atheism’</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associated meanings and worldview - dictionary or plus (Rationalism, Skepticism, Humanism, social justice, one life, awe at life, responsibility for actions)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Positive definition of ‘atheism’ and ‘gnostic atheism’</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The negative definition of atheism (95%) appear to be the main way in which atheism is viewed by my sample. On the negative definition Martin (2007), provides some insight. He distinguishes between negative and positive atheism; in positive atheism the atheist makes the claim that God does not exist, in negative they see no evidence to conclude that a God exists. In the negative definition, the ‘a’ in ‘atheist’ signifies that an atheist is just someone who has no
belief in God, not someone who claims to know that God does not exist. When it comes to pure definitions and labels, most atheists in my sample use negative atheism in defining their philosophical stance. Atheism is mostly defined in a negative dictionary way as ‘the lack of belief in Gods and the supernatural’ (95%), rather than the positive belief that ‘there is no God’ (5% Table 4).

It certainly is a lack of belief in any supernatural power and that that belief is formed on a basis of evidence that you would expect in any other form of life (Anya).

Given the absolute lack of positive proof of supernatural entities acting in this world or being in this world... [I call myself an atheist] (Morgan).

The negative definition is attached to the term ‘agnostic atheism’ in the new atheist milieu. In nearly all of my interviews the epistemologically driven ‘agnostic atheist’ definition appeared. When the description was supplied it fit the term as used by the new atheist authors. This definition has been taken up by most in my sample, and the discussion has turned to epistemology, ontology and their separation.

Atheism is simply a non-belief in God/s. Although many atheists have similar beliefs regarding other aspects, all it takes to be an atheist is to not believe in a God. This is distinct from agnostic, which is whether we can really ever know if there is a God or not. I personally consider myself an agnostic atheist - I don't believe in God, and I don't know if it is possible to ever prove or disprove one exists because, by definition, God is supernatural and outside the realms of science (Beatrice).

In practise I'm an atheist, I have no problem admitting that, I have no role of religion in my life and so forth, but philosophically I'm an agnostic because there is a logical problem with asserting the non-existence of a deity that you can't tell anything about (Jim).
The agnostic atheism category indicates that my sample see their worldview as based in evidence. This orientation means that these individuals choose not to believe in ideas unless evidence is provided for that idea. Due to that stance they define God as something that should be approachable with evidence based scientific methods. From the atheist perspective no evidence is provided for a deity, and it is philosophically impossible to prove a negative (in this case that God does not exist), thus they take a stance defined by technical agnosticism. Only two people claimed to be gnostic atheists (5%) and the rest said that this position was not philosophically tenable based on available evidence (95%). It seems clear that the new atheists have helped to instil this particular idea into a wider audience.

[Agnostic Atheism is to do with] Dawkins' seven point scale... here's what [he] would call a seven, they definitely are an atheist ... [he puts] the argument of the equal probability forward and what we’re basically saying is that... God’s existence is as likely as his non-existence and that’s more the position you’re taking when [definitely] agnostic and also what you’re saying is we don’t know and we can’t know and therefore why bother delving into it any further (Brody).

In terms of the Dawkins ‘spectrum of milestones regarding the probability of God’, I would say I rate as a ‘6’: De facto atheist. Very low probability, but short of zero. I don’t know for certain but I think God is very improbable, and I live my life on the assumption that he is not there. This is something I generally sum up with ‘I am philosophically agnostic, but pragmatically an atheist’ (Krissie).

Further reinforcing this view, in my interviews, some claimed that agnosticism itself was just a weak form of atheism based on false epistemological reservations, as is consistent with the perspective of the Four Horsemen.

I’ve got an awful lot of friends who are agnostic, you know my girlfriend’s agnostic. I’ve yet to tell her that I think it’s an act of intellectual and moral cowardice (Morgan).
You are calling yourself an atheist as well, even if its agnostic atheist, you've still got a clear definition of yourself as an atheist in that title... Whereas the people who consider themselves to be straight agnostic (that doesn't even make sense), just agnostic, those people tend to be very much fence sitters as in 'I don't want to say whether I believe or not because there is no proof of God'. Anybody who's willing to go towards the atheist title has made some sort of step in the direction of convincing themselves that there's no need for the God idea anymore. I'm not sure the agnostics aren't that far along, I'm still trying to work it out myself (Deidre).

Therefore based on this, and the participant observation data earlier provided, in the current irreligious milieu agnostic atheist is the preferred technical term for an irreligious individual. This technical identity term seems to serve protective ends for the new atheists as it absorbs the technical implications of Huxley's 'agnosticism' while allowing the irreligious to hold onto the 'atheist' label. This however, seems to come at the expense of excluding 'gnostic' atheists and those who use the agnostic term as a form of deliberately liminal identity, rather than a technicality as used by the new atheists.

**Dictionary or Plus**

Within my sample, there are those who believe other factors are attached to the term atheism; the associated meaning category (28% Table 4). They think that certain social justice and political ideas are implicitly attached to the atheist worldview. However, it must be noted that even some of those that went on to describe associated meanings (Humanism, Rationalism, social justice, and women's rights) often started their description with the negative dictionary definition, thus showing that the negative dictionary definition is still part of the worldview of those who also add associated meanings to the term. At the time of research, some participants were adamant that the definition should not be extended (60%). They do not want to attach other social factors to atheism as they believe that being an atheist should not restrict the political and personal views of an individual. This strong feeling that atheism should be defined in a
dictionary way could be related to the recent visibility of the dictionary versus plus dispute at the time of interviews as described in the internet participant observation section of this chapter. The visibility of this dispute and the very recent events of Elevatorgate may have inclined my sample to be wary of this argument and its potential implications for the movement. While my statistics cannot be generalised, they do give a further indication that there is a split in the community around this idea. As shown in the quote below, some atheists already recognised this split at the time of interviews:

On the one hand you’ve got what some people like to dismiss as dictionary atheism which I think is valid anyway, which is basically you know the literal meaning of the word, no theism, just absence of theism [negative definition]... which I think is completely legitimate and fair enough, however obviously it does have a lot of associated meanings you know whether it’s sort of secular humanism, reason based thinking and that kind of thing which are kind of generally inextricably linked if you are firm or confident or well-rounded in your atheism (Brody).

This idea will be discussed further in Chapter 7 when considering the emergence of the Atheism Plus.

Views on the New Atheism

The interview participants were asked the questions: What do you think of when you hear the term ‘New Atheism’? followed by questions about perceptions of the effectiveness of the movement, and its contributions to society. For example: What effect do you think the presence of these people [new atheists] and organisations is having on society? The themes from the resulting answers are seen in Table 5. It is clear that my sample see the new atheist movement as a form of scientifically based (Intellectual 33% Table 5) public identity politics (Public 79% Table 5) that has emerged in protest, as a reaction to the resurgence of religion (56% Confrontational Table 5). This lines up with Campbell’s (1972) insight that irreligious groups are more likely to resemble political parties than a religious congregation. However, there have also been moves to make irreligion more communal and spiritual since the time of my
interviews, discussed in Chapter 6. During my interviews, these movements weren’t as visible and this could explain the lack of discussion of atheist ritual. The low discussion of ‘elimination’ of religious ritual as an idea could come from notions of ‘atheist spirituality’ that are found in my sample at this time and are seen as derived from the new atheist authors as seen in Chapter 6.

### Table 5: What Interview Participants Think of When They Hear the Term ‘New Atheism’?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dimension</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Public</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>79</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambiguous Term</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intellectual</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Elimination</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

New Atheism as an Ambiguous Term

There was much discussion in my sample about the term new atheism itself. However, many of the participants did not see a need for this term and did not often use it as a term of self-identification. It was considered a name for a movement, not an identity, simply ‘atheist’ or one of the other irreligious designations such as Humanist, Rationalist or Secularist was generally preferred. I decided to ask for Australian ‘new atheists’ and ‘atheists’ in my initial posts. However, I was soon rebuked on the Australian Foundation for Atheists (AFA) forums for using the term new atheist as an identity term. This would be one of my earliest lessons on the importance of labels in the irreligious milieu. I was quickly asked, “What is this New Atheism of which you speak?” I was firmly told by this group that simply ‘atheist’ would suffice and they were unsure why the ‘new’ part was necessary (41% Table 5). There appears to be a more ambivalent feeling towards the term new atheism in Australia as shown below:

Objectively speaking there is nothing new about the new atheists except the better scientific arguments they have for atheism and against the particularly idiotic forms of religion that have achieved

---

this strange political power like quote intelligent design unquote...

The majority of the new atheist’s arguments are enlightenment arguments... so as far as I’m concerned the new atheism is not really new atheism, it’s just that it’s been pushed into prominence by certain people (Darrel).

Yet at the same time some people talk about it as if it’s a new set of beliefs which I don’t think it is. Like the new atheism by itself implies that somehow there was something wrong with old atheism or that it’s revamped its way of thinking about it like neo-liberal because most of the time when you chuck ‘new’ on something it means it’s actually changed. Where new atheism feels more to me almost like a political movement based on atheism than it is actually a change to a core set of beliefs (Ally).

Some people described the term ‘new atheism’ as negative in the way that it was only used by the religious to demean atheists, as the quotes below suggest:

I suspect its origins might be derogatory, a term conjured up by religious people to dismiss it as a new and passing fad. But I don't really mind. In my mind it belongs to the new era of Hitchens, Dawkins, Harris etc. as opposed to maybe Sagan and Russell and earlier atheists. I say own it, and throw it back at them! It is still exactly the same atheism, with more voices, but with new mediums, such as Youtube, to communicate in...Much like the term 'atheist' was originally a derogatory term to describe non-believers, it often appears to me that 'New Atheism' is used in a similarly derogatory fashion. However, much like most have taken up and accepted the label ‘atheist’ with in a positive way, many have done the same with New Atheism (Michael).

I generally think, ok, is this person either misguided or are they trying to bait me [when they use the term new atheist]. Like the term militant atheist, it’s generally used by somebody hostile who’s come gun slinging. The only exception could be someone who’s not fully
informed yet. I don't necessarily come out swinging, but I'm alert that I could either have a fight or a small bit of clarification to do (Mr Black).

It became clear in my interviews that Australia is a relatively lax country when it comes to atheist identity (see Table 6), which could help explain the fact that my participants felt less need to embrace a new label. No one from my sample used it as a term of self-identification.

Despite this aversion, all of my sample were able to describe what the ‘new atheism’ represented. At the time of my interviews most of my participants still had the feeling of being involved in a united and global movement, even if constructed or negative, and that its main properties were its public, active and visible nature compared to past movements. In my interviews, the most common answers emphasised the idea that the new atheism is a public and confrontational form of atheism, a form of identity politics (NOT a religion), designed to confront and counter religious resurgence through scientific and intellectual argument (see Table 5).

Global Rather than Local Focus
I had originally intended to focus on Australian atheists, but after conducting interviews I found that most themes were internationally applicable. An analysis of media releases from the Australian Foundation for Atheists (AFA) from January 2009 to May 2012 also supports the impression that atheism within Australia is a global construct, with 56% of their media releases relating to international themes and personalities. Even the conferences that the AFA organised were named the Global Atheist Convention and the majority of speakers were international personalities. Overall, most of my sample see the new atheism as a means to open up space for atheists, through a public and confrontational identity movement, as is found in Cimino and Smith’s (2007, 2010) studies of American atheists. There are some differences between Australian and other international atheist groups, mainly due to the initial acceptability of atheism in particular countries prior to the new movement (see Bullivant 2010 and Cragun et al. 2012 for UK and US differences). Despite the
activities of the Lyons forum\textsuperscript{89} and the recent Australian government use of religious symbolism (Maddox 2005), Australian atheists in my interview sample felt that their atheism was relatively unchallenged. In my interviews the top answers Australians gave when asked: \textit{Are there any situations that you can describe where you have been negatively affected because of atheism?} (Table 6). The top two responses were ‘awkwardness’ (51\%) and ‘very little’ (36\%).

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|l|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Theme} & \textbf{No. of People} & \textbf{\%} \\
\hline
Awkwardness when atheism is discovered or discussed & 20 & 51 \\
None or very little & 14 & 36 \\
Religion in the public square (politics and education) & 13 & 33 \\
Lies about atheists (immoral, ill, violent, heartless, liars, haters of God) & 12 & 31 \\
Social exclusion & 11 & 28 \\
Social pressure & 11 & 28 \\
Lies about science & 4 & 10 \\
Angry atheists (cause the problem) & 1 & 3 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{What Type of Negativity towards Atheism in Australia have Interview Participants Experienced?}
\end{table}

Australia and Britain (Bullivant 2010 and Cragun et al. 2012) both have low levels of religious attendance and more private religious cultures. The stigma of being an atheist in these countries is much lower. This is quite different to US atheists, who were found by Cimino and Smith's (2007, 2010) to have high levels of anxiety around the idea of being public atheists. This difference can be interpreted as arising from the much more openly religious culture of the US in comparison to Australia. Religion in Australia has been argued by Bouma (2006) to exist as a ‘shy hope in the heart’ rather than an open expression of beliefs, as expressed by Darrel below:

\begin{quote}
Australia is to a large extent an agnostic country, we treat religious leaders the same as we treat politicians to a great extent which is wonderful (Darrel).
\end{quote}

Australians are generally inclined to keep quiet about their religious beliefs, they are far less vocal than Americans on this subject and thus may have more reservations about a public atheist movement. Besides feeling less confronted

\textsuperscript{89}Wikipedia. Lyons Forum viewed 21 December 2013: \url{http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyons_Forum} also see Maddox (2005)
about their atheism, the Australian atheist population largely reflects that of the Americans. Even more negative impacts such as social exclusion were mitigated by the idea that these were not common occurrences, perhaps happening once in a person’s life rather than being ongoing. There were some family cases where the impacts were more apparent and long lasting, but these were the rarity in my sample. Possibly due to being Australian and having less issues with being openly atheist, my sample seem to be fighting for a more expansive and global atheist community. They see themselves as supporting atheists in countries that may not have such tolerant cultures in relation to atheist identity. Overall, the participants did recognise the impacts of religion in Australia, but seemed more directly concerned with events occurring in the US and other countries, where they considered the danger to be more profound:

To some extent the public debate if you like was always there but it was from the other direction, particularly because the US is so large and it’s so influential, organised religion is so influential there, that there’s been sort of an assumption about the need to have religious forces involved in public and civic debate. So in some ways that discussion was there, it was just one sided. I think there’s been a resurgence of the fact that it’s legitimate to argue the opposite (Ally).

In America now we’ve got situations [where]... Dawkins was supposed to speak at some hall in the States right and it was a privately owned hall and when the guy found out who Dawkins was and what his views were, he cancelled the booking. Now they’re going to take him to the [ACLU]... saying that he’s been discriminated on religious grounds because he’s an atheist and they’re discriminating against him because he doesn’t have a religious view... the American’s have the words ‘In God We Trust’, they were never in their constitution... there’s a movement now to get it taken off because it’s religious, it’s not a secular... that religion mixed in with politics or with government and so on is not permitted (Artie).

This global focus was further reinforced by the participant’s answers (Table 7) to the following questions:
1. *Who/what are your top authors, blogs, Twitter feeds, sites or organisations to do with atheism?*

2. *Do you think there are more or less of these blogs, feeds, organisations and sites since the start of the ‘New Atheism’?*

3. *Are there any people that you would consider as leaders or heroes of the ‘New Atheist’ movement and how have they affected your views (negative or positive)?*

4. *Have these people been the same group over the last 5 years or so?*
Table 7: Popular Figures and Websites for Australian Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Organisation, Site or Personality</th>
<th>Country</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Richard Dawkins</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christopher Hitchens</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sam Harris</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Daniel Dennett</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PZ Myers – Pharyngula</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Australian Foundation for Atheists</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Four Horsemen</td>
<td>US &amp; UK</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RichardDawkins.net</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Victor Stenger</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Australian Skeptics</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hemant Mehta - The Friendly Atheist</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nonstamcollector</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Token Skeptic – Kylie Sturgess</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anthony Grayling</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Living Dinosaur</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Western Sydney Freethinkers</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Atheist Experience</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Greta Christina</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ricky Gervais</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tim Minchin</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ophelia Benson</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FreeThought Blogs</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theoretical Bullshit</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VJack – Atheist Revolution</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Penn Jillete</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat Condell</td>
<td>UK</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dave the Happy Singer</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skepchick.org</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Why Evolution is True</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Common Sense Atheism</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martin S. Pribble</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Party of Australia</td>
<td>Australia</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The Digital Cuttlefish</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jen McCreight</td>
<td>US</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Only those items with a frequency above 2 are shown, as the full list is extensive.

The fact that my sample was Australian has affected the answers as demonstrated by the fact that an Australian site, the Australian foundation for Atheists (AFA) features prominently. There are a number of other Australian
related sites (29%) but most are international in scope. Australian sites are overrepresented due to my sample, however the international sites represented are considered popular as shown by other sources like the readers choice awards on About.com as illustrated in my internet participant observation section.

It is clear that the Australian scene has much overlap with the international scene due to a large presence on the internet, a shared vision of the movement’s goals, and the pervasive influence of foreign figures in the local scene (such as the Four Horsemen and PZ Myers), as was also found in earlier periods of history. The most popular figures were international figures such as Richard Dawkins (90% Table 7). Only Australian, UK and US organisations, sites and personalities were mentioned by my sample. This reinforces the idea of these countries being the most prominent in new atheist activities (Emilsen 2012).

The two most commonly mentioned sites in most cases are PZ Myers’ Pharyngula (US 38%) and RichardDawkins.net (UK 26% Table 7).

The growing literature on the manifestations of the new atheism in various countries around the world also supports my assertion that the new atheism is global in scope. Though there may be small differences between the manifestations in each country, for the purposes of my research these small differences can be overlooked in order to demonstrate the global aspects of the movement (Zenk 2012 - Germany; Zuckerman 2010b, 2012b – Scandinavia and US; Taira 2012 - Finland; Martinson 2012 - Sweden; Quack 2012 - India). This was reinforced by the finding that new atheism was largely global in its use of leaders and texts. Thus the interviews I conducted could be used as support for the more global internet observations. For the purposes of this thesis ‘Global’ includes English speaking countries, mostly in the developed West, though throughout my analysis I will bring in other countries where events have had an effect on the irreligious scene or vice versa. In summary, it can be argued that the new atheist milieu is global and cosmopolitan, and the focus of research at a global level can be justified.
DISCUSSION

This chapter has outlined the new atheism as viewed from a participant perspective. New atheists have been in a process of attempting to accurately define atheism from the very beginning of the movement. There have been increasing efforts to define atheism adequately and in a way that deflects attacks. This can be seen in part as a defensive tactic, drawing boundaries between atheists and the religious and attempting to bring agnostics into the fold. Although through my own work I suspect that there is a group of true agnostics, mostly separate from the atheist group. Though these people seem rarer in the public atheist community, I suspect these individuals may actually choose other terms such as ‘agnostic’ (Huxley 1869) or ‘secular’ (Berlinerblau 2005). This can be explained historically with the introduction of Huxley’s (1869) definition of agnosticism. With this definition, it became more clear that gnostic atheist claims are hard to defend and can be seen as a form of belief.

The solution that has become most common in the current milieu involves admitting the presence of a belief component along a continuum of probabilities based on evidence of God’s existence. The emergence of the term agnostic atheist and the Burden of Proof are the result of this effort. Against my findings, authors such as Davies (2010) have claimed that the new atheist authors are, by Martin’s (2007) criteria, positive atheists. He thinks they tend to claim that God definitely does not exist. I think this designation is very questionable, the new atheists are employing the agnostic term in a technical way that indicates them as negative rather than positive atheists. As seen in this data, the new atheists have gone out of their way via the ‘agnostic atheist’ term to state that they are in fact ‘negative’ atheists by Martin’s definition, but practically they act as positive atheists, so this is far less clear than Davies (2010) makes it seem. The term in this case is also defensive in a philosophical sense, as a group that claims to rely on evidence would be hypocritical to ignore correct epistemology. The epistemological certainties of religion are prime attack point for atheists who claim to rely on the inductive scientific method and claiming ‘I don’t know’ rather than making what they consider spurious theories without evidence. Perhaps due to Huxley’s earlier argument, most new
Chapter 3: What is the New Atheism?

atheists want to avoid being caught by the concept of ‘belief’. Thus agnosticism has become technically implicated in atheist self-definitions. This could be part of the reason for attempts to see agnosticism as a form of atheism or as a negative concept on its own. It is a boundary marking exercise, to delimit pure agnosticism from atheism, while absorbing agnosticism’s technical implications.

I believe the dictionary/plus debate has been flagged as an issue in the movement at this time as people feared splitting up the small group of existing atheists into even smaller groups. This would accelerate as an issue as the dictionary/plus conflict became more apparent and the fear became a possible reality with *Atheism Plus* (see Chapter 7). The dictionary designation is seen by some as performing both protective and unitary functions. It unifies atheists under one banner, despite their personal politics and protects against attacks that target positive ideologies. Dictionary atheism is not useless in this view and therefore these atheists are taking a stance against Myer’s call to see atheists as more than just their dictionary definition. Thus as seen throughout irreligious history, the differences in political stances seem to have played a major part in the ‘schism’ that followed. The *Elevatorgate* scandal was mostly concerned with gender issues and feminism and can be seen as reflecting wider issues in the society of the time. However, it is the connection to liberal politics and the potential and actual conflict that this brings which was the focus of criticism, as will be shown in Chapter 7.

Many of the current analyses of the new atheism reinforce the view of the ‘old atheists’ as ‘accommodationist’ and ‘covert’. I have shown via historical data that this is not actually a true stereotype, even if held by many in the new atheist milieu. While figures like Russell could arguably be presented as ‘armchair atheists’, there are many other older irreligious groups who were far from covert or accommodationist in their actions and campaigns (see Chapter 4 and 5). Thus, I think this view could be tempered by a more accurate reading of past movements, who were far more popular and active than they are generally portrayed by modern atheists and many in academia.

The new atheism is seen by participants and the public as having certain traits when compared to the ahistorical stereotype of the ‘old atheism’. Despite some
issues with the term itself, atheist participants are aware of what the ‘new atheism’ is supposed to represent and they place it on certain sides of the dimensions put forward in this research. My interview participants and my observations of new atheists online largely agreed with the traits identified in the literature as belonging to the new atheism. The new atheism is public, rather than covert, confrontational rather than accommodationist, eliminationist rather than substitutionist and intellectual rather than empathetic. In summary, to my interview participants, the new atheism is:

A public form of scientifically grounded irreligion that had risen to confront religious forces.

Thus, most of my sample agreed that the term new atheism was identifiable with a certain form of irreligion, even if some disagreed strongly with the tactics being employed or the use of the label, as we will see in more detail below. My interview analysis confirmed that the new atheism was perceived by participants to sit at particular ends within these dimensions. These dimensions are also present in the overall irreligious field and can be seen as having an effect on the new atheist group itself, creating a number of emergent subgroups within the movement. These divisions will be explored via various case studies discovered throughout my fieldwork. We now turn to the data that supports this brief overview and the divisions it is causing in the new atheist movement.
CHAPTER 4. Covert/Public
‘COMING OUT’ ATHEIST

Part of Knott’s (2005) description of the postsecular includes the idea that the religious and the secular are part of the same field, rather than simply opposing each other. The re-entrance of the religious into the public sphere over the last few decades has again aroused the irreligious to public action through public political channels. The new atheist authors have emphasised the need for public atheism to act as a counterpoint to religion and means to normalise atheism in public perceptions. They ask all atheists to come out publicly as atheists in order to achieve this goal. Many atheists have listened to the call and there are now many public atheists expressing their views through both real world and internet channels, making this part of their identity public. Atheists have begun to realise their atheistic identity through individual and structural changes (Smith 2010). This trait has most certainly led to the new atheists being viewed as a public form of irreligion as shown earlier.

Despite this call, there are still many atheists that choose to stay covert or semi-public via the use of pseudonyms. This is because the consequences of public atheism can still be problematic to some people (IHEU 2012). The problematic nature of the identity arises due to reactions from the religious themselves and indicates that atheist views are in conflict for the right to exist, rather than in competition with religious views in this postsecular environment. Although the presence of both views does indicate such a field, it still involves a certain level of conflict for the irreligious, who do not think it is entirely safe to come out publicly as irreligious in all parts of their lives. If the religious and the secular were truly part of a postsecular field in which their views were accepted, it would seem that covert and semi-public tactics would be unnecessary. However, the new atheists do not in fact live in such a world. Their environment appeared to be one of conflict over the right to their identity, rather than competition in an equal postsecular field.

HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Figure 9 shows the popularity of the term atheist (blue line) throughout the 19th century remained very high in literary publications. The early 1800’s saw the publication of romantic poet Percy Bysshe Shelly's pamphlet *The Necessity of Atheism* (1811). This work would see Shelly expelled from Oxford College, due to its interrogation of the bible and justification of the atheist worldview (Bieri 2004). At the same time many works were also being produced against atheism and defending Christianity and Deism against atheism (i.e. Dyer 1796; Faber 1816). Thus some of this popularity came from protestations to the term and the implications such authors felt it held.

*Figure 9: Google Ngram – Interest over Time for the Terms Atheism, Humanism, Rationalism and Secularism from 1800 to 2000*

By the 1840's one of the earliest definitely irreligious movements, the Secularist movement, had a non-religious basis to its public protests, as opposed to earlier movements (Campbell 1972). However the use of the term atheist as a pejorative term continued late into the 19th century, with atheism becoming increasingly associated with immorality and lawlessness (Hyman 2007). The stigma on atheism that developed throughout the 19th century led some of these earlier irreligious groups to coin other terms of self-description in order to avoid the taint of being a public ‘atheist’. In this vein, Holyoake’s
‘Secularism’ gained popularity in the UK, US and Australia at the end of the 19th century. Thus the Secularists represent the earliest attempts at covert or semi-public forms of irreligion. Despite these efforts, the refusal of Holyoake to sign the Owenites Charter of Public Protestantism and his subsequent imprisonment for anti-religious comments would make his atheism publicly visible (Campbell 1972). His imprisonment for blasphemy added to his image as a martyr and helped in the formation of the public irreligious movement. Thus he would be a very public figure in irreligion despite his attempts to move away from strictly irreligious terms and arguments.

Holyoake’s successor, Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) would also become an important public figure for the irreligious (Campbell 1972). Bradlaugh, in contrast to Holyoake, was interested in maintaining atheist as the public word used for the irreligious and fought battles to allow ‘atheists’ to sit in parliament and give evidence in court. Bradlaugh established the National Secular Society in 1866 with Charles Watts, a society that would become one of his biggest contribution to the Freethought movement and which still has an influence today (National Secular Society91). Bradlaugh was elected to parliament as the representative of Northampton in 1880. He was refused the right to participate in the parliament due to the requirement to swear an oath of allegiance to the Queen, which was sworn on the bible, a requirement which he denied as unnecessary. After four trials, starting in 1880, he forced a bill through the house, yielding to the right of affirmation and finally sat in parliament in 1886 after being elected four times. He then went on to become the first publicly atheist member of the British parliament and fought for the right of atheists to give evidence in court (1880-1886; Dahlitz 1994, Campbell 1972; Hyman 2007). Hyman (2007) argues that Bradlaugh was seeking nothing more than a neutral respectability for atheists, and although he may not have completely achieved it, he added significantly to the cause. Bradlaugh can be viewed as an early adopter of the public irreligious stance, in which irreligion itself is embraced as an identity. His main concern was with the ability to live as a public atheist with rights equal to the religious.

The movement that would emerge from his efforts, the Rationalists, would be less public in the expression of irreligion, using the term technical term 'agnostic' instead of the atheist identity term (Campbell 1972). They placed their focus on the public argumentation against religious ideas using an intellectual form of agnosticism. Like Thomas Huxley they rejected the term atheist because it was too dogmatic. He believed there was not enough evidence to decide either way if there was a God and used the term ‘agnostic’ to represent this (1869). From this point on agnostic would rival atheist as a term used by the non-religious. Despite its appearance of supporting religion, the Rationalist version can actually be seen as an extreme form of intellectual atheism, where what cannot be known is not worth deciding on. Over time this has been converted into a more accepting ‘I do not know’ within Western discourse. Modern uses of ‘agnosticism’ often come in this ‘accommodationist’ form. This accommodationist form is often seen as weak by the new atheists, as seen in my interviews, because it is seen as a way to avoid being public about one’s atheist beliefs (Chapter 5). A graph from Google Trends (Figure 10) using the term agnostic, in amongst other potential identity terms, shows that it represents another example of a potential competitor term for the irreligious at the time of research. Agnostic is seen as equal to atheist in the early parts of the graph, rising from 2004 until 2007. After this time it shows a relative decline as atheist begins to rise dramatically. It begins an actual decline around 2011, making the relative difference in use between the atheist and agnostic terms more noticeable again.

*Figure 10: Google Trends – Interest over Time for the Terms Atheist, Humanist, Agnostic,*
Socialist and Secular from 2004 to 2014

At the same time as the Rationalists, other people turned away from theological/intellectual issues, towards practical/political concerns, with ‘Socialism’ becoming the favoured term for this socio-political solution. As Dahlitz (1994: 8) puts it, “The cause of Socialism... waxed, while the cause of Secularism waned.” The Socialists, due to their connection with Karl Marx were publicly irreligious. However, it was their focus on the social world (like the Secularists) that separated them from the Rationalists, who were clearly adverse to social activism, at least partly as a reaction to the former activities of the Secularists and their contemporaries, the Socialists. Thus while they emphasised different types of activism (intellectual versus social-empathetic), they were equally public in their irreligion and the belief that the world would be better off without religion. I show Figure 11 as a separate graph due to the enormous popularity of the term Socialist in literature at least until the 1990’s. The term may appear at this relative level due to both Socialists themselves and the use of the term by Capitalist governments throughout the World Wars and the Cold War, this would also help to explain the extreme decline in use after 1990. By 2004 (Figure 10) it quickly becomes less fashionable. We can see that the term Socialist continues the trend until 2008, where it receives a spike in interest due to media discussion of US President Obama as a Socialist, and the Capitalist failures of the Global Financial Crisis. However, after this point the decline continues.

Figure 11: Google Ngram – Interest over Time for Irreligious Terms and Socialism from
1800 to 2000

With the production of the Humanist Manifesto (Bragg 1933), the Humanists would put forward their public image and quickly have their name turned into an insult by the religious (Dahlitz 1994). Humanism was always meant to be public, providing an irreligious ontology that people could use to live their lives. It was thus designed from the beginning as a public set of beliefs for the irreligious (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994). This would not change with Secular Humanism as it emerged in the late 1970’s now devoid of religious concepts and language. Secular Humanism would maintain the public aspect of the previous Humanist movement and move forward as the most coherent voice for public irreligion (Dahlitz 1994), a state of affairs that continued until at least 2004 with the emergence of the new atheists. In evidence, Figure 11 shows Humanism to have continued to be the most popularly used term for irreligion up until the end of the 20th century. The graph also shows the emergence of Humanism as the dominant term in literature up until the year 2000. It is significantly more popular as a term than the term atheist since at least the 1930's when the Humanist Manifesto was released. Some of this may be accounted for by the general academic term Humanism, referring to the historical scholarly movement. However, even if this is taken into account the large gap in popularity between the terms would still indicate Humanist as the dominant word for the irreligious during this period, as is suggested by scholars of irreligion (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994). Turning to some data from after 2004 until 2013, we may illuminate the effects of the new atheism (Figure 12). It can be seen that as the 21st century has progressed, the term Humanist has lost popularity, while atheist has gained in relative use.

---

92 Google Ngrams currently finishes data at 2000 and Google Trends begins in 2004. Rationalist barely registers on this graph and has therefore been removed due to search term number restrictions.
What we can say is that at the turn of the 21st century atheist has become the favoured term for discussion of irreligious individuals. The Google Trends graph clearly indicates that the term atheist has become the most popular term in the irreligious milieu by 2007. After 2009 the trend is very clear and increasing. Thus, this data backs up the choice made at the time of my interviews and participant observation, to focus on the word atheist as an identity term. However, as the discussion of the various movements and terms shows, none of these organisations were covert in their views or actions. Even the Rationalists, who are often portrayed by the new atheists as the covert ‘old atheists’ due to having less focus on politics (including figures such as Bertrand Russell who is often cited as an ‘old atheist’), were public in their distribution of books and support for conferences. The tactic may have varied, but the intention was always to provide a public presence for the irreligious whether that came through publications and conferences or through social activism. Thus historically it is hard to pin the new atheism down as a more public expression of irreligion in comparison to past movements. However, the new atheists do see themselves as especially public, even if based in ahistorical interpretations of past groups, as will be seen below. Despite this, as will also be shown, the new atheists often still attempt to hide their irreligious identity in some public
situations, due to the continuing stigma around the word atheist. Thus if the new atheists are indeed part of a postsecular field, it is not one in which they feel completely free to reveal their identity.
INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Public

Richard Dawkins’ talk encouraging people to become ‘militant atheists’ in 2002 has gathered over 3 million views, and the script has been translated into 39 different languages on the TED website.93 At the end of the talk, Dawkins makes a call to create an atheist lobby, that would stop being polite and come out publicly as atheists.

I also suspect that a fair number of those secretly despise religion as much as I do. (Laughter) If you’re one of them, and of course many of you may not be, but if you are one of them, I’m asking you to stop being polite, come out and say so, and if you happen to be rich, give some thought to ways in which you might make a difference. The religious lobby in this country is massively financed by foundations -- to say nothing of all the tax benefits -- by foundations such as the Templeton Foundation and the Discovery Institute. We need an anti-Templeton to step forward... People are always going on about, “How did September the 11th change you?” Well, here’s how it changed me. Let’s all stop being so damned respectful. 94

The commenters below the video consist of many detractors and supporters. A number of comments, which clearly come from supporters, help to illuminate how new atheists online feel about the call for public atheism that Richard Dawkins puts forward in this talk:

He is asking passive atheist to become active.95

Why is it that a theist is allowed to openly condemn others but when someone like Dawkins does it, people see him as “harming” 96

93 Dawkins, R, 2002. Militant atheism, viewed 15 November 2013:
http://www.ted.com/talks/richard_dawkins_on_militant_atheism#

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VxGMrKcN6A

95 De Young, N, 2013. Richard Dawkins: Militant atheism, viewed 15 November 2013:
http://www.ted.com/talks/richard_dawkins_on_militant_atheism#
He hasn’t made it his goal to attack Christians but to defend atheists. The new atheists have made much of their identity politics, linking it to the gay revolution and notions of ‘coming out’ of the atheist closet (e.g. Dawkins 2006). The OUT Campaign is a major example. Set up by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science (RDFRS), the campaign is intended to let individuals know that they are not alone as atheists. It also intends to help demolish the negative stereotypes around atheists. It encourages atheists to ‘come out’ publicly and to be open with others about their identity, so that atheism may be normalised and destigmatised. Thus this campaign aligns with one of the perceived core missions of the new atheism as identified in the literature and in my own investigations, that of publicising and normalising atheism (also the top answer from my interview sample in answer to: What is the New Atheism?). The quote below connects with another theme that has become common in new atheist circles, that of seeing agnosticism as a way of avoiding the public ramifications of atheism (also discussed in Chapter 3).

I called myself an agnostic for a long time until I realized that there was really no particular reason to put God in a separate category. I don’t and never did use an agnostic equivalent for Bigfoot, Leprechauns or Super-Intelligent ducks from the 9th dimension so why should I for god? I go with atheist and not agnostic because I believe it is a distinction without a difference so just use the ACTUAL word.

In this view agnosticism is not an identity term to be respected, it is a way of sitting on the fence in regard to the question of God. To the new atheists the term agnostic is being used in this way to remain covert, to hide one’s atheism,
rather than coming out publicly as they are being asked to by new atheist leaders.

Latent or Covert – ‘Coming Out’

There is a list of threads on r/atheism that deal with ‘coming out’ as an atheist. Many groups have supported coming out campaigns inspired not only by LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and questioning) campaigns. They do this in the words of the US Secular Student Alliance, because “life is better when we can be open and proud of who we are, together.” CommonSenseAtheism discusses the impact of the new atheists and the atheist coming out movement:

The New Atheists have put atheism into public discourse more than ever before, they’ve opened the door so that people can criticize religion just like they criticize everything else like political positions and economic policies and moral positions and so on. They’ve helped people to feel comfortable coming out of the closet as nonbelievers.

So they’ve really done a tremendous good.

Many sites now offer advice on coming out to family friends and others about your atheist views. Some give reasons that coming out is a good idea, such as the emotionally draining nature of staying in the closet, isolation from the atheist community, the wasted time on religion, the risk of being found out, and that coming out promotes tolerance for atheists.

Other accounts discuss the difficulties with coming out in different social locations and useful tactics for avoiding confrontation or loss of family, friends

---

100 Reddit. Atheism Coming Out, viewed 1 February 2014: http://www.reddit.com/r/AtheismComingOut


105 Ibid
or networks.\textsuperscript{106} \textsuperscript{107} They suggest that one should be polite, non-aggressive and humble in approaching others about their views.\textsuperscript{108} There is recognition of the difficulties that some people could have in the coming out process and that in some cases coming out may not be worth it, as seen in this \textit{About.com} piece on coming out to your family:

> There are some people who stay in the closet because coming out could mean losing a job, or being kicked out of the house, or even being beaten or killed. Such people should probably stay in the closet, at least until they can get a new job, or find a home of their own, or move to a locale that isn’t socially retarded. But even these people should come out eventually, after they have arranged things so that it is safe to do so. And those who stay in solely to avoid offending friends and family would be better served by coming out now. In the short run, it will be hell, but in the long run, it’s the only way to go. The only real alternative is a lifetime of hypocrisy, self-loathing and fear.\textsuperscript{109}

However, even when they suggest these tactics, the emphasis is still on coming out as the right course of action.

There is also discussion of the types of activities that can be used to publicly talk about and promote atheism. This may include things like mentioning it to peers, sharing atheism on social networking sites, and displaying symbols related to atheism.\textsuperscript{110} This again aligns with the social justice and normalisation agenda for the irreligious, its connection with the struggles of the gay community and the notion of coming out. However there is also recognition that the atheist position is not the same as the LGBTQ position (see Furseth 2010 for an earlier academic discussion of this idea). In such accounts, atheism is recognised as an

\textsuperscript{106} Teresa, C, 2013. \textit{Teen atheist asks Dawkins advice on how to come out}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://cherryteresa.com/wp/2013/10/21/teen-atheist-asks-dawkins-advice-on-how-to-come-out/}

\textsuperscript{107} Cline, A. \textit{Coming Out to Your Family: Should You Reveal Your Atheism to Family, Parents?} viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://atheism.about.com/od/atheistactivism/p/ComeOutFamily.htm}

\textsuperscript{108} Ibid


\textsuperscript{110} Teresa, C, 2013. \textit{Teen atheist asks Dawkins advice on how to come out}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://cherryteresa.com/wp/2013/10/21/teen-atheist-asks-dawkins-advice-on-how-to-come-out/}
inherently antagonistic position, different from being an LGBTQ individual. 
Atheists are looking for converts, whereas the LGBTQ community simply want acceptance.

There’s a big difference between being gay and being an atheist. 
Someone can persuade you to be an atheist; no one is going to persuade you to be gay (no matter what the extremist anti-gay propaganda says)... I don’t foresee a best-selling book entitled “The Straight Delusion” or “Heterosexuality Poisons Everything.” The LGBT community wants acceptance; they don’t want to persuade others to join their “team,” and even if they had that objective, they would strive for it in vain.111

There are similarities between coming out atheist and coming out queer; however, there is at least one big difference with important implications:

There is something inherent in saying, “I’m an atheist” that implies, “You are mistaken to be a believer.” Even if you’re not saying it explicitly. Even if you couldn’t care less about persuading people out of religion. Even if you’re actively opposed to the idea of persuading people out of religion. There is no way to say, “I don’t believe in God,” without implying, “If you do believe in God, you’re wrong.” 112

The emphasis on coming out publicly as an atheist in new atheist writings strongly indicates that the new atheism is designed to be a very public form of irreligion. According to this view the irreligious should make this part of their identity public. In doing so, will give support to other irreligious individuals and raise public consciousness about presence of irreligious views, groups and individuals. Through this process the new atheists hope to normalise atheist views in the public sphere. However, coming out atheist is often attached to

rejecting the views of religious groups and hence is not as neutral as coming out in other identity groups. The irreligious also recognise that atheism is about conversion, and even if the idea is to normalise atheist views, there is confrontation included in even the most simple irreligious truth assertion. Thus being public about their views may bring the irreligious into conflict with others, even if they have no intention of engaging in identity politics in an aggressive way. Due to this, the irreligious recognise the difficulty that other people may have with exposing their identity publicly. Thus they provide many support structures to encourage covert and latent atheists to come out and display their identity. These include the community itself, lobby groups like the OUT Campaign, support groups such as The Clergy Project, websites such as r/atheism (Reddit) and a network of blogs giving advice on how to handle the coming out process.

Pseudonyms and Semi-Public Anonymity

It became clear in my observations that there were many people on the internet using pseudonyms to remain semi-public as atheists. These pseudonyms are seen to allow the individual to remain partly anonymous, while still publicly professing their atheism. An example comes from TheDigitalCuttlefish who uses his pseudonym itself to describe the atheist need for at least partial anonymity. The description also insinuates that the author understands that people on the other side of such debates may also utilise the anonymous properties of the internet and he goes on to state his position:

Cuttlefish are shy and elusive creatures; when necessary, they hide in their own ink. This particular cuttlefish has chosen as its habitat the comment threads of science, religion, and news sites, where it feeds on the opinions of those who are emboldened by the cloak of internet anonymity. Cuttlefish is an atheist and a skeptic, and is madly, passionately in love with science.113

A more descriptive, every day account of the need for anonymity comes from blog Atheist Revolution. The author uses the pseudonym Vjack in online blog Atheist Revolution. The author uses the pseudonym Vjack in online

interaction and they discuss the need for anonymity in certain environments such as work and family settings:

I remain convinced that the benefits of continued anonymity outweigh the costs. I have a variety of reasons for remaining anonymous, some obvious and some probably less so...I believe that my ability to do my job would be jeopardized in many ways by professing my atheism. I would not be fired, but it would become much more difficult to do my job well. I would face increased alienation, a loss of credibility, greater hostility, etc. Because most of my co-workers and many more of my students are Southern Baptists who take their religion very seriously, I simply cannot expect that they would be tolerant of atheism... I do not like the idea of my students and co-workers reading this blog and knowing that this was how I felt about their religion. There are enough sources of conflict in the workplace without adding this to the mix. Not having to worry about this makes me more effective here... Giving up anonymity would change the way I write this blog. Maybe it wouldn't be a major change, but it would be a change. I would find myself tempted to hold back. 

Some are against this use of pseudonyms, as seen in the same post by Vjack who is making his argument against another popular atheist blogger the Friendly Atheist (Hemant Mehta):

This post was prompted by Hemant at Friendly Atheist who recently leveled some subtle criticism of anonymous atheist bloggers. After acknowledging that his opposition to anonymity as “caused some friction with some people I know,” Hemant asks why we anonymous atheist bloggers maintain our anonymity when doing so makes it "that much harder to make atheism more acceptable in society".

A similar example is found in a discussion between members of Atheist Nexus:

115 Ibid
There are many members who use pseudonyms for participating in discussions as well as for registering. Why does any one want to hide one’s true identity? Personally, I am given to strong expressions, yet I do not want to use a pseudonym. Should this practice be permitted and continued on A N? (Madhukar Kulkarni).

Reply: Of course it should. There are many places around the world where it is positively dangerous to be identified as an atheist. If I lived even in the USA I would radically reduce my chances of getting employment should I be identifiable as such (Littlejohn Dellar).

Reply: Not to mention some people would be executed as apostates should their real identity get found out (Meddlesome).\footnote{Atheist Nexus, 2011. Using Pseudonyms, viewed 1 February 2014: http://www.atheistnexus.org/group/originuniverselifehumankindanddarwin/forum/topics/using-pseudonyms}

The dangers seen in coming out lead some to the use pseudonyms to compartmentalise the separate parts of their life, so that some parts can remain publicly atheist while others can be kept separate from the atheist identity.

If you sign your real name to what you write about atheism and religion, assume that your parents, coworkers, and neighbors will find it. Assume that future dates will also find it. Assume that people where you apply for your next job will find it. If you don’t want them reading it, blog anonymously.\footnote{Cline, A, 2014. Blogging About Atheism: How to Blog More Effectively About Atheism, Philosophy, viewed 1 February: http://atheism.about.com/od/atheismblogs/p/BlogAtheism.htm}

The fear of future reprisals for publicly displaying atheist views on the internet is also a common concern that prompts compartmentalisation of internet identities. Many understand this to be an important property of the online environment due to the reasons stated above.

This allows atheists to flourish. It also (and I’ll get into this later) allows people to be visible AS ATHEISTS. They’re no longer the
bogeyman, they’re the friend on the other side of the computer screen, and that makes them harder for the extremists to villify.\textsuperscript{118}

The anonymity of the internet allows atheists to come out on-line while maintaining their disguise at other times.\textsuperscript{119}

Thus, despite the call to come out, many of the irreligious still feel that the personal consequences of exposing their irreligion could out way the benefits of public normalisation. These people can either remain completely covert or find ways to display their irreligion publicly without showing their true identity, a semi-public form of irreligion. However, even when atheists go to such lengths to become partly public, there is always, as with past movement, the chance that their real identity may become exposed, as shown below.

\textbf{Doxing – A Forced ‘Coming out’}

Connected to the semi-public nature of internet pseudonyms, is the practice that has become known as ‘doxing’. It refers to investigating and revealing a pseudonym or online personality’s identifying information without consent, such as home address, workplace information and credit card numbers. The word is derived from ‘docs’, which is a shortened term for documents.\textsuperscript{120} The quote below discusses the practice in relation to the contemporary atheist community.

Sometime in the near future, someone in the freethought community will get doxxed, that is, they will have some of their personal information published (or republished) on the internet. That

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{Turley, J., 2013. \textit{Oprah’s Bias Against Atheists}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://jonathanturley.org/2013/10/19/oprahs-bias-against-atheists/}}
\footnote{Know Your Meme. \textit{Doxing}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://knowyourmeme.com/memes/doxing}}
\end{footnotes}
person's enemies will say they had it coming, while others will say it was completely inappropriate.\footnote{121}

Doxing became an increasingly used practice in atheist circles over the period of my research. It became particularly used after the events of \textit{Elevatororgate} described in Chapter 7. One particularly well known case is attributed to Greg Laden\footnote{122} who attempted to dox \textit{SlymePit}\footnote{123} member Mykeru by publicly exposing his address.\footnote{124} The tweet below is a copy of the tweet that started this particular doxing controversy:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.4\textwidth]{tweet TaiY.png}
\caption{A tweet by Greg Laden.
\begin{itemize}
\item @Mykeru
\item @Thomas_Birds7
\item @rebeccawaison
\item Still living here?
\item reedin.com/VA/Arlington/8...
\end{itemize}
\end{figure}

It turns out that the address he posted on this tweet was not Mykeru's address but an old address of his ex-wife. However, this is a prime example of how the doxing process works, and can potentially misfire on those using it. There were a number of other examples of prominent doxing during this period. It became such a major issue that blogs and organisations began creating policies about anonymity and doxing practices. The \textit{Center for Inquiry} announced a Twitter accounts policy.\footnote{125} PZ Myers announced that he would publicly reveal the identity of anyone who leaves comments he does not agree with. He goes so far as to say, “I won’t hesitate to expose your IP address and email.”\footnote{126} In response Coyne of \textit{WhyEvolutionIsTrue} stated that this announcement would be likely to raise questions from potential commenters on other blogs. Dr Coyne disclosed his policy when it comes to the privacy of commenters and doxing:

\begin{itemize}
\item [121] Reinhardt, D, 2012. \textit{A few thoughts on dropping docs}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://www.skepticink.com/backgroundprobability/2012/12/30/a-few-thoughts-on-dropping-docs/#sthash.ToNrwapM.dpuf}
\item [123] The SlymePit. \textit{Home}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://slymepit.com/phpbb/}
\item [124] Mykeru. \textit{Twitter}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{https://twitter.com/Mykeru}
\item [125] Center for Inquiry, 2013. \textit{How to Get Blocked (and Not Blocked) by a CFI Twitter Account}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/how_to_get_blocked_and_not_blocked_by_a_cfi_twitter_account/}
\item [126] Myers, PZ, 2013. \textit{Freeze Page: I support your right to post anonymously}, viewed 1 February 2014: \url{http://www.freezepage.com/1370686636X0Q1CNDWTA}
\end{itemize}
Under no circumstances will I reveal your name, email, IP address, or other personal information to other commenters. Nor will I reveal them to anyone with one exception: if a comment appears to threaten physical or other harm to someone, including me, I will report the information to the proper authorities. 127

Atheist Revolution128 agreed, arguing that there are many valid reasons someone would want to comment under a pseudonym. These policies clearly have implications for those atheists that felt the internet was providing them with the cloak of anonymity and may have an effect on the number of atheists who are willing to visit sites that will not guarantee such anonymity.

What these ideas and practices make clear is that being an openly public atheist is not seen as possible by some individuals. Whether it is problems caused with government, work, colleagues, friends or family, being a public atheist still has many negative ramifications. These consequences may range from awkwardness to death and thus the cloak of anonymity is still very desirable for many in the irreligious community. The need for such anonymity indicates that the public sphere is not seen as a completely safe space for atheists. The fact that so many atheists still feel the need to hide their atheism in public discourse suggests that the irreligious identity still holds stigma for those engaged in such activities. They do not feel that it entirely safe to expose their identity. If so, this brings into question the very idea of a postsecular field as put forward by Knott (2005). If the irreligious are in fact engaged in such a field, it seems unlikely that they would feel the need to hide their identity. This in fact appears as a field in which the atheist identity can still have dire consequences for the irreligious if exposed in an inappropriate situation. The atheist identity is not viewed as fully acceptable in public discourse and debates, as one would expect in such a postsecular environment. This appears to be a field still strongly governed by competition as well as interpenetration. This is a field in which the irreligious

---

127 Why Evolution is True, 2013. Roolz and policies: Anonymity on this site, viewed 1 February 2014: http://whyevolutionistrue.wordpress.com/2013/06/08/roolz-and-policies-anonymity-on-this-site/
feel that they must fight publicly or at least semi-publicly in order to have their identity accepted.
Chapter 4: Covert/Public

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA

Public

The view of the new atheism as a public form of irreligion is supported in my interviews, where most mentioned that the ‘new atheism’ was definitely public in its orientation (79% Table 5) in fact this was my top answer to the questions What do you think when you hear the term New Atheism? and How much and in what ways do you think the ‘New Atheist’ movement has effected your views and behaviours? The overall feeling of my interview sample was one of excitement about the possibilities of the movement and an understanding that there may be at least something more active and vocal about it. At this time it indeed did seem that the atheist community was still mostly united in their causes and that the new atheist movement was providing a public push for the irreligious. The new atheism was seen in relation to past movements, or as many said, the ‘old atheism’.

It might be talking about the visibility that might be what the ‘new’ part is... the coming out movement... made me a bit braver online to identify as an atheist (Ally).

There’s also been a shift to using these bigger technologies... and using the popular press to put ideas out which was never a thing that atheists did (Taneal).

Some atheists also saw the public nature of the new atheism as having negative connotations. This illustrates one of the issues that atheists themselves have with the public nature of the new atheism:

This does happen often if I’m describing myself as an atheist, sometimes I feel like I need to distance myself from the Dawkins kind of atheist if people have seen some of the stuff that I would consider more aggressive that he’s said, because they’re so prominent in public as atheists, they can define your identity as well which is probably something I would feel as a negative effect because there’s more wrapped in there than just belief about an
absence of religion, about an absence of God, there’s a whole set of
beliefs about how evil religion is, some of which I do agree with and
some of which I don’t. But that somehow has been wrapped into
atheism (Ally).

Despite the negative issues they have with a public and confrontational atheism,
these individuals still have a clear vision of the new atheists as a public form of
irreligion.

Latent or Covert – ‘Coming Out’

The term ‘coming out’ further reinforces the idea of the movement is attempting
to create a public presence. The particular term ‘coming out’, indicates that
atheists now wish to be publicly visible to alleviate stigma. The presence of the
term throughout my interviews indicates the extent to which this concept has
diffused through atheist networks.

I don’t want to call it a label but I just see it as atheism coming out of
the closet which is a great thing… Yes it’s opened up and it’s also that
atheists are now pushing for their rights… so atheism becoming
more assertive and affirming their belief and pushing now a little bit
better and I think that’s what I see when you talk about the term
new atheism, that movement, that coming out and being a bit more
active and taking the initiative now rather than just sitting back and
saying we’re atheists, they’re doing something about it and saying
we’ve got rights. It’s just that atheism has gone a little bit further, it’s
come out of the closet so to speak, and that’s the best way to look at
it (Artie).

I think it’s so, so important for them to be right out there clearing
some space for the average person who’s a little bit frightened of you
know, coming out of the closet as it were (Morgan).

As shown here, even Westerners in a relatively accepting country feel some fear
when reflecting on the idea of ‘coming out’ or revealing atheism that was
previously covert. The use of ‘agnostic’ as an identity term prior to taking up the
term ‘atheist’ is another common theme (38% 15/39 participants), some used it to avoid offending others.

The wave of ‘New Atheism’ allowed access to arguments and opinions online. Without the easy access and communication with the new atheist community I might still be identifying as ‘agnostic’. It has also given me the confidence to publicly state my atheism when asked about my religious views. I’m non-confrontational, but at the same time I’m proud to say I’m the Primary Ethics Teacher, and will happily answer all the question which that topic brings up (Hariot).

And some used it to avoid discrimination:

I sort of called myself an agnostic at that point so I didn’t really have good or well-formed counter arguments to what they were telling me but the more they sort of pressed me I just knew it wasn’t the way that I thought and I was more of an atheist than I considered myself (Dean).

However, some atheists also recognise that coming out can be a much bigger deal for people living outside the comfort of the Western world, where consequences can be far more severe:

It is encouraging more people to come out of the closet in a religious sense, ah and it is encouraging more people to speak up and when I talk... I mean I’ve talked to people in Pakistan and those Indonesians [discussed earlier], I talked to a guy who’s Caribbean who wanted to think about setting up an atheist group there. I mean these things are in their absolute infancy where people are like in Pakistan, doing it anonymously and so forth (Taneal).

Comments such as this also serve to reinforce the impression that the new atheism is intended to be a global public phenomena. The encouragement to ‘come out’ is a call to expose one’s atheism publicly for the future good of all atheists, globally. The idea is to globally normalise atheism through public visibility and exposure.

I guess in thinking more about how I can contribute to other people’s lives being an atheist and even though I don’t really think I’m doing
that actively, I think by being a good person and being a good moral person and saying ‘look us atheists are not baby eaters’ (Deidre).

The new movement itself has been a factor of importance in activating latently irreligious individuals.

I think two things, I think of the kind of emergence into the public sphere of atheism as a more discussed concept, like Christopher Hitchens and Richard Dawkins all those who’ve been around for a long time, it seems you know there’s that real kind of public forum thing that seems to be going on in you know the Global Atheist Conference and stuff like that, these are the kind of associations with that (Brody).

I think of ‘new atheism’ as a much more vocal form of atheism, where more people are willing to stand up and identify as atheists. It seems far more organised and willing to debate against believers. It’s also spurred on by charismatic and outspoken leaders, such as Dawkins, Hitchens and Harris... Due to the rise of New Atheism, more groups have popped up that are willing to discuss the issue. These groups are where I met most of my friends, and so I go to many more social events that are formed by people who are atheists. I also read blogs and books about the subject which weren’t so previously well-known and wouldn’t be known to me if it weren’t for new atheism (Beatrice).

Some people (20% 8/39 participants) in my research stated that they were not as interested in irreligion prior to the appearance of new atheist writings and noticing other self-identified atheists. Some (10% 4/39 participants) even indicated that they had moved from a nominal religious view to that of atheism. The level of the effect varied from those who said it had been a major factor in their atheism to those who denied any effect at all. Whatever the level of effect expressed by the participant, on continued questioning it was clear that they all knew what the movement was and agreed with its goals to some degree. On the stronger effect end of things, people discuss the new atheism as a ‘liberation’ or
a ‘revelation’ (in a non-religious sense) or feelings of being a ‘born again atheist’, some of these accounts resemble ‘irreligious experiences’ as described by Bullivant (2008). The following accounts illustrate the stronger influence of the new atheism:

After I read the God Delusion, I became a Born Again Atheist, but then I was also seeing how the Churches and those who believe in religions were undermining democracy in the USA, as it’s rather obvious over there. It’s also been happening in Australia since John Howard and the influence of the Lyons forum. It’s just as pervasive in Australia but it’s much more hidden. I thought 9/11 would make people think again about religion, but it seems it’s made some people think there is still not enough of it (Reese).

Well, it confirmed my atheism as soon as I’d finished [The God Delusion], like before I’d even finished it and everything just changed for me from then on… It was a real liberation (Kerry).

A lot. Enormously. I have an appetite for learning I didn’t have before. I feel like I have a credible outline in which to fit the jigsaw pieces. I feel like I won’t waste time and money on all the woo. I think with more clarity. I am more solutions focussed. I am learning to think more critically. I wish I had arrived at this point years and years ago (Brody).

Some felt that the movement was more of a catalyst or opportunity to confirm their atheism in the company of others (60% 24/39 participants). Many of these accounts discuss the wider access to atheist thinkers and resources through the new culture, and the opportunity to join in on a bigger conversation.

All it has done is to confirm and strengthen my views that there are no gods, that there is no supernatural existence, that religious beliefs can delude, divide and control people…They are having a major impact. The World Wide Web has done much to increase enlightenment and encourage exchange of views globally (Kale).
As the term seems to mostly be describing the so-called four horsemen: Hitchens, Dawkins, Dennett and Harris, I would say that they’ve helped bring atheism from a personal to a wide-ranging social discussion. I’ve gained information and fresh perspectives based on the newly emerging culture rather than from them specifically. I’ve benefited more from the output of the culture they helped inspire (e.g. bloggers like PZ Myers and Greta Christina as well as youtubers like Nonstampcollector and Thelivingdinosaur) than I have from them as individual writers and philosophers (Adison).

On the contrary, there were many other participants who did not place any great importance on the new atheist movement and its writings (20% 8/39 participants). Lastly here are two examples of those who felt the movement was having little or no effect on them.

Strengthened my views but not greatly changed my behaviour
(Gary).

The only Richard Dawkins I’ve ever taken in is seeing him on Q and A and one or two YouTube. I intend never to read Richard Dawkins, it’s not an antipathy to the man, it’s not an antipathy to anything he has to say, its more, well a bit of an obnoxious aspect to my person. I don’t like being called a new atheist. I arrived at atheism the hard way; it’s what’s left after the bullshit that has been dispelled. I do not worship Richard Dawkins, thank you very much. I do not regard Richard Dawkins as a high priest, while I respect Richard Dawkins, I maintain a distance from his writing and that of Hitchens, etc, etc. so that I can always refute the charge that this is the only reason I’m an atheist... I’m really pleased to see that there are a lot more atheists visible and outspoken and while it hasn’t affected my views, I am at least happy to know that a number of people share them (Mr Black).
The new atheist coming out movement seems to have emboldened some atheists to be more public with their irreligious identity. Whether it has achieved this by conversion, liberation or increased support, it has most certainly drawn more people towards the cause of irreligion. Recent research (Zickuhr and Smith 2012; Kosmin and Keysar 2007), combined with earlier insights from Google Trend data also suggests that this is occurring on a macro level and that the new atheism has actually caused more people to embrace their public identity as an atheist. Other research and evidence (Zickuhr and Smith 2012; Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan 2011) gives support that the public presence of atheism may actually be succeeding in its normalising goals. However, the need for such activities in order to normalise the atheist identity again brings up the postsecular field and its interpretation. Most atheists still seem to feel that the world they live in contains less respect for atheist identities than is being implied by some interpretations of postsecularism. Especially those that assume secular and religious views are already equal in the public sphere, and this seems to be the case even in liberal Western democracies.
DISCUSSION

The evidence presented in this chapter indicates that there is a perceived need among contemporary irreligious individuals for a public irreligious movement. The movement has also been shown to revolve around two major factors, the normalisation of atheism and the curtailing of religious privileges within the public sphere. They are attempting to achieve this through outreach campaigns that ask the irreligious to ‘come out’ publicly as atheists. Through the public presence of atheists they hope to reduce prejudice against atheist individuals and place atheist views in the public sphere to compete with public religious groups.

The media world (including and perhaps especially the internet) is bringing us all closer together and the people that we now experience as significant others are not always those with whom we have direct communication. This turns private matters into public issues, from the atheist who is harassed at work to the persecution of atheists in other countries. Many cases of persecution of atheists have come to light throughout my research, with consequences from shunning to death. Thus asking people to ‘come out’ is far from simple and can have dire consequences for some atheists. However, the idea is to normalise atheism to some degree and thus lessen the chances of persecution for all atheists. By providing a community that is there to support the irreligious in coming out and remaining an atheist, the new atheists have provided a feeling of ontological support to the atheist milieu (like Davie 1994 *Vicarious Religion* as will be outlined in Chapter 7). In this way, atheists are attempting to provide community support structures, outreach, and to be a true and popular alternative/ competitor to religious views. Due to this, the new atheism is a very public form of atheism. Psychological research by Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011) backs up the effectiveness of the ‘coming out’ campaigns. In the research it is found that high visibility/perceived presence of atheists leads to less prejudice and discrimination, contrary to findings on other groups. Atheists now know they are not alone and society seems to be seeing them as less problematic. This has also been supported in recent Pew surveys (Zickuhr and Smith 2012) which show that we have now reached the point where more
than half of Americans feel comfortable voting for an atheist. By making this part of their identity public, atheists have begun to publicly realise their atheistic identity through individual and structural changes (Smith 2010).

The latently irreligious are unlikely to come out into the milieu unless their irreligion is made explicit. The process of latent atheism becoming explicit or public could be through encountering the milieu itself or through some form of traumatic event which brings their atheism into focus, both of which I have argued were present at the beginning of the 21st century. The covertly irreligious can actually still partake in the public irreligious milieu if they choose to, with the challenge of remaining hidden. They may also choose other labels that make their irreligion less confronting or offensive, such as Holyoake's 'Secularist' and Huxley's 'agnostic'. They might still be drawn into the more internal system, but their involvement in these different atheist groups would have to remain anonymous or hidden in order for them to maintain their covert status. The internet has made this more possible by providing easily accessible and anonymous platforms for those who wish to express their views while remaining covert. Even the publicly irreligious may choose to keep some parts of their life separate from their irreligious views and the internet enhances the ability to do that. However, as shown in the data above there have been cases where such a status has been broken, such as 'doxing' and some persecution cases, and thus it is difficult for some atheists to know that their multiple identities will not be exposed at some time. Even semi-public atheists could end up as fully public atheists in the long run, as has happened with past irreligious groups like the Secularists.

It seems that the need to normalise atheism due to negative public views of atheists unites both those who wish to be public and those who remain semi-public or covert. This need arises from the belief that the atheist identity is still not fully acceptable in many parts of society. Atheists do not feel that they have been given equal and full access to the postsecular field. Incidences of discrimination against and persecution of atheists are still high and atheists have often not been offered the same cultural respect that is offered to the religious in the public square. If we have indeed entered a postsecular era, from
the atheist view it is one that they have entered on uneven terms with their opponents, they are still experiencing conflict over the right to exist openly as atheists.

Pseudonyms and Semi-Public Anonymity

As seen in Chapter 3, Australians do not feel that being public about their atheism brings them many negative responses. However, as shown in the quote below, this does not stop them from applying a certain amount of compartmentalisation within their identity. Compartmentalisation can be viewed as a less extreme version of being covert. The person may have multiple online accounts or identities or socialise in separate groups to achieve this. This compartmentalisation can allow them to be semi-public about their atheism without risking ‘coming out’ in a less accepting environment.

I think a lot actually, it’s sort of sent me spinning wildly for a while, then I had to create two different Facebook accounts... My atheist self from my family self.

Researcher: Do you think it would have been bad for you to put them two together or to keep them together?

Kerry: No, look they've got the option of requesting me under my alternate name if they want to but they haven’t.

Researcher: It’s more just a way of not annoying people with your views?

Kerry: Yes, exactly (Kerry).

Even in this relatively accepting environment, a few examples are found in my interviews. There was even one individual, Mr Black who decided to conduct the interview under a pseudonym, he was an older atheist and seemed more concerned about his identity remaining private. However, it was clear that Mr Black was still a very public atheist despite his pseudonym. He provided me with various extra documents explaining his atheist stances, which was
available on the AFA forum,\textsuperscript{129} Atheist Nexus\textsuperscript{130} and his web site\textsuperscript{131} for others to read. His pseudonym was a very public atheist, even if not his real name. Many, like Mr Black see coming out in full as risky and choose to do this in a semi-public way. As shown in the quote below my participants felt that the internet provided a space that would allow them and others to come out safely as an atheist. It also provides an extended community who have similar interests around the topic of atheism and was seen as an extension of the new atheist movement.

With forums and bulletin boards - and the anonymity that comes with it - whenever religious topics came up, common people could dissent, debate or simply insult any idea/person. People who felt like they were alone in their atheism suddenly have like-minded people they could easily talk to... There is the appearance of a movement and I would now call it such, but from what I've seen it wasn't a conscious group effort to initially create it. People have been presented with tools to do what they want. Can't get the funds to write a book? Publish a blog. Can't get on TV to talk about a subject? Create a YouTube channel. Everyone wants their say, and there just happens to be a large group of people who want their say on religion (Michael).

Thus the internet is seen as a way of achieving an anonymity that still allows activism. This identity can still be exposed, as shown in the historical section and the online participant observations. Despite this fact the internet is still seen as a relatively safe space for atheists, even amongst Australians, indications are that atheists do not feel like they are completely welcome in the public and supposedly postsecular field.

\textsuperscript{129} Due to some controversy Mr Black has left the AFA Forum – Black, 2013. The Irreverent Mr Black, viewed 5 February 2014: http://irrev-black.com/archives/792
\textsuperscript{130} Atheist Nexus. The Irrev. Mr Black's Page, viewed 5 February 2014: http://www.atheistnexus.org/profile/TheIrrevMrBlack?xg_source=activity
\textsuperscript{131} Black, 2013. The Irreverent Mr Black, viewed 5 February 2014: http://irrev-black.com/
CHAPTER 5. Accommodation/Confrontation
SAVING SCIENCE

The confrontational nature of the new atheists will be shown to arise from a similar background to its public presentation; the perceived need to fight for the rights of atheists and science in the public sphere. The need to end, ‘false respect’ for religious views and default stances around religion arises from these desires, in order to even the playing field for the irreligious. Likewise, we will see that the fear of losing allies held by accommodationists is due to the continued dominance of religious views in public life. Most people are still religious and if the irreligious are to retain allies in scientific causes they must keep these people interested in science. Both of these tactics come from the same concern to allow atheist identities and science a better chance to survive public sphere culture clashes. This brings us back to a discussion of postsecularity. It again indicates a field in which secular and religious views are publicly interacting, but critiques the idea of this being a field in which they are equally accepted.
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

Figure 13 is a cartoon from 1903 that illustrates the idea that the aggressive and public atheism is not new with the current wave of irreligion.\(^{132}\)

\textit{Figure 13: Vocal and Aggressive Atheism, Early 20th Century}

It shows a soldier of ‘Rationalism’ brandishing a sword of ‘cold facts’ and a ‘whip of ridicule’ against the running clergy carrying the ‘pulpit lies’. The caption above is the soldier’s words, “I’m not dead yet... Let ROGUES and SHAMS beware!!!” Thus, the confrontationist sentiment is most certainly not new with the new atheism. Throughout history, there were a number of figures that saw confrontation as the best tactic to deal with religion. Although stopping short of God itself the Protestants and then Deists used confrontation to dismantle the ‘superstitions’ of the Catholic church (Dahlitz 1994; Bruce 2010; Weber [1905] 2005), and eventually, all churches, creating objects such as the Jefferson Bible (Epstein 2009; Gaustad 1996). The 18\(^{th}\) century was still mainly dominated by religious criticism arising from believers. Deism, or the belief in a non-interfering God, became very popular in this century and pushed forward its arguments via the more advanced and cheaper printing technologies of the

time (Herrick 1997). One figure commonly cited is the Deistic Thomas Paine (1737-1809). His three main writings, *Common Sense* (1776), *Rights of Man* (1791) and *The age of Reason* (1794) are seen as a major influence on freethinkers that would follow him. Paine’s arguments were not new to the elite of the time, but he presented them in a way that made them appealing to the masses. The book was also relatively cheap, bringing it in the price range of those individuals with a lower income. His Deism is seen as of less importance than his infidelity to Christianity and Dahlitz (1994) suggests that it was Paine’s writings which inspired many following him to disprove the bible and desert the church. His arguments in *The Age of Reason* continue to have gravity in the modern secular discourses due to its advocation of reason over revelation, rejection of miracles and description of the bible as mere literature (Dahlitz 1994). Thomas Jefferson also stands prominently in this period, though he was again self-identified as a Deist. His anti-clericalism, strong calls for a wall of separation between church and state and rewriting of the bible without miracles and contradictions (*The Life and Morals of Jesus of Nazareth* or The Jefferson Bible) remain as inspiring symbols for the irreligious today (Epstein 2009). By the middle of the 18th century Parisian intellectuals were using ‘atheist’ as a term of self-identification. A well-known example of this was Denis Diderot who overtly declared his atheism in a very religious time. He is often cited as the first self-identified atheist philosopher (Hyman 2007; Buckley 1987). According to Buckley (1987: 250) Diderot made the definitive statement of atheism:

> The principle of everything is creative nature, matter in its self-activity eternally productive of all change and all design.

It states that matter is the only known substance and that it is the interaction of matter that produces the universe. The statement is clear in its naturalism, no God or spirits are implicated in the production or sustaining of the universe. These thinkers can be argued to have cleared space for a wave of organised irreligion, which would in the 19th century have an irreligious base to its activities. Holyoake famously stated that God should be ‘put on half pay’ while workers continued to live in distress (Dahlitz 1994). Bradlaugh of the English
Secularists and later Rationalists used his election to parliament to confront the need for swearing into office on the bible (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994). An illustrative comment comes from H. L. Mencken when he wrote in The Baltimore Evening Sun in the wake of the Scopes Trial. Otherwise known as the ‘Scopes Monkey Trial’, it challenged the right of a Tennessee teacher to teach evolution in public schools. Mencken (1925; cited in Lebo 2012: 357) said the following about the right to challenge the beliefs of the ‘superstitious man’:

Even a superstitious man has certain inalienable rights. He has a right to harbor and indulge his imbecilities as long as he pleases, provided only he does not try to inflict them upon other men by force. He has a right to argue for them as eloquently as he can, in season and out of season. He has a right to teach them to his children. But certainly he has no right to be protected against the free criticism of those who do not hold them. He has no right to demand that they be treated as sacred.

Irreligious groups that can be seen as accommodative in history are rather rare. It is possibly only the early US Humanists born out of Unitarian traditions that had a truly accommodationist stance. They were happier to accept those with religious views into their groups, unlike most other past irreligious groups. What Mencken and others had hoped for is now beginning to emerge. The new atheists (as confrontationists) are making a concerted effort to end the notion that ‘respect for religion’ means freedom from criticism. The fear of atheist persecution and the loss of ‘legitimate’ science in the public sphere drives the confrontationists. They see a public sphere in which religion has re-entered as a major player, yet has still retained the immunity to criticism that has been extended to the religious views in the past. However it is clear that not all contemporary atheists are comfortable with the confrontationist stance. Some feel that the new atheists could be doing more harm than good by alienating potential allies in a war for the public dissemination of science. Thus the debate has been quite rigorous between the new atheists and so called ‘accommodationists’.
INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Every week a blogger somewhere will point out how dangerous New Atheism is for Old Atheism. This will quickly be followed by another blogger using accommodationist as a pejorative, listing how their criticisms against fellow atheists is simply not cricket, and how they coddle those nasty Bible bashers. Each article will proceed to spawn a fetid tail of comments that gradually decay into barely coherent sentences that might be illogical if they weren’t initially illegible...And so the conversation goes. On. And on. And on. And on.\(^\text{133}\)

The position of the atheist accommodationists can be contrasted with that of some of the New Atheists who maintain that all faith-based ideas are counter to scientific thought and should be criticized. Well-known new atheists include Richard Dawkins and Paul Zachary Myers... The question of how, or if, accommodationism should be addressed within the rationalist/atheist community is one of the bigger issues in the community today. Indeed, both “sides” sometimes appear on this very wiki.\(^\text{134}\)

The conflict between the new atheists and those who became known as the accommodationists has its roots in atheist disputes from around 2006 (Koch 2008). However, an extensive scan of the internet (using Google) was unable to find any mention of the word before 2009 and a search engine aided scan is also backed up by a search using Google Trends which shows three main peaks starting in 2009 and coming again in 2010 and 2013 (Figure 14), this sequence also links up with the a manual Google search which finds peaks in the same timeframes (the term ‘accommodationist’ was used as ‘accommodationism’ did

\(^{133}\) The Tribal Atheist, 2011. The two species problem of New Atheism, viewed 15 December 2013: http://tribalscientist.wordpress.com/2011/05/05/the-two-species-problem-of-new-atheism/

not return enough volume for *Google Trends*). Nearly all mentions of either word come from the atheist milieu.\(^{135}\)

*Figure 14: Google Trends – Interest over Time for the Term Accommodationist from 2004 to 2013*

January 2009 is notable because at this time *Edge* presented a special event. The event was called: “Does the Empirical Nature of Science Contradict the Revelatory Nature of Faith.” \(^{136}\) It was a Reality Club conversation on Jerry Coyne’s *New Republic* piece “Seeing and Believing: The never-ending attempt to reconcile science and religion, and why it is doomed to fail”, in which he reviewed two books, *Saving Darwin: How to be a Christian and Believe in Evolution* by Karl W. Giberson, and *Only A Theory: Evolution and the Battle for America’s Soul* by Kenneth R. Miller. Coyne praised the books for providing an edifying summary of the tenets and the flaws of modern creationism, but also criticised their attempts to reconcile science and religion. Participating in the conversation were Lawrence Krauss, Howard Gardner, Lisa Randall, Patrick Bateson, Daniel Everett, Daniel Dennett, Lee Smolin, Emanuel Derman, Karl W. Giberson, Kenneth R. Miller, Sam Harris, Steven Pinker and Michael Shermer. With this line-up it was clearly an event of note in the atheist movement. After this debate the conversation actually shifted to what is now being called

---

\(^{135}\) Though there are some links to the racial debate in the US during the emancipation of slaves and some other spaces where ‘hardliners’ and ‘accommodationists’ clash.

‘accommodationism’ versus ‘confrontationism’ (or new atheism) (Coyne 2009). As Alonzo Fyfe from *Atheist Ethicist* states:

There is a strong social incentive to seek admission into one of these two camps - or any camp, for that matter. By gaining acceptance, one gains an instant set of friends. One gains a community. Humans are tribal creatures. Those who obtain membership in a tribe obtain all of the benefits of membership. Other tribal members will think of you as a great person - so long as you abide by and promote the tribe's code of conduct. Deviate from the code - or, worse yet, question the code, and you are out...We talk about the atheist “coming out” to his religious tribe. The same phenomena applies to the “new atheist” coming out as an accommodationist, or an accommodationist coming out as a “new atheist”. You lose the fellowship obtained by membership in the original tribe - and that is a very difficult thing to give up. These psychological forces cause people to absorb the culture of their tribe without question - this is the price of acceptance.\(^\text{137}\)

On the ‘confrontationist’ side there are bloggers like PZ Myers, Jerry Coyne, Eric Macdonald and Jason Rosenhouse. Also authors like Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, Victor Stenger, Ayan Hirsi Ali and Richard Dawkins. On the ‘accommodationist’ side there are journalists, philosophers and bloggers like Chris Mooney, Michael Ruse and Josh Rosenau.

**Confrontation**

So when I meet somebody who claims to be religious, my first impulse is: “I don’t believe you. I don’t believe you until you tell me do you really believe — for example, if they say they are Catholic — do you really believe that when a priest blesses a wafer it turns into the body of Christ? Are you seriously telling me you believe that? Are you seriously saying that wine turns into blood?” Mock them! Ridicule them! In public! Don’t fall for the convention that we’re all

---

too polite to talk about religion. Religion is not off the table. Religion is not off limits.\textsuperscript{138}

Richard Dawkins is the most popular and considered one of the most confrontational new atheist authors. He presented the above speech at the 2012 \textit{Reason Rally} in the US.\textsuperscript{139} Although Dawkins later took back the call to ‘mock’ and ‘ridicule’ Catholics publicly,\textsuperscript{140} this shows the kind of language that has become associated with Dawkins and the other new atheists. The most confrontational new atheists are often also the most well-known as the above quote illustrates. In the comments for this video, there are many people accusing Dawkins of hatred and fundamentalism, which negatively emphasises the confrontational leanings of the new atheists. Adding to this there are many irreligious supporters who reiterate the need for confrontational interactions with the religious, I provide two examples below:

Yes. I’m sure that’s why some call Dawkins militant. But I kinda feel the same way. If you know something is a lie and you see how it damages society and the world and women’s equality and gay’s equality...not to mention wasting people’s time and the one life they get with false hopes...I too, want to SAY something. I wish my atheist friends had said things more strongly to me. Maybe I would have freed myself of the brainwashing a little sooner!\textsuperscript{141}

Hard to argue with such a wonderful speech! Dawkins is great. Too bad I came on the scene too late to know Hitchens.\textsuperscript{142}

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{139} Ibid
\end{flushleft}
Another case, PZ Myers, was by far the most popular and direct of the newer batch of confrontational atheists (see Chapter 3), at least until 2011 and the events of Elevatorgate (see Chapter 7). At the Australian GAC in 2010, in a speech called The Inescapable Conflict between Science and Religion, Myers argues adamantly that science and religion are incompatible via many negative religious examples. Even when an example of a successful religious scientist is given, he proceeds to show that their religion causes problems with other parts of that scientists beliefs. As Myers says in the conference, “It’s not that it’s evil, it’s that it’s wrong and makes you stupid.” The YouTube video of the speech contains many negative comments about Myer’s aggressive style, which again provide backup for the perception of new atheists as confrontational. Again there are also many irreligious people in these comments who support the aggressive stance being employed by Myers, adding further support to the notion that new atheists are viewed as confrontational.

Smart, funny, intellectual, honest and balanced P Z Myers is fast becoming a favourite speaker of mine about atheism and science.

Believers: Your vast ignorance always comes through when you express yourselves about your imaginary god. With all the evidence out there that confirms your imaginary god is a product of man’s imagination, you still choose to believe in it without a shred of evidence, suspending rational judgment.

Whether negatively or positively evaluated, it is clear from these comments that new atheists are viewed as being confrontational in their approach to religion and religious people. The perceived need for confrontation on the side of the irreligious highlights the idea that the irreligious must become more competitive in the public sphere. The need to become more competitive can be

144 Ibid
145 Ibid
seen as a way of re-injecting secular ideas into a public sphere that continues to be and is increasingly influenced by religious voices. The vision from the new atheist side confirms the idea of secular and religious views both being present in a post-secular field. However, the aggressive nature of such pronouncements also indicates that the new atheists do not feel they are on an equal footing in such a sphere. The confrontationists feel that they must confront religion in order to defend the right to atheist identity and the views of science, within public spaces. The new atheists are at heart saying that incorrect belief is problematic despite the science. The accommodationists are arguing that it should not be. The emphasis of difference seems to be the need for scientists to hold irreligious beliefs in order to produce legitimate science. However, both views indicate that the irreligious are involved in a battle for the future of science, it is their choice of tactics which varies.

Accommodation

Group A, holding a viewpoint or belief, will often attack Group B for holding a different belief that Group A believes is wrong. Example: Atheists hold Christians to be wrong regarding their belief in a Christian god. Example: Baptists hold Catholics to be wrong regarding their obedience to the RCC hierarchy. Some members of Group A may disagree with attacking Group B, claiming that members of Group B can be accommodated while still furthering the beliefs and goals of Group A. Example: Atheists may wish to partner with religious people who nonetheless support science. Example: Baptists may wish to form “a coalition of faith” that includes Catholic churches as members. The members of Group A who wish to “accommodate” Group B rather than attack their “wrong” beliefs, are known as “accommodationists”. More “orthodox” members of Group A will argue that the “wrong” beliefs must be opposed and that “accommodationist” efforts are destructive to the aims of Group A. Example: Atheists oppose efforts to cooperate with the religious, since faith-based beliefs are destructive to scientific thinking and education. Example: Baptists oppose efforts to cooperate with Catholics, because God does not agree with what the RCC is doing.
and the Catholics need to repent and become “real” Christians, not be accommodated. That’s how I understand it, anyhow.¹⁴⁸

The above passage indicates what accommodation is about - choosing to strategically ally with opposition groups when it is opportune to do so. At the GAC in Australia 2010, there were two speakers out of 26 presenters that were identifiably on the more ‘accommodationist’ side of the argument, indicating the confrontational leanings of the milieu.¹⁴⁹ The other major examples of accommodationism are found outside of the new atheist milieu. One of the earlier ‘accommodationist’ critics was Philosopher of Science, Michael Ruse.¹⁵⁰ His stated reasons included a dislike of “wrong or simplistic or misleading” ideas getting “great traction with the public.”¹⁵¹ He sees Dawkins as “simplistic” in analysing arguments for the existence of God, Dennett as “naïve and simplistic”¹⁵² in analysing the attractions and growth of religion, and Harris as “crude beyond belief”¹⁵³ in his science-based approach to morality. As for Christopher Hitchens, Ruse says that he doesn’t read Hitchens because of his support for the war in Iraq (which also places Ruse in the Atheism Plus camp, attaching politics to atheism).¹⁵⁴ Ruse believes that the danger of the new atheism and its confrontational tactics is that a future conservative United States Supreme Court could turn against the teaching of Darwinian evolutionary theory. He thinks that atheistic or anti-religious arguments based on evolution could lead the court to view evolutionary theory itself as an anti-religious philosophy. He believes this could endanger the case for evolution being taught as fact in public schools. For Ruse, a line must be drawn between religion and science, to protect the teaching of science in the US public system.

¹⁴⁹ Tamas Pataki and Leslie Cannold discussed the need for accommodationist tactics at this convention http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Global_Atheist_Convention#The_Rise_of_Atheism_12_to_14_March_2010
¹⁵² Ibid
¹⁵³ Ibid
¹⁵⁴ Ibid
Chris Mooney is another figure of prominence in this dispute. Mooney is a journalist who became a figure of note to many with his book *The Republican War on Science* (2005). However, after the emergence of the new atheism, he began arguing that popular atheists were hurting the pro-science cause. A response to the episode that began this chapter is illustrative. In response to Coyne’s *Edge* Piece, Mooney wrote a blog post saying:

> Coyne may be right that there’s no good reason to believe in the supernatural, he’s very misguided about strategy. Especially when we have the religious right to worry about, why is he criticizing people like Miller and Giberson for their attempts to reconcile modern science and religion?  

Mooney also advised atheists in general to “be nice.” He wrote this in spite of the fact that, as he clarified in a follow-up post, thought Coyne’s review was “a very good, extensive, thoughtful article.” Previously, Mooney had been accused of wanting atheists to “shut up” about their atheism, an accusation which Mooney continued to deny in this post. In a final example, after Phil Plait gave a talk at *The Amazing Meeting* (TAM – Skeptics Conference) entitled ‘Don’t Be a Dick’ in which he argued that many atheists were guilty of bad tactics when in conversation with the religious, he received copious numbers of responses from within the atheist community, one notable response came from Barbara Drescher at *ICBS Everywhere* who said:

> I spoke to several people who admitted to fleeting thoughts that they had prompted this speech somehow and I could not help feeling this way myself. That is testimony to the timeliness of it.

---

This exchange again reinforces the feeling that some new atheists were uncomfortable with the more confrontational tactics being employed by the movement and believed there may be a more compromising way to address the issues at hand. However, despite these reservations from parts of the irreligious milieu, the new atheists are seen as mostly confrontational, and this trait can be seen in both a negative and positive way by the irreligious, even within the same person. For the new atheists confrontational tactics must be employed to keep irreligious and scientific voices visible in the public sphere. For accommodationists such confrontation will only serve to alienate potential religiously oriented allies in the cause of science dissemination. From their perspective it is better to avoid confronting supportive religious people in order to form an alliance of science supporters at the public level. A further issue for accommodationists arises from the concern over irreligious views being seen as a form of religion in the public sphere. Such a view would negate the separation between science and atheism, potentially linking evolution to anti-religious philosophy and making it harder for courts to view the theory as nonreligious. Accommodationists share the same goals as confrontationists in the public sphere, that of raising the profile of science, but they employ different and contrasting tactics in order to achieve this goal. The fact that these tactics are united in their goals leads to a third tactic being employed by the irreligious, a middle way; pluralism.

Pluralism

The truth is different religious people react to us in different ways. Some of them will be much more receptive to the kinder, gentler atheists. Some will be so stubborn that you need a more blunt approach to get through to them... We need the angry, the sweet, the Brights, the Humanists, the Atheists-with-a-capital-A, the Blasphemy Challenge, the Muhammad drawings, the Secular Pinky Swear, and everything in between... When a movement grows, there will be factions within it. But if we want to increase our visibility and respectability (to quote the Secular Coalition for America’s mission statement), we need to make ourselves known... I fear that if we’re
constantly fighting over tactics, we're missing out on a golden opportunity to actually *get something* done.\(^{159}\)

As the above quote from the *Friendly Atheist* shows, there have been calls for methodological pluralism in response to this debate, in order to tackle the issues with which the atheist community is concerned, without getting bogged down. The article's author, Gubbins, recognises the differentiation that is likely to occur in a growing movement, but calls for atheists to respect this diversity and its need. On the accommodationist side, some argue that there is a tendency to remain silent about evils for the purpose of securing a political alliance. Thus according to this view, the accommodationist abandons morality and refuses to blame the guilty (and, in doing so, shares some of their guilt). The new atheists on the other hand are accused of employing a bigot's fallacy. That is repeatedly, making the unwarranted leap from the wrongs of a subgroup of religious people to the conclusion that all religious people are evil. The new atheist abandons reason for the sake of placing blame on all of religion, including the innocent. As *Atheist Ethicist* says:

> This is how the racist thinks about blacks, how the sexist thinks about women, and how religious bigots think about atheists.

Consider the “Hitler and Stalin” argument. Notwithstanding the fact that with Hitler the claims are not true, only a bigot thinks that one can take the evil actions of “an atheist” and condemn all atheists. Yet, many atheists think they can take the actions of “a theist” and condemn all religion.\(^{160}\)

Rosenau also points out a related issue with the dichotomy presented as accommodation versus confrontation, the issue is that it is possible for many new atheists to be accommodationists, depending on the circumstances:

---


When Richard Dawkins – whose writings helped define New Atheism – says that science and religion can be compatible in some sense, he could well be both a New Atheist and an accommodationist... [In that case] the question would not be who is right. The question would simply be under what circumstances it would be best to apply either or both.161

This can also be witnessed in other actions by Dawkins himself who has retracted remarks that he has later deemed as too confrontational:

At one point, though, Dawkins did retreat from one of his previous comments. At Reason Rally 2012 — a national atheist event — he had encouraged atheists to “ridicule” Catholics. In hindsight, he confessed, “I think I did go too far,” though he claimed that he had not intended for ridicule to mean name-calling but more as a call for “subtle satire.” 162

The goal for both of these tactics is to keep scientific views prominent in the public sphere. The main difference between these views appears to be the emphasis on correct underlying beliefs as necessary to legitimate scientific findings or ideas. In the end both groups wish to keep scientific ideas and insights in the public sphere. However, the confrontational new atheists also wish to elevate the irreligious worldview as being necessary for correct scientific thought. Thus they believe they must confront any semblance of religious thought or belief in scientific circles. However, as the accommodationists and pluralists point out, this could be alienating useful allies in the overall cause and thus it may be necessary to employ a variety of tactics if this overall goal is to be achieved in the long run. The connection of accommodationist and confrontationist goals means that many view these opposites as being equally legitimate options in the fight for public science dissemination.

Despite which tactic is taken, it is clear that both groups fear the encroachment of uncritical religious views into the public sphere, as they think it may put at risk the gains made by science in Western societies. Both of these views indicate that scientists and the irreligious feel science is potentially in danger of losing its position in the public sphere. This does indicate that religious views have indeed entered the public sphere, but again that the irreligious do not feel they have entered the field on equal footing with the religious. Both accommodation and confrontation are tactics in a conflict and the argument would seem less poignant if in fact the irreligious were in equal competition with the religious.
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA

The interviews helped to establish the views within this dimension that have diffused down to the individual level. Thus they establish the dissemination of views in this dimension at the individual level, in a private situation that would be less affected by peer pressures to conform to group level thinking. It is clear that my interview participants agree that the new atheists have taken a confrontational stance with regards to the religious. While most people agree that this stance may be necessary in the current world, it is also clear that individuals still hold reservations about whether the confrontational route will be effective at protecting science and atheist identity on its own.

Confrontation

Despite their particular stance on the new atheism, most participants acknowledged that the movement has provided space for discussion of atheism more publicly by confronting the recent resurgence in religion (56% Table 5). This is interesting and goes against versions of postsecularism that indicate the field is one in which religious and secular voices are equally accepted. It seems to support the idea of the competitive version of postsecularism, in which the religious have re-entered the public sphere again, but still with advantages over the secular milieu. The issue for many new atheists is that religion still commands a respect in the public sphere which makes it less susceptible to criticism. Religion is to be respected as a sacred belief, where atheism can be openly criticised. Thus the new atheists feel that this polite respect must be broken in order for the secular and religious views to be equal in such a postsecular sphere. When discussing the new atheism my participants were clear on the confrontational stance employed by the group:

I think of aggressive, confronting atheism — of the view that religious belief needs not only to be dissented from but actively opposed (Gary).

There’s been this shift [away] from being polite and not offending religious people (Taneal).
These quotes again relate to the perception of the ‘old atheists’, presented earlier, as being ‘covert’ and ‘accommodative’. Even when my participants did not believe the image of the new atheists that was being presented, it was clear to them that the new atheism was at least being perceived as a more aggressive and confrontational movement. However, for confrontational atheists, this confrontation is a good thing as religion should ideally be expelled from the public sphere, not seen as an equal competitor:

So now we have a larger volume of people exposed to atheistic ideas and aware of sceptical and atheist events. More people feel encouraged to confront religion rather than shy away. Many people are getting organised in what can be called a movement. Although, to reiterate, the goal of the movement isn’t necessarily atheism, its education, skepticism and keeping our society secular and politics free of religious influence (Michael).

Thus, to many in my sample, the confrontational attitude of the new atheists serves a purpose within society, which is to normalise atheism and curtail religious privilege.

It’s putting Christians on the defensive there is also the (sometimes very slow) progress in secular laws. Christians are losing undeserved privilege, and quite a few are unhappy about it (Reave).

I think that there’s been a real debate emerged about the validity of the role of religion in determining social policy that wasn’t there before and I think that’s a good thing (Ally).

Through confrontation, the hypocrisy and public and political influence of religion can be exposed and countered.

[I defend atheism] when religious thinking affects public policy, for example gay marriage and abortion debates (Beatrice).
Lots of people are prepared to stand up and debate people attempting to force the influence of religion onto the rest of society (Darren).

I don't know, a more aggressive proposal of the idea of atheism within a society... I think to some degree this is some people finally saying well you know stuff this, let's actually put an active case against them [the rising religious right] rather than just laughing at them over our coffee... I have been triggered to join them [an irreligious forum] and to join in the discussions and to seek to advance in some respects ideas which arise from a rationalist viewpoint (Doug).

This leads to a clearing of space for the average person to feel more confident in ‘coming out’ and confronting religion, thus the confrontation dimension is also closely linked to the covert/public dimension:

I think it’s really, really important in some sense to have really rabidly angry atheists out there on the front lines, in some senses you know perhaps seriously risking their lives, I mean Dawkins gets death threats all the time. I’d be shocked if you know Hitchens and Dennett and Harris hadn’t had their fair share of them as well. I think it’s so important for them to be right out there clearing some space for the average person who's a little bit frightened of coming out of the closet as it were (Morgan).

The new movement has encouraged me to speak out where I previously remained relatively quiet. I’d always voice my opinion but treated religion with the kid gloves, most people do. The movement has shown me why I shouldn’t hold back and given me the will to do it (Michael).

As expressed in the following comments, to some atheists, it seems that even the most polite statements made by Richard Dawkins can be interpreted as aggressive by his opponents.
Dawkins in particular is ridiculously polite, he’s just saying in a ridiculously polite way the things that some people find extremely offensive and so when they realise that they are extremely offended, they think well usually when one is extremely offended one has just been shouted at or least shouting is about to happen and so I presume he must have just shouted that (Darrel).

I mean I remember reading a fantastic article in response to The God Delusion, the Dawkins book, where someone said you know there are jokes going around that there are actually two editions of this book that are available. There’s the one that atheists buy which they find to be witty and cogent and well-argued and a very decent and respectful piece of literature and then there’s the one that gets slipped to the people of faith which is, bawdy and insulting and juvenile and pathetic in every way shape or form (Morgan).

Part of my sample used an analogy between new atheist rhetorical techniques and those of the religious in a positive way when talking about ‘angry atheists’. Rhetorical tactics in this light are seen as a way of winning people back to the causes of science and a way of achieving the goal of curtailing religious privilege. The normalisation of atheism through the public visibility of its most aggressive adherents is also mentioned, as Morgan puts it:

You know I think in a way it gives people a bit of protection because you could potentially say I suppose to family members, friends, lovers, you know, I’m sorry I am an atheist, but I’m not a Dawkins kind of atheist.

In this way the most aggressive atheists give ‘normal’ atheists someone more aggressive to compare themselves to in public, thus further normalising the presence of atheists in the public sphere.

Thus my participants are clear on the confrontationist stance taken by the new atheists. To most in my sample, this type of confrontation is necessary in a world that is still being overly influenced by religious forces. It is a world that seems less postsecular in regard to secular and religious equality, from the new
This again emphasises the need for atheists to enter the public sphere in a competitive way, and critiques versions of postsecularity that see secular and religious views as equal in the public sphere. If the secular and religious views were in fact equal, than there would be no need for normalisation of irreligious views or curtailing of religious privilege.

**Accommodation**

A small number in my sample discussed the fact that they find some atheists too extreme in regards to rhetorical tactics. These individuals were concerned about what they perceived as a ‘negative’ image that new atheists had gathered due to these tactics. They often believe that no worldview should be aggressively thrust into the public sphere.

I maybe spend more time now defending other atheists or just defending... what atheism is or explaining that I’m not quite as angry as Richard Dawkins (Any).

When people ask me, I talk about it, but I don’t want to be a fundamentalist... I don’t want to be, I guess I call then angry atheists, you would never see me go on the street and say ‘everyone should be an atheist’, you know I’m not like that so no, I don’t think I’ve ever defended it. I often think of the new atheism... I always think that there’s two groups of atheists, there’s the angry atheists and there’s us atheists...so when you say new atheists, my first association is that that’s my definition of angry atheists (Deidre).

These discussions of new atheist tactics often emphasised the rhetorical style of argument being used by the new atheists and that it is designed to gather followers rather than educate. This part of my sample made comparisons between the new atheists and Pentecostal preachers in a negative way.

I find the use of religious techniques to promote atheism just objectionable so when people start to use the same sort of rhetoric and rhetorical tricks and what have you, I get testy and I criticise them (Jim).
Well it irritates me... Simply because it sounds like a religion and a lot of the people who I’ve seen identifying themselves as new atheists do have a proselytising sort of style and do actually sound as though they’re on a religious campaign and to me that’s an anathema (Paul).

Jim expresses a similar sentiment, this time in relation to the new atheist treatment of religious scientists as seen with PZ Myers’ GAC163 talk in the last section. I provide the extended quote due to its insight into accommodationist thinking:

One of the things that the new atheists do is they attack any scientist that has religious or spiritual belief, and they say they can’t be good scientists. As I’ve said to you, the thing that matters to me most is the ability of science to do its work and if people are religious I don’t care as long as they are good scientists, alright I’ve defended people like Francis Collins and Francisco Iala and other religious scientists against the attacks of the new atheists on my blog and in occasion in print because I think that by excluding any religious person from doing good science, you are going to end up with people doing religious science... if religious people don’t have an allowable place, they can’t be accommodated... hence accommodation... if they can’t be accommodated in science or for that matter in any other aspect of human activity like the political sphere and what have you, if there’s no place for them, they will become exclusionists. Let’s face it, in any foreseeable future there’s going to be a lot more of them than there are of us. So if you make a precondition to doing good science or doing good politics or doing good law or any of these things, that you aren’t religious, you’re on a road to nothing basically...so whenever anyone attacks a religious scientist, I will defend them. Whenever anyone says you can’t logically be religious and be a scientist at the same time, I will write a paper that shows how you can. So my argument that you can be a Darwinian Christian right, is a reaction to

people who say you can’t believe in evolutionary theory and be a Christian whether they’re on the Christian side or on the new atheist side (Jim).

Jim fears that we will split the scientific cause along religious lines we will end up with a number of separate civilisation projects and that this could be detrimental to the scientific cause overall, reflecting the fear of losing allies. The fear is similar to that expressed by the accommodationists mentioned in the participant observations above, such as Mooney, Ruse, Pataki and Cannold. If we exclude religious scientists from the group of legitimate scientists, we risk losing potentially good allies in the cause of science. The fear of rhetorical atheism as potentially bringing the irreligious closer to religious also appears in the more critical interview answers about the new atheism, indicating their link to accommodationist stances. From this perspective rhetorical confrontation may be effective in bringing new recruits to atheism, but it fails in its education goals by alienating potential allies and presenting irreligion in a more rhetorical and potentially dogmatic way. The postsecular sphere may require all views to be made public, but many of the irreligious are uncomfortable with this move from an irreligious perspective, fearing that atheism may become just another worldview attempting to convert rather than educate.

Pluralism

There are also signs of people that see a mix of confrontational and accommodative tactics as being appropriate. To these people both may be necessary depending on the situation encountered. Sometimes it is better to keep the peace and other times it is better to fight for your rights as an atheist.

It’s [new atheism] an ‘anti-accommodationist’ stance... It’s something that I endorse to a certain extent, but I’m not convinced that it is possible to wipe out religious belief and I settle for a more pragmatic attitude towards some issues. Not all, however (Krissie).

And some like Dawkins goes a bit further like downright criticising people and he’s attracted a lot of flak for that by people saying no
you should do it softly softly, but I think at times he’s right, that some arguments are so stupid that you just say ‘that’s stupid’, you can’t colour it any other way and maybe he says it a bit more often than other people and maybe at inopportune times (Artie).

Both of these quotes emphasise the idea that the irreligious should apply these tactics according to the circumstances, in a pragmatic fashion. They acknowledge that not all tactics are appropriate at all times and with all individuals. This mixing becomes possible because the two groups share the goal of increasing the dissemination of science in the public sphere. For accommodationists, this at least partly involves strategic alliances with the religious. For confrontationists, such alliances give too much acknowledgement of religious views and are not appropriate when in competition. Via this connection, it is easier to see how these tactics may be mixed to achieve the overall goal, and how pluralism becomes a legitimate option for the irreligious in this dimension.
DISCUSSION

Within the new atheism, the most visible people are often the most confrontational and less confrontational views get less air time. This places importance on the public nature of the new atheism, as from the perspective of some participants, if the movement was not public and confrontational, it could not be effective in its goals. This is a political movement to normalise atheism and therefore it is unsurprising that it consists of rhetorical techniques and public aggressive voices. When viewed through the lens of history, the perception of the new atheists as particularly confrontational has been related to the perception of the ‘old atheists’, presented earlier, as being ‘covert’ and ‘accommodative’. In historical analysis, it seems that all past irreligious movements, with the possible exception of early US Humanists, have in fact been confrontational in their views. Thus this mythical view of the ‘old atheists’ allows the new atheists to feel that there is something innovative in the confrontational tactics of the new atheists. Despite reservations from parts of the irreligious milieu, the new atheists are still seen as mostly confrontational, and this trait can be seen in both a negative and positive way by the irreligious.

Some irreligious individuals are uncomfortable with the more confrontational tactics being employed by the movement and believe there may be a more compromising way to address the issues at hand. The concern about religious scientists becoming exclusionists, and therefore enclaving also arises as a main concern. The irreligious could be losing important scientific allies unnecessarily, and reducing the field of science supporters due to exclusion of the religious from scientific activities. In some ways this argument is similar to Ruse’s, as is that of Dawkins; religion and science are separate. They give this argument with different content and different motives, but are essentially fighting for the same cause. The difference lies in their stance on the need for ‘correct belief’ in order to make science valid, also connecting this dimension with the empathetic/intellectual dimension (Chapter 7) due to similar concerns in that domain. The emphasis on right beliefs rather than right action is prevalent in the confrontational group; an intellectual focus, with an opposite emphasis in the accommodationist group who often have an empathetic and pragmatic
focus. The perceived need for right beliefs within the new atheism is connected to the need to protect the boundaries of science from religious incursion, as is perceived as occurring from groups such as Intelligent Design proponents (see Nixon 2012).

As indicated by the discussions around ‘angry atheism’, a small number of my interview participants commented on the dispute between ‘accommodationists’ and ‘confrontationists’ and had taken a side on the issue. This particular issue seemed to have less of a divisive effect on the movement, with many of those expressing distaste for confrontationist or accommodationist stances still believing that both tactics may be necessary and effective. This continues to be a big debate in the atheist community even in 2013 (see Figure 14).

The validity of using only the accommodationist stance has been questioned by new research by Gervais, Shariff and Norenzayan (2011). They found that discrimination against atheists decreases when atheists have a strong public presence, thus there is some evidence that confrontationalist tactics do have validity. This research gives support to confrontationist and pluralist approaches to the issue. A program that includes both accommodation and confrontation could be valid for the movement. In this view a variety of approaches and tactics may pay off, as biodiversity in an ecosystem.

Such techniques would seem less necessary if the new atheists actually lived in a postsecular world where secular and religious voices are on equal standing. Both sides of this dimension again emphasise the idea that the irreligious feel like they are in conflict with the religious for public attention. Confrontationists feel that they must confront the religious to keep science and atheism in the competition, where accommodationists fear that such tactics could backfire in a world where scientific (secular) and religious worldviews are not yet on equal footing.

The next chapter on substitution or elimination of religious/spiritual ideas also discusses a form of accommodationism. The substitution practices discussed also suggest that if the irreligious are to be effective in their mission to bring the world to a less religious state, they may have to understand the needs of those
escaping religion. The need to accommodate religious ideas, rituals and practices thus also comes to light in the next chapter, where a process of mixing between secular and religious views does seem to be occurring, even if in very specific ways.
CHAPTER 6. Substitution/Elimination
RULES TO LIVE BY

The secularisation thesis has had a continuing influence on the irreligious from the earliest movements. The thesis, in summary, stated that religion would disappear as modernity progressed and the systems of the modern society replaced religious organisations. This belief has led to attempts to both replace and eliminate religious ideas and rituals from those within the irreligious group. As discussed earlier, disputes in irreligious circles often arise from the attempts made to break away from religion and religious practices. This has meant that some believe the things that are being lost must be replaced or substituted, while others think they are better to sever all ties with religion and religious-like structures. As will be seen below, many attempts have been made to replace religious concepts and these attempts have been critiqued by others who think these attempts are too religious in nature (Campbell 1972: 39).

While the new atheists are often viewed as eliminationists, the data presented below brings this view into question. The new atheist authors and other groups within the milieu have been involved in exploring the utility of spiritual and religious ideas and practices. Such exploration seems to indicate that the irreligious are interpenetrating secular and religious views within a postsecular public field. This interpenetration can be seen as one of the ways that atheists can reach out to less intellectually inclined people, via ritual, ecstatic and social activity. However, many atheists still remain suspicious of these activities as they seem too religious in character or make atheism seem too much like a religion.
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The 19th century begins the first phase of secularisation as presented by Borer in the edited volume *Religion and the New Atheism* (from 17th to mid 20th century). It represents the thesis in its early stages and its instantiation as an ideology by the fathers of Sociology and Anthropology. It is intricately connected to the grand social changes occurring in the Western societies of the time. Borer (2010: 128) argues that it is “marked by an overall belief that the social forces behind modernity would eventually, unrelentingly and unrepentantly, lead to a religion-less society.” He argues that the new atheists are ‘purveyors’ of this phase of the secularisation thesis. Therefore they have a tendency towards elimination of religious ideas, practices and ritual, as they see society benefitting from the complete removal of religion in all of its manifestations. On the other side of this dimension we have the substitutionists, those who feel that former religious rituals and ideas must be replaced with some form of secular counterpart. As pointed out by Campbell (1972), due to the separation of the irreligious from the religious, and the ubiquitous nature of religious involvement in past organisational structures, the types of organisations and rituals that the irreligious may or should be engaged in has often been a matter of dispute.

There are examples within the historical irreligious group where disputes have arisen over ritual and organisation. In a first example, August Comte, who was considered one of the fathers of Sociology and one of the early purveyors of the secularisation thesis, became a major figure of this period. His Positivist religion called the *Religion of Humanity* gained adherents in many countries like France, Britain, Hungary, Sweden, Argentina, Chile, India and Brazil. In Brazil it became the official philosophy of the republican revolution and later became almost a state religion. It was a full blown alternative secular religion, with congregations, priests, rituals and holy days, even its own calendar cycle. The new deity was Humanity, renamed ‘The Great Being’. Love was to be the basis of moral action and selfishness would be countered by the worship of Humanity. The church was extremely active in the social sphere, playing a crucial role in the recognition of trade unions and the feminist movement. Moreover, it was one of the only substitutionist forms of irreligion created at that time that lasted
into the 20th century (Campbell 1972: 62-64). However, it avoided being seen as pure atheism, despite the absence of God. Comte’s church drew a lot of fire from within the ranks of the irreligious, including John Stuart Mill who viewed Comte’s elaborate construction with an “air of ridicule” (Campbell 1972: 64). Thus one of the weaknesses of the Religion of Humanity is that it was open to criticism from both sides of the religious/non-religious divide. Though never gaining a large following, it did take off in a number of countries and had influence far beyond its formal adherents. This provides one of the earliest examples of the irreligious dispute over the substitution or elimination of religious organisations and ritual.

Another example is seen in the case of Paul Kurtz’s (1980) move to Secular Humanism. The dispute arose due to some Humanists wishing to remove all religious ideas and ritual from Humanism. Organised Humanism itself actually appeared much earlier than Kurtz’s secular interpretation. It began in the US in the late 1920’s, when a group called the Humanist Association formed to publish The New Humanist (Campbell 1972: 90). At this point in Humanist history the US milieu was largely dominated by religious Humanists or those people who held to a form of substitutionism having roots in Universalist and Unitarian ideals (Cimino and Smith 2007). According to Cimino and Smith (2007) it was mostly Unitarians in the Humanist Association who promoted Humanism by publishing the Humanist Manifesto in 1933. Discussing the manifesto Campbell (1972: 90) outlines its main thrust saying that

It attacked the notion of creation, rejected the traditional dualism of mind and body, upheld the theory of evolution, dismissed supernaturalism and defined religion as ‘those actions, purposes and experiences which are humanly significant.

As noted in this quote, Religious Humanism was religious in the sense described here, activities that were ‘humanly significant’ were to be emphasised while excluding supernatural beliefs and explanations. Humanism shares kinship with its 19th and early 20th century forebears, with a predilection for social activism coming from the Secularists and ideas about the importance of education coming from the Rationalists. It was however a fresh response to changed socio-
cultural conditions (Campbell 1972), in which evolution, science and a generally irreligious base were being used as a support for ontological beliefs. Campbell (1972) describes 20th century Humanism as an ontological form of Humanism that uses evolution and materialism as its foundation, as opposed to empathetic or tragic Humanism as expressed in Le drew (2012) and represented by the socialist and anarchist movements of the earlier 20th century. It is against the background of evolution that the possibility of progress (a concept that would come under increasing criticism as the 20th century unfolded) was emphasised and the goal of self-fulfilment and social-fulfilment were set. Evolution as a process gave the Humanist a vision of the universe which was monistic, impersonal and changeable and of themselves as related to all life. For the 19th century Secularist evolution was a stick with which to beat scripture and divine revelation. For early 20th century Humanists it was a support for ideological belief structures (Campbell 1972). The question of which framework was most appropriate was the main factor in a schism within the primary US Humanist group, the American Humanist Association in the late 1970's. The Humanist Manifesto II (Kurtz and Wilson 1973), was published and it contains no references to religious Humanism, even stating that such redefinitions of religion often perpetuate old dependencies and escapisms. This schism led to the birth of the Council of Secular Humanism in 1980, Secular Humanists then defined themselves by a purely secular philosophy and dismissed all religious language (Cimino and Smith 2007). Therefore in later years (1970's) this tension came to fruition with the emergence of Secular Humanism. Due to these examples, the substitution/elimination dimension can be shown as a more general dimension in relation to irreligious groups. In the example just discussed, the general Humanism is affected by this dimension too and thus cannot be categorised definitively as substitutionist. This also backs up previous discussions of the myth of Humanism as accommodationist and substitutionist. It seems that these views are being drawn from an earlier phase in Humanist history rather than the modern Secular Humanists themselves, The Secular Humanist views on both of these dimensions largely agree with the new atheists and are certainly not accommodationist or substitutionist in public stances.
It became clear throughout my history and literature review that the communal rituals that the irreligious should be engaged in has always been a matter of dispute. Adding to this the term spirituality, was very much still under negotiation in the irreligious milieu. The clearest academic, empirical example at the time came from Pasquale’s (2010) study which found that around a third of US based secular group affiliates were willing to use the word spirituality in a non-religious way. There were also indicators of the use of the term within the community, by popular, new atheist figures such as Dawkins, Grayling and Harris. The interview sample for this research can be seen to reflect similar attitudes. Some people in my group were more ritually inclined than others and some were willing to view spirituality in a psychological or science based way, similar to that being put forward by Humanist and new atheist figures. This data will establish a pattern that will be a subject of this chapter, which is the difference between ‘atheist spirituality’ and ‘no spirituality’ within the irreligious milieu. Those who are interested in atheist spirituality are clear to point out that it contains no supernatural content, and is thus a true secularist substitute, rather than religion in disguise. Those who embrace no spirituality tend to think that any involvement in religious-like ideas or practices is too much and should be avoided.
INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

There have been attempts to humanise atheism by explaining awe, empathy, morality, cooperation, love and connection more fully from a naturalistic, evolutionary perspective within the new atheist milieu. This is because such concepts are often expressed in pseudo-religious or spiritual terms and can be hard to separate from that history. The quote below suggests something that is of great relevance to this chapter, as it will be the focus of critique. It suggests that humanism is an ‘atheistic religion’, a view that has become common in new atheist circles despite the protests of many Humanists.

Besides the issue of whether to team up with other progressives who are religious and to downplay differences with them in order to do so [confrontation/accommodation], there is the related issue of humanistic religion itself. Many Humanists identify Humanism as an atheistic religion and not just as an atheistic social justice movement. So far Atheism Plus is consistent with the predominant New Atheist viewpoint that religion itself is a bad thing and that there should be no atheistic, rationalistic religions to replace theistic, faith-based ones [substitution/Elimination].

Both new atheism and Atheism Plus see Humanists as substitutionist. This means that they are attempting to provide the irreligious with a substitute set of principles and rituals. More direct attempts such as Comte’s Religion of Humanity appear to go unnoticed, but a mythical substitutionist version of the Humanism seems to inform new atheist views. As discussed in the last section, Humanism has rarely been either of these since Paul Kurtz’s split into Secular Humanism and this was recognised by some in the movement during the emergence of Atheism Plus (see Chapter 7) as seen in the example below:

Not all humanists want to emulate religion, not all humanists want to build temples or conduct rituals.

---

165 Myers, PZ, 2012. Following up on last night’s Atheism+ discussion, viewed 1 February 2014: http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2012/08/27/following-up-on-last-nights-atheism-discussion/
However, both of these groups generally use the myth to differentiate their movement and thus this ahistorical interpretation plays a large part in the group formation of the newer movements. Moreover, it is far from clear that either of these new groups are even that much different from the myth they are using to differentiate themselves. Such substitution appears to be occurring despite protests over the more direct forms of substitution such as the mythical atheistic religion of Humanism just discussed, Alain De Botton’s ideas in *Religion for Atheists* (2012) or the *Sunday Assembly* as discussed below.

**Worldview**

All new atheists have arguably written texts which could be considered attempts to substitute some parts of religion, making the division on this dimension less certain. Where the line is drawn is unclear, and as I will argue there seems to be a continuum of acceptable practices that can be taken from religion, from total elimination to total substitution, both of which could include rituals and moral codes in their proscriptions (or lack of). Those who wish to abolish completely can shun all moral controls in an extreme and those who are not so extreme tend to take on the bits of secular and religious moral and ritual that they feel comfortable with. In this between-zone we have Dawkins’ call to see the ‘poetry of science’ and his descriptions of *this-world* as a positive place, the only life and place we have. Such attempts to enchant materialist reality and science in order to compete with the enchantment of the religious field can be viewed as a form of ‘substitution’ of the original religious awe and ‘spirituality’ (Nixon 2012). Figures such as Sagan (1980) and Dawkins have been integral in this enchantment. It can be viewed as an attempt to replace religious awe and transcendence with secular counterparts. This leads to a number of ideas and proscriptions for how to live the ‘good life’ emerging from the atheist scene and arguments as to why that should entail being an atheist. The release of De Botton’s *Religion for Atheists* (2012) and the emergence of the *Sunday Assembly* (2013) have caused some leaders, individuals and groups to express their disapproval. One example comes from Dawkins who criticised De Botton’s idea
of creating an atheist temple\footnote{Booth, R, 2012. Alain de Botton reveals plans for ‘temple to atheism’ in heart of London. \textit{The Guardian}, 27 January, viewed 14 January 2014: \url{http://www.theguardian.com/books/2012/ian/26/alain-de-botton-temple-atheism}} in London to celebrate the scientific understanding of the universe. In \textit{The Guardian} (UK) and later reprinted in Australia’s \textit{SMH} he is quoted as saying of the temple idea:

Atheists don’t need temples, I think there are better things to spend this kind of money on. If you are going to spend money on atheism you could improve secular education and build non-religious schools which teach rational, sceptical critical thinking.\footnote{Booth, R, 2012. Dawkins spurns the tenets of de Botton’s temple for atheists, \textit{SMH World}, viewed 14 January 2014: \url{http://www.smh.com.au/world/dawkins-spurns-the-tenets-of-de-bottons-temple-for-atheists-20120127-1qlk3.html#ixzz2LyMORxAa}}

The main issue seems to be around overt rituals and formal institutions, though even this gets blurred in some places. However, despite this, and even more interesting, there is evidence that the new atheists themselves have been involved in various forms of substitution or encouragement of substitution. In the end, what is acceptable is definitely a matter of debate and runs along a spectrum. Harris even presented at the 2012 GAC by leading a mindfulness meditation session (2012a). A number of people that attended the conference with me were not impressed by the display of ‘religion’. De Botton’s ‘useful parts of religion’ and the \textit{Sunday Assembly} with their minimal proscriptions are in between too. De Botton (2012) makes suggestions for secular ritual and the \textit{Sunday Assembly} provide a structured service that the participants have no obligation to attend. They take the ritual structure of religion, but ask for minimal communal obligations. In this way the \textit{Religion for Atheists} of Alain De Botton (2012), shows a clear empathy for the religious and their rituals, while standing definitively in the atheist camp, and making minimal proscriptions to other atheists. Along with this we have seen, the advent of atheist churches,\footnote{Sunday Assembly. \textit{What is the Sunday Assembly}, viewed 14 January 2014: \url{http://sundayassembly.com/}} meditation and prayer.\footnote{DeWitt, J, 2013. \textit{How to Pray if You’re an Atheist}, viewed 14 January 2014: \url{http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jerry-dewitt/how-to-pray-if-youre-an-atheist_b_3573423.html}} In the US the Unitarian Universalists have also provided a space for ritually inclined atheists outside of irreligious
organisations. It is clear that the new atheists generally viewed as sitting in the eliminationist camp and the advent of the more ritual and communal versions of atheism have again reinforced this view, with many in the atheist and new atheist communities, including Richard Dawkins, suggesting these changes are dangerous or unnecessary. However, the proliferation of products that bare resemblance to substitutionist religious products has also increased and therefore the line of division is far from easy to draw.

Secular Spirituality and Ritual

The atheist use of the word ‘spirituality’ has been increasing in new atheist circles since the beginning of the movement. In example, the following transcript is taken from a radio interview with new atheist Philosopher A. C. Grayling on an Australian ABC program about religion. In the interview Grayling is discussing his newest book at the time *The Good Book: A Secular Bible*.

Kohn: You must be wondering why you’re on a program that’s usually dedicated to religion and spirituality, but you have written a secular bible after all.

Grayling: That’s true, but that was to encourage people to think that there are other ways of thinking about the good and the life, which if I may use the word ‘spiritual’ in a nonreligious sense, would also be a spiritual life.

His use of the word ‘spiritual’ in a non-religious sense is instructive, especially since he uses it to justify his relevance to the program on which he is being interviewed. Figure 15 shows the types of arguments being used in this process. Comedian and actor Gervais here displays a sign suggesting that the atheist worldview is positive and life affirming; atheists have ‘Nothing to die for, [no God or afterlife], everything to live for [one life, one experience]’.

The above points are also illustrated in the following interview with Gervais:

Interviewer: What do you think will happen to you when you die?

Gervais: People that liked me will remember me... Some people say you can't believe in love if you're an Atheist. Of course I believe in love; of course I believe in the beauty of nature, I just believe that the Earth was made over four and a half billion years and not by design in six days. I'm not being disrespectful but I believe I have the right to say I'm not a believer in God just like everybody has the right to believe in God, and spirituality is very different to religion let's not forget that.

Interviewer: Are you a spiritual person would you say?

Gervais: Well not in that sense, but I get a funny feeling when I see a friend or a mountain or an animal, it fills me with joy. My first love is science and nature.

I don't believe there is a spirit. I think the spirit is an upshot of all your inputs, your beliefs.\(^{173}\)

In this interview Gervais represents the feelings of many atheists. The things in this world and their incredible intricacy, are worthy of awe in their own right.

This form of ‘naturalistic’ or ‘materialist’ spirituality has been spoken about in a number of blogs.\textsuperscript{174, 175} A good example comes from \textit{Atheist Revolution}:

Practically, we might see a spiritual Atheist as highly empathic, aware of his or her connection to others, concerned with equality and social justice, regularly awed by the beauty of nature, etc. Such descriptors apply in varying degrees to all persons, theist and Atheist alike.\textsuperscript{176}

While all of these qualities are agreed to have the potential to produce a ‘spiritual’ experience (Hay 2007), they are not considered supernatural by atheists and are generally expressed in \textit{this worldly} experiential terms such as beauty and love, or even in scientific terms such as brain chemistry or evolutionary history. This type of knowledge search is discussed on a number of other blogs as being a part of atheist spirituality and the spiritual quest in general. The notion of humility and awe in the pondering and experiencing of a complex and infinite universe is evident in many accounts. In this sense, many people state that their atheism makes them feel liberated to see the world as it is, and to live and investigate the real world.

\begin{quote}
I do think lack of belief in a deity has made me more intellectually curious to learn about this place and given me more drive to understand just what exactly all this is. On Atheism, one can approach the universe with [a] much more open mind than is possible on theism, and that does feel good.\textsuperscript{177}
\end{quote}

The open and individual nature of this search is often emphasised by both atheist authors and my interview participants. However, the type of spirituality that atheists are interested in appears to be a spirituality devoid of supernatural forces. On this matter, Dawkins has become fond of quoting Douglas Adams and used a quote from him in dedicating \textit{The God Delusion} (2006) to Adam’s, and the

\begin{footnotes}
\item[175] Cline, A. \textit{Atheism and Spirituality: Are there any Spiritual Atheists?} viewed 1 March 2011: http://atheism.about.com/od/atheismquestions/a/Spirituality.htm
\end{footnotes}
quote has become very popular online. Adams uses the analogy of enjoying a garden to illustrate the point about seeing nature for its own beauty:

Isn’t it enough to see that a garden is beautiful without having to believe that there are fairies at the bottom of it too? 178 179

Using this quote as a model, these people do not feel that their world is disenchanted by science or a lack of supernatural interpretations (also see Pasquale 2010 and Manning 2010); in fact many, such as Gervais, Adams, Sagan and Dawkins,180 express a profound feeling of awe and joy at the beauty of the world that they believe is visible to them. This view has passed into the atheist milieu as seen above and as has been shown in this presentation of blog and internet data, many in the wider milieu feel the same way. However, many of these people are still very suspicious of religion-like structures or rituals being attached to such atheist spirituality as shown earlier.

Others in the milieu are more clearly embracing substitutionist ideas of atheist spirituality. De Botton (2012), who declares his atheism from the outset, has a firm belief that there is no God. After acknowledging this fact, he goes on to talk about being ‘fully human’ and being able to ‘lead a good life’ outside of religious structures. It should be noted that De Botton also begins this discussion by taking a swipe at the new atheists (“atheists of the militant kind” 2012: 18), suggesting that their enthusiasms mean that they see religion as “entirely daft” (2012: 12). He is suggesting that the error in modern atheism has been to dismiss the aspects of faith that “remain relevant even after their central tenets have been dismissed” (2012: 12-13). Therefore, unlike the new atheists, he has praise for some of the formal aspects of religion and suggests these can be extracted and applied to aspects of secular art, culture and education. The challenge facing atheists, De Botton claims, “is how to reverse the process of religious colonization: how to separate ideas and rituals from the religious

179 Ask Atheists. Quotes, viewed 26 October 2013: http://www.askatheists.com/75067
institutions which have laid claim to them but don’t truly own them.” Religion offers “well-structured advice on how to lead our lives” (De Botton 2012: 111), which De Botton contends the secular world often fails to provide. The challenge for modern atheists is to offer such structure in a non-religious way. He states that there are two needs that the secular realm has been less successful at meeting.

1. ... The need to live together in communities in harmony, despite our deeply rooted selfish and violent impulses.
2. ... The need to cope with terrifying degrees of pain which arise from our vulnerability (De Botton 2012: 12).

Both of these things point to morality and ontological comfort as lacking within secular discourses and it is interesting that these have also been focal points for new atheist writers as discussed above. De Botton is suggesting (like Comte did before him) that religion may be the place to look for substitutional forms that can fill out the moral and ontological needs of the secular worldview. This contrasts to the new atheists who seem wary of borrowing too explicitly from religion, at least publicly. He proposes that we should look to religions for insights into, among other concerns, how to:

- Build a sense of community.
- Make our relationships last.
- Overcome feelings of envy and inadequacy.
- Escape the twenty-four hour media.
- Go travelling.
- Get more out of art, architecture and music.
- And create new businesses designed to address our emotional needs.

He gives a number of suggestions for how this may be achieved in Western life. He uses food, often used by religions, to bring strangers together in a structured way.

---

way. He puts forward the ‘Agape Restaurant’ in which diners will be encouraged to meet new people and share intimacy (in a number of ways, intellectual, empathetic and in some cases sexual). He considers the idea that art and architecture might be used to express and foster certain values or to help us navigate life’s troubles. He discusses the idea that religious values and even consumer products, harnessing the arts and music, are branded and promoted far more passionately and effectively than secular values. He proposes that university lecturers might be trained to present their ideas as passionately and dramatically as Pentecostal preachers. A review of De Botton’s (2012) book by James Loft in the May/June 2012 The Humanist was posted on popular blog the Friendly Atheist. This blog post is also the first found when doing a Google search for ‘Alain De Botton Religion for Atheists’ and thus can be seen as a popular article in this regard. The majority of the 49 comments (27 personalities) posted about the article are negative, with only 22% (6/27) giving support. Most people seem to think that there is no need for religious replacements when the secular world already offers all that humans need. According to this view, it is only those losing religion that would feel the need for such structures.

Well I’m one atheist that needs no religion. And as far as the whole community and coping and fellowship stuff is concerned, I have family and friends. They seem to be doing a pretty good job for me. Then what is the point? Plenty of people disagree with de Botton that atheists need to mimic the trappings of religion. We can certainly point out that the human desire for community, support, and tradition can be met in entirely secular ways, and that the “need” for certain rituals stems from being raised in a culture.

---


184 Ibid

that glorifies religious communities and deems them necessary for proper emotional and social development.\textsuperscript{186}

On the less popular side of this argument (around 20-30\% based on my own investigations and that of Pasquale (2010)), we can see people who think it is a bad idea to dismiss the ideas of religion before they are investigated. They tend to agree with De Botton’s conviction that there is more to gather from religious and spiritual circles than most atheists are willing to concede:

Then it sounds like the only fair way to judge the positive and negative aspects of either the religious sphere or the secular sphere is to examine both spheres in great detail. All too often the non-believing side seems to just revel in strictly negative examples of the religious side of things. At least de Botton is trying to address this imbalance. More effort obviously needs to be done, but at least it is a start.\textsuperscript{187}

Thus we can see that the resistance he has received has also been matched by enthusiasm in others, such as those at the \textit{Sunday Assembly}. \textit{Sunday Assembly} (Logo: Figure 16), an atheist organisation that uses church worship structures to celebrate atheist life, can be seen as an upcoming example of this kind of exploration in the public arena.

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{186} Anna Tom, 2012. \textit{A Review of Alain de Botton’s Religion for Atheists}, viewed 26 June 2013: http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2012/04/21/a-review-of-alain-de-bottons-religion-for-atheists/
\end{flushleft}
It began in London, UK in January 2013. In an interview on Religion Dispatches about the Sunday Assembly, the two founders were asked:

Who were your influences and mentors in this venture?

Evans: Well, I was inspired by church having gone to church when I was younger.

Jones: I had the idea in my head for some time. When Alain de Botton’s book Religion for Atheists came out, I realized if I don’t do this soon, then someone else will. So I might as well get a move on.

Evans: We now hold our church in the same building as his School of Life.

Jones: The difference between our two programs is that his has a lot more price tags. We want it to be free for people to enter. Also, we’re about building a community not a business. 188

As suggested in the answer, there is a connection between De Botton’s Religion for Atheists and the emergence of the Sunday Assembly, even if that connection is only as a catalyst to begin. The Sunday Assembly is not the first Godless church in the Western world as discussed earlier in this chapter, but it is the most

188 Garrison, B, 2013. UK Atheist Church Invasion, viewed 1 February 2014: http://www.religiondispatches.org/archive/atheologies/7356/sundayassembly.com
visible and active attempt in the milieu at the time of writing. The Humanist community at Harvard (i.e. Chris Stedman; seen as substitutionists by many new atheists) has also supported the effort. Both Greg Epstein and Chris Stedman have spoken at the Sunday Assembly in New York City. The church could be likened to the ‘ethical unions’ formed in the late 19th century to accommodate the growing popularity of atheism. Likewise, to Auguste Comte’s Religion of Humanity and the associated churches built throughout the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

The Sunday Assembly began the year after the release of De Botton’s (2012) book. The first meeting of the Sunday Assembly was held on January 6, 2013 in a former church in Islington, North London, attracting about 240 atheists. This first service featured a lecture by children’s book author Andy Stanton. It attracted considerable media attention and led to several offshoot groups across London. These included the No-Bible Bible Group an atheist-oriented book club, and Life Anonymous, a discussion group centred upon the sharing of everyday dilemmas. By June, 2013, congregants at the monthly services grew to over 600. They held their first international service on June 30, 2013 at Tobacco Road, a bar located in Manhattan, New York, between 100 and 200 nonbelievers were in attendance. The following month, Jones and Evans announced their plans to further expand their church throughout the United Kingdom, the United States, Canada, and Australia in their ‘40 Dates and 40 Nights’ tour that began on October 22, 2013. The two announced plans for a second tour in December and the establishment of Sunday Assembly churches across the globe. This was a rapidly expanding movement, indicating a demand for the services on offer, as can be seen in this brief timeline and the

---

192 Hallowell, B. 2013. Godless ‘Church’ Is Coming to America This Month as Atheists Seek Non-Theistic Community — But Why? viewed 1 February 2014: http://www.theblaze.com/stories/2013/06/17/atheists-godless-church-is-coming-to-north-america/
international expansion of the ‘church’ within six months of the first service. The *Sunday Assembly* reportedly occupies 40 different sites (those involved in the tour) around the world as of October 2013.\(^{193}\) Interestingly these are also the three countries most involved in the English speaking new atheist milieu and in past expansions of this milieu as discussed in my short history. The *Sunday Assembly* was modelled after a traditional Christian church, and Jones and Evans argue that, contrary to the commonly-held atheist idea of organised religion, “organization is one of the best things about religion.”\(^ {194}\)

The internet is seen by Jones and Evans as a significant tool to communicate large amounts of information in a short period of time. They attribute the church's fast and growing popularity to this use of internet spaces.\(^ {195}\) The group’s website includes a blog where the founders inform followers of upcoming church events and ways in which they can become involved in activities.\(^ {196}\) Jones and Evans also live-stream assembly services from their London congregation and launched an online fundraising campaign on October 20, 2013 that allows congregants to donate money to finance the *40 Dates and 40 Nights* tour while minimising collection costs.\(^ {197}\)

A review of *The Sunday Assembly* in the *Associated Press* claiming that it was an atheist megachurch was discussed by popular atheist blogger the *Friendly Atheist*. The majority of the 106 comments (66 personalities, 29 opinions) posted about the *Sunday Assembly* were positive, with only 31% (9/29) critiquing the gatherings.\(^ {198}\) The majority of positive comments focus on the idea that some of the irreligious may find these activities desirable and therefore they may bring more people to irreligion (69% 20/29). Interestingly

---


\(^ {196}\) Ibid

\(^ {197}\) Sanderson, 2013. *What Are We Raising Money For?* viewed 1 February 2014: [http://sundayassembly.com/blog/2013/10/12/what-are-we-raising-money-for/](http://sundayassembly.com/blog/2013/10/12/what-are-we-raising-money-for/)


it seems the emergence of this group is receiving the opposite response to De Botton’s views when presented a year earlier on the same site. Jones and Evans founded the Sunday Assembly on the belief that atheists should have a means through which they can assemble and practice their beliefs. Sunday Assembly services therefore resemble those of Pentecostal religious church services in many ways. This was also confirmed for me when I spoke to a number of ex-Pentecostals at the GAC (2012) who informed me that they would like a place to gather as atheists that was like a church, as this was part of what drew them to church in the first place. Thus, this seems especially important to those people raised with religion, a first example comes from an ex-Christian:

If there was one thing that was difficult to do without once I left the faith, it was the loss of community. I am tickled pink that this deficiency is quickly becoming a thing of the past.\(^{199}\)

This idea also received support from irreligious individuals who are less inclined to ritual and organised irreligion:

We have no place that people can go, no accessible experts that people can ask in person, no way (other than the internet or paid conventions) where people can hear the rational arguments for NOT believing. This makes it harder for people to transition and easier to cling to religion - even when they don't believe anymore (Madison Blane).\(^{200}\)

That's it! I was raised in a household where religion was not mentioned, neither good or bad, but I knew I was missing some great events like campouts and potlucks, etc. So, yes, we need the sense of community that today’s world does not give us in our neighborhoods. If I lived near Mesa, Az., I would be attending the


Humanist Society of Greater Phoenix at their newish quarters to enjoy some of the events and, as the churchy say, "fellowship" (sailor50 to Madison Blane).\(^{201}\)

My problem with the Sunday Assemblies is probably the opposite of a majority of Atheists – I want it to be more like religion not less. Atheism has done a great job of getting the non-conformers, skeptics and free thinkers and this is wonderful. However to broaden our base we need to broaden our appeal beyond that niche group. We need people that want to be part of a community IRL, not because they are necessarily better or worse than those that do not but because if we are going to truly separate church from state and more importantly church from policy considerations then we need more people to believe strongly in Atheism (AndyTK).\(^{202}\)

Thus the need that some people have for religious-like communion and ritual is recognised by this group. The *Sunday Assembly* can thus be viewed as a group aimed at gathering people who feel that communion and ritual are or have been important parts of their lives. Fundamentally, according to the *Sunday Assembly*, atheism is the belief which defines them. However, like the Secularists, Humanists and *Atheism Plus* groups before them, disbelief in a God/s alone is not the central theme of church teachings, which places the group on the plus side of the dictionary/plus dispute. Rather, as Jones has stated, “atheism is boring” and people should not organise their lives around disbelief.\(^{203}\) The group teaches that we have one life and attitudes toward this notion should be shifted from one of negativity and hopelessness to one which should be celebrated as a gift.

The *Sunday Assembly*, as well as its founders, has faced steady opposition throughout the group’s short history. Jones and Evans have reported receiving hate mail, including requests to change the location of group events from a deconsecrated church to a more neutral location. The group was also met with

\(^{201}\) Ibid
\(^{202}\) Ibid
but a single protestor at the location of their New York service. They have also received steady resistance from the irreligious. As Jones stated around the time of the events:

Actually, the biggest aggression towards us has probably been from atheists saying that we’re ruining atheism and not not believing in God properly. So that’s quite funny.\(^{204}\)

In this way, the movement away from atheism as a term became an issue for the group. As a further piece of evidence on the resistance to the group, Figure 17 was taken with *NodeXL*, as discussed in my methods chapter. The search terms were “Sunday Assembly” AND “Atheist Church”. The green nodes are those who are supporting the *Sunday Assembly*, they are mainly grouped around the founders *Twitter* accounts and the main *Sunday Assembly Twitter* account. The orange are those who dislike the *Sunday Assembly* idea.

---

There are also some outlying conversations that are still discussing the idea, some religious people discussing the idea (purple) and some less relevant conversations that happen to contain one of the search terms (blue: new atheist or grey: irrelevant). The graph shows a number of atheist and religious detractors in the main conversation, those in orange or purple. The vast majority of those in the conversation are supportive, but the very integrated nature of the conversation and the presence of outlier detractor groups indicates that those who disagree with the concept may be mostly staying away from the main conversation. What we can most definitely draw from this picture is that there are atheists that are resistant to the idea of *Sunday Assembly* and substitution in general. Jones (2013) explains why he believes they are receiving this resistance:

> I think religion has become associated with some certain practices, which because people don't like religion, they think that all of the things associated with it are bad. But that's not the case. There are loads of things which it does that are not bad in and of themselves but they've become guilty by association. The big difference is there's no supernatural in our thing.\(^{205}\)

This quote from Jones links with the observations made earlier in this chapter about the default negative association between religion and bad practices. This link is part of the attempt by the irreligious to break away from religion and religion-like forms. In the process, as Jones and earlier De Botton (2012) are suggesting, the good parts have been thrown out with the bad; ‘guilty by association’. However, like De Botton, Jones here is clear that there are still no supernatural elements in the version of practice presented by the *Sunday Assembly*.

While the reasoning behind their opposition differs considerably, nonbelievers and religious affiliates alike have expressed concern that by following traditional church format and organisation, the *Sunday Assembly* is attempting to transform atheism into a religion. Atheist opponents have voiced concern

---

with the organisation as well as apparent derivative philosophy held by the
group, maintaining that it treads dangerously close to becoming a religion that
possesses its own "code of ethics and self-appointed high priests." Some
critics have gone a step further, expressing fear that the group may come to
resemble a cult and questioning Jones’ level of involvement in the group,
likening him to a charismatic preacher. Some examples of resistance are also
found in the comments from the Friendly Atheist which were earlier analysed
for positive perceptions:

Atheists can gather or not gather, but they don’t worship. And
Sunday Assembly ... ick, To me an assembly is for high school or...
church (Rebecka Toney).

Love the idea of hanging out with fellow non believers... not sure I’d
want call it a church though...that word just invokes
"religion"...which we keep telling the christians that we are not
(Guest).

Wait till they get their 'churches' a little more organized and the
fights about the bylaws begins and the politics and infighting of all
the little groups. Then they will be an official religious organization
(newavocation).

207 Hott, L and Bromley, DG, 2013. Sunday Assembly, viewed 1 February 2014:
http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/SundayAssembly.htm
208 Mehta, H, 2013. The Sunday Assembly Isn't An Atheist Megachurch, No Matter What the Media
Says, viewed 26 November 2013:
http://www.patheos.com/blogs/friendlyatheist/2013/11/11/the-sunday-assembly-isnt-an-
atheist-megachurch-no-matter-what-the-media-says/
209 Ibid
210 Ibid
However, Jones has denied all of these allegations, and furthermore, Jones has expressed his intent to downsize his role in the services once the church becomes more established.211

The *Sunday Assembly* experienced their first schism within six months, largely due to this stance on the term atheism. On June 30, 2013, some the board of directors chose to form their own group called *The Godless Revival*. Thus while the group grew rapidly it would split just as rapidly. As Jones relays it:

> It's my understanding that the chief split is between those who are more on the atheist side of the fence, and then those who want to have a more inclusive message. This division has meant that the inclusive contingent resigned from the board. This then led the remaining gang to start a new group called The Godless Revival.212

Lee Moore, one of the founders of *The Godless Revival* commented on the *Friendly Atheist*’s article analysed above concerning the schism:

> Lee here from the Godless Revival.
> We didn't split because we wanted to preach Atheism, that's just silly.
> We split because we did not agree with the idea that the word Atheism was negative and should be avoided at all costs. We just could not support an event that would further push the idea that Atheism is a taboo subject and at the same time raise money so some overseas stand up comics can perpetuate this bad idea...Atheist Assemblies are a great idea and their time has come, but ones that wish to alienate those of us who are "out and proud" should be avoided...You can celebrate life and your godlessness too... (Lee Moore).213

---

211 Hott, L and Bromley, DG, 2013. *Sunday Assembly*, viewed 1 February 2014: [http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/SundayAssembly.htm](http://www.has.vcu.edu/wrs/profiles/SundayAssembly.htm)

212 Engelhart, K, 2013. *Atheism starts its megachurch: Is it a religion now?* viewed 1 February 2014: [http://www.salon.com/2013/09/22/atheism_starts_its_megachurch_is_it_a_religion_now/](http://www.salon.com/2013/09/22/atheism_starts_its_megachurch_is_it_a_religion_now/)

In support of the *Sunday Assembly*’s stance, another commenter highlights the idea that some people that may wish to attend a ‘celebration of life’ may not be atheists:

Not everyone in the group is an atheist, and you don't have to be to join -- that's exactly the point the founders are trying to make. The Sunday Assembly is not about what God you do or don't believe in, or what religion you subscribe or don't subscribe to. It's a secular community organization with humanist values that happens to present it in a "church-like" setting (Stacey R).214

We also see here the inclusion of another dimension in this split, some atheists think that one must be a public atheist to help the cause, while others like the Sunday Assembly see this as unnecessary to their goals. Thus the covert/public dimension caused this early split in the movement. What will become of this schism is unfortunately out of the scope of this research, however, it again highlights the diversity of irreligious views and that they do split along the dimensions proposed in this research. As stated by another commenter on the *Friendly Atheist* article:

I appreciate the reminder that atheists are a VERY diverse bunch (good thing) and what suits one may not suit another (Glenn Weare).215

214 Ibid
215 Ibid
INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA

As discussed above atheist spirituality tends to be of a special kind, in that it contains no Gods, or supernatural occurrences. Atheists tend to have their own, this worldly ideas about what gives life meaning, makes one moral or connects one to another person. The substitution/elimination dimension became visible in my interviews with regard to worldview when asking participants the questions:

Worldview

1. How much does science effect your worldview?
2. Are there any events related to science that have effected your worldview?
3. Are there any other major events, ideas or things that have influenced your worldview?
4. What other parts your life do you consider important?
5. What is love to you?
6. What is happiness to you?
7. Have you experienced sorrow or extreme sadness?
8. What is the meaning of life, if any?
9. What is the meaning of your life?
10. Do you ever experience awe or wonder?

Summary

1. Do these things relate to your Atheism in any way?

This extensive list of questions about the participant’s worldview and its relationship to religion helped to expose the views held by contemporary atheists.

Worldview

Irreligious ideas of the ‘good life’ have often been interpreted via the worldviews of science, arts and popular culture (Pasquale 2010). Pasquale (2010) found that the values of affiliates were similar to religious ‘moderates’ and that they found meaning through friends, family, experiences, productive work and positive contributions. This pattern was also discovered in my
interview sample as shown below (Table 8). The answers to a question on the important things in life shows correlation with Pasquale's (2010) findings. 63.8% of Pasquale's sample mentioned family, friends and other people as providing important meaning in their lives. 39.2% mentioned personal experiences and pursuits and 33.8% mentioned social and political engagement such as productive work and contributions to society. This aligns closely with my findings where the numbers are 64%, 36% and 44% respectively.

**Table 8: Important Things to Interview Participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family (including animals)</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Productive Work and Social Contributions</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal Experiences and Pursuits</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Adding to the idea of worldview and meaning being centred in this world, the following was found in my interviews when I asked about love (Table 9). All of the descriptors were psychological, physiological or social, having no connection to supernatural concepts. Love is one of the things that is often discussed in pseudo-spiritual terms and thus the lack of such descriptions in my sample would seem reinforce the idea that atheists view meaning as a psychological and this worldly phenomenon. The sociological descriptions included ideas such as love being intersubjective, selfless, mutual and about respect. Physiological descriptions focused on brain chemistry, addiction and the fact that it was a genetically evolved feature of humans. Lastly the Psychological descriptions focused on emotion, attraction, empathy and euphoria as being signs of the feeling that is love.

**Table 9: What is Love to Interview Participants?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sociological</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physiological</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychological</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The question on love drew passionate and nuanced responses from those who answered it. They all described love in a *this worldly* way, using science, emotion and connection. In nearly all cases people (81%) expressed the idea
that love was not diminished by being viewed in these terms (19% being more reductive in their analysis or at least less clear). To these people, love is not phenomenologically reducible to the components that make it possible, but it is a social, material and psychological process, containing no otherworldly elements. As Taneal relays the idea:

I mean you can reduce everything to that because everything is electricity running through your head, but that in no way makes it unimportant, I mean these are the things that drive humans to act basically. They are the things that we place the most importance on in our lives, so in no way does that diminish their importance.

This is further indicated by a look at Table 10 with the question: *What is the meaning of life?* Again family, friends and other people are mentioned in connection with meaning, in this case by all of my participants. However, it was clear from the answers people gave that life has no overarching ‘meaning’ to these individuals. Even the comical answer ‘42’ derived from self-described radical atheist Douglas Adams’ *Hitch Hikers Guide to the Galaxy* (1979-1992 *Trilogy in Five Parts*) as the ‘Answer to the Ultimate Question of Life, the Universe, and Everything’ points toward the idea.

**Table 10: What is the Meaning of Life to Interview Participants?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Other people and relationships</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life in general has no meaning</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Life can have meaning through an individual’s interpretation</td>
<td>23</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing useful or creative things</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the novel a computer to answer this question is created by inter-dimensional beings, in the form of mice. Adams’ narrative discusses the futility of giving an answer to a question you are not clear on. It indicates that any answer to the question of the ‘meaning of life’ would lack coherence, as the question itself is so broad that we cannot actually know the real question. This is finally revealed in Adam’s novels, when the mice give up on looking for the real question and settle for the out-of-thin-air suggestion: *How many roads must a man walk down?*
from Bob Dylan’s song *Blowin’ in the Wind*. Similar to this question provided by Adams’ mice, meaning for my participants can be created ‘with other people’ and ‘as you desire’, depending on the context. Meaning is a process to my participants, it involves actions and their interpretations, not necessarily a particular ideal or narrative involving the universe’s purpose or teleology. The answer is within the doing, being and becoming, not some arbitrary criteria.

Morality is similarly grounded in this cosmos and within social relationships. Table 11 below, is a spread of the answers I received from a sample of my atheist participants when I asked them: *Where do morals come from?*

*Table 11: Where do Interview Participants Morals Come From?*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Morality as socially constructed</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality is innate</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality is a choice (e.g. of losing god and making good decisions)</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality evolves/changes</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Morality is contextual (e.g. white lies)</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

To my sample, morality is evolved, innate and governed by human choices and changing conditions. It is socially constructed and must change with the times to avoid becoming stagnant, hurtful or repressive. A common concern within the answers to this question was the idea that atheists are often seen as being without morals. In connection with this, the one thing that my sample definitively agree on is that religion itself does not make people more moral, and atheist morality, due to its basis in free will, is of a superior kind. These are very moral people, who believe in the choice to be moral, because empathetically it is ‘the right thing to do’. The ‘Golden Rule’ or the negative version, the ‘Silver Rule’\(^{216}\) were mentioned in most of these interviews (75%).

**Secular Spirituality and Ritual**

Questions about ‘spirituality’ were used to get at the ideas that underpin the irreligious naturalistic worldview and the negotiations that are occurring within the community over terms like ‘spirituality’. It also helped to enlighten the

researcher on participant’s feelings about religious ritual, before the emergence of the two cases that make up the internet portion of this chapter. The substitution/elimination dimension became visible in my interviews with regard to ‘spirituality’ when asking participants the questions:

**Spirituality**

1. *Have you ever been religious or spiritual, if so in what way?*
2. *Have you ever had a religious or spiritual experience, or perhaps an experience you found hard to explain?*
3. *Who/What are your major religious or spiritual influences (even if not current, could be historical or negative)?*
4. *What is your definition of spirituality?*
5. *Is there any way in which you could consider yourself to be a spiritual person?*

Table 12 below shows the responses I received to these questions organised along two themes, the view the participant held of the word spirituality and the possibility of spirituality being expressed in psychological or scientific terms (‘Atheist Spirituality’).

**Table 12: Interview Participants View on ‘Spirituality’ and whether it can be Part of Atheism**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>AP</td>
<td>Atheist Spirituality: Spirituality may be psychological</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AS</td>
<td>Atheist Spirituality: Spirituality is supernatural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AO</td>
<td>Atheist Spirituality: Open Spirituality, may be psychological or other worldly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>XS</td>
<td>No Spirituality: Spirituality is supernatural</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A</td>
<td>Atheists can have spirituality</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>X</td>
<td>Atheists cannot have spirituality</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>S</td>
<td>Spirituality is supernatural</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>O</td>
<td>Open, may be psychological or other worldly</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I found that 46% (18 people) were willing to use the word spirituality if it was seen in a psychological way that included no Gods or supernatural forces, and that atheists could believe in such an idea. 25% (10 people) were willing to accept that atheists could have something that resembled spirituality, but they did not think the word could be used due to supernatural loading and misinterpretation by others. A further 25% did not think that atheists could have anything related to the idea of spirituality and also believed that the term was always connected to supernatural ideas. Only one participant (3%) said they were open to any kind of supernatural force outside of God (they discussed ghosts and actual spirits as a possibility) and they believed the term could be interpreted either way. 74% did think that an ‘atheist spirituality’ was possible, even if they did not want to attach it to this term. The remaining 26% believed that atheists should not be involved with spiritual ideas. On the word spirituality itself, 51% believed that the word was strongly attached to religious ideas such as Gods and the supernatural. 46% believed that the word could be viewed in a psychological or this worldly way, and 3% thought that the word could be used either way for them. Connected to ideas of spirituality, I also discussed the idea of a sense of awe and wonder with my interview sample (Table 13). All of my participants claimed to experience awe and wonder in their world. They claimed to experience this awe in the following circumstances:

Table 13: What Causes Awe and Wonder for Interview Participants?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Being in nature</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Complexity of the Universe</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>64</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human achievement</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Science</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote distance (Space and Distant Galaxies)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Remote time (Geological Time and The Age of the Universe)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>An understanding of our deep connection to nature via evolution</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Every participant that answered this question was emphatic in expressing their sense of awe and wonder at the world/universe they live within. However, all except one of my participants insisted that this awe and joy should not and does not need to be expressed in supernatural terms. Thus, despite the lack of supernatural elements, there were many in my sample who were viewing the world through a type of ‘atheist spirituality’ in which the real world and our attachment to this cosmos, as we know it, are more than enough to provide feelings of ‘spirituality’ and connection with something greater. At the time of my interviews it seemed that only a small number of my participants are concerned about ritual and the new atheism. This could be explained by the fact that my interviews were undertaken shortly before the release of De Botton’s *Religion for Atheists* and some time before the emergence of the *Sunday Assembly*. Thus at the time of my interviews there was little controversy over ritual within the new atheist milieu. Most discussion of ritual in my sample surround the idea that atheists are not generally drawn to ritual and that some of the new atheist tactics resemble religious ritual.
DISCUSSION

This dimension appears to have a strong connection to Campbell’s (1972) observation that irreligious groups are based on rejecting religion. This part of the irreligious outlook means that any connection to religion becomes suspect to irreligious groups and negotiations about the appropriate level and use of such content are common. As seen here in my sample, even the new atheists themselves are sometimes accused of being ‘too religious’ in their behaviour. Suspicion causes strong friction at some fault lines, even though the thing being fought over may literally be a matter of perspective or taste. With no real evidence to back up the claims of either side in such debates, ‘religion’, even if being practiced by atheists, must be rhetorically demonised in order to raise the atheist view to one of ‘good taste’. This can involve uptake and critique of many and varied religious ideologies and practices.

However, despite this, it was also clear that a significant minority of my sample were open to religious organisation, ritual and the idea of an irreligious styled ‘atheist spirituality’. This allows them to compete with the more enchanting elements of religion, those involving the less intellectual parts of the human experience. Up until the last few years there has been a large amount of resistance to religious styled rituals in atheist circles as is seen in my interviews. However, with the release of De Botton’s Religion for Atheists something seems to have changed. Though it is early days and it is yet to be seen where this heads, there are early indications of expansion in the ritual side of substitution practices. We have seen atheists discussing Lent, praying and an emerging church movement based in the UK, US and expanding worldwide, all without supernatural content.

Such non-traditional this worldly views still require support to maintain them, as one must defend against the arguments put forward by the religious, who often still hold the default position in society. This involves answering claims such as the idea that atheists cannot love, have no morality or basis for their morality, or no ‘humanity’ (usually framed in pseudo spiritual terms). Thus atheists often feel under attack in societies where religion is still the default stance. The resources being created in this dimension are ‘substitutes’ for the
resources that religion has traditionally supplied for individuals, such love and morality. This atheist spirituality is of a non-traditional kind in the Western world, as has been explained, it contains no supernatural elements.

This dimension displays a mixing of religious and secular practices, in a way that indicates postsecularity as put forward by Knott (2005). However, there is still a clear distinction between the religious and irreligious versions of such practices. The irreligious versions of such practices are framed to contain no Gods or supernatural forces, and tend to have their focus on this world and the things within it. The need to provide structure for emerging atheists, many of whom have come from religious backgrounds, could be part of the more direct return to church styled texts and rituals that the new atheist movement seems to be embracing. From Dawkins rewriting of Genesis (The Blind Watchmaker) to Grayling’s Secular Bible and the traditional structure of the Sunday Assembly. The new atheists are producing works, groups and ideas that are clearly substitutionist in nature. They are anti-supernatural, anti-clerical and anti-God, but other parts of religious organisation and ritual appear to be in negotiation.

The attempts being made to tap into religious and spiritual structures within this dimension are about addressing the less intellectual needs of those who come to irreligion. They represent an attempt to address the human needs of such individuals, in an empathetic way via religious-like ideas and rituals. The next chapter explores a similar concept at the level of politics, it is concerned with the best overall tactics to make the world less religious.
CHAPTER 7. Empathetic/Intellectual
IS IT ALL IN THE HEAD?

The attempts throughout history to either accept or reject the atheist label have generally been at least partly to do with beliefs about the correct tactics to bring the world to a religion-less state, and can be found within the empathetic/intellectual dimension. It has been noted that the new atheists hold a conception of religion that relies heavily on reductionist cognitive sciences and intellectual epistemological arguments to make their case against religion (Martinson 2012; Le Drew 2012). This has led them to downplay sociological and humanist aspects of irreligious thought and to emphasise skepticism and scientific versions (Le Drew 2012). There were signs of a shift in this understanding when atheists began to get involved in charity and volunteer work in order to present atheists as good citizens (Nixon 2012) and this was coupled with public relations campaigns like the billboard and bus campaigns worldwide.217 The clergy project218 also showed some empathy towards the religious (as long as they are becoming atheists) by acknowledging the sociological difficulties with leaving religion and religious ideas behind. Dawkins’ (1986, 1995, 1996, 1998, 2004, 2006) contributions to filling science with awe (emotional channels) and Hitchens’ (2007) discussion of the moral ills of religion could also be included because they look outside of knowledge to reach the religious.

The emergence of Atheism Plus out of the feminist controversy that became known as Elevatorgate marks the formal emergence of this dimension in the current milieu. Adherents of Atheism Plus recognise that that there are other human concerns that keep people attached to religions and that it may be necessary to work on social justice to bring the world to a fully irreligious state. However, I think the bulk of the evidence still points to most new atheists holding to a deficit model when interacting with the religious. The deficit model assumes that it is a deficit or lack of knowledge that keeps someone attached to religious practices and ideas. Once the lack of knowledge is corrected, the person should stop being religious. This dimension again brings up the

discussion of postsecularity. The need for such tactics indicate that the world is still largely religious and that tactics and actions outside of intellectual arguments may be necessary to move the world further towards irreligion.
HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

The intellectual strands of religion and modernity formed a big part of the backdrop to irreligious emergence. Martin (1969: 116) states “the general sense of human power is increased, the play of contingency is restricted, and the overwhelming sense of divined limits which afflicted previous generations is much diminished.” As many discussions have pointed out, the irreligious critique was developed within religion itself (Hyman 2010; Bruce 2010). Scientific insights from Copernicus, Galileo and Newton also allowed an alternative view of the universe during this period, further opening a window for critique (Locke 2011; Bruce 2010). Looking through works such as Campbell’s *Towards a Sociology of Irreligion* (1972), and Dahlitz’s (1994) *Secular Who’s Who*, it could be suggested that there has been an oscillation between empathetic and intellectual versions of irreligion throughout the movement’s history. There has been a continuous struggle over if and how politics and social justice issues should be united with irreligious activities and circles, since at least the 1890’s (Campbell 1972). How explicitly social justice is attached to irreligion varies amongst groups. Some may be stronger activists in social justice causes than irreligious ones (e.g. Secularists), while others have no involvement in social justice issues and no desire (e.g. Rationalists).

Holyoake’s Secularists used the term ‘secularism’ to avoid being seen as morally suspect and his movement was less involved with arguments against God and more involved with social issues (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994). As Dahlitz (1994) suggests that the term ‘Secularist’ is used to describe those who go further than embracing unbelief in conventional religion. The word ‘secularism’ first appeared in Holyoake’s paper *Reasoner*, (arguably the single most important journal in British Freethought; Dahlitz 1994), in 1851 and shortly after he released what he called the ‘Principles and Aims’ of the Central Secular Society. The principle was to be the “recognition of the Secular sphere as the province of man” and the aims were:

1. To explain that science is the sole providence of man.
2. To establish the proposition that morals are independent from Christianity.
3. To encourage men to trust Reason throughout, and to trust nothing that Reason does not establish.

4. To teach men that the universal fair and open discussion of opinion is the highest guarantee of public truth.

5. To claim for every man the fullest liberty of thought and action compatible with the possession of like liberty by every other person.

6. To maintain that, from the uncertainty as to whether the inequalities of human condition will be compensated for in another life – it is the business of intelligence to rectify them in this world; and consequently, that instead of indulging in speculative worship of supposed superior beings, a generous man will devote himself to the patient service of known inferior natures, and the mitigation of harsh destiny so that the ignorant may be enlightened and the low elevated (Campbell 1972: 48-49).

Campbell (1972) attributes this list to the influence of Owenism and Utilitarianism and detects strands of Comte’s positivist thought within it. Dahlitz (1994) summarises Holyoake’s three points as:

1. The improvement of this life by material means.
2. That science is the available providence of man.
3. That it is good to do good

Though there is an implicit statement of non-belief in these tenets, the focus is more generally on this world and the non-belief is not spoken of directly, indicating the more social nature of Holyoake’s Secular movement, as opposed to an intellectual argument about the existence of God. These tenets, side-step or ignore the question of God’s existence to focus on this world.

As Secularism declined in the late 19th century (~1880’s depending on the region) some Secularists began to feel that the changing times required a change in aims and methods of the Freethought movement. In the early 20th century the rising ideologies of Socialism, Anarchism and Fascism had split the radical cause, offering what they saw as fully formed, and permanent social engineering solutions to a Western world now dominated by largely secular
nation states. Those in the secular movement who were more interested in advocating Freethought for its own sake and who felt that the attachment to politics was a hindrance to the movement came to the forefront of the secular movement (Campbell 1972; Dahlitz 1994). As well as issues with politics, these Secularists (who would become Rationalists as the 20th century dawned) also rejected political agitation as a tactic, leaving political agitation to the Socialist and labour groups they were separating from. They turned away from speeches, debates and mass meetings and turned towards publishing as a main avenue for the movement. This is a trait that can be seen to separate them from the new atheists in the 20th century, who are scientific atheists that have embraced political agitation, while still focusing primarily on the intellectual arguments against God. While the new atheists appear to be reacting directly to the rise of religion (aided by post-modernism), it appears that the Rationalists were reacting to a different social milieu. The early 20th century, while containing the early seeds of fundamentalism, also contained many rival atheistic and utopian thought systems, it was an environment awash with new political ideologies (Zuckert (ed.) 2011). The Rationalists were also, according to Campbell (1972: 87), at least partly reacting to the perceived vulgarity of the previous Secularist movement (its attachment to working class speakers and political actions) and attempting to ‘clean up’ its image, which would further separate them from the Socialists. For this purpose, the Rationalist Press Association (RPA) was formed in 1899. Its main intent was to publish and distribute books which booksellers were reluctant to stock due to their irreligious content. It became an organisation that expressed the educational power of reading, as stated in an early article:

We believe in the religion of reading good books, and would willingly be the priest of that religion (Campbell 1972: 87).

The RPA maintained the subtitle Rationalist Review for its Literary Guide until 1956, at which point it was re-subtitled as The Humanist. The name change is put forward by Dahlitz (1994) as reflecting the changing nature of secular expression during the 20th century. Campbell (1972) suggests that the middle of the 20th century saw a generation of non-believers who were not principally
interested in philosophical and ethical issues but in the practical. By this time most people in the West had a rudimentary education and literacy, more people could be considered to be in the middle classes than ever before. Disposable income also increased as industrial conditions and social services improved. Women increasingly come into the picture as well due to the build-up of Socialist and Feminist cultural capital and the increased societal participation of women throughout the 20th century and particularly after WWII (e.g. Goldin 1991). The paperback revolution of the middle years of the 20th century again increased access to information and created a bigger audience than ever, many of whom had grown up in largely irreligious households and an increasing number who had university educations (Thelin 2011). Humanism, this time as a movement, lost ground in the late 20th century.

This left space for irreligion to morph into yet another scientific phase, fuelled by the social change occurring in the time leading up to its emergence, such as the rise of the religious right and Islamist groups. The new atheism can be seen as a continuance of the historical pattern. It shares kinship with its forebears, with both arguments against God and evolution as a belief structure holding strong places within the new atheist milieu. However if we combine this insight with those from Le Drew (2012) it is possible to see that the new atheists have at times ejected some earlier material in the form of the Humanistic philosophies that attempt to understand religion at a social level and irreligious ideas that do not fit with the post-communist, free market outlook (also see Martinson 2012).

In summary, some atheists have felt that social issues are a distraction from the core cause of dismantling religion and winning atheist rights, such as Bradlaugh, the Rationalists, Madalyn Murray O’Hair and the dictionary atheists.\textsuperscript{219} To these people the cause is best served by correcting the intellectual deficits of their opponents and converting them through knowledge. Others have felt that such activities were a natural extension of irreligion such as Comte, Holyoake,

\textsuperscript{219} Those new atheists who disagree with\textit{ Atheism Plus} after the Great Rift, including the\textit{ Slymepit} and Men’s Rights Activists as discussed below.
Socialists, Anarchists, Humanists, New Atheists\textsuperscript{220} and most recently *Atheism Plus* as discussed in this chapter. To these individuals if one is to make the world nonreligious they must change the human circumstances of religious believers, so that people no longer need religion. By having empathy with at least some of the less intellectual reasons that people may remain religious, they attempt to tap into less intellectual parts of the human experience.

\textsuperscript{220} At least until the ‘Great Rift’ as discussed below.
INTERNET PARTICIPANT OBSERVATION

Earlier in the new atheist movement it had seemed that most atheists were united in ideas of liberal politics and social justice, but events described in this chapter served to expose the ‘undesirables’ on both sides of the political divide. The advent of the FreeThoughtBlogs Network\(^\text{221}\) and the events of Elevatorgate (discussed below) began a process of group divergence within the new atheism. The attachment of Feminism and other liberally oriented social justice issues would become the main area of dispute, as first discussed in Chapter 3 around the dictionary/plus definitions of atheism. A year after these events Atheism Plus emerged from the fallout around Elevatorgate and a schism was underway that would become called the ‘Great Rift’ of atheism by those in the movement as will be evidenced later in this chapter. The Slymepit\(^\text{222}\) is another group that emerged in protest at the politics and tactics being employed by Atheism Plus and it is discussed after Elevatorgate below.

Elevatorgate and Fallen New Atheist Heroes

A number of incidents have served to crystallise the sense that all is not right in the world of unbelief. Most notoriously, there was "Elevatorgate", an (sic) late-night incident in a lift during an atheist conference in Dublin during which the blogger Rebecca Watson was propositioned. Her subsequent public complaint about the man's behaviour and sexual harassment within the Skeptic movement drew criticism from Richard Dawkins himself and fuelled an ugly flame war. She received, and continues to receive, rape and death threats.\(^\text{223}\)

---

\(^\text{222}\) The Slymepit. Home, viewed 13 April 2013: http://slymepit.com/phpbb/
The fact that atheism plus came from FtB cannot be separated from the responses it has received.\textsuperscript{224}

\textit{Elevatorgate} began as a public affair with the release of a \textit{YouTube} video by Skepchick blogger Rebecca Watson called \textit{About Mythbusters, Robot Eyes, Feminism, and Jokes}.\textsuperscript{225} In the video she says that the response to her communicating atheism talk was positive, with the exception of a man who did not quite grasp what she was saying. After leaving the hotel bar at 4:00am, Watson got on the elevator. An anonymous man joined her and according to her account said “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I find you very interesting, and I would like to talk more. Would you like to come to my hotel room for coffee?” Watson’s commentary on this interaction is as follows:

Just a word to the wise here, guys: don’t do that. You know, I don’t really know how else to explain how this makes me incredibly uncomfortable, but I will just lay it out that I was a single woman in a foreign country at 4:00 AM in a hotel elevator with you. Just you. And don’t invite me back to your hotel room right after I finish talking about how it creeps me out and makes me uncomfortable when men sexualize me in that manner. So, yeah, but everybody else seemed to really get it, and thank you for getting it.\textsuperscript{226}

The video of the conference panel that Watson had been involved in had been posted online by \textit{AronRa},\textsuperscript{227} a fellow panellist and activist (who has worked for the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science – RDFRS\textsuperscript{228}). It is worthy of note that in this video Watson also criticises Paula Kirby, another panellist, for an alleged assertion during a previous panel discussion that there was no sexism problem in the atheist community. Watson states that Kirby is lucky that she is part of a privileged group that do not experience sexism. In Watson’s blog video that begins \textit{Elevatorgate}, Watson commentates on the


\textsuperscript{225} Watson, R, 2011. \textit{About Mythbusters, Robot Eyes, Feminism, and Jokes}, viewed 13 April 2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uKHwduG1Frk

\textsuperscript{226} Ibid

\textsuperscript{227} AronRa. \textit{Communicating Atheism}, viewed 15 June 2013: http://www.youtube.com/user/AronRa?feature=watch

\textsuperscript{228} Kirby, P. \textit{Paula Kirby’s Profile}, viewed 15 June 2013: http://old.richarddawkins.net/profiles/14311
number of sexist comments the video received and thanks them for proving her point. Early in the comments there are also many supporters and many who rebuke the people making anti-feminist and sexist comments. The next event of interest is when Watson summarised what happened in Dublin at a CFI Leadership Conference and provided a sample of sexually explicit, violent and rape filled messages she had received on some of the YouTube videos. She also stated that her ‘elevator proposition’ video had received similar responses along with dismissive statements about feminism and sexism. Watson went on to illustrate that she believed young women were naïve about feminism, quoting from Stef McGraw’s UNI FreeThought blog:

My concern is that she takes issue with a man showing interest in her. What’s wrong with that? How on earth does that justify him as creepy? Are we not sexual beings? Let’s review. It’s not as if he touched her, or made an unsolicited sexual comment. He merely asked if she’d like to come back to his room. She easily could have said, and I’m assuming did say, ‘No thanks, I’m tired, and would like to go to my room to sleep.’

Watson’s comments and use of McGraw as an example led to controversy within the skeptic and atheist communities. Many said that Watson had taken advantage of her privilege as a conference presenter to publicly shame McGraw instead of approaching her personally. Though figures such as PZ Myers, who fully supported Watson’s view of events, tried dismissing McGraw’s criticisms, even trying to claim Watson was doing her a favour by dismissing her. Thus FTB bloggers began and pushed forward the controversy around Elevatorgate. While a few people blogged about Watson’s talks and prominent figures added their thoughts to the comment sections such as Myers’ blog, the most famous and divisive comment came from Richard Dawkins:

---

229 AronRa, 2011. Communicating Atheism (pt 1) Skepchick, viewed 15 June 2013: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=W014KhaRti&list=PL5C7C56C4B035FA08
Dear Muslima,

Stop whining, will you. Yes, yes, I know you had your genitals mutilated with a razor blade, and... yawn... don't tell me yet again, I know you aren't allowed to drive a car, and you can't leave the house without a male relative, and your husband is allowed to beat you, and you'll be stoned to death if you commit adultery. But stop whining, will you. Think of the suffering your poor American sisters have to put up with.

Only this week I heard of one, she calls herself Skep “chick”, and do you know what happened to her? A man in a hotel elevator invited her back to his room for coffee. I am not exaggerating. He really did. He invited her back to his room for coffee. Of course she said no, and of course he didn't lay a finger on her, but even so...

And you, Muslima, think you have misogyny to complain about! For goodness sake grow up, or at least grow a thicker skin.

Richard.233

After this comment, Dawkins was widely rebuked by the community after which gave more explanation234 that indicated Watson’s experience was non-physical and thus trivial, comparing it to the offence of a “man [who] gets into an elevator with me chewing gum.” He then followed this up with another comment stating that:

Muslim women suffer physically from misogyny, their lives are substantially damaged by religiously inspired misogyny. Not just words, real deeds, painful, physical deeds, physical provisions, legally sanctioned demeanings.235

This added further to the idea that Dawkins was trivialising the experiences of Western females. Then he went silent everywhere on the issue. As the original

---

235 Ibid
The article is gone. I have had to piece this together from commentaries. I have done my best to confirm the data gathered. It was at this point that the battlelines began to be drawn more strongly. Dawkins’ comments elicited several more responses, including a post by Jen McCreight at her own FTB blog, *BlagHag*, arguing that “words matter.” She writes:

> You don’t get that because you’ve never been called a cunt, a faggot, a nigger, a kike. You don’t have people constantly explaining that you’re subhuman, or have the intellect of an animal. You don’t have people saying you shouldn’t have rights. You don’t have people constantly sexually harassing you. You don’t live in fear of rape, knowing that one wrong misinterpretation of a couple words could lead down that road.

Myers documented Dawkins’s comments and McCreight’s response in another post which received yet another comment from Dawkins. This time he countered the argument made by Watson supporters that being propositioned in an elevator is particularly scary because “there is no escape.” Dawkins responds:

> Here’s how you escape from an elevator. You press any one of the buttons conveniently provided. The elevator will obligingly stop at a floor, the door will open and you will no longer be in a confined space but in a well-lit corridor in a crowded hotel in the center of Dublin.

After posts by a number of bloggers who disagreed with Dawkins, Watson was finally drawn into the conversation:

> When I started this site, I didn't call myself a feminist. I had a hazy idea that feminism was a good thing, but it was something that other people worried about, not me. I was living in a time and culture that had transcended the need for feminism, because in my world we

---


238 Ibid
were all rational atheists who had thrown off our religious indoctrination so that I could freely make rape jokes without fear of hurting someone who had been raped... And then, for the past few years as the audience for Skepchick and SGU grew, I’ve had more and more messages from men who tell me what they’d like to do to me, sexually. More and more men touching me without permission at conferences. More and more threats of rape from those who don’t agree with me, even from those who consider themselves skeptics and atheists. More and more people telling me to shut up and go back to talking about Bigfoot and other topics that really matter...

This weekend when I read Dawkins’ comments, I was, briefly, without hope. I had already seen the future of this movement dismissing these concerns, and now I was seeing the present do the same.239

She urges readers to protest Dawkins’s work, declaring that:

This person who I always admired for his intelligence and compassion does not care about my experience as an atheist woman and therefore will no longer be rewarded with my money, my praise, or my attention. I will no longer recommend his books to others, buy them as presents, or buy them for my own library... I will not attend his lectures or recommend that others do the same. There are so many great scientists and thinkers out there that I don’t think my reading list will suffer.240

At this point in time it seemed that Dawkins had done some real damage to his reputation through the Dear Muslma comment and that Watson was winning the support of the community, as one article on 6 July 2011 stated:

Dawkins seems to be losing, based on the many who’ve disagreed with him in the Science Blogs comments section and their own blogs. Watson, though having become disillusioned by someone she once

240 Ibid
admired, should feel vindicated by the amount of support she’s received.\textsuperscript{241}

This situation would not last long however. Different sides complained of being bullied, silenced, marginalised and excluded.\textsuperscript{242} For further confirmation of the events I had identified in my internet ethnography I used Google Trends to confirm spikes in interest at appropriate times and across various members involved in the events. Figure 18, the first graph of interest is that of Rebecca Watson herself:

\begin{figure}[h]
\centering
\includegraphics[width=0.8\textwidth]{figure18.png}
\caption{Google Trends – Interest over Time for Rebecca Watson from 2004 to 2013}
\end{figure}

This graph shows a clear spike at the period around Elevatorgate and two raised plateaus of interest in Watson following the event. It also shows a spike around the time of Atheism Plus’s instantiation, as discussed later. The related


\textsuperscript{242} Webster, D, 2012. Atheism Plus. Or Not. Or Something Else... viewed 15 June 2013: http://dispirited.org/2012/08/30/atheism-plus-or-not-or-something-else/
terms box below the graph also shows a connection between keywords such as ‘Rebecca’, ‘Watson’ and ‘Elevator’ and ‘Dawkins’, further confirming the importance of these two in the events around *Elevatorgate*. It shows that the event was mostly searched for by those in the UK, US, Australia and Canada. The graph below (Figure 19) was a search on ‘Rebecca Watson, PZ Myers, Elevatorgate, Atheism Plus, and New Atheism’:

*Figure 19: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Rebecca Watson, PZ Myers, Elevatorgate, Atheism Plus and New Atheism from 2004 to 2013*

This graph shows spikes in the search volumes for both Watson and Myers at the *Elevatorgate* origin point. The peak in 2011 (C) is the event *Elevatorgate* (yellow line) itself. Rebecca Watson (blue line) was a main personality in this event and this is illustrated by the large spike in interest she receives at the same time as the event. PZ Myers (red line) was heavily involved in the events too and correspondingly shows a peak at the time of the event. *Atheism Plus* (green line) is non-existent until 2012 (A) when the label finally emerges. Both personalities in the graph are also involved with this movement and they receive boosts in interest as the *Atheism Plus* graph emerges. This example shows the types of links that can be made between personalities and events using *Google Trends*. It also illustrates the above assertion that the second smaller spike in Watson’s graph is aligned with the emergence of *Atheism Plus*, as there is a spike in the *Elevatorgate* line at the same time. Interestingly the graph also shows PZ Myers beginning to lose search interest after *Elevatorgate*. The lowering in search volumes coincides nearly exactly with *Elevatorgate* (Figure 19), it seems that Myers may have begun to lose favour in the
community after this. While he is given a brief boost by the emergence of *Atheism Plus*, he then experiences another sharp decline. Search volumes on Myers (and one would suggest interest in him), seems to have been severely impacted by his involvement in these events, as can be seen in Figure 20 (*Pharyngula* is Myers blog name).

![Figure 20: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Pharyngula from 2004 to 2013](image)

The FreeThoughtBlogs (FTB) network itself also appears to have been affected by this controversy. As seen in the following graph, Figure 21, the network has suffered the same drops in popularity seen by Myers himself and both seem to at least correlate with the events of *Elevatorgate*. In fact against Greta Christina’s assertions, the events of *Elevatorgate* do seem to have given a temporary boost to FTB’s interest, its line (blue) emerges slower than the popularity of the event itself just after the event (yellow), indicating that many people had discovered the network through the event. The network is for a time given more interest than the event, but as time goes by and particularly after the emergence of *Atheism Plus*, both FTB and PZ Myers lose popularity and *Elevatorgate* as a term and perhaps the personality, becomes even more popular than FTB.

---

"Elevatorgate" was followed by a period of debate in which battlelines were more distinctly drawn. This period sees the beginning of the #FTBullies tag on Twitter and the further division that would emerge around the tag. As the conversation shifted to the need for anti-harassment policies at atheist conferences, the FTB bloggers were once again perceived as overreaching their position by some in the community. While most of the atheist community seemed to agree that these anti-harassment policies could be helpful, there were some who thought that anyone questioning such policies was being branded as a sexist, misogynist or a rape apologist. Due to this, the rhetoric became more extreme, especially in the comment threads on some of the prominent blogs and on Twitter. The ‘FreeThought Bullies’ meme/hashtag (#FTBullies) got started to express disapproval at some of the tactics people perceived to be emanating from the FTB network. It can be seen in the light of label creation and reclaiming by those labelled.

The ‘#’ is a technical component of the platform (using a split between platform and its social uses), but the label ‘FTBullies’ is the word that was created to

describe a ‘deviant’ community. Although notably the group applying this label also felt that they were being stigmatised as indicated by the ‘bullies’ part of the label, the label has also then been reappropriated by the stigmatised community for their own purposes. Thus this is not a clear case of a group being stigmatised by another group, but also contains elements of protest and ‘freedom fighting’ on both sides. This could be put forward as one of the reasons for the ongoing nature of the conflict and the strong entanglement of the two sides. They both feel like they are fighting for the ‘correct’ future of the same system, they must persuade the ‘neutral’ atheists and the other side that they are correct about their particular vision of the irreligious milieu. The future of the movement, is at stake for both sides. The #FTBullies tag became the meeting point for the argument on Twitter. The incidents of ‘dictionary atheism’, Elevatorgate, the #FTBullies hash tag led to the perception that there was a Great Rift in the atheist group around gender issues, progressive political issues and their proper place within the community. As discussed at the beginning of the chapter, the empathetic/intellectual dimension has affected the history and sociological structuring of the movement many times and this Great Rift represents the latest such impact in the history of this dimension.

A particular opposition group emerged from the critiques of Elevatorgate. The group started as a discussion thread which allowed the airing of grievances against FTB. This thread was labelled as a ‘slime pit’ by PZ Myers, the group then took on this name and became known as the Slymepit. It started as an infinite thread on Abbie Smith’s blog to be a place where people could debate what had happened without fear of being banned, deleted or threatened. According to those who use it, Slymepit is a Group, not a Movement. It is considered by its supporters as a stronghold of everyone that objects to the tactics of Atheism Plus. It was set up in response to what its users see as the controversy and ensuing attacks and smear campaigns against Dawkins and anyone who agreed with him or Stef McGraw about Elevatorgate. It was to be a free speech forum and there were thousands of comments before the thread

246 The Slymepit. Home, viewed 13 April 2013: http://slymepit.com/phpbb/
had to finally be closed and moved to a new forum, where it continues.\textsuperscript{247} Thus the Slymepit was formed by those people that felt shunned or left out by who they were now calling the ‘FTBullies’.\textsuperscript{248} It became a main launching point for those against Atheism Plus. Figure 22 shows the Slymepit increasing as Atheism Plus takes off with a bang, but as Atheism Plus peters out the Slymepit keeps growing, eventually catching up, then lowers between spikes in the Atheism Plus baseline.

\textit{Figure 22: Google Trends – Interest over Time for Atheism Plus and Slymepit from 2004 to 2014}

The number of blogs involved in the discussions increased over time, with different blogs staking out their position with regards to the FTB network and their censorship and accusations.

\textbf{Politics}

In my internet observations I was looking at the types of political stances that my sample took, to ascertain how they viewed social justice issues and their connection to irreligion or ‘atheism’ in this case and change in this connection over time. The events of Elevatorgate do appear to have been integral in making the new atheists more aware of the politics of other members of the group. In contrast, in earlier periods of the new atheism (prior to 2011), due to the way arguments have been put forward against the religious, it appeared that the

\footnotesize
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{247} SoggyMog, 2012. \textit{Atheism Plus; the Last Rites}, viewed 13 April 2013: \\
  \url{http://musingsbysoggymog.blogspot.com.au/2012/10/atheism-plus-last-rites.html}
  \item \textsuperscript{248} West Coast Atheist, 2013. \textit{What is the Slymepit?} viewed 13 April 2013: \\
  \url{http://westcoastatheist.wordpress.com/2013/05/29/what-is-the-slymepit/}
\end{itemize}
new atheism was implicitly concerned with social justice and liberal issues. This is because religion was put forward as representing the dogmatic oppression of various groups due to religious beliefs. Women are a common target of such critiques, with the religious right being accused of suppressing women through predetermining appropriate roles and behaviour.

It’s worth noticing how many among the religious right openly wish death and suffering on women. Early in the year, I reported on Catholic hospitals denying women abortions, even in life-and-death emergencies, and Republican congressmen who want to make it legal for any hospital to do the same, even as they push to exclude abortion care from health insurance. Later on in the year, I wrote about the misogyny common to all major religions, with special reference to fundamentalist Islam and ultra-Orthodox Judaism (a topic I expect to revisit often in 2012).249

Despite the differences, both my interview sample (discussed below) and the sample from the ARIS,250 it is clear that a significant minority, if not a majority of Secular/atheist individuals lean towards a ‘liberal progressive’ form of politics. It can be seen in the blogs and Twitter feeds on the internet that ‘progressive’ atheism is more common than ‘conservative’. Figure 3 is one example of the many graphs I took in my ethnography. It represents the tweets containing the word ‘atheism’. Only four (4/1299) nodes in here are most definitely ‘conservative’ as their profiles directly state their political stance, though we could add those who are adamantly against feminism and Atheism Plus. These people are not clearly conservative, many of them just dislike ‘radical feminism’ as a caricature and Atheism Plus due to its perceived bullying and use of ‘radical feminism’. However, the vast majority of these atheist tweeters (those not in purple (religious), grey (irrelevant) or grey-blue (political and rhetorical uses of ‘atheism’) would fit into the socially liberal, progressive category.

250 77% of the ARIS sample either do not believe in God or do not know if there is a God, so most are atheists or agnostics.
Though their numbers seem to be smaller, it is worth giving some examples of Conservative, Neo-Liberal and Men’s Rights Activists in order to clarify the differences between them and the ‘progressives’. Both disagree with religion, but they have taken up different stances with regard to the best political tactics and social models. *Secular Right*,[^251] *Pro-Life Secular, The Atheist Conservative*, and *The Unreligious Right* are amongst the explicitly conservative blogs that I’ve discovered in my ethnography and the *Slymepit* became another space after the emergence of *Atheism Plus*. The number of conservative blogs are small compared to the more socially progressive blogs. In an article in the *New York Times* discussing the emergence of Godless conservatives in the US, Razib Khan[^252] and Heather Mac Donald[^253] are cited as atheist conservatives, with Khan an apostate to his family’s Islamic faith, and Mac Donald to her left-wing education. The caption under a photo of Ms Mac Donald reads:

Heather Mac Donald, an atheist conservative, derides the way God is credited for good fortune but absolved of misfortune.

They are ‘conservatives with no use for religion’. Since 2008, they have both been contributors to the blog *Secular Right*.[^254] They argue that conservative values like small government, self-reliance and liberty can be defended without recourse to invisible deities or the religions that exalt them.[^255] Both of them, along with the other data mentioned, serve as public proof that irreligious conservatives exist. As Mr Khan says:

A lot of religious conservatives say, ‘You can’t be conservative because you don’t believe in God,’ said Mr. Khan, 34, who was raised in New York and Oregon but whose grandfather was an imam in Bangladesh. ‘They say I am logically impossible, and I say, well I am


possible because I am’… They assert your nonexistence, and you have to assert your existence.\footnote{Oppenheimer, M, 2011. A Place on the Right for a Few Godless Conservatives, viewed 15 February 2013: \url{http://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/us/19beliefs.html?_r=1}}

Some have also pointed to the more right leaning/neo-liberal tendencies of the new atheist writers themselves (Le Drew 2012). The first example comes from Christopher Hitchens:

It is… impossible to compromise with the stone-faced propagandists for Bronze Age morality: morons and philistines who hate Darwin and Einstein and managed, during their brief rule in Afghanistan, to ban and erase music and art while cultivating the skills of germ warfare. If they could do that to Afghans, what might they not have in mind for us? In confronting such people, the crucial thing is to be willing and able, if not in fact eager, to kill them without pity before they get started.\footnote{Hitchens, C, 2002. Saving Islam from bin Laden, The Age, viewed 15 February 2013: \url{http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/09/04/1031115884039.html}}

The clearly authoritarian stance of this statement and others made by Hitchens has led many to see the new atheists as Neo-Liberals wanting to spread Western imperialism through the forced conversion to democracy and the swift destruction of those who would oppose such imperialism.\footnote{Ruse, M. 2011. New Atheism Redux. The Chronicle of Higher Education. Viewed 20 June 2013: \url{http://chronicle.com/blogs/brainstorm/new-atheism-redux/34321}} Hitchens talks much about his anti-totalitarianism, while at the same time calling for totalitarian tactics against those that do not share his views. Similar accusations of ‘Islamaphobia’ and Neo-Liberal colonialism have been made against Dawkins\footnote{Lean, N. 2013. Richard Dawkins Does it again: New Atheism’s Islamaphobia Problem. Salon. Viewed on 12 August 2013: \url{http://www.salon.com/2013/08/10/richard_dawkins_does_it_again_new_atheisms_islamophobia_problem/}} and Harris\footnote{Harris, S. 2013. On Islamaphobia and other Libels. Sam Harris’s Blog. Viewed on 12 August 2013: \url{http://www.samharris.org/blog/item/on-islamophobia-and-libels}}. Sam Harris said the following in a blog article entitled The End of Liberalism.

The [...] failure of liberalism is evident in Western Europe, where the dogma of multiculturalism has left a secular Europe very slow to address the looming problem of religious extremism among its
immigrants. The people who speak most sensibly about the threat that Islam poses to Europe are actually fascists.\(^{261}\)

The concern over liberalism in both cases, seems to be that the conversation between ‘progressives’ and their opponents is one of appeasement, leaving the West open to being invaded by irrational cultural and religious perspectives. As discussed in my short history, postmodern progressive ideas like multiculturalism are seen as blocking the right to legitimate critique. This idea is echoed in the *Pharyngula* post called *Atheism ≠ Fascism* in which Myers also references the above quotes to declare his dislike of them. He then goes on to explain where he thinks these attitudes arise from, making a partial apology for the conservative/neo-liberal views being espoused. This is particularly interesting because Myers is known as a very openly ‘progressive’ atheist and is a main antagonist in the events that will surround the dictionary/plus argument in this era of irreligion.

“I want to chop off my daughter's clitoris,” says the Islamist. “Oooh, that’s not nice,” says the ‘progressive’, “and your deep, rich cultural traditions make me hesitate to object.” Meanwhile, the New Atheist says "NO. There is no ambiguity here: your children are individuals, you have NO RIGHT to butcher them. And being an ignorant barbarian is no excuse”… “Homosexuals are a disgusting abomination,” scream the fundamentalists. The ‘progressives’ respond, “Oooh, well, we were going to advocate tolerance and equality, but in the light of your rousing certainty, we'll yank this commercial that blandly suggests that maybe gay people are human just like you.” The New Atheist, at this point, just facepalms incredulously and walks away from these lily-livered fair-weather advocates for equality.\(^{262}\)


At the end of this article Myers puts forward the *Dublin Declaration on Religion in Public Life*,\(^{263}\) as a “much more accurate summary of the attitudes expressed in these new atheist gatherings.” He comments that the declaration is a:

> Very progressive document. Not in the sense that some ‘progressives’ believe, in which the only progressive value is surrender, but in the sense that it actually stands firmly for positive values, like freedom of conscience and thought, equality before the law, and secular education for all. That we actually believe in something, and that we stand up for it in speech and deed, does not imply that we’re totalitarian fascists, except to people who think the only true progressive response must be silence, and inaction, and acquiescence.\(^{264}\)

Thus while some true conservative atheists do exist and became more visible in the years following these comments, due to the controversies around *Elevatorgate*. The new atheists on the whole, however, see themselves as carriers of a less appeasing and more hard-line progressive tradition. They are progressives compared to the religious and other types of Fascists. However, they are unwilling to compromise on core values. The quotes below draw attention to the presence of the idea within the irreligious milieu following *Elevatorgate* and the emergence of *Atheism Plus*. They indicate that ideas of social justice were now under negotiation within the wider irreligious milieu, thus showing the importance of these events in critiquing the idea that social justice is inherently connected to the new atheism:

> A few other objections to Atheism Plus are argued by Notung, like how do we decide what does or does not count as social justice for atheists? We disagree on a lot of issues. Given that we do, then to require atheist organizations to focus on social justice requires mission drift, which would essentially minimize what they each do


best and cause them to divide into smaller groups. There already are, for instance, movements that support these extra causes.²⁶⁵

The extent to which feminism, however interpreted, should influence the conduct, policies, and goals of movement organizations.²⁶⁶

**Atheism Plus**

The new atheist sub-group, *Atheism Plus* emerged out of the series of events that have been previously described in this chapter as *Elevatorgate*. McCreight, who is also part of the FTB network, became the catalyst for the Atheism Plus movement. She first came to prominence as the creator of 2010’s *Boobquake*,²⁶⁷ a satirical response to claims by an Iranian authority, Kazem Seddiqi, that women who dressed immodestly were responsible for earthquakes. McCreight called for a ‘third wave’ of atheism that extends atheist activism into progressive politics and feminist ideals. Many people applauded McCreight’s call for a new wave. This pattern of praise and empathy was repeated on her blog comments and on 19 August 2012 she announced the name of the new movement in a follow-up post called *Atheism+*, McCreight stated its basic values as being:

We are...

Atheists plus we care about social justice,

Atheists plus we support women’s rights,

Atheists plus we protest racism,

Atheists plus we fight homophobia and transphobia,

---

Atheists plus we use critical thinking and skepticism.\textsuperscript{268}

In the same post she also presented a number of possible logos (Figure 23) that had been submitted by community member \textit{Jadehawk}:

Chapter 7: Empathetic/Intellectual

Figure 23: Proposed Atheism Plus Symbols

The first logo was eventually taken up by the fledgling movement. It is a variation on the logo being used by the new atheists, the scarlet A, with the addition of the plus. The connection that this logo maintains with the new atheist movement may have been the reason for its uptake over the other two logos on offer in this post. The uptake of this logo can be seen in its use on Atheism Plus sites. Below (Figure 24) is an example from Atheismplus.com:

Figure 24: Atheism Plus Symbol – more than disbelief

What this art has in common with past movements discussed in the historical analysis, is the belief that there is more to atheism than mere disbelief in Gods and that the progressive leaning stance of Atheism Plus is correct for atheists. This relates to the earlier discussion between those who hold a dictionary form of atheism and those who believe it entails more. Figure 24 further strengthens the idea that this is a long term structuring dimension of atheism, conjuring up one of my earliest examples of irreligious activism in the form of Holyoake’s Secularist movement. As described earlier this movement declared itself to be an organisation that goes beyond the disbelief in God.

---

McCreight’s proposition for a third wave of atheism received more support over the next few days.\textsuperscript{270} 271 272 On 21 August 2012 Greta Christina chimed in.\textsuperscript{273} Greta Christina was clear in her support of \textit{Atheism Plus}. She cited the increasing visibility of a sexist section of the atheist movement as the primary reason for believing the new movement is a good idea. She thinks there is a need for a space in which atheists interested in feminism and social justice can meet. On 27 August 2012, the post also received qualified support from the \textit{Center for Inquiry}, an organisation very linked with Humanism and new atheism.\textsuperscript{274} Myers added to the conversation on the same day,\textsuperscript{275} with his usual aggressive style, this is one of the posts that continues the ‘Us and Them’ dynamics that had led to the \#FTBullies hashtag. It further attaches the emergence of \textit{Atheism Plus} with the FTB network and its ‘firebrand’ style of activism. This would become a major issue for the \textit{Atheism Plus} movement going forward, as they would lose a lot of allies due to confrontational and polarising tactics with the irreligious other.

Many argued that the move to \textit{Atheism Plus} is not divisive, as it was only providing a space for those atheists who wished to work with others on ‘progressive’ causes. One response comes from Maryam Namazie, FTB blogger, atheist and human rights activist who likens the process to the creation of ‘Muslims for Secular Democracy’. The process does not necessarily split the group, but allows the newly created group to focus on their particular cause, while still advocating for atheism:

\textsuperscript{271} Blackford, R, 2012. \textit{Collectively, we have failed Alexander Aan}, viewed 13 December 2013: \url{http://metamagician3000.blogspot.com.au/2012/08/collectively-we-have-failed-alexander.html}
\textsuperscript{272} Warren Stupidity, 2012. \textit{A+ A draft manifesto for ethical atheism}, viewed 13 December 2013: \url{http://www.democraticunderground.com/123010477}
\textsuperscript{274} Center for Inquiry, 2012. \textit{Some Observations About Atheism Plus}, viewed 13 December 2013: \url{http://www.centerforinquiry.net/blogs/entry/some_observations_about_atheism_plus/}
\textsuperscript{275} Myers, PZ, 2012. \textit{Following up on last night’s Atheism+ discussion}, viewed 13 December 2013: \url{http://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/2012/08/27/following-up-on-last-nights-atheism-discussion/}
I don’t see the creation of Atheism Plus as necessarily divisive... For example, the establishment of "Muslims for Secular Democracy" doesn’t divide all Muslims. Muslims – like atheists – are not a homogeneous group or community. Moreover, those who don’t join or support "Muslims for Secular Democracy" and even those who may oppose its establishment for various reasons aren’t necessarily anti-secular or anti-democracy. Nonetheless "Muslims for Secular Democracy" is making an important point and contribution. From my perspective, Atheism Plus is similar. It’s a group of atheists who want to assert the importance of social justice. This in and of itself isn’t divisive and isn’t a condemnation of anyone and everyone who isn’t on board.276

Others saw it as a protective space away from sexual harassment and misogyny that they felt were very real in the movement.

As I see it, Atheism+ is a hybrid of New Atheism and Humanism. Of course it was already possible to be both a New Atheist and a Humanist (take James Croft for a prominent example). But it was also possible to be a Humanist and an Accommodationist (see Chris Stedman). Stephanie Zvan does a nice job of articulating how much she prefers what I will call a “New Atheist” approach to social justice that takes religion itself (and not just bad religions) to be one of the barriers to social justice... Atheism Plus does not bury the “atheism” part but keeps it at the forefront of one’s socio-religious identity.277

I’d argue that the new label serves some important purposes. For one thing, it puts the big red A-word front and center: it makes it completely clear that we are atheists. This fearless self-identification thus serves the purpose of destigmatizing atheism, bringing it out of

the closet and into the daylight as a familiar and accepted alternative to religion.\textsuperscript{278}

This is a particularly interesting post from the point of my analysis as it links Humanism and new atheism, indicating that they are not incompatible. However, it also links Humanism and accommodationism through Chris Stedman. Chris Stedman is used because he is known as a social justice activist, however he works with the religious on such projects and thus has the pejorative ‘accommodationist’ label attached to his activities. In contrasting \textit{Atheism Plus} with Stedman’s form of activism the first quote is showing that there is an important continuation between \textit{Atheism Plus} and the new atheism. \textit{Atheism Plus} is confrontational in nature. \textit{Atheism Plus} is a way of continuing to be a confrontationist while taking on board social justice issues. The last part of this quote and the second quote discuss the idea that using the identity term \textit{Atheism Plus} keeps the atheism part of the identity at the front. This open use of atheism will continue to serve the purpose of destigmatising the word as was indicated to be a long term goal of public atheism by participants in the covert/public chapter.

\textit{Atheism Plus} supporters were in a process of discussing and giving the reasons why Humanism was not enough and \textit{Atheism Plus} was a useful addition. In summary the issues with Humanism as a label for this group are as follows, Humanism is:

1. Interested in accommodation, not confrontational enough.\textsuperscript{279}
2. Interested in substitution.
3. Lacking a focus on public atheism.
4. Not descended from new atheism (culturally different/identity issues).
5. Humanism is too defined by its long history and is therefore more rigid and broad than a new name at the same time.


These justifications again back up the impression that the new atheists hold a mythical interpretation of what Humanism entails. Firstly, it is seen as a substitutionist and accommodative form of irreligion. The third point also leads to this idea as it insinuates that the Humanists are attempting to be semi-public about their atheism’ they do not make it a central part of their definition. This idea is integral in the fourth point, as Atheism Plus adherents were mostly involved in the new atheism and therefore can be seen as endorsing most of what the new atheist movement puts forward. Humanism is not seen as containing the traits that have been claimed for the new atheism. Although as discussed earlier, these traits may be drawn from an ahistorical caricature of ‘Humanism’ when compared to Humanist self-descriptions.

1. Same as Humanism.  
2. ‘Mission Creep’ – Radical Feminism and Social Justice are separate issues, not related to atheism. 
3. Splitting the movement.  
4. Too dogmatic.  
5. Us versus Them stance.

---

282 Ibid.
284 Ibid.
285 Athemit Minus. Facebook, viewed 18 April 2013: https://www.facebook.com/atheismminus
Mission creep, or the fear that adding more issues to the atheist base would divide the movement, was another large part of the concern about *Atheism Plus*. The argument goes that very few political issues are also atheist issues and that adding extra issues into the cause will only cause division in an already small group. Thus the concern about mission creep and splitting the movement further were justified by a general concern about splitting the community. Part of this issue arose from atheists that had already embraced progressive politics as part of atheism. To these individuals, there was no need for the further split into *Atheism Plus*, as their views were already covered under ‘atheism’. *Atheism Plus* was also being seen by some as a religion due to its narrow proscriptions on ‘right living’. Thus for these atheists, *Atheism Plus* looks like a form of religious substitutionism in which the ideas that a ‘good atheist’ should hold are being commanded from above. Some atheists felt that the idea of *Atheism Plus* was creating a small umbrella atheism that would cause a divide in atheism due to acting as the ‘thought police,’ attempting to control what ‘real’ atheists should be and think. This is because *Atheism Plus* prescribes some of the ideas that an atheist must hold in order to be part of the smaller umbrella. Some also complained that the tactics being employed by the movement were leading to ‘us and them’ attitudes. Internally directed ‘us and them’ tactics seemed to many that it was the major problem with *Atheism Plus* as it was instituted. *Irritably.org* quotes McCreight’s Twitter post about Humanists on 22 August 2012 to suggest that *Atheism Plus* is being too free with its ‘othering’ tactics, even including ‘good allies’ in the ‘enemies’ category. And last, but not least, some feel that *Atheism Plus* is a platform for ‘radical feminism.’ To these atheists it made the movement too narrow from the start.

---

INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT DATA

I found material relevant to this dimension when I asked about worldviews and politics in my interviews. I was looking at the types of political stances that my sample took, to ascertain how they viewed social justice issues and their connection to irreligion or ‘atheism’ in this case. Questions such as:

1. How would you describe your political views (please expand further than the name of your view as people often have different definitions of a political position)?
2. Do you consider yourself to fit within any particular class or group within society?
3. Are there any events in history that have affected your worldview?
4. Are there any events in history related to religion or atheism that have affected your worldview?

Elevatorgate and Fallen New Atheist Heroes

Interviews were undertaken between Elevatorgate and the emergence of Atheism Plus. Thus while my participants were aware of the debate that was in progress (hence some of the more adamant perspectives on either side about the extension, or politics of atheism), the debate had not evolved into a full blown schism at this point. It seems that even before the emergence of Atheism Plus, the split between those who wished to see atheism as its dictionary form and those who believe that it must have other things added was well under way, as noted by the participants’ responses below:

Their [the leaders] opinions conflict with each other. There was an example a couple of months back... where the girl [Rebecca Watson] was propositioned in the elevator... and Richard Dawkins thought she was making a big fuss about nothing and he absolutely copped it, from the Pharyngula readers certainly and all over the place, I agree... I think his view was very interesting actually because initially I could sympathise with his point a little bit... and the more I read and the more responses I read, some of them were a bit out of proportion, and I think actually, he has missed the point. I suppose,
the point I’m trying to make is that, not all of these people are reading from the same page... absolutely they jumped all over him, and fair enough, I think he was probably wrong on that one, he’s a 70 year old guy, I think it’s fair to say that he does not understand what it is to be a 20 something year old woman (Brody).

However, I’ve gone off him [Richard Dawkins] a bit after his recent misunderstanding of the current feminist movement, all of which came to a head in Elevatorgate in August. By ‘off him’, I mean he has been removed from hero status, back to mere human, like the rest of us, and he still has a lot to learn. I believe in striving for equal rights for all people, race, gender, sexual orientation, social status and religion don’t matter. It was through the podcast “the Skeptics guide to the Universe”, that Rebecca Watson hosts, that was the gateway to scepticism and the new atheism for me. So I actually had heard of Rebecca Watson before ever reading or listening to anything by Richard Dawkins (Sally).

Only 5% (the 2 people above) of participants at this time (December 2011) directly mentioned that they had noticed the events of Elevatorgate that had occurred a few months before and were beginning to cause divisions in the movement.

Politics

The answers to such questions indicate that there was a general feeling of mistrust in politics amongst my interview sample as shown in Table 14. This mistrust is reflected in the number of people in my sample designating themselves as ‘Independent’ or ‘Green.’ The Greens are not in power in Australia and are seen as a left leaning alternative to the two main central-right parties. Their lack of power in Australia also makes them seem like an alternative to mainstream politics, which appears to have been in turmoil in the country for some time now. Australia’s last few elections have seen minority wins by the party that took power, largely due to an air of mistrust in both major parties. This has been reflected again in the 2013 elections with many
Thus the views seen in my sample may actually be reflective of a general feeling in the country at the time. Yet paradoxically, most were supporters of collective and progressive economic models which inherently require the interference of government. So, despite the mistrust, most of my sample were what would be called socially left leaning; the connection to Green politics only reinforces this impression.

Table 14: Interview Participants Political Views and Stances

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Party Self-Designation</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Total %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Independent</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Independent Green</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Labour</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Liberal</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*4 people failed to answer the question

A recent study (American Religious Identification Survey - ARIS) of worldviews and opinions of American college students has further backed up the progressive, left leaning status of most ‘secular’ individuals in the US and helps to establish the progressive leanings of the irreligious in general when compared to my interview sample. The study was based on an online national survey conducted by the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture (ISSSC) during April-May 2013 from Trinity College, with major contributions from the Center for Inquiry, an international organisation advocating for science, reason, and secularism in public life. Drawn from a random sample of publicly available email addresses, over 1800 students took part in the survey in whole or in part, representing 38 four-year colleges and universities. The study found that US college students broke fairly evenly

---

between the religious (31.8%), the spiritual (32.4%) and the Secular (28.2%).

The results around politics for the survey were as follows:

- Religious students are the most likely to regard themselves ‘conservative’ (34%) compared with 11% are spiritual and 4% are secular.
- Secular students are also the most likely to view themselves as ‘liberal’ (44%) compared with 35% are spiritual and 17% are religious.
- Secular students are also the most likely to describe themselves as ‘progressive’ (20%) compared with 12% of Spiritual and only 5% of Religious.
- Interestingly, the ‘libertarian’ option attracted almost the same share of students in each group.
- The Religious are the most likely to consider themselves ‘moderate.’

Only 3% of interview participants (Table 14) considered themselves ‘conservative’ (authoritarian; Liberal in the Australian case) which is closely aligned with the results from the ARIS survey, although my data cannot be generalised and it can be difficult to extrapolate research results between countries. 71% took on the label of ‘liberal/collectivist’ which largely aligns with what are normally called ‘progressive’ values, such as progressive taxation and wealth re-distribution. Libertarianism is relatively rare in my sample (17%). Not many participants would use the word moderate to describe their political views. Many thought that the Labour Party had abandoned its collectivist, socially liberal roots and had become too ‘moderate’ or ‘centre-right’, thus they preferred the label Green or Independent to express their feelings about politics. Social justice (including justice for future generations (sustainability), women, LGBTQ people, the poor and atheists) was one of the top five answers given to a question asking: What are the important things in

---


life? (Table 15) It came in at number three in the sample after family and friends. Thus the link between my sample and left leaning ‘progressive’ politics is clear.

Table 15: Things that are Important to Interview Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>No. of People</th>
<th>Response %</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Family</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Friends</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Relationship (Partner)</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Works</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Animals</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sport</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

However, the presence of even one conservative individual in such a small sample indicates the fact that there is a population of conservative atheists in society, even if they are in the minority as indicated in this study and in my online observations. Thus the events of Elevatorgate seem inevitable once it is realised that while many of the irreligious are liberal collectivist leaning, the presence of conservative and libertarian irreligious people and groups makes complete agreement on political and empathetic issues unlikely.
DISCUSSION

Due to the empathetic/intellectual leaning tendencies of various atheists and groups, the question of whether to mix atheism and other causes has been huge throughout atheist history, and remains so today. There are increasing signs that Atheism Plus adherents are showing more empathy for the religious and attempting to understand the other reasons that people may believe. There have even been specific critiques of the deficit model within the movement. The dictionary atheism/Atheism Plus discussion is part of the atheist definition as discussed in Chapter 3. It came to the fore of the new atheist movement in February 2011 when PZ Myers published his blog post titled Why Are You an Atheist? The consensus seems to have been that atheists were ostensibly liberal up until this point, and that most people thought that atheists were implicitly positive towards feminism, LGBTQ equality, racial equality and other social justice issues. However, with Elevatorgate, the less liberal and the liberally extreme parts of the community were exposed. This began a process of internal negotiation within the community, as it became increasingly clear that not all atheists held the same political views. The march towards what became known as the Great Rift of atheism had begun. This very recent chapter of the empathetic/intellectual dimension ended with the emergence of a group that called themselves Atheism Plus in 2012. Through this emergence, the community, at least on the surface, was split into those that thought liberal social justice were part of atheism and those who did not. A major issue brought into salience by these events is the variety of political stances that may exist within an irreligious group. If the core focus remains on irreligious activities, there may be no issue as is seen at the beginning of most irreligious organisations. However, once politics is introduced, in case after case, it inevitably causes divisions within the group. Whether such division is useful or

---

detrimental is debatable, but differentiation does occur and regularly, because of political views.

In reflecting on the schism that caused Atheism Plus, some have seen it as a disaster, while others have seen it as an opportunity to ‘cut the fat’; some as division and some as improvement. While there are many factors that complicate the outcomes of this ‘schism’, it is clear that something has changed and the honeymoon period of big umbrella new atheism is over. Like its predecessors, it is bound to divide, but as always the changes found in this cycle have had an effect. Atheism Plus retains the public and aggressive nature of the new atheism, while catering to a more specific political audience. Attaching my historical analysis and the analysis provided in this chapter, it becomes apparent that it is at the intersection of irreligion and politics that another driver of structural divergence lies. Even if the movement’s concerns do roam into these other ideals, for irreligious groups the question always remains, are irreligious organisations best placed to deal with them directly? The institutional answer to this question has varied throughout history as seen in my overview and many now view the previous era of Humanism as providing the space for such activities. Humanists, as opposed to new atheists, had their focus on improving the social lives of society members. For these individuals, Humanism represents the empathetic form of irreligion that the new atheists had broken from. An important point for my study is the perception of continuance between Atheism Plus, the new atheism and Humanism, at the same time as separating from both, in a form of institutional cultural evolution.

This dimension again emphasises the idea of postsecularisation. The intellectual atheists with their focus on deficits of knowledge are omitting emotional and social justice concerns, historically associated with Secularists and Humanists, from their range of tactics. This includes avoiding discussions of tragic Humanism as espoused by figures such as Freud, Nietzsche, Camus and Marx. Due to this, they are not seen as addressing the human need for religious ideas which arise from alienation and oppression. To the intellectual atheists, once the intellectual deficits of believers have been corrected, people should become irreligious. In contrast empathetic atheists focus on changing the social world.
This view acknowledges that people remain attached to religion for social and psychological reasons outside of knowledge, because they require something more to believe in when in tough times. Religion in this view is the ‘opium’ that Marx discusses and can only be replaced if the world is seen as less alienating and oppressive. Thus by alleviating such issues these groups hope to bring the world closer to the irreligious world that they desire. Social activism and social justice are the means by which religion becomes unnecessary for society.

While both intellectual and empathetic atheists share the same goals, they employ different tactics in achieving those goals. The empathetic atheists are acknowledging that religion may stem from more than just a knowledge deficit. Thus they acknowledge the idea that religion may be necessary for some people. In doing this they are taking on a critique of the secularisation thesis by acknowledging the use of religions in societies. Thus the idea of religion as necessity, even if only under certain and limited circumstances, becomes incorporated in secular worldviews. By taking on social justice issues they also play one of the roles that religion has traditionally played in societies. We can see through this idea that this is another case of mixing of religious and secular views argued to be present in the postsecular sphere, albeit, once again, for the purposes of continuing secularisation rather than ending it or acknowledging its end.
CHAPTER 8. Conclusions
As discussed at the beginning of the thesis, Beckford (2012) has suggested that it is necessary to extend the research fields of both postsecular studies and non-religious studies via research that considers both. Based on this idea, the aim of this thesis was to examine the irreligious field as a potential example of non-religious voices and diversity within the postsecular field. The possibility of change to a non-teleological postsecular field was discussed in the process. The postsecular field that was tested is described in the introductory discussions. It is discussed using empirical data on mixed secular and religious fields in countries where such mixing has become more apparent (Rosati and Stoeckl (eds.) 2012). The postsecularism described is one in which secular and religious voices, ideas and rituals are now interacting in a public postsecular field (derived from Knott 2005). The aims of this research were achieved via a Grounded Theory approach which uses empirical data to guide findings. I derived non-linear sociological structuring categories described from a constant comparison of literature, history, my interview sample and online participant observations. I have theorised through this approach, that there are four sociological structuring dimensions in the irreligious field that can be analysed for connections with postsecular theories. These dimensions are covert/public, accommodation/confrontation, substitution/elimination and empathetic/intellectual.

**Historical Dependencies**

Through this research and the non-religious examples within it, I have evidenced the idea that we are indeed in such an evolving and competitive postsecular field. It could be argued that by removing the false teleology of the secularisation thesis, we are seeing the field as it has always been, without the teleological blinders of the thesis. Whatever the case, even in a post-religious world (if there could be such a thing), worldviews will continue to evolve. In illustration, historically, the irreligious emerge out of the modernist critique of religion from within religion itself. Due to this it often emerges through rejection of the Western concepts of religion and God. This rejection has had effects on the internal structuring of the movement over time, evidenced through the fact that there have been many movements over the history of
Western culture that have taken on different labels which represent differing stances on the dimensions discussed throughout this thesis. The various groups have been found to emerge due to at least one of the dimensions described herein. Often, they define themselves along these dimensional lines with reference to the previous movements from which they are breaking. These dimensions have firstly, been shown to structure the irreligious field through time by funnelling individuals into various groups as shown in Table 16.

Table 16: The Dimensions of Irreligion

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>Covert / Public</th>
<th>Accommodation / Confrontation</th>
<th>Substitution / Elimination</th>
<th>Empathetic / Intellectual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>Description</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secularists</td>
<td>Covert (Secularist)</td>
<td>Accommodation / Confrontation</td>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>Empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Rationalists</td>
<td>Public (Atheist)</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Elimination</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Later Rationalists</td>
<td>Covert (Agnostic)</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Elimination</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Socialists (and other Social Utopians)</td>
<td>Public (Socialist)</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>Empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early US Humanism</td>
<td>Public (Religious Humanism)</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>Empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secular Humanism</td>
<td>Public (Secular Humanism)</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Elimination</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

There is a fundamental place for history in any complex system and all things are not equally possible/probable due to historical dependencies. Historical dependencies arise at least partly because of imitation. It is a core aspect of human social life (Bellah 2011; Smith and Jenks 2006). Many of our rituals and interactions rely on it as a mechanism (memetic socialisation; Bellah 2011; De Waal 2001). To help explain this idea at a macro-sociological level, Bourdieu (cited in Collins 1993) implements (though not extensively) the concept of Hysteresis, which is the dependence of a system not only on its current environment but also on its past environment. Indeed, it would be very difficult to transmit the complex cultures we now inhabit without the reliance on the prior knowledge of other society members, and imitation of their behaviours. If one had to learn all of this on their own, it could take too long and relearning every generation would leave little time for ratcheting. Thus mimicking stable
strategies is a reliable way to get by without reinventing the wheel, passing on at least close-enough strategies and knowledge to each generation, hopefully building accuracy and complexity over time.

There is normally more than one path of development within any complex system. These consist of historical trajectories that leave structural traces (physical and cultural). Due to this even material and ideological leftovers of a dead or previous system may inform the reproduction of a system. This includes information materials such as books and recorded events from previous times. Structure appears in the form of cultural and physical accretions and restricts the possibilities available for future interaction. This is especially important when considering the influence of hysteresis or imitation. Derrida's (1959a, 1959b) analysis of ‘originary complexity’ is informative. Derrida's (1959a, 1959b) ideas can been seen as recognising the complexity of initial conditions in any large system. His ideas connect strongly with Eisenstadt’s (1964, 2003) discussion on evolutionary theory in the social sciences and the issue of teleology in modernist social sciences. To Eisenstadt there are multiple modernities present in the world system due to a similar idea of originary complexity. Such recognition of complexity of origins leads to a vision of continual change and evolution from different initial conditions and in relatively isolated pockets. We must recognise the multiple ideas and voices that lead to complexity and show the contradictions that can arise from the multi-vocal environment. What such originary complexity exposes is the multiple initial conditions and contradictions between systems that any complex social system must inevitably entail. The origins are non-recoverable due to their complexity (same as initial conditions in Complexity Theory - Smith and Jenks 2006; Sawyer 2005). However, they are present and an attempt must be made to draw out the forms of such originary complexity in order to understand the moment we are currently viewing. Following this idea, diachronic change (evolution) of structures occurs, from different historical bases, and in relatively isolated pockets.

The phrase ‘sensitivity to initial conditions’ conceals the ideas that biological and social systems always have a past, and the past and the current states of the
system are the material for possible revision (Smith and Jenks 2006). This trait is also found in the recursive nature of Bourdieu (1990) and Giddens (1991). Self-organisation is fundamentally self-reflexive and somewhat circular in the recursion of this self-reflection. The past and current states are presumably viable strategies, or society/an organism would not have made it this far. Thus these built up strategies are not easily (or even possibly in some cases) rejected or ignored. An initially successful strategy can therefore become stable through consumption practices. This stabilisation is necessary to allow transmission of knowledge. However, it may also become stable through tradition and an unwillingness to change such traditions (Smith and Jenks 2006). This is not a homeostatic state, but a spread of possibility. This is an elementary explanation in evolutionary theory that contemporary sociology seems to have forgotten (Smith and Jenks 2006); we are dealing with population level dynamics in a system of interconnected and interdependent systems. This is not randomness but a picture of possible correlations and degrees of freedom. In other words, “variation within limits” are perfectly capable of generating the complex symbolic ecology to which we belong (Smith and Jenks 2006: 92).

In this research it was discovered that the new atheism itself is defined with relation to perceptions of historical movements, along the dimensions found in the overall irreligious field. These traits are often defined with reference to past forms of irreligion and some parts of the new atheism can be seen as misinterpreted or reinterpreted when looked at through a historical lens. For example, some traits ascribed to the mythical ‘old atheism’ (seems to be a combination of past groups), such as being covert and accommodationist, are not often present in earlier movements. The main caricatures for the new atheism are the ‘old atheism’ and ‘Humanism’, which are seen as being covert, accommodationist (old atheism and Humanism) and substitutionist (Humanism) when compared to the new atheism (Table 17). I have shown through historical examples that the caricatures are ahistorical, despite their motivating nature for the new atheist movement, and frequent employment by those opposing the movement. These mythical separations allow the new movement to break itself from the old and gives the movement an identity of its own, even if ahistorical to some degree.
Despite all of the looseness seen in this postmodern world, there are a number of points where it is clear that the interactions are being restricted in some way and are thus coming under the influence of some type of structure. Structures have not disappeared altogether in this world, but have rather been replaced by more, multiple, free flowing and short term structures than in the past, as we have refined our view of the social world. People are still led down similar paths by biological, cultural, social, historical or material constraints. They become tied to each other through their consumption choices, some intentionally (Neo-tribes: Maffesoli 1996; Neo-tribal markers: Bennett 2008), some less so (Standardised Commercial Trends: Possamai 2011a). Structures still have an influence, even in a postmodern world, and therefore the open and unstructured nature of some postmodern social theories will fail to capture the full picture. The issue comes in looking for foundations, as the evolutionary and recursive nature of social systems makes such foundations unrecoverable in full. In solving this problem, some have chosen to throw out the possibility of finding any foundations (see Wagner 2012 on postsecularism earlier in this thesis). However, a recursively changed foundation works due to providing stability, while allowing change as is seen in the examples above (Table 16 and 17). Event driven models, as employed in this research, recognise the eternal regression that occurs in looking for a true foundation, when in fact the foundation can be a recursive input to the ‘next cycle’ that evolves over time and is always based on the particular slice of time (initial conditions) from which we start; it is circular in its recursiveness. Society begins, at any slice we can take, from complex origins (Derrida’s 1959a, 1959b; Eisenstadt 2000).
The New Atheism

As Lee (2012) suggests, keeping a clear view of the new atheism in mind makes it possible to distinguish between types of irreligion, a suggestion that has been confirmed by this research. The term ‘new atheism’ is often critiqued by the irreligious as a media construct or a negative term applied by people who dislike atheists. Despite this, the term was recognised by my participants as representing a certain movement within irreligion, which contains specific characteristics. The phenomenon of the new atheism has been shown to be characterised as a form of irreligion that has risen in response to irrational forces (e.g. ‘fundamentalist religion’, conspiracy theories and postmodern religions). It is public, rather than covert, confrontational rather than accommodationist, eliminationist rather than substitutionist and intellectual rather than empathetic. This typology was constructed through the ‘primary source’ narratives of individuals, and the ways in which they represented themselves. Thus my research confirmed these dimensions qualitatively using in-depth interviews and online participant observation. I found that the phenomenon of the new atheism is characterised by a number of traits from a participant’s perspective and it largely agreed with the traits identified in the literature. In the case of the new atheists, their rise is at least partly a reaction to the false teleology of the secularisation thesis which has been revealed over the last 50 years (see Borer 2010 for discussion in relation to the new atheists).

The covert/public dimension relates to the public presence of the irreligious individuals and groups. My interview participants primarily identified the new atheism with the public normalisation and politicisation of atheism. They saw it as a way to keep secular and atheist views in the public eye via a confrontational and vocal movement. Similar to Davie's (1994) discussion of ‘Vicarious Religion’, the new atheists are providing a visible support structure for atheist worldviews. An isolated atheist can reach out to other atheists in times of need, through books, websites and social media. I noted this vicarious irreligion in that my participants felt more supported by the presence of a public atheist movement and the feeling of being part of something larger. Therefore atheists can feel like they are attached to a worldwide atheist
community at all times through such mediums. Though not everyone agreed with the political tactics being employed, talking of ‘angry atheism’ and ‘rhetorical atheism’, they all saw the normalisation potential in having a public presence for irreligious views.

Another twist on the same idea can be made with relation to irreligion. Vicarious religion (Davies 1994) can be viewed in a negative way, as a threat, rather than a support to irreligious individuals. It is the support that the ‘religious’ draw on to make their voice louder. When religion appears in the media it is openly scorned and critiqued by many atheists. Nearly any comment section, of any news related to ‘atheist issues’, will contain many atheist critiques. My interview participants particularly discussed this in relation to the US, my participants were Australian and were thus interpreting issues in the US as closer to them. I noted a negative form of vicarious religion in my internet sample which sees the individual problems of an atheist in one country turned into a public and global issue. It is also represented by the persecution of atheists around the globe. When an atheist is in need, other atheists will tweet, blog and promote their cause. There do appear to be some biases towards ‘known communities’, in that an American (Jessica Ahlquist for example297) can often receive more support than say an Indonesian (Alexander Aan for example298). This represents the glocal (as in Robertson 1992) level impact; problems that are closer to home may still take precedence. However, the causes of many atheists in many countries came across my social media screen during my research. Therefore we can see that the new atheism is a political movement, in line with Campbell’s (1972) observation that irreligious groups are more likely to resemble political movements than religious communities. There was no doubt about the political kinship that people felt for others who may not have been directly related to them, partly due to the ‘atheist’ label. Thus there appears to be both a ‘vicarious irreligion’ and a ‘negative vicarious religion’ in action within the new atheist milieu.

The production of these ideas can be interpreted in the light of Maffesoli’s (1996) idea of the neo-tribe. Neo-tribes are temporary and associational groupings based on symbolic taste. These groupings allow individuals to connect with each other for reasons of entertainment and social activism. Thornton (1996) connects this idea to consumption practices of the forming group, noting that products and labels are displayed by individuals to create this symbolic link. In the case of the new atheists these are things such as coming out publicly as an atheist, displaying atheist symbols and quotes, and wearing atheist apparel and merchandise. In order for cultures to survive in the post-modern world, they must maintain their connectedness, both with internal structures of the particular culture and the external structures that impact it. A loss of interest in a culture would erode the internal and external connections and lead to the culture running down over time, as more and more resources (including humans) are removed from the structure. This is also why the new atheists ask atheists to ‘come out’ publicly as atheists. By displaying their irreligion publicly it is hoped that they will normalise irreligion by becoming visible and connected to the wider society. The new atheists, including all within the public group, give a public voice to the irreligious in a world where public and political manifestations of religion are viewed as more common.

The accommodation/confrontation dimension concerns tactics for dealing with the religious in the public sphere. The new atheists are ‘confrontational’ in that they do not think that the religious should be given a pass on their ‘irrational’ beliefs (originally proposed by Campbell 1972). In other words they do not feel that these beliefs should be ‘accommodated’. This understanding of the new atheists is often built using a contrast with past irreligious organisations. For example the ‘old atheists’ and the ‘Humanists’ are viewed as ‘accommodationist’ because they are viewed as willing to work with the religious on common goals without interrogating their beliefs. In the current milieu, new atheists are seen as confrontationists and for example, Michael Ruse, Chris Mooney, Leslie Cannold and Tamis Pataki are seen as accommodationists.

In the postmodern world there are many voices competing for public attention, and without a voice, irreligion as a worldview may become lost in the noise.
This is because the postmodern world consists of many groups attempting to define good taste, increasingly some of whom are religious. The religious produce myths and worldviews to support their particular tastes and compete with the naturalistic, evidence driven worldview being put forward by irreligious and non-religious groups, and perhaps society in general. Religion has not disappeared as predicted by the Fathers of sociology. In fact we appear to have entered a postmodern, perhaps postsecular phase in which religious voices are increasingly publicly visible. Thus the teleology of the Secularisation Thesis can also come into question from the perspective of the new atheists themselves, who are in the process of recognising and reacting to the new state of affairs. Confrontational techniques would seem less necessary if the new atheists actually lived in a postsecular world where secular voices were dominant or where secular and religious voices were on equal standing. This is a competitive postsecular field in which the new atheists are entering in a confrontational way, in order to protect scientific views and irreligious identities from the visible and competitive public religious voices in postmodernity.

The substitution/elimination dimension is concerned with the treatment that religious ideas and ritual are given by atheists and if such views are plausible for atheists. The new atheist writers hoped to convince their readers that the atheist worldview alone provides a viable and coherent way of living. In fact their narrative puts it forward as more worthy than the competition and more true to ‘reality’. In the more rhetorical works, science is put forward as wholly good, and as having the capacity to find all of the answers. Meanwhile, religion is put forward as an ultimate evil, with no redeeming features. Due to this stance, even ritual and community can be seen as potentially religious by many new atheists, and all scientists with religious views are suspect. Overall, my sample saw the new atheists as ‘eliminationists’. According to this view they do not believe religious rituals and moral prescriptions should be replaced with secular alternatives. Despite participant perceptions, my analysis finds this division less certain in the recent milieu, as the rhetorical techniques, moral works and community orientations of the new atheists continue to grow. The new atheist contributions include secular bibles and discussions of ‘atheist
spirituality’. Atheist spirituality in every form was shown to involve no supernatural forces, but there is still a fear among some new atheists that these things could turn into religion or are too religion-like. Despite this surface view, there does appear to be a large amount of negotiation over religious, spiritual and religious-like ideas and practices occurring in the current irreligious milieu. Such re-evaluation does indicate that the new atheists may be part of a postsecular field. However, the specifically non-religious form of such explorations and the resistance they have received also indicates that these versions will continue to be in competition with religious views. Thus the postsecular sphere represented by these examples is of a competitive kind.

The empathetic/intellectual dimension deals with the best tactics to bring the world to a non-religious state. The new atheists do seem to have rejected empathetic interpretations of the need for religion, such as Feuerbach, Marx, Camus and Nietzsche who are completely missing from new atheist discussion. The new atheists do not seem to treat this domain with the same empathy that has been extended to other parts of culture and nature. While they generally hold liberal ideas on concepts such as freedom of thought, expression and congregation, they seem to be applying a different standard to the religious. The ignorance of less reductionist social science and theological perspectives has also been discussed. This has led to accusations that the new atheists are conservative or neo-liberal colonialists, and to some extent there is data to back this up. However, there is also a lot of confounding data, about the new atheists themselves and the greater new atheist milieu. New atheists do appear to be mostly liberal collectivist leaning and they advocate for causes that are associated with such politics.

I would suggest that this is a consequence of the multi-vocal, multi-cultural state brought about by postmodernism and the threat that the irreligious feel due to this postsecular cultural state. In this world atheists fear that too much ground is being given up to religious ideas and preferences. Ex-Muslims have joined the new atheist chorus, claiming that the multicultural West is giving up the rights of those outside the West in the name of anti-colonial guilt. They claim we are now allowing people to be persecuted in the name of multiculturalism. Thus the
ideological assumptions of the new atheism are less clear even if largely liberal leaning. The new atheists have largely directed their critique at ‘fundamentalist’ forms of ‘religion’. However, the concern over weak liberalism has directed the new atheists into seeing even moderate forms of ‘religion’ as problematic. This is because moderate views are implicated in supporting the more extreme ideas within these groups and giving them support in a volatile public sphere. The new atheists are rejecting liberal multiculturalism (not completely, just at the edges) because of social justice issues, not because they are against them. Thus while the initial new atheist thrust may have been intellectual, the movement is not as clearly driven by intellectual issues as is sometimes claimed. The new atheists are ‘intellectual’ according to my participants, in that they use ‘scientific’ methods to solve problems, including social and psychological ills. These impressions are summarised in Table 18.

Table 18: Dimensions of the New Atheism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>Covert / Public</th>
<th>Accommodation / Confrontation</th>
<th>Substitution / Elimination</th>
<th>Empathetic / Intellectual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>Consciousness/ Overtness</td>
<td>Relations with ‘Others’</td>
<td>Morality and Ritual</td>
<td>Effective Activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Atheism</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Elimination (Arguably)</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A critique of the appropriateness of certain academic and popular interpretations of the new atheism was also brought to light in the process of analysis. The common view of new atheists as ‘gnostic atheists’, was countered by my data showing that new atheists have been careful to state the evidence based and negative nature of their position. This is often coupled with a split between epistemology and ontology in the identity phrase ‘agnostic atheism’. The phrase has become widely illustrated in the new atheism via Dawkins’ *Seven Point Scale*, which indicates the strength of an individual’s atheism using a scale of probabilities.

Visibility of ‘Undesirables’ and Change

Structures react to events within their wider environment via their adherents and other physical manifestations. The strong interaction space provided by the hyper-connectedness of the postmodern world means that it is increasingly
important to recognise the power that individual agency (and thus contingency) can have in a system, along with the structural fallibility that arises with this agency. The new atheists also live in a world of ephemeral and shifting social spaces through social media technologies. The need to rethink structures and structuring is paramount in such spaces. In some ways these new developments make the world that was already there far more visible, by providing public records of the everyday interactions of individuals. On the other hand, it changes the rate and type of interaction in ways that can be difficult to predict, such as the events of Elevatorgate, which were largely driven by a real world interaction that became amplified by social media platforms. Clearly this highly connected world requires us to pay attention to the interaction of agents, as individual interactions have increasing effects in a more fully networked world.

The research identified the emergence of splinter groups out of the structuring actions of these dimensions, empirically confirming their action in the current milieu. With the new visibility accorded by the public nature of the new atheism, the other life stances of atheists also become more visible to both outsiders and insiders. Differences, outside of atheism, become more salient. It is often more difficult to deal with an enemy in your midst than it is to deal with a distant enemy. The presence of ‘near other’ is far more threatening to our ontological security, as they bring into question our very sense of self in relation to the traits we do share. In this way, diversity and visibility began to cause friction within a few years of the original new atheist books, as other ‘old’ atheists began to object to the tactics, labels and organisation of the movement. A few years later other cracks would begin to emerge between the original new atheists and the newer leaders that had begun to gain power through the new media channels like blogs and Twitter. The dimensions described in Table 18 continue to have an effect in the current irreligious milieu (the new atheism and its divisions like Atheism Plus). They are dually sociological in that they negotiate the status of relationships both inside and outside of the irreligious field. These dimensions have provided launching points for newer groups that wish to separate themselves from the parts of the new atheism with which they do not agree. What is clear is that all of these frictions occurred due to the various participants holding different ideas of what the new atheist milieu
should look like, what appropriate beliefs and rituals are, what the appropriate tactics of engagement with the religious would be and what the best tactics to spread secularism might be (originary complexity). These disputes are not just about names, they are referring to deeper issues to do with the future of the irreligious and irreligious organisations.

There were early signs of concern within my interview sample regarding the internal changes caused by these disputes and these became more apparent and extreme during the course of my internet participant observations. It became clear throughout this research that all four dimensions and eight positions were still relevant to the contemporary irreligious milieu and that the new atheist perspective does not represent all current irreligious groups. Thus the dimensions that were found to structure the irreligious field of the past appear to still be present in the current movement and are having continued structuring affects, as shown in Table 19.

Table 19: Divisions in the New Atheism

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DIMENSION</th>
<th>Covert / Public</th>
<th>Accommodation / Confrontation</th>
<th>Substitution / Elimination</th>
<th>Empathetic / Intellectual</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DESCRIPTION</td>
<td>Consciousness / Overtness</td>
<td>Relations with ‘Others’</td>
<td>Morality and Ritual</td>
<td>Effective Activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>New Atheism</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Elimination (Arguably)</td>
<td>Intellectual</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Closet or Semi-Public Atheists (Pseudonym based)</td>
<td>Covert</td>
<td>Confrontation or Accommodation</td>
<td>Elimination or Substitution</td>
<td>Intellectual or Empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accommodationists (Ruse, Mooney, Cannold, Pataki)</td>
<td>Covert or Public</td>
<td>Accommodation</td>
<td>Elimination or Substitution</td>
<td>Intellectual or Empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Substitutionists (De Botton and Sunday Assembly)</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Confrontation or Accommodation</td>
<td>Substitution</td>
<td>Intellectual or Empathetic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Atheism Plus</td>
<td>Public</td>
<td>Confrontation</td>
<td>Elimination</td>
<td>Intellectual and Empathetic</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As with past movements, some atheists often attempt to remain partly covert with the use of alternative labels and pseudonyms. The internet provides increased chances for the management of impressions. It introduces a greater separation between backstage and front stage areas. The ability to create highly managed and multiple front stage personalities allows individuals to more fully separate the multiple roles and avoid role conflict and role strain. This can be
achieved in a mostly invisible backstage area. However, this is coupled with the more permanent and public nature of internet exchanges, making the possibility of being exposed more permanent than in the past. Examples include pseudonym based online personalities (liminally covert as with past movements) and the breaking of anonymity through the process of ‘doxing’. It seems that the need to normalise atheism due to negative public views of atheists unites both those who wish to be public and those who remain semi-public or covert. This need arises from the belief that the atheist identity is still not fully acceptable in many parts of society. If we have entered a postsecular field, atheists do not feel that they have been given full access to this field. Incidences of discrimination against and persecution of atheists are still high and atheists have often not been offered the same cultural respect that is offered to the religious in the public square. If we have indeed entered a postsecular era, from the atheist view it is one that they have entered on uneven terms with their opponents, they are experiencing conflict over the right to hold their view, not competition in an equal marketplace.

The public manifestation of the secularisation thesis has had implications for the confrontational stance of the new atheism due to its instantiation by the Fathers of sociology as a theory with a teleological endpoint. This is because assumptions about the disappearance of religion have guided research, government programs and Western public perceptions. The new atheists have been described as purveyors of the hard Secularisation Thesis. This means that they expect that the processes of modernity will eventually remove ‘religion’ from society. However, the rising religion of the past 30 years has left many irreligious people feeling that these processes are less certain and that they may have to be confrontational in the public domain to see this goal achieved. Some in the community have also pointed out that it is difficult to be a public atheist without being confrontational, because by its very nature atheism states that the religious other is incorrect in their beliefs. Due to this, it is almost impossible for an atheist to discuss their stance with the religious without being at least perceived as confrontational. This is recognised as a key difference between coming out LGBTQ and coming out atheist. One cannot come out as an atheist without at least implicitly critiquing the deeply held beliefs of others.
Both sides of this dimension again emphasise the idea that the irreligious feel like they are in conflict with the religious for public attention. Confrontationists feel that they must confront the religious to stay in the competition and keep science alive. Accommodationists fear that such tactics could backfire in a world where secular and religious worldviews are not on equal footing and in which the vast majority of people remain religiously affiliated. For both parties the gains of science could be at stake when religious worldviews are given equal respect to science. Thus both sides still see themselves as representing views that are competing with religion in the postsecular public sphere, though the connection here is more about science than the irreligious identity itself.

Contrasting themselves to the new atheists Alain De Botton (2012) and the Sunday Assembly (2013) have put forward more directly ‘substitutionist’ versions of irreligion in recent years. Within participant views, Alain De Botton and the Sunday Assembly represent the substitutionist side of the dimension, new atheists, the eliminationists. Adding to this, my findings confirmed Pasquale’s (2010) data indicating that ‘atheist spirituality’ is a valid idea within the irreligious community. It also notes a pattern of increasing comfort with the term, as the atheist version has become better articulated. Despite this, it does seem that most people in the community still reject the term due to supernatural loading, and others reject the idea completely. This dimension displays a mixing of religious and secular practices, in a way that indicates postsecularity as put forward by Knott (2005). However, there is still a clear distinction between the religious and irreligious versions of such practices. The irreligious versions of such practices are framed to contain no Gods or supernatural forces, and tend to have their focus on this world and the things within it. The need to provide structure for emerging atheists, many of whom have come from religious backgrounds, could be part of the more direct return to church styled texts and rituals that the new atheist movement seems to be embracing. From Dawkins rewriting of Genesis (The Blind Watchmaker) to Grayling’s Secular Bible, and the traditional structure of the Sunday Assembly. The new atheists are producing works, groups and ideas that are clearly substitutionist in nature. They are anti-supernatural, anti-clerical and anti-God, but other parts of religious organisation and ritual appear to be in negotiation.
The types of issues that the community has focused on and the emergence of *Atheism Plus* illustrate the fact that social justice is important to most atheists, even if there is clearly a group that feel such issues do more harm to atheism than good. From a participant perspective, new atheists are intellectually oriented, and Chris Stedman (*Faithist*) and *Atheism Plus* represent the empathetic side of the dimension. With the emergence of these more empathetic styles of irreligion we can see a more nuanced version of ‘religion’.

This dimension again emphasises the idea of postsecularisation. The intellectual atheists with their focus on deficits of knowledge are omitting emotional and social justice concerns, historically associated with Secularists and Humanists from their range of tactics. This includes avoiding discussions of tragic humanism. Due to this, they are not seen as addressing the human need for religious ideas which arise from alienation and oppression. To the intellectual atheists, once the intellectual deficits of believers have been corrected, people should become irreligious. In contrast empathetic atheists focus on changing the social world. This view acknowledges that people remain attached to religion for social and psychological reasons outside of knowledge, because they require something more to believe in. Religion in this view is the ‘opium’ that Marx discusses and can only be replaced if the world is seen as less alienating and oppressive. Thus by alleviating such issues these groups hope to bring the world closer to the irreligious world that they desire. Social activism and social justice are the means by which religion becomes unnecessary for society.

While both intellectual and empathetic atheists share the same goals, they employ different tactics in achieving those goals. The empathetic atheists are acknowledging that religion may stem from more than just a knowledge deficit. Thus they acknowledge the idea that religion may be necessary for some people. In doing this they are taking on a critique of the Secularisation Thesis by acknowledging the use of religions in societies; the idea of religion as necessity becomes incorporated in secular worldviews. By taking on social justice issues they also play one of the roles that religion has traditionally played in societies. We can see through this idea that this is another case of mixing of religious and secular views argued to be present in the postsecular sphere. However, *Atheism*
Plus is still clearly public and confrontational in their irreligion despite this introduction of empathetic thinking. They still believe that once these problems are cured, religion will or should disappear. There are reasons that people remain religious, but they are not permanent, given the right social circumstances. Thus they still retain the competitive nature of the new atheism and are still an example of a competitive postsecular worldview.

A Competitive and Evolving Postsecular Sphere

As another group within an evolving postsecular field, the new atheist group are concerned about the space being allowed for religious resources in the postsecular Western world. Thus the self-reflective process that allows religious views to be expressed in the public sphere can be problematic from their viewpoint. They represent a group who are opposed to self-critical evaluation of Western modernity and secularisation processes. There are also parts of this group involved in exactly the self-critical assessment that some consider necessary for the emergence of a postsecular world. These groups are often opposed by those holding the new atheist viewpoint and represent alternative versions of the Western secular project, which have taken on critiques about the efficacy of their particular form of modernity. Thus, there are also multiple modernities present in the non-religious part of the postsecular field, and they can be viewed as part of the emergence of postsecular societies. All of the dimensions discussed in this research and their relationship to new atheism and its subgroups suggest something about the postsecular sphere in its current state. The postsecular sphere as defined in this research is a space in which secular and religious worldviews inhabit the same field. However, inhabiting this field does not mean that they are on equal terms or that the various groups will agree with each other. In fact the examples given seem to point to a postsecular public sphere that is inherently competitive in nature. Even where the irreligious have been willing to compromise with the religious, or religious ideas, it has been in aid of either allowing or elevating the irreligious standpoint.
Further Research

The qualitative categories created during this research can be utilised as the theoretical background to design a range of quantitative studies which explore these categories. The investigation could be conducted through a number of methods that will help to ensure the accuracy of the findings and help to test qualitative observations made in earlier research. This would allow the confirmation of numbers within the various categories discovered in my dissertation, something that was not possible with the qualitative analysis (a limitation of my thesis). These numbers will also allow the further methodical interrogation of the new atheist worldview and its various divisions. Online quantitative surveys and quantitative analysis of social network data could be used, both sampled at regular intervals. This could be coupled with online participant observation of events within the movement and the specific groups that embody the differentiation along the theoretical dimensions already discussed. It could include:

1. An updated round of participant observation to look for any new groups or trends that may affect the design of surveys and the keywords used for Social Network Analysis.
2. A systematic employment of online survey methods at time intervals to measure the demographics of opinions around my theoretical dimensions and their change over time.
3. A systematic employment of Social Network Analysis over a period to aid in the visualisation and empirical investigation of ongoing system change around these dimensions.

Further to these core dimensions the agnostic atheist term brings up a number of questions about the nature of the connection between irreligion and agnosticism. Research could be designed to interrogate the term agnostic further. I suspect that the term agnostic may also represent a sociological category in its own right.

Likewise, the connection between evidence driven worldviews and current social theory is brought up by the dictionary/\textit{Atheism Plus} argument. The idea
that science driven individuals are still unaware that social science is evidence driven and that postmodern ideas have useful applications, is concerning for the discipline. It seems that the Social Sciences may need some charismatic public voices of their own to aid in the public understanding of the Social Sciences.

No Canadian sites were founded before this review of internet participants, and Canada is also largely missing from other histories. This could be an area for further research as the ex-Commonwealth status of Canada would indicate something strange is happening here, or that we are missing data.

Lastly, the liberal collectivist concern over multiculturalism and problematic accommodation of destructive religious practices seems to be an important part of the sociological puzzle of the postmodern condition. It may help to shed more light on the resurgence of nationalist, anti-religious and racist sentiments that appear to have been rising around the globe in the last 15 years, despite the idea that we have entered a more tolerant and open era.
References


Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS) 2013a. 2071.0 - Reflecting a Nation: Stories from the 2011 Census, 2012–2013, Cultural Diversity in Australia, 16 April, viewed 25 November 2013:


Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013b. 4102.0: Australian Social Trends, Nov 2013: Losing My Religion? 20 November, viewed 25 November 2013:

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013c. 4102.0: Australian Social Trends, Nov 2013: Males and younger people more likely to have no religion, 20 November, viewed 25 November 2013:
http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/4102.0Main+Features30Nov+2013#malesandyoungerpeople

Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS), 2013d. 4102.0: Australian Social Trends, Nov 2013: Does Education Make a Difference? 20 November, viewed 25 November 2013:


Coyne, J, 2009. Does the Empirical Nature of Science Contradict the Revelatory Nature of Faith, Edge, viewed 1 February 2014:

Coyne, J, 2009. Does the Empirical Nature of Science Contradict the Revelatory Nature of Faith, Edge, viewed 1 February 2014:


Holyoake, GJ, 1896. The origin and nature of secularism; showing that where freethought commonly ends secularism begins. Watts: London.


References


Paine, T, 1776. *Common Sense*. USA.

Paine, T, 1791 and 1792 (Published in a 2 part pamphlet series). *Rights of Man*. Britain.

Paine, T, 1794, 1795 and 1807 (Published in a 3 part pamphlet series). *The Age of Reason Being an Investigation of True and Fabulous Theology*. USA.


http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/belief/2009/nov/02/atheism-dawkins-ruse


Wesch, M, 2008. *Professors discuss psychology behind anonymous posts; sites allow people to be malicious and unknown*. Kansas State Collegian, 3 December, viewed 18 August 2013:
http://www.kstatecollegian.com/2008/12/03/professors-discuss-psychology-behind-anonymous-posts-sites-allow-people-to-be-malicious-and-unknown/


Glossary

Identity Terms

**Atheism** – A lack of belief or knowledge of the existence of a God and now often extended to the supernatural overall.

**Atheism Plus** – A socially and empathetically focused form of the new atheism.

**Irreligion** – The category used to describe those people that self-identify as being against religion.

**Negative atheism** – The idea that there is no evidence for the existence of God.

**New atheism** – A 21st century manifestation of Irreligion that is characterised as Public form of confrontational atheism that uses intellectual arguments against all forms of ‘Religion’.

**Non-religion** – The category used to describe those people that self-identify as having no religion.

**Positive atheism** – The belief that God does not exist.

Theories

**Modernity** – The phase of culture in which traditional structures are replaced by modern structures such as the nation state and its various systems.

**Multiple modernities** – The recognition that modernity will progress along different paths due to socio-cultural history in different areas of the world.

**Postsecular** – A state of culture that comes after the recognition of the teleology in the original Secularisation Thesis.

**Secularisation thesis** – The idea that religion would disappear as modernity progressed
Appendices
Appendix A: Interview Participant Information Sheet

Information Sheet
The Rise of the New Atheism?

Alan Nixon
a.nixon@uws.edu.au
PhD Candidate
University of Western Sydney
Ethics Approval Number: H9065

What is this study about?
This study seeks to examine the importance of modern Atheism to people who are self-proclaimed 'Atheists'. It aims to explore how people gain meaning from their Atheism. It is especially concerned with how people integrate their Atheism into their sense of who they are or their self-identity, how this affects the feeling of being part of a group and how this affects their lives. The study hopes to give people who have been affected by Atheism or the new atheism a chance to describe their experiences. It also hopes to shed light on the relationship between the current society and Atheism from the perspective of participants.

Who would I like to contribute to it?
I would like to talk to men and women aged 18+ years who are self-proclaimed Atheists or New Atheists.

What's involved if I agree to participate?
If you agree to participate, you will be asked to be interviewed on one occasion for about 2 hours. The interview will involve discussing (in text, voice or face to face) your experiences as an Atheist and how they have affected your life. With your agreement face to face interviews will be audio-taped and transcribed. The interview can take place anywhere that you feel comfortable to talk, such as in your home or other favourite location or online (e.g. Skype or e-mail).

Please let me know what your preferred interview method will be.

Please note: Details of any illegal activities that you or others may be involved in should not be discussed with the researcher.

Will the interview be confidential?
Any personally identifying information you provide is treated confidentially. We will use an alternative name (Pseudonym) to record your contribution and will also change any details that could be used to identify you. Your contact details will be kept in a locked filing cabinet separate from the interview material. Although by default we will keep your information confidential, you can request to have your details (real name) printed in the final document.

Am I able to refuse or withdraw at any time?
Participation in this research is voluntary and you can choose to stop the interview at any time without giving a reason. You can also refuse to answer specific questions. There are no consequences for withdrawing from the interview.

People to contact for information or complaints
If you have any questions about the study, you can contact the researcher, Alan Nixon on 0406652329.

If you have any concerns or complaints about the study, please contact the University of Western Sydney Human Research Ethics committee on humanethics@uws.edu.au
Appendix B: Original Questions for Interview Participants

Interview Questions: The Rise of the New Atheism?
Interviewer: Alan Nixon
a.nixon@uws.edu.au
University of Western Sydney for the degree of PhD
Project Ethics Approval Number: H9065

Demographic Data
1. How old are you?

2. What is your gender?

3. In what country do you normally reside?

3a. Where were you born?

3b. What state do you currently reside in?

4. What is your highest level of educational attainment?

5. What is your occupation?

5a. Where did you hear about this study?

Worldview
6. Are there any members of your family that you would consider religious or spiritual? Can you give an influential example?

7. Have you ever been religious or spiritual, if so in what way?

7a. Have you ever had a religious or spiritual experience, or perhaps an experience you found hard to explain?

8. Who/What are your major religious or spiritual influences (even if not current, could be historical or negative)?

9. What is your earliest experience with Atheism?

10. What does Atheism mean to you?

11. Do you have a story or idea about how you came to be an Atheist?

12. How much does science effect your worldview?

13. Are there any events related to science that have effected your worldview?

14. Are there any other major events, ideas or things that have influenced your worldview?
15. What is your definition of spirituality?

15a. Is there any way in which you could consider yourself to be a spiritual person?

**Living with Atheism**

16. What do you feel the Atheist identity is for you in everyday life?

17. How much time and energy do you feel you put into Atheism or discussing Atheism?

18. Do you buy any Atheist merchandise and if so what?

19. Are there any situations that you can describe where you have been negatively affected because of Atheism?

20. What types of things, if any, make you defend Atheism?

21. What other parts your life do you consider important?

21a. What is love to you?

21b. What is happiness to you?

21c. Do you ever experience awe or wonder?

21d. Have you experienced sorrow or extreme sadness?

21e. What is the meaning of life, if any?

21f. What is the meaning of your life?

22. Do these things relate to your Atheism in any way?

23. How would you describe your political views (please expand further than the name of your view as people often have different definitions of a political position)?

24. Do you consider yourself to fit within any particular class or group within society?

**The 'New Atheism'**

25. What do you think of when you hear the term 'New Atheism'?

26. How much and in what ways do you think the 'New Atheist' movement has effected your views and behaviours?

27. Are there any people that you would consider as leaders or heroes of the 'New Atheist' movement and how have they effected your views (negative or positive)?

28. Have these people been the same group over the last 5 years or so?

29. Who/what are your top authors, blogs, twitter feeds, sites or organisations to do with Atheism?
30. Do you think there are more or less of these blogs, feeds, organisations and sites since the start of the 'New Atheism'?

31. What effect do you think the presence of these people and organisations is having on society?

32. What do you think will be, or what would you like to be the future of the New Atheist movement over the next decade?

33. Do you think the New Atheism will influence the future of Atheism generally and in what ways?
Appendix C: Additional Questions for Interview Participants

Additional Questions: The Rise of the New Atheism?
Interviewer: Alan Nixon
a.nixon@uws.edu.au
University of Western Sydney for the degree of PhD
Project Ethics Approval Number: H9065

Worldview

7a. Have you ever had a religious or spiritual experience, or perhaps an experience you found hard to explain?

15. What is your definition of spirituality?

15a. Is there any way in which you could consider yourself to be a spiritual person?

Living with Atheism

21a. What is love to you?

21b. What is happiness to you?

21c. Do you ever experience awe or wonder?

21d. Have you experienced sorrow or extreme sadness?

21e. Where do morals come from?

21f. What is the meaning of life, if any?

21g. What is the meaning of your life?
Appendix D: Interview Participant Statement of Informed Consent

Statement of Informed Consent

The Rise of the New Atheism?
I have read and understood the information sheet provided for this study.
The nature and possible effects of this study have been explained to me.
I understand that the study involves an interview which will be tape-recorded
and transcribed.
I understand that any research data will be treated as confidential.
Any questions that I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction.
I agree that any data gathered for the study may be published provided that I
cannot be identified as the subject.
I agree to participate in the investigation and understand that I may withdraw
at any time without prejudice. I understand that there is no consequence for my
withdrawal.

Name of Subject: __________________________
Signature of Subject: __________________ Date: ____________

I have explained this project and the implications of participation to this
volunteer and I believe that the consent is informed and that he/she
understands the implications of participation.

Name of Investigator: _______________________
Signature of Investigator: ____________ Date: ____________

Alan Nixon
a.nixon@uws.edu.au
PhD Candidate
University of Western Sydney
Ethics Approval Number: H9065