

CHAPTER NINE

## A Brief Coda on Atheism

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THE WAY OF REASON

Atheism is not a great religion. It has always been for elites rather than ordinary folk. And until the twentieth century, its influence on world history was as nonexistent as Woody Allen's god. Even today, the impact of atheism outside of Europe is inconsequential. A recent Gallup poll found that 9 percent of adults in Western Europe (where the currency does *not* trust in God) described themselves as "convinced atheists." That figure fell to 4 percent in Eastern and Central Europe, 3 percent in Latin America, 2 percent in the Middle East, and 1 percent in North America and Africa.<sup>1</sup> Most Americans say they would not vote for an atheist for president.<sup>2</sup>

Nonetheless, atheism stands in a venerable tradition reaching back to ancient Greece, where Diagoras was kicked out of Athens for impiety, and ancient India, where Buddhists, Jains, and some Hindus also denied a personal god. Some of the greatest minds in the modern world (Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Sigmund Freud, Jean-Paul Sartre) were atheists. So were some of modernity's most brutal dictators (Mao Zedong, Joseph Stalin, Vladimir Lenin, Pol Pot, Slobodan Milosevic).

A few years ago I wrote that, in staunchly unsecular America, atheists had "gone the way of the freak show."<sup>3</sup> I was wrong. For much of the last decade, books on atheism have crowded U.S. best-seller lists. And in his 2009 inaugural address President Barack Obama called the United States a "nation of Christians and Mus-

lims, Jews and Hindus, and nonbelievers."<sup>4</sup> In both Europe and the United States today there is a vibrant conversation about the virtues and vices of Godtalk. So while atheism is not a great religion, it deserves some attention here.

After all, atheism is a religion of sorts, or can be. Many atheists are quite religious, holding their views about God with the conviction of zealots and evangelizing with verve. Atheists take aim at organized religion, miracles, and groupthink. They defend reason over revelation, logic over faith, and scientific experimentation over magical thinking. Echoing Confucius and Laozi, they focus on life before death. As the term implies, however, *atheism* is first and foremost about denying the God proposition. Theoretically, atheists deny the existence of all deities, but as a practical matter they can deny only the gods they know. Freud rejected the Jewish and Christian conceptions of God swirling around him in late-nineteenth-century Vienna. Most of today's "New Atheists" know little about the gods and goddesses of Hinduism, for example, so when they take aim at the idol of "God," it is the deities of the Western monotheisms they are hunting.

Atheists argue that the human problem cannot be solved by religion, because religion itself is the problem. Religious belief is man-made and murderous—irrational, superstitious, and hazardous to our health. The solution is to flush this poison out of our system—to follow the courageous examples of heroic unbelievers from Diagoras to Freud to the patron saints of the New Atheism: American writer Sam Harris, American philosopher Daniel Dennett, British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins, British-American journalist Christopher Hitchens, and French philosopher Michel Onfray. And where will this cleansing lead? To a postreligious utopia. Without the foolishness of faith, all will be well, and all manner of things will be well.

### Angry Atheists

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Of course, not all atheists are created equal. Some describe themselves as secularists, humanists, naturalists, freethinkers, skeptics, or rationalists. Others do not. Because of the stigma attached to the term *atheist*, some have suggested alternatives such as "bright." An online group calling itself The Brights' Net claims close to fifty thousand members in 185 different countries, including Harvard psychology professor Steven Pinker, comedy duo Penn and Teller, and New Atheists Dennett and Dawkins.<sup>5</sup>

Some distinguish between strong atheists (who actively deny God) and weak atheists (who simply do not affirm God), but the distinction between angry and friendly atheism is more useful. New Atheists exemplify the angry type. Their atheism is aggressive and evangelistic—on the attack and courting converts. Even the titles of their books (*The God Delusion*, *The End of Faith*) and chapters ("Jesus at Hiroshima," "Down with Foreskins!") are provocations.<sup>6</sup> These militants see the contest between religion and reason as a zero-sum game, but their favorite metaphors come from war rather than sports, and their rhetoric takes no prisoners. According to Dawkins, "faith is one of the world's great evils, comparable to the smallpox virus but harder to eradicate."<sup>7</sup> According to Harris, theology is "ignorance with wings."<sup>8</sup> According to Hitchens, organized religion is "violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children."<sup>9</sup> At least in Europe, these New Atheists are not above hitting below the belt. Michel Onfray, the popular French philosopher and *enfant terrible* whose *Atheist Manifesto* (2007) has sold hundreds of thousands of copies in Europe, attacks circumcision as barbaric and, in perhaps the unkindest cut (at least for a Frenchman), reports that the apostle Paul was impotent and "unable to lead a sex life worthy of the name."<sup>10</sup>

Earlier skeptics such as Mark Twain and H. L. Mencken took

aim at fundamentalists and revivalists. And Hitchens, who thrills to the chase of “foam-flecked hell-and-damnation preachers,” was on the air only hours after the death of televangelist Jerry Falwell, remarking that “if you gave Falwell an enema, he could be buried in a matchbox.”<sup>11</sup> But the New Atheist complaint is more comprehensive—against the sins and wickedness of Western monotheism, which Hitchens describes as “a plagiarism of a plagiarism of a hearsay of a hearsay,” and, more broadly, against religion in general, which, Hitchens adds, derives in East as well as West “from the bawling and fearful infancy of our species.”<sup>12</sup>

This is an old lament, itself a plagiarism of Freud (who got it from Marx, who got it from Ludwig Feuerbach, among others), updated largely by the New Atheists’ trademark indignation and rhetorical excess. In decades past, Western intellectuals honored a gentleman’s agreement of sorts to keep their faith, or lack thereof, largely to themselves. Three things blew that agreement up. First, the U.S. Religious Right began in the late 1970s to put God to partisan political purposes, prompting atheists with different political views to go public with their criticisms of Godthink. Second, Muslims began to pour into Europe, edging toward 10 percent of the population in France and topping 5 percent in the Netherlands. Finally, Quran-quoting terrorists hijacked four jets and steered themselves and thousands of others to their deaths on September 11, 2001.

This confluence of events led many to worry about the public power of religion. Was U.S. president George W. Bush’s born-again faith sending soldiers to their deaths in Iraq? Was British prime minister Tony Blair’s Catholicism behind his decision to stand by Bush? And so the gloves came off. Resurrecting the nineteenth-century metaphor of a war between science and religion, the New Atheists came to see themselves as pugilists for reason, logic, and common sense. As increasing numbers of atheists became convinced that religion was a real and present danger, more and more of them came to believe that putting the wrecking ball to it was a personal duty and a public good.

These wrecking-ball atheists soon came to question even the cherished ideal of religious tolerance. In a *Guardian* essay published shortly after 9/11, Dawkins laid down the gauntlet, identifying the horror of that day as a tipping point between the old atheism and the new:

*Many of us saw religion as harmless nonsense. Beliefs might lack all supporting evidence but, we thought, if people needed a crutch for consolation, where’s the harm? September 11th changed all that. Revealed faith is not harmless nonsense, it can be lethally dangerous nonsense. Dangerous because it gives people unshakeable confidence in their own righteousness. Dangerous because it gives them false courage to kill themselves, which automatically removes normal barriers to killing others. . . . And dangerous because we have all bought into a weird respect, which uniquely protects religion from normal criticism. Let’s now stop being so damned respectful!<sup>13</sup>*

Harris then attacked the ideal of religious tolerance as “one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.”<sup>14</sup> “Some propositions are so dangerous,” he wrote in a chilling passage, “that it may even be ethical to kill people for believing them.”<sup>15</sup> For Harris, religious tolerance is almost as dangerous as religion itself. Belief in God is not an opinion that must be respected; it is an evil that must be confronted.

For these New Atheists and their acolytes, the problem is not religious fanaticism. The problem is religion itself. So-called moderates only spread the “mind viruses” of religion by making them appear to be less authoritarian, misogynistic, and irrational than they actually are.<sup>16</sup> “The teachings of ‘moderate’ religion, though not extremist in themselves,” writes Dawkins, “are an open invitation to extremism.”<sup>17</sup> The only solution is to get out the disinfectant and wipe your hands clean.

### Fundamentalism by Another Name

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Critics have accused these evangelistic atheists of aping the dogmatism of their fundamentalist foes. Chris Hedges, a former Middle East bureau chief for the *New York Times*, describes the New Atheism as “a secular version of the Religious Right,” which portrays the Muslim world “in language that is as racist, crude and intolerant as that used by Pat Robertson or Jerry Falwell.”<sup>18</sup> The New Atheists’ broadsides against bigotry are bigoted, and their speeches against hatred are full of hate, Hedges argues. Is it so hard to see that human beings are as capable of killing in the name of progress and the proletariat as they are in the name of tradition and God?

One of history’s most dangerous games begins with dividing the world into the good guys and the bad guys and ends with using any means necessary to take the villains out. New Atheists play this game with brio, demonizing Muslims, denouncing Christians and Jews as dupes, and baptizing their fellow “brights” into their own communion of the smarter-than-thou saints. Like fundamentalists and cowboys, they live in a Manichaeian world in which the forces of light are engaged in a great apocalyptic battle against the forces of darkness. They, too, are dogmatic and uncurious and every bit as useful to neoconservative policymakers as right-wing televangelists. Franklin Graham says that Islam is “a very evil and wicked religion.”<sup>19</sup> Harris says that Islam “has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death.”<sup>20</sup>

New Atheists also fume against the anti-intellectualism of religion. Yet when it comes to making their own case, these “brights” don’t just mimic their fundamentalist opponents; they go them one better. Most people of faith harbor some doubt. But the supposedly open minds of New Atheists are so settled and sure that there is nary an opening in their invective for genuine conversation. Every refusal of a person of faith to come over to the atheist side is viewed not as a principled disagreement but as evidence of

stupidity or malice or worse. Apparently the axioms of atheism are so obvious to any properly functioning human intelligence that it is not even worth arguing for them. And so, aside from outrage, the main emotion in these books is smug exasperation. Why isn’t the rest of the world exactly like us?

### But Is It a Religion?

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Some atheists, including attorney Michael Newdow, who took his complaint against the inclusion of God in the Pledge of Allegiance all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, believe that atheism is, in the words of novelist David Foster Wallace, an “anti-religious religion, which worships reason, skepticism, intellect, empirical proof, human autonomy, and self-determination.”<sup>21</sup> Most atheists, however, are offended by the suggestion that they, too, might be religious.<sup>22</sup> For them, exhibit A is as simple and powerful as their denial of God. But all sorts of religious people deny God, including many Buddhists, Confucians, and Jews. And the history of atheism has featured some undeniably religious moments. During the Furies of the French Revolution, the *ancien régime* that married Catholicism to the French state got the guillotine. What followed, however, was not irreligion but the Cult of Reason. This religion—and it *was* a religion—was as ritualized as French Catholicism. It worshipped Voltaire as a secular saint and revered martyrs of the revolutionary cause. It renamed Notre Dame the Temple of Reason, lauded the Goddess of Reason, and celebrated a Festival of Liberty. Soon the French were baptizing their children in the name of the holy trinity of *liberté, égalité, fraternité*, confessing their faith in the French republic, and marking the year with holy days commemorating reason, virtue, and the French Revolution itself.<sup>23</sup> Closer to our time, both socialism and communism have proven that secular religions are as prone to fanaticism and fundamentalism as Christianity and Islam. In his doctoral dissertation, Marx wrote, “I hate the

pack of gods," but that didn't prevent his followers from worshipping Lenin and Stalin.<sup>24</sup>

Whether atheism is a religion depends, of course, on what actual atheists believe and do. So the answer to this question will vary from person to person, and group to group. It will also depend on what we mean by religion. Religion is now widely defined, by scholars and judges alike, in functional rather than substantive terms. Instead of focusing on some creedal criterion such as belief in God, we look for family resemblances. Do the works of Ayn Rand function like scripture for atheists? Do the various humanist manifestos function like creeds? According to one common formula, members of the family of religions typically exhibit Four Cs: creed, cultus, code, and community. In other words, they have statements of beliefs and values (creeds); ritual activities (cultus); standards for ethical conduct (codes); and institutions (communities). How does atheism stack up on this score?

Atheists obviously have a creed. Some atheists deny that they believe anything. Is bald a hair color, they ask? But this denial is disingenuous. In fact, atheism is more doctrinal than any of the great religions. By definition, atheists agree on the dogma that there is no god, just as monotheists agree on the dogma that there is one. Belief is their preoccupation, as anyone who has read even one book on the subject can attest.

Cultus is trickier. Years ago I received a letter from a Boston-area chaplains group accompanying an interfaith calendar. The letter urged professors to be broad-minded enough to excuse students from class for religious holidays, and the calendar indicated when such broad-mindedness might be called for. Among the holy days was the birthday of British philosopher Bertrand Russell (May 18). More recently, the Albany, New York-based Institute for Humanist Studies published a Secular Seasons calendar with a more thorough accounting of atheists' High Holy Days, including Thomas Paine Day (January 29) and Darwin Day (February 12). There is not much evidence, however, that atheists celebrate these days with any gusto or actually regard these exemplars as saints.

Most atheists do have a code of ethical conduct. In fact, one of the most frequent claims of the New Atheists is that they are the moral superiors of the old theists. One dissenter here is Onfray, a self-described hedonist who after suffering a heart attack famously told a dietician urging a better diet on him that he "preferred to die eating butter than to economize my existence with margarine."<sup>25</sup> Following Nietzsche, who argued that God's death would free true atheists from the shackles of conventional morality, Onfray is convinced that Anglo-American atheists such as Hitchens and Dawkins are still in the thrall of Christian ethics. So he urges them to trade in their "Christian atheism" for his "atheistic atheism"—to convert from Christian values centered on compassion to "ethical hedonism" focused on pleasure. "To enjoy and make others enjoy without doing ill to yourself or to others," he writes, "this is the foundation of all morality."<sup>26</sup>

Although most atheists go it alone, some gather into communities. There is a network of summer camps for atheist children called Camp Quest. Other prominent atheist organizations include Atheist Alliance International, American Atheists, British Humanist Association, Humanist Association of Canada, and the Germany-based National Council of Ex-Muslims. In the Boston area, over a dozen different humanist, atheist, and secularist groups sit under the umbrella of the Boston Area Coalition of Reason. A U.S. group known as the United Coalition of Reason ran a billboard and bus campaign with ads that read, "Don't Believe in God? You Are Not Alone." Though intended to raise the visibility of atheists in the American public square, this campaign also trumpeted the availability of atheist communities, not least the United Coalition of Reason itself.

Using this functional approach, the U.S. Supreme Court concluded in 1961 that secular humanism functions like a religion, so secular humanists merit the same sorts of First Amendment protections that religious practitioners enjoy.<sup>27</sup> In 2005, in a decision that irked atheists and Christians alike, a lower U.S. court held that, because atheism walked and talked like a religion, judges should treat it like one.<sup>28</sup>

Onfray, the most radical and, after Hitchens, the most gifted New Atheist writer, detects the stench of religion in much atheism today, and he wishes for a stiff breeze to blow it away. "The tactics of some secular figures seem contaminated by the enemy's ideology: many militants in the secular cause look astonishingly like clergy. Worse: like caricatures of clergy," he writes. "Unfortunately, contemporary freethinking often carries a waft of incense; it sprinkles itself shamelessly with holy water."<sup>29</sup> Here Onfray seems to be channeling at least some of the spirit of German philosopher Arnold Ruge, a friend of Marx who refused to jump on the atheism bandwagon not because it was too radical but because it was too traditional: "Atheism is just as religious as was Jacob wrestling with God: the atheist is no freer than a Jew who eats pork or a Mohammedan who drinks wine."<sup>30</sup>

Are human beings *homo religiosus*? Is it human nature to grasp after the sacred? Yes, say those biologists who find evolutionary advantages in religious beliefs and practices. If they are right, if religion is an inescapable part of being human, then atheism would seem fated to take on the form of religion. But not all atheists are religious. Some take their atheist creed with a shrug, steering clear of the cultus, codes, and communities of their atheist kin. For others, however, atheism is, in the words of German theologian Paul Tillich, an "ultimate concern."<sup>31</sup> It stands at the center of their lives, defining who they are, how they think, and with whom they associate. The question of God is never far from their minds, and they would never even consider marrying someone outside of their fold. They are, in short, no more free from the clutches of religion than adherents of the Cult of Reason in eighteenth-century France. For these people at least, atheism may be the solution to the problem of religion. But that solution is religious nonetheless.

### Friendly Atheists

One of the mistakes observers of religion often make is imagining that all religious people are hard core. We pay far too little attention to ordinary Christians who read their Bibles with a shrug (or never crack them at all). And so it goes for atheism. The village atheist was a gadfly, not a bomb thrower, and most atheists today are far less dogmatic than the high priests of the New Atheism.

A Web site called "Friendly Atheist" defines this kinder, gentler type as someone who "can talk to a religious person without invoking an argument," "questions his/her own beliefs as much as others' beliefs," and "does not think someone is inferior for believing in God."<sup>32</sup> In a book called *Losing My Religion* (2009), William Lobdell, a former *Los Angeles Times* religion writer, tells of his journey from evangelicalism to Catholicism to atheism. It's a deconversion narrative, but this "reluctant atheist" isn't trying to deconvert anyone else, and his tone is more wistful than angry. Of the New Atheists, Lobdell writes that "their disbelief has a religious quality to it that I'm not ready to take on." "With all that's happened to me," he adds, "I don't feel qualified to judge anyone else."<sup>33</sup> *Letting Go of God* by the former *Saturday Night Live* comic Julia Sweeney is a similar project. This one-woman play also proceeds via storytelling rather than argument and steers clear of New Atheist vitriol. Another friendly atheist is Nica Lalli, a Brooklyn-based writer and self-proclaimed "pink atheist" who observes in an essay called "Atheists Don't Speak With Just One Voice" that atheists come in all shapes and sizes. Most of the angry and argumentative atheists are men, she writes, and their old-boys network doesn't speak for her.<sup>34</sup>

At an atheism rally I attended at Harvard University in 2009, I heard two very different arguments. The first was the old line of the New Atheists: Religious people are stupid and religion is poison, so the only way forward is to end the idiocy and flush away the poison. The second was less controversial and less utopian. Ad-

vocates of this perspective present atheism not as the infallible truth but as a valid point of view deserving of a fair hearing. Their goal is not a world without religion but a world in which believers and nonbelievers coexist in a spirit of mutual toleration.

These competing approaches could not be further apart. One is an invitation to a duel. The other is a fair-minded appeal for recognition and respect. Or, to put it in terms of the gay rights movement: One is like trying to turn everyone gay and the other is like trying to secure equal rights for homosexuals.

This Harvard rally included a series of white male speakers preaching to the choir, taking potshots at Christians as their congregation snickered on cue. There was one female speaker, however, and she spoke in a very different voice. Amanda Gullede is a self-described "Alabama mom" who got on her first plane and took her first subway ride in order to attend this event. Although Gullede stood up on behalf of logic and reason, she spoke from the heart. Instead of arguing, she told stories of the "natural goodness" of her two sons who somehow manage to be moral without believing in God. But the key turn in her talk, and in the event itself, came when Gullede mentioned, in passing, how some neighborhood children refuse to play with her boys because they have not accepted Jesus as their Savior.

The New Atheism stands at a crossroads. Until now it has been spearheaded by the sort of white, male firebrands that led the charge for evangelicalism during the Second Great Awakening of the early nineteenth century. But there is a different voice emerging—call it the *new* New Atheism—and with it a very different agenda from the "Four Horsemen" of the angry atheist apocalypse (Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins, and Dennett). This friendlier atheism sounds more like a civil rights movement than a crusade, and it is far more likely to issue from the lips of friendly women than from the spittle of angry men.

If the hope is to pummel into submission every theist from Salt Lake City to São Paulo to Sydney, then the atheist movement has about as much of a chance as an evangelical revival in the National

Assembly of France. But if the hope is for a world in which children can play with other children without regard for the religious (or non-religious) beliefs of their parents, then this is a wave that many Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus would happily catch. I wouldn't walk around the block to hear Christopher Hitchens take cheap shots at Christians. But I'd get on the subway, and maybe even a plane, to hear Amanda Gullede tell me why her kids are good people too.