

atheism REMIX
A Christian Confronts the New Atheists

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Introduction

Atheism is not a new concept. Even the Bible speaks of the one who tells himself in his heart, “There is no God.”¹ Atheism became an organized and publicly recognized worldview in the wake of the Enlightenment and has maintained a foothold in Western culture ever since. Disbelief in God became part of the cultural landscape in the 1960s when *Time* magazine published a cover story—“Is God Dead?”—that seemed to herald the arrival of a new secular age.²

Nevertheless, atheists have represented only a small (if vocal) minority of Americans. Surveys estimate that atheists represent less than 2 percent of the population, even as the larger group of “unaffiliated” includes over 15 percent. Atheists have published books, held seminars, presented their views in the media, and honed their points in public debates. As a worldview, atheism is overrepresented among the intellectual elites, and atheists have largely, though not exclusively, talked to their own.

Until now. Get on an airplane, settle in for a flight,

¹Psalm 14:1.

²*Time*, April 8, 1966.

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and observe what other passengers are reading. You are likely to see books representing a new wave of atheism as you look around the cabin. The so-called New Atheists have written bestsellers that have reached far beyond the traditional audience for such books. Books by Richard Dawkins and Christopher Hitchens have spent weeks and months on the best-seller list published by the *New York Times*. Clearly, something is happening.

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The New Atheism is not just a reassertion of atheism. It is a movement that represents a far greater public challenge to Christianity than that posed by the atheistic movements of previous times. Furthermore, the New Atheism is not just another example of marketing an idea in the postmodern age. The New Atheists are, in their own way, evangelistic in intent and ambitious in hope. They see atheism as the only plausible worldview for our times, and they see belief in God as downright dangerous—an artifact of the past that we can no longer afford to tolerate, much less encourage.

They see science as on their side and argue that scientific knowledge is our only true knowledge. They argue that belief in God is organized ignorance, that theistic beliefs lead to violence, and that atheism is liberation. They are shocked and appalled that Americans

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refuse to follow the predictions of the secularization theorists, who had assured the elites that belief in God would be dissolved by the acids of modernity. They have added new (and very important) arguments to the atheistic arsenal. They write from positions of privilege, and they know how to package their ideas. They know that the most important audience is the young, and they are in a position to reach young people with their arguments.

The New Atheists represent a major challenge to the Christian church and to Christian theology. *Atheism Remix* is based upon the W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures delivered in 2008 at Dallas Theological Seminary. Dr. Griffith Thomas was one of the key founders of Dallas Theological Seminary and a staunch defender of the Christian faith. If alive today, he would undoubtedly see the New Atheism as a theological challenge that calls for our active engagement and most careful thought. He would be right.

I express appreciation to President Mark Bailey and the faculty of Dallas Theological Seminary for the invitation to deliver the 2008 W. H. Griffith Thomas Lectures and to the students for their respectful and interested listening. They, along with the students I see every day at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, represent the generation that cannot avoid engagement with the New Atheism. It is not going to go away any time soon.

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I also want to express appreciation to Greg Gilbert, director of research in my office, who has been of such great assistance in my lectures and writings, and to the many friends and colleagues who have sharpened my thinking on this new challenge.

As always, I am thankful for my wife, Mary, without whose constant support and care none of these things would ever see the light of day, and to our children, Katie and Christopher, who love me and make me laugh.

The New Atheism and the Endgame of Secularism

Several years ago, I attended a lecture in which I seized upon a thought that has never left me. The lecturer was Doctor Heiko Obermann, the great and now late historian of the late Medieval and early Reformation eras. In the midst of his lecture, he looked out at the audience, paused, reflected, and then said, and I paraphrase, “I can see that you do not understand what I am saying to you. What I am saying to you is that you do not live life as Martin Luther lived life. You do not wake up in the morning as he did, nor do you go to bed at night as he did. You need to understand something about changed conditions of belief. Do you not understand that in the time of Martin Luther, almost every single human being in European civilization woke up afraid that he would die before nightfall? Eternal destiny was a daily, hourly, minute-by-minute thought. Every night, as the late Medieval or early Reformation human being closed his eyes, he feared that he would

wake up either in heaven or in hell. You do not live with that fear. And that means that your understanding of these things is very different from Martin Luther's. That's why he threw ink pots at the Devil, and you close your notebook and sleep well at night."

This whole idea of "changed conditions of belief" takes on new importance when we consider the movement that we now call the New Atheism. Something has happened in our culture, and it is now impossible to miss. Something has changed, and that change can be easily measured by the sales of books. The sales figures of books written by the New Atheists—the most notable being Richard Dawkins, Daniel Dennett, Sam Harris, and Christopher Hitchens—are simply astounding. Their books are selling by the millions, and three of these authors have produced books that remained on the *New York Times*' best-seller list for a matter of months, not weeks. In the history of books about atheism nothing like this has ever happened. Atheism has long had a niche audience, but it has now become a mass phenomenon in terms of publishing and media attention.

Not too long ago, I had a conversation with a network news anchor in which he made the off-hand comment, "If I were you, I would give these fellows a great deal of attention." When a network news anchor is advising theologians to give attention to a cultural movement, it is indeed probably time to start paying attention. The prominence of the New Atheists in the media, multi-

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plied by their influence among the academic and intellectual elites, means that the New Atheism presents a significant challenge to Christian theology—a challenge that demands our closest attention.

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One of the key questions to ask about the New Atheism is, “What makes the New Atheism *new*?” Before launching too far into our interaction with this new challenge, we should recognize something from the very outset: atheism is not new. David said in the psalms, “The fool says in his heart, there is no God,” (Ps. 14:1). Even that statement, however, assumes something different from what faces us today. In the ancient world and throughout most of human history, the question was never whether or not there *is* a God, but which god is God? Thus, in the Old Testament, one of God’s most insistent purposes is to make clear that he is the *only* God, and that he will tolerate no other. That is a very different question from what is being asked today.

The word *atheism* did not appear in the English language until the sixteenth century. The *Oxford English Dictionary* documents the first use of the word to 1568, when it was coined (or borrowed from another language) by Miles Coverdale. In a fairly short time, the word made its way into more common usage. Even then,

it was used to describe a phenomenon that was thought to be very new—the denial of belief in God. The outward, straightforward, public rejection of belief in theism was so new at that time that it required a new word. It's interesting to note that this happened in the wake of what is now known as the Elizabethan Settlement. Elizabeth I of Great Britain decided to settle the strife of the Reformation struggles by declaring a sort of religious toleration. "I do not intend to make windows into men's souls," she famously said. As a result, there was loosed within English society a degree of religious pluralism that had not existed before, including some on the periphery of society—mostly limited to the intellectual elite and some cultural cranks—who denied belief in any God. These people were considered dangerous and worthy of ostracism. In fact, they were considered worthy of a new word: *atheists*. Yet even after the emergence of the word in the English language there were very few people who actually denied belief in God.

Unsurprisingly, it is only after the Enlightenment that atheism became a real intellectual force. The Enlightenment produced a massive shift in the conditions of belief. In the great turn to the subject, in the division between the phenomenal and the noumenal, as Kant famously construed it, even in the rise of historical analysis and modern science, there was a great epistemological shift in Western consciousness, and the result was a new opportunity for the denial of

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belief in the supernatural in general and the denial of a personal supernatural God specifically. Doubt came to be considered as an intellectual tool, and there arose a culture of doubt and skepticism. In the period from the sixteenth to the eighteenth century, the conditions of belief changed dramatically.

One way to understand what happened is to consider what kind of god was left in the wake of Enlightenment thought. For example, if you consider carefully the philosophy of Immanuel Kant, it is clear that he believed in God. But it is not clear at all that he believed in a supernatural, personal God—and certainly not in a God who intervenes in human history. What was left in the wake of the Enlightenment was no longer a fairly monolithic affirmation of theism, but rather a plethora of movements that also included skeptics and freethinkers, as well as Deists and pantheists.

In the late nineteenth century we finally arrive at the four horsemen of the modern apocalypse—Friedrich Nietzsche, Karl Marx, Charles Darwin, and Sigmund Freud. To mention those four names together is to represent a massive cultural, intellectual, and epistemological shift. Each of these men contributed to human thought in a way that changed the conditions of belief, the intellectual foundations of all thought.

Take Sigmund Freud for example. The unconscious, Freud said, explains more than does the conscious. Indeed, it is the precondition of the conscious. Given

that, it is easy to see why Freud would believe that religion is merely an illusion that would eventually pass away. Long before Freud came the publication in 1859 of Charles Darwin's book *The Descent of Man*.¹ From 1859 until the death of Freud at the beginning of the Second World War, an entire change of thinking had taken place, at least among the intellectual classes. Nietzsche, of course, the most abrupt and abrasive of these thinkers, actually celebrated the death of God. In his book *The Gay Science*, Nietzsche declared flatly that "God is dead," which was his way of saying that belief in the Christian God had become unbelievable.² In his work *The Anti-Christ*, he went on to write that the worst enemy of human enlightenment and progress is the Christian. He refers to Christianity and to Christians in particular as the "domestic animal, the herd animal, the sick animal—the Christian."³ He said:

Christianity has taken the side of everything weak, base, failed; it has made an ideal out of whatever *contradicts* the preservation instincts of a strong life; it has corrupted the reason of even the most spiritual natures by teaching people to see the highest spiritual values as sinful, as deceptive, as *tempta-*

¹Charles Darwin, *The Descent of Man: Selection in Relation to Sex* (Penguin, 2004).

²Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Gay Science: With a Prelude in German Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs*. Cambridge Texts in the History of Philosophy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001).

³Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche, *The Anti-Christ, Ecce Homo, Twilight of the Idols and Other Writings*, ed. Aaron Ridley and Judith Norman (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 4–5.

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tions. The most pitiful example—the corruption of Pascal, who believed that his reason was corrupted by original sin when the only thing corrupting it was Christianity itself!⁴

So Nietzsche declared war on theology:

I wage war on this theologian instinct: I have found traces of it everywhere. Anyone with theologian blood in his veins will approach things with a warped and deceitful attitude. This gives rise to a pathos that calls itself *faith*: turning a blind eye to yourself once and for all, so you do not have to stomach the sight of incurable mendacity.⁵

And:

The Christian idea of God—God as a god of the sick, God as spider, God as spirit—is one of the most corrupt conceptions of God the world has ever seen; this may even represent a new low in the declining development of the types of god. God having degenerated into a *contradiction of life* instead of its transfiguration and eternal *yes*. God as declared aversion to life, to nature, to the will to life. God as the formula for every slander against “the here and now,” for every lie about the “beyond.” God as the deification of nothingness, the canonization of the will to nothingness!⁶

⁴Ibid., 5.

⁵Ibid., 8.

⁶Ibid., 15–16.

In one famous essay he ends with these words: “And all the while, this pathetic God of Christian monotheism instead, acting as if it had any right to exist, like an *ultimatum* and *maximum* of god-creating energy, of the human *creator spirititus!* this hybrid creature of ruin, made from nullity, concept, and contradiction, who sanctions all the instincts of decadence, all the cowardices and exhaustions of the soul!”⁷ Nietzsche declares the necessity of God’s death in order for humans to find liberation in this new intellectual age. He also suggested that Christianity itself was a vile and pathetic faith that produced vile and pathetic creatures. Any creature, he said, who would need belief in God—any creature who would need prayer, any creature who would exercise faith—is a creature whose will is so corrupted by the virus of Christianity that it cannot contribute to society and the building of a strong people.⁸

It is fairly clear, in retrospect, where Nietzsche’s philosophy led. It led to nihilism and eventually to the Third Reich. Even so, Nietzsche is one of the most celebrated figures in intellectual life today, a fact borne out by the sheer number of dissertations being written these days on Nietzsche and his heirs such as Michel Foucault. Nietzsche’s radicalism makes him one of the most fascinating figures in modern thought. He believed himself to be declaring what should be obvious

⁷Ibid., 16.

⁸Ibid.

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to all, and he was confident that others *did* see what he saw but were too timid or intellectually fearful to declare themselves.

If anything, Nietzsche's atheism serves to remind us all that atheism has consequences. As we shall see, one of the features of the New Atheism that seems most perplexing is its cultural cheerfulness. The New Atheists seem genuinely to believe that God is dead, but that humanity can now move cheerily along into a brave secular future. Nietzsche knew that atheism would be very costly—and very dangerous.

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One of the fascinating themes to note in all this is what historians now call the “Victorian Loss of Faith.” This is the context in which the word *atheism* becomes far more widespread, indicating a change in the mentality of very many people who lived in Victorian England. We tend to look back to Victorian England and note the overt religiosity of the era—the great churches, the great preachers like Charles Spurgeon, and the publicity given to Anglican luminaries. But what you might miss if you are not careful is that the Victorian era also saw a significant slide from Christian belief, famously encapsulated in the British motto, “My mind is no longer a Christian even though my body is.”

In other words, a person can continue to *live* as

a Christian without believing anymore in the basic tenets of the faith, even in the existence of God himself. One symbolic figure of that era is the Reverend Leslie Stephen, who was the father of the writer Virginia Woolf. Stephen was an orthodox Anglican pastor who lost his faith, resigned his orders, left the church, and thus became a symbol of the Victorian loss of faith within British intellectual thought.⁹ This loss of faith was perhaps best expressed in poetry, for example in Thomas Hardy's poem "God's Funeral." Hardy wrote:

*And, tricked by our own early dream
And need of solace, we grew self-deceived,
Our making soon our maker did we deem,
And what we had imagined we believed,
'Till, in Time's stayless stealthy swing,
Uncompromising rude reality
Mangled the Monarch of our fashioning,
Who quavered, sank; and now has ceased to be.
'So, toward our myth's oblivion,
Darkling, and languid-lipped, we creep and grope
Sadlier than those who wept in Babylon,
Whose Zion was a still abiding hope.
'How sweet it was in years far hied
To start the wheels of day with trustful prayer,
To lie down liegely at the eventide
And feel a blest assurance he was there!
'And who or what shall fill his place?
Whither will wanderers turn distracted eyes*

⁹A. N. Wilson, *God's Funeral* (New York: Norton, 1999), 8–11.

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*For some fixed star to stimulate their pace
Towards the goal of their enterprise?'*

And then later:

*I could not prop their faith: and yet
Many I had known: with all I sympathized;
And though struck speechless, I did not forget
That what was mourned for, I, too, once had prized.*

One of the most notable hallmarks of this Victorian loss of faith is a sense of mourning. That is extremely important, because it is conspicuously lacking in the New Atheism. Among the New Atheists, there is no sense of mourning something that was lost, no sense that something precious is now gone. Instead, there is actually a sense of celebration that theism is finally left behind.

The sense of mourning was also captured in another, equally famous, poem—Matthew Arnold's *Dover Beach*. He writes:

*The Sea of Faith
Was once, too, at the full, and round earth's shore
Lay like the folds of a bright girdle furled.
But now I only hear
Its melancholy, long, withdrawing roar,
Retreating, to the breath
Of the night wind, down the vast edges drear*

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*And naked shingles of the world.
Ah, love, let us be true
To one another! for the world, which seems
To lie before us like a land of dreams,
So various, so beautiful, so new,
Hath really neither joy, nor love, nor light,
Nor certitude, nor peace, nor help for pain;
And we are here as on a darkling plain
Swept with confused alarms of struggle and flight,
Where ignorant armies clash by night.*

The sense of absence here is palpable. The One who once had been here, who had defined all of reality, was now gone, no longer accessible and no longer existent. And that absence of God began to define everything the Victorian intellectual knew.

In the twentieth century, the Victorian loss of faith was codified intellectually, first in the philosophy of logical positivism and secondly in protest atheism. It's interesting to note that the Holocaust became—along with the other unspeakable tragedies of the twentieth century—the great cause of much protest atheism. Evil became a catalyst for a form of atheism that argues that if there is a God, he cannot be a God like this. If this is God, then there is no God. In his play *J.B.*, Archibald MacLeish has his character, speaking in the form of Job, say, “If God is God He is not good, If God is good He is not God.”¹⁰ For many, the events of the twentieth

¹⁰Archibald MacLeish, *J.B.: A Play in Verse* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1958), 11.

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century—in particular the Holocaust and those two murderous World Wars—seemed to prove that point beyond doubt.

* * *

There was also in the early twentieth century the rise of the explicitly atheistic state. The Russian Revolution in 1917, and successive revolutions as well, produced the first atheistic states. Tsar Nicholas II had not only been Tsar of all the Russias, but also the titular head of the Russian Orthodox Church. Now, however, the state was explicitly atheistic and dedicated to Marx's assumption that religion is "the opiate of the masses."¹¹ And as the cultural elites saw it, that opiate must be taken from the people and replaced with the vision of the new Communist man.

After World War II, the West accelerated toward modernity, particularly in terms of technology and science. Great social changes affected the way most people in the West lived. People became more mobile than ever before, which led to unprecedented levels of social dislocation and, in turn, to the demise of the extended family. No longer was it natural for successive generations of the extended family to live together under one roof. Personal autonomy began to be prized, the therapeutic

¹¹Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, trans. Annette Jolin and Joseph O'Malley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970).

culture started to take hold, and the elites of culture became increasingly secularized. By the time we reach hyper-modernity, after the atom was split and Sputnik was launched, after vaccines were invented and man had stood on the moon, there was a sense that human beings, much like Nietzsche's prototypical human, had finally come of age. People began to believe that God is simply no longer necessary.

Then arises the postmodern era, in which the very foundations of theism are denied, along with all other foundationalist thinking. God is made merely one thought among other thoughts, one principle among other principles, one socially constructed reality among others. And in the midst of this arise the New Atheists.

* * *

I believe that what we see in the rise of the New Atheism is something of the endgame of secularism. In order to understand this, we must look at the origins of what is known as secularization theory.

The idea of secularization emerged from early sociological analysis. It was thought that as modernity worked its way through civilization, as human beings learned to harness the energies of nature, dam rivers, and eventually split the atom, there would be less and less need for God as the causal, explanatory

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factor in the intellectual framework of civilization. As the secularization theorists saw the future, life would become increasingly rationalized. More and more of life would be experienced in a secular space, and belief in God, along with participation in organized religion, would dissipate. Inevitably then, God would recede from human consciousness.

Max Weber spoke of this process as “disenchantment.”¹² Eventually modernity would lead to society’s disenchantment with the enchanted world, by which he meant a world in which God is necessary and meaningful, and its entrance into a disenchanted (or secular) world. Emile Durkheim predicted the same, as did Auguste Comte. Modernity was understood as humanity come of age, and religious faith and belief in God were seen as recidivist, backward, and limiting beliefs that would inevitably recede.

Lying behind the secularization theory were two great assumptions: first, the theory assumes that theism is basically an inherited belief that is necessary to provide meaning, coherence, and comfort. In other words, secularization theory has an essentially functional understanding of religion. So, as religion’s function is no longer needed, as people find other sources of comfort and meaning in life, belief in God will recede.

Second, secularization theory assumes that the

¹²Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, ed. Stephen Kalberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

forms of religious belief were supported by the acknowledgment of its social functions. In other words, the adherents of secularization theory believed that religious forms would remain for some time even after true belief was gone—at least so long as people found them aesthetically attractive—but that eventually they also would disappear. They believed history was driving toward the utter removal of belief in God, and that education, technology, affluence, and the inevitable breaks with tradition that came with modernity would lead to a massive, civilization-wide loss of belief.

It would work this way: first it would become *plausible* or thinkable not to believe in God, and then eventually it would become *inevitable* that one would not believe in God at all. Secularization theorists believed education would play a big role in this, effecting in society an intellectual coming of age. In sum, belief in God was a part of prehistory, a part of what Nietzsche would call “the intellectual infancy of humanity.” But as humanity has now come of age, belief in God is no longer necessary. Freud put it this way: “The more the fruits of knowledge become accessible to men, the more widespread is the decline of religious belief.”¹³

Ultimately then, modernity would produce a fully secularized world. On a global scale it would begin in the West, where technology, scientific advance, and democratic theory had most quickly taken shape. But

¹³Sigmund Freud, *Future of an Illusion* (New York: Norton, 1989).

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eventually these ideas would spread around the world, and secularization would be a global phenomenon. The theory certainly appeared to be credible, and it soon became the accepted wisdom. Indeed, it was considered to be inexorable: there would be a worldwide, global, secular culture, led by new institutions such as the United Nations and marked by the rejection of both the social functions and the symbolic nature of theistic belief.

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John Sommerville, another major British figure in secularization theory, suggested that secularization would follow this pattern: first would come the secularization of space. In the year 1500 in Great Britain, about half of all the land in the kingdom was owned by the church, and a good portion of the rest was owned by the Crown. That began to change with Henry VIII, who confiscated the monasteries and began the process of secularizing the property. The idea that land would not be owned by either the Church or the Crown was a massive change in British society. Second, Sommerville predicted the secularization of time and play, and third, the secularization of language. Fourth was the secularization of technology and work. No longer would people consider their vocation as being done to the glory of God. Rather, the dominant paradigm would be that of

making a contribution to society and ultimately a profit. Then would follow the secularization of art, the secularization of power, the secularization of personhood and association, and finally the secularization of scholarship and science until humanity's passage from infancy and adolescence into adulthood was complete.

Sommerville went on to speak of six aspects of secularization. First, secularization would take place at the macro-social-institutional level. This is known as *differentiation*. This process has clearly become a reality. Indeed, the fragmentation of knowledge and the specialization of expertise are now just taken for granted. Whereas the church once defined reality across an entire range of intellectual fields, it does so no longer—even for most Christians. We live in a time in which it is plausible to us that people would not ask the pastor about vocational issues, intellectual issues, legal issues, and all the rest. The church used to be at the center of all these questions, but differentiation now means that you go to a lawyer for legal advice and to a psychotherapist for counseling. People now go to any number of experts who are completely freed from the church and theistic belief. That is a massive shift brought about by secularization.

Second, secularization affects individual institutions. Think of all the universities and hospitals once established explicitly as Christian, which are now fully secularized. The most significant dimension of this

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institutional secularization has to do with the secularization of the academy. The secularization of colleges and universities has shaped the minds and worldviews of millions.¹⁴ Third, activities such as education and welfare, which used to be done by the church and in the name of the church, have now largely been taken over by the bureaucratic state. Fourth, Sommerville argued, mentalities and worldviews would be secularized. At the level of worldview, basic presuppositional ideas would be secularized and, almost imperceptibly, the mind would be secularized. Fifth, entire peoples would be secularized in terms of belief and identity. They would, like Europe today, desperately strive to separate themselves from their Christian heritage. Finally, Sommerville even talks about the secularization of religion, the attempt to accommodate theology to a secularized world.¹⁵

There were of course some scholars who did not go along. By 1986, Jeffrey Hadden would say that secularization was more a doctrine than a theory: it too had to be taken on faith.¹⁶ But even more problematic for the theory is the fact that it simply isn't happening—at least not as the secularization theorists said it

¹⁴See George M. Marsden, *The Soul of the American University: From Protestant Establishment to Established Non-Belief* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994) and James Tunstead Burtchaell, *The Dying of the Light: The Disengagement of Colleges and Universities from Their Christian Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1998).

¹⁵C. John Sommerville, *The Secularization of Early Modern England: From Religious Culture to Religious Faith* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992).

¹⁶Jeffrey Hadden, 1986 Presidential Address to the Southern Sociological Society.

would happen. Take the United States of America, for example, the most hyper-modern state in the world as measured by sociological analysis. Ninety-five percent of Americans claim to believe in God. Now obviously the god in whom these people believe is not necessarily the God of biblical theism. But even so, Americans by and large are *not* secularists. Furthermore, instead of the spread of a global phenomenon of secularization, there appears to be a reassertion of religious belief around the world. So what happened?

What happened is that the theory of secularization soon became known as the “myth” of secularization. Peter Berger, who was one of the initial framers of the entire idea of secularization theory, has been very helpful in coming back to acknowledge that the theory must be recalibrated.¹⁷ At the same time, however, we must recognize that there is still something to the theory—even in its classical form. Secularization theory may have been falsified in terms of its major claims, but there are still two senses in which it was *exactly* right.

The first sense in which secularization theory was right is geographic. Western Europe followed the theory perfectly. Rates of church-going in Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Spain, and France hover right around 1 to 5 percent of the population. In many surveys, fewer than 10 percent of those populations claim to believe in God. The second exception to secularization theory’s

¹⁷See Peter C. Berger, “Secularization Falsified,” *First Things*, February 2008, 23f.

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failure is among the world's cultural and intellectual elites. Here Peter Berger has put it wonderfully. In the course of studying the relative levels of religious belief in the world's countries, sociologists determined that the least religious nation in the world was Sweden, while the most religious was India. Berger, speaking of the United States, said that what we have in America is a nation of Indians ruled over by an elite of Swedes. As Berger has explained, the secularized global intelligentsia is in all nations a minority of the population, "but a very influential one."¹⁸

The significance of these two exceptions is that Western Europe and the world's cultural elites play an inordinate role in influencing the larger culture. Thus the secularization of Europe and of America's elites has created a cultural opening for the emergence of what we are calling the New Atheism. How exactly has this opening occurred?

* * *

Perhaps the most insightful philosopher to have considered this is Charles Taylor. His massive work *A Secular Age* is a bold but also rather humble and honest work.¹⁹ Taylor has given attention over the decades to the secularization of society and to what it means to live

¹⁸Ibid., 24.

¹⁹Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 2007).

in a secular age, and he makes an argument that is very difficult to refute. Taylor's argument is that Western history has experienced three different intellectual stages, three different sets of conditions of belief.

First, there once was a time in which it was impossible *not* to believe. If you move back before the Enlightenment, into the Medieval period and beyond, it was virtually impossible to find persons who did not believe in God, or who at least did not assume that belief in God was absolutely necessary in order to make sense of the world. Believing in God was crucial to understanding why the sun was there in the morning and the moon and the stars at night. God was an integral, inseparable part of society's *Weltanschauung*, its worldview. It was impossible not to believe because there was no other explanation. There was no other theory, no other rival worldview that could explain all that human beings experienced.

The second phase Taylor describes is when it becomes *possible* not to believe. The Enlightenment becomes the great opening for this, for even though it remained, for most people, still impossible not to believe, the great epistemological turn to the subject meant that the possibility of nonbelief suddenly emerged. The individual himself became the center of meaning, and thus God was no longer understood to be the sovereign subject, but rather the object of study. And like any other theory, one could take him or leave him.

The Endgame of Secularism

Taylor suggests that we have now entered a third stage of intellectual development. Having moved from a time in which it was impossible not to believe, through a time in which it became possible not to believe, we have now arrived at a situation in which, for the elites especially, it has become impossible *to believe*. If you compare the first stage and the third stage, an absolute reversal has taken place. In the first stage there was no rival explanation for any reality—for life, for the past, for the present, or for the future—other than Christianity. But now it is the absolute opposite. Now there are not only alternatives to the biblical worldview available, but these alternatives are declared to be superior. Indeed if nonbelief was an oddity in the first stage—so much that it was considered eccentric and even dangerous—in this third stage it is *theism* that is considered eccentric and dangerous. Theism is not just something we have moved beyond, not just something we ought to put behind us as belonging to an infantile or adolescent period of human development. It is actually dangerous, because people who believe in God are dangerous people who do dangerous things. They are a deadly toxin within the culture at large.

These are the conditions of belief under which we now live. This is the situation—a world in which the elites have declared that it is impossible and even dangerous to believe in God. This new event has provided the opening for the New Atheism. And what an opening it is.