



# To Err in their Ways: The Attribution Biases of the New Atheists

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**Abstract:** The term “new atheism” has been given to the recent barrage of anti-religion and anti-God books written by Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Daniel Dennett (2006), and others. This paper contends that one of the fundamental arguments put forth by the new atheists – that religion poisons everything or that religion is responsible for much of the evil in the world – falls victim to one of the best established theories of interpersonal and intergroup relations in social psychology: the fundamental attribution error. Insights gleaned from social psychology are especially useful for critiquing the new atheism. Instead of simply arguing that the new atheists “over-generalize,” social psychological studies on the nature of individual and group attribution provide the tools needed to launch a more substantive critique.

**Résumé :** Le « Nouvel athéisme » est une expression donnée au grand nombre de livres anti-religion et anti-Dieu écrits récemment par Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Daniel Dennett (2006), et autres. Cet article soutient que l’un des arguments fondamentaux mis en avant par ces nouveaux athées, que la religion empoisonne tout et est en grande partie responsable du mal dans le monde, est victime d’une des théories les mieux établies des relations interpersonnelles et intergroupes en psychologie sociale: l’erreur fondamentale d’attribution. Renseignements tirés de la psychologie sociale sont particulièrement utiles pour critiquer le Nouvel athéisme. Au lieu de se contenter d’argumenter que les nouveaux athées généralisent à l’excès, les études de psychologie sociale sur la nature de l’attribution collective et individuelle fournissent les outils nécessaires pour lancer une critique plus substantielle.

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## Mots clés

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The term “new atheism” has been given to the recent barrage of anti-religion and anti-God books written by Richard Dawkins (2006), Sam Harris (2004, 2008), Christopher Hitchens (2007), Daniel Dennett (2006), and others. The new atheist writers and their respective books have been selling extremely well; they have conducted conferences dealing, largely uncritically, with their own material, and have had a significant media presence discussing and debating their ideas with journalists and other scholars. The academic community, with a few exceptions, has largely dismissed their writings as unsophisticated, crude, and lacking nuance. One of the most persistent responses to the new atheism has been to argue that there is in fact nothing *new* about the new atheism. It is stated that everything that is said by the likes of Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens, and Dennett had already been said, and said better, by Russell, Paine, Feuerbach, Marx, Freud, and others. There is, of course, much truth to this. As Damon Linker (2008: A14) writes, the new atheism is “not particularly new. It belongs to an intellectual genealogy stretching back hundreds of years, to a moment when atheist thought split into two traditions: one primarily concerned with the dispassionate pursuit of truth, the other driven by a visceral contempt for the personal faith of others.”

Although much of the content of the new atheism may have past precedents, what *is* original is the new-found urgency in the message of atheism, as well as a kind of atheist social revival that their writings, lectures, and conferences have produced. 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. One only needs to peruse the Converts’ Corner on RichardDawkins.net to get a sense of the influence of the new atheism. The thousands of reader comments posted on the site state *ad nauseam* that *The God Delusion* had given them the arguments and the courage to confidently profess their atheism (see also Bullivant, 2008). To provide just one example: “Thank you, Dr. Dawkins, for giving me the words to explain, in clear, convicted and coherent voice, that which I have always felt. I have never felt so empowered, so humbled, so awestruck or so electrified as when I read *The God Delusion*. All of the pieces, which I had been clumsily trying to fit together for a long time, slid into place with an easy grace.”

The aim of this paper is not to provide a theological response to the new atheism. This has admirably been done by John Haught (2008), Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath (2007), and others. Neither do I enter into traditional debates for the existence or non-existence of God, or the interplay between religion and science. Instead, this paper contends that one of the most rancorous arguments put forth by the new atheists – that religion poisons everything or that religion is responsible for much of the evil in the world – falls victim to one of the best established theories of interpersonal and intergroup relations in social psychology: the fundamental attribution error. Extensive

literature has pointed to the existence “of a systematic bias in this person-perception process: a pervasive tendency on the part of observers to overestimate personality or dispositional causes of behavior and to underestimate the influence of situational constraints on behavior” (Tetlock, 1985: 227). The attribution error is one of social psychology’s better replicated theories, and the new atheists repeatedly succumb to it with force. In other words, I propose that the social psychological framework – one utilizing research on attribution errors, out-group homogeneity biases, etc. – is a fruitful avenue for critiquing the new atheists and one that better showcases their many missteps. It should also be noted that I am not arguing that secularists are the only group that succumb to attribution biases. Christians may view Muslims as a coherent whole, even though this is far from the case, and Muslims in turn may view secularists with similar biases. However, I focus on the new atheism, because it often presents itself as an objective, value-free, and universal critique of religion *en bloc*. Additionally, I point out that although religious belief is a situational cause of behavior, the new atheists more often than not treat it as a dispositional or personality defect.

## The Attribution Errors of the New Atheists

Social psychologists and attribution researchers have amassed a mountain of evidence pointing to a series of tendencies that individuals exhibit when attempting to understand why others behave the way they do (Lewin, 1931; Kelley, 1967; Gilbert and Malone, 1995). One of the most replicated of these tendencies is one in which individuals assume that some stable dispositional or attitudinal characteristic lies behind the behavior of another. As Gilbert and Malone (1995: 21) note, “three decades of research in social psychology have shown that many of the mistakes people make are of a kind: When people observe behavior, they often conclude that the person who performed the behavior was predisposed to do so – that the person’s behavior corresponds to the person’s unique dispositions – and they draw such conclusions even when a logical analysis suggests they should not.” In other words, people often downplay situational reasons for the actions of others while overestimating the significance of dispositional causes. In a now classic study by Jones and Harris (1967), subjects were shown essays that either supported or opposed Fidel Castro. They were told either that the writers of these essays had *freely chosen* their position in relation to Castro or that they had been *assigned* a particular point of view to defend, by their debate coach. As suspected, the subjects of the experiment noted that the essay writers had strong pro- or anti-Castro feelings when they freely chose their position. What was surprising in the study was that subjects inferred similar feelings even when they knew that the position had been assigned. These perfectly intelligent individuals seemed to be saying: “Well, yes, I know he was merely completing the assignment given him by his debate coach, but to some degree I think he personally believes what he wrote” (Gilbert and Malone, 1995: 24). Social psychologists have been debating the cause of this “correspondence” bias for some time, producing many insights, but no conclusive explanation. As Gilbert and Malone (1995: 24) note, the correspondence bias is “something of a stray puppy, that no one could quite get rid of but whose owner no one could seem to track down.”

It must be noted that religious belief is best treated as a situational cause of individual behavior, and not as a disposition. However, for the new atheists, religion alternates between these two realms, depending on the argument they are making. At times, they effectively treat religion as a social constraint and critique it accordingly. At other times, they treat individual religious actions as if they were dispositional. As Sam Harris (2004: 67) argues, “The men who committed the atrocities of September 11 were certainly not ‘cowards’, as they were repeatedly described in the Western media, nor were they lunatics in any ordinary sense. They were men of faith – *perfect* faith, as it turns out – and this, it must finally be acknowledged, is a terrible thing to be.” For Harris, all that is required to understand the terrorist acts of 9/11 is the knowledge of the fact that these individuals were people of faith. Situational causes – Western injustice, geopolitical realities, etc. – do not need to be factored into the equation.

This argument goes to the heart of one of the main arguments of the new atheism: that religion involves blind faith. As Harris (2004: 25) argues, “Religious faith represents so uncompromising a misuse of the power of our minds that it forms a kind of perverse, cultural singularity – a vanishing point beyond which rational discourse proves impossible.” It may be that the new atheists have come to take this argument less seriously, as, since the publication of their books, they have engaged in numerous debates with Christian scholars, often in front of thousands of religious people. The willingness of the religious to engage in debate indicates that religious faith and rational discourse may not be as mutually exclusive as the new atheists propose. As Michael Taunton of Fixed Point Foundation noted in his opening remarks to the March 2009 debate between Christopher Hitchens and mathematician John Lennox, “If an idea cannot properly take its stand in the marketplace of ideas without collapsing, if it cannot survive without constantly being guarded from outside attacks, then it is not worth believing in the first place. We, however, think that Christianity *can* take its stand, and it is with such confidence that we invite thoughtful opposition such as Mr. Hitchens to engage us.” To continue to argue that religion is about *blind* faith and not open to discussion and criticism seems disingenuous.

Another notable characteristic of new atheist writings is the tendency to present to readers basic historical information about religion, particularly Christianity, as if it were new information. It seems that religious illiteracy is now so pervasive that simply revealing what theologians and scholars have known and published for decades is enough to create skepticism (Prothero, 2007). Having settled on the belief that religion is about blind faith, the new atheists present this information as if it will be crushing to the fragile faith of believers. Hitchens (2007: 102, 105, 115), for example, lavishes on readers such unremarkable insights as: religion is man-made, the Exodus likely did not happen, and Moses could not have written Deuteronomy because it discusses his own death. Although there is much in Hitchens’ text to admire, and several philosophical arguments to take seriously, his presentation of basic historical *facts* about religion as if they are revelatory is rather perplexing, especially since most religious people (not to mention theologians and scholars of religion) have known about them for years. John Haught (2008: 31) similarly notes that Hitchens “seems unaware that exegetes and theologians have known about these discrepancies since antiquity, but they have not been so literalist as to interpret insignificant factual

contradictions as threats to the doctrine of biblical inspiration.” In other words, just because religious people have learned to live with inconsistencies in their religious tradition, this does not mean that they practice blind faith. Hitchens’ claim that religion is man-made is particularly revealing as he believes himself, once having stated it, to have made a devastating critique of religion.

Haught also takes issue with the way in which the new atheists define faith itself. For the new atheists, faith means believing in something without evidence. As he rightly notes, the main difference is that the new atheists “think of faith as an *intellectually* erroneous attempt at something like scientific understanding, whereas theology thinks of faith as a state of self-surrender in which one’s whole being, and not just the intellect, is experienced as being carried away into a dimension of reality that is much deeper and more real than anything that could be grasped by science and reason” (2008: 13). The seat of faith for the new atheists “is not a vulnerable heart but a weak intellect” (Haught, 2008: 5). In arguing that faith is simply “belief without evidence,” the new atheists are undermining “the intended universality” of their condemnation of faith: “Even one white crow is enough to show that not all crows are black, so surely the existence of countless believers who reject the new atheists’ simplistic definition of faith is enough to place in question the applicability of their critiques to a significant sector of the religious population” (Haught, 2008: 62).

Haught is particularly frustrated with the fact that the new atheists have dismissed theology as a whole without really engaging with it. If faith is “belief without evidence,” and materialistic evidence is the only path to knowledge, then theology is, as Sam Harris (2004: 173) writes, simply a “branch of human ignorance.” It follows, then, that it is unnecessary for the new atheists to seriously engage with the writings of prominent and respected theologians. The situational causes of belief can, from the new atheist perspective, be dismissed as nothing more than a dispositional, and defective, attribute of individuals. 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 is an important one, and has frustrated many scholars of religion. When asked at a public lecture to clarify the reasons why he does not engage with respected theologians like Paul Tillich or Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Dawkins provided a response that disagrees with pronouncements he made in *The God Delusion*: “I *wish* that all religious people were like Tillich and Bonhoeffer. I wouldn’t have bothered to write the book if they were! But, unfortunately, the huge majority of religious people in the world – not just Christians, but Muslims, and others as well – wouldn’t have the faintest clue what Tillich and Bonhoeffer are talking about . . . And it’s no good saying ‘oh, that’s not my kind of Christianity!’ Well fine, it is not your kind of Christianity, but I didn’t write the book for you” (YouTube, 2008b). Such candid statements by Dawkins contradict the intended universality of his writings. It is unclear, then, whether the writings of the new atheists are aimed at religious fundamentalists or religion *en bloc*. It is likely, as we will see below, that the new atheists believe that fundamentalists best represent religion as a whole.

## Intergroup Attribution Errors

Social psychologists have extended their insights about individual fundamental errors to the group level as well. Studies in intergroup attribution have dealt with the ways in which members of different social groups explain the behavior of their own group (the in-group) as well as other groups (out-groups). One area of research has been the nature of stereotyping and prejudice (Allport, 1979). For example, when an individual attempts to explain the behavior of another, s/he may attribute the behavior not only to individual characteristics, but also to the perceived characteristics of the group to which they belong. Another area of research deals with attributions for positive and negative outcomes. For example, Rosenberg and Wolfsfeld (1977) analyzed attributions made for five Arab and five Israeli behaviors during the Middle East crisis. A total of 212 students in the Boston area took part in the study. The behaviors were all major news events and were classified into five categories: successes, failures, moral acts, immoral acts, and neutral acts. The subjects were asked to indicate, on a three-point scale, whether they believed these actions to have been a success or failure, and whether they were moral or immoral. The subjects were then asked to state, in an open-ended manner, what they believed to be the most important factor explaining the behavior. The results are important for understanding intergroup attribution. The Israeli group “gave more dispositional attributions for Israeli success and moral acts, and fewer dispositional attributions for Israeli immoral acts, than did Arab students. They also gave fewer dispositional attributions for Arab success, and more dispositional attributions for Arab immoral acts, than did Arab students” (Hewstone, 1990: 315). In other words, when the group that we are a member of performs a positive act, we are more likely to see that act as stemming from a dispositional trait. But, when this in-group performs a negative act, we are more likely to see it as stemming from situational, contextual, causes. When it comes to the out-group, however, we tend to do the opposite.

As Pettigrew (1979: 464) has noted, there “appears to be a positivity bias for intimate others, such that you grant them the benefit of the doubt by attributing positive actions to dispositional causes and negative actions to situational causes” (see also, Hewstone, 1990; Khan and Liu, 2008). Similarly, there is often a negativity bias, where the situational constraints of a negative action performed by an individual member of a disliked group are underplayed in favor of dispositional explanations. “And often when race and ethnicity are involved, these attributions will take the form of believing the actions to be a result of immutable, genetic characteristics of the derogated group in general – the bedrock assumption of racist doctrine” (Pettigrew, 1979: 465). Although I am certainly not calling the new atheists racist, they do, as we will see, repeatedly fall victim to what is known as the “ultimate attribution error”: whenever a member of the out-group (i.e. adherents to a particular religion) perform a positive act inconsistent with their overall view of the group (i.e. all religious people), the new atheists either dismiss it as an exception to the rule or deny that religion had anything to do with the positive act. The reverse is true when the new atheists deal with their in-group (other secularists).

For example, one of the arguments put forth by the new atheists is that secularists are likely to be “more respectful of the law, more sensitive to the needs of others, or more ethical than religious people. Certainly no reliable survey has yet been done

that shows otherwise” (Dennett, 2006: 55). Hitchens (2007: 5) concurs: “We do not believe in heaven or hell, yet no statistic will ever find that without these blandishments and threats we commit more crimes of greed or violence than the faithful. (In fact, if a proper statistical inquiry could ever be made, I am sure the evidence would be the other way.)” In other words, there is no evidence to suggest that, absent religion, individuals would be more evil or less compassionate to their fellow human beings. As Harris (2008: 39) contends,

Do members of the National Academy of Sciences, 93 percent of whom do not accept the idea of God, lie and cheat and steal with abandon? We can be reasonably confident that these groups are at least as well behaved as the general population . . . Recently, crowds of thousands gathered throughout the Muslim world – burning European embassies, issuing threats, taking hostages, even killing people – in protest over twelve cartoons depicting the Prophet Muhammad that were first published in a Danish newspaper. When was the last atheist riot? Is there a newspaper anywhere on this earth that would hesitate to print cartoons about atheism for fear that its editors would be kidnapped or killed in reprisal?

Although the new atheists shy away from actually admitting it, secularism is, for them, a motivating factor behind civilized behavior. The new atheists generally do not give religion the same benefit of the doubt. As Sam Harris (2004: 78) notes, “The fact that faith has motivated many people to do good things does not suggest that faith is itself a necessary (or even a good) motivation for goodness.” This is indeed true: faith, and/or religion, is not necessary for people to be good. However, neither is it a sufficient element for the perpetration of evil. Harris (2004: 78–79), however, does not allow for this: “By contrast, the most monstrous crimes against humanity have invariably been inspired by unjustified belief. This is nearly a truism.” Here we see the ultimate attribution error in full bloom.

Evidence for the ultimate attribution error can also be found in the new atheists’ discussion of what are often thought to be secular atrocities. The new atheist argument that religion is responsible for much of the evil in the world is often countered by defenders of religion with the examples of Stalin and Hitler (Froese, 2008; Weikart, 2004). Like a grenade in a foxhole, the new atheists have generally embarked on a concerted effort to throw Hitler and Stalin out of the atheist camp as soon as possible. This discussion can be found in all of their writings (see Dawkins, 2006: 272–278; Hitchens, 2007: 229–252; Harris, 2004: 100–107). In this particular debate, Dawkins has been the most clear-headed (2006: 273):

“Hitler and Stalin were atheists. What have you got to say about that?” The question comes up after just about every public lecture that I ever give on the subject of religion, and in most of my radio interviews as well. It is put in a truculent way, indignantly freighted with two assumptions: not only [1] were Stalin and Hitler atheists, but [2] they did their terrible deeds *because* they were atheists. Assumption [1] is true for Stalin and dubious for Hitler. But assumption [1] is irrelevant anyway, because assumption [2] is false. It is certainly illogical if it is thought to follow from [1]. Even if we accept that Hitler and Stalin shared atheism in common, they both also had moustaches, as does Saddam Hussein. So what? The interesting



question is not whether evil (or good) individual human beings were religious or were atheists. We are not in the business of counting evil heads and compiling two rival roll calls of iniquity. The fact that Nazi belt buckles were inscribed with “*Gott mit uns*” doesn’t prove anything, at least not without a lot more discussion. What matters is not whether Hitler and Stalin were atheists, but whether atheism systematically *influences* people to do bad things. There is not the smallest evidence that it does.

Although I disagree with Tina Beattie (2007: 77) that this is the way Dawkins “wiggles and squirms” out of the conversation, it is nevertheless unfortunate that the new atheists do not give religion the same tempered judgment. The question of whether *religion* systematically influences people to do bad things deserves the same nuance. Of course, in some instances, like the case of HPV discussed in Harris (2008: 26–28), it is clear that religion may be primarily to blame. However, in the case of suicide terrorism, for example, the relationship is not so straightforward (Crenshaw, 2007). For example, Robert Pape (2006), a professor of political science at the University of Chicago, has recently compiled a database of every suicide bombing attack that took place in the world between 1980 and 2003 (a total of 315 attacks). After analyzing the data, he argues that nearly all suicide terrorist attacks have one “secular and strategic goal: to compel modern democracies to withdraw military forces from territory that the terrorists consider to be their homeland” (2006: 4). He goes on to point out that “religion is rarely the root cause, although it is often used as a tool by terrorist organizations in recruiting and in other efforts in service of the broader strategic objective” (2006: 4). If the new atheists argue that Stalin and Hitler were not influenced by their atheism, then it would seem that something similar could be argued for religion in the case of suicide terrorism.

Once the new atheists discover that religion may have been even minutely influential in current or historical atrocities, all other contributions are immediately minimized. When discussing the Holocaust, for example, Harris (2004: 79) argues that the “anti-Semitism that built the crematoria brick by brick – and that still thrives today – comes to us by way of Christian theology. Knowingly or not, the Nazis were agents of religion.” Such attribution errors are common in the new atheist corpus. Harris does not even attempt to explain why, if Christian anti-Semitism was the sole driving force behind the Holocaust, the Nazis also attempted to eliminate the Romani people, the deaf, the disabled, as well as homosexuals (Ryan and Schuchman, 2002; Plant, 1988; Rosenbaum, 1998). What is more surprising is that none of the new atheists provide even a passing mention of the influence of social Darwinism or eugenics in inspiring the Holocaust.

Yet another argument that betrays the new atheists’ group attribution error is their controversial contention that a religious upbringing is akin to child abuse. For both Dawkins and Hitchens, the issue revolves around whether or not the child has the freedom to choose his/her religion. As Dawkins (2006: 315) argues, “the idea that baptizing an unknowing, uncomprehending child can change him from one religion to another at a stroke seems absurd – but it is surely not more absurd than labeling a tiny child as belonging to any particular religion in the first place . . . isn’t it always a form of child abuse to label children as possessors of beliefs that they are too young to have



thought about?” Dawkins notes that he was once asked for his opinion on the scandals regarding sexual abuse by Catholic priests. He replied that “as horrible as sexual abuse no doubt was, the damage was arguably less than the long-term psychological damage inflicted by bringing the child up Catholic in the first place” (2006: 317). For Dawkins, psychological abuse can often outlast and outclass physical abuse. If a child is told from a very young age that sinners burn in hell, “it is entirely plausible that words could have a more long-lasting and damaging effect than deeds . . . I am persuaded that the phrase ‘child abuse’ is no exaggeration when used to describe what teachers and priests are doing to children whom they encourage to believe in something like the punishment of unshriven mortal sins in an eternal hell” (Dawkins, 2006: 318).

Dawkins is particularly concerned about the labeling of children. As he notes, “I think we should all wince when we hear a small child being labeled as belonging to some particular religion or another. Small children are too young to decide their views on the origins of the cosmos, of life and of morals. The very sound of the phrase ‘Christian child’ or ‘Muslim child’ should grate like fingernails on a blackboard . . . A child is not a Christian child, not a Muslim child, but a child of Christian parents or a child of Muslim parents” (2006: 338, 339). The BBC’s Stephen Sackur, confused by the distinction, asked Dawkins to explain the *practical* difference between how a “Christian child” is raised in the home compared with a “child of Christian parents.” In other words, if we assume that both children will be raised Christian, with Christian values, what is the particular significance of the labeling itself? Dawkins only responded by stating that “labels are important.” As he tells Sackur, “It is specifically the *labeling* that I am talking about . . . I do think it is wicked specifically to label children. I have never said that it is wicked to bring children up in a particular belief. Of course children are going to learn from their parents!” (YouTube, 2007). Labels may be important, but they are only significant when they are attached to stigma or stereotypes (see, for example, Scheff, 1984; Link et al., 1989). In other words, it may only be in a new atheist utopia, where religion has been relegated to the fringes of society as a mental illness, that the label “Christian child” will be harmful. As the label carries no social stigma at present, except for Dawkins and Hitchens, it should pose no danger to the child.

## Out-Group Homogeneity Effect

Another important finding of social psychological studies into intergroup relations is what is known as the out-group homogeneity effect. This bias is defined as the propensity of individuals to see their own group as relatively more variable than an out-group. It is the “tendency for a group to be seen as more variable by the members of the group than by individuals who are members of some other group” (Judd and Park, 1988: 778; see also Quattrone and Jones, 1980). If the out-group is seen as homogeneous, individual identity for members of the in-group is strengthened – they seem nuanced and complex – while also allowing for the out-group to be easily understood. Alternatively, there has also been some evidence suggesting that perception of *in-group* homogeneity can be prevalent, and can be just as beneficial for individual identity (Lee and Ottati, 1995). As Lee and Ottati (1995: 610) note, “perceptions of in-group variation appear to fluctuate across time and circumstances.” The new atheist writings reflect this

inconsistency: at times, they complain that organizing their fellow secular humanists is a bit like “herding cats” because they are “such independent thinkers,” while viewing religion as homogeneously irrational. At other times, they view themselves as a homogeneous, enlightened whole, fighting back superstition. As Lee and Ottati (1995: 611) note, much scholarly evidence exists to suggest that “shared threat increased the tendency for individuals to perceive themselves as similar to other group members.” In other words, if the member of the in-group feels threatened from outside, s/he is more likely to view her/himself as a part of a homogeneous whole. “Perceptions of in-group homogeneity are influenced by the individual’s motivation to protect and maintain a positive sense of social identity” (Lee and Ottati, 1995: 610); for the new atheists, their fellow secular humanists, and indeed society as a whole, are under attack from the irrational motives of the religious. As such, they view themselves as the vanguard of the rational masses fighting back the superstitious hordes.

In an interesting study conducted by Doosje and Branscombe (2003), the ultimate attribution error was shown to exist even when groups dealt with the historical actions of out-group members (see also, Taylor and Jaggi, 1974). In two separate studies, they found that the level of in-group identification “was a significant predictor of greater external attributions for negative in-group behavior and of higher internal attributions for negative out-group behavior. Out-group homogeneity was significantly predicted by in-group identification, and this effect was primarily due to the out-group being seen as less variable than the in-group” (2003: 244). In other words, if individuals identified closely with their own group, they were more likely to point to external causes for the negative historical actions of their own group, as well as to point to dispositional causes for the negative historical actions of the out-group. As Doosje and Branscombe (2003: 246) note, their study suggests that “identification with a group allows people to maintain a positive attitude toward their group, even in the face of unfavorable information.” Additionally, if they identified closely with their own group, they were more likely to see the out-group as a unified whole, and their own group as internally varied. Doosje and Branscombe show that the out-group homogeneity bias is increased when individuals display stronger in-group identification (see, for example, Quattrone and Jones, 1980; Judd, Ryan and Park, 1991).

Social psychologists have also noted that observers are more likely to underplay a group’s situational constraints – the group attribution bias – when the group comes across as a *coherent entity* (i.e. it displays entitativity) (Campbell, 1958; Pettigrew, 1979; Allison and Messick, 1985; Yzerbyt et al., 1998; Rogier and Yzerbyt, 1999). As Yzerbyt et al. (1998: 1090) note, just as with the individual attribution error, “when members of a group take a particular line of action and that group is perceived to be a coherent social entity, perceivers may well underestimate the causal role of the environment and credit instead some underlying disposition of the group members.” The idea that social attribution could be facilitated by a group’s perceived entitativity was elaborated in a study conducted by Yzerbyt et al. (1998). Researchers divided individuals into three groups: a questioner group, an answerer group, and an observer group, in a quiz game. The three-person questioner group and the three-person answerer group were presented to the observer group as either an entitative group or an aggregate group. The questioner group was told to come up with some general knowledge questions that would

then be answered by the answerer group. The observer group then rated the six contestants, as well as the two groups.

The researchers expected “observers to rate the individual questioners and the group of questioners as a whole as being more knowledgeable when observers faced an entitative group rather than an aggregate. Also, we hoped that observers would rate the individual answerers and the group of answerers as a whole as being less knowledgeable when they were confronted with an entitative answerer group rather than an aggregate” (Yzerbyt et al., 1998: 1093). Taking part in the experiment were 324 female first-year students from the University of Massachusetts, but the data they used to explore this particular hypothesis only concerned the 131 students who were assigned the role of observer. The three questioners were seated next to each other on one side of the room, and the three answerers were seated next to each other on the other side of the room. The observers were also seated together, facing the contestants. One of the experimenters, who was blind to the manipulations of the experiment, explained to the contestants that those taking part in the study came from all five colleges of the Amherst, Massachusetts, area. In order to create the sense that a particular group was entitative, another experimenter prepared two-sided name labels to put in front of all the participants. On one side, seen by everybody in the room, was the first name of the individual. On the other side, which only the participant could see, was listed information about the six contestants (their names, and the school they allegedly came from). The names of the schools were manipulated to create the sense that the three questioners or answerers were from the same school (entitative) or from different schools (aggregate). As the quiz game began, each questioner could ask a question to an answerer, both picked by the experimenter. At the end of the game, the experimenter told the participants how well they had done. Participants were then asked to fill out a questionnaire evaluating the contestants’ performance. Observers evaluated each questioner and each answerer as well as the group of questioners and answerers as a whole. They were asked to rate both general knowledge and ability, on a scale of 1 (much worse than average) to 7 (much better than average).

Their findings are significant. As they conclude, “whereas observers confronted with aggregates did not make a difference between questioners and answerers, observers facing entitative groups rated the questioners more favorably than the answerers. This difference emerged whether or not the target group was composed of students belonging to the same university as the observers. Clearly, the present pattern suggests that entitativity and group membership combine to shape the observers’ perception” (Yzerbyt et al., 1998: 1099). In other words, the observers’ simple perception that a certain group was a coherent entity affected the way they were evaluated. In another series of studies, Corneille et al. (2001) attempted to understand the role of threat in facilitating the group attribution error. One interesting result of their study was that “threat did not only result in more extreme (and clearly unwarranted) inferences about a typical group member’s attitude but also in the perception of a greater similarity among the group members as far as their position about the proposition is concerned” (Corneille et al., 2001: 440). In other words, if a group is perceived to be threatening (for our purposes, the religious), observers often assume that members of the group agree with one another (i.e. form a coherent entity). When faced with a threatening group, “perceivers are quite willing to infer the presence of a consensus without much information simply because they want

to see the group as a unified whole” (Corneille et al., 2001: 440). Such biases will become apparent below when we explore the new atheist treatment of Islam.

Kenworthy and Miller (2002) explored the question of how people explain why others hold the attitudes that they do. To begin, they interviewed 40 individuals and asked about the *sources* of their attitudes for three topics: abortion rights, legalization of medicinal marijuana, and capital punishment. Most of the respondents, 59 percent, reported that they came to their attitude through thinking or rationality. In a separate study of 73 individuals, Kenworthy and Miller asked respondents to indicate whether it was desirable to hold an attitude based on externality, rationality, and emotionality. They found that, for respondents, “it was indeed more desirable that attitude positions be held for rational reasons, and that it was less desirable to be influenced by one’s emotions” (2002: 694). Building upon this study, Kenworthy and Miller attempted to discover whether the preference for rationality and the devaluing of emotionality affected intergroup relations. As we have seen, attributions at the group level, not surprisingly, tend to be ethnocentric and group-serving (Pettigrew, 1979; Hewstone, 1990). In the first related study, Kenworthy and Miller (2002: 697) found that “Given that participants’ explanations for their own attitude positions received the strongest attributions of rationality and the weakest attributions of emotionality and externality and that attributions for the out-group position were weakest for rationality but strongest for emotionality and externality, one can infer that holding an attitude for rational reasons is desirable and that holding an attitude for emotional, external reasons is less desirable.” In other words, the in-group tends to view its position as the most rational, while viewing the position of the out-group as overly emotional or irrational (see also, Shermer, 2000: 74–84; Kenworthy, 2003). In two more related studies conducted by Kenworthy and Miller, they found that when groups felt that they were under threat by an out-group, they were more likely to “attribute more externality, more emotionality, and less rationality to the out-group position” (2002: 702). It is not difficult to see how such attributions may benefit the group as well as the identity of individual group members. As they point out, “if a person makes external and emotional attributions for out-group attitudes, then the legitimacy or validity of the out-group members’ personal or group attitude position (political, religious, etc.) is undermined and, by comparison, the person’s self- and own- group identity are simultaneously enhanced” (2002: 702). For the new atheists, religion is the height of irrationality, and with this branding, the atheist position is simultaneously seen as the fulfillment of reason. As Harris (2004: 226) argues, “the only angels we need invoke are those of our better nature: reason, honesty, and love. The only demons we must fear are those that lurk inside every human mind: ignorance, hatred, greed, and *faith*, which is surely the devil’s masterpiece.”

The new atheists’ out-group homogeneity bias is best exemplified by their treatment of Islam (see Dickson, forthcoming). Sam Harris, more than his compatriots, brings upon Islam a tsunami of criticism constituted by wit, urgency, and cringe-inducing generalizations. As he writes, “To see the role that faith plays in propagating Muslim violence, we need only ask why so many Muslims are eager to turn themselves into bombs these days” (2004: 32). This, of course, is akin to studying the Manhattan Project and asking why so many scientists are dedicated to nuclear warfare. The important thing to note about Harris’s treatment of Islam is his argument that the religion *itself* is one of violence. For Harris, the out-group, Islam, is indeed thoroughly homogeneous. For example, he argues that “If a twenty-first century

Muslim loses his faith, though he may have been a Muslim only for a single hour, the *normative response*, everywhere under Islam, is to kill him” (2004: 115; italics added). If we are to believe Harris, Muslims, regardless of whether they live in Dearborn or Dubai, live under the fear of death if they even contemplate apostasy. As Corneille et al. (2001: 440) noted, individuals are more than willing to believe there is a consensus in a given community simply because they wish to see this community as homogeneous.

According to Harris (2004: 109, 110), we are at war with Islam as a whole, “it is not merely that we are at war with an otherwise peaceful religion that has been ‘hijacked’ by extremists. We are at war with precisely the vision of life that is prescribed to all Muslims in the Koran . . . While there are undoubtedly some ‘moderate’ Muslims who have decided to overlook the irrevocable militancy of their religion, Islam is undeniably a religion of conquest. The only future devout Muslims can envisage – *as Muslims* – is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, subjugated, or killed.” Harris (2004: 127) envisions a Palestinian, born into privilege, who decides to wrap a bomb around himself and blow up a discotheque: “What will the Palestinians think about such behavior once peace has been established? If they are still devout Muslims here is what they *must* think: ‘Our boys are in paradise, and they have prepared the way for us to follow. Hell has been prepared for the infidels.’” The “here is what they *must* think” part of the above statement is key for understanding how Harris, more than his compatriots, views religion. It might as well be scientific: if one wants to be a chemist, one studies the laws of chemistry, takes them *to be inerrant*, and utilizes them when practicing chemistry. Chemists have no choice *as chemists* other than to take these laws as they are if they wish to practice chemistry. The only problem is that religious doctrine and teaching are not *laws* like the laws of chemistry or physics, and are susceptible to interpretive and cultural nuance (see, for example, Bruce, 2002: 108–117). The new atheists have often stated in interviews that they can at least *understand* the fundamentalist, who argues that the laws of the tradition should be followed without question, as opposed to the moderate, who is liable to believe anything. As Harris (2004: 21) argues, “By failing to live by the letter of the texts, while tolerating the irrationality of those who do, religious moderates betray faith and reason equally.”

## Conclusion

The popularity of the new atheism has caught many scholars of religion off guard (see Bullivant, forthcoming). Their writings, according to scholars, mischaracterize religious people so profoundly that it is best to ignore them. However, I argue, their popularity is a symptom of much larger and much more interesting developments in the contemporary religious landscape. The new atheist corpus has much in it that is worth admiring and taking seriously. For example, their critique of religious extremism, their treatment of suffering, and their thoughts on religion in the public sphere contain much insight that can contribute to discussions already taking place in several fields of study. Even still, many readers recoil at the rhetoric and generalizations that plague their writing. This paper has argued that insights gleaned from social psychology – particularly the fundamental attribution error, out-group homogeneity bias, etc. – are especially useful for critiquing the new atheism. Instead of simply arguing that the new atheists

“over-generalize”, social psychological studies on the nature of individual and group attribution provide the tools needed to launch a more substantive critique.

In particular, those reacting to the new atheism have been especially baffled by their choice to allow fundamentalists to speak for entire traditions (i.e. out-group homogeneity bias). As Haught (2008: xi, xv–xvi) notes, the new atheist “engagement with theology lies at about the same level of reflection on faith that one can find in contemporary creationist and fundamentalist literature. This is not surprising since it is from creationists and intelligent design theists that the new atheists seem to have garnered much of their understandings of religious faith . . . the new atheists are saying in effect that if God exists at all, we should allow this God’s identity to be determined once and for all by the fundamentalists of the Abrahamic religious traditions.” McGrath and Collicutt McGrath (2007: 22, 50) similarly note that one of the main characteristics of the new atheism is its presentation of “the pathological as if it were normal, the fringe as if it were the center, crackpots as if they were mainstream. It generally works well for his intended audience, who can be assumed to know little about religion and probably care for it even less. But it’s not acceptable. And it’s certainly not scientific.” This assumption is also evident in Dawkins’ interview with Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford. In the interview, Dawkins is seen to be continually perplexed by Harries’ liberal stance. To take one example, Harries points out that although there are verses in the Bible that regard homosexuality to be an abomination, we in the contemporary world have to face the fact that the authors of these texts were working under the flawed assumption that homosexuality is a choice. Today, there is some consensus that a certain percentage of the population is genetically, biochemically, or psychologically attracted to members of the same sex. Dawkins responds: “This, of course, is all music to my ears, but I’m kind of left wondering, why you stick with Christianity at all!” Harries (YouTube, 2008a) rightly responds that perhaps Dawkins has spent too much time in fundamentalist circles.

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