

# **IS GOD GREAT?**

CHRISTOPHER HITCHENS AND THE NEW ATHEISM DEBATE

Master's Thesis  
in North American Studies  
Leiden University

By

Tayra Algera

S1272667

March 14, 2018

Supervisor: Dr. E.F. van de Bilt

Second reader: Ms. N.A. Bloemendal MA



## **Table of Contents**

Introduction .....	3
Chapter 1 – The New Atheism Debate and the Four Horsemen .....	17
Chapter 2 – Christopher Hitchens .....	27
Conclusion.....	433
Bibliography.....	455



## Introduction

*“God did not make us, we made God”*

Christopher Hitchens (2007)

*“What can be asserted without evidence can be dismissed without evidence”*

Christopher Hitchens (2003)

*“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.”*

Christopher Hitchens (2007)

These bold statements describe the late Christopher Hitchens’s views on religion in fewer than 50 words. He was a man of many words, most aimed at denouncing the role of religion in current-day societies. Religion is a concept that is hard to define, but it is broadly interpreted as a system of beliefs associated with the divine and provides orientation in questions concerning the meaning of life. Religion, to this day, remains one of the most fundamental elements of societies around the world. This also manifests itself in the United States where religion has played a prominent role since its founding. Religion is interwoven in the basic structure of American society and therefore influences many aspects of the American way of life. In recent years, however, a trend can be detected exposing a significant decline in the number of religiously affiliated Americans. This trend can be found from the 1990s onwards and is growing exponentially.<sup>1</sup> Although, the United States has always been a religious nation, this decline has opened up space for new movements that aimed to counter the religious impact on American society. The “New Atheist” movement is in this respect a remarkable development, undermining the central role of religion. This movement has found support among an increasing number of religiously unaffiliated Americans. The New Atheists movement builds on the foundations of Atheism, defined by Bullivant and Ruse in *The Oxford Handbook on Atheism* as: “an absence of belief in the existence of a God or gods.”<sup>2</sup>

“New Atheism” came into existence when four writers came together in 2007 to discuss their recently published books on the – what they believe to be – harmful nature of religion. The group is comprised of Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett and Christopher

---

<sup>1</sup> Robert P. Jones et al., “Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They’re Unlikely to Come Back,” *Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)* (2016): 2, accessed September 3, 2017, <https://www.pri.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Report.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 13.

Hitchens. Labelled the “Four Horsemen,” these four fundamental atheists critically analyze religion and “share a belief that religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized and exposed by rational argument wherever its influence arises.”<sup>3</sup> They argue that religion should not be accepted but contradicted. These four writers were influential in creating public awareness on atheism and New Atheism. Through their writings, they made (new) atheism a much-discussed topic, thus, creating an active counter-movement against dogmatic religious truths in the United States.

It is difficult to measure the impact of this group of atheists. Does it contribute to the general trend in the United States indicating a decline in religious affiliation? This thesis does not claim to measure the impact of the four atheists, since the decline in religious affiliation in the United States cannot be traced back to one specific element or movement. What will follow, is an analysis of the place and the role of religion in American society by looking at the response to Hitchens’s writing in relation to New Atheism. This will be done with a specific focus on Christopher Hitchens: his aggressive stance and fierce attack on religion found broad support among atheists. Hitchens was not afraid to speak his mind and was provocative in his arguments about religion. It is interesting to evaluate how an Anglo-American with a British heritage, who believed religion to poison everything, is perceived in a strong religious nation like the United States. As a journalist, Hitchens was not a passive academic but looked for an audience to share his beliefs. In *God is Not Great*, Hitchens makes a case against organized religion. Evaluating the response to a provocative atheist in the United States makes for an interesting analysis: the response to Hitchens’s atheist writings, raises questions about the religious decline currently taking place in the United States.

How does the reaction to the work of critical atheist Christopher Hitchens and the other members of the Four Horsemen fit into the debate about, and history of, religious decline in the United States? This question will be analyzed by discussing the reception of Hitchens’s atheist position against the background of developing religious trends in the United States. As we will see, this simple question will be difficult to answer. In the end, for instance, it will be difficult to distinguish between causes and effects: did New Atheism contribute to the decline of religion or was it an effect of the decline? This thesis basically argues that while fueling the larger decline of religion in the United States New Atheism’s impact remained limited. To explain this limited impact, this thesis points to politics as an important factor. As we will also see, however, it will be difficult to really “prove” these points. What follows describes the response

---

<sup>3</sup> Simon Hooper, “The Rise of New Atheists,” *CNN International*, November 9, 2006, <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/11/08/atheism.feature/index.html>.

to Hitchens's ideas, and assesses this response by taking into account developments in recent religious history in the United States.

First, I will discuss religious developments in the United States, indicating shifts in religious affiliation and trends that developed in the late twentieth century. For the purpose of this research project, different databases concerning religious development in the United States have been employed to examine the general trend in religious affiliation. By using databases like The Gallup Polls, the Pew Research Center and The General Social Survey, one can place the current religious landscape in the United States and the debate about atheism in perspective. This will become the foundation on which to analyze the rise of atheist movement in the United States in chapter one, more specifically New Atheism and The Four Horsemen: their core values and motivations. The Four Horsemen will also be introduced, with a specific focus on Hitchens. I will then discuss the response to the New Atheist movement. After this, at the center of the discussion, is a close reading of Hitchens's work: the response to particularly *God is Not Great* will be evaluated in order to assess his contributions to the rise of New Atheism. In doing so, the response to the writings of Hitchens will be placed within the larger debate concerning the present role of religion in the United States.

The New Atheist movement has been extensively researched in the last decade. Many academic works have been written in response to the publications by the Four Horsemen, including polemics and counter-polemic works.<sup>4</sup> Discussing the entire response to New

---

<sup>4</sup> Polemic works on New Atheism include: Herman Philipse, *Atheïstisch Manifest en de Onredelijkheid van Religie* (Amsterdam: Bakker, 2004); Michel Onfray, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam* (Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2007); Victor J. Stenger, *God: The Failed Hypothesis – How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books, 2007); Victor J. Stenger, *The New Atheism: Taking a Stance for Science and Reason* (Amherst, New York, Prometheus Books, 2008, 2009); Ayaan Hirsi Ali, *Infidel* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008); Greg Graffin and Steve Olson, *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science and Bad Religion in a World Without God* (New York: Harper Perennial, 2010) and Frank Turek, *Stealing from God* (Carol Stream, Illinois: NavPress, 2015). Academic responses to New Atheism include: Allister McGrath, *The Twilight of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World and The Dawkins Delusion? – Atheist Fundamentalism and the Denial of the Divine* (New York: WaterBrooks, 2006); David Marshall, *The Truth Behind the New Atheism: Responding to the Emerging Challenges to God and Christianity* (Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2007); Albert Mohler, *Atheist Remix: A Christian confronts the New Atheists* (Carol Stream, Illinois: Crossway, 2008); Scott Hahn and Benjamin Wiker, *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God* (Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road, 2008); John Haught, *Deeper than Darwin: The Prospect of Religion in the Age of Evolution* (New York: Basic Books, 2008); Amarnath Amarasingam, "Introduction: What is the New Atheism," in *Religion and the New Atheism: A critical Appraisal* ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010); Gavin Hyman, *A Short Introduction of Atheism* (London: I.B.Tauris, 2010); John Lennox, *Gunning for God: Why New Atheists are Missing the Target* (Oxford, UK: Lion Hudson, 2011); Bullivant and Ruse, *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*; Steven Kettell, "What's really new about new atheism?" *The Social Science Journal Volume 43, Issue 2* (2006); Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014); Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, *Atheists Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014); Cottee and Cushman, "The Suppression of Open Debate: The Case of Christopher Hitchens," *Springer Science* 45 (2008): 397–402; Marcus Schulzke, "New Atheism and Moral

Atheism would make for a too extensive analysis that would not fit within the boundaries of this thesis. Therefore, the focus of this thesis is the response to the work of Hitchens and not all the Four Horsemen. Additionally, it is important to note, that this thesis will focus on the broad context of New Atheism: the broad “public” response to the movement will be analyzed and evaluated. Where in the past research into this topic has predominantly been conducted by theologians or religious scholars who emphasize theological issues, this thesis focuses on the broader context and places the more or less “popular” response at the center. This thesis does not discuss the theological debate surrounding New Atheism involving issues such as the question whether a God exists or not. In order to evaluate the response to Hitchens’s work, particularly his *God is Not Great*, books by various prominent religious scholars have been consulted; but here the primary sources consist, apart from Hitchens’s work and these academic responses, of reviews published in not only academic periodicals but also prominent American newspaper and other articles in the “popular” press and readers’ responses to these articles. Even YouTube clips have been consulted. Yet, despite the varied nature of the sources, this thesis does not claim to cover all aspects and perspectives involved in the debate about New Atheism.

In order to evaluate the development of New Atheism and the response to Hitchens’s work, it is first necessary to analyze the religious development in the United States. The general developments in the second half of the twentieth century will be analyzed because substantial changes in the religious landscape can be detected: a significant decline in the number of Americans who affiliate themselves with religion. I will explore not only recent religious developments but also the link between religion and politics before introducing the New Atheism.<sup>5</sup>

---

Theory,” *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol. 9, No. 1 (2013); George H. Smith, *The Case Against God* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2016) and Christopher R. Cotter, Philip Andrew Quadrio and Jonathan Tuckett, *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates* (New York: Springer 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Traditional historical books on religion in the US have been written by the following authors: Henry Kalloch Rowe, *The History of Religion in the United States* (Basingstoke, UK: The Macmillan Company, 1924); Herbert Wallace Schneider, *Religion in 20<sup>th</sup> century America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952); Aldous Huxley, *Brave New World Revisited* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1959); Alan Heimert, *Religion and the American Mind* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1966); Elwyn A Smith, *Religious Liberty in the United States: The Development of Church-State Thought since the Revolutionary Era* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972); Thomas W Segady, “Traditional religion, fundamentalism, and institutional transition in the 20th century.” *The Social Science Journal* 43 (2006): 198, accessed September 26, 2016; Geoffrey Stone, “The Second Great Awakening; A Christian Nation,” *Georgia State University Law Review* 26, no 4 (2008). Literature on religion and politics includes: Walter Sundberg, “Religious Trends in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America,” *Word & World* Volume XX, No. 1 (2000): 27, accessed September 29, 2017; Michael Kazin, “Religion and Politics since 1945,” *The Concise Princeton Encyclopedia of American Political History* (2011): 453, accessed September 27, 2017. Scholars who wrote about religion in the U.S. from 1960’s onwards include; David Knoke, “Religion, Stratification

The following analysis of the development of religion will demonstrate that atheism is growing, but not yet commonly accepted in American society. “Simply being an atheist may be acceptable – if, that is, one keeps it to oneself.”<sup>6</sup> This relates predominantly back to the open denunciation of religion. Additionally, it can be argued that atheism is presumably the most unpopular and least comprehended philosophical view in American society today.<sup>7</sup> Atheism is a steadily growing movement with an increasing presence in American society that is relatively new. In religious America, the movement is commonly seen as a threat and met with fear. “The practice of revealing oneself – coming out – as an atheist has never been a matter of treading a well-worn path in the United States; instead, claiming an atheist identity can still carry a significant stigma.”<sup>8</sup> This is the case, because of old stereotypes that classify atheists as immoral and un-American and the stigmatic religious elements that are interwoven into American society and politics. So, even though the movement is growing and more people are religiously unaffiliated, “atheism, even in today’s ‘liberal’ atmosphere, is still somewhat unacceptable.”<sup>9</sup>

Atheists are nevertheless starting to form a collective identity, engage in cultural activism and are building a community together. “A big part of this phenomenon involves atheists decoupling themselves from other roles, obligations, and identities and coming out with their atheism at their primary identity.”<sup>10</sup> They use online platforms and come together and discuss their atheistic beliefs. Even though atheists still occupy the margin of society and are commonly met with stigmas and negativity, it can be argued that a higher level of acceptance and understanding is starting to develop. This level of understanding is limited, however. Because religion and politics are interlinked, atheists feel the drawback of religious influences by the bipartisan political system in the United States. Particularly the conservative right-wing groups (but not just these segments of society) hold on to conservative Christian values that still play a role within the political system of the United States. Secularist organizations are fighting this, however: “the growth of conservative and often political religion has not only ‘raised the

---

and Politics: American in the 1960s,” *American Journal of Political Science* 18, no. 2 (1974) :331; Charles Y. Glock, “The Churches and Social Change in Twentieth Century America” *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527, no 1 (May, 1993): 67 – 83; Darren E. Sherkat, “Tracking the Restructuring of American Religion: Religious Affiliation and Patterns of Religious Mobility 1973-1998,” *Social Forces* 79, no. 4 (June 2001): 1459-1493; Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001); Kevin M. Schultz, “Religion as Identity in Postwar America: The Last Serious Attempt to Put a Question on Religion in the United States Census,” *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 2 (September 2006): 259-284.

<sup>6</sup> Smith, *Atheism, the case against God*, Introduction, xvi.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> Cimino and Smith. *Atheist Awakening*, 3.

<sup>9</sup> Smith, *Atheism, the Case Against God*, Introduction, xvi.

<sup>10</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 4.

consciousnesses' of individual atheists but also compelled secularist organizations to retool their strategies to wage both a defensive and offensive battle against their ideological and political antagonist."<sup>11</sup> These organizations are trying to create a space for secularist and atheists in American society to counter conservative movements that hold on to religious ideologies. The Four horsemen are a perfect example of a group of academics and writers who created a critical counter movement.

It can therefore be stated that because of recent developments and trends in religious perspectives across the religious landscape, there is now a stage in American society for active religious denunciation. Moreover, in contrast to the non-acceptance of the past, current religious developments and trends allow for people like Christopher Hitchens to write a bestseller contradicting, and even ridiculing, the existence of God.

Religion has always played a significant role in the United States. With the first colonists and immigrants, religion was brought to the American shores. Many Europeans came to the United States to escape religious persecution in Europe and in order to practice their beliefs without government interference or restraint. Since the founding of the United States of America in 1776, freedom of religion has been a central element of society. Freedom of religion was so important that the principle became part of the first amendment of the Constitution; "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people peaceably to assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."<sup>12</sup> With the foundation of the United States of America freedom of religion became a fundamental right.

Along with this principled ideology which was a fundamental part of the new nation, a second ideology came to the American shores, namely an enlightened republicanism: "a powerful assertion of the natural and rational."<sup>13</sup> These two traditions would form a relationship that adhered to the philosophy of the new nation. After independence, some states maintained established forms of religion, while others disestablished the church with the adoption of state constitutions. Eventually, all state churches were disestablished and as constitutional scholar George Goldberg states, "it was equally agreed that, just as the federal government should be prohibited from telling people how to worship, it should be prohibited from telling them how

---

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>12</sup> United States Constitution. Amendment 1. Sec. 1.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *Religious Liberty in the United States*, 2.

not to worship.”<sup>14</sup> With this notion, religion became free from government interference. The separation of church and state and the disestablishment of state-religions were the results.

However, as demonstrated above, religion has always had a dominant presence in both society and politics in the United States. “Religion was the institution that defined all other institutions, and the energy of religious belief formed the impetus that sparked not only unprecedented accomplishments in a rapidly developing society, but the development of new religious movements as well, each with their own special dynamic.”<sup>15</sup> This demonstrates the power of religion as the United States shaped itself as a new nation. It also shows that two traditions that have always been present in America – one religious and the other political – developed together and are undeniably interwoven. This development can be seen throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when religion diversified into a multitude of religious beliefs throughout the United States.

In the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, approximately up until the 1960s, six Protestant denominations of Christianity – Baptists, Congregationalists, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Methodists, and Presbyterians – were considered to be the mainline denominations in the United States. These six denominations shared the largest body of religiously affiliated Americans. Therefore, analyzing American religion in the 20<sup>th</sup> century usually meant analyzing Protestant Christianity.<sup>16</sup> In this thesis, Protestant Christianity will be used when discussing religion and its development in the United States.

In Europe, a wave of secularization swept the continent during the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This trend did not occur in the United States, where religion remained a fundamental aspect of society. Moreover, instead of secularization, religious convictions continued to strengthen during this time. In 1800 twenty percent of the United States’ population was considered to be religiously affiliated. This number rose to fifty percent in 1900. This trend gradually persisted during the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: in 1950 at least fifty five percent of the United States’ population were church members. The foremost reason given for this lack of change was the influence of the First and Second World War.<sup>17</sup> Another twenty-five to thirty percent regarded themselves as religiously affiliated but did not regularly attend church at the time, making the overall religious populace of the United States consist of at least eighty five percent of the total

---

<sup>14</sup> George Goldberg, *Church, State and the Constitution – The Religion Clauses Upside Down* (San Francisco: Gateway Books, 1978), 11.

<sup>15</sup> Segady, “Traditional Religion.”

<sup>16</sup> Joanne Beckman, “Religion in Post WWII America,” *National Humanities Center*, October 2000, <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/trelww2.htm>.

<sup>17</sup> Schneider, *Religion in 20<sup>th</sup> century America*, 16.

population. This demonstrates that religion in the country became even more integrated and institutionalized during this period. What can be concluded from this is that only a small part of the population defined itself as not belonging to any religious institution. “Not much more than ten per cent of the population acknowledges no religious affiliation whatsoever.”<sup>18</sup> These developments over the course of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries made the religiously unaffiliated vastly outnumbered as the United States continued to be one of the most religiously affiliated major nations in the world.

What is more, Christian religion demonstrated to be a powerful institution in the United States at that time. Between the three mainline established religious groups – Catholicism, Protestantism and Judaism – an objective grew to fight the increasing secularization that despite religion’s relevance occurred. This resulted in forms of unification within the major denominations, creating an even smaller stage for the religiously unaffiliated. In 1908, “this nation-wide movement for cooperation between the denominations was institutionalized when the Federal Council of Churches of Christ in America was formalized and found its numbers in the steady growth in size, scope and power of the religious population.”<sup>19</sup>

The growth of this institution could not have taken place without its influence in the political arena. “It goes without saying that the American people’s vested interest in religion would be ineffective in democratic politics if it were not organized as a pressure group for political influence.”<sup>20</sup> This indicates that the link between religion and politics was central to the expansion of the religious body, something that can be seen throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The development of religion in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century shows an increase in religious affiliation and the growth of the church as an institution in the United States. Churches urged unity within, and fought the growth of secularization outside of their denominations. Moreover, the stage for the religiously unaffiliated remained small, if it did not grow even smaller. These trends continue into the 1950s.

Religion in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century experienced a dynamic development. The United States was simultaneously both very secular and very religious.<sup>21</sup> A clear distinction can be made between the 1950s, the post-war years, and the 1960s, a period of social, political, economic and cultural change and diversity. The 1950s saw the masses go back to church,

---

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>21</sup> Kazin, “Religion and Politics since 1945,” 453.

whereas, in the 1960s and 1970s, both progressive and conservative movements arose. These two movements stood in stark contrast to each other. On the one hand, a new conservative movement sprouted up that held on to strong Christian values. On the other hand, new generations found new forms of progressive spirituality that rejected the religious institutions and moved away from dogmatic Christian values.

In the 15 years after World War II, many Americans went back to church after an unsteady period. The United States found itself in the middle of a baby boom until the mid-1960s. New parents moved into suburbs and found “establishing church and family as the twin pillars of security and respectability.”<sup>22</sup> After the war these elements formed the foundation of American society. “Religious membership, church funding, institutional building, and traditional faith and practice all increased in the 1950s. At midcentury, things looked very good for Christian America.”<sup>23</sup> This religious revival, however, did not last very long.

In the 1960s a significant cultural change occurred: “the 1960s witnessed great social turbulence and a rapid shift in public mores, many of which had religious and political implications.”<sup>24</sup> The after-war years proved to give an economic boost to the United States and these economic trends of prosperity were followed by an expansion of the middle class. The baby boom generation grew up and found new fundamental beliefs like social equality, freedom and peace. This created a counter-culture that rose up against established institutions, like government and the church, two elements of society still interwoven. This period is characterized by diversity within religious life.

“Perhaps the one characteristic that distinguishes late-twentieth-century religious life from the rest of America's history is *diversity*.”<sup>25</sup> The new generation found alternative religions and ideals which rejected the dominant and established religious bodies along with their conservative norms and values. These new forms of spirituality went beyond the three mainline dominations. “In the late 1960s and early 1970s religion itself was not rejected so much as was institutionalized Christianity. The Church, along with government, big business, and the military—those composing the Establishment—was denounced by the young adults of the '60s for its materialism, power ploys, self-interest, and smug complacency.”<sup>26</sup> The new counter-culture revolted against elements that were historically part of American culture. At the same time, a new conservative movement sprouted up urging the preservation of established

---

<sup>22</sup> Beckman, “Religion in Post WWII America,”

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Kazin, “Religion and Politics since 1945,” 453.

<sup>25</sup> Beckman, “Religion in Post WWII America.”

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

American culture. A prominent link between religion and politics can be found in this movement. Morality issues with religious overtones became prominent in the political arena. These included school prayer, the teaching of evolution, abortion, birth control, and homosexuality: all hotly debated topics with clear religious overtones that shaped political policy, indicating the ever present religious influence within the political spheres. "Since the civil rights movement of the 1960s, ecclesiastical leaders have sought not only to appeal to the consciences of individual members, but also to make denominational organizations the official agents of political and social change": a prominent reaction to the progressive movements of the 1960s.<sup>27</sup> In fact, new forms of political activism led to "an important trend in the 1970s: the return of evangelicals and fundamentalists to active politics."<sup>28</sup> Evangelicals are strong religious believers, who more often than not, affiliate with conservative ideologies. Conservatism was fostered by conservative Protestant churches across the United States. "These adherent's normative conservatism, firm religious convictions, and moral values helped infuse a socially conservative political culture."<sup>29</sup> For example, this conservative political culture helped ensure the election of Republican president Ronald Reagan, demonstrating the prominence of this new conservative movement that pulled the Christian Right out of the margin and into the mainstream.

Both progressive and conservative movements marked a period of social and cultural change in the United States. Demonstrated here is a decline in religious affiliation and a strengthening of the conservative movements that wanted to hold on to the religious values of American society. Moreover, two opposing trends can be detected: the increase of progressive movements and the diversity of the religious body on the one hand and a conservative movement that lobbied for dogmatic religious policies on the other. These two trends are of major significance because they influenced the development of religion from 1990 onwards: strong conservative Christian values that developed in the 1970s limited the stage for atheists and the unaffiliated. Religious influence of the conservative movements continued well into the 1990s and beginning 2000s, which continued to limit the stage for the religiously unaffiliated. However, with the active promotion of the New Atheism movement, atheists in the United States started to gain ground. At this time, progressive movements played into the development and prominence of New Atheism: they influenced the space that opened up for atheists in the United States at the

---

<sup>27</sup> Sundberg, "Religious Trends," 27.

<sup>28</sup> Kazin, "Religion and Politics since 1945," 453.

<sup>29</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*, 49.

time that it did. This space, however, remained limited because the conservative Christian right continued to attack the moral and ethical aspects of atheism. In doing so, Christians were not so much attacking Hitchens but the liberal aspects of atheism connected to the – according to conservatives – immoral values of its belief.

From the 1990s onwards, an important shift in the American religious landscape can be detected. Whereas from the 1950s to the 1980s the religious scene in the United States underwent significant developments – religious involvement increased, declined and shifted – the 1990s predominantly brought a decline in religious affiliation. Moreover, a rise in atheism can be detected. These trends can be analyzed by both quantitative and qualitative research: data gathered by the Gallup Polls and the Pew Research Center and the works of academic scholars.

Both Michael Kazin and Walter Sundberg have examined denominational shifts within the religious sphere and have given three explanations for religious developments in the after-war period. “First was the steady decline in membership and influence of mainstream Protestant churches.”<sup>30</sup> This shift could increasingly be detected from the 1960s onwards. Sundberg adds to this, that during this shift, along with a decline in mainline church membership, a growth in the evangelical church membership can be found. This correlates with the rise of the Christian Right conservative movements that increased their presence in American political life. The mainline denominations experienced this first shift when new forms of religion found a stage in the United States in the 1960s, as mentioned earlier. Moreover, “Despite their impressive role in society, mainline denominations have suffered loss of members since 1965. The figures for the period from 1965 to 1994 are as follows:”<sup>31</sup>

American Baptist Churches in the USA	-3.3%
Christian Church (Disciples of Christ)	-51.1%
Episcopal Church	-27.0%
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America	-8.5%
Presbyterian Church (USA)	-13.1%
Reformed Church in America	-19.8%
United Church of Christ	-27.5%
United Methodist Church	-22.4%

<sup>30</sup> Kazin, “Religion and Politics since 1945,” 457.

<sup>31</sup> Sundberg, “Religious Trends,” 23.

This table demonstrates that the Christian Church, the United Church of Christ and the Episcopal Church saw a serious decline in membership. The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America lost some of its members, but this can be considered a small number compared to the other Protestant denominations. The Evangelical denomination as a whole did enjoy an increase in numbers. This trend follows the significant development from 1970 onwards when the conservative (predominantly evangelical), right wing supporters gained momentum.

The second shift, according to Kazin, was “the increasing politicization of religious life. The sharpest divisions had once been between denominations, but now separation was deepest between the religious left and the religious right, often with representatives of both points of view in the same denomination.”<sup>32</sup> This was the result of the turbulent cultural changes in the 1960s. The religious field was now more diverse than ever and divided across different lines. Sundberg describes this as a disruptive effect of political activism on the communal life of denominations.<sup>33</sup> For example, where Protestants were first only regarded as Protestants, now there were several subdivisions within this denomination of Christianity. These subdivisions were often oppositions between progressivists and conservatives.

Sundberg points to a third important development that affected religion in the United States at this time, namely, the reduction of the role of religion in public life through the enforcement of the Supreme Court’s legal doctrine of separation of church and state.<sup>34</sup> However, as this thesis argues, religious values and politics remained linked; Sundberg probably exaggerates the impact of the court’s legal doctrine.

A significant rise in religiously unaffiliated Americans can be found from approximately 1990 onwards. This trend is illustrated in the graph below. In 1991, six percent of the American population classified their religious affiliation as “none,” a number that has not substantially moved since 1970. At the end of the 1990s, however, this number rose up to fourteen percent. This number increased again in the late 2000s and early 2010s, eventually reaching twenty percent by the end of 2012. In 2016, twenty five percent of the American population “claim no formal religious identity, making this group the single largest ‘religious group’ in the United States.”<sup>35</sup>

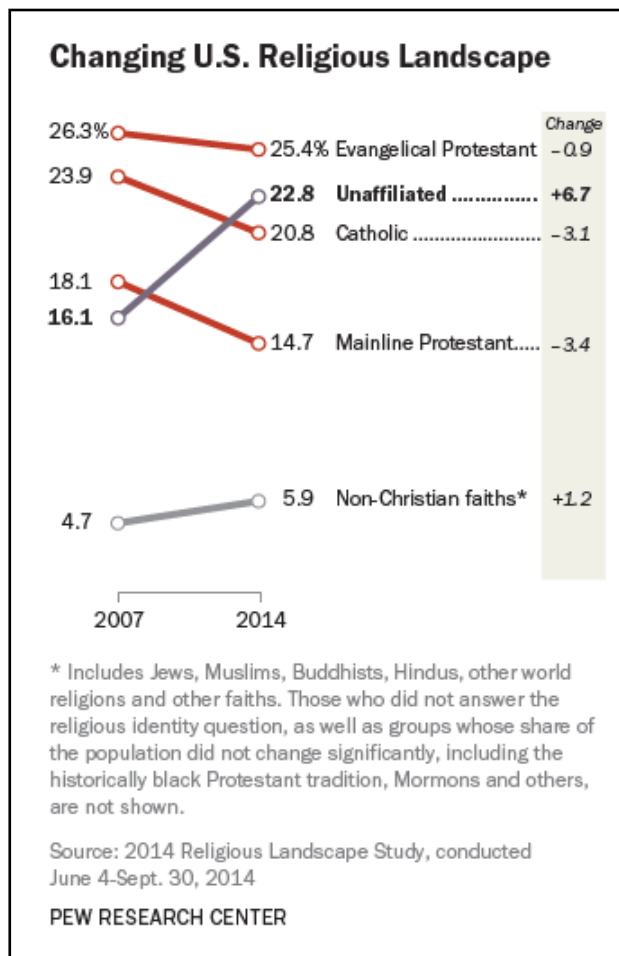
---

<sup>32</sup> Kazin, “Religion and Politics since 1945,” 457.

<sup>33</sup> Sundberg, “Religious Trends,” 23-25.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*, 29-31.

<sup>35</sup> Robert P. Jones et al., “Exodus,” 2.



**FIGURE 1. Growth of the Religiously Unaffiliated, 1972-2016**

Percent of population



Sources: *General Social Survey, 1974-2012; PRRI Surveys, 2014-2016.*<sup>36</sup>

This development within the religious landscape in the United States was accompanied by a rise in atheism; the belief that no God exists. “Along with the rise of religiously unaffiliated Americans (many of whom believe in God), there has been a corresponding increase in the

<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 2.

number of atheists.”<sup>37</sup> So, whereas a decline can be found in the share of Americans who define themselves as Christian, “the number of U.S. adults who do not identify with any organized religion is also growing.”<sup>38</sup> This is a noteworthy development: a drop in religious affiliation and a steady growth of the number of atheists have never been this significant, especially because the numbers seem to correlate, linking the decline in religious affiliation to a rise in atheism. It has to be noted, however, that even though a correlation can be found, atheist movements were relatively new and not yet established.

The trend within the religious landscape, which can be detected beginning in the 1990s, continues, and even grows from 2007 onwards. The Pew Research Center found that between 2007 and 2014 “the Christian share of the population fell from 78.4% to 70.6%, driven mainly by declines among mainline Protestant and Catholics denominations. The unaffiliated experienced the most growth and the share of Americans who belong to non-Christian faiths also increased.”<sup>39</sup> According to the Pew research center, at the same time, “the percentage of Americans who are religiously unaffiliated – describing themselves as atheist, agnostic or ‘nothing in particular’ – has jumped more than six points, from 16.1% to 22.8%.”<sup>40</sup> This is a significant rise in the number of people who don’t identify with any form of religion. Out of the 22.8% of Americans who are not affiliated with any religion, 3.1% identify as atheist, 4% identifies as agnostic and 15.8% does not identify with anything in particular.<sup>41</sup> Additionally, according to The Gallup Polls, the importance of religion in one’s life, church membership, the belief in god and affiliation with no religion have decreased within the last 20 years.<sup>42</sup> The “nones” have overtaken Catholics, mainline Protestants, and all followers of non-Christian faiths.<sup>43</sup> It can therefore be concluded, that according to the data, even though the number of unaffiliated Americans is growing, the actual number of atheists in the United States is still very low.

---

<sup>37</sup> Michael Lipka, “10 Facts About Atheists,” *Pew Research Center*, June 1, 2016, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/10-facts-about-atheists/>.

<sup>38</sup> Alan Cooperman et al., “America’s Changing Religious Landscape,” *Pew Research Center*, May 12, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/#fn-23198-1>.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> Pew Research Center, “Religious Landscape Study,” *Pew Research Center*, accessed September 29, 2017, <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.

<sup>42</sup> The Gallup Polls, “Religion,” *The Gallup Polls*, Accessed September 9, 2017, <http://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.

<sup>43</sup> Gabe Bullard, “The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion,” *National Geographic*, accessed November 15, 2017, <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/>.

## Chapter 1– The New Atheism Debate and the Four Horsemen

The following chapter is divided into three parts and will focus on the development of New Atheism and the Four Horsemen. Firstly, the New Atheist movement will be introduced along with its key players: the Four Horsemen. The development of the movement and the role the Four Horsemen played in its emergence are analyzed and examined. Secondly, reasons for the movement's emergence, prominence and success are examined. This will be done by evaluating multiple books written by religious scholars on different topics concerning the New Atheist debate. Thirdly, the focus will be placed on the Four Horsemen: they will be introduced and compared. This will be done in order to analyze correlations and differences between the writings and argumentation of the four men, and to get an understanding of Hitchens's contributions to the movement. An in-depth analysis of Hitchens's views and opinions and a summary of *God is Not Great* will follow in chapter two. This chapter will focus on the response to the New Atheist movement and the response to *God is Not Great*: the public reactions will be analyzed and evaluated. Finally, the New Atheism debate will be placed next to the religious decline in order to answer the central question: how does the reaction to the work of critical atheist Christopher Hitchens and the other members of the Four Horsemen fit into the history of religious decline in the United States?

New Atheism is a movement “commonly associated with a group of atheists who, starting around 2004, began publishing works arguing that atheists should take a more aggressive stance towards religion and begin fighting its influence on public life.”<sup>44</sup> They believe that societies should take a less accommodating stance toward religion and they argue for the active denunciation of the existence of God. New Atheists make considerable use of the natural sciences to criticize theism and their given explanations of origin and evolution. They use science to refute claims made by theists and conclude that science demonstrates that there is no empirical evidence to prove the existence of a God.<sup>45</sup> “New Atheism is a predominantly Anglo-American phenomenon (though concentrated primarily in the United States) and is typically centered on the works of a number of high profile authors, colloquially known as the Four Horsemen— Richard Dawkins (2006), Daniel Dennett (2006), Sam Harris (2004) and Christopher Hitchens (2007).”<sup>46</sup> These four influential authors have written multiple books,

---

<sup>44</sup> Schulzke, “New Atheism and Moral Theory,” 65.

<sup>45</sup> James E. Taylor, “New Atheism,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed September 29, 2017, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>.

<sup>46</sup> Kettell, “What’s really new about new atheism?,” 2.

articles and blogs about the, according to them, harmful nature of religion. This is not specified to one particular religion; their ideas center around the cross-cultural nature and the effects of religion on societies. Through their writings, the dangers of organized religion are thoroughly analyzed and explained.

“The Atheist Alliance International (AAI)’s convention in September 2007 was a watershed event in the recent history of atheism.”<sup>47</sup> This was the first time the four writers appeared together at the same event. This event highlights the eclipse of the increasing prominence of the New Atheist Movement. Hitchens had just published his book *God is Not Great*, approximately a year after Dawkins, Harris and Dennett launched their anti-religious polemics. After this watershed event, Dawkins took the opportunity to (informally) bring the writers together and talk about their ideas on religion and atheism. This discussion was filmed and released under the name *The Four Horsemen*. The men talked for two hours about their strong aversion against established religion. The video can be seen on YouTube and has been watched over 1.6 million times and has received over 11.300 comments.<sup>48</sup>

After this, the Horsemen sparked a lively debate that stimulated the development of New Atheism. They attended many conferences, had a significant media presence (especially Hitchens and Dawkins in this regard) and debated with scholars and journalist about their ideas and views.<sup>49</sup> The Four Horsemen have successfully brought the concept of (new) atheism to the public’s attention, broke through barriers of religious America and made New Atheism a much-discussed topic. They instigated discussions about religion, evolution and creationism. The most important reason for the success of the movement is the active promotion of New Atheism by the Four Horsemen. Hitchens in this regard, had been most publicly present: he appeared on many TV shows, talk shows, discussion panels and documentaries. As he stated in an interview with Tim Rutten: “I’ve been up and down this country with this book; I’ve been debating with Baptists in North Caroline and rabbis in Coral Gables, Al Sharpton in New York and so on.”<sup>50</sup> This active promotion of the new movement, together with his aggressive confrontations with religious ideologies, made Hitchens the most outspoken horseman, especially regarding religious denunciation. In an interview with George Stroumboulopoulos in 2009, Hitchens was asked the following question: “in a couple of years this growing atheist movement seems to

---

<sup>47</sup> LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 40.

<sup>48</sup> CaNANDian, “The Four Horsemen,” filmed 2007, YouTube Video, 1:57:14, posted July 23, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7IHU28aR2E>.

<sup>49</sup> Amarnath Amarasingam, “Introduction: What is the New Atheism,” in *Religion and the New Atheism: A critical Appraisal*, ed. Amarnath Amarasingam (Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010), 1,2.

<sup>50</sup> Questioning Everything, “Christopher Hitchens – Why God is Not Great Part 1,” filmed 2007, YouTube video, 37:21, Posted May 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RcgP6dWMXI>.

have continued in its own way, what have you noted about it in the time since your book has come out?” His answer: “that there are more people in America who are determined to defend the constitution than the Christian Right had thought, who really do care about the separation of church and state, who are not going to have their children taught creationist nonsense in school, and who really think that the whole point of the United States is; you can be free to practice religion and you can be free not to.”<sup>51</sup> He highlights that this atheist minority is now the fastest growing group in the country; “those who don’t check any box for the faith have gone from about eight to about sixteen percent in ten years.”<sup>52</sup> Here one sees the increasing success of the movement. Together with the other horsemen, Hitchens was key in creating space for the religiously unaffiliated in the United States. This was an important development for the religiously unaffiliated in the United States: where the conservative Christian right and the Evangelicals were shown to gain momentum from the 1990s onwards, New Atheism created a counter movement against the increasing religious influence of these movements on American social life.

A peak can be found in the growing body of literature on New Atheism between 2006 and 2010, both within the academic community and the general public domain. Within the academic community, books, journal articles and reviews were written in response to the publications of the anti-religious polemics. Within the public sphere, a response can be found in the growth of online (new) atheist communities and in the response to videos and blogs posted on New Atheism. This can be seen in the growing number of atheist online platforms. Some of the fastest growing atheist blogs include; Reddit/r/ with 1,037,113 Facebook fans and 448,485 twitter followers, Friendly Atheist with 500,000 followers, Patheos with 95.000 followers and My Atheism, 17.000 followers.

These developments – in combination with the bestselling books by the Four Horsemen – signify how the New Atheist ideology is highlighted and brought to the attention of the American public and academic community. The response to their writing can be defined as diverse, mainly because of the controversial nature of the topic. The books met both praise and admiration, but also condemnation and disapproval. Since the publications of the anti-religious polemics, many followers joined the movement. Through freethinker organizations, the reach

---

<sup>51</sup> CaNANDian, “Christopher Hitchens – Interview on the Hour,” Filmed 2009, YouTube Video, 12:58, posted July 17, 2012, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll1JNik9E\\_Y](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ll1JNik9E_Y).

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

within the online sphere and the massive book sales, the word of New Atheism has spread to thousands of people.<sup>53</sup>

Before an evaluation of the response to New Atheism and Christopher Hitchens can be made, the reasons for the emergence of New Atheism at this point in time need to be explained. This will be done in order to track the development of the movement and understand why it emerged at this specific moment in time and to find possible correlations between the emergence of the movement and the responses it received. Multiple reasons can be attributed to the rise and increased significance of the New Atheist movement. In the following paragraph, the foremost reasons and explanations for its rise are listed.

The first reason centers on the decline in religious affiliation in the United States. As demonstrated in the introduction, a significant decline in religious involvement can be found from 1990 onwards. Additionally, it was stated that the number of atheists has grown in the last 25 years. LeDrew allocates this predominantly to a shift in religious affiliation in the younger demographic.<sup>54</sup> This younger generation is moving away from organized religion. Kazin, Sundberg and Jones et al. have also attributed this to be a reason for the decline in religious affiliation.<sup>55</sup>

Another cause of the rise in New Atheists is the reach of the media. Cimino and Smith and Steven Kettell argue that the reach of the media and online communities have increased the reach of New Atheism. Cimino and Smith explain “how the media environment of America, in the midst of globalization, fits in with the particular ‘socio-logic’ secularism, allowing it to expand and create a new kind of community.”<sup>56</sup> This community has grown exponentially since the publications of the Four Horsemen. Kettell attributes the online platform to the development of the New Atheist movement; “while best-selling publications have been critical for raising awareness of new atheism, one of the central features of its development has been its online character.”<sup>57</sup>

LeDrew, Bullivant, Hyman and Kettell give an additional plausible explanation for the increase in the popularity of the Four Horsemen and New Atheism, namely the rise in Islamic

---

<sup>53</sup> Victor Stenger, “What’s New About The New Atheism?,” *Philosophy Now*, 2010, [https://philosophynow.org/issues/78/Whats\\_New\\_About\\_The\\_New\\_Atheism](https://philosophynow.org/issues/78/Whats_New_About_The_New_Atheism).

<sup>54</sup> Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 55,56.

<sup>55</sup> Kazin, “Religion and Politics since 1945,” 453-457; Sundberg, “Religious Trends,” 27-30; Jones et. all, “Exodus,” 3.

<sup>56</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 5.

<sup>57</sup> Steven Kettell, “Faithless: The politics of new atheism,” *Secularism and Nonreligion*: 2 (2003): 62, accessed December 14, 2017, <https://www.secularismandnonreligion.org/articles/10.5334/snr.al/.63>.

fundamentalists: this rise turned the critique of religion into a “patriotic atheism.”<sup>58</sup> Bullivant pinpoints the rise of popular atheism to 9/11 and the “war on terror” that followed. Because of a rise in Islamic fundamentalism, people began to fear the impact of Islamic religion. Whereas in the past atheism was seen as a threat to the world order, atheists could now assert that religion poses the real threat. It highlights a shift from the previous theist against atheist discussion to a new one: Christianity vs. the Islamic world, a political conflict, as well as a cultural one.<sup>59</sup> This shift was of major importance to the rise of the movement, as the focus shifted to influence of religious extremism instead of the harmful nature of atheism.

This plausible explanation is followed by another component belonging to patriotic atheism. A major factor in the rise of the New Atheism, as argued by LeDrew, is the “surging power and influence of the Christian right during the presidency of George W. Bush. All New Atheists were united in opposition to this movement, Harris and Hitchens for explicitly political reasons, while Dawkins and Daniel Dennett were ostensibly opposed primarily to the attack on evolutionary biology by young-Earth creationists, who advocated for teaching intelligent design in public-school science classes.”<sup>60</sup> In the introduction of this thesis, it was demonstrated that during the 1970s, conservative movements sprouted up in response to the diversification of religion: since Reagan, fundamental Christians in the United States have begun to dominate politics.<sup>61</sup> This turn to conservative politics is something that Hitchens and the other Horsemen fiercely opposed. Hitchens was a well-known political journalist, who openly opposed the Bush administration. In an interview with Chris Matthews in 2000 about the upcoming election, Hitchens called Bush “unusually incurious, abnormally unintelligent, amazingly inarticulate, fantastically uncultured and extraordinarily uneducated, and apparently quite proud of all these things.”<sup>62</sup> Two years later, in an article published by *The Guardian*, Hitchens continued his rant against the then one year old Bush administration; “Mr. Bush is still one of the most unqualified people ever to have run for the highest office, let alone to have attained it.”<sup>63</sup> These bold, public statements made by Hitchens, highlighted his aversion to Mr. Bush and his conservative political agenda. In chapter two, the impact of the rise of the Christian right will be analyzed in

---

<sup>58</sup> LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 39-40; Bullivant, *Religion and the New Atheism*, 115-120; Hyman, *A Short Introduction of Atheism*, Introduction, xiv; Kettell, “Faithless: The Politics of New Atheism.”

<sup>59</sup> LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 39.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> McGirr, *Suburban Warriors*; E.J. Dionne, *Why Americans Hate Politics* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991); Frances FitzGerald, *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017).

<sup>62</sup> TheStevenBlue, “Christopher Hitchens on George Bush (2000),” filmed 2000, YouTube Video, 1:44, posted March 22, 2011, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn0sH1gnHm4>.

<sup>63</sup> Christopher Hitchens, “Hey, I’m doing my best,” *The Guardian*, January 20, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jan/20/usa.georgebush>.

relation to the impact this lingering influence of the movement had on the reception of Hitchens's work.

The academic debate about the public sphere is relevant for the discussion of atheism in the United States. As scholars involved in the debate about atheism (and taking into account the concept of the public sphere developed by colleagues such as Jürgen Habermas) indicate, this debate in “its constitution reveals an affinity with the study of minority and marginalized groups.”<sup>64,65</sup> By means of the public sphere these groups can connect and communicate about their marginalized position and create counter movements where they can express their vision and perspectives through the online public sphere. The public sphere is defined by Habermas as “a realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed. Access is guaranteed to all citizens. A portion of the public sphere comes into being in every conversation in which private individuals assemble to form a public body.”<sup>66</sup> It is important to highlight Habermas in this instance because the New Atheist Movement was predominantly formed in the online public sphere. Moreover, the response and reactions can be evaluated most accurately in this realm. The public sphere – the online media platform in this respect – shaped the impact of new atheism: if the books written by the Four Horsemen had been published prior to established media culture, the influence of the movement would have been substantially different and less influential.

Since 2006 the New Atheist movement has been growing in numbers. Many have joined the movement, “with an upsurge in books, freethinker organizations and an exponential expansion on the blogosphere, spreading the word on atheism to thousands.”<sup>67</sup> The public sphere has become a place where atheists can find each other. Social media and the internet are now used as means for secularists to speak out about their beliefs; it is a place where atheists can connect with one another. While doing this, they are creating a “new kind of collective identity that bypasses previous means of community-building in a particular locale (although it does this, too) while also mobilizing highly individualistic freethinkers into various forms of activism.”<sup>68</sup> This has allowed for atheists to grow in numbers. Moreover, “The largest atheist community is not found in any building or city, yet it serves as both a refuge for beleaguered

---

<sup>64</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 56.

<sup>65</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *Post metaphysical Thinking* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994).

<sup>66</sup> Jürgen Habermas, Sara Lennox, Frank Lennox, “The Public Sphere: an Encyclopedia Article,” *New German Critique*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974): 49, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/487737>.

<sup>67</sup> Stenger, “What’s New About The New Atheism?”

<sup>68</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 5.

secularist and launching pad for attacks against religion and broadsides for atheist rights.”<sup>69</sup>

The powerful rise in the universality of the internet has been especially influential in the growth of the New Atheist movement.<sup>70</sup> By means of the online public sphere, atheists now have a place to connect, find each other and create a shared collective identity. Therefore, a correlation can be found between the prominence of the internet and the rise of secularism and atheism. This is predominantly the case because a sense of community has in the past been difficult to find for many atheists. “Capturing the affective quality of nonreligion is a challenge not only because of the aforementioned individualism, but also because atheist by definition reject religion and its building blocks of rituals and spirituality.”<sup>71</sup> Whereas the belief in God and the act of going to church make a religious person instantly part of a community, atheists, who collectively do not believe in the existence of a God, have had a harder time finding these communities. By means of online platforms, atheist can create their own communities where they can practice their own form of religion; nonreligion. It can therefore be concluded that with the help of the online public sphere, the number of atheists has grown. Moreover, atheism is increasingly developing a public identity as it is finding a place in American society.

Before the response to the writings of Hitchens and the other Horsemen are evaluated, an introduction into the writers will be given to get insight into their main ideas and points of view. All have written books that center around the harmful nature, and their aversion to, religion. Their arguments used to refute the importance of religion relate back to natural science and rational thinking. All writers have different academic backgrounds; they all use different reasoning and argumentation which makes for a diverse set of ideas and arguments used to fuel the New Atheist movement. The reactions to this controversial and critical way of thinking will be analyzed in order to examine to what extent these “horsemen,” in particular Hitchens, were criticized, accepted, and tolerated.

The first Horseman to publish his anti-religious polemic was Sam Harris, born in 1967. He is an American philosopher, neuroscientist, author, blogger and podcast host. He is by far the youngest of the four horsemen and brings another perspective to the discussion on the harmful nature of religion. Harris wrote the book *The end of Faith*.<sup>72</sup> With this book, he won the PEN/Martha Albrand Award for First Nonfiction in 2005. Additionally, in 2005 *The end of*

---

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 85.

<sup>70</sup> Kettell, “Faithless,” 63.

<sup>71</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 6.

<sup>72</sup> Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York City: W.W. Norton, 2004).

*Faith* entered the *New York Times* Best Seller list at number 4 and remained on the list for an entirety of 33 weeks. Harris wrote this book as a “call to arms” for what he believes is an unavoidable battle between science and reason versus the influences of faith and superstition, with enormous and destructive consequences should science and reason fail.<sup>73</sup> As LeDrew argues in his chapter on New Atheism, “*The End of Faith* today reads very much like a fevered response to 9/11 in its discussions of the West’s engagement with Islam as a clash of civilizations, with one representing Enlightenment and moral progress and the other representing barbarism.”<sup>74</sup> He was able to play into the fears of religious (Islamic) fundamentalism after 9/11. For an unknown writer, with only a bachelor’s degree at the time when the book was published, the book was a success. His book was well received by the American public (possibly as a response to the 9/11 anxiety). However, the academic community’s response to his book was more critical; more mixed reviews can be found here.<sup>75</sup> It is noticeable that at the time of publication Harris was hardly taken seriously by academic scholars, unlike Hitchens, Dawkins and Dennett, who were already accredited academics. His text alone would not have sparked the movement, but his publication was an important contribution to the New Atheist Movement.

An academic who influenced the movement to a significantly larger extent was Richard Dawkins. Richard Dawkins, born 1941, is an English ethologist, evolutionary biologist and author of more than a dozen influential books on the topics of science and evolution. The book that made him come to prominence was titled *The Selfish Gene* published in 1976. The book he wrote that made him one of the Four Horsemen was *The God Delusion*.<sup>76</sup> Published in October 2006, it sold a million copies within a year. In September 2014 the book had been sold over 3 million times. Additionally, it hit number four on the *New York Times* hard cover non-fiction best seller list. *The God Delusion* centers on the argument that God almost certainly does not exist and that the belief in a God or gods is a delusion. Dawkins explores topics on the harmful nature of religion and the psychological effects believing in a God can have on societies. Moreover, Dawkins believes that the natural sciences are, and must be, able to explain everything. He places religion against science and tries to use science to discredit religious

---

<sup>73</sup> Harris, *The End of Faith*; LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 41.

<sup>74</sup> LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 41.

<sup>75</sup> Natalie Angier, “The End of Faith: Against Toleration,” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris, *New York Times*, September 5, 2004; Daniel Blue, “A fear of the faithful who mean exactly what they believe,” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris, *San Francisco Gate*, August 15, 2004; David Boulton, “Faith Kills,” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris, *New Humanist*, May 31, 2007; Madeleine Bunting, “The New Atheists loathe religion far too much to plausibly change it,” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris, *The Guardian*, May 7, 2004.

<sup>76</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (London: Penguin Random House UK, 2006).

beliefs. Dawkins does not just focus on religion in general, but particularly on the issue of creationism versus evolution, the latter of which Dawkins is a fierce proponent of. The strongest opposition to evolutionism (Darwinism) comes from religious fundamentalists.<sup>77</sup> His book was the most successful one written by the Four Horsemen, partly because of his well-established academic career and reputation. Dawkins received many responses to his book from the academic community.<sup>78</sup> His book sparked a critical debate about atheism and religion in the United States, and about the teaching of evolution. He found a way to activate critical thinking about a sensitive subject like religion and the place it occupies in Western society. His book created a new platform and opened a new discussion about the existence of religion. It was appraised by LeDrew as “the key text of the contemporary atheist movement and a significant cultural event in its own right.”<sup>79</sup> Dawkins has been a key player in the New Atheist Movement.

The third of the Four Horsemen, Daniel Dennett, can be labeled a fierce opponent of creationism. Daniel Dennett, born 1942, is an American philosopher, cognitive scientist and author. His research focusses on science, biology and the philosophy of the mind. Like Dawkins, his work relates to the field of evolution and science. The book he wrote that made him one of the horsemen is titled *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*.<sup>80</sup> In this book, Dennett states that religious arguments and beliefs should be examined and should be able to be refuted like any other form of belief. His reasoning is clear and precise, especially in reflecting on the relationship between science and religion. Some response can be found in reaction to his book, but not the same amount as in the case of the other Horsemen.<sup>81</sup> *Breaking the Spell* was a bestseller but did not reach the level of fame or prominence as the publications by the other horsemen. His book least resembles an anti-religion polemic, and therefore created the least controversy.

Christopher Hitchens, unlike the other three horsemen, is neither a scientist nor a philosopher of science, which makes him a unique fourth member of the Horsemen. About the similarities between the Hitchens and the other Horsemen Stephen Prothero writes: Hitchens,

---

<sup>77</sup> LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 45.

<sup>78</sup> David Berlinski, *The Devil's Delusion* (New York: Basic Books, 2009); John Cornwell, *Darwin's Angel: An Angelic Riposte to The God Delusion* (London: Profile Books, 2007); John Lennox, *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* (Oxford: Lion Hudson plc, 2007) and Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath, *The Dawkins Delusion* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007).

<sup>79</sup> LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism*, 43.

<sup>80</sup> Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking (Penguin), 2006).

<sup>81</sup> Charles T. Rubin, “The God Meme,” review of *Breaking the Spell*, by Daniel Dennett, *The New Atlantis* 12 (Spring 2006): 71-79; James Brookfield, “Dennett's Dangerous Idea,” review of *Breaking the Spell*, by Daniel Dennett, *World Socialist Website*, November 6, 2006; George Johnson, “Getting a Rational Grip on Religion: Is religion a fit subject for scientific scrutiny?” review of *Breaking the Spell*, by Daniel Dennett, *Scientific American*, January 1, 2006.

“like Richard Dawkins, denounces the religious education of young people as child abuse. Like Sam Harris, fires away at the Koran as well as the Bible. And like Daniel Dennett, views faith as wish-fulfillment.”<sup>82</sup> The following chapter will focus on the writing and argumentation of Hitchens and the response this received within the public, academic and political sphere.

---

<sup>82</sup> Stephen Prothero, “The Unbeliever,” review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2007.

## Chapter 2 – Christopher Hitchens

Christopher Hitchens (13 April 1949 – 15 December 2011), was an Anglo-American author, political journalist, columnist and religious critic. Hitchens wrote, co-authored, edited and co-edited over 30 books.<sup>83</sup> These include five collections of essays which he wrote on the topics of politics, literature and religion. He contributed to newspapers and magazines like *New Statesman*, *The Weekly Standard*, *The Atlantic*, *Free Inquiry* and *Vanity Fair*. Hitchens was a public intellectual who participated in many debates and appeared regularly on TV shows and documentaries. He was a provocative writer who did not often mince his words. He was known for this confrontational, yet intelligent, style of debate. Michael Kinsley wrote in his review on *God is Not Great* in the *New York Times*: “Hitchens is an old-fashioned village atheist, standing in the square trying to pick arguments with the good citizens on their way to church.”<sup>84</sup> Of the Four Horsemen, Hitchens was the most outspoken and therefore received the most critical response. Hitchens was a known liberal: he was listed one the 20 most influential liberals in the United States Media in 2009.<sup>85</sup> Additionally, in 2005, Hitchens was named 5<sup>th</sup> on the list of Top 100 Public Intellectuals by *Foreign Policy* and *Prospect* magazines (Richard Dawkins was 3<sup>rd</sup> on the list). *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* was published on the first of May, 2007.<sup>86</sup> Within just one week, *God is not Great* reached the no 2. Spot on the Amazon best seller list (behind Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows). In its third week, Hitchens’s book reached the number 1 place on the *New York Times* Bestseller list. This book has reached millions of people, creating intense controversy and debate.<sup>87</sup>

In *God is Not Great*, Hitchens makes bold statements about the harmful nature of religion. He aims to show how the world would be better off without it. He found that the religiously affiliated impose their beliefs on those who don’t share the same ideas and convictions. In an interview with Tim Rutten, Hitchens was asked to respond to the following passage from his book explaining why and how religion kills everything: “As I write these words, and as you read them, people of faith are in their different ways planning your and my destruction, and the destruction of all the hard-won human attainments that I have touched upon. Religion poisons

---

<sup>83</sup> Some of his books include: *Imperial spoils* (1987); *Blood, Class, and Nostalgia: Anglo-American Ironies* (1990); *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (2001); *Why Orwell Matters* (2002); *God is Not Great* (2007), *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Non-Believer* (2007); *Hitch-22* (2010); *Mortality* (2011).

<sup>84</sup> Michael Kinsley, “In God, Distrust,” review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *New York Times*, May 13, 2007.

<sup>85</sup> “In Depth: The 25 Most Influential Liberals in the U.S. Media,” Forbes, accessed November 24, 2017, [https://www.forbes.com/2009/01/22/influential-media-obama-oped-cx\\_tv\\_ee\\_hra\\_0122liberal\\_slide/#3ded20ca3832](https://www.forbes.com/2009/01/22/influential-media-obama-oped-cx_tv_ee_hra_0122liberal_slide/#3ded20ca3832).

<sup>86</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God is Not Great* (New York: Twelve (Hachette Book Group), 2007).

<sup>87</sup> On goodreads.com, *God is Not Great* has 71.946 ratings and 4.069 reviews.

everything.”<sup>88</sup> In his response, Hitchens highlights the – in his perspective – “incorrectness” of Mother Theresa; “She is not saying; I have a great relationship with Jesus, and I have a wonderful church and I have a wonderful faith and it makes me happy. She is saying it better make you happy too, because whether you agree with it or not, we are going to impose it on you.”<sup>89</sup> These bold statements are distinctive of Hitchens’s fierce attack on religion and those who preach it. Additionally, when asked the question in an interview with Charlie Rose, “do you find it interesting if you just take those who believe deeply in a God more likely to be in your judgement militaristic”? Hitchens responded to this argument with the following statement: “the way I meet them is, they come to me and say ‘I can’t be happy until you believe it too’ [...] they won’t leave me alone.”<sup>90</sup>

In *God is Not Great*, Hitchens refutes the biblical stories (especially the New Testament) and makes claims as to why religion is not the core foundation of morality. He also refers to the other three horsemen in his book, and how their books, ideas and arguments are beneficial in making the case against religion. Science and reason also play an important role and are used to justify the arguments made by Hitchens. *God is Not Great* includes chapters like ‘Religion Kills’, ‘Religion as an Original Sin’ and ‘Is Religion Child Abuse?’ These chapters demonstrate the provocative nature of Hitchens’s writing.

Hitchens starts his books by giving insight into his childhood, where as a nine-year-old, he knew his teacher got it wrong when she said how powerful and generous God is by making the grass green because it is “the most restful color for our eyes.”<sup>91</sup> He phrased his atheistic belief as follows:

Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith. We do not rely solely upon science and reason, because these are necessary rather than sufficient factors, but we distrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason. We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, open mindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake.<sup>92</sup>

Additionally, Hitchens relays the difference between the perspectives of an atheist to that of a religious believer and links this to the morality of people. He adds to that that “God did not

---

<sup>88</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 12.

<sup>89</sup> Questioning Everything, “Christopher Hitchens – Why God is Not Great Part 1,” filmed 2007, YouTube Video, 37:21, Posted May 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RcgP6dWMXI>.

<sup>90</sup> Rational Thought321, “Christopher Hitchens - "God Is Not Great" Interview,” Filmed May 2007, YouTube Video, 11:20, posted August 10, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbsYsB3tS1k>.

<sup>91</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 3.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

create man in his own image. Evidently, it was the other way about.”<sup>93</sup> Hitchens continues by giving examples of five different places where religion has been responsible for violence and brutalities. Hitchens also makes a case of how religion poses a threat to public health. He noted that “the attitude of religion to medicine, like that attitude of religion to science, is always necessarily problematic and very often necessarily hostile.”<sup>94</sup> Here, Hitchens also mentions Dennett and his views on religion and health. Hitchens also makes a case against the New and the Old Testaments. He relates this back the argument that “religion comes from the period of human prehistory where nobody [...] had the smallest idea what was going on.”<sup>95</sup> Hitchens continues with the harmful nature of the Islam; he lists the violent beginning of Islam, like the violent beginning of Christianity. He acknowledges the foreign nature of this religion but he feels there is “no certainty or truth to the story.”<sup>96</sup> When he talks about the Islam, its religious practices and the Koran in his interview with Rutten, he states very clearly: “I won’t be talked to like that, I am not going to be tolerated by the admirers of an illiterate middle-eastern peasantry.”<sup>97</sup> He continues by giving examples of “miracles” that people believe in, which, according to Hitchens, can easily be explained through science. He argues that even in light of scientific explanations, “it is surprising how petty some of the ‘supernatural’ now seem.”<sup>98</sup>

In an interview with Charlie Rose, Hitchens explained the statements made in his book on the belief in the supernatural. As he argued: “the attempt to derive morality from the supernaturally is becoming very menacing now. The people that think they have permission from the heavens are trying to kill us.”<sup>99</sup> In his book, therefore, Hitchens also discusses moral issues such as racism, slavery and Martin Luther King Jr. He makes a bold statement in calling King in a way a likeminded figure: “in no real as opposed to nominal sense, was he a Christian.”<sup>100</sup> Additionally, he feels that “the argument that religious belief improves people, or that is help tot civilize society, is one that people tend to bring up when they have exhausted the rest of their case.”<sup>101</sup> Moreover, he makes a case by utilizing a different argument: “it is impossible to argue that religion causes people to behave in a more kindly or civilized

---

<sup>93</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid., 74.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 156.

<sup>97</sup> Questioning Everything, “Christopher Hitchens – Why God is Not Great Part 1,” filmed 2007, YouTube Video, 37:21, Posted May 26, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RcgP6dWMXI>.

<sup>98</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 166.

<sup>99</sup> Rational Thought321, “Christopher Hitchens - "God Is Not Great" Interview,” Filmed May 2007, YouTube Video, 11:20, posted August 10, 2010, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbsYsB3tS1k>.

<sup>100</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 210.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 221.

manner.”<sup>102</sup> Hitchens elaborates on this in an interview regarding the morals of atheists. “If Christopher Hitchens does not believe in God, reviewers have asked, then where does he get his sense in right and wrong?” Hitchens found this question in itself insulting and when asked why, he replied with the following statement: “because I think its degrading to the human, to us, to you and me, to state directly that absent a celestial dictatorship that has some supernatural influence over us, jet to be established by the way as anything really existent, but without the assumption of it, we wouldn’t know right from wrong.”<sup>103</sup> In the chapter labeled “Is Religion Child Abuse,” Hitchens talks about the harmfulness of religion for children. He argues that “we can be sure that religion has always hoped to practice upon the unformed and undefended minds of the young, and has done to great lengths to make sure of this privilege by making alliances with secular power in the material world.”<sup>104</sup> He conveys the dangers of religion and the effects this can have on the young minds of children. In a speech given by Hitchens at the Festival of Dangerous Ideas in 2009, he elaborates on the harmful nature of religion when it comes to children; “civilization in my submission, begins where that evil nonsense leaves off and we have to advance the time when more and more people will be able to civilize themselves by outgrowing religion and leaving this awful nonsense behind.”<sup>105</sup> In his final chapter “The Need for a New Enlightenment,” Hitchens calls for a renewed Enlightenment and the replacement of faith by reason. He argues that “religion has run out on justifications” and that we should “banish all religions from the discourse.”<sup>106</sup> Atheism is the solution to the problem of religion and a clear separation between religion, politics and society is needed. These bold claims and statements in his crusade against religion, his outspoken opinion and his provocative writing style caused the response to Hitchens’s book and the New Atheist movement to vary immensely.

Response to the New Atheist movement is plentiful. Multiple books have been written about the Four Horsemen and New Atheism. These can be divided into two main categories, anti-religious polemics and counter polemics. “Polemics,” as defined by the Cambridge Dictionary, refers to “a piece of writing or a speech in which a person strongly attacks or defends a particular

---

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 230.

<sup>103</sup> CaNANDian, “Christopher Hitchens - The morals of an atheist,” Filmed 2007, YouTube video, posted July 19, 2012, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOHgrnaTxk0>.

<sup>104</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 260.

<sup>105</sup> \_Four\_Horsemen, “Christopher Hitchens destroys the myth that morality comes from religion,” filmed October 2009, YouTube Video, 07:49, posted July 17, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG-JLmc4Krw>.

<sup>106</sup> Hitchens, *God is Not Great*, 339/340.

opinion, person, idea, or set of beliefs.”<sup>107</sup> New Atheist polemics often come in the form of religious attacks and the defense of evolution. They stir up controversy and debate. These writers published critical books on religion and the importance of evolution and creationism. This type of academic response can be dubbed fierce and opinionated and tends to be met with controversy. Response also comes in the form of counter-polemics (books and articles): these respond or evaluate the polemic works of the four horsemen, the ideology and theories they advocate. More often than not, these are written by either theologians or religious scholars.

Predominant literature on New Atheism in this thesis includes the work of LeDrew (2016), Cimino and Smith (2014), Amarasingam (2010), Cotter, Quadrio and Tuckett (2017) and Bullivant & Ruse (2013). These books conceptualize New Atheism and its historic background. An evaluation of these books will place the academic response to New Atheism in a larger debate. These particular books were chosen because they highlight the development of New Atheism, they analyze New Atheism from different perspectives, and they demonstrate a varied response coming from the academic community.

In their book, *Atheist Awakening*, Cimino and Smith bring “together eminent and rising scholars in the fields of religious studies, sociology of religion, sociology of science, philosophy, and theology in order to engage the New Atheist literature and place it in the context of larger scholarly discourses and debates.”<sup>108</sup> In relation to Habermas and his ideas about the public sphere, here one sees this theory in practice. Both the online platform and the media have contributed to the rise of (new) atheism. Cimino and Smith explain “how the media environment of America in the midst of globalization fits in with the particular ‘socio-logic’ secularism, allowing it to expand and create a new kind of community.”<sup>109</sup> Social media and the online public sphere helped create a space for atheists to find each other and facilitated the creation of a shared collective identity.

They analyze both the environment of social media along with the public response: the sociology and the context of the public sphere. This is an important analysis because it highlights a significant factor in the rise of New Atheism: the (online) media. Research in this thesis differs in this respect that it does not focus on the context of media environment but on the content within it: the reaction to Hitchens within the public sphere (social media).

---

<sup>107</sup> “Polemic,” Cambridge Dictionary, accessed December 19, 2017, <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polemic>.

<sup>108</sup> Amarasingam, “Introduction: What is the New Atheism,” 2.

<sup>109</sup> Cimino and Smith, *Atheist Awakening*, 5.

Stephen Bullivant together with Michael Ruse wrote *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. They give an extensive, in-depth analysis of atheism. They touch upon the many elements connected to atheism. Some of these include Atheism and History, Atheism and the Natural Sciences and Global Expressions. Additionally, in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, Thomas Zenk has written a chapter about New Atheism. The Four Horsemen are highlighted along with their core ideas.<sup>110</sup> Bullivant is an influential scholar in the field of atheism. He wrote a chapter called “The New Atheism and Sociology: Why Here? Why now? What next?” in *Religion and the New Atheism*.<sup>111</sup> LeDrew also mentions Bullivant in his book on the evolution of atheism. He is an influential writer in the atheism field and an often quoted academic.

Amarasingam gives a traditional response to New Atheism in his book *Religion and the New Atheism*. In twelve chapters, different prominent religious scholars shared their views on New Atheism, religion and science. Amarasingam wrote the introduction and in general gives a critical response to the Four Horsemen. The book “serves to contextualize and critically examine the claims, arguments and goals of the new atheism so that readers can become more informed of some of the debates with which the New Atheists inevitably and, at times unknowingly, engage.”<sup>112</sup> Writers like Stephen Bullivant, Cimino and Smith and Steve Fuller have written chapters in this analysis of religion and New Atheism.

LeDrew has written on the evolution of atheism. He makes the argument that New Atheism can be seen as a response to religious fundamentalism. In his book *The Evolution of Atheism*, he devotes chapters to new atheism, the four horsemen and the public impact and critical response to New Atheism. *The Evolution of Atheism* is important in this regard because it gives multiple reasons for the rise of the New Atheist movement. This, together with the extensive analysis given on the Four Horsemen, makes for an important contribution to the field.

In *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates*, Christopher Cotter, Philip Andrew Quadrio and Jonathan Tuckett give an overview of the contemporary research on New Atheism.<sup>113</sup> The book starts with an introduction by Stephen Bullivant and is comprised of eleven chapters written by religious academics, philosophers, literary critics and sociologists. This diverse group of writers ensures new perspectives on the newly developed

---

<sup>110</sup> Thomas Zenk, “New Atheism,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, ed. Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 245-260.

<sup>111</sup> Amarasingam, “Introduction: What is the New Atheism,” 2.

<sup>112</sup> “Religion and the New Atheism,” Brill, accessed December 9, 2017, <http://www.brill.com/religion-and-new-atheism>.

<sup>113</sup> Cotter, Quadrio and Tuckett, *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives*.

movement and the theism versus atheism debate. This book is sure to spark new debates on the topic of New Atheism mainly because the book highlights the controversial nature of the movement and because of the multidisciplinary approach by its writers. Different topics are explored in relations to New Atheism which gives a comprehensive analysis of the movement: critical perspectives and contemporary debates on New Atheism.

These books only make up a small part of the response to the New Atheist movement. These books were chosen because they highlight the diversity of the response including definitions and the development of the concept, New Atheism in relation to the online public sphere, its historic background, the impact of the movement and the contemporary debate. Most books have been written by theologians and religious scholars. The evaluation of the response to Hitchens in the following part of this thesis will contextualize the New Atheism debate in relation to Hitchens's writing. This will be done in a broader context than the examination of the movement solely within the academic debate in the United States.

The reviews analyzed here were all written in the months after *God is Not Great* was published. Reviews by Michael Kinsley from *The New York Times*, Stephen Prothero, chair of Boston University's religion department, in *The Washington Post*, Jennie Rothenberg Gritz from *The Atlantic*, Michael Skapinker, a contributing editor and columnist on business and society at *The Financial Times* and Laura Lloyd from the *National Catholic Reporter*, will be evaluated. These newspapers have been chosen because together they demonstrate a diverse response, which will make for a varied analysis of the reaction to Hitchens's work. Kinsley and Rothenberg Gritz offer a positive evaluation, whereas Skapinker, Prothero and Lloyd are significantly more critical about Hitchens's work.

Positive commentary on *God is Not Great* is mostly found in Hitchens's intelligent and provocative writing style as well as in his wit and his ability to add a comical element to the serious topic of religion. Michael Kinsley wrote a review in the *New York Times* applauding Hitchens and his *God is Not Great*. He finds Hitchens to be bright and confrontational in his writing and his opinions. Kinsley adequately portrays Hitchens's ferocious attack on religion, and feels he does so with "tremendous brio and great wit."<sup>114</sup> Jennie Rothenberg Gritz agrees in her review of Hitchens in *The Atlantic*. She mentions his critical and provocative language and admires his boldness and his "razor sharp wit blatant disregard for all things sacred."<sup>115</sup>

---

<sup>114</sup> Kinsley, "In God, Distrust."

<sup>115</sup> Jennie Rothenberg Gritz, "Transcending God," review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *The Atlantic*, July, 2007, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/07/transcending-god/306076/>.

Stephen Prothero also comments on Hitchens's intelligence: "Christopher Hitchens is a brilliant man, and there is no living journalist I more enjoy reading."<sup>116</sup> Additionally, Prothero also comments on Hitchens's writing style: "his attack on 'intelligent design' is not only convincing but comical, coursing as it does through the crude architecture of the appendix and our inconvenient 'urinogenital arrangements.'"<sup>117</sup> Kinsley ends his review with the sentence "God should be flattered: unlike most of those clamoring for his attention, Hitchens treats him like an adult."<sup>118</sup>

Hitchens is critiqued most for his lack of valid reasoning, his lack of evidence to substantiate his claims and his inability to understand the fundamental meaning of religion. Prothero is not a fan of Hitchens, and he feels his work is not sufficiently substantiated. "Hitchens says a lot of true things in this wrongheaded book" but "what Hitchens gets wrong is religion itself." Prothero feels Hitchens does not have enough religious knowledge and thinks Hitchens is naïve in his claims about religion. Moreover, he feels Hitchens did not do enough inquiry into the subject of religion and is very ill-prepared to write a book on, in Hitchens's perspective, its harmful nature. "I have never encountered a book whose author is so fundamentally unacquainted with its subject. In the end, this maddeningly dogmatic book does little more than illustrate one of Hitchens's pet themes -- the ability of dogma to put reason to sleep."<sup>119</sup> This is also something Skapinker found as he argues that Hitchens does not have enough evidence to support his claims. He calls the book "not only a polemic against literalism; it is an attack on any accommodation between religion and science, faith and progress."<sup>120</sup> In the end, Skapinker's review clearly demonstrates that he feels the book is lacking in valid reasoning. Moreover, whereas Hitchens claims that religion poisons everything, Skapinker feels that statement is too bold. Lloyd writes her piece around the question: "What is it about *God Is Not Great* that is giving it the legs to keep selling vigorously in a crowded field of summer nonfiction?"<sup>121</sup> She answers this question by portraying the critical opinions of multiple people in the bookselling and book-reading profession. She quotes Steve Shapiro, who feels that "Hitchens has gotten to a point where he thinks he's God." She also quotes Christopher C. Roberts, who feels that "consumerism and a lack of understanding of traditional religion leads

---

<sup>116</sup> Prothero, Stephen, "The Unbeliever," Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2007.

<sup>117</sup> Prothero, "The Unbeliever."

<sup>118</sup> Kinsley, "In God, Distrust."

<sup>119</sup> Stephen Prothero, "The Unbeliever."

<sup>120</sup> Skapinker, "Here's the Hitch," review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *Financial Times*, June 22, 2017.

<sup>121</sup> Laura Lloyd, "An Attack on God both Outrages and Popular," review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *National Catholic Reporter*, August 3, 2007.

Americans to want to be amused, not enlightened.” She also features Fr. Richard McBrien, a professor of theology and writer at the University of Notre Dame, who feels “the recent spate of anti-God books by such writers as Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris and Hitchens are unsophisticated arguments.”<sup>122</sup> Moreover, in accordance with the critique given by Prothero and Skapinker, Lloyd highlights Hitchens’s lack in understanding the fundamentals of religious faith. Additionally, Skapinker finds many gaps in Hitchens’s reasoning and is not fond of Hitchens’s argumentation style. The most significant gap Skapinker found was that “the problem with Hitchens’s thesis that religion poisons everything is how to explain those who use it to do good.”<sup>123</sup> He ends his review with the sentence “If that sort of intellectual and moral shabbiness is to your taste, this book should be too.”<sup>124</sup>

A rather elaborate review was written by pastor and adjunct seminary professor Dr. Mark D. Roberts. This review is included because Roberts gives a comprehensive account of Hitchens’s work and analyses the discussion adequately. He wrote a review of Hitchens’s book after a discussion with him on the Hugh Hewitt radio Show. He posted a blog on Patheos, writing about his 3-hour long discussion with Hitchens.<sup>125</sup> Roberts takes a professional approach in his analysis of Hitchens. He acknowledged Hitchens’s prominence as an intellectual and atheist. Additionally, Roberts called Hitchens “a bright, well-educated, quick-thinking, widely-read, rhetorically-brilliant and dagger-tongued debater.” Moreover, even though reverend Roberts does not agree with Hitchens’s points of view, a respectful discourse between the two men led to an interesting analysis of Hitchens and his book. Roberts was most critical about the fact that he feels the book is filled with statements that appear to be factual. Books like these are valuable according to Roberts, but are hard to assess; arguments in this field cannot easily be tested on truthfulness. According to Roberts this is why the book both resonates with atheists and why the religious community has an easy time dismissing its claims. In his evaluation he takes a fact-checking approach. Roberts keeps the reader within the realm of the rational and scientific, like Hitchens does. Roberts, after doing some research into the book, finds that Hitchens is not a “reliable reporter of facts.” Moreover, he adequately portrays the debate surrounding the book; “I think I can say something about *God is not Great* that everyone can agree with: It is filled with purported statements of fact. Those who like Hitchens may be unhappy with ‘purported,’ but surely they must understand that by using this word I’m

---

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Skapinker, “Here’s the Hitch.”

<sup>124</sup> Ibid.

<sup>125</sup> “Patheos.com is the premier online destination to engage in the global dialogue about religion and spirituality, and to explore and experience the world’s beliefs,” <http://www.patheos.com/about-patheos>.

not necessarily denying the truthfulness of Hitchens's claims. I'm simply noting that *God is Not Great* is filled with thousands of statements that appear to be factual."<sup>126</sup>

To summarize: these outspoken reviews all highlight Hitchens's fierce attack on religion. These reviews acknowledge the prominence of the movement. Positive commentary is found in Hitchens's writing style, his wit and his ability to capture his audience. These authors agree on the fact that *God is Not Great* makes for sparkling reading. However, these reviews are more negative than positive in their arguments. A reoccurring theme is his lack in substantiating his arguments, his insufficient understanding of religion and his refusal to recognize the importance of the meaning of God for those who benefit from religious convictions. The vast response to Hitchens's work proves the significance of the (new) atheist debate within the public sphere. The response resembles the one in the academic reviews, which can also be labeled as diverse.

The following reviews are written by academics shortly after Hitchens's book was published. The reviews are generally positive about Hitchens's writing and argumentation, but find flaws in his reasoning and substance. This is predominantly the case because Hitchens refuses to acknowledge the importance of God to the religious community. These reviews are written by Nicolas Marsh in the *Journal of Peace Research*, MD Maurie Markman, a professor at the University of Texas, June Sawyers, a freelance reviewer and regular contributor to the *Chicago Tribune* who specializes in pop culture and religion and Mimi Hanaoka, a professor of religious studies at the University of Virginia in Richmond. Overall, these reviews by academics are relatively positive in nature. The authors of these reviews seem to agree on Hitchens's strengths and shortcomings.

Throughout these reviews, the writers agree on Hitchens's ability to capture his audience, his witty writing style and his skillful argumentation. Nicholas Marsh starts his review in the *Journal of Peace Research* with the sentence "Christopher Hitchens has written a well-crafted polemic against religious faith."<sup>127</sup> He captures the essence of his book with precision and finds Hitchens to be a skilled writer. Markman, a professor at the University of Texas, evaluated both *The God Delusion* and *God is Not Great*. He finds the books brilliantly written; "both writers have unquestionably—and quite eloquently—expressed a coherent

---

<sup>126</sup> Rev. Dr. Mark D. Roberts, "Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not great*," *Patheos*, accessed December 19, 2017, <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/god-is-not-great-by-christopher-hitchens-a-response/>.

<sup>127</sup> Nicholas Marsh, "Review," review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *Journal of Peace Research* 45, No. 1 (Jan. 2008): 122, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640632>.

perspective on the role of religion in the daily life of individuals and its disconcerting impact on both history and our current geopolitical environment.”<sup>128</sup> Sawyers understands that Hitchens has a tendency to provoke and that he will not be liked by many, but she finds him amusing and well-spirited. “Indeed, he is effortlessly witty and entertaining as well as utterly rational. Believers will be disturbed and may even charge him with blasphemy, and he may not change many minds, but he offers the open-minded plenty to think about.”<sup>129</sup> In her review Hanaoka labels *God is Not Great* as “the best of bad scholarship.” Moreover, “his prose is articulate, his style is witty and his zeal is catching. What Hitchens lacks in substance — which is considerable — he abundantly compensates for in style.”<sup>130</sup> Marsh concludes his review with the following statement; “whether or not you agree with its thesis, the book is to be recommended as fine example of tightly controlled argumentation. In the end, it is a polemic rather than a treatise, but a well-written one.”<sup>131</sup>

Negative commentary on *God is Not Great* within these academic reviews is predominantly found in Hitchens’s lack in acknowledging the importance and meaning of a personal God and on flaws in Hitchens’s reasoning. Hanaoka describes this as follows: “While Hitchens's invective is clever and unapologetic, it is ultimately weaker—though no less fun to read—for his insistence on drawing a division between religious forces and worldly concerns where no such neat distinction exists.”<sup>132</sup> Marsh acknowledges his shortcomings: he feels that “at times, he overreaches and indulges in the mental gymnastics he condemns in the faithful.” Marsh finds flaws in Hitchens’s reasoning and relays some of his arguments. Moreover, he gives an example of a flaw in his reasoning concerning his chapter on secular atheist regimes. “Most importantly, he tries to define officially atheist and murderous regimes (such as the Soviet Union or North Korea) as actually being religious because they deified their leaders and used elements of ritual. While they did borrow from religion, these atheists were very different from the faithful described in the rest of *God Is Not Great* and cannot be classed as such.”<sup>133</sup> Hanaoka found that Hitchens’s call for enlightenment and his insistence to separate religion from politics is something that cannot be achieved. Even though “his assault on religion is articulate, the central problem with Hitchens's argument is also what makes his tirade such a

---

<sup>128</sup> Maurie Markman, MD, “Benefits of Religious Beliefs for Cancer Patients: A Response to Dawkins and Hitchens,” *Current Ontology Reports* 10(2008): 185.

<sup>129</sup> June Sawyers, “Religion—Bad or Good?,” *Booklist* (April 1, 2007): 8.

<sup>130</sup> Mimi Hanaoka, “The Devil in the Details,” review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no 1 (Fall/Winter 2007): 265.

<sup>131</sup> Marsh, “Review.”

<sup>132</sup> Hanaoka, “The Devil in the Details,” 263.

<sup>133</sup> Marsh, “Review.”

good read: his stubborn insistence on divorcing religion from political, social and economic concerns where no such distinction can be made.”<sup>134</sup> Markman uses science to pinpoint a significant lack in Hitchens’s and Dawkins’ argumentation. He finds that “unfortunately both authors either fail to appreciate, or have chosen not to acknowledge, the extraordinary importance that a very ‘personal God’ may play in the lives of many individuals forced to deal with profoundly life-changing situations.”<sup>135</sup> Hanaoka agrees with Markman and feels Hitchens fails to acknowledge the religious experience that can be important to others. Because Hitchens has written such an anti-religious polemic, critical commentary on his book often includes his lack in acknowledging the meaning of God for others. Hitchens also had a hard time divorcing religion from politics and issues of political religion. Politics and religion are inevitably interwoven, something that can be seen in the rise of the Christian right, the election of Reagan and the conservative agenda of the George W. Bush administration. Hanaoka highlights Hitchens’s inability to acknowledge this connection: “Hitchens seems intermittently aware that he is really describing the juncture of religion and politics, yet he always returns to his stubborn insistence that complex phenomena are exclusively religious.”<sup>136</sup>

After a close evaluation of these reviews, it can be concluded that, like the reviews published in American newspapers, academics highlight Hitchens’s ability to capture his audience with his witty comments and his particular argumentation style. They acknowledge his provocative writing style and find it one of Hitchens’s strengths. Most recommend his book as a well-crafted polemic against religion. On the other hand, these reviewers agree on his inability to substantiate some of his claims, and the failure to acknowledge the meaning of a “personal God.” Reverend Mark D. Robert generalized the response in two opposing groups: “Few books will divide the house more than *God is not Great*. Atheists will happily devour it; religious folks will find it most distasteful. My guess is that few books are more polarizing than this particular volume.”<sup>137</sup>

While, within the public and academic sphere the New Atheist movement and Hitchens’s work are thoroughly discussed, response within the political field remained mostly absent. Even though Hitchens was a well-known (provocative) political journalist in Washington D.C., politicians refrained from publicly addressing Hitchens and the New Atheism. New Atheism

---

<sup>134</sup> Hanaoka, “The Devil in the Details,” 265.

<sup>135</sup> Markman, “Benefits of Religious Beliefs for Cancer Patients.”

<sup>136</sup> Hanaoka, “The Devil in the Details,” 265.

<sup>137</sup> Roberts, “Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not great*.”

can be labeled as a non-issue in American politics because religion still strongly influences Americans politics: because of the lingering influence of religion in American politics, atheism is not considered a topic that needs to be discussed. As I mentioned before, religious issues are increasingly part of American politics from the 1970s onwards.<sup>138</sup> “Evangelical Christians under the banner of the Moral Majority made a determined push to influence political leaders since the 1970s and to inject religion into political debates.”<sup>139</sup> This religious presence affected political debates throughout the years: from issues like abortion in the 70s and later, to gay marriage in more recent years. Conservatives adhered to the strong Christian values they felt should influence politics. Atheists, they argued, lack these moral values and should not be represented in politics. Nowadays, given international developments and the rise of movements such as IS politicians may well engage in denunciation of religious extremism. However, even though recently the conservative right increasingly focused on the dangers of Islam, it still does not, generally speaking, accept atheists into the political sphere.

Additionally, taking a stand in the atheism-debate is not considered to be an issue to gain votes; on the contrary, silence on the issue is more profitable. Newspaper articles can be found discussing the limitations of atheism in politics. These include titles such as “Atheism in American politics,” “Why do Americans still dislike atheists?,” “There Are Still No Open Atheists in Congress,” and “Atheism is the stained-glass ceiling in American politics.”<sup>140</sup> These newspaper articles argue that atheists in American society and politics are still in a disadvantaged and compromised position. As Mark Kingwell wrote, “The original stained-glass

---

<sup>138</sup> Tom Freiling, *Reagan's God and Country: A President's Moral Compass: His Beliefs on God, Religious Freedom, the Sanctity of Life and More*, (Regal House Publications: Raleigh, 2003); Kim Phillips-Fein, *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*, (New York City: W.W. Norton, 2004); Paul Kengor, *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life*, (Harper Perennia: New York, 2005); Steven M. Teles. *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law (Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives)*, (New Jersey: Princeton University, 2008); Rick Perlstein, *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*, (New York: Nation Books, 2009); Robert C. Smith, *Conservatism and Racism, and Why in America They Are the Same*, (New York: State University of New York Press, 2009); Thomas Borstelmann, *The 1970s A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*, (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011) and Dominic Sandbrook, *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2012).

<sup>139</sup> Nigel Barber, “Why Religion Rules American Politics,” *Huffington Post*, July 7, 2012.

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nigel-barber/why-religion-rules-american-politics\\_1690433.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nigel-barber/why-religion-rules-american-politics_1690433.html)

<sup>140</sup> Gregory Paul, “Atheism in American politics,” *The Washington Post*, June 20, 2011,

<https://live.washingtonpost.com/atheists-fed-up.html>, Gregory Paul and Phil Zuckerman, “Why do Americans still dislike atheists?,” *The Washington Post*, April 29, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-americans-still-dislike-atheists/2011/02/18/AFqgnwGF\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.88afb26892bd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-americans-still-dislike-atheists/2011/02/18/AFqgnwGF_story.html?utm_term=.88afb26892bd), Nick Wing,

“There Are Still No Open Atheists in Congress,” *Huffington Post*, April 1, 2017,

[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/no-atheists-in-congress\\_us\\_586c074ae4b0de3a08f9d487](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/no-atheists-in-congress_us_586c074ae4b0de3a08f9d487), and Mark Kingwell, “Atheism is the stained-glass ceiling in U.S. politics,” *The Globe and Mail*, July 27, 2016 (updated March 24, 2017), <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/atheism-is-the-stained-glass-ceiling-in-us-politics/article31122827/>.

ceiling kept women from the top of religious hierarchies; this one [the class-ceiling for atheists] keeps non-believers from the levers of power.”<sup>141</sup> Kingwell demonstrates that, while the religiously unaffiliated and atheist communities in the United States are growing, there are still political limitations to those open about their atheist beliefs. This is shown by the fact that not one open atheist can be found in today’s 155<sup>th</sup> United States Congress. Moreover, “No candidate has ever entered Congress as an avowed atheist.”<sup>142</sup>

Whereas academics have discussed the correlation between religious decline, atheist affiliation and the implications of New Atheism, not many have discussed the politics involved. Steven Kettell is one of the few exceptions, with an article about the issue. He discusses the absence of a political dimension within the academic debate on New Atheism. “The broader dynamics of new atheism, including its political aims, organization and strategies, particularly beyond the small number of high-profile authors who are typically taken to represent new atheism as a whole, remain largely unexplored.”<sup>143</sup> The lack of interest in the issue of New Atheism’s political implications is at once difficult to explain and obvious. Atheism is a non-issue for politicians, a topic they stay away from, which makes relating politics and New Atheism not only a hazardous but also futile endeavor. However, this is exactly what people like Hitchens were trying to do: challenge the ever-present relationship between politics and religion in his provocative articles and books like *God is Not Great*. Even though he stirred up controversy with his statements and books, he failed in the end to create the political debate he was interested in. In politics as well as academia, this debate about New Atheism’s political implications is not really taking place. The American religious landscape may be changing and growing increasingly diversified, but this religious diversity has not yet impacted, to a serious extent, the political sphere.

The response to Hitchens’s work is diverse. On the one hand a general public embraced him as a witty author who succeeded in bringing the important debate about atheism to a large group of people and skillfully delineated the atheist position. On the other hand, his critics attack him for doing what he accuses his opponents of and for his blindness about the positive elements of religion. In their perspective, Hitchens fails to distinguish between fact and opinion. Rev. Roberts highlights this in his review: “I think I can say something about *God is not Great* that

---

<sup>141</sup> Kingwell, “Atheism is the stained-glass ceiling.”

<sup>142</sup> Wang, “There Are Still No Open Atheists In Congress.”

<sup>143</sup> Kettell, “Faithless: The Politics of New Atheism,” 61.

everyone can agree with: *It is filled with purported statements of fact.*<sup>144</sup> Moreover, Hitchens's charm of one-sidedness is also his flaw: by fiercely opposing religion, he is unable to see its merits, on a private as well as a social level. Yet Hitchens's ideas and the convictions of New Atheist Movement more generally resonated (and still resonate) with a broad public. This popularity can probably be linked to the emergence of conservative Christian rights movements and the rise of Islamic fundamentalism. The crusades of "Moral Majority" groups and similar campaigns during the Reagan presidency and the administrations of George W.H. Bush and George W. Bush and the events of 9/11 increased the aversion among Americans against religious extremism. They help explain why the Four Horsemen received so much attention.

It is difficult to assess to what extent the popularity of New Atheism is fueled by these factors and the recent decline in religious affiliation in the United States and the subsequent, but small rise in the number of atheists. While it appears logical to see or create a correlation between the recent religious decline and the rise of the New Atheist movement, it is hard to distinguish between cause and effect here. As we have seen, it is difficult to assess what caused what: whereas the decline may have fueled New Atheism, the latter may well have contributed to the former too. What can be stated is that the movement of New Atheism played and plays into the religious diversification in the United States. The work of the Four Horsemen have had an impact and stirred up a controversy that several decades ago would probably have been absent or more limited. Three or four decades ago these books would probably not have made it to the top of the bestsellers lists. This highlights a cultural and religious change in the United States, where a stage has been created for the religiously unaffiliated. Moreover, within the larger religious debate atheism has begun to find a place within American society.

At the same time, the debate that the Four Horsemen and Hitchens brought about remains limited. They may have reached a well-educated general public and created a debate in the academic world, but one of Hitchens's major aims has not been achieved. New Atheism is only partly an issue in actual politics. Perhaps it is just a matter of time before (new) atheism will gain a prominent place on the political agenda. On a state level, a debate has been raging for years about the teaching of creationism in schools. Politicians have the ability to influence education, particularly on the state level: "in the United States, education is decentralized to a degree not seen in any other developed nation."<sup>145</sup> For that reason, states and school districts have a tremendous amount of influence on educational standards. Particularly in conservative states, religious groups have, with varying degrees of success, for decades tried to obstruct the

---

<sup>144</sup> Roberts, "Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *god is not great.*"

<sup>145</sup> Eugenie C. Scott, "Creationism and Evolution," *Elsevier* Vol.124 (February 10, 2006): 449.

teaching of evolution in the school-curricula: “some districts require teachers to teach evolution, and some ignore it completely.”<sup>146</sup> Discussed against the backdrop of this debate, New Atheism is simply a response to the far older controversy that pits creationism against evolutionism. At the same time, this often highly emotional and political debate about school-curricula indicates the limitations of the New Atheism movement: politics undercuts its impact.

---

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

## Conclusion

According to religious trends, involvement of Americans with (organized) religion is declining: Americans are slowly moving away from religion. This development can predominantly be ascribed to the younger generations who no longer adhere to the strong religious American values of their parents and grandparents. Research has shown that a drop in religiously affiliated Americans correlates with a rise in atheism. Yet religion in the United States remains a fundamental part of society and American religious history is not a clear-cut linear story. Between the 1950s and 1970s for instance large groups of Americans went back to church after a turbulent period during and just after WO II, and while the 1960s mark a time of cultural change and religious diversity, in the 1970s conservative movements arose that upheld the established American religious culture. The trend that started in the 1990s and showed a decline of religious influence is too recent to talk about the United States finally following the Western-European example and becoming an increasingly (and thoroughly) secularized society.

As a result, the rise of New Atheism in the years between 2006 and 2010 is an intriguing topic. Its success can be attributed to the active promotion of the new movement by a few intellectuals, the Four Horsemen, with Hitchens prominently among them. Several factors can be invoked to explain the rise and success of the movement. The decline in religious affiliation itself can be used as a cause. The online public sphere and the reach of the media were key in the creation of online platforms where atheists could build new communities. The rise of Islamic fundamentalism was probably also conducive to the growth of New Atheism and created an audience for the movement. At the same time, the presence of powerful Christian groups during Ronald Reagan's and George W. Bush's time in office probably helped drawing people to the New Atheist movement. These people aimed to limit the impact of conservative Christians on American society and politics. Atheism grew because some Americans blamed the turmoil in society on religion. But other explanations remain relevant. The school-curricula debate about creationism is a good example. Moreover, it remains difficult to distinguish between New Atheism as a cause and New Atheism as an effect of religious decline.

The Four Horsemen spurred a nationwide debate on the controversial topic of atheism, made it possible for a growing group of atheists to find a collective identity, and were vital in creating a new platform in American society involving open denunciation of (Christian) religion. They have made atheism more common by focusing on the harmfulness of religion. As the most outspoken of the four horsemen when it comes to the open denunciation of religion, Hitchens not only is of central importance in this history, but also bore the brunt of many critical

appraisals and attacks. The response to his ideas and particularly his *God is Not Great* was varied. He was perceived as an intelligent writer who makes for interesting and sparkling reading but also as someone who could not appreciate the value of Christianity for individuals and society. Academics and journalists created the bulk of the response to his work. Politicians ignored him.

Particularly this last element is interesting and demands to be explored further. The lingering religious presence in, and nature of, politics makes New Atheism a non-issue, an issue not relevant for politics. In American politics, atheism does not bring in votes. On the contrary, the open embrace of atheism will alienate voters. And that raises an interesting issue. Hitchens was also a political commentator and journalist, and always wanted to show the negative impact of religion on society and politics. However, it looks as if he failed to achieve this aim. Ironically, it looks as if he did not manage to limit the impact of Christianity on American politics—it looks as if American politics managed to restrict the impact of New Atheism.

An upsurge in New Atheist writings has created a new interest in the nature of religion. It has sparked a new debate about not only the existence of God, but also religion's place within American society. New Atheism's rise and impact remain limited, partly due to the link between religion and politics. The Christian right remains extremely influential in the United States and actively seeks to counter secularization. Current religious developments and trends allowed people such as Christopher Hitchens to write a bestseller contradicting, and even ridiculing, the existence of God. However, atheists are still marginal figures in American society.

Is God great or not? At least he got in Christopher Hitchens an honest, intelligent, and witty opponent.

## Bibliography

- Four Horsemen. “Christopher Hitchens destroys the myth that morality comes from religion.” Filmed October 2009. YouTube video, 07:49. Posted July 17, 2016. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iG-JLmc4Krw>
- Amarasingam, Amarnath. “Introduction: What is the New Atheism.” in *Religion and the New Atheism: A critical Appraisal*, edited by Amarnath Amarasingam. Leiden: Koninklijke Brill NV, 2010.
- Angier, Natalie. “The End of Faith: Against Toleration.” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris. *New York Times*, September 5, 2004.
- Barber, Nigel. “Why Religion Rules American Politics.” *Huffington Post*, July 7, 2012. [https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nigel-barber/why-religion-rules-america\\_b\\_1690433.html](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/nigel-barber/why-religion-rules-america_b_1690433.html)
- Beckman, Joanne. “Religion in Post WWII America.” *National Humanities Center*. October 2000. <http://nationalhumanitiescenter.org/tserve/twenty/tkeyinfo/trelww2.htm>.
- Berlinksi, David. *The Devil’s Delusion*. New York: Basic Books, 2009.
- Blue, Daniel. “A fear of the faithful who mean exactly what they believe.” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris. *San Francisco Gate*, August 15, 2004.
- Borstelmann, Thomas. *The 1970s A New Global History from Civil Rights to Economic Inequality*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2011.
- Boulton, David. “Faith Kills.” review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris, *New Humanist*, May 31, 2007.
- Brewster, Melanie E. *Atheists in America*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014.
- Brill. “Religion and the New Atheism.” Accessed December 9, 2017. <http://www.brill.com/religion-and-new-atheism>.
- Brookfield, James. “Dennett’s Dangerous Idea.” Review of *Breaking the Spell*, by Daniel Dennett, *World Socialist Website*. November 6, 2006.
- Bullard, Gabe. “The World’s Newest Major Religion: No Religion.” *National Geographic*. Accessed November 15, 2017. <https://news.nationalgeographic.com/2016/04/160422-atheism-agnostic-secular-nones-rising-religion/>.

- Bullivant, Stephen and Ruse, Michael. *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.
- Bunting, Madeleine. "The New Atheists loathe religion far too much to plausibly change it." Review of *The End of Faith*, by Sam Harris. *The Guardian*, May 7, 2004.
- Cambridge Dictionary. "Polemic." Accessed December 19, 2017. <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/polemic>.
- CaNANDian. "Christopher Hitchens - The morals of an atheist." Filmed 2007. YouTube Video. Posted July 19, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wOHgrnaTxk0>.
- CaNANDian. "The Four Horsemen." Filmed 2007. YouTube video, 1:57:14. Posted July 23, 2012. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=n7IHU28aR2E>.
- Cimino, Richard and Smith, Christopher. *Atheist Awakening: Secular Activism and Community in America*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2014.
- Cooperman, Alan et al. "America's Changing Religious Landscape." *Pew Research Center*. May 12, 2015. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/#fn-23198-1>.
- Cottee, Simon and Cushman, Thomas. "The Suppression of Open Debate: The Case of Christopher Hitchens." *Springer Science* 45 (2008): 397–402.
- Cotter, Christopher R, Quadrio, Philip Andrew and Tuckett, Jonathan. *New Atheism: Critical Perspectives and Contemporary Debates*. New York: Springer, 2017.
- Cornwell, John. *Darwin's Angel: An Angelic Riposte to The God Delusion*. London: Profile Books, 2007.
- Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. London: Penguin Random House UK, 2006.
- Dennett Daniel. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking (Penguin), 2006.
- Dionne, E.J. *Why Americans Hate Politics*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991.
- Glock, Charles Y. "The Churches and Social Change in Twentieth Century America." *The ANNALS of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 527, no 1 (May, 1993): 67 – 83.
- Goldberg, George. *Church, State and the Constitution – The Religion Clauses Upside Down*. San Francisco: Gateway Books, 1987.

- Graffin, Greg and Olson, Steve. *Anarchy Evolution: Faith, Science and Bad Religion in a World Without God*. New York: Harper Perennial, 2010.
- FitzGerald, Frances. *The Evangelicals: The Struggle to Shape America*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 2017.
- Forbes. "In Depth: The 25 Most Influential Liberals in the U.S. Media." Accessed November 24, 2017. [https://www.forbes.com/2009/01/22/influential-media-obama-oped-cx\\_tv\\_ee\\_hra\\_0122liberal\\_slide/#3ded20ca3832](https://www.forbes.com/2009/01/22/influential-media-obama-oped-cx_tv_ee_hra_0122liberal_slide/#3ded20ca3832).
- Freiling, Tom. *Reagan's God and Country: A President's Moral Compass: His Beliefs on God, Religious Freedom, the Sanctity of Life and More*. Regal House Publications: Raleigh, 2003.
- Habermas, Jürgen, Lennox, Sara and Lennox, Frank. "The Public Sphere: an Encyclopedia Article." *New German Critique*, No. 3 (Autumn, 1974): 49-55. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/487737>.
- Habermas, Jürgen. *Post metaphysical Thinking*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 1994.
- Hahn, Scott and Wiker, Benjamin. *Answering the New Atheism: Dismantling Dawkins' Case Against God*. Steubenville, Ohio: Emmaus Road, 2008.
- Hanaoka, Mimi "The Devil in the Details." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. *Journal of International Affairs* 61, no 1 (Fall/Winter 2007): 263-269.
- Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith*. New York City: W.W. Norton, 2004.
- Haught, John. *Deeper than Darwin: The Prospect of Religion in the Age of Evolution*. New York: Basic Books, 2008.
- Heimert, Alan. *Religion and the American Mind*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock Pub, 1966.
- Hirsi Ali, Ayaan. *Infidel*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008.
- Hitchens, Christopher. *God is Not Great*. New York: Twelve, Hachette Book Group, 2007.
- Hitchens, Christopher. "Hey, I'm doing my best." *The Guardian*. January 20, 2002. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/jan/20/usa.georgebush>.
- Hitchens, Christopher. "Mommie Dearest - The pope beatifies Mother Teresa, a fanatic, a fundamentalist, and a fraud." *Slate*. October 21, 2003.

- Hooper, Simon. "The Rise of New Atheists." *CNN International*. November 9, 2006. <http://edition.cnn.com/2006/WORLD/europe/11/08/atheism.feature/index.html>.
- Huckley, Aldous. *Brave New World Revisited*. London: Chatto & Windus, 1959.
- Hyman, Gavin. *A Short Introduction of Atheism*. London: I.B.Tauris, 2010. Introduction, xiv. <http://web.b.ebscohost.com/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/bmxlYmtfXzM0NTU2MF9fQU41?sid=a10dc264-db96-4720-946fc0a412ce4c2@sessionmgr103&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.
- Johnson, George. "Getting a Rational Grip on Religion: Is religion a fit subject for scientific scrutiny?" Review of *Breaking the Spell*, by Daniel Dennett. *Scientific American*. January 1, 2006.
- Jones, Robert P. at all. "Exodus: Why Americans are Leaving Religion – and Why They're Unlikely to Come Back." *Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI)* (2016): 0-26. Accessed September 3, 2017. <https://www.prii.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/09/PRRI-RNS-Unaffiliated-Report.pdf>.
- Kazin, Michael. "Religion and Politics since 1945." *THE CONCISE PRINCETON ENCYCLOPEDIA OF AMERICAN POLITICAL HISTORY* (2011): 453-459. Accessed September 27, 2017. <http://blog.press.princeton.edu/wp-content/uploads/2012/02/2Religion-and-Politics.pdf>.
- Kettell, Steven. "What's really new about new atheism?." *The Social Science Journal* Volume 43, Issue 2 (2006). Accessed January 23, 2017. <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0362331906000036>.
- Kettell, Steven, "Faithless: The politics of new atheism" *Secularism and Nonreligion 2* (2003): 61-72. Accessed December 14, 2017. <https://www.secularismandnonreligion.org/articles/10.5334/snr.al/>.
- Kinsley, Michael. "In God, Distrust." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. *New York Times*, May 13, 2007.
- Knoke, David. "Religion, Stratification and Politics: American in the 1960s." *American Journal of Political Science 18*, no. 2 (1974).
- Lennox, John. *God's Undertaker: Has Science Buried God?* Oxford: Lion Hudson plc, 2007.
- Lipka, Michael. "10 Facts About Atheists." *Pew Research Center*. June 1, 2016. <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2016/06/01/10-facts-about-atheists/>.

- Kengor, Paul. *God and Ronald Reagan: A Spiritual Life*. Harper Perennia: New York, 2005.
- Kingwell, Mark. "Atheism is the stained-glass ceiling in U.S. politics." *The Globe and Mail*. July 27, 2016 (updated March 24, 2017).  
<https://www.theglobeandmail.com/opinion/atheism-is-the-stained-glass-ceiling-in-us-politics/article31122827/>.
- LeDrew, Stephen. *The Evolution of Atheism*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016.
- Lloyd, Laura. "An Attack on God both Outrages and Popular." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *National Catholic Reporter*. August 3, 2007.
- Markman, MD Maurie. "Benefits of Religious Beliefs for Cancer Patients: A Response to Dawkins and Hitchens." *Current Ontology Reports* 10(2008): 185-187.
- Marsh, Nicholas. "Review." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *Journal of Peace Research* 45, No. 1 (Jan. 2008): 122.  
<http://www.jstor.org/stable/27640632>.
- Marshall, David. *The Truth Behind the New Atheism: Responding to the Emerging Challenges to God and Christianity*. Eugene, Oregon: Harvest House Publishers, 2007.
- McCormick, Matt. "Atheism." *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed September 29, 2017. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/atheism/>.
- McGirr Lisa. *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2001.
- McGrath, Allison. *The Twilight Of Atheism: The Rise and Fall of Disbelief in the Modern World and The Dawkins Delusion? – Atheist Fundamentalist and the Denial of the Devine*. New York: WaterBrooks, 2006
- McGrath, Alister and McGrath, Joanna Collicutt. *The Dawkins Delusion*. London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 2007.
- Mohler, Albert. *Atheist Remix: A Christian confronts the New Atheists*. Carol Stream, Illinois: Crossway, 2008.
- Onfray, Michel. *Atheist Manifesto: The Case Against Christianity, Judaism, and Islam*. Paris: Éditions Grasset, 2007.
- Paul, Gregory. "Atheism in American politics." *The Washington Post*. June 20, 2011.  
<https://live.washingtonpost.com/atheists-fed-up.html>.

- Paul, Gregory and Zuckerman, Phil. "Why do Americans still dislike atheists?" *The Washington Post*. April 29, 2011. [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-americans-still-dislike-atheists/2011/02/18/AFqgnwGF\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.88afb26892bd](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/why-do-americans-still-dislike-atheists/2011/02/18/AFqgnwGF_story.html?utm_term=.88afb26892bd).
- Perlstein, Rick. *Before the Storm: Barry Goldwater and the Unmaking of the American Consensus*. New York: Nation Books, 2009.
- Pew Research Center. "Religious Landscape Study." *Pew Research Center*. Accessed September 29, 2017. <http://www.pewforum.org/religious-landscape-study/>.
- Philipse, Herman. *Atheïstisch Manifest en de Onredelijkheid van Religie*. Amsterdam: Bakker, 2004
- Phillips-Fein, Kim. *Invisible Hands: The Making of the Conservative Movement from the New Deal to Reagan*. New York City: W.W. Norton, 2004.
- Prothero, Stephen. "The Unbeliever." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. *The Washington Post*, May 6, 2007.
- Questioning Everything. "Christopher Hitchens – Why God is Not Great Part 1." Filmed 2007, YouTube video, 37:21. Posted May 26, 2017 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5RcgP6dWMXI>.
- Rational Thought321. "Christopher Hitchens - "God Is Not Great" Interview." Filmed May 2007. YouTube Video, 11:20. Posted August 10, 2010. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QbsYsB3tS1k>.
- Roberts, Rev. Dr. Mark D. "Christopher Hitchens: My Response to *God is Not Great*." *Patheos*. Accessed December 19, 2017. <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/markdroberts/series/god-is-not-great-by-christopher-hitchens-a-response/>.
- Rothenberg Gritz, Jennie "Transcending God." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens, *The Atlantic*. July, 2007. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2007/07/transcending-god/306076/>.
- Rowe, Henry Kalloch. *The History of Religion in the United States*. Basingstoke, UK: The Macmillan Company, 1924.
- Rubin, Charles T.. "The God Meme." Review of *Breaking the Spell*, by Daniel Dennett, *The New Atlantis* 12 (Spring 2006): 71-79.

- Sandbrook, Dominic. *Mad as Hell: The Crisis of the 1970s and the Rise of the Populist Right*. New York: Anchor Books, 2012.
- Sawyers, June. "Religion—Bad or Good?." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. *Booklist* (April 1, 2007): 8.
- Schneider, Herbert Wallace. *Religion in 20<sup>th</sup> century America*. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1952.
- Schultz, Kevin M. "Religion as Identity in Postwar America: The Last Serious Attempt to Put a Question on Religion in the United States Census." *The Journal of American History* 93, no. 2 (September 2006): 259-284.
- Schulzke, Marcus. "New Atheism and Moral Theory." *Journal of Global Ethics*, Vol. 9, No. 1, 65–75. Accessed January 23, 2017.  
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/17449626.2012.756420>.
- Scott, Eugenie C. "Creationism and Evolution." *Elsevier* Vol. 124 (February 10, 2006): 449-451.
- Sherkat, Darren E. "Tracking the Restructuring of American Religion: Religious Affiliation and Patterns of Religious Mobility 1973-1998." *Social Forces* 79, no. 4 (June 2001): 1459-1493.
- Skapinker, Michael. "Here's the Hitch." Review of *God is Not Great*, by Christopher Hitchens. *Financial Times*, June 22, 2017.
- Smith, Elwyn A. *Religious Liberty in the United States: The Development of Church-State Thought since the Revolutionary Era*. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1972.
- Smith, George H. *Atheism, the case against God*. New York: Prometheus Books, 2016.
- Smith, Robert C. *Conservatism and Racism, and Why in America They Are the Same*. New York: State University of New York Press, 2009.
- Stenger, Victor J. "What's New About The New Atheism?" *Philosophy Now*. 2010.  
[https://philosophynow.org/issues/78/Whats\\_New\\_About\\_The\\_New\\_Atheism](https://philosophynow.org/issues/78/Whats_New_About_The_New_Atheism).
- Stenger, Victor J. *God: The Failed Hypothesis – How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* Amherst, New York , Prometheus Books, 2007.
- Stenger, Victor J. *The New Atheism: Taking a Stance for Science and Reason*. Amherst, New York , Prometheus Books, 2008, 2009.

- Stone, Geoffrey. "The Second Great Awakening; A Christian Nation," *Georgia State University Law Review* 26, no 4 (2008).
- Sundberg, Walter. "Religious Trends in 20<sup>th</sup> Century America." *Word & World* Volume XX, No. 1 (2000): 22-31. Accessed September 29, 2017.  
[https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/20-1\\_20th\\_Century/20-1\\_Sundberg.pdf](https://wordandworld.luthersem.edu/content/pdfs/20-1_20th_Century/20-1_Sundberg.pdf).
- Taylor, James E. "New Atheism.," *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Accessed September 29, 2017. <http://www.iep.utm.edu/n-atheis/>.
- Teles, Steven M. *The Rise of the Conservative Legal Movement: The Battle for Control of the Law (Princeton Studies in American Politics: Historical, International, and Comparative Perspectives)*. New Jersey: Princeton University, 2008.
- The Gallup Polls. "Religion." *The Gallup Polls*. Accessed September 9, 2017.  
<http://news.gallup.com/poll/1690/religion.aspx>.
- TheStevenBlue. "Christopher Hitchens on George Bush (2000)." Filmed 2000. YouTube video, 1:44. Posted March 22, 2011.  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hn0sH1gnHm4>.
- Turek, Frank. *Stealing from God*. Carol Stream, Illinois: NavPress, 2015.
- United States Constitution. Amendment 1. Section 1.
- Wing, Nick. "There Are Still No Open Atheists In Congress." *Huffington Post*. April 1, 2017.  
[https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/no-atheists-in-congress\\_us\\_586c074ae4b0de3a08f9d487](https://www.huffingtonpost.com/entry/no-atheists-in-congress_us_586c074ae4b0de3a08f9d487).
- Zenk, Thomas. "New Atheism." in *The Oxford Handbook of Atheism*, edited by Stephen Bullivant and Michael Ruse, 245-260. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013.