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04/14/2014

## Unaffiliation:

Where the New Atheists Went Wrong, and How *South Park* Paved the Way for the

'Rise of the Nones'

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An abstract of  
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Abstract

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From 2004 to 2007, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens published a series of books that would later be recognized as the foundation of "New Atheism." Recently, several publications have announced the so-called 'rise of the nones,' and due to their congruency of timing, it appears that "New Atheism" and the 'rise of the nones' are related. Indeed, Dan Dennett, one of the leaders of New Atheism, claimed in 2013 that the 'rise of the nones' would not have occurred without New Atheism.

An analysis of statistics and New Atheist literature reveals, however, that the New Atheists and the nones differ markedly in terms of ideology, and shows that atheism has grown slowly in the United States over the last five years while the nones have grown at an increasing rate. As opposed to the New Atheists who promote militant atheism and believe that organized religion is inherently dangerous, the nones are a heterogeneous, constantly evolving group and do not necessarily support active resistance to religion. Due to their over-the-top criticism of religion, I believe that the New Atheists damaged the reputation of all atheism, and that the nones have risen in response to their errors.

Through an analysis of several particular episodes, I demonstrate how *South Park* contributed to the cultural discussion surrounding atheism by illustrating the errors of New Atheism as the movement was evolving. Additionally, I suggest that *South Park's* subtle religious critique and opposition to dogma correlate with the ideology of the nones, reflecting a cultural disapproval of extreme atheism. Finally, I posit that the future religious landscape of the United States will be more secular and unaffiliated than the antireligious vision of the New Atheists.

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## ***Introduction***

Religious satire dates back to the 14<sup>th</sup> century when Geoffrey Chaucer portrayed churchmen as hypocritical, corrupt, and greedy in *The Canterbury Tales*. The *Tales* was significant for its nuanced critique of the Church, but its impact on the cultural discussion surrounding religion was limited by the text's unavailability—it was not performed until after the author's death, and even then, the scarcity of paper inhibited the poem from being widely distributed and realizing its full potential.<sup>1</sup> Several centuries later, in 1664, Molière critiqued religious hypocrisy in his famous play, *Tartuffe*, satirizing the use of religion for personal gain. Molière's criticism of false piety can be seen in Cléante's jeer at the irreverent behavior of the pious: "So there is nothing that I find more base / Than specious piety's dishonest face."<sup>2</sup> Even though most of the play's language did not critique religion, the small jabs such as this were enough to warrant the play's immediate censorship during Louis XIV's monarchy heavily influenced by the Catholic Church.

Like *The Canterbury Tales*, *Tartuffe* was not widely performed or appreciated until long after the author's death due to the oppressive authority of the Church. Now that censorship is less prevalent in much of the world, however, religious satire has grown and evolved. In the late 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries in particular, religious satire has appeared in various mediums including films, documentaries, literature, the Internet, and animated sitcoms. Today, the genre responds more quickly than ever to developments in religious affairs, and continues to fuel mocking derision and antireligious sentiment.

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<sup>1</sup> Bisson, Lillian M. *Chaucer and the Late Medieval World*. New York: St. Martin's, 1998. Print.

<sup>2</sup> Molière, and Richard Wilbur. "1.5.11." *Tartuffe; Comedy in Five Acts, 1669*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1963. Print.

One particular expression of religious satire that has pushed the boundaries of censorship and that has been especially outspoken regarding prevalent religious traditions is *South Park*, an animated sitcom about four potty-mouthed boys in a quiet mountain town that took the world by storm in 1997. *South Park* established itself as an intrepid social parody from its inception, and it entered the world of religious satire with classic episodes like “Mr. Hanky the Christmas Poo” (1997), irreverently satirizing religious sensitivity, and “Are You There God? It’s Me, Jesus” (1999), parodying the surge of religious hysteria approaching the turn of the millennium.

What has set *South Park* apart from other religious satires is its scathing mockery of atheism that debunked its reputation of being an atheist show. Due to the show’s fierce critique of Christianity, Judaism, Islam, Mormonism, and numerous other religious traditions, many believed the show to be antireligious.<sup>3</sup> With “Red Hot Catholic Love” (2002), “Go God Go” (2006), and “Go God Go XII” (2006), however, *South Park* dismissed its antireligious standing by scoffing at militant atheism and the leaders of organized atheist movements. *South Park*’s mockery of atheism took many followers by surprise, but these particular episodes’ popularity and critical acclaim suggest that the critique of atheism resonated with viewers.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, I believe that *South Park*’s critique of extreme atheism furnished a cultural disapproval of atheism, in turn encouraging the proliferation of less radical forms of non-belief. Specifically, I posit that *South Park*’s dismissal of atheism coupled with its advocacy of free thought and secularism contributed to the cultural discussion surrounding atheism, indirectly influencing the “rise of the nones.”

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<sup>3</sup> Parker, Trey; Stone, Matt. Audio commentary for “Go God Go.” In: *South Park – The Complete Tenth Season* (DVD). Paramount Home Entertainment. 2007.

<sup>4</sup> Gorgan, Elena. “The ‘South Park’ Episodes That Changed the World.” Softpedia, 20 Sept. 2006. Web.



Contemporaneous with the arrival of *South Park* and the diversity of religious satire, Americans have come to identify as atheists and non-believers at an increasing rate. Indeed, the 2012 “Global Index of Religion and Atheism” reported that since 2005, 13% more Americans identify as “not religious” as opposed to “religious,” and 4% more identify as “atheist.”<sup>5</sup> In light of the congruence of these phenomena’s timing, it appears that the explosion of religious satire and the proliferation of non-believers in America are related. I believe that the development of religious satire not only reflects shifting cultural attitudes regarding organized religion, but also demonstrates that irreverent religious critique has contributed to the growth of non-believers by reaching a large audience through its multiplicity of mediums and nuanced opposition to popular religions.

According to the General Social Survey, in comparison to 1990, more than twice as many Americans today say that they have “no religion.” Additionally, one-third of Americans under the age of 30 say that they have “no religion,” comprising those that identify as “none of the above,” “none,” “spiritual but not religious,” “unattached,” and “unaffiliated.”<sup>6</sup> These classifications include both non-believers and those that believe in something, but nothing in particular, so it is difficult to precisely define the unaffiliated and to make generalizations about them. It is clear, however, that Americans are identifying as “nones” at an increasing rate, vindicating the so-called “rise of the nones.”<sup>7</sup>

While the unaffiliated were becoming statistically significant, Sam Harris, Richard Dawkins, Dan Dennett, and Christopher Hitchens found great economic success with their

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<sup>5</sup> WIN-Gallup International. *Global Index of Religion and Atheism*. Redcresearch, 2012. Web.

<sup>6</sup> “‘Nones’ on the Rise.” *Pew Research Centers Religion Public Life Project RSS*. PewResearch Religion & Public Life Project, 9 Oct. 2012. Web.

<sup>7</sup> Grossman, Cathy L. “Religious ‘Nones’ Defy Simple Political And Racial Categorization As Numbers Grow.” *The Huffington Post*. TheHuffingtonPost.com, 14 Mar. 2014. Web.

books: *The End of Faith* (2004), *The God Delusion* (2006), *Breaking the Spell* (2006), and *God Is Not Great* (2007). Above all, the four authors encouraged militant atheism and criticized the prevalence of religion in light of the growing body of scientific knowledge that casts doubt on the existence of the supernatural. In late 2006, shortly before Hitchens and *God Is Not Great*, the journalist and contributing editor to *Wired* magazine, Gary Wolf, published an article entitled "The Church of the Non-Believers." Wolf catalogued the "crusade against belief in God" by Harris, Dawkins, and Dennett, and dubbed them the "New Atheists."<sup>8</sup> After the addition of Christopher Hitchens, the New Atheists would become known alternatively as the "Four Horsemen of New Atheism."<sup>9</sup>

Wolf coined the term "New Atheism," and according to him, the New Atheists call upon all agnostics, non-believers, and fence sitters to make up their mind about where they stand on God. Additionally, they say that not only is faith itself a curse, but also even *respect* for faith is a problem of critical importance. To combat the proliferation of both religious moderation and extremism, the New Atheists make "an appeal to our intellect. Atheists make their stand upon truth."<sup>10</sup> As Wolf explains, New Atheism's argument is based purely on logic and reason, disregarding all emotional and personal motivations for faith. The New Atheists became known for their aggression and militancy, and in a recent short debate with religion columnist Andrew Brown, Dan Dennett stated:

It was important to turn the tide and I think we've done that. I'm really very proud to say that the New Atheism has changed the face of America, as far as expression of religious belief or disbelief .... What we gave [the religiously unaffiliated] was

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<sup>8</sup> Wolf, Gary. "Wired 14.11: The Church of the Non-Believers." *Wired.com*. P. 1. Nov. 2006. Web.

<sup>9</sup> Gribbin, Alice. "Preview: The Four Horsemen of New Atheism Reunited." *New Statesman*. 22 Dec. 2011. Web.

<sup>10</sup> Wolf, p. 5.

permission to declare their lack of interest in religion, which was something people were rather afraid to do before we wrote our books.<sup>11</sup>

Thus, Dennett claims that the New Atheists enabled the detachment from organized religion characteristic of the nones. This assertion makes sense in light of the congruence of timing between the arrival of the New Atheists and the rise of the nones, but does it hold water? In light of the fact that a majority of nones believe in God and that four in ten say they are “spiritual but not religious,” I believe that Dennett was off the mark in claiming that the New Atheists spurred the rise of the nones.<sup>12</sup>

The unaffiliated are a diverse and constantly evolving group, and consequently, it is impossible to discern any consistency or commonality among them. In her September 2013 article “Rise of the Nones,” Amelia Thomson-Deveaux remarked that the nones were “hard to organize and even harder to convert—whether those evangelizing are atheists or believers. In fact, the unaffiliated are blurring the line between religion and atheism.”<sup>13</sup> As Thomson-Deveaux concurs, the unaffiliated are a heterogeneous group that cannot easily be defined, suggesting that Dennett’s presumed link between the New Atheists and the unaffiliated is ill considered.

To better grasp the incompatibility between the nones and the New Atheists, it is necessary to understand how the New Atheists are different from one another, and what they advocated as a group. Many individuals bought into New Atheism, but I believe that the New Atheists’ attack on religion was so belligerent that they actually amplified the negative connotations associated with atheism, ultimately doing more harm than good for

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<sup>11</sup> Dennett, Daniel, and Andrew Brown. “Do the New Atheists Have Any New Ideas?” *Theguardian.com*. Guardian News and Media, 08 July 2013. Web.

<sup>12</sup> “‘Nones’ on the Rise.”

<sup>13</sup> Thomson-Deveaux, Amelia. “Rise of the ‘Nones’” *Prospect.org*. The American Prospect, 19 Sept. 2013. Web.

the atheist cause. Consequently, identifying as a “none” or as “unaffiliated” has become more socially acceptable than identifying as “atheist,” causing the nones to grow markedly faster than atheists, and to encompass more diverse forms of non-belief.<sup>14</sup>

While atheists may militantly or aggressively reject faith, the unaffiliated do not necessarily support active opposition to religion, and some actually believe in the existence of the supernatural. In fact, according to the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, more than two-thirds of the unaffiliated believe in some sort of God, and nearly one-quarter pray every day, challenging Dennett’s stake on the boom of the unaffiliated.<sup>15</sup> The nones are thus a much more fluid, inclusive, and dynamic group than atheists, welcoming both fence sitters and certain non-believers, while avoiding the all-or-nothing nature of atheism, especially as espoused by the New Atheists.

Aside from the esoteric aggression and militancy that limited their appeal to fence sitters and believers, the New Atheists also failed to take advantage of additional forms of multi-media besides books, causing them to reach a limited audience. Consequently, the New Atheists were unable to communicate their messages as effectively and loudly as possible, and their attempt to reinvigorate atheism did not materialize. Compared to the New Atheists’ forceful attack on organized religion that sold primarily among literate, wealthy, white Americans, *South Park’s* satire has been self-reflexive, not too preachy, and episodes have been made available for free online by South Park Studios.<sup>16</sup> Consequently, *South Park’s* religious critique is superior to that of the New Atheists in form and in content, reaching a younger and more diverse audience.

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<sup>14</sup> “Rise of the ‘Nones.’”

<sup>15</sup> “‘Nones’ on the Rise.”

<sup>16</sup> Wolf, p. 5.

The New Atheists' promotion of militancy failed to accelerate the slow climb of atheism due to their over-the-top demands, ultimately damaging the image of atheism more than helping its cause. Accordingly, atheism has grown slowly over the past decade and has failed to reach a tipping point.<sup>17</sup> *South Park's* less preachy form of religious satire, however, resonated with younger viewers in comparison to the homogenous followers of New Atheism.<sup>18</sup><sup>19</sup> In light of *South Park's* subtle critique and opposition to dogma, the show has implicitly encouraged unaffiliation, and thanks to its availability and mass appeal, the show has contributed to the rise of the nones. Furthermore, the surge of the nones suggests that readily accessible, youth-friendly mediums are more successful in effecting cultural change than intellectual books, and that the future religious landscape of America will be more secular and unaffiliated than the antireligious vision of the New Atheists.

### ***From "Red Hot Catholic Love" to New Atheism***

In early 2002, the Boston Globe began to extensively report the sex abuse scandal within the Catholic Church.<sup>20</sup> As the story was still evolving, *South Park* masterminds Trey Parker and Matt Stone released the episode "Red Hot Catholic Love" on July 3, 2002, in which South Park residents decide to become atheist after their faith in Catholicism and in God has been destroyed by the sexual molestation scandal. Towards the beginning of the episode, the parents have the following dialogue:

ROGER

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<sup>17</sup> *Global Index of Religion and Atheism*.

<sup>18</sup> Kissell, Rick. "'South Park' Returns to Three-Year Ratings High." *Variety*. 26 Sept. 2013. Web.

<sup>19</sup> Wolf, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Cox, Christy. "Abuse in the Catholic Church." *Dart Center for Journalism & Trauma*. Web. 8 Apr. 2003.

If there was a god, why would he let our kids be molested in the first place?

STEPHEN

Yeah! Let's kill God! Yeah!

RANDY

Well, let's just be atheists.

STEPHEN

Same thing.

RANDY

Yeah!

EVERYONE

Yeah!<sup>21</sup>

Their readiness to become atheists and to equate atheism with 'killing God' parodies the parents' rash behavior, implying that many atheists may not have adequately thought their decisions through. Indeed, Randy's whimsical change of heart from "Let's just be atheists" to "Let's kill God!" serves to critique the extreme mentality that Parker and Stone believe many atheists had in the early 2000s. As he explained in the commentary to the episode, Stone wanted to address atheists "spouting their antireligious stuff" with "Red Hot Catholic Love."<sup>22</sup> In other words, he wanted to critique atheists that fail to see the evangelical nature of their own ways and that blindly proselytize without noticing the ironically religious nature of their actions. In opposing the Church and rejecting Catholicism, the parents believe that they are standing up to dogma, but their impulsive

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<sup>21</sup> Parker, Trey, and Matt Stone. "Red Hot Catholic Love." *South Park*. Comedy Central. 608, 3 July 2002. Television.

<sup>22</sup> Parker, Trey; Stone, Matt. Audio commentary for "Red Hot Catholic Love". In: *South Park – The Complete Sixth Season* (DVD). Paramount Home Entertainment. 2005.

and over-the-top atheism demonstrates the folly of their ways. Overall, this dialogue critiques extreme atheism as dogmatic and excessive, as opposed to moderate or private atheism that individuals keep to themselves.

In the episode, as atheism continues to overtake *South Park*, Father Maxi organizes an all priests' meeting to discuss the problem of declining church attendance in response to the molestation scandal. Father Maxi finds, however, that all of the priests are merely concerned with finding ways to get victims of sexual misconduct to keep quiet: "We've got to stop these boys from going to the public!" says one priest, and "They've got to know to keep their mouths shut!"<sup>23</sup> adds another. Parker and Stone thus portray all priests as sexual predators using the Church to conceal their pedophilia, and Father Maxi, expressing the voice of Parker and Stone, appears to be the only moral priest.

Father Maxi heads to the Vatican to take up the issue directly with Church leaders, but finds the pope to be a decrepit, shriveled old man who can hardly utter a sound. Instead of finding all of the cardinals, bishops and priests concerned about the Church's internal problems, the archbishop states that if they cannot find a way to stop children from reporting molestations, "We will never be able to have sex with young boys again!" When Father Maxi explains that the solution to the Church's problems is to not have sex with young boys, all of the leaders become upset, claiming that the "Holy Document of Vatican Law" does not explicitly prohibit sex with young boys, and that "the Holy Document of Vatican Law cannot be changed!"<sup>24</sup>

As Father Maxi fruitlessly retrieves the Holy Document of Vatican Law, parents gather at the South Park Atheist Club and begin experimenting with *interorectogestion*—a

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<sup>23</sup> "Red Hot Catholic Love."

<sup>24</sup> "Red Hot Catholic Love."

new method of eating where food is consumed through the anus. While one parent says to the group: “‘under God’ should be taken out of the pledge of allegiance,” he stops speaking to defecate out of his mouth, and then continues ranting. The juxtaposition of atheist preaching and defecation represents Parker and Stone’s higher-order critique of atheism in “Red Hot Catholic Love”—they believed that atheists calling for the end of religion were ‘spewing a bunch of crap out of their mouths.’<sup>25</sup> In light of the plethora of other episodes scorning various organized religions, Parker and Stone certainly were not entirely dissimilar from atheists, but they wanted to make it clear that atheists were not necessarily as enlightened as they thought they were, and that it was possible to take atheism too far.

Father Maxi retrieves the Holy Document, but the Pope says that they will ask the “Highest Source” if they can edit the Holy Document, whereupon the great “Queen Spider” appears. Regarding the Queen Spider, Father Maxi shouts that all of the clergymen have lost touch with what it means to be a Catholic, and he tears the Holy Document in half. The Vatican comes crumbling down, and atheists back in South Park watch the events on television with joy. Finally, Father Maxi delivers this monologue:

You’ve forgotten what being a catholic is all about- this book. You see, these are just stories, stories that are meant to help guide people in the right direction- love your neighbor, be a good person- that’s it. And when you start turning the stories into literal translations of hierarchies and power, well, well you end up with this-(pan to Queen Spider). People are losing faith because they don’t see how what you’ve turned the religion into applies to them- they’ve lost touch with any idea of any kind of religion, and when they don’t have no mythology to try and live their lives by, they just start spewing a bunch of crap out of their mouths! ... It is time for *change*.<sup>26</sup>

In Father Maxi’s monologue, Parker and Stone impart wisdom to both Catholics and atheists. They appeal for clergymen to be held accountable for their actions, but leave the

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<sup>25</sup> Audio Commentary for “Red Hot Catholic Love.”

<sup>26</sup> “Red Hot Catholic Love.”



door open for Catholicism to make amends, to return to its roots, and to continue making a positive impact on the world. Illustrating the evangelical nature of aggressive, proselytizing atheism, Parker and Stone suggest that non-believers be more self-aware and keep their beliefs to themselves. Anne Garefino, one of the co-executive producers of the show and a devout Catholic, said that even she really liked the message at the end of the show.<sup>27</sup> Garefino's favorable reception of the final message further demonstrates that *South Park* is not an antireligious show, and shows that while *South Park* concerns four potty-mouthed boys in a quiet mountain town, it still communicates forward-thinking insights regarding real-world issues.

Thanks to its timing and thoughtful message, "Red Hot Catholic Love" was voted #2 out of "The 10 South Park episodes that changed the world," and part of South Park's "Dirty Dozen."<sup>28</sup> Despite the episode's caricature of Catholicism and broad generalizations about priests, "Red Hot Catholic Love" is actually relatively pro-Christian compared to other *South Park* episodes concerning Christianity. Indeed, at the very end of the episode, in response to Father Maxi's monologue, Randy says: "He's right, Sharon, we don't have to believe every word in the Bible, they're just stories to help us live by. We shouldn't toss away the lessons of the Bible just because some [expletive, plural] in Italy really screwed it up."<sup>29</sup> Thus, while Parker and Stone often critique religion, they do not call for its downfall—the parents' conversion to atheism and eventual return to Catholicism reflects Parker and Stone's opinions about the follies of atheism and their support for moderate religious faith. Parker and Stone do draw the line with faith, however, when religious

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<sup>27</sup> Audio Commentary for "Red Hot Catholic Love."

<sup>28</sup> "The Dirty Dozen." *South Park Booster Club Newsletter* (13 June 2007). *Newsletter Archive*. Comedy Central. Web.

<sup>29</sup> "Red Hot Catholic Love."

dogma or hierarchy enables any sort of immoral behavior. Consequently, they chastised the Vatican for its poor handling of the sexual misconduct scandal, but simultaneously parodied atheism's extreme and unproductive response.

While *South Park* appears antireligious in light of its mockery and parody of numerous religious traditions, Parker and Stone do not actually consider themselves or their show to be antireligious. They "tend to be interested in religion," and do not parody religion for no reason—*South Park's* religious critique does more than simply bash organized religion or call for the end of all religion. At the turn of the millennium, the debates surrounding the congruence of science and religion and creationism and evolution were in the public spotlight, and a vast majority of scientists and intellectuals were ganging up on religion.<sup>30</sup> With "Red Hot Catholic Love," Parker and Stone were addressing how at the time it appeared as if every academic, scientist, and mathematician was jumping on the "antireligious bandwagon."<sup>31</sup> In other words, Parker and Stone were not choosing sides, but were instead suggesting that both believers and non-believers reevaluate their positions regarding the science-religion and creationism-evolution debates.

To express their bipartisan message, Parker and Stone used exaggeration and symbolism to condemn both corrupt priests and hypocritical atheists. Above all, they showed how atheists could be just as conceited, distasteful, and ignorant as the priests involved in the misconduct scandal, a surprising lesson to many viewers. Simultaneously critiquing Catholic leaders and extreme atheists for their faults and hypocrisies, Parker and Stone expressed the necessity for a return to integrity and self-awareness among believers and non-believers alike.

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<sup>30</sup> Audio Commentary for "Red Hot Catholic Love."

<sup>31</sup> Feltmate, David. "Dr. David Feltmate Interview." Online interview. 24 Jan. 2014.

### ***The Errors of New Atheism***

While *South Park*'s critique of atheism resonated with viewers, in 2004, shortly after "Red Hot Catholic Love," the philosopher and neuroscientist, Sam Harris, published *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*, marking the beginning of what would later be dubbed "New Atheism." In *The End of Faith*, Harris acknowledges the positive effects of faith, and does not deny the existence of numinous experiences or the "sacred dimension" to human life.<sup>32</sup> Indeed, Harris draws on neuroscience and philosophy to provide a modern foundation for ethics and the search for the numinous, and he supports a naturalistic explanation of religion, vehemently opposing "faith in untestable propositions" to explain these phenomena.<sup>33</sup> Harris believes that the study of spirituality could provide valuable insights to maximize wellbeing and happiness, but more importantly, he asserts that the accommodation of moderate faith enables religious extremism. In *The End of Faith*, he attempts:

to reconcile the bewildering juxtaposition of two facts: (1) our religious traditions attest to a range of spiritual experiences that are real and significant and entirely worthy of our investigation, both personally and scientifically; (2) many of the beliefs that have grown up around these experiences now threaten to destroy us.<sup>34</sup>

Evidently, Harris is convinced that religion is inherently dangerous and warrants immediate actions. In the first chapter of his book, he claims that if the prevalence of

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<sup>32</sup> Harris, Sam. *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason*. New York: W.W. Norton &, 2004. Print. P. 16.

<sup>33</sup> Harris, p. 16.

<sup>34</sup> Harris, p. 43.

religiosity is not curbed, then religious extremists armed with chemical, biological, and nuclear weapons will unmake our world.<sup>35</sup>

Harris hopes to show “that the very ideal of religious tolerance—born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe whatever he wants about God—is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.”<sup>36</sup> In other words, even religious moderates that support a pluralistic understanding of other faiths and do not literally interpret the Bible or the Koran enable extreme religiously motivated acts such as 9/11. According to Harris, religious moderation is a slippery slope, much more slippery than moderates are aware. To remedy this slippery slope we have created, Harris believes societies must first re-examine the privilege they bestow upon religious traditions:

The greatest problem confronting civilization is not merely religious extremism: rather, it is the larger set of cultural and intellectual accommodations we have made to faith itself.<sup>37</sup>

Harris opposes the privilege that many, both religious and nonreligious, bestow upon religion, and he examines the enduring prominence of faith in light of the increasingly large body of knowledge that discredits supernatural explanations for the numinous. Evidently, Harris views religion as a social construct and does not take it to be a *sui generis* phenomenon that is immune to examination and criticism. To effectively combat faith, Harris says that our “primary task” is to subject religious beliefs to sustained criticism such that one day, “faith, without evidence, disgraces anyone who would claim it.”<sup>38</sup> In other words, Harris envisions a future where it is simply too *embarrassing* to be religious, but where spiritual wellbeing and happiness are of the utmost importance.

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<sup>35</sup> Harris, p. 14.

<sup>36</sup> Harris, p. 15.

<sup>37</sup> Harris, p. 45.

<sup>38</sup> Harris, p. 48.

In critiquing religion as a system that produces extremism, Harris set a precedent for “New Atheism.” He believes that the human project will not succeed unless it rids itself of religion, and he articulated his points well enough that *The End of Faith* went to #4 on *New York Times* bestseller list when it was first published, and remained there for 33 weeks.<sup>39</sup> This degree of success from an antireligious book typified what Dennett would later claim to have spurred the rise of the nones.

While *The End of Faith’s* economic success suggests that Harris may have influenced the detachment from religious affiliation that would become the rise of the nones, many believers and non-believers took great offence to Harris’ claims and methodology, criticizing his use of rational atheism as a guise for promoting Islamophobia.<sup>40</sup> In *The End of Faith*, he asserts: “Islam, more than any other religion human beings have devised, has all the makings of a thoroughgoing cult of death.”<sup>41</sup> In other words, while he supports no religion, Harris believes that Islam is especially dangerous. He continues: “All civilized nations must unite in condemnation of a theology that now threatens to destabilize much of the earth.”<sup>42</sup> In distinguishing between Muslims and sophisticated Westerners, Harris oversimplifies Islam, vindicating his critics’ accusations of Islamophobia. Considering Harris’ overly antireligious, Islamophobic approach, it appears that he may not have actually played a role in encouraging less extreme forms of non-belief.

As a matter of fact, Harris’ radical condemnation of religious moderation and Islam opposes what a majority of nones stand for—the two-thirds that believe in God and four-

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<sup>39</sup> Sunday Book Review, 2005-07. *New York Times*.

<sup>40</sup> Lean, Nathan. "Dawkins, Harris, Hitchens: New Atheists Flirt with Islamophobia." *Saloncom RSS*. 30 Mar. 2013. Web.

<sup>41</sup> Harris, p. 123.

<sup>42</sup> Harris, p. 123.

tents that are “spiritual but not religious” seem to favor pluralistic understandings of faith, challenging Harris’ censure of religious moderation. Additionally, Harris’ Islamophobia appears to stand against the inclusive nature of the nones—the unaffiliated are characterized by a detachment from antireligious dogma, the exact sort of dogma that *The End of Faith* espoused with its criticism of Islam and religious moderation.<sup>43</sup>

Following Harris, Richard Dawkins, the evolutionary biologist who had long been known for his atheist views, published *The God Delusion* in 2006. Like Harris, Dawkins subjected religious traditions to scientific analysis, and was a fierce proponent of “militant atheism.”<sup>44</sup> In the eyes of many, Dawkins was already known as loudmouthed, aggressive, and overtly antireligious. With *The God Delusion*, however, he intensified his critique by targeting those in particular that stand by religion despite contradictory evidence and logic. *The God Delusion* appealed to the wave of antireligious sentiment that Harris had capitalized on with *The End of Faith*, cementing Dawkins’ position among the developing New Atheist movement.

At the end of the first chapter of his book, “A Deeply Religious Non-believer,”

Dawkins writes:

I am not in favour of offending or hurting anyone just for the sake of it. But I am intrigued and mystified by the disproportionate privileging of religion in our otherwise secular societies. What is so special about religion that we grant it such uniquely privileged respect? I shall not go out of my way to offend, but nor shall I don kid gloves to handle religion any more gently than I would anything else.<sup>45</sup>

Dawkins states that his goal with *The God Delusion* is not to simply offend the religious—rather, he isolates and examines the protective boundaries of religion, inevitably

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<sup>43</sup> “Rise of the ‘Nones.’”

<sup>44</sup> “Richard Dawkins: Militant Atheism.” TED, Feb. 2002. Web.

<sup>45</sup> Dawkins, Richard. *The God Delusion*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2006. Print. P 27.

offending some in the process. In other words, Dawkins merely appeals to logic, incidentally displeasing those with emotional attachments to religion. According to Dawkins, the taboo surrounding the criticism of supernatural beliefs is indicative of the larger problems regarding the immunity of faith. To accomplish his goals, Dawkins first takes a stand against the monotheistic traditions' conception of God, elucidates various arguments suggesting the absence of a God, and then attempts to discredit the divine origins of religion by offering a naturalistic account of religion. Finally, he outlines what a happy and meaningful atheist lifestyle could look like, and proposes that, contrary to conventional wisdom, religion actually produces more harm than good.

As opposed to Harris who targets Islam, Dawkins addresses Christianity in particular. He addresses all monotheistic traditions, but explains: "Unless otherwise stated, I shall have Christianity mostly in mind, but only because it is the version with which I happen to be most familiar."<sup>46</sup> While he foresaw the offence many would take from his book, suggesting that his book was not deliberately insulting, many have criticized Dawkins for being intentionally polemical and offensive with *The God Delusion*.<sup>47</sup> The title, for one, questions the mental capacities of those of faith, and his bias is evident from the very beginning of the book. Indeed, he writes: "I am attacking God, all gods, anything and everything supernatural, wherever and whenever they may of will have been invented."<sup>48</sup> This declaration of war on God challenges Dawkins' claim of objectivity and of not being unnecessarily offensive. While he is candid, Dawkins is also evidently heavily biased and discriminatory, resulting in the publication of various responses such as Alister McGrath's

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<sup>46</sup> Dawkins, p. 37.

<sup>47</sup> Vernon, Mark. "The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins." *Philosophy Now*. Web. 2007.

<sup>48</sup> Dawkins, p. 36.

*The Dawkins Delusion?* (2007), Douglas Wilson's *The Deluded Atheist: A Response to Richard Dawkins' The God Delusion* (2008), and Curtis White's *The Science Delusion: Asking the Big Questions in a Culture of Easy Answers* (2013).

Like Harris' Islamophobia that marked a disparity between the New Atheists and the unaffiliated, Dawkins' belligerence set him apart from the nones. In the chapter "What's Wrong with Religion? Why Be So Hostile?" however, Dawkins addresses the common criticism questioning the necessity to actively oppose religion and accusing him of being a fundamentalist. In response, Dawkins asserts that all of his hostility "is limited to words," and regarding the accusation of fundamentalism, he explains that if given adequate evidence, he would gladly change his mind about anything, including his faith in science or evolution.<sup>49</sup> Thus, he defers all judgments to logic and reason, and dismisses the accusation that he is a fundamentalist because of his open-minded scientific rationalism. While he may be open to admitting his errors if presented sufficient evidence, Dawkins' offensive title and declaration of war on God suggest that his book's goal was to condemn faith and to make noise for the atheist cause, as opposed to engaging in even-tempered dialogue.

Despite Dawkins' unsavory reputation among believers, *The God Delusion* has sold over 2 million copies, and was a top-10 bestseller on the lists of both the *New York Times* and the *LA Times*.<sup>50</sup> Though already an established advocate of atheism, Dawkins further cemented his position in opposition to religion with *The God Delusion*, and rallied the wave of antireligious sentiment that would become New Atheism. Dawkins undoubtedly made an impact on individuals and the cultural discussion surrounding atheism and non-belief, but

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<sup>49</sup> Dawkins, p. 281.

<sup>50</sup> McNally, Terrence. "Atheist Richard Dawkins on 'The God Delusion'" *Alternet*. N.p., 17 Jan. 2007. Web.



like Harris, Dawkins' ideology is distinctly different than that of the unaffiliated.

Considering the prevalence of secular faith among the unaffiliated, it follows that Dawkins' militant atheism and attack on God would not necessarily resonate with the nones. While it is difficult to categorize the nones, their very lack of consensus suggests that aggressive atheism does not typify them.

Shortly after *The God Delusion*, Dan Dennett published *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* in 2006, and would also be thrown into the New Atheist melting pot with Harris and Dawkins. The very first thing that Dennett says in the preface is that he is an "American author" writing primarily for "American readers," acknowledging his own worldview and prejudices.<sup>51</sup> He deliberately focuses his efforts on Christianity, then Islam and Judaism, and admits that he simply does not know enough about the rest of the world's god-less religions to address them in his critique. Dennett begins with a historical account of the history of religions, analyzes contemporary religion and its study, and finally speculates where religion is going and how that may impact humanity, adding: "I can think of no more important topic to investigate."<sup>52</sup> I couldn't agree more.

In opposition to Harris and Dawkins, Dennett is much more collected, objective, and calm in *Breaking the Spell*. Dennett's overall argument is that "religion as a global phenomenon" should be subject to rigorous multidisciplinary analysis in order to better understand how it ties into conflicts and functions as a source of meaning," but he does not take the same aggressive, accusatory approach as Harris and Dawkins.<sup>53</sup> Indeed, Dennett is the most self-reflective and progressive of the New Atheists, setting him apart from the

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<sup>51</sup> Dennett, Daniel C. *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. New York: Viking, 2006. Print. P. xiii.

<sup>52</sup> Dennett, p. 7.

<sup>53</sup> Dennett, p. 14.

others with respect to advancing the dialogue between organized religion and atheism. Dennett's tone of voice is not as strident as Dawkins or Harris, but he still strongly opposes organized religion. At the end of his book, Dennett writes: "Ignorance is nothing shameful; *imposing* ignorance is shameful."<sup>54</sup> Like Dawkins and Harris, Dennett takes issue with the rejection of reason for faith, in addition to the indoctrination of children. Addressing religious folks that fail to regard all of the examples in history of "large crowds of deluded people egging one another on down the primrose path to perdition," Dennett asks:

How can you be sure you're not part of such a group? I for one am not in awe of your faith. I am appalled by your arrogance, by your unreasonable certainty that you have all the answers. I wonder if any believers in the End Times will have the intellectual honesty and courage to read this book through.<sup>55</sup>

Thus, while most of his book is nuanced and calculated, Dennett still chastises believers that perpetuate the suspension of reason, and he challenges them to read his book through with an open mind. Dennett is by all means an evangelizing non-believer, but he does not regard faith as a primitive mental function to merely be discarded; rather, he supports an appropriation of inquiry examining the functions of sacred values.<sup>56</sup> Dennett hopes to reach as broad an audience of believers and non-believers as possible with *Breaking the Spell*, but he understands that in-your-face atheism *à la* Dawkins is not the most effective way to bring about change. Dennett's interdisciplinary approach to the problems afflicting the study of religion stands above that of Dawkins and Harris in

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<sup>54</sup> Dennett, p. 339.

<sup>55</sup> Dennett, p. 51.

<sup>56</sup> "The Church of the Non-Believers," p. 5.

presentation and in content, and *Breaking the Spell* has consequently remained one of the highest selling books in science, spirituality, and religion on Amazon.<sup>57</sup>

Much more could be said about Dennett's methodology that dissociates him from the errors of Harris and Dawkins, but in advocating for New Atheism in numerous interviews, Dennett forever affiliated himself with the others' faults. By embracing the New Atheist label, Dennett agreed to join forces with Harris and Dawkins, taking on some of their burden. Collectively, Harris, Dawkins, and Dennett achieved success waging war on God in terms of literary celebrity, but the aggression and militancy characteristic of Harris and Dawkins made atheism unappealing to believers and mild-mannered fence sitters.<sup>58</sup> Thus, when Dennett recently claimed the rise of the nones as a product of New Atheism, it appears he may have jumped the gun.

To better understand how the New Atheists came up short in preaching their message, it is useful to return to Wolf's article, "The Church of the Non-Believers." Wolf coins the term "New Atheism," and while he agrees with the New Atheists regarding the value of reason and logic, he asks:

Were I to declare myself an atheist, what would this mean? Would my life have to change? Would it become my moral obligation to be uncompromising toward fence-sitting? That person at dinner, pissing people off with his arrogance, his disrespect, his intellectual scorn—would that be me?<sup>59</sup>

This dilemma concerning the logically rational yet economically irrational nature of atheism is exactly what stumps Wolf, leading him to embark on his secular pilgrimage to meet the New Atheists. At the end of his journey, however, he decides to refuse the call of

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<sup>57</sup> "Best Sellers in Theism Religion." *Amazon Best Sellers: Best Theism Religion*. Web. 28 Feb. 2014.

<sup>58</sup> Wolf, p. 7.

<sup>59</sup> Wolf, p. 5

the New Atheists—it is “this prophetic attack on prophecy, this extremism in opposition to extremism” that compels him to decline.<sup>60</sup> While he may agree for the most part with the New Atheists’ beliefs, their aggression pushes him away. Thus, while Wolf coins “New Atheism,” he decides to remain unaffiliated, paradoxically creating and laying to rest the New Atheist movement at once.

Shortly after Wolf’s “The Church of the Non-Believers,” the now deceased author, journalist, debater, and comedian, Christopher Hitchens, released *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* on May 1, 2007, which would become the last installment in the works of the four original New Atheists. It made sense for Dennett to unite with Dawkins and Harris to promote atheism despite their faults, but allying with Christopher Hitchens, the last of the “Four Horsemen,” may have further damaged Dennett and the New Atheists’ hopes of effecting real change. Where Dennett dialed down his tone of voice and explicit criticism of religion, Hitchens, as Dr. Feltmate remarked, “got carried away” with *God Is Not Great*.<sup>61</sup> Hitchens states that organized religion is “violent, irrational, intolerant, allied to racism and tribalism and bigotry, invested in ignorance and hostile to free inquiry, contemptuous of women and coercive toward children.”<sup>62</sup> In short, he does not think highly of organized religion, and makes that abundantly clear to the reader without letting up.

Hitchens admits that in the era of human pre-history, the concept of a God or gods understandably was a valid explanation for the unexplainable. Nowadays, however, similar to Harris and Dawkins before him, Hitchens sees four irreducible objections to religious faith:

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<sup>60</sup> Wolf, p. 7.

<sup>61</sup> “Dr. David Feltmate Interview.”

<sup>62</sup> Hitchens, Christopher. *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*. New York: Twelve, 2007. Print. P. 55.

That it wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos, that because of this original error it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism, that it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression, and that it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.<sup>63</sup>

In this statement of non-belief, Hitchens establishes that organized religion ignores the growing body of knowledge discrediting belief in supernatural phenomena, inculcates egocentrism disguised as humility, perpetuates primitive sexual practices, and disgraces free inquiry, tolerance, and the pursuit of knowledge. In short, he sums up *how religion poisons everything*. While Hitchens eloquently and sometimes humorously highlights how organized religion causes wars, unnecessary suffering, and misogyny, he never adequately addresses how and why billions of people remain devout believers.

Hitchens articulately reiterates the scientific and logical counterarguments to religion, but in a nutshell, he fails to address the spiritual needs of secular society and why scientific evidence and logical arguments fail to convert believers. *God Is Not Great* makes a fantastic stocking-stuffer for an atheist friend or a cruel gag-gift for a devout enemy, but its over-the-top criticism of faith severely limits its chances to convert any believers or fence sitters. While his ‘shock value’ appeals to some, Hitchens’ frequent use of ridicule and scorn detracts from his book’s chances of effecting real change. Hitchens’ polemical nature is particularly evident when he states:

The “evidence” for faith, then, seems to leave faith looking even weaker than it would if it stood, alone and unsupported, all by itself. What can be asserted without evidence can also be dismissed without evidence. This is even more true when the “evidence” eventually offered is so shoddy and self-interested.<sup>64</sup>

By classifying all justification for faith as self-interested, shoddy, and unable to support itself like an infant, Hitchens puts smiles on the mouths of nonbelieving readers,

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<sup>63</sup> Hitchens, p. 11.

<sup>64</sup> Hitchens, p. 139.

but does little to convince others of his opinion. Like Dawkins and Harris, Hitchens succeeds at badmouthing organized religion and selling books, but offers the least of all the New Atheists by way of proposing secular guidelines for happiness. Additionally, Hitchens does not offer any sort of method to achieve his goals, and does not explain how his principles pertain to those of different cultures and socioeconomic statuses. Even if one were questioning his or her faith in God, *God Is Not Great* might turn them away from atheism with its over-the-top condemnation of religion.

In 2010, while he was on tour promoting his memoir *Hitch-22*, Hitchens was diagnosed with esophageal cancer. He had to cancel appearances at numerous debates and talks while undergoing treatment, and regarding conversion to faith on his deathbed, Hitchens wrote in a letter to a convention: “redemption and supernatural deliverance appears even more hollow and artificial to me than it did before.”<sup>65</sup> Thus, even in the face of imminent death, Hitchens remained an devoted atheist and continued to promote atheism and non-belief. While Hitchens did not explicitly describe how to lead a meaningful life in *God Is Not Great*, his intrepidity approaching imminent death speaks much louder than any words could have.

While his resoluteness was admirable, *God Is Not Great*, like the other New Atheist texts, was not pertinent or accessible to a majority of Americans. Clark Davis Adams (1969-2007), a prominent American freethought and atheism activist and leader, conceded that atheists generally fall in the top 5% of the income bracket and are “overwhelmingly white.”<sup>66</sup> Consequently, the rest of Americans that cannot afford to invest time or resources

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<sup>65</sup> Meyers, PZ. "Hitchens' Address to American Atheists." *Pharyngula*. ScienceBlogs, 22 Apr. 2011. Web.

<sup>66</sup> Wolf, p. 4.

into New Atheist literature have little to gain by purchasing one of their books, and much to lose. Indeed, most religious folks get a certain spiritual utility from religion that Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens failed to adequately address, indicating that more than a logical argument would be necessary to bring about change. The New Atheists sold scores of books, but many of their readers, even if they agreed with the New Atheists' logic, disapproved of their methodologies, implying that the New Atheists' true effect was more limited than sales suggest.<sup>67</sup>

While Harris and Dennett alluded to such a spiritual utility, their books focused on discrediting religion from multiple angles more so than they concerned the development of secular spirituality. In other words, Harris and Dennett got carried away with bashing religion instead of promoting viable alternatives for readers to try. Overall, the Four Horsemen forcefully professed atheism in their New Atheist literature well enough to achieve bestseller status, but they reached a primarily upper-class, intellectual audience, and there has been no statistically significant rise in atheism since their arrival.<sup>68</sup> It follows that the New Atheists' form of religious satire and critique was too aggressive and over-the-top, damaging the reputation of atheism by irreversibly linking it to New Atheism.

In comparison to the slow rise of atheism following the birth of New Atheism, the religiously unaffiliated have grown at an increasing rate, and are ideologically distinct from the New Atheists. The nones are more fluid, inclusive, and mild-mannered, and the measure of unaffiliated that believes in God or regularly pray suggests that the nones reject the fierce opposition to religion characteristic of New Atheism. Thus, when Dennett recently claimed that the New Atheists enabled the nones' disinterest in organized religion,

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<sup>67</sup> Wolf, p. 4.

<sup>68</sup> *Global Index of Religion and Atheism*.

it appears that he may have been overhasty, and that the nones actually rose as a response to the New Atheists' errors.

### ***The Unaffiliated Push***

In reaction to the success of Harris' *The End of Faith* and Dawkins' *The God Delusion*, *South Park* aired the episode "Go God Go" on November 1, 2006, and then "Go God Go XII" the following week. Parker and Stone released these episodes before the arrival of Dennett, Hitchens, and the term "New Atheism," but the "Go God Go" episodes aired at the peak of Dawkins' celebrity from *The God Delusion*, making them pertinent to the discussion of New Atheism. In a sense, these episodes built on their critique of atheism in "Red Hot Catholic Love," but this time around, Parker and Stone targeted solely the wave of antireligious sentiment and militant atheism championed by Harris and Dawkins.<sup>69</sup> While the New Atheist movement would continue to evolve with the absorption of Dennett and Hitchens, these episodes addressed the core of what would become "New Atheism," and their critique of Dawkins' errors would enter the cultural discussion surrounding the social acceptability of atheism and New Atheism.

In "Go God Go," since waiting three weeks for the Nintendo Wii to be released would be too much to endure, Cartman decides to freeze himself in order to make the time go faster. While Cartman recruits Butters to help freeze him, Ms. Garrison, formerly Mr. Garrison before having a sex-change operation, tries to resist teaching evolution in her classroom as ordered by the school. Upon giving her skewed take on the theory to her students, she concludes: "So there you go! You're the retarded offspring of five monkeys

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<sup>69</sup> Audio Commentary for "Go God Go."



having butt-sex with a fish-squirrel! Congratulations!"<sup>70</sup> Due to the misrepresentation of the theory, South Park Elementary brings in Richard Dawkins to help Ms. Garrison teach evolution.

The two quarrel at first, but soon enough, they fall in love, and Ms. Garrison converts to atheism. In the middle of a lecture about evolution the next day, Stan posits: "Couldn't evolution be the answer to how and not the answer to why?"<sup>71</sup> In other words, Stan suggests that perhaps evolution and intelligent design are not necessarily at odds. In response, Ms. Garrison scolds Stan and forces him to sit in the corner of the classroom with a dunce cap reading: "I have faith." Cuddling in bed later that night, Dawkins suggests that Ms. Garrison may have been too harsh with Stan in class. Ms. Garrison responds: "You've just been too soft on religious people in the past. Think about it, Richard. With your intellect and my balls, we can change the future of the world."<sup>72</sup> Unaware that Ms. Garrison actually formerly had 'balls,' a passionate sex scene ensues between Dawkins and Ms. Garrison, crudely ridiculing Dawkins.

Instead of thawing just in time for the Nintendo Wii's release, Cartman's frozen body is lost in an avalanche, and he is eventually discovered and brought back to life by the United Atheist League (UAL) in the year 2546. The future is an entirely atheist world dedicated to reason and science, inspired by Dawkins and his wife, Mrs. Garrison, where the UAL is at war with the Allied Atheist Alliance (AAA) and the United Atheist Alliance (UAA) over who has the most logical answer to "The Great Question." "Go God Go" ends here with Cartman stuck in the future and Dawkins starting an atheist revolution while

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<sup>70</sup> Parker, Trey, and Matt Stone. "Go God Go." *South Park*. Comedy Central. 1012, 1 November 2006. Television.

<sup>71</sup> "Go God Go."

<sup>72</sup> "Go God Go."

being incapable of perceiving what's right in front of him—the love of his life who was formerly a man.

In the follow-up episode, “Go God Go XII,” the war between the three atheist factions intensifies. Cartman purchases a Crank-Prank Time Phone to try to call back into the past and change the future, but nobody that he gets a hold of takes him seriously due to all of the times that they had been pranked or wronged by Cartman. While a massive battle takes place, Cartman learns that The Great Question is merely which atheist denomination has the most logical answer for what atheists should call themselves: the AAA, the UAA, or the UAL. Thus, even though everyone in the future is atheist, the war between the AAA, the UAA, and the UAL is religious in the sense that it defies the very logic and rationality that is supposed to define these factions. Desperately trying to return to the past, Cartman uses the time-phone to call back to 2006, interrupting Dawkins and Ms. Garrison in bed:

CARTMAN

I need to speak to Mr. Garrison right now!

DAWKINS

I'm sorry, but Mr. Garrison has passed away. Mrs. Garrison is the only person here, and she's rather tied up at the moment

CARTMAN

Look, asshole, this is a real emergency! Just pass the phone to whatever Garrison wants to call himself since the sex-change operation!

DAWKINS

Sex-change operation?

MS. GARRISON

Uh oh.

DAWKINS

Uuuuugh! You're a man?

MS. GARRISON

Not anymore, I've been fixed. Richard, hold on. I can explain.

DAWKINS

Explain, how can I be so stupid?

MS. GARRISON

Richard, come back, please! (Dawkins does not return)

Well, go ahead and leave, you atheist [expletive]! Have fun mocking God in hell, you [expletive]!<sup>73</sup>

Since the two "co-founders of world atheism" no longer get married, the future changes and Cartman all of a sudden finds himself in a room with leaders from each atheist faction. This time, however, there is peace, and nobody fights about abstract "isms" anymore; there is only a war against the French-Chinese over the ownership of Hawaii. Cartman is sent back to the past, but must now wait two whole months for the Nintendo Wii.

Parker and Stone admitted that they ultimately were expressing their inability to wait for the Nintendo Wii with the episodes "Go God Go" and "Go God Go XII," but they also wanted to address the "bitchy" tone that they believed Harris and Dawkins had in their books. Parker and Stone wanted to say much more about the errors of atheism, but found that an episode preaching their own opinions with a detailed critique of the authors would

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<sup>73</sup> Parker, Trey, and Matt Stone. "Go God Go XII." *South Park*. Comedy Central. 1013, 8 November 2006. Television.

lose its comedic value.<sup>74</sup> While the two “Go God Go” episodes did not feature a nuanced religious critique on par with that of “Red Hot Catholic Love,” the episodes’ mockery of Dawkins was still significant in its own way.

Parker and Stone were influenced to make more episodes about atheism when, during a Nightline interview, they were asked: “So, you guys are atheists? Because you’ve made fun of religion a lot on the show.”<sup>75</sup> Parker and Stone explained that they were in fact not atheists, and talked about their particular beliefs, pushing Penn Jillette, a friend of the *South Park* creators, to send them an email expressing how upset he was to learn that they were not atheists. This led Parker and Stone to read *The God Delusion* and *The End of Faith*, but the two remarked that they really needed to “fight through” the books.

Regarding his difficulty reading *The God Delusion*, Parker stated: “Dawkins’ book sounded to me exactly like that kid when you were in high school, that 15 year old that was running around going, ‘Don’t be stupid, God!’”<sup>76</sup> Parker meant that Dawkins reminded him of an adolescent atheist sticking his nose in other people’s business, feeling the need to put every person of faith on the spot. After this comment, Parker went on to compare Dawkins to the kid in kindergarten telling everyone that Santa Claus isn’t real. In short, although they agreed with many of Dawkins’ anti-extremist, anti-dogmatic messages, Parker and Stone thought that preaching atheism was inherently hypocritical because it was analogous in nature to proselytizing fundamentalism.

Other than expressing their inability to tolerate waiting for the Nintendo Wii, “Go God Go” and “Go God Go XII” expressed that Parker and Stone were not actually atheists,

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<sup>74</sup> Audio Commentary for “Go God Go.”

<sup>75</sup> Audio Commentary for “Go God Go.”

<sup>76</sup> Audio Commentary for “Go God Go.”

and that they believed Dawkins and Harris were dogmatic in their own way. In fact, Parker does believe in a sort of God, and the two have never intended to wage war against all religion or spirituality with the show.<sup>77</sup> *South Park's* religious critique targets fundamentalism, indoctrination, dogmatism, and hypocrisy, but never condemns religious moderation or faith in general as do the New Atheists. The very fact that *South Park* made a pair of episodes mocking Dawkins demonstrates that the show had no bias regarding religion—not even atheism was protected.

Dawkins and Harris are convinced that religion is the root of all war and that there would be peace without religion, but these episodes turned that argument on its head by imagining an atheist war revolving around a name dispute. While this war was satirical, featuring otters riding ostriches, the viewer was pushed to reconsider the ideals of atheism, and to contemplate whether or not an atheist world could function. Parker and Stone ironically demonstrated that reason and rationality as personal and political ideologies would not necessarily prevent all future wars. Additionally, these episodes were significant because they were released at the height of *The God Delusion's* celebrity—what was considered to be an antireligious and sacrilegious show depicted Dawkins, the atheist leader, in the most offensive and unexpected way. The timing of these episodes, in addition to their unanticipated attack on Dawkins, in and of themselves combatted the “evangelical push” occurring among atheist culture.<sup>78</sup> That is to say, in the wake of *The God Delusion* and *The End of Faith*, when antireligious sentiment was becoming more overt and prevalent, *South Park* opposed this surge by surprising viewers at a critical moment. Indeed, David Feltmate, Assistant Professor of Sociology at Auburn University at Montgomery and author

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<sup>77</sup> Audio Commentary for “Go God Go.”

<sup>78</sup> “Dr. David Feltmate Interview.”

of numerous publications concerning religious humor including “It’s Funny Because It’s True?: *The Simpsons*, Satire, and the Significance of Religious Humor in Popular Culture” (2013), and “Cowards, Critics, and Catholics: The Catholic League for Religious and Civil Rights, *South Park* and the Politics of Religious Humor in the United States” (2013), remarked:

Through [*The Simpsons*, *South Park* and *King of the Hill*], we can see how popular culture contributes to the ongoing culture wars about religious validity and NRMs’ place in American society.<sup>79</sup>

Dr. Feltmate contends that religious humor in particular episodes of animated satire significantly contributes to the cultural discussion regarding the religious traditions that are addressed. *South Park*’s mockery of Dawkins, on the other hand, contributed to the cultural discussion surrounding atheism. Dawkins himself watched the episode and commented:

Satire is supposed to satirise. Depicting somebody as having a predilection for bugging a bald transvestite is not satire and not witty. The futuristic projection of wars between atheist factions is genuine satire and quite witty. I think it's important to understand the difference.<sup>80</sup>

In light of *South Park*’s mockery of just about every religious tradition imaginable, it follows that Parker and Stone support Dawkins and Harris’ opposition to religious dogma and extremism. Parker and Stone, however, strongly oppose militancy and hypocrisy, which is why they made the “Go God Go” episodes where Dawkins unknowingly falls in love with a “bald transvestite,” starts another iteration of war “religious” in nature, and doesn’t even get the courtesy of a proper British accent. Due to its criticism of extreme atheism, I

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<sup>79</sup> Feltmate, David. “The Humorous Reproduction of Religious Prejudice: “Cults” and Religious Humour in *King of the Hill*, *The Simpsons*, and *South Park*.” *Journal of Religion and Popular Culture*. 24 (2): 201-216.

<sup>80</sup> “Richard Dawkins reddit AMA-November 2013.” *Interviewly*. Nov. 2013. Web.

believe that *South Park's* ideology aligns with that of the unaffiliated. Parker and Stone's uncertain religious beliefs correspond to those of the nones, and the show's critical representation of militant atheism suggests that the show supports the unaffiliated identity over atheism.

### ***Conclusion***

Before the "Church of the Non-Believers" was published, Harris, Dennett, and Dawkins espoused similar ideologies, but were not officially or unofficially affiliated with one another. In naming them the "New Atheists," however, Wolf brought Dawkins, Dennett, and Harris together under one banner, and the term "New Atheism" caught on, further increasing their popularity. Following the incorporation of Hitchens, the New Atheist movement has absorbed additional scholars including Michel Onfray, Dan Barker, and A.C. Grayling. Since the Four Horsemen's run on bestseller lists, however, additional atheists publications have not been able to achieve the same popularity or success as the original New Atheists' works.<sup>81</sup>

A.C. Grayling's *The God Argument* (2013), for example, supports a "beautiful and life-enhancing" humanism in place of common religious practices. The book is still a recent publication and deserves the benefit of the doubt regarding its ultimate impact on the cultural discussion surrounding atheism and non-believers, but *The God Argument* lacks the aggression and zest of the New Atheist texts that made them so provocative. Grayling is likely trying to address the current less antireligious climate by avoiding harsh criticism of

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<sup>81</sup> "In Search of the Ungodly." *The Economist*. The Economist Newspaper, 06 Apr. 2013. Web.

religion, but his book consequently lacks the same allure of the Four Horsemen's books.<sup>82</sup>

The lack of New Atheist publications achieving the same literary acclaim as the Four Horsemen suggests that the wave of antireligious sentiment that enabled the original New Atheists' success is subsiding.

New Atheism's extremism appealed to many, but its strong stance against moderate religious faith may have been too extreme to start a revolution. Perhaps it was this same extremism that allowed the New Atheists' books to sell so well, simultaneously inhibiting them from converting significant numbers of fence sitters and believers to the atheist cause. Additionally, for the less educated and less affluent, the New Atheists offered no incentive to invest in their way of life, and they neglected to take advantage of other mediums of expression besides books that appeal to a younger, more diverse audience. Documentary films have found economic success jabbing at organized religion, but there is still yet to be a significant, widely successful, and non-commercial publication promoting atheism. Instead of selling out with a bestseller or a movie that reaches an exclusive audience, I believe that atheist advocates could reach more diverse individuals by taking advantage of less profitable multi-media avenues such as Youtube, Facebook, iPhone apps, video games, and music. In short, the New Atheists—Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens in particular—offered esoteric and idealistic arguments against organized religion that accomplished little besides imploring atheists to 'come out,' chastising moderates, and raising hell.

Though their goal was to convert moderate non-believers to militant atheists, I believe that Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens' level of offense and outspokenness did more

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<sup>82</sup> "In Search of the Ungodly."



harm than good in promoting their cause. While New Atheism sold well, the Four Horsemen spurred the New Atheist identity that only appealed to radical, extreme personalities. Due to Harris, Dawkins, and Hitchens, 'atheism' gained a stigma that could not be disassociated from New Atheism. Consequently, I believe unaffiliation took off in response to New Atheism, without ever truly being born—the unaffiliated by definition have no leader or organization, and will avoid repeating the mistakes of the New Atheists by dint of not being a uniform group.

In order to truly make a difference in the religious landscape, various forms of literature and multi-media will need to be taken advantage of, and different socioeconomic classes must be appealed to. Statistics show that atheism is growing slowly, but that the nones are growing much more rapidly.<sup>83</sup> I do not believe that New Atheism is dead as the New Atheist books will always have their places on bookshelves, but it appears that contemporary attempts to convert the faithful and fence sitters to atheism are encountering difficulties.

One notable attempt to market and advocate the meaningful lifestyle that non-believers are capable of is the brights, a sociocultural movement co-founded in 2003 by Mynga Futrell and Paul Geisert, and later supported by influential non-believers such as Dawkins. The brights' homepage defines a bright as one who bases his or her ethics and actions on a naturalistic worldview free of belief in the supernatural. As of 2010, there are 50,000 brights registered in 186 countries.<sup>84</sup> The brights evidently have momentum, but the movement has several critical problems that I believe will inhibit it from growing exponentially.

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<sup>83</sup> "Nones' on the Rise."

<sup>84</sup> "The Brights." *The Brights Bulletin*. 31 Jan. 2010. Web.

The movement wants to make 'bright' a positive association just as 'gay' was used to associate pride with what was before queer, but to many, 'bright' suggests that all others are 'dull' or 'dim.'<sup>85</sup> Brights may believe that to be the case, but 'bright' carries unnecessary connotations of subtle arrogance that make it hard to compel others to join the cause. Additionally, the brights have failed to reach a broad enough audience to be considered socially significant. 50,000 brights worldwide is impressive, but the brights have not been pervasive in the news, publications, or television shows, and consequently, many individuals whose beliefs align with those of the brights choose not to join or simply have not been exposed to the movement.<sup>86</sup>

In light of the lessons learned from New Atheism and the brights, it is apparent that a label attempting to successfully gather atheists, agnostics, fence sitters, and the "spiritual but not religious" under one banner cannot involve aggressive or subtle arrogance— instead, it must appeal to a broad, inclusive audience. The rise of nones has already been declared, and I believe that the nones and the unaffiliated have a golden opportunity to unite non-believers and in-betweeners.

What sets the unaffiliated apart from the brights and the New Atheists is that the unaffiliated by definition lack organization. While this makes it difficult to identify and categorize the nones, it also allows for more fluid boundaries of definition, and more importantly, for the movement to promote itself. I believe that if the unaffiliated were to appoint a leader, the movement would be doomed. Analogous to the war between the AAA, the UAL, and the UAA in the "Go God Go" episodes of *South Park*, if unaffiliation were to

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<sup>85</sup> "The Future Looks Bright." *The Guardian*. Guardian News and Media, 21 June 2003. Web.

<sup>86</sup> Mooney, Chris. 'Not Too "Bright"' The Committee for Skeptical Inquiry, 15 Oct. 2003. Web.

define itself, it would eventually find the same unsatisfying fate as the brights and the New Atheists, in the middle of a tug-of-war over insignificant differences.

In the two-part “Go God Go” episodes, *South Park* demonstrated that petty differences between factions of non-believers damage the greater objectives of non-belief. A war ensued, and each faction ended up self-destructing until Dawkins and Ms. Garrison’s union was retroactively impeded. By illustrating this war, Parker and Stone called upon non-believers to reject atheism and other labels such as ‘brights,’ an affront to the New Atheists’ proselytizing efforts. With the “Go God Go” episodes, along with “Red Hot Catholic Love,” *South Park* promoted free thought and combatted dogmatism. Parker and Stone insightfully and obscenely demonstrated the faults of militant atheism, and by not waging war on all religion and spirituality, they consequently contributed to the rise of the nones.

In light of the aggression and extremism that turned many away from New Atheism, in addition to the diverse spirituality of the nones, it appears that Dennett was off the mark when he claimed that the New Atheists enabled the unaffiliated to declare their disinterest in religion. The nones began to rise at the same time that the New Atheists appeared, but the inability to categorize the nones, along with their distinct ideological differences in comparison to the New Atheists, suggests that Dennett was overhasty. As of now, the unaffiliated reject all labels, and essentially represent all forms of non-belief, opposition to belief, and confusion with belief, granting the nones the opportunity to continue absorbing fence sitters and non-believers. With additional attention from newspapers and bloggers, along with the continued implicit support of *South Park* and other religious satires, I believe that the nones will continue to evolve and to grow in numbers. If they avoid the arrogance and exclusivity that doomed previous factions of non-belief, the nones could

continue to grow at an increasing rate, and perhaps some day soon eclipse believers in numbers.

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#### List of Episodes Referenced

*South Park*. Comedy Central. Created by Trey Parker and Matt Stone. 1997-Present.

<b>Episode Name</b>	<b>Original Airdate</b>	<b>Production Code</b>	<b>Writer(s)</b>	<b>Director(s)</b>
Mr. Hankey, the Christmas Poo	December 17, 1997	110	Trey Parker & Matt Stone	Trey Parker
Are You There God? It's Me, Jesus	December 29, 1999	316	Trey Parker & Matt Stone	Trey Parker
Red Hot Catholic Love	July 3, 2002	608	Trey Parker	Trey Parker
Go God Go	November 1, 2006	1012	Trey Parker	Trey Parker
Go God Go XII	November 8, 2006	1013	Trey Parker	Trey Parker