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From Pariahs to Patriots: Organized Atheism in America, 1925-2011

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Abstract

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This honors thesis traces the history of American atheist groups from their origins through the recent past. I find that their overall size, composition, and leadership structure changed little until a small group of atheist intellectuals emerged in the twenty-first century. After the September 11th terrorist attacks the intellectuals began publicly criticizing numerous aspects religious belief and explicitly advocating atheism as a solution to sociopolitical problems. While much of their success stemmed from broad, generational developments, I show that their decisions and styles of activism directly impacted pre-existing atheist groups, ultimately causing them to embrace new tactics and modes of leadership.

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*In loving memory of Frances Grudzina,
I finally found my way to the top of my class*

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INTRODUCTION:

Madalyn Murray O’Hair was completely sure of herself in December of 1986 when she wrote: “Today, I know what Atheism ought to be, and I have been shaping it toward that end, when Atheism is finally established as a principle upon which future societies are based, it will be the Atheism I have defined and delimited.”¹ Reflecting on this utterance from the not so distant vantage point of 2013, it is remarkable how rapidly and decisively it has been repudiated. When she penned these words, organized atheism in America barely had a pulse. Its figurative heartbeat was practically indistinguishable from her actual one. Although her notoriety had declined since her career as an activist began in the 1960s, she remained the most visible atheist in the country until her mysterious disappearance in 1995, controlling her organizations with an iron fist and a venomous tongue. By 2011, however, few atheists remembered her name or the war she had waged to advance atheism’s cultural and legal standing. Even fewer looked to her sizeable corpus as a source of information – let alone a credible one – about their identity. As a result, fewer still were influenced by her ideas on atheism. O’Hair’s flagship organization, American Atheists (AA), managed to survive the turmoil elicited by her abrupt departure and the protracted, rumor-laden murder investigation that followed. While AA clung tightly to her legacy into the twenty-first century, it self-consciously began loosening its grip as its leadership aged and died, and as it began to be eclipsed by secularist organizations that welcomed all nonbelievers irrespective of their chosen identities.

What prompted such abrupt and unanticipated developments within America’s atheist community? While precisely generalizing about cultural shifts is challenging and inevitably

¹ Madalyn Murray O’Hair, *An Atheist Speaks* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 1986), iv.

² Dan Barker was an evangelical preacher who made noise in the 1990s by becoming an atheist activist with the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

³ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006),

contentious, there is no doubt that America's changing religious and irreligious zeitgeist had a role to play. As we will see, however, the most important factors originated from much more tractable levels of discourse – in particular from academia. To demonstrate this point, I concentrate on a broad yet clearly delineated phenomenon that I refer to as *organized atheism*. This phenomenon includes atheist groups as well as atheist intellectuals working in conjunction to advance atheism in public discourse. It does not consist of the isolated, quiet, or disinterested atheists who are nonetheless represented in anonymous polling statistics. Organized atheism, as I use the term, refers to atheists who make their beliefs public and then proceed to work with each other on behalf of atheism. Conceptualizing atheist groups and intellectuals as distinct manifestations of organized atheism is necessary to understand the unprecedented success of atheist activism in early twenty-first century America. It will become clear, however, that I believe the concept is also useful for historians trying to understand why religious skepticism, cynicism and, more broadly speaking, extreme acts of irreverence have become so commonplace in mainstream American culture.

Organized atheism passed through a critical period between 1995 and 2011. Prior to the twenty-first century it was extremely lopsided. Since the concept of explicitly atheist activism first appeared in America in the 1920s, almost all of it derived from atheist groups. While there were a few intellectuals who publicly advocated atheism, these individuals usually spoke softly and avoided controversy intentionally or because their prominence sprang from unrelated fields and eclipsed their atheism altogether. Most of them quietly resided in academia and embraced atheist activism as a hobby or, if they joined a group, as a social outlet. Even though they were generally more interested in ideas and reflection than atheist group leaders were, these intellectuals had little or nothing to add to the millennia-old metaphysical debate on the existence

of God. More importantly, however, their atheism had little cultural impact. Consequently, they are rarely associated with or remembered for their atheist activism. Few took notice in 1980 when the astrophysicist Carl Sagan implicitly advocated atheism in an ample section of his immensely popular television series, “Cosmos: A Personal Voyage”, or when the notable scientist and science fiction writer Isaac Asimov took charge of the American Humanist Association in 1985. By their association, this handful of intellectuals gave atheism a modicum of respectability that Madalyn Murray O’Hair and other atheist group leaders, try as they might, could not confer. The respectability bestowed, however, never translated into a tangible boost in the size and scope of organized atheism. The most prominent of these intellectuals had died by the mid-1990s. When they did expire, they failed to pass the torch of atheism to a new generation of intellectuals, either because there was no one to pass it to, or because its light was so dim that nobody took notice.

Then, almost out of nowhere, organized atheism changed. Between 2004 and 2007, four intellectuals—Sam Harris, Daniel Dennett, Richard Dawkins, and Christopher Hitchens—published books aggressively criticizing elements of religious belief and explicitly advocating atheism as a palliative to numerous sociopolitical discontents. While they all challenged religion as a source of morality, the belief in God, and the value of faith in general, they did so by bringing their own unique expertise to bear. Their most aggressive criticism was directed at the contemporary taboo in public discourse that prevented fact-based analysis of religion. This taboo, the intellectuals argued, was upheld by so-called religious moderates, whose liberal views directly shielded religious fundamentalists from the censure they deserved and facilitated their war on science, reason, and freedom of expression. No one versed in the history of American atheism (or in any other branch of American history) could have predicted the positive reception

and commercial success the books received. Each book was translated into multiple languages and three sold well over a million copies, spending months atop the bestseller charts. Books, however, were but the first armament in the intellectuals' rhetorical arsenal. They attracted such consistent and widespread media attention, via news programs, talk shows, panel discussions, and filmed debates that their faces and names quickly achieved a cultural status that can be appropriately called "household." Videos of their debates with countless religious interlocutors proliferated on the Internet, obtaining tens of millions of hits and overwhelmingly positive ratings and commentary. In September 2007 in Washington D.C., the intellectuals finally assembled as a quartet to discuss their experiences since publishing as well as their ideas, hopes, and expectations about the future of society, religion, and atheism. While they had already been collectively labeled the "New Atheist Movement", it was only after this gathering that their goals and actions coalesced enough to warrant it.

My central argument is that this small contingent of atheist intellectuals changed organized atheism more than any other social, political, or cultural factor. They did this simply by devoting themselves to activism wholeheartedly and, most importantly, in unison. Their credentials and erudition retained a cachet that could not be dismissed as crackpot or caricatured as a sideshow to the ongoing Culture Wars. Yet another boost to their cause derived from their nearly complete lack of history with atheist groups. None had defended or voiced support for well-known atheists like Madalyn Murray O'Hair or Dan Barker.² Thus, as a neuroscientist, a philosopher, a biologist, and a journalist they were not linked with any previous manifestation of organized atheism and were free from the stigmas it carried. This did not imply, however, that they were themselves not organized or that they did not plan to associate themselves with

² Dan Barker was an evangelical preacher who made noise in the 1990s by becoming an atheist activist with the Freedom From Religion Foundation.

organizations that fostered atheists. While the New Atheists continued publishing books that contributed to the ongoing public debate, they formed groups of their own that advanced tangible goals and shared their intellectual clout and media buzz with atheist and secularist groups. In turn, long-standing organizations started growing – both in terms of national membership, state chapters, and local affiliate groups. Their annual conference attendance rates soared, their budgets grew, their leaders made more television appearances, and they began sustained, provocative advertising campaigns that drew more and more attention to their cause.

Historiography:

This work follows a single phenomenon, organized atheism, back and forth across established historiographical boundaries. As a consequence, it operates at three distinct levels of analysis: social, intellectual, and cultural. In the first sense, it is a work of social history because organized atheism is composed of relatively large groups of people who are quite obviously not intellectuals. The individuals who make up these groups come from a variety of socioeconomic and educational backgrounds. While atheist groups are not completely homogenous, their members shared commonalities that suggest that organized atheism had, until recently, a fairly specific demographic appeal.

This is also a work of intellectual history because organized atheism fostered a small but highly significant group of intellectuals commonly known as the New Atheists. While the New Atheists have always been very easy to identify, I have taken George Nash's rather neat definition of *intellectuals* into consideration to better distinguish them from previous atheist intellectuals and other aspects of organized atheism: intellectuals are "those engaged in study,

reflection, and speculation; purveyors of ideas; scholars and journalists.”³ These men (and as it happens they are all men) staked their livelihoods on their ideas and words. Two of the four had successful careers in academia and three had PhD’s. The New Atheists, however, were not simply interested in formulating ideas and arguments – they yearned to disseminate them as widely as possible and literally change the societies in which they lived. They sought to accomplish this common goal not only by partnering with each other, but also by partnering with atheist groups. In Leon Fink’s words, they attempted to “look beyond the constraints of styles of expression and focus on the basic relationships—or lack thereof—between the intellectuals and their would-be coalition partners.”⁴ For this reason the New Atheists can, and should, be called “public intellectuals.”

The primary link that quickly brought together the New Atheists and American atheist groups was forged by a mutual desire for social reform. This makes it impossible to avoid examining the cultural soil in which organized atheism germinated. Although organized atheists tended to engage in far more recreational pseudo-philosophizing than did members of other reform movements, they had uniformly deep convictions about what American society should look like and believed that they had an important role in turning this vision into reality.

Scholarship:

Historical scholarship treating atheism in post-WWII America is exceedingly sparse. Historical scholarship treating atheism or organized atheism in post-Cold War America is almost non-existent. Aside from two well-researched biographies of Madalyn Murray O’Hair (which

³ George H. Nash, *The Conservative Intellectual Movement in America Since 1945* (Wilmington: ISI Books, 2006), xvii.

⁴ Leon Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 3.

stress her life and not the movement she was a part of), two small anthologies by a credible, though non-academic historian, and a handful of sociology studies, the subject is untouched. It is clear that this scarcity of scholarship stems partly from a general perspective among historians and other scholars. While American exceptionalism has gone out of fashion, many still endorse a kind of American *religious* exceptionalism. They are certainly not without grounds for doing so. It is undeniable that the sociopolitical influence of American religion is unparalleled in the industrialized West. One need not delve into the polling data here to say that many more Americans attend church, pray regularly, and believe in God than their counterparts in Canada and Europe. Most scholars seem to think, however, that they will be able to fully understand and explain the enduring vitality of American religion without studying or even acknowledging American unbelief. They must examine this view more critically.

James Turner's 1985 monograph, *Without God, Without Creed*, is, in part, an attempt to address this myopia. By carefully examining the work of numerous intellectuals, he locates unbelief's headwaters in sustained, cursory decision-making on the part of liberal theologians:

In trying to adapt their religious beliefs to socioeconomic change, to new moral challenges, to novel problems of knowledge, to the tightening standards of science, the defenders of God slowly strangled Him. If anyone is to be arraigned for deicide, it is not Charles Darwin but his adversary Bishop Samuel Wilberforce, not the godless Robert Ingersoll but the godly Beecher family.⁵

Regardless of how successful Turner was in advancing this argument, the phenomenon he attempts to explain, namely unbelief, certainly merits further examination and explanation.⁶ Indeed, the portion of his monograph that focuses on religious developments in America seems to end almost precisely at the moment of unbelief's birth. My purpose is far from picking up

⁵ James Turner, *Without God Without Creed* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985), xiii.

⁶ David Hall is one of several intellectual historians who have challenged Turner's thesis. I advance no opinion on it here. However, much of the research I present implicitly contradicts Hall's self-reassuring claim that "agnosticism of the kind that Turner has described had little future." *Reviews in American History* 14, no. 1 (1986): 42.

where Turner left off. I have attempted, however, to address a phenomenon that quite clearly resides within a larger one that he refers to as unbelief.

My central claim—that the New Atheists were the primary cause of organized atheism’s unprecedented growth and development in twenty-first century America—rebutts several alternative hypotheses, which are encapsulated in David Niose’s *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans*. The most common of these is that astonishing acts of religious extremism and hypocrisy, and the unapologetically Christian conservative face of the Bush administration drove nonbelievers out of the closet to stand up for their beliefs and reason in general. This claim cannot be lightly dismissed.

Terminology and Purview:

Classifying religious and non-religious beliefs is a task in which subtle distinctions and seemingly minor decisions on the part of the historian matter enormously. The first step the historian must take to avoid misleading him- or herself is to recognize the distinction between belief and identity. While neither term is free of ambiguity, the former is often far more cumbersome than the latter. This is especially true for the historian, like myself, who is attempting to describe how atheists, as social, intellectual, and cultural phenomena, changed over time.

A given figure’s belief or disbelief in God or gods necessarily falls on a spectrum of corresponding identities.⁷ Some of these identities are mutually exclusive (theism and atheism) and some overlap (agnosticism and atheism). While assigning someone an identity based on his or her belief or disbelief may be fairly simple in principle, it is anything but in practice. This is

⁷ Henceforth I use the singular God with the understanding that belief/disbelief God also implies belief/disbelief in gods.

because each possible identity has strong cultural connotations. So, even though two identities may imply the same or very nearly the same disbelief, people typically express a strong affinity for one and an equally strong aversion to the other. In part because of this paradox a second set of more nebulous identifiers also come into play. ‘Humanist,’ ‘secularist,’ and ‘skeptic’ are all examples of identities that suggest a general attitude towards God but are not necessarily concerned with belief or disbelief. Nonetheless, many individuals prefer one or more of these identities to convey their unbelief instead of more explicit ones such as agnostic or atheist.

In this project I do not assign anyone an identity based on an interpretation of his or her written or verbal beliefs. While this approach might not be problematic for the historian honing in on a single thinker, it is too error-prone for one like myself who seeks to describe the broader phenomenon of organized atheism. I have restricted my purview to groups, cohorts, and movements of people who collectively label themselves atheists. Thus, the only criterion I have used for selecting which groups and individuals to treat is: *That they explicitly and collectively identified themselves as atheists.*

For decades, numerous individuals, ranging from optimistic atheist spokespersons to deeply concerned religious conservatives, have taken gratuitous liberty in interpreting polling data on America’s religious demographics. Their claims about the country’s number of atheists often dramatically overstate the actual figure while obscuring the most revealing aspect of the identity: atheism is best distinguished from alternative identities that also express disbelief by its present cultural status.⁸ Opinion polls show that the majority of Americans have unfavorable views about people who identify themselves as atheists. All of the subjects I treat in this work were very well aware of this fact. Still, self-described atheists associated with atheist groups

⁸ My conception of atheism contrasts with attempts to distinguish atheism from alternative identifiers based on its historical or etymological roots.

almost always explicitly dispensed with alternative identifiers. This is significant because these alternative identifiers like agnostic, skeptic, or humanist, offered less odious, less suspect cultural connotations. Thus we can say that atheist group members choose their identity because they want to declare their lack of belief in God more strongly than other unbelievers or because it is very important to them.⁹

This, however, does not imply that atheists necessarily *believe*, as one well-established definition of atheism implies, that no God exists. In philosophical jargon this position is construed as the *belief* that one can prove *a priori* that something does not exist, which is logically or ontologically impossible. All of the New Atheists and the overwhelming majority of atheists in general do not sign off on such a proposition. By refusing to do so, they have effectively reclaimed what is widely understood to be agnosticism's territory on the spectrum of disbelief for atheism: recasting atheism as the position of withholding judgment on the God question and thereby asserting nothing.

'Agnosticism' is a recent coinage even though the principle it signifies was expressed in a nearly identical fashion by an ancient Greek school of philosophy.¹⁰ In the mid-nineteenth century, an English biologist and stalwart defender of Darwinian evolution named Thomas Huxley wrote: "It is wrong for a man to say that he is certain of the objective truth of any proposition unless he can produce evidence which logically justified that certainty."¹¹ This definition of agnosticism belies the fact that it has been used almost exclusively with respect

⁹ Other explanations cannot be ruled out. In certain parts of America atheists need not fear grave social repercussions for coming "out of the closet" as an atheist. This is the case in many liberal northeastern cities.

¹⁰ Robert Audi, ed., *Cambridge Dictionary of Philosophy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 850. The School of Pyrrhonian Skepticism was formally established in the first century BCE.

¹¹ Thomas Huxley, "Agnosticism and Christianity," in *Science and Christian Tradition*, vol 5 of *Collected Essays*, ed. Charles Blinderman and David Joyce (Worcester: Clark University Press, 1998), 309.

towards God. Huxley was motivated to coin agnosticism so that he and other ‘freethinkers’¹² could convey their disbelief in God without being tethered to atheism’s repellent connotations.¹³ He was remarkably successful in accomplishing this goal.

The word atheism is currently undergoing revision. In America, it is still in the process of dispensing with its long-standing vernacular association with communism. Any historian interested in modern atheism must be aware that its cultural meaning has changed and is still changing, and be accordingly careful not to misrepresent or caricature his or her subject. In this work I have done my best to meet organized atheists on their own terms. Thus, their new, broader conception of atheism is the one I have emphasized.

¹² “Freethinker” is an Enlightenment-era term used to denote someone whose thought or mind was free of dogma (usually religious). Almost all freethinkers, including the famous Voltaire and Thomas Paine, were deists, not theists or atheists. Marshall G. Brown and Gordon Stein, *Freethought in the United States: A Descriptive Bibliography* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1978), vii-xi.

¹³ In practice, the word “atheism” was synonymous with “impiety” or “immorality” throughout ancient, medieval, and early modern history. Michael J. Buckley, S.J., *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 1-13; Jan N. Bremmer, “Atheism in Antiquity,” and Gavin Hyman, “Atheism in Modern History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 11-22, 27-44.

*CHAPTER I***PROTO-ORGANIZED ATHEISM: 1925-1960**

Madalyn Murray O’Hair did not invent the concept of organized atheism. Her activism, however, changed its scope and structure so profoundly that the groups that predated her can be thought of as *proto*-organized atheism. Their history is both obscure and convoluted. While very few of these groups existed long enough to leave significant records behind, it is clear they had a militant, anti-clerical bent and were either directly associated with or highly influenced by radical leftist political ideology.

America’s first explicitly atheist organization was founded in New York City in 1925 by the Arkansas-born lawyer Charles Lee Smith and named the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (AAAA). Two years later the AAAA released its second annual report, which chronicled the organization’s achievements and called for further atheist activism. The report’s final paragraph contains all the hallmarks of the form of atheism that stems from a Marxist social outlook: “The hour to overthrow the Church has come. Arise, ye prisoners of the priest! Strike down the God superstition! The clergy are powerful because you are on your knees. Stand up! Cast aside supernatural faith and fear. Be men! Prepare for the oncoming religious revolution.”¹⁴ As Smith saw it, the clergy were deceitfully entrancing their congregations into a submissive state of mind on behalf of the ruling sociopolitical class so that they could be easily manipulated. Atheism was the only way to break free from this religiously imposed stupor, become aware of one’s exploitation, and ultimately take part in the revolution in which the ruling and clerical classes will be extirpated.

¹⁴ “Sees Gain For Atheism.” *New York Times*, February 14, 1928.

In stark contrast with subsequent manifestations of atheist activism, proto-organized atheism drew the vast majority of its members from high schools and colleges. On the same day in 1927 two boys attending different high schools in Brooklyn, New York walked out of assemblies when teachers prepared, in accordance with tradition, to read from the Bible. When questioned by school officials, both boys responded that they did not believe in the bible and were members of an organization called the Society of the Godless.¹⁵ Officials discovered that the Society of the Godless had been engendered by the AAAA's activism, which included street-corner speeches, lectures, and pamphleteering.¹⁶ The AAAA, which claimed 100,000 members in 1927, also sponsored student clubs at colleges and universities.¹⁷ That year, ten students at the University of Wisconsin at Madison founded a group called the Circle of Godless and then successfully applied for a charter from the AAAA. Other groups were chartered at the University of Rochester and University of North Dakota and went by similarly ostentatious appellations: "The Damned Souls" and "God's Black Sheep" respectively. It is clear that these student-run organizations had little relationship with the AAAA after receiving its endorsement in the form of a charter. The AAAA itself seems to have been understaffed and poorly organized. Smith, the AAAA's president, managed the organization with the help of only a few individuals and was arrested several times in New York City before returning to his home state of Arkansas in 1928.¹⁸ Smith purchased the Truth Seeker Company (TSC) in 1930, a radical freethought publishing organization founded in 1873 during a period of activism known as The Golden Age

¹⁵ O'Hair, *An Atheist Speaks*, 13. The Society of the Godless had 125 members and held biweekly meetings in New York City.

¹⁶ "Atheistic Literature Discovered in School." *The Washington Post*, February 11, 1928; "Soviet Leaders Urge Anti-Religious Drive." *New York Times*, June 13, 1929. It is hardly coincidental that the Society of the Godless shares its name with the contemporaneous Moscow-based Society of the Godless Congress. This latter group was associated with the Soviet Communist Party and communicated with atheist groups in the United States.

¹⁷ "The Devil's Angels." *Los Angeles Times*, August 7, 1927. The claimed membership of 100,000 is almost certainly a wild exaggeration.

¹⁸ O'Hair, *An Atheist Speaks*, 14-16; Brian F. Le Beau, *The Atheist* (New York: New York University Press, 2003), 55.

of Freethought. The AAAA continued to exist as a subsidiary of the TSC through the end of the 1980s, but without any significant activity. The vast majority of atheist organizations had been driven underground or marginalized out of existence by the end of the 1930s. While the Great Depression crippled them financially, government-sponsored anti-communism policies intimidated potential members and stymied the efforts of their leaders.¹⁹ Atheism continued to be promoted in freethought or liberal publications, however, few if any were actually labeled atheist.²⁰ Smith never stopped advocating atheism, but had fewer and fewer supporters to rely on as his career went on. He sold both the AAAA and the TSC just before his death in 1964 to another atheist named James Hervey Johnson who moved the organization to California.

¹⁹ J. G. Melton, ed., *Melton's Encyclopedia of American Religions* (Gale, 2009). According to this credible estimate, the AAAA had roughly 200 members during the 1970s. Membership was down from approximately 2000 when it peaked in the late-1920s.

²⁰ The two most visible figures of the mid-Twentieth Century were both publishers: Emanuel Haldeman Julius (1889-1951) and Joseph L. Lewis (1889-1968). The latter eventually became one of O'Hair's earliest benefactors during her suit to remove prayer from public school.

*CHAPTER 2***THE O’HAIR ERA: 1960-1995**

Nothing about Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s early life suggested that she was destined to become America’s most vocal and recognizable atheist for nearly a half-century. Madalyn Mays was born in a suburb of Pittsburg, Pennsylvania to a working class union couple.²¹ She was baptized in a Presbyterian church and given a nominally Christian upbringing. O’Hair claimed to have lost her faith in one weekend, at about the age of twelve, when she read the Bible cover to cover: “The miracles, the inconsistencies, the improbabilities, the impossibilities, the wretched history, the sordid sex, the sadism in it—the whole thing shocked me profoundly.”²² Once the Great Depression began, her family was forced to move around, segmenting O’Hair’s college education. In 1941, shortly after getting married to a young man, the United States entered World War II and O’Hair joined the Women’s Auxiliary Army Corps. She was separated from her new husband, as the two were sent overseas to different parts of the globe. Not long before the end of the war, O’Hair had an affair with a man, who was also married, named William Murray. She became pregnant, returned to America, and sued for a divorce, which was granted. Despite her urging, William Murray Jr. did not divorce his wife, leaving O’Hair as an unmarried, single mother after giving birth in May 1946. Shortly thereafter, she began using William Murray Jr.’s last name in place of Mays, her maiden name, and gave it to her son William (“Bill”) Murray III.²³

O’Hair continued living with her family, finished her B.A. in 1948, and briefly studied graduate-level history before enrolling in Ohio Northern University Law School. When her

²¹ Ellen Johnson, “The Murray-O’Hair Family,” *American Atheist* 39, no. 2 (2001): 4-5.

²² “A candid conversation with the most hated woman in America,” *Playboy* (October 1965): 62.

²³ Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 19-27.

family relocated to Houston, Texas, O'Hair transferred to the then non-accredited South Texas School of Law and completed her LL.B. degree in 1952.²⁴ That November she moved with her parents to Baltimore, Maryland. While initially somewhat optimistic about the future, she became disillusioned with various aspects of her new life within months. In late 1954 she gave birth to a second son out of wedlock after having a brief relationship a man from New York. Jon Garth Murray was baptized, like his older brother, in a Protestant church.²⁵

As the decade wore on, O'Hair began paying more and more attention to national politics. Agitated by the successes of those who she saw as reactionary conservatives, she joined the Socialist Labor Party in Baltimore in 1954. O'Hair was both astonished and inspired in 1957 when Sputnik, the first satellite, was launched by the Soviet Union. She expressed frustration at having believed the widespread negative propaganda about the USSR and developed distaste for capitalism that grew stronger over the next three years. While pursuing a master's degree in social work, O'Hair left the Socialist Labor Party to join the more radical Socialist Workers Party. Within months, she also joined a pro-Castro group. In 1959 she applied to be a citizen of the Soviet Union and was visited by a member of the American Communist Party. O'Hair ignored his attempts to convince her to keep her American citizenship and work for his party. The following August, after being disregarded by the Soviet Government for over a year, she moved to Paris with her two sons to seek citizenship directly from the embassy there. The trip was ultimately fruitless, and she returned to Baltimore in late September 1960.²⁶

²⁴ Ibid, 29; She did not technically complete a J.D. degree. Her LL.B. was converted into a J.D. by default after South Texas School of Law became the first law school in the state to begin awarding J.D. degrees to its graduates in 1965. O'Hair never passed the bar examination. She later claimed that this was because she refused to take the required oath ("so help me God").

²⁵ Ibid, 34.

²⁶ Ibid, 37-39. It is very important to note that Le Beau had access to O'Hair's diaries. While O'Hair later vehemently denied having ever been interested in, influenced by, or associated with communist ideology, her diary entries from this period strongly suggest otherwise.

Upon returning to Baltimore, O'Hair made an abrupt but steadfast decision that irrevocably changed her life. She resolved to challenge compulsory morning prayer in the city's public schools. Bill had attended a private school, where no prayers were held, since moving to Baltimore with his mother. In 1959, however, the school relocated to a more distant part of the city, adding a lengthy commute to O'Hair's already demanding job of supporting two children as a single mother. No longer able to drive Bill to and from school, she enrolled him at a local public school in the spring of 1960, where he was required to recite the Lord's Prayer every at the start of each day. In the first several weeks after O'Hair threatened to sue the school, the principal prevented Bill from attending the prayer. However, on the morning of October 31, 1960, he entered school from a back door and took his seat in the classroom. When the teacher began to recite the prayer with the rest of the class, Bill walked out of the room. His complaint, now officially registered, gave his mother legal standing to challenge the city's prayer law, which she promptly took advantage of.²⁷

O'Hair's life, and the lives of her children, immediately became chaotic. Bill was beaten up and abused frequently at school, and the family's house was vandalized several times. O'Hair pressed the ACLU to send a lawyer to help her press her case, but the organization was already embroiled in another school prayer lawsuit in Pennsylvania which had begun two years earlier.²⁸ O'Hair initially accepted legal counsel from two very different lawyers: Leonard Kerpelman, a secular Jew from Baltimore, and Harold Buchman, a member of the American Communist Party.

²⁷ Ibid, 40-48. The law requiring prayer had been enacted in 1905.

²⁸ This lawsuit was filed by a man named Edward Schempp in 1958. Schempp was not an atheist, but, like O'Hair, he refused to have his son take part in compulsory morning prayers. He won the lawsuit in a Pennsylvania district court in 1959, but the school board quickly added a provision allowing students to wait outside the classroom during the prayer with parental consent and appealed to the Supreme Court. The case first reached the Supreme Court in 1960 but was quickly sent back to the district court for further deliberation in light of the school board's adjustment. Schempp refused to allow his son wait outside the classroom, fearing that he would be socially ostracized, and pressed the lawsuit forward again. The Pennsylvania district court upheld its initial ruling in 1962, after which the school board again appealed to the Supreme Court.

She quickly dismissed Buchman after finding his name on a published index of the Committee on Un-American Activities. Between the fall of 1960 and the spring of 1962, when her case was appealed to the Supreme Court, O’Hair was contacted by several atheist figures offering support. She received money from Joseph L. Lewis, who ran the Freethought Society of America, Carl Brown, a Kansas farmer and nudist, and Charles Lee Smith, who was still the president of the AAAA and the TSC. Smith, who was an unapologetic racist and anti-Semite, sent O’Hair 5,000 dollars for her lawsuit on behalf of the atheist cause. She saw them for what they were: a bizarre collection of individuals who loathed and relentlessly competed with each other, while being completely excluded from serious public discourse. Years later, when writing her own account of the lawsuit, she admitted: “They were often more nutty than the religionists.”²⁹

In early 1962 O’Hair concluded that she could and would organize atheists better than anyone before her and make atheism relevant and respected in America. That May, she founded her first non-profit group, the Maryland Committee for the Separation of Church and State. Through referral, she compiled a list of several hundred atheists and began soliciting them for donations. O’Hair received just over 2,000 dollars in reply. When she sent another letter proposing to send each of them her list of contacts so that they could get better organized, the proposal was soundly rejected. Most of the atheists and freethinkers did not even want others like them to know who they were. That summer O’Hair visited a freethought convention in Missouri and a few other individual supporters in the Midwest. She collected several hundred dollars and returned in high spirits. This was her first foray into organized atheism.³⁰

Her lawsuit, *Murray v. Curlett*, came before the Supreme Court alongside *Abington School District v. Schempp* in late February 1963. There was never much doubt about how the

²⁹ Madalyn Murray O’Hair, *An Atheist Epic: The Complete Unexpurgated Story of How Bible and Prayers Were Removed from the Public Schools of the United States* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 1989), 125.

³⁰ Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 78-9.

Court would decide. Since 1940 the Supreme Court had ruled on a number of cases that dealt with the intersection of government and religion. These cases dramatically strengthened the Establishment and Free Exercise Clauses of the First Amendment and imposed them on states via the Fourteenth Amendment. During oral arguments, O’Hair was pleasantly surprised by how uncritically the justices were treating her lawyer, asking only leading questions. At the trial she submitted a brief that proudly identified herself and her son Bill as atheists, and articulated the positive worldview that they shared. This was certainly her most important statement of the trial, and perhaps the most important one she ever made:

Your petitioners are Atheists and they define their beliefs as follows. An Atheist loves his fellow man instead of god. An Atheist believes that heaven is something for which we should work now – here on earth for all men together to enjoy. An Atheist believes that he can get no help through prayer but that he must find in himself the inner conviction, and strength to meet life, to grapple with it, to subdue it and enjoy it. An Atheist believes that only in knowledge of himself and a knowledge of his fellow man can he find the understanding that will help to a life of fulfillment.

He seeks to know himself and his fellow man rather than to know a god. An Atheist believes that a hospital should be built instead of a church. An Atheist believes that a deed must be done instead of a prayer said. An Atheist strives for involvement in life and not escape into death. He wants disease conquered, poverty vanquished, war eliminated. He wants man to understand and love man. He wants an ethical way of life. He believes that we cannot rely on a god or channel action into prayer nor hope for an end of troubles in a hereafter. He believes that we *are* our brother’s keepers; and are keepers of our own lives; that we are responsible persons and the job is here and the time is now.³¹

Although this statement clearly has historical value in that it represents the first time a self-identified atheist legally challenged a law respecting the establishment of religion, it seems highly unlikely that it had any bearing whatsoever on the Court’s decision. The Court ruled 8 to 1 in favor of O’Hair and Schempp. The clerks entered the case into the Court records as *Abington School District v. Schempp* – a decision that O’Hair deeply resented. She wanted all the credit for the lawsuit that banned prayer in schools, and claimed that she was discriminated

³¹ Quoted in Johnson, “The Murray-O’Hair Family,” *AA* 39, no. 2 (2001) 5.

against because she was an atheist.³² Regardless of whether or not this was a tacit slight, O’Hair got more than her fair share of credit in the public eye. While Edward Schempp quietly resumed life in eastern Pennsylvania, Madalyn Murray O’Hair used the lawsuit as a springboard into mainstream public discourse. As a result, she became the first self-labeled atheist in the country’s history to become a widely recognizable figure.

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After a scuffle with police at O’Hair’s home in Baltimore, she was charged with multiple counts of assault and faced time in jail. Believing she would not receive a fair trial in light of her recent lawsuit, she fled Maryland with her two children.³³ When Maryland authorities finally dropped the assault charges and stopped seeking her extradition in late 1965, O’Hair settled in Austin, Texas. From this city O’Hair forged what became, relative to the size and scope previous groups, an atheist corporate giant. She started out, however, with few helping hands. She married a retired FBI agent named Richard O’Hair shortly after settling in Austin. He enthusiastically devoted himself to atheist activism alongside his wife. Although their marriage was strained, it lasted thirteen years until he died in 1978. The nationwide outrage at the *Schempp/Murray* decision was enough to earn O’Hair her famous title – “The Most Hated Woman in America” – from *Life* magazine. As a result, major secularist groups were attempting to distance themselves from her even before she settled in Austin. But her continued legal agitation on behalf of atheism and the separation of church and state combined with her abrasive, often vulgar rhetoric to make

³² Considering that *Murray* had a lower docket number than *Schempp* (meaning it was appealed to the Supreme Court earlier), this is not beyond the realm of possibility. As mentioned above, however, the Supreme Court had already reviewed *Schempp* in 1960 before remanding it to the Pennsylvania district court for further deliberation. Court clerks may have decided to give *Schempp* preference in name simply because it had been going on for a longer period of time. Hereafter I will refer to the case neutrally, as *Schempp/Murray*.

³³ For my purposes, the only relevant detail of this incident was that it came about because Bill Murray’s young girlfriend was living in the O’Hair family house. Her parents complained to the police, who then arrived to return her to them. However, she had already legally married Bill in secret and conceived a child. After leaving Baltimore with the O’Hair family, she gave birth to a daughter named Robin Murray, who was later adopted by O’Hair, the child’s biological grandmother.

her a tool and an asset for those whom Benjamin Sasse referred to as “culture-warring entrepreneurs” and religious conservative politicians. In his dissertation, *The Anti-Madalyne Majority*, Sasse demonstrates that O’Hair became a reliable talking point to galvanize evangelicals who perceived her honest and upfront disdain for religion as a threat to traditional American values.³⁴ What he does not say, however, is that O’Hair’s behavior in front of cameras and microphones paved a two way street. Although her headline-grabbing antics quite plainly failed to improve atheism’s standing in the vast majority of minds not predisposed to it, they did attract a steady flow of atheists into her organizations.

In May 1969 O’Hair formally incorporated the Society of Separationists, Inc. (SOS), merging it with her original organization, the Maryland Freethought Society.³⁵ The Austin operation expanded quickly over the ensuing two decades to include several more groups. The Charles E. Stevens American Atheist Library and Archives, which was established in the mid-1960s, quickly became an immense and valuable repository of atheist and freethought documents. In 1976, after several years of communicating with a prominent atheist in India, O’Hair founded the United World Atheists, which attained United Nations official NGO status three years later. American Atheists, Inc. (AA) was added to this list when it was officially incorporated in 1987. However, because all of these organizations operated from same facility in Austin, O’Hair usually referred to them collectively as American Atheists or the American Atheist Center well before AA became an official group. In 1988 O’Hair formed American Atheist General Headquarters (GHQ), which turned AA’s physical base of operations into a non-profit organization. Her relationship with government regulatory agencies like the IRS was

³⁴ Benjamin E. Sasse, “The Anti-Madalyne Majority: Secular Left, Religious Right, and the Rise of Reagan’s America” (PhD dissertation, Yale University, 2004).

³⁵ SOS was informally established sometime in the mid-1960s. O’Hair also merged another organization she had previously created into SOS. This one was called “Other Americans.”

always uneasy, but she won and maintained nonprofit status for most of her groups as educational entities – she was the first atheist to achieve this feat. O’Hair can also be credited as the first person to build an atheist information infrastructure with print, radio, and television media.³⁶ Over the years, however, O’Hair founded other organizations without clearly articulating their goals or purposes. These existed in name only and were typically referred to as “affiliate” groups. Aside from a president and a board of directors, these groups were memberless, created either as repositories for tax-free donations or facades to enlarge the perceived size of organized atheism.³⁷

Gauging the size of O’Hair’s organizations was always high on the often-concerned media’s list of priorities, so membership figures became one of her customary talking points. Nonetheless, it is notoriously difficult to establish reliable ones. It is simply indisputable that O’Hair took great liberty when disseminating facts and figures about her organizations. Shortly before SOS was formally incorporated in 1969, she estimated that it had 28,000 members and numerous international partners.³⁸ O’Hair’s later estimates were even more extravagant, and they often increased at times when her groups were admittedly suffering financially. In the mid-1970s, in two separate interviews, she estimated that between 60,000 and 70,000 “families” held membership. In 1981, this number had climbed to 100,000 members.³⁹ However, that February she informed members in a newsletter that because the American Atheist Center’s budget had decreased by 60,000 dollars during the previous year, the length of *AA* magazine would be cut

³⁶ O’Hair was keen on making use of every available piece communication technology. She began a radio broadcasting in the mid-1960s, despite resistance on the part of local station owners. In 1969 she started printing atheist books and pamphlets through her own press operation, American Atheist Press. In 1980 she established a public access television program called “The Atheist Viewpoint.”

³⁷ The United Secularists of America (USA) was a prime example of this type of group. Established by O’Hair sometime in the early-1990s, it was treated as little more than a piggy bank. When planning pickets and other events, affiliate groups like USA were often listed as endorsers.

³⁸ Madalyn Murray O’Hair, *What on Earth is an Atheist!* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 1972), 107.

³⁹ Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 302.

back and that the annual convention, which was scheduled to take place in Salt Lake City in April, might be canceled. She excoriated convention attendees for not reserving rooms in the designated hotel, which AA was contractually obliged to fill, forcing her to pay unnecessary expenses. She later admitted, “We have, to date, twenty-five registrants.” It is challenging to believe that an organization with 100,000 members would have trouble meeting the conditions of a hotel convention contract that merely requires “50 double rooms” filled, and “100 persons” to attend lunch and dinner “on five separate occasions.”⁴⁰ It also seems improbable that O’Hair’s organizations grew steadily in terms of membership while experiencing serious financial hardship. What seems more likely is that O’Hair deliberately exaggerated membership figures while addressing external parties, but behaved more candidly when addressing the actual members of her organizations.⁴¹ One must be skeptical of the estimates made by former family, friends, and associates who resented O’Hair. But their figures, given years apart, agree on a fairly precise membership range of 1500 to 3000. This range is consistent with estimates given by AA’s new leadership shortly after O’Hair disappeared in 1995. At the very least, it is reasonable to discount the more extravagant estimates given by O’Hair and Jon Garth, which claim tens of thousands of members. Organized atheism was numerically small during the O’Hair era. But because of O’Hair’s great talent for attracting attention, she brought organized atheism exponentially more publicity than its numbers would have otherwise justified.

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⁴⁰ American Atheists, Insider’s News, February 1981.

⁴¹ Examples of this kind of inconsistency are far too numerous to list. It is clear that Jon Garth and other AA representatives also used this tactic. One of O’Hair’s atheist critics even reprinted a section of an AA “Handbook for Chapter Directors” that gave specific instructions on how to distort membership and circulation figures so as to project numerical strength. The handbook concluded: “If the media knew our actual number of members or subscribers they will know that we do not have enough clout numerically to keep them from saying anything they like about us.” Fred Woodward, *An Atheist Cult* (Tucson: self published, 1991) 10.

The overwhelming majority of atheists who joined AA were not particularly interested in activism – they purchased subscriptions to magazines and newsletters, paid membership dues, sent donations, and occasionally attended conferences. Most had already reached their own conclusions about religion well before catching wind of O’Hair. They tended to be elderly, well-educated, liberal, white males, joining AA primarily as a social outlet.⁴² In this capacity they attended small gatherings organized by their local chapters. The scope of these gatherings rarely exceeded coffee, dinner, or drinks with a handful of other members in the area. Those that lived in conservative, religious regions of the country relished any time spent with like-minded people, who were otherwise very quiet about their views, making them hard to find. Many of these individuals were deeply grateful for O’Hair’s work organizing atheists. Before joining one of her groups they felt isolated from mainstream society and compelled to take part in religious traditions that they did not believe in. Gathering with other atheists never abated their sense of being an outsider, but it did help ease the loneliness and instilled the confidence needed to resist conformity in their daily lives. They were well aware that O’Hair always made atheist activism, not socializing, the highest priority of organized atheism. They simply felt, however, that this obligation could be satisfied with monetary donations, and went on using the organizational infrastructure she built happily and guiltlessly.⁴³

A much smaller subset of atheists actually devoted themselves to O’Hair’s activism. They immediately developed a strong admiration for O’Hair after seeing her on a television or hearing her on radio talk show, and frequently became invested in her on an emotional level while working under her for AA. Some even looked up to her as a mother figure. O’Hair drew on

⁴² Bruce E. Hunsberger and Bob Altemeyer, *Atheists: A Groundbreaking Study of America’s Nonbelievers* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2006), 106; Frank L. Pasquale, “A Portrait of Secular Group Affiliates,” in *Atheism and Secularity, Vol. 1*, ed. Phil Zuckerman (Santa Barbara: Praeger, 2010), 47-54.

⁴³ This paragraph describes several strong trends, not unbroken rules. There are numerous examples of group members who, while demographically typical, were exceptionally given to atheist activism.

this class of followers to fill upper-level leadership roles. If, while serving as a state or regional director, O’Hair requested help with operations at GHQ, many heeded the call, quitting their jobs, and moving to Austin. However, those who worked with O’Hair personally rarely lasted more than few years. The ones who sacrificed their jobs and relationships often found themselves again without work after being fired. The stakes were higher still because O’Hair seldom hesitated to, without irony, “excommunicate” them from AA if she was aggravated.

Generalizing about the specific beliefs and influences of either of these groups of atheists is an exacting task simply because O’Hair retained absolute editorial control of AA’s print media and silenced those whom she did not agree with. It is plain to see, however, that most group members read Enlightenment thinkers who wrote critically of organized religion, especially Thomas Paine, Thomas Jefferson, and Voltaire. Low-level group members, who mainly took advantage of AA’s social resources, were probably not very interested in atheistic political ideologies like Marxism or communism. They took great pride in the democratic and freethinking traditions established by America’s founding fathers. This is not to suggest that higher-level group members were anti-American communist devotees. It is clear that there was a lot of intellectual continuity between the two member types. However, a conspicuous number of the atheists associated closely with O’Hair found the American political system distasteful. Some believed communism was preferable to democracy (at least to the extent that it implied atheism) while others still were staunch anarchists who found the slightest government intrusion deeply onerous.

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O’Hair clearly regarded herself as an intellectual and behaved accordingly. She insisted that her followers call her “Dr. O’Hair” because of her law degree and considered herself to be

“the world expert on Atheism and Atheist history.”⁴⁴ In writings, speeches, and interviews, O’Hair projected an air of mental superiority regardless of whom she was addressing. Speaking down to all who asked questions, she lectured as if they were grade school pupils in need of knowledge that only she could provide. The lessons she gave, however, were not based on original thinking, and were delivered in a way that made her seem pretentious.⁴⁵ She clearly spent a great deal of time memorizing factoids to deploy when sparring with theists. The majority of *All the Questions You Ever Wanted to Ask American Atheists*, a book O’Hair coauthored with her son Jon Garth, is written as a dialogue between an atheist and a fundamentalist Christian. It is based on questions she actually received during speaking engagements. While “not intended to be a catechism,” it frequently comes across that way.⁴⁶ Flaunting her encyclopedic knowledge of the Bible, O’Hair counters the claims and accusations of the hapless Christian by citing chapter and verse. For every topic broached, O’Hair has a lengthy, pedantic, pre-prepared lesson. When discussing the history of the First Amendment she supplies all the names and dates. If the issue is science, she includes jargon-laden expositions of concepts in biology and physics. This schoolmarmish conduct manifested itself in her radio programs as well, which often revolved around Biblical contradictions and the history of religious events like the Reformation.⁴⁷ S. T. Joshi described her writing as, “Disappointing to anyone even superficially trained in philosophy,” and one of her lectures on the subject as “an

⁴⁴ O’Hair, *An Atheist Speaks*, iv. O’Hair claimed to have received a Ph.D. from an institution called the “Minnesota Institute of Philosophy” in 1971. *AA* 39, no., 2 (2001): 22. What she did not bother to say, however, is that this institution was founded that same year by another atheist activist named Garry De Young, Jr. whom she worked closely with. It is excruciatingly obvious that the institution was a diploma mill. (See: <http://www.lib.utexas.edu/taro/utcah/01457.xml>).

⁴⁵ This is not to suggest that she tried to pass the work and ideas of others off as her own. At times she did acknowledge other atheists and freethinkers before her, who, she believed, had struggled valiantly to make advances in times of ignorance.

⁴⁶ Jon Murray and Madalyn O’Hair, *All the Questions You Ever Wanted to Ask American Atheists: With All the Answers* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 1986), 7.

⁴⁷ O’Hair, *An Atheist Speaks*.

embarrassing piece of work” containing “simple-minded philosophical assertions about materialism” and “a seriously erroneous interpretation of Kant’s categorical imperative.” Joshi concludes: “It is a feeble defense of this lecture that it was intended for general, nonphilosophical audiences.”⁴⁸

O’Hair’s self-image was paradoxical considering her style of activism. While acquitting herself like a bona fide intellectual and public educator, she expressed contempt for calm, reasoned dialogue and all atheists who took pleasure in the exchange of ideas. Her disdain was often so great that it became outright anti-intellectualism: “I can no longer bear to hear Nietzsche characterized in three sentences. Or have Feuerbach analyzed in terms of Comte, or Camus balanced against Sartre... Frankly, ‘my dear, I don’t give a damn’ about either Plato or Aristotle. If Socrates were alive today, I would be the one to hand him the hemlock.”⁴⁹ O’Hair mocked atheists who were captivated by science and admired Carl Sagan. She ruthlessly caricatured atheists with proclivities for philosophy: “This man smokes a pipe, wears a slightly worn tweed jacket, and brags about waiting for his wife to have her orgasm first. He has been ten years in the American Humanist Association... reading in depth the Gentile, erudite, and completely worthless articles in *Free Inquiry* or memorizing Smith’s *Atheism*.”⁵⁰ O’Hair believed that debating was a frivolous indulgence. Atheists needed to be fervent in their activism, wasting no time conversing with each other or with the religious, who did not need to be treated with even a modicum of dignity.⁵¹

⁴⁸ S. T. Joshi, *The Unbelievers: The Evolution of Modern Atheism* (Amherst: Prometheus Books, 2011), 177-8. Joshi has no religious bias against O’Hair. He is a staunch atheist.

⁴⁹ Murray and O’Hair, *All the Questions You Ever Wanted to Ask American Atheists*, 228.

⁵⁰ Ibid, 228. *Free Inquiry* is a journal published by the Council for Secular Humanism, an organization formed by Paul Kurtz in 1980. The book O’Hair references, *Atheism: The Case against God*, was written by George H. Smith and published in 1974. It was extremely popular among atheists and other freethinkers in the 1970s, 80s, and 90s. Smith typified many of the characteristics O’Hair detested in other atheists. She ejected him from AA in 1979.

⁵¹ Madalyn Murray O’Hair, *Atheists and State-Church Separation* (CSPAN video library, 1993). In her keynote speech at the 1993 AA convention, O’Hair described an incident in which she walked off of a talk show once she

O’Hair’s anti-intellectual bent ultimately makes sense in light of her beliefs about the state of the country and world. She maintained that organized atheism was at war with organized religion and that it was the duty of every dignified atheist to resist religious encroachment into politics, society, and everyday life. In her estimation, no other contest had higher stakes. In the first editorial of the first issue of *AA* magazine, printed in January 1971, O’Hair wrote:

If left unchallenged religion can trammel individual rights and freedom of speech in this decade. Under the *superstructure* of our culture lies the basic philosophy of living which supports it.... Religion will not cure itself, nor will it voluntarily give up its power or wealth. Not alone your freedoms, but those of our total American culture, are in your hands. We plan to stand up and fight.⁵² (Emphasis added)

The influence of Marxist theory is unmistakable whether or not it had any bearing on O’Hair’s rhetorical urgency. After the arrival of the Religious Right in the late-1970s, America was, in O’Hair’s opinion, literally on the verge of becoming a theocracy. O’Hair firmly believed that the Reagan administration was composed entirely of religious zealots, eagerly trying to usher in the apocalypse. In a speech she delivered in September 1982 at a university in Texas, she opined that America’s “Christian fundamentalist leaders have panted after a possible Armageddon so that in one fell swoop there can be 3+ billion crisply fried souls wafted to heaven to meet Jesus.”⁵³ While parading her 1963 Supreme Court victory, O’Hair firmly maintained that American society was becoming more religious with every passing year. Prayer may have been removed from public schools, but culture ensures that it can never be banished altogether:

Religion is in the cinema, in the theater... on radio, on television, in newspapers, in books, in magazines and/or journals. It intrudes into our government, into our social groups. Churches assault our neighborhoods. The music of the day is contaminated with

found out that the host had also invited a priest on to foster a dialogue. She justified her actions with an analogy: “If you had a brain surgeon in here, would you invite a witch doctor?” In the same speech she defended Jon Garth’s refusal to shake the hand of a cordial priest on a recent television talk show. He made the right choice because he did not want to come into contact with “the enemy of human kind.” This decision prompted outrage from the local AA chapter, causing 60 members to leave the organization immediately.

⁵² *AA* 1, no. 1 (1971): 1.

⁵³ Murray and O’Hair, *All the Questions You Ever Wanted to Ask American Atheists*, 195.

religion. From all sides it moves in on us incessantly. It is not possible to go through a day of one's life without there being some reinforcement of religious ideology laid on one.⁵⁴

This disastrous state of affairs meant that there was no time left for dialogue or debate: “The atheist must abandon the defensive opinion [and] take up his cudgel.”⁵⁵ O’Hair maintained that atheists were the only people who could save America from its practically inevitable future of intellectual bondage under religion.

Like his mother, Jon Garth saw himself as an “atheist intellectual,” and his writings also display the same ideological hallmarks and sense of desperation.⁵⁶ In a 1986 editorial, “The Need for New Directions,” he described the tactical shift AA’s leadership was being forced to make in light of members’ regnant stinginess and broader sociopolitical developments:

In the past the national leadership has been representing Atheists. Now [it] prefers to represent *Atheism*.... This change in emphasis is necessitated by the growing reliance of American society on irrational thinking – even among atheists. From voodoo-economics and the trickle-down theory to Star Wars we are literally now living in a nation gone mad.⁵⁷

After making the highly implausible claim that AA “is entering 1986 with greater membership and more funding than at any other time,” he concluded: “It is not at all bizarre or pessimistic to envisage our nation as a mirror image of Iran with a leader such as the Ayatollah Khomeini. Pat Robertson looms larger and larger in America’s political future.”⁵⁸ In other writings, his description of religion’s social function consistently betrays its Marxist roots: “The government of this country, in all its forms and outreaches, has been using religion in general and Judeo-

⁵⁴ Ibid, 200.

⁵⁵ O’Hair, *Atheists and State-Church Separation* (CSPAN video library, 1993).

⁵⁶ Jon Garth Murray, *Essays on American Atheism* (Austin: American Atheist Press, 1986), v.

⁵⁷ Ibid, 589.

⁵⁸ Ibid, 594.

Christianity in particular as a tool to manipulate the collective psyches of the American people with the goal of keeping everyone docile and easily manipulatable.”⁵⁹

Neither O’Hair nor Jon Garth actually advocated Marxism or communism as a system of government while leading atheist organizations. Their understanding of religion, however, drew heavily on Marxist teachings. O’Hair believed religion was a tool used by governments to coerce their own people and was thus especially disdainful of religious leaders like the Pope. Jon Garth shared in this opinion and even wrote to Mikhail Gorbachev in 1988 questioning his commitment to atheism and referring to him as “the single notable hope in the world for modern Atheism.”⁶⁰ Ultimately, their understanding of religion was at best paradoxical and at worst hypocritical. They repeatedly ejected members from their groups by claiming that they were Marxist or communist infiltrators. With a lurking sense of danger, their rigid, autocratic leadership was justified.⁶¹ O’Hair’s struggle to eliminate America’s vernacular association of atheism with Marxism and communism was ultimately fruitless.⁶² While she occasionally articulated a positive definition of atheism, as in the brief she submitted to the Supreme Court in 1963, her diatribes against religion and God were far more common. The odds that positive atheism would convince others to take her and her organizations seriously were probably injured by these tirades, which were plainly influenced by thinkers that Cold War Americans were encouraged to fear.

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⁵⁹ Ibid, 603.

⁶⁰ Jon Garth Murray, letter to Mikhail Gorbachev, December 19, 1988.

⁶¹ Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 168, 285. The most blatant incident occurred in May in 1977, when, without warning, O’Hair removed and replaced the leadership of the New Jersey AA chapter. The following year at the annual convention in San Francisco O’Hair defeated a resolution put forward by a member that would have prevented excommunications except of a two-thirds vote of all members.

⁶² Bill Cooke, “Atheist in a Bunker,” *Free Inquiry* 23, no. 2 (2003).

O’Hair and organized atheism remained stable until about 1980. Her major lawsuits after *Schempp/Murray* included suing NASA after one of its astronauts read the Bible during the first moon orbit, suing the Secretary of the Treasury to remove “In God we trust” from currency, and suing to prevent the Pope from conducting mass at the National Mall.⁶³ These suits, while unsuccessful, attracted considerable attention, which translated into interviews on major network talk shows and invitations to speak on college campuses. In the 1960s and early-1970s she even became somewhat popular among liberal college undergraduates even though the demographics of her organizations tended overwhelmingly towards elderly males.⁶⁴

But in 1980, only two years after the death of her husband, O’Hair’s elder son Bill deserted her and organized atheism for good. After a dream vision, in which he claimed he was visited by an angel, Bill became a full-blown, God-fearing, evolution-denying fundamentalist Christian. He publically denounced his mother to the mouth-watering media, and was “born again” at a Baptist church in Dallas, Texas. In 1982 he published a book that made his mother’s early history – especially her attempt to defect to the Soviet Union – widely known for the first time.⁶⁵ The extravagant irony of the affair alongside Bill’s disclosures about O’Hair’s communist and Marxist ties in the 1950s brutalized her credibility. It never recovered. Adding insult in injury, he founded his own non-profit organization, the Religious Freedom Coalition, dedicated to putting required prayer back in public schools and began protesting AA conventions yearly. After describing Bill’s actions as “a postnatal abortion on the part of a mother,” O’Hair refused to discuss him publically. Because of this decision, she had to turn down numerous interview requests because most media outlets were only interested in her fallout with Bill.

⁶³ She alleged that NASA had specifically planned the prayer reading by astronaut Frank Borman months in advance of the mission.

⁶⁴ Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 140.

⁶⁵ He claimed that his mother was little more than a tool for communist activists who had deep-seated goals to banish prayer in schools. The book made the cover of *Publishers Weekly* on February 12, 1982.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, few paid attention to O’Hair or organized atheism in general. According to one journalist, O’Hair had “dropped from fame,” but had not yet “dropped from sight.”⁶⁶ While a determined contingent of atheists continued to associate with AA, it was a small and increasingly divisive lot. Partly because of Bill’s defection, O’Hair grew more and more paranoid and began ejecting members at will. One of her excommunicates had already established the Wisconsin-based Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF) in 1978. It was not technically an atheist organization, but because its leadership was predominantly atheist, and had local chapters throughout the country, it definitely stood to compete.⁶⁷ The publication of Bill’s tell-all book in 1982 opened the floodgates holding back the anti-O’Hair sentiment churning for years within the organized atheism community. In 1983 and 1989 two former AA members wrote denunciations of O’Hair in different secularist publications, which, aside from criticizing her leadership, asserted that many of her public claims were outright fabrications. Another critic followed suit in 1991, referring to O’Hair as a “cult leader” and “a bigot who referred to blacks as niggers, who routinely calls gay people ‘cocksuckers’, and who has written articles implying that the Holocaust never happened.” He described many of the chapter leaders as vultures, eagerly waiting for the sickly O’Hair to die so that they could assume control of AA or at least a large chunk of its assets.⁶⁸ The insider criticisms might have been exaggerated because of personal enmities with O’Hair. It is clear, however, that she became increasingly dictatorial and, more importantly, increasingly paranoid in the mid-1980s. Dispassionately reflecting on O’Hair’s career, one atheist writer described her leadership style as exemplary of the “bunker mentality,” and opined that O’Hair and her son Jon Garth demonstrated many of the integral

⁶⁶ David Van Biema, “Where’s Madalyn?” *Time*, February 10, 1997.

⁶⁷ FFRF was founded by Anne Nicol Gaylor in 1978. Gaylor left AA after O’Hair sacked the leaders of the New Jersey chapter.

⁶⁸ Woodward, *An Atheist Cult*.

characteristics of cult leaders: “Cults need to maintain the sense of isolation and danger.”⁶⁹ O’Hair’s diary entries often point in the general direction of this conclusion. In 1985 she wrote: “This year it became clear to me that we are fighting for atheism, the ideology, and for atheists, who probably do not really exist outside of ourselves. Most persons who think they are atheists are ass-holes and nit-wits.”⁷⁰ Subtler changes in the organization’s structure also suggest a hardening “bunker mentality.” In January 1989 *AA* magazine introduced a new, more exclusive membership application. It limited membership to atheists, thereby excluding all other types of nonbelievers, and reserved the right to deny applicants who did not publically identify as atheists even if they did so privately.

AA’s fortunes worsened precipitously after Jon Garth became president in April 1986. In 1987 O’Hair began looking into ways to acquire the multi-million dollar fortune of James Hervey Johnson, the aging, ailing leader of the TSC and the AAAA. After failing to orchestrate a coup d’état, she sued for the rights to Johnson’s estate in 1988 after he died. While she personally detested Johnson (a feeling that was mutual) she believed that his assets should be entrusted to her simply because she was the only one who could carry on Johnson’s legacy of atheist activism. O’Hair lost the case in the beginning of 1990, but was countersued the next year by his estate for 7 million dollars because of her repeated attempts to appeal the decision.⁷¹ At almost the same time the IRS determined to seek 1.5 million dollars from O’Hair for various unpaid taxes and fines. In October 1991 she suffered a major heart attack. She was already diabetic and needed a walker to move around, which did not ease the recovery process. The magazine and newsletter perpetually lagged behind schedule, often leaving chapters without

⁶⁹ Cooke, “Atheist in a Bunker,” *Free Inquiry*.

⁷⁰ Quoted in Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 277.

⁷¹ *Ibid*, 296-300. 7 million accounts for the total earnings of O’Hair’s corporations from 1986 to 1992. This number was established by the lawyers managing Johnson’s estate.

news for months at a time. When communications did arrive, they almost always included frantic pleas for cash reminiscent of the melodramatic antics of the then-contemporary class of televangelists. This image is substantiated somewhat by the fact that the Murray-O’Hair family owned two luxury cars – a Mercedes and a Porsche – and went on shopping sprees, purchasing expensive clothing and jewelry.⁷²

It is clear, however, that AA’s national leadership was not being completely disingenuous. In 1992 O’Hair centralized the entire organization, effectively eliminating its hierarchy of local and state leaders. This decision was prompted in part by the secession of several of key state and local chapters including San Francisco, Miami, and Houston. The following year AA discontinued its magazine, its weekly public access television series, and in April held what would be its final national convention for five years. Between 1993 and 1995, O’Hair’s paranoia escalated beyond precedent. Ruling AA de facto, with her son Jon Garth as a proxy, she excommunicated chapter leaders and veteran associates at the slightest perfidy – real or imagined – and sacked a number of loyal, veteran GHQ employees for minor acts of insubordination. While burning these bridges with imprudent gusto, several of O’Hair’s dearest and most trustworthy confidantes died. Their deaths adversely impacted the Murray-O’Hair family much more than they did organized atheism. This is because the Murray-O’Hair family was preparing to leave the country with company money and wanted to be as clandestine as possible. The plan initially established New Zealand as the getaway destination, and O’Hair transferred more than 1 million dollars to banks there. However, once government caught wind of the ongoing IRS lawsuit, it delayed their visa applications, forcing her to change of plans. There were simply not enough trusted associates to make the necessary preparations: money

⁷² Ibid, 300.

needed to be wired back to America, AA needed to be defended in court, its valuable library and archives needed to be packed and hid, and GHQ needed to be liquidated.⁷³ Just before she was kidnapped in August 1995, O’Hair could be fairly described as an aging, ailing, demagogue, eagerly preparing to vacate her pulpit.

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O’Hair had long harbored suspicions that her life would be ended by some vengeful religious zealot. This hunch, however, was never born out, and her demise became the most poignant irony of her life, in every way eclipsing the fateful break with her son Bill. She was murdered by a former employee and AA member – an atheist named David Waters. Waters began working in GHQ two years earlier as a typesetter. While O’Hair knew about his lengthy criminal record, she was willing to give him a fresh start in the form of a steady job. He quickly earned her trust and was promoted to office manager at the end of 1993. This placed him in charge of GHQ when the Murray-O’Hair family left to handle legal matters in California in January 1994. Waters promptly sacked the other remaining employees and absconded with 60,000 dollars in bearer bonds. When he turned himself over to authorities that April, O’Hair sued for the stolen money. The investigation was drawn out through May 1995, and a trial never took place. Waters managed to elude incarceration by fabricating a complex story that seemingly justified his actions and convincing the local district attorney of its veracity. O’Hair was livid, and set to work writing an agonizingly detailed exposé of Waters’ criminal past, which included robbery, assaulting his mother and then urinating on her, and murdering a young man. It was published that July in AA’s national newsletter and distributed to more than 2,000 subscribers. Outraged, Waters immediately began plotting revenge. With the help of two other ex-convicts,

⁷³ Ann Rowe Seaman, *America’s Most Hated Women* (New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2005), 247-65.

he abducted O’Hair, Jon Garth, and Robin from their home on August 27th, 1995, and held them captive in various motels around Austin over the next month. Using his intimate knowledge of O’Hair’s financials, Waters extorted her for over 600,000 dollars worth of gold coins. The coins were delivered in the last week of September, and on the 27th Waters and his men murdered their captives in a cheap motel room. Waters strangled O’Hair personally in the bathroom. The three bodies were taken to a rented storage unit where they were dismembered and stored in 50-gallon barrels before being transported to a desolate ranch near San Antonio and buried in a shallow pit. Waters had planned the whole operation so well that he was able to return to his apartment in Austin without being pursued, or even pestered, by the local authorities, which were content to let O’Hair’s sudden disappearance go uninvestigated, and the rumors surrounding it fester. Onlookers generally assumed that O’Hair had run off either to escape lawsuits, or to die in peace, without being prayed over. Few suspected murder, and O’Hair “sightings” recurred around the country in the years that followed.⁷⁴ As the details of her murder were slowly brought to light by two muckraking journalists, it became obvious that she had not died a martyr’s death. O’Hair was pitilessly exterminated by an atheist ex-convict who she had recklessly taken under her wing and then publicly humiliated. While the story of her murder came to overshadow the rest of her legacy, her most notable, lasting achievement was building organized atheism’s modern infrastructure: a network of small groups, primarily social in function, controlled by a centralized authority and loosely connected by an internal, print-based media.

⁷⁴ Ibid, 319-33.

*CHAPTER 3***DOLDRUMS AND DISARRAY IN THE SHADOW OF O’HAIR: 1995-2007**

AA survived the disappearance of its founding family, but only barely. With its ruling dynasty suddenly gone, six hundred thousand dollars missing from the coffers, and rampant confusion, the power vacuum was both strong and intimidating. Ellen Johnson, the long time New Jersey Chapter leader and loyal confidante of the Murray-O’Hair family, courted board members as soon as the disappearance occurred and was installed as president within a week.⁷⁵ Johnson’s leadership saved the organization from imploding, but could not prevent significant fallout among members. For the next twelve years AA expended vast resources fighting to protect its founder’s rather dubious legacy. This reduced the amount of time and energy it could devote to growth and development and in turn weakened the organization’s rebound.

Two principal factors limited AA’s growth after the Murray-O’Hair family disappeared. The first originated outside the organization, serving as the main impediment to growth through the 2001. Because O’Hair’s leadership style had been virtually absolute, AA’s public initiatives had always required her approval. If one was approved, O’Hair usually positioned herself as its chief architect and representative, claiming as much publicity for herself as possible. Although she frequently plugged her organizations, she never went out of her way to credit their contributions to her success or share airtime with members and other collaborators. Thus, for the media, AA had only ever been relevant in the context of its founder. After O’Hair disappeared, media outlets simply found it uninteresting or altogether irrelevant without her characteristically provocative presence. Because her disappearance lacked closure, however, her public persona

⁷⁵ Ibid, 265-7; Johnson was appointed in New York City during AA’s “Picket the Pope” event, which was scheduled well before the Murray-O’Hair family disappeared. The appointment was dubious in light of the organization’s pre-established hierarchy of succession, and so abrupt that several other contenders did not hear about it until after the fact. One actually filed a criminal complaint with the attorney general in Texas.

lived on after her death, and it continued to overshadow AA, much to the chagrin of its new leadership.

Early on in her tenure, Johnson learned to highlight any small successes or uplifts while imploring members not to take part in the media's rampant speculation about the unresolved disappearance. But these efforts were mostly in vain. Between September 1995 and December 1996, when *AA* magazine resumed printing, the organization's leadership relied exclusively on its newsletter to communicate with members. Grudgingly, Johnson found herself dwelling on the disappearance month after month. She initially avoided disclosing important details, like the missing 600,000 dollars, and discussing their implications for the organization, but grew more forthcoming as time passed.⁷⁶ Keeping members abreast of the Murray-O'Hair family's whereabouts, however, was not nearly as challenging as dealing with the news media. AA needed and sought publicity to attract new members. Initiatives, such as pickets, protests, and lawsuits, rarely generated uncritical press, but the organization never needed or expected to be well received by the media to operate. As long as media outlets covered AA's initiatives, it usually stood to gain members. This relationship, however, became uniquely problematic after the disappearance. When Johnson issued press releases, which were generally used to explain the organization's positions on church-state separation issues, the media simply did not listen. But the media was interested in AA for other reasons:

I have been getting a lot of calls for interviews. Good you say? I used to think so. I used to think that giving interviews would allow us to publicize our many activities and outreaches.... Yet the same media that won't respond to our press releases tell us repeatedly that I should cooperate with them on their stories about disappearance.... [Reporters] let me discuss [church-state separation] issues, but they never appear in print. Only my comments about the Murray-O'Hairs get printed. Fool me once, shame on me.⁷⁷

⁷⁶ Ellen Johnson "From American Atheist President," *AA Newsletter* 35, no. 6 (December 1996). She finally discussed the missing money in this newsletter, making it her first order of business.

⁷⁷ Johnson, "American Atheists and the Media," *AA Newsletter* 35, no. 4 (October 1996).

The media's attitude never changed while the Murray-O'Hair family was unaccounted for. In the mid- to late-1990s and early-2000s, the only way AA could voice its opinions about current events in mainstream periodicals was through letters-to-the-editor.

The second factor limiting AA's growth after the disappearance originated within the organization itself. Unlike the organization's new relationship with the media, its implications were not immediately clear. In the long run, however, they were certainly more debilitating. Simply put, AA's new president and other high-level leaders positioned the organization poorly, especially in its relationship with disaffected members and secularist groups, which typically had similar goals and like-minded members but were not explicitly atheist. In every way, Johnson was far milder than either of her predecessors.⁷⁸ She never "excommunicated" members, never ranted immoderately, never advanced bizarre conspiracy theories, and never expressed interest in radical political ideologies. Her overarching vision, however, closely followed a line of thinking that O'Hair and Jon Garth had articulated years earlier. When the organization was suffering in the 1980s, both opined that it needed to be broadly restructured to function like a public advocacy group in order to become politically and culturally relevant.⁷⁹ Johnson's actions suggest that she had a very similar point of view. She began the process of moving AA to New Jersey shortly after becoming president. The decision was justified in several ways. The most important one, however, emphasized New Jersey's proximity to Washington D.C. and New York City, which would provide AA with easy access to the nation's political and business hubs. The move was not complete until 1999, but Johnson, who was a New Jersey native, began planning

⁷⁸ Laurie Goodstein, "It's a Harsh Political Climate for a Believer in Nonbelief," *New York Times*, September 16, 2000. Johnson was a suburban homemaker with young children. She raised them as atheists but encouraged them to say the pledge of allegiance, with the requisite "under God" clause, if they wished to fit in. This attitude was exemplary of her comparatively calm, moderate disposition.

⁷⁹ Murray, *Essays on American Atheism*, 590-1, "The Tasks Before Atheist Activism," *AA*, special issue (August 1995). They believed that AA would have to lead an atheist civil rights movement in order to achieve cultural acceptance and political standing. This entailed lobbying and grassroots organization.

initiatives in D.C. as early as 1997. In July she led a group of 17 picketers on Capital Hill to protest the proposed Religious Freedom Amendment, which sought to alter the First Amendment to prevent the government from infringing on Americans' rights to practice religion. Johnson held a small press conference afterwards, and later reflected: "Being in Washington D.C. felt good. That's where we belong. American Atheists' goal is to have a full-time office in Washington, D.C., so that we no longer have to sit at the back of the proverbial bus. Those days are over. We are on our way to the front."⁸⁰ That October, Johnson led AA's protest of the Promise Keepers, a popular male-only Christian organization that vowed to uphold traditional family values. During the 2000 presidential election season, she protested both the Republican and Democratic national conventions for funneling too much money into religious groups. Events like these earned AA some publicity. But the fact that they rarely constituted more than a small group of noisy protestors made them very easy for the media to caricature and poke fun of.

Membership figures were poorly kept during the first five years of Johnson's presidency and vary widely, making it difficult to gauge the fallout from the Murray-O'Hair disappearance. By 2000, however, AA had lost roughly 500 members, or one-quarter to one-fifth of the members it had in 1995.⁸¹ In January 2001, just days before Texas investigators discovered the remains of the Murray-O'Hair family, *New York Times Magazine* published a feature-length article about being an atheist in America. Its author somberly reflected on the difficulties of living in a deeply religious country: "To be an active atheist seems almost silly and beside the point. After all, the most famous group devoted to atheism, the American Atheists, was founded by Madalyn Murray-O'Hair, an eccentric megalomaniac whose greatest claim to fame, at this

⁸⁰ Johnson, "American Atheists in Washington," *AA* 35, no. 4 (Autumn 1997): 7.

⁸¹ Steve Strunsky. "Atheists Come to Lobby for What They Believe," *New York Times*, April 11, 1999; Iver Peterson, "Nonbelievers in a Land of Much Faith," *New York Times*, April 18, 1999; Goodstein, *New York Times*, September 16, 2000.

point, is that she and her son were kidnapped several years ago and are presumed dead.”⁸² The portrayal of AA encapsulates the organization’s dismal public standing and utter marginality at the start of the new millennium. After being led by Johnson for almost six years, AA was still obscured by the shadow of O’Hair, whose disappearance had almost completely erased her most famous exploit, the prayer lawsuit, from America’s collective memory.

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The remains of the Murray-O’Hair family were unearthed on January 27th, 2001. With the nearly six-year investigation over, the murderers locked away for life, and many of the more unflattering rumors laid to rest, AA at last experienced something resembling closure. After one final spike in media coverage that lasted several weeks, the organization was free to set a new course in what was, almost unbelievably, a post-O’Hair era. Americans soon forgot all about Madalyn Murray O’Hair if they had not done so already. But AA’s leadership was not eager to move on. Ellen Johnson, alongside her colleagues, led the organization forward slowly and conservatively, intent to safeguard the legacy of its fallen queen.

The discovery of the Murray-O’Hair family naturally elicited strong, emotional reactions from AA members. The response from its leaders, however, was simply grotesque. Since the disappearance, AA’s print media operation had been run almost exclusively by a tiny cohort of fervent O’Hair loyalists. While it is unclear whether or not this group intentionally marginalized dissent, the fact remains that nearly every page in every newsletter and magazine was written or vetted by Johnson and three other likeminded individuals. As they reflected on O’Hair’s life and legacy, they let their emotions run wild, inflating her historical significance, justifying every unpopular decision, excusing all her paranoid antics, and holding her up as the paragon of atheist

⁸² Natalie Angier, “Confessions of a Lonely Atheist,” *New York Times Magazine*, January 14, 2001, 36. The author of this article identifies herself as an atheist.

activism. Frank Zindler, *AA* magazine's managing editor, epitomized this type of rhetoric. After the bodies were discovered, he swooned: "Greater even than the dream of Martin Luther King were the dreams of the Murray-O'Hairs. Their dreams incorporated all the laudable goals of Dr. King, but amplified and extended them to all humanity."⁸³ Month after month, Zindler harkened back to the life and accomplishments of the Murray-O'Hair family, encouraging AA members to see their organization's past as the model for its future. In the spring of 2002, the adulation reached new heights:

Madalyn was the quintessential intellectual... like Aristotle, she took all knowledge as her province.... [She] was the catalyst of the culture war now being waged in America [and] was the most important legal figure of the twentieth century – in terms both of the practical impact she had and in terms of the theoretical implications of her cases.⁸⁴

Even after suspending disbelief regarding Zindler's extraordinary historical and intellectual claims, O'Hair's record as the leader of America's largest atheist organization still appears dubious for emulation. As we have seen, her despotic behavior fueled discontent among members and affiliates, many of whom broke off to form their own organizations or seceded, creating autonomous, localized groups.⁸⁵ Moreover, she regularly attacked important secularist groups like the American Humanist Association and the Council for Secular Humanism, which were composed of individuals whose views about God and religion were not very different from her own. Those who had been the targets of O'Hair's abuse did not readily forget the experience. By refusing to acknowledge any of her faults, or even temper their praise, Johnson, Zindler, and the rest of AA's ruling faction effectively transferred the widespread animus against O'Hair to

⁸³ Frank Zindler, "In Memoriam," *AA* 39, no. 2 (Spring 2001): 3.

⁸⁴ Zindler, "Madalyn Murray O'Hair," *AA* 40, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 3-5.

⁸⁵ Marshall Sella, "Godless and Proud of It," *New York Times Magazine*, December 7, 1997, 103-5. By the late-1990s, FFRF had approximately 1000 members more than AA. Many journalists regarded FFRF as a "light" version of AA even though it was not explicitly an atheist organization.

themselves and the organization as a whole. This prevented AA's reputation from recovering among disaffected atheists and likeminded secularists through the twenty-first century.⁸⁶

Still, verbal loyalty to O'Hair was not the organization's biggest problem. In general, the old "bunker mentality" of the Murray-O'Hair family softened during Johnson's presidency. It did so, however, very slowly and subtly. By persistently emphasizing the organization's exclusivity Johnson preserved old animosities and injured AA's prospects for collaborating with secularist organizations. In 1998, AA's membership application, which had been unchanged since January 1989, was updated. The new version, however, still barred non-atheists from joining, and still reserved the right to reject atheists who did not make their identity known publicly. The updated application belied lingering fears of infiltration and sabotage and the survival of old hostilities toward secularists and timid atheists. Nonetheless, on several occasions in the late-1990s and 2000s, Johnson took the initiative to write to secularist organizations requesting their support and partnership.⁸⁷ The effect these outreaches had on easing old tensions was almost certainly undermined by her broader rhetorical habits. In her address at the 2000 national convention, she explained: "This is not an organization of humanists, realists, rationalists, Unitarians, liberal religionists, secular humanists, or any other of the names that so many people hide behind. We are first and foremost an organization of *Atheists* and proudly we will remain so." This position was only a tacit slight to secularists. However, Johnson immediately proceeded to quote and enthusiastically endorse one of O'Hair's less subtle statements: "Abandoning the word *Atheist* goes beyond insult and seeks to have us cringe in deceit and cowardice... Persons eschewing [*Atheist*] are 'fair weather' Atheists, wishy-washy fence-sitters, who would 'build bridges' at any cost.... Hiding under other nomenclature echoes

⁸⁶ I use the term 'secularists' broadly, to connote all nonbelievers who do not identify themselves as atheists.

⁸⁷ Johnson, "Atheist Words & Atheist Actions in Washington," *AA* 36, no. 1 (Winter 1997-8): 4-8, "Presidential Welcoming Speech," *AA* 36, no. 4 (Autumn 1998): 6.

shame and embarrassment, hardly an attribute of a true atheist.”⁸⁸ Johnson presented secularist groups with an unpalatable catch-22: she belittled their chosen identities while urging them to collaborate with the atheist organization she represented. This combination of atheist-only exclusivity and half-hearted solidarity hurt AA early and often in the post-O’Hair era.

In November 2002, Johnson planned a rally at the National Mall in Washington titled “Godless Americans’ March on Washington.” Relative to the past several decades, the event came at an excellent time for atheist activism. That June, a federal appeals court judge had ruled in favor of an atheist named Michael Newdow, whose lawsuit alleged that the pledge of allegiance constituted an establishment of religion because of its “under God” clause.⁸⁹ The clause had long agitated atheists and secularists, who regarded it as a relic of the McCarthy-era’s anti-communist politicking, and its repeal elicited considerable excitement. Johnson capitalized on this enthusiasm by inviting Newdow to speak at the rally. Moreover, she specifically designed and marketed the rally to be inclusive of all nonbelievers in order to increase the event’s magnitude. This decision only achieved the desired result to an extent. The Council for Secular Humanism, alongside a panoply of small, local atheist and secularist groups, endorsed the rally, contributing to its between 2000 and 3000 attendees. However, the rally still betrayed AA’s low standing. It was not endorsed by the American Humanist Association or FFRF. Both organizations were well funded, with large, enthusiastic followings that enjoyed access to high-quality media and social resources. Johnson and other event organizers tried to disguise and compensate for this lack of broad support in a subtle, misleading way. The list of event endorsers individually records AA state chapters, whose support was implicit, and several O’Hair-era subsidiary groups that, if still in use, were run by AA employees.

⁸⁸ Johnson, “All Roads Lead to Washington,” *AA* 38, no. 3 (Summer 2000): 10.

⁸⁹ The lawsuit, *Elk Grove Unified School District v Newdow*, was filed in 2000 against the school district where Newdow’s daughter was a student. The Supreme Court overturned the circuit court ruling in 2004 upon appeal.

Johnson had hoped that the rally would generate enthusiasm to fulfill her goal of creating an advocacy and lobbying group based in the nation's capital. In her keynote address, she called on all nonbelievers to join a local atheist or secularist group regardless of their identity, become single-issue voters for state-church separation, and support the launch of the Godless Americans' Political Action Committee (GAMPAC).⁹⁰ This appeal did not resonate very strongly. GAMPAC was not formally launched until March 2004, more than a year after the rally. At the small press conference commemorating the event, Johnson, the PAC's executive director, admitted that convincing member groups to overlook past organizational animosity had been the main impediment to GAMPAC's formation. None of the country's major secularist groups occupied a seat on its advisory board. She provoked laughter when she reported that GAMPAC's total assets stood at 1000 dollars and suggested that it could negotiate with politicians that did not want the PAC's endorsement by threatening to endorse them anyway.⁹¹ Enthusiasm for GAMPAC fizzled almost as soon as it was established. A year after it endorsed John Kerry for president in the 2004 election, the Secular Coalition for America (SCA) became the first advocacy group representing secularists and nonbelievers to open an office in Washington D.C. with a full-time lobbyist. SCA had been informally established in the weeks leading up to and following the Godless Americans' March. Its three original signatory groups had endorsed the rally but not GAMPAC. Johnson prevented AA from joining SCA, which presented obvious competition for her PAC. It soon became clear, however, that SCA was the preferred choice among the major secularist organizations interested in politicizing. By 2006 it had been joined by the American

⁹⁰ Johnson et al., *Godless Americans Rally* (CSPAN video library, 2002).

⁹¹ Johnson, et al., *Political Action Committee Launch* (CSPAN video library, 2004).

Humanist Association and FFRF, effectively ensuring that GAMPAC would remain little more than a diminutive AA subsidiary.⁹²

Ultimately, the inter-organizational cooperation and numerical success of the Godless American's March were not harbingers of meaningful change within AA. Johnson's attitude towards secularist organizations did not evolve to tolerate greater collaboration, even though she repeatedly implored nonbelievers to stop allowing their identities to divide them. While she admitted that atheist and secularist groups had more similarities than differences, she doggedly emphasized the differences and kept her distance: "Our organizations are very, very different. What I would prefer that we do, and what we have been doing quite successfully for a long time, is bring us together on an ad hoc basis."⁹³ This statement, given at AA's 2005 national convention, was problematic simply because AA had enjoyed limited success in the ten years since Johnson became president. Her position made AA seem aloof and arrogant when compared to the behavior of secularist organizations, which harbored no old grudges between each other and were far less concerned with having homogeneous memberships. Some even welcomed liberal believers such as deists. Johnson was especially perturbed by this fact and avoided formally associating with such groups.

Her stringency eventually started to relax a little, though only with respect to her own organization. In January 2006, AA leaders once again updated the membership application. The disclaimer reserving the right to deny applicants who considered themselves atheists but refused to admit so publicly was removed. The clause explicitly barring non-atheists from joining was also removed. Applicants were simply presented with AA's aims and purposes and its definitions

⁹² Johnson, "Keynote Address," *AA* 43, no. 3 (Summer 2005): 11-5. Johnson made it clear that secularist groups "balked at joining" GAMPAC. As her comments clearly indicate, she resented their criticism of AA's leadership and O'Hair's legacy.

⁹³ *Ibid*, 13.

of atheism and materialism, and then directed to its website for further information. Because AA's definitions were so broad, they were effectively compatible with the views of all nonbelievers – even if they preferred an alternative identity to atheist.⁹⁴ The following year, in March of 2007, Johnson reported the findings of an internal survey conducted to gather information about AA members. The survey had asked respondents to list their preferred identity to represent their views about God and religion. Of the roughly 300 respondents who completed this section of the survey, 26 eschewed atheist in favor of alternative identities including agnostic, freethinker, humanist, rationalist, and spiritual.⁹⁵ No witch-hunt ensued. Johnson simply focused on the survey's political findings, expressing no concerns that non-atheists had joined AA. Her silence constituted a small but resounding step away from the conduct of her predecessors who feared that the organization would be contaminated with non-atheists. The following month the membership application was clarified to reassure applicants that they only had to express "general agreement" with AA's aims and purposes to be eligible for membership.⁹⁶ The timing of this modification was anything but coincidental. Atheist intellectuals were already permeating the media, giving her identity unprecedentedly positive coverage in American history. The enthusiasm their words and ideas inspired among the country's nonbelievers forced AA to continue reevaluating old codes of conduct.

⁹⁴ Atheism is "The mental attitude which unreservedly accepts the supremacy of reason and aims at establishing a life-style and ethical outlook verifiable by experience and scientific method, independent of all arbitrary assumptions of authority and creeds." Materialism is the declaration that "the cosmos is devoid of immanent conscious purpose [and] that there is no supernatural interference in human life." These two definitions were written by O'Hair in the early-1960s.

⁹⁵ Johnson, "November Mid-Term Elections: How You Voted and More!," *AA* 45, no. 3 (March 2007): 5. Somewhat ironically, this survey also reported that 40% of respondents had never heard of GAMPAC.

⁹⁶ *AA* 45, no. 4 (April 2007).

CHAPTER 4:

ATHEIST INTELLECTUALS: THEIR EMERGENCE, IDEAS, AND IMPACT

Numerous leaders of atheist and secularist organizations expressed considerable frustration shortly after it became clear that the New Atheists had accomplished something that they all had, at least partly, aspired to do: make atheism socially, culturally, and even politically relevant. This group of somewhat exasperated observers included Ellen Johnson, the president of AA, and Tom Flynn, the Executive Director of the Council for Secular Humanism (CSH). Johnson addressed the issue in her keynote speech at AA's 2007 national convention:

For some reason the media thinks that Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris are the only ones to have ever said what they said in their books. They have been described as representing the New Atheism. How untrue. Its all been said before. If this is the New Atheism, then what is the old atheism? I think it would be more apt to talk about the new media, to describe those who are just now discovering atheists. American Atheists has been publishing these kinds of books for decades.⁹⁷

The main goal of the preceding chapters was to chart the history of organized atheism before the advent of New Atheism – to answer, in other words, Johnson's question about the nature of *old* atheism. The main goal of this chapter is to provide an answer to the question she automatically dismisses: what is *new* about New Atheism? The more astute Tom Flynn offered a strong though incomplete answer to this question in his *Free Inquiry* column, "Why I don't Believe in the New Atheism." He correctly observed that "The triumph of Harris, Dennett, Dawkins, and Hitchens was to take arguments against religion that were long familiar to insiders, brilliantly repackage them, and expose them to millions who would never otherwise pick up an atheist book."⁹⁸ This much is certainly true. Flynn is right to disillusion those who credit the New Atheists for establishing the logical basis for atheism – though it must be said that the New Atheists

⁹⁷ Johnson, *National Atheists Convention* (CSPAN video library, 2007).

⁹⁸ Tom Flynn, "Why I don't Believe in the New Atheism," Council for Secular Humanism, http://www.secularhumanism.org/index.php?section=library&page=flynn_30_3 (accessed March 27, 2013).

themselves proudly acknowledged their debts to other thinkers. While the existence of self-identified atheists is a fairly recent phenomenon, the philosophical questions raised by atheism have changed little, if at all, since the earliest days of systematic thought. Flynn's answer, however, is ultimately incomplete because he neglects to explain *why* New Atheism became so popular. As he recognized, New Atheism was *new* because it was the first time in American history that atheism became popular. But this occurred because New Atheism was *new* in a more crucial respect: it represented the first time intellectuals took their atheism into public discourse in unison and with gusto. By working with each other and, more importantly, with atheist groups they became a new and ultimately indispensable part of organized atheism's infrastructure.

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The roots of New Atheism run deeper than 2004, when Sam Harris published his bestseller, *The End of Faith* – but not much deeper. The angst at the heart of New Atheism stems directly from liberal concessions made to religious groups and individuals. These liberal concessions came in many forms and it seems that each member of the New Atheist cohort was especially disdainful of one in particular. After the New Atheists coalesced into a well-organized group they began targeting many of them at once. But years before this key development occurred there was only one concession, manifested in the context of one intellectual debate, which elicited public condemnation from one of the eventual New Atheists. The debate took place within the scientific community about how to properly safeguard the teaching of evolutionary theory from advocates of “Intelligent Design” (ID).

In the words of historian Edward J. Larson, ID constituted “the third phase of the controversy over teaching evolution.”⁹⁹ In the first phase opponents of evolution successfully advocated for laws completely banning it from the classroom. These were enacted in numerous conservative states after the 1925 Scopes Trial in Dayton Tennessee and remained in practice until 1968 when the Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional because they constituted an establishment of religion. The second phase began with the publication of *The Genesis Flood* by Henry Morris in 1961, which “gave believers scientific-sounding arguments supporting the biblical account of a six-day creation within the past ten thousand years.”¹⁰⁰ This book formed the basis of laws demanding that so-called “creation science” be taught in biology classes alongside evolution as an equally valid scientific theory. Laws of this kind remained in effect until 1987, when the Supreme Court ruled them unconstitutional in *Edwards v. Aguillard* for the same reason as the preceding array of laws. ID became the most common method of resisting evolution immediately thereafter. Its basic premise was that scientific methodology inherently excludes God as means of explaining natural phenomena. Proponents of ID did not outright discard evolution as a possible explanation for the origins of human beings, they simply demanded that it be taught as “just a theory” alongside ID. ID claimed to successfully fill gaps in scientific understanding by invoking God as an explanatory device. Moreover, they typically argued that the gaps that did exist could never be filled by science alone because of the “irreducible complexity” found in nature.¹⁰¹

Many within the scientific community were deeply concerned in the late-1980s and 1990s that proponents of ID would convince lawmakers that it counted as legitimate science and

⁹⁹ Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America's Continuing Debate Over Science and Religion* (New York: Basic Books, 2006), 271.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid, 270.

¹⁰¹ Ibid, 271-2.

thereby force it into public school curricula. Historians have shrewdly pointed out that religious conservatives consistently failed to accomplish their sweeping legislative goals after politicizing in the late-1970s, and that American politics and law in general have become more and more secular every decade since 1960s.¹⁰² To many onlookers in the early-1990s, however, public discourse seemed to intensify, making the culture wars nastier than they had been before the Cold War ended.¹⁰³ Whether the culture wars heated up because the nation found less common ground on which to rally in peacetime, or as a result of the news media's shift toward highly sensational "infotainment," the fact is that they induced considerable anxiety among groups that tended to be well-educated, secular, and liberal. Scientists overwhelmingly fit these criteria and found it difficult to remain detached from sociopolitical discourse. They were particularly threatened by ID because it was the only mainstream conservative initiative that directly challenged the basis of their work and its reception by students.

By the mid-1990s, the scientific community had developed two very different methods of dealing with the challenges posed by ID. Both methods did so, however, by defining the broader relationship between science and religion. The first and by far more popular one sought to make science in general, and evolution in particular, appear less intimidating to religious groups by downplaying the apparent conflict between science and religion or by denying it altogether. The idea behind this approach was that if religious people did not perceive science as a threat to their beliefs, they would not be motivated to try to prevent their children from learning

¹⁰² Patrick Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945* (New York: Columbia, 2003), 195-8, 214-5, 262-3; James Livingston, *The World Turned Inside Out: American Thought and Culture at the End of the 20th Century* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2010), xiv-xv; James T. Patterson, *Restless Giant: The United States From Watergate to Bush v. Gore* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 266-74.

¹⁰³ Patterson, *Restless Giant*, 260-5. Patterson advances a twofold explanation for this phenomenon. On the one hand, Bill Clinton's victory in the 1992 presidential election broke the Republican Party's twelve-year control of the White House. On the other hand, many media outlets simply began exaggerating the severity of the culture wars with the hope of generating higher ratings.

about it. This view had won enthusiastic endorsement at all levels of the scientific community since the early-1980s, when creation science was still the primary impediment to the teaching of evolution. The famous evolutionary biologist Stephen Jay Gould powerfully reasserted this position in a 1997 essay for *Natural History* magazine, a non-academic publication devoted to the promotion of scientific literacy. In the essay, which was titled “Nonoverlapping magisteria” (NOMA), Gould argued that science and religion address different magisteria, or categories of human understanding. Science only seeks to uncover facts about the natural world. It is incapable of providing answers to abstract questions about the existence of a supreme being or concerning moral values. These types of questions fall within the purview of religion. Because science and religion occupy distinct intellectual realms, they cannot, by definition, come into conflict.¹⁰⁴ He advocated NOMA more extensively in 1999, when he published *Rocks of Ages: Science and Religion in the Fullness of Life*. The National Academy of Sciences, an organization composed entirely of the country’s preeminent scientists, implicitly endorsed the NOMA principle in a booklet for science educators it published in 1998.¹⁰⁵ NOMA was also the strategic position of the National Center for Scientific Education (NCSE), a non-profit organization founded in 1980 devoted to defending evolution in public schools.

The group of scientists who advocated a second approach to countering the threat of ID was exceedingly small. If not for the British scientist Richard Dawkins, it probably would have been altogether imperceptible. Dawkins was a giant in the field of evolutionary biology. In terms of output and influence, his only equal was Gould. From the late-1970s through the early-2000s, academic evolutionary biologists were divided into two camps – one led by Dawkins, the other by Gould. The divide stemmed from opposing theories on how the process of evolution unfolded

¹⁰⁴ Stephen Jay Gould, “Nonoverlapping magisteria,” *Natural History*, March 1997.

¹⁰⁵ Larson, *Summer for the Gods*, 274. Larson only references the booklet, not Gould’s NOMA principle.

with respect to speciation.¹⁰⁶ The bipolarity of the field was so significant that it prompted one scholar to write a book on the topic that became a bestseller.¹⁰⁷ However, while their dispute regarding fine points of evolutionary theory was cordial, their disagreement about how the scientific community should handle ID in particular and religion in general was not. Dawkins made little effort to disguise his strong dislike of Gould's NOMA principle. He challenged it early, often, and aggressively. In his *Forbes* essay "Snake Oil and Holy Water," Dawkins criticized the scientific community's "agnostic eagerness to concede to religion" absolute sovereignty over "its own 'magisterium' of equal importance to that of science." He argued that this strategy of "agnostic conciliation," or "the decent liberal bending over backwards to concede as much as possible to anybody who shouts loudly enough," is "easy to mistake for genuine convergence, a true meeting of minds." By "partitioning up the intellectual territory into 'how questions' (science) and 'why questions' (religion)" scientists offer religion special explanatory powers that it does not actually have.¹⁰⁸ Dawkins illustrated his point with an anecdote in which he asked a prominent astrophysicist about how the fundamental laws of physics came to be. The astrophysicist said that as a scientist he could not answer that question and suggested that Dawkins consult a chaplain. Dawkins wondered how a chaplain could have an advantage in this area of knowledge over a scientist (or even over a gardener or a chef): "There may be some deep questions about the cosmos that are forever beyond science. The mistake is to think that they are therefore not beyond religion too." Dawkins believed that NOMA may work in principle, but

¹⁰⁶ Dawkins advocated a well-established theory known as "Phyletic Gradualism" in which species change slowly, splitting into distinct species only after long periods of genetic isolation. Gould proposed his own theory of "Punctuated Equilibrium," which posits that the vast majority of species remain morphologically consistent throughout their evolutionary history – speciation occurs most often in sudden bursts.

¹⁰⁷ Kim Sterelny, *Dawkins vs. Gould: Survival of the Fittest* (Thriplow: Icon Books, 2001).

¹⁰⁸ Richard Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain: Reflections on Hope, Lies, Science, and Love* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), 148-50. This volume is a collection of Dawkins' writings, which includes the *Forbes* article referenced, renamed, "The Great Convergence."

rarely, if ever, in practice: “When talking to intellectuals, [religious apologists] carefully keep off science’s turf, safe inside the separate and invulnerable religious magisterium. But when talking to non-intellectual mass audience they make wanton use of miracle stories, which are blatant intrusions into scientific territory.” In other words, the defenders of religion usually want to have their cake and eat it too. Here he added footnote, personally excoriating Gould: “The ‘separate magisteria’ thesis was promoted by S. J. Gould, an atheist bending over backwards far beyond the call of duty or sense.”¹⁰⁹

NOMA was not the only position held by most of the scientific community that agitated Dawkins. He was deeply troubled by what he perceived as an increasing tendency among scientists to linguistically distort their own beliefs about life and nature. The biologist Ursula Goodenough typified this trend. In 1998 she published *The Sacred Depths of Nature*, which became an immensely successful bestseller. In the book she described her feelings of wonder and amazement at the natural world and included prayers and meditations. Dawkins complained, however, “By the book’s own account, Dr. Goodenough does not believe in any sort of supreme being, does not believe in any sort of life after death; on any normal understanding of the English language, she is no more religious than I am.” Like other “atheist scientists,” Goodenough firmly asserted that a naturalistic outlook based on science evokes hope and meaning, not angst and nihilism. Dawkins emphasized the same point with respect to the relationship between science and aesthetics in his book *Unweaving the Rainbow* – without, of course, the quasi-religious language.¹¹⁰ He maintained that Goodenough’s habit of conjoining the words ‘sacred’ and ‘science’ had the potential to mislead readers who may not grasp her figurative, metaphorical language. More pointedly, Dawkins described how this rhetorical imprecision has enabled

¹⁰⁹ Ibid, 149-50.

¹¹⁰ Richard Dawkins, *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusions and the Appetite for Wonder* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1998).

religious apologists to make fallacious claims about the personal beliefs of great scientists like Albert Einstein.¹¹¹

Dawkins' frustration was clearly exacerbated by the statistics on the religious beliefs of his fellow scientists. In a widely publicized 1998 study, two academics polled leading scientists, asking questions about whether or not they believed in a personal God, or the existence of a life after death. Of the scientists who were members of the prestigious National Academy of Sciences, only 7% believed in the concept of a personal God and only 7.9% believed in an everlasting life after death.¹¹² The overwhelming majority of these scientists were, just like Dawkins, nonbelievers who dismissed traditional religious dogma. This bewildered Dawkins more than it comforted him. Why, he wondered, did they insist on avoiding conflict with, and often even capitulating to religious critics like ID advocates who criticized science on the basis of uncompromising faith? Dawkins was fully aware of the cultural taboo against criticizing widely held religious beliefs, even if they were plainly contradicted by scientific fact. He did not, however, point his criticism directly at this taboo until after the September 11th terrorist attacks.

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Most Americans who saw footage of the hijacked passenger jets crashing into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon on September 11th neglected to draw dramatic, sweeping conclusions about religion. For the most part, they reacted as they had to previous acts of religiously motivated violence, just on a much larger scale. When abortion doctors and clinics were targeted by fringe Christian lunatics in the 1990s, the vast majority of Americans rallied behind the victims. When fanatical religious figures like Randy Weaver and David Koresh were killed alongside their families in standoffs with federal agents, most Americans prayed for the

¹¹¹ Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*, 146.

¹¹² Edward J. Larson and Larry Witham, "Leading scientists still reject God." *Nature* 394 (1998): 313.

departed, regardless of how spiritually misguided they considered them to be.¹¹³ And when the Reverend Jerry Falwell blamed abortionists, feminists, pagans, gays, and the ACLU for inciting God's wrath in the form of Islamic Jihadists on September 11th, he was widely condemned and strongly urged to apologize. Much of the grief expressed on and after that day was conveyed in religious language. Some Americans followed Falwell's line of thinking and predicted that the end times were imminent, but far more banded together across religious lines to pray and find comfort. Anti-Islamic sentiment spread far and wide, resulting in the murders of three people, only one of whom actually was Muslim. Most moderate and liberal Americans, however, agreed with President George Bush when he asserted "Islam is a religion of peace," and those who did not generally granted that not all Muslims were terrorists. It seemed almost all Americans expressed or at least endorsed a kind of quasi-religious faith in America itself as a "chosen" nation.¹¹⁴ It did not even occur to the overwhelming majority of onlookers that certain characteristics and impulses found in almost all religions were directly responsible for the charred wreckage in New York City and the nation's capital. This was, however, one of the primary conclusions that the intellectuals who eventually established the New Atheist cohort drew from the calamity.

Four days after the attacks, Dawkins published an article on religion. He had previously only treated religion with respect to science, focusing on the beliefs of scientists while occasionally taking jabs at some of the more uncompromising examples of religious dogmatism such as creationism. In this article he went much further, arguing that the belief in life after death made the attacks of September 11th possible because it encourages people to devalue their own life on earth in exchange for an everlasting one in paradise:

¹¹³ Allitt, *Religion in America Since 1945*, 212-4.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 256-8.

There is no doubt that the afterlife-obsessed suicidal brain really is a weapon of immense power and danger. It is comparable to a smart missile, and its guidance system is in many respects superior to the most sophisticated electronic brain that money can buy. Yet to a cynical government, organization, or priesthood, it is very very cheap.¹¹⁵

It is significant that this article was published in the United Kingdom and not reprinted in any American newspaper. It drew a bit of criticism and approval, but otherwise failed to make a splash. On September 22nd, exactly one week after the Guardian article appeared in print, Dawkins was scheduled to accept an award at FFRF's annual convention in Madison Wisconsin. While flight security concerns prevented his attendance, he nonetheless sent the speech that he had planned to give to FFRF and it was read at the convention. The speech, provocatively titled "Time to stand up", called on atheists to organize themselves, start speaking up about their views proudly and publicly, and, most importantly, challenge the established codes of civility that shielded religions from criticism:

My last vestige of 'hands off religion' respect disappeared in the smoke and choking dust of September 11th 2001, followed by the 'National Day of Prayer', when prelates and pastors did their tremulous Martin Luther King impersonation and urged people of mutually incompatible faith to hold hands, united in homage to the very force that caused the problem in the first place. It is time for people of intellect, as opposed to people of faith, to stand up and say 'Enough!' Let our tribute to the September dead be a new resolve: to respect people for what they individually think, rather than respect groups for what they were collectively brought up to believe.¹¹⁶

It is essential to recognize that he could not rely on academia's traditional means of discourse to relay this message. Undeterred, he addressed atheists and other nonbelievers directly, through one of the groups they congregated in. In his speech he spoke as an atheist, but more importantly, as a scientist. The speech constituted Dawkins' first attempt to support and encourage atheist activism in America and his talk at the well-publicized TEDx conference in February 2002 proved that he was committed. Addressing the many wealthy "people of intellect" at the

¹¹⁵ Richard Dawkins, "Religion's misguided missiles," *The Guardian*, September 15, 2001.

¹¹⁶ Dawkins, *A Devil's Chaplain*, 157.

conference in Monterey California, Dawkins reiterated the central arguments of his FFRF speech and encouraged audience members to donate their money to help foster an atheist movement in America, emphasizing that “If my books sold as well as Stephen Hawking’s books, I’d do it myself.” His passionate conclusion harkened back to the recent terrorist attacks and the taboo he had long reviled, “Here’s how September 11 changed me: lets all stop being so damned respectful.”¹¹⁷ The response to his figurative call to arms, however, was muted. The New York Times probably captured the general attitude towards the speech by writing it off as “a rather strange campaign by the evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins to create an advocacy group for American atheists.”¹¹⁸ Despite the lack of return on his efforts in America, Dawkins continued criticizing religion publicly. His criticisms, however, generally appeared in British and European newspapers and magazines, not American ones.

Aside from establishing a dialogue in his FFRF speech, Dawkins did little to support specific American organizations that harbored atheists and promoted atheism. It is tempting to view Dawkins’ early attempts at atheist activism in America as foreshadowing the New Atheists. But there is no direct line to be drawn between the two phenomena. Dawkins boldly ventured outside of academia by himself – approaching atheist activism as a public intellectual – and was met with the same kind of confused silence he was so used to receiving from fellow scientists.

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Sam Harris was a neuroscience doctoral student at UCLA in 2002 when Richard Dawkins appeared before the TEDx conference. Unlike the eminent biologist, he was young and virtually unknown, but his reaction to the September 11th terrorist attacks was at least as

¹¹⁷ Richard Dawkins, *Militant Atheism*, (http://www.ted.com/talks/richard_dawkins_on_militant_atheism.html), accessed April 12, 2013.

¹¹⁸ Patricia Leigh Brown, “3 Days in the Future,” *New York Times*, February 28, 2002. Dawkins was not referring to AA when he referenced “American atheists.”

powerful and emotional. By his own accounting he began writing his book, *The End of Faith*, on the day after the bombings. The project consumed so much time that he needed to take time off from his doctoral studies in 2004 to complete it. It was published that August by Norton Inc., a massive publishing house with broad topical reach, and began selling rapidly and climbing the best-seller charts.

The central argument of *The End of Faith* closely followed the line of reasoning Dawkins articulated in 2001 and 2002. After establishing the premise that belief is the most important factor in determining people's actions, Harris took aim at faith, which he defined as a kind of belief without evidence or the acceptance of an idea on the basis of authority.¹¹⁹ While he rejected the value of faith in almost every context, he was especially concerned with one of its forms – religious faith. Religion, he argued, is the preeminent source of violence and hatred in the world because it encourages people to divide themselves into factions, which coexist anxiously at best and compete ferociously at worst. By turning unquestioning belief into a holy virtue and simultaneously dismissing alternative belief systems as false or evil, all religions have intolerance and conceit built into them vis-à-vis their ancient holy books. In other words, if the teachings of one's religion make everlasting life contingent on slaughtering people of other religions, and everlasting punishment contingent on making peace with them, the truly faithful simply have no choice but to take up arms and spill blood. Thus, religious terrorists, including the September 11th hijackers, are not cowardly or insane as Americans frequently describe them, they are simply people of “*perfect faith*” acting rationally within the context of their belief

¹¹⁹ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company Inc., 2004), 64-5.

systems. On this point Harris emphasized, “Certainty about the next life is simply incompatible with tolerance in this one.”¹²⁰

But Harris did not suggest that all religious people are terrorists in potentia. He recognized that the relatively small cadre of religious extremists that targeted innocent civilians received very little support in the West, and that numerous Muslim scholars discredited their interpretations of the Koran that justify violence against non-Muslims. He was not reluctant to accept the distinction between religious “moderates” and “fundamentalists,” which was vigorously stressed by President Bush and many other Americans after the September 11th attacks. According to Harris, however, the existence of this distinction does not mean that religious moderates lack culpability for the violence caused by fundamentalists:

Moderates are themselves the bearers of a terrible dogma: they imagine that the path to peace will be paved once each of us has learned to respect the unjustified beliefs of others.... The very ideal of religious tolerance – born of the notion that every human being should be free to believe what he wants about God – is one of the principal forces driving us toward the abyss.¹²¹

Harris argued that the demand for absolute religious tolerance prevents the type of honest, reasonable criticism that religious fundamentalism deserves. This has lethal consequences because it compels people to misdiagnose the basic cause of Islamic terrorism. While Harris accepted that long standing geopolitical conflict in the Middle East is an important motivating factor for terrorists, he rejected the widely accepted idea that it is the primary factor. He emphasized that Muslim fundamentalists engage in terrorism because of central Islamic teachings, articulated explicitly throughout the Koran. The seemingly non-violent injunctions found in the Koran and the Hadith are very easy to overlook or discount altogether because they are so few compared to the calls for killing infidels. Conversely, the preponderance of moderate

¹²⁰ Ibid, 67,13.

¹²¹ Ibid, 14-5.

Muslims in America owes nothing at all to the innate peacefulness of Islam. Moderate Muslims are moderate because they are far less ignorant about the world than people who established their religion and because they choose, consciously or subconsciously, to ignore the barbaric, tribalistic aspects of their holy books. In stark contrast to the moderates and liberals of the West, Harris concluded that the Koran, like most other sacred texts, is fundamentally violent and plainly justifies the murder of non-Muslims. The situation is dire because modern technology is making it easier and easier to access increasingly destructive weapons. America and the West simply cannot afford to parlay their ability to criticize irrational faith to protect their taboos of civility any longer.

Harris' basic solution to the problem of faith-based violence is straightforward: we must begin "to correct everyone's reading of these texts by making the same evidentiary demands in religious matters that we make in all others." If our modes of discourse are not rewritten to permit and encourage this way of treating religion the consequences will be grave:

If we cannot find our way to a time when most of us are willing to admit that, at the very least, *we are not sure* whether or not God wrote some of our books, then we need only count the days to Armageddon – because God has given us far many more reasons to kill one another than to turn the other cheek.¹²²

In light of another one of Harris' key arguments, this ultimatum is not as atheistic as it initially seems: "There is clearly a sacred dimension to our existence, and coming to terms with it could well be the highest purpose of human life." Harris devoted an entire chapter to explaining how people can be both spiritual and rational at the same time. By using science to study human consciousness, humans can find new and meaningful ways of altering their mental states in order to escape the dull, prosaic aspects of their daily lives. Harris appreciated some of the techniques employed by Eastern religious traditions to explore different states of consciousness, but was

¹²² Ibid, 35.

disappointed that they had achieved a monopoly over the entire field. He stressed that the new and cutting-edge field of neuroscience stands to unlock secrets about the brain that could give fresh meaning to human existence without religion's unverifiable promises about life after death. In this respect, Harris is an optimist, and while *The End of Faith* often carries a frightening sense of urgency, it culminates with a resoundingly hopeful and uplifting message:

Man is manifestly *not* the measure of all things. This universe is shot through with mystery. The very fact of its being, and of our own, is a mystery absolute, and the only miracle worthy of the name.... No personal God need be worshiped for us to live in awe at the beauty and immensity of creation. No tribal fictions need be rehearsed for us to realize, one fine day, that we do, in fact, love our neighbors, that our happiness is inextricable from their own, and that our interdependence demands that people everywhere be given the opportunity to flourish.¹²³

The End of Faith was generally well received by American intellectuals as well as their average, literate countrymen and women. It earned favorable endorsement from many notable scholars, and the critics who took issue with some of its main points usually granted that the book was important and that the taboo it challenged ought to be examined more closely.¹²⁴ Its commercial success is difficult to explain, but there are at least two plausible factors. The first is that Harris never advocates atheism. He does not even use the word once. Although highly devout readers were bound to be offended by his critical treatment of faith in general, liberal, open-minded religious ones could at least find some common ground in his endorsement of rational spirituality. The second factor stemmed from mounting anxiety about America's presence in Iraq and widespread distrust of Muslims and Islam in general. The de-Ba'athification policies enacted by the Coalition Provisional Authority, an American-led institution that governed Iraq between April 2003 and June 2004, led to vast unemployment and widespread

¹²³ Ibid, 227.

¹²⁴ Natalie Angier, "The End of Faith: Against Toleration," *New York Times*, September 5, 2004. The philosopher Peter Singer, the Harvard law professor Alan Dershowitz, and Joseph Hough Jr., the president of Union Theological Seminary in New York, all enthusiastically recommended *The End of Faith* on its dust jacket.

dissatisfaction amongst Iraqis.¹²⁵ This in turn fueled an insurgency which had escalated to open warfare by the end of March 2004, when several major Iraqi cities were lost to sectarian rebels who then killed, mutilated, and publically displayed four American military contractors in Fallujah. While the overwhelming majority of Iraqi insurgents were not Al-Qaeda-trained Jihadists, most average Americans found it difficult to see the difference.¹²⁶ *The End of Faith*, was released that August by a major publishing house. It seems likely that the violent and uncertain context of its publication combined with the still-fresh memories of September 11th to draw Americans to Harris' book, which focused its barbed criticism on Islam, not Christianity, because, he emphasized, "At this point in history, it represents a unique danger to all of us."¹²⁷ The insurgency continued intensifying through 2006, when it became a full-blown civil war drawn along sectarian lines. It is likely that mounting instability in Iraq coupled with the rising American death toll to give weight to the arguments of the atheist intellectuals.

Harris' success instantly made him a hero for American atheists and nonbelievers. He did not, however, rush to advocate for specific atheist or secularist organizations. Much like Dawkins, he established an amiable dialogue with several of them by publishing articles in their magazines and periodicals. This limited relationship did not rapidly boost organized atheism, which, as we have seen, struggled in the first five years of the new millennium. AA – still the only national atheist group in the country – did not grow perceptibly in this period.

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¹²⁵ The policies were designed to cleanse the Iraqi military and government institutions of Saddam Hussein loyalists. Unemployment rates at this time were estimated between 30-50%.

¹²⁶ Mary Anne Weaver, "The Short, Violent Life of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2006. Many journalists, commentators, and political insiders have suggested that this misperception stemmed from the Pentagon's leaked "propaganda campaign" to exaggerate the significance of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, a ruthless al-Qaeda-trained Jihadist who carried out numerous bombings and executions in the early years of the insurgency and became symbolic of anti-American resistance in Iraq.

¹²⁷ Harris, *The End of Faith*, 28.

Although 2005 passed quietly, no momentum was lost. Atheist intellectuals published three books in 2006, making it a breakthrough year for their brand of activism. They drew on each other's work and enthusiastically endorsed each other's books, causing them to be closely linked in media coverage. The atheist intellectuals also began marketing their arguments and criticisms to American readers more explicitly. Their tremendous success at doing so intensified the country's debate about religion and atheism, in turn giving them an enthusiastic, rapidly growing following.

In February 2006, Viking press, a branch of the Penguin Group, published *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon*. The book was written by Daniel Dennett, a philosopher well known in academia for his sizeable contributions to the field of cognitive science. Dennett introduced himself and carefully defined his target audience in the book's preface: "I am an American author, and this book is addressed in the first place to American readers... the curious and conscientious citizens of my native land – as many as possible, not just the academics."¹²⁸ Like most scholars writing for a non-academic audience, he justified this decision, explaining that he was motivated to explore why America's relationship with religion is so distinctively close compared to other wealthy, industrialized nations. It is clear throughout the book, however, that Dennett also shared in Dawkins' and Harris' anxiety about the role that religion – Islam in particular – was playing in geopolitics.

Dennett's central thesis is that the practice of silencing candid scrutiny and criticism of religion has become dangerous and must be repudiated. This taboo is the titular "spell" that needs to be "broken." Like Dawkins and Harris, Dennett challenged the taboo in mainstream culture, but he also took issue with a particular manifestation of it within academia. He accused

¹²⁸ Daniel C. Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York: Viking, 2006), xiii.

humanities scholars of pig-headedly resisting the application of scientific methodology to study religion on the basis of self-defeating, post-modernist critiques about the hopelessness of finding any objective truth.¹²⁹ Dennett argued that science, if allowed to study religion, can provide valuable insights that might help leaders mitigate the threat of religious extremism today. *Breaking the Spell* was designed to do precisely this. It is primarily devoted to examining religion's role in human evolution, beginning with the origins of supernatural belief and ending at the transition from primitive or folk religion to organized religion that took place within recorded history. In this sense, it is a work of anthropology, drawing on cognitive science and the study of primitive cultures to examine and evaluate competing theories.

Philosophers have attempted to explain the origins and functions of religion since ancient times. When the anthropology of religion was formalized in the nineteenth century, shortly after Charles Darwin published *On the Origin of Species* in 1859, the basic ways of explaining religion had already been proposed. By addressing a non-academic audience in *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett aimed to synthesize competing theories and popularize the general field of inquiry. The most notable aspect of his approach is its application of cultural epidemiology, or the principle that culture is transmitted from person to person, like bacteria, via “memes” – “information packets or recipes for doing something” non-verbally, like “shaking hands” or “taking off your shoes when you enter a house.”¹³⁰ Cultures morph and evolve over time as people invent new memes, and as memes replicate themselves and compete with one another. A particular meme becomes dominant when it becomes the preferred way of behaving or doing something. Dennett used cultural epidemiology to probe the transition from primitive to

¹²⁹ Ibid, 258-64.

¹³⁰ Steward E. Guthrie, “Anthropological Theories of Religion,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 283-96; Dennett, *Breaking the Spell*, 80-2. The concept of memes was invented in 1976 by Richard Dawkins. Dawkins and Dennett shared a close academic relationship because of overlapping interests well before the two were united in atheist activism.

organization religion without having to invoke group selection, a controversial biological idea which postulates that individuals will sometimes act contrary to their own fitness to improve their group's overall fitness.¹³¹ Dennett concluded that the transition took place very gradually, as people stopped expecting material or "concrete" rewards for believing and worshipping (such as rain), and began expecting non-physical or "elusive" rewards (such as life after death). A meme that came to dominate during the transition was the "belief in belief," which Dennett defined as the belief that believing in God or religion is inherently good and advantageous even if either seems improbable.¹³² He maintained that many more people today believe that believing in God or religion is good, than believe that it is real or true. In turn, this meme sustains the contemporary taboo against criticizing religion.¹³³ In the final section of *Breaking the Spell*, Dennett defends Sam Harris' "brave book," *The End of Faith*, and issues a similar call for religious moderates to lead the charge in repudiating religious extremists. According to Dennett, religious terrorism might simply be a class of "toxic" memes that can only be eradicated by scientific research, fact-based education about religion, and honest, pointed criticism.¹³⁴

In September and October of 2006, Sam Harris and Richard Dawkins published *Letter to a Christian Nation* and *The God Delusion* respectively. Following the trend established by *The End of Faith*, both books were released by major American publishing houses. In *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Harris sought to "demolish the intellectual and moral pretensions of Christianity in its most committed forms." It takes the form of a dialogue, between its author and a typical conservative, evangelical, American Christian who believes "that the Bible is the word of God, that Jesus is the Son of God, and that only those who place their faith in Jesus will find

¹³¹ Ibid, 183-6.

¹³² Ibid, 226-34, 200-4.

¹³³ According to Dennett, these two forms of belief are not mutually exclusive.

¹³⁴ Ibid, 299, 334-9.

salvation after death.”¹³⁵ Harris emphasized that the Christian he is addressing is not representative of “liberal” or “moderate” Christians, who tend to value inter-faith dialogue and are open to the idea that there is more than one path to salvation. The majority of *Letter to a Christian Nation* focuses on morality. As he did with the Koran, Harris concluded that the Bible is fundamentally immoral: at worst it explicitly justifies cruelty, and at best it is so ambiguous that it can easily be misinterpreted to justify cruelty. He then examined the implications for his interlocutor’s beliefs and behavior in the context of various contentious, contemporary debates, including abortion, contraception, and scientific education. By far the most significant aspect of *Letter to a Christian Nation* is its explicit advocacy of atheism. Harris identified himself as an atheist – something he had neglected to do in his previous book – and argued that atheism is perfectly compatible with good morals and healthy societies. He firmly rejected the opinion that it leads inexorably to evil, arguing that the Holocaust had its roots in Catholic anti-Semitism, and that despised atheists, like Joseph Stalin, committed their atrocities because they were ideologically dogmatic, not because they lacked belief in a higher power.

Harris’ conclusion was designed to serve as something of a rallying cry for fellow atheists and nonbelievers. He expressed hope that the twenty-first century bears witness to the birth of a “public discourse that encourages critical thinking and intellectual honesty,” and the end of religion itself.¹³⁶ More notable, however, is his list of suggested books. The top two spots were occupied by the soon-to-be-released *The God Delusion*, and *Breaking the Spell*. This, like Dennett’s vigorous defense of *The End of Faith*, was indicative of the shift towards greater cohesion among atheist intellectuals that began in 2006.

¹³⁵ Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York: Knopf, 2006), xi, 3.

¹³⁶ *Ibid*, 87.

Richard Dawkins' *The God Delusion* followed in, and greatly strengthened this trend. Much of *The God Delusion* simply reiterates and expands on criticisms its author had already articulated in the late-1990s and early-2000s. The first two chapters rehearse old quibbles with Goodenough's style of writing about science and nature, clarify important scientists' beliefs about God, and attack NOMA. Throughout the rest of the book, Dawkins focuses on many issues already taken up by Harris and Dennet, always plugging their work, and usually reaching similar conclusions. Like Harris, he emphasized morality. After analyzing the Bible at length, he argued that it is an immoral text, that religion in general does not underpin morality, and that atheism is compatible with ethical behavior. Like Dennett, Dawkins explored the origins of religion, avoiding group selection by invoking cultural epidemiology. To eliminate the taboo shielding religion from reasonable analysis and reproach, Dawkins called for more vocal criticism of extremists and the type of irrational thinking implicit in all religion. He demanded that all children be factually educated about religion and free from parental indoctrination to limit the transmission of violent, hateful beliefs and traditions from one generation to the next. Rallying cries reminiscent of his 2002 TEDx talk appear throughout the book.

Dawkins promotion of atheism – as a “brave and splendid” way of life – was more aggressive than either of his fellow atheist intellectuals. His direct support for specific organizations, however, was by far his most distinctive decision.¹³⁷ In the back of the book, Dawkins appended a list “of friendly addresses,” in America, “for individuals needing support in escaping from religion.” AA is the very first entry, making it the only explicitly atheist group on the list. No atheist group in America had ever before received this kind of publicity. *The God Delusion* sold more than 2 million copies and spent nearly a year on the New York Times'

¹³⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (New York: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2006), 1-3.

bestseller list. More importantly, however, it was generally well received. Dawkins was critiqued at least as often as he was lauded, but his critics took him very seriously. While he did not add very many new arguments to the debate that Harris set off in 2004, he moved beyond general advocacy to endorsing and aiding an atheist group. This proved to be a critical stepping-stone for the cohort of atheist intellectuals, which expanded, solidified, and gained momentum in 2007.

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Christopher Hitchens entered the fray with pomp. He had long been recognized as an elite journalist for his staunch opinions and gifted writing and oratory abilities. He was British, but had lived in America since the early-1980s, when he began writing for *The Nation*, the country's premier left-wing news magazine. He was moved by the September 11th attacks to apply for citizenship, which he attained one month before joining Harris, Dennett, and Dawkins in their atheist activism. Hitchens had been an atheist since his childhood and made public some of his critical views on organized religion in 2001, with the publication of *Letters to a Young Contrarian*, a slim volume on mentoring.¹³⁸ Nonetheless, he was not known for his atheism until the release of *God is not Great* in May 2007. The book's provocative subtitle, "*how religion poisons everything*", encapsulated its author's rhetorical flare and unequivocally aligned him with the three other atheist intellectuals, whose momentum he fed off of and contributed to.

Hitchens did not break very much new ground in the ongoing debate concerning religion and atheism. In *God is not Great*, He generally reiterates and recasts arguments and ideas that had already been percolating. Lacking the scientific training of his peers, Hitchens supplements his expertise as a journalist and political correspondent as well as his robust background in history and philosophy to make his case. On the fundamental issues, it is the same as that of

¹³⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *Letters to a Young Contrarian* (New York: Basic Books, 2001), 53-69. The opening anecdote from *God is not Great*, in which Hitchens describes his boyhood loss of faith, first appeared in *Letters to a Young Contrarian* in a less dramatic form.

Harris, Dennett, and Dawkins. Hitchens attacks accepted codes of civility regarding religion, upbraids religious moderates for demanding that the irrational beliefs of their fundamentalist counterparts be treated with deference, challenges the perceived morality of scripture, and attempts to muster atheists in defense of democratic civilization, the freedom of speech, and Enlightenment principles. He also defends atheism from the classic critique that it leads to immorality. Hitchens admits, that as a young man, he developed a dangerous and destructive “secular faith” in Marxism: “Those of us who had sought a rational alternative to religion had reached a terminus that was comparably dogmatic.”¹³⁹ In turn, he emphasizes that secular dogmatism drove many twentieth-century tyrants, not lack of belief in a higher power. The most unique aspect of *God is not Great* is its use of collective language. The words “we” and “our” appear regularly, situating Hitchens as a spokesperson for all atheists and nonbelievers. The initial thrust of *God is not Great* unmistakably reflects this tendency:

Here is the point about myself and my co-thinkers. Our belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith.... We may differ on many things, but what we respect is free inquiry, openmindedness, and the pursuit of ideas for their own sake.... We atheists do not require any priests, or any hierarchy about them, to police our actions.... Not all can be agreed on matters of aesthetics, but we secular humanists and atheists and agnostics do not wish to deprive humanity of its wonders or consolations. Not in the least.¹⁴⁰

If Hitchens had published several years earlier, his emphasis on collective beliefs and group solidarity would not have carried very much weight. He was, however, following in the footsteps of three successful, like-minded intellectuals, which enabled him to broaden the scope of the dialogue they had initiated and demand recognition for atheists and nonbelievers as a distinct class of people.¹⁴¹

¹³⁹ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (New York: Twelve, 2007), 151-3.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 5-8.

¹⁴¹ Christopher Hitchens, ed., *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (Philadelphia: DA Capo Press, 2007). This volume, published in November, includes selections from *The End of Faith*, *Breaking the Spell*, and *The God Delusion*, creating a kind of intellectual family tree for the New Atheists.

Harris, Dennett, and Dawkins met Hitchens at his home in Washington D.C. in September 2007. While the quartet divided their time between several topics, the central purpose of the gathering was to identify and register common objectives in the war of ideas they intended to continue waging. One put forward by Dawkins won assent from all parties: “I want to live in a world where people think skeptically for themselves [and] look at evidence.... It’s an impoverishing thing to be reduced to the pettiness of astrology records and I think you could say the same of religion.”¹⁴² This objective disclosed the mutual desire to live in a world without faith or religion. While the four intellectuals appraised their chances of success differently, all strongly believed in the possibility of shaking people’s faith to the point of relinquishing God. This belief formed the foundation on which their activism would build in the years that followed. The intellectuals did not, however, delineate rules or principles to shape the style of their activism. As a consequence, each pursued their common ends according to his individual means. But lack of strategic consensus did not result in a wide variety of tactics or behavior, and after 2007 there never was much confusion about what the New Atheists collectively strived for. Ultimately, the war of ideas they waged was not very nasty. They indeed trampled America’s civility taboos to make their arguments and in so doing offended many people. But they rarely fostered personal animus against their interlocutors, and never encouraged disrespect towards believers in general. Many older Americans were undoubtedly struck by how dignified and decent the behavior of the New Atheists seemed in comparison to that of Madalyn Murray O’Hair.

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¹⁴² Dawkins, Dennett, Harris, and Hitchens, *The Four Horsemen*. (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cTjHf77FqTI>), accessed April 3, 2013.

The New Atheists bolstered organized atheism in America in two distinct ways. The first was through broad cultural engagement, working within the parameters of the country's information infrastructure in order to generate a tremendous amount of raw enthusiasm for atheism. In this sense, books merely represented the New Atheists' first job in their war of ideas. After 2007 their ideas and arguments were generally relayed through more direct, personal mediums.¹⁴³ This shift occurred simply because the New Atheists developed more interest in hands-on activism and engagement. Dawkins was the first to move in this direction. In late 2006 he founded the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Science and Reason, a non-profit organization based in America and the United Kingdom. In 2007 it began its first major initiative, the Out Campaign, to encourage atheists and nonbelievers to "come out of the closet" and proudly display their identity by wearing apparel marked with a scarlet letter "A". More than one million people participated by uploading videos of themselves denying the existence of God on the Internet.¹⁴⁴ Harris also founded a non-profit organization in 2007. Project Reason collected and disseminated information about science and religion, and sponsored various social outreach initiatives designed to support atheists. While Hitchens did not create an organization of his own, he was by far the most committed to debating religious apologists. His vigor and oratory flare contributed greatly to the re-popularization of 'atheism vs. religion' debates in America. By 2008 they had become both trendy and lucrative. That year Hitchens went on nationwide debate tour with a fundamentalist pastor named Douglas Wilson. The two unexpectedly became friends along the way, and they agreed to release their debates and conversations both as a movie and as

¹⁴³ The New Atheists continued writing and publishing books, but the various topics they addressed moved away from atheism.

¹⁴⁴ David Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation: The Rise of Secular Americans* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 140.

a co-authored book.¹⁴⁵ Harris, Dennett, and Dawkins participated in numerous debates as well, though to a lesser extent than Hitchens, and gave countless interviews and lectures.

The long-term success of this style of engagement owed much to new information technology that enabled the dissemination of videos and other digital content. The Internet in particular played a critical role in cementing the New Atheists' cultural status. Compared to newspapers, magazines, and television, the Internet was extremely cheap, better at catering to personal interests, less beholden to sociopolitical and financial considerations, and far more difficult to expurgate. Once debates and interviews were uploaded online they were there to stay and very easy for users to find regardless of where they lived. Thus, when the New Atheists were covered speaking and debating in auditoriums and newsrooms around the country, their capacity to persuade and influence was not hindered by the ideological predisposition of their immediate spectators as much as it would have been fifteen years earlier. This form of engagement was more likely to appeal to younger Americans, who had smaller appetites for traditional media than their older counterparts and generally regarded religion as less relevant to their daily lives.¹⁴⁶ The success of a website called Reddit is exemplary of how the Internet absorbed and retained the raw enthusiasm provoked by the New Atheists. In 2008 it formed a repository of atheist news, information, and event schedules, which listed gatherings and conventions nationwide. Within a year it boasted almost two million users and was used a platform for notable atheists to interact with their fans and for atheist and secularist groups to court new members.¹⁴⁷

¹⁴⁵ Christopher Hitchens and Douglas Wilson, *Is Christianity Good for the World?* (Moscow: Canon Press, 2009).

¹⁴⁶ The Pew Forum on Religion & Public Life, *Religion Among the Millennials*, and, *'Nones' on the Rise* (Washington: Pew Research Center, 2010, 2012). I am not asserting that the New Atheists directly increased America's number of atheists, nonbelievers, or religiously unaffiliated individuals. I am simply claiming that they increased the proportion of atheists and nonbelievers willing to establish or join atheist and secularist organizations. Because the Internet catered to personal interests so effectively, disinterested Americans could ignore the New Atheists just as easily interested ones could focus on them.

¹⁴⁷ All four New Atheists communicated with their fans on Reddit after 2007 through question and answer sessions. Dave Silverman did so as well in 2010 when he was elected president of AA.

The second and by far more important way the New Atheists affected organized atheism involved using their celebrity to channel fans into specific atheist and secularist organizations. They often accomplished this by attending and endorsing conferences, rallies, and other events. After Atheist Alliance International booked the New Atheists to speak at its 2007 annual conference in Washington D.C., tickets to the event sold out instantaneously, resulting in a 500-person waiting list.¹⁴⁸ Dawkins attended AA's 2008 and 2009 national conventions, and a sent representative from his foundation to attend in 2010. Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens did the same with respect to numerous other conferences, rallies, and events during and after 2007. Major atheist and secularist organizations grew noticeably between 2005 and 2007, suggesting that some of the New Atheists' readers and fans took the initiative to seek them out and join them. But, as we will see, the pace at which such organizations expanded accelerated dramatically after the intellectuals coalesced in 2007 and shifted from broad cultural engagement to direct activism alongside their new "coalition partners."¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁸ Jacqueline Salmon, "In America, Nonbelievers Find Strength in Numbers," *Washington Post*, September 15, 2007.

¹⁴⁹ Fink, *Progressive Intellectuals and the Dilemmas of Democratic Commitment*, 3.

CHAPTER 5:

ORGANIZATIONAL INTEGRATION AND GROWTH: 2008-2011

At the end of April 2008 AA's board of directors voted unanimously to remove Ellen Johnson from the office of president and replace her with Frank Zindler, an even more venerable leader. Like Johnson when she took charge in 1995, Zindler was designated as a "temporary" president. He too had been a staunch supporter of O'Hair, regarded her as a mother figure, cherished her legacy, and defended it from all critics. At the time one could have been excused for assuming that AA's leadership would maintain the status quo and limit the organization's association with secularist groups, which had almost the same goals but were not explicitly atheist. Several factors, however, prevented AA from continuing along this well-worn path, all of which are clarified by the context of Johnson's removal from office.

The conflict between Johnson and AA's board of directors emerged in the early- to mid-2000s, incubating slowly but consistently.¹⁵⁰ Members were not privy to relevant information as it escalated. However, as soon as details were reported it became obvious that Johnson had been removed from office because the board lacked confidence in her ability to court the New Atheists and capitalize on the widespread excitement they had engendered. AA had recovered most of its numerical strength bottoming out at the turn of the twenty-first century, By 2006 membership stabilized at a range of 2300 to 2500 and total assets stood at 1.1 million dollars. AA posted tangible growth after the first wave of atheist best sellers and receiving Dawkins' endorsement in *The God Delusion*.¹⁵¹ However, it started falling behind secularist organizations at a startling rate after the New Atheists formally gathered to launch their campaign. In terms of

¹⁵⁰ It is not possible to pinpoint the origin of the divide, but it clearly coincided with the Godless Americans' March and the launch of GAMPAC.

¹⁵¹ Julia Scott, "Founder of S.F. atheist group honored by colleagues," *Oakland Tribune*, August 25, 2007. Membership was approaching 3000 in the summer of 2007.

membership and assets, FFRF was the earliest beneficiary of the New Atheists' success. Between 2005 and 2006, its membership rose from 6,000 to 7,500 and its asset base increased by nearly 500,000 dollars, reaching a total of 4.1 million dollars. However, its growth accelerated, reaching 11,600 members and 5.6 million dollars by the end of 2007. Two years later FFRF boasted more than 14,000 members and assets over 6.8 million dollars.¹⁵² The Secular Student Alliance, a group founded in 2000 to support atheist and secularist groups at colleges and universities, more than doubled in size between 2006 and 2008, growing from fewer than 50 chapters to 100.¹⁵³ Comparatively, AA failed to keep pace. Between early 2007 and early 2008 its number of affiliate groups held fast at 59.¹⁵⁴ Accumulating affiliates was important not only to raise total membership, but also to increase attendance rates at conventions, which were held in different cities each year and relied heavily on the local population to cover expenses. Roughly 171 people attended the 2007 national convention in Seattle, only two more than the number that had attended 2003 national convention in Chicago.¹⁵⁵ Such stagnancy reflected poorly on AA considering that interest in atheism had risen markedly during this four-year period, and its board of directors ultimately diagnosed the problem as originating from the executive branch.

The board had gradually grown younger since the Murray-O'Hair family disappeared in 1995. By the mid-2000s obituaries were appearing in *AA* magazine almost every month. These typically reported on the deaths of elderly members and leaders who had worked alongside O'Hair decades earlier. As venerable board members departed, the fraction that had personal ties

¹⁵² Christopher Hitchens and Daniel Dennett were the keynote speakers at FFRF's 2007 and 2008 national conventions respectively.

¹⁵³ Salmon, "In America, Nonbelievers Find Strength in Numbers," *Washington Post*; Niose, *Nonbeliever Nation*, 145-6; Eric Gorski, "College atheist groups multiply; As the stigma of non-belief has diminished, the number of clubs has been going up," *Los Angeles Times*, November 22, 2009.

¹⁵⁴ *AA* 45, no. 4 (April 2007): 10-1; *AA* 46, no. 9 (October, 2008): 7-8. Affiliate groups were generally small and based locally. AA offered them various benefits for their association including discounts on magazine subscriptions and conference tickets.

¹⁵⁵ The conference was held in early April, several months before the New Atheists coalesced.

to O’Hair and proclivities for her organizational vision declined, thereby widening the gap between the board and Johnson. In light of the New Atheists’ unprecedented success, the board members reached the conclusion that, in order to stabilize and expand, AA needed to decisively repudiate old animosities towards and establish strong ties with organizations that represented nonbelievers despite differing nomenclature. By April 2008 the board simply ran out of patience for Johnson to accept this point of view. She provoked outrage that month by deciding to march from Chattanooga, Tennessee to Jackson, Mississippi in honor of an atheist and civil rights activist named Bill Moore who was murdered in the early-1960s while trying to deliver a letter to Mississippi’s pro-segregation governor. Johnson made this resolution spontaneously after watching an old video of O’Hair giving a speech praising Moore.¹⁵⁶

Upon learning of the march, AA and its subsidiary groups scheduled board meetings without Johnson’s presence. The purpose of these meetings was to resolve “The question of *who should be held most responsible* for what America Atheists does – or *doesn’t* do.... Board members felt that under the constitution and bylaws their fiduciary responsibilities were decisively greater than those of the president.”¹⁵⁷ On April 29th, while Johnson was still marching to Mississippi, the board of directors of all five AA subsidiaries voted to remove her from office. It gave her three days to resign with dignity, but she refused to do so and was replaced by Frank Zindler as interim president. Zindler finally published the developments in the July issue of *AA* magazine. More significant than his discussion of Johnson’s termination were his frank comments about O’Hair’s legacy. For the first time in his career he publically acknowledged that O’Hair had always treated AA like her own hereditary possession:

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, “Remembering Bill Moore and the Freedom Walkers,” *AA* 46, no. 4 (April 2008): 4.

¹⁵⁷ Zindler, “In Service of the Cause of Reason,” *AA* 46, no. 6 (July 2008): 3.

Madalyn Murray O’Hair would be quite astounded – indeed, a bit dismayed – to see me occupying the president’s chair of American Atheists.... I say this because even though Madalyn was like a second mother to me and to my wife Anne, it was always clear that she expected the organization to be ruled by a dynasty of which she was the progenetrix.¹⁵⁸

Zindler even admitted that O’Hair had always preferred Johnson to himself and that Jon Garth had been a hapless, incapable president. He concluded by emphasizing that AA leaders had already begun searching for his successor: “I am confident that we will receive applications from at least several men and women of whom not only Madalyn would be proud but – more importantly by far – *you* will be proud.”¹⁵⁹ This parting comment was even more significant than Zindler’s newfound candor. It constituted an unsubtle affirmation that AA would never again compromise the interests of its members by trying to protect and preserve the legacy of its founder. Dave Silverman, a younger, newly elected board member, articulated this point much more bluntly in a video broadcast: “We are leaving the era of Madalyn Murray O’Hair.... We’re not disrespecting her, but we are moving beyond her.... It’s a new world and what we have to do is build some serious bridges [that are] made of steel and concrete. These bridges need to become really solid so that they can’t be burned.” Silverman added that AA leaders would be extending “olive branches” to secularist organizations, and implored members of these organizations, “who may have had serious issues with Madalyn and or Ellen to rekindle their relationship with us.”¹⁶⁰ More cynical observers might have dismissed these supplications as insincere or rhetorical, but they would soon be substantiated with sweeping internal reforms.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid, 2.

¹⁵⁹ Ibid, 3.

¹⁶⁰ Dave Silverman and Dennis Horvitz, *Atheist Viewpoint 647: Transitions*, and, *Atheist Viewpoint 648: Politics and Patriotism* (AA video library, 2008). Silverman made a point of emphasizing that he had never met O’Hair, and neither had the other board member who was elected in the wake of Johnson’s termination. Silverman discussed the leadership changes in the context of younger Americans’ budding interest in and enthusiasm for atheist and secularist organizations.

Zindler and the board immediately began streamlining AA's corporate infrastructure. All of its constituent groups were to be integrated, creating a single "full-service organization for its members," with one board of directors and one bank account.¹⁶¹ The process was logistically complicated and time-consuming, leaving AA somewhat handicapped to address other issues including upkeep and growth. A mundane yet serious obstacle presented itself less than a month after Johnson's termination. It was discovered that the roof of the AA center in Cranford, New Jersey had deteriorated beyond repair, resulting in widespread water damage that threatened to inundate the valuable library and archives. The cost of replacing the roof – 77,000 dollars – would eviscerate AA's annual operations budget and force the organization to remove money from its otherwise untouchable trust fund. Thanks to one wealthy benefactor, however, no such measures were required. Richard Dawkins donated well over 60,000 dollars to cover the cost of replacing the roof and simultaneously joined AA as a life member.¹⁶² Dawkins' investment and solidarity ensured that AA would not be mired in a financial calamity at the very moment it was preparing to dispense with its founder's burdensome legacy. In October 2008 Zindler officially stepped down as president. Just before passing the torch to his successor, he repudiated one more aspect of O'Hair's leadership:

[Atheists] can and should, I think, be cordial and civil in our disputes with the religious without backing away.... We will unhesitatingly attack ideas, but we will seek to avoid unnecessary personal attacks.... We – all of us Atheists – need to show the world that the lies about us – that we don't enjoy life, that we are unhappy, that we lack morality or decency or standards – are indeed lies.¹⁶³

Zindler subtly acknowledged that O'Hair's behavior and rhetoric had not only reinforced America's association of atheism with communism, they had also reinforced its association of

¹⁶¹ Zindler, "American Atheists in the Future," *AA* 46, no. 7 (August 2008): 4.

¹⁶² Zindler, "Urgent Appeal," *AA* 46, no. 6 (July 2008): 31; Conrad Goeringer, "Renaissance at CESAALA," and "Roof Rescue Fund Contributors," *AA* 46, no. 8 (September 2008): 9, 28. Purchasing a life membership cost Dawkins an additional 1,500 dollars.

¹⁶³ Zindler, "From the Out-Going President," *AA* 46, no. 9 (October 2008): 4.

atheism with depression, anger, rebellion, and numerous other negative connotations. By affirming the need to treat religious people with dignity, he took a final step away from the legacy of his predecessors in the direction of the New Atheists.

Few observers would have considered Ed Buckner a viable candidate for AA's presidency simply because he had never been a member of the organization. His outsider's status, however, proved to be one of his main advantages in the application process. Buckner had previously served as the executive director of the Council for Secular Humanism, approving its endorsement of the Godless Americans' March in 2002. After stepping down the following year, he remained a highly regarded figure among secularist groups through his leadership of a freethought society based in Atlanta, Georgia.¹⁶⁴ By selecting Buckner to serve as president, AA leaders erased any lingering doubts about their sincerity and effectively guaranteed good rapport with major secularist organizations moving forward. Buckner was always composed and soft-spoken, ensuring that the organization would never be embarrassed by his antics or overshadowed by his public persona. In this capacity, he plainly stood to reduce AA's potential for grabbing headlines. But any such risk was outweighed by Buckner's proven track record of shrewd, steady leadership without alienating associates or peers.

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AA grew quickly after Buckner became president, keeping pace with FFRF and other secularist organizations. It added twenty-two affiliates between October 2008 and June 2009, reaching an all-time high of eighty-three. That year AA joined SCA, which, aside from making GAMPAC utterly irrelevant, created a formal, institutional bond with major secularist organizations. This contributed to additional growth, and by March 2010 AA boasted 103

¹⁶⁴ Zindler and Ed Buckner, "From the Out-Going President," and "From the In-Coming President," *AA* 46, no. 9 (October 2008): 4, 5. Unlike O'Hair, Buckner actually had a PhD. He mentioned her once in his self-introduction, and only to distance himself from her.

affiliate groups.¹⁶⁵ Membership and conference attendance rose at an equally dramatic pace. AA set a new record for its total number of members in 2010 with more than 4,300. Nearly 400 people attended its national conference that year, where guest speakers included several of O’Hair’s old adversaries: Dan Barker of FFRF as well as Paul Kurtz and Tom Flynn, the former and then current executive directors of the Council For Secular Humanism.¹⁶⁶ AA’s widening appeal helped attract new benefactors and increase the organization’s asset base. In 2009 an affluent member donated 100,000 dollars, challenging other members to collectively match the gift. The challenge was fulfilled and an identical one was issued the following year by another wealthy member, which was also met.¹⁶⁷ By the time Buckner stepped down as president in October 2010, AA’s financial standing was stronger and more transparent than it had ever been, reporting nearly 2 million dollars in total assets and, more importantly, a significantly larger annual operating budget.¹⁶⁸

The leadership transition provoked no controversy whatsoever. After two years at the helm, the aging Buckner simply wished to retire to a less laborious position within the organization and was awarded a spot on the board of directors after announcing his decision. Dave Silverman, who had been serving as Buckner’s vice-president, was promptly promoted. Silverman, who was two decades younger than Buckner, had already been with AA for almost fourteen years, joining after its protest of the Promise Keepers rally in 1997.¹⁶⁹ While rising through the ranks, he had occasionally expressed vague admiration of O’Hair and

¹⁶⁵ AA 46, no. 9 (October 2008): 7-8; AA 47, no. 5 (May/June 2009): 34-7. AA 48, no. 2 (March 2010): 27-9.

¹⁶⁶ Silverman, “The American Atheists 2010 National Convention: A Vice-Presidential Perspective,” AA 48, no. 5 (June 2010): 8-13. Somewhat ironically, Silverman referred to Barker as “our old friend” – perhaps without realizing that AA and FFRF had been enemies for far longer than they had been allies.

¹⁶⁷ Buckner, “From the President,” AA 48, no. 4 (May 2010): 5.

¹⁶⁸ Silverman and Buckner, *Atheist Viewpoint 738: Goodbye Ed* (AA video library, 2010). By winning property tax exemption from the New Jersey state government, Buckner saved AA 30,000 dollars annually.

¹⁶⁹ AA 48, no. 7 (September/October 2010): 31.

disappointment at never getting the opportunity to meet her. Nonetheless, it was clear long before he became president that his personality, leadership style, organizational vision had almost nothing in common with those of AA's founder.¹⁷⁰ Silverman was shrewd, straightforward, disinterested in petty conflicts, and highly ambitious. Once elected, he emphasized that he would not pursue unwinnable lawsuits over token issues that would create undesirable legal precedent. He was especially eager to continue the organization's recent growth and presented a comprehensive strategy for doing so. In addition to calling for even more cooperation with secularist organizations, he planned on reaching out to unrelated interest groups that tended to foster atheists. Silverman was aware, for example, that many science fiction enthusiasts were atheists and hoped to pique their interest in joining AA by specifically marketing to them. Moreover, he intended to expand AA's small scholarship program to attract college students and keep them interested in atheist activism after they graduated and could no longer participate in organizations like Secular Students Alliance. Perhaps most significantly, however, he was determined to initiate a mainstream advertising campaign to reach diverse swathes of the American population.¹⁷¹

Silverman's intended campaign was modeled directly on one conducted in 2009 by Dawkins through his foundation. That year Dawkins purchased a series of advertisements on busses in London assuring passers-by: "There's Probably No God. Now Stop Worrying and Enjoy Your Life." The ads provoked several hundred complaints, but also several hundred thousand pounds of donations from atheists across the United Kingdom.¹⁷² Within a week of

¹⁷⁰ Silverman, "The American Atheists 2010 National Convention," *AA* 48, no. 5 (June 2010): 8. It is clear that Silverman was more attracted to the ideas and styles of activism of the New Atheists. He considered himself "a die-hard Dawkinsian."

¹⁷¹ Silverman and Buckner, *Atheist Viewpoint 739: New President, Atheist Viewpoint 740: The Future (part 1)*, and, *Atheist Viewpoint 741: The Future (part 2)* (AA video library, 2010).

¹⁷² Silverman, *Atheism on track* (AA video library/Library of Congress Folk Lives Project).

being elected president in October 2010, Silverman met privately with Dawkins to discuss his strategy for AA's upcoming advertising campaign.¹⁷³ That November, with the holiday season approaching, AA purchased a billboard ad just outside of the New Jersey entrance to the Lincoln Tunnel, which led into and out of New York City. The billboard depicted the traditional Christian nativity scene of Jesus' birth below the words: "You Know it's a Myth. This Season Celebrate Reason!" The ad had precisely the desired effect. In the weeks leading up to Christmas, Silverman was invited on numerous television interview programs, increasing the ad's publicity-payoff exponentially. In 2011 membership once again reached an all-time record – more than 5,700 – and that Fourth of July, AA spent tens of thousands of dollars on banner advertisements towed across the sky behind airplanes in twenty-six states. The ads had nothing at all to say about the overthrow of the clerical class, the use of religion to manipulate believers, or even the evil committed in the name of God. They simply read: "Atheism is Patriotic!"¹⁷⁴ Recent polling data suggested that more Americans – fifty-four percent – agreed with this sentiment in 2011 than in 1999, when Gallup found that forty-nine percent of the electorate would not vote for an atheist for president.¹⁷⁵ Broad, slow-changing social and cultural factors were certainly more responsible for the shift than the activism of the New Atheists or the developments within AA. However, by 2011 it was very clear, at least, that the behavior of organized atheism was no longer counteracting America's cautious change of heart.

¹⁷³ Silverman and Buckner, *Atheist Viewpoint 739* (AA video library, 2010).

¹⁷⁴ "American Atheists Reach the Heavens," AA 49, no. 3 (Third Quarter 2011): 4-5.

¹⁷⁵ Jeffrey M. Jones, "Atheists, Muslims See Most Bias as Presidential Candidates," *Gallup*, June 21, 2012. The most fascinating aspect of these polling data is that seventy percent of respondents from ages eighteen to twenty-nine said they would vote for an atheist for president. Only fifty-six percent of respondents from thirty to forty-nine gave the same answer. This constitutes the largest attitude difference between the age groups surveyed.

CONCLUSION:

Barack Obama was sworn in as President of the United States in January 2009. Like almost all of his predecessors, he placed a hand on the bible when taking the oath to preserve, protect, and defend the Constitution, and affirmed his faith with “So help me God.” When he turned to address the nation, however, he broke with tradition in a small but unmistakable way. He became the first president in American history to acknowledge nonbelievers as part of the country’s diverse social fabric: “We are a nation of Christians and Muslims, Jews and Hindus – and nonbelievers.” The media’s reaction was relatively subdued. Most major outlets noticed the novel clause and articulated either approving or indifferent comments.¹⁷⁶ A handful of conservatives expressed concern, but the issue passed quickly from their talking points.¹⁷⁷ Undoubtedly, more would have been troubled if they had known that Obama’s campaign organizers solicited the support of AA in the lead up to the election with the hopes of solidifying the support of nonreligious voters.¹⁷⁸ Several days before the Presidential Inauguration, Pete Stark returned to Capital Hill to represent California’s thirteenth district in the lower house of Congress. While he had been a congressman for more than three decades, 2008 marked the first year he was reelected as an atheist. Stark had “come out” in January 2007 by filling out an SCA questionnaire designed to gauge the religious affiliation of public officials. In so doing, he became the first congressman in American history to publically identify as an atheist.

¹⁷⁶ Cathy Lynn Grossman, “An inaugural first: Obama acknowledges ‘nonbelievers,’” *USA Today*, January 22, 2009; Nicholas D. Kristof, “Obama’s inauguration,” *New York Times*, January 20, 2009; Steven Waldman, “Obama Touches the Untouchables: Non-Believers,” *Huffington Post*, January 20, 2009; Laura Meckler, “Obama Walks Religious Tightrope Spanning Faithful, Nonbelievers,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 24, 2009. The Southern Baptist Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission was one of many religious groups that accepted Obama’s recognition of nonbelievers.

¹⁷⁷ Evangelicals were the most agitated, perceiving the acknowledgement of nonbelievers as a threat to the nation’s supposed Christian underpinnings. Interest groups, including the American Family Association and the Family Research Council, joined pundits like Mike Huckabee, the former Governor of Arkansas, in voicing their alarm.

¹⁷⁸ Silverman, *Atheism on track* (AA video library/Library of Congress Folk Lives Project). Obama’s Faith and Community Development Program approached AA, which released a statement certifying Obama in response.

These two landmark events occurred as the New Atheists' popularity reached new heights. The concurrence was no historical accident. Obama's 2008 victory in the ballot box was earned, in a large part, by his appeal to young Americans, who were born after 1980 and reached adulthood at or after the turn of the new millennium. By the time of the election, roughly twenty-six percent these 'millennials' were religiously unaffiliated. Seven percent identified as either atheist or agnostic.¹⁷⁹ Few remembered what life had been like during the Cold War, making the rhetoric of godless communism – still invoked on occasion – seem foreign or even meaningless. Millennials came of age in an era of suicide bombings and bloody sectarian conflicts. They left childhood in the wake of the September 11th terrorist attacks and applied for their first jobs while media outlets were enthralled by burqas, honor killings, martyrdom, and Osama bin Laden. At about the same time millennials discovered atheism. To the overwhelming majority, the New Atheists' ideas and arguments were fresh, intriguing, and totally unthreatening. Moreover, the New Atheists carried intellectual cachet from their successful careers in academia and journalism. As a result, millennials purchased their books, crammed into auditoriums to hear them speak and debate, and followed their movements closely on the Internet.¹⁸⁰ In this capacity, the New Atheists profited greatly from their historical moment. They were not, however, merely products of that moment.

Organized atheism in America during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries did not change in conjunction with the country's slow, generational shifts away from organized religion. While the language of Dave Silverman was a far cry from that of Madalyn Murray O'Hair, it would not have been tolerated in 1995, or even in 2005. Until the New Atheists coalesced, AA

¹⁷⁹ Pew Forum, *Religion Among the Millennials* (Pew Research Center, 2010). By contrast, only sixteen percent of the total population was religiously unaffiliated and four percent identified as atheist or agnostic.

¹⁸⁰ Pew Forum, *'Nones' on the Rise* (Pew Research Center, 2012): 33-4. American atheists and agnostics were extremely young relative to religious groups. By 2012 millennials constituted forty-two percent of all atheists and agnostics in America – this number had increased from twenty-nine percent five years earlier.

leaders stubbornly kept the organization isolated from likeminded secularist groups and prevented all but the staunchest atheists from joining. At times the New Atheists ruminated about the minute distinctions between atheism and alternative identities of nonbelief, but they almost always treated them as either irrelevant or illusory. While they dispensed with labels like agnostic, skeptic, and humanist, they did not deride those who chose not to. As a consequence, their fans proudly identified themselves as atheists, but did not demonstrate a strong preference for explicitly atheist organizations. In turn, major secularist organizations were the first to capitalize on atheism's newfound popularity. When AA leaders realized why their organization was falling behind the curve, they moved against Johnson who remained committed to her predecessor's habits and enmities. O'Hair's emphasis on uncompromising and discriminatory atheist activism was simply not viable at a time when most atheists did not worry about distinguishing themselves from other nonbelievers, and the walls of her bunker mentality crumbled as soon as Johnson was terminated. By 2011 AA had little in common the organization once founded and controlled by O'Hair. It had, however, only a little bit more in common with itself six years earlier. After the New Atheists coalesced, organized atheism was civil, inclusive, and, as a result, growing.

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