

## Research Article



# The New Atheism and Religious Fundamentalism: Are They a Mirror Image of Each Other

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**Abstract** | Despite the fact that the new atheists are vehemently opposed to religious fundamentalists and their teachings there are marked similarities between the two groups. In this paper I analyse new atheism in terms of fundamentalist characteristics discussed by the Fundamentalism Project: Reactivity, dualism, absolutism and inerrancy, apocalypticism. Additionally both underscore the role of evidentialism. From my analysis of these characteristics I conclude that the movement is fundamentalist

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## Introduction

Passion for passion, an evangelical Christian and I may be evenly matched. But we are not equally fundamentalist. The true scientist, however passionately he may 'believe', in evolution for example, knows exactly what would change his mind: evidence! The fundamentalist knows that nothing will (Dawkins 2007: 19)

The past decade has witnessed a surge of writing by the 'new atheists' – a name given to the authors of four recent books written by prominent scholars and scientists who argue that any belief in God or other supernatural entity is, at best, vain and, at worst, pernicious in this modern age of science. As Cotter notes, 'although Alister McGrath hinted at the emergence of a 'new atheism' in 2004, the appellation is commonly traced to the article "The Church of the Non-Believers" by Wolf (2006), Cotter (2011a: 80) and cf. Zenk (2012). Best known among this group is Richard Dawkins for his work, *The God Delusion* – a highly contentious and polemical attack on religion. Other popular texts criticising religion include

Sam Harris's *The End of Faith* and *Letter to a Christian Nation*, Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell*, Christopher Hitchens' *God is Not Great: How Religion poisons everything*, Victor Stenger's *God: the Failed Hypothesis*; and texts from Nobel Laureates including Stephen Weinberg and Francis Crick, and Harvard's Pulitzer-winning E O. Wilson.

Stenger (2007) argues that there is no evidence for the existence of a deity and that God's existence, while not impossible, is improbable. Using evidence from cosmology, particle physics and quantum mechanics he attempts to show that the universe appears exactly as it should if there is no creator. For him religion often makes claims that are very much within the abilities of science to investigate. While the supernatural by definition cannot be observed, its effects can.

In this paper, I analyse new atheism in terms of the four characteristics described by the Fundamentalism Project based at the University of Chicago, an international scholarly investigation of conservative religious movements throughout the world (Ap-

pleby and Marty 1994; McNulla 2014). First, *reactivity and selectivity* – fundamentalism involves a response to the marginalisation of a religion, caused by forces of modernisation and secularisation. Second, *absolutism and inerrancy* – fundamentalists often believe that one or more Holy texts convey the inerrant word of God. Particular texts or traditions are considered to provide inviolable truths. Third, *moral Manicheanism* – fundamentalists tend to divide reality into ‘good’ and ‘evil’-they are dualistic. Finally *millennialism and messianism* – fundamentalists often believe history will culminate in ‘eternal justice’.

## Reactivity

The success of the ‘movement’ is attributed to various factors such as shock at the events of September 11th and subsequent terrorist attacks (Dixon 2010; Bullivant 2010), outrage over the policies of President George W. Bush, and secular reaction against the bold pronouncements of American evangelical leaders (Zoll 2007). The new atheists assert that unethical behaviour under the banner of religion (especially by Christians, Jews and Muslims) is the major cause of some of the most dangerous global conflicts of recent years, and presents the greatest threat to the future survival of civilisation itself. It is particularly Islam which is singled out as malignant. As Hedges (2009: 140) remarks, they embrace what has been called the ‘clash of civilizations’ hypothesis. The West and Islam simply cannot coexist; they are on a collision course as evidenced by 9/11 and other religiously-motivated extremist violence.

Another factor is the rise of religious fundamentalism, which conflicts with evolutionary science in an obvious way. Creationism as a Christian belief is still an important cultural phenomenon. According to Gallup poll 2001, about 45% of Americans believe that ‘God created human beings pretty much in their present form at one time within the last 10,000 years or so’ (Newport 2004). A later Gallup poll from May 2014 indicates that, 42% of Americans hold the creationist belief that God created humanity as it currently exists a mere 10,000 years ago.

Le Drew (2013) discusses the ideological basis of the new atheism. He asserts that new atheism can clearly be situated within the tradition of scientific atheism. It is a Darwinistic social philosophy that presents a vision of the evolution of modern societies

from barbarism (characterized by religion and superstition) to civilization (characterized by scientism). The ideological bias for scientism is illustrated in the new atheist authors’ puzzling over what evolutionary and neuro-chemical processes may be responsible for differences in religiosity among individuals. For him the new atheism, then, is a response to religious fundamentalism (*i.e.* the Christian Right and Islamism), which it considers to be ‘pre-modern’ and thus opposed to modernity. Furthermore, it also reacts to what it considers the ‘post-modern’ forces of pluralism and relativism, which undermine scientific authority and the universalization of Enlightenment values.

Although, not new in the true sense – the Western world has long had outspoken skeptics and critics of orthodoxy – the new atheists ‘preach’ that the world religions are collections of false superstitions, not merely wrong, but foolish and extremely dangerous. The main proponents are articulate, charismatic and effective polemicists, are seen as the public face of science, and propagate the idea that science is implacably hostile to religion, creating a market for pseudo-scientific alternatives such as young earth creationism in the process. By so doing they not only highlight the previously subdued tension between Darwinism and creationism, but depict Darwinism as the enemy of religion.

Rather than providing sophisticated philosophical accounts of atheism, their motive seems to be consciousness raising (Cotter 2011a). Kelly (2009), in his review of Haught’s *God and the New Atheism*, notes that the atheism of Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens is ‘soft-core’ compared to the more complex and nuanced critiques of ‘hard-core’ atheists such as Nietzsche and Sartre. Where classic atheists deconstructed religion on theological and philosophical grounds, new atheism hardly offers anything substantial. New atheists do not fully explain the implications of a God-less world and therefore fail to ‘go all the way and think the business of atheism through to the bitter end’ (Kelly 2009).

For many, the novelty of new atheism is not to be found in the details of its intellectual arguments, but in the extent to which atheists are now openly criticising religion, and the degree to which such an approach has found wider public resonance. One area that has been peculiarly absent from studies of new atheism, however, has been its political dimension (Kettell 2013). New atheism is politically engaged in a variety

of ways. One of the most significant involves on-going efforts to reduce the influence of religion in the public sphere. Its proponents expand far beyond the typical vision of new atheism as limited to the confines of the Four Horsemen. They are organisationally arranged in a loosely connected, non-hierarchical and decentralised fashion, with no formal representative body (and, indeed, with many eschewing formal involvement altogether), and frequently operate within the existing nexus of groups set up to promote broader nonreligious causes and ideals.

When they criticize religion the new atheists usually focus on the excesses of fundamentalist churches: their intolerant attitudes, extremist behaviour, literalist interpretation of scripture, bizarre eschatological beliefs and so on. As Jay (2009) points out, the ideological rigidity the new atheists both despise and require exists in religious orthodoxy. The new atheists find their ideal targets in American fundamentalist Christianity and Arab extremist Islam. These particular religions are dogmatic, dependent on religion for explanation and exhortation, and openly resistant to science. Haught (2008) complains that the New Atheists neglect theology almost completely, and only aim at the biblical literalists. This, he says, makes them the atheistic counterparts of the creationists.

While there has been some recent scholarly attention given to new atheism (e.g. Amarasingam 2010a), Cotter notes that:

“Debate between theists and non-theists is “improperly” located at the extremities of both groups. While many New Atheists accept (religious) fundamentalists’ self-understanding and assume that it can adequately describe all religion, many Christian responses to the New Atheism perpetuate this caricature, and address an equally unrepresentative atheistic straw man (Cotter 2012: 118-119)”.

Hedges (2009) states that a number of recurring assertions are defended throughout new atheist writings: it is almost certain that there is no God, life is not meaningless without belief in God, religious belief has a naturalistic evolutionary explanation, religions are dangerous and do not automatically deserve respect and religious education of children is ‘child abuse.’ They promote what Karl Giberson calls ‘scientific fundamentalism’, an attempt not just to refute religion but rather to replace it ([http://biologos.org/](http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/Giberson_white_paper.pdf)

[uploads/projects/Giberson\\_white\\_paper.pdf](http://biologos.org/uploads/projects/Giberson_white_paper.pdf)).

## Atheist Fundamentalism

More than a few authors writing on the new atheism have discussed the similarities between this phenomenon and religious fundamentalism. The new atheists analyse not only arguments for and against the existence of God, but also the effects of religion on society, which they consider mainly detrimental. As Baggin (2003) notes, in the broad version of atheism, people simply do not accept the basic premise of theism; in the narrower and more determined position, they believe that the theistic position is not only misguided but actively wrong. Sometimes this is called ‘fundamentalist atheism’.

Hedges (2009), a sociologist, refers to the new atheists as America’s new fundamentalists. In the Dawkins Delusion (2007), Alistair McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath compare Richard Dawkins’ ‘total dogmatic conviction of correctness’ to ‘a religious fundamentalism which refuses to allow its ideas to be examined or challenged’ (PXII) Stahl (2010: 97) notes that ‘What is striking about the current debate is the frequency with which the New Atheists are portrayed as mirror images of religious fundamentalists’. In his ‘One Dimensional Rage’, he notes that a key point for critics is that both are extreme. For him, beneath superficial stylistic similarities lie deeper structural and epistemological parallels. Stahl is critical of the cognitive emphasis of both groups and their need to assert authority through belief. Both claim to have a monopoly on the truth and express anger – even rage – at non-believers. The rage the new atheists direct against religion mirrors the rage of fundamentalists against secular society.

## Dualism

Both groups are dualistic and see their own positions as unambiguously good and their opponents (and anyone in between) as unambiguously evil. The fundamentalist mindset sees things in terms of clear-cut boundaries which determine what is and what is not acceptable belief, who is and who is not in the community. Any person, situation or object belongs either within the orbit of the ‘saved’ or outside it; there are no intermediate stations. The liberal is more inclined to allow for ‘grey areas’, intermediate situations. By liberal I refer to religious liberalism which advocates freedom for the individual not limited to or by es-

established, traditional, orthodox, or authoritarian attitudes, views, or dogmas;

Mcanulla (2014: 135) notes that religious fundamentalists view the world in 'black' and 'white' terms. Believing that they have maintained, or recovered, the essential truths of a religion, they advocate a set of beliefs that often inspire absolute judgments concerning the rights or wrongs of actions and a 'them' and 'us' mentality. Davie argues this is an area in which the new atheism 'takes on characteristics of those it opposes' (Davie 2012: p. 6). Both engage in bumper-sticker-like polemics rather than fair-minded debate. Both are socially and politically conservative.

Sam Harris, in particular, writes 'Either the Bible is the word of God, or it isn't. [...] Either the Bible is just an ordinary book, written by mortals, or it isn't' (Harris 2005: 4). While religious fundamentalists reject all evidence that contradicts their holy book, Dawkins overlooks and distorts evidence that does not serve his proselytizing agenda. As one example while describes in great detail the violent propensity of religion, he fails to discuss atheism's propensity to turn violent, saying: 'I do not believe there is an atheist in the world who would bulldoze Mecca – or Chartres, York Minster, or Notre Dame' (Dawkins 2006: 249). As Watson (2010) correctly points out, in reality Marxism is an atheist ideology for which Soviet authorities systematically destroyed and eliminated the vast majority of churches and priests during the period 1918 to 1941. This violence and repression was undertaken in pursuit of an atheist agenda – the elimination of religion (McGrath and Colicutt 2007: 78). The typical response to this is to suggest that that Communism and Nazism were 'political religions' (Burleigh style) and so not properly secular, thus not a counter-example at all; indeed insofar as they are 'religious' this is allegedly confirmatory evidence that religion leads to 'unreason'

## Evidentialism

The term evidentialism refers to a theory of justification according to which the justification of a belief depends solely on the evidence for it. Both the new atheists and the religious fundamentalists emphasise the importance of belief. For the new atheists, the only truth is found in nature. They are vehemently opposed to supernaturalism and deploy scientific arguments to refute religion. They underscore the idea that everything

in the universe can be explained naturalistically. New atheism's most important feature is its radical commitment to the idea that only the natural sciences ask real questions (Baddeley <http://davidould.net/?p=3080>). They expound a trio of philosophical beliefs: that science entails naturalism, that only scientific methods can discover truth, and that all reasonable beliefs must be based on publicly available and repeatable evidence. One common thread in these authors' writings is that they postulate that religion should be treated as a scientific hypothesis, tested by empirical methods, and rejected if found wanting. Dawkins and Stenger both claim the 'God Hypothesis' is a valid scientific hypothesis, having effects in the physical universe, and like any other hypothesis can be tested and falsified. Dawkins (2006) notes that 'the existence of God is a scientific hypothesis like any other'; 'Either he exists or he doesn't. It is a scientific question; one day we may know the answer' (48, 50). Both authors conclude overall that the God hypothesis fails scientific testing.

Dawkins' more recent book, *The Magic of Reality* (Dawkins 2012), written in clear prose for all ages, is a polemic against supernatural explanations, and essentially extols science as a method for discovering the 'really' real. The central argument is that the world is fundamentally physical and knowable, that religion and scientific understanding cannot coexist – ideas which remain contentious even within the scientific community (see, e.g., Ecklund 2010). Reality is defined as that which can be perceived with the senses, detected with scientific instruments, or predicted with models, such as black holes. For him, the term 'magic' is deployed in a poetic and rhetorical sense only, referring to the deeply moving and exhilarating.

What counts as authoritative knowledge, however, differs between the groups. For the new atheists it is scientific method and for (Christian) religious fundamentalists it is the biblical text. Dawkins sees religion as a set of propositions or beliefs and thus attempts to disprove the 'God Hypothesis'. However, for religious fundamentalists the biblical text itself becomes subordinated to doctrine since this is what determines the meaning of the text as a whole. Fundamentalist hermeneutics involve processes of harmonisation and proof texting.

Falcioni (2010) examines the role of evidentialism in the writings of both the new atheists and the crea-



tionists. He begins by critiquing the God Hypothesis – the notion that religious beliefs are hypotheses about the world and can therefore be confirmed or disconfirmed. This seminal claim is made by people such as Dawkins, Harris and Stenger who see belief in God to be a putative truth claim about the nature of reality. Falcioni chides these writers for this misrepresentation of religious beliefs. In his view religious believers do not hold hypotheses about the world which can be refuted. When they make religious statements they are not advancing putative truth claims like one might do in the sciences. Rather their beliefs are entwined in their religious lives.

He further argues that we do not first believe in religious propositions (because of their alleged evidential support) and then go about becoming religious. Rather it is through religious lives that believers come to see what their religious propositions mean. As philosopher asserts, there are logical differences between scientific beliefs and religious ones. It is not that there is no rationality to religious beliefs, but rather a different type of rationality, one that is internal to (or seen in) religious lives and practices. Finally, unlike scientific beliefs, religious beliefs are not tentative and held in proportion to evidences. Statements of religious beliefs are acts of commitment and are statements about one's life, values, and ultimate things. [Cotter \(2012\)](#) points out that whether atheists place epistemic authority firmly in the hands of science, or whether the religious place similar authority in doctrine or scripture, arguments based in empirical evidence miss the point entirely and prevent a meaningful conversation.

The overwhelming majority of science-religion philosophers strongly disagree with this premise of god as a hypothesis. As Catholic philosopher John Haught argues, 'thinking of God as a hypothesis reduces the infinite divine mystery to a finite scientific cause, and to worship anything finite is idolatrous' ([Haught 2008: 43](#)). Haught charges that the new atheists' understanding of Christian theology is antiquated and has much in common with religious fundamentalists. New Atheists handicap themselves by thinking of all theology as the literalist theology promoted by conservative evangelicals and religious extremists. Keith Ward similarly asserts that 'the question of God is certainly a factual one, but certainly not a scientific one.' Instead, '[i]t lies at the very deep level of ultimate metaphysical options' ([Ward 2008: 30](#)). Another common critique of the new atheism is that it conflates

belief with religiosity. As [Zuckerman \(2008\)](#) argues from his research in Scandinavia, people may be outwardly religious not simply because they believe, but also because they're looking for community, strength, and solace within congregations; religion cannot be reduced to a set of beliefs.

Moving onto religious fundamentalism, scientific facts for most religious fundamentalists are acceptable as long as they can be reconciled with biblical truth. There is an emphasis on facts rather than other aspects of religion such as tradition and experience. Indeed they maintain the Bible itself is a reliable source of science ([Haught 2008](#)), a statement which scientists vehemently disagree with. Furthermore, religious fundamentalists are directly opposed to naturalism – the idea that nature, and natural phenomena, are all there is. For religious fundamentalists, scientific and historical facts are subordinated to scripture.

As [Mendelsohn \(1993\)](#) notes, 'one of the striking aspects of fundamentalist movements is the open willingness of their members to adopt modern technology to reclaim a society that they believe has been misshaped by the manner in which these modern means have been used by secularists'. They seek to construct a viable synthesis between tradition and modernity and to integrate segments of the modern with the traditional. [Tiffin \(1994\)](#) remarks that they are, however, not traditionally antiscientific and share with their non-fundamentalist counterparts a sense of awe and admiration for the products of modern science. Tiffin furthermore notes that some even strongly desire to be recognised as scientists themselves and offer quasi-scientific confirmations of events which are not backed by scientific evidence, such as the Flood.

A number of creationist movements have grown in the USA over the past five decades (see [Numbers 2006](#)). These forms of scientific creationism attempt to provide scientific support for the Genesis narrative while at the same time disproving accepted scientific theories of cosmology, history of the Earth and biological evolution. Creationists propose that the existence of God can be established by scientific experimentation and/or reasoning. This is a common staple of the creationism and intelligent design literature. For example, creationist Henry Morris has argued that highly ordered structures cannot arise from purely natural means, because this, according to Morris, would violate the Second Law of Thermodynamics. Along the

same line, intelligent design advocate Michael Behe argues that certain biological systems are ‘irreducibly complex’ – they consist of multiple subsystems, the removal of any one of which would render the system non-functional – and thus must have been created or at least designed by an intelligent Being.

Indeed, much of the literature of both writers is devoted to exhibiting features of the natural world that they believe cannot possibly have been produced by natural processes, which thus require a supernatural creator or designer. This is one reason that creationists, in particular, question the conventional old-earth worldview of geology and palaeontology – such a notion undermines their argument that the creation must have occurred completely by supernatural action. However, Creationist concerns are not purely epistemological matters of fact and understanding. As rightly points out, moral claims are equally important.

Creationist Fundamentalists also take the religious notion of a creator to be both a statement of fact and a rival hypothesis to Darwinian evolution. They maintain that the account of the creation of the universe as presented in Genesis is literally true in its basic claims about Adam and Eve, the six days of creation, making day and night on the first day.

Thus both groups view religion in a one dimensional way as cognitive belief divorced from culture (Stahl 2010) and neglect other elements of religion such as community, rituals, traditions and experience. Davie (2012) notes that the most successful religions in Europe focus upon experience rather than on belief. Believers are very often exposed to the experiential in the course of worship. It is built into the liturgy and becomes an essentially shared activity. Jay (2009) concurs that lacking the intellectual rigor to attempt finding a meaningful working definition cannot be forgiven. The new atheists make no attempt to construct sophisticated concepts of religion and are content to use the most basic and inadequate definitions of it. Dawkins does refer to more ‘liberal’ interpretations of belief in the first chapter of ‘The God Delusion’ but he focuses on more fundamentalist forms of belief because these are the forms of belief which he thinks are detrimental to human societies. Furthermore, religion always entails interpretation because those truth claims are expressed through ritual practice. Different communities have different standards for practicing their religion, and those practices have profound

implications for the interpretation of truth claims. Religious truth claims must be evaluated within the context of tradition and practice. Science has no analogous place for interpretation.

## The Quest for Certainty, Inerrancy and Absolutism

Cunningham (2010) asserts that creationists appeal to privileged or elite knowledge about the Bible as though it were a comprehensive information manual, while new atheists ‘quasi-worship’ reductive physicalism by forcing Darwin’s scientific insight into an operational theory of everything.

One of the underlying differences between fundamentalists and those with a liberal theological outlook is that the former are driven by a desire for certainty. Hofstadter (1996: 119) has called this the ‘one-hundred per cent mentality’. Such individuals ‘tolerate no ambiguities, no equivocations, no reservations, and no criticism’. For the fundamentalist, certainty is only to be found in objectivity. The indecisive world of the liberal who is willing to see some truth in all opinions, the uncertain field of historical and literary criticism where different opinions abound, are all tainted by personal opinion, and therefore by subjectivity.

The only way of achieving objective truth is to take a standard that lies outside of the human subjectivity. Acceptance of the Bible as inerrant, however, is considered by fundamentalists to constitute objectivity, giving one a standard of absolute truth and hence objectivity, and hence certainty. This desire for certainty also accounts for the enthusiastic adoption of scientific (or, as their critics would maintain, pseudo-scientific) approaches by fundamentalists. The scientific method acts, for the modern mind, as a guarantor of the correctness of one’s conclusions. It also accounts for the fact that fundamentalists are often very keen on building up elaborate logical arguments. The mathematical certainty of logic appeals to such minds. Despite the fact that from the outside the new atheism and religious fundamentalism appear to hold opposing views about the world, there are several overlaps. Cotter, citing Ivan Strenski opines.

For instance, committed theists and atheists, who are usually cast to the extremes of a religion-nonreligion dichotomy, ‘may in fact have far more in common [...] than either have with those who are utterly indifferent’

in that they share the same discourse (Cotter 2011b, 18; citing Strenski 2004, 147).

Each claims to give a different account of knowledge and its consequences - particularly the relationship between religion and science. For the former science is epistemologically privileged, with scientific methodology providing the ultimate means of determining truth or falsehood of events. In contrast, Protestant Christian fundamentalism stresses the inerrancy of the Bible which is without error in all matters pertaining to faith and practice, including history, geography, science *etc.* But both groups are preoccupied with intellectual certainty (Stahl 2010) and are caught in what Bernstein (1983: 18) calls 'Cartesian anxiety'; either there are some fixed foundations for our knowledge or we will be engulfed by intellectual and moral chaos.

Their views thus fail to reflect the empirical world. Additionally, both attempt to align empirical reality with their epistemological stance. Where religion leads to positive outcomes he quickly dismisses the evidence as false - for instance he asserts that Martin Luther King was not really religious. He fails to collect and systematically weigh up all the relevant evidence (cf. Amarasingam 2010b).

Fraser (2015) argues that new atheists and fundamentalists have 'secret sympathies'. From his analysis of atheist and fundamentalist Protestant texts, he notes areas of difference, while also noticing a great number of common assumption. He concludes that new atheists and Protestant fundamentalists seem to accord with theological assumptions about the Bible, divine action, and the incompatibility - or as one should rather observe, the corrosive effects of the evolution upon the Christian faith. For him textual study reveals two presuppositions shared by both new atheists and Protestant fundamentalists: a literal, univocal, and perspicuous understanding of Scripture, and a disruptive and substitutionary conception of divine activity in nature. Both see religious people as taking scripture literally and both see religious people as thinking that God intervenes in the world, breaking physical law. But significantly both refuse to see the Bible in terms of allegory. Both groups maintain similar beliefs concerning the Christian faith, ignoring any middle way. It is the emphasis on evidence that I examine here.

## Apocalypticism

Apocalyptic elements are identifiable in new atheist thought. Hedges (2009) states that the new atheists propose a route to collective salvation, utopianism and moral advancement through science and reason. Harris and Hitchens underscore the extreme likelihood of social catastrophe arising from types of religious belief, notably the rise of Islamism and the possibility that anti-Western radicals may obtain access to weapons of mass destruction. While the new atheists dismiss religious myths, they themselves describe a myth of secular progress. Such a belief requires a faith just as profound as that which they would condemn in the religious believer.

Dawkins for instance speaks of 'a world with no religion ... no suicide bombers, no 9/11 no 7/7, no Crusades, no witch-hunts, no Gunpowder Plot, no Indian partition, no Israeli/Palestinian wars, no Serb/Croat/Muslim massacres, no persecution of Jews as "Christ-killers", no Northern Ireland "troubles", no "honour killings", no shiny-suited bouffant-haired televangelists fleecing gullible people of their money' (Dawkins 2006: 23-24). While the new atheists do not promise a non-religious utopia, they are confident that those factors causing or exacerbating human conflict can be removed with the elimination of religion

## Conclusion

### So, are the New Atheists fundamentalists?

The labels 'fundamentalist atheist' and 'atheist fundamentalist' are used pejoratively as a criticism of contemporary atheists by associating them with religious fundamentalists who are perceived to be intolerant, militant, oppressive, and anti-democratic. Ironically, then, in attacking "religion" and proselytizing for atheism, Dawkins uses the same rhetoric as the religious fundamentalist he seeks to destroy. However, it is fair to assert that critics of atheists only employ the label 'fundamentalist atheist' as a means for discrediting atheists, not as a way to provide an objective, neutral description of some phenomenon.

In the religious context, fundamentalism can be broadly seen as a movement emphasizing strict adherence to basic principles, accompanied by a belief in the infallibility of some literally interpreted holy books and associated doctrine. It involves assent to absolute religious authority and legal enforcement of this religious authority (Ellis 2009). Fundamentalists adhere strictly to the fundamental tenets of a religion,

philosophy or any other prescribed thought or dogma – and will have no room for change or deviation from these ideas and practices, such as Biblical literalism and creationism.

While the term ‘fundamentalism’ emerged in early twentieth century American Protestantism after the publication of a series of twelve mass-produced booklets called *The Fundamentals* (1910–1915) (Numbers 2006: 33), Riesebrodt (2000) notes that fundamentalism has become a term which nowadays is also used to refer to religious revival movements outside the Protestant tradition, in Islam and Judaism, in Buddhism, Hinduism, Sikhism, and even Confucianism. He notes, however, that it has also become a catchword used to label and delegitimize religious movements.

The Fundamentalism Project represents perhaps the most influential body of work on the understanding of fundamentalism to date (Appleby and Marty (eds), 1993, 1994a, 1994b, 1995, 1996; Almond et al., 2003). This project discusses a number of elements associated with fundamentalist belief. Groups need not possess all of these features to be considered fundamentalist, but would be expected to hold a number of them. As discussed above these include: reactivity and selectivity; absolutism and inerrancy; Moral Manicheanism and apocalypticism.

Above we have argued that both new atheism and Protestant fundamentalism involve these elements. New Atheism represents a response to the perceived threat of secularism. Both groups see the Bible in a literalist way with no room for allegory. New atheist discourse establishes sharp ‘either/or’ boundaries through which to understand the atheist-theist debate. Religions are all taken to hold beliefs in the supernatural. In this sense at least, all are taken to be opposed to the use of reason. Finally, both Christian Fundamentalism and the new atheism include apocalyptic elements. Finally, as noted above both groups undercore the role of evidentialism in their arguments for the truth of their positions.

Fundamentalism is not always religious. Le Drew (2013: 6) notes the emergence of *secular fundamentalism*, which attempts to re-assert the ‘secular certainties’ of science and reason. From this perspective, then, fundamentalism attempts to re-create certainty and authority in response to challenges to established patterns of belief: religious fundamentalism in response

to modernity (more precisely its Enlightenment manifestations), and secular fundamentalism in response to late/post-modernity (specifically, relativism and pluralism, which challenge the universality of reason and scientific authority). Davie (2013) argues that the New Atheism may be understood as just such a fundamentalist secular ideology.

Unsurprisingly the new atheists themselves vehemently reject the label of fundamentalism. Dawkins argues:

“Maybe scientists are fundamentalist when it comes to defining in some abstract way what is meant by “truth”. But so is everybody else. I am no more fundamentalist when I say evolution is true than when I say it is true that New Zealand is in the southern hemisphere. We believe in evolution because the evidence supports it, and we would abandon it overnight if new evidence arose to dispute it. No real fundamentalist would ever say anything like that (2006: 282) and Fundamentalists know they are right because they have read the truth in a holy book and they know, in advance, that nothing will budge them from their belief. ... [I]f the evidence seems to contradict it, it is the evidence that must be thrown out, not the book. By contrast, what I, as a scientist, believe (for example, evolution) I believe not because of reading a holy book but because I have studied the evidence. Books about evolution are believed not because they are holy. They are believed because they present overwhelming quantities of mutually buttressed evidence (2006: 282)”.

In this chapter, I have discussed whether religious fundamentalists and the new atheists are mirror images of each other and argue that the answer to this question is decidedly yes.

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