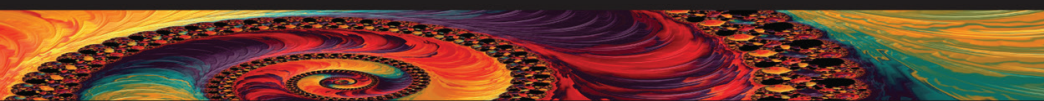


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GODLESS POLEMICS

Atheist Pamphleteering and the Specter of
Emancipation in the United States

Florian Zappe



Godless Polemics

Godless Polemics examines the role of pamphleteering as a medium for radical critique in the intellectual and cultural history of American atheism, focusing on its function as oppositional and counter-hegemonic discourse. It investigates how atheist pamphleteers, operating from the margins of public discourse, have challenged overt and covert religious influence on public and private life by producing and disseminating polemical texts that intervene in ongoing cultural, social, and political debates. The author argues that atheist pamphleteers have historically functioned as both critics of religious authority and proponents of intersectional struggles against social, political, and cultural power structures. Drawing on Pierre-Héli Monot's concept of the "pamphletary event," the book examines how these texts did more than articulate atheist positions—they actively shaped public debates, contested dominant narratives, and introduced a tradition of radical anti-religious dissent into American progressivism. By analyzing key pamphleteers from the nineteenth century to contemporary digital activists, this book redefines the role of pamphleteering in the history of unbelief in the United States, highlighting its vital role in introducing affirmative atheist ideas in emancipatory contexts. It will be of particular interest to scholars of religious studies and American studies.

Florian Zappe is Postdoctoral Researcher in the ERC Project *The Arts of Autonomy: Pamphleteering, Popular Philology, and the Public Sphere, 1988-2018* at the Department of English and American Studies at Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, Germany.

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Introduction

The following study argues that radical atheist pamphleteering represents a distinct and critically understudied tradition that has been instrumental in positioning atheist ideas within the American public sphere. Historically, this tradition has served as a central vehicle for articulating dissent against dominant religious and cultural norms in the United States—a nation that, despite its constitutional commitment to secularism, continues to operate within what I describe as a *crypto-theistic* public sphere. By foregrounding this tradition, the study highlights how pamphleteering has facilitated the public circulation of atheist critique, functioning both as a mode of cultural intervention and as a counter-hegemonic practice aimed at challenging the privileged status of religious belief in American civic life.

Crucially, this book analyzes atheist pamphlets not merely as texts but as public events, as rhetorical interventions that contest hegemonic discourse and attempt to mobilize normative change. In doing so, it traces the cultural, rhetorical, and political significance of atheist polemics from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. The argument begins by addressing an underlying paradox: while describing the United States as a theocracy may amount to polemical overstatement—one that may resonate in some activist or political circles but falters under close analytical scrutiny—it nonetheless points to a deeper and more enduring cultural tension. Although any attempt to generalize about a society as heterogeneous and complex as that of the United States risks reductive essentialism, a growing body of scholarship has noted America’s distinctive position in the cultural history of Western atheism. This position is defined by a persistent and unresolved contradiction between the country’s formally secular constitutional foundations and a public sphere in which religious discourse remains both pervasive and normatively dominant.

As I have argued elsewhere, this paradox may be understood as a specific form of American exceptionalism, rooted in the extent to which religion permeates U.S. culture, society, politics and public discourse (cf. Zappe, “The Other Exceptionalism” 2018). This cultural difference has been noted by other scholars as well. Michael Hochgeschwender, for example, points out that the prevalence of religious practice is much higher than in Europe and

2 *Godless Polemics*

that public debates over issues such as abortion, creationism, and same-sex marriage continue to be framed in overtly religious terms (Hochgeschwender, *Amerikanische Religion* 11–15). While the United States is, of course, not governed by religious law or structured as a theocracy in any institutional or legal sense, it remains—at its cultural core—what scholars have variously described as a “godly republic” (Moore and Kramnick 2018) or a “godly nation” (Schmidt 2016). The resulting socio-cultural landscape, though marked by profound religious and ideological pluralism, continues to exhibit a deep ambivalence—if not outright hostility—toward overt expressions of radical unbelief. As Amandine Barb observes, atheism in the United States still carries “a social and political stigma” (Barb), a perspective that is also supported by Petra Klug, who compellingly argues that, despite its cultural pluralism, the United States has long functioned as a distinctly “anti-atheist nation,” insofar as “anti-atheism is and has always been a pillar of American religious identity” (2).

The emergence of this distinctly American variety of normative anti-atheism has been explained as the result of a prevailing ideological nexus between two dominant narratives of identity: religion and national belonging (cf. Barb 2011; Zappe, “The Other Exceptionalism” 2018). Canonical studies have traced this antagonism toward atheistic ideas back to the very foundations of American identity, particularly to Puritan colonialism, which was conceived from its inception as both a political and spiritual project (Bercovitch 1975). The enduring conflation of religious and national identity in the United States has produced what Robert Bellah famously termed “American civil religion”—a socio-cultural narrative that, while recognizing the formal separation of church and state, simultaneously offers a religious narrative of collective belonging (cf. Bellah 1967; for a cultural history of the concept, cf. Gorski 2017). In this concept, God is cast as the primary symbol of American identity, serving as a unifying emblem that brings together diverse social and ethnic communities. Americans experience social cohesion through a shared civil religion, which implies that questioning the existence of this central symbol is analogous to rejecting the social contract, thereby making it a question of cultural membership. Charles Taylor notes that Bellah’s notion of American civil religion is a “tremendously fertile idea” that has “captured something essential about American society, both at its inception, and for about two centuries thereafter” (Taylor 447).

Against the backdrop of the anti-atheist paradigm inherent in U.S. culture, this study situates the radical role of atheist pamphleteering within American public discourse. In general, pamphleteering—precisely in its status as a marginal, emergent, and unofficial mode of communication—has historically performed a particular function: it has enabled forms of dissent deemed “unspeakable”—positions excluded from dominant discursive institutions and largely absent from mainstream public debate. In the specific American context, it served as a crucial medium for voicing anti-theistic views under the

constraints of what I propose to understand as a distinctly American *crypto-theistic* public sphere.

The Crypto-Theistic Character of the American Public Sphere

When I speak of the “public sphere” in this study, I adopt a broad and pragmatic understanding of the term, following Charles Taylor’s definition, which, in turn, draws on the work of Jürgen Habermas and Michael Warner.¹ In *A Secular Age*, Taylor defines the public sphere as

a common space in which the members of society are deemed to meet through a variety of media: print, electronic, and also face-to-face encounters; to discuss matters of common interest, and thus to be able to form a common mind on these.

(185)

The emergence of this sphere in the eighteenth century constitutes a distinctive and transformative step in the development of modern society. Although the media channels that constitute the public sphere are diverse—ranging from personal exchange to print media and electronic communication—it is conceived as a pluralistic yet unified realm of exchange. Its historical novelty lies in its “meta-topical” character: it transcends specific physical settings or immediate gatherings, linking dispersed conversations into a broader, more abstract discourse (196). Unlike ancient institutions such as the Athenian agora or the Roman senate, where deliberation was confined to localized, formal assemblies, the modern public sphere exists independently of official structures and loci of power. Taylor emphasizes this extra-institutional nature, describing it as “a space of discussion which is self-consciously seen as being outside power. It is supposed to be listened to by power, but it is not itself an exercise of power” (190). For him, the public sphere’s position outside the sphere of power is also what renders it a secular realm. However, this does not imply the absence of religion from public discourse (cf. 192) or the institutional separation of church and state but rather reflects a deeper transformation in the cultural and epistemic conditions of modernity. As Taylor clarifies in his introduction to *A Secular Age*, his notion of secularity denotes the erosion of religion’s *exclusive* authority to define meaning and moral order. In essence, secularity means that “[b]elief in God is no longer axiomatic. There are alternatives” (3).

The cultural history of the United States has given rise to several non-confessional and non-orthodox alternatives to traditional religion which, in this context, may be understood—at least to some extent—as expressions of secularity. Among these are the deism of the late colonial and revolutionary

period, rooted in Enlightenment rationalism (albeit without pursuing its implications to its most radical conclusions), which, as Taylor notes, served as an important bridge between religious belief and emerging forms of humanism (Taylor 117); the transcendentalism of the nineteenth century, which—though philosophically diverse—typically embraced a pantheistic metaphysics while seeking to deflect charges of outright unbelief (cf. Hurth 2007); and various manifestations of skepticism and agnosticism, which likewise gained substantial cultural traction in the same period.

If we follow Taylor's definition of secularity—that cultural condition of modernity in which the existence of God and traditional religious doctrines are fundamentally open to question—this does not imply that, in the lived reality of post-Enlightenment public discourse, all alternative worldviews circulate equally and without hierarchy. In the case of the United States, it becomes particularly evident that the prevailing normativity of anti-atheism has significantly constrained the public articulation of one specific alternative worldview: an explicit, affirmative, and philosophically defended atheism cannot be openly expressed without risking serious social sanctions. In this respect, the American public sphere diverges sharply from that of post-Enlightenment Western Europe, where modern concepts of atheism—whether in the form of British rationalism, Marxist materialism, or the cultural critiques of religion as formulated by philosophers such as Ludwig Feuerbach, Arthur Schopenhauer, or Friedrich Nietzsche—originated and, although certainly highly contested, have historically enjoyed greater public visibility, broader intellectual legitimacy, and, to some extent, wider social acceptance. By contrast, explicitly anti-religious positions in the United States have often been rendered culturally anathema and marginalized within mainstream discourse. This exclusionary tendency is precisely what defines the American public sphere as crypto-theistic.

The prefix *crypto* is not meant to suggest concealment in a conspiratorial sense, but rather to describe a public sphere that—while formally pluralistic and nominally secular—has historically rendered the explicit denial of *theos* culturally taboo. Here, *theos* refers not merely to a personified deity within doctrinal systems, but to a broader metaphysical principle with far-reaching cultural and identity-forming significance. I use crypto-theistic in preference to related terms such as crypto-religious, crypto-Protestant, or crypto-Christian, as the religious underpinnings of American public culture are not always explicitly Christian, let alone Protestant. While Protestantism has undoubtedly exerted dominant historical influence in U.S. culture, analytical categories such as the “American civil religion” point to more abstract religious imaginaries that transcend denominational boundaries but nonetheless tend to invoke a personalized deity as a normative symbol—a tendency evident in idioms such as “God’s own country” when referring to the United States. The term crypto-theistic, then, is meant to capture this implicit yet pervasive religious grammar that continues to shape American cultural identity.

Atheist Pamphleteering and the Specter of Emancipation

Like any term used to describe belief or value systems, atheism resists straightforward definition and is shaped by a long and complex conceptual history. Etymologically defined in negative terms, the concept first emerged in fifth-century BCE Greece (Bremmer 19). From the early modern period onward, it came to function less as a unified philosophical doctrine than as a label applied to a broad range of positions, including religious skepticism, anti-clericalism, secularism, and radically anti-metaphysical, rationalist, or materialist worldviews (for concise conceptual and intellectual histories, cf. Baggini 2003; Hyman 2007; Bullivant 2013; Reeves 2020).

In the following discussion, I adopt Stephen Bullivant's definition of "positive," "strong," or "hard" atheism, which he distinguishes from "negative," "weak," or "soft" forms of atheism. The latter encompasses philosophical positions such as agnosticism and skepticism, which evade an ultimate judgment on the existence of deities. Positive atheism, by contrast, entails the explicit affirmation that metaphysical deities do not—and cannot—exist (Bullivant 15–16).

It is precisely this form of positive atheism that has been rendered a cultural taboo within the normative anti-atheist framework of American society—a discursive prohibition that the pamphletary tradition examined in the following chapters seeks to confront and dismantle. The radical potential of these pamphletary texts lies in their disruption of the hegemonic public discourse in the United States, where alternatives to orthodox belief have largely been limited to negative or soft forms of non-religion. They advance affirmative, uncompromisingly hard atheist positions and their authors share a common approach: rather than engaging atheism as a theological problem, they frame it through socio-cultural and political lenses. Atheism is thus articulated not merely as a rejection of religious belief, but as part of a broader critique of entrenched social, political, and cultural power structures.

What distinguishes these atheist interventions from the more prominent freethought tradition in U.S. cultural history is their decisive break with the secular humanist framework that characterizes much of freethought's *soft* or *weak* position. While freethought—a term marked by a degree of taxonomic imprecision—rejected religious orthodoxy, biblical literalism, and clerical authority, and promoted rationality, secular governance, and egalitarian causes (Schmidt 13), it typically fell short of the ultimate act of iconoclasm: the public declaration of the "death of God" (Zappe, "The Other Exceptionalism" 81).

The pamphleteers discussed in the following chapters pursued similarly progressive agendas, but went one significant step further by promoting hard atheism not merely as a rejection of religious authority in public life, but as an active challenge to the legitimacy of religion itself—even as a private belief system. From their perspective, religion constitutes an inherently oppressive

and ontologically unfounded ideological system that represents a persistent obstacle to social progress and human autonomy—and as such must be overcome. In advocating this position, they conceptualize their antagonism toward theistic metaphysics as a productive force for emancipation—a telos that the philosopher Peter Sloterdijk has described as “the great project of the modern age [*Das große Thema der Neuzeit*]” (Sloterdijk 10, my translation). Given their extensive reach, their writings have played a vitally important role in conveying culturally ostracized atheistic thought to wider audiences. They thereby disseminated affirmative atheism throughout the American public sphere, asserting an anti-religious vision that transcended mere metaphysical skepticism to articulate it as an explicitly *practical philosophical foundation for specific political emancipatory aims*.

In pursuit of their emancipatory goals, the atheist pamphleteers draw on two major complementary strands of affirmative atheism that emerged, as Stephen LeDrew has pointed out, as dominant in public debates on unbelief in the United States. The first, “scientific atheism,” views religion as both the antithesis of scientific rationalism and an obstacle to social and scientific progress. For proponents of this perspective, the eradication of religious influence through education based on Enlightenment values is the primary means of ensuring modernization and societal improvement. “Humanistic atheism,” on the other hand, regards religion not primarily as a challenge to scientific materialism, but as a construct that reinforces socio-cultural power structures (LeDrew 14). Despite their different approaches, the two forms intersect in their opposition to both overt and covert religious influence on public and private life, providing a philosophical basis for critical engagement with the immanent effects of religious metaphysics.

To understand the emancipatory impact of these ideas in American culture, it is essential to examine how they are articulated and disseminated. This study argues that pamphleteering has played a crucial discursive role in this context. It traces the intellectual history of radical unbelief through a close, contextually grounded reading of this subversive textual tradition, which has significantly shaped public discourse on atheism in the United States. This is not to suggest that the history of unbelief can be reduced to pamphleteering alone—such a view would overlook the broad spectrum of critique directed at established religion and its institutions that kept a more moderate tone. However, what characterizes pamphleteering in particular—an aspect I will examine in greater detail below—is its rhetorical force and confrontational style, which makes it especially well-suited to inserting marginal and radical forms of “hard” atheism into a structurally anti-atheist public sphere.

Methodologically, this discussion is situated within cultural and communication history rather than the sociological subfield of non-religious studies, and it adopts a historically contextualized, discourse-oriented perspective. A context-based analysis of these texts requires examination of several inter-related dimensions. First, their historical and cultural conditions must be

considered, particularly the ideological construction of the dominant public sphere regarding the relationship between belief and unbelief, not only as worldviews but also as options for cultural status and belonging. Second, the intellectual context must be analyzed, as the political, ideological, and philosophical foundations of the arguments advocated in these texts not only support their emancipatory objectives but also influence how they are publicly articulated in their specific historical moment. Third, a thorough examination of the reception context is essential, particularly in a bid to understand how these texts engaged with and challenged the dominant discursive norms of the hegemonic public sphere. It is crucial to consider how these texts were received by different readerships, and how their circulation either occurred within—or actively contributed to—the formation of what Michael Warner terms critical counterpublics, which denote “publics [that] are defined by their tension with a larger public” (*Publics and Counterpublics* 56). A counterpublic, situated against the backdrop of a dominant public sphere, provides a space for distinct communicative exchanges that remain separate from authority and maintain a critical stance toward power. Its reach is not limited to a specific demography, but is instead “mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like” (Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* 56–57).

The activist writers analyzed here operated in and contributed to the emergence of such counterpublic environments. They were selected according to three primary criteria. First, the atheism they advocate is linked to socially, culturally, or politically emancipatory causes that held particular significance in their respective historical moments. Second, their pamphleteering is situated within an activist framework, understood in the broadest sense. Lastly, their texts received widespread attention, and the public impact renders them significant as *pamphletary events*.

The Pamphlet as Event: Redefining the Role of Pamphleteering in Public Discourse

The concept of the pamphletary event (cf. Monot 2024 and 2025) arises from a critical revision and expansion in recent scholarship of conventional understandings of the pamphlet. This approach extends the traditional definition of the pamphlet as a material medium and genre of activist literature to a broader conception of *pamphleteering* as “a social practice that engages one or several authors, a readership, and a clearly identified sociopolitical context or normative horizon” to which “societies turn to in specific historical circumstances” (Monot, *Pamphleteering* 2). This conceptual reorientation fills a notable gap in academic discussion. While the pamphlet—as a medium—is often anthologized and historically contextualized, the generic status, communicative

characteristics, and sociopolitical affordances of pamphleteering—as a practice in public discourse—have remained surprisingly under-theorized.

These affordances are threefold: first, pamphleteering addresses a public composed of “ordinary” readers—“ordinary as much in the etymological sense of having authority to deal with political orders or norms directly rather than by deputation, as in the sense of always relating their readerly dispositions to their ordinary, daily, and concrete political circumstances” (Monot, *Pamphleteering* 27). Second, pamphleteering has the capacity to translate complex, specialist discourses—such as those found in philosophy, political theory, or theology—into more accessible, vernacular forms that engage a broader audience. In this way, pamphletary texts can “circulate across geographical boundaries and social divides” and “reach and attract a readership that is usually excluded from the genteel public sphere” (1). Third, their confrontational tone and marginal status within dominant discursive frameworks enable the articulation and emergence of non-hegemonic ideas and alternative social, political, and cultural positions.

Any pamphletary event is contingent on the media, social, political, and cultural parameters that structure the hegemonic public sphere in which activist texts are produced, circulated, and received. To understand the conditions under which certain texts acquire the status of an *event* within specific historical publics, it is also necessary to first consider the tradition of the pamphlet, the structural, political, and cultural logic of its rhetoric, and recent shifts in its conceptualization.

Most of the academic work on pamphleteering is predominantly historiographical, with limited attention given to theorizing the practice as a distinctly partisan mode of public communication that employs satire, ridicule, provocation, accusation, personal insult, and rhetorical aggression to disrupt prevailing norms. In addition, the focus of the existing scholarship tends to gravitate toward the early modern period, a historical era in which the pamphlet emerged as a key medium for political communication. Foundational studies such as James Holstun’s *Pamphlet Wars: Prose in the English Revolution* (1992), Joad Raymond’s *Pamphlets and Pamphleteering in Early Modern Britain* (2003), Jason Peacey’s *Politicians and Pamphleteers: Propaganda during the English Civil Wars and Interregnum* (2004), and collections such as Marion Löffler’s and Bethan Jenkins’s *Political Pamphlets and Sermons from Wales 1790–1806* (2014) primarily define the pamphlet in terms of its material form and discursive tone during the early modern era but do not focus on its public efficacy. Other publications address more contemporary traditions—for example, David Paul Nord’s *Faith in Reading: Religious Publishing and the Birth of Mass Media in America* (2004), which examines the role of organized religious pamphleteering in the emergence of mass media culture in nineteenth-century America, or *Pamphlets of Protest: An Anthology of Early African-American Protest Literature, 1790–1860*, edited by Richard Newman, Patrick Rael, and Philip Lapsansky (2001), which offers

a genre-focused analysis of the pamphlet as a medium for “black Americans to assert themselves in the public sphere” (3).

The origins of pamphleteering as a mode of communication lie in print culture, though the practice has since expanded into a range of other media. The sixteenth century marked the historical moment when the pamphlet emerged as a medium of debate within public discourse. Defined as “a short, vernacular work, generally printed in quarto format, costing no more than a few pennies, of topical interest or engaged with social, political or ecclesiastical issues” (Raymond 8), it emerged as a cheap, convenient and efficient medium of distributing ideas to new non-aristocratic and non-clerical reading publics that formed in light of an increasing literacy rate during the early modern period. Because of their immediate communicative function in public deliberation, pamphlets, in this traditional sense, were not made to last. They were, as Gillian Whiteley phrased it, “printed ephemera” that nevertheless “had a huge impact on the range and reach of debates—political, religious, social—and facilitated new rhetorical devices which were previously unknown” and were “crucial in developing the idea of public opinion” (6). From the outset, pamphlets “were positively *‘agentive’*” and “had become a crucial medium in the development of literary and political communication; in time, they became the primary medium for news, propaganda, and public debate” (10, emphasis added).

As such, pamphlets have long served as a medium of communication for individuals or groups positioned outside established centers of cultural, social, economic, or political power. The practice of pamphleteering provided these actors with a means of disseminating their ideas on a broader scale, thereby enabling them to intervene in a public discourse whose hegemonic media ecologies and epistemic conditions were neither defined nor controlled by them. This positions the pamphlet as an inherently counter-hegemonic form, intimately linked to subversion, resistance, and revolutionary potential. George Orwell—himself a historian, collector, and editor of political pamphlets—articulated this dynamic succinctly. He noted that a pamphlet “is written because there is something that one wants to say now, and one believes there is no other way of getting a hearing,” thereby endowing it with a clear political implication. Whether composed “for” or “against” a particular subject, a pamphlet, as Orwell observes, is “in essence [...] always a protest” (Orwell, “Introduction” 7–8).

The pamphlet’s intrinsic urgency—always addressing its immediate historical context—and its activist impetus define it as a distinctly interventional medium and a discursive weapon within broader socio-cultural and political debates. As a result, pamphleteering is often regarded as an inferior form of public discourse, adhering to a belligerent, non-dialectical, and non-deliberative logic compared to more established or allegedly more prestigious forms of intellectual exchange. Rather than engaging in reasoned argumentation or weighing opposing viewpoints, pamphlets are often seen as forcefully

advocating a singular cause, prioritizing rhetorical impact over nuanced discussion. Orwell described this phenomenon as a “mental atmosphere” in which

nobody is searching for the truth [and] everybody is putting forward a ‘case’ with complete disregard for fairness or accuracy, and the most plainly obvious facts can be ignored by those who don’t want to see them. The same propaganda tricks are to be found almost everywhere.

(Orwell, “As I Please 51” 789)

Considering this belligerence and its role as a discursive weapon, this “mental atmosphere” described by Orwell has become a persistent hallmark of pamphleteering. Especially as the practices of pamphleteering have evolved and migrated into digital platforms such as social media, blogs, and online communities, the core characteristics of this rhetorical form persist. Historically, pamphleteers have employed a diverse array of stylistic devices—satire, allegory, provocation, direct attack, and *ad hominem* insult—to assert their positions forcefully, a tradition that contemporary digital polemicists continue to emulate (cf. Tormey 351). This enduring preference for a polemical voice—engaged, often provocative, sometimes aggressive, yet always aimed at delivering a ballistic impact within the cultural sphere—appears almost inevitable given that the term itself derives from *polemos* (Πόλεμος), the Greek word for war.

The widespread academic disregard for pamphleteering is closely linked to a general skepticism toward polemic discourse, as exemplified by Michel Foucault’s perspective. In an interview entitled “Polemics, Politics, and Problematisations” (1984), Foucault argues that the polemicist operates with inherent privileges, claiming “rights authorizing him to wage war” against an opponent who “is not a partner in the search for truth but an adversary, an enemy who is wrong, who is harmful, and whose very existence constitutes a threat.” The polemicist’s aim is not to engage in dialogue or in intellectual argumentation but to ensure victory for the cause he has already deemed righteous, relying on a “legitimacy that his adversary is by definition denied” (Foucault 382). If we follow this argument, polemical speech assumes the character of preaching: it establishes a one-sided communicative situation in which the polemicist—as a priest-like figure—is the sole possessor of truth, proclaiming truth claims to either individual or collective recipients, who, from the polemicist’s viewpoint, are seen as passive consumers of these (asserted) truths. These recipients are not seen as legitimate participants in the dialogue, nor are they afforded the right to occupy their own speaker position.

This anti-polemical discursive ethic has been met with criticism: In his 2004 essay *Can Polemic Be Ethical?*, Jonathan Crewe takes a critical stance toward Foucault’s remarks, arguing that Foucault,

by separating polemic from ethically sanctioned, intellectual discourse—by making polemic, in effect, the Other of such discourse—at once relegates polemic to a lawless outside and paradoxically pre-empts it as an inferior *genre* in which intellectual aggression, *ipso facto* unprincipled whatever it excuses, can be cordoned off, at least in principle.

(Crewe 138, emphasis in the original)

He characterizes this as a “double move of expulsion and tacit enclosure”—a gesture that, he notes, appears surprisingly at odds with the logic of Foucauldian argumentation from *Madness and Civilization* through *The History of Sexuality* (138).

What the Foucauldian argument overlooks is the fact that every polemic, regardless of its form or medium, always has at least two audiences: alongside the adversary, who is the explicit target to be discursively delegitimized, the polemicist also speaks *to* and *within* a public sphere. While the direct exchange between polemicist and opponent may allow little room for dialectical deliberation or the negotiation of truth claims, the polemic—as an utterance in its own right—circulates within the public realm, where it begins to exert its discursive influence. As a form of activist communication, polemical speech is by its very nature directed not only at specific interlocutors but also at broader, potential audiences, with the aim of constituting them as politically effective counterpublics. It is through its circulation among wider publics that such speech gains the potential for broader impact, actively engaging in and contributing to the ongoing formation of public discourse with the specific intention of transgressing the normative boundaries of what is considered acceptable and sayable. “The pamphleteer,” Nils C. Kumkar writes “‘makes public’ what has hitherto not been integrated into the realm of the real, thereby creating an incompatibility, and public discourse reacts by processing this incompatibility as conflict” (44).

It is precisely this potential to provoke disruption, irritation, and controversy within a specific, historically contingent hegemonic public sphere that lies at the heart of Pierre-Héli Monot’s concept of the *pamphletary event*. The innovation of his approach lies in his consideration not only of the form, content, and rhetorical style of pamphlets, but also in his emphasis on their modes of circulation and the specific historical contexts in which they emerge. Crucially, Monot foregrounds the reactions and resistances that pamphletary texts are capable of provoking, stressing their capacity to intervene in public discourse and unsettle hegemonial norms. His expanded concept of “popular” philology shifts analytical focus beyond the texts themselves to the epistemic and socio-cultural conditions in which they function and the discursive dynamics they generate. To this end, Monot coined the term “pamphletary event,” which he defines as “events which unfold in the public sphere and which engage both a pamphletary text and interpretative competences widely

distributed among the general reading public” (“Art, Autonomy, Philology” 16). Arguing for a reconceptualization of “pamphleteering as an event in the public sphere rather than a literary genre” (17), his theory rejects formalist definitions of the pamphlet in favor of a broader literary ontology. In this framework, pamphleteering extends beyond textual production to encompass the public responses it evokes, producing “events” that inscribe debates and controversies onto the public sphere (17). By moving beyond the limitations of traditional philology and incorporating a perspective on the discursive conditions and reception contexts of agentic and polemical texts, this approach foregrounds the communicative potency of pamphlets rather than their textual characteristics alone.

Monot defines the pamphletary event according to four key criteria: first, pamphletary writing constructs its audience as a collective, addressing individual readers as members of broader social groups, which makes “[t]he pamphlet [...] a *society-at-large* discourse” (“Art, Autonomy, Philology” 18, emphasis in the original). Second, pamphlets possess a subversive political intentionality, seeking to “radically contest an established normative order and simultaneously uphold the abstract value of normativity itself, that is, they must argue, polemicize, or campaign in favor of a normative *change* and the modification of *rights*” (18, emphases in the original). Third, pamphlets explicitly engage with their present historical moment, addressing contemporary social formations while drawing on historical arguments and projecting future consequences. Finally, pamphletary texts attribute a “high degree of agency” to their readership. To function as public interventions, they must “circulate in the public sphere [and] be recognized and treated as [pamphlets] by reading publics” (18). This requires them to “become *viral*, at least in the sense that they become accessible to readers not originally addressed by the pamphlet itself,” which, in turn, “trigger specific individual and collective modes of literacy intent on normalizing their polemical content” (18, emphasis in the original).

The Pamphlet as Disturbance: Mapping the American Anti-Atheist Public Sphere

To understand how atheistic pamphleteering acquires the event-like quality to pose a counter-normative challenge to dominant (crypto-)theistic discourse, it is essential to examine the unique characteristics of the American public sphere, particularly in relation to religion. It has widely been noted (Barb 2011; Zappe, “The Other Exceptionalism” 2018; Moore and Kramnick 2018; Klug 2022) that this sphere differs significantly from its European counterpart. As Susan Jacoby observes,

religion is so much a part of the public square that a majority of Americans say they would refuse to vote for an atheist for president, even though they would consider voting for an African American, a woman, a Jew, or a homosexual.

In her view, this demonstrates that “Americans find it much more socially acceptable to express prejudice against atheists than against other groups” (Jacoby 354). Empirical sociology supports this observation and confirms that publicly professing atheism is still a profound cultural anomaly in the United States: According to the 2024 *Religious Landscape Study* conducted by the Pew Research Center, 29% of adult American citizens identify as “religiously unaffiliated” but only 5% identify as atheists (Pew Research Center).²

Despite the growing acceptance of religious diversity in the United States, atheists continue to experience significant social stigma. A widely cited sociological study by Penny Edgell et al. on the social perception of atheists in American culture highlights that nonbelievers—particularly those who explicitly identify as atheists—are still regarded as disruptive and fundamentally “other.” As a cultural minority, they constitute a notable exception to the broader trend of increasing tolerance in the United States: “Out of a long list of ethnic and cultural minorities, Americans are less willing to accept intermarriage with atheists than with any other group, and less likely to imagine that atheists share their vision of American society” (Edgell et al. 216; cf. also Moore and Kramnick 161–162). This persistent marginalization indicates that, while religious pluralism has expanded, secular and non-religious identities continue to be met with suspicion, raising critical questions about the boundaries of inclusion within the American public sphere.

Atheist thought has struggled to secure a significant presence in American public discourse, largely because it stands in fundamental conflict with this entrenched crypto-theistic cultural framework that exerts considerable normative power, thereby hindering the development of a uniquely American philosophical tradition comparable to the rich European heritage of radical religious iconoclasm. Consequently, the pamphleteers discussed in the following not only articulate their views from a position of radical otherness but also act as important disseminators of atheist ideas with a transnational trajectory.

About This Book

This book does not seek to offer a comprehensive historical account of the development of American atheism (for such attempts, cf. Turner 1985; Schmidt 2016; Moore and Kramnick 2018; and, to some extent, Jacoby 2004; LeDrew 2016; Klug 2022). Rather, this study examines the impact of a selective archive of pamphletary articulations that constitute a tradition insofar as

they have shaped and radicalized public discourse on the complex relationship between religion and unbelief in American culture. These interventions employ the affordances inherent to the pamphletary mode of communication, highlighting the way in which their polemical styles and rhetorical strategies were crucial to their efficacy in advocating for *normative change* and the *redefinition of rights*—both of which are characteristic features of the pamphletary event (Monot, “Art, Autonomy, Philology” 18). Therefore, the focus is on atheistic polemics that emerged within distinct emancipatory activist contexts and were disseminated in the American public sphere at key historical and sociopolitical junctures. By tracing the cultural repercussions of these polemics, this approach seeks to develop a text-centered intellectual history that highlights how they influenced and reframed public debates. Rather than conceptualizing atheism as a monolithic phenomenon, this perspective emphasizes the historical contingency and discursive agency of these writings, demonstrating their role in contesting dominant religious narratives and shaping emergent paradigms that extend beyond secularism. Nevertheless, a degree of continuity remains evident. While American anti-atheism has assumed diverse political and socio-cultural forms, it has persistently functioned as a defining constant in U.S. society. Owing to its transhistorical normative force, it has continually generated—and continues to generate—polemical opposition.

The choice of primary material for my analysis does not aim for historical exhaustiveness and is deliberately selective, driven by both practical necessity and the specific focus of my research on representative texts that make not only secular but also affirmative atheist statements that qualify as pamphletary events. For this reason, several prominent figures in American anti-religious discourse, such as Abner Kneeland, Robert G. Ingersoll, Elmina Drake Slenker, Voltairine de Cleyre, Moses Harman, Benjamin Tucker, Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, and Joseph Lewis, will receive only marginal attention, if any.

James Turner’s observation that “[m]odern unbelief burst into full blossom in American culture rather suddenly, in a few decades after 1850” (4) marks the starting point for the timespan from which the pamphletary texts analyzed in this study are drawn. Before the mid-nineteenth century, atheism was largely absent from public discourse in the United States and, if addressed at all, was primarily framed in two ways. First, it appeared in hauntological terms—as a specter invoked instrumentally in defamatory political and culture war rhetoric, or as a disciplinary tool to regulate socially nonconformist behavior (cf. Zappe, “Conservative Exorcisms”; Klug 15). Second, it was embodied in the figure of the “village atheist,” who, in the collective imagination, was portrayed as an immoral and dangerous individual abandoned by God, incapable of differentiating between good and evil, and condemned to remain an eternal outcast (cf. Barb; Schmidt).

It is also important to note that the pamphletary atheist tradition examined in this study was, for the most part, shaped by white writers and activists. As Christopher Cameron has noted, atheist attitudes were already widespread

among enslaved African Americans, although such positions were rarely articulated in print due to the violent conditions that fundamentally structured their existence. As he argues, “slavery provided the necessary foundation for them to deny prevailing theodicies and to embrace nonbelief” (xxi; for a more detailed account, see *ibid.*, 18–23). Yet despite the prominence of religious skepticism in private and communal contexts, explicit atheism played little part in abolitionist activism prior to emancipation. Instead, many abolitionists adopted a freethought position with an instrumental view of religion, often “envisioning it as a bridge of understanding between the races” (Newman et al., 15).

The marginalization of atheistic perspectives began to change during the late antebellum period, when overtly affirmative expressions of atheism increasingly entered an American public sphere defined by normative anti-atheism. As will be demonstrated in the following, the pamphletary tradition played a pivotal role in this development. Its belligerent polemical style and impetus proved particularly well-suited to articulating a “hard” atheism that seeks to persuade others that religious belief is not merely culturally irrelevant and epistemologically untenable, but also socially harmful and ethically misguided.

The following chapters offer historical-contextual close readings of selected activist polemics from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. These texts mark pivotal moments in American cultural history in which the radical public articulation of atheistic positions not only challenged dominant religious norms but actively contributed to the formation of a discursive tradition. This tradition is defined not solely by its polemical agitation and rhetorical structures, but by the ways in which these works operate as *pamphletary events*—deliberate interventions in public discourse that confront the anti-atheistic normative grammar of U.S. culture through their affective force, discursive reach, and the public responses they provoke. In tracing these dynamics, the study identifies a transhistorical continuity in certain argumentative patterns—at times to the point of redundancy—within this tradition, arguing that, despite their different historical contexts and ideological orientations, these texts participate in an enduring cultural struggle over the visibility and legitimacy of unbelief in American public life. In doing so, the analysis proposes that the explicit advocacy of atheism constitutes a necessary—albeit often marginalized—step toward a deeper cultural secularization of American cultural life.

Chapter 1 examines selected influential texts by activists Ernestine L. Rose (1810–1892) and Emma Goldman (1869–1940), both of whom are widely recognized as among the most radical voices in the emancipatory movements of nineteenth-century America. Both being born in Europe, they represent a transnational form of atheistic discourse that provides an external perspective on the American religious debate. Their work not only challenges religion-based oppression in general society but also questions the humanistic and religious foundations of the mainstream reform movements of their era.

The first text subjected to close reading is Rose's *A Defence of Atheism* (1861), which represents, in more than one way, a discursive break with established traditions. Originally delivered as a lecture in Boston and later widely circulated as a printed pamphlet, Rose's text is not only of philological and aesthetic interest as a sharp anti-religious polemic, but it also marks a decisive pamphletary event in the public discourse on unbelief, being the first known culturally influential public proclamation of affirmative atheism in the history of American progressive activism.

As my analysis of the text's reception will show, Rose, with this explicitly anti-theistic radicalization of the emancipatory discourse, broke a taboo, paving a philosophical path that most of her contemporary activist peers were not willing to follow, but which Emma Goldman later embraced. While Rose grounded her atheism in Enlightenment rationalism and scientific argumentation, Goldman, influenced by radical European iconoclasts like Friedrich Nietzsche and Max Stirner, rejected religious authority primarily on cultural and philosophical grounds. Through an analysis of the arguments and reception of three exemplary pamphlets—"The Hypocrisy of Puritanism" (1910), "The Failure of Christianity" (1913), and "The Philosophy of Atheism" (1916)—I explore how Goldman's atheism, rooted in these philosophical traditions, shaped early twentieth-century anarchism and contributed to her persecution during the First Red Scare.

The second chapter discusses H. L. Mencken's coverage of the Scopes Trial of 1925, which, in the present context, is understood as an exemplary manifestation of activist journalism that also gained long-term significance within the American public sphere. Originally published as a series of newspaper articles in *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, Mencken's reports were later—often selectively and out of context—anthologized in the long-popular collections of "Menckenisms" and other short forms in the United States, before circulating online and eventually becoming widely available. They were later edited by Art Winslow and compiled in the volume *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee* (2006). The texts therefore have a long reception history, but are generally not perceived as pamphletary texts. However, if one considers pamphleteering not as a genre but as a communicative practice aimed at evoking a specific public reaction ("an event"), then Mencken's reporting certainly exhibits such qualities.

As my analysis will demonstrate, Mencken took a clear stance in the Scopes Trial, which, in public perception, was viewed not just as a legal dispute but as a proxy battle between religious fundamentalism and (allegedly atheistic) modernism. He did so as a clearly partisan polemicist pursuing an agenda. Implicitly, the reporting was not only aimed at the newspaper's readership but also functioned as a direct ideological attack on the implicit opponent in the polemic, William Jennings Bryan, whom Mencken portrayed as the embodiment of reactionary religious fundamentalism. Given Mencken's agitational fervor, his texts did not merely reflect the public memory of the trial; they actively shaped it. The aesthetic effect of his polemical style ensured that his

reports became a central component of the cultural memory of the case in the United States.

Chapter 3 focuses on Madalyn Murray O'Hair, arguably the most vocal atheist activist of the second half of the twentieth century. Her significance for public atheism in the United States stems not only from the radicalism of her anti-religious positions but also from her ability to introduce atheistic polemics into the mass media in a highly effective manner. Against the backdrop of the heightened anti-atheist climate during the Cold War, O'Hair strategically leveraged television and print journalism to disseminate her confrontational message, establishing a media presence that far surpassed that of other anti-religious activists. A key text in this context is her pamphlet *Why I Am an Atheist* (1961), in which she articulates a decidedly militant stance, targeting not only religious institutions but also moderate secular movements, which she criticizes as overly willing to compromise.

Using the example of O'Hair, this chapter further demonstrates how pamphleteering as a practice adapted to the shifting media landscape and the multiplication of publishing channels in the second half of the twentieth century. It will highlight how she strategically employed popular mass media—particularly television—to amplify her message, as exemplified by her widely discussed *Playboy* interview (1965) and her debates on *The Phil Donahue Show* and *Firing Line*. By crafting a highly polemical public persona, O'Hair strategically capitalized on her status as the “most hated woman in America” to expand her influence and reframe the marginalization of atheists in the United States as a civil rights issue.

Chapter 4 examines the new wave of atheistic polemics in public discourse since the turn of the millennium, noting that these debates—particularly in the United States—have been conducted with far greater aggression than in other Western countries. At the center of this form of anti-religious activism are the “New Atheists,” notably the prominent “Four Horsemen”—Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett—who gained prominence in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks and the political rise of evangelical Christianity in the United States in the early 2000s. Although the influence of this movement is indisputable, New Atheism has also been criticized, as its ideas are often seen as a rearticulation of concepts previously explored by earlier atheists, and it is further accused of fostering Islamophobia. Key texts of this movement, such as Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006) and Hitchens's *God Is Not Great* (2007), are discussed in concise excerpts in this chapter. Moreover, the chapter analyzes how the influence of the New Atheists was substantially reinforced by their intensive media presence, marking a shift toward Internet activism—both through the active use of this medium and the widespread dissemination and ongoing commentary on their polemics by supporters and critics alike.

The chapter will further look at the work of prominent contemporary atheist Internet activists Hemant Mehta and P. Z. Myers. Mehta utilizes a range of

digital platforms—e.g. his *The Friendly Atheist* Substack—to engage deeply with atheistic themes, offering incisive critiques of religious institutions and deconstructing traditional theistic narratives through essays, multimedia content, and interactive discussions. In parallel, Myers, through his widely read science blog *Pharyngula*, not only disseminates complex scientific ideas to a broad audience but also explicitly champions an atheistic perspective. His blog rigorously challenges the veracity of religious doctrines, advocating for a secular, evidence-based worldview that rejects faith-based claims.



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Notes

- 1 Taylor here explicitly draws on two key sources: Jürgen Habermas's influential study *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (originally published in German in 1962 and translated into English only in 1989) and Michael Warner's *The Letters of the Republic: Publication and the Public Sphere in Eighteenth-Century America* (1990) (cf. Taylor, 185–196).
- 2 Religiously unaffiliated citizens, often referred to as “nonbelievers” or “nones,” are not atheists per se. Hannah K. Scheidt noted that this label “covers a broad spectrum of individuals, from self-identified atheists to ‘religious nones’ (seekers and the spiritually eclectic, who reject institutionalized religion but who may profess belief in God). There are nones, nonbelievers, atheists (weak or strong), agnostics, humanists, spiritual-but-not-religious (SBNR) individuals—the list goes on and on” (6). For a detailed empirical study on the spectrum of metaphysical positions negotiated under the label cf. Drescher (2016).

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1 Atheist Agitation and Pan-Emancipatory Struggles

The Godless Polemics of Ernestine L. Rose and Emma Goldman

This chapter examines two early examples of the discursive entanglement between political-emancipatory and atheist pamphleteering within the broader context of the first wave of American feminism. In light of the staunchly anti-atheist character of hegemonic American culture, radical unbelief required a “Trojan horse” to facilitate its entry into public discourse. Political-activist pamphleteering has taken up this function more than once, leveraging the particular sensitivities of disenfranchised individuals or groups toward the social effects of religious doctrines.

To exemplify this phenomenon, I critically analyze the intellectual and activist trajectories of Ernestine L. Rose (1810–1892) and Emma Goldman (1869–1940) through a discussion of selected polemical texts. Both women were key figures in the major progressive movements of their respective historical moments: Rose advocated for women’s rights and abolition in the context of the middle-class reform movements during the second half of the nineteenth century, while Goldman—to this day an iconic figure in anarchist circles—campaigns for women’s autonomy from patriarchal structures, workers’ rights, and the dismantling of state and religious authority during the apex of left-wing activism in the early twentieth century. Despite being separated by a generation, Rose and Goldman share striking biographical and ideological parallels: both were of Eastern European Jewish heritage and emigrated to the United States, where they emerged as central figures in radical sociopolitical activism. Particularly in their shared opposition to religious narratives as foundations of social oppression, Rose and Goldman exhibit a profound ideological kinship that makes it fitting to describe Rose as “the Emma Goldman of the 1840s and 1850s” (Jacoby 97).

The pamphlets discussed in the following draw on both scientific and humanistic atheist traditions. Despite differences in tone and the positions they critique, they argue that any truly emancipatory critique of oppressive power structures and of the ideologies that sustain them must rest on a fundamental rejection of religious metaphysics. In linking these two aspects, they played a pivotal role in disseminating radical anti-religious arguments to a broader public. Rose’s *A Defence of Atheism* (1861) is a pioneering text in

this regard, a quintessential pamphletary event in the sense that it marks a caesura in American progressivism as the first public proclamation of affirmative atheism in the realm of social activism, signaling the beginning of a polemical tradition that challenges the anti-atheist cultural paradigm in U.S. society. This pamphlet will be examined in detail to illustrate how Rose's challenge to religious authority aims at transforming emancipatory discourse by advancing a more radical critique than many of her contemporaries were willing to embrace.

The selected polemics by Goldman—"The Hypocrisy of Puritanism" (1910), "The Failure of Christianity" (1913), and "The Philosophy of Atheism" (1916)—extend this tradition, incorporating the then most recent radical European critiques of religious metaphysics (among them Nietzsche and Stirner) to discard Christianity specifically and the moral regimes stemming from it in explicitly cultural and philosophical terms. Through a context-based discussion of these polemical texts and their historical status, this chapter will highlight the structural similarities between Rose's groundbreaking fusion of anti-metaphysical and emancipatory discourse and Goldman's more expansive vision of atheism as a vehicle for social and political transformation.

Ernestine L. Rose: From Private Emancipation to Public Advocacy

In *A Defence of Atheism*, Rose adopts a self-conscious public-speaker position that is informed by her unconventional biographical history of personal emancipation during which her individual pursuit of autonomy evolved into broader political struggles. Born as Ernestine L. Potowsky in Piotrków Trybunalski in 1810 to a religious Jewish bourgeois family, she experienced what her biographer Bonnie S. Anderson terms "three oppressive situations" (11): as a rabbi's daughter in a predominantly Catholic society marked by the respective degree of antisemitic prejudice, as an ethnically Polish individual in a partitioned nation lacking institutionalized statehood (Poland at the time was divided among Prussia, Russia, and the Habsburg Empire), and as a woman in a patriarchal culture. This multiple marginalization fostered in her an "unusual ability to recreate herself in opposition to circumstances she deplored" (Anderson 11), a trait that intrinsically fueled her later political activism. Despite her conservative upbringing, Rose received an education—an uncommon privilege for women in this cultural environment—that nurtured her critical thinking and led to an early crisis of faith that foreshadowed her eventual apostasy. At the age of 16, she successfully contested her arranged marriage and managed to legally secure her inheritance, thereby asserting a certain degree of autonomy, both financially and ideally (Kolmerten 15).

This decisive break prompted her to leave Poland at an early age, embarking on a journey through Europe that, in many ways, resembled the *grand tour*

typically reserved for aristocratic and upper-middle-class men. In Germany, she moved in progressive circles, and there is speculation that she may even have attended the salons of Rahel Varnhagen and Dorothea Schlegel (cf. Doress-Worters 4). She later moved to England, where her association with utopian socialist Robert Owen marked her shift from personal emancipation to political activism. It is hardly a coincidence that the skeptic Rose was drawn to Owen's ideas, given that his early brand of socialism was characterized by a persistent critique of religion. As Robert A. Davis observes, Owen was "fundamentally a materialist, a deist inclining as he grew older more and more certainly towards atheism," and he devoted a significant portion of his activist efforts to challenging "the central dogmas and metaphysical assumptions of the Christian faith," often in highly public and adversarial settings (Davis 92). Recognizing her eloquence and radical conviction, Owen invited Rose to speak at radical forums, where she quickly gained prominence as a social reform advocate (Anderson 42).

After migrating to the United States in 1836, Rose came into contact with progressive groups via the local Owenite community and promptly became a central figure in the abolitionist and women's rights movements. By the 1850s, she was widely recognized as a progressive orator, frequently sharing the platform with prominent activists such as Susan B. Anthony and Frederick Douglass, with whom she campaigned for women's rights and the abolition of slavery (cf. Anderson 67).¹ Elizabeth Cady Stanton, however, portrayed her as something of an eccentric within reformist circles, referring to her as a "foreign propagandist" and describing her as "the ringleted, gloved exotic, Ernestine L. Rose" (Stanton 191).

As with any pamphletary event, the radicalism of *A Defence of Atheism* can only be fully understood through a closer examination of the specific discursive contexts in which it was produced and received. Rose's public advocacy for an affirmative atheistic position must be considered not only in relation to the broader anti-atheistic character of general American culture but also within the intellectual and activist circles in which she operated. Despite her significant contributions to the emancipatory movements of the mid-nineteenth century, Rose's legacy was long overshadowed by her more religious contemporaries—Margaret Fuller (whose thinking was shaped by pantheist transcendentalism), Lucretia Mott (a Quaker), Susan B. Anthony (a Unitarian with Quaker roots), and Elizabeth Cady Stanton (a deist skeptic). The relative obscurity of her legacy may stem from the fact that, even during her lifetime, she remained, as Anderson phrased it, a "minority of one" (98), positioned at the margins "[e]ven in alternative communities dedicated to radical social change" (DuBois xix). Her unapologetic atheism not only set her apart from a dominant culture informed by the Second Great Awakening, but also marked her out as a solitary voice within progressive public discourse. While criticism of religion—particularly of dogma or clerical authority—was, to a certain extent, tolerated as part of emancipatory politics, any open endorsement

of a positively articulated, affirmative form of hard atheism remained taboo. Rose's explicit commitment to atheism thus represented a significant irritation, confronting as it did both dominant religious orthodoxy and the ambivalent, often crypto-theistic tendencies of progressive reform movements.

In general, the intellectual climate of these activist circles exhibited a complex and often contradictory relationship with religion. This was particularly evident in the first wave of American feminism's engagement with scripture, as Claudia Setzer has demonstrated. She argues that the women's movement followed three approaches regarding the status of the scriptures and the related issue of the epistemic authority of biblical revelation. While activists generally shared a critical stance toward religiously sanctioned oppression of women, one faction sought to reclaim a "pure" Christian gospel—conceived as untainted by dominant patriarchal religious institutions—that could serve as a potential foundation for emancipation. Another faction adopted a broadly deistic position, which did not question the existence of God but was, at most, skeptical of the scriptures' revelatory authority and fundamentally opposed the socio-cultural instrumentalization of biblical dogma as an inherently oppressive ideology. A third approach focused primarily on the institutional structures of religious oppression, addressing the role of scripture only incidentally (cf. Setzer 2017). Regardless of whether they regarded the Bible as an "ally," an "enemy," or a "bystander" (Setzer 188), these reformers refrained from explicitly affirming atheism as an intellectually defensible position.

Although Rose's radical stance remained isolated within the activist counterpublic, the broader progressive discourse was nonetheless subjected to conservative attacks, which strategically employed accusations of atheism to discredit emancipatory positions in their entirety. Even moderate freethinkers critical of religion within the reform movements were frequently vilified as "infidels" and "atheists"—labels that carried significant potential to ostracize and marginalize them socially.

Such denunciations were often distinctly gendered. Although not exclusively so—Black freethinkers being a notable exception (cf. Cameron 2019)—the freethought movement was largely perceived as a project of the white male middle class. Evelyn A. Kirkley characterizes the prototypical American freethinker of the latter half of the nineteenth century as "an Anglo-American, middle-class married male professional who lived in a small town in the Midwest, with a Christian background and limited formal education" (27). Nevertheless, approximately 20% of freethinkers were women, many of whom conformed to the social expectations associated with their class position (20–22), while still embracing religious skepticism and actively promoting it in the public sphere. When directed at female activists, allegations of atheism were often intertwined with misogynist insinuations of sexual promiscuity, reinforcing societal anxieties surrounding women's autonomy (cf. Anderson 50–53).

Rose was confronted with this strategy of gendered vilification six years before she publicly declared her atheism in *A Defence of Atheism*, during the course of another publicist-polemical skirmish. In 1855, the conservative reverends and activists Rufus Wilmot and G. B. Little launched a defamation campaign against Rose after she spoke at an abolitionist meeting in Bangor, Maine (cf. Schmidt 223–224; Anderson 88–89). As part of this campaign, they published an article in a local newspaper, declaring “that we know of no object more deserving of contempt, loathing and abhorrence than a female atheist. We hold the vilest strumpet from the street to be by comparison respectable” (Wilmot and Little qtd. in Rose, *Mistress of Herself* 198). According to Schmidt, Rose defended herself against these attacks on several instances “and managed to turn the Bangor confrontation to her advantage with a pair of packed lectures” that did, however, “not produce a ceasefire in the polemics aimed against her” (Schmidt 223).

***A Defence of Atheism*—A Foundational Pamphletary Event**

The Bangor Affair serves as a paradigmatic example of the pariah status assigned to atheistic positions—whether genuinely held or merely alleged—within the public discourse at the end of the antebellum period. It is within this cultural atmosphere that Rose, as Doress-Worters phrased it, “comes out proudly as an atheist” (Doress-Worters in Rose, *Mistress of Herself* 295),² strategically leveraging her considerable public gravitas to advance a more radical and atheistic emancipatory ethos. Stylistically, the text exemplifies the tradition of transposing philosophical ideas into a vernacular register—a strategy well-established in the American pamphletary tradition at least since Thomas Paine’s *Common Sense*—thereby making them accessible to a broad readership and positioning them as critical interventions in public discourse through the deliberate use of polemical rhetoric.

The *Defence* emerged within the distinct media ecology of nineteenth-century social-progressive movements that was characterized by an interplay of speeches, articles, and periodicals, with individual pamphlets serving as an important vehicle for disseminating radical ideas. The boundaries between these formats were often fluid, allowing content to be republished and recirculated across multiple communication channels, thereby extending its reach and impact.

Originally delivered as a public lecture in Boston on April 10, 1861, the *Defence* was subsequently widely distributed in print as a 21-page pamphlet under the full title *A Defence of Atheism: Being a Lecture Delivered in Mercantile Hall, Boston, April 10, 1861, by Mrs Ernestine L. Rose*, published by J. P. Mendum, the radical editor of the iconoclastic freethought periodical *Boston Investigator*. Priced at 5¢ (Anderson 140, n.2), the pamphlet was affordable for a wide general readership and remained in circulation for

decades, going through three editions (1861, 1881, and 1889), demonstrating sustained public interest over nearly 30 years.³ Although Rose was otherwise highly active in the media landscape of progressive freethought, both through her public speaking and her journalistic contributions to periodical publications, it remained her only publication in book form and her most widely circulated text (Anderson 8).

In terms of content, Rose's public declaration of atheism is significant in two ways: first, it reflects a shift in her personal approach to social critique, moving from her earlier deism to a firmly expressed anti-metaphysical atheism. Second, she deliberately integrates this radical, anti-transcendental stance into the larger discourse of progressive activism. *A Defence of Atheism* thus marks a decisive pamphletary event that challenged the general crypto-theistic paradigm as well as the strong normative authority that paradigm retained even within emancipatory activist discourse.

Rose proceeds in two distinct argumentative steps. In the first part of her text, she undertakes a materialist-critical deconstruction of supernatural explanations for the existence of God. In the second part, she launches a harsh polemical attack against organized religion and its adherents, advocating instead for a fundamentally immanent concept of ethics as a basis for both individual and collective emancipation, independent of any (by now, in her view, untenable) metaphysical foundation. By explicitly framing her text as a "defense" of affirmative atheism in its very title, Rose signals her awareness of the radical implications of her claim, anticipates and counters antagonistic attacks, and implicitly formulates the aim of affirmatively establishing a new and previously unarticulated paradigm—one that had already been called for within the European intellectual tradition by contemporaries such as Percy Bysshe Shelley and Ludwig Feuerbach.

At the outset of her argument, Rose observes that even raising the question of the existence of God evokes "awe, as if stepping on forbidden ground, too holy and sacred for mortals to approach." As she points out, this reluctance has been entrenched through the normative power of "education" and "public sentiment," casting a "stigma" on those "bold enough" to challenge theist worldviews unless their conclusions conform to prevailing expectations (Rose, *Defence* 3). In a distinctly polemical style, which is "rational and logical, but laced through with her trademark sarcasm and humour" (Anderson 119), Rose steps onto this contested intellectual terrain.

By integrating polemic with empirical rhetoric, she systematically examines various scientific disciplines—geology, natural history, physiology, mathematics, chemistry, and astronomy (Rose, *Defence* 3–5)—to demonstrate that none of them can provide verifiable evidence for the existence of a divine being, aligning with what Charles Taylor called "the standard 'death of God' theory that science disproved religion, which thus disappears" (428). With an irony that is characteristic of her style, Rose contends that even if one were to "ascend into the heavens, and enter the 'milky way'" to ask the stars

about God's existence, "Echo answers. Where?" (Rose, *Defence* 5). Having established that no positivist-materialist proof of God can be derived from the "Universe of Matter," she proposes that conceptions of God are human constructs shaped by cultural, intellectual, and moral discourses. In a quasi-F Feuerbachian move (cf. Zappe, "The Other Exceptionalism" 84), she argues that "[m]an, in all ages, made his God in his own image," as a reflection of the dominant epistemological narratives and cultural and ethical values—or lack thereof—of the respective societies that produced this mythological projection. Whether depicted as "cruel and vindictive, or kind and generous," God remains an "emanation of [man's] own mind—the picture of himself." Rose attributes the origins of religious belief to the absence of rational knowledge in pre-Enlightenment societies, arguing that a lack of understanding of natural laws prompted humans to formulate transcendental narratives as a means of coping with the contingency of existence and providing explanations for its origins and meaning: "In proportion to man's ignorance is he superstitious—does he believe in the mysterious. The very name has a charm for him. Being unacquainted with the nature and laws of things around him, with the true causes of the effects he witnessed, he ascribes them to false ones—to supernatural agencies" (Rose, *Defence* 6). In this view, religion emerges not from divine revelation but as a mythopoeic response to uncertainty, with supernatural explanations filling the gaps of knowledge that exist due to scientific and philosophical underdevelopment. Accordingly, religious doctrines cannot claim any inherent credibility, as the very phenomenon of belief is, according to Rose, merely the result of cultural socialization and indoctrination, a view she articulates by claiming that "it is an interesting and demonstrable fact, that all children are Atheists, and were religion not inculcated into their minds they would remain so" (16).

If religious beliefs are ontologically unfounded, they cannot claim any moral authority. This philosophical insight leads to a confrontation with radical immanence, as the obsolescence of the religious paradigm redirects fundamental existential, epistemological, and ethical questions back to humanity and, ultimately, to the individual. The foundational void left by the decline of transcendental metaphysics must be filled with inner-worldly, humanistic foundations, grounded in a natural law-based "accurate knowledge of the nature of man" (18). This ethical and epistemological turn toward immanence is of particular significance for Rose's emancipatory project, as she argues that the political and ideological instrumentalization of religious convictions to justify fundamentally unethical behavior has effectively discredited any ethics grounded in metaphysical foundations. She illustrates this point by referring to one of the major crimes against humanity of her own historical moment, namely, the enslavement of "4,000,000 human beings, bought and sold like brute chattels under the sanction of religion and of God" (18). Emancipation—whether of enslaved individuals, women, or other marginalized groups—can,

Rose argues, be realized only through atheism, which functions both as an ethical framework and as a foundation for individual and collective agency in both solitary and intersectional struggles. To make her point, Rose contrasts the atrocities committed in the name of religion—including “persecuting and exterminating his fellow man on account of difference of belief” (21)—with the ethical stance of the atheist, who, recognizing that belief is determined by cultural conditioning rather than evidence, cannot engage in such injustices. Unlike the religious believer, whose alleged morality is motivated by fear of divine punishment or the hope of transcendental reward, the atheist acts virtuously for the intrinsic value of goodness itself.

For Rose, this immanent ethical framework provides a more authentic and self-sustaining foundation for moral behavior, as the motivation to do good arises not from external compulsion but from the inherent satisfaction and happiness derived from virtuous action. She encapsulates this perspective in the culmination of her argument:

In conclusion, the Atheist says to the honest, conscientious believer, “Though I cannot believe in your God, whom you have failed to demonstrate, I believe in man; if I have no faith in your religion, I have faith—unbounded, unshaken faith—in the principles of right, of justice, and humanity.”

(21)

This programmatic statement is crucial, as it is here that Rose’s scientific argument against the existence of a deity finds its humanistic application, by serving as a conceptual bridge to the issue of politics, which, though only briefly addressed in this particular text, remains central to any emancipatory project.

Rose’s polemic is not only an attack on the religion-based ideological status quo of the dominant public sphere, but it also critiques the strong transcendental tendencies that characterized her contemporary progressive—and here especially feminist—counterpublics. For Rose, emancipation cannot be limited to liberation from specific religiously grounded patriarchal and racist dogmas—it necessitates a fundamental critique and questioning of the concept of religion *itself*. Within the specific framework of feminist politics, any strategy that fails to transcend its own religious grammar or structure—such as the *Declaration of Sentiments* with its various religious references—is predicated on flawed assumptions and remains conceptually bound to the theological narratives of the oppressors. As early as 1853, Rose articulated this position unequivocally in a speech titled “Trample the Bible, the Church, and the Priests.” After presenting an extensive critique of the mythopoeic origins of the concept of God, the oppressive doctrines derived from it, and

the institutions that exploit these beliefs for political purposes, she directly addressed her fellow women's rights activists, urging them to take action:

To you, my sisters, I would but say that the defenders of the Bible have given you the most practical evidence of the rights and liberties Christianity has conferred upon you. The Bible has enslaved you, the churches have been built upon your subjugated necks; do you wish to be free? Then you must trample the Bible, the church, and the priests under your feet.

(Rose, *Mistress of Herself* 144)

Although Rose demolished the ideological pillars of practiced religion in this speech, she had not yet agitated for the overthrow and destruction of the central idol. By 1861, however, her rhetoric had evolved, shifting from institutional iconoclasm to an open call for fundamental philosophical deicide.

Rose's *Defence* is addressed to multiple audiences at once. At the most superficial level, it is an attack on dominant upper- and middle-class White Anglo-Saxon Protestant culture, an ideological critique aimed at delegitimizing Protestant orthodoxy and its institutions—particularly the “corrupt priesthood who fatten on the credulity of the public” (Rose, *Defence* 17). This is not only an attack on this corrupt priestly caste but also an implicit call to the public at large to turn away from these opponents. She agitates through the deconstruction of their personas, employing a combination of deductive rationality on the content level and a polemically affect-driven ridicule on the stylistic level. The implicit audience at this level is precisely that “public” which suffers on various levels under the *dispositifs* established by decadent religious elites. To them, atheism is presented as a viable path to the attainment of civil liberties and rights.

On a second level, Rose's polemic can be understood as an attempt to discursively create a distinctly atheistic emancipatory counterpublic—a collective actor that, at the time of the pamphlet's emergence, had been neither articulated nor established as a communicative or politically active network within U.S. culture. By addressing her readers as “My Friends” (3), she employs an inclusive rhetorical strategy that fosters a sense of belonging among a public that is not institutionally predefined. Unlike the speeches she gave regularly at the Thomas Paine Society, which were directed at an already established audience of skeptics (not necessarily atheists) within a predefined discursive framework, this text—both in its printed form and in its original oral delivery—is aimed at an audience that comes into being *as a public* through the discursive dynamics of address and reception. In doing so, it exhibits all the characteristics that Michael Warner defines as typical of a counterpublic, which

enables a horizon of opinion and exchange; its exchanges remain distinct from authority and can have a critical relation to power; its extent is in principle indefinite, because it is not based on a precise demography but mediated by print, theater, diffuse networks of talk, commerce, and the like.

(Warner 56–57)

Rose's polemical transgression of the societal taboo surrounding the "death of God" and her re-appropriation of the concept of atheism in a public forum as unequivocally positive is a radical normative intervention that actively seeks to create the conditions for a communicative space in which atheistic thought—across various social boundaries—can be collectively articulated and strengthened.

More intriguingly, however, the pamphlet also addresses a third, more implicit yet specific audience: the reform-oriented, progressive segment of the American public, which she seeks to radicalize by urging them to adopt a fundamentally critical stance on religion. One particularly revealing passage illustrates this. Rose not only accuses the clerical establishment of attempting "to make the very term Atheism odious," but also condemns a significant faction within the reformist movement for adhering to anti-atheist paradigms. She attacks

some of the reformers, [for] not having the moral courage to avow their own sentiments, wishing to be popular, fearing lest their reforms would be considered Infidel (as all reforms assuredly are), [who] shield themselves from the stigma by joining in the tirade against Atheism, and associate it with everything that is vile, with the crime of slavery, the corruptions of the Church, and all the vices imaginable. This is false and they know it. Atheism protests against these injustices.

(20)

By exposing the complicity of certain reformers in perpetuating anti-atheist positions, Rose not only challenges the hypocrisy of those who seek reform while remaining bound by theological constraints but also insists that a genuinely radical and egalitarian movement must break decisively with religious metaphysics as a whole. For her, the failure to confront and dismantle these ideological barriers renders reformist efforts inherently compromised, unable to realize their full emancipatory potential.

In that, her critique is not merely a defense of atheism but also an effort to agitate the political activist scene of her day. By portraying atheism as the logical extension of progressive ideals—rather than an aberration from them—Rose reclaims the term from its stigmatized status and reframes it as a vehicle for justice. In doing so, she asserts that social rights can only be

meaningfully expanded through an affirmative, rather than defensive, stance against religious narratives. Consequently, the equation of atheism with moral degradation is, from this perspective, not only intellectually dishonest but also strategically stifling for movements advocating for social change. Reformers who distance themselves from atheism to avoid public condemnation ultimately bolster the very systems of oppression they purport to oppose. Thus, Rose's polemic demands more than incremental change within existing moral coordinates; it calls for an unflinching rupture with both religious ideology and normative anti-atheism as the precondition for genuine progress.

The impact of Rose's atheistic polemic is difficult to assess empirically. As previously mentioned, the fact that her pamphlet, first published in 1861, went through two additional editions over the following three decades suggests that Rose's vehement anti-religious tirade continued to reach a wider readership even after she left the United States to live in Europe in 1869. However, her appeal to both openly Christian and crypto-theistic reform movements to ground their activism in the ideological foundation of affirmative atheism did not achieve the desired resonance. While Elmina Drake Slenker had already shown solidarity with "strong" atheism in support of Rose during the Bangor Affair, the major figures of the progressive freethought movement largely remained committed to "soft" atheism—whether out of personal conviction or due to strategic concerns about the stigma associated with pronounced godlessness. In this regard, Klug's assessment remains valid: despite her temporary prominence, Rose ultimately remained an outsider on multiple levels—"an immigrant in an increasingly nativist society, a Jew in a largely Protestant country, and an atheist in an anti-atheist nation" (47).⁴

Emma Goldman: Anarchist Counterpublics and Atheist Liberation

Emma Goldman's revolutionary pamphleteering follows in the footsteps of Ernestine Rose. Similar to Rose, Goldman's cosmopolitanism—both intellectual and biographical—plays a crucial role in shaping her lasting legacy and relevance in radical emancipatory politics. Born in 1869 in Kaunas (now Lithuania), Goldman emigrated to the United States in her teens, and there she became a central figure in the anarchist movement. Her activism, writing, and relentless advocacy for free speech, women's rights, and anti-capitalist causes spanned continents, effectively leading to her deportation from the United States in 1919, whereupon she continued to campaign for her causes across Europe and Canada until her death in 1940. As Clare Hemmings notes, her "border crossings and the lack of belonging underwrite her challenges to patriotism and capitalism, as well as the gendered and sexual norms that secure them" (Hemmings 20). Defined by an "outsiderness of every kind" (Gornick 6), Goldman operated within a dominant public sphere that, since

the Haymarket affair of 1886, was characterized by fiercely anti-leftist sentiments, in which atheism was framed as the “ideological twin” (Moore and Kramnick 26) of anarchism specifically and of revolutionary leftist politics more broadly.⁵

Goldman’s atheism was far more class-conscious in orientation than that of Rose, whose middle-class standpoint led her to focus largely on mobilizing anti-religious dissent within her own social sphere. Goldman’s pan-revolutionary polemics, on the other hand, combine feminist, individual anarchist, pro-proletarian, pro-free speech, sexual liberationist, and anti-statist emancipatory currents with an explicitly articulated atheistic worldview. However, her pamphleteering operated within a markedly different discursive environment from that of the nineteenth-century freethought scene in which Rose formulated her anti-religious agitation. While Rose remained a solitary figure within a middle-class reformist movement that was reluctant to openly embrace hard atheism, Goldman worked within a distinctly radical revolutionary publishing milieu which included figures such as Benjamin Tucker, editor of the anarchist newspaper *Liberty*, Moses Harman, publisher of the journal *Lucifer the Light-Bearer*, and Emanuel Haldeman-Julius, a radical publisher and long-time editor of the socialist newspaper *Appeal to Reason* and the highly influential *Little Blue Books* pamphlet series.⁶

As a tireless activist and prolific publicist whose extensive body of work includes numerous texts, speeches, articles, and pamphlets, Goldman links her critique of religion with broader forms of oppression, offering rich material for analysis in the context of this study. To highlight her seminal role in the tradition of atheist pamphleteering, I have chosen to focus on three exemplary pamphlets: “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism” (1910), “The Failure of Christianity” (1913), and “The Philosophy of Atheism” (1916). Although these works differ in theme and tone, they are united by the view that anarchist atheism is not merely a political philosophy, but a comprehensive social and personal ethos dedicated to the liberation of individuals. Although she is often seen more as “an activist and eloquent speaker” than “a political thinker or a theorist” (Wigger 137), Goldman does, in fact, formulate the essential parameters of her emancipatory anarchism, which, in its very essence, is anti-theistic and directed at “the liberation of the human mind from the dominion of religion” (Goldman, “Anarchism” 73).

Goldman’s rhetoric, which reflected her deep-seated resentment of politically ineffective academicism (cf. Ferguson 7), is quintessentially pamphletary: distinctly democratic and inclusive in its address, unmistakably confrontational in its political orientation, and clearly belligerent and agential in its intent. Her activism had a considerable social effect. Like Rose, Goldman was an active and prolific public speaker, addressing—by her own estimation—between 50,000 and 75,000 individuals annually (Glassgold xxviii). She “synthesised theory and practice through her more than 10,000 public lectures and speeches, attended by various subaltern groups, including immigrant communities, workers, trade unions, and liberal and feminist

circles,” thereby managing to discursively create “a political social space in which a radical public, united by shared visions of how the world ought to be, and in a wider sense, also theory, came into being” (Wigger 137). Kathy E. Ferguson has already persuasively demonstrated that these discursively evoked networks—shaped in large part by Goldman’s widely disseminated publishing activity—exemplify what Michael Warner defines as a counterpublic (Ferguson 71–75). Rather than constituting a closed anarchist subculture, this counterpublic is conceived as a communicative space in which anarchists “rubbed shoulders with other political dispositions, inciting conversations among radicals and liberals over shared agendas” (73).

A crucial factor in Goldman’s extensive impact among these diverse audiences—whose primary commonality was often their shared experience of social marginalization—was the media infrastructure surrounding *Mother Earth*, the anarchist magazine she founded in 1906 and published until it was closed down by the American government under the Espionage Act of 1917. Besides the periodical, which reached approximately 10,000 readers (Glassgold xxiv), this infrastructure included the Mother Earth Publishing Association (MEPA), a press that published and distributed a wide range of anarchist writings, as well as the short-lived Mother Earth Book Shop, founded in New York in 1918 in response to the periodical’s politically motivated suppression by authorities (Hsu 44). During this time, the *Mother Earth* publication network functioned as an “integrative nexus of a hybrid counterculture, surpassing the immediate anarchist movement,” that brought together a “great mixture of audience members—from immigrant workers to the native-born cultural elite and professionals in various lines of work” (Hsu 1; 4).

The texts discussed below represent Goldman’s most explicit articulations of a practical politics grounded in an atheistic worldview. They played a pivotal role in shaping the multifaceted counterpublic evoked by her activism as characterized not only by political radicalism but also by a pronounced anti-religious orientation. The media ecology of *Mother Earth* served as the epicenter for the circulation of these texts. “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism” first appeared in Goldman’s collection *Anarchism and Other Essays*, published by *Mother Earth*’s press; “The Failure of Christianity” was first published in the April 1913 issue and “The Philosophy of Atheism” appeared in the February 1916 issue of the periodical. All three polemics were subsequently widely distributed as individual pamphlets,⁷ anthologized countless times, and remain widely available online, not least due to Goldman’s enduring popularity in anarchist circles.⁸

“The Hypocrisy of Puritanism”

“The Hypocrisy of Puritanism” is conceived as an attack on the dominant bourgeois-conservative morality and its social effects in American culture, which Goldman attributes to the enduring normative legacy of Protestant

Puritanism—a doctrine she considers inherently repressive and alienating to human development. Her critique is explicitly cultural and unfolds through a genealogical examination of Puritanism's historical trajectory. She traces the cultural climate of her own historical moment back to the "reign of [Puritan] terror" in England during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries ("Hypocrisy" 150), explores its persistence through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in the persecution of nonconformist artists and intellectuals such as Mary Wollstonecraft, Percy Shelley, Lord Byron, George Eliot, and Oscar Wilde, and culminates in the "Puritanic provincialism" ("Hypocrisy" 151) of early twentieth-century America. For Goldman, the enduring influence of the Puritan canon of values forms the foundation of a multi-layered system of social control, particularly with regard to the regulation of the body, sexuality, and women's autonomy. As historian Jennifer Ratner-Rosenhagen observes, she presents "the latter-day Puritan as the ascetic guardian of public morality who sought to protect young girls' sexuality by denying it" (182). For Goldman, the harmful social effects of this moral regime arise from the suppression and transformation of authentic creative and vital forces—"the natural and healthy in our impulses" ("Hypocrisy" 151)—which she views as not only central to a fulfilled and emancipated existence but also essential for individual freedom, as unalienated access to these impulses is foundational to her conception of human authenticity and autonomy.

The historical reference to the intellectually and practically repressive effects of a Puritan ideology that has been absorbed into the dominant hegemonic culture of the United States is not an end in itself. For Goldman, it serves as the foundation for the actual target of her polemic: the governmental apparatus of repression embodied in the legislative measures of the Comstock Act and the censorship system it instituted. This law, named after its initiator Anthony Comstock—the conservative politician and founder of the New York Society for the Suppression of Vice—was passed by the U.S. Congress in 1873. It was designed to suppress the mailing of materials deemed obscene or immoral and, like many censorship laws, it was formulated deliberately vaguely, "defining obscenity so broadly that it included birth control, sexuality, erotic literature, and radical ideas in general" (Ferguson 25–26), thereby also criminalizing the circulation of anarchist and—implicitly—atheistic views. *Mother Earth* frequently clashed with the Comstock legislation (cf. Glassgold xxxi), not only because of its distribution of radical political ideologies but also because Goldman actively participated in initiatives to promote birth control, an issue she considered to be central to female liberation (Jacoby 237). Goldman saw the Comstock legislation as a form of religious persecution hidden under a veneer of social reform that consistently worked to restrict both public discourse and private liberties.

To stress her point, she draws a forceful historical parallel between the censorship infrastructure based on the Comstock Act and the Inquisition, sarcastically remarking that while Puritanism no longer resorts to physical torture, it

still exerts a “most pernicious hold on the minds and feelings of the American people.” She argues that this moral dominance explains the power of figures like Comstock himself, who, in her view, is akin to the “Torquemadas of the antebellum days.” Comstock, she writes, is “the autocrat of American morals; he dictates the standards of good and evil, of purity and vice” (“Hypocrisy” 152). She condemns the invasive nature of this absolute claim to moral authority personified in him, who “[l]ike a thief in the night, [...] sneaks into the private lives of the people, into their most intimate relations.” She questions why the public tolerates such intrusions on its liberties, arguing that it is because Comstock represents the “loud expression of the Puritanism bred in the Anglo-Saxon blood,” from which even liberals have not fully emancipated themselves (“Hypocrisy” 152). Goldman’s emphasis on the distinctly Anglo-Saxon character of Puritanism carries a (more or less) implicit anti-American sentiment. This is reenforced by her repeated juxtaposition of the intellectual and artistic vibrancy of European culture with what she perceives as the stifling, conformist, anti-intellectual, and anti-creative atmosphere of the United States, which she derides as “the stronghold of the Puritanic eunuchs,” in which “the only day of recreation left to the masses, Sunday, has been made hideous and utterly impossible.” For the working classes, she observed, “the sociability and fun of European outdoor life is exchanged for the gloom of the church, the stuffy, germ-saturated country parlor, or the brutalizing atmosphere of the back-room saloon” (“Hypocrisy” 156–157).

At the heart of Goldman’s critique in “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism” lies her diagnosis of the pervasive saturation of American culture with religiously grounded moral norms—norms that, she argues, are not merely life-denying but also serve to uphold a socially unequal order. This order is maintained not only through cultural normativity and the pressures of conformity, but also through institutional repression, enforced by state authorities that act as arbiters of public morality. Through a legalistic apparatus functioning as a form of crypto-theistic censorship, the state determines which texts may circulate freely and which are to be suppressed. For Goldman, the narrowing of public discourse and the confinement of human experience to a limited range of morally sanctioned possibilities are inextricably linked to this repressive system.

“The Failure of Christianity”

In “The Hypocrisy of Puritanism,” Goldman’s critique of the American censorship infrastructure aimed to raise awareness of the specific repressive effects that a politically secular yet culturally religious order imposes on public discourse and the distribution of non-official texts within it. In contrast, “The Failure of Christianity” seeks to attack the ideological roots of this system directly, urging its readership—whom Goldman addresses as the subjects of a potential revolution—toward a decisively atheistic awakening, which she

views as the only truly emancipatory path. She articulates this stance explicitly and programmatically: "Whoever sincerely aims at a radical change in society, whoever strives to free humanity from the scourge of dependence and misery, must turn his back on Christianity, on the old as well as the present form of the same" ("Failure" 234).

In this polemic, Goldman draws on the philosophical ideas of the German iconoclasts Max Stirner and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose ideas, at that time, were gaining increasing recognition within the transnational anarchist movement in the United States—a movement significantly shaped by immigrant influences, which in turn contributed to the denunciation of anarchism as un-American.⁹

She aligns with Nietzsche and Stirner's view of Christianity as a "slave morality" that demands submission, obedience, and the relinquishing of self-reliance and "is most admirably adapted to the training of slaves, to the perpetuation of a slave society; in short, to the very conditions confronting us to-day [sic!]" ("Failure" 233). This critique extends to what she perceives as the false promises of transcendental salvation, which serve as a tool to uphold the existing oppressive social hierarchies and unjust conditions in the imminent realm: "The reward in heaven is the perpetual bait, a bait that has caught man in an iron net, a strait-jacket which does not let him expand or grow" ("Failure" 238). By framing subjugation as a virtue and assuring the impoverished and disenfranchised that their reward will come in a transcendental sphere, Christianity becomes a stabilizing force for existing power structures, rather than a vehicle for liberation.

Goldman locates the failure of Christianity primarily in its ethics of compassion, which she argues reinforce passivity rather than fostering genuine liberation. Her critique extends beyond hegemonic religious narratives to encompass a range of (pseudo-religious) reform movements—"be it New Liberalism, Spiritualism, Christian Science, New Thought, or a thousand and one other forms of hysteria and neurasthenia" ("Failure" 240)—which, in her view, are steeped in the same sentimental ideology of submission.

In a striking parallel to Rose's argument, Goldman contends that any vision of emancipation rooted in Christian values is inherently illusory: "So many otherwise earnest haters of slavery and injustice confuse, in a most distressing manner, the teachings of Christ with the great struggles for social and economic emancipation. The two are irrevocably and forever opposed to each other" ("Failure" 234). Viewing the mythological figure of Christ not as a revolutionary but as a mere "reformer," she argues that he was "ever ready to patch up, to fulfil, to carry on the old order of things," lacking the radical potential "to destroy and rebuild" ("Failure" 239). While Goldman is aware that Nietzsche "opposed the slave-morality idea inherent in Christianity in behalf of a master morality for the privileged few" ("Failure" 232), she saw the ethos of radical individualism he shared with Stirner—whose critique of the "generalized and fixed concept of 'Man'" (Koch 27) similarly resonates

with her own anarchist rejection of essentialism—as a liberatory alternative: “How much more ennobling, how much more beneficial is the extreme individualism of Stirner and Nietzsche than the sick-room atmosphere of the Christian faith” (“Failure” 239).

“The Philosophy of Atheism”

In “The Philosophy of Atheism,” Goldman offers a surprisingly positive assessment of modernity’s impact on practical religion. While she critiques the resilience and adaptability of “the God idea” (“Philosophy” 241) across various historical contexts, she also observes a certain decline of theism as a significant cultural development. She notes the growing skepticism and disinterest in metaphysical beliefs among the general public and especially in its proletarian segments, who increasingly prioritize the tangible problems of their immediate existence: “[T]he masses are growing daily more atheistic, more anti-religious; that they are quite willing to leave the Great Beyond and its heavenly domain to the angels and sparrows” (“Philosophy” 243). The diminishing authority of institutionalized religion has forced Christian denominations to adopt a new form of tolerance, which Goldman views not as a demonstration of strength, but as a desperate attempt to preserve relevance. This “theistic ‘tolerance’” is, for Goldman, a strategy of the upper- and middle-classes, aimed at finding “a common ground to rescue the modern mass from the ‘pernicious’ influence of atheistic ideas” (“Philosophy” 144). She argues that these efforts primarily serve to consolidate the social status quo by maintaining bourgeois privilege under the guise of religious plurality. Emancipatory forces, by contrast, must confront these hegemonic structures in their pursuit of both collective and individual rights—through a philosophically affirmative atheism capable of advancing the nascent secularization of the working masses by offering a constructive narrative of liberation without religion. Goldman articulates this form of atheism with notable belligerence and a distinctly utopian goal.

The philosophy of Atheism has its root in the earth, in this life; its aim is the emancipation of the human race from all God-heads [sic]. [...] Man must break his fetters which have chained him to the gates of heaven and hell, so that he can begin to fashion out of his reawakened and illumined consciousness a new world upon earth.

(“Philosophy” 247)

Unlike Rose a generation earlier, Goldman enjoyed a degree of success in promoting the nexus of resolute anti-religiosity and emancipatory politics. Her ability to engage diverse segments of the public sphere—reaching beyond the core anarchist audience to include “socialists, single-taxers, militant

Wobblies, social reformers, and even parlor liberals” (Glassgold xviii)—enabled her to discursively connect these diverse publics and disseminate the necessity of a nexus between religious critique and the struggle for social rights across various emancipatory activist milieus.

Goldman’s deportation from the United States during the First Red Scare of 1919–1920 serves as a telling indicator of the perceived subversive potential of her activism. Far from being an isolated or arbitrary act, her expulsion—like her persecution under the Comstock Act—was a predictable and targeted maneuver by a political establishment that construed American national identity as fundamentally underpinned by a crypto-theistic moral order. The severity of the response proves the extent to which Goldman’s articulated affirmative atheist and anti-authoritarian ethos was seen as a direct threat to this ideological framework. This also becomes particularly evident in the rhetoric of Attorney General A. Mitchell Palmer, the principal instigator of the so-called “Palmer Raids,” whose language cast political dissidents not merely as ideological opponents but as existential dangers to the moral and spiritual fabric of the nation. That the state responded with such force suggests not only the depth of its anxieties but also the disruptive potency of Goldman’s emancipatory project. In his 1920 polemical defense of his policies, “The Case Against the ‘Reds,’” published in *The Forum*, Palmer accused the deported “criminal aliens” of having ignited a “blaze of revolution [...] over every American institution of law and order,” with their revolutionary fervor not only “eating its way into the homes of the American workman” but also extending to “its sharp tongues of revolutionary heat [...] licking the altars of the churches” (Palmer 174). As Klug has rightly observed, Palmer’s argument contained not only “nativist and anti-Semitic” but also “strong anti-atheist undertones” (73). Given that both Goldman herself and her ideas were perceived as radical and foreign, her expulsion epitomized the widespread anxieties of the period concerning ideological and cultural infiltration, in which atheism, too, was cast as a hostile, alien, and revolutionary threat.

In sum, the writings of Ernestine L. Rose and Emma Goldman represent the beginning of a radical tradition of pamphleteering in which atheism functions not merely as theological dissent but as a foundational element of emancipatory critique. While Rose, as a pioneering feminist and freethinker, challenged the religious underpinnings of social injustice in the context of mid-nineteenth-century middle-class activism, Goldman extended this critique within an anarchist framework that fused anti-theism with revolutionary agitation. Their polemics reveal that the struggle for liberation—whether reformist or revolutionary—demands a sustained confrontation with the metaphysical ideologies that legitimize oppression.



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Notes

- 1 In terms of his personal religious convictions, Frederick Douglass was more accurately described as a skeptical freethinker than a committed atheist. Politically, however—particularly in the context of his campaign for the abolition of slavery—he adopted a markedly more affirmative stance toward atheism than many of his contemporaries, who remained bound to normative imperatives of anti-atheism. As Cameron observes, Douglass explicitly argued that “people should embrace atheism and religious unorthodoxy rather than support ministers who sanction slavery” (31).
- 2 Doress-Worters draws on the metaphor of the “closeted atheist,” a recurring trope in discussions of American atheism (see also my discussion of Richard Dawkins in Chapter 4 of this book).
- 3 In the following, I quote from the 1881 edition.
- 4 There has been a longstanding antisemitic element in the defamation of atheists in American culture, as Jews “had, since American Enlightenment-bashing began in the 1790s, often been lumped with other religious ‘infidels’ as well as with the French revolutionary brand of atheism” (Jacoby 101).
- 5 For a detailed analysis of the effects of the Haymarket affair on the general public's perception of the workers' movement, see Ferguson (134–138) and Shone (105–116).
- 6 According to Susan Jacoby, Haldeman-Julius's press “was turning out 240,000 Blue Books a day” by the early 1920s and sold over 300 million copies during its 30-year publication period between 1919 and 1949. The series was not limited to freethought pamphlets: “The list included the Bible (like all other old-fashioned freethinkers, Haldeman-Julius had studied it from cover to cover). The Greek classics, Goethe, Shakespeare, Voltaire, Emile Zola, H. G. Wells, and Ingersoll” (Jacoby 265).
- 7 An advertisement on the inside cover of the twelfth issue of *Mother Earth* in February 1916, in which “The Philosophy of Atheism” was first published, was already promoting the pamphlet edition of this text. Released together with “The Failure of Christianity,” it was explicitly presented as a “new anti-religious pamphlet” and was available for purchase at a price of ten cents.
- 8 Besides official archival projects such as the Emma Goldman Papers project at Berkeley, independent left-leaning online archives, such as the *anarchistlibrary.org* and *marxists.org*, play a crucial role in keeping Goldman's texts accessible and in circulation.

- 9 Particularly in her engagement with Nietzsche, Goldman—like many early leftist Nietzscheans—approaches his thinking in a distinctly selective and instrumental manner, emphasizing its anti-traditional, individualistic, and iconoclastic dimensions while deliberately overlooking its anti-egalitarian aspects.

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2 Polemic Proxy Wars

H. L. Mencken and the Scopes Trial

This chapter offers a reassessment of H. L. Mencken's reporting on the 1925 Scopes Trial, framing it as a form of activist anti-religious journalism. It contends that Mencken's articles, originally published in *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, consciously departed from the journalistic ideal of neutrality and were written as polemical interventions that, in critical retrospect, amount to a pamphletary event. These texts, I argue, deploy a distinctly Nietzschean conception of atheism as a rhetorical weapon in the then-contemporary cultural struggle between "fundamentalists" and "modernists." Moreover, the chapter explores the enduring influence of Mencken's writings, which played a crucial role in shaping public memory of the trial, casting it as a symbolic clash between religious fundamentalism and an ostensibly atheistic modernity.

The Scopes "Monkey" Trial—officially *The State of Tennessee v. John Thomas Scopes*—holds great cultural significance as "one of the most important events in the politicization of atheism," (LeDrew 37) particularly in its scientific form, as it centered on the legality of teaching evolution in public schools and a socio-cultural conflict between religious fundamentalism and a scientific worldview. This political dimension was a distinctly American phenomenon, shaped by the nation's exceptional status in the cultural history of Western atheism. As LeDrew observes, it was "largely confined to the United States, where science was frequently attacked by religious forces," in contrast to Western Europe, where such interference remained minimal (LeDrew 37).¹ The Scopes Trial has been the subject of extensive scholarly attention, and there is no need to reiterate its intricate details here (for comprehensive accounts, cf. Rodgers 271–294; Teachout 212–222).² Nevertheless, its historical and cultural significance cannot be overstated. The proceedings were heavily covered by the print media and marked a turning point in American media history as the first court case to be broadcast live via radio across the United States. This unprecedented media exposure transformed the trial into a national spectacle, but it was Mencken's reporting that contributed to its particular cultural relevance, not only because it can be seen as a paradigmatic example of activist journalism but also because of its lasting impact on the debate on the status of religion in American public discourse.

Between June 15 and September 14, 1925, Mencken published a series of 16 highly polemical articles in *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, offering a sharp commentary on the lead-up to, proceedings of, and immediate aftermath of the trial. These articles were concluded by a caustic obituary of William Jennings Bryan, Mencken's ideological adversary, who died just days after the trial's conclusion. While originally appearing as serialized newspaper pieces, the texts form a coherent and sustained critique, evidencing a deliberate rhetorical strategy that transcends their initial journalistic format. Despite their origin in what is essentially a transient medium, the articles remained accessible to the public for decades and were later anthologized—often selectively and with little regard for their original context—in widely circulated collections of Mencken's work, before later circulating online. Their lasting appeal can be attributed not only to the controversy they sparked but also to their stylistic force and satirical acuity. In 2006, Art Winslow edited and compiled these writings in a single volume titled *A Religious Orgy in Tennessee*.

Despite the broad and enduring reception of his reports, they are rarely classified as pamphletary texts. However, if one adopts Monot's definition, which conceptualizes pamphleteering not as a fixed textual genre but as an agitational communicative practice designed to subvert, irritate, and challenge dominant public discourse, Mencken's reporting must, as the following discussion will demonstrate, be understood as embodying these characteristics. His articles did not merely document the trial; they actively shaped its public perception and, by doing so, contributed to one of the most crucial cultural and ideological contestations of the period. Given the significant impact of his reporting on public understandings of the trial, this coverage can be regarded as an exceptionally potent—albeit unconventional—pamphletary event, one that continues to resonate in historical and scholarly discussions.

In that, Mencken certainly occupies a distinctive place in the history of atheistic pamphleteering in the United States, primarily because of the social position from which he wrote.³ Unlike the activists previously examined, Mencken's anti-religious polemics did not originate from grassroots efforts by oppressed groups within the context of emancipatory or progressive social movements. Whereas figures such as Rose and Goldman consistently intertwined their atheistic critiques with broader struggles for justice—grounded in personal experiences of structural marginalization as women, Jews, immigrants, and political dissidents—Mencken articulated his opposition to religion from a markedly different social position. He did not write as someone subjected to systemic disenfranchisement, nor did he identify with any marginal social group. Rather, his outlook was shaped by his membership in the cultural elite and by the privileges conferred by his socio-economic status and professional standing. As a result, his polemics were not animated by solidarity with the oppressed or by a vision of collective liberation. On the contrary, Mencken remained consistently skeptical, and at times overtly dismissive, of the egalitarian ethos underpinning both reformist and revolutionary projects.

He harbored a deep distrust of mass movements and democratic leveling, which he saw as threats to what he perceived as the natural hierarchy of intellect and taste. For Mencken, cultural and intellectual excellence were the preserve of a gifted few, inherently incompatible with the mediocrity he attributed to the preferences and sensibilities of the majority.

Mencken's contempt for what he regarded as the anti-intellectualism of the working and lower middle-class mainstream found its most enduring expression in his coining of the term "booboisie" (Rodgers 215)—a satirical neologism that encapsulated his scathing indictment of mass culture, which he viewed as inherently antagonistic to intellectual advancement and artistic innovation. This elitist attitude also profoundly shaped his interpretation of the Scopes Trial, wherein his critique of religious fundamentalism converged with deeper anxieties concerning social stratification and the erosion of cultural authority. As Michael Hochgeschwender notes, Mencken's "fear of fundamentalists was related to his fear of the troublesome working class, of Catholics and, often enough, of Jews" ("The Scopes Trial" 223), revealing the extent to which his brand of cultural elitism was entangled with a broader distrust of populist energies and the democratization of social hierarchies.⁴ Such attitudes suggest that his interventions cannot be easily characterized as "unofficial" or marginal in nature. On the contrary, Mencken operated from a position of considerable cultural influence. As one of the most visible and prolific public intellectuals in early twentieth-century America, he enjoyed direct and sustained access to the dominant channels of mass communication. Unlike many traditional pamphleteers, who were often dependent upon fragile, economically precarious, and oppositional publication infrastructures, Mencken was embedded within the very institutions that shaped mainstream public discourse.

Despite his elitist sensibilities and his position of socio-cultural privilege, Mencken may nevertheless be considered one of the most unyielding and provocative pamphleteers in the history of American public atheism. His rhetorical strategy—marked by its agitational purpose, combative tone, and what Harrison characterizes as an "outrageous and explosive" style (4)—reveals a deliberate attempt to provoke, unsettle, and challenge the prevailing orthodox norms of his time. Through his self-stylization as a relentless critic of what he perceived to be the growing intrusion of reactionary religiosity into both public discourse and political institutions, Mencken cultivated an image of himself as an anti-religious crusader, wielding satire and polemics as instruments of ideological resistance. As this chapter illustrates, his intervention in the Scopes Trial exemplified this posture. He did not limit himself to the role of detached observer or legal commentator but rather actively reframed the trial as a symbolic battleground in a much larger contest over cultural hegemony and a critical episode in the ongoing struggle between the regressive forces of religious dogma and the advancing, ostensibly rationalist, project of modernity. The cultural memory of the trial in the United States is largely shaped by its portrayal as a quasi-Manichaean conflict between opposing worldviews.

Mencken's rhetoric cast it as a stark binary confrontation: religious dogmatism versus secular critique, science versus superstition, and modernity versus archaism. He reinforced this opposition through culturally and geographically charged contrasts, juxtaposing the American South with the North and depicting rural small towns as bastions of backwardness in contrast to the intellectual vibrancy of urban centers.

Hochgeschwender characterizes this mode of polemical polarization as the "Mencken paradigm," which distills the complex socio-cultural tensions exposed by the Scopes Trial into reductive ideological binaries that serve the larger polemical agenda. Hochgeschwender contends that the social and cultural divisions of the 1920s, particularly those surrounding modernization and social transformation, were "far more varied and fragmented than suggested by the Mencken paradigm." Instead of a simplistic dichotomy in which "pre-modern, irrationally pious rural people confront enlightened, cosmopolitan, secular urbanites," he argues that these divisions often "cut across these groups," thereby challenging the assumptions not only of Mencken but also of some of his ideological opponents ("The Scopes Trial" 222). To fully understand the impact and significance of Mencken's polemical reporting on the discourse of atheism in the United States, it is essential to consider the historical circumstances and discursive conditions framing the ideological battleground that allowed these polemics to become a "pamphletary event."

Mapping the Terrain: The "Battle of Texts" between Modernism and Fundamentalism

The trial and its public perception must be understood as a symptom of the period of transformation and profound social upheaval in the United States following the First World War, characterized by clashes between modernist and anti-modernist forces over cultural, social, and political values. On the conservative side, this era saw a resurgence of religious attitudes most prominently exemplified by the rise of Christian fundamentalism—"a programmatic keyword which, like the concept of totalitarianism in the 1950s, is used less as a scholarly term with a definite meaning and more as a term that stops argument" (Hochgeschwender, "The Scopes Trial" 218)—as a reaction to the challenges of modernity.⁵

This "fundamentalist-modernist controversy" was, as Douglas Carl Abrams phrased it, chiefly "a *battle of texts*, ranging from Scripture and *The Origin of Species* to biology textbooks in public schools, as well as a host of works in modern philosophy and psychology" (2, my emphasis). Within this struggle—a battle fought not only *about* texts but also *with* texts—the literal interpretation of the Bible was pivotal for the fundamentalist faction, which regarded itself as a counterrevolutionary force against what it perceived as the ongoing erosion of biblical authority since the Enlightenment. Central to this

movement were the principles of biblical inerrancy and the absolute truth of revelation, which served as its ideological cornerstones.

In the aftermath of World War I, the religious political right, encouraged by the rise of fundamentalism, sought to capitalize on growing anti-secular sentiments by introducing a series of legislative initiatives aimed at further undermining the already fragile Jeffersonian principle of the “wall of separation between church and state.”⁶ One of the most significant and early examples of such anti-secularist legislation on a state level was the Butler Act, passed in Tennessee in 1925. This law explicitly prohibited “the teaching of the Evolution Theory in all the Universities, Normals and all other public schools of Tennessee,” while also forbidding any instruction that “denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the Bible” and instead promoting the teaching that “man has descended from a lower order of animals” (“The Butler Act”). The liberal American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), concerned about the success of similar anti-secularist measures, sought to challenge the legality of the Butler Act through a landmark court case. To this end, the organization made a public appeal for volunteers willing to intentionally violate the law in order to bring the matter to trial, offering both financial and legal support. Responding to the appeals of liberal advocates, John T. Scopes, a substitute teacher and athletic coach from Dayton, Tennessee, agreed to participate in this pivotal legal challenge, thereby becoming the central figure in a trial that would later come to symbolize the broader national struggle over the teaching of evolution in public schools (Moore 23).

On a formal legal level, the case centered on the constitutionality of a specific state law on education, assessing whether it violated federal constitutional principles of secularism. Culturally, however, it functioned as a proxy battle within the ongoing struggle regarding the status and acceptance of non-religious worldviews in American society, pitting modernist and anti-modernist factions against each other at a time when “Darwinism became a symbol of modernity, despite the fact that the Darwinian version of evolution was still, in reality, not unequivocally accepted by scientists” (Hochgeschwender, “The Scopes Trial” 223). From its inception, the creationist movement, in its various manifestations, has consistently employed the term “Darwinism” in a pejorative sense and this rhetorical framing has allowed its proponents to establish a discursive congruence of evolutionary theory with atheism and other doctrines—such as Marxism (cf. Weinberg 22–24)—effectively weaponizing the term within the broader culture war (Scott 90).⁷ This ideological nexus prompted John Washington Butler, a Tennessee state representative and the instigator of the act later named after him, to publicly portray the proceedings as the symbolic “beginning of a great battle between infidelity and Christianity” (Butler qtd. in Klug 55–56).

Polemicists at War

Amid the politically and culturally charged discursive climate of the time, Mencken, who throughout his career had never been particularly inclined to adhere to the ethos of journalistic impartiality, overtly positioned himself as an active participant in the ideological conflict surrounding the events in Dayton. In his reporting on the trial, he unequivocally aligned himself with the anti-fundamentalist side of the debate, abandoning any pretense of neutrality. In his autobiographical reflections, Mencken described the trial as “the Twentieth Century’s effort to match the Nineteenth’s flood and march” (Mencken, *The Days Trilogy* 544), and in light of this profound imbuing with symbolic significance, it was only fitting that, as Marion Elizabeth Rodgers observes, he approached Dayton not merely as an observer but as “a combatant in what he sincerely took to be a struggle of civilization and science against bigotry and superstition” (Rodgers 273).

His belligerent intentions to engage in the struggle within the broader context of the “battle of texts” between modernists and fundamentalists were not unique to him within this ideological landscape. The two central figures of the Scopes Trial—William Jennings Bryan, representing the prosecution, and Clarence Darrow, defending Scopes—were not only distinguished legal minds but also fervent activists, both renowned for their polemical writings and their unwavering commitment to their respective causes. Bryan, a celebrated orator, veteran of American populism, three-time presidential candidate, and former Secretary of State, emerged as a leading advocate for the anti-evolution movement and one of the most influential figures within the fundamentalist cause. As early as 1921, he had published a pamphlet provocatively titled *The Menace of Darwinism*, which was originally conceived as a chapter for his book *In His Image*, published in 1922. In this fiery polemic, Bryan condemns Darwinism as a speculative doctrine that threatened not only the integrity of the Christian creation narrative but also the moral foundations of society. He vilifies its supporters, referring to them as “cold and clammy materialists” (17) and “pseudo-scientists” (30), labeling Darwinian theory as a dangerous ideological affliction that needed to be contained (51). Darrow, on the other hand, a liberal-progressive defense attorney with a reputation for taking on controversial cases, was also a vocal agnostic who had long engaged in public debates with prominent religious figures, notably since 1919 (cf. Scheidt 106). His advocacy extended beyond the courtroom, as he regularly published pamphlets for Haldeman-Julius’s *Little Blue Book* series.⁸

While Mencken was equally committed to his cause, he regarded his role as fundamentally distinct from that of Darrow or Bryan. For Mencken, the cultural dimension of the conflict took precedence over legal, constitutional, political, or theological considerations. His writings were crafted with the specific aim of securing victory for the anti-fundamentalist position in the proverbial “courtroom of public opinion.” Unlike Darrow and Bryan, who were

engaged in formal legal procedures aimed at addressing juridical secularism, Mencken's polemics were directed at dismantling religious fundamentalism on a cultural level. He viewed fundamentalism as a persistent yet complex adversary—a nemesis with whom he maintained a longstanding ideological antagonism (see Hart)—and the Scopes Trial provided him with the ideal stage upon which to confront and critique this force, offering an opportunity to engage with the broader public through sharp, satirical, and fiercely polemical commentary. As Rodgers astutely observes, “[i]f the Scopes Trial had not existed, H. L. Mencken would have had to invent it” (271).

In his dispatches from Dayton, Mencken deployed three primary discursive and rhetorical strategies: first, the polemical delegitimization of the ideology he sought to discredit; second, the fragmentation and polarization of the public sphere into distinct, opposing audiences; and third, the *ad hominem* discrediting of William Jennings Bryan, whom Mencken viewed as the personal embodiment of the antagonistic ideological position.

Mencken's first rhetorical strategy becomes immediately apparent in his early dispatches, in which he unequivocally rejects the intellectual legitimacy of Christian fundamentalism, particularly the form that adhered to a rigid, archaic scriptural literalism. In his first report from Dayton, dated June 15, 1925, he dismissed any optimistic belief that the escalating cultural conflict might be resolved through compromise, directly challenging the liberal notion that modern science could be reconciled with religious doctrine. With characteristic belligerence, he anticipated “many casualties and much suffering among the optimistic neutrals who strive to compose the controversy—that is, among the gentlemen who believe fondly that modern science and the ancient Hebrew demonology can be reconciled” (Mencken, *Orgy* 3). For Mencken, the rationalist and empirical worldview was irreconcilable with a scripture-based understanding of the world, and he rejected any attempt to synthesize them, such as those made by Enlightenment deists. To underscore the incommensurability of these perspectives, he ridicules the very idea of the Bible's revelatory truth, dismissing its alleged historical accuracy as a form of delusion:

Either Genesis embodies a mathematically accurate statement of what took place during the week of June 3, 4004 BC or Genesis is not actually the Word of God. If the former alternative be accepted, then all modern science is nonsense; if the latter, then evangelical Christianity is nonsense.
(Mencken, *Orgy*, 4)

In this, Mencken sets the stage for his universal critique of religious belief, positioning fundamentalism not only as a particularly extreme phenomenon, but as a particularly dangerous manifestation of a more pervasive religious mindset. His polemical attacks extend beyond evangelicalism, targeting other

religious denominations that he disparages as “more sophisticated cults” (5), recognizing that groups such as Anglicans, Greek Orthodox Christians, Presbyterians, and especially Catholics adopted a more nuanced approach to scripture. Nevertheless, he mocks their reliance on a complex bureaucracy of theologians and exegetes, arguing that even these denominations, despite their interpretative apparatus, failed to resolve the contradictions inherent in the Bible (5–6). While he undoubtedly sees fundamentalist religions as the most politically and socially dangerous in the contemporary moment, his broader concern lies with the enduring power of religious metaphysics in the modern age. The subsequent articles reinforce Mencken’s critique, employing a tone of sarcasm to expose the intellectual shallowness of religious doctrines. He routinely dismisses such beliefs as mere “superstitions” and intellectual “short cuts” (15), characterizing them as convenient but ultimately unsubstantiated epistemological tools that simplify complex worldviews and reduce the need for rigorous intellectual engagement with social, moral, or philosophical issues (a strategy that he, as we will see below, is also guilty of). In Mencken’s view, these religious ideologies were not only intellectually lazy but also dangerous in their insistence on an unquestionable truth claim, providing a false sense of certainty in a world that, by nature, demands nuanced thought and open inquiry. He condemns the widespread anti-intellectualism within religious circles, which fostered an atmosphere of rigid conformity and intolerance toward dissenting views in which “[t]o call a man a doubter [...] is equal to accusing him of cannibalism” (42).

Such portrayals of Bible-centered religiosity as an outdated cultural anachronism—one that any society considering itself enlightened must reject—are neither novel nor unexpected. As a rhetorical strategy, they have been well established in historical-critical and materialist critiques of the Bible within earlier atheist activism and, as later chapters will demonstrate, remained a consistent line of argument through to the New Atheists and contemporary anti-religious movements. While Mencken frequently employs this tactic, often ridiculing supposed biblical truths, such an approach may well represent the bluntest instrument in his rhetorical arsenal.

A crucial factor in shaping the enduring public perception of the Scopes Trial as an epic clash between two fundamentally opposing cultures lies in Mencken’s second rhetorical strategy: the polarization of the public sphere. As previously examined in relation to the “Mencken paradigm,” his communicative approach served to simplify the complexities of social, cultural, and political realities, simultaneously creating a dichotomous framework in which such issues were presented in stark ideological opposition. In this context, Mencken’s depiction of the conflict between anti-modern fundamentalists and modernists not only reinforced the binary opposition but also incorporated a distinct populist element—one that, interestingly, inverts traditional populist dynamics. Historically, political populism has often functioned by constructing an antagonistic divide between “the people,” however they

may be defined, and a power elite or establishment (Roberts 683). Populist discourse typically asserts itself as the voice of a legitimate, authentic, and emancipatory political subject—the people—whose demands are positioned in opposition to a cultural, social, economic, or political elite that is, in any case, alienated from these demands. In contrast, Mencken's portrayal inverts this dynamic. Rather than aligning with the interests of "the people" against an elite establishment, Mencken positioned modernist values, science, and intellectualism as the voices of enlightened progress, in opposition to the perceived ignorance and dogmatism of the fundamentalist masses.

With regard to their target audiences, his polemics rhetorically construct a clear and rigid hierarchy between two sharply demarcated, discursively constructed groups: on the one hand, the modern, urban, educated, and progressive public *to whom he speaks*, and on the other, the rural, uneducated, unenlightened, and irrationally religious segment of American society, *about whom he speaks* with considerable disdain. Mencken's rhetoric rejects any nuanced attempts to talk about a pluralistic society, creating a binary opposition that allows no room for the blurring of these boundaries. In this sense, his polemical approach can be characterized as a form of "populism from above," effectively reversing the traditional logic of political populism. In his quasi-aristocratic worldview, it is not the people who are urged to rise against an oppressive elite, but rather the cultural elite who must defend themselves against what he perceives as the looming tyranny of the masses' ignorance and superstition. This inversion positions Mencken as a defender of intellectual and cultural superiority, casting himself and like-minded individuals as the guardians of reason and progress in the face of what he sees as an encroaching tide of anti-intellectualism and religious dogma. Through this ideological framing, Mencken's polemics elevate the cultural elite as the true bearers of civilization, while simultaneously vilifying those he views as intellectually and culturally inferior.

In consequence, Mencken's polemical style does not merely describe cultural antagonisms—it actively produces them. His rhetorical strategy operates performatively, contributing to the polarization of the public sphere by framing ideological conflict as a clash between inherently incompatible social types. Rather than fostering deliberation or democratic contestation, his pamphletary interventions harden boundaries between groups, encouraging intellectual elites to view large segments of the population not as interlocutors but as cultural antagonists. In doing so, Mencken's rhetoric risks reducing the public sphere to a spectacle of mutual contempt, where persuasion gives way to ridicule and social complexity is flattened into binary opposition. This mode of engagement foreshadows later developments in American culture wars, where public debate becomes a zero-sum struggle between opposing camps.

In his second article from Dayton, dated June 29, 1925, and provocatively titled "Homo Neanderthalensis," Mencken's polarized view of modern

American society becomes more pronounced than in any other text within the Scopes cycle. While retrospective interpretations often regard the article as a sharply discriminatory satire that violates contemporary journalistic ethics (cf. Harrison 4), at the time, it was recognized as a bold and, for some, legitimate contribution to the print media landscape. What is particularly striking about this article is the way in which it exposes Mencken's fundamentally anti-egalitarian vision of society—an outlook that, when viewed in the larger context of his work, is crucial to understanding his deep-seated hostility toward religion.

In this piece, Mencken rejects the fundamental tenets of Enlightenment thinking, particularly the idea that human progress is an inherent and universal good. He challenges the prevailing assumption that the benefits of intellectual and cultural advancement inevitably reach all members of society. Instead, Mencken contends that these advancements are disproportionately concentrated within an educated minority, while “the great masses of men, even in this inspired republic, are precisely where the mob was at the dawn of history” (Mencken, *Orgy* 11–12). For him, the majority of people remain trapped in a state of ignorance, dishonesty, and intellectual inability, incapable of engaging meaningfully with the complexities of modern life and therefore taking refuge in the archaic mythologies of religion.

Following this, Mencken's rhetoric adopts an increasingly malicious and anti-humanitarian tone. He starkly contrasts the “mob,” which he portrays as driven by a “hatred of superiority” (Mencken, *Orgy* 14), with a self-identified intellectual and cultural aristocracy, whom he regards as the true custodians of civilization. For Mencken, society is irreparably divided into two fundamentally antagonistic classes: a small, enlightened elite capable of meaningful intellectual engagement, and a vast majority that, for reasons Mencken deems inherent, finds intellectual exertion painful and, as a result, fosters a profound and hostile resentment toward those who dedicate themselves to such pursuits. He asserts that “the intellectual heritage of the race belongs to the minority, and to the minority only,” while the majority remains either oblivious to this heritage or actively resents its existence (Mencken, *Orgy* 16). He draws a distinct line between the educated few and the unthinking many, reinforcing his belief that the masses, incapable of such engagement, serve as an obstruction to both cultural and intellectual progress. At numerous points, Mencken's rhetoric shifts from dismissive to explicitly dehumanizing, veering toward what might be construed as eliminatory fantasies. He refers to those outside his imagined elite as “immortal vermin” (12) and as “so-called human beings” (16).

This idiosyncratic form of cultural classism, infused with unmistakable social Darwinist overtones, is further elaborated through Mencken's strategic use of spatial imagery. He locates the perceived ochlocratic threat firmly within the provincial countryside, employing his preferred epithet “yokels” to refer to the rural population in a tone of thinly veiled disdain. For Mencken,

this geographical and cultural periphery stands in stark contrast to the modern, cosmopolitan urban centers, which he presents as bastions of intellectual vitality, rationalism, and cultural refinement.

In this framework, the religious organizations spearheading what he mockingly terms the “Tennessee buffoonery” (Mencken, *Orgy* 14)—his phrase for the anti-evolution campaign symbolized by the Scopes Trial—are reduced to little more than “conspiracies of the inferior man against his betters” (13). Here, Mencken characterizes the rural religious establishment as engaged in a deliberate and malicious campaign to suppress intellectual advancement by imposing anti-scientific dogma on the broader public sphere. He suggests that such movements are not born out of sincere conviction but are symptomatic of a deep-seated resentment harbored by the less educated toward those they instinctively recognize as intellectually superior.

Mencken’s pronounced sense of intellectual superiority exemplifies yet another instance of an American religious iconoclast whose worldview was deeply and enduringly informed by European intellectual traditions. Among the most significant influences on his thinking, two figures stand out in particular: the British biologist and staunch advocate of Darwinism, Thomas Huxley, and Friedrich Nietzsche, whose famous proclamation that “God is dead” has—whether despite or precisely because of its semantic openness—become a foundational trope in modern atheist discourse.

Mencken’s lifelong opposition to hegemonic orthodoxies—whether religious, moral, or political—was decisively shaped by his early engagement with Huxley’s work. His introduction to Huxley during adolescence proved to be a formative intellectual experience, one that left an indelible mark on his philosophical orientation:

All of us owe a vast debt to Huxley ... All his life long he flung himself upon authority—when it was stupid, ignorant, and tyrannical. He attacked it with every weapon in his rich arsenal—wit, scorn and above all, superior knowledge. To it he opposed a single thing: the truth as it could be discovered and established—the plain truth that sets men free.

(Mencken qtd. in Rodgers 46)

This eulogy to Huxley, the originator of the term *agnosticism* and the fiercest defender of Darwin in Britain during the nineteenth century, also serves as an idealized self-portrait, reflecting the qualities that Mencken placed at the center of his own public persona: a resolute anti-authoritarian attitude, a superior intellect, an affinity for intellectual confrontation, and a belief in human self-emancipation that he linked not to collective democratization but to an individualist-libertarian ethos.

Mencken’s intellectual debt to Friedrich Nietzsche is deeply intertwined with his German-American heritage and lifelong Germanophilia, and he

played a pioneering role in popularizing the philosopher's ideas in the United States (cf. Ratner-Rosenhagen 53; Steilberg 100–115).⁹

His engagement with Nietzsche extended beyond direct commentary or translation; he integrated key Nietzschean concepts into his critique of American society and culture. As Ratner-Rosenhagen notes, “when Mencken was not writing about Nietzsche, he was borrowing liberally from his artillery of concepts, peppering his own texts with ‘slave morality,’ ‘herd morality,’ ‘ressentiment,’ and ‘will to power’ to articulate his displeasure with American democratic culture” (55). This newly acquired conceptual arsenal profoundly influenced the polemical style of his coverage of the Scopes Trial, a context in which it was put to the test in the midst of intellectual conflict. While Mencken did not make explicit references to Nietzsche in his dispatches, his hierarchical worldview, especially in relation to religious arguments, was clearly informed by these concepts, albeit interpreted with considerable latitude.

The subtle yet significant influence of Nietzschean thought was not only pivotal in shaping Mencken's ideological stance in the Scopes Trial but also played a central role for the opposing side. As Abrams observes, Nietzsche, as the foremost proponent of a philosophy centered on the “death of God,” became a central symbolic figure in the debate between modernists and fundamentalists from its inception. Abrams argues that, following World War I, fundamentalists traced the ideological origins of modernity to recent German intellectual history, which positioned the notorious German iconoclast—characterized by his “militant atheism, underpinned by his naturalism and historicism, which mocked Christianity” (Abrams 88)—as one of their principal adversaries. In their extensive polemical discourse, fundamentalists frequently linked Nietzsche's ideas, albeit through highly interpretative readings, to those of Darwin, regarding both as primary intellectual threats to the cultural hegemony of religion (see *ibid.* 88–93). This dynamic briefly surfaced in the exchanges between Darrow and Bryan during the Scopes Trial, as Mencken observes with his characteristic dry wit in his article of July 17, 1925: “Bryan then proceeded to denounce Nietzsche, whom he described as an admirer of Darwin. Darrow challenged the fact and offered to expound what Nietzsche really taught. Bryan waved him off” (Mencken, *Orgy* 84). This brief yet revealing exchange highlights how Nietzsche became a symbolic figure in this culture war as a representative of an explicitly post-religious modernity.

In addition to his polemical delegitimization of fundamentalism and his rhetorical reduction of the pluralistic American public into two opposing sub-publics—the “superior” minority of cultural and intellectual elites on one side and the gullible “yokels” clinging to an archaic understanding of religion on the other—Mencken employs a third strategy that remains to be examined: the personal delegitimization of his anti-modernist foe. In this context, Mencken deliberately invokes the transgressive potential of the pamphletary tradition, which—unlike ostensibly more legitimate forms of intellectual debate—has

long regarded personal insult as a legitimate rhetorical strategy. Accordingly, his attack is directed *ad hominem*—and, given the circumstances, *postmortem*—at William Jennings Bryan, who died unexpectedly in Dayton on July 26, 1925, just four days after the Scopes Trial verdict.

Disregarding the time-honored ethical principle *de mortuis nil nisi bene*, Mencken published a sardonic obituary of Bryan in *The Baltimore Evening Sun* on July 27, 1925, just one day after his death. Simply titled *Bryan*, the piece portrayed him not primarily as a principled crusader for evangelical Christianity but as a man consumed by personal grievances against the modern world. Mencken characterized Bryan's faith as secondary to his deeper motivation: resentment. "Evangelical Christianity," he wrote, "as everyone knows, is founded upon hate," yet Bryan was "an evangelical Christian only by sort of afterthought." Rather than being driven solely by religious conviction, Bryan, in Mencken's view, sought retribution against the liberal urban elites who had humiliated him, particularly through his failed presidential campaigns

The men of the cities had destroyed him and made a mock of him; now he would lead the yokels against them. [...] The hatred in the old man's burning eyes was not for the enemies of God; it was for the enemies of Bryan.

(Mencken, *Orgy* 105)

In October 1925, in an article written for *The American Mercury* titled "To Expose a Fool," Mencken delivered a scathing indictment of Bryan's political and cultural legacy, branding him as a ruthless demagogue and "the most sedulous flycatcher in American history," whose ideological quarry was not the common housefly but "Homo neanderthalensis" (Mencken 127). He portrayed Bryan as the instigator of a politically and culturally perilous wave of fundamentalist activism, one that he believed threatened everything he considered to be progress in American society. The metaphorical urgency with which Mencken framed his critique was stark:

It is too early, it seems to me, to send the firemen home; the fire is still burning on many a far-flung hill, and it may begin to roar again at any moment. The evil that men do lives after them. Bryan, in his malice, started something that will not be easy to stop, in ten thousand country towns his old heelers, the evangelical pastors, are propagating his gospel, and everywhere the yokels are ready for it.

(Mencken 133–134)

In conclusion, Mencken's commitment to the modern project of emancipation was deeply intertwined with his very personal notion of autonomy, which he framed as the liberation of the exceptional individual—echoing Nietzsche's *Übermensch*—from the constraints of what he perceived as the slave morality

of religious orthodoxy. Mencken's journalism embodies a pronounced agitational style, advocating freedom *from* religion not only as a positive ideal but also as a necessary condition for the preservation of cultural progress. He regarded the eradication of "old-time religion" as essential to safeguarding American society from cultural decline and the unchecked dominance of the masses. The brief episode of what he termed the "Tennessee Hagiocracy" (130), however grotesque it appeared to him, functioned as a *chiffre*—a symbolic condensation of his fears regarding a normative order that threatened to stifle the forces of modernization and intellectual freedom in the United States.

As has been demonstrated, Mencken's polemical writings left a lasting imprint on both public and scholarly understandings of the Scopes Trial. Although he occupied a privileged position compared to other figures in the history of public atheism, his aesthetic and agitational strategy nonetheless secures him a significant place in the tradition of American atheist pamphleteering. His commentary on the trial stands as a paradigmatic instance of cultural atheism articulated not from the margins but from within the dominant media apparatus. While his elitist disdain for both religion and democratic mass culture complicates any straightforward celebration of his critique, his dispatches played a pivotal role in casting the trial as a symbolic clash between rational modernity and religious reaction. Situated at the intersection of journalism, satire, and pamphleteering, Mencken's writings not only shaped the cultural memory of the Scopes Trial but also expanded the rhetorical repertoire of American atheism in the twentieth century.



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Notes

- 1 In the American cultural and political landscape, the Scopes Trial not only magnified the ideological clash between modernists and fundamentalists but also played a pivotal role in the formation of the nation's first organized activist group for atheism—the American Association for the Advancement of Atheism (AAAA), founded in November 1925. This organization was the brainchild of Charles Lee Smith, a controversial figure known for his racist and antisemitic views, who sought to further his own personal crusade within the larger context of this ongoing cultural war. Smith attracted some national attention in 1928 when he was convicted of blasphemy in Arkansas for publicly displaying a provocative sign in Little Rock that boldly proclaimed: “Evolution is true. The Bible’s a lie. God’s a Ghost.” Following this incident, Smith embarked on a series of largely unsuccessful legal efforts aimed at promoting a radical, secular agenda within American law, hoping to embed a radical form of secularism into the nation’s legislation (cf. Schmidt 253–266; Moore and Kramnick 38–40).
- 2 Moreover, a substantial body of literature exists on the case. Here is a selection of books and journal articles published since the turn of the millennium alone, though this list is likely not exhaustive: Jeffrey P. Moran, *The Scopes Trial: A Brief History with Documents*. Boston: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2002; Edward J. Larson, *Summer for the Gods: The Scopes Trial and America’s Continuing Debate over Science and Religion*. Harvard: Harvard University Press, 2006; George M. Marsden, *Fundamentalism and American Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006; Kary Doyle Smout, *The Creation/Evolution Controversy: A Battle for Cultural Power*. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2012; Adam R. Shapiro, *Trying Biology: The Scopes Trial, Textbooks, and the Antievolution Movement in American Schools*. University of Chicago Press, 2013; Carl Weinberg, *Red Dynamite: Creationism, Culture Wars, and Anticommunism in America*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2021. Brenda Wineapple, *Keeping the Faith: God, Democracy, and the Trial That Riveted a Nation*, New York: Random House, 2024.
- 3 The question arises as to how one should assess the extent of Mencken’s atheism. The absence of an explicit commitment to affirmative atheism has led his biographer, Marion Elizabeth Rodgers, to deny him an atheistic stance, instead categorizing him more as an agnostic (cf. 351). However, when considering the entirety of his statements on religion as an archaic, man-made cultural phenomenon that has historically functioned as a coping strategy for existential and ethnic contingencies—an argument he most prominently presented in his widely read book *Treatise on the Gods* (1930)—he undoubtedly fits into the genealogy of “strong” atheistic pamphleteering examined here.
- 4 Mencken’s antisemitism may not have been a defining feature of his public persona or his career as a journalist, yet it is undeniably present in his posthumously published personal diaries and evidenced by several public remarks made during his lifetime. Scholars continue to debate whether his statements merely reflected the casual prejudices prevalent in his cultural milieu or whether they were indicative of a deeper, more systematic ideological conviction. While some argue that his biases were in line with the dominant social attitudes of his time and class, others contend that they reveal a more troubling dimension of his worldview. Regardless of its origins or intensity, this aspect of his life and work casts a significant shadow over his legacy as an advocate of freethought, intellectual independence, and cultural critique. For a more extensive discussion of this issue, see Rodgers (353–356) and Teachout (286–290).
- 5 The term “fundamentalist” itself has its origins in the pamphlet culture of the early twentieth century, and, according to scholarly consensus, derives from a series of

biblical exegetical tracts titled *The Fundamentals*. These pamphlets, published between 1910 and 1915 by the Testimony Publishing Company of Chicago, played a pivotal role in shaping the ideological contours of religious conservatism in the United States. Ironically, while these texts were crafted to oppose the perceived threat of modernism, they inadvertently introduced modernist ideas—such as Darwinian evolution—into the American public discourse (see Teachout 223). This paradoxical contribution demonstrates the complexity of the movement: while fundamentalists rejected Enlightenment ideals and various manifestations of modernity, their ideological response to contemporary challenges was, as LeDrew contends, “distinctly modern.” Fundamentalism, in its attempt to defend traditional religious beliefs, employed the totalizing and utopian rhetoric typical of modern political ideologies. In this sense, it sought to reshape society around an absolutist conception of truth, mirroring the aspirations of radical movements that aimed to create a new social order based on unyielding ideological certainties (LeDrew 5).

- 6 Thomas Jefferson had advocated for the establishment of a secular state, which, as he famously stated in his *Letter to the Danbury Baptists* from January 1, 1802, would erect “a wall of separation between church and state” (Jefferson).
- 7 The ideological nexus between Darwinism and atheism, as constructed within fundamentalist discourse, is vividly exemplified in E. J. Pace’s iconic caricature *The Descent of the Modernists* (1922), which continues to be widely reproduced in American history textbooks. The caricature visually represents a perceived moral and spiritual decline, one that is initiated by the acceptance of modern critiques of biblical truths and ultimately culminates in atheism, which is depicted as the lowest and most degenerate point of human existence. Although Darwinism is not directly illustrated, it is subtly referenced through the step labeled “Man not made in God’s image” and, more significantly, in the caricature’s title, a clear and deliberate parody of Darwin’s *The Descent of Man, and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871). This intertextual reference not only connects evolutionary theory to the broader narrative of social and cultural degeneration but also reinforces the cultural anxieties of many adherents of orthodox religious beliefs in the early twentieth century. In this way, Pace’s caricature encapsulates the deep-seated fear that the acceptance of Darwinian evolution would lead to the erosion of moral and spiritual values, further cementing the association between Darwinism and atheism in the fundamentalist imagination.
- 8 Some of them with a distinctly anti-religious character: *Why I Am an Agnostic* (1929); *Absurdities of the Bible* (1931).
- 9 In 1908, he authored *The Philosophy of Friedrich Nietzsche*, the first comprehensive English-language introduction to Nietzsche’s thinking. This was followed by *The Gist of Nietzsche* (1910), a collection of aphorisms, and a 1920 translation of *The Antichrist*. Additionally, Mencken regularly contributed essays and articles to newspapers and journals, further disseminating Nietzschean philosophy and solidifying his role in shaping its reception in early twentieth-century America.

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3 Madalyn Murray O’Hair and the Polemical Performance of Radical Atheism

During the peak of the Cold War, at a time when public discourse in the United States was becoming increasingly saturated with religious rhetoric, Madalyn Murray O’Hair (1919–1995) developed a distinct mode of atheist activism that leveraged both traditional and emerging media. This chapter examines O’Hair’s pamphleteering, with particular attention to her text *Why I Am an Atheist*—originally based on a 1961 speech—and her rise as one of the most prominent public atheists of the twentieth century. Situating her work within the heightened anti-atheist climate of the era, the chapter explores how O’Hair deliberately cultivated a provocative public persona, not only to contest the cultural and legal marginalization of atheists but also to reposition atheism as a fundamental civil rights issue. She strategically exploited the formal affordances of pamphleteering—its polemical tone, belligerent attitude, and wide distributive potential—to aggressively promote an affirmative, unapologetic atheism. By framing religious disbelief as a matter of civic equality rather than mere philosophical dissent, she challenged dominant narratives that equated religiosity with patriotism and civic legitimacy. Through a multi-platform media strategy spanning print, television, and radio, O’Hair extended the reach of atheist critique beyond the printed page. Her interventions marked a significant shift in the tradition of atheist pamphleteering—transforming it into a more dynamic, performative, and confrontational form of public activism.

In 1961—exactly one century after Ernestine L. Rose first delivered *A Defence of Atheism* as a public lecture in Boston, introducing affirmative atheism as both a cornerstone of civic discourse and a philosophical foundation for social reform—Madalyn Murray O’Hair addressed a “hall [...] jammed with students” (O’Hair, *Why I Am an Atheist* 1) at the University of Maryland. Like Rose’s speech, O’Hair’s lecture gained widespread circulation in pamphlet form, reinforcing the historical continuity of printed atheistic polemics as a means of public persuasion.¹ At the outset of her polemic, programmatically titled *Why I Am an Atheist*, O’Hair presented herself to her audience with the agitational passion of a crusader, portraying herself as an anti-religious messianic figure determined to liberate American society from the crypto-theistic

and profoundly anti-atheist framework of its hegemonic culture: “My name is Madalyn Murray O’Hair. I am an Atheist. I am a bit more than that—an Atheist. I am, in fact, *the* Atheist. The Atheist who made Americans stop to take a little stock of their accepted values” (O’Hair, *Why I Am an Atheist* 5; emphasis in the original).

Given the notoriety O’Hair garnered during her years of activism in the United States, this somewhat hyperbolic polemical self-assessment is not entirely unwarranted. Through her radical and attention-grabbing anti-religious advocacy, she secured an unprecedented level of public visibility for an atheist, establishing herself as “American atheism’s leading proponent, educator, spokesperson, and symbol” (Le Beau, *The Atheist* 2). Unlike many secular public intellectuals who approached the topic of the relationship of religion and state with scholarly detachment, O’Hair fully embraced her role as a public pariah, performing it with evident enthusiasm and defiance. Her biographer, Bryan F. Le Beau, describes her as an activist with a radically nonconformist teleology, “a ‘mover and shaker’ who struggled against the cultural and political consensus on many subjects” (Le Beau, *The Atheist* 2). Following in the tradition of figures such as Ernestine L. Rose and Emma Goldman, O’Hair engaged in activism that extended beyond atheism, advocating for second-wave feminism, opposing the U.S. military interventions in Korea and Vietnam, condemning atmospheric nuclear testing, and speaking out against the suppression of rights for Algerians and Black South Africans. Additionally, she championed the rights of migrant workers, foster care recipients, detainees in correctional facilities, and juvenile offenders (Le Beau, *Most Hated Woman* 160). However, what distinguished O’Hair from her predecessors was that she did not merely use anti-religious rhetoric as a tool to critique institutional oppression that was overtly or covertly sanctioned by religious doctrine. Instead, she positioned atheism itself as the central battleground in a broader struggle for civil rights. The biographical sketch in *Why I Am an Atheist* explicitly frames her activism as a “fight for the civil libertarian rights of American atheists” (O’Hair, *Why I Am an Atheist* x), presenting atheists as a systematically oppressed minority within an anti-atheist American cultural landscape. For O’Hair, this struggle was not simply about securing legal recognition for nonbelievers but about challenging the very foundations of a crypto-theistic culture that sought to marginalize and silence them. Through her activism, she transformed atheism from a private conviction into a public identity, demanding that it be recognized as a legitimate and protected position within American society.

O’Hair thus represents a new phenomenon in the cultural history of public atheism in the United States. While she stands in a sociopolitical tradition of earlier anti-religious polemicists, sharing their critique of the dominant anti-atheist hegemony and their analysis of how religious narratives perpetuate social and political inequality, she also departs from them in significant ways. Unlike many of these predecessors, whose arguments remained largely

confined to secular activist circles and counterpublics already predisposed to religious skepticism, O'Hair actively sought to bring hard atheistic ideas into the broader mainstream. This effort was facilitated in part by the evolving media landscape of the latter half of the twentieth century, which provided her with new platforms to reach audiences beyond traditionally irreligious enclaves. In the 1960s and 1970s, O'Hair established herself as a controversial and polarizing media figure, revered by a small, progressive segment of the audience but sharply criticized by the mainstream public. She embraced her role as a bogeywoman, actively contributing to the controversies surrounding her. Her public appearances included numerous radio and television shows, ranging from Phil Donahue's program to Johnny Carson's late-night show to the talk show of William F. Buckley, the godfather of modern American conservatism.² Additionally, she served as a guest speaker at various universities, where she was warmly received by supporters of the 1960s student movement, thanks to her subversive positions and, not least, her opposition to American involvement in the Vietnam War (see Le Beau, *The Antichrist* 136–140).

Yet, despite—or because of—her unprecedented visibility, her challenge to hegemonial religious narratives was met with fierce opposition, and her ideas struggled to gain widespread traction within the public sphere. Her confrontational approach, while effective in garnering attention, often reinforced prevailing stereotypes about atheism rather than dismantling them. In this respect, O'Hair's public advocacy not only involuntarily reinforced the persistent barriers to mainstream acceptance of atheistic perspectives in American culture but also anticipated some of the developments regarding the “New Atheism” in the early 2000s.

Her public image was profoundly shaped by the sharp, sardonic, and polemical style through which she propagated her opposition to religious influence in public life. Her rhetorical approach, deeply rooted in orality and performativity, was a key element of her communication strategy. In her speeches, writings, and media appearances, she employed an uncompromising and often sarcastic tone, using ironic rhetoric to challenge the entrenched position of religion within American political and social structures. Addressing her audiences in an intentionally vernacular mode, she made her arguments accessible to a wide demographic, consciously eschewing the formal intellectualism that characterized academic atheist discourse. As her biographer Bryan F. Le Beau notes, “[h]er use of foul language shocked people” while “her message was always accessible even to the minimally educated” (Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 2). This popular—some might say populist—approach not only broadened her appeal but also accentuated the performative dimension of her activism. Her numerous television appearances, in particular, showcased an almost theatrical intensity, reinforcing her reputation as an outspoken and combative figure. The fervor with which she attacked both religious institutions and the deeply embedded theological assumptions underpinning American civic identity

provoked strong reactions. Her relentless and widely publicized critique of the religious grammar of American culture and society led to widespread vilification, culminating in *Life* magazine's now-infamous description of her as "the most hated woman in America" (Howard).

A Specter Haunting ...: The "Spiritual Cold War" and the New American Civil Religion

The intensity of the antagonistic reactions toward O'Hair's atheistic polemics and the controversies surrounding her public persona must be understood within the context of a further period of resurgence of religious self-identification in American public life. By the time O'Hair emerged as a prominent activist in the early 1960s, the ideological framework of the public sphere had already been profoundly shaped by the preceding decade—the formative years of the Cold War. The 1950s had witnessed an unprecedented reinforcement of the longstanding association between national identity and religious consciousness, with religious belief increasingly positioned as a defining characteristic of American patriotism. Prior to this shift, a more pluralistic ideological balance existed between secularists and religious liberals, both of whom broadly accepted that, while religion should not directly dictate political decision-making, it maintained a legitimate presence in the public sphere (cf. Jacoby 313). However, this fragile consensus disintegrated in the aftermath of the Second World War, as religious rhetoric became increasingly intertwined with the political discourse of anti-communism. Against this backdrop, O'Hair's uncompromising atheism was not merely an ideological challenge but a direct provocation to the emerging national consensus that framed religiosity as an essential component of American democratic values. Her activism, therefore, did not simply contest religious influence in public affairs—it directly confronted the Cold War-era construction of American identity itself.

Although the Truman administration had already embraced the concept of a "spiritual Cold War" (Ruotsila 105), Dwight D. Eisenhower emerged as its most significant symbolic figure. A staunch anti-communist, Eisenhower was deeply religious in his personal life and formally converted to Presbyterianism in 1953, making him the only U.S. president to be baptized while in office, an event that marked "a new era of public religiosity in American life" (Inboden 257). Under Eisenhower's leadership, the public sphere became increasingly saturated with Christian symbolism through political initiatives such as the establishment of the National Prayer Breakfast, the adoption of "In God We Trust" as the national motto and its inscription on currency, and the insertion of "one nation, under God" into the Pledge of Allegiance. As Inboden notes, "the Eisenhower Administration oversaw the establishment of a *new American civil religion*" (257, emphasis mine), an endeavor designed to

equip American society with the ideological tools necessary to counter the perceived threat of “godless” or “atheist communism.” This vision not only reinforced the religiously infused patriotism that has long been integral to the United States’ national identity but also pushed it to the brink of Christian nationalism, surpassing the crypto-theistic identity narrative described by Bellah and others. Eisenhower himself articulated this fusion of religion and national identity in unequivocal terms:

Without God, there could be no American form of Government, nor an American way of life. Recognition of the Supreme Being is the first—the most basic—expression of Americanism. Thus, the Founding Fathers saw it, and thus, with God’s help, it will continue to be.

(Eisenhower)

This dynamic was particularly evident during the Second Red Scare, when the entrenched political paranoia surrounding communism reached an unprecedented intensity. This period saw not only the aggressive enforcement of public loyalty pledges but also the widespread practice of blacklisting, the criminalization of political dissent, and the systemic persecution of individuals suspected of ideological deviation. The anti-communist campaign—spearheaded by notorious conservative figures such as Joseph McCarthy and a young Richard Nixon, with strong support from the religious right—did not merely present communism as a geopolitical adversary but framed it as fundamentally antithetical to the moral and civic principles underpinning the “American project.” Frequently labeled “atheistic communism,” it was depicted as inherently anti-American, positioning the United States as a divinely ordained bulwark against its spread both at home and abroad (Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 11). In this context, the Cold War catalyzed a profound revitalization and more explicit articulation of the symbiotic relationship between religion and national identity. While the crypto-theistic social imaginary had long been an implicit feature of American exceptionalism, it was now made an explicit ideological pillar and systematically woven—both propagandistically and institutionally—into official narratives defining the nation’s character. This ideological shift extended far beyond the realm of *realpolitik*, as the United States’ self-conception as a “redeemer nation” increasingly took on millennial overtones, embedding religious rhetoric into the very fabric of its geopolitical mission (Le Beau, *The Atheist*, 12). Consequently, the Cold War ceased to be perceived as a purely political or economic struggle between competing superpowers and was instead imbued with metaphysical significance, reframed as an existential, Manichaean battle between the forces of divine providence and those of non-religious nihilism.

This fusion of religious and nationalistic discourses reached its apex in the early Cold War years, when American religiosity became inextricably linked

to its anti-communist stance. As Thomas Aiello observes, “[m]id-twentieth-century America clung to the Manifest Destiny of earlier generations, claiming a superiority and godliness diametrically opposed to Communist claims of superiority and godlessness.” The ideological confrontation between the two blocs was no longer understood merely as a contest between political systems but was instead “perceived as a religious battle with a religious foe, rather than a political battle with a collectivist answer to capitalism” (Aiello). The integration of longstanding notions of American exceptionalism with an explicitly religious crusader mentality further solidified a normatively charged and ideologically rigid understanding of what Aiello calls “Americanism.” However, this sacralization of national identity came at a significant cost, as this “Americanism that categorically included religious belief dispossessed a disbelieving minority in a nation whose First Amendment had consistently been interpreted as offering freedom of and from religion” (Aiello). The establishment of this new American civil religion not only reinforced the cultural marginalization of atheists but also contributed to the rise of what might be termed a hauntological atheism, whereby the evocation of an atheistic adversary—portrayed as an existential threat to the moral order—provoked an intensified public religiosity. As Inboden notes, “no doubt the specter of an atheistic foe unleashing a global apocalypse prompted Americans to prayer—in pews and pulpits, and also in the public square” (Inboden 258).

Madalyn Murray O’Hair as America’s Antichrist: The Creation of a Public Persona

It was in the cultural climate of this “spiritual” Cold War that O’Hair emerged as a controversial public figure, first gaining national attention through her involvement in the *Murray v. Curlett* case of 1963.³ This landmark First Amendment case—ironically reversing the ideological coordinates of the *Scopes Trial*—resulted in the prohibition of mandatory prayer in public schools (for detailed accounts of the trial, see Dierenfield; Le Beau, *Most Hated Woman*, 162–166; for O’Hair’s own retrospective account, see O’Hair, “The Matter of Prayer”). The extensive media coverage surrounding the case brought her national prominence, which she strategically used to further her activism. O’Hair’s campaign against state-sanctioned religious practices placed her in direct opposition to the dominant *zeitgeist*, shaped by the consolidation of civil religion in Cold War America. Her activism centered on securing the *negative* freedom of citizens—freedom *from* religious influence in public institutions—also beyond the sphere of education. As Klug astutely observes, the term “public” in the culture wars surrounding American secularism has always carried a dual meaning: it refers both to the public sphere as a space for discourse, which is “open and perceptible,” and to the governmental public institutions. However, in matters of religious norms, these meanings

diverge significantly. The removal of compulsory religious observance from public institutions did not equate to a broader prohibition of religious expression in public life, yet O'Hair's activism was frequently framed as an attack on religion itself and the fundamental right to practice it (Klug 80).

Much of O'Hair's notoriety can be attributed to her commanding personal charisma and her strategic ability to manipulate media attention. In the wake of the Supreme Court's decision on *Murray v. Curlett*, press coverage overwhelmingly fixated on her, constructing a narrative in which she was depicted as the singular force behind the removal of prayer and Bible readings from American public schools. This portrayal, though somewhat reductive, solidified her status as the nation's most infamous atheist. Rather than attempting to temper this perception, O'Hair actively embraced her role as a public antagonist to America's religious mainstream, deliberately crafting an image that defied the dominant expectations of religious conformity. Through her outspoken rhetoric, calculated provocations, and relentless self-promotion, she positioned herself not merely as an activist but as an iconoclast, challenging the deeply entrenched association between religiosity and national identity.

Beyond her legal battles, O'Hair played a pivotal role in unifying the previously fragmented and loosely organized atheist movement in the United States, transforming it into a more cohesive and politically engaged force. In 1963, she founded *American Atheists*, an organization that quickly became a central platform for advancing anti-religious positions and advocating for the protection of individual autonomy from religious influence in both public and private life. Unlike earlier secularist, rationalist, and humanist organizations, which tended to frame their advocacy in more moderate or philosophical terms, *American Atheists* was the first organization in the United States to explicitly champion affirmative atheism. It also actively promoted the rights of "hard" atheists—those who not only lacked belief in a deity but also opposed religious influence in civic affairs—thereby marking "the true beginning of a movement for atheism in the contemporary sense, with activism largely framed by minority discourse, and a clear entry into the political sphere" (Le Drew 106). By unapologetically foregrounding atheism as a legitimate identity category in need of social and legal recognition, O'Hair's organization sought to shift public discourse away from the assumption that religious belief was a normative and default component of American identity. This legacy remains evident in *American Atheists'* ongoing activism. Today, the organization continues to position itself as a civil rights group dedicated to fostering societal acceptance of atheism and challenging the systemic biases that marginalize nonbelievers. Its stated mission is "to create an environment where atheism and atheists are accepted as members of our nation's communities and where casual bigotry against our community is seen as abhorrent and unacceptable" ("Our Vision").

The degree of O'Hair's anti-religious antagonism, as well as the agitational intensity with which she pursued her cause, represented a radical

departure from earlier secularist activism in the United States. Unlike many of her predecessors, who often framed their advocacy in terms of rational inquiry, scientific skepticism, or the constitutional principle of church-state separation, O'Hair advanced a far more combative stance—one that not only rejected religious belief but actively sought to delegitimize religion as a social and ideological force. She was, as Klug notes, “actually *against* religion—maybe even as much as religious people were *against* atheism” (Klug 80, emphases in the original).

What rendered O'Hair's brand of atheism a significant public phenomenon was not only the radicalism of her anti-religious stance but also her ability to disseminate atheistic polemics into the mass media with unprecedented reach and effectiveness. Over the decades of her activism, she systematically expanded her influence across a diverse range of media platforms, ensuring that her message reached audiences far beyond the traditional print-based pamphleteering that had long been the primary mode of atheist advocacy.

Similar to other bottom-up forms of social activism, the development of an alternative media infrastructure proved to be a crucial factor at the beginning. Her founding of the American Atheist Press had provided a dedicated platform for the publication and dissemination of explicitly anti-religious literature, facilitating the emergence of a counterpublic that challenged the dominance of religious narratives in American cultural and political life. The press's flagship periodical, *American Atheist: A Journal of Atheist News and Thought*, founded in 1971, became a key forum for intellectual and polemical engagements with religious ideology, while its broader publishing efforts encompassed pamphlets, tracts, and annotated editions of classic secularist works, including Thomas Paine's *The Age of Reason*. O'Hair's own contributions to this multifaceted activist publishing effort ranged from short pamphlets—often adapted from public lectures and bearing provocative titles such as *Atheists: The Last Minority* and *An Atheist Looks at Woman and Religion*—to full-length books, including *What on Earth Is an Atheist* (1971) and *An Atheist Epic* (1989), the latter providing a comprehensive account of her legal battles to remove religious practices from public education.

What marked a departure from the established tradition of pamphleteering was the extension of its strategies beyond the conventional dual approach of public speaking before live audiences and disseminating theses through print media within a counter-hegemonic media ecology. In this context, O'Hair has to be seen as an innovative figure in the media history of pamphleteering, as she strategically embraced the new broadcast infrastructure of the 1970s, recognizing the growing influence of cable television and radio in shaping public discourse. She launched programs such as *American Atheist [Television] News Forum* and the *American Atheist Radio Series*, using these platforms to engage directly with geographically dispersed audiences in real time, thereby transforming atheistic polemics from a primarily print-based endeavor into a more dynamic, performative, and widely accessible media phenomenon.

No atheist activist before O'Hair had attained a comparative level of public visibility or exerted such a profound influence on mainstream discourse. Her ability to transform atheism from a marginalized intellectual position into a widely discussed cultural and political issue was, in large part, a consequence of her mastery of media spectacle. By skillfully navigating the dynamics of televised and broadcast mass communication, she ensured that atheism was no longer confined to the relatively insular circles of intellectual, secularist, and activist counterpublics but instead became a subject of national debate. Through her confrontational rhetoric, calculated provocations, and highly performative media appearances, O'Hair compelled the American public to engage with atheism in a way that had not been previously possible. Her strategic use of the mass media, particularly television, demonstrated a keen awareness of the growing importance of attention economies in shaping public discourse. She understood that visibility was power and that securing a presence in the media landscape would enable her to amplify her message far beyond the reach of traditional secularist pamphleteering.

This relationship between O'Hair and the media, however, was deeply reciprocal. While she benefited from the exposure television and print journalism provided—using them as platforms to disseminate her radical critique of religion—the media, often driven by sensationalism and the pursuit of controversy, capitalized on her subversive persona for their own ends.⁴ Her willingness to embrace public controversy cemented her status as the embodiment of atheistic defiance in Cold War America, a figure who, in the eyes of her detractors, came to represent nothing less than the nation's "anti-Christ" (cf. Dierenfeld 72).

Why I Am an Atheist: Atheism as an Identity

Given O'Hair's flamboyant and performative media persona, a printed pamphlet such as *Why I Am an Atheist* may initially seem like an anachronistic artifact of an earlier era of activist communication, standing in contrast to the emerging landscape of televised debate and media spectacle. Like the polemical writings of Ernestine L. Rose and Emma Goldman, O'Hair's text originated as a spoken lecture before it was printed, following a well-established model of public advocacy that dates back to the Enlightenment. Nevertheless, it remains essential to analyze it as a central programmatic manifesto in which O'Hair articulates the philosophical foundations of her rejection of religious metaphysics, positioning atheism not merely as a personal conviction but as a crucial means of emancipation for both individuals and society as a whole.

In the introduction to the *Second Revised Edition* of *Why I Am an Atheist*, published in 1991, which serves as the foundation for the following discussion, O'Hair reflects on the remarkable reach of her speech, while the edition itself—still available for purchase as a printed pamphlet for \$8 through the

online shop of *American Atheists*—stands as a nostalgic media artifact in an era dominated by digital distribution.⁵ In this introduction, O'Hair expresses her amazement regarding the text's lasting public impact following its initial delivery in Maryland:

Later I was astonished that I could use the same speech over and over again at some of the most prestigious universities and have the same reactions. During the next ten years I wrote, and delivered, other speeches—but this was a perennial favorite, and I knew that I could give it anytime, anywhere and draw the same astonishing reactions.

(O'Hair, *Why I Am an Atheist* 1)⁶

These reactions manifested in high demand from student audiences—the speech's original addressees—but also extended to the broader readership of its printed version, which went beyond the initially intended critical-student counterpublic of the early 1960s, a period whose level of political mobilization was not yet comparable to that of the decade's later years. O'Hair herself acknowledged that there continued to be “quite a demand for this little booklet” (2). Indeed, prior to the 1991 edition—which she personally sanctioned as the definitive version—the text had already gone through six slightly differing print editions, attesting to its persistent relevance and public interest.

The central tenets of O'Hair's atheistic views can be read as a synthesis of ideas that had already been articulated within earlier emancipation movements with an anti-religious dimension. These include a historical-critical rejection of the truth claims of holy scriptures and a materialist rejection of the supernatural, which encompasses a firm denial of the possibility of the existence of a divine being. On the level of rhetoric, however, she employed a style that bore a closer resemblance to an amplified version of Goldman's blunt aggressiveness than to Rose's striking yet comparatively measured sarcasm regarding the crypto-theistic tendencies of her fellow freethinkers or to Mencken's aristocratic intellectual fencing against the perceived “buffoonery” of rural “yokels.” Unlike these predecessors, who often tempered their critiques with wit or strategic irony, O'Hair adopted an unrelentingly confrontational tone, positioning herself as an unwavering opponent of religious belief and its influence on public life.

In *Why I Am an Atheist*, she dismisses biblical mythology not merely as anachronistic but as wholly untenable from the perspective of a modern, enlightened, and rational individual. Engaging in the well-established tradition of exposing the internal contradictions and implausibility of religious doctrine, she ridicules “these ancient fables” as patently “silly,” going so far as to label the concept of the virgin birth “an insult to you and me” (6); she also indicts religious institutions for their historical complicity in violence and oppression. The Catholic Church comes under particular scrutiny, as O'Hair

condemns its historical abuses, noting that its so-called "truth was to exterminate hundreds of thousands of persons in the Inquisition" (12).

What sets her work apart from her predecessors is her emphasis on the marginalization of atheists in American society, which she asserts is evident in external societal discrimination as well as in the internalized self-denial of nonbelievers, who often adopt euphemistic labels to conceal their atheistic convictions. This phenomenon, she argues, arises from the dominant cultural hegemony of anti-atheism in the United States. O'Hair forcefully critiques this dynamic in her aforementioned affirmative self-positioning as "*the* Atheist" [emphasis in the original], explicitly rejecting alternative labels such as "agnostic," "rationalist," or "humanist," which, she contends, are adopted out of fear of social reprisal. Her statement—"And isn't it an indictment against our society that we who do not believe—we nonbelievers of all stripes—must hide behind certain names since reprisals and sanctions would be put into effect against us if we said what we really believe?"—serves as a powerful expression of her view that atheists should be regarded as an oppressed socio-cultural group, compelled to obscure their true identity to avoid ostracism (5). By drawing attention to this enforced self-concealment, O'Hair draws an implicit parallel between the experience of atheists and that of other marginalized groups, for example "closeted" homosexuals, who similarly engage in self-denial to navigate a hostile social environment. This analogy draws a connection between atheism within the larger discourse of the suppression of minority identities and the multifaceted civil rights struggle that began to gain momentum in the 1960s. In doing so, O'Hair challenges the reductive assumption that religious disbelief is merely an abstract intellectual position, presenting it instead as a socially charged and politically contested identity. Her critique serves as an explicit indictment of the deeply ingrained normative expectation that individuals must subscribe to some form of civil religion to attain full cultural legitimacy. However, a direct attack on this foundational norm could not have been voiced through conventional intellectual channels, which are structurally predisposed to preserve the ideological orders they claim to interrogate. Instead, O'Hair mobilizes the discursive affordances of pamphleteering—adapted to the media ecologies and communicative logics of her time—to confront the most recent iteration of normative anti-atheism in Cold War America. It is precisely the belligerent logic of pamphleteering, with its rhetorical transgressiveness and unapologetically confrontational stance, that enables her to articulate her anti-hegemonic ideas and create space for alternative social, political, and cultural positions. By adopting this mode, O'Hair does not merely advocate for atheism as a private belief or philosophical position; she forcefully propels it into public visibility as a counter-hegemonic identity, demanding cultural recognition and political relevance in a landscape historically structured to marginalize religious dissent.

Beyond this enduring historical pattern, O'Hair directly engages with the specific cultural and ideological landscape of her historical moment—the

Cold War that was, as previously discussed, framed in explicitly spiritual terms. She positions her rejection of religious metaphysics within the well-established tradition of scientific materialism and asserts its validity as a worldview rooted in empirical inquiry, rational analysis, and a commitment to scientific reasoning. At the same time, she demonstrates an acute awareness of the ideological weight that the term “materialism” carried in Cold War America, where it had been imbued with strong political connotations and closely linked to communism in the public imagination.⁷ In *Why I Am an Atheist*, she directly challenges the assumption that the two concepts were synonymous:

We accepted the technical philosophy of materialism. Aha! you think—materialism, that is a dirty word, you are communists! We are like hell! Materialism has been around for over six thousand years and Marxist communism is not even a hundred years old. Materialism is a valid philosophy that cannot be discredited.

(8–9)

By disentangling scientific materialism from the ideological framework of anti-communist rhetoric, she seeks to reclaim it as a legitimate and historically grounded philosophical position. In framing her argument, O’Hair situates materialism within a longstanding intellectual dichotomy that, she argues, has structured human thought throughout the ages: the perpetual struggle between an immanent-materialist perspective and a transcendental-idealist worldview. This opposition, she contends, has historically manifested as an ongoing conflict of truth claims “between materialists and religionists (or idealists)” (9). In this context, O’Hair argues that the concept of materialism has been systematically “corrupted by its opponents—the religious people—for thousands of years” (10) in a bid to undermine its credibility and maintain the dominance of theological explanations.

Echoing arguments advanced by earlier atheist activists such as Rose and Goldman, O’Hair critiques religious belief for imposing a metaphysical burden that inhibits individual self-realization. She argues that the doctrine of transcendental salvation—by directing human aspirations toward an illusory afterlife—diverts attention away from the pursuit of fulfillment in the material world. In contrast, she presents materialism as a philosophy of liberation, one that enables individuals to take responsibility for their own happiness and the betterment of society. In her view, a materialist outlook does not simply reject supernatural claims but offers a transformative ethical imperative: “Materialism liberates us by teaching us not to hope for heaven beyond the grave, not to hope for happiness in death but rather to prize life on earth and strive always to improving it” (10).

O'Hair's rejection of religious supernaturalism aligns her with a broader tradition of European materialist thought, drawing on figures such as Democritus, Anaxagoras, and even Immanuel Kant to dismantle the metaphysical premises of religious belief. Like earlier secular polemicists, she systematically deconstructs what she identifies as the "five basic arguments" (15) commonly used to justify religious faith and rejects each of them with the forceful formulation "the [...] argument is worthless" (cf. 14–16): She dismisses what she calls the *cosmological argument*, which posits God as the "first cause" of existence, by posing the counter-question: "who created or caused god?" (14).⁸ The *teleological argument*, which envisions a deity as a benevolent "planning intelligence" (15), is, according to O'Hair, refuted by the brutal and unjust realities of the material world. The *ontological argument*, asserting that God's existence is "implied by his very nature," is summarily dismissed as nonsense (15). The *moral argument*, which holds that God is necessary as the source of ethical orientation, is undermined by the very existence of evil, being ultimately reduced to a restatement of the classic problem of theodicy (15). Finally, the *pragmatic argument*, which suggests that religion functions as a socially beneficial organizing force, is countered with the unequivocal claim that "[r]eligion has caused more misery to all men in every stage of human history than any other single idea" (16).

Unlike polemicists such as Rose, Goldman, and, implicitly, Mencken, whose critiques of religion frequently centered on the internal inconsistencies of sacred texts, O'Hair largely disregards scriptural analysis by dismissing the Bible outright, declaring it to be "so unimportant that we hardly need to look at it" (16).

At the conclusion of her pamphlet, O'Hair directs her critique toward agnosticism, which she perceives not merely as an epistemological position but as a stance that, both philosophically and politically, remains complicit with religion. From her self-declared materialist perspective, agnosticism aligns more closely with "idealism" (as she defined it) than with atheism, as it fails to categorically reject the possibility of a divine entity. This intellectual hesitancy renders agnosticism fundamentally accommodating to religious thought and allows the agnostic to be "accepted in the community and he is accepted by the church" (18). In her view, agnosticism ultimately mirrors theological doctrines that assert the limitations of human reason and the necessity of non-scientific paths to truth. By positing that the existence of a deity is unknowable, agnosticism, she contends, does more than merely suspend judgment—it actively undermines scientific inquiry and reinforces theological premises: "The reason is that agnosticism, which puts forward the false notions [that] the world is unknowable, undermines science and reinforces theology" (18). In her view, such a position is not a neutral middle ground but an epistemological failure, one that perpetuates the hegemony of religious thinking by refusing to embrace the definitive conclusions of scientific materialism.

The agitative force of O'Hair's rhetoric is most powerfully conveyed through the spoken word, which frequently serves as the foundation for her written work. However, rather than confining herself to self-published media, she deliberately sought to infiltrate mainstream platforms with distinctly polemical rhetoric, ensuring that her ideas reached audiences beyond the already secular or atheist-leaning counterpublics on the political left and in progressive liberalism.

A particularly striking example of this strategy is her October 1965 interview with *Playboy* magazine, the unofficial flagship publication of mid-twentieth-century white, middle-class masculinity. The interview serves as a paradigmatic case study of why O'Hair was perceived as an anathema to the conservative mainstream. Over the course of the conversation, she launches a scathing polemic against virtually every ideological pillar held sacred by her ideological opponents. Blasphemy and ridicule serve as her primary rhetorical weapons in dismantling religious and conservative discourses. With biting sarcasm, she grants religious individuals "their right to the insanity of belief in God," ironically grants Pope John XXIII—because of his reputation as a modest reformer within the Catholic Church based on his role as the initiator of the Second Vatican Council—as an "amoeba of goodness in a sea of waste," and dismisses the doctrine of the Virgin Birth alongside the historicity of Jesus with the irreverent assertion that "[i]f a son of God was ever born, it was because of this wonderful sex act that Joseph and Mary enjoyed one night" (O'Hair, "Playboy Interview"). The very concept of religion itself is not merely critiqued but unequivocally denounced as an obsolete relic of a primitive past, no longer necessary for the rational, self-sufficient modern mind:

Because religion is a crutch, and only the crippled need crutches. [...] Perhaps this sort of claptrap was good for the Stone Age, when people actually believed that if they prayed for rain they would get it. But we're a grown-up world now, and it's time to put away childish things.

(O'Hair, "Playboy Interview")

Given that O'Hair was known to have read Nietzsche (see Le Beau, *The Atheist* 221), it is not unreasonable to detect echoes of his philosophy in her rhetoric, albeit more in the form of rhetorical catchphrases than substantive philosophical engagement. Much like the German thinker, O'Hair links recognition of the "death of God"—that is, the realization that religion has lost its hold over the modern world—to an affirmation of individual autonomy and a resolutely life-affirming stance. Her rejection of religious dependence is accompanied by a fervent endorsement of self-reliance and human empowerment, a theme she articulates with characteristic defiance:

[A]theism is a very positive affirmation of man's ability to think for himself, to do for himself, to find answers to his own problems. I'm thrilled to feel that I can rely on myself totally and absolutely; that my children are being brought up so that when they meet a problem they can't cop out by foisting it off on God. Madalyn Murray's going to solve her own problems, and nobody's going to intervene. It's about time the world got up off its knees and looked at itself in the mirror and said: "Well, we are men. Let's start acting like it."

(O'Hair, "Playboy Interview")

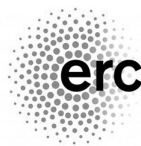
O'Hair's personal journey toward atheism can be understood as a narrative of emancipation, a process of self-discovery in which she gradually sheds the socially imposed, and therefore inauthentic, identity shaped by religious orthodoxy. This transformation unfolds in distinct stages, ultimately culminating in a fully realized, unalienated self-identification as a nonbeliever. She recalls her first encounter with the term "atheist" as a moment of revelation, stating that she had grown up in America and even received a college education without ever having heard the word. Upon learning its meaning, she realized that it described her own convictions precisely: "Finally, at the age of 24, I found out who—and what—I was. Better late than never" (*Playboy Interview*). This assertion of intellectual and existential independence extended beyond religious disbelief to a general rejection of socially prescribed norms, particularly those concerning gender and sexuality. In the *Playboy* interview, she explicitly identified as a "militant feminist" and championed "complete equality with men: intellectual, professional, economic, social, and sexual." This feminist view naturally rejected marriage as an institution that, under Christian conservatism, functioned as a mechanism of patriarchal control. She further dismissed puritanical sexual morality, positioning herself as "a sexual libertarian but not [...] a libertine" and condemning religiously motivated repression of sexuality as "shit for the birds" (*"Playboy Interview"*). For O'Hair, the moral doctrines espoused by religious institutions were not just intellectually indefensible but actively harmful, designed to instill fear and submission rather than encourage genuine ethical reflection. She extended her critique of religious morality to include its psychological and social influence, particularly its role in fostering guilt and suppressing individual autonomy, and denounced the Church's emphasis on sin and divine punishment as one of its most damaging legacies, arguing that it had "warped and brainwashed countless millions." The long-term consequences of religious indoctrination, she maintained, were deeply destructive, depriving individuals of the ability to live fully and freely:

It would be impossible to calculate the psychic damage this has inflicted on generations of children who might have grown up into healthy, happy,

productive, zestful human beings but for the burden of antisexual fear and guilt ingrained in them by the Church. This alone is enough to condemn religion.

(“*Playboy* Interview”)

O’Hair’s position was defined by a series of paradoxes that shaped both her public influence and reception. As a fierce antagonist to mainstream discourse, she openly challenged the religious and ideological foundations of mid-century American society. Yet, her radicalism also led to marginalization within secular circles, where her confrontational tactics were often seen as excessive. While many secularists favored a more conciliatory approach, O’Hair embraced provocation, complicating her role within both the general public sphere and the specific counterpublic she sought to represent. Despite these tensions, O’Hair remained committed to maximizing her reach, employing a multi-platform media strategy that spanned print, television, and radio. More than a vehicle for dissemination, her activism constituted a deliberate rupture in public discourse—a pamphletary event aimed not only at challenging the hegemony of religious ideology and forcing atheistic thought into mainstream debate but also—for the first time—at establishing atheism as a minority identity within public discourse and asserting its associated rights. Her interventions were not merely communicative but strategically disruptive, injecting anti-theistic critique into a cultural landscape increasingly shaped by public religiosity. In this sense, O’Hair’s activism marks a decisive moment of productive irritation in the history of atheist pamphleteering—one in which the pamphlet became performance, and protest became spectacle.



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Notes

- 1 In the *Second Revised Edition* of the pamphlet version of the speech, which I will refer to in the following, no exact date for O'Hair's public lecture is provided, a surprising omission given the significance of the event. In the retrospective introduction she wrote in 1990, O'Hair references only the year and the time of day, leaving the precise date of her speech unspecified.
- 2 Many of O'Hair's media appearances are now accessible on YouTube, where they continue to attract significant viewership, highlighting the enduring relevance of her activist legacy. Her appearance on *Firing Line* with William F. Buckley Jr. has accumulated approximately 130,000 views, while her interview on *The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson* has been viewed around 230,000 times and has generated approximately 4,600 comments. These figures demonstrate that, decades after the peak of her public influence and even long after her death, O'Hair's ideas continue to circulate widely, reaching new audiences—including those born long after her time—through the viral dynamics of digital media.
- 3 *Murray v. Curlett* was not the first attempt to defend secularism in public education, which was coming under increasing pressure in American society during the early Cold War period. Bruce J. Dierenfield also references the *Engel v. Vitale* case, which also dealt with mandatory school prayer and influenced subsequent cases. As Dierenfield notes, "[t]o dampen the extraordinary fervor against Engel, the U.S. Supreme Court revisited the question of school prayer in a pair of cases decided the following year. In *School District of Abington Township v. Schempp* and *Murray v. Curlett*, the Court considered whether school officials could require students to engage in religious exercises, even if not state-mandated. These cases had broad implications, as thirty-nine states permitted or required such practices in public schools" (Dierenfield 62).
- 4 In addition to financial difficulties and conflicts with life partners and family members, there are two important events in this context: first, her son William—on whose behalf she had initially filed the *Murray v. Curlett* case—later underwent a religious conversion and became her adversary in the public arena. The media (and not only the conservative outlets) exploited this act of symbolic matricide in sensationalist ways. The second event is O'Hair's death: on August 28, 1995, O'Hair, her son Jon, and her granddaughter mysteriously disappeared. Various theories emerged, ranging from the family having fled the country with the funds of her organization *American Atheists* to their having been murdered by a Christian fanatic. In reality, the trio had been murdered by a former employee of *American Atheists*, whom O'Hair had previously accused of stealing from the organization. This event was also subject to sensationalist media coverage. O'Hair's status as a media celebrity in the public discourse came to an end with her violent death, and "by the 1990s, she had been pushed out of public view, only occasionally emerging as a caricature" (Le Beau, *The Atheist* 17). In 2017, Netflix produced a dramatization of her life entitled *The Most Hated Woman in America*.
- 5 This edition also includes a second text titled "A History of Materialism," originally aired as part of the "American Atheist Radio Series," a weekly broadcast by a Texas radio station in the 1970s (cf. O'Hair, *Why I Am an Atheist* 50).
- 6 O'Hair lists more than 20 institutions of higher education at which she delivered the speech in the front matter of the pamphlet, including Ivy League universities such as Harvard and Dartmouth.
- 7 O'Hair faced relentless personal attacks and an overwhelming volume of hate mail, with accusations of communism being especially common. Although she was not a communist, she had briefly considered emigrating to the Soviet Union in the

late 1950s during a period of personal crisis. However, bureaucratic obstacles ultimately prevented her from leaving the United States (Le Beau, *The Atheist* 39).

- 8 To underscore her rejection of any divine authority even at the orthographic level, O'Hair consistently renders the word "god" in lowercase throughout her pamphlet.

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4 New Atheism and the Digital Age

The Transformation of Atheist Polemics in the Twenty-First Century

The final chapter focuses on the most recent peak in atheist pamphleteering, which, in the first decade of the new millennium, achieved an unprecedented level of visibility within the American public sphere and carried this tradition into the emerging media ecologies of the digital age. Central to this development is the momentum generated by the pamphletary activism of the so-called New Atheists—most notably Richard Dawkins, Christopher Hitchens, Sam Harris, and Daniel Dennett. Radically anti-religious bestsellers such as Dawkins’s *The God Delusion* (2006) and Hitchens’s *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007) brought their authors to the forefront of public debate—a space they, following in the footsteps of O’Hair, skillfully occupied across various media platforms to make the case for the atheist position. While the written polemic remained central for New Atheism, the movement’s reach extended far beyond the printed page. As Stephen LeDrew notes, leading figures of the movement “made multiple appearances on most major American news networks [...] including CNN and Fox News,” while Dawkins’s cultural visibility was further enhanced through popular media appearances—most notably a 2013 cameo on *The Simpsons*, where he appeared as the devil, and his satirical portrayal in *South Park* (LeDrew 50). This level of mainstream media exposure significantly contributed to the virality of New Atheism’s public figures, enabling them to reach new and wider audiences well beyond traditional print readerships.

The New Atheists operated at a pivotal crossroads in media history: while grounded in print culture and adept at navigating the electronic mass media of the twentieth century, they also laid the groundwork for a new wave of atheist activists whose work emerged from—and was shaped by—the digital environment. This new generation of public atheists was the first to strategically use the digital landscape as a platform for activism. Online media became a crucial tool for spreading their ideas and expanding their reach to global audiences across diverse platforms. The phenomenon of digital atheist activism is illustrated through the examples of Hemant Mehta and P. Z. Myers, both of whom effectively adapted traditional tactics of atheist pamphleteering to the affordances of the digital sphere.

In that regard, the polemics by the New Atheists and their digital successors cannot be understood in isolation but must be seen as the next chapter in the ongoing history of a radical cultural critique surrounding religious fundamentalism and the unbroken entanglement of religion with American public life. From the New Atheist perspective, these phenomena demand an assertive and uncompromising response that seeks to dismantle the privileged status of religious belief in the public sphere and promote a rationalist and distinctly anti-religious alternative to the pressing challenges of the twenty-first century. That this stance continues to provoke controversy testifies to the enduring subversive force of classical atheist arguments—long articulated by their pamphletary predecessors—which, within the crypto-theistic grammar of U.S. culture, retain a striking potency.

New Atheism and the Problem of Definition

In public perception, New Atheism has been, and continues to be, understood primarily as a movement that began with polemical writing aimed at a broad audience, later adopting a more overtly political stance. Yet this characterization as a coherent and collective “-ism” is itself problematic. As Thomas Zenk has noted, the term New Atheism suffers from “conceptual weaknesses,” lacking a clear definition or consistent criteria for inclusion, and is thus “ultimately a matter of discursive politics.” He observes that many of the figures commonly associated with New Atheism do not self-identify with the label, which in public discourse often carries pejorative connotations. From a religious studies perspective, the term functions similarly to contested designations such as “cult” or “sect,” shaping both academic frameworks and popular understandings (Zenk 258). While acknowledging that New Atheism is, at its core, a journalistic construct, Zenk nonetheless concedes its rhetorical and taxonomic utility in scholarly literature, where it has come to serve as a shorthand for a particular constellation of texts, actors, and discursive strategies (Zenk 258). For reasons of clarity and pragmatic consistency, I will therefore retain the term in the present discussion.

The origin of the label is often traced to journalist Gary Wolf, who popularized it in a 2006 article for *Wired* magazine.¹ In his ironically framed reference to a “Church of Unbelievers,” Wolf sought to capture a wave of publications that did not merely defend atheism as a legitimate position within a secular, pluralistic culture, but actively promoted it as a rational and morally imperative worldview, forcefully placing anti-religious arguments at the center of public debate (Wolf 2006).

Whether understood as a social movement,² a media fad or a discursive formation, New Atheism clearly formed around a specific corpus of activist literature. The core texts commonly regarded as formative for the phenomenon were all published within a relatively short span of time between

2004 and 2007: Sam Harris's *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (2004) and his *Letter to a Christian Nation: A Challenge to the Faith of America* (2006), Richard Dawkins's *The God Delusion* (2006), Daniel Dennett's *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (2006), and Christopher Hitchens's *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Yet it was above all two radical polemics that transformed New Atheism into a highly controversial phenomenon in the public sphere. The publication of the combative *The God Delusion* in 2006 marks the defining pamphletary event in the movement's public impact. Alongside Hitchens's *God Is Not Great*, Dawkins's book remains one of the two most prominent bestsellers to articulate the core tenets commonly associated with the New Atheist movement. Aimed at a broad general readership, both works were deliberately provocative—not only in their forceful rejection of religion, but also in their overtly confrontational promotion of atheism as a superior worldview.

“Ditchkins” Revisited

Terry Eagleton—himself no stranger to polemics—grouped the two together under the unflattering nickname “Ditchkins” (2), not as a homage, but rather in recognition of the profound influence their works have had.³ Both figures garnered widespread public attention—not only through their strategic media presence but also by virtue of their status as prominent public intellectuals.

Rather than revisiting the political or ideological content of their arguments—territory already well mapped in existing scholarship (Amarasingam 2010; LeDrew 2016; Cotter et al. 2017; McAnulla et al. 2019)—my focus is on situating them within the larger genealogy of the tradition of atheist pamphleteering in the American context. It is neither necessary nor productive to exhaustively catalog their arguments, public appearances, or media interventions. Instead, the emphasis lies on the activist intentions and rhetorical strategies that shaped their work—particularly how each sought, through deliberately confrontational styles, to challenge and reshape dominant public narratives around religion and atheism in their respective cultural moments.

Among the leading voices of the New Atheist movement, Dawkins has emerged as its most visible, controversial, and influential figure. Trained as an evolutionary biologist, Dawkins first attracted widespread public attention with *The Selfish Gene* (1976), a landmark publication that established his reputation as a prominent “Public Professor of Science” (Rosenfeldt 37) within the anglophone world.⁴ Over the ensuing decades, his authority in the public sphere expanded considerably, as he became a regular presence in media debates, shaping public perceptions not only of evolutionary science but also of atheism and secularism (for an analysis of Dawkins's influence prior to *The God Delusion*, cf. Grafen and Ridley 2006). By the early twenty-first century,

however, Dawkins had refashioned himself into a militant atheist campaigner, adopting an unyielding stance toward religion and its role in society. This evolution in his public identity sparked intense reactions from both religious and liberal secular critics. Notably, the *Catholic World Report*—hardly a neutral party in this debate—castigated him as a “blustering polemicist, bad philosopher, naked atheist emperor” (Olson).

It is not merely Dawkins’s polemical tone that renders *The God Delusion* a pamphletary text. Rather, he assumes the role of a partisan advocate who—regardless of whether one shares Olsen’s dismissive stance toward the quality of his philosophical or scientific arguments—launches one of the most forceful attacks on American normative anti-atheism in recent public discourse, advancing a distinctly emancipatory and agitational agenda oriented toward atheist identity politics. His address is direct, aimed at readers he understands as doubting individuals, typically socialized in environments that are either actively religious or shaped by normative and culturally habitual forms of religiosity:

If you are one of them, this book is for you. It is intended to raise consciousness—raise consciousness to the fact that to be an atheist is a realistic aspiration, and a brave and splendid one. You can be an atheist who is happy, balanced, moral, and intellectually fulfilled.

(*The God Delusion* 1)

His rhetoric echoes two distinct traditions: on the one hand, it parodistically appropriates the language of religious conversion sermons, adopting their tone to encourage readers to embrace what he frames as a transition to godlessness. Simultaneously, Dawkins draws a parallel with the gay and lesbian rights movement—an emblematic case of successful social emancipation, despite ongoing discrimination and reactionary backlash. He constructs a structural analogy between these two identities as marginalized cultural minorities, claiming that “the status of atheists in America today is on a par with that of homosexuals fifty years ago.” Through this analogy, he seeks to evoke an activist counterpublic, calling for an “atheist pride” movement and urging atheists to “come out” of the metaphorical closet until a “critical mass” is reached that is significant enough to be mobilized for political and social transformation (*The God Delusion*, 3–5).

In light of Dawkins’s disciplinary background as a biologist, it is not surprising that his humanist and emancipatory agenda is grounded in the tradition of scientific atheism. Explicitly rejecting agnosticism as a poor intellectual position (46–54), he systematically refutes classical arguments for the existence of God (76–109) on a rationalist basis and draws on evolutionary theory as the principal foundation for dismissing both theism and deism, which he collectively frames as the unconvincing “God hypothesis” (113–159).

Dawkins's style of atheist pamphleteering pushes the tradition's characteristic belligerence to new extremes. His aggressive rhetorical posture has attracted considerable criticism, particularly for favoring inflammatory provocation over elaborate, scholarly engagement with religious philosophy or theological arguments. A striking example of this calculated strategy of transgression is Dawkins's widely cited description of the God of the Old Testament, who, for him, functions as an allegorical condensation of everything he finds objectionable in religion itself. In a tone reminiscent of the hawkish, radical preachers he so vehemently opposes, Dawkins denounces this figure as "arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: jealous and proud of it; a petty, unjust, unforgiving control-freak; a vindictive, blood-thirsty ethnic cleanser; a misogynistic, homophobic, racist, infanticidal, genocidal, filicidal, pestilential, megalomaniacal, sadomasochistic, capriciously malevolent bully" (*The God Delusion*, 31). This vehemently transgressive rhetorical ethos has been met with the kind of widespread rejection typically directed at pamphleteering—a response rooted less in substantive disagreement than in objections to its allegedly undialectical and anti-academic mode of argumentation. As Adrian Rosenfeldt observes, "Dawkins' methodology [...] is neither objective, scientific, nor academic, but rather steeped in his own subjective biases and beliefs, deeply influenced by the cultural context from which they cannot be disentangled" (62). What Rosenfeld identifies as Dawkins's subjective bias lies in his unwavering commitment to a rationalist epistemology, which tends to frame all positions external to it as inherently pathological, as his comparison of faith to a virus that infects those "vulnerable to infection" (*The God Delusion* 188) demonstrates. This focus is emblematic of Dawkins's role as the major advocate for what LeDrew has identified as the "latent project" of New Atheism: "the universalization of the ideology of scientism and the establishment of its cultural authority" (2). Many of his critics have accused Dawkins of being a crusader for a dated and rigid form of scientific rationalism, precisely because of this ideological commitment. Eagleton, for instance, labeled him a "true child of nineteenth-century Positivism" (*Reason, Faith, and Revolution*, 88), while Christian advocates such as Alister McGrath and Joanna Collicutt McGrath contend that Dawkins's thought is defined by an "absolute dichotomous mode [...] his own peculiar version of a fundamentalist dualism" that precludes any meaningful dialogue between science and religion (48).

Hitchens was no less of a polemicist than Dawkins, but his background and intellectual trajectory were different. Dawkins's authority stemmed from his academic career in evolutionary biology, whereas Hitchens had long established himself as a combative journalist and public intellectual, renowned for his confrontational style and his willingness to engage in high-profile ideological skirmishes in the public arena. His rhetorical approach was not that of a dispassionate scholar but rather of a literary provocateur, more akin to a figure such as Mencken—to whom he explicitly refers as "one of the best satirists of

religion" (Hitchens, *God Is Not Great* 300)—than to academic theologians or scientific critics of religious metaphysics. As Jim Welsh notes in his review of *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens was "more a bare-knuckled polemical street fighter, not a scholar given to illuminating manuscripts," while simultaneously recognizing him as an "accomplished sophist possessed of rhetorical tricks" and a "master of outrageous opinions" (Welsh 226). Whether attacking religious dogma, exposing political hypocrisy, or confronting ideological opponents in public debate, Hitchens cultivated the persona of a radical non-conformist and aimed to maximize the public impact of his polemics through calculated transgressions and deliberate violations of social taboos. In *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens offers a form of religious criticism that, as Zenk notes, is "non-systematic [but] all-embracing," targeting "not only the Abrahamic theistic religions and deism—like Dawkins—but also Mormonism, Hinduism, and, unlike Harris, Buddhism" (250). Echoing familiar tropes from the tradition of atheist pamphleteering, Hitchens did not merely argue that religion is based on false premises; he portrayed it as an actively malignant force—one that has obstructed human progress, legitimized authoritarian rule, and perpetuated systemic violence throughout history. His negative stance toward the socio-cultural effects of religion went beyond conventional atheism, as he explicitly identified himself not only as an atheist but as an "antitheist" (Hitchens, "Introduction" xxii) in order to emphasize the militancy of his agenda and his rejection of the inherently authoritarian and absolutist nature of religious truth claims, which demand dogmatic obedience, impose arbitrary moral law, and stifle both intellectual inquiry and social progress.

From the outset, Hitchens makes it clear that the atheism he advocates is not merely a simplistic inversion of the structural logic of religious belief. Instead, he positions atheism as a worldview grounded in reason, empirical inquiry, and intellectual scrutiny rather than faith or dogma. He explicitly states, "[o]ur belief is not a belief. Our principles are not a faith" (5) to stress that atheism is not a matter of conviction but of knowledge grounded in critical thinking and scientific inquiry. While he acknowledges that evidence and reasoning are "necessary rather than sufficient factors" in supporting atheism—expressing a more nuanced view of science as an epistemological foundation than Dawkins—he simultaneously affirms the imperative to "mistrust anything that contradicts science or outrages reason" (5). His critique extends beyond epistemology to the psychological and moral dimensions of religious belief, particularly the anthropocentric "vanity" that leads individuals to see themselves as the personal objects of a divine plan (7), a quasi-narcissistic perspective that fosters a distorted sense of self-importance while simultaneously encouraging an unhealthy preoccupation with guilt, cultivating a culture in which believers are "continually aware of one's own sin" (7).

Beyond its psychological implications, Hitchens rejects any argument that tries to reconcile religion with scientific progress. He contends that such

claims obscure the historically antagonistic relationship between scientific epistemologies and religious authority, emphasizing that the advancement of scientific knowledge has typically occurred in direct contestation with institutionalized religion (47). This tension between religious authority and scientific discovery, he claims, is symptomatic of a broader epistemological conflict, wherein faith-based moral codes remain inadequate in addressing fundamental ethical concerns. He highlights the glaring omissions in religious commandments—pointing out the absence of prohibitions against child abuse, rape, slavery, and genocide—questioning the notion that religious texts provide an unimpeachable moral foundation (100). By exposing these ethical deficiencies, Hitchens challenges the legitimacy of religious morality, arguing that its inability to evolve in response to contemporary ethical imperatives undermines its claim to universal moral authority. His critique casts religion as a structural impediment to human progress. His claim that “[r]eligion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important” (282) frames it as an antiquated epistemological model replaced by scientific inquiry.

New Atheism and Its Fundamental(ist) Structural Logic

The polemics of Dawkins and Hitchens reveal a core characteristic of New Atheism. While the degree of public visibility achieved through the adoption of new media strategies for the tradition of atheist pamphleteering was certainly novel and unprecedented, the same cannot be said of the arguments themselves: the content largely reiterated longstanding critiques of religion. Its protagonists have frequently been criticized for presenting “nothing more than a repackaging of previous atheist arguments combined with an intolerant, dogmatic and aggressively anti-religious rhetoric” (McAnulla et al. 54). McAnulla et al. identify three key features of New Atheist politics: first, a challenge to the public role of religion, advocating for the actual implementation of secularist norms such as “the separation of church and state alongside the removal of perceived unfair privileges granted to religious groups (e.g. tax-exemptions and privileged rights of consultation)”; second, a critique of social customs that protect religious beliefs from scrutiny even in “interpersonal relations or private discussions,” thus setting their approach apart from more conventional forms of secularism and certain manifestations of “‘accommodationist’ atheism”; and third, the promotion of atheist identity politics, encouraging nonbelievers to be open about their views and attitudes in a bid to make atheism more socially acceptable, particularly in the United States (154).

LeDrew similarly characterizes New Atheism as “a *secular fundamentalism*, a modern utopian ideology for social transformation,” which consciously

transcended traditional metaphysical or theological debates in order to present itself as “an essentially political phenomenon” (2, emphasis in the original).

Unlike other manifestations of atheist activism that sought to influence legislative and judicial processes, the New Atheists largely abstained from formal political engagement. Instead, they concentrated their efforts on atheist identity politics and on shaping cultural and intellectual discourse by advocating anti-religious positions across prominent public platforms, using polemical speech as their primary weapon of choice. Philip Andrew Quadrio observes that they display an utterly ruthless belligerent rhetoric to the extent that

one cannot avoid the conclusion that they do intend to harm their opponents, harms to their opponents are not coincidental but intended; make little to no effort to minimize harm to their opponents, indeed [...] at times [...] seek to maximise it.

(98)

In these efforts, the New Atheists represent a clear continuation of the combined scientific and humanistic tradition of atheist pamphleteering. However, they tended to lean more heavily toward the former, as they regarded “religious doctrines as making truth claims and therefore [to be] subject to scientific inquiry, and to rejection when no evidence is found that supports them” (Klug 106). Nevertheless, describing the phenomenon monolithically as ideologically scientific-materialist would fail to do justice to its internal diversity. While its two most prominent figures—Dawkins and Hitchens—certainly exemplified a distinct strand of militant scientism and skeptical rationalism combined with a political focus, other leading voices adopted different approaches. Harris and Dennett, for instance, concentrated more on the epistemological and ethical dimensions of religion in *The End of Faith* (2004) and *Breaking the Spell* (2006), respectively. Despite these differences in intellectual background and rhetorical approach, the collective prominence of Dawkins, Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens led to their designation as the “Four Horsemen” of New Atheism—a moniker they happily embraced as it emphasized their self-styled image as heralds of an impending reckoning for religious dogma.⁵

The apocalyptic connotations of the label not only reflected the protagonists’ self-understanding as cultural warriors committed to nothing less than rescuing post-Enlightenment modern civilization from an archaic religious threat, but also contributed to their popular appeal. All four principal figures of the New Atheist movement were able to draw on their established speaker positions and the socio-cultural capital associated with their respective fields of expertise to maximize their public visibility: Dawkins on his status as a renowned evolutionary biologist and science communicator. Hitchens, as a

journalist and one of the most prominent public intellectuals in the English-speaking world, was known for his incisive rhetoric and flair for controversy. Harris brought the dual authority of a philosopher and neuroscientist, while Dennett contributed the intellectual gravitas of a senior professor of philosophy. It would, however, be reductive to conceive of New Atheism solely as a top-down phenomenon driven by a group of public intellectuals. As LeDrew points out, New Atheism

is as much a social phenomenon as an intellectual one [that] is not restricted to a group of elite thinkers; rather, it is an ideology that informs the practices of a burgeoning social movement and a vast and disparate network of secular communities.

Accordingly, “there is no doubt that the New Atheists galvanised a moribund movement,” and their popularity is “indicative of a generational turn, with many young sceptics finding in them a voice for the expression of views rarely encountered in the public sphere” (LeDrew 54).

The fact that the forcefully articulated positions of New Atheist activists resonated so well with a broad audience and contributed to the revitalization of atheism as a movement is closely tied to the socio-cultural and political context in which they emerged. The secular fundamentalism identified as the hermetic ideological core of New Atheist agitation represented the most visible and radical expression of a broader anti-religious tendency that arose as a counter-reaction to a historically contingent resurgence of religious influence in American public life, particularly characterized by the increasing entanglement of evangelical Christianity with institutional politics. Tamas Pataki has remarked that the New Atheists

are spooked by [...] an assault on Reason ranging across the entire fundamentalist spectrum, but manifest in particular in the brew of Christian nationalism, theocratic hankering and obstinate unreason that touched the seat of power during the G. W. Bush presidency and continuous to color the Right in America and elsewhere.

(121)

Indeed, the election of Bush in 2000 marked a new phase in the mainstreaming of evangelical fundamentalism within U.S. political discourse. Bush’s public affirmation of a God who actively intervenes in history, and his self-identification as a political leader guided by religious principles, exemplified a broader religious shift that manifested institutionally—for instance, in his administration’s support for the inclusion of “intelligent design” in school curricula.⁶ Moore and Kramnick describe this moment as a “wake-up call” for the entire spectrum of American nonbelievers, leading to the consolidation of

a collective sense of identity among them that was “dramatically facilitated by aggressive organizational activity and by the internet and social media” (164; for a sociological field study of this “atheist awakening,” cf. Cimino and Smith 2014). This newfound organizational strength, developed in response to an increasingly religious-reactionary cultural climate, was further reinforced by the agitational rhetoric of the New Atheists. Through their verbal radicalism, they revived a combative tradition of pamphleteering that had largely receded following the death of Madalyn Murray O’Hair in 1995.

Another pivotal factor—alongside this religious revival—that enabled the agitational vehemence of New Atheist rhetoric to gain traction was the events of September 11, 2001. In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks, New Atheists identified theistic belief *as such* as a primary causal factor behind these acts of violence. This critique was articulated through the drawing of structural analogies between Islamic and Christian fundamentalism—both of which, they argued, derive their epistemic authority from literalist interpretations of allegedly sacred texts. A defining feature of this polemical strategy was the harsh denunciation of Western politicians and intellectuals, who were accused of collectively refusing to confront this uncomfortable equivalence between fundamentalisms. In the pointedly titled second chapter of *God Is Not Great*, “Religion Kills,” Hitchens asserts that the terrorists may well have been “the most sincere believers on those planes,” while caustically underscoring the irony that their fundamentalist zeal was condemned by then influential American evangelical politicians such as Attorney General John Ashcroft and President Bush, who themselves repudiated the secular principle of separating religion from politics (Hitchens 37). This form of perceived hypocrisy, rooted in an excessive deference to one’s own religious convictions while delegitimizing the religious character of the attacks (cf. Klug 101–106), constitutes a recurrent target of New Atheist critique.

The Reactionary Tendencies of New Atheism

The pamphletary interventions of “Ditchkins” and their New Atheist allies have had a lasting impact on contemporary public discourse, particularly in the United States. Their arguments have been amplified not only through their own prolific engagement with public media platforms but also through the widespread dissemination, reception, and critique of their ideas by both supporters and detractors. However, as McAnulla et al. (2019) have aptly observed, placing these figures within traditional political dichotomies such as left–right or progressive–reactionary is complicated by the anti-religious militancy of the New Atheists. As they note:

Many on the right see New Atheism as a foolishly progressivist movement, which risks undermining the guidance and support religion offers.

Many on the left characterize it as a reactionary trend which too easily offers resources to those who wish to attack members of minority religions who are being scapegoated during an era of terror.

(154)

Although New Atheism adopts the language of progress and frames itself as having a distinctly emancipatory agenda, critics have long drawn attention to its reactionary underside. One of the central critiques concerns the movement's pronounced white heteronormativity. Despite its youthful and ostensibly egalitarian ethos, New Atheism has been described as a "boys' club" (Bekiempis 2011), dominated by white men who occupy culturally privileged positions. Katja Guenther (2019) further argues that the movement's strong reliance on scientism as its ideological core reproduces gendered assumptions about masculine rationality, which ultimately undermines its emancipatory claims. In addition, the movement has been accused of racism and Islamophobia. Taner Edis (2015) points to the fact that New Atheist discourse often treats Islam as inherently irrational and violent, contributing to a racialized conception of secularism that aligns with broader patterns of Western cultural superiority.

A clear political positioning of New Atheism is further complicated by the fact that its most prominent figures have at times expressed affinities with views more typically associated with the political right. Dawkins, for example, has drawn on strategies from the gay and lesbian rights movement as a model for articulating a self-determined atheist identity in the context of civil rights. However, his solidarity does not extend to other identities within the LGBTQ+ spectrum. His biologically determinist view of gender has led him to take public stances that align closely with conservative and reactionary discourses. In 2021, the American Humanist Association revoked the honorary title of "Humanist of the Year," originally awarded to him in 1996, due to transphobic comments he had made online (Flood 2021). A similar ambivalence is evident in the case of Christopher Hitchens, who—despite his sharp critiques of evangelicalism and the religious right—nonetheless supported the Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq, framing it as a necessary confrontation with religious extremism (cf. Seymour 2013).

From Books to Blogs: The Evolution of Atheist Polemics in the Digital Age

As the examples discussed throughout this study have demonstrated, pamphleteering is a highly adaptable mode of communication. Activists have consistently modified their strategies in response to emerging media technologies, engaging the distinct discursive affordances each new medium offers—ranging from expanded audience reach and novel forms of address

to enhanced immediacy, interactivity, and opportunities for visual and performative self-representation. While the polemical written text has remained a central medium of expression, its forms and methods of dissemination have evolved in response to shifting technological landscapes, allowing for greater reach and impact.

The accessibility, immediacy, and interactive nature of online platforms have fundamentally changed the way atheist arguments and positions are circulated. They have lowered the barriers to addressing potentially vast audiences and generated a communicative ecosystem in which ideas can circulate virally and with unprecedented reach, largely irrespective of their origin.

As mentioned above, the New Atheists played a pivotal role in this media transformation as they were the first generation of anti-religious activists to capitalize on the Internet's capacity to amplify their message and address a global audience. As Teemu Taira observes, "[t]he Internet helped to spread the message of the 'New Atheists,' and for many it was the primary media through which people got to know Dawkins and others" (Taira 1025–26). The early twenty-first century witnessed an unprecedented proliferation of online debates, YouTube videos, and later social media activities, many of which prominently featured the leading figures of this new wave of public atheism, especially the media-savvy figureheads Dawkins and Hitchens. Their strategic use of digital platforms not only multiplied their public visibility but also played a crucial role in shaping the discourse of contemporary atheism, ensuring that their polemical interventions remained at the forefront of public debate. Taira highlights The Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science, founded in 2006, as a particularly influential laboratory for atheist online activism. Its website serves as a platform for secular, anti-religious advocacy, disseminates information on global atheist issues, promotes evidence-based science education and secular public policy, and even offers a "Convert's Corner" where apostates can share their personal experiences (cf. Taira 1026).

As a new incarnation of atheist pamphleteering, online agitation enabled the New Atheists to amplify their discourse at scale, reshaping the discursive field of secular critique and intensifying the polarization of public debates on religion. The transient nature of digital media and content recalls the inherent ephemerality traditionally associated with printed pamphlets, which, as an instrumental medium, were intended for immediate impact rather than lasting permanence. Nevertheless, such physical publications—despite their originally fleeting purpose—often retain a degree of permanence through their preservation in archives and personal collections. By contrast, online content is inherently fluid, subject to continual modification, relocation, or even deletion. This impermanence raises critical questions regarding the long-term accessibility and historical preservation of atheist discourse in the digital age. While the Internet facilitates rapid dissemination, it also introduces the risk of content disappearing or becoming inaccessible over time, due to shifts

in platform policies, algorithmic changes, or intentional removal by authors themselves. Consequently, the influence of digital atheist pamphleteering depends not only on its immediate reach but also on its long-term archiving, referencing, and incorporation into broader intellectual and cultural debates. As we shall see, this dynamic is particularly evident in the cases of Hemant Mehta and P. Z. Myers, two activists who “are preoccupied with progressive social change” and whose “writing has a certain status given the frequency of its citation and re-citation within other Internet fora” (Laughlin 316). Their sustained presence and engagement in digital discourse illustrate not only the opportunities afforded by online platforms as a contemporary pamphleteering medium—particularly their capacity to democratically address (a) potentially global public(s) and to facilitate participatory engagement—but also the historically contingent nature of these activities. In this sense, the digital realm reactivates core features of early modern pamphleteering: its immediacy, its focus on agitation in response to current issues, and its rootedness in specific sociopolitical moments. Online agitation thus mirrors the pamphlet culture of the early modern period in both its ephemeral urgency and its direct appeal to the broader public.

Mehta (born 1983) has emerged as a leading figure in digital atheist activism, consistently emphasizing the transformative potential of the Internet for the atheist movement. Central here is his widely read blog *Friendly Atheist*,⁷ which has ranked at the top of major atheist blog lists (Taira 1031). At the time of writing this chapter, Mehta’s blogging activity primarily focuses on providing commentary on events and news stories that intersect with the tensions surrounding religion, secularism, and unbelief in the American public sphere. His earlier, more polemic and programmatic posts have fallen victim to the ephemeral nature of online texts and were not transferred when his blog was migrated away from Patheos, its initial platform. As a result, many of these early posts can now only be cited indirectly, through excerpts referenced in the narrow body of secondary literature on Mehta’s activism. In a 2012 blog post that is no longer accessible online, Mehta described the Internet as “a religion destroyer as much as anything else we’ve ever seen—open access to information, the ability to prove your pastors wrong, the overwhelming number of atheists who make their case online” (Mehta qtd. in Laughlin 320). For him, the Internet is not merely a medium for the circulation of content; rather, his statement echoes the early utopian vision of the Internet as an almost ideal-typical, non-hierarchical, emancipatory space of communication—one in which individuals can form counterpublics and connect beyond traditional institutional structures. His assessment exemplifies a widely shared conviction among atheist bloggers that digital platforms are essential tools for community formation, particularly in the context of the “atheist awakening” of the early millennium.

In the context of public atheism in the United States, Mehta holds particular significance due to both the breadth of his online reach and his status as

one of the first activists who emerged *genuinely* from the digital sphere. His self-designation as the “Friendly Atheist” signals an affiliation with a more liberal and conciliatory strand of atheist activism. Nevertheless, he is no stranger to polemical strategies, even if his activism often lacks the radical edge found in the more confrontational currents discussed in this study. Notably, in 2014, he abandoned a provocatively titled book project—*God Is an Abusive Boyfriend (And You Should Break Up)*⁸—following intense public criticism, a move that makes the limits of his polemical engagement evident.

Myers (born 1957), on the other hand, represents the continuation of the belligerent tradition of atheist pamphleteering in the online world. An evolutionary biologist whose academic trajectory parallels that of Richard Dawkins, he is best known for his influential blog *Pharyngula*,⁹ where he pointedly identifies himself in the header as a “godless liberal.” Initially focused on using his scientific expertise to counter creationist claims and promote public understanding of evolutionary biology, Myers positioned himself as a vocal advocate for scientific literacy in opposition to religiously motivated pseudoscience (e.g. the doctrine of intelligent design). As *Pharyngula* expanded, so did the thematic scope of his interventions. Moving beyond narrowly framed scientific debates, he increasingly addressed broader issues related to atheism and focused more on the sociopolitical implications of religious belief. By adopting an accessible yet deliberately provocative vernacular style, Myers aimed to strike a balance between confrontation and inclusivity. A revised selection of his blog posts was published in 2013 under the title *The Happy Atheist*, a volume that serves as a valuable reference in the following analysis given the transient nature of digital publications.

Rhetorically and politically, Myers explicitly positions himself in the tradition of New Atheism and its advocacy for a self-conscious atheist identity. In the “Acknowledgments” of the collected blog posts in *The Happy Atheist*, he specifically expressed his “appreciation to those notorious atheists who blew open the doors for a self-respecting community of the godless” (189), Dawkins and Dennett among them. His writings draw upon familiar motifs and polemical strategies associated with the movement, including the derision of divine figures—referring, for instance, to God as a “soap-opera god” (7) or an “empty hulk” (182)—and the caricature of rural religiosity as the supposed heartland of American identity: “immersed in religion, like every other God-soaked spot in lightly populated, Republican-leaning, Real Live Genuine USA” (5). Myers echoes longstanding accusations that “[r]eligion flourishes in ignorance” (63) and laments the enduring dominance of the Abrahamic religions by framing “our cultural history” as “the progeny of nomadic herders” (95).

Yet, unlike some of New Atheism’s most prominent figures—particularly Dawkins and Harris, whose increasingly reactionary positions on issues such as Islam, gender, and race have been widely critiqued in the context of online controversies (cf. Taira 1026–27)—he has resisted this trajectory of

radicalization. As LeDrew has observed, Myers's mode of activism maintains a clear epistemological boundary between science and religion, reflecting New Atheism's foundational belief in their essential incompatibility. This sustained antagonism is not merely rhetorical but strategic, intended to attract adherents to rational discourse and unite them into a distinct minority identity that may serve as a basis for broader political mobilization (LeDrew 141). In this regard, Myers continues the tradition of atheist pamphleteering that seeks to mobilize a distinctly self-identifying counterpublic through polemical provocation and offer alternative identity options untinged by religious narratives. In that, his rhetoric has an outspoken emancipatory telos, framing atheism as a "message of liberation" from the authority of "a pan-galactic overlord reading your mind and telling you what to do" (Myers 56).

A particularly illustrative example of this approach is his short polemic "One Nation Free of Gods," in which he directly challenges the ideological conflation of religion and national identity in the United States.¹⁰ The piece opens with a characteristically sardonic observation:

A strange thing has happened to this country: somehow the United States of America has become a biblical entity. I know the country didn't even exist for way over a thousand years after the Bible was composed and assembled, and there isn't one word about the USA in the text, but you couldn't tell from the way some people have confused patriotism and piety. (100)

Here, Myers exposes the obvious logical inconsistencies of religious nationalism. He further reinforces his attack on the crypto-theistic character of American identity through intertextual engagement with *It Can't Happen Here* (1935), Sinclair Lewis's classic dystopian novel warning against the rise of authoritarianism in the United States. Drawing on Lewis's cautionary vision, Myers frames American Christian nationalism—in all its varieties—as symptomatic of a broader susceptibility to authoritarianism, warning of its continuities with the Cold War-era "new civil religion" and its re-emergence in contemporary political discourse: "It's happening now, too" (102). By highlighting the mutually reinforcing logics of religious obedience and patriotic conformity—"Do not question God. Do not question America. Mix those two ideas together, and you've got a lovely recipe for blind obedience" (103)—Myers implicitly identifies atheism as a foundation for a mature and democratic civic ethos.

In articulating atheism as a vehicle for civic responsibility and emancipation, Myers exemplifies a variation of the activist impetus of New Atheism—yet, as Taira cautions, its rhetorical ambition, both online and offline, must be weighed against the more ambiguous question of its actual transformative impact in terms of effectively altering religious paradigms, norms, and

identifications in the social realm: "If it is assumed that its representatives wanted to change society, it is debatable how much they have achieved" (Taira 1027).

Jack C. Laughlin critically discussed the effects and results of the socio-transformative aspirations of the New Atheist movement and its online allies during the 2000s, engaging explicitly with Warner's concept of counterpublics. He claims that, although online atheist activism may appear to foster genuine socio-cultural influence, its impact remains largely superficial. While "atheists may claim that, thanks to the Internet, the propagation of atheism is more organic, spontaneous, and even more democratic today [...] than it was when Dawkins, Harris and others published their influential manifestos," Laughlin argues that "authority still coalesces around particular voices" who speak primarily to audiences already sympathetic to their views. One can argue that this produces a solipsistic discourse dominated by a handful of prominent figures in which "despite the fact that 'indefinite strangers' have the opportunity to react to these voices," the conversation is still shaped predominantly by those "with special access to the means for the management of their own attending public" (Laughlin 318).

The resurgence of atheist pamphleteering in the post-9/11 and George W. Bush era—spearheaded by the New Atheist figures and their digital successors—attests to both the resilience and adaptability of polemical discourse in the face of rapidly evolving media ecologies. Figures such as Dawkins and Hitchens reinvigorated a longstanding tradition of anti-religious critique through best-selling polemics that constituted genuine pamphletary events, their confrontational rhetoric prompting an unprecedentedly broad discursive response across the public sphere. While their strategic media presence brought atheism to the forefront of mainstream debate, digital activists like Mehta and Myers extended this discourse into the participatory spaces of the Internet, reshaping the modes through which atheistic critique could be articulated and disseminated. These developments have undoubtedly altered the contours of public discussion surrounding religion and affirmative unbelief, even if the structural entrenchment of religious privilege and the pervasive anti-atheist bias in hegemonic American culture remain largely intact. Nevertheless, the sociopolitical achievement of the polemical fervor of the movement—however ephemeral or internally contested—has helped to articulate atheism as a legitimate identity within a cultural context still profoundly shaped by religiosity.



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Notes

- 1 Although Wolf is often cited as the originator of the term, Zenk has argued that it was already in circulation prior to the article in *Wired* (cf. Zenk 251–252).
- 2 Zenk has pointed out that the term “movement” is conceptually as problematic as the label “New Atheism,” as there is no unified “program or manifesto,” nor any formal political organization associated with New Atheism (256). Nonetheless, the term is well established and widely used in the academic literature, which is why I also use it for pragmatic reasons.
- 3 While Eagleton acknowledges a significant ideological congruity between the two authors, he considers their polemical styles markedly different, describing Hitchens's book as possessing “a stylish, entertaining, splendidly impassioned, compulsively readable quality,” while criticizing Dawkins for allowing his “doctrinal ferocity [...] to eat into his prose style” (3).
- 4 Before his retirement, Dawkins held the prestigious Simonyi Professorship for the Public Understanding of Science at Oxford—a position created specifically for him.
- 5 The designation of Dawkins, Harris, Dennett, and Hitchens as the “Four Horsemen” of New Atheism originates from a recorded discussion of the four writers organized by the Richard Dawkins Foundation for Reason and Science in 2007. It was later released on DVD under the title *The Four Horsemen* and is available online on the YouTube channel of the Dawkins Foundation, where it has, at the moment of writing this chapter, garnered over two million views and roughly 7,800 comments—demonstrating a wide international audience and an enduring relevance in contemporary public atheist discourse.
- 6 Exactly 80 years after the Scopes Trial, the *Kitzmiller v. Dover Area School District* case of 2005—sometimes ironically called the “Dover Panda Trial” or a “second ‘Monkey Trail’” (LeDrew 36) in a callback to the 1925 case—bore striking similarities to the Scopes affair, proving the culture war between secularists and the religious right is an enduring conflict in American society. In this case, the local school board in Dover, Pennsylvania, tried to make it mandatory for schoolteachers to also include the creationist doctrine of “intelligent design” as an alternative to evolution in their curricula. Eventually, a district court ruled in favor of the secular side.
- 7 Originally hosted on the Patheos platform, Hemant Mehta's blog *Friendly Atheist* is now published independently via Substack (www.friendlyatheist.com / <https://substack.com/@friendlyatheist>). In addition to his prolific online output, Mehta is

the author of *I Sold My Soul on eBay* (2007) and *The Young Atheist's Survival Guide* (2012), both of which reflect his commitment to public atheism and secular advocacy. Further extending his efforts to amplify underrepresented voices within the atheist movement, he published *Queer Disbelief: Why LGBTQ Equality Is an Atheist Issue* by Camille Beredjick through his own imprint, The Friendly Atheist Press, in 2017.

- 8 https://web.archive.org/web/20140809204446/https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/friendly-atheist-cancels-book-comparing-god-to-abusive-boy-friend/2014/08/08/8f6c810c-1f2b-11e4-9b6c-12e30cbe86a3_story.html
- 9 <https://freethoughtblogs.com/pharyngula/>
- 10 As the original blog post is no longer accessible online, its precise date is difficult to determine. However, Myers's references to figures such as Billy Graham, Pat Robertson, and Rush Limbaugh—most notably the Texas intelligent design advocate Cynthia Dunbar, who, during her tenure on the state's Board of Education from 2006 to 2010, promoted the inclusion of creationism in public school curricula—strongly suggest that the text was written during this period.

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Conclusion

From the Margins to the Center? Atheist Pamphleteering as Cultural Intervention

This study has traced the trajectory of atheist pamphleteering in the United States as a historically relevant and rhetorically potent tradition of discursive activism. Rather than offering a comprehensive account of the history of atheist activism, it has focused on a selective archive of polemical texts written in a confrontational and belligerent spirit—marked by affective intensity, rhetorical aggression, and a clear intent to catalyze socio-cultural transformation. These texts intervene in dominant cultural narratives not merely by negating religious belief, but by demanding recognition for unbelief as a legitimate and politically consequential position within the public sphere. Framed as pamphletary events, such interventions function not simply as textual artifacts but as performative acts of cultural disruption—moments in which the normative authority of religious belief is momentarily suspended, and counter-hegemonic voices are brought into visibility.

Because of this, atheist pamphleteering has historically also functioned in the context of emancipatory activism embedded within specific movements for social and political liberation. Figures such as Ernestine Rose and Emma Goldman, for example, did not merely contest religious dogma as an abstract concept. Their atheist critique was inextricably linked to feminist, anarchist, or abolitionist struggles. In these specific contexts, unbelief functioned as a discursive weapon against patriarchal norms, oppressive moral regimes, and social injustice. By denouncing clerical authority, their pamphlets simultaneously articulated visions of gender equality, economic justice, and individual autonomy. Similarly, twentieth-century activists like Madalyn Murray O'Hair challenged the entwinement of state power and Christian hegemony not only in order to defend secularism, but to advocate for a civic order in which marginalized voices—nonbelievers, women, political dissidents—could claim visibility and dignity outside the shadow of religious normativity.

From the radical emancipatory counterpublics of the nineteenth century to the hybrid media ecologies of the digital age, atheist polemicists have consistently operated under conditions of cultural marginalization—particularly in the United States, where the public sphere has been structured by a deep and enduring adherence to normative anti-atheism. This religio-political order, as

the chapters have shown, manifests not only in law and politics but also in national mythology, public ritual, and shared moral imaginaries. Within this context, atheism has persistently been cast as a threat to collective identity, cultural belonging, moral cohesion, and civic virtue. Atheist pamphleteering has thus emerged in direct response to—and been shaped by—the structural exclusions of this symbolic framework. Its rhetorical strategies reflect the imperative to secure forms of mediated visibility that do not merely enter the public sphere but seek to reconfigure its normative foundations. In this sense, atheist pamphleteering is best understood not only as oppositional critique but as a practice of symbolic self-constitution: it enacts anti-religious subjectivity through the very process of articulating its marginalization and confronting the cultural logics that sustain it. Even when atheistic critique takes the form of an anti-sermon—replicating the dogmatism and stylistic features of the very religious discourse it opposes—this phenomenon, described by scholars as “imitative atheism,” which “merely replaces ‘God’ with a supposedly atheistic placeholder such as ‘Man’ or ‘Reason’” (Watkin 1–2), should not be dismissed as a failure of originality or critical distance. Rather, it reveals the structural embeddedness of atheist discourse within the hegemonic semantic order it seeks to disrupt. To intervene effectively, atheist pamphleteers must speak a language the dominant culture can recognize—even as they endeavor to subvert its meaning from within.

While early activists such as Ernestine Rose and Emma Goldman articulated their atheism from within specific political counterpublics that were structurally excluded from dominant communicative spheres, later actors like H. L. Mencken and Madalyn Murray O’Hair managed to insert anti-religious critique into more prominent platforms, albeit often at the cost of public vilification. The New Atheists, by contrast, operated within a fully mediatized landscape that enabled their interventions to achieve unprecedented reach—amplified through bestsellers, televised debates, and digital channels—while their rhetoric remained deeply polarizing. Across these shifting historical contexts, however, a structural continuity persists: all public atheists in the United States—regardless of their visibility or media strategies—have operated at the unstable threshold between anti-normative dissent and public notoriety.

Yet the gradual expansion into broader public visibility has not translated into commensurate gains in cultural legitimacy. As Moore and Kramnick observe, atheists “have not successfully challenged the public pronouncement [...] that America is ‘one nation under God’” (195). While unbelief may enjoy formal legal recognition, this—still—rarely equates to substantive cultural inclusion. The persistent disjunction between juridical rights and lived experience remains one of the defining paradoxes of atheistic identity in the United States. Within this context, atheist pamphleteering continues to serve a critical function—both as a mode of resistance to the hegemony of overtly religious narratives and as a strategy for emancipating individual and collective subjects from the constraints of a crypto-theistic normative order.

Crucially, pamphleteering has also functioned as a means of collective self-articulation. Through its capacity to discursively create counterpublics—whether in print, broadcast, or digital form—it has enabled the expression of communal identities otherwise fractured by isolation, stigma, or social marginalization. The rhetorical trope of “coming out,” frequently invoked by contemporary atheist activists and scholars discussing atheism alike, exemplifies how unbelief is framed as a shared identity to be publicly asserted and politically mobilized. The digital age has further transformed the contours of this tradition.¹

Online platforms have facilitated a proliferation of atheist expression, allowing for real-time debate, intertextual commentary, and global reach. The pamphletary mode of communication, once confined to printed tract or public speech, now circulates as meme, tweet, podcast, or online post—each iteration extending the tradition’s reach while adapting to the affordances of its medium. At the same time, this multiplicity of voices has rendered the discursive field more fragmented, which reflects a diversification and multiplication of tactics and audiences.

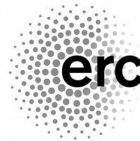
The question of efficacy—of whether atheist pamphleteering has effectively established atheism as a fully accepted alternative to religion—resists simple quantification. Its successes are often intangible and not measurable through specific revolutionary policy shifts. Rather, its impact often manifests in more diffuse and indirect forms, discernible in the ideological friction it produces and the disturbances it provokes within dominant discursive contexts. Pamphleteers intervene by unsettling prevailing norms, generating dissonance that, as Nils C. Kumkar observes, prompts public discourse to engage in “the political and epistemological processing of irritation-as-conflict” (45). In this sense, the effectiveness of atheist pamphleteering may be located less in institutional change than in the visibility and intensity of the irritation it generates and the controversies it sparks—particularly within the specific ideological conditions of the anti-atheist public sphere of the United States.

This study has demonstrated that atheist pamphleteering is more than a historical curiosity or a fringe practice of rhetorical antagonism. It is a sustained tradition of cultural engagement that has played a formative role in the negotiation of non-religious identity, the critique of religious authority, and the redefinition of public discourse. It reveals how the margins can speak to the center, not always to persuade, but to make themselves known, to assert their presence, demand recognition, and expose the ideological scaffolding of dominant narratives.

In this sense, atheist pamphleteering has functioned as an ongoing attempt to disrupt the structural logic of American public discourse concerning the relationship between religion and unbelief. Historically, public expressions of atheism have been positioned as deviant or marginal, often excluded from the discursive norms that regulate acceptable forms of public speech about morality, citizenship, and social order. Atheist pamphleteering seeks to challenge this exclusion by reframing unbelief not as a private deficiency or pathological stance, but as a legitimate and publicly assertable identity. However, the

emancipatory effects of this tradition remain deeply ambivalent. Its history is marked by provisional and often temporary victories: brief expansions of public discourse that are, however, frequently followed by backlash, containment, or cultural oblivion.

Whereas nineteenth-century public atheism operated primarily within oppositional counterpublics and circulated through ephemeral print networks, contemporary atheist rhetoric now moves across diverse media ecologies, including electronic mass media, online platforms, and global digital publics. The tradition examined here has contributed to the expansion of discursive space, redefining not only what may be articulated about atheism but also who is authorized to speak on its behalf within a cultural landscape long structured by the normative authority of religious belief. Yet this struggle remains ongoing. Despite its persistent efforts to secularize public discourse, atheist pamphleteering has not succeeded in rendering itself obsolete. The anti-atheist paradigm continues to hold cultural hegemony in U.S. society, ensuring that atheist polemics remain necessary as a vital—and still contested—form of counterpublic intervention.



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Note

- 1 On the websites of many American atheist activist groups, one can find blog posts about the experience of coming out as an atheist.

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