

Chapter 6. Atheism is neither a religion nor the opposite of religion (or, why atheists should not wear their hats on their elbows).

*They seek to remove from the public domain any acknowledgment of God. Religion is seen as merely a private affair with no place in public life. It is as if they are intent on establishing a new religion in America--the religion of secularism.*¹ American Presidential Candidate Mitt Romney

*Atheism is the religion whose belief about God is that there is no God. . . . it must be subject to the same legal restrictions imposed by governments on all other religions. In particular, in the United States, the teaching of Atheism must be prohibited wherever the teaching of Christianity is prohibited.*² The Reverend Bill McGinnis

Atheism is defined by religion, but it is not the opposite of religion. Neither is atheism a form of religion. Everyone is born atheist, just as everyone is born human. Some humans learn religion, some do not, and some learn religion and later reject it.

It is kind of like humans and hats. All humans are born without hats, just as all humans are born without religion. Some humans have hats put on their heads pretty soon after birth, but they are not born that way. Humor me and let me call newborns “a-hatist” (that is without hats, just like “a-theist” is without religion). If hats were never invented, there would be no need for the term “a-hatist,” but a-hatism would still exist.

Similarly, atheism is defined by religion. Atheism is a lack of belief in religion. If men had never invented religion, there would be no need for the term “atheist,” but atheism would still exist.

Neither is atheism a religion. Religionists want to call atheism a religion.³ They seize on language in a 1961 U.S. Supreme Court case that labeled secular humanism a religion.⁴ The language is located in a footnote and is what lawyers call *dicta*—incidental words that are thrown into the case but have no bearing on the decision and do not serve as binding legal precedent. Religionists call us secular humanists more frequently than they call us atheists. There is a reason for

this.

If religionists succeed in categorizing atheism as a religion, they can claim victory. Atheism would just be another supernatural theory, no better or worse than their own. They could call evolution a religion and demand that their bearded man myths get equal billing.⁵ But they are wrong. Religion is a belief in the supernatural. Atheism is the absence of that belief. Think back to Chapter 1 where I described the mayonnaise jars of religionists and atheists. A Christian religionist's jar is full of supernatural beliefs like: the world was created in six days, woman was created from man's rib, a virgin gave birth to a child, dead people can come back to life, and so on. The atheist's mayonnaise jar is empty. No matter how much the religionists try, they cannot transmute the lack of supernatural belief into a supernatural belief. That is, unless we let them.

It is easy to imitate the religious model and allow religionists to set the agenda. Satanists are a good example. They take Christianity and flip it on its head. Satanists worship Lucifer instead of Yahweh. They have black masses instead of white. It seems that some people get a rebellious thrill by claiming to be Satanists, but they are misdirecting their frustration with Christianity by being its opposite. They let the religionists set their agenda and act in a manner as equally silly as the religionists they are rebelling against.

The Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a spoof of Christianity. It provides a bit of comic relief in the debates over religion and creationism. Tongue in cheek, the Church announces, "Some claim that the church is purely a thought experiment, satire, illustrating that Intelligent Design is not science, but rather a pseudoscience manufactured by Christians to push creationism into public schools. These people are mistaken."⁶ Admittedly, I laugh at the irreverent references. But all fun aside, the Church of the Flying Spaghetti Monster is a limited joke that conforms to the religious model.

On the serious side of things, the Church of Reality gives little more than a wink before announcing it is "winning souls for Darwin" and then plugging common sense concepts into the religious model.⁷ Although spoof remains evident, it is a more serious attempt to fit atheism into a religious model. They have even obtained tax-free status for their organization from the Internal Revenue Service.⁸

The American Humanist model is a very serious attempt to mold atheism into a religion. Humanists are so intent on answering the religionist posed question "can

you be good without god,” that they create an alternative church. In fact, their first Humanist Manifesto repeatedly labeled humanism a religion.⁹ Their recent billboard campaign advertises, “Millions are good without god.”¹⁰ Humanists have allowed religionists set their agenda. Humanists seem like nice people but I believe they have gone down the wrong path.

Everyone has a right to express their beliefs but I believe that these “churches” fall into the trap set by religionists to make atheism another religion. It is like “a-hatists” proclaiming:

*Hat-ists are wrong
to wear their hats on their heads,
so we will wear hats
on our elbows instead.*

Atheism is the absence of religion, it is not the opposite of religion and it is not a new religion. To behave otherwise allows the religionists to set our agenda.

Even an organization with the hopeful title “Freedom From Religion Foundation (FFRF)” falls into the same trap. Their co-leader is a former preacher who went from traveling around the country singing Christian songs and preaching Christianity to traveling around the country singing atheist songs and preaching atheism.¹¹ They even print atheist recipes in their church bulletin—um, I mean freethought paper. An FFRF billboard campaign adopts a religious stained glass motif and proclaims, “Praise Darwin!”¹² Perhaps I am missing the sophisticated humor of juxtapositioning religious imagery with atheism in the campaign, but it looks to me like they are elevating Darwin to the position of saint or deity. I believe Darwin was a brave and bright scientist. But I think that making him a saint is allowing the religionists to set the agenda. Atheism is the absence of religion. If we make atheism the opposite of religion, it is like (going back to the a-hatism example) wearing a hat on our elbow instead of wearing no hat. And if we wear our hats on our elbows, we are letting religionists dictate the rules.

A personal example is my recent decision to grow my hair long. Styles are changing, it reminds me of my youth when I first grew long hair, and it is a final opportunity to wear long hair before it turns white. These are my rationalizations. But I also decided to grow my hair long about the time I learned a Bible passage¹³ dictates that men should wear their hair short. If I am growing my hair simply to be the opposite of what the Bible dictates, I am letting the religionists set the

agenda. It is like I am wearing a hat on my elbow. I believe I am growing my hair for the reasons I first stated, but I must admit the possibility exists it is simply to oppose religion.

Religionists have a mayonnaise jar full of myths. Atheists have an empty jar. Where religionists promote myths, atheists look to facts. If religionists can convince us to comply with their model, to fill our mayonnaise jar with replacement myths, then they have a battle of myth versus myth, something they want. Then, for example, religionists can say that in the conflict between teaching religion versus science in the classroom (creationism v. evolution); that no myth can have priority over another myth and that the law gives them equal opportunity. One reason religionists label their enemy “secular humanists” is because the humanist belief structure fits better into the myth versus myth battle than that of atheists. Religionists have a much harder time creating the battle with atheists who point out that their mayonnaise jar is empty.

When it comes to facts, the religionists’ position is indefensible. Look at creationism. There are no facts to support that the world was created in six days, no evidence that the world was created less than 10,000 years ago, and nothing indicates that the species are fixed in their current form. But, bargaining from their position of power, if the religionists can keep atheists chasing after a red herring like “can you be good without god,” then the religionists can maintain their dominance—they never need to face the facts. Atheists reject religious myths. We must also reject the religionists’ agenda of making the debate myth versus myth instead of myth versus reality. Atheism is not a religion. There should be no atheist churches. We do not put our empty mayonnaise jars on altars. That is the difference between atheists and religionists.

When religion goes away there will be no need for the term “atheist.” But the status will still exist. Humans can exist without religion, but religion cannot exist without humans. Religion is a byproduct of human behavior but atheism is not a product at all, it is the absence of religion.

Atheism and negativity.

In emphasizing that we should not allow religionists to set our agenda, I do not mean to deny that there is an oppositional aspect to atheism. Atheism is defined by religion, it is not the opposite of religion, but there is an element of opposition to religion contained within atheism. In fact, I believe a negative factor is a key

element of atheism. When pressed, “nones” admit, “I have no religion.” Atheists,

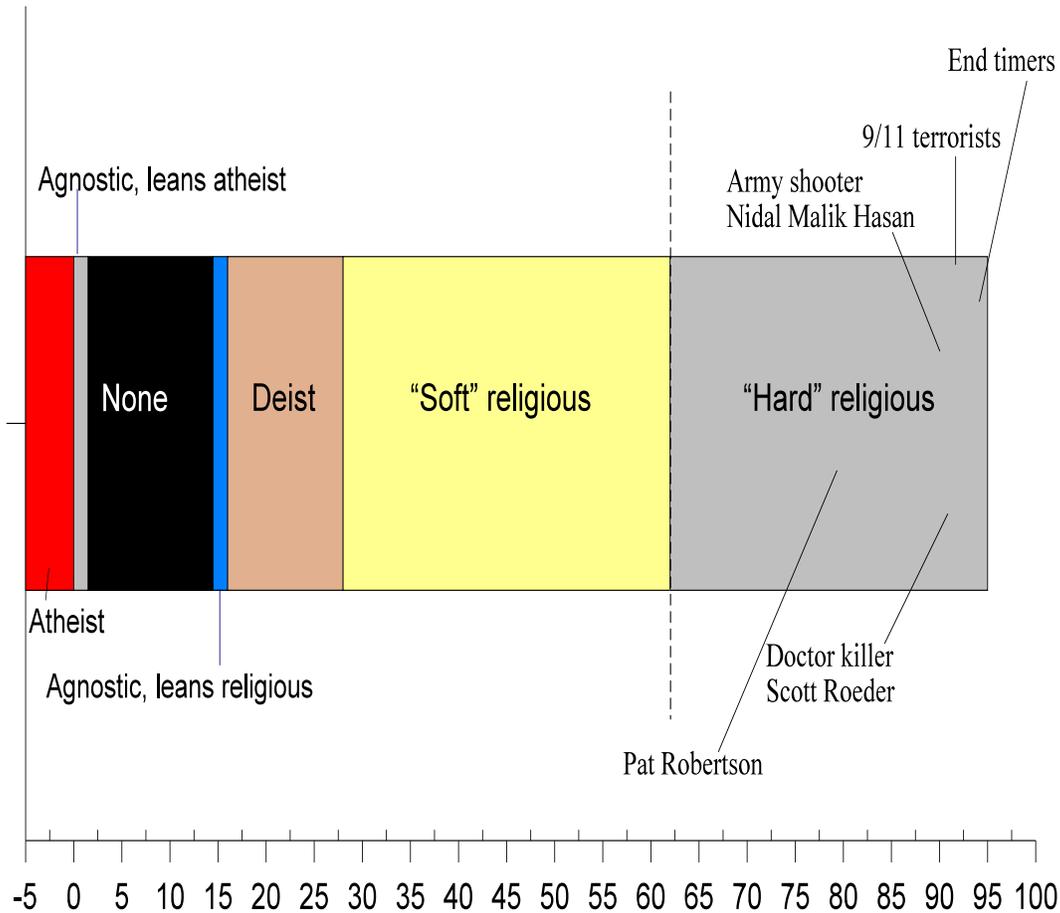


Figure 13. Religiosity with the scale representing the strength of religious belief.

on the other hand, are proud to announce they have no religion. They advertise it. When you ask an atheist about religion, he happily responds, “can I tell you more?” Atheists are willing to speak out to some degree against religion, that is what distinguishes them from “nones.”

Returning to the religiousness scale from Chapter 4, but changing the scale from the percentage of the population to a numerical rating of religiousness, the scale appropriately extends from negative numbers to positive numbers. That is, “nones” would sit around zero on the scale. Religious zealots would be near 100, and atheists would fall below zero into the negative numbers as shown in Figure

13.

Religionists could argue that the negative scale should go to -100 . However, I see no evidence that atheists are as extreme as religionists. For example, I am one of the most vocal atheists I know. However, my atheist activism goes no further than talking to religionists, being open about my atheism, putting bumper stickers on my car and writing this book. To me, it seems reasonable to call my anti-religionism a -5 . Some religionists, on the other hand, kill for their religion. The 9/11 terrorists come quickly to mind. These radical acts earn a higher number--close to 100, on my religiosity scale.

To help make sense of the chart, I mentally put a few stories from the news on the scale. To the right falls Pat Robertson, the former presidential candidate and preacher who said the 2010 earthquake in Haiti was punishment for a pact the Haitian people made with the devil 200 years earlier to gain freedom from the French.¹⁴ A bit further right fall the religious shooters, such as Christian Scott Roeder, who shot abortion doctor George Tiller at his church,¹⁵ and Muslim Army shooter, Nidal Malik Hasan, who allegedly yelled “god is great” before killing 12 and wounding 31 at his military workplace.¹⁶

Toward the very end of the chart are zealous believers who use improvised weapons of mass destruction, like the 9/11 hijackers and the Detroit underwear bomber. At the very far right are the “end timers” who may seek to use nuclear weapons, especially in the Middle East, because they believe it will accelerate the appearance or return of their messiah.

I use the religiosity scale as a tool to give a graphic depiction of the range of religious behavior. First, I use it to acknowledge that atheism has a negative, antireligious element. It is not the sole element of atheism, but it is a factor. Second, I use it for encouragement. Facing the statistic that 80% of Americans believe in god, is disheartening. But the scale helps me to see that they do not all believe equally. The religious block is not a solid monolith, but a gradation of belief. The scale helps me to see that a large number of people are closer to atheism than at first appears. This helps me to target my message and encourages me to continue my efforts.

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<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=16969460>
2. "The Religion of Atheism," Patriot.net, February 3, 2009,
<http://patriot.net/~bmcgin/atheismisareligion.html>
3. "Biblical Christianity vs. Secular Humanism, Why Should I Worry about Secular Humanism?" Dr. Justin Imel, undated,
<http://justinimel.com/biblicalchristianitysecularhumanismwhysouldiworryaboutsecularhumanism.html>
4. The footnote reads, "Among religions in this country which do not teach what would generally be considered a belief in the existence of God are Buddhism, Taoism, Ethical Culture, Secular Humanism and others." The text of the case, accompanying the footnote, provided, "We repeat and again reaffirm that neither a State nor the Federal Government can constitutionally force a person 'to profess a belief or disbelief in any religion.' Neither can constitutionally pass laws or impose requirements which aid all religions as against non-believers, and neither can aid those religions based on a belief in the existence of God as against those religions founded on different beliefs." *Torcaso v. Watkins*, 367 U.S. 488 (1961),
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7. "Our World View is Real Reality," Church of Reality, undated,
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12. "Secularist group posts 'Praise Darwin' billboards," USA Today, February 10, 2009,
http://www.usatoday.com/news/religion/2009-02-10-darwin-secular_N.htm
13. "Does not the very nature of things teach you that if a man has long hair, it is a disgrace to him, but that if a woman has long hair, it is her glory?" The Bible, 1 Corinthians 11:14-15.
14. "What's a Natural Disaster Without Pat Robertson to Explain?" Time Magazine, January 13, 2010,
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16. "The Fort Hood Killer: Terrified . . . or Terrorist?" Time Magazine, November 11, 2009,
<http://www.time.com/time/nation/article/0,8599,1938415,00.html>