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## **Public reason secularism : a defense of liberal democracy**

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## Chapter One: Secularism and Atheism

### I. Introduction

Secularism is encountering a myriad of existential challenges across the globe, while the unsettling, longstanding assumptions about “what secularism is”, among others, greatly haunt secularism. If we cannot come to a clear understanding of what secularism is, then all subsequent discussions about whether secularism is desirable, or how to improve secularism as a political mode, or how to implement secularism in certain regimes are groundless. Jose Casanova reminds us of a significant distinction within the concept of secularism. On the one hand, secularism can refer to “a whole range of worldviews and ideologies concerning religion”; on the other hand, secularism also refers to “different state projects, as well as to different legal-constitutional frameworks of separation of state and religion.”<sup>1</sup> Therefore, the preliminary step is to draw an analytical distinction between secularism as a political doctrine about the relation between state and religion, and secularism as a view of religion *per se*. Secularism as a political principle entails the principle of separation between religious and political authority. Such a doctrine neither presupposes nor entails any substantive view of religion. At most it could be seen as a meta-religion theory (in the same sense as meta-ethics), so a theory *about* religion but not *of* religion. Once the state explicitly upholds a particular conception of religion, one enters the realm of ideological evaluation. If religion in a self-claimed secularist state is presupposed as an outdated or an irrational force of discourse that should be banished from the public sphere, the state is actually referring to secularism as an antireligious ideology rather than a political principle.

In my view, a plausible and compelling defense of secularism should be restricted to the political realm, which means that we will take secularism as a political principle which requires the separation of church and state. If we fail to distinguish secularism as a political principle from an ideology of religion, secularism in political discourse is likely to be confused with atheism<sup>2</sup> and even an antireligious worldview. For instance, even a

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<sup>1</sup> See Jose Casanova, “The Secular, Secularizations, Secularisms” in *Rethinking Secularism* (Craig Calhoun, Mark Juergensmeyer & Jonathan Van Antwerpen ed., Oxford University Press, 2011) 66.

<sup>2</sup> Apart from atheism, there are some other related concepts which have always been inevitably but mistakenly associated with secularism; secularization, for instance. In the very beginning, secularism was diagnosed as the transition period toward the better state of atheism. Some prominent sociologists and philosophers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, like Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber, all believed that, through functional differentiation, scientific knowledge, and de-mystification, the world would move toward atheism and a total rejection of God. It is actually a prediction of religion’s demise, a secularization thesis. In contrast to it, secularism is a normative creed that makes no prediction, and its validity is sustained regardless of religion’s future.

philosopher as sophisticated as Charles Taylor claims that:

“A political system that replaces religion with a comprehensive secular philosophy as the foundation of its actions makes all the faithful members of a religion into second-class citizens, since these citizens do not embrace the reasons and evaluations enshrined in the *officially recognized philosophy*. In other words, that political system replaces established religion, as well as the core beliefs that define it, with a secular but *antireligious* moral philosophy, which in turn establishes an order of metaphysical and moral beliefs.”<sup>3</sup>

At least three inferences can be made from Taylor’s statement. One, either the state has an established religion, or it has an official established secular doctrine; two, this established secular doctrine is antireligious; three, a state with an established secular doctrine, namely an antireligious doctrine, discriminates against its religious citizens. Taylor’s understanding of secularism, as voiced in the word above, is so misleading that many influential anti-secularism and multicultural arguments share this line of thought. This representative line of reasoning presumes that secularism stands opposite an established religion, under the assumption of an either-or binary opposition between secularism and religion. Nevertheless, if the distinction between secularism in its political sense and secularism’s ideological entailment is recognized, we can see that secularism as a political principle occupies a different level than an ideology of religion. Secularism invoked as a political principle exemplifies an institutional arrangement of state and religion, which is not a substantive view of religion. Therefore, it is a ridiculous and logically fallacious allegation to accuse a secular state principle of being antireligious. And thus there is no ground for discrimination of religious citizens either. Before moving on in this chapter, I will make it clear that, in this dissertation, when I refer to religion, I am referring only to monotheist religions.

Taylor’s misleading usage of secularism as an antireligious ideology demonstrates an

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Also, the confusion between secularism and agnosticism is similar to the confusion between secularism and atheism. With regard to the question whether there is a supernatural deity in the world, there are three possible stances. One, theism, there is a God; two, atheism, there is no God; and three, agnosticism, there is no way to know the answer. Secularism cannot be attributed to any of the three stances, and in fact, secularism does not, and does not need to consider the question of God’s existence.

In this chapter, I follow Paul Cliteur, taking atheism as a concept as contrary to theism, which “is not a belief; it is the absence of belief.” An atheist “is not convinced by the proofs of theism.” See Paul Cliteur, “The Definition of Atheism,” *Journal of Religion and Society* 11(2009): 1-23.

<sup>3</sup> Jocelyn Maclure & Charles Taylor, *Secularism and Freedom of Conscience* (Harvard University Press, 2011) 13-14. Italics added by me.

underlying subtle confusion of secularism and atheism. This confusion goes all the way back to the very first adoption of the term secularism, and it still remains in contemporary political theory. Although the distinction between secularism and atheism does receive considerable recognition and careful analyses, at least in academics,<sup>4</sup> the confusion has been aggravated over recent years. The philosopher David Novak, also an ordained Conservative Rabbi, thinks that what undergirds authentic secularism is an “inevitably vehement denial of any God”, which is precisely a claim of atheism.<sup>5</sup> The contemporary overheated discussion about religious extremist violence seems to exasperate the tendency to conflate secularism and atheism, as a motivation for the violence seems to be a misidentification of secularism as an anti-deity worldview. There is a perilous and misleading trend embedded in the confusion. People tend to misidentify religion itself as the root of escalated religious violence. Thus they consciously or unconsciously campaign for atheism as if the best or only solution is the abandonment of religion. Jacques Berlinerblau warns us that, in the United States, religious conservatives have profitably promulgated this misconception at least since the 1970s. Claiming that secularism and atheism are the same thing makes for good “culture warfare”.<sup>6</sup> Many Americans harbor irrational prejudices toward non-believers. Jacques Berlinerblau worries that by “intentionally blurring the distinction between atheism and secularism, the religious conservative succeeds in drowning both.”<sup>7</sup> That is precisely why we need to make a conceptual distinction to shield secularism from being viewed as atheism or even an antireligious worldview.

But what is wrong with atheism and an antireligious worldview in the public discourse, really? Why do we need to make this distinction and restrict secularism in the political sense in the first place, and why not defend secularism as a comprehensive moral view? These are the questions I need to answer in this and the next chapter. Part of the answer hinges on the deficiencies of atheism which I am about to discuss in section V. I am going to explain the quintessential new atheist arguments and unravel their flaws (section IV & V). Apart from the weaknesses of atheism, the purpose and limitation of political philosophy also demands that we to defend secularism as a political doctrine, which will be dealt with in the following chapters.

Historically speaking, secularism is a product of the Protestant ethic and was

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<sup>4</sup> Paul Cliteur has written thorough and extensive accounts about the differences between them in *The Secular Outlook: in Defense of Moral and Political Secularism* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2010) 25-42.

<sup>5</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, “Introduction: Secularism and Its Confusions”, in *Secularism on the Edge: Rethinking Church-State Relations in the United States, France, and Israel* (Jacques Berlinerblau ed., St. Martin’s Press, 2014) 5.

<sup>6</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, “Secularism Is Not Atheism,” in *The Huffington Post*, 07/28/2012.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

shaped by it, so they were far from opposites. Before the Protestant Reformation, the Church had absolute authority in both the religious sphere and in secular politics. The Protestant Reformation came to “designate the passage, transfer, or relocation of persons, things, functions, meanings, and so forth from their traditional location in the religious sphere to the secular sphere.”<sup>8</sup> One of the most prominent effects of the Protestant Reformation is the undermining of the Church’s authority. After the Reformation, the Church’s monopolist compulsory character was undermined by the rise of a modern secular state which was able to progressively concentrate and monopolize the means of violence and coercion within its territory.<sup>9</sup> The secular and the religious were envisioned as coordinated, mutually enriching components of a polity under God. That is why Berlinerblau points out that the attempts to equate secularism with atheism are at least “historically imprecise”.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, the official term “secularism” was not used until the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The term was coined by British freethinker George Jacob Holyoake (1817-1906), who coined the term in a newspaper, *The Reasoner*, on 10 December, 1851.<sup>11</sup> Holyoake’s promotion of secularism as a comprehensive worldview that, to some extent, could replace religion leads to the inevitably dubious equation of secularism and atheism. It is therefore very important for us to grasp the cause of the continuing confusion by examining the conceptual beginnings of secularism and atheism, their entailments, and their long-standing entanglement with each other (section II & III).

## II. The Birth of the Concept of Secularism

The dominant Victorian values in 19<sup>th</sup> century England were seen as repressive and hypocritical. It was not a coincidence that such a concept was born in such a time. With the fall of dogmatic religious faith and the rise of freethought<sup>12</sup>, 19<sup>th</sup> century England

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<sup>8</sup> José Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994) 22.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> See Jacques Berlinerblau, *Introduction: Secularism and Its Confusions in Secularism on the Edge: Rethinking Church-State Relations in the United States, France, and Israel* (Jacques Berlinerblau ed., St. Martin’s Press, 2014) 8.

<sup>11</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief* (Open Court Publishing Co., 1896) Chapter IX. Also see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38104/38104-h/38104-h.htm>, produced by David Widger. In this dissertation, I am citing from this free online source.

<sup>12</sup> The tradition of freethought is closely associated with secularist ideas. Freethought aims to criticize religion, which is because freethought is, first of all, the free development of thought. The practitioners of freethought are known as “freethinkers”. In Holyoake’s time in England, the term freethinker was used “to describe those who stood in opposition to the institution of the Church of England and to literal belief in the Bible. The beliefs of these individuals were centred on the concept that people could understand the world through consideration of nature.” See Paul Cliteur, *The Secular*

was in drastic intellectual turmoil. Most of Europe, including England, went through a period of rapid industrialization and urbanization, and the conditions of the poor caused much concern in society. The religious majority's opposition to contraception, treatment of sexually transmitted diseases, and legal controls on prostitution inspired intellectual push-back. Although the 19<sup>th</sup> century is thought of as a pious age, it was also an age of "doubt and loss of faith for many thoughtful people".<sup>13</sup> Correspondingly, humanist thinking developed rapidly in this era, largely owing to new scientific thinking and discoveries. One of the most influential publications in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Charles Darwin's (1809-1882) *Origin of Species*, was published in 1859. Evolution theory caused many people to doubt their long-held views about religion. T. H. Huxley (1825-1895), a staunch defender of Darwin, coined the word "agnostic" in 1869 to describe his belief that there were things that "we could not possibly know".<sup>14</sup> Coincidentally, moral philosophy also became increasingly detached from religion. The positivist movement put forward by French philosopher Auguste Comte (1798-1857) profoundly fortified people's dependence on empirical observation and, in the meantime, reduced their reliance on metaphysical thought. John Stuart Mill (1806-1873) further developed Jeremy Bentham's (1748-1832) utilitarianism by introducing higher and lower pleasures and proof of the principle of utility, the ultimate standard by which to measure moral actions.

The England of the 19<sup>th</sup> century also witnessed the ascent of intellectuals who openly challenged religion and theology. George Jacob Holyoake and Charles Bradlaugh (1833-1891) are both representatives of the freethinkers of 19<sup>th</sup> century England. Holyoake was the person who invented the concept of secularism while Bradlaugh was Britain's first open atheist. They were both significantly influenced by the social and political reforms of that time, and both aimed to advocate humanist thinking by undermining the impact of religious doctrines and spreading rational principles. However, they had their disagreements with respect to their approaches to dealing with religion and theology. While Holyoake advanced secularism as a comprehensive worldview in place of religion, Bradlaugh insisted on treating atheism as the only alternative to theism.

## 2.1 Holyoake's Life

Holyoake was born and bred in Birmingham, in an age "when social and political ideas

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*Outlook*, 69-70.

<sup>13</sup> See <https://humanism.org.uk/humanism/the-humanist-tradition/19th-century-freethinkers/>.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

were in the air”.<sup>15</sup> Robert Owen<sup>16</sup> declared in the London Tavern that all the religions of the world were wrong; Jonathan Wooler<sup>17</sup> issued the first issue of *The Black Dwarf*; St. Jean Godin<sup>18</sup> founded the famous Familistere of Guise.<sup>19</sup> Trained in Christianity, Holyoake began to understand that “sincerity was not the same thing as truth”, just as knowledge was more than what could be found in the books lying about everywhere to those who observe and think.<sup>20</sup> “Seeing that he had to be answerable for what he believed”<sup>21</sup> made him realize it was prudent to form his own opinions. The habit he had acquired in his early days of frequenting chapels and missionary meetings led him to attend political assemblies, which further broadened his views of life and duty.<sup>22</sup> Holyoake met Robert Owen in 1837, and they quickly became friends. They began to lecture and write articles advocating socialism together. Later, he joined Charles Southwell in protesting against and refusing to enforce the official policy that lecturers should take a religious oath. Holyoake became the editor of an atheist newspaper, *Oracle*, and became an atheist himself.<sup>23</sup> Holyoake retained his disbelief in God all his life; however, he decided to adopt Huxley’s label of agnostic<sup>24</sup> once it was available. He felt that agnosticism more exactly suited his a-theological position since it illustrated “the limitation of an assertion to actual knowledge”.<sup>25</sup> “Never doubting that other persons

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<sup>15</sup> See George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life* (London T. Fisher Urwin, 1892)4.

<sup>16</sup> Robert Owen (1771-1858) was a Welsh social reformer and one of the founders of utopian socialism and the cooperative movement, also a renowned secularist who combined secularism with socialism. He inspired Holyoake’s secularism idea and maintained close relationship with him.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas Jonathan Wooler (1786-1853) was a publisher, and he was active in the radical movement of early 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. He used to work for the journal *The Reasoner*, the one Holyoake took over in 1860. *The Black Dwarf* was a satirical journal, which made him famous.

<sup>18</sup> Jean-Baptiste André Godin (1817 –1888) was a French industrialist, writer and political theorist, and social innovator.

<sup>19</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life*, 4.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> See *ibid*, 33.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> Agnostic is a contextual word, which can be used in a non-theological way. For example, a cosmologist could say he is agnostic about quantum theory. Huxley nevertheless confines the word to a theological context. Huxley explains his account of agnosticism: “I took thought, and invented what I conceived to be the appropriate title of ‘agnostic’. It came into my head as suggestively antithetic to the ‘agnostic’ of Church history, who professed to know so much about the very things of which I was ignorant.” By way of clarification, Huxley states, “In matters of the intellect, follow your reason as far as it will take you, without regard to any other consideration. And negatively: In matters of the intellect, do not pretend that conclusions are certain which are not demonstrated or demonstrable.” Huxley thought that we would never be able to know about the ultimate origin and causes of the universe. Aldous Huxley, *Agnosticism* (London: K. Paul. Trench, 1889)183, 186-187.

<sup>25</sup> See George Jacob Holyoake, *Bygones Worth Remembering* (Vol. II, E.P. Dutton & Company, Two volumes, 1905): Chapter XXX. Also see



had a right to disagree”<sup>26</sup>: that is what Holyoake found was lacking from the theological-inclined. This taught him the “dangerous” habit of freely saying what he thought, which resulted in his being imprisoned for six months in 1842.<sup>27</sup>

It happened when Holyoake was delivering a public lecture in the Cheltenham Mechanics’ Institution upon Self-Supporting Home Colonies. A local preacher rose and said Holyoake had spoken of “our duty towards men, but had said nothing of our duty towards God,” and so the preacher asked for information about this.<sup>28</sup> Holyoake could have replied that theology was not his subject, but instead he subversively condemned spending too much money to build churches in British industrial colonies, while people there were living in distressed conditions. He said, “If I could have my way, I would place the deity on half pay as the Government of this country did its subaltern officers.”<sup>29</sup> It was a defiant answer to the preacher, but not to the extent to shock anyone, as it was conveyed in a light tone yet with audacity, which he deemed the occasion required, but later he was charged with blasphemy.<sup>30</sup> Holyoake was the first and also the last person in England who was to be imprisoned on such a charge.

Before his incarceration in 1842, Holyoake was the editor of the newspaper *Oracle*, whilst after the imprisonment it was not easy for him to find profitable employment. He thought if he retired from public advocacy he would be regarded “as a coward”, that many others would be discouraged too, and that “the enemies of freethought would triumph and grow insolent”, so he became a free speaker on prohibited subjects.<sup>31</sup> In 1845, Holyoake established the newspaper *The Reasoner*, in the context of which he developed the concept of secularism in 1851. Before its official launch, secularism as a new form of thought and action was not in Holyoake’s mind yet; he admitted that he merely had “a taste for reasoning on morality” that excluded theology.<sup>32</sup> By the time Holyoake coined the term secularism, he took the term secularism as a new name for a new conception, epitomizing a new form of freethought.

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<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36796/36796-h/36796-h.htm>, produced by David Widger. In this dissertation, I am citing from this free online source.

<sup>26</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life*, 49.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>29</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The History of the Last Trial by Jury for Atheism in England: A Fragment of Autobiography* (London: James Watson, 1851): Chapter I. Also see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36799/36799-h/36799-h.htm>, produced by David Widger. In this dissertation, I am citing from this free online source.

<sup>30</sup> See George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life* (London T. Fisher Urwin, 1892) 141-169.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 176.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.

In Holyoake's later years, he mainly dedicated to facilitate the cooperative movement of lower-class workers. On 22nd January, 1906, Holyoake died at Brighton, Sussex. He was buried in London.

## 2.2 Secularism as a Comprehensive Set of Affirmative Principles

When Holyoake maintains that secularism is a new name for a new conception, what Holyoake has in mind is a set of affirmative principles mainly intended "for those who find theology indefinite or inadequate, unreliable or unbelievable."<sup>33</sup> It is, however, already more than a mere negation of theology.

Tremendously influenced by the positivist philosophy of French philosopher Auguste Comte, Holyoake believes that negation cannot bring sustained progress.<sup>34</sup> Comte believes that the scientific method, especially the mutual dependence of theory and observation must replace the abstract and unverifiable metaphysics. Holyoake repeatedly referred to one maxim which was also quoted by Comte: "nothing is destroyed until it has been replaced."<sup>35</sup> This criticism has precisely revealed the deficiency of theology for mankind, and the real task of secularism is to "set up and maintain affirmative propositions", replacing "negations by affirmations", substituting "demonstration for denunciation", spelling out "the truths of nature and humanity".<sup>36</sup> So far we can see that what Holyoake understands by secularism is what is called "humanism" in contemporary speech.<sup>37</sup> Holyoake is also hugely impacted by the utilitarianism of John Stuart Mill, with whom he sustains a life-long friendship. Strongly under the influence of 19<sup>th</sup> century humanist thinking, especially Comte's and Mill's, Holyoake forms his own system of what secularism entails.

Holyoake wrote extensively in his life, but his major work of secularism was compiled in *The Origin and Nature of Secularism* (1896), while its American version was entitled as *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*. Holyoake defines secularism as "a code of duty pertaining to this life, founded on considerations purely human."<sup>38</sup> In general,

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<sup>33</sup> See George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism* (Third edition, Revised, Austin and Company, London 1871): Chapter III. I. Also see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36797/36797-h/36797-h.htm>. In this dissertation, I am citing from this free online source.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., chapter IX. II.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> See Andrew Copson and A.C. Grayling, eds., *The Wiley Blackwell Handbook of Humanism*, (Wiley Blackwell, Chichester 2015) 2.

<sup>38</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*. Chapter VII. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38104/38104-h/38104-h.htm>.

Holyoake claims that

“[S]ecularism is the study of promoting human welfare by material means, measuring human welfare by the utilitarian rule, and making service to others a duty of life. Secularism relates to the present existence of man, and to action, while both of those issues can be tested by the experience of this life.”<sup>39</sup>

Secularism propagates itself “in the promotion of human improvement by material means”, and thrives as the foundation of “common unity for all who would regulate life by reason and ennoble it by service.”<sup>40</sup> Holyoake proposes three affirmative principles of secularism to compensate the deficiency of theology, which are “(1) the improvement of this life by material means; (2) that science is the available providence of man; (3) that it is good to do good. Whether there is other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good.”<sup>41</sup>

At first glance, the first principle of secularism appears far removed from today’s discussion of political philosophy and ethics. Simply put, Christians and secularists both intend to cultivate people but their methods are quite different: “Theology works by spiritual means”, while secularism works by “material means”.<sup>42</sup> The second principle proposed by Holyoake is that “science is the available providence of man”.<sup>43</sup> One of theology’s common claims is that mankind is limited in power and is often in peril; however, those “who are taught to trust in supernatural aid are betrayed to their own destruction”<sup>44</sup> as praying for help actually does not help. By contrast, secular life is enhanced by the idea of self-help. Holyoake believes that a secularist guides himself by means of “maxims of positivism”<sup>45</sup> so that he upholds provable principles. Secularists do not have to be scientific, but they are able to “discern the value of science, to appreciate and promote it.”<sup>46</sup> These two principles show the strong influence of Comte’s positivist philosophy on Holyoake.

When it comes to meta-ethics, Holyoake’s philosophy of secularism also manifests a

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<sup>39</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*. Chapter III. I.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36797/36797-h/36797-h.htm>.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.

<sup>41</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*: Chapter VII.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38104/38104-h/38104-h.htm>.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., chapter VIII.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., chapter VII.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., chapter VIII.

<sup>45</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*. Chapter III. II.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36797/36797-h/36797-h.htm>.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., chapter IX. III.

naturalistic position. Holyoake reckons that a secularist seeks to discern what is in nature so that he knows what ought to be in morals. Secularism only accepts the authority of nature, adopting the methods of science and philosophy, and only respects rules of conscience, as they exist in the common sense of mankind.<sup>47</sup> As for the meaning of “secular”, what “can be tested by the experience of this life”<sup>48</sup>, the principle requires that precedence should be given to the duties of this life over those which pertain to another world. The common ground of all freethinkers then is the independence of opinion. It can be prompted by atheism depriving superstition of its foundation, so as to compel theism to argue for its validity. Or it also can be induced by materialism, “which shows the physical consequences of error, supplying, as it were, beacon lights to morality.”<sup>49</sup> On the subject of the dispute on the nature of existence between atheists and theists, due to a lack of sufficient evidence, secularism “neither asks nor gives any opinion” on this, and it confines “itself to the entirely independent field of study, the order of the universe.”<sup>50</sup>

Holyoake states the third principle as “it is good to do good. Whether there is other good or not, the good of the present life is good, and it is good to seek that good.”<sup>51</sup> The third principle is, as far as I am concerned, the most crucial, complex, and relevant one for secularism in the contemporary context. Even in today’s world, one of the most powerful assertions of theology or religious ethics is that religion represents the utmost good and leads human beings toward it. To a large extent, all of our persistent arguments of secularism, religion, or even ethics spring from that principle. Does religion symbolize the supreme good in the world? Do we uphold religion solely because it is fundamentally good? Is it justified and desirable to bring the good of religion into political debates? Do we have any obligations to do what religious scripture specifies? Is it possible to act morally without religion? Certainly it is not Holyoake who invented or initiated those arguments. But Holyoake’s claim explicitly shakes the fundamental grounds of religion. Secularism denotes the “moral duty of humans in this life, deduced from considerations”<sup>52</sup> pertaining to this life alone. Holyoake argues that “goodness is service to others with a view to their advantage” and human welfare; that is the “sanction of

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<sup>47</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*: Chapter XV.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38104/38104-h/38104-h.htm>.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., chapter VII.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *The Principles of Secularism*: Chapter IX. I.

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36797/36797-h/36797-h.htm>.

morality”.<sup>53</sup> Enlightened and convinced by J. S. Mill, Holyoake builds the moral correctness of his secularism on utilitarian moral philosophy, on the idea that morality is independent of scriptural religion and that it is built on reason and utility. Holyoake’s defense of this principle or the whole idea of secularism is established on the basis of Mill’s utilitarianism by asking whether secularism is useful or serviceable to many minds. He argues that the “measure of a good action is its conduciveness to progress.”<sup>54</sup>

“Whatever may be the value of metaphysical or theological theories of morals, utility in conduct is a daily test of common sense, and is capable of deciding intelligently more questions of practical duty than any other rule.”<sup>55</sup>

On the premise of taking utilitarian rules as adequate guides in all matters of morality, Holyoake states that the sufficiency of secular reason for guidance in human duties is part of what secularism means. Admittedly, Holyoake’s defense of such a moral principle may not be compelling or comprehensive enough; it does indeed leave room for the religious good. As human beings, we are perfectly able to perform our duties as rational agents and seek the good as what is desired in this secular world. By virtue of this principle, the significance of humanism and the moral thinking of secularism emerged. Secularism is no longer merely a fancy cover for atheism, or a natural attribution, e.g., a substitute for nature of origins.

### III. Atheism Endorsed by Charles Bradlaugh

#### 3.1 Bradlaugh’s Life

As the first open atheist in the UK, Charles Bradlaugh was a zealous social activist, an eloquent speaker, a parliamentarian, and one of the most important leaders of organized atheism in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Bradlaugh was born and grew up in Bethnal Green in London under financially unprivileged circumstances. He started his schooling, which was steeped in Christian teaching, at seven years old, and ended it before eleven.<sup>56</sup> After that, Bradlaugh continued to attend Sunday school and eventually became a Sunday school teacher, presumably immersing him more in the Bible than his regular school had

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<sup>53</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*. Chapter VIII. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38104/38104-h/38104-h.htm>.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., chapter VII.

<sup>56</sup> See Timothy Larsen, *A People of One Book: The Bible and the Victorians* (Oxford University Press, 2011) 69.

ever done.<sup>57</sup> However, later on, Bradlaugh carefully studied and compared the thirty-nine articles of the Church of England and the four gospels. To his dismay, he found that they did not agree and he was completely unable to reconcile them.<sup>58</sup> Bradlaugh thus wrote a letter to the Reverend of his parish asking for aid and explanation, which brought him three months of Sunday school teaching suspension and he was thrown out of his own house. During the three months suspension, Bradlaugh had the opportunity to meet people of whom “he had scarcely heard” before.<sup>59</sup> He joined an energetic and enthusiastic group of freethinkers led by Richard Carlile (1790-1843),<sup>60</sup> who was an important propagandist promoting the establishment of universal suffrage and freedom of the press in the UK.

Due to his financial predicament, Bradlaugh joined the British Army from 1850 to 1853, and then became an antireligious lecturer under the name of “Iconoclast”.<sup>61</sup> By then, Bradlaugh had grown more radical in his views compared to before he was enlisted. Bradlaugh delivered a series of anti-Bible lectures which gained prominence in a number of liberal groups and among secularists. In 1858, Bradlaugh became the president of the London Secular Society. Two years later, he took over the editorship of the secularist newspaper the *National Reformer*, which was prosecuted for blasphemy and sedition. Luckily, Bradlaugh was eventually acquitted on those charges.<sup>62</sup> Later on, Bradlaugh was elected Member of Parliament for Northampton in 1880, but his seat was denied because he asked to be allowed to make a solemn affirmation in court instead of taking the religious oath of the parliament.<sup>63</sup> For the next five years, he compromised and relinquished his request eventually. After three more elections, Bradlaugh was finally

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<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>58</sup> See Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (7th ed., London, 1908). Also see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm> (Vol. I) and <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45131/45131-h/45131-h.htm>. (Vol. II) In this dissertation, I am citing from these free online sources.

<sup>59</sup> See Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. I): 9. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm>.

<sup>60</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>61</sup> See *ibid.*, 39-42.

<sup>62</sup> But his problems with the authority were not over yet. In 1876, Bradlaugh and his friend Annie Besant were prosecuted and tried because they republished the American Charles Knowlton’s pamphlet advocating birth control in England. Bradlaugh and Annie were sentenced with fines and six months’ imprisonment, but later the court of Appeal overruled their convictions. See Edward Royle (2004-09-23), “Bradlaugh, Charles (1833-1891)”, politician and freethinker. *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*. Retrieved 29 May 2018, from <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/10.1093/ref:odnb/9780198614128.001.0001/odnb-9780198614128-e-3183>.

<sup>63</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. II): 209. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45131/45131-h/45131-h.htm>.

admitted to be seated in 1886.<sup>64</sup> Over the next few years, he had the right to speak and vote in the House of Commons regarding issues ranging from domestic affairs to Britain's foreign policies. He died at the age of 57 in 1891 in London, with over 3000 mourners at his funeral.

### 3.2 Bradlaugh's Defense of Atheism and Refutation of Theism

Bradlaugh mounts systematic, thorough, and strong defenses of atheism in his life's work. He argues that atheism, properly understood, is no mere disbelief; "it is, on the contrary, a hearty, fruitful affirmation of all truth, and involves the positive assertion of the highest humanity."<sup>65</sup> Atheism is a positive affirmation which does not include any possibility of theology. To defend atheism, Bradlaugh has to collect the meaning of God as expressed by theism and defeat it first. Theism includes pantheism, polytheism, and monotheism, in which Bradlaugh locks on monotheism as the form of theism he will deal with. It is because, according to Bradlaugh, if monism is defeated then all pretenses of theism collapse. Moreover, "there cannot be more than one ultimate explanation of the universe,"<sup>66</sup> which has to be either atheism or monotheism. Therefore, Bradlaugh focuses on the Christian Scripture, with an animating purpose to discredit the Bible in every possible way, point by point.

Bradlaugh refutes theism from four perspectives: 1) the untenable explanations of what God is; 2) the nullity of the specific word "God" itself; 3) the implausibility of God's intelligence; 4) the fallibility of proving God's existence. First of all, regarding the theistic explanations of God as the creator and the governor of the universe, Bradlaugh considers both inconceivable. As for the theists' claim of God as a creator, atheists think this conception is utterly impossible. According to Bradlaugh, "we are utterly unable to construe it in thought that the complement of existence has been either increased or diminished, and we certainly cannot conceive of an absolute origination of substance."<sup>67</sup> Bradlaugh continues, "we also cannot conceive of, on the one hand, nothing becoming something, or on the other, something becoming nothing. The words 'creation' and

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 361.

<sup>65</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, "A Plea for Atheism", xci, in *Charles Bradlaugh's Theological Essays* (London, A. Bonner, 1895) and also republished in *An Anthology of Atheism and Rationalism*, (Stein, Gordon, ed., Prometheus Books, 1980). Also see [http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/39266/pg39266.pdf?session\\_id=eca428032b8b4f7dd44f9731805dd9c0298b4c2a](http://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/39266/pg39266.pdf?session_id=eca428032b8b4f7dd44f9731805dd9c0298b4c2a), produced by David Widger. I will cite from this version provided by Gutenberg.org hereafter.

<sup>66</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, "A Plea for Atheism", cvi.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid., xci.



‘destruction’ have no value except when applied to phenomena.”<sup>68</sup> In confronting the claim of God as the governor of the universe, atheists point to the contradiction of all the existing evil things, like “pain, misery, crime, poverty”, and the eternal goodness of God.<sup>69</sup> “Theism, asserting God as the creator and governor of the universe, hinders and checks men’s efforts by declaring God’s will to be the sole directing and controlling power.”<sup>70</sup> Conversely, atheism, “by declaring all events to be in accordance with natural laws — that is, happening in certain ascertainable sequences — stimulates men to discover the best conditions of life, and offers them the most powerful inducements to morality.”<sup>71</sup> While theism provides “future happiness for a scoundrel repentant on his death-bed”,<sup>72</sup> atheism “affirms present and certain happiness”<sup>73</sup> for those who live a fulfilled life in this life.

Secondly, as for the specific meaning of the word “God”, Bradlaugh wanted to ascertain what is meant to be conveyed by the word “God”, it is very important to prevent any misunderstanding of theism in the first place.<sup>74</sup> In order to search for the meaning attached to the word “God”, Bradlaugh learns Hebrew and traces back the word “God” in its Hebraistic origin in the ancient Jewish records. In Hebrew, Bradlaugh hardly finds anything within it to aid what is required for the sustenance of modern theism. The most charitable definition of the word can only be equivalent to such a declaration: “I am, I have been, I shall be”.<sup>75</sup> When it comes to tracing the theistic ideas’ growth amongst all people, Bradlaugh ends up finding its root “in the superstition and ignorance of a petty and barbarous people, nearly ignorant of literature, poor in language, and almost entirely wanting in sophisticated conceptions of humanity.”<sup>76</sup> Bradlaugh thus concludes that “the theist derives no argument in his favor; it teaches nothing, defines nothing, demonstrates nothing, explains nothing”.<sup>77</sup>

Thirdly, the theists also declare their God to be infinitely intelligent, whereas atheists disagree. Bradlaugh holds that there is no perfect intelligence without reason, will, and perception, and God has none of them. By reason, Bradlaugh means the ability to predict the future based on the past and present experience, which can never be true of God. To God, there can be neither past nor future; therefore, to him, reason is

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., xcii.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid., xciii.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., xciv.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., xcv.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., xciv.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., xcvi.



impossible. As for will, if God wills, “the will of the all-powerful must be irresistible while the will of the infinite must exclude all other wills. God can never perceive,”<sup>78</sup> as the act of perception leads to a new idea, which is impossible for God since, if he is omniscient, his ideas should have been and always remains unchanged.<sup>79</sup>

The last proposition of theism, and also the strongest one Bradlaugh examines, is the claim that God is the first cause of every effect in the world.<sup>80</sup> It is the most difficult one to deal with as well. Through a priori arguments and a posteriori arguments, theists try to demonstrate the existence of the omnipotent God. Bradlaugh nullifies their endeavors by deconstructing the priori argument and posteriori argument respectively. The a priori argument, from cause to effect, is “a method of proof in which the matter of the premises exists in the order of conception antecedent to that of the conclusion.”<sup>81</sup> The a priori argument argues that “the universe owes its existence...to the reason and will of a self-existent being who is infinitely powerful, wise, and good.”<sup>82</sup> The a priori argument nevertheless forces theism into an impasse by assuming that the universe has not always existed. The claim was that the new existence added when the universe began was either an improvement or a deterioration, or precisely identical with what had always existed in all respects.

“...[I]f the new universe was an improvement, then the previously self-existent being could not have been infinitely good. If the universe was a deterioration, then the creator could have scarcely been all-wise, or he could not have been all-powerful. If the universe was in all respects precisely identical with the self-existent being, then it must have been infinitely powerful, wise and good, and must have been self-existent.”<sup>83</sup>

Again, if a God exists, he could have convinced all mankind of the fact of his existence so that there would not be any doubt, disagreement, or disbelief. If he fails to do so, then he is neither omnipotent nor omniscient.<sup>84</sup> Contrariwise, the posteriori argument aims to establish itself on the analogy between other substances and God as the designer. Proponents of the posteriori argument endeavor to deduce the existence of a deity from the appearance of designs in nature. But the most the posteriori argument can do is to

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<sup>78</sup> Ibid., xcvi.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., xcvi.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., ci

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., ci.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., cii.

“infer the existence of a finite cause or...of a multitude of finite causes”.<sup>85</sup> The problem of the posteriori argument is that it is impossible to deduce the infinite from the finite, and thus it cannot demonstrate God’s existence. By the same token, God’s omnipotence remains unproved too. Theists’ inability to convince all mankind of God’s existence precisely contradicts God’s omniscience. Besides, if God does exist then, being a good God, he would not allow all that unfortunate persecution, strife, and bloodshed resulting from doubts and disagreements about his existence and attributes. Hence, either he is not good or he is not all powerful after all.<sup>86</sup>

Apart from the above refutation against theism from the perspective of metaphysics, Bradlaugh also criticizes the delusion that progress and civilization are the product of Christian theology.<sup>87</sup> It was claimed that many prominent humanity endorsers were Christians, which claim puts the cart before the horse: the development in other ideas and principles of civilization were long procrastinated by Christian dominated governments.<sup>88</sup> He takes the abolition of slavery as a clear exemplification of a gain to humanity led by unbelief in contrast with the fact that Christianity supported slavery for ages. As for those prominent proponents of humanity, Bradlaugh argues that their exceptionality was not “a consequence of their adhesion to Christianity, but that it existed in spite of it; the specific points of advantage to human kind have been in direct opposition to precise biblical enactments.”<sup>89</sup> The progress of the human race has sprung precisely from unbelief.

### 3.3 The Cross between Holyoake and Bradlaugh

In attending freethought meetings, young Bradlaugh became acquainted with Holyoake’s brother Austin Holyoake, by whom he was first introduced to George Jacob Holyoake.<sup>90</sup> From his first meeting with Holyoake in 1850 till his death, the relationship between the two most prominent freethinkers at that time endured many twists and turns. According to Bradlaugh’s daughter, Holyoake “had long been on strained terms with Bradlaugh, and avowedly regarded him with disfavor as a too militant atheist.”<sup>91</sup> But in Holyoake’s own

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., xcix.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., ciii.

<sup>87</sup> See Charles Bradlaugh, “Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief,” *North American Review* 148 (1889): 296.

<sup>88</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, “A Plea for Atheism”, lxi.

<sup>89</sup> Charles Bradlaugh, “Humanity’s Gain from Unbelief,” 297.

<sup>90</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. I): 21. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm>.

<sup>91</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work*: (Vol. II): 224. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45131/45131-h/45131-h.htm>.

view, he had personal relations with Charles Bradlaugh all his life.<sup>92</sup> Holyoake helped Bradlaugh with his first lecture “Past, Present, And Future of ‘Theology’” when Bradlaugh was only sixteen years old.<sup>93</sup> Holyoake admitted that it was with great reluctance and only in defense of principle that he had to oppose him.<sup>94</sup>

The deterioration point of Bradlaugh and Holyoake’s relationship came in 1857. Holyoake refused to publish Bradlaugh’s work “The Bible: What It Is”, on the ground that “Bradlaugh had probably gone too far in his mode of criticism”.<sup>95</sup> Holyoake did not want to be identified with Bradlaugh’s progressive criticism of religion. Bradlaugh was both surprised and indignant by such an unexpected rejection at the time. After that, in the beginning of 1862, Holyoake became a special contributor to Bradlaugh’s newspaper the *National Reformer*, which engendered a financial dispute between the two of them in the end. Apart from those two unhappy incidents, Holyoake also resented freethinkers taking a religious oath under any circumstances, but Bradlaugh was willing to do it as “the forced formality is a much smaller matter than the evil of a miscarriage of justice”.<sup>96</sup> In 1881, at the opening of the Leicester Secular Society’s new Secular Hall, both of them spoke, representing different unions. Bradlaugh was the leader of the National Secular Society, while Holyoake was the founder of the British Secular Union.

The culmination of their being lifelong frenemies was epitomized in the following event. In 1870, they held two oral debates entitled “the principles of secularism do not include atheism” and “secular criticism does not involve scepticism” respectively on two consecutive nights from 10 to 11 March, which drew great attention and were copiously quoted for many years.<sup>97</sup> Both of them were freethinkers of the most convinced kind, but whereas Holyoake chose rather to describe himself as a secularist, Bradlaugh called himself an atheist. The whole difference between them is already indicated in these two descriptors. Bradlaugh referred to atheist in its simplest meaning as “without God”, and as for all those attached opprobria; they merely lay in the narrowness of others’ minds

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<sup>92</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *Bygones Worth Remembering* (Vol. I, E.P. Dutton & Company, Two volumes, 1905): Chapter II. Also see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36795/36795-h/36795-h.htm>, produced by David Widger. In this dissertation, I am citing from this free online source.

<sup>93</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. I): 21. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm>.

<sup>94</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *Bygones Worth Remembering* (Vol. I, E.P. Dutton & Company, Two volumes, 1905): Chapter II. Also see <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/36795/36795-h/36795-h.htm>.

<sup>95</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. I): 64. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm>.

<sup>96</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. II): 224. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45131/45131-h/45131-h.htm>.

<sup>97</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. I): 333. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm>.

but not in the atheists'.<sup>98</sup> Holyoake personally was an atheist as well, but he refused to adopt such a term. He preferred to adopt the new name of secularism and disassociated it from atheism altogether, not as a matter of policy, which point he underscores repeatedly.<sup>99</sup>

In those two debates, Holyoake held that secularism had no connection with atheism or skepticism. Secularism should assert its own principles without assailing others, including theological systems. He conceded that secularism, which presupposed the existence of atheist societies and freethinking societies, is indeed built partly upon the results attained by atheism or theism.<sup>100</sup> "The significant next step of secularism, also the one distinguishing it from atheism, is to go farther than that, to be distinct from them, to be affirmative, to act upon what free inquiry had discovered, to occupy the ground criticism had won, to set up principles of nature in the place of principles of theology, and found, if possible, a kingdom of reason, for those who found the kingdom of faith inadequate and unreliable."<sup>101</sup> Neither the existence of God, nor the non-existence of God, neither the mortality, nor the immortality of the soul are in any way necessary; they are separate and independent from secular tenets.<sup>102</sup> Holyoake stressed his point as follows:

"Secularism is not an argument against Christianity; it is one independent of it. It does not question the pretensions of Christianity, it advances others. Secularism does not say there is no light and guidance elsewhere, but maintains that there is light and guidance in secular truth, whose conditions and sanctions exist independently, act independently, and act forever. Secular knowledge is manifestly that kind of knowledge which is founded in this life, which relates to the conduct of this life, conduces to the welfare of this life, and is capable of being tested by the experience of this life."<sup>103</sup>

Like what Holyoake underlines before, the term secularism is never merely taken to be a mask or as a substitute term for skepticism or atheism. Secularism extends free thought to ethics, to the extent of replacing the chief errors and uncertainties of theology.

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<sup>98</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of His Life and Work* (Vol. II): 122. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45131/45131-h/45131-h.htm>.

<sup>99</sup> George Jacob Holyoake & Charles Bradlaugh, *Secularism, Scepticism, and Atheism: Verbatim Report of the Proceedings of a Two Nights' Public Debate* (London, Austin & Co., 1870) 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 5-6.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

Secularism claims that morality does not rest on theology but on material and social facts without actively dismissing or criticizing religious beliefs. The word “secular” implies those issues “which can be tested by the experience of this life.” Secularism is not the removal of Christianity; secularism’s object was to “contest the error, not the truth, which was also likely included in Christianity, whereas to remove it would amount to removing the good as well as the evil.”<sup>104</sup> What Holyoake yearned to maintain was that:

“The secular principle that duties of this life which we know should take precedence over those of another which we do not know; that in human affairs science is the providence of man, that morality rests upon foundation purely human; that escape from the penalties of sin by the death of another is not good in principle nor in example; and that where scriptural precepts appear to conflict, guidance can only come by selection.”<sup>105</sup>

Holyoake being an atheist himself should not interfere with his arguments for secularism.<sup>106</sup> *The Reasoner’s* reader, the English social theorist and writer Harriet Martineau, was a supporter of Darwin’s theory and a steady endorser of Holyoake’s work. In a letter she sent to an American newspaper, *Liberator*, she understood that, Secularism could be justified by

“[I]ts including a large number of persons who are not atheists, and uniting them for action which has secularism for its object, and not atheism. On this ground, and because by the adoption of a new term a vast amount of impediment from prejudice is got rid of, the use of the name secularism is found advantageous; but in no way interferes with Mr. Holyoake’s profession of his own unaltered views on the subject of a First Cause.”<sup>107</sup>

By contrast, Bradlaugh questions the genuine intelligibility of Holyoake’s secularism. According to Holyoake, the secularist’s position is a kingdom of reason for those who

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<sup>104</sup> See George Jacob Holyoake, *Sixty Years of an Agitator’s Life*, 259.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid.

<sup>106</sup> This comes as a bit of surprise to the reader who might think: “So what is the difference?”. The difference is that Holyoake, partly for strategic reasons, probably does not want to make atheism the focus of his attention. He chooses secularism as a term which might attract a wider circle of supporters. But, in essence, he personally is an atheist; that does not differ from Bradlaugh in the sense that Holyoake also does not believe in God. I thank Paul Cliteur for this supplementary point.

<sup>107</sup> George Jacob Holyoake & Charles Bradlaugh, *Secularism, Scepticism, and Atheism: Verbatim Report of the Proceedings of a Two Nights’ Public Debate*, 49.

find the kingdom of faith impossible. The secularist finds the kingdom of faith impossible, he finds belief in god impossible, and he finds belief in religion impossible. Bradlaugh argues there is no difference between a secularist's claim of "finding belief in God impossible" and that of an atheist.<sup>108</sup> He further argues that, even at present, it is possible that all men who are secularists are not atheists; the "logical consequence of the acceptance of secularism" must be atheism.<sup>109</sup> The divergence in their thoughts is that Holyoake thinks ignoring something does not amount to denying something, whereas, to Bradlaugh, finding theological doctrines unreliable is denying them because there is no other truth besides theism and atheism. In his own words, "every idea of God is such that as a secularist I am bound to deny."<sup>110</sup> Additionally, Bradlaugh disregards the opprobrium cast upon the word atheism. An atheist, as also a human being deserves the same respect.<sup>111</sup>

Bradlaugh's stance of atheism is quite common among freethinkers of that time. Even Holyoake's own brother criticized Holyoake's approach by asking, "How can anyone not an atheist be a secularist?"<sup>112</sup> According to Bradlaugh, nearly all secularists sided with him in agreeing that the use of the term of secularism was reduced to nullity. Secularism is not an appropriate name for Bradlaugh and his endorsers. They deprive the name of specific meaning to counter the agitators of freethought, while showing no reason why it should be adopted by anybody else. In accordance with secularism's overreaching view of regarding secularism-related concerns as secularism, every political club is a secular organization and an exponent of secularism.<sup>113</sup>

### 3.4 Periodical Summary

Bradlaugh's critique of Holyoake's equivocality is not without reason. On account of Holyoake's narrative of secularism, the confusion between it and atheism is almost inescapable. As Holyoake admits, his accounts of secularism are already established on the conclusion of atheism, namely the unreliability of faith. It then seems that he does not leave much room for a positive argument for secularism apart from rejecting unreliable faith. The only weight Holyoake holds to maintain his distinct secularist

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>112</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of his Life and Work* (Vol. I): 336. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45130/45130-h/45130-h.htm>.

<sup>113</sup> Hypatia Bradlaugh Bonner and J. M. Robertson, *Charles Bradlaugh: A Record of his Life and Work* (Vol. II):142. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/45131/45131-h/45131-h.htm>.

position compared to atheism is his insistence on not denying God's existence. Holyoake defends secularism as a comprehensive outlook, based on positivism and utilitarianism. It aims to answer questions ranging from nature to ethics, as a comprehensive doctrine to replace theology. What Holyoake aspires to purport is a general metaphysical theory proceeding from a general encompassing point beyond religious contestations.

However, Holyoake's idea of secularism both over- and under-reaches. Holyoake tries to characterize secularism in an all-encompassing fashion with answers for all philosophical and moral questions. That is to say, as a substitution of a worldview for theism. In that sense, Holyoake has constructed an over-reaching scheme of a secularism that is too heavily laden with contents. When it comes to its projection in moral philosophy, Holyoake's secularism also under-reaches in taking utility as the sole secular standard against which to measure moral actions, while it excludes other moral standards such, for instance, good will. Nevertheless, the significance of Holyoake's slightly crude system of secularism lies in its affirmativeness. It is not just an approach to criticize or negate theism; it delivers its own assertions and offers another option besides theism for all mankind.

In today's discussion, secularism has already evolved from an all-encompassing doctrine to an ethical creed proposing that "the best way to deal with religious differences is a morally neutral vocabulary that we all share and a morality that is not based on religion."<sup>114</sup> The concept of secularism we are addressing today has largely retreated from Holyoake's ambitious denotation to a certain extent, whereas it has also refined the old version as well. In my opinion, generally, there are two major retreats and one big adaption: (1) Holyoake's secularism does not argue against theological metaphysical truth because of a lack of empirical proofs to verify. Today's secularism, though not necessarily upholding a positivist stance of the truth of nature, refrains from involving itself in metaphysical discussions of theology altogether. (2) The reason that Holyoake maintains secularism as a morally correct philosophy is because he considers Mill's utilitarianism to be secularism's moral foundation, whereas today, there is no moral doctrine called "secular moral philosophy", as secularism can refer to any moral theory which accommodates utilitarianism, deontology, virtue ethics, or any eccentric moral philosophy as long as it does not include the concept of God. (3) Holyoake's secular philosophy is rather a concise and general one. With the exception of the one time he explicitly stated that "the state could not continue to exist upon Christian principles"<sup>115</sup>, he did not, at least explicitly, make any statements about the relationship between church

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<sup>114</sup> Paul Cliteur, *The Secular Outlook: in Defense of Moral and Political Secularism*, 3.

<sup>115</sup> George Jacob Holyoake, *English Secularism: A Confession of Belief*. Chapter VIII. <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/38104/38104-h/38104-h.htm>.

and state. He does consider it and even promotes the setting of certain limits in states, but it is solely for the sake of secular education for the children. However, the secularism we are addressing today is more about the role of religion in public life. The relationship between church and state has been one of the most important debates of contemporary's secularism.

#### IV. Mainstream Arguments of the New Atheism: a Scientific Perspective

Bradlaugh's account of atheism, built upon the critique of the theory that posits God as a creator, including God's characteristics, definitions, and proofs, works as a negative approach against theism. As a matter of fact, Bradlaugh's atheism stance is not only common among freethinkers in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; it is also inherited by new atheists in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The essence of contemporary atheism has not significantly altered since Bradlaugh's writing. However, the most crucial progress contemporary atheists have offered is an alternate scientific explanation of the world. They propound the view that "religion should not simply be tolerated but should be countered, criticized, and exposed by rational arguments wherever its influence arises."<sup>116</sup> Richard Dawkins (the author of *The God Delusion*), Christopher Hitchens (the author of *God is Not Great*), Sam Harris (the author of *The End of Faith*) and Daniel Dennett (the author of *Darwin's Dangerous Idea*) were seen as the four most prominent figures in the New Atheism movement. These new atheists, using Darwin's theory in *On the Origin of Species* as their theoretical weapon, seek to excoriate religion from scientific perspectives to illustrate the falsity of creationism and Divine creation theory. In this section, I will display their criticisms of religion by two main propositions on the questions of God's being and God's impact respectively: one, God cannot be the explanation of the world's origin and everything in the universe; second, religion in general brings about more misery than well-being to human kind.

##### 4.1 Divine Creation Theory v. Natural Selection

Among contemporary atheists, Richard Dawkins (1941-), a British biologist, is probably one of the most prominent of this era.<sup>117</sup> Dawkins assembles a comprehensive attack

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<sup>116</sup> Simon Hooper, "The rise of the New Atheists". CNN, 16 March 2010.

<sup>117</sup> To my surprise, recently (approximately May, 2014), Dawkins denounces to continue calling himself atheist, but describing himself as a secular Christian, because he has a feeling for nostalgia and Christian ceremonies. See <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/hay-festival/10853648/Richard-Dawkins-I-am-a-secular-Christian.html>.



against religion in one influential book, *The God Delusion* (2006), which is one of the most popular and accessible books advocating atheism in our age. This publication was indeed an indication of the rise of the New Atheism movement. In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins not only criticizes the arguments for God's existence; he also discusses the relationship between morality and religion. In the most general sense, Dawkins's contention is already vividly illuminated by the book's name, which claims that the whole idea of God is a delusion. Identifying himself as a scientist, Dawkins intends to debunk such a delusion by scientific arguments.

It is not the first time Dawkins wages the atheism battle against the hypothesis for the existence of a supernatural creator. Dawkins has always been a prominent critic of creationism. Admiring and taking natural selection as the only known and solution to the origin of the world, Dawkins is one of the sturdiest endorsers of Darwinism. In his previous scientific works *The Selfish Gene* (1976) and *The Extended Phenotype* (1982), Dawkins supported Darwin's natural selection hypothesis by arguing that the gene is the unit of natural selection. Moreover, Dawkins also aims to extend Darwinian natural selection to culture. In analogy with how the gene works in natural selection, in *The Selfish Gene*, Dawkins coined the term "meme" as the units of cultural inheritance which can self-replicate, disappear, and respond to variety. The meme can be transmitted from one to another consciously and unconsciously through social means. Nevertheless, Dawkins's systematic criticism of creationism, especially divine creation theory, did not start until his 1986 book *The Blind Watchmaker*. The 18<sup>th</sup> century English theologian William Paley proposed a notorious watchmaker analogy to argue for God's existence. Paley argues that, since a watch is too complicated to come into being without design, all living things in this world must also have been purposefully designed by an omnipotent Supreme Being. Dawkins's theoretical aim in *The Blind Watchmaker* is to oppose Paley's analogy.<sup>118</sup> Dawkins believes that natural selection theory is sufficient to explain the biological world, albeit automatically, and he continues that argument in *The God Delusion*.

Dawkins recognizes a gap between what we already know and what is still a mystery. On the one hand, science is indeed benefited by such a gap insofar as it is ignorance that drives scientists to solve more mysteries; on the other hand, once scientists fail to give an immediate and comprehensive answer, divine creation theory would try to attribute any unknown gap to God's intelligent design by default.<sup>119</sup> Dawkins contends the reason why he is an atheist is that "the holy book is an axiom but not the end product of a process of reasoning."<sup>120</sup> Instead, books about evolution are believed not because they are holy

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<sup>118</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Bantam Press, 2006) 372.

<sup>119</sup> See *ibid.*, 125-34.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 282.

but because they “present overwhelming quantities of mutually buttressed evidence” that “any reader can go and check.”<sup>121</sup> Despite the science lesson of the origin of the universe and life Dawkins tries to teach in *The God Delusion*, his main message in the book is that natural selection in general “not only explains the whole of life”, but also “raises our consciousness to the power of science to explain how organized complexity can emerge from simple beginnings without any deliberate guidance.”<sup>122</sup>

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins also summarizes, examines, and refutes several philosophical arguments on God’s existence, including the arguments from beauty, personal experience, scripture, admiration for religious scientists, and also Thomas Aquinas’s proofs.<sup>123</sup> The argument from beauty is a rather romantic one, which implies that if there is no God, there is nothing that could explain the beauty of Shakespeare’s sonnets or Beethoven’s late quartets. Dawkins disregards this argument inasmuch as the beauty of Shakespeare’s or Beethoven’s works is not affected by whether God exists or not. Those works do not prove the existence of God, but only the existence of Shakespeare and Beethoven.<sup>124</sup> The argument from personal experience is like a double-edged sword. On the one hand, it is most convincing to those people who claim they have experienced a vision of God, and on the other hand, it is most unconvincing to anyone else, because it is purely personal.<sup>125</sup> The argument from scripture is only persuasive for people who are not used to asking questions about the source and veracity of the texts. Ever since the 19<sup>th</sup> century, gospels that featured Jesus’s birth were already proved by theologians to be unreliable accounts of the real history.<sup>126</sup> Even if Jesus existed, the reliability of the New Testament as a record of history is generally doubted by reputable biblical scholars.<sup>127</sup> Dawkins therefore also dismisses the Bible as evidence for any kind of deity. As for the argument from esteemed religious scientists, Dawkins also deprecates it since almost every significant figure before the 19<sup>th</sup> century was religious.<sup>128</sup> The great French mathematician Pascal once argued that whatever “the odds against God’s existence might be”, we had better still believe in God due to the eternal penalty for guessing wrong.<sup>129</sup> Dawkins considers Pascal’s argument odd, as believing is not something to decide “as a matter of policy”.<sup>130</sup> After the 20<sup>th</sup> century, those great

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<sup>121</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>122</sup> See *ibid.*, 116.

<sup>123</sup> See *ibid.*, 75-110.

<sup>124</sup> See *ibid.*, 86.

<sup>125</sup> See *ibid.*, 86-88.

<sup>126</sup> See *ibid.*, 92-93.

<sup>127</sup> See *ibid.*, 97.

<sup>128</sup> See *ibid.*, 98.

<sup>129</sup> See *ibid.*, 103.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 103-104.

scientists who claim to be religious use the term “religious” in a wider Einsteinian<sup>131</sup> sense, such as a belief in nature or the universe.

Thomas Aquinas’s five proofs of God’s existence are treated in much more detail than other arguments by Dawkins. Three of the five proofs of God’s existence involve infinite regresses: nothing moves without a prior mover, nothing is caused by itself; therefore “there must have been something non-physical”, like God, “to bring [physical things]them into existence.”<sup>132</sup> Dawkins thinks that all three of them rely upon invoking God to terminate the infinite regress, but they also “make the entirely unwarranted assumption that God himself is immune to the regress.”<sup>133</sup> Moreover, all the features that people normally ascribe to God are indeed self-contradictory. For example, if God is omniscient in the sense that he knows exactly how to change the world by using his omnipotence, then he cannot change again, which means he is not omnipotent after all. The fourth one is the proof from degree. For Aquinas, there are degrees in the world of goodness or perfection and there must be “a maximum to set the standard for perfection.”<sup>134</sup> That standard must be God. Dawkins does not think it is an actual argument, for it is conspicuously insane to presume any maximum, such as the smelliest person or the shortest person, to be a God.<sup>135</sup> The last proof Aquinas provides is the one still used today: divine creation theory, denoting that every living thing in the world looks as though it has been designed, so there must have been a designer.<sup>136</sup> This theory also presumes that complex things could not have occurred randomly; therefore a designer who deliberately designs those things must exist.<sup>137</sup> It is the argument that Dawkins chooses to tackle emphatically with a whole chapter (Chapter Four in *The God Delusion*). Dawkins argues that Darwin’s natural selection theory and similar scientific theories are superior to divine creation theory in explaining the living world and the universe.

In the fourth, and also the core chapter of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins deploys an argument of improbability to illustrate the falsity of divine creation theory. Generally, a

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 99. Dawkins (and possibly others, for instance Ronald Dworkin in his posthumous work *Religion without God* 2013) describes the non-theistic uses of the word “God” and “religion” by Albert Einstein and some other important non-religious scientists. Einstein had a profound religious or perhaps spiritual appreciation for the beauty and complexity of the universe and nature. Presumably, he placed it on a level equivalent to that of the traditional God concept. See Ronald Dworkin, *Religion without God* (Harvard University Press, 2013) 45-104.

<sup>132</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 77.

<sup>133</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 79.

<sup>135</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>137</sup> See *ibid.*

designer God cannot be inferred to explain how complex the world is.<sup>138</sup> That is because if any God is capable of designing everything, he would have to be complex enough to design himself and explain that design, which eventually leads to “an infinite regress from which he cannot help us to escape.”<sup>139</sup> Along with divine creation theory, chance theory also attempts to deploy the argument from improbability for its purpose, by assuming that biological adaptation is a question of all or nothing.<sup>140</sup> In that sense, natural selection theory is not a theory of chance; it is the opposite. Dawkins believes in the power of accumulation, which can be traced from natural selection. Precisely by virtue of this accumulation, the plausibility of chance theory along with divine creation theory is ruled out. Working as a cumulative process, natural selection “breaks the problem of the improbability up into small pieces”.<sup>141</sup> While each piece is improbable to a certain extent, “large numbers of these improbable [pieces] are stacked up in series”, where “the end product of the accumulation is...improbable enough to be far beyond the reach of chance.”<sup>142</sup> Even if Darwinian natural selection theory does not suffice to explain everything, God’s design hypothesis certainly does not work either, “because design is ultimately not cumulative, and it therefore raises bigger questions than it answers” about its own origin.<sup>143</sup> Thus, far from terminating the infinite regress, divine creation theory “aggravates it with a vengeance”.<sup>144</sup>

#### 4.2 Epistemic Atheist Argument: Religion Does More Harm than Good

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins also discusses the relationship between religion and morality and what is the matter with religion. He explains that his hostility toward religion is because strong religious faith tends to result in religious absolutism and also helps to produce a force for evil in the world.<sup>145</sup> For example, blasphemy, one of the fiercest penalties in the Bible, still exists and exerts its force in some countries (including Iceland, which might come as a surprise to many<sup>146</sup>). Religious absolutism also lays the groundwork for fostering a more restrictive moral code which condemns distribution of

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>139</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 122.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 121.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 141.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 120.

<sup>145</sup> See *ibid.*, 286.

<sup>146</sup> See from *The Freedom of Thought Report 2014: A Global Report on Discrimination Against Humanists, Atheists, and the Non-religious; Their Human Rights and Legal Status* (International Humanist and Ethical Union, 2014) 436.

pornography and views some sexual activities as criminal offences: for instance, homosexuality.<sup>147</sup> Even the usage of condoms in sexual activities is seen as unnatural and thus frowned upon by Christianity. More seriously, in light of the terrorist attacks in prosperous and liberal lands, religions, even the moderate ones, “help to provide the climate of faith in which extremism naturally flourishes.”<sup>148</sup> In comparison with patriotic love of country or the sense of glory of ethnic groups, religious faith “is an especially potent silencer of rational calculation, which usually seems to trump all others.”<sup>149</sup> And only religious faith is a strong enough force to induce an unreasonable craziness in ordinary people.<sup>150</sup> Dawkins reckons that it is “because of the easy and beguiling promise that death is not the end, and that a martyr’s heaven is especially glorious.”<sup>151</sup> Plus, the discouragement of questioning and the quest for knowledge is religion’s very nature, since both Christianity and Islam teach children that it is virtuous to not question faith.<sup>152</sup>

Dawkins is certainly not alone in this battle against possibly the most potent delusion, namely the idea of God. One year after the publication of *The God Delusion*, the late, celebrated British author, prominent atheist, and critic of religion, Christopher Hitchens (1949-2011) published another significant book critical of religion with a forthright title: *God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (2007). Hitchens often publicly spoke against the Abrahamic religions and considered them to be the axis of evil. This book further fortified his reputation as a major advocate of the New Atheism movement. Hitchens welcomed any invitation from religious leaders who wished to debate him. He was not afraid of controversies and openly criticized public figures like Mother Teresa, Bill Clinton, Henry Kissinger, and Pope Benedict XVI, including his own brother, a conservative Christian journalist, Peter Hitchens.<sup>153</sup> Particularly, he had a series of written debates on the question “Is Christianity Good for the World?” with Christian theologian and Pastor Douglas Wilson in 2007, which became a book with the same title in 2008.<sup>154</sup> In 2010, Hitchens debated the former British Prime Minister Tony Blair about whether religion is a force for good, and he won the debate by a 68 percent majority according to the website of the debate.<sup>155</sup> Differing from some atheists,

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<sup>147</sup> Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion*, 289-290.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 303.

<sup>149</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>150</sup> See *ibid.*, 303.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid., 306.

<sup>152</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>153</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher\\_Hitchens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Hitchens).

<sup>154</sup> See <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2007/mayweb-only/119-12.0.html>.

<sup>155</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XK4O-3aoRww>.

And

<http://www.munkdebates.com/debates/religion>.

Hitchens is not satisfied to be merely identified as an atheist; rather he called himself an antitheist. He did this because an atheist can be someone who could still “wish belief in God were correct, but an antitheist would be relieved that there is no evidence for any belief in God.”<sup>156</sup> Hitchens admitted that his final goal was to eradicate religion because ultimately religion is incapable of leaving atheists alone.

Generally, from the aspects of religion’s unreliability in its source and its immorality in its influence on humankind, Hitchens lists four irreducible objections to religious faith:

“(1) [I]t wholly misrepresents the origins of man and the cosmos; (2) because of this original error, it manages to combine the maximum of servility with the maximum of solipsism; (3) it is both the result and the cause of dangerous sexual repression; and (4) it is ultimately grounded on wish-thinking.”<sup>157</sup>

As the name of the book illustrates, it is mainly a collection of criticisms with regard to the negative repercussions of religion on people or the world. Both of Dawkins’s and Hitchens’s works address the issue of God’s existence and how religion does more harm than good in human history. While Dawkins’s core arguments focus on the former part, God’s existence, Hitchens takes more time to explicate religion’s murky side.

In addition to the harms brought by religion presented by Dawkins, Hitchens also particularly lists the damage done to children by religion. Such as, children had their psychological minds and physical lives eternally hurt being nonvoluntarily exposed to religion, not to mention circumcision and a fear of healthy sexual activities.<sup>158</sup> According to Hitchens, if not severely damaging, religion at least does not assist to make people behave better or feel more peaceful. In some of the most famous battles against fanaticism or the violation of human civilization, e.g., slavery in United States and the Second World War, he thinks that non-religious people fought for moral causes with as much vigor and effect as religious advocates.<sup>159</sup> In his view, the argument that “religious belief improves people, or that it helps to civilize society, is one that people tend to bring up when they have exhausted the rest of their case.”<sup>160</sup>

According to Hitchens, religion poisons everything. Moreover, he believes that religion is also sinful in itself. Religion is sinful in its very infancy; the texts of religious scriptures are full of inconsistencies, contradictions, and even plagiarisms; the precepts of

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<sup>156</sup> See [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher\\_Hitchens](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Christopher_Hitchens).

<sup>157</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything* (Allen& Unwin, 2007) 4.

<sup>158</sup> See *ibid.*, 217-28.

<sup>159</sup> See *Ibid.*, 173-184.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*, 184.

religion are plainly immoral.<sup>161</sup> He aims his critiques at all religions, ranging from the Abrahamic religions to Hinduism and Islam. He depicts them as “violent, irrational, and intolerant”<sup>162</sup>, with abundant support from his personal anecdotes, historical documents, and semantic analysis of religious scriptures such as the Bible and the Koran.<sup>163</sup> For starters, Hitchens says that religion’s beginnings were spearheaded by corrupt and immoral individuals.<sup>164</sup> Citing from a New York court examination, Hitchens regards the founder of Mormonism, Joseph Smith, as “a disorderly person and an impostor” who defrauded people.<sup>165</sup> Hitchens depicts the Old Testament as a “nightmare”, as there are innumerable “anachronisms”, inconsistencies, “dreams”, “astrology”, and even “genocidal incitements” in the Old Testament.<sup>166</sup> At different times and places, huge discrepancies in prophets or mediums occur. Most notably in Christianity, one prophet or revelation is not sufficient and needs to be reinforced by others. Hitchens points out that they are “hopelessly inconsistent” and cannot be true at the same time.<sup>167</sup> Likewise, the New Testament, “full of star-predictions and witch doctors and sorcerers”<sup>168</sup>, is also a work of “crude carpentry, hammered together long after its purported events”.<sup>169</sup> For instance, the questionable existence of Jesus calls for improvised attempts to make out a good case for the contradictions within it. Hitchens points out that many of the sayings and deeds of Jesus in the New Testament are innocuous; “many are unintelligible and show a belief in magic”, overflowing with absurdities and primitive attitudes; while many are plainly immoral.<sup>170</sup> For instance, to Hitchens, Islam is a composition of contents borrowed from other religious sources, such as Christianity and Judaism.<sup>171</sup> Not only both doubtful and flawed in terms of textual sources, religion is also positively immoral. The immorality lies in its original precepts, including “presenting a false picture of the world to the innocent and the credulous”; praising sacrifice, which results in bloodshed; propagandizing “doctrines of atonement and eternal punishments or rewards”; and “the imposition of impossible tasks”.<sup>172</sup>

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<sup>161</sup> See *ibid.*, 123-133.

<sup>162</sup> *Ibid.*, 56.

<sup>163</sup> See *ibid.*, 123-137.

<sup>164</sup> See *ibid.*, 155-68.

<sup>165</sup> *Ibid.*, 161.

<sup>166</sup> See *ibid.*, 97-107.

<sup>167</sup> *Ibid.*, 97.

<sup>168</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

<sup>169</sup> *Ibid.*, 110.

<sup>170</sup> See *ibid.*, 117-118.

<sup>171</sup> See *ibid.*, 123.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*, 205.

Hitchens almost spends the entire book discussing the abhorrent side of religion, but he does not omit the potential arguments of the opposition. What about those religious leaders “who protested in the name of religion and who tried to stand athwart the rising tide of fanaticism and the cult of death”<sup>173</sup> in human history? As for those cases, Hitchens takes them as a tribute paid to humanism rather than to religion. It is the humanist spirit embedded in them as human beings that inspires their bravery and integrity, which is irrelevant to their religions.

## V. Why Atheism Is Not Appealing

Atheism is an indispensable description of people who do not believe in the existence of God. Nevertheless it gains some misleading popularity in political philosophy. In my view, the appeal of atheism lies in its completeness, thoroughness, and robustness. First of all, some atheists and most believers tend to confuse their personal religious beliefs with the understanding of religion’s place in the political arena. For most believers, asserting God’s existence amounts to taking God as the only truth, moral and epistemological, of the world. Therefore, correctly following God’s guidance is certainly required in political philosophy as well. Likewise, in denying God’s existence, some atheists also negate the whole idea of religion. After all, for atheists, what is the reason to build and organize society according to a false philosophy? Secondly, no matter what the reasons are, both secularism and atheism ask to separate religion from state authority, while atheism seems more tempting, considering its theoretical virtue of thoroughness. The third charm of atheism could, oddly enough, be associated with the resurgence of religious fundamentalism in the past two to three decades. A disturbing identification of religion as the root of the growing religious extremist violence has gradually gained sympathy in the contemporary world. Against such a backdrop, the rigid stance of atheism appears more attractive than in any other time. Those violent atrocities have deviously transferred the focus of people’s indignation from extremist violence to religion *per se*. It might trigger this idea that religion resulted in those tragedies so that the idea of rejecting religion at least invites some serious consideration.

However, the appeal of atheism nevertheless stems from three corresponding deficiencies, which also demonstrate the core disparities between atheism and secularism. Departing from the purpose of disclosing the ontological absurdity of theology, atheist arguments backed by Darwinian natural selection theory suffer from a philosophical naiveté. They presume an either-or binary opposition of religion and science. The

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., 27.



underlying assumption is that once the delusion of religion is exposed, we would embrace a naturalistic, evidence-based mode of thinking that could be applied to both the natural world and our moral compass. Such a philosophical presumption of atheism derives from an underlying kind of thinking that resembles that of religious adherents. In order to rebut theological contentions thoroughly, atheism adopts the same point of view that religious adherents adopt, which is also rejected by secularism. Religious adherents take God's existence as both an epistemic foundation and a value foundation, so that the ethical creed is established on the premise of God being the creator of everything in the world.<sup>174</sup> That logic leaves atheists no option but to directly debunk the assumption of God as the creator of the world. But the justification for secularism is made from a general and morally neutral perspective. Additionally, there is a persistent myth of secularism, which is also explicitly expressed by Bradlaugh, that secularism is a soft version or an intermediate phase toward atheism.

### 5.1 Religion and Science Are Not Necessarily Mutually Exclusive

There is one widely recognized assumption that is also an argumentative strategy embedded in atheistic arguments. In order to destroy the epistemic foundation of belief in God, the rejection of any belief in God's existence is prerequisite. As I have previously shown, Dawkins also holds such an assumption in both of *The Blind Watchmaker* and *The God Delusion*. He mainly objects to taking the God hypothesis as the final explanation of the universe. In the core chapter of *The God Delusion*, Dawkins sets up a binary opposition between the God hypothesis and physicalist naturalism in terms of the explanation for everything in the universe. Thomas Nagel points out that Dawkins's binary does not exhaust every possibility, so that even if we reject religion, we do not have to embrace a naturalistic explanation for the world.<sup>175</sup>

In *The God Delusion*, on the question of "what explains the existence and character of the astounding natural order we can observe in the universe,"<sup>176</sup> Dawkins cautiously sets out his position by displaying two alternatives: the divine creation hypothesis and natural selection theory. As previously illustrated, in refuting the view of "a superhuman intelligence who deliberately designed and created the universe and everything in it,"<sup>177</sup> Dawkins, who believes in the accumulation, holds that "the possibility of any creative

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<sup>174</sup> See Steven D. Smith, "Is God Irrelevant?," in *Boston University Law Review* 94(2014):1341.

<sup>175</sup> See Thomas Nagel, *Secular Philosophy and the Religious Temperament* (Oxford University Press, 2010) 19-26.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*

intelligence of sufficient complexity to design anything only comes into existence as the end product of an extended process of gradual evolution.”<sup>178</sup> Dawkins thinks the ultimate explanation of everything lies in the law of physics.

Nevertheless, Nagel indicates that neither the God hypothesis nor Dawkins’s physicalist naturalism offers an ultimate explanation for everything. It is not necessarily the case that, if we reject the one explanation, we automatically embrace the other. The binary opposition between religion and science that Dawkins reveals is not necessarily a real opposition. Nagel suggests that the real opposition between Dawkins’s physicalist naturalism and the God hypothesis is about whether the world is purely “physical, extensional and purposeless”, or whether it is “mental, intentional and purposive”.<sup>179</sup> But as Nagel put it, “the God hypothesis does not explain the existence of God, while naturalistic physicalism does not explain the laws of physics.”<sup>180</sup> The point of the God hypothesis is to claim that not all explanation is physical, and that there is a mental, purposive or intentional explanation more fundamental than the basic laws of physics.<sup>181</sup> Nagel points out that the key omission here is that Dawkins’s dialectic leaves out another possibility, which is the teleological principle in nature. It is more or less the Aristotelian view, which is explained neither by “intentional design nor by purposeless physical causation.”<sup>182</sup> Fundamentally, there is more than one form of understanding to account for different genres of subjects.<sup>183</sup>

In *The God Delusion*, Dawkins’s contempt for Aquinas’s fourth argument, the one claiming that God is the maximum to establish the standard for perfection, precisely reflects this critical mistake. Dawkins overlooks the difference between moral calibration and empirical comparison, namely the difference between how we evaluate what is morally good or bad and how we determine the comparison result of empirical facts. Aquinas’s fourth proof from degree is an argument based *only* on what is crucial for our moral thinking, whereas Dawkins’s rebuttal misses the point by applying the argument to

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<sup>178</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>179</sup> *Ibid.*, 23. It is worthwhile to be careful that the extension of a sentence or expression is usually contrasted with the intension, not with the intention: intensionality and intentionality are not identical terms. Extensionality is the reference to the state of affairs of a sentence in the world “out there”, while intensionality is a particular mode in which this state of affairs is presented. Intentionality refers to the general directedness of language towards something outside itself; according to John Searle, this is the product of the general directness of the human mind toward the world. The intensionality-extensionality distinction derives from German philosopher Friedrich Ludwig Gottlob Frege, while the term intentionality derives from German philosopher Edmund Husserl. I thank Arie-Jan Kwak for pointing out this to me.

<sup>180</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>181</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

both the world of moral evaluation and that of empirical comparison. The possibility that Dawkins's propaganda for physicalist naturalism might severely damage our moral thinking worries Nagel. Nagel worries that if we follow Dawkins's line of thinking, then "moral reasoning, introspection, or conceptual analysis as ways of discovering the truth" would be dismissed merely because they are not physics.<sup>184</sup> It is understandable, especially against the contemporary backdrop of rampant religious extremist violence, that many intellectuals, including Dawkins, are horrified by the dreadful things that continue to be done by religion.<sup>185</sup> However, the dangers of both blind faith and the authority of dogma do not imply that "we can make ultimate sense of the world only by understanding it as the expression of mind or purpose."<sup>186</sup>

From the perspective of some religious believers, religion and science are also not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some religious believers, especially Christians, do accept Darwin's theory of evolution by natural selection as a scientific explanation of lives on earth, because above all, Genesis is not scientific material that counts as factual documentation. Some Christians tend to extend their understanding of their scripture beyond its literal meaning to a deeper meaning, otherwise there will be no room for any theological reflection at all. According to Alvin Plantinga, there is no genuine or "superficial conflict but deep concord between science and theistic religion".<sup>187</sup> Theologians and scientists occupy different territories, and theologians do not seek dominance on scientific matters, so nor should scientists. The real conflict, however, is between "theistic religion and a philosophical gloss...to the scientific doctrine of evolution", which is claimed as "undirected, unguided, and not orchestrated by God".<sup>188</sup>

As one of the most militant atheists of our age, Dawkins does understand the key difference between atheism and secularism completely. In recollecting the history of American religion, Dawkins indicates that America, one of the most religious nations in the world, was actually built upon a secular republican tradition. No matter what those founding fathers' personal religious views were, the one identity they shared was secularist: they believed in keeping religion out of politics.<sup>189</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau also suggests that "the secular vision was bred by religious thinkers, such as Martin Luther, John Locke, Thomas Jefferson, and James Madison... Throughout American history, it has been religious groups like Baptists, Jews, progressive Catholics, as well as countless

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid.

<sup>186</sup> See *ibid.*, 26.

<sup>187</sup> Alvin Plantinga, *Where the Conflict Really Lies: Science, Religion, and Naturalism* (Oxford University Press, 2011) ix.

<sup>188</sup> *Ibid.*, xiii.

<sup>189</sup> See Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Bantam Press, 2006) 39-40.

smaller religious minorities who have championed secular political ideas.”<sup>190</sup> But religious believers, even moderate ones, are extremely vigilant of the claim of atheism.<sup>191</sup> Precisely because Dawkins does understand what it means to be a secularist, his attacks on theism and religion in *The God Delusion* are particularly based on his atheism. He claims to be a secularist as well, but if he wants to defend secularism, he needs a different book to do that. It is evident that Hitchens also grasps the key difference when he uses the expression like “...secular Christians and Jews, and many atheist and agnostic militants of...”<sup>192</sup> Hitchens is perfectly aware that there is no necessary connection between being secular and being an atheist. It is perfectly compatible to be secular and religious simultaneously. If we misidentify Hitchens’s arguments as arguments for secularism, then we are falling straight into the trap of “soft” atheism.

## 5.2 The Myth of Secularism Being a “Soft” Atheism

There is a popular myth surrounding the relationship between secularism and atheism. It claims that secularism is too moderate a strategy to cope with the potential dangers brought by religious extremism, and secularism will evolve into atheism eventually. Such a myth stems from a tacitly cognized assertion that religion is negative, troublesome, and potentially wedded to paranoid violence. Would the world be a better place if one day there were no religion anymore? Both Dawkins and Hitchens pinpoint the answer to such a question by spending plenty of ink in expounding the harms religion has already done to the world and humanity. Is that necessarily so? At least the safest thing to say is that it is a complex question. If Dawkins, Hitchens, or other atheists can illustrate the harmful or the evil side of religion by abundant historical instances, contemporary recurring tragedies, or vivid personal experiences, John Finnis, John Hare, and even Jeremy Waldron can enumerate correspondent or even more numerous examples of the uplifting and inspiring side of religion as well.<sup>193</sup> For example, Hitchens mentioned that the tribute paid to those “priests and bishops and rabbis and imams who have put humanity ahead of their own sect or creed is a tribute paid to humanism, not to

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<sup>190</sup> Jacques Berlinerblau, “Secularism Is Not Atheism,” in The Huffington Post, 09/27/2012.

<sup>191</sup> Ibid.

<sup>192</sup> Christopher Hitchens, *God Is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*, 251-252. However, at least from what is expressed in *God Is Not Great*, Hitchens is unlikely to be identified as a secularist as he views religion as poison and hopes for an end of faith, whereas secularism supports religious liberty and holds nothing against religion.

<sup>193</sup> For instance, see John Finnis, “Does Free Exercise of Religion Deserve Constitutional Mention?” in *The American Journal of Jurisprudence* 54(2009): 41-66. John Hare, *God and Morality: A Philosophical History* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2009). Jeremy Waldron, “Religious Contribution in Public Deliberation”, *San Diego Law Review* 30 (1993): 817-848.

religion.”<sup>194</sup> By the same token, is it not also possible to say that the condemnation and indignation we feel with regard to those religious fundamentalists who commit terrorist attacks should be attributed to the intolerance, bigotry, inferiority, stupidity, or just the dark corner hidden inside human nature instead of religion? Would it not be like throwing the baby out with the bath water to reject the whole idea of religion when encountering religious violence? Either way, it is too hasty to determine that religion is the obsolete, evil source of human problems which ought to be sifted out.

More importantly, unlike atheism, secularism does not require a rejection of the concept of God to be a morally correct philosophy; rather, it holds an independent position from the metaphysical discussions of religion so that the validity of secularism will stand still irrespective of our value judgment of religion.

This discussion highlights the significant distinction between the concept of atheism and the concept of secularism I made at the outset of this chapter. Secularism is not concerned with religion *per se*, but is concerned about religion’s position in the public and political arena. Confronting religious extremist terrorism, secularism has prescribed a more mature and stable prescription which does not involve rejecting, denouncing, or praising religion. Atheism and secularism just launch their claims from different discourses, while atheism is an assertion of metaphysics of religion; secularism belongs to normative ethics and political discourse. Atheism declares the falsity of deity’s existence along with any belief in such a deity, whereas secularism makes no such claim so that it can coexist with even the most sincere religious beliefs. While atheism entails a rejection of belief in God, secularism does not necessarily call for such a rejection. Atheism is neither the precondition nor the future direction of secularism.

### 5.3 Particular and General Points of View

As previously mentioned, almost all of the atheists’ arguments to some extent depart from a believer’s perspective. For a religious believer, the belief in a deity’s existence determines his outlook on moral duties, ethical values, and conceptions of what is good. Theism, especially monotheism, professes theological doctrines as the only truth of the world. Hence, for atheists such as Bradlaugh, in order to render secular truths and values available, the sham of theology’s metaphysics must be penetrated. It is also what Dawkins and Hitchens purport to do in their works. To atheism, if the false ontological assertion of religion, namely God’s existence, cannot be exposed, then other fallacies of theology, especially those concerning morality, cannot be revealed either. The opponent,

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., 27.

or rather the critic of theism concedes that atheism has to object to every aspect of theism. Atheism is thus unfortunately susceptible to being a negative doctrine, incapable of proposing positive dogmas for itself. It is unreasonable and unnecessary to think that one must refute the metaphysical arguments of theism in order to resist the normative ethical arguments thereof. The ultimate validity of atheistic arguments lies in whether a God exists in the world, which is not secularism's concern.

Unlike atheistic and theistic arguments, secularism does not particularly take religious believers' perspective into account. In answering to which justified principles could be the basis of general agreement, as I am going to propose in this book, secularism is the principle that should govern the relation between religion and state that no one could reasonably reject. Secularism stands on a general and political viewpoint that both religious adherents and atheists are expected to support for the sake of a stable life in a political system. Therefore it is the only perspective under which people of different religious persuasions can live together. I'll come back to this point in more detail in the next chapter.

I can summarize the three deficiencies of atheist arguments as follows. First of all, when atheism reveals the mistaken foundation of theology by exposing its ontological unintelligibility, it also suffers from an oversimplified philosophical assertion of the binary opposition between naturalism and the God hypothesis. Secondly, the myth of viewing secularism as a phase toward atheism overlooks the distinction between secularism as a comprehensive doctrine of religion and secularism as a political doctrine. Secularism as a political doctrine is indeed independent from metaphysical discussions about religion and thus does not, and does not have to, reject religion. Thirdly, atheism as a theory intended to oppose theism occupies the same viewpoint as religious adherents do, so that it fails to provide a general basis agreed on by most reasonable people. Contrariwise, secularism, which departs from a general political point, could be supported by people of different religious backgrounds.

From the summary above, the implausibility of atheism is clearly shown. At the same time, the key discrepancies between secularism and atheism are also exposed. The fundamental conceptual distinction between the two concepts lies in the divergence of the questions they address. Atheism answers questions regarding the substantive view of religion. Atheism disclaims the existence of God, or any conception of God, and thus denounces faith as a basis for belief. Secularism addresses the relationship between religion and state authority in political discourse and does not engage in any substantive discussions of religion. Moreover, secularism does not imply negative or hostile attitudes toward religion. Admittedly, in the contemporary world, support for atheism and secularism tends to overlap. Commonly, when someone states her idea of secularism

both as an ethical notion and a political vision, she intertwines such a claim with a disavowal of God or religion. The illusion of secularism as a moderate form of atheism, or of atheism as a final destiny of secularism stems from such an unreflective, but nonetheless prevalent attitude. However, when someone states her indignation about religion while at the same time advocating for secularism, we need to carefully identify two distinctive attitudes here: the attitude of atheism when she addresses her disbelief in religion; the attitude of secularism when she argues that religion should be separated from the state. It is one thing to reject a belief in a certain God, another to disapprove of the connection of politics and religion. The former rejection is the rejection of the ontological presupposition of God's existence and religion itself, whereas the latter, the characterization of secularism, is a rejection of certain institutional arrangements in political systems.

## VI. Concluding Remarks

This book is dedicated to justifying secularism. Before commencing to defend secularism, it is vitally important to draw a preliminary distinction between secularism as a political principle and secularism as a comprehensive view of religion, which is actually a view of atheism. Two reasons account for why I restrict my defense of secularism to secularism as a political concept instead of undertaking a comprehensive project. The previous discussion in this chapter explains the first reason.

Secularism can refer broadly to a range of worldviews and ideologies concerning religion. A lack of analytic distinction would confuse secularism with some other related concepts, such as atheism, agnosticism, secularization, etc. Especially secularism in the sense of characterizing religion as an outdated, obsolete, and irrational ideology has led to a dubious equation of secularism and atheism. If we retrieve the elucidation of secularism from Holyoake's writings, which treats secularism as a comprehensive replacement of religion, we will find the skeptical confusion of secularism and atheism understandable. But many contemporary influential critiques of secularism are also mistakenly made from the perspective of taking secularism as an atheistic and antireligious worldview. Atheism has its appeal. However, it is also severely theoretically defective. In contrast with atheism, the secularism I am about to defend in this book is a political concept. The secularism I am about to defend does not engage in metaphysical exploration of theological claims, nor does it hold any hostile views against religion. It is certainly possible that people can be morally or politically inspired by religious ideas;

what I am rejecting is simply the notion of religion as the basis of politics.<sup>195</sup>

The second reason why I am defending secularism as a political concept is associated with how we view political philosophy. If we identify political philosophy as part of moral philosophy, then its aim is to lay out the moral principles of an ideal society. However, as I will argue in the next chapter, the social fact of reasonable disagreement determines that there is a certain distance between morally just principles and the principles which can be legitimately forced on citizens.

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<sup>195</sup> See Paul Cliteur, “A Secular Critique of Religious Ethics and Politics,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Secularism* (Phil Zuckerman and John R. Shook ed., Oxford University Press, 2017) 390-391.