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## World Religions Discourses Turned in on Themselves; or, Why the New Atheists Hate the Laurentian Federation

### Introduction

Lest there be some misunderstanding of my basic intentions today, I report at the outset that I am, for *most* intents and purposes, an atheist. So, my answer to the New Atheists is not a defense of theism; nor is it an apology for religion (or the academic study of it in specific senses). I intend merely to draw attention to some ways that the New Atheism creates a system of anti-religion which marginalizes the strategies for the interpretation of religious phenomena that we employ in Religious Studies in the endeavour to be fair to religious persons and the evidence of religiosity we encounter not as religionists, or apologists, but as careful scholars.

The movement we call The New Atheism is new in some very real senses, but in others merely the continuation of trends in Western thought from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19th centuries – the Rationalism and Empiricism of the Enlightenment, and the cultural critiques of Marx, Freud *et al.* and all things in between – but often without the sophistication or coherence of its antecedents, and suffering still with all the flaws of the colonial thought entailed therein.

Now, the New Atheism begins in a very real sense with 9/11. Sam Harris says as much in his book, *The End of Faith* (2004). And it was shortly after Harris that the rest of the so-called Four Horsemen published their works. As a result of these Revelations, dozens of other publications by lesser known authors have come out arguing against belief in god, other religious claims (esp. Creationism) and outlining the deleterious effects of religion on civilization. Again there is nothing new in this; it is the return to a fashion of previous eras.

Yet, the spread of this movement among a large rank and file has been facilitated in unprecedented ways thanks to the internet and especially the

advent of blogging. Daily, dozens of testimonies, arguments, news of religious nastiness, sciencey stuff, and other atheist matters from several blogs and networks of them fill my RSS reader. It is mostly from within these sources that I take the specifics of my talk today.

There is a relatively high degree of diversity among these daily atheist authors, but they do remain mostly male, mostly white, and mostly American. While there has been some hand wringing in the movement about diversity with respect to gender and race, its decidedly American orientation has not been a subject of much reflection.

Now, lots of these virtual atheists would object to any attempt to generalize about them. Fair enough. But of course, any stock-taking requires some degree of that. I'll just say that my use of the terms New Atheist, atheist, *etc.* is for convenience and not an attempt to construct them.

And when you hear the examples I evoke, you may think that I'm merely going after low-hanging fruit. There may be some truth to this, but as one who reads a lot of this commentary, I find nothing exceptionally base in these examples, nor are they the thoughts of internet outliers. (And at least some of my sources are paid per view of the posts they write.)

So, I think it's possible to generalize fairly and accurately about the nature of the whole movement, and based on the sources I'll employ. What we find should give us pause. For it consists of a vision of religion that reiterates all of the terms born of the modern Western invention of religion(s). The primary target (and primary source) of the atheist critique is American Christianity; however, it's with this framework that the critique is extended to cover religion however and wherever atheists find it.

And this is to say that in this movement, World Religions discourses are turned in on themselves: a Modern Christian vision of religion imposed on all other imagined religiosities, but now not to establish either the superiority of Christianity, but to establish the superiority of Modern Western Liberalism, nor to establish the common experiential core of world religiosity, but the universal absurdity of – singular – religion.

And this entails the force of an Americanism mapped across the West, *and* across the rest, insisting that most of the world's population is negotiating their social lives the wrong way.

### The Atheist Gaze

For all their concern about evidence and argument, New Atheists are surprisingly blinkered when it comes to understanding religious phenomena (which they often encounter in the News). It's seldom that atheist responses to complex activities we'd provisionally call 'religious' are not reduced to some form of categorical irrationality. Invariably absent from the relaying of such reports is any curiosity about the greater context (which the Western press, of course, is famous for occluding), and any shred of additional interpretation endeavouring to make some sense of what's been witnessed. To theoretically generalize, atheist responses reject the possibility of any sort of "thick description" or critical analyses of relations of power, ritual action, and agency.

Hence, actors in any series of events are reduced to automatons, motivated strictly by forms of religious or superstitious false consciousness. This "Atheist Gaze" robs religious actors of their agency and the capacity (individually or collectively) to generate meaning within religious (or any cultural) performances.

This is not necessarily to say that any natural conscious intentions on the part of religious actors are here being suppressed, but it is possible; more importantly for us, equal witnesses to events with the atheists, interpretations of events as occurring in a natural social context are dismissed as fantasy or apology. Hence, it's hard to know what frontiers of explanation atheists would ever concede.

So in the following, I will examine three ways that blogging atheists reconstruct religion for the purposes of arresting any other possible interpretations of events and expressions of identity among the religious.

## Reimagining “The West and the Rest”

Among the peculiarities that grow out of the anti-metaphysical first principles of the New Atheism is the rehearsal of numerous lines of argument I’ve not encountered outside of casual personal conversations with otherwise thoughtful people, or the historical record of European colonialism.

Among the most insidious that’s now re-presented as if it were a perfectly natural is the idea that some religions and some cultures are better than others. Before proceeding further, I must make it clear that my position is not derived from anything so base as a bald cultural relativism; rather, my issue is with the naturalized terms ‘religion’ and ‘culture’ within such argumentation. These encompassing terms obviously catch everyone who’d be identified by culture, religion (and ethnicity or nationality) within them and the relative moral evaluations of them – that’s at worst simple bigotry and at best obvious Othering.

All this was made apparent to me recently by a series of blog posts by an obscure blogger who nonetheless may be said to be within the mainstream by virtue of the fact that his blog appears on one of the largest networks of religious information on the internet, and affirmation of this position may be found in many other forums.

Early this month, the blogger Chris Hallquist wrote a post entitled, “Yes, some religions (and cultures) are worse than others,” which begins:

Something strange I’ve encountered in online discussions of religion ... is a resistance to accepting that some religions and cultures are worse than others.

Then follows a quotation from another blogger in which it’s argued that Richard Dawkins is selective in his criticism of religion, giving for instance, The Church of England mostly a pass.

Hallquist follows with a defense of the CofE relative to Catholicism and Islam:

there are no Anglican countries where you can be executed for leaving the local version of the Anglican Church. Nor has the Church of England been involved in enabling child rape on a massive scale, nor has it campaigned against the use of condoms in regions of Africa

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For Dawkins to ignore such facts would be to do what religious apologists often wrongly accuse atheists of, painting all religions with the same overly broad brush.

And while it may be somewhat difficult to give an overall rating that takes into account all the various pluses and minuses of any given culture, it's hard to imagine what could balance out the frighteningly widespread support for various forms of religiously-motivated oppression that exists in many Muslim countries.

A variation on this is common among atheists: for example, in the course of the Arab Spring, the TV host Bill Maher countered a guest's comparison of sexual violence against women in the US to that in Egypt, declaring it a case of false equivalence. Maher went on to list assorted habits of Egyptian men – women walking three paces behind, etc. – to argue that Arab culture was worse than American.

To return to Hallquist, a day after the post I quoted he directed his readers to his comments on another blog:

1) I consider myself a liberal, but I'm happy to endorse cultural imperialism .... By all means, design public school systems for aggressive assimilation of students into the dominant culture.

2) I'm generally in favor of easy immigration ... but I can accept that there are situations where tighter immigration policies might be necessary. But really, try assimilation first.

Careless at the least: what is the dominant American culture? But more than that, it's clear that Hallquist doesn't just arrange cultures hierarchically;

radical secularism is imagined in such a way as to force all aspects of identity not just out of the “public square” but within the domestic threshold (and it’s not even clear that atheists would tolerate it here).

Now, as Canadians, we can probably all agree on a list of cultural and religious practices we’d neither accommodate nor tolerate. But I turn now to a case that shows that atheists abhor even the most morally neutral expression of identity that doesn’t conform to their rationalist instrumentalist scientific construction of social life. More than that, the atheist gaze turned upon cultural expressions outside of itself acts to reduce the agents of such expressions to the status of Modern Primitives.

### The Discovery of Modern Primitives

Last summer a skeptical blog dedicated to calling out all manner of “woo” (any irrational belief, from religion to pseudoscience) directed me to a story from the National Geographic Daily News about a unique Catholic liturgy performed at the foot of the Aletsch glacier above the Swiss village of Fiesch.

The ostensible purpose of this ritual is to slow the recession of the glacier which geographers estimate is losing about 23 metres of its length annually and has been receding since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century.

The article goes on to give a vague history of this practice:

- Pilgrimage to the foot of the glacier began in 1674
- One time a piece of the glacier slid into a lake below and inundated many villages
- At some point the liturgy beseeching God to slow the growth of the glacier was instituted.
- The Vatican approved a change in the liturgy – from prayer against growth to prayer against recession – for 2012

Other details reported in the story worth noting:

- The village was very poor until the late 19th century
- The mayor of the district is quoted as saying: “We prayed for the ice to recede, and our prayer worked—too well”
- Today the villagers worry about having less drinking water, less hydro (the #1 source of income for the district) and less tourism (the #2 source of income)

The skeptical blogger’s commentary:

Here is a great example of superstition at work. They prayed to stop the destruction of their lands from the glacier’s floods and hazards. Global warming decimated the ice which has receded to such a degree that it’s causing its own hazards .... So, with the help of nature (aided by the industrial age), the prayer appeared to work. Now, reality bites.

The new prayers will do nothing to reverse global warming .... Yet, people will cling to their hope they can exert some effect on the environment by appealing to a higher power.

This isn’t analysis, this is the Atheist Gaze which cannot perceive anything here but a system of truth claims, entailing claims about causation, all of which fly in the face of the verifiable material facts of the matter. The liturgy is thus action undertaken on the basis of a fundamental delusion.

Fundamentally, I’m not sure how anybody could know what the actors here believe about their actions and the events in which they participate (at least based upon the evidence presented and the way it’s presented).

But even if we could be certain that these actors believe exactly as they appear to, that’s really beside the point, and focussing on that 1) obscures the larger frames encompassing the events and their context as reported by the journalist, and 2) serves to reinscribe a problematic image of religion (for atheist purposes).

As for the 2<sup>nd</sup> point: assumed here is religion as belief, hence as individual, and hence as an interior disposition. Again, not only beside the point, but it diminishes the agency and personhood of the participants, and their identities as members of multiple intersecting communities, engaged in social acts expressive of their collective concerns.

As for the 1<sup>st</sup> point (which the 2<sup>nd</sup> has obscured in much of the history of the academic study of religion – at least according to many recent theorists): consider the hypothesis that what we witness here is not religious, but social and political (assumed here is, of course, the deconstruction of religion as a first order term, by the RLST New Theorists as I call them, but I leave this aside). So, this is to argue that events some would regard as religious are more fundamentally a form of social or political theatre. To disregard this is itself, a political act.

At the edge of the widest frame, among my first questions are: how did Nat'l Geo happen to end up there to observe this ritual? Did some journalist-cum-anthropologist just happen upon the event, or alternatively, was she invited? This, I'd argue, matters a great deal. If the actors thought that they'd be portrayed as our atheists portray them, would they have tolerated the presence of the press? Assuming that they welcomed the press, what was the reason? Perhaps they desired that the greater world might know their plight, expressed through a form of theatre some might view initially as religious.

Whether they intended that or not, they succeeded: a statement from a University of Bern geographer quoted in the piece implies as much: "Even if all the new prayer does is to draw attention to man-made global warming ... it's a good thing." Who's to say with what we're given, that this was not the intention? Even if it wasn't, what then does intention matter?

Our atheist stands right beside us, outside even the media representation of these events, yet she zeroes in on the narrowest of possible views. Intellectually and morally, this is problematic.

Reducing these events simply to superstition not only casts aside germane facts of the case, but closes down every other avenue of interpretation as

well as imaginings that might prompt any other self-expression or subsequent political action. This is, at best philistinism, and at worst the imposition of a kind of orthodoxy of the most authoritarian sort, upon the religious (the Other), and the rest of us inspired to other interpretations.

*[That's a conclusion I'd ultimately make with respect to topics like some I cut out of this talk – the definition of religion, and theology, and biblical exegesis.]*

Even if we grant that the liturgy is exactly as it appears to be and participants truly believe (in the superstitious way the atheist thinks they do) we cannot ignore the existential threat to these Swiss which the liturgy addresses – formerly the growth of the glacier and now its shrinkage. To do so, as the atheist does (“reality bites”) is simply callous.

So at least the Atheists have neither a sense of the Picturesque or the Exotic but are they colour blind?

I've gathered all the material for this talk under what I've called The Atheist Gaze, adapting an expression from post-colonial scholarship especially with India in mind. Like the colonial gaze, the atheist gaze is a delimited way of conceiving of anything re-cognized as religious. This invariably distorts and diminishes events to which atheists turn their attention, and renders religious actors incapable of rationality, and in all probability, a danger to themselves if not world.

For my last topic, and with an eye to my conclusion, I turn to an example of a more literal seeing (and unseeing), and one that illustrates more explicitly a connection between New Atheist and colonial conceptions of the world of the Other. And that furthermore, implicates the atheists in a greater culture in which their conception of religion is recreated.

For this purpose, I return to blogger Chris Hallquist, and one his final posts before returning to the US last week after teaching and travelling in Southeast Asia.

In Hong Kong, Hallquist visited Lantau Island where he had a set of troubling experiences.

The primary site for his excursion was one Lantau's most distinctive features: a bronze Buddha billed as the world's largest outdoor image of its kind.

Of it he says:

I've seen a fair number of these religious monuments and on the whole I'm fond of them. Intellectually, I realize they're all probably the result of various kings wanting to show off how rich and powerful they were, and spending a ton of money that probably could have been used for a better purpose. But that doesn't stop me from enjoying how pretty they are. [edited]

I might view this statement more charitably – and not assume that Hallquist thinks the Lantau Buddha is some pre-colonial artefact. But, I cannot help but regard his comments as an unintentional evocation of something like Oriental Despotism, an especially popular colonial idea intended to signal that the Orient was immemorially subject to despotic rule and subsequently incapable of developing modern liberal political institutions.

I conclude this based upon a couple of facts about Lantau not mentioned by the author. First, the Lantau Buddha was erected in the period 1990 to 1993! So royal patronage seems quite unlikely; though can't be sure, I'd bet a good deal of Asian banking money went into the image.

The second fact I save for after I consider the proper substance of Hallquist's post.

What he really wants to report is his experience at some sort of information centre at the foot of the monument:

I went to a short presentation on Buddhism .... And to my complete surprise, I was totally creeped out by it.

... there should have been no surprises, because *there was nothing I hadn't been told when I learned about world religions in grade school/middle school*. But hearing it again as an adult, I was struck by how totally generic the story was ....

I thought, “wow, it would be so easy to change the names and incidental details and make this story about L. Ron Hubbard .... Like, you could tell a story about how L. Ron Hubbard was dissatisfied with his life, went on a quest for answers, and then in a flash of insight discovered the key principles of Dianetics....

What makes this creepy is the claiming to have discovered ultimate wisdom, juxtaposed with the total lack of any significant content that would justify the claim .... the only “spiritual truths” he [the Buddha] was said to have discovered were banalities: everyone dies, moderation is good. That means the tropes in the presentation could be used to sell any leader or ideology.

... we were directed to walk past a series of plaques with Buddhism’s “Four Noble Truths” and “Eightfold Path” written out .... I remember thinking, “how about a better way to avoid suffering is to give people food and medicine and then work on radical life extension?” ....

Final thought: maybe we should just feel sorry for the Buddha, who apparently lived such a sheltered life when he was young that when he finally found out about suffering, it seemed like a profound revelation.

Notice in his reaction that he doesn't bemoan the cheapening of Buddhist thought in this display; rather suggests that in essence Buddhist thought is cheap. And for our purposes, it is notable that he compares this information with what he received in his early education – banal litanies of basic belief (presumably presented in a way meant to be objective). Through atheists like Hallquist, again, world religions discourse is turned in on itself, a construct serving to render all religions (and religion itself – whatever that is) ridiculous.

As for the second fact about Lantau, which I suggest the author's failure to report tells us much, and which gives us a clue as to how to read the Lantau Buddha and Buddhism exhibition: Lantau island is also home to Hong Kong Disneyland, a temple to a vapid American culture and civil religion!

I suggest that Hallquist tries too hard by half to inure himself from things Buddhist which is especially startling considering that it seems obvious that the vision of Buddhism to which he turns his jaundiced eye is apparently caught up in a largely cultural complex which includes that most American of distractions, the theme park, and not just any theme park, but that which bills itself as "The Happiest Place on Earth."

In Hallquist's final expression of cynicism I don't think I've encountered a more thorough failure to understand the full implications of the Buddhist First Noble Truth:

'Life is suffering', or rather life is ultimately unsatisfactory, because happiness is as fleeting as a ride on Space Mountain.

*[Just before I conclude. One of the accusations the religious make which atheists work very hard to counter is that without religion life is meaningless. Atheist responses range from what I casually call Epicurean to absolute narcissism. This is a topic I'd like to have taken up here, but certainly must in future. That atheists refuse to entertain anything existentialist is surely telling.]*

## Conclusion

The New Atheist understanding and treatment of religion, while questionable in several respects, falls well within the critical and empathetic analyses characteristic of Western thought since at least the late 17th century. From the Age of Discovery, European Christians were forced to take account of formations of religious thought they found as they came to map the entire globe; and from the Romantic period, they felt the urge to

determine the nature of religion itself, manifest in the multiple traditions earlier discovered.

From the former, came a vision of ‘the West and the rest’, a hierarchy culminating in Christianity as the one truly universal system of thought, and the only one capable of producing institutions to maximize human liberty and prosperity. I’m suggesting that the New Atheists reimagine the West and the rest with only cosmetic modification: with the ascendancy of Secularism, we are able to transcend the Christian roots of Modern Liberal tradition, but even while we haven’t been entirely successful in doing so, we are in possession of a “culture” (Euro-American) which compares favourably to all others.

There is an implied essentialism here – some fundamentals of particular cultures are intrinsic impediments to the development of liberal democracy. Immigrants from lesser cultures are expected to conform to our superior values. Such sentiment isn’t limited to the likes of our blogger, but are prevalent. I quote Richard Dawkins who said just last week:

Isn't it really about time we decent, nice, liberal people stopped being so pusillanimously terrified of being thought 'Islamophobic' and stood up for decent, nice, liberal values?

Admittedly I take this out of an important context. But the implication remains that those who belong to certain religiosities or ethnicities simply cannot be habituated to Western society.

From the identification of religions in the plural (‘the rest’ becoming Hinduism, Buddhism, *etc.*) came the imagining of essences for each and for religion itself. This was accomplished through the analysis of source texts and the observations of practices. The systemic wheat could be separated from the chaff, so too the true faith from superstition and sacerdotalism. And hence, what religion is in the singular for all people could be identified. Again, New Atheists perpetuate this enterprise, but in order to establish the error of religion itself. They accomplish this by all the same ahistorical and decontextualized means by which the religions were originally invented – they cold-read texts, maybe hit some theological

highlights, and confront religious people with respect to their beliefs and practices. Religion becomes a thing, reimagined as a meme, a parasite, an evolutionary adaptation, and one that we all should grow up and learn to live without.

And so again, World Religions discourses have been turned in on themselves. The Romantic dream of a universal theology is exposed – accidentally – necessitating atheism; and the weaknesses of the liberal dream of cultural pluralism are exposed.

And this really shouldn't surprise anyone, believers or religion's mere empathizers. For, as I've long wondered, can the imagining of religion in the singular, even with the support of a mystifying theology like the phenomenology of religion, not inevitably lead to the dismissal of religion in the singular? The construction of bald laundry lists of 'beliefs' of each "religion" laid out in one plane for the sake of comparison, cannot but render each religion and so "religion" itself ridiculous.

*[It's worth noting that on the Pew Forum U.S. Religious Knowledge Survey atheists score the highest. They are proud of this fact; my reaction is simply that they are the most likely to internalize knowledge produced within World Religions discourse. Close second? Mormons.]*

And if differences between people are as the atheists conceive of them – based on a basic delusion, and who couldn't conclude that from the World Religions construction of religion? – then tolerance and accommodation would seem to be folly. And add the morally rotten fruit of such delusions and pluralism looks downright dangerous.

*[If it isn't obvious, this is intended as almost as much a criticism of the World Religions discourse as it is of the Atheists.]*

And now to return to my provocative subtitle. The New Atheists hate the Laurentian Federation (or would if they were even aware of us) for all sorts of reasons. Some we might be able to respect; several I think not.

First, they are secularism absolutists. They can't abide an arrangement like the Laurentian Federation in which public money funds institutions with any

sort of religious affiliation. Understandable among Americans since they have the force of settled law on their side. But Canadian atheists are of the same mind, even though our country is not secular in the same way. (CFI Canada has as one of its primary initiatives the elimination of all Separate education in Canada.)

Second, it's clear to me that very little in Religious Studies (which exists at Laurentian only across the denominational colleges) passes muster with atheists:

- that religious action and religious expression might signify something other than bald truth claims (so that real and apparent truth claims are really beside the point – my disposition);
- that religious (and irreligious) authors – say, Augustine and Dostoyevsky – might teach us something about meaning in life (or lack of it);
- and that the meaning of the Bible might not be as obvious as it might appear at first blush (notwithstanding its history of reception).

These and more academic orientations in our Department are simply inconceivable and politically verboten among those for whom nongodness is *sui generis*.

*[Comparative Religions, on the other hand (which is not a central methodology in many departments today including this one) they find useful – imagining it in service to the creation of more atheists, in the manner I've outlined.]*

I think I understand where they're coming from – contesting, in the first instance, that most thoroughly modern of religiosities, American Christianity – but they simply have no awareness of the contingency of this entity that frames their sense of this thing “religion.” Subsequently, as mere reactionaries, they've little awareness of their own contingency as (anti-) religious agents.

Finally, it's clear that the New Atheists have little regard for the liberal arts in general, and especially philosophy. As scientists (or mere science-fans) they are often inclined, for example, to debate about whether anything outside of science can create knowledge and the answer is invariably no. (I'll let that sink in.)

And at the risk of ivory tower elitism, I note that the culture they consume seldom rises above science fiction, fashion, video games and collegiate football. Nothing wrong with that in itself, but one searches in vain for any reflection on what connotations might lie in such representations. And it is this near lack of self-reflexivity that is characteristic of the New Atheism, with respect to religion as well as the rest of culture from which only World Religions discourse imagines it might be separated.

I'll do the self-reflexive needful here. The New Atheism is not a Thing. Rather, it's a second order tag I apply to various mythologies sourced in a number of internet networks (and middle-brow publications and conferences of like-minded people and elsewhere). My analyses are not intended as disputations with them, as theirs are with believers (or so they think) any more than my analyses of things commonly thought to be religious are disputations with real or implied believers.

And so when an atheist declares, "I dream of a world similar to Star Trek ... in which we are exploring strange new worlds far from Earth," I have to conclude that I'm not engaged in an academic debate (think Blair-Hitchens, and the paradigm of disputation among atheists) I'm observing anthropological subjects.

This presentation is my latest step in developing methods for doing so.

Thank you.