

2018

The prevalence of atheism in the sciences and its impact on scientists of color

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The Prevalence of Atheism in the Sciences and its Impact on Scientists of Color

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27 April 2018

Senior Thesis
Science, Technology and Society
Vassar College

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Preface

I grew up in a small town in Connecticut that was predominately Christian and predominately white. Growing up in that environment as a Hindu Indian-American, everything that preceded that “American” was doubly emphasized. I was keenly aware that the culture and the faith that my family practiced was different. This is a common narrative amongst second generation immigrants. The feelings of isolation and the sense of community found in similarly displaced members of the homeland are familiar tropes. While this is a common narrative, it is digested and processed in different ways, depending on the individual.

I have one older brother – and he is the scientist of the family. He liked math and science, and I liked English. My mother would teach him long division two years early, and I would write stories in my Barbie journal. Never one to stray from his path, he is currently pursuing a PhD in Biochemistry. My brother was one of the first people to expose me to atheism. My mother is devoutly religious. She prays for hours every day and brought our family to as many temple visits that she could wrangle out of my religiously indifferent father. While visits to the temple and other religious prayer ceremonies and festivals admittedly verged on boring, a sense of comfort could be found in surrounding myself with people with whom I shared a common experience. Hinduism is mainly based in India, so the majority of the people at these religious events were Indian. Furthermore, our religious festivities were often further divided and we celebrated festivals with fellow Bengalis, an Indian and Bangladeshi sub-ethnicity.

When he was in high school, my brother ventured more and more into the sciences. He declared himself an atheist and became much less willing to attend religious events of any kind. I

watched him curiously, as a younger sibling does, but continued to accompany my mother on her Hindu outings. I continued to pray with her on major holidays, I helped her make flower garlands for the statues of our deities, and I helped her cook the sweets she offered to God. As I grew older, I began to think that my brother was on to something. Many of the parables of Hinduism are conveyed through mythologies and fables. It was getting increasingly difficult for me to believe in the fantastical tales of Hinduism and reconcile religion with what I considered reality. Especially when my mother was the only one who could teach me about Hinduism, as soon as I doubted it, it had no way to fight back.

Soon, I too declared myself an atheist. I could not understand how anyone could actually believe that a god could exist when there was no *evidence* to support it. I dissociated from Hinduism and distanced myself from our religious practices. Over the next couple of years, I stopped praying with my mother and I stopped attending religious events. At first, I felt relieved at not having to pretend to believe in something that I did not. I felt superior, in that I had “figured it out”, I was enlightened, I knew that there was no god. However, as time went on, I realized that there was something absent from my life. By not engaging with Hinduism, I was not wholly engaging with being Indian. I had cut myself off from interacting with any Indian people who were not my family. While being Hindu and being Indian are not exclusively mutual, while identifying as an atheist, I felt less engaged with my heritage and ethnicity.

My brother continues to identify as an atheist. I cannot be sure of whether his beliefs on spirituality and religion impact his ethnic identity in the same way they did for me. However, despite having the same parents and being raised in the same household, he maintains that I have always been “more Indian than him”.

My personal experiences with religion, ethnicity, atheism, and science have lead me to my thesis topic: How does atheism in the sciences affect scientists of color?

Introduction

In order to ground and clarify this topic, I would first like to define a few terms that I will be using throughout this thesis. The lack of belief or participation in religion can be defined in many ways. Non-belief in general is the lack of religious belief.¹ It can be further broken down and in this thesis I will focus on atheism, the belief that there is no God or the lack of belief in a god.² I will also touch on humanism which is a form of non-belief that is a “rational, human-centered life stance that is primarily concerned with life in the here and now.”³ In contrast to non-belief I will be defining religion as a set of beliefs and practices associated with the service and worship of the divine/transcendent, often institutionalized in forms of community.⁴

I will be examining the impact of atheism on scientists of color, defining people of color as “racial and ethnic minority groups.”⁵ With race meaning “a social grouping of people who have similar physical or social characteristics that are generally considered by society as forming a distinct group.”⁶ Race can be characterized as socially constructed, partly characterized by physical similarities, partially characterized by general social similarities, characterized by the formation and self-identification of racial groupings in society.⁷ Ethnicity can be defined as the outcome of a social process that characterizes a group of people based on national and cultural

¹ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252.

² Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

³ Norm R. Allen Jr., *The Black Humanist Experience* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2003), 9.

⁴ *Miriam Webster*, s.v. “Religion,” accessed April 25, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/religion>.

⁵ Salvador Vidal-Ortiz, “People of Color,” in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 1038.

⁶ John Barnshaw, “Race,” in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 1091-1093.

⁷ John Barnshaw, “Race,” in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 1091-1093.

characteristics.⁸ Scientists of color have a plethora of racial and ethnic backgrounds. I will be examining a sampling of specific races and ethnicities, but the scope of this thesis will only be able to address race and ethnicity as generalities. Additionally, I examine the impact of atheism in the sciences on people of color specifically and I do not examine the effect of atheism on white and/or conditionally white ethnic and religious minority groups in the United States. Atheism in the sciences may have an impact on all non-Christian ethnic and religious minority groups, but that is beyond the scope of this thesis.

In order to understand the manifestation of atheism in the sciences, it is important to recognize science not just as practice but as institutions support scientists physically, financially, and intellectually” that include “universities, national laboratories, government agencies, and corporations that provide physical space and support for scientific research [...] Professional societies [that] promote interactions between individuals across institutions by organizing meetings and publications [and] Governments, private industry, and other institutions provide financial support for scientific research through grants and research contracts.”⁹ These institutions support scientists who are individuals studying or working in the STEM field, including the disciplines of the natural sciences and engineering.

Unlike many other Western countries which have been consistently turning more towards secularism, the United States is situated uniquely in its commitment to religiosity. While secularism is on the rise in America, the United States is the most religious country in the Western world.¹⁰ Religion was pervasive throughout the colonization of America, its independence, and through to the present day.

⁸ Dusko Sekulic, “Ethnic Group,” in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 457.

⁹ Anne Egger and Carpi, Anthony, “Scientific Institutions and Societies.” Visionlearning. 2009.

¹⁰ Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 13.

The current religious landscape of the United States is as follows¹¹:

Christian	70.6%	Non-Christian Faiths	5.9%
▶ Evangelical Protestant	25.4%	Jewish	1.9%
▶ Mainline Protestant	14.7%	Muslim	0.9%
▶ Historically Black Protestant	6.5%	Buddhist	0.7%
Catholic	20.8%	Hindu	0.7%
▶ Mormon	1.6%	Other World Religions	0.3%
▶ Orthodox Christian	0.5%	▼ Other Faiths	1.5%
Jehovah's Witness	0.8%	▶ Unitarians and other liberal faiths in the "Other Faiths" Tradition	1.0%
▶ Other Christian	0.4%	▶ New Age	0.4%
		Native American Religions	< 0.3%
		Unaffiliated (religious "nones")	22.8%
		Atheist	3.1%
		Agnostic	4.0%
		▶ Nothing in particular	15.8%
		Don't know	0.6%

In the United States, atheism is a minority belief system. In certain communities and in certain areas of the country, atheists are perceived unfavorably. For example, “40% of Americans polled in a survey of feelings toward religious groups in the United States reported negative views of atheists.”¹² Atheists are often stereotyped as being “immoral, trustworthy, or to be feared” and “atheist individuals report having experienced significant discrimination in schools, at their places of employment, within the legal system, and in many other settings”¹³ Atheists can be discriminated against because of their beliefs and identity.

The discrimination that atheists face varies largely based on geographic location. For example, in a 2015 Gallup Poll, it was found that the religious breakdown of the most religious US State – Mississippi, was starkly different compared to the least religious state – New Hampshire. 63% of Mississippi residents described themselves as Very Religious, 26% as

¹¹ Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”

¹² Melanie Brewster et al., “Perceived experiences of atheist discrimination: Instrument development and evaluation.” *Journal of Counseling Psychology* 63, no. 5 (2016): 557

¹³ Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 14-15.

Moderately Religious, and 11% as Nonreligious. Comparatively, New Hampshire residents were classified as 20% Very Religious, 24% Moderately Religious, and 55% Nonreligious. Brittany Friedel, an atheist resident of Kansas, a very religious state, discussed her experience of atheism in Melanie Brewster's *Atheists in America*. She described how "coming from Kansas I've realized that this must be one of the worst states to be an atheist in the nation [...] When a 'good Christian' or conservative person finds out you're an atheist, they hate you, they want you dead."¹⁴ Comparatively, as a student at Vassar College, the least religious university in the United States, I have experienced number of peers who are atheist express how "stupid" and "useless" religion is.¹⁵ Similarly, a scientist's experience with atheism will differ based on the location and culture of their workplace. The phenomena of the manifestation of atheism in the sciences that I will discuss is more present and relevant in places like New Hampshire and Vassar where religion is less prevalent.

The atheists who critique religion and seek to eradicate it are not unfounded in their claims. Like many institutions in the United States, institutions of religion can uphold oppressive social structures and can exhibit religious fundamentalism. White Christianity has been criticized for its active participation in and implicitness in colonialism, imperialism, racism, sexism, homophobia, and more.¹⁶ Religions of people of color can be oppressive as well and uphold institutional discrimination against further marginalized groups like women and the LGBTQ+ community. Some people of color may find atheism as a reprieve from their religion and as a place of safety and escape from an institution that oppresses them.¹⁷

¹⁴ Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 181.

¹⁵ https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2014/08/06/most-least-religious-colleges-usa_n_5649242.html

¹⁶ Steve Brouwer, Paul Gifford, and Susan D. Rose. *Exporting the American gospel: global Christian fundamentalism* (Routledge, 2013).

¹⁷ Elijah G. Ward "Homophobia, hypermasculinity and the US black church." *Culture, health & sexuality* 7, no. 5 (2005), 493.

However, I focus specifically at institutions of science in the United States. Atheism operates in a different paradigm in the sciences compared to the United States in general. In the sciences, non-belief is more normative, especially in geographic areas that are already less religious. Additionally, those who practice atheism are primarily white.¹⁸ While religion has the capacity to be oppressive, for people of color, religion can provide racial, ethnic, cultural, social, emotional, and financial networks and resources that may not be as easily available outside of their ethnoreligious communities. *The prevalence of atheism in the sciences can act as a barrier to scientists of color from entering and succeeding in the sciences because for people of color, religion often acts as a form of community. The way in which atheism manifests in the sciences can disrupt the ethnoreligious communities that scientists of color are a part of, thereby removing them from their racial and religious networks.*

In this thesis I will examine the ways in which religion, race, science, and atheism interact and how the prevalence of atheism in the sciences impacts scientists of color. I will begin by discussing the historical origin of atheism and its link to science. I will examine how atheism manifests in the sciences today and how a modern form of atheism, New Atheism, influences scientific and atheist discourse. Then, I will explore the relationship between atheism and race. Specifically, I will examine why atheism consists primarily of white men and why people of color are generally not attracted to the atheist movement. Next, I will look at how for people of color in the United States, religion can act as a form of community. Then, I will consider the impact of atheism in the sciences on scientists of color. I will observe the mechanisms by which religious scientists of color may feel a sense of stigma in being openly religious in institutions of science as well as how atheist scientists of color may feel a separation

¹⁸ Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, "America's Changing Religious Landscape"

from their racial and ethnoreligious communities. Lastly, I provide possible solutions that could mitigate how atheism can perpetuate barriers for people of color to enter and succeed in the sciences.

Atheism and Science

In order to understand the impact of atheism in the sciences on scientists of color, it is firstly important to examine how atheism and science are linked and why atheism is prevalent in the sciences. Atheism can be found in many cultures, and even religions throughout the world. However, in this thesis I will be specifically focusing on atheism in West, as that is the form of atheism that is most present in scientific institutions in the United States. Atheism and the non-belief in a god take many forms. Atheism can be *positive*, which is defined as “one who believes there is no God or gods”¹⁹ or *negative* which is one who is “without a belief in God.”²⁰ Agnosticism is one who “could neither affirm nor deny the existence of God due to the limits of human knowledge.”²¹ Another relevant form of non-belief is Humanism which is a focus on morality and being good without god.”²² Atheism was born out of scientific investigation and remains closely tied to the sciences today. Atheism is also present in scientific institutions at higher rates than in the general public. The way that atheism manifests in the sciences today can partly be contributed to the rise of New Atheist thought in the early 2000s. By examining all of these factors, it will become evident that atheism and science are inextricably linked together.

¹⁹ Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

²⁰ Michael Martin, *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 1.

²¹ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 266.

²² Ashley F. Miller, “The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance.” *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 212.

Historically, “atheism emerged from a dialectical relationship between religion and science in early modernity, which gradually gave way to a dichotomy in the Enlightenment, and particularly in the nineteenth century as Darwinists used the theory of evolution by natural selection as a case for the emancipation of science from the fetters of institutionalized religion”²³ In contrast to the modern-day perception of a science/religion binary, atheism’s foundation can be found in theology. During the 17th Century, “science was considered work in the service of Christianity.”²⁴ The realms of science and religion overlapped and in Britain, as late as the nineteenth century, “theology could claim to be a science.”²⁵ Atheism did not rise out of an antagonism between religion and science, but rather from a contradiction within theology itself. Michael J. Buckley and Gavin Hyman pinpoint the contradiction as an emergence of God as a material object found in nature with a definite “substance and location”, rather than a transcendent, meaning beyond physical human experience, being.²⁶ As soon as theologians conceptualized God as material, “God by definition became an object of scientific inquiry, according to both science and orthodox theology.”²⁷ The contradiction between God as transcendent versus material allowed for theologians to use science as a mechanism to examine God’s materiality.

There were several important figures who contributed to the establishment and rise of atheism in the West, including Isaac Newton whose discoveries in physics enabled thinkers to investigate previously unanswerable questions that were the domain of theology. They began “a new phase in the science/religion dialectic as the ideological foundation of atheism, with science

²³ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14.

²⁴ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

²⁵ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 4.

²⁶ Gavin Hyman, “Atheism in Modern History,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

²⁷ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

making discoveries that did not need the concept of the divine designer.”²⁸ Denis Diderot, an 18th century French philosopher, is recognized as being the first atheist philosopher. He “played a key role in the history of non-belief,” and “introduced atheism into the intellectual culture of the West with such strength that its presence was permanently secured.”²⁹ Diderot’s intellectual and societal legitimacy provided the momentum needed to transition the doubt that arose from scientific investigation of theology into atheism – the specific disbelief of a God.

Diderot and his peers legitimized atheism, but it continued to be stigmatized and remained a minority belief. The publishing of Darwin’s *The Origin of Species* in 1859 was a critical event that loaned even more credibility to atheism. Additionally, it shifted atheist thought towards a dialectical separation of religion and science that laid the foundation of New Atheist thought today. Darwin’s theory of evolution by natural selection was an “astonishingly successful explanation of life [that] had no need for invocation of the divine.”³⁰ For atheists, it provided an explanation for the origin of life that countered the Christian, theological explanation of intelligent design. LeDrew terms “the atheism of this period, which connected Enlightenment skepticism to the expanding influence of evolutionary theories of both the natural and social worlds” as “scientific atheism.”³¹ Darwin-influenced atheists were able to use evolution to explain the early origins of humans without theology and created a “new form of non-belief that disrupted the alliance between science and religion.”³² For early Darwinists, “the theory of evolution meant for some that science was able to complete the break from religion

²⁸ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 16.

²⁹ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 258.

³⁰ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 21.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

³² Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 264.

instigated by the Scientific Revolution and contemporaneous revolution in theology.”³³ Darwin’s evolutionary theory was influential in atheist challenges to religious thought and institutions and introduced a separation between Christianity and science.

Atheism in the United States today has carried on the European, Darwinian tradition of linking atheism and science. The missions of modern-day atheist organizations focus on defending civil liberties of atheists and advocating for the separation of church and state. The advancement of science and reason are commonly a part of these organizations’ visions and missions. The following are a selection of mission statements from popular atheist organizations and their references to science:

Atheist Alliance International

“VISION STATEMENT: AAI’s vision is a secular world where public policy, scientific inquiry and education are not influenced by religious beliefs, but based upon sound reasoning, rationality and evidence, and where individuals who lack religious beliefs enjoy free speech, freedom of association and freedom to participate in public life.”³⁴

American Humanist Association

Humanism supports a set of ethical values “that are grounded in the philosophy of the Enlightenment, informed by scientific knowledge, and driven by a desire to meet the needs of people in the here and now.”³⁵

Center for Inquiry

“Our Mission: The Center for Inquiry strives to foster a secular society based on reason, science, freedom of inquiry, and humanist values.

³³ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 24.

³⁴ “About Us,” Atheist Alliance International, accessed March 1, 2018. <https://www.atheistalliance.org/about-us/>.

³⁵ “About the American Humanist Association,” American Humanist Association, accessed March 1, 2018. <https://americanhumanist.org/about/>.

Our Vision: A world where people value evidence and critical thinking, where superstition and prejudice subside, and where science and compassion guide public policy.”³⁶

United Coalition of Reason

“At UnitedCoR we aspire to a world where secular ideals are treated with respect and dignity.

We are committed to promoting science and reason, nurturing unity and developing cooperation within local communities.”³⁷

Additionally, the American Atheists organization’s mission statement does not reference science, but their logo consists of an atomic whirl, which is based on the Rutherford model of the atom and has come to represent atheism in general. They state that the logo “acknowledges that only through the use of scientific analysis and free, open inquiry can humankind reach out for a better life.”³⁸

From these examples, it is evident that atheism and atheist organizations use science to guide their visions of non-belief and promote the advancement and importance of scientific thought in the public sphere. Atheism and science are inextricably intertwined. Science is prevalent in atheism and atheism is prevalent in science. As a whole, scientists are significantly less religious than the average American. In the general United States public, in a survey conducted by the Pew Research Center 83% of adults stated that they were fairly to absolutely certain of their belief in God. Comparatively, in a survey of scientists from the American Association for the Advancement of Science, 51% of those polled believed in a God or higher power. Among scientists, 17% identified as atheist, 11% as agnostics, and 20% as nothing in particular (which does not necessarily correlate with non-belief but potentially contains non-

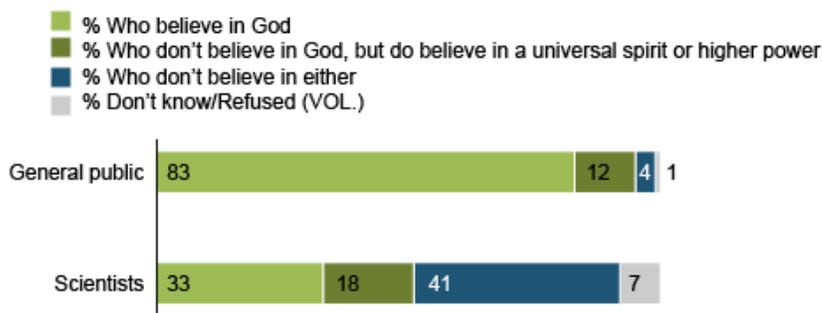
³⁶ “About the Center for Inquiry,” Center for Inquiry, accessed March 1, 2018. <https://www.centerforinquiry.net/about>.

³⁷ “About UnitedCoR,” UnitedCoR, accessed March 1, 2018. <https://unitedcor.org/about-unitedcor/>.

³⁸ “Our Logo,” American Atheists, accessed March 1, 2018. <https://www.atheists.org/about/our-logo/>.

believers). Comparatively, among the general public, 2% identified as atheist, 2% as agnostic, and 12% as nothing in particular. These statistics can be seen illustrated in the figures below which show Religious Belief Among the General Public and Scientists for 1) belief in god and 2) religious affiliation, as well as a breakdown of belief in God by sex, age, and scientific discipline.³⁹ It is evident that atheism and non-belief are more prevalent amongst scientists compared to the general US public.

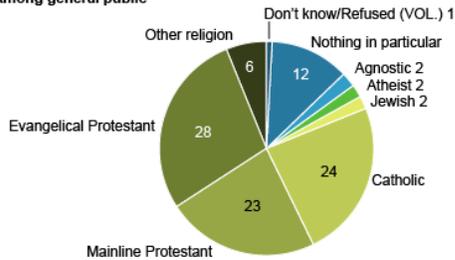
Religious Belief Among the General Public and Scientists



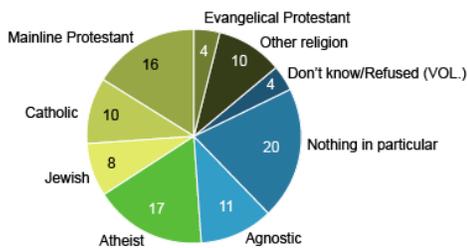
Religious Affiliation Among the General Public and Scientists

% who are...

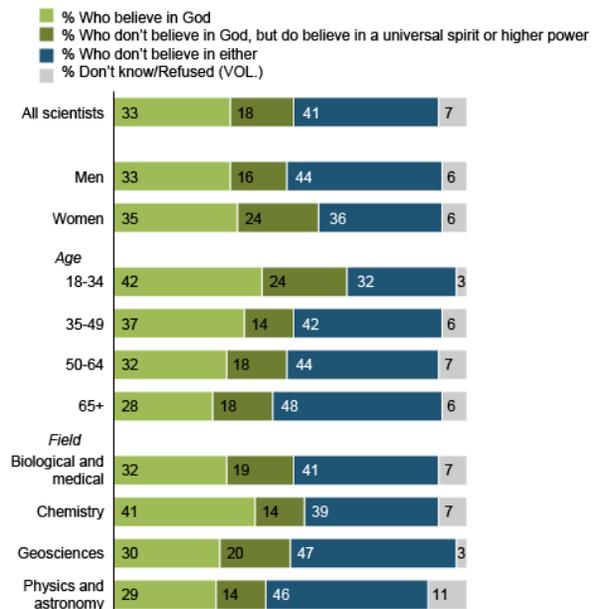
Among general public



Among scientists



Religious Belief Among Scientists



³⁹ David Masci, "Scientists and belief." *Pew Research Center* 5 (2009).

Within modern-day atheists, there is a smaller movement called New Atheism. New Atheists advocate for rationality and reason and use their beliefs to criticize and counter religion. New Atheists do not represent all atheists by any means, but they are a vocal part of the atheist movement. New Atheism became popular in the early 2000s and its aggression towards religion was a founding philosophy. New Atheists link their philosophy to science and promote a religion/science binary. They do this in part by attack all religions in the name of scientific progress. The binary that New Atheists adhere to contributes to alienating people who are culturally and functionally religious, like many people of color, from their movement.

New Atheists tend to be outspoken and militant, however their views do not represent the views of all atheists. Some atheists are even critical of New Atheism, consider it “atheist fundamentalism”⁴⁰ and “do not find blanket condemnations of religion justifiable particularly in light of the scientism often embedded in” it.⁴¹ Additionally, we must be careful while examining New Atheists because not all of their work is considered credible or taken seriously by scholars.⁴² Despite these precautions, it is still essential to examine the impact of New Atheism because of its reach and visibility.

Atheism rapidly rose to prominence in the public sphere in the early 2000s, largely due to the works of New Atheist scholars. Richard Dawkins was one of the catalysts for atheism’s rise in popularity. New Atheist Richard Dawkins’s book *The God Delusion* sold over two million copies from its release in 2006 to 2010 and was a *New York Times* nonfiction bestseller for fifty-one weeks⁴³. In New Atheism’s most active years (2006-2010), prominent New Atheists “made

⁴⁰ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 5.

⁴¹ Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2011), 3.

⁴² Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 6.

⁴³ RichardDawkins.net

multiple appearances on most major American news networks during this time, including CNN and Fox News.”⁴⁴ Although New Atheists are minorities amongst the atheist community, it is necessary to examine their movement because it was New Atheist discourse that brought atheism into the spotlight in the 21st century. Because New Atheism served as a vehicle to popularize public interest in atheism, it is New Atheist ideology that has become present in public discourse.

Who are New Atheists and what do they believe? The key catalyst for the inception and rise of New Atheism was 9/11 and the War on Terror. Atheism was relatively quiet in the West in the 20th century. It was pejoratively associated with communism and the Soviet Union during the Cold War. However, with the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center and its ties to Islam, “while identified with the enemy during the Cold War, atheists were now in a position to assert that religion, not atheism, constituted the greatest threat to world order.”⁴⁵ New Atheists used 9/11 in order to blame and demonize Islam and subsequently all religions. Another catalyst for the materialization of New Atheism was opposition towards the influence that the Evangelical Christian right had in contributing to the elections of George W. Bush as president in 2000 and 2004. While both of these events triggered the origination of New Atheism, the increase in public interest of atheism would not have been possible had there not already been a general shift downward in religiosity in America. Americans were taking an “increasingly critical position toward the institution of religion”⁴⁶ The political and social environment of the early 2000s fostered the ascent of New Atheism.

The most prominent leaders of the New Atheist movement are Richard Dawkins, Sam Harris, Christopher Hitchens, and Daniel Dennett. They are informally known as the “The Four

⁴⁴ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 50.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 39.

Horsemen” of New Atheism – an allusion to the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse found in the Bible. The Four Horsemen are militant and aggressive in their promotion of atheism and critique of religion. For example, in *The God Delusion*, Dawkins equates religion to insanity by quoting Robert M. Pirsig’s *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance*, saying “When one person suffers from a delusion, it is called insanity. When many people suffer from a delusion it is called Religion.”⁴⁷ Hitchens is perhaps more vicious in his critique of religion and simply put says “*Religion poisons everything.*”⁴⁸ The Four Horsemen have made various contributions towards New Atheism and are known for being inflammatory and deeply critical of religion. What they also have in common is their use of science to uphold their ideological atheist beliefs.

Similar to how the development of atheism is inextricably linked to science, New Atheism has roots in science as well. As an intellectual movement, New Atheism generally consists of “scientists and philosophers of science, particularly those in the fields of evolutionary biology and psychology”⁴⁹ Both Dawkins and Hitchens are British, and their ideologies of atheism arise from the scientific atheism of Darwinian evolutionary biology. New Atheism draws from Western atheism’s history as “the social and intellectual roots of the movement are found in nineteenth-century England and the debates concerning Darwin’s theory of evolution.”⁵⁰ Dawkins himself asserts the intertwined nature of atheism and science and “asserts that atheism lies at the heart of modern science.” Whether or not atheism is truly the “heart” of modern science, Dawkins’s assertion illustrates the extent to which New Atheist theory is grounded in science.

⁴⁷ Richard Dawkins, *The God Delusion* (Bantam Press, 2006), 5.

⁴⁸ Christopher Hitchens, *God is not great: How religion poisons everything* (McClelland & Stewart, 2008), 12.

⁴⁹ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 50.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

New Atheists use scientific theories to support their atheistic ideas. Beyond solely advocating for atheism, New Atheists advocate for the advancement and spread of science. In their quest to critique religion, it can be seen that “the New Atheism is much more than a critical inquiry into religious faith. It is an extension and manifestation of the modern project of scientific mastery of the world and the rationalization of society.”⁵¹ Theoretically, the non-belief in a god does not need to be linked to scientific thought. But integral to the New Atheist mission is the spread of scientific, advancement, evidence, and rationality in opposition to religious faith and “irrationality”. Dawkins reinforces a binary between religion and science and “sets religion up as the opponent of science in the tradition of his nineteenth century Darwinist forbearers and then attempts to use science to discredit religious beliefs in his “crusade to use Darwinism as a means of dissolving all traditional belief in a purposeful universe.”⁵² The curiosity in Dawkins’s opposition to religion is that at the heart of his argument, Dawkins is opposed to creationism and the biggest opponent of Darwinism is religious fundamentalism in the United States. In order to defend Darwinism and critique creationism, Dawkins does not just attack Fundamentalist Christianity – he attacks religion as a concept and all religious institutions.

New Atheists engage with religion aggressively. Regardless of their essential conflict with creationism, “not satisfied with an attack on creationists, intelligent design, and conservative Christianity, they are prepared to take on all religions and all shades of opinion within each religion, liberal as well as orthodox. All of them look to scientific theories to support their unbelief.”⁵³ The way in which New Atheists create a dichotomy between science and religion and use science as evidence in their attacks against religion disregards religion as anything but

⁵¹ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 15.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵³ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273.

theology. “The evolutionistic theories of the New Atheists treat religion strictly as belief, with no accounting of the social nature of religious practice.”⁵⁴ Because in the United States religion can be a social, cultural, and economic network for people of color especially, the way in which New Atheists engage with religion is largely un-nuanced regarding non-Christian religions as well as race.

⁵⁴ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 45.

Atheism and Race

Atheism functions as more of a norm in institutions of science compared to the general public. While atheist thought and belief are not inherently harmful, normative atheism situated in the sciences can be disruptive to scientists of color. Institutions of science uphold social, political, and economic structures that benefit whiteness⁵⁵. Race is a barrier towards the access, opportunity, and success of people of color in science careers. Understanding the relationship between atheism and race and how atheism and whiteness are situated in the sciences is a key piece in determining how atheism impacts scientists of color.

Atheism is practiced by people from a variety of racial backgrounds, however, atheists are primarily white and primarily men. Demographically, the racial/ethnic breakdown of atheists in the United States is white (78%), Latinx (10%), Asian (7%), Black (3%), Other/mixed (2%)⁵⁶. The gender composition is men (68%) and women (32%). People of color are not as attracted to atheism because of two main mechanisms. The first is outright attacks on religion, which are sometimes racialized. Additionally, because for people of color religion is often tied to race and culture, attacking religion can be felt as a cultural and racial affront. These more obvious criticisms of religion are usually carried out by New Atheists. The second more subtle mechanism is the perpetuation of whiteness in atheism which is observed through the lack of people of color in positions of power in the atheist movement, the lack of racial awareness, or

⁵⁵ Sikivu Hutchinson, “. “Mad Science or School-to-Prison?” *Humanism and Technology: Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Anthony Pinn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 273.

⁵⁶ Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, “America’s Changing Religious Landscape”

colorblindness, by white atheists, and the lack of focus on racial issues within the atheist movement. “Although atheists are predominately liberal and claim to be pro-equality for all races, genders, and sexualities, the movement has failed to attract those people they claim to support—despite the fact that organized religion often subjugates and oppresses those same people, they are not finding their way to the atheist movement.”⁵⁷ The perpetuation of whiteness in atheism is contributing factor to why people of color are less compelled to join the atheist movement. That is not to say that there are not atheists of color. Certain subsets of atheism are composed of and cater to communities of color – a prominent movement being humanism, which has a tradition in African American thought. Despite the existence and persistence of a subset of atheists of color, white men continue to dominate atheism.

New Atheists attack all religion as a proxy for opposing Evangelical Christianity. They are “not satisfied with an attack on creationists, intelligent design, and conservative Christianity, they are prepared to take on all religions and all shades of opinion within each religion, liberal as well as orthodox.”⁵⁸ New Atheists are philosophically and morally opposed to Evangelical Christianity, however they critique and attack all other religions as well. Because religion is often racialized, New Atheist critiques of religion can be felt to extend to critiques of race. For example Islam is a religion that is often racialized as brown or black in the United States. 9/11 and the Islamophobic backlash it caused, placed a target on Islam for the religion-based attacks of New Atheists. The prominent New Atheist, Dawkins, is one of many who have “joined a growing chorus of xenophobia and ethnic nationalism in Europe, tweeting endlessly about

⁵⁷ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 213.

⁵⁸ Bernard Lightman, "Unbelief," in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273.

“Muslim barbarians” to his over one million followers.”⁵⁹ Another of the Four Horsemen, Sam Harris, writes in *God is Not Great* that “there are good beliefs and there are bad ones – it should now be obvious to everyone that Muslims have more than their fair share of the latter” and that “Islam is undeniably a religion of conquest. The only future devout Muslims can envisage – as *Muslims* – is one in which all infidels have been converted to Islam, subjugated, or killed”⁶⁰.

Harris’s characterization of Islam being composed of bad beliefs and implying that devout Muslims want to convert, subjugate, or kill non-Muslims is not only an unsubstantiated generalization, it is blatantly Islamophobic. If an individual who was raised Muslim was considering becoming an atheist, why would they want to join a movement that so openly attacks their religion, culture, and heritage? Even if an individual does not consider themselves practicing or devout, for many people of color, religion is also a form of racial community and culture and New Atheist attacks on religion extend past belief and into race and culture.

As previously mentioned, not all atheists are so harshly critical of religion by any means and not all support New Atheist attacks on religion. There are more subtle ways in which whiteness is perpetuated in the atheist movement and why people of color and women are not as attracted to the movement. Firstly, there are few people of color in positions of power in the atheist movement. The leaders of atheism tend to be white. Of six major secular organizations in the United States (American Atheists, Freedom from Religion Foundation, Atheist Alliance International, American Humanist Association, Secular Student Alliance, and Secular Coalition for America), the most executive position on the Board of Directors is consistently held by white non-believers. The Freedom from Religion Foundation and the Secular Coalition for America

⁵⁹ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 45.

⁶⁰ Sam Harris, *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror, and the Future of Reason* (WW Norton & Company, 2005), 109-110.

appear to have only white non-believers on their Board of Directors. If white atheists are the ones in positions of power, then the atheist movement will continue to cater to white atheists. This is not necessarily intentional, but white atheists will not be as in tune to the practicalities of being an atheist of color, and in this way whiteness is self-perpetuated in the atheist movement.

The white atheist community's lack of racial awareness within their own movement contributes to its lack of diversity. The atheist movement largely consists of people who identify as liberal⁶¹ and are open to racial diversity within the atheist community. Yet, a trend amongst white atheists is to engage in color-blindness when it comes to race. Being implicit in "color blindness allows Whites to claim the moral high ground of being "beyond race" while forestalling further racial progress by denying the enduring significance and reality of racial inequality."⁶² Although this is not necessarily ill-intentioned, or even intentional at all, failing to recognize race in the atheist movement perpetuates institutional discrimination, which is when the negative treatment against an individual or a group based on a characteristic of that group "is performed by an institution as a result not of individual belief but as a result of the structure, organization, or practices of that institution."⁶³ This happens through the disadvantaging of atheists of color by failing to address their issues and needs as people of color. Ignoring race disserves atheists of color and ignores the negative implications that atheism can have on communities of color. It is important for atheists to engage with race so that atheists of color do not face institutional discrimination within the atheist movement and to be accountable for the potentially negative impacts that atheism can have on communities of color.

⁶¹ Pew Research Center, May 12, 2015, "America's Changing Religious Landscape"

⁶² Amy E. Ansell, "Color Blindness," in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 321.

⁶³ William Alfred Sampson, "Institutional Discrimination," in *Encyclopedia of Race, Ethnicity, and Society*, ed. Richard T. Schaefer (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2008), 727.

An example of Non-believers in the Orlando area illustrates the colorblindness found in the movement. Richard Peacock, the founder of the Black Nonbelievers of Metro Orlando, describes his experience of engaging with white atheists and claims that “They’ll tell you, ‘Don’t you know race is a social construct?’”⁶⁴. True to form, Jack Maurice, a white non-believer and the head of the Orlando Freethinkers and Humanists claims that his group “welcomes members of all races” and that “We are all non-theists, we are all critical thinkers. It’s no difference.”⁶⁵ Colorblind acceptance of racial diversity is unhelpful to atheists of color and “white claims about embracing colorblindness or believing “everyone should be equal” in the face of the New Jim Crow of “invisible” segregation does not translate into atheist or humanist solidarity.”⁶⁶ By not acknowledging the racial inequities in science and atheism, it alienates people of color from joining their movements and the whiteness in atheism become self-perpetuating. By being color *conscious* rather than color *blind*, white atheist activists may better be able to advocate for and address racial equity in atheism and the sciences.

The way in which white atheists engage with science contributes to color-blindness and can dissuade people of color from joining the atheist movement. Anthony Pinn, a black humanist scholar, describes the bad form in which some atheists, including Richard Dawkins use science to combat racism in the form of wearing “We are all Africans” T-shirts. Dawkins can be viewed wearing said T-shirt in his twitter profile picture accompanied with a tweet stating “We are all African apes. That’s what my t-shirt means. Add political moral if you wish. Genetically we are a v [sic] uniform species. Shun racism”⁶⁷ Pinn critiques how “the ‘We are all Africans’ T-shirts popular in atheist quarters speak a certain scientific truth. Based on the findings who can argue

⁶⁴ Jeff Kunerth, “Black Atheists Search for Sense of Belonging,” *Orlando Sentinel* (March 22, 2013).

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶⁶ Sikivu Hutchinson, “The Trouble With Those Atheists.” *Atheist Republic*, 9 Oct. 2013.

⁶⁷ Richard Dawkins. Twitter Post. February 27, 2014, 12:30 AM.

with the science behind this statement? However, taken alone, the scientific “truth” of this proclamation does not wrestle with its cultural implications in light of colonial processes and structures that still affect the continent of African descent across the globe.”⁶⁸ Science in the United States has a history of taking advantage of people of color and excluding people of color from its practice. This fact may not be of interest or importance to white scientists and “a white male scientist is naturally going to be interested in causes related to being a white male scientist and blind to or ignorant of causes not related to that. It is a systematic bias. As a movement founded primarily by white male scientists who felt ostracized, the atheist movement has a difficult time acknowledging that science has its problems both historically and as the sole foundation of a worldview and that being white confers special privileges, as does being male.”⁶⁹ By engaging with science as a true philosophy instead of a social system that perpetuates racism, white atheists continue to fail to address the racial issues in science and in their own movement which continues the alienation of people of color from their movement.

Beyond failing to fully recognize and engage with race and the relevance of race to atheists of color, white atheists do not center their activism on racial issues. Where are atheists putting their time and resources? Certainly, atheists focus on spreading the message of non-belief. However, when critiquing organized religion, there is “little analysis of the relationship between economic disenfranchisement, race, gender, and religiosity” so these critiques are of “limited cultural relevance for people of color.”⁷⁰ By interrogating religion, but not recognizing

⁶⁸ Anthony B. Pinn, *The End of God-Talk: An African American Humanist Theology* (Oxford University Press, 2011), (page?).

⁶⁹ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 213.

⁷⁰ Sikivu Hutchinson, *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Infidel Books, 2011).

the functionality that religion can have for people of color, this again disservices the social and cultural importance that religion can have for people of color.

Additionally, atheist activism works to eradicate “the stigma attached to atheism”⁷¹. In *Atheists in America*, Melanie E. Brewster claims that “atheism is considered a marginalized identity, and to be nonreligious in most Western cultures relegates a person to a minority status associated with oppression and prejudice”⁷² Whether or not atheists face similar levels of oppression and prejudice as other minority groups in the United States, atheist activism focuses on reducing stigma and prejudice against atheists. Consequently, “The majority of the scholarly literature on atheism concerns anti-atheist bias and how to combat it [...] has not included little research or exploration of the experience of atheist women and African-Americans.”⁷³ While white atheist activists are fighting for recognition and against oppression for themselves, they fail to interrogate the experiences that other minority groups have within their own community.

When atheist activism centers on eliminating anti-atheist bias and ignores racial inequities within its own sphere, it further dissuades people of color from joining its movement. In a blog post “The Trouble With Those Atheists”, Sikivu Hutchinson, a prominent black, atheist writer describes the shortcomings of white atheist activism. Hutchinson uses racial inequities in STEM to illustrate how whiteness is centered in atheist activism and race is ignored. Atheism is heartily intertwined with the sciences it informs and is the basis for many atheist thinkers who promote a commitment to both science and reason. Hutchinson notes that atheist activists criticize religious communities as “backward, unenlightened and unsophisticated in the exceptionalist ways of Western rationality” yet they are silent “when it comes to discussions

⁷¹ Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 9.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 17.

⁷³ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 213.

about STEM college pipelining, STEM literacy and culturally responsive recruitment and retention of STEM scholars and professionals of color in academia”⁷⁴. White atheist activists do not allot time or resources in promoting racial equity in the sciences, despite heavily relying on the sciences for their own philosophical base.

Hutchinson narrates the different emphasis that humanists of color have on activism. For atheists and humanists of color, a relationship with the sciences goes beyond its use as a theoretical foundation because “For many humanists of color who live in communities where black and Latino youth are being relentlessly pipelined into prisons – redressing educational apartheid is more critical than the mainstream secular emphasis on creationism and school prayer”⁷⁵ White atheist activists advocate for the separation of religion and education in the form of limiting practices like teaching creationism and school prayer in schools. Hutchinson’s highlighting of racial inequities in STEM fields demonstrates the different priorities of atheists of color and white atheist activists. The white atheist indifference towards racial inequity in STEM is illustrative of the hypocrisy of white atheists who “rather than coalition build with STEM organizations and activists of color to seriously address the race/gender "opportunity gap" in the STEM fields atheist organizations are content to posture about the need for "science and reason" to elite white audiences.”⁷⁶ There, white atheist activists lose people of color from their audience. The intention of white atheist activism does not prioritize the needs of atheists of color, scientists of color, and communities of color in general. While white atheists may be open and willing for racial diversity in their organizations and movements, their lack of prioritization of racial issues alienates people of color from their movement.

⁷⁴ Sikivu Hutchinson, “The Trouble With Those Atheists.” *Atheist Republic*, 9 Oct. 2013.

⁷⁵ Sikivu Hutchinson, “. “Mad Science or School-to-Prison?” *Humanism and Technology: Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Anthony Pinn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 145.

⁷⁶ Sikivu Hutchinson, “The Trouble With Those Atheists.” *Atheist Republic*, 9 Oct. 2013.

Hutchinson's critique of white apathy in atheism grounds itself in humanism – a philosophy of non-belief that emphasizes an individual's ability to choose their own destiny and contribute to benefitting the human condition. Philosopher A.C. Grayling describes humanism as “the concern to draw the best from, and make the best of, human life in the span of a human lifetime, in the real world, and in sensible accord with the facts of humanity that are shaped and constrained by the world. This entails that humanism rejects religious claims about the source of morality and value.”⁷⁷ There is a community of black secular (atheist and agnostic) humanists who draw their philosophy from a tradition of African American thought.⁷⁸ Historically, atheism and humanism have drawn from black thinkers as well, including Frederick Douglass who criticized the complicity of religious faith in the upholding of slavery saying, “Many of its most eloquent Divines who stand as the very lights of the church, have shamelessly given the sanction of religion and the Bible to the whole slave system... and this horrible blasphemy is palmed off upon the world for Christianity! For my part, I would say, welcome infidelity! welcome atheism! welcome anything! in preference to the gospel as preached by those Divines!”⁷⁹ I reference the black humanist and atheist movements to acknowledge that despite atheism being an overwhelmingly white belief system, communities of black non-believers are present and are active. There are black non-believers, like Douglass who heavily criticized religion. However, generally humanism is juxtaposed against New Atheism and downplays the differences between religion and humanism. Humanists “do not take an oppositional stand against religion”⁸⁰. The dissolving of the religion/atheism binary enables humanism to be a space that allows atheists of

⁷⁷ A.C. Grayling, “The God Argument,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Atheism*, ed. Michael Martin (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 140.

⁷⁸ Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 10.

⁷⁹ Frederick Douglass, oration delivered in Corinthian Hall, Rochester, July 5, 1853, University of Rochester Frederick Douglass Project, <http://www.lib.rochester.edu/index.cfm?page=2945>

⁸⁰ Melanie E. Brewster, *Atheists in America* (Columbia University Press, 2014), 7.

color to reconcile their ethical beliefs and spaces where their religious and racial communities intersect.

Unfortunately, movements that consist of non-believers of color are overshadowed by more vocal white atheists, especially New Atheists. The lack of visibility of atheist communities of color, like the black humanist movement, can make it difficult for people of color to find atheism attractive and to find racial communities within atheism. The outward attacks on religion from the New Atheist movement and the more subtle perpetuation of whiteness found in the white leadership, color-blindness, and lack of focus on racial issues in the atheist movement all contribute to why people of color are not as attracted to the movement. Atheism, catering to whiteness, offers community for whiteness. "From the position of privilege many in the atheist movement occupy, the focus is always on what is false rather than on what helps one to survive. This is not to say that organized religion is a net good, or something not worth fighting against, but rather to say that ignoring the reality of how religion helps people means being unable to offer meaningful alternatives to it."⁸¹ For people of color in the United States, community is found elsewhere. Racial community is often embedded in religion. The complex relationship between religion, atheism, and race force us to interrogate what religion means to communities of color and how atheism can disrupt that.

⁸¹ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 213.

Religion as Community for People of Color

Religion is complex. It is profoundly individual, yet undoubtedly systematic and it intersects deeply with race and ethnicity. In the United States, the role of religion differs amongst different races. Broadly, for people of color, religion tends to be a form of culture and community. It provides spaces for ethnic and racial congregation, for communal experiences as racial minorities, and is a social organizing factor. While religion can act as a form of community for different white communities as well, the mechanisms for how this occurs differs for people of color. People of color can gain social and economic networks and resources through their religions which are not as readily available to them outside of their racial community because of the oppressive nature of structural racism in the United States. Religious white communities can also benefit from religious networks, however, white people, especially middle-upper class white communities, can more easily access social and economic resources outside of religion compared to people of color.

For many white-non-believers, especially New Atheists, a major critique of religion is that it is oppressive. Additionally, religion is often framed as solely a belief system. Religious institutions have the potential to oppress to those that ascribe to them and those they oppose. Many religious institutions *are* oppressive. However it is important to recognize that “religion can be a very useful thing to women and people of color, in a strictly utilitarian way, even while

it oppresses them.”⁸² Ignoring the functionality of religion limits the understanding of how religion can be useful and/or important to people of color.

In this chapter, I examine how religion can provide racial, ethnic, cultural, social, emotional, and financial networks and resources for people of color. In order to illustrate the relationships between religion, ethnicity, and race I use African American communities and Indian American as examples to contextualize how religion can be a form of community for people of color. By examining the function of religion in African American communities, we can gain a perspective of how black religious communities have engaged with religion throughout the history of the United States into the present day. The relatively recent influx of Indians to the United States is an example of the ways in which religion manifests and functions in immigrant communities. These two perspectives, while not at all exhaustive, touch on the ways in which religion acts as more than a belief system for people of color.

Black religious communities in the United States have a long, established history of being vital community spaces. Christianity itself was oppressive towards black communities during the onset of colonialism and slavery and “Anglican Christianity in the early eighteenth-century South enthusiastically endorsed slavery.”⁸³ In fact, pro-slavery apologists “justified the Christianization of slaves by the 1830s on the grounds that it humanized slavery and uplifted Africans from superstition and paganism.”⁸⁴ While Christianity upheld white supremacy and Non-Christian religious traditions were lost by the slave trade, black churches in the United States became important functional sites for black communities. I focus on black churches and black Christianity specifically because black churches have a historical foundation of being

⁸² Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 218.

⁸³ Curtis Junius Evans. *The Burden of Black Religion* (OUP USA, 2008), 18.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

religious institutions purposed for cultural and community spaces. I will be examining why black churches are foundations of black community, how black churches manifest as cultural centers, and how black churches are used as organizing centers against racial oppression.

Black churches are hubs for black community because black people were historically excluded from other, mostly white, community spaces. In Allison Calhoun-Brown's "Upon This Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement" she describes how, "During the 1800s, when blacks were struggling to establish their own denominations and their own places in which to worship, they were rebelling against subordinating themselves to the principal institutions of oppression and racism in the country – white churches."⁸⁵ It was clear that white churches, despite being Christian spaces of spirituality, as institutions did not welcome black Christians. Even though there was a religious similarity, white churches upheld racism and were a contributing factor for black communities to establish their own separate churches. The spirituality and religious practices of black Christianity were also rooted in and combined with how black people approached their church experiences. Because slavery was the root of blackness in the United States, the belief system of black Christians differed from those of white Christians. For example, Leonard Gadzekpo asserts that "Freedom for whites encompassed the value of American individualism" while "For the African in America as a slave, it meant release from bondage; after emancipation, it meant education, employment, and freedom of movement to the "Negro"; and for the past forty years, it has meant social, political, and economic justice to African Americans."⁸⁶ The black concept of freedom manifested in black churches firstly

⁸⁵ Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 169.

⁸⁶ Leonard Gadzekpo. "The Black Church, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Future." *The Journal of Religious Thought*, no. 2 (1997): 98.

because it meant that “Freedom for African Americans was both secular and spiritual.”⁸⁷ Secondly, it meant that black Christianity was separate from whiteness and was uniquely black because black churches offered "environment in which people [were] able to learn a new self-respect, a deeper and more assertive group identity, public skills and values of cooperation and civic virtue" which was denied to black people before and during the establishment of black churches.⁸⁸ The formation of black churches as places for black community lies at the foundation of black people needing communal spaces that they had traditionally been denied access to.

Black people needed community spaces, and black churches manifested as cultural centers. They were important for spiritual needs, but additionally “In church, one could find politics, arts, music, education, economic development, social services, civic associations, leadership opportunities, and business enterprises.”⁸⁹ Black churches serve as social networks as well as spiritual ones. While socially relevant, they also function as lenses into black culture and “religion was perhaps the best prism to cultural understanding, that culture was a form of religion, and religion was the heart of culture.”⁹⁰ The culture of blackness is present in the arts, economics, politics, and more of black people, and black churches act as physical institutions that can uphold black culture and community. Sikivu Hutchinson, a prominent black humanist, describes her experience attending an NAACP community service awards lunch. She describes how , “Through their church leadership these primarily Baby Boomer generation women

⁸⁷ Leonard Gadzekpo. "The Black Church, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Future." *The Journal of Religious Thought*, no. 2 (1997): 98.

⁸⁸ Sara M. Evans and Harry C. Boyte, *Free spaces: The sources of democratic change in America* (University of Chicago Press, 1992), 17.

⁸⁹ Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 169.

⁹⁰ Eric C. Lincoln and Lawrence Mamiya, *The Black Church in the African American Experience* (Durham: Duke University Press 1990), 371.

supported youth groups, spotlighted juvenile justice issues, provided scholarship assistance, spearheaded tutoring programs, developed college financial aid resources, mentored foster care youth and gave legal aid counseling. The performance of religious fervor reconfirmed what I'd already known about black women's organizing—namely, that social justice through faith-based communities was still the foundation for not just activism, but identity, self-affirmation and self-determination.”⁹¹ Hutchinson provides a present day example of the role that the black church plays in organizing and providing resources to the black community. She even notes how, “Contrary to popular belief, many black religious organizations and churches support higher education initiatives such as STEM pipelining and scholarship programs.”⁹² In this way, it can be seen that black churches provide economic networks, including support for black students to enter STEM. Black churches manifest social networks and cultural centers.

In addition to acting as cultural centers, black churches play an integral role as places for organizing movements against oppression. During the Civil Rights Movement, they were centers for social and political organizing. The church, “along with its spiritual activities in black communities, is also the anchor of black activism in the face of hostile conditions that these communities endure.”⁹³ Black churches were the sites of spirituality, community, *and* activism, and the reason that the church could encompass all of these roles is because of the social networks that it fostered. Specifically for the activism of the Civil Rights Movement, it “could offer social communication networks, facilities, audience, leadership, and money to the movement.”⁹⁴ In Montgomery, Alabama, the First Baptist Church provided resources for the

⁹¹ Sikivu Hutchinson, “The Trouble With Those Atheists.” *Atheist Republic*, 9 Oct. 2013.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ Leonard Gadzekpo. "The Black Church, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Future." *The Journal of Religious Thought*, no. 2 (1997): 95.

⁹⁴ Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 170.

movement and the physical place itself became a meeting place. In fact, ““The First Baptist Church... became a rallying point, it became the meeting place, it became the place where students, young people, community leaders, could come and discuss, debate and argue about what the city should become.”⁹⁵ The space of the church was important both in its physicality, as well as in its maintenance of black social networks. Other activist organizations also used the church as a means to achieve their political goals. For examples, ““The SCLC's mandate was to coordinate nonviolent direct action activities through churches in various locations and its initial leadership was made up of ministers who led many of the largest nonviolent actions” in various cities.⁹⁶ The Southern Christian Leadership Conference directly relied on the church to coordinate political action. Black churches played an essential role in liberation and organization for the Civil Rights Movement and for other social movements in the United States.

Black religion in the United States, specifically black Christianity and black churches have an intricate, established history of being black community spaces. Black churches are foundations of black community, they manifest as cultural centers, and they are used as organizing centers against racial oppression, like during the Civil Rights Movement. Religion for black communities is racially community-based in a way that is not present in white Christianity. Regarding black communities, religious attitudes, and activism, “It was the church, and not simply black Christianity, that helped to shape these attitudes.”⁹⁷ While spirituality is very present in black churches, they play a role that encompasses a racial community that extends beyond spirituality.

⁹⁵ Allison Calhoun-Brown, "Upon this Rock: The Black Church, Nonviolence, and the Civil Rights Movement." *PS: Political Science and Politics* 33, no. 2 (2000): 171.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 170.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 172.

Similar to the role that black churches play in fostering racial networks and community, Indian American religious communities also extend beyond spirituality and into race and ethnicity. The Indian American community is incredibly diverse and contains many different religious and ethnic experiences. There is a commonality in the Indian American religious experience that uniquely stems from existing as an ethnic and religious minority in a new country. I use Khyati Y. Joshi's *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground : Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America* and Prema A. Kurien's *A place at the multicultural table: the development of an American Hinduism* as texts that both illustrate the ways in which Indian Americans engage with religion, race, ethnicity, and community. I focus on the Indian American experience specifically, because as an ethnic group that has immigrated to the United States relatively recently, religion serves an additional purpose in passing culture from one generation to the next. Additionally, religion functions as a common factor found by Indian Americans experiencing being a minority in the United States. Certainly, for Indian Americans, religion is plays a larger role than only being a personal relationship with one person and spiritual deity and manifests itself as a marker of community.

Indian immigration to the United States increased greatly post-1965 after the passing of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965. Consequently, Indian Americans are a relatively new migratory group to the United States with generally three generations maximum. India itself is incredibly diverse and contains many sub-ethnic groups, many different languages, and different religions. The most practiced religion in India is Hinduism (80%), with Islam as the next practiced (14%), and Christianity, Sikhism, Buddhism, Jainism, and Zoroastrianism practiced each at less than 3%.⁹⁸ Because Hinduism is also the most practiced religion of Indian

⁹⁸ 2011 Indian National Census

American immigrants, the following analysis will focus mainly on Hindu Indian Americans, but will also include other religions.

Immigration creates a new role for religion where it functions as a method for parents to pass their culture on to the second generation. As an ethnic minority in a new country, maintaining the cultural heritage of India can be difficult for immigrants. Religion not only serves as a way to maintain culture, but is the “primary vehicle for the retention and transmission of ethnic culture to the second generation.”⁹⁹ Described by Joshi as a vehicle, including “a vehicle for cultural maintenance,” religion plays an active and mobile role in both maintaining cultural heritage and transmitting it to the next generation.¹⁰⁰ Cultural transmission can occur in several ways. Religious texts and history see an increase in use where “the desire to transmit Hinduism to its children have meant that the immigrant generation often experiences an increasing interest in reading Hindu texts and in understanding Hindu theology and history.”¹⁰¹ The increased interest in Hindu texts and history arise from the desire to transmit this information to the second generation. In addition to literature, physical spaces provide an area for immigrants to transfer their culture to their children through the use of religion. For Hindu immigrants, “Hindu temples and centers in the United States and in India are popular among Hindu Americans as a means of reconnecting with their spiritual heritage and transmitting it to their children.”¹⁰² The temple allows a space for immigrants to provide their children with a setting that is simultaneously religious and cultural.

⁹⁹ Khyati Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America's Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 14.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰¹ Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 55.

¹⁰² Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 55.

Religious spaces act as centers of community not just for immigrants, but for the children they are passing their culture on to as well. Religious events and functions are useful to second generation Indian Americans in that they provide a specific community who are going through similar experiences. For Indian American adolescents attending religious events, “the phenomenon of religious community as a place to come together and hang out with young people like themselves was for most even more important than the religious function per se.”¹⁰³ In this case, religious events act as gathering spaces for Indian youth and provide a mechanism for meeting and interacting with their peers. Spaces like temples and event halls not only provide a physical meeting space, but enable the “second-generation youth searching for identity and community.”¹⁰⁴ While first-generation Indian parents use religion as a method to transmit culture to the next generation, second-generation children also use religion as a method to engage with their peer racial and ethnic identity and community.

For Indian Americans, religion is racialized. Regardless of which religion, religious and racial communities usually align and “race and experiences related to race affect the way Indian Americans experience religion.”¹⁰⁵ Take Priti, a second-generation Indian American Hindu who participated in Joshi’s study. During her first year at college, she attended a Hindu puja, or religious ceremony, at a local multi-religious and multicultural center. When she arrived at the puja, she realized that it was attended solely by white Hare Krishna followers. Priti stayed at the puja for a short time and then left because she “did not feel at ease among Hindus who were not also Indian – or, perhaps more to the point, who were white. Broadly speaking, she understood

¹⁰³ Khyati Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America’s Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 3.

¹⁰⁴ Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 53.

¹⁰⁵ Khyati Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America’s Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 89.

Hindu religious practice as something done in a context that was Indian American as well Hindu and without that context she could not feel engaged in a spiritual act.”¹⁰⁶ In this case, for Indian American Hindus, Hinduism is a racial experience and therefore, the religious experience provides racial solidarity. There is racial solidarity in Indian Hindu communities that can be used to identify and work through the realities and oppressions of being a racial minority in the United States. For example, many newly immigrated Indian software engineers and programmers in Northern California “turn to Hindu groups such as the HSS in the United States as a way to counteract the marginalization they experience in their work lives.”¹⁰⁷ The HSS (Hindu Swayamsevak Sangh) camp provides the Indian workers a religious space in which to discuss and find solidarity in their racial community.

It has been established that religion is a form of racial and ethnic community for Indian Americans and the following section will expand upon how Indian ethnic and religious communities manifest and intersect. Part of the self-identification of ethnicity for Indian Americans is identification with their religion. Participants of Joshi’s study “identified as Indian because they attended *pujas*, celebrated *Vaisakhi*, said the Lord’s prayer in Malayalam.”¹⁰⁸ One of the reasons that religious markers like attending *pujas* and saying the Lord’s prayer are associated with being Indian is because for Indian Americans, religion and community are intertwined. They are related to the extent that “most research participants spoke of cultural and religious gatherings and community in the same breath, and even interchangeably” and point to community as a concept that refers to a larger ethnoreligious community.¹⁰⁹ The term

¹⁰⁶ Khyati Y. Joshi, *New Roots in America’s Sacred Ground: Religion, Race, and Ethnicity in Indian America*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 90.

¹⁰⁷ Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 55.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

¹⁰⁹ Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 35.

ethnoreligious community “acknowledges the role and social impact of religion as the community’s organizing force.”¹¹⁰ Religious networks are social networks. Beyond kinship, ethnoreligious communities serve as practical networks. For example, Kurien describes her interaction with Gopi, a member of the Kerala Hindu Organization in Southern California. The organization is both ethnic, as Kerala is a state in southern India, and religious, yet it also provides a practical social network. Gopi describes how “We have doctors with different specializations from psychiatrists to cardiologists, engineers, accountants, business people, scientists, and attorneys. So, whatever problem comes up, we have an expert who can help us.”¹¹¹ There is an element of practicality in the religious community network. A final intriguing manifestation of religion as community can be found with another research participant of Joshi’s who was previously Hindu and currently is an atheist. This participant, Anand “no longer identifies with Hinduism but feels that his culture is vicariously attacked whenever Hinduism, still the faith of those he loves, is attacked.”¹¹² Although Anand has cut religious ties with Hinduism, his statement illustrates the attachment he has for his personal culture, which is still related to Hinduism, regardless of if he practices it. For Indian Americans, religion manifests itself as community and culture.

Indian American religious communities are complex and diverse and for many, religion is not simply a spiritual connection with a God. Due to the unique situating of Indian Americans as a new immigrant group, religion serves the purpose of passing culture from one generation to the next. It is also used as a place for solidarity for Indian Americans to find commonality in

¹¹⁰ Prema A. Kurien, *A Place at the Multicultural Table: The Development of an American Hinduism*. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2006), 53.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 76.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 47.

being a minority in the United States. Certainly, in a racial and ethnic way that is not as present for white people, Indian religions manifest themselves as markers of Indian community.

For people of color, religion tends to be a form of culture and community. Religion offers spaces for ethnic and racial congregation, communal experiences as racial minorities, and is a social organizing factor. People of color can gain social and economic networks from their religions that are not as readily available outside of their religions. Additionally, religion is often racialized and can be tied directly to race and ethnicity to form racial ethnoreligious communities. By understanding the functionality of religion for people of color, we can better understand how atheism can disrupt communities of color and how atheism in the sciences impacts scientists of color.

The Effect of Atheism in the Sciences on Scientists of Color

I have previously examined the relationships between atheism and science, between atheism and race, and between religion and race. In this chapter, I will explore how atheism, science, race, and religion interact and how atheism can contribute to barriers for the success of people of color in the sciences. This topic is relevant because people of color have faced and continue to face systematic barriers towards entering and succeeding in the sciences. In the United States, as of 2010, the Science and Engineering Workforce racial breakdown was reported as 51% white male, 18% white female, 13% Asian male, 5% Asian female, 4% Hispanic male, 3% Black male, 2% Black female, 2% Hispanic female, 1% other female, 1% other male¹¹³. Black, Latinx, and Native American students are discouraged from entering the sciences as “the dominant culture codes heroism, scientific discovery, scientific genius, and rationality as white.”¹¹⁴ In addition to whiteness in the sciences being normative, for black students, “the lack of access to Advanced Placement classes (through unofficial tracking policies, racial stereotyping and unavailable courses) undermines African American college preparedness in STEM fields.”¹¹⁵ Many black and brown students are not given access to the same resources as white students in order to succeed in STEM.

¹¹³ *Scientists and Belief* (Pew Research Center, November 5, 2001), <http://www.pewforum.org/2009/11/05/scientists-and-belief/>.

¹¹⁴ Sikivu Hutchinson, “. “Mad Science or School-to-Prison?” *Humanism and Technology: Opportunities and Challenges*, ed. Anthony Pinn (Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 144.

¹¹⁵ Sikivu Hutchinson, “The Trouble With Those Atheists.” *Atheist Republic*, 9 Oct. 2013.

Asian Americans are overrepresented in STEM but are still a minority racial/ethnic group, especially when further breaking down “Asian” into the many ethnic groups it encompasses. While overrepresented, Asian Americans face the burden of the model minority myth which “conveys that they have won the battle against racial discrimination in employment. It penalizes Asian immigrants by assuming that they need no mentoring, support, or resources. Their portrayal as an over-represented minority ignores inequalities within and among Asian groups”¹¹⁶ and Asian Americans are routinely rarely “administrators in supervisory positions” in science institutions.”¹¹⁷ There are obstacles towards racial minority groups entering and succeeding in the sciences.

Science also has a history of taking advantage of people of color. From the Tuskegee Syphilis Experiment, the nonconsensual use of Henrietta Lacks’s HeLa cells, J. Marion Simms gynecological experiments on black women who were slaves, the development and use of the atomic bomb, forced sterilization of people of color, the justification of biological race, and eugenics to name a very, very few – like religion, science has done its fair share of brutalizing people of color. Because of this, “There is a natural distrust from people who have faced generations of horror at the hands of scientists and science and the atheist movement’s focus on science above all, with no recognition of the problematic history, makes it difficult for many to trust it.”¹¹⁸ Mitigating the impact of atheism on scientists of color will enable people of color to succeed in the sciences and reduce the systematic racism present in scientific institutions.

¹¹⁶ Roli Varma, "High-tech coolies: Asian immigrants in the US science and engineering workforce." *Science as Culture* 11, no. 3 (2002): 345.

¹¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 346.

¹¹⁸ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 213.

The prevalence of atheism in the sciences is only one contributor to systematic barriers against the success of scientists of color. As previously mentioned, the prevalence of atheism in the United States and in scientific institutions differs based on geographic location and the culture of those specific institutions. However, by addressing the impact that atheism has on scientists of color, especially in scientific institutions where atheism is normative, hopefully we can mitigate and reduce the barriers for the entrance, retention, and success of people of color in the sciences.

Scientists of color have a diverse range of beliefs regarding religion. The mechanisms by which atheism affects scientists of color varies based on where the scientists situate themselves in terms of their belief. Atheism impacts *religious* scientists of color in multiple ways. Atheist attacks on religion, particularly found amongst New Atheists, atheist critiques of religion using science, and scientific atheism's reinforcement of the religion/science binary can result in a stigma towards practicing religion and can make scientists of color feel disapproval or shame in openly identifying with and/or practicing a religion. This can make religious scientists feel a pressure to conform to institutional norms and as though they must leave their religion "at the door" of their workplace.

Atheist interpretations of religion are critical. New Atheists attack all religion as a proxy for opposing Evangelical Christianity and "not satisfied with an attack on creationists, intelligent design, and conservative Christianity, they are prepared to take on all religions and all shades of opinion within each religion, liberal as well as orthodox. All of them look to scientific theories to support their unbelief."¹¹⁹ Religious scientists may feel uncomfortable expressing their religious beliefs in the workplace if they feel as though their religion is being attacked.

¹¹⁹ Bernard Lightman, "Unbelief," in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L. Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273.

The aggression with which New Atheists attack religion is not present throughout atheism as a whole. Scientific atheism however, still critiques religion with the aid of science. This critique serves to promote the eradication of religion and establishes a binary between religion and science. Scientific atheism emphasizes “one major element of the Enlightenment critique of religion, the cognitive critique, which situates religion as the binary opposite of science and a contradiction of reason. This strategy seeks to eradicate religious belief through rational-scientific critique of its tenets and truth claims, thus ending the “darkness” of religious superstition by shining the “light” of reason.”¹²⁰ Through designating religion as “dark” and science as “light”, scientific atheism creates a hierarchy or sense of superiority, that science and reason are more intellectual and legitimate than religion. “Dawkins maintains that the proper conclusion to draw from the current state of scientific knowledge is that unbelief is the most enlightened position to embrace.”¹²¹ But even without the non-New Atheist vitriol, “scientific atheism understands religion as an obstacle to science-driven social progress and seeks to eradicate this relic of the pre-modern world through science education and “enlightenment”.”¹²² The designation of religion as primitive and science as enlightened reinforces a religion/science binary.

The placement of religion as unenlightened in comparison to science does not provide a welcoming environment for religious scientists to openly practice and identify with their religions. For example, scientific atheism “portrays the belief system behind the Bible as “primitive” in comparison to the progressive, scientific system of the twenty-first century.”¹²³

¹²⁰ Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 2.

¹²¹ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 252.

¹²² Stephen LeDrew, *The Evolution of Atheism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 14.

¹²³ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273.

For Christian scientists of color, calling the bible and their belief system primitive brands religion as unintelligent and backwards and provides an unwelcome environment for their religious beliefs and identities. Atheist exceptionalism harkens back to 18th century French philosophers who declared that “every man must be either an Atheist or a fool.”¹²⁴ Because atheism is normative in the sciences, religious scientists “have found that the burden of proof has shifted and it is up to them to persuade the public that current science has not, as Dawkins maintains, rendered God a mere delusion.”¹²⁵ Because of New Atheist attacks on religion, and the scientific atheist mission to eradicate religion as well as deem it “unenlightened” and “primitive”, religious scientists may find a stigma associated with being religious at science institutions. They may therefore feel uncomfortable in openly practicing their religion and bringing their religion into the workplace and face a separation from their scientific community. They feel a sense of shame in practicing religion for fear of seeming primitive.

The science/religion binary enforced by scientific atheism could also prevent religious scientists of color from feeling comfortable in bringing their religious identity into the workplace. There are religious scientists who integrate their scientific work with their religion. Mehdi Golshani is a Professor of Physics at Sharif University of Technology, Tehran, Iran. He received his PhD in Physics from the University of California-Berkeley. Golshani identifies as Iranian and Muslim and provides an example of how he integrates Islam into physics. He “sees his science as one form of worship among others. The Qur’an directs us to study the works of God, he says, and science gives us tremendous tools to do that”¹²⁶ and “religious inspiration is a

¹²⁴ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 261.

¹²⁵ Bernard Lightman, “Unbelief,” in *Science and Religion around the World*, ed. John Hedley Brooke and Ronald L Numbers (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 273.

¹²⁶ Mark Richardson and Gordy Slack, *Faith in Science* (Routledge, 2001), 120.

very important determining factor for me. I am presently involved with the foundational problems of quantum mechanics and cosmology [...] This area shows the mystery of the world more clearly, and the religious world view is an inspiring guide for me.”¹²⁷ Golshani integrates his faith with his science and use both to drive each other. Golshani advocates for the importance of philosophy in science and founded the Philosophy of Science Department at the University of Technology.¹²⁸ Though he is not based in the United States, he recognizes how the general attitude towards the relationship between religion and science has changed “especially after the Renaissance, and later through infiltration of Western ideas and Western science. So, while at the end of the first millennium, in the days of the Islamic philosopher and physician Avicenna, there was no separation between mathematics, physics and theology, later they became completely separated, and even now they are separate disciplines at our universities. A student at our universities, as in Western universities learns science without paying attention to the philosophical or metaphysical implications of his discipline.”¹²⁹ Golshani recognizes how the Enlightenment (post-Renaissance) of the West impacted the relationship between religion and science even in Iran. Golshani is an example of a scientist of color who integrates his religion and his science.

Similar to Golshani, Dr. Amit Goswami is a Hindu Indian theoretical quantum physicist who integrates science and religion. Goswami received his PhD from the University of Calcutta and is now a retired full professor from the University of Oregon’s Department of Physics. Goswami engages Quantum Physics with the concept of God. He theorizes that “there is a new blending of philosophy with religion, of science with intuition. God as consciousness [...]

¹²⁷ Mark Richardson and Gordy Slack, *Faith in Science* (Routledge, 2001), 133.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 120.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 122.

Quantum Physics offers a tight philosophical model based on the fact that consciousness is primary to everything. Things, thoughts, feelings, emotions are all waves of possibilities; waves which are collapsed into actuality by consciousness. Therefore consciousness, not matter, is the ground of all being. (This is an idea not uncommon in religious and philosophical circles, but which is revolutionary in science.)” Goswami discusses the ways in which he uses Quantum Physics to understand God. He also notes that consciousness as the matter of all being is common in religious practices, but new in science. Goswami’s research transcends the idea of the religion/science binary, but even he notes that his theories are relatively foreign in science. For scientists of color in the United States, the opportunity for integration of science and religion may be more limited because of the normativity of scientific atheism and its enforcement of the binary between religion and science.

The potential stigma surrounding being religious in scientific institutions and the religion/science binary that creates a barrier towards integrating religion and science may make scientists of color feel uncomfortable openly practicing and identifying with their religion in the workplace. Because for people of color, religion can function as a part of an ethnoreligious community, by leaving their religion “at home”, that could cause a tension or separation between the scientist and the ethnoreligious community. It is important to note that all the phenomena that were previously described can happen to white scientists as well. However, a separation from an ethnoreligious community is different for people of color versus white people. For people of color, religion is often tied to race, so a separation from a religious community results in a separation from a racial community. Because people of color are underrepresented in the sciences, it’s more difficult for them to find racial community in science institutions compared to white scientists. For white religious scientists, even though they may feel stigmatized in

practicing their religion or unable to integrate their religion into their science, if they leave their religion at the door, they still have a racial community in their workplace because 69% of workers in STEM are white.¹³⁰ Additionally, white scientists may not need the social, economic, and emotional support that is found in non-white racial communities because they don't face the same systematic racial oppression that people of color do. The resources that can come from a specific racial community for people of color are available for white scientists in mainstream institutions and they do not face the same barriers to access that people of color do.

People of color may also be hesitant to become atheist in a way that white atheists may not be. People of color may not want to “rock the boat” outside of the sciences by openly identifying as atheist because “groups in society that face more discrimination and prejudice are, in general, more hesitant to voluntarily take on stigmatizing identities like “religious non-affiliate” or “atheist.””¹³¹ While identifying as atheist is certainly not easy for all white atheists, white atheists do not have to deal with the racial aspect of what it means to identify as atheist. In that way, scientists of color may not feel comfortable identifying as atheist, and therefore face a separation from their scientific community.

The manifestation of whiteness in scientific atheism impacts religious scientists of color and non-believing scientists of color. By identifying as non-believing, or atheist, scientists of color can face a separation from their ethnoreligious communities. By identifying as atheist, people of color can be stigmatized and persecuted by their racial, ethnic, and religious community. In Jeff Kunerth's, “Black Atheists Search for Sense of Belonging,” he details Bridget Gaudette's experience with atheism. She is a “34 year-old atheist who grew up as a

¹³⁰ “Women, Minorities, and Persons with Disabilities in Science and Engineering” *National Science Foundation*, January 2017, <https://www.nsf.gov/statistics/2017/nsf17310/data.cfm>. xxx

¹³¹ Kevin McCaffree, *The Secular Landscape: The Decline of Religion in America* (Springer, 2017), 9.

Jehovah's Witness."¹³² Gaudette describes the process of telling her family that she was an atheist saying that in her religious community, atheists are "seen as basically alien [...] You are confused, you are mentally ill."¹³³ For Gaudette, the stigma associated with identifying as atheist resulted in an estrangement from her family. She was "shunned by the Jehovah's Witnesses" and was "rejected by her church, her family and her friends."¹³⁴ Not only was losing her family emotionally excruciating, Gaudette lost her entire social network. For people of color, the separation from an ethnoreligious community can result in the loss of a racial community, family, resources, a social network, and a financial network and all of the other practical elements that can be found through religion.

In "The non-religious patriarchy" Ashley F. Miller accurately summarizes the social cost of being an atheist of color. She asks "Why is the atheist movement so dominated by white men? The answer is this: There is a social cost to being an atheist that is more easily borne by those with privilege than by those who are already minorities. Women and people of color, occupying a fundamental minority position in society, will thus suffer far greater social costs by identifying with atheism than white men. People are drawn to religion for reasons beyond belief – organized religion offers cultural and social capital and identity for people, especially those who are disenfranchised already. Atheism means abandoning not just a belief system (which is, incidentally, the primary thing the atheist movement focuses on) but also an entire social system."¹³⁵ For people of color to identify as atheist, they both increase the stigmatization of being a part of a marginalized group as well as lose the utilitarian benefits of religion.

¹³² Jeff Kunerth, "Black Atheists Search for Sense of Belonging," *Orlando Sentinel* (March 22, 2013).

¹³³ *Ibid.*

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*

¹³⁵ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 215-216.

Because of the integration of race and religion for people of color, by identifying as atheist, there is also the stigmatization of being considered less of your race. Meaning, “white people do not face the threat of seeming ‘less white’ by rejecting belief.”¹³⁶ Atheists of color may find themselves viewed as “less black” or “less Indian” for example if they do not associate with their given religion. This can cause personal emotional frustrations as well as emphasize the separation between themselves and their racial and ethnoreligious communities.

Scientists of color who have been separated from their ethnoreligious communities and have lost access to resources because of this separation could face challenges in finding support in their careers. Leaving a racial and ethnoreligious community can result in the emotional trauma of loss, as seen in Gaudette’s experience. Losing the resources and networks of racial and religious communities also causes scientists of color to not have access to the same resources that white scientists do both in the workplace and out of it. The economic and social networks of racial and ethnoreligious communities provide financial and social resources to aid scientists of color in overcoming barriers to success in the sciences. By losing that support, scientists of color would have a more difficult time overcoming barriers that arise from institutional racism.

Because of the lack of people of color in the sciences, scientists of color can have difficulty finding racial community in the workplace. The site of their social and economic networks is often with their ethnoreligious and racial communities *outside* of the workplace. When atheist scientists of color lose that network outside of the workplace, they can have difficulty finding similar racial networks in the workplace because of the small number of people of color in the sciences. White atheist scientists in contrast, may lose their religious networks by becoming atheist, but they can still network racially within the sciences because the majority of

¹³⁶ Ashley F. Miller, "The non-religious patriarchy: Why losing religion HAS NOT meant losing white male dominance." *CrossCurrents* 63, no. 2 (2013): 217.

people in the science industry are white. Additionally, people of color tend to build racial networks to circumvent the barriers that racial oppression builds and to access resources denied to them by institutional racism. White atheist scientists may become separated from their religious networks, but they do not need racial communities in the same way that people of color do.

In addition to being unable to find racial community in the sciences, scientists of color may be unable to find community in the atheist movement. As aforementioned, the atheist movement is predominately white. When white atheists who were previously religious leave their religious community, they can venture to a newfound community within the atheist movement. Atheists of color may find themselves a part of this community, but likely the community they find will not be racially involved. There are non-believing organization centered around race and ethnicity, but they are few compared to the larger atheist movement. As Kunerth puts it specifically for black atheists, “This leaves black atheists in the no man's land between the black community they grew up in and the predominantly white world of atheists, agnostics and nonbelievers.”¹³⁷ Many white atheists will also have not had the same experiences of atheists of color in possibly losing their racial community when becoming atheist. The inability to find racial community within both the atheist movement and in the sciences has the potential to create and uphold barriers that prevent scientists of color from having an active community and support network that helps them to succeed in the sciences.

It is important to consider the impact of atheism in the sciences on scientists of color because it is a potential barrier to entering and succeeding in the sciences. New Atheist attacks on religion as well as the relative normativity of atheism in the sciences and the perpetuation of

¹³⁷ Jeff Kunerth, “Black Atheists Search for Sense of Belonging,” *Orlando Sentinel* (March 22, 2013).

the religion/science binary may cause religious scientists of color to feel distant from the scientific community. Atheist scientists of color may face a separation from their racial and ethnoreligious communities and may have lost the social and economic networks and resources associated with those communities. These phenomena can reinforce barriers for people of color to succeed in the sciences, born from structural racism in science institutions.

Conclusion

This thesis has explored the relationships between religion, race, science, and atheism. I have examined the historical origin of atheism from science as well as the manifestation of atheism in the sciences today, specifically focusing on New Atheist discourse. I then observed the racial dynamics of atheism, specifically why the majority of the atheist movement consists of white men and why people of color are not as attracted to the movement. In order to understand the impact of atheism on people of color, I looked at how for people of color, religion acts as a form of social, economic, and cultural community. Finally, I examined the mechanisms by which atheism in the sciences affects scientists of color. I focused on understanding why religious scientists of color may feel stigmatized in being openly religious in institutions of science and how atheist scientists of color may become separated from their racial and ethnoreligious communities.

The mechanisms by which atheism affects scientists of color only describe a small part of how people of color routinely face barriers in entering and succeeding in institutions of science. Hopefully, by acknowledging the impact of atheism on scientists of color, we can mitigate the obstacles people of color face in succeeding in STEM. I provide the following as possible solutions:

White atheist scientists can provide **space** for religious scientists of color to comfortably and openly identify with and practice their religion in the workplace. Through mechanisms of: Reducing the stigma surrounding practicing science while being religious.

In the sciences, there are many religious scientists and certainly not all atheist scientists stigmatize religion. However, the reinforcement of the perceived religion/science binary as well as the aggression and militancy of the New Atheist movement can cause a stigma in practicing science while being religious. If scientists of color feel comfortable identifying with their religion in the workplace, it could reduce the separation from their scientific community as well as their religious community.

Challenging the narrative of the binary between religion and science.

By challenging the religion/science binary, scientists can reduce the stigma associated with practicing religion while in the sciences. Blurring the boundaries between religion and science can also reduce the “conflict myth” narrative. Doing so would make it easier for scientists of color to comfortably practice their religions.

Recognizing the differences between the white, Evangelical, Christian right and religions of people of color

Religion can be harmful. The Evangelical Christian right that many atheists are opposed to is complicit in limiting women’s rights, LGBTQ+ rights, blocking scientific advancement, including environmental science, and more.¹³⁸ Religions of people of color can also be oppressive to people of color. However, it is important to recognize the power dynamics of race and religion. The white, Christian right has more political, social, and economic power in the United States than people of color. Amongst the atheist movement, white atheists have the most power and privilege. When white atheists critique white Evangelical Christianity, they are critiquing groups that have power. When they critique the religions of people of color, they are

¹³⁸ Steven P. Brown, *Trumping religion: The new Christian right, the Free Speech Clause, and the courts*. (University of Alabama Press, 2002).

critiquing groups do not have dominant social, political, and economic power in the United States. By doing so, they disrupt the social and economic networks of racial and ethnoreligious communities of people of color and they engage in white saviorism by invoking the “religion is primitive” mentality of the perceived science/religion binary. While religion should be held accountable, it is important to recognize the utilitarian aspects of religion for people of color even if religion can be oppressive.

White atheist scientists can enable **community** for atheist scientists of color in the sciences.

Through mechanisms of:

Providing atheists of color space in the atheist movement.

Atheists of color are a part of the atheist movement. However, the atheist movement is majority white and positions of power are primarily held by white atheists. By providing atheists of color with space in the atheist movement, atheists of color may be able to more easily find networks and racial community within the atheist movement. In doing so, atheist scientists of color would have greater support and resources required to succeed in science careers. For example, New Atheists could take a step back, which would create space for atheist movements of color, like the Black Humanist Movement, to be more vocal.

Acknowledging that atheists of color may have been separated from their racial and ethnoreligious communities.

White atheist scientists can recognize that atheists of color who have been separated from their religious communities may have been separated from their racial communities, family, support, resources, and social, emotional, and economic networks. By recognizing this, white atheist scientists can advocate for and support atheists of color in regaining the resources they

may no longer have access to. Additionally, people of color can work to reduce anti-atheist bias and stigma in their own communities, so that atheists of color may still have access to resources from their racial and ethnoreligious communities even if they are not explicitly religious.

Taking a humanist approach.

Taking a humanist approach involves understanding the underlying mechanisms for why people of color need religion for social and economic networks.¹³⁹ The previously mentioned steps are solutions for addressing the manifestation of white atheism in scientific institutions and how to mitigate that impact on scientists of color. While these are possible solutions to address the impact of atheism in the sciences on scientists of color, they do not address the underlying reasons for why people of color need the functionality of religion. As previously mentioned, religious networks provide people of color with resources that are not as readily available to them because of the oppressive nature of structural racism. A humanist approach would involve working to eliminate structural racism so that religion is not as much of a necessity for people of color. Therefore, people of color and scientists of color would have greater access to social and economic networks and resources outside of their racial and ethnoreligious communities. This would mean the reduction of structural racism in the sciences and would also enable people and scientists of color to have greater agency in choosing their level of engagement with religion.

By becoming cognizant of the impact that atheism in the sciences has on scientists of color and nuancing our understanding of the relationships between religion, race, science, and atheism, I hope that we make both science and religion accessible and successful endeavors for people of color in the United States.

¹³⁹ Sikivu Hutchinson, *Moral Combat: Black Atheists, Gender Politics, and the Values Wars* (Infidel Books, 2011).

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