Practicing Disbelief: Atheist Media in America from the Nineteenth Century to Today

by

Eric Russell Chalfant

Graduate Program in Religious Studies
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
David Morgan, Supervisor

___________________________
Randall Styers

___________________________
Joseph Winters

___________________________
Mark Chaves

___________________________
Leigh Eric Schmidt

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
ABSTRACT

Practicing Disbelief: Atheist Media in America from the Nineteenth Century to Today

by

Eric Russell Chalfant

Graduate Program in Religious Studies
Duke University

Date:_______________________

Approved:

___________________________
David Morgan, Supervisor

___________________________
Randall Styers

___________________________
Joseph Winters

___________________________
Mark Chaves

___________________________
Leigh Eric Schmidt

An abstract of a dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Religious Studies in the Graduate School of Duke University

2016
Abstract

While the field of religious studies increasingly turns toward material culture as a counterbalance to understandings of religion that privilege questions of individual belief, theology, and text, influential histories of atheism in the West remain largely confined to the mode of intellectual history. This is understandable when atheism is commonly understood first-and-foremost as an idea about the nonexistence of God. But like religion, atheism is not a purely intellectual position; it is rooted in interpersonal emotional exchanges, material objects and media, and historically-contextual social communities. This dissertation uses tools from the materialist turns in both religious studies and media studies to explore the history of American atheism and its reliance on non-intellectual and non-rational forces. Drawing on theories of affect, visual culture, and aesthetics, it argues that atheism in America has always been more than an idea. In particular, it uses different media forms as lenses to examine the material bases of evolving forms of American disbelief from the 19th century to today. Using archival records of nineteenth-century print media and political cartoons, transcripts and audio-recordings of radio broadcasts during the mid-twentieth-century, and digital ethnography and discourse analysis on contemporary Internet platforms, this dissertation argues that American irreligion has often eschewed the rational in favor of emotional and material strategies for defining a collective identity. Each chapter
highlights different metaphors that have been enabled by print, broadcast, and digital media – metaphors that American unbelievers have used to complicate the understanding of atheism as simply a set of beliefs about the nature of reality.
# Contents

Abstract ......................................................................................................................................... iv

List of Figures ................................................................................................................................... viii

Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................................... x

1. Introduction ................................................................................................................................ 1

2. Infidelity in Ink: Print Media in the Nineteenth Century .......................................................... 1

  2.1 Infidels in their own Words ................................................................................................. 1

  2.2 A Golden Age of Freethought ........................................................................................... 5

  2.3 The Truth Seeker: Room to Identify ............................................................................... 10

  2.4 Visibility in The Trial of DM Bennett ........................................................................... 29

  2.5 Watson Heston and the Imprinting Pencil ........................................................................ 36

  2.6 Infidel Identity Incarnate ............................................................................................... 40

  2.7 Imprinting the Textual Image ....................................................................................... 55

  2.8 Impressionable Children: Acculturating New Infidels .................................................. 65

  2.9 Missionary Work ............................................................................................................ 72

  2.10 Conclusion: E. Haldeman-Julius and Personal Atheism ............................................ 79

3. Atheism on the Airways: Secularist Radio and the Material Voice ....................................... 91

  3.1 Robert Harold Scott: Radio Pioneer ............................................................................... 94

    3.1.1 The Atheist and the FCC ......................................................................................... 102

  3.2 Madalyn Murray O’Hair ............................................................................................... 111

    3.2.1 O’Hair on the Radio ............................................................................................. 113
List of Figures

Figure 1: Watson Heston, “The Modern Balaam,” Illustration. *The Truth Seeker*, May 2, 1885. ................................................................. 38

Figure 2: Watson Heston, "The Cry of Collared Christians - 'Don't Hurt Our Feelings.'" Illustration. *The Truth Seeker*, May 5, 1888. .............................................................................. 43

Figure 3: Watson Heston, "A Hint," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, September 22, 1888. ......................................................................... 45

Figure 4: Watson Heston, "Two Ways of Dealing with the Tiger," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, January 11, 1890 .............................................................................................................. 48

Figure 5: Watson Heston, "The Contest Between Theology and Skepticism," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, October 27, 1888. ........................................................................................................ 50

Figure 6: Watson Heston, "A Choice for the Children - An Old Allegory Remodeled," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, July 6, 1889. ........................................................................................................ 52

Figure 7: Watson Heston, "Bait for the Credulous - Children, Beware of the Trap," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, May 28, 1887 ........................................................................................................ 56

Figure 8: Watson Heston, "How to Convert Infidels," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, May 9, 1891 ................................................................................................................................. 74

Figure 9: Harry Fowler, "The Plumed Knight of Journalism - The American Freeman,” Illustration, *A Book of Freeman Cartoons (Reprinted from the American Freeman)* Vol. 1, (1949), 23. ......................................................................................................................... 85

Figure 10: “Rougher Notes,” Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, Author’s photograph from issue of April 1952 at Charles E. Stevens American Atheists Library and Archive, Cranford, NJ. .............................................................................................................. 86

Figure 11: “The Debunker,” *The Debunker*, Author’s photograph from issue of November 1928 at Charles E. Stevens American Atheists Library and Archive, Cranford, NJ. ........... 86

Figure 12: James Erickson, Illustration, *A Book of Freeman Cartoons* (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1949), 13. ......................................................................................................................... 149

Figure 14: James Erickson, Illustration, *A Book of Freeman Cartoons* (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1949), 41. .................................................................................................. 153

Figure 15: M. Wisecup, "Evolution of an Evangelist," Illustration, *Secular Subjects #295*, (October 1974), CESAALA Archive.................................................................................................................................................. 154

Figure 16: Percentage of Atheist/Infidel Language Used to Label Identity in *The Truth Seeker*, 1880-1897 .................................................................................................................................................................. 241

Figure 17: Occurrence of Infidel/Atheist Language per Page of *The Truth Seeker*, 1880-1897 .................................................................................................................................................................. 242
Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my advisor, David Morgan, for the continuous support of my PhD study and related research, for serving as a model of academic clarity and insight, and for his continued advocacy on my behalf. I would like also to thank the rest of my dissertation committee: Randall Styers, for his generosity and frank advice, Joseph Winters, for his openness and theoretical rigor; Mark Chaves, for his willingness to push me toward clarity; and Leigh Eric Schmidt, for his generosity and knowledge.

I have been sustained for the last decade by the support and encouragement of a number of mentors. At Whitman College, Robert Morrison was the reason I fell in love with religious studies, and I owe much of my intellectual formation to Walt Wyman, Jon Walters, Melissa Wilcox, and Jim Hanson. At Wake Forest, I would like to thank Jarrod Whitaker, Stephen Boyd, and Sheila Lockhart for giving me the confidence to pursue a doctoral degree. I am especially grateful to my master’s advisor, Tanisha Ramachandran, for her generosity, humor, and above all, friendship.

Of my mentors during my time at Duke, I am especially indebted to Wesley Kort for modeling the life of an academic, to Ebrahim Moosa and Leela Prasad for modeling intellectual generosity, and to David Need, Shalom Goldman, Mohsen Kadivar, and Hwansoo Kim for their kindness. I would also like to thank Todd Ochoa, Jonathan
Boyarin, Kenneth Surin, Tim Lenoir, Stephen Chapman, and Kathryn Lofton for their insights and encouragements, and Carol Rush for her patience.

I would like to thank all of the marvelous friends that have sustained and refreshed me over the last five years: Adrienne Krone, Brenna and Jimmy Keegan, Hunter Bandy, Sam Kigar, Lila Hemsell, Yael Lazar, Oren Wais, Yasmine Singh, Carter Higgins, Seth Ligo, Sonia Hazard, Michael Quick, Christopher Luna, Jennifer Kryszak, Torang Asadi, Erin Galgay Walsh, Randy Johnson, Andrew Coates, Jamie Brummitt, Andrew Aghapour, Kenny Richards, Shannon Schorey, Alex McKinley, Zaid Adhami, Saadia Yacoob, and William Babcock.

I am deeply grateful for the love of my parents, sister, and nana Cynthia, and for their proud encouragement and support. I will never be able to express enough gratitude for the tireless help of my mother-in-law, Min, without whom writing this dissertation would have been simply impossible.

To my spouse, Ali, for giving me all the best ideas and listening patiently to all the worst, for your love and kindness and trust, and for the unbelievable effort you put into our partnership in raising our spectacular child – thank you.

And to Mayhem – thanks for being so spectacular. You only get most of that from your mother.
1. Introduction

Those scholars who have attempted to track the history of atheism have generally fallen into two camps: on one side are those who see atheism as a philosophical position which has remained largely unchanged since its emergence in ancient Greece with Epicurean materialism, and on the other are those who see atheism as a modern invention, emerging only as recently as the eighteenth century in Enlightenment France. Both approaches attest to the difficulty of sorting and resolving contradictions between lived experiences and intellectual positions. History is replete with examples of self-professing religionists articulating atheistic positions and self-professing atheists describing seemingly-religious experiences. Determining where atheism ends and religion begins often involves drawing rigid epistemological boundaries and then imposing those boundaries anachronistically on a plethora of experiences and discourses that seem to want to transgress them.

This is the difficulty of intellectual history. Human experiences rarely deign to neat articulation or even conceptualization. Two of the most prominent recent attempts to account for the emergence of widespread atheism in the West will serve to demonstrate the limitations of intellectual history as a method for historicizing atheism.

Michael J. Buckley begins *At the Origins of Modern Atheism* by noting the difficulty of pinning down the historically-variable term 'atheist.' “Its definition is parasitic; like any denial, it lives off the meaning denied.”\(^2\) As the religious ideas which atheism rejects mutate, then, so does the meaning of atheism. Hence Buckley's parameter-setting move to always treat atheism in the negative: “the central meaning of atheism is not to be sought immediately in atheism; it is to be sought in those gods or that god affirmed, which atheism has either engaged or chosen to ignore as beneath serious challenge. The history of the term indicates this constant, and the analysis of its meaning suggests that it is inescapable: atheism is essentially parasitic.”\(^3\) This negative understanding of atheism, in turn generates an exclusively dialectical understanding of atheism's origins. The bottom line of Buckley's sweeping treatment of Western theological skepticism is that atheism emerges not of its own inertia, but as the inadvertent self-alienation of religion itself – a necessary consequence of a contradiction at the heart of Enlightenment theology in “the persuasion that the existence of god was essentially a philosophical problem rather than a theological or religious one.”\(^4\) The contradiction between philosophy and theology is more fundamentally a binary

\(^3\) Ibid., 15.
\(^4\) Ibid., 341.
between the rational and the irrational,⁵ and it is highlighted by Buckley’s striking commitment to a method which traces the history of ideas in a vacuum:

An inquiry into atheism as a serious idea, as a conviction not simply reducible to external factors, sociological conditionings, or economic pressures, as a conviction that is taken precisely as a judgment that claims insight into the nature of reality, must take the meaning of what it treats from those whose claims are contradictory and must examine the evidence to see whether it supports a dialectical reading of what is already a relationship of dependence.⁶

We need not wholly disagree with Buckley’s characterization of atheism as “dependent on theism for its vocabulary, its meanings, and its embodiments.”⁷ Indeed much of what follows demonstrates the extent to which American atheists articulated their emerging ideas in conversation with the religious contexts of their times. But Buckley’s commitment to intellectual history at the expense of all those “external factors” produces a two-dimensional image of atheism as purely intellectual. Because Buckley’s atheism emerges out of theological debates, it is always limited by the form of those debates; his dialectical method posits the emergence of atheism as the resolution of a contradiction between the content of theological reasoning and “the form in which it is proposed.”⁸

Put differently, the central question for Buckley is: “How did the issue of Christianity vs...

---

⁵ And importantly, Buckley’s project ultimately serves to make a theological point: the binary between religion and philosophy is also one between the Christian God and all impersonal conceptions of divinity, culminating in Buckley’s plea for the centrality of Christology as the antidote to modern atheism. See for example Ibid., 345–346, 361.
⁶ Buckley, *At the Origins of Modern Atheism*, 17.
⁷ Ibid.
⁸ Ibid., 19.
atheism become purely philosophical?” Ultimately, in Buckley’s account, the issue is theological. Theologians signed their own death certificates by accepting the terms of philosophy. Once theologians saw themselves as philosophers, it was seemingly inevitable that the rationalism of philosophy would dispense with everything unique to theological reasoning. Thus, Buckley tells the story of theologians and rational philosophers repeatedly letting the wolf of atheism in the back door while staunchly guarding the front. Leonard Lessius and Marin Mersenne, for example, begin a long process of protecting theology from skeptic strands of fideism by embracing rationalism and abandoning Christian revelation in the process. Everything which follows takes the form of an inevitable unfolding of the very simply dialectic opposition between rational philosophy and theological revelation. Rene Descartes, Isaac Newton, and Nicolas Malebranche take Lessius' and Mersenne's impulse and run with it, transforming theology into a natural science infused with a form of mechanism so self-sufficient that it no longer requires divine oversight. When Denis Diderot and Baron d'Holbach arrive on the scene, they have merely to execute the last subtractive move and embrace atheism as the logical extension of theology’s own drive toward mechanism and rationalism. The movement is inevitable: “Given enough time, intrinsic contradiction and inteluctable implications will out. The origin and choice of particular

\^9 Ibid., 33.  
\^10 Ibid., 66.  
\^11 Ibid., 332–333.
philosophic ideas may be free; their exploration may be voluntary; but their consequences are necessary.”\(^\text{12}\) The short version of Buckley’s story traffics in language that essentializes ideas and makes them the motors of history: “Religion had entrusted itself to philosophy. Philosophy first subsumed this task, then became the only grounds for religion, then denied religion in order to be true to its mechanical nature.”\(^\text{13}\) The only atheists in Buckley’s text are reduced to carriers of ideas developed in a kind of hermetically-sealed theological laboratory. Atheism as an intellectual movement is little more than the cognitive dissonance generated by a bad theology which posits an “implicit, unspoken enmity between god and creation.”\(^\text{14}\)

A more generous treatment of atheism’s historical emergence is provided in Charles Taylor’s magisterial *A Secular Age*, in which Taylor attempts to move away from the kind of intellectual determinism manifest in Buckley’s account. For Taylor, the fact that modernity is profoundly marked by secularism does not owe to the ineluctable unfolding of a dialectical contradiction; instead, Taylor offers “a zig-zag account, one full of unintended consequences.”\(^\text{15}\) Nonetheless, Taylor’s treatment of atheism and its relationship to secularism suffers from a particular focus on epistemological questions as the drivers of history. Taylor repeatedly attempts to describe belief and unbelief in non-

---

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 334.

\(^{13}\) Ibid., 357.

\(^{14}\) Ibid., 363.

\(^{15}\) Ibid., 363.

\(^{16}\) Taylor, *A Secular Age*, 95.
epistemological terms – for example, as “lived experience,”16 “social imaginary,”17 or the taken-for-granted “background” within which epistemological distinctions operate.18 But at the same time, Taylor often falls back into epistemological language when describing lived experiences. When he refers to “human flourishing” as a way to think about lived experiences, he describes “some conception(s) of what human flourishing is.”19 His distinction between experiencing the world as a porous or buffered self relies on the epistemological question of whether one’s experiences of mysterious agents or forces are regarded as coming from within the immanent from or from the external/transcendent.20 And despite being more willing than Buckley to consider the material and social bases of intellectual transformations, Taylor still wants to tell a story that sounds like Buckley’s self-alienation of religion: “To understand the social basis is not to take away from the prominence of the religious motives which were at work here. The new interest in nature was not a step outside the religious outlook, even partially; it was a mutation within this outlook.”21 As with Buckley, Taylor’s historical account describes secularism (and thus atheism) emerging out of a rationalizing tendency within religious thought. Though today’s secularism can be described in terms of “lived

16 Ibid., 5.
17 Ibid., 172.
18 Ibid., 13–14.
19 Ibid., 16.
20 Ibid., 360.
21 Ibid., 95. For more on Taylor’s marriage of intellectual history with materialist explanation, see Ibid., 156, 178, 212.
experiences” or “background pictures,” the historical process that got us here is described largely as ironic backfires in theological/philosophical debates over mechanism and disenchantment.22 Thus, providential deism gives rise to exclusive humanism among intellectual elites, which then trickles down to the masses23 and explodes in a nova of religious pluralism in which atheism becomes one option among many.

But as with Buckley, Taylor's account of atheism’s emergence out of theological debates colors his understanding of contemporary atheism. For Taylor, if atheism has its origin in a theological debate about rationality, “all contemporary unbelief is still marked by that origin.”24 This generates a picture of atheists as rationalists: “That is why God is still a reference point for even the most untroubled believers, because he helps define the temptation you have to overcome and set aside to rise to the heights of rationality on which they dwell.”25 This gets to one of the consequences of an overly-cognitive account of atheism’s history: if atheism is regarded as synonymous with rationality, over and against theological faith, then “unbelief...is understood as an achievement of rationality.”26 When modern atheists behave in ways that seem to reflect something non-rational or emotional, by this understanding, they necessarily engage in

22 See for example Ibid., 145: “The irony is that just this, so much the fruit of devotion and faith, prepares the ground for an escape from faith, into a purely immanent world.”
23 Ibid., 221.
24 Ibid., 268.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 269.
self-contradiction. Taylor repeatedly points out instances in which atheists do precisely this, betraying their own claims to inhabit a “closed world structure.”  

Atheists claim to believe in an impersonal order, and yet they describe experiences in ways that make reality seem vulnerable to mysterious forces and agents. But this contradiction is only apparent – it emerges out of Taylor’s rigid distinctions between epistemology and lived experience, on the one hand, and immanence and transcendence, on the other. The contradiction among contemporary unbelievers between their epistemological disbelief and their seemingly religious experiences testifies to Taylor’s insistence that the immanent frame is an illusion – a question only of “spin.” For Taylor, the divine still operates on everyone, but atheists misrecognize the transcendent in ways that generate self-contradiction and cognitive dissonance. His commitments to intellectual history, an interesting story about the self-alienation of religion, and an overly-cognitive conception of unbelief goes hand in hand with a theological argument about the need to rescue modernity from the malaise of secularism. It requires caricaturizing atheists as blind rationalists, so committed to principles of reason that they are unable to experience true fullness and repeatedly misrecognize the redemptive power of nonrational forces.

These accounts of atheism’s origins reduce atheism to a purely philosophical position which unfolds inevitably as the logical culmination of insular theological

27 Ibid., 549.
28 Ibid., 768.
29 Ibid., 768–772.
30 Ibid., 769.
debates and then trickles down to the masses, where any complexity, nuance, or contradiction may be waved away as vulgar distortion. The atheism which emerges is a static and rigidly-interlocking set of logical propositions about the nature of reality. It is an image which has been repeatedly reified both by the proponents of “New Atheism” and by its opponents. Advocates of atheism seeking to reinforce the dichotomy between atheism and religion reduce the distinction to an intellectual one between science and theology. In this model, science is committed to verifiable truth at the expense of certainty – always willing to adapt to new evidence and recognize the unknown – while theology clings to delusion in the face of the stubborn facts of reality. At the same time, critics seek to demonstrate that New Atheism is hypocritically similar to religion by reducing it to a kind of faith in science. In this model, atheism – like religious fundamentalism – reduces the world to a single-dimension, insisting on its own veracity by outlawing all competing epistemologies. In both cases, it is what atheists believe that situates them on the same epistemological terrain as religion, whether in opposition or ironic agreement.

These images are caricatures. Atheists, like religionists, are more than what they do or do not believe about the metaphysics. But while the field of religious studies

continues to turn toward the material in an effort to replace the outdated and Protestant-centric understanding of religion as a series of individually-held convictions about personal divinities, popular and scholarly language around atheism continues to commit the cognitivist fallacy of understanding atheism first and foremost as an idea. This project, therefore, follows Leigh Eric Schmidt’s lead in writing a history of American atheism that focuses not on the intellectual and philosophical, but on the social and material. As Schmidt writes:

American freethinkers emerged from an intricate web of everyday encounters...The religious estrangements that vexed them were not philosophically abstracted; they were visceral, relational, and densely particular. They were rarely sophisticated metaphysicians worrying over the niceties of epistemology, but instead aggrieved contrarians stunned at the moral shabbiness of scriptural stories or the manipulative theatrics of popular revivalists. Their myriad alienations...were hardly ethereal, but rather earthy in their lived concreteness.\(^{33}\)

Thus, the central aim of this dissertation is a simple one: to demonstrate that Atheism has never been a purely intellectual position. Alongside the history of ideas surveyed by Buckley, Taylor, and other intellectual historians, there is a rich history of embodied practices, material objects, mediated discourses, emotional encounters, and affectively-charged networks of living, breathing subjects. By focusing on and through the lens of material media, this dissertation shows that, in addition to the hasty association between

atheism and rationalism, American Atheism has always been firmly rooted in an affective realm which is precisely nonrational.

This project aims to replace the simplistic notion of atheism as ideology – that is, as a logically-coherent array of beliefs about the nature of reality – with an account of atheist subjectivity rooted in material forces and relationships. Toward that end, the materialist and affective turns within and alongside religious studies provides a necessary corrective. As Donovan Schaefer notes in Religious Affects, “ideology” remains a useful concept for scholars in the humanities only to the extent that it articulates affective forces: “the substantive precursor of ideology is not a rationalized matrix of concepts, data, and argument, but prediscursive compulsions circulating heavily within bodies.”34 Ideology, in Schaefer’s reading, is only the most prevalent example of a “linguistic fallacy” in which language is presumed to be inherently compelling – the most fundamental explicans of a subject’s behavior. It is an attitude endemic to treatments of both atheism and religious fundamentalism. The notion that people behave (or ought to behave) according to their beliefs fuels a desire to expose hypocritical contradictions between those beliefs and behaviors. Hence, for example, Taylor’s repeated emphasis on atheists who insist in their belief that the universe constitutes a Closed World System while unknowingly misrecognizing the very real presence of the transcendent. The affective turn bypasses the judgmental attitude

toward such apparent contradictions by downplaying the centrality of epistemology as a
determiner of behavior. The linguistic fallacy, as Schaefer describes it, “has no sense of
how discourses attach to bodies and get them to move, and is baffled when bodies
sincerely 'believe' one thing and do another.”35 The materialist turn within religious
studies has encouraged scholars of religion to cling less tightly to the question of belief,
but the lesson has yet to be seriously taken up in the context of atheism, where atheists
are still treated as mere carriers of an epistemological commitment, strictly measured
against the standard of whether they practice what they preach. Their fidelity is still in
question.

But the truth is that atheists repeatedly act in ways that belie their beliefs about
the absence of transcendence because, as human subjects, their behavior is never fully
governed by structures of discourse. “Affects,” Schaefer writes in reference to the work
of Lauren Berlant, “saturate politics and ramify in complex ways into the churn of
power relations between bodies, institutions, media apparatuses, and discourses.”36
Rather than understanding ideology as a commitment to a clearly-understood political
(or, in this case, theological) project, an affective reading of ideology generates a shift
away from the kind of teleological reading of history generated by intellectual history.
“Rather than being used to achieve specific material or political ends, ideologies under

35 Ibid., 35.
36 Ibid., 124.
some circumstances may be self-motivating, surging out of bodies and leaving behind
them a wake of political accidents.” 37 In the context of American atheism, this is to
suggest that the specific tenets of philosophical atheism may be far from our sole or
primary resource for understanding the contours of the movement.

For all of affect theory’s insistence on materiality, it can often sound frustratingly
abstract or theoretical. Particularly following those who would see affect as purely and
exclusively pre-discursive, the question becomes how to discuss affect at all without
betraying its radical potential. It is here that the question of media becomes paramount.
This project follows Schaefer’s lead in recognizing that we need not abandon the
linguistic so long as we see it as expressive of more fundamentally affective forces. In
this sense, discourse can provide clues for the affects that precede it. But this
understanding of discourse, like the affects that it attempts to articulate, is always fully
materialized through culturally-specific media forms. And the field of media studies,
with its insistence since McLuhan on the material specificity of media forms over and
often against the rational content of media messages, provides fruitful soil for affect
theory.

Thus, a handful of affect theorists have come to recognize the centrality of media
as a site for the generation, transformation, and dissemination of affect. William
Connolly, for example, argues that “media mixtures of noise, rhythm, image, concept,

37 Ibid., 126.
and music touch the infrasensible register as they also convey conscious judgments. That register, again, precedes, augments, or intensifies the others in something like the way the subaudible vibrations of organ music infuse the composition of moods without themselves being felt.”  

More commonly, one of the predominant theoretical tools for discussing mediated affects has been that of “aesthetics,” understood today as “the study of artistic perception as a form of cognition” And increasingly, the form of cognition associated with the aesthetic has been defined by affect theorists in ways that eschew the rational. Ben Highmore, for example, traces his use of the aesthetic to Alexander Baumgarten, for whom “aesthetics was the field of sensate perception – the world perceived through what he called the 'lower cognitive faculties,’” and to Terry Eagleton, who famously equated the aesthetic with “nothing less than the whole of our sensate life together – the business of affections and aversions, of how the world strikes the body on its sensory surfaces, of that which takes root in the gaze and the guts and all that arises from our most banal, biological insertion into the world.”

Thus, for Highmore, “aesthetics, in its initial impetus, is primarily concerned with material experiences, with the way the sensual world greets the sensate body, and with the

---

affective forces that are generated in such meetings.⁴² Media, then, provide those affective aesthetic encounters which differentiate communities at the level of the sensate rather than the ideological.⁴³

From a methodological perspective, this project seeks to apply the critical resources of media and affect theory within religious studies to the history of American atheism. Media and affect provide two of the most potent tools for the elaboration of the materialist turn within religious studies, shifting scholars’ attention from questions of individualized belief and unmediated religious experience to those of social practice and material culture. This shift of focus is necessary to enact a number of correctives to scholarship on atheist history. First, the narrow parametricization of the topic – atheist engagements with American media – disables sweeping historical generalizations about philosophical atheism. What follows is not an epistemic chronology meant to illustrate that the atheism of today is either radically new or same-old, but an illustration of the ways that different media forms have been marshaled to generate affects that interface with nonreligious subject-positions in divergent ways.

---


⁴³ For Highmore, drawing on the notion of “schismogenesis” coined by Gregory Bateson, media serves in the acculturation of ethos, “the orchestration of perception, sensorial culture, affective intensities, and so on.” (Highmore, “Bitter After Taste: Affect, Food, and Social Aesthetics,” 128–129.)
Second, any historical consideration of atheism must take into account the close relationship between atheism and media. Though frequently neglected within the studies of religion and media, atheists have had one of the most significant and important relationships with media in American history. Unlike most communities – religious, cultural, regional, etc. - which are primarily constituted by relationships of unmediated contact, atheist identity has developed almost exclusively through changing media forms. Historically, atheists and freethinkers have had little opportunities for physical congregation, and thus have situated themselves at the cutting edge of media technologies that have provided alternative forms and avenues of communication. Pushed to the margins of society, atheists have relied on diffuse networks of communication for the generation of collective identity. From antiquity, as Tim Whitmarsh notes, “to be an atheist was, for most, to be a member of a virtual rather than a face-to-face community. There were no real-world schools of atheism that allowed one disbeliever to engage in dialogue with another.”\(^{44}\) Instead, doxography, or the recording of philosophical tenets, “functioned as a virtual network, joining together disbelievers across time and space, in much the same way that electronic media do.”\(^{45}\) Any coherent examination of atheist ideas and subjects, then, relies on thorough contextualization within these virtual and material media networks.

---

\(^{44}\) Whitmarsh, *Battling the Gods*, 208.
\(^{45}\) Ibid., 212.
Third, an emphasis on the materiality of media provides a corrective to the overly-cognitivist method of intellectual history. While each chapter relies on analyses of the discursive content of atheist messages in different media forms, those content analyses serve not to illustrate the primary importance of philosophical developments or intellectual arguments, but to provide clues to the nonrational affective engagements and subtle transformations in taken-for-granted modes of embodiment and communal belonging on which those intellectual arguments are overlaid.

As a final note on methodology, it is necessary in any study of mediated communities to outline one’s position on various risks of determinism. Whether concerned about a technological determinism in which media are understood to impose an inherent logic on a passive social community or a social determinism in which a community’s pre-mediated commitments dictate precisely how they will adopt and deploy a media technology, media scholars are often at pains to stress the flexible relationship between the social and the technological. On this point, I adopt Mark Hansen’s treatment of the problem:

[T]here simply is no such thing as technological determinism, not because technics don’t determine our situation, but because they don’t (and cannot) do so from a position that is outside culture; likewise, there is no such thing as cultural constructivism—understood as a rigid, blanket privileging of ideology or cultural agency—not because culture doesn’t construct ideology and experience, but because it doesn’t (and cannot) do so without depending on technologies.
that are beyond the scope of its intentionality, of the very agency of cultural ideology.\textsuperscript{46}

In the chapters that follow, there is often an implicit interplay between determinism and freedom, in which a certain range of potential actions or acceptable discourses is circumscribed by, and in fact enabled by, material boundaries which provide pushing-off points for the celebration of agency. That is to say that while no media form possesses an inherent logic that dictates toward what ends it may be used, each media form provides a unique set of material characteristics that enable and perhaps tend toward different uses. Throughout this dissertation, then, the intent is not to establish media as the primary determiner of developments in American atheism, but instead to offer media as one material factor to be added to – and at times posed against – previous intellectual histories.

The chapters of this dissertation each revolve around a different medium. These media correspond roughly with different historical periods, but are not intended to constitute an exhaustive historical progression. Instead, each chapter borrows different theoretical insights from media studies to highlight affective forces enabled by the material specificity of such media. Chapter one explores Freethought print media of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, focusing primarily on pictorial representations published in \textit{The Truth Seeker}, the weekly organ of the National Liberal League

\textsuperscript{46} Mark B. N. Hansen, “Media Theory,” \textit{Theory, Culture & Society} 23, no. 2–3 (May 1, 2006), 299.
Theoretically, the chapter borrows the insights of scholars of visual rhetoric interested in the enthymematic tendency of political cartoons – that is, the ability of a provocative cartoon to draw the viewer into the process of argumentation by omitting or condensing explicit textual reasoning. Deploying theoretical tools from visual rhetoric, which inherits a long tradition of understanding discourse in terms of argumentation, runs the risk of privileging the cognitive or rational in reading the printed image. At the same time, owing to the highly textual characteristics of political cartoon, the notion of the enthymeme provides a critical lever for understanding how cartoons were able to represent – in heightened contrast – a debate among Freethinkers concerning the role of argumentation in engaging with the religious mainstream. Print media provided a set of metaphors, rooted largely in material technologies like the printing press, the artist's pencil, and the United States Postal Service, that privileged the visual as an alternative to a notion of textuality that was increasingly regarded as impotent due to its reliance on rationality. I argue that the visual became, toward the end of the nineteenth century, a telling indicator of an emerging sense among some infidels and Freethinkers, that the proper mode of engagement with religionists was no longer debate or negotiation but militant confrontation, that the goal of such confrontation was no longer conversion to the ranks of infidelity but conquest, and that nonreligious identity was no longer something achieved by rational persuasion but by nonrational acculturation.
Chapter two explores atheist broadcast media during the middle of the twentieth century, focusing primarily on Robert Harold Scott’s engagements with the Federal Communications Commission during the 1940’s and Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s *American Atheist Radio Series* during the 1960’s and 70’s. I argue that the notion of visuality articulated in the nineteenth century takes on increasing significance during the broadcast era due in part to specific material limitations of the medium. The electromagnetic spectrum was defined and regulated according to mutually reinforcing notions of scarcity and publicity, in which shared access to the American airways combined with a limited range of bandwidth on the electromagnetic spectrum, necessitating that atheists like Robert Harold Scott justify their presence among an increasingly nationalistic understanding of American religion. Furthermore, deploying insights from the field of sound studies, I argue that anxieties concerning several kinds of invisibility unique to broadcast media contributed to an emphasis in Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s activism on the visibility of the atheist community. Broadcast media in general, with its transmission through the invisible medium of the electromagnetic spectrum and its uncertain reception by an invisible audience, and radio in particular, with its lack of visual content, contributed to a heightened emphasis on the visibility of atheist identity. And whereas nineteenth century print media saw a conflation of the visual and the textual which enabled a kind of usurpation of rationalist atheist philosophy under the more nonrational banner of atheist identity, twentieth century broadcast media
witnessed a conflation of the visible and the auditory, such that to be heard was to be seen and the voice came to stand in for the subject. In other words, if nineteenth century print media produced a close relationship between American atheism and the visual, twentieth century broadcast media provided another set of metaphors and material limitations that encouraged and enabled the emergence of a more fully-developed atheist identity politics, in which the primary duty of the atheist was to make themselves as publicly visible as possible.

Chapter three explores the loosely-defined atheist community existing on the internet today, focusing primarily on r/atheism, the platform for atheist communications on the massive social aggregation site reddit.com. Drawing on insights from a number of digital media scholars that I group together under the heading of “interface studies,” along with the work of Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner to redefine the public sphere in the highly mediated modernity of today, I argue that digital media provide novel and complex forms of intimacy that constitute r/atheism as a counterpublic. The intimacies enabled on reddit.com are highly interfacial, meaning they blur and dissolve boundaries between human agents and impersonal algorithms just as between public and private spaces. Focusing on a particular moment in the history of r/atheism in which moderators attempted to regulate the publication of images, I argue that the digital image came to represent, as it did in nineteenth century print media, different understandings of the proper boundaries both around and within the atheist community. But owing in part to
the sheer speed and complexity of algorithmic culture, the power of the digital image has been articulated today primarily through the language of speed rather than permanence, as it was during the late nineteenth century. Thus, the question of visibility acquires new wrinkles in digital media. In addition to the increased emphasis on speed, the association between visibility and atheist identity becomes more complex on r/atheism. In contrast to the emphasis during the broadcast era on public visibility, the digital space comes to be regarded as the proper site of visibility and publicity, such that “coming out” to the public is replaced with “coming in” to the counterpublic. At the same time, the question of individual agency becomes more difficult as digital culture increasingly obscures the delineation between free choice and the algorithmic machinations of big data aggregation. Thus, more than ever, the notion of the individual atheist making a rational choice to disbelieve based on available information is replaced with that of the atheist hivemind conditioned by algorithmic feedback loops and echo chambers.

In the conclusion, I translate the discussion of affect into a language of “noise” borrowed from the field of informatics. Understanding noise as the material and non-informational sensory experiences (that is, the affects) transmitted by media, I reflect on some of the themes that have run through each chapter: spatial experiences of mediascapes, the relationship between emotion and reason, and the conflation of the visual and the auditory.
It may be tempting to construct a long arc through the different media forms and historical epochs presented here, either toward the dissolution or efflorescence of atheism. In the wake of the explosion of New Atheism at the turn of the twenty-first century, a number of scholars and commentators have sought to predict the future of atheism in the West, with more than a few anticipating the death of atheism at the hands of more nuanced forms of postmodern spirituality less attached to objective understandings of the truth. The fundamental aim of this project is to demonstrate, by highlighting the importance of historical and material contexts in the articulation of atheist identity, that predictions concerning the future of atheism as a philosophy or epistemology are relatively futile. Limiting the question to atheist identity and experience rather than epistemology, the question becomes only somewhat more manageable. In a certain light, the story presented here depicts a wave of consolidation and dissolution. A plurality of nonreligious identities – infidel, Liberal, Freethinker, atheist – enabled by a wide-open print mediascape\(^7\) in the nineteenth century, coalesce during the twentieth century under a strongly militant understanding of the Atheist as the exclusive moniker of the irreligious on the narrow bandwidth of broadcast media, only to loosen and redistribute in a digital arena again defined by wide-open spaces and

\(^7\) Following Arjun Appadurai, I use “mediascapes” to refer both to material technologies for the distribution of information and to “image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality” which offer users “a series of elements (such as characters, plots and textual forms) out of which scripts can be formed of imagined lives, their own as well as those of others living in other places.” [Arjun Appadurai, “Disjuncture and Difference in the Global Cultural Economy,” Public Culture 2, no. 2 (1990), 298-299]
non-exclusive networks of affiliation. This suggests that the kind of militant atheism and identity politics espoused by Richard Dawkins and his New Atheist cohort may belong to a certain moment in the history of atheism destined to be washed away by an increasingly pluralist and non-exclusive range of irreligious identities. At the same time, the emphatic embrace of digital technology by those same militant atheists (and militants of all kinds) serves as a reminder that the digital is not a melting pot. The affects that flow through digital interfaces can break down previously rigid boundaries, but they can also fortify, rebuild, or relocate all kinds of animosities and exclusions.

In any case, what should be clear is that the question of rationality and belief about God’s non-existence has never been the exclusive driving force of American atheism. On the contrary, the explicitly nonrational has always been there, motivating and cultivating historically unique understanding of atheist subjectivity. In contrast to the image of the rational atheist, wedded to scientific reason and logical positivism, the rational has frequently served as a foil for the evolution of atheist identity. It is the emotional, rather than the rational, which has often been most effective in producing the distinctions between the unbeliever and the unbeliever – distinctions which are felt more than thought. As Sara Ahmed puts it, emotions “align individuals with communities – or bodily space with social space – through the very intensity of their attachments.”

They “mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the

individual and the collective.” In the case of American atheists, the emotional or affective has taken a variety of forms – the repulsive caricature on the printed page, the cackling laughter coming through the radio speaker, the chance encounter with an emotional individual on the other side of the world – and served a variety of ends, but in each case, affects are not merely present but in many ways vital, generating the energies and concerns that attach discourses to bodies and get them to move.

Finally, the following story about American atheists is also a story about modernity. We have already seen how, for Charles Taylor, the unbeliever serves as the quintessential modern – the most ironic example of the modern subject’s vain attempt to seal off the immanent frame and shut out the transcendent. This characterization relies on exposing an apparent contradiction between the atheist’s epistemological beliefs and experiential practices; the atheist believes the world is completely immanent but feels overpowered by mysterious forces and agents that seem transcendent. This project aims to reorient the way we approach this apparent contradiction. These experiences of the transcendent, the overpowering, or the desubjectifying are not anomalous failures but vital strategies in the cultivation of those affects which form collective identities. They are engagements with material media which enact those mysterious forces, shape and reshape vertical and horizontal transcendings, and distort notions of individual agency.

49 Ibid.
50 Schaefer, Religious Affects, 35.
This is all to say perhaps that the immanent frame is a myth, that the apparent
disjuncture between atheist epistemology and modern experience is not a failure on
behalf of atheism, but a testament that the immanence/transcendence binary has never
been as determinative as we might think.

It would be fruitful to translate this discussion into the vocabulary of
disenchantment. For Max Weber, *Entzauberung*, commonly translated as
“disenchantment,” meant the “elimination of magic from the world”\(^5\) by means of the
general impetus toward rationalization. That is, mystery was not eliminated from the
world but achieved a negative valuation, becoming a problem to be solved by scientific
reasoning. Drawing on Weber, Marcel Gauchet has broadened the notion of
disenchantment to mean “the impoverishment of the reign of the invisible.”\(^5\) And for
Gauchet, as for Taylor and Buckley, the primary engine of disenchantment has been
Christianity itself, the “religion for departing from religion.”\(^5\) Gauchet’s characterization
of disenchantment raises a number of questions for the present discussion of atheism
and affect, the foremost being: does modernity truly impoverish the reign of the
invisible? The affective turn in the humanities along with the speculative turn in the
physical sciences would indicate that modernity thrives on the production and

---
Scribner’s Sons, 1958), 105.
\(^5\) Ibid., 4.
consumption of forces which escape observation. To Gauchet’s credit, he suggests (in strikingly affective terms) that the disenchantment of religion liberates secular forms of enchantment:

When the gods abandon the world, when they stop coming to notify us of their otherness to it, the world itself begins to appear other, to disclose an imaginary depth that becomes the object of a special quest, containing its purpose and referring only to itself. This is simply because the imaginary apprehension of the real, which previously constituted the anthropological support for religious activity, begins to operate for itself, independently of its previous contents...There thus appears an autonomous activity for exploring the sensory in all its registers and diverse modulations.54

But for Gauchet, it is unclear just how “imaginary” this apprehension of the real is – whether this sensory otherness of the world is on the side of reality or perception. At the same time, Gauchet’s secular enchantments occur exclusively in spatial depths. An “unfathomable ‘hidden world’” or “the revelation of the strange depths of a secret world lying beneath the surface of history.”55 If we are to translate Gauchet’s formulation into affective terms, suggesting that the disenchantment of religion has liberated and enabled the affective turn, we must emphasize that we are not necessarily projecting illusions into impressionistic depths, but simply reading the surfaces of mediated reality.

Jane Bennett has resisted the story of disenchantment on ethical grounds, redefining enchantment as a mood rather than a sociological tendency. Enchantment is, for Bennett, “a surprise encounter,” “a state of wonder,” “momentarily immobilizing,”

54 Ibid., 203.
55 Ibid., 204.
“a state of interactive fascination,” etc.56 This emotional reading of enchantment implies a critical distance from Gauchet, in that it refuses to accept a terminology that frames materialism as an impoverishment. For Bennett, the fundamental question is “whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world.”57 And for Bennett, the possibility that “the world is not disenchanted, that is, not populated by dead matter and fragmented selves,”58 is neither a question of secular perspective nor an ironic consequence of the Enlightenment’s liquidation of religion. Her marshaling of Epicurean and Lucretian materialism serves to indicate that “material enchantment” is immemorial.

For our purposes, contemporary examples in which nonreligious subjects meaningfully engage with invisible forces throw a wrench in traditional understandings of disenchantedment. And crucially, these examples demonstrate the centrality of media in enabling enchantments. Understanding enchantment as “a recognition of power within things,”59 David Morgan has highlighted this centrality: “Whether one is a Neolithic islander or a modern technologist, enchantment is a way of accounting for agency beyond one’s means.”60 Thus, enchantment offers another way to conceptualize the

57 Ibid., 3.
58 Ibid., 80.
60 Ibid., 9.
relationships between affect and media. If media constitute complex networks in which agency is distributed amongst visible and invisible actants, they provide pivotal sites for the exploration of material enchantments – enchantments which operate for the religious and nonreligious alike.

These reformulations of enchantment bring the discussion of secularism and atheism down to the material world from the lofty heights of the Enlightenment, which has carried too much weight for too long as the explanation for modern secular rationality. The figure of the atheist, now embodied and affectively-engaged, serves as a productive site to correct an overly-rationalistic and individualistic understanding of modern subjectivity. By the popular accounts provided by Charles Taylor and Anthony Giddens, modern subjects are defined by a kind of rationalized freedom. As globalization liberates us from once-necessary ties to regionally-specific social and religious traditions, the logic goes, we now can choose our own beliefs, our own social milieus, our own values. And at least for Taylor, the atheist serves as the perfect emblem of this capability – liberated from religion, the atheist is consequently deprived of the sense of humbling fulfillment that comes from feeling guided or overpowered by the transcendent. But restoring the role of affect in the formation of individual and collective subjectivities reveals this depiction to be at least somewhat mythical. The history of

American atheist media teaches us that even the most “rational” subject-positions are predicated on nonrational affective and material forces – that no one is free to rise above feelings of dependence or seize full control of their own identity. This is to suggest that we should invert Taylor’s claim that transcendence lurks, misrecognized, in the background of the immanent frame. Perhaps those moments when the atheist feels overpowered or guided by unseen forces involve the misrecognition not of transcendence, but of affect. This is the most destabilizing lesson from Schaefer’s work on religious affects and Morgan’s work on religious media: that there is a reason religious studies seems to be shifting in parallel with advances in affect studies and media studies. To suggest that religion is affect, or that religion is mediation, means fundamentally reconceptualizing our notions of the modern secular subject and its relationship to religious belief and practice. If the atheist has stood in for the epistemological disenchantment of modernity, then the discovery of the affective at the heart of the atheist subject-position provides one piece of the project to articulate anew the immanent forms of enchantment that proliferate in modernity.
2. Infidelity in Ink: Print Media in the Nineteenth Century

That minoritary status of the Freethought tradition arose from its own character. Lacking genius or profundity, misunderstanding the American temper, doctrinaire, negative, extremely individualistic as its proponents often were, they found union and organization difficult. Left to itself, the whole movement would perhaps have withered away. – Martin Marty

2.1 Infidels in their own Words

Martin Marty’s first monograph, 1961’s Infidel: Freethought and American Religion, is marked by a profound disappointment with the intellectual pedigree of America’s nineteenth-century unbelievers. Judging by frequent proclamations throughout the nineteenth-century by prominent religious leaders about a crashing wave of infidelity, Marty was perhaps expecting to uncover a formidable and historically underappreciated Freethought movement. Instead, what he discovers in his search is scant and specious: “Historians have dragged magnets through the evidence and come up with few significant filings. Little of success or enduring character appears. A few societies, several short-lived newspapers and magazines with few subscribers, occasional efforts at building meeting-halls, a handful of colorful leaders were the monuments of the aggressive phases of the first Freethought movement.”¹ Unsurprisingly, Marty spends little time in Infidel engaging directly with these meager “filings.” Instead, he understands the American Freethought movement of the nineteenth century almost

entirely as a scarecrow constructed by religious conservatives to scare the laity into stronger observance. As American Christianity became more and more liberal toward the end of the nineteenth century, infidelity was doomed to wither away with nothing left to stand against, and any delay in its demise is understood as a kind of religious life support. Even as “there was progressively less to be infidel about,” Evangelical Christians, “like the cat that plays with the cornered mouse...played a stalling game with antagonists who had never been their match.” For Marty, the decline of infidelity is all for the best – not because it ends the impulse to liberalize religion, but because it frees liberal theology to do it better. “So much more daring is the expression of theologians and social critics – and so much more effective – than was that of the infidel, that the best advice one could give a latter-day infidel who wanted to be heard would be to join a church.” Today, once feeble attempts to sew seeds of doubt in religious faith are enriched and nuanced within, rather than against, theological debates: “In the absence of the image of the infidel, the right war at the right time, at the right place and with the right enemy can be engaged. New attempts at understanding the arena of doubt versus faith within the Christian characterize much of the inquiry in theology and religious psychology that is going on today.”

\[2\] Ibid., 14.
\[3\] Ibid., 19.
\[4\] Ibid., 202.
\[5\] Ibid., 201.
This chapter aims to provide a corrective to Marty’s dismissive treatment of American Freethought in the nineteenth century, not by proving that infidels constituted a particularly powerful segment of American society, but by considering infidelity in its own words. Rather than approaching Freethought as a strawperson fabricated or at least magnified by Evangelical Christianity, this chapter asks about the processes by which nineteenth century American infidels identified themselves as individuals and as collectives. Where Marty finds “little of success or enduring character” in the “short-lived newspapers” of American Freethought, this chapter seeks to unpack a number of rich debates playing out on the pages of America’s foremost infidel publications. Whether one believes that these publications made a significant impact on American religious history, I argue that they have implications for the history of American atheism. Throughout the nineteenth century, a nascent atheist community wrestled with questions of individual and collective identity in relation to concurrent social, political, economic, and religious movements.

I argue in this chapter that nineteenth century print media provided a set of metaphors with which American unbelievers began to articulate certain personality traits that remain relevant for understandings of atheist identity today. On one hand, the materiality of print provided the ingredients for an understanding of identity as something permanent. The ink with which words were printed, the pencil with which illustrations were drawn, the paper space on which both were printed, and the
mechanical technologies of the printing press, daguerrotype, and telegram provided a set of symbols for articulating identity as something imprinted indelibly on the mind of the reading or viewing subject. Thus, over the course of the nineteenth century, American infidels began discussing personal identity less in terms of something rationally subscribed to and more in terms of something non-rationally imprinted with at a young age. At the same time, the late nineteenth century witnessed an increasing emphasis on a militaristic understanding of missionary activity incumbent upon American infidels – a tendency partially enabled both by understandings of the cartoon image as a tool suited to the defeat of believers and the creation of young unbelievers and by highly politicized discussions of the proper means of transmitting Freethought material surrounding Anthony Comstock’s arrest of DM Bennett in 1878, which brought the question of visibility to the foreground of infidel communication.

To observe such subtle wrinkles in diffuse and vague notions of anti-religious subjectivity, it will be necessary at times to loosen our commitment to epistemological rigor. In what follows, terms like ‘atheist,’ ‘infidel,’ ‘Freethinker,’ ‘Liberal,’ etc. will be used interchangeably in contexts where we seek to uncover elements of the nondiscursive or nonrational that a rigid separation of philosophical or theological positions would otherwise obscure. While the distinctions between various types of Freethinkers and Freethought are important and will be highlighted at times, more often we aim to illuminate, in Bourdieu’s famous formulation, “what goes without saying
because it comes without saying.”6 To understand the swirling currents of thought and practice that will later coalesce and disperse in complicated ways in American atheism, we first must cast a wide net in order to see their interactions while avoiding the tendency to anachronistically understand past experiences with today’s vocabulary. What we are after is thus not to be found in straightforward discussions of the distinction between atheism and agnosticism, for example, because these abstract philosophical distinctions rarely touch a ground inhabited by living, breathing subjects.

We are looking for the ripples of changes to modes of existence or experiences of life which take place not in the heights of pure discourse or within the depths of the confessing subject but at the surfaces where material things and affects interact.

2.2 A Golden Age of Freethought

The history of American Freethought is defined by peaks and valleys – vacillations between golden ages and dark ages. The nineteenth century, in broad strokes, would perhaps be a continuous efflorescence of Freethought if not for a substantial and understandable decline leading up to and during the American Civil War. The periods before and after the Civil War have both been characterized as golden

ages for American Freethought,⁷ and are best understood as two waves of a continuous movement. In *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850*, Albert Post attributes the first wave of American Freethought to the steady influx of immigrants from the British Isles to American cities after the Panic of 1819.⁸ The influence of German immigrants is also attested to in Post’s survey of infidel periodicals. “During the period from 1825 to 1850 about twenty papers were published dedicated to the destruction of Christianity and ‘superstition’; in addition, there were about half this number in the German language.”⁹ Of the twenty papers published in English, almost all were destined to failure. For example, *The Free Enquirer*, probably the first openly atheistical paper published in the United States, operated for only six years.¹⁰ *The Beacon* operated for nine years, from 1837 to 1846.¹¹ “By 1850,” writes Post, “the Freethought press had declined until only the *Boston Investigator*, the only paper really put on a secure financial basis, was being issued with any degree of regularity...This waning of activity on the part of freethinkers resulted, in part, from the intensification of the anti-slavery struggle and the awakening

---


⁸ Post, *Popular Freethought in America, 1825-1850*, 32.

⁹ Ibid., 34.

¹⁰ Ibid., 43.

¹¹ Ibid., 50.
of interest in spiritualism.”12 Thus, for Post, “1850 marks the end of an era in American Freethought.”13

Freethought would return in the period surveyed by Sidney Warren in *American Freethought, 1860-1914*. For Warren, the strength of this second wave of American Freethought has two apparent causes. The first is the growing influence of the British secularist movement, represented by the success of Charles Bradlaugh's American tours during the 1870's and the wide consumption of George Jacob Holyoake's writings.14 The second and more important cause is the emergence and development of Darwinism after 1859, though the influence of Darwinism is somewhat circuitous. Initially, according to Warren, Darwinian ideas promoted a greater emphasis among Freethinkers on scientific evidence as the basis of truth.15 But during the course of the second half of the nineteenth century, Darwinism was increasingly taken up by Liberal Protestants in a way that took much of the sting out of Freethought's attempts to deploy Darwinism against orthodox religious dogma. As prominent Protestant and Catholic theologians increasingly embraced evolution as supporting a liberal interpretation of Genesis, “the doctrine of evolution...tended to strengthen rather than undermine the cause of religion. It was only natural, then, that the propagandists for evolution who were most widely

12 Ibid., 71.
13 Ibid.
heard were not dogmatic freethinkers who saw in the new science an opportunity to
destroy age-old beliefs, but Christian believers who recommended evolution to the
people as an additional bulwark to their religion.” Thus, Warren concludes that
Darwinism did not benefit Freethinkers directly, but instead affected the prevailing
culture in a way that made Freethought more relevant and outspoken. Following
Warren, and at the risk of getting ahead of the argument which follows, we might see
nineteenth-century Darwinism as contributing to a complex relationship among
Freethinkers with notions of scientific reason. If the period from 1859 to the end of the
century witnessed a kind of perceived theft of Darwinism by religion, then this
perception of scientific betrayal may have prompted some infidels to turn to the realm of
emotion as the proper terrain for the struggle between disbelief and belief. To pose this
possibility, we need not approach the issue in terms of intellectual history as the natural
progression of an abstract debate between theology and science. The impact of
Darwinism on American skepticism has been given thorough-enough treatment by
intellectual historians. Here, it must suffice to point out that Darwinism constituted a
social force which, far from determining the contours of American Freethought,

---

8 Ibid., 71. It is worth noting that a number of Heston’s cartoons would later ridicule attempts by popular
Protestant figures to marshal Darwinian ideas in the defense of religious conviction, as in 1886’s “A Hint to
Beecher,” in which Henry Ward Beecher is depicted standing on the back of a train labeled “Evolution”
trying vainly to drag by its tail a donkey labeled “Orthodoxy” along with its rider (apparently John Jasper,
famous for espousing geocentrism and other scientific anachronisms). (Watson Heston, “A Hint to Beecher,”
Illustration, The Truth Seeker, December 25, 1886.) The obvious contempt for attempts to marry Darwinism
with scriptural beliefs indicates a frustration with their prevalence and popularity.
provoked and reacted to a host of other material factors at play in the second half of the nineteenth-century. If we eschew treating Darwinism as determinative and conclude, following Warren, that it was one element provoking Freethinkers to grapple with questions of scientific objectivity and its perceived ability or inability to ground personal identity, then we have to turn to print media as providing a venue and a set of metaphors with which to engage such questions.

The postbellum period saw greater distribution of Freethought media and organized societies than antebellum,\(^\text{17}\) in part because the Civil War contributed to the wider popularity of print media and a relative fragmentation of reading publics. Roderick Bradford explains the success of Freethought print media in the postbellum period:

During the Civil War, Americans started to routinely read newspapers with enthusiasm in order to follow battle details, learn information about loved ones, and keep abreast of the ever-changing status of the wartime conflict. After the war, the country saw a proliferation of publications catering to a diverse group of readers with disparate interests involving local and national events.\(^\text{18}\)

Hence, “The free-thought press revived, with the 'Investigator' once again prominent, but almost every large centre of population had its own journal”\(^\text{19}\) Joining the ranks of the *Boston Investigator*, founded in 1831, were a plethora of new regional and national Freethought periodicals. *The Index*, the unofficial organ of the Free Religious Association

---

\(^\text{17}\) Ibid., 22–23.


\(^\text{19}\) Colin David Campbell, *Toward a Sociology of Irreligion* (Macmillan, 1971), 60.
dedicated to dispelling superstition and maintaining the separation of Church and State, achieved national circulation. Regional Freethought newspapers were virtually innumerable – Texas’ Common Sense, Agnostic, and Independent Pulpit, Kentucky’s Blue Grass Blade, Kansas’ Lucifer the Lightbearer, Missouri’s Liberal, California’s To-Morrow and Freethought, New York’s Man, Truth Seeker, and Freethinker’s Magazine, Chicago’s The People’s Press and Ingersoll Memorial Beacon. But of the Freethought newspapers of the late nineteenth century, none achieved the breadth of circulation and lasting impact of The Truth Seeker.

2.3 The Truth Seeker: Room to Identify

The Truth Seeker was founded in Paris, Illinois in 1873 (though printed initially in Terre Haute, Indiana) by DeRobigne Mortimer (DM) Bennett. In 1846, Bennett had defected along with three others from a Shaker community, the Society of Believers at New Lebanon, New York. In 1848, Bennett began reading infidel publications, traveling to New York in 1850 to purchase twenty volumes of Freethought literature, including Thomas Paine’s The Age of Reason, which Bennett later claimed transformed him from a devout Christian into becoming an infidel. The story of how Bennett came to start The Truth Seeker is a familiar one – Bennett felt unfairly excluded from and

20 Bennett would maintain a lifelong friendship with a number of prominent Shakers, whom he regarded as allies in the war against superstition and orthodoxy.
attacked by a dominant mediascape. Wishing to participate in a debate with local clergy in the local newspapers in Paris, Illinois, Bennett reports in his introductory remarks to his own paper, “we found it difficult to gain admittance to their columns and have in some cases been flatly refused the opportunity of defending ourselves when attacked. The pulpit is against us, the press is against us, and unless we have a 'mouth-piece' of our own, we can hardly see how we are to have an equal chance with our opponents.”

Bennett retired from a failing seed business and began publishing full-time to immediate success. When it began in September 1873, *The Truth Seeker* was an eight page monthly, but expansion would not take long. By January 1874, Bennett had moved operations to New York city and expanded the paper to sixteen pages, and in September 1874, he announced the transition to a semi-monthly as a compromise with those readers demanding weekly publication, and beginning with the third volume in January 1876, *The Truth Seeker* settled into its long-term format of sixteen pages issued weekly.

At first glance, *The Truth Seeker* might seem an inappropriate resource for examining infidel identity in nineteenth-century print media. It is not the first long-running infidel periodical published on American soil – that honor belongs to *The Boston Investigator* (which was to merge with *The Truth Seeker* in 1904). It is also not the most atheistical of Freethought publications – while *The Truth Seeker* situated itself on the left

---

wing of organized Freethought by espousing infidelity,\textsuperscript{23} regional newspapers like Lexington’s \textit{The Bluegrass Blade} and Indianapolis’ \textit{The Ironclad Age}, for example, were more brazen in catering to an exclusively atheistic clientele.\textsuperscript{24} But these caveats actually constitute a methodological strength. While \textit{The Truth Seeker} wasn’t the first, it was and continues to be the longest-running Freethought publication in American history. Moreover, it had, in its heyday, the largest subscription list of any Freethought newspaper, which contributes to its relatively successful preservation. \textit{The Truth Seeker} was pioneering in its publication of full-page illustrations beginning in the 1880’s, providing an important glimpse into the role of imagery in constituting the borders of and within the Freethought movement. Most importantly, \textit{The Truth Seeker}’s ideological inclusivity – its acceptance of myriad viewpoints ranging from materialist atheism to liberal Protestantism – positions it as a unique site for understanding infidelity in context. The simultaneous diversity of philosophical viewpoints and commonality of cultural experiences exhibited on the pages of \textit{The Truth Seeker} means that today’s historian can parse relationships between a number of intellectual and personal positions that would go unarticulated in a more exclusive periodical.

\textsuperscript{23} When starting \textit{The Truth Seeker}, Bennett apparently sent a letter to Francis Abbot, editor of \textit{The Index}, promising that his periodical would be more “radical and infidelic” than Abbot’s, and thus would not compete for subscribers. Bradford, \textit{D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker}, 218.

\textsuperscript{24} For example, \textit{The Ironclad Age}, a “paper with few principles,” advertised itself as “the only straight atheistic paper now or ever published in the world or out of it,” \textit{(The Ironclad Age, March 24, 1894.)}
In fact, the question of inclusivity and exclusivity on the pages of *The Truth Seeker* provides an opportunity for a first foray into the question of the materiality of media and collective identity. From its first issue, *The Truth Seeker* engages directly with questions of collective identity and theological disagreement, and importantly, these questions are explicitly connected with material understandings of the mediascape and the degree to which it affords room for disagreement. At one level, the decentralization of the means of production of print media means that there is room in American society for niche publications. As Bennett writes in his introduction to the first issue of *The Truth Seeker*, “It seems to us also there is ample room for a monthly visitant of this kind. There are hundreds of thousands—yes several millions in our fair country, who are more or less skeptical in their religious views, and we have but few organs through which to speak and be heard, and we see no reason why our modest effort should not be liberally sustained.”25 At another level, this same concept of “ample room” plays out on the pages of the periodical itself. In articulating infidelity’s relationship with the nascent Spiritualist movement, Bennett writes, “There is no need of jealousy between us, there is room enough for all. The labor to be performed is immense; the field is truly ample; ‘the harvest is plenteous but the laborers are few.’ Though we may not agree upon all points, we occupy the same common ground of free thought and mental liberty.”26

25 *The Truth Seeker*, September 1873, 1. My emphasis.
26 Ibid., 5.
spatial metaphors indicates the importance of media in providing materially-based metaphors for the articulation of identity. The relationship between infidelity, materialism, and Spiritualism would remain a hot topic for contributors to the *Truth Seeker* for decades, and in many cases the debate revolved in part around the question of whether there was “room” enough for disagreement on the written page. Beyond Spiritualism, Bennett frequently published sermons from conservative Protestant leaders. In introducing a sermon by Alabama Missionary Baptist Elder J.C. Shelton, Bennett writes “We make room for what the pious man of God has to say.”27 The amount of space afforded by the media, it seems, is proportional here to the degree of acceptance of intellectual disagreement and the promise of negotiation.

In the early years of publication, then, the prevailing view was that the preponderance of room both in the overall mediascape suffusing American society and on the literal written page meant that there was little need to settle disagreements concerning questions of collective identity. Subscribers to *The Truth Seeker* needed not share a common identity, because the newspaper was not in the business of restricting the publication of viewpoints that came from those outside a clearly-defined fold. As Bennett outlines in the platform published on the first page of the early issues of *The Truth Seeker*, “We extend the right hand of fellowship to liberal minds of all grades and classes...Let us compare our views...We have no creed or dogmas to ask others to

subscribe to.”  

Throughout *The Truth Seeker*’s inaugural year, Bennett published earnest contributions from Spiritualists, Atheists, Materialists, conservative Christians, Quakers, Shakers, suffragists, Free Lovers, Free Religionists, and all manner of vaguely-defined infidels.

Based on the regular publication of letters sent from subscribers, readers of *The Truth Seeker* largely reflected this plurality and vagueness, expressing identities primarily in subscriptive, rather than subjective, terms. That is to say, more common than language which affixed a shorthand label like ‘infidel’ or ‘Atheist’ to one’s identity were descriptions of a close correspondence between personally-held convictions and opinions expressed by the editors. Thus, a reader might claim, “I have never before seen a paper which so nearly holds my own views as yours does,”  

or, “I have found no publication so much in harmony with my own ideas as yours; in fact they are mine only a thousand times better expressed,”  

or “Having had the pleasure of your noble and excellent paper...I find it be the very idiom of my own zeal and aspirations.”  

Such declarations scarcely adumbrate the contours of identity by pointing to an alignment between the individual and the publication. Readers here “subscribe” to the ideas articulated in *The Truth Seeker* and, to some extent, to the identities implied by or having

---

an affinity with those ideas. Less frequently do readers employ categorical or exclusive characterizations of identity.

Given the various approaches to the various shades of disbelief, then, it is difficult to draw hard and fast distinctions between the infidel, Liberal, Freethinker, Atheist, or Agnostic. This difficulty is not unique to The Truth Seeker, but plagues virtually every historical account of American Freethought. Sidney Warren, in his survey of American Freethought at the end of the nineteenth century, complains, “It was often difficult to discern the difference between the American agnostic and atheist; the former was usually as militantly opposed to all forms of Christian supernaturalism and religion as was the most thorough-going atheist.” 32 His solution is to separate the Freethought community into wings: the left wing of dogmatic atheism, the center of agnosticism, and the right wing of Free Religion. 33 Yet, these wings break down under scrutiny. Warren has already noted that agnosticism was, for all intents and purposes, roughly identical with atheism 34 – Robert Ingersoll, the Great Agnostic, denied the existence of God 35 – and the Free Religionists at times seemed to accept accusations of atheism. 36 Hence, Warren considers DM Bennett the most ardent of atheists, 37 when his

33 Ibid., 96. See also Bradford, D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker, 217.
34 See also Warren, American Freethought, 1860-1914., 186.
36 Felix Adler, figurehead of the Ethical Culture movement, admitted before the Society for Ethical Culture, “if [atheism] means the denial of being conceived by superstitious mortals in the image of themselves, a 'big
espousal of atheism came with as many qualifications as it did for the Free Religionists and most observers regarded him as a materialist Spiritualist.

There is a danger in trying too hard to parse the various forms of disbelief prevalent toward the end of the nineteenth century if it means losing sight of fruitful overlaps and shades of difference which go largely unarticulated. Nonetheless, patterns do emerge in discussions of appropriate labels, so long as one is looking not for logical or philosophical distinctions as much as differences of emphasis and connotation rooted in social context. For the sake of clarification, we can take “infidel” as a starting point. From the beginning of The Truth Seeker’s publication, readers employed the term “infidel” and “infidelity” much more readily than “atheist” or “atheism,” in part because it was the term most often employed pejoratively by the religious majority. Very often, “infidel” comes up in discussions of society-at-large’s contempt for religious skeptics. There is a clear desire among some readers to reclaim this pejorative. For example: “I have generally been called an Infidel, and now I am proud to acknowledge the name of one who is willing to discard the old fables of the past in favor of that which is true and reliable.”

Perhaps because “infidel” carried such a strong connotation of moral disapproval by religionists, readers often adopted the term in ways that

man’ above the clouds, then the sooner we accept Atheism the better.” (Felix Adler, Atheism, a Lecture before the Society for Ethical Culture, Sunday, April 6, 1879. (New York: Cooperative Printer’s Assn., 1890), 17–18.


confronted its normative baggage. As one reader writes in verse: “And though I’m a ‘horrible Infidel,’/ (How they sneer who thus express It,)/ And Suffragist and Spiritualist./ I’m one that’s proud to confess it. - / For with hated name does glorious truth/ Perch high on fair reason’s steeple...”

Hence, “infidel” came already morally loaded, making it a relatively popular term with which to either confront and disprove the stereotype of the evil unbeliever or to embrace the reputation and scandalize the devout.

The term “atheist” was often presented in conjunction with “infidel.” In some cases, atheism and infidelity appear synonymous and interchangeable, though almost always printed in tandem: “Looking at the world at large, the Atheism and Infidelity of to-day is the medicine of the world.”

“The Infidel, or Atheist, whose mind has been educated and enlightened, can bear sorrow...” Elsewhere, atheism seems to constitute a more extreme version of infidelity, as when Thomas Jefferson, Aaron Burr, and Ethan Allen are described as “Infidels, if not Atheists.” Readers might describe other individuals as “Infidels and even Atheists.”

By comparison, it is safe to say that the term ‘atheist’ was often understood in primarily philosophical terms, harkening to a longer intellectual heritage. Thus, when a

39 Mrs. Jacob Martin, “Be True,” The Truth Seeker, March 1, 1875.
41 Mrs. Elmina Drake Slenker, The Truth Seeker, April 8, 1876, sec. Gems of Thought.
contributor describes the cooperation between “scientists and philosophers, Infidels and Atheists,” there is an implied correlation between infidelity as scientifically pragmatic and atheism as philosophically abstract. Readers frequently described atheism as an improper name for a more rigorous philosophical position:

The word Atheist means simply a person without an idea of God, and the word Atheism describes but one negativ quality of a very copious and extensiv positiv philosophy of which the word itself give no hint. This system is more properly called universology, natural cosmogony, or monism. Of course there may be individuals called Atheists who are very ignorant and not well versed in philosophy and science, but such are extremely scarce, if they exist at all.

Those who defined themselves as atheists, then, were purportedly defining their philosophical position with regard to the nature of reality, while those who defined themselves as infidels were more often stating their social position with regard to a religious milieu.

These understandings of atheism as simultaneously more extreme and more philosophical than infidelity have roots dating back to at least the 1830’s, when Abner Kneeland, editor of The Boston Investigator, became the last American tried and convicted of blasphemy. During his tenure as editor, Kneeland had published a number of articles defending without necessarily advocating atheism. And as early as 1834, The

---

45 A common writing convention of this time-period is to drop the final “e” from words ending “-ve.” I leave this convention intact throughout.
Boston Investigator provided the familiar distinction between atheism and infidelity: “We never have applied the word infidel to an Atheist; he who does not believe, no matter in what rules of faith, is an infidel. We are all infidels in some things, but an Atheist believes in nothing.”⁴⁸ Here, both atheism and infidelity are intellectual positions – questions of belief – but atheism is a more extreme and negative stance. When Kneeland was convicted in 1838 of atheism, he read before the Supreme Court of Boston his philosophical creed, originally published in the July 12, 1833 issue of the Investigator:

“Hence I am not an atheist but a pantheist; that is, instead of believing there is no God, I believe, in the abstract, that all is God, and that all power that is, is God, and that there is no power except that which proceeds from God.”⁴⁹ Both legally and socially, Kneeland’s attempt to distance his publications from accusations of atheism was unsuccessful.

When Horace Seaver took over editing The Boston Investigator, the number of articles defending atheism as well as the number of readers espousing atheism increased, yet the understanding of atheism articulated was almost exclusively philosophical. As Seaver editorialized, “Perhaps of all doctrines, atheism may be taught with safety to society. It never can influence many to either good or evil, for it is a cold abstraction not suited to

⁴⁸ “Atheism,” Boston Investigator, March 14, 1834.
⁴⁹ Abner Kneeland, Speech of Abner Kneeland Delivered Before the Supreme Court of the City of Boston, in His Own Defence, on an Indictment for Blasphemy. November Term, 1834 (J. Q. Adams, 1834), 16; Abner Kneeland, “A Philosophical Creed,” Boston Investigator, July 12, 1833.
any passion or feeling.”\textsuperscript{50} This may give us a clue as to why, in the second half of the nineteenth century, \textit{The Truth Seeker}’s readers more often employed language of ‘infidelity’ rather than ‘atheism.’ We can only speculate, but perhaps Seaver’s attempt to drive a wedge between atheism and immorality in defense of Kneeland’s character was successful enough that it separated atheism from social behavior and identity altogether.

In the \textit{Boston Investigator} and \textit{The Truth Seeker}, atheism is clearly a philosophical position first and a form of identification second, while infidelity refers more to social position than an intellectual one strictly defined.\textsuperscript{51} What is clear is that whether because atheism was considered more intellectually radical than infidelity or because atheism was understood primarily philosophically, the term was far less popular at the end of the nineteenth century than “infidel.” Even as one reader of \textit{The Truth Seeker} claims “I will remain a firm Atheist,” they immediately emphasize that “There is no name under the heavens that will classify us so well as the word Infidel.”\textsuperscript{52}

On the other side of ‘infidel’ was ‘Liberal,’ the identification of choice for many of \textit{The Truth Seeker}’s readers and contributors. Particularly following the formation of the National Liberal League in 1876, of which \textit{The Truth Seeker} was the official organ,

\textsuperscript{50} \textit{Boston Investigator}, October 14, 1846.
\textsuperscript{51} A rudimentary textual analysis bears out this claim. Analyzing digitized copies of \textit{The Truth Seeker Annuals} from 1880 to 1900, we can determine the ratios between generic or philosophical terms like ‘atheism’ or ‘infidelity’ on the one hand and personal or identifying terms like ‘atheist’ or ‘infidel’ on the other. The percentage of “atheistic” terms that refer to identity ranges between 43 and 71 percent, while the percentage of “infidelic” terms that refer to identity ranges between 60 and 84 percent, indicating a relatively greater use of “infidel” as a label for individual or collective identity than “atheist.” (Figs. 16 and 17 in Appendix)
\textsuperscript{52} J. Kinser, \textit{The Truth Seeker}, July 13, 1889, sec. Letters from Friends.
'Liberal' became overwhelmingly the most common term of identification for those opposed to institutional religion. The relationship between the Liberalism of the National Liberal League and political Liberalism in general is a murky one. As the Nine Demands of Liberalism, the official platform of the National Liberal League, make clear, the good Liberal places utmost importance on the religious question, demanding “that our entire political system shall be founded and administered on a purely secular basis, and whatever changes shall prove necessary to this end shall be consistently, unflinchingly and promptly made.”53 At the same time, this Liberalism maintains an unofficial emphasis on tolerance that encourages respectful disagreement and celebration of difference. As the Demands of Liberalism spoke only to the question of secular politics, 'Liberal' served as an appropriate term for those like Bennett who saw little benefit in exclusivity in self-identification.54 Some Liberals were infidels, some were atheists, some were both, most were neither. This should not discourage us from seeing The Truth Seeker as a valuable source for uncovering the roots of American atheism. Liberalism provided an umbrella under which disbelievers of various shades could debate, and it was through those debates that more exclusive forms of identity began to emerge.

53 “Demands of Liberalism,” The Truth Seeker, October 1873.
54 Despite the use of the term “secular” in the Liberal platform, other secularist language was relatively scarce on the pages of The Truth Seeker in its first decade. In general, it is used only in reference to the works of George Jacob Holyoake and other British secularists. By the end of the nineteenth century, “secularism” has begun to replace “Liberalism” as the political term of choice. Evidence of this transition includes that when the National Liberal League splintered in 1884 over the issue of whether to advocate repeal or reform of the Comstock Law of 1873, it reformed in 1885 as the American Secular Union.
In the early years of *The Truth Seeker*, questions of collective identity beyond terminology occupied a central position in ongoing debates. The first and one of the longest-running debates concerned the appropriate relationship between infidelity and the burgeoning Spiritualism movement. In October 1873, the second month of *The Truth Seeker*’s publication, Herman Wettstein began a series of contributions passionately denouncing the possibility of cooperating or finding common cause with Spiritualists, whom he believed would merely prolong the demise of American religion. A vigorous backlash in ensuing months indicates that his position was the minority one among subscribers, but *The Truth Seeker* continued to publish both sides of the ongoing debate through the following year.

Bennett himself espoused a belief-system which brought together materialism and Spiritualism – often to the consternation of some subscribers. According to Bradford, “Bennett…was a spiritualist decades before it became the rage of the Gilded Age,” presumably owing to the same impulse that drew him earlier in life to the Shakers, who inaugurated a number of practices foundational to the later Spiritualist movement. Bennett never shied from publicizing his personal beliefs. As George MacDonald would later write, “[Bennett’s] journalism was of the sort called personal.

---

The Truth Seeker was Bennett, and in advertising himself he advertised the paper.” 58 Nonetheless, Bennett’s choice of whether to emphasize his Spiritualism or his Materialism varied depending on context. In response to a claim in The Boston Investigator that Bennett had been “converted to spiritualism,” Bennett writes “The ‘conversion’ referred to has not been late nor sudden. For several years we have felt that we had received proofs of the existence of an intelligence not connected with physical bodies, and the Spiritual theory accounts for it to our mind better than any other.” 59 But Bennett is quick to defend the materialism of his Spiritualism: “Notwithstanding any leaning we may have towards the Spiritual philosophy, we are still a Materialist, believing that what is not matter, in some form or other, is nothing. If spirits really exist, they are real, organized bodies of refined or highly sublimated matter.” 60 Bennett thus confesses that he aspires to be a “connecting link” or “hyphen” between Materialists and Spiritualists. 61 At other times, Bennett was more aggressive in his attempts to avoid giving readers the impression that his spiritualism constituted religiosity. In response to one subscriber’s request for clarification of his beliefs, Bennett replies, “When proofs are placed before us of the existence of a God, we shall at once believe in him. Up to this time we have received no such proof, and consequently we are an unbeliever...Our

60 Ibid.
61 Ibid.
friend will be entirely justified in counting us an Atheist.” Similarly, upon entry to Albany Penitentiary, Bennett was supposedly asked whether he was a Protestant or Catholic, to which he said he was neither. Upon further questioning, Bennett claimed to have said, “I am an unbeliever, commonly called an Infidel, and that is why I am here.”

While Bennett saw no contradiction between his spiritualism and his infidelity, however, readers expressed consternation about his conviction even after his death. A frustrated editorial note in 1887 gives some idea of how prevalent this consternation was:

In answer to a question from a subscriber we may state— for about the fiftieth time—that D. M. Bennett was a Spiritualist and Atheist. That is, his faith was strong that the phenomena of Spiritualism proved another existence for mortals, and he had no idea whatever that a personal God existed. Sometimes Mr. Bennett expounded a philosophy akin to Pantheism, but on straight theological lines he would properly be put down as an Atheist.

Bennett stood, in many cases, for a broader debate about the relationship between Spiritualists and infidels which begins in the earliest issues of The Truth Seeker.

Most readers and contributors, in response to Wettstein’s criticism, advocated making

---

62 DM Bennett, “Three More Questions,” The Truth Seeker, June 19, 1878. Interestingly, Bennett went so far as to regard Spiritualism as providing evidence for the truth of atheism. “If any credit can be given to the messages said to have been brought from the denizens of the mystic realm—the spirit world—then it is just as difficult to find God there as it is here. No spirit has yet been heard of that has been able to find that mythical being or to demonstrate his existence.” (DM Bennett, “Spiritualism and Atheism,” The Truth Seeker, July 20, 1878.


64 “Editorial Notes,” The Truth Seeker, July 2, 1887. The concern about Bennett’s commitment to Materialism were surely not helped by his public infatuation, late in life, with the nascent Theosophical movement.
common cause with Spiritualists, whom Roderick Bradford claims made up about a quarter of *The Truth Seeker*’s subscribers.\(^{65}\)

Another early debate in *The Truth Seeker* concerned the use of the term “infidel.” A number of contributors in 1874 express a dissatisfaction with the term as a form of identification due to its ambiguity. In the March issue, two writers attribute this ambiguity to its deployment by Christian polemicists: “The term 'infidel' is in common use with Christian people in this country, as a term of reproach. It means nothing, as they use it.”\(^{66}\) Defining infidelity as unfaithfulness, this writer then regards the Christian believer as “the very biggest 'infidel' about town.”\(^{67}\) In light of the potential semantic overlap between Christianity and infidelity, one Quaker writer advocates abandoning the term: “I would suggest the propriety of using some other term as applied to us Free-Thinkers and Truth Seekers in place of that indefinite word infidel.”\(^{68}\) What made the word 'infidel' “indefinite,” to these writers, was apparently its context-dependence – one person’s infidelity was another’s orthodoxy depending on perspective. Thus, “orthodoxy is infidel to free enquiry and genuine Christianity or Free Religion.”\(^{69}\) Despite these reservations, however, the term ‘infidel’ seems to have continued to be a popular one among a portion of the Freethought community. Other correspondents were dismayed

---

\(^{67}\) Ibid. Emphasis original.
\(^{69}\) Ibid.
over the reluctance of some to celebrate their infidelity: “Why are so many Infidels so weak-kneed? Why are they afraid of their own free thoughts? Come out from your hiding places, and no longer give a seeming support to what you do not believe in. Be not ashamed of your high calling, but glory in being Infidels to the Christian superstition.”

Debates over the accuracy of terms like “infidel” or “atheist” simmered but rarely caused widespread shifts in opinion. By 1878, concern about the survival of “nicknames” and “party commonplaces” culminated in the adoption of a number of resolutions at the Freethinkers’ Convention at Watkins, NY – the convention at which Bennett was arrested for the second time:

> WHEREAS, the common use of the words Heretic, Infidel, Atheist, and others of like import only mislead the ignorant and offend the wise; therefore, Resolved. That their further use be discountenanced and discontinued by the Freethinkers and Liberalists of this and kindred conventions, and that we recommend to reformers everywhere the just use of words in all spoken and written relations of thought, that the righteous and rigorous phraseology of science may take the place of these theologic vulgarisms.

The resolutions represent a clear attempt to rescue Freethought from a lack of philosophical rigor. Nicknames “are serviceable only in so far as they truly characterize the individualities of nature and specialize the forming, reforming, or deforming tendencies of men and measures in history.” Thus, the resolutions advocated that these inaccurate terms be replaced as a means to remove Freethought from the realm of the

---

70 Wm. Willicott, “Organizing,” The Truth Seeker, November 1, 1874.
72 Ibid.
personal. “[I]n dismissing the terms theism, monotheism, polytheism, deism, pantheism, and atheism from the terminology of the scientific and positive schools, our position is logical, not personal; constructive, not destructive.”73 The necessity of maintaining a divide between the logical and the personal here explicitly raises the questions implicit in ongoing debates about terms like “infidelity” - to what extent should a collective identity accurately represent the intellectual or philosophical viewpoints of those who adopt it, and to what extent should it serve a strategic social function; is it possible to predicate an identity on the purely philosophical, or is identity inevitably personal? That these warnings went largely unheeded, evidenced by the increasing use of nicknames like “infidel” and “atheist” toward the end of the nineteenth century, suggests that the insistence that Freethought was a purely rational and philosophical movement divorced from personal (i.e. social, historical, nonrational) forces was myopic. One of the reasons that “infidel” only increased in popularity during this period is surely that it appealed to individuals’ very personal desires and sensibilities – that it provided something missing from the most accurate description of philosophical opinions. Infidelity was at least as much affective as it was intellectual – it captured and articulated, if only opaquely, some of the suprarational forces that go into the processes by which individuals define themselves in relation to others. If we wish to see those facets of identity that are

73 Ibid.

28
rendered invisible by a focus on the abstract, the intellectual, the rational, we have to shift our focus to the material, the sensate, and the nonrational.

2.4 Visibility in The Trial of DM Bennett

Adolf Reinach, a pupil of Husserl, is said to have taught a semester-long seminar exclusively on the phenomenology of the mailbox. At a time when phenomenology occupied a privileged philosophical position as a line of thought aimed at serious questions of human experience, Reinach's object of inquiry struck critics as trivial, but the question of the postal system and its role in shaping human connectivity is an important one. What kind of subject is the recipient of a mailed letter? How is one affected by a form of communication in which text is concealed within a package, carried by countless unfamiliar hands, deposited in a box, and then opened by a single recipient indicated by a geographical address? What relationships does a national postal service establish between a paying user and a government? The complex interminglings of public and private, personal and impersonal, and material and discursive enabled by a national postal system have profound but opaque implications for human participants. For the Freethought movement of the late nineteenth century, the mail would take on a pivotal role in driving infidels to grapple with both their modes of interaction and their collective self-presentation.

---

74 The truth of this legend is difficult to verify – Gadamer reports it only secondhand in his Philosophical Hermeneutics. [Hans-Georg Gadamer, Philosophical Hermeneutics (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1976), 133.]

75 Ibid.
In December 1879, DM Bennett was arrested for the third time, upon the charge of depositing prohibited (obscene) material in the mail. The materials in question were, by today’s standards and to many observers of the time, innocent enough – a pamphlet written by Ezra Heywood called *Cupid’s Yokes* about the oppressive tendencies of monogamy. It was a relatively well-known pamphlet within Freethought circles, having enjoyed a wide distribution for a number of years. Anthony Comstock, the fascinating and controversial special agent for the United States Postal Service and Secretary of the Society for the Suppression of Vice, lured Bennett into mailing a copy of the pamphlet to a fictitious recipient. The ensuing legal battle between Bennett and Comstock would become a notorious public affair and would set legal precedents concerning obscenity that would stand until the middle of the twentieth century.

The legacy of nineteenth century Comstockism and the trial of DM Bennett has been much analyzed by students of law and occupies the centerpiece of Roderick Bradford’s excellent biography of Bennett’s life. Here, I focus only on the question of the mail as it relates to infidelity and visibility. At issue in Bennett’s legal troubles was the potency of the US postal service in enabling the distribution of obscenity. District Attorney William Fiero, in addressing the jury during Bennett’s trial, summarized the importance of the mail: “And what does the United States Mail do? It reaches all these schools [seminaries]. Can you to-day calculate the influence of the United States mail for
good or evil upon the young and rising generation? It is beyond estimate.”

The presiding Judge Charles L. Benedict concurred with Fiero in stronger terms, saying:

If you think what the United States mails are, how they are protected by the law, where they go, the secrecy attending their operations, you will at once see that for the distribution of matter of any kind upon paper there is no other engine of equal power. It is the machine best adapted to the dissemination of obscene literature, because of the fact that it reaches every person, and letters delivered by the mail can be received in secret by the person to whom they are addressed, whether in their own or in fictitious names.

By the prosecution’s (and judge’s) logic, the mail constituted an unequaled agent for evil in its capacity to reach all people and to do so under the cover of secrecy. Focusing on the machinations of the postal service meant that the court could simultaneously highlight and defer the question of Bennett’s infidelity. The judge informed the jury that the issue was:

not a question of religion, nor a question of the freedom of the press...This defendant may entertain peculiar and improper notions on the marriage relation; he may be a Freethinker; he may be whatever he pleases; that should have no effect upon your deliberations...Freelovers and Freethinkers have a right to their views, and they may express them, and they may publish them, but they cannot publish them in connection with obscene matter and then send that matter through the mails.

Fiero went further in emphasizing that Bennett’s personal views were both legally irrelevant and personally reprehensible:

77 Ibid., 146–147.
78 Ibid., 149–150.
They are to-day more bold than ever before. They're sending obscene and indecent literature through the mails, and I ask you by your verdict, to say: In the expression of your views, Freelovers and Freethinkers, you may go so far as you . . . [sic] but 'when you come to put them on paper and send them through the mails of the United States, and reach the young and the old and all the people of the land, and contaminate them with your foul and pernicious thought and ideas, then we come in with the strong arm of the law and say, "Stop! thus far and no farther." . . . Let the Freelovers of the country embrace their ideas; let them, if they like, roll vice as a sweet morsel under their tongue; we spit it out of our mouths to-day, once and forever.79

Not surprisingly, Bennett and his defenders saw the judge's and district attorney's seemingly unnecessary rhetoric around Freethought as an attempt to influence the jury's opinion of Bennett's character. For Bennett and interim editor Eugene Macdonald, Bennett's opponents claimed to be concerned with obscenity as a technical matter while in fact seeking cover for a more ideological attack on infidelity: “I do not by any means object to the punishment of obscenity, but when the charge is only a pretext, and gotten up only to punish and persecute unbelievers not guilty of obscenity, the justice is most reprehensible.”80 In fact, all parties involved, including Bennett and his most radical supporters, agreed with the aim of suppressing obscenity. But, as Bennett's attorney, Abram Wakeman, argued, “[i]t is a charge under the cover of this statute to punish hetrodoxy [sic].”81

79 Ibid., 146. Today, we can only imagine exactly how Fiero characterized the “they” who are today more bold than ever; the preceding sentences were missed by the stenographer “because spoken in a lowly whisper.”
81 Bennett et al., Trial of D.M. Bennett, in the United States Circuit Court, 122.
In part, the claim that obscenity laws merely provided a cover for the suppression of infidelity was surely based on the importance of the mail for the distribution of Freethought literature. Mailing lists were crucially important for the survival and growth of *The Truth Seeker*. As a minoritarian viewpoint, Freethought relied on the magnificatory power of the mail to reach a wide enough audience to survive. By the same logic, suppression of the mail, even if not directly targeting Freethought, would always privilege dominant viewpoints:

> If the Christians are thus empowered to judge, the Infidel must be placed at great disadvantage. He will be sure to be condemned...If Materialists and Atheists were, at some time in the future, to come into power, and they were allowed to prohibit mail facilities for opinion’s sake, or upon the ground of morality, it would be very easy for them to say all belief in religions and superstitions is immoral and damaging to the rising generation, and consequently must be prohibited.

Bennett’s trial raised the issue of Freethought’s subordinate position in society – a position rendering the movement vulnerable to legal disruption and persecution – while at the same time explicitly tying this minoritarian position to the question of visibility. Acknowledging that one of the dangers of the postal system in contributing to the

---

82 In fact, *The Truth Seeker’s* mailing list would become, on more than one occasion, the site of a bitter dispute with a rival publisher. In 1879, John C. Bundy, editor of Chicago’s *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, acquired Bennett’s mailing list, which had been stolen the year prior, and sent subscribers publications of Bennett’s “scandalous” love letters to a potential mistress, dealing a major blow to Bennett’s reputation while he served his prison sentence. (Bradford, *D.M. Bennett: The Truth Seeker*, 227.) Over a century later, Madalyn Murray O’Hair allegedly commandeered the newspaper’s mailing list as part of an attempt at a forcible legal takeover, sending a letter to all subscribers asking them to “round out” their subscriptions to a new headquarters in Austin, TX and issuing the “Truth Seeker Newsletter” from her own press. (“Setting the Record Straight,” *Truth Seeker Magazine*, April 1995.)

The dissemination of obscene materials was that materials could be sent and received in secret, Bennett’s supporters were quick to argue that the interception of mail was the wrong way to suppress obscenity:

To forbid the transport of obscene matter by mail, leaving the express and freight lines free to carry it...is so glaring an example of how not to do it that no one but a wholly incapable obscene agent and his reverend backers would resort to it. If there are tons and tons of obscene matter, as the agent claims, certainly the recognized carriers for tons are the great freight forwarders and you never can suppress the transportation of tons of obscenity as long as the Erie canal remains open.  

The logic here pushes back against the claim that the mail constitutes a major vehicle for the dissemination of obscene material, but there is also an implicit claim concerning the visibility of the mail. The mail is indeed private, and this makes it an ineffective site for Comstock’s intervention. Instead:

The place where obscenity originates is the place to attack and uproot it. It has but few places of origin—it has many ways of circulation. It is printed somewhere, it is produced at some place, and the detective force of this country is equal to the task of finding out where and by whom...This kind of literature must have types, plates, and presses, like any other, and cannot be wholly hidden from observation.

From this perspective, Bennett is framed not as a peddler of obscenity operating through the occult vehicle of the mail, but as a transparent and honest printer. Indeed, Bennett was, even throughout his legal troubles, defiantly public about his willingness to print

---

85 Ibid.
and distribute *Cupid’s Yokes.*

This transparency served as the foundation of Wakeman’s defense of the pamphlet against the charge of obscenity. Why, Abram asked, if *Cupid’s Yokes* was obscene, did everyone hold it up “before the face of the world?” By emphasizing Bennett’s visibility, Wakeman strategically conceded the relationship between the postal service and the secrecy of the obscene. Obscene books are always “mailed secretly,” he claimed, but “vice loves darkness: virtue loves light.”

Ultimately, Bennett was to lose his case against Comstock and the Society for the Suppression of Vice, spending thirteen months in Albany Penitentiary. History would validate Bennett when, in 1957, the Supreme Court would replace the Hicklin test on which the obscenity of *Cupid’s Yokes* was determined, making room for the questions of intentionality and context that Wakeman attempted to raise in defending Bennett. But for the American freethinking community of the late nineteenth century, Bennett’s trial served as a moment highlighting the importance of visibility – not only of the individual, but of the material modes of communication by which the individual expresses their infidelity. This emphasis on the visibility of media would soon move

---

even closer to center stage with the introduction to *The Truth Seeker* of Watson Heston’s provocative cartoons.

### 2.5 Watson Heston and the Imprinting Pencil

*The Truth Seeker* broke new ground with the front page of the May 2, 1885 issue. There, for the first time, was a full-page drawing composed by Watson Heston, who was to provide illustrations for nearly every issue of *The Truth Seeker* from 1886 to 1900.

Heston was, by most accounts, a figure best understood through his illustrations. Biographically, there is little of note about Heston other than a not-so-subtle intimation that he was stubborn and unfriendly. The notice of his death in *The Truth Seeker* provides several textbook examples of passive and active aggression:

> Mr. Heston had a brilliant mind, and had his execution been equal to his conceptions would have taken a place among the best caricaturists of his day. It was his misfortune not to be docile under instruction. The Truth Seeker brought him to New York once that he might attend some art school and improve his touch, but the venture was not a gratifying success, and the "coarseness" of his work, of which many readers complained, was not modified. He was satisfied with the degree of skill he possessed, and seemed to regard attempt at improvement as waste of strength and time. Our relations with Mr. Heston were as cordial as he would permit them to be. He was not robust, ill health made him somewhat irritable, and he had a rather impulsive way of expressing his views to and about those who did not agree with him.⁸⁹

But if Heston was personally prickly, his illustrations made him a pivotal figure in the history of nineteenth-century Freethought. His illustrations were prolific, widely beloved, and expressed twin passions for religious and social reform. During the period when

---

Heston was publishing acerbic cartoons ridiculing religious convictions in *The Truth Seeker*, he was also publishing powerful illustrations for the cause of labor reform on the pages of Populist newspapers like *Sound Money* and *American Nonconformist*. The Boston Investigator was hardly exaggerating when it referred to him as “the artist-hero of Liberalism.”

For a thorough exploration of Heston’s role in the Populist movement, see Worth Robert Miller, *Populist Cartoons: An Illustrated History of the Third-Party Movement in the 1890s* (Kirksville: Truman State University Press, 2011). While Miller notes that “Heston almost never let his Populist and freethinker artwork overlap,” (163) a few of Heston’s *Truth Seeker* illustrations exhibit a special concern for the laboring classes – e.g. “The Workingman’s Burden,” (August 21, 1886) “The Case of Dr. McGlynn,” (February 12, 1887) and “The Way Church Debts are Lifted.” (February 11, 1888)

Heston’s first cartoon for *The Truth Seeker*, “The Modern Balaam,” (fig. 1) encapsulates at least two noteworthy facets of Heston’s later illustrations. First, it visually incarnates both protagonist and antagonist figures as well as abstract ideas. In Heston's illustration, the donkey (here, half-human) represents 'free people', while Balaam represents priestcraft, beating the donkey with the symbol of hell. In part, the representation of religious antagonists in Heston’s illustrations can be understood as a manifestation of a fundamental referentiality; Heston’s cartoons traffic in symbols borrowed from the American religious and social imaginary. “The Modern Balaam” recreates the Biblical story of Balaam, (Numbers 22-24) whose donkey refuses to continue because it sees an angel invisible to Balaam. Virtually all of Heston’s cartoons for *The Truth Seeker* would traffic in religious symbolism, sometimes by caricaturizing Biblical claims (as in his weekly back-page contributions of visually absurd literalizations of Biblical passages), sometimes by directly attacking those images with secular counterparts, and sometimes by celebrating quasi-religious ideals in the deification of scientific truth. At the same time, many of Heston's symbols would be borrowed from the stock of imagery common to American political cartoons.⁹² The angel

---

⁹² In fact, another facet of Heston’s illustrations epitomized in “The Modern Balaam” is that it commits a bit of what observers today might consider plagiarism. The cartoon is clearly visually based on Gustav Jaeger’s 1836 painting, “Bileam und der Engle,” along with the famous 1837 political cartoon “The Modern Balaam and his Ass” by Henry Robinson, perhaps the first visual representation of the Democratic party as a
depicted here would become one of Heston’s most prevalent symbols – adorned with the light of truth, wielding a scroll of Freethought in one hand and the sword of reason in the other, winged with the pages of infidel publications. This angel of reason would often be visually conflated with Columbia or Lady Liberty and paired with Uncle Sam.93 Thus, as Leigh Eric Schmidt writes, “For his freethinking admirers, Heston’s art provided the chief means of visualizing a secular nation; his lifework consisted in the prolific provision of emblems—of Enlightenment, anti-Catholicism, women’s emancipation, anti-evangelicalism, scientific progress, intellectual freedom, and strict donkey. (Donald Dewey, The Art of Ill Will: The Story of American Political Cartoons (New York: New York University Press, 2007), 17.) Some of Heston’s later cartoons would go further, particularly in borrowing imagery from his biggest obvious influence, the famous Harper’s Weekly cartoonist Thomas Nast. I note the following instances in which Heston’s cartoons tread dangerously close to Nast’s: (1) February 20, 1886’s “Once Upon a Time a Donkey Kicked a Lion, The Lion was Dead” echoes Nast’s famous 1870 “A Live Jackass Kicking a Dead Lion.” Heston takes his title from a Robert Ingersoll letter to the editor of the New York Observer on November 2, 1877, in which Ingersoll lamented the paper’s criticism of Thomas Paine, but all three – Nast, Ingersoll, and Heston – appear to be referencing Aesop’s fable “The Old Lion,” and perhaps its accompanying engraving in Samuel Croxall’s collection of fables (Samuel Croxall, Fables of Aesop and Others (Philadelphia: S. Probasco, 1831), 264.), suggesting more complexity than simple borrowing. (2) December 10, 1887’s “Our Undesirable Immigrants” directly echoes Nast’s famous 1871 “American River Ganges,” complete with the inventive depiction of Catholic bishops as crocodiles. (3) January 31, 1891’s “Trying to Keep the Sectarian Wolf out of our Schools” appears to directly trace components of Nast’s 1876 “Tilden’s Wolf at the Door.” Interestingly, Heston replaces Nast’s multiracial group of schoolkids with exclusively white children and replaces the figure of Uncle Sam with Lady Reason, suggesting both a racial homogenizing of secularists and a relative distrust of government. 90 A potential connection to the Goddess of Reason briefly enthroned by secularists during the French Revolution remains unclear. For a historical overview of the image of the Goddess of Liberty, its origins in the Roman Libertas Publica, and its conflation with the Goddess of Reason during the French Revolution, see E.H. Gombrich, “The Dream of Reason: Symbolism in the French Revolution,” The British Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies 2, Iss. 3 (1979), 187-205.
church-state separation—designed to make liberal secularism tangible.”

Beyond the representation of abstract Freethought ideals, Heston’s caricaturizing of religious antagonists and construction of freethinking protagonists contributed to the emergence of the sense of self emerging concurrently within the Freethought community. Second, “The Modern Balaam” exemplifies a textuality common in Heston’s cartoons. The ubiquitous labeling of visual symbols constructs a close relationship between the visual and the textual, extending but simultaneously altering prevalent metaphorical understandings of print media and subscribing publics as primarily textual. This close pairing of the visual and the textual deployed on the pages of The Truth Seeker, and reflected in descriptions from subscribers concerning the consumption of Heston’s cartoons, I argue, contributes to an understanding of infidel identity that distances itself from notions of logic and rationality, emphasizing instead non-rational acculturation. And the notion that infidel identity can be imprinted on the mind of the viewer against their rational judgment, in turn, generates an emphasis on a particularly militant form of visual evangelizing in which the goal is no longer conversion but defeat.

2.6 Infidel Identity Incarnate

I hav often heard people remark that “Christians were priestridden.” I understood the import of the language; but I was never so thoroughly impressed with the facts in the case as when I first saw that cartoon representing a donkey-man ridden by a priest. I exclaimed, audibly, “That is me to a lifelike

representation!” My mind ran back to early manhood, and all along through life, and I saw how exactly I was like a donkey-man, with a Presbyterian priest on my back, directing all my ways and actions...Thus it was for more than forty years, until I began to kick. Glory to THE TRUTH SEEKER for enabling me to become a KICKING DONKEY.95

For this subscriber to The Truth Seeker, and for many others, the visual image provides an unparalleled provocation to self-identification and definition. Upon a mere glimpse of “The Modern Balaam,” this man suddenly realizes the impotence of language to arouse reflection. The image spurs him to articulate a retroactive autobiography as he identifies himself with the donkey – a symbol loaded with conflicting connotations of gullible submission and stubborn resistance. The cartoon is not merely consumed by a passive viewer; it transforms him from passivity to kicking activity.

Throughout the period when Heston published his weekly cartoons, subscribers to The Truth Seeker frequently discussed the front-page images as accurate depictions of their identities. It wasn’t just that the editors “believed that these pictures help to define our position;”96 those who consumed the images saw them as provoking identification beyond philosophical position. “Complete the record with the fruits of all other systems of theology and their books, look at all the cartoons that may be devised to show human ignorance, superstition, and crime, and I apprehend you might ask. How can any sensible man help being an Atheist?”97 In addition to frequent attempts at both accurate

96 “The Cartoons,” The Truth Seeker, May 1, 1886.
and caricaturized representations of real-life freethinkers – most often, Thomas Paine or Robert Ingersoll – Heston regularly published images with which freethinking viewers could themselves identify. In some cases, a figure like the donkey-man of “The Modern Balaam” represented the individual prior to their liberation from the oppressive forces of priestcraft. In an 1886 cartoon, “A Model Faith-Cure Establishment,” a man is depicted on his knees being force-fed “total depravity.”98 A subscriber’s comment indicates the extent to which such an image provides a kind of former-self with which to identify: “That picture represents ME in a most truthful and impressiv manner...As soon as I saw that picture I said, 'How true to life in my case!'”99 In other cases, Heston depicted individuals who represented perhaps a protean stage of Freethought – a burgeoning awareness of their exploitation by religious institutions. Thus, for example, “The Teachings of the Gospel Practically Applied” depicts a priest pickpocketing a man while his barn burns in the background.100 The look of anger on the man’s face indicates a common sense among contributors to The Truth Seeker that the religious laity in America was approaching a tipping point at which a general rising sense of frustration would develop into outright infidelity if given the means of articulation.
In other cases, Heston’s cartoons incarnate the figure of the freethinker unfettered by religious forces. In 1888’s “The Cry of Collared Christians – ‘Don’t Hurt our Feelings,’” (fig. 2) the infidel is depicted as the embodiment of masculine civility.¹⁰¹

---

¹⁰¹ Here, Heston’s art reflects an ethos of masculinity prevalent in American visual culture in the 1890’s. David Morgan has described this ethos in the context of pictorial representations of the Biblical relationship between Jonathan and David as well as popular representations of Jesus at the turn of the century. In both cases, Morgan notes a “late nineteenth-century emphasis on virility and a belief in the necessity of physical culture for the successful formation of male character,” [David Morgan, Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 108.] indicating the close interrelationship between images of masculinity and theories of acculturation. Morgan attributes the increased “masculinization of values” toward the end of the nineteenth-century in part to the “postbellum explosion of industry, unprecedented urbanization, the shift from an economy of production to one of mass consumption, and the formation of dynastic wealth among the so-called captains of industry.” (David Morgan, Visual Piety, 110)
In contrast to the disheveled representative of religion, recoiling and aghast, the
mustachioed infidel here exudes strength. Behind him, the power lines and railroad
tracks symbolize scientific progress in contrast to the relics of the dark ages littering the
ground behind the Christian. The infidel’s breach of the “limit of human endurance”
represents a necessary reaction to the persecution by his religious opponent. Thus, the
figure with which Liberals and infidels are clearly encouraged to identify represents a
host of normative qualities, ranging from an affiliation with science to a stance of
aggressive confrontation (in the guise of self-defense) with religious forces.
Figure 3: Watson Heston, "A Hint," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, September 22, 1888

This confrontational stance served, in Heston's cartoons, to demarcate boundaries both internal and external to a freethinking or Liberal collective. In some cases, Heston's illustrations established a clear contrast between a united Liberal camp and its religious opponents. In 1888's "A Hint," (fig. 3) the Liberal camp is depicted literally, with the familiar freethinking everyman guarding the entryway. He points to a sign above his head which reads, "Free to everybody. But no rubbish admitted! Our sanitary regulations will not allow us to admit any dead things or unhealthy baggage.” Seeking entrance are two men carrying the unhealthy baggage of "stale dogmas,”
“mouldy opinion,” and “Biblical morals and defunct doctrines,” along with a woman carrying an apparently dead and rotting baby labeled “dead creed” - a particularly potent representation given the importance of the figure of the child as a symbol of future progress and survival of infidel identity.\textsuperscript{102} Here, the representation of a Liberal collectivity is one of unity in tolerance; the claim that the camp is “free to everybody” is belied by the obvious policing of the border, and this apparent contradiction is justified as a matter of “sanitary regulations.” It is an image of literal purification arising from an anxiety concerning religious ideas as somehow contaminating. Hence, the unity of the liberal camp is predicated on a kind of negativity distinct from ideological purity – a collectivity defined not by agreement but by being free of pollutants.\textsuperscript{103}

But while the visualized opposition between the unbelieving and the believing sometimes served to construct a unified freethinking or Liberal collective, the necessity for confrontation with the religious majority also served at times to render divisions internal to infidelity. The confrontational stance is affirmed forcefully in 1887’s “To Be or Not To Be’ – A Hint to the Timid.” The image is comprised of two scenes. In the first,

\textsuperscript{102} By way of comparison, see Watson Heston, “Faith and Reason – Or Tastes Natural and Unnatural,” Illustration, \textit{The Truth Seeker}, April 18, 1891, in which “Freethought” is depicted as an infant in the arms of “Reason.”

\textsuperscript{103} See also Watson Heston, “The Infallible Judgment of the Majority – The Argument of Numbers,” Illustration, \textit{The Truth Seeker}, July 12, 1890, in which an unbelieving man and boy stand in opposition to a plurality of religious opponents: Pope Leo XIII, Protestant orator Thomas De Witt Talmage, a Native American, an African American Reverend (likely John Jasper), a group of Puritans, and a group of children who allege to believe in Santa Claus. Here, the unity of the “unbelieving minority” is implied in opposition to the plurality of the majority. Where the majority, “the knowing ones of all nations,” is comprised at least partially of real historical figures, the minority is presented as archetype.
a band of brave men marches to war, promising no quarter “when no foe appears in view.” In the second scene, when the scarecrows of public patronage, public opinion, and excommunication bar the way, the same men either flee in terror or humbly prostrate themselves. The image, “dedicated to hypocrites, moral cowards, and others whose great protensions and little grit proclaim they have more wind than wit,” represents a strikingly normative message for freethinkers. At a time when the text of *The Truth Seeker* repeatedly affirms the principles of Liberalism, the message here is one of relative intolerance – not for believers, but for those who fail to confront believers forcefully enough.
Figure 4: Watson Heston, "Two Ways of Dealing with the Tiger," Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, January 11, 1890
In “Two Ways of Dealing with the Tiger,” (fig. 4) a contrast is established between those who would attempt to use moral suasion on a tiger representing ecclesiasticism and those who would seek to exterminate the tiger. The clear denigration of the former option is depicted not only through the figure of the tiger (presumably immune to appeals to reason) and the subservient rhetoric on the paper (“we would not hurt your feelings for the world!”), but also through the visual depiction of the human figures. The figure representing moral suasion is again disheveled, or perhaps his hair stands on end out of fear, while the figure representing extermination is well-groomed and attired in a way that displays his class and physical strength. Here, the contrast between courage and timidity, then, is correlated with that between rationality or moral suasion and the non-rationality of brute force and the implication that a willingness to injure feelings means a step beyond the rational into the domain of the personal.

The distinction between timid and courageous infidels is but one of many contrasts established visually in Heston’s cartoons. Of the various tropes deployed by Heston, one of the most prevalent is the establishment of clear visual contrasts. In some cases, a line internal to the scene divides terrain between the side of Freethought and the side of religion. Thus, for example, the “limit of human endurance” depicted in “The
Cry of Collared Christians” corresponds with the line between Church and State that Uncle Sam is supposed to guard in “What Uncle Sam Should Do.” 104

Figure 5: Watson Heston, “The Contest Between Theology and Skepticism,” Illustration, The Truth Seeker, October 27, 1888.

At times, the dividing line internal to the scene is constructed with a visual language more immanent to the subject depicted. For example, in “The Contest Between Theology and Skepticism,” (fig. 5) theologians stoke the fires of hell while skeptics attempt to extinguish them, generating a massive plume of smoke and steam that renders the image primarily a representation of the uncrossable division between the

two groups – the site of any potential meeting between the two camps is literally hell. In other cases, the line of division separates two separate and parallel scenes, as in “Two Ways of Dealing With The Tiger” or in “Now and Then,” in which the Statue of Liberty backed by light on the left is replaced on the right with a statue of Popery swathed in darkness.\(^{105}\) Similarly, in “Which Shall We Hav?,” Columbia stands on the left with the American flag in front of the American Eagle and a monument celebrating free schools and an American republic while on the right, a priest stands in the same position, having impaled the Eagle with his crosier in front of a monument celebrating parochial schools and an American monarchy.\(^{106}\)

---


Another trope deployed by Heston for the purpose of visualizing a contrast was that of the crossroads. In “A Choice for Children – An Old Allegory Remodeled,” two children stand at a fork between “The Freethought Road” and “The Orthodox Route.” While the orthodox route is loosely littered with death, decay, fraud,

---

107 The “allegory remodeled” could be a reference to Ezekiel 21:19: “‘Son of man, mark out two roads for the sword of the king of Babylon to take, both starting from the same country. Make a signpost where the road branches off to the city.’ More likely, Heston refers to the story of Hercules at the Crossroads described in Xenophon’s *Memorabilia* 2.1.21-34. This allegory, in which Hercules must choose between the path of virtue and that of vice, was a subject of engravings during the Enlightenment. See for example John Wierix’s sixteenth-century *Herkules am Scheidewege* and Giacomo Frey’s eighteenth-century *Hercules at the Crossroads of Vice and Virtue*. 

---

52
superstition, ignorance, etc., the Freethought road represents a regimented climb up the mountain of truth. As we will see shortly, the figure of the child is crucial here, as children were widely understood to be the most important vehicles for the cultivation of infidel subjectivity. This image does more than establish a visual contrast between Freethought and orthodoxy. It represents this contrast temporally as a largely-irreversible life decision. These children must make a choice here and now, in their youth, and the path they take will continuously take them further from the possibility of return. By this logic, the difference between Freethought and orthodoxy is not to be understood in philosophical terms as if it could be overcome by intellectual effort, but is better understood in biographical terms as a consequence of choices made in youth. Hence the importance of the secular school as the first step up the long path to liberty and truth.

Heston’s cartoons trafficked in the proliferation of contrasts and bifurcations, both internal and external to infidelity. A fundamental opposition between a Liberal camp composed of various infidels and freethinkers, united in their respect for difference, gave way to more fine-tuned distinctions between good and bad infidels. In some cases, visual contrasts served merely to distinguish alternative attitudes or convictions, as in the distinction between timid and courageous unbelievers. In other cases, contrasts served to distinguish purportedly incommensurable or insurmountable differences between subjects, as in the children forced to choose between a life of
religion and a life of freethinking. What is more, Heston’s illustrations themselves came
to symbolize, in a more general or abstract sense, these very divisions. While the
majority of subscribers seemed to love Heston’s cartoons, a sizeable minority dissented
to their crass abandonment of reason and their propensity to offend the religious.
Disagreements over the role of the image then came to stand in for disagreements over
the appropriate behaviors and attitudes of unbelievers:

Now, my brother Freethinkers, you who oppose the cartoons on account of your
Christian neighbors are very tender footed. Are you not giving aid and favor to
superstition, and wounding Freethought, in opposing the cartoons? This
halfway, “milk-and-cider,” won’t do for an Infidel. Lay aside every vestige of
superstition, and come right up to the help of Freethought against superstition in
every shape. Help is what we want; don’t retard our progress.108

Heston’s cartoons signaled a victory for those who rejected the idea that Freethought
should be, as the Watkins Convention resolution had put it in 1878, “logical, not
personal.” The ability of the cartoon to hurt feelings – to offend – indicates just how
personal infidelity could be. If the early years of The Truth Seeker were defined by an
embrace of plurality and a widespread disinterest in exclusive identification, Heston’s
images constituted a provocation to subscribers to choose a side in a number of
distinctions that cut through the heart of personal identity. And these distinctions, in
turn, were both visualized by Heston’s pencil and understood metaphorically in the

relationship between image and text – pencil and pen. It is to this relationship that we now turn.

### 2.7 Imprinting the Textual Image

Watson Heston's *Truth Seeker* cartoons vacillated between complementing and superseding the printed word. At a basic level, the images were often inextricable from textual reading practices. Pictures were sometimes accompanied by detailed explanations of their meaning or relevance to current events written by the editors. And the cartoons themselves relied heavily on a kind of textual labeling that presented illustration as condensed argumentation. 1887’s “Bait for the Credulous” (fig. 7) offers a useful example.
Two children ponder a monstrous bear trap. Each individual component of the trap is labeled in such a way as to construct a theological argument. The two jaws of the trap are labeled “Roman Catholicism” and “Protestantism.” The handle is labeled “priestcraft,” with “selfishness” and “brutality” inscribed on the inside of the handle. The bait – an apple labeled “vicarious atonement” sits atop a pressure plate labeled “faith,” which itself is supported by “ignorance” and triggered by “deceit.” The entire apparatus rests on the Vulgate and Holy Bible. Here, then, a theological argument is presented in highly condensed form by way of the marriage of image and text. The
various implications of this argument – that Protestantism and Roman Catholicism cooperate as two sides of a more general religious mechanism; that vicarious atonement is bait intended only to lure unwitting victims into danger; that faith is undergirded only by ignorance; that priestcraft is primarily a tool, composed of selfishness and brutality, for wielding this terrible mechanism; etc. – are not explicitly articulated, but emerge out of the relationships between visualized parts. And crucially, it is the viewing subject who is tasked with constructing these relationships. The bulk of the argument is unsaid because shown, and the viewer, whether at the level of conscious awareness or not, does much of the work in constituting the theological reasoning implicit in the image. In this example, then, the cartoon image fundamentally relies on the marriage of textuality and visuality.

Those scholars who have attended most closely to the particular potency of the political cartoon have hailed from the field of visual argumentation, which emerged in earnest with a 1996 double issue of *Argument and Advocacy*. Methodologies and theoretical focuses vary within the field, but one frequently used concept will serve well for our concern – the enthymeme. In Aristotle’s original formulation, an enthymeme is

---

109 Volume 33, nos. 1 (June 22, 1996) and 2 (September 22, 1996)
a rhetorical syllogism in which one or more premises is left out, often because it is sufficiently self-evident that it will be filled in by the listener.\textsuperscript{111} It is the taking-into-account of the relationship between the speaker and the listener which renders the enthymeme into a useful lens through which to theorize the cartoon. Thus, for example, Martin J. Medhurst and Michael A. Desousa have theorized the enthymematic tendency of the political cartoon as one of the sources of its potency. In their analysis, cartoon enacts a reversal of a classical understanding of memory. By this understanding, memory relies on “the speaker’s ability to construct a mental image, a psychological photograph, which could be populated with specific icons. The icons could then be associated with particular ideas or topics and the placement of the icons correlated with the order in which the ideas were to be expounded. Movement was from visual sign (constructed mentally) to specific idea to oral discourse.”\textsuperscript{112} By contrast, the “graphic rhetoric” of the cartoon begins with the selection of a specific idea and a corresponding visual sign with which to express it. “The cartoonist constructs his frame in such a manner as to compress into a single image the various streams of cultural consciousness

\textsuperscript{111} Aristotle, \textit{The Rhetoric of Aristotle} (Macmillan and Company, 1886), 16.

from which he has drawn his idea.”¹¹³ In Heston’s case, images and ideas are drawn from a number of such streams – one consisting of predominantly Protestant and Catholic theological symbols, one consisting of real figures from Freethought and religious imagined communities, one consisting of symbols for American political and civil life borrowed from the political cartoons of Thomas Nast and others, and so on.

Viewers of Heston’s cartoons “are not, therefore, processing a single, simple image when they place an interpretation on a caricature. Instead, they are unpacking one or more layers of available cultural consciousness, which the cartoon has evoked from them.”¹¹⁴ The ability to process Heston’s images requires a familiarity with theological symbols, current events and figures in American religious life, and ongoing debates playing out among Liberals, Spiritualists, and variously-defined infidels on the pages of The Truth Seeker. This is all to say that the eager reception of Heston’s cartoons presumed a degree of agreement among viewers concerning how to “read” the infidel image. As Medhurst and DeSousa argue, “Cartoons ‘work’ to the extent that readers share in the communal consciousness, the available means of cultural symbology, and are able to recognize that shared locus of meaning as expressed by the caricature.”¹¹⁵ What is more, Medhurst and DeSousa’s analysis reminds us of the importance of memory in both the function of the cartoon and the articulation of collective identity. The close marriage between visuality

¹¹³ Ibid., 220.
¹¹⁴ Ibid.
¹¹⁵ Ibid.
and textuality in the cartoon serves to amplify the “compressing and condensing function of memory.” The cartoon delegates the responsibility to remember to the viewer, not by leaving out information as in the classic Aristotelian enthymeme, but by compressing it into a highly condensed visual form. “Unlike the rhetorical syllogism where one part is usually left unspoken, caricature achieves its enthymematic nature by including, in compressed form, the entire universe of discourse on the given topic.”

Based on subscriber responses to the introduction of cartoons to *The Truth Seeker*, Heston’s images were widely regarded as simultaneously replacing and extending the power of the printed word by means of this enthymematic compression. The images were repeatedly said to “speak volumes,” often in a language somehow more potent than words. They spoke “louder and with more force than words,” they were “silent sermons” – “everyone of them is a sermon in itself.” – and perhaps most significantly for our purposes, they spoke in a language that somehow abjured the rational or logical. By speaking “in a language that cannot be misunderstood,” or “in a

---

116 Ibid.
117 Ibid.
way...that cannot be answered or denied,“¹²³ Heston’s images were taken to occupy a
privileged position with respect to pure text, which relied too heavily on logic, suasion,
and reason to reach the unconverted. “By pictures even Roman Catholics can be
reached, and between them and the Liberals who enjoy the solid philosophy of
Freethought there is an immense intellectual country peopled by those who must be
reached in a variety of ways, and to whom pictures are more powerful than logic.”¹²⁴
Here, then, we are beginning to touch on the question of visual missionary work, but for
now we must be content to recognize that Heston’s cartoon images were frequently
understood as simultaneously textual to some extent, and yet bearing the potential to
move beyond textuality’s reliance on rational assent. It is worth noting, also, that there is
an important conflation in these metaphors between the printed word and the spoken
word. That Heston’s cartoons were described as silent sermons, for example, posits a
relationship between the visual and the oral, which actually sublates the textual into a
more general linguistic category. It is the word, either printed or spoken, which stands
in opposition to the image. In other words, the conflation of the textual and the oral
serves to privilege a binary between the image and the word, such that the word comes
to represent the rational while the image embodies the sensate.

¹²⁴ “Shall We Illustrate the Truth Seeker?,” *The Truth Seeker*, October 31, 1885.
This simultaneous bifurcation and coordination of the visual and the linguistic was discussed at times with tropes of pen and pencil. The ink pen was familiar to readers of *The Truth Seeker* as a symbol of rational argumentation. If the printing press was a mere machine that put words to paper, Bennett’s pen possessed an aura of inspiration in its ability to reveal truth to the reader. As one subscriber writes, “My God is the great and wise power (if you please) which enables the wise and good to come near and guide your pen in the silent hours spent in your sanctum.” At the same time, ink frequently usurped qualities from religious symbols: “The Ink – yes, the *ink* – spilled on THE TRUTH SEEKER once a month in teaching the true Science of Life, will do more to save your soul (if you have one) than all the 'blood' ever shed from Jesus Christ down to Mary Dyer.” In Heston’s illustrations, the pen was visualized as a weapon in the war against religion – for example, a mighty fountain-pen-spear lofted by Robert Ingersoll. And if Bennett and Ingersoll were the men holding the pens, Heston was the man with a pencil. The pen and the pencil stood in for two ways of engaging with religion – with reason, or with ridicule. “It is impossible to describe in full with the pen the hypocrisy and falseness of the orthodox church without the aid of the artist’s pencil.

127 Watson Heston, “Truth from a Churchman Illustrated,” Illustration, *The Truth Seeker*, April 3, 1886. The visual trope of the pen as a weapon, along with metonymic linguistic comparisons of pens and swords, is obviously an old and catholic one, used for example during the Reformation to visualize Luther’s assault on Pope Leo X (e.g. Grale, Conrad. *Göttlicher Schriftmessiger, Woldenackwürdiger Traum, Welchen Der Hochlöbliche...Churfürst Friedrich Zu Sachsen...3 Mal Nacheinander Gehabt...*, 1617.) and more recently in response to the radical attacks on satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo*. 
With both combined in THE TRUTH SEEKER old orthodoxy shall receive double defeat."¹²⁸ That is to say that the symbolism of the pen and the pencil – of words of reason and images of ridicule – served to identify two prongs of the same weapon.

The minority of Truth Seeker subscribers who opposed the publication of Heston's cartoons expressed a passionate disappointment predicated on the understanding of images as nonrational. The editors gave voice to a common complaint when they published the words of rival Freethought publication the Independent Pulpit, run by JD Shaw out of Waco, Texas: “There is great danger...that the ridiculous be allowed to usurp the place of the sensible...Ridicule and contempt may serve to gratify the minds of the extremely prejudiced, but rarely accomplish anything in an argument.”¹²⁹ Unhappy readers regarded the pictures as an attempt to “appeal to man's sensual nature.”¹³⁰ The notion that the image arrogates the role of the printed word in achieving rational assent is furthermore connected, by critics, to the question of available room in the mediascape articulated earlier as the foundation of tolerance and pluralism:

We have our Christian friends right in our own families – the wife and children Christian, the father pagan, and vice versa. Tis said, that the owl and rattlesnake and prairie dog will all liv in the same hole happily together, but if some cartoon of an animal should come prowling around and crawl into the hole, it would without doubt break up that happy family...if we behave tolerably well we can liv in the same hole with Christian.¹³¹

¹²⁹ The Truth Seeker, February 20, 1886, sec. What Other Papers Say.
There is an implicit analogue here between two kinds of occupation of space. The prevalent opinion that the image takes up too much space on the pages of The Truth Seeker that would be better occupied by rational text\textsuperscript{132} corresponds with the concern that infidels might occupy too much space in the social imaginary, alienating those religionists with which they would otherwise cohabit. The immediate response from The Truth Seeker’s editors is telling: “When there are Christians and pagans, as Mr. Gill calls the Infidels, in one family, we fail to see why each may not hav his or her favorit journal, and yet get along peacefully.”\textsuperscript{133} There are two notable elements to this response. First, the editors change Gill’s “pagans” to “Infidels,” indicating an implicit alignment between the defense of Heston’s images and the attempt to unify a collective Infidel identity. Second, the question of room has been deferred to an external realm. Recall Bennett’s insistence in the first issue of The Truth Seeker that there is ample room for all perspectives to share the same terrain. The appeal to ample room was a justification for the inclusion of multiple perspectives in one publication. Here, the logic is slightly mutated. The appeal to the ampleness of the mediascape still serves to justify tolerance, but the mechanism of that tolerance is a process of differentiation rather than negotiation. Alternate perspectives are encouraged to seek out alternate publications. This is a subtle but important distinction between coalescence and fragmentation of


\textsuperscript{133} “Peace With Honor (editor Response),” The Truth Seeker, July 3, 1886.
reading publics. It demonstrates that the image, more so than the text, enabled a widening rift between an ideal of Freethought – dispassionate, disembodied, and open to negotiation – and the reality of infidel subjects – passionate, embodied, and prone to fragmentation.

2.8 Impressionable Children: Acculturating New Infidels

The supra-rationality of the image is perhaps why Heston’s cartoons were frequently discussed with relation to children and questions of subject-formation. If the medium of print provided the metaphors with which subscribers to The Truth Seeker discussed individual and collective identity, the engraved image became a potent symbol for processes of acculturation which, by nature of their independence from the realm of the rational, were understood to be uniquely permanent. At the same time, the figure of the child became the symbol of the acculturated subject, vulnerable to a kind of imprinting that would render them into either permanent believers or permanent unbelievers.

It is important to situate these understandings of Heston’s cartoons in the broader visual ecology of nineteenth-century American religion. The emphasis on children and on images as appropriate vehicles for appealing to them was not unique to the freethinking movement. As David Morgan notes, “the early nineteenth century was
a watershed in the history of illustrated books.” 134 Owing in part to the Second Great Awakening and the movement to establish publicly funded common schools, the antebellum period in America was marked by an expansion of illustrated primers and school books. 135 Hence, a close association between the printed image and an educational civilizing project predated and informed readings of secular cartoons. “As part of liberty’s arsenal of education, images were considered a tool for inculcating virtue and assimilating whoever was different (immigrants) or unformed (children).” 136

The role of the child thus becomes paramount in analyzing religious imagery. Morgan understands picture Bibles of the nineteenth century as tools for “forming the young and… nurturing lifelong faith.” 137 Heston’s illustrations should be understood as attempts to redeploy this understanding, seizing upon the power of images as “a kind of moral technology.” 138 As Gail Schmunk Murray argues in American Children’s Literature and the Construction of Childhood, children’s literature was seen by many as a privileged means by which to inculcate Christian morality in the future generation during a time of social anxiety provoked by rapid urbanization and industrialization. 139 Thus, visuality

135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 53.
137 David Morgan, Protestants & Pictures (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 201.
seemed to possess a unique ability to engender permanent identities which could be imprinted on the malleable mind of the child. Morgan’s citation of a hieroglyphic Bible published in 1821 indicates the extent to which the rhetoric of permanent imprinting predates discussions on the pages of The Truth Seeker concerning young infidels: “To imprint on the memory of youth by lively and sensible images, the sacred and important truths of Holy Writ, and to engage the attention, by striking the eye, and to make the lesson delightful as well as profitable to the juvenile mind, is the object of the following pages.”

This visual ecology is expanded when we consider the celebrity of Thomas Nast’s political cartoons as propagandistic vehicles for rectifying political injustice and activating the subject to political consciousness. That is to say, the religious understanding of imagery as a moral technology was balanced by a political reading of the image as a trigger or provocation, inciting Republican commitment and persuading by feeling rather than rational argumentation. But both Protestant readings of religious imagery and secular readings of political cartoons indicate an emotional disposition toward the printed image, in which images “do not merely symbolize…unseen dimensions of personal and collective identity,” but “are the material interface with them – surfaces that turn seeing into feeling and vice versa.”

\[141\] David Morgan, “Image,” 97.
visual rhetoric familiar to conservative Protestantism as means of arguing more effectively – that is, emotionally – against it. The taking up of this sort of rhetoric among infidels and freethinkers suggests an intuitive degree of isomorphism with the surrounding Protestant culture. By this logic, it follows that the increasing emphasis on imagery as a means for reaching the minds of children attends a corresponding emphasis, at the end of the nineteenth century, on the reproduction not just of infidel ideas but of infidel subjects.

Joanne Ellen Passet’s insightful article on Freethought children’s literature of the late nineteenth century gives a glimpse into the role that the figure of the child played in cultivating an emphasis on infidel identity. Fortuitously, Passet focuses on The Truth Seeker – in particular, on a section of The Truth Seeker called the “Children’s Corner,” found toward the back of issues from November 1883 to August 1912. The section, curated by Susan Wixon, consisted of four columns of easily-approached essays on science and morality, poems and short stories, pictorial riddles, and excerpts of letters from children aged six to twenty-four. One of the first things that becomes obvious from Passet’s rigorous analysis of published letters is that Heston’s cartoons were often used in the teaching of children, demonstrating a particularly strong relationship to the

---

Demographic analysis is based on Passet’s correlation of personal information provided by contributors between 1885 and 1893 with available census data. Passet notes that most contributors over the age of fifteen wrote to share memories of their childhood engagements with the column. The average age of contributors was eleven. Joanne Ellen Passet, “Freethought Children’s Literature and the Construction of Religious Identity in Late-Nineteenth-Century America,” Book History 8, no. 1 (2005): 111–112.
construction of identity. While, for Passet, “print culture played a vital role in the 
construction of the religious identities of late-nineteenth-century freethinkers’ children” 
by providing “an imagined community consisting of readers most never would 
meet,”143 Heston’s cartoons incarnated that religious identity in visual form, providing a 
depth and texture that transformed an imagined community into an imaged one. 

And while children eagerly consumed Heston’s cartoons, adult subscribers were 
equally eager to take advantage of the image’s power in transforming consumption into 
mobilization. “I find that the children become interested in the ‘pictures’ and that is what 
we want. We must get hold of the young mind and try and guard it against the dwarfing 
and demoralizing influences of superstition and priestcraft.”144 “It is beyond question a 
thing of fact that the minds of young children (who must be the coming army of 
Liberals) are greatly influenced by this thing of wall mottoes, emblems, pictures, 
designs, etc.”145 Perhaps most tellingly, Susan Wixon, curator of the Childrens’ Corner, 
argued forcefully for the power of the image to imprint information upon the mind of 
the child:

Pictures convey many lessons that we learn by a glance, as it were. They often 
make a deeper impression than the printed word, and you hav made a great hit 
by introducing them into The Truth Seeker, for not only will they be of use to the 
grown reader, but children who cannot understand the thoughtful essays of

143 Ibid., 124.
older minds will readily grasp the meaning...and thus great facts may be implanted upon the brain, never to be effaced.  

The notion of “implanting” information on the brain here is by no means atypical of discussions of how children were understood to consume Heston’s illustrations. During the period when Heston's cartoons were published, the issue of permanence became paramount in discussions of their consumption. Illustrations had more “lasting effect than descriptiv words can ever tell. The imprint on the mind will last when words are forgotten.”  

And often, this permanence was articulated through metaphors based on technology, whether associated with printing or Spiritualism. Thus, for example, according to prominent Shaker Elijah Myrick, illustrations “daguerreotype the subject on the mind more than any sermon of words can do, and which few memories can hold. These pictures are arguments that children can comprehend and remain a lifelong history. They will stimulate 'eternal vigilance.'” Or as another contributor claims, “The eye is easier reached than the ear, and its electric flashes upon the mind are far more vivid than telegrams from the ear. Hearing is understanding, but seeing is believing.”  

These technological metaphors, then, enhance the understanding that the image bypasses rationality, short-circuiting processes of subject-formation. “The best logic by

149 O. Richardson, The Truth Seeker, April 10, 1886, sec. Letters from Friends. See also Nelson Hunt, The Truth Seeker, December 4, 1886, sec. Letters from Friends: “The pictures are the glory of our noble old TRUTHSEEKER. Like a flash they impress upon the mind truths never to be forgotten.”
mouth or pen...is nought in comparison with an artistic illustration. It strikes the mind of everybody and leaves an impression never to be eradicated by either old or young.”

Where the printed word aims to compel the reader to submit voluntarily, the image is calculated to “impress forcibly on the mind those wrongs it wars against and to imprint them indelibly and ineffaceably upon the memory.”

To understand the mind as a daguerreotype plate was to operate in a traffic of images taken from sensory experience. The highly mechanical nature of these media technologies help to construct the subject as passive, imbuing images with a potent ambivalence as both deleterious and constructive.

In the face of this ambivalence, one of the qualities that made children the site of a burgeoning preoccupation with permanence of identity was the purported malleability of their minds. If the dominant metaphor for discussions of acculturation and individuation within the Freethought community was that of imprinting, then the notion of a youthful mind susceptible to shaping and molding was an appropriate corresponding metaphor. This is to suggest that the material specificity of print media and visual engraving provided a set of metaphors – of (im)printing, engraving, etching, etc. – which contributed to an emphasis on identity-formation as a process imposed on a vulnerable and receptive mind rather than willfully enacted through reason. The

---

externality of this process, then, contributes to a gradual shift away from principles of rational persuasion and textual debate and toward a kind of un-willing evangelizing.

### 2.9 Missionary Work

From the earliest publication of Heston’s cartoons, it is clear that they were intended to serve as a missionary tool. Upon the publication of Heston’s first image, “The Modern Balaam,” the editors wrote, “We hope a large number will be ordered, and posted up everywhere.” Judging by subscribers’ discussions of the cartoons, this hope was justified. Individuals frequently expressed a desire to use the images to confront believers. “I want them to send to some orthodox friends. It is the most appropriate illustration I hav seen. I would like to be able to scatter thousands of them around the country.” “The wonder is, too, how any lover of humanity, science, right, and reform, in circumstances above want, can refrain from spreading it broadcast in their neighborhoods.” Hence, directly adopting the strategies of their religious foes, Liberals were urged to “place them where they will be able to do missionary work.”

And while some subscribers were apparently posting Heston’s images in public spaces, as many subscribers claimed to have framed them and displayed them in their own homes. What might appear to be a private question of home décor was more often articulated as fulfilling the missionizing impulse by transforming the home into “a

---

Freethought haven where...neighbors who stopped for a visit would be exposed to liberal ideas.”¹⁵⁶ Subscribers frequently describe hanging pictures prominently to be observed by visiting Christians: “I put each one up in a frame, and it is fun to see Christians look at them. They appear to hav the same influence on them that a red rag has on a bull.”¹⁵⁷ Here, the intent is apparently not to persuade unwitting viewers of the image's truth, but primarily to shock and disturb the viewer's sensibilities. “When my Christian friends come to see me I show them, and it grieves them so that they can hardly stand the sight.”¹⁵⁸ While opponents of the pictures lamented their tendency to alienate potential converts who could be persuaded by reason, it appears that those most enthusiastic about the pictures had little faith in the power of persuasion. Instead, language of voluntary assent to the logic of text was replaced with metaphors of warfare and violence at the hands of the image. “The church is in abject fear of the cartoonist. It is as afraid of a laugh as an ape of a whip. We hav found out its weak spot; let us puncture it.”¹⁵⁹

It is important to note that Freethought evangelism and the missionary impulse clearly precede the period during which Heston’s cartoons were consumed. Albert Post describes a number of missionary activities executed by Freethinkers in the first half of the nineteenth century: Gilbert Vale, editor of *The Beacon* boasted in 1838 of placing copies of his newspaper in public places like hotel lobbies and riverboats in order to convert as many people as possible from the clutches of superstition,\(^{160}\) infidel tract societies sporadically attempted to convert believers throughout the nineteenth century.

---

\(^{160}\) *The Beacon*, April 21, May 12, 1838. Quoted in Post, *Popular Freethought in America*, 50.
century,\textsuperscript{161} and the \textit{New-York Observer} described books left on Mississippi boats that looked like Bibles but contained infidel pamphlets like Paine’s \textit{Age of Reason}.\textsuperscript{162} But there is something different about these appeals to the power of Heston’s images in doing missionary work. There is no seduction or trickery here. The image is not intended to sugarcoat the truth for easier digestion by the religious. The image does not \textit{convert} believers to the ranks of infidelity at all; “it beats dynamite out of time for blowing Faith and Fanaticism to sheol.”\textsuperscript{163} The goal is not conversion but defeat. The message of Heston’s cartoon, “How to Convert Infidels,” (fig. 8) is that conversion is a distraction – the religious enemy seeks to convert infidels while infidels plot their destruction. This shift in tone which accompanies the caricature is surely related to the coinciding emphasis on the permanence of identity through the metaphor of the image (im)printed on the mind of the child. These advocates of Heston’s cartoons would give up the attempt to convert the enemy, aiming instead to imprint infidelity on the minds of the next generation and defeat the enemy. If identity was increasingly understood as the result of processes of acculturation and imprinting experienced at a young age, then adult conversion would perhaps seem to be a relatively unimportant objective.

There is one further consideration that might help explain the emphasis in the late nineteenth century on infidel identity as something permanently acculturated rather

\textsuperscript{161} Ibid., 122.
\textsuperscript{162} \textit{New-York Observer}, August 5, 1843. Quoted in Ibid., 131.
\textsuperscript{163} Sturgis, “The Short Lesson.”
than achieved by conversion. A genre of literature devoted to the death-bed experiences of famous Christians and infidels surely contributed to a concern among Freethinkers about the permanence of conversion and deconversion. At least as early as the middle of the nineteenth century, editors amassed voluminous collections of deathbed experiences. One of the most influential was Rev. Erskine Neale's *The Closing Scene*, published in London in 1848.\(^{164}\) The volume established something of a template for later collections, in which accounts of Christians slipping serenely and confidently into oblivion are juxtaposed with the accounts of gnashing teeth and pathetic screams of religious skeptics. While the majority of deathbed scenes depict infidels denying religious consolation until their bitter and agonizing end, the most popular accounts were those of last-minute converts. Neale's account of the deathbed scene of Joseph Blanco White, “The Waverer,” is illustrative. Noting White's apparent apostasy from Catholicism, Neale writes, “But a mind cannot unchristianize itself in a moment: infidel convictions are not the growth of a day.”\(^{165}\) Faced with the imminent prospect of his own death, White recants his infidelity, commends his spirit into the hands of Jesus, and slips peacefully into a final sleep.\(^{166}\)

\(^{164}\) Rev. Erskine Neale, *The Closing Scene; Or, Christianity and Infidelity Contrasted in the Last Hours of Remarkable Persons* (London: Longman, Brown, Green, & Longmans, 1848). See also Davis W. Clark, *Death-Bed Scenes; Or, Dying With and Without Religion: Designed to Illustrate the Truth and Power of Christianity* (New York: Lane & Scott, 1851).

\(^{165}\) Neale, *The Closing Scene; Or, Christianity and Infidelity Contrasted in the Last Hours of Remarkable Persons*, 93.

\(^{166}\) Ibid., 100–101.
Stories of late conversions like that of “the waverer” were popular throughout the nineteenth century, with Thomas Paine being a favorite target among Protestant orators. An advertisement that ran in The Truth Seeker throughout 1886 promised to refute the “fabricated account of the scene at the deathbed of Thomas Paine” attributed to Bishop Fenwick.167 Subscribers frequently lamented the popularity of similar accounts toward the end of the nineteenth century. “A part of the Christian’s stock-in-trade out here is the old, exploded, and worn-out contemptible lies about the deathbed of Thomas Paine, Mr. Beecher flooring Ingersoll, etc.” At least as early as 1886, a pamphlet by G.W. Foote called “Infidel Deathbeds,” intended to refute accounts of pitiful deathbed scenes involving freethinkers, was being discussed on the pages of The Truth Seeker, and by 1891 Foote’s pamphlet had been expanded into a book collection. In the introduction to the volume of 1910, Foote acknowledges the continuing prevalence of such accounts:

Infidel death-beds have been a fertile theme of pulpit eloquence. The priests of Christianity often inform their congregations that Faith is an excellent soft pillow, and Reason a horrible hard bolster, for the dying head…In that extremity the proud Freethinker turns to Jesus Christ, renounces his wicked scepticism, implores pardon of the Savior he has despised, and shudders at the awful scenes that await him in the next world should the hour of forgiveness be past.169

---

Notably, while Foote refutes the commonality of cases of recantation, he simultaneously deploys the same logic as Neale in explaining the risk of backsliding for the converted infidel. Like Neale, Foote recognizes the ever-present temptation to return to religion. "If they discard the faith in which they have been educated, they are never free from its influence. It meets them at every turn, and is constantly, by a thousand ties, drawing them back to the orthodox fold." But for Foote, this possibility of return owes not to the truth or comfort of religion, but to acculturation. "Throughout the world the religion of mankind is determined by the geographical accident of their birth...in all cases of reversion, the sceptic invariably turns to the creed of his own country. What does this prove? Simply the power of our environment, and the force of early training." Hence, Foote's refutation of the genre of deathbed narratives demonstrates a heightened emphasis on the precariousness of conversion. The convert to infidelity will always feel the pull back toward religion – a tendency avoided by the individual raised free from the influence of religion. This distrust of conversion, then, suggests a factor motivating attempts to place infidel subjectivity on a more solid ground – attempts executed in part via metaphors of imprinting visualized in Heston's illustrations.

In fact, a number of Heston's cartoons exemplify a negative attitude toward conversion, though in a religious context. 1886's "Jerked to Jesus, or Heavenward by

---

170 Ibid., 6.
171 Ibid., 5.
172 Ibid.
Hemp,” depicts a “cut-throat” being given last rites by a priest before his execution, in the first scene, and arriving in heaven and receiving a harp and wings, in the second. Almost as often as Heston depicted morality as the logical consequence of Freethought, he depicted the promise of salvation before death as a license to immorality. Conversion was understood as a vehicle of hypocrisy. Thus, metaphors of permanence and visual incarnations of infidel subjectivity enabled by Heston’s images contributed to a relative movement away from the notion that the aim of missionary activity ought to be conversion. That the missionary potential of the image consisted of producing new infidel subjects from scratch rather than transforming believers into unbelievers suggests a subtle but fundamental shift in how the non-religious understood identity at the end of the nineteenth century.

### 2.10 Conclusion: E. Haldeman-Julius and Personal Atheism

By way of conclusion, we can briefly consider the figure who most aggressively took up the mantle of infidelity in print between the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the broadcast era – Emanuel Haldeman-Julius. Born in Philadelphia in 1889, Haldeman-Julius would become one of the most prolific publishers in American history. Between 1919 and 1949, he published between 300 and 500 million small

---

booklets, leading Harry Golden to declare in 1960 that “no other publisher will ever create so wide a reading audience,” and the St. Louis Dispatch to dub him “the Henry Ford of literature.” Haldeman-Julius has largely been forgotten today, perhaps due in part to the irreligious content of his publications, but it is hard to overstate his contribution to American print culture. Until the advent of the internet, one can reasonably argue that Haldeman-Julius' publications constituted the most explosive distribution of information in human history.

Haldeman-Julius' personal biography follows from nineteenth century Freethought. Like Bennett, he describes Paine's *Age of Reason* as the first “mind-liberating” book he encountered as a young teenager. He attributes his loss of religion to the reading of dozens of Ingersoll pamphlets. At age fifteen, in Philadelphia, after reading a pamphlet edition of Oscar Wilde's “The Ballad of Reading Jail” and witnessing the success of the local Socialist movement in producing cheap pamphlets, Haldeman-Julius became convinced of the power of the press. He joined the editorial staff at the *Appeal to Reason*, the Socialist weekly in Girard, Kansas in October 1915 and

---

177 Haldeman-Julius, *My First 25 Years*.
178 Ibid., 12.
179 Ibid., 12-13.
soon took over the failing plant, publishing the Oscar Wilde ballad and Omar
Khayyam’s *Rubaiyat* in pamphlet form. Haldeman-Julius’ three-and-a-half by five-inch
booklets cost 25 cents and were advertized in the *Appeal* to its 175,000 subscribers. In
1919, Haldeman-Julius began publishing the series that would come to be called his
“Little Blue Books,” and by 1929, he was producing up to 80,000 Little Blue Books every
eight hours. While topics ranged from liberal sexual education to Socialist propaganda
to psychoanalysis, the largest genre of his booklets was rabidly antireligious, urging
readers to identify as atheists and Freethinkers. And in addition to the Little Blue Books,
Haldeman-Julius would edit a series of monthly’s and quarterly’s throughout the early
twentieth century.

Haldeman-Julius’ attitude toward both print media and American atheism
demonstrate some of the dominant ways that nineteenth century Freethought proceeded
into the twentieth century. First, Haldeman-Julius exhibited a profound optimism in the
power of print media that stemmed in part from a comfortableness with the
fragmentation of reading publics. If Bennett’s understanding of the *Truth Seeker* was that
it constituted an extension of his persona out into a receiving public, as MacDonald

---

180 Ibid., 13.
181 Ibid., 14.
183 Tracing the history of these publications can be daunting. The *Haldeman-Julius Monthly* ran from
December 1924 to September 1928, then as the *Debunker* from October 1928 to February 1932, and then as
*American Parade*. The *Haldeman-Julius Quarterly* became the *American Parade* and then merged into the
*Debunker* in May 1929. *Appeal to Reason* became first the *Haldeman-Julius Weekly* in 1922 and then the
*American Freeman* from 1929 to 1951.
reports, then Haldeman-Julius saw his publications as bringing the public into his own world: “As editor and publisher I’ve always known my public intimately – it’s myself. I judge a manuscript by only one standard – do I like it? If I find it interesting and readable, I print it. I’m Mr. Public – E. H.J. multiplied hundreds of thousands of times.” This is simultaneously an extension and reversal of Bennett’s understanding of the reading public. On the one hand, it extends Bennett’s logic by closely relating the publication and the personality of the editor. But on the other hand, it constructs a different relationship between the editor's persona and the reading public. In Bennett’s case, the editor was there to make room for dissenting viewpoints, while in Haldeman-Julius’ case, the editor was there to publicize his own viewpoint with the understanding that a suitable public would form organically. With *The Truth Seeker*, the newspaper suited the readers – here, the readers suit the publication.

Haldeman-Julius’ optimism that his publications would find a receptive audience reflects a more general faith in the power of print media to transform society. As he writes in *My First 25 Years*:

> It was my simple theory that if anything struck me as evil, the remedy was to pull up before a typewriter and tell about it. I've always felt that way. Whenever I'm particularly outraged, I think in terms of the printing press. A well-written, widely distributed pamphlet should dispose of any social problem. All we needed was a strong press and, presto, poverty, war, imperialism, crime, unnecessary sickness, unemployment, old age insecurity would disappear in a

matter of months, or perhaps a few years, and the country could be turned into a utopia. It sounds naive, and yet what’s wrong with the idea?  

For Haldeman-Julius, the solution to religion in America was not to be found in organizing Liberal Leagues or conventions but exclusively in the printing press. In “The Task of Atheism,” published in The Militant Atheist, he writes, “But as long as the struggle is so one-sided, a thousand parsons and a thousand dollars working on behalf of religion for one man and one dollar working against it, we must make every effort to get cheap critical literature distributed. It is the only effective antidote.” This follows from the emphasis at the end of the nineteenth century on the use of print media to do militant missionary work. For Haldeman-Julius, the goal is not strictly conversion to the ranks of Liberalism; his atheism is militant, and the distribution of cheap literature is aimed more at strengthening the core than extending the edges of the atheist camp. The first article in the Militant Atheist argues against attempting to expand readership. “A man pleases himself what he reads. No one, even in the Bible Belt, is likely to buy the Militant Atheist under the impression that it is on the side of the angels.” The increasing fragmentation of readerships means that there is no need or desire to appeal to the enemy. “Seriously, what the world badly needs is good straight talk, seasoned with the truth.”

185 Ibid., 36–37.
with jokes, about religion. It needs to laugh away the last traces of its great illusion and get to serious business."  

The primary method of dealing with religion for Haldeman-Julius was "debunking," a militantly derisive engagement with religious thought: "Debunking, as I see it, is an art that should not be practiced with too much subtlety...The simple, direct, powerful phrase – the sentence that strikes like lightning – the word that one aims an idea as one aims a shot from a pistol – the strength of a pile-driver: these are the proper tools and weapons of the debunker at his best." Hence, Freethought print media increasingly embraced the cartoon image as a debunking tool. The pages of The American Freeman were peppered with cartoons by Harry Fowler and James Erickson which took up and extended some of Heston’s tactics. In their illustrations, the pen was again a weapon – here debunking not only intellectual conceits like Bible legends and dogmas, but also spiritual values and power politics. Pen and ink, more than ever, stood as a symbol for a proudly disrespectful strategy against religious propriety. "Rougher Notes," a column by Woolsey Teller in The Truth Seeker, is adorned with the image of a man hurling a fountain-pen-spear at a fleeing priest, while the masthead of Haldeman-Julius’ Debunker features a man squirting ink into another man’s face. These images,

---

^188 Ibid.
then, constitute an extension into an engagement with religion that idealized militant combat over respectful disagreement.

Figure 9: Harry Fowler, "The Plumed Knight of Journalism - The American Freeman," Illustration, A Book of Freeman Cartoons (Reprinted from the American Freeman) Vol. 1, (1949), 23.
This militancy is clearly connected, at least by Haldeman-Julius, to a more personal understanding of atheism than that expressed in the late nineteenth-century.

Rejecting the classical divorce between the philosophy of atheism and the personal question of identity, Haldeman-Julius sees atheism as highly personal. In the Little Blue Book called “The Meaning of Atheism,” he writes:

If it were merely a matter of abstract argument, we should not be so interested. Ideas, if they could be quite separated from actual influence in living issues,
might be regarded with an air of detachment. They might in such case be
discussed mildly and dismissively, One might be indifferent to such ideas or
only amused by them. But religion has always asserted and it does yet assert a
very direct and commanding interest in the conduct of men.\footnote{E Haldeman-Julius, \textit{The Meaning of Atheism} (Girard, Kan.: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1931).}

As with Heston's cartoon depicting the Freethinker aggressively crossing the limit of
human endurance to hurt the feelings of the religious, Haldeman-Julius faults religion
for making the question of belief personal. It is because religion asserts a commanding
interest in the conduct of men that atheism must always be more than purely
philosophical.

And in general, Haldeman-Julius is strikingly uninterested in appeals to reason,
logic, or objectivity. “Man does not live by logic. Logic is here in the way that chess is
here, or mathematics, or crossword puzzles. We made logic, and we can unmake it.”\footnote{Haldeman-Julius, \textit{Confessions of a Debunker: A Rationalist Looks at Life}, 57.}\footnote{Ibid., 58.}

Intellectual consistency, too, is undesirable: “I am a living being, not a machine. And
thought itself is such a recent thing that we haven't learned how to use it yet, so we try
to keep it tied down to a set of rules, which is a serious mistake. The desire to be logical
and the desire to be everlastingly consistent – these two ways of looking at thought are
the best ways to limit thought and make it purely mechanical.”\footnote{Ibid., 58.}

This rejection of consistency might, on the one hand, seem to move away from
the emphasis on permanence prevalent on the pages of \textit{The Truth Seeker}, but it is only
logical consistency that Haldeman-Julius rejects. The problem with logic, to Haldeman-
Julius, is closely related to the problem of will. “Free will,” he argues, is “essentially a religious doctrine” which “obscures understanding, leads to senseless condemnation, and prevents us from making the most intelligent use of the forces of life.”\textsuperscript{193} Haldeman-Julius’ rejection of a voluntary conception of will does not result in determinism, however, but an interminable struggle with the twin forces of “circumstance and temperament.”\textsuperscript{194} Individuals are not in control of their own subjectivities, but are “jostled about very unceremoniously and uncomfortably by forces outside themselves that they do not understand. Still less, I may add, do [they] understand the forces within themselves.”\textsuperscript{195} This notion of circumstance follows the emphasis in the late nineteenth century on religious and areligious identity as something cultivated from a young age, and the notion of internal and occult temperaments reflects the distrust of conversion as dangerously vulnerable to the vagaries of emotion.

There is, then, a tension in Haldeman-Julius’ embrace of atheism as a personal identity and distrust of the human subject’s ability to freely choose that identity. He addresses this tension, then, by appealing to the intelligence. “Intelligence is an excellent safeguard against the evils of circumstance and temperament. If a man will study the faults of his character, he can suppress if not remove them; if he weighs circumstance with the right appraising eye, he can often enlist it on his side...It is certainly true that

\textsuperscript{193} Ibid., 78.
\textsuperscript{194} Ibid., 17.
\textsuperscript{195} Ibid.
the faculty of choice is not providentially handed down to us by some higher power; it is quite evidently a matter of happy cultivation.”\textsuperscript{196} It is precisely this idea of atheist identity as a product of “happy cultivation” that, I argue, follows from the debates of the late nineteenth century. Permanence of identity is not achieved in the realm of abstract reason, but is cultivated through cultural practices. Haldeman-Julius’ distrust of logic and rationality, then, owes to the tendency of logic to piggyback on the will, making individuals think that they are able to freely rationalize and justify their own identities. “A thinking man soon realizes how his logic can lead him astray.”\textsuperscript{197} Intelligence, on the other hand, is for Haldeman-Julius an embodied and culturally-dependent knowledge that makes the individual realize that they can’t freely choose their own identity. Logic rigidifies the creative process of acculturation of identity, which is always changing and adapting. In Haldeman-Julius' ideal, “Thought, at best, can be nothing more than a series of happy guesses and quick impulses.”\textsuperscript{198} Thought, despite its continual fluctuation, can be marshaled and trained toward the cultivation of a permanent and militant atheist identity.

Freethought print media, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, thus laid the groundwork for the strongly militant form of atheist identity politics that was to emerge in the late twentieth century. Print media – in particular the

\textsuperscript{196} Ibid., my emphasis.
\textsuperscript{197} Ibid., 57.
\textsuperscript{198} Ibid.
printed image – provided a set of metaphors for the emergence of an understanding of infidel identity as something visibly imprinted on the embodied mind through cultural practices of reading. The period from roughly 1870 to 1950 saw a subtle shift from an understanding of atheism as a philosophical position underlying but necessarily divorced from personal identity (which was more often discussed in terms of infidelity or liberalism) to one in which the atheist was a deeply personal, publicly active, and militant subject position created through complicated processes of acculturation. As the distinction between abstract philosophy (atheism) and social behavior (infidelity) dissolved in the print mediascape, the figure of the atheist was destined,\textsuperscript{199} for whatever reason, to take on the myriad personal connotations associated with the various forms of Freethought identity.

\textsuperscript{199} It is beyond the scope of this project to prove why “atheist” rather than “infidel” became the term that collected the condensed connotations of Freethought in America. Surely, a major factor must have been the emergence of the close association between communism and atheism during the middle of the twentieth century.
3. Atheism on the Airways: Secularist Radio and the Material Voice

A new upper geography dawns upon us, in which there is no more sea, neither are there any boundaries between the peoples. – A. E. Kennelly

Who can refute a sneer? – William Paley

Scholars of broadcast media have long been emerging from under a spell, cast and recast over the last century, in which radio and television were hailed as great national and international unifiers, enabling – even more so than print culture before them – the solidification of a truly homogenous and national imagined community. Today, even as scholars continue to recognize radio’s unique ability to blur and even erase localized categories of identity, such declarations increasingly come tempered by the important recognition of radio’s simultaneous ability to craft and empower minoritarian identities predicated on division and exclusion. For example, Michele Hilmes and Jason Loviglio, in their introduction to their Radio Reader, write, “In a more compelling way than any other medium, radio blurred the boundaries between public and private and the important social identities subsumed by these categories. Still, the power of disembodied voices to embody powerful social identities, even those at odds
with mainstream norms, made radio a site of controversy as well as national unity.”¹ Citing both “ontological” as well as “socially-constructed” facets of radio’s specificity as medium, Alexander Russo has more recently emphasized the important relationship between broadcast media and identity-formation: “Radio has given expression to tensions in American culture because of its embodiment of individuality and collectivity. Its individualized reception, use of oral modes of communications, and invocation of the imagination clash with culture industries’ desire for homogenized, uniform responses to programming.”² There seems to be something, or rather some things, about the phenomenological experience of radio and its materiality that are uniquely suited to the negotiation of identities, whether imagined collectively or individually, but what are they?

This chapter explores the history of American atheists’ engagement with broadcast media in order to draw out some of the processes by which radio and atheist identity have been historically co-constitutive. It is my argument that the medium of radio contributed to the consolidation of a view of atheism as a subject position roughly synonymous with ethnicity and mutually exclusive with religion, whereas in the print media of the nineteenth century the possibility was still largely open that atheism be understood as an affiliation or opinion potentially overlapping with liberal religious

sentiment. To make this argument, it will be necessary to address a number of facets of radio as medium without necessarily distinguishing between real and socially constructed or assumed: the regulation of broadcast media by the Federal Communications Commission, changes in the economic and industrial structure of radio and television, the various modes of consumption of and reaction to media content by listeners and viewers, phenomenological experiences of liveness, repetition, and the affective qualities of individual voices and images, and the historical actions of influential atheist individuals and groups – each of these factors and others resonated in complex ways to contribute to the ascendancy of particular understandings of what it meant to call oneself an atheist.

Principally, my analysis of O’Hair’s use of radio pushes on the question of the materiality of both the speaking voice and the broadcast medium. Though material, the medium of radio provides resources both for generating physical experiences of embodiment and for obfuscating those experiences in the name of disembodied speech. In the case of O’Hair, the radio paradoxical provided a material with which to dematerialize atheist identity. But this ambivalence of radio – the tendency toward disembodiesing the speaking voice made impossible by the vibrational materiality of the medium itself – helps explain the tortuous relationship between Madalyn Murray O’Hair and American atheism in the second half of the twentieth-century. O’Hair’s attempt to provide an ethereal voice that spoke for all of atheism was always going to be
haunted from within by the materiality of her own voice in all of its situated specificity and public infamy.

3.1 Robert Harold Scott: Radio Pioneer

Atheism’s foray into the medium of radio began in earnest with Robert Harold Scott’s one-hour introduction to atheism on San Francisco radio station KQW on November 17, 1946. Scott, a retired court stenographer, had in 1944 requested three San Francisco-area radio stations (KPO and KFRC San Francisco and KQW San Francisco) allow him to purchase time to disabuse the listening public of misguided conceptions of atheism as a result of radio’s domination by religious programming. As Scott later described his efforts, echoing sentiments from the 19th century about the exclusion of atheism from mass media:

My application for broadcasting time...was made solely from my desire to counteract, to some extent, the veritable flood of religious propaganda to which, for the last 15 years, the American people have been subjected...Organized religion in the United States has never, in this present century, been so powerful; and this power it has acquired almost solely because of its virtually unopposed use of American radio stations and networks during the last 15 years and more. The July 19 ruling of the FCC was designed to put an end to this highly dangerous misuse of radio. \(^3\)

In 1945, Scott was attempting to break in to radio at precisely the time when radio was approaching its zenith in terms of growth of listenership and number of broadcasting

\(^3\) Robert Harold Scott, “Letters,” *Time* 48, no. 10 (September 2, 1946). There are a number of examples from atheist print media of the 20\(^{th}\) century of feelings of exclusion from the medium of reader. See for example Gordon Caulfeild, “Religion on the Radio and Social Forces,” *The Freethinker* 9, no. 6 (June 1945), 7-8.
stations,\(^4\) and this for a plethora of reasons. At the end of World War II, the economic and cultural forces that had held back the growth of the radio industry were being rapidly relieved. Returning military personnel trained in radio communication were eager to translate their technical proficiency into the commercial sphere. Economic growth and disposable income combined with the established financial potential of AM radio compared with the still burgeoning spheres of FM and television broadcasting meant a massive influx of capital. At the same time, the costs of radio production were plummeting. The radio stations of the 1920’s and 30’s resembled elaborate parlors and relied on live content. Radio stations of the postwar period were sleeker, relying primarily on recorded content and a disk-jockey fulfilling a number of formerly separate roles. Advertisements were ad-libbed by the DJ based on written material provided by sponsors. News was read from an AP or UP news ticker, replacing news commentators. Finally, the unprecedented availability of cheaper transmitters and receivers meant larger radio audiences.\(^5\) “To accountants the trend was a delight. Low overhead, few headaches.”\(^6\)

---


\(^5\) By 1950, 95% of homes had radio sets – most with several. Ibid., 455.

Scott, then, was faced with a rapidly expanding radio industry and yet his attempts to access the airways were repeatedly rejected. When each station rejected his request, Scott petitioned the FCC on March 27, 1945, requesting the revocation of the broadcasting licenses of each station on the grounds that they had failed in their public duty to broadcast all sides of a controversial issue. At issue in Scott's petition and the radio stations' defenses was the question of whether the existence of God constituted a significant public controversy, and thus whether the potential listening public was being exposed to a dangerously one-sided perspective on religion and therefore deserved exposure to alternative perspectives. That the FCC spent more than a year considering the implications of the case reveals how seriously the FCC took the risk of the radio perpetuating a kind of ideological monoculture even in a case where the dominant religious ideas expressed enjoyed near-universal appreciation.

The FCC's response,7 issued in July 1946, while denying Scott's attempt to shut down the defendant radio stations, established a line of reasoning that would have significant import for atheist identity even after its effective annulment by 1948.8 The FCC declared that freedom of religious disbelief was a right on par with freedom of belief, and that it was up to individual broadcasters to determine whether a potential broadcast could be construed as distasteful or objectionable to particular communities.

8 For a summary of the FCC's retreat from the language of the Scott decision, see Tona J. Hangen, Redeeming the Dial: Radio, Religion, & Popular Culture in America (Univ of North Carolina Press, 2002), 138–139.
Leaving it up to radio stations to use their own good judgment in locating the line between religious controversy and blasphemy, on the one hand, constituted a fundamentally conservative decision protecting the right of broadcasters to deny atheists access to American airways. At the same time, however, the FCC's appeal to the importance of airing unpopular perspectives on religious controversies even despite the purportedly limited numbers of listeners who actively endorsed such perspectives was rightfully taken by many as a blow against religious programming. *Time* expressed a popular though inaccurate understanding of the decision as one which entitled atheists to “all the radio time they could get.”

More important than any firm change in the regulatory stance of the FCC (*Time* noted that the FCC decision amounted to a “greenish light” for “ardent atheists with a proselyting itch”10) was the sense of achievement that the decision intimated to Scott and others. Despite the lack of any regulatory requirement that radio broadcasters give voice to atheists like Scott, radio station KQW, a CBS affiliate in San Francisco, voluntarily gave Scott 30 minutes on Sunday, November 17, 1946, to make his broadcast, titled “An Atheist Speaks,” in order, according to program director Fred Ruegg, “to determine whether there is sufficient interest in atheism in this area to justify time

---

9 “Air for Atheists,” *Time* 48, no. 6 (August 5, 1946): 60.
10 Ibid.
devoted to future broadcasts on the subject.” In terms of content, Scott’s lecture was unremarkable, revolving mostly around an argument from suffering to dispute the existence of a loving or personal God and an appeal to the rationality and progressivism of science. *Time* was not wrong to claim that Scott merely “rehash[ed] the arguments that have been the unbeliever’s stock-in-trade for many a Christian year.”

The reaction to Scott’s broadcast was immediate and divisive. “Within seven days 5,000 listeners had written KWQ...24% of the letter writers, while mostly disagreeing with Scott’s irreligion, commended the station for letting him speak his mind.” According to the Los Angeles Times, “the office switchboard was flooded with calls by indignant churchgoers immediately following Scott’s address.” Among those defending Scott’s right to be heard were members and clergy of liberal Protestant congregations. Writing in the *Atlanta Constitution*, Ralph T. Jones declared “although I disagree wholly with his theories, I say Robert Harold Scott has won a noteworthy victory for freedom of speech and freedom of religion at a time when most of us have, too complacently, thought those freedoms were won and secure for all time, in America at least.” In *Zion’s Herald*, a Methodist weekly, the editors wrote, “We do not agree with our friends of atheistic persuasion, but at the very same time we must grant to them

---

12 “Time for Atheism,” *Time* 48, no. 23 (December 2, 1946): 77.
13 Ibid.
14 “Atheist Broadcasts Talk; Protests Flood Studio,” *Los Angeles Times*, November 18, 1946.
the right to disbelieve as they please. The church must recognize and defend the right of
an individual to disbelieve either in part or completely.” An unnamed Congregational
minister was quoted in Time: "It is good for any institution to be under healthful
criticism, including the church. It is good for any theory to defend itself from time to
time.”

To Scott, the positive responses were energizing:

[The broadcast] was heard or read about with approval by at least 25 per cent of
the people who, as a result of the broadcast, wrote to KCBS or me in care of that
station, a per cent which, in view of the fact that the Knights of Columbus in
California waged a campaign of letters of protest to KCBS, a campaign supported
by a San Francisco Roman Catholic diocesan newspaper, is comparatively high.

In Scott’s notes on later FCC hearings in which he was involved, he repeatedly
emphasizes the importance of atheism’s access to the medium of radio:

Before I made the atheistic broadcast over station KCBS (then KQW) on
November 17, 1946, a program that was made possibly by the Scott decision,
atheism had been given no time whatever on American broadcasting stations.
There is a world of difference between equal radio-time and some radio-time;
and the difference between some radio-time and no radio-time is infinite.

---

16 Quoted in John Crosby, “House Committee’s Stand On Air Atheism Is ‘Nonsense,’” The Washington Post,
September 25, 1948.
17 “Time for Atheism.”
18 Robert Harold Scott, “A Critical Survey (of That Part of the U.S. Government’s Printed Transcript (titled
‘Investigation of the Federal Communications Commission’) of the Hearings on August 31 and September 1,
1948, before a Select Committee of the House of Representatives, on the ‘Scott Decision’ of the FCC; and
Some Observations on the ‘First Interim Report’ (House Report No. 2561) on the Hearings as Submitted by
the Select House Committee” (San Francisco, Calif., June 1, 1949), 11, Charles E. Stevens American Atheists
Archive and Library.
19 Ibid., 3.
This sense of importance concerning his own broadcast stems from a utopian understanding of the power of radio. To Scott, radio represented the most important modern avenue of expression for atheism—a double-edged medium whose power of distribution was belied by powerful forces of censorship and misinformation. “[R]adio is a medium of mass communication which is more effective by far than are all other communication instruments combined for enlightening or misinforming the general public.”

Thus, as with proponents of print media like E. Haldemann Julius before him, Scott’s struggle to break into the medium of radio was motivated by an overarching sense of unfair exclusion and political inequity:

Broadcasting stations...may be depended upon to place profits above principle, dollars before democracy...American churches, with a few honorable exceptions, habitually exert their coercive and intimidating power to keep adverse criticism of their religious teachings not only from the microphones of commercial broadcasting stations but also from the microphones of stations which are educational corporations or fraternal organizations, so that these several kinds of broadcasting stations are as tightly closed to atheism and related views as are stations which are religious corporations; a policy of repression and suppression which, almost as effectively, is extended to include motion pictures, and, though far less effectively, newspapers, magazines, and books.

This alleged censorship, to Scott, constituted a crucial logical position in his understanding of the public. The Scott decision, as issued by the FCC, hinged on the matter of whether a religious debate constituted an “open controversy,” but, according to Scott, “How indeed could an open public controversy on this topic develop in this

---

20 Ibid., 13.
21 Ibid., 12–13.
country if the radio continues to be barred to the atheist and made readily available to
the religionist?"  

Crucially, then, Scott’s continued engagement with the FCC simultaneously revolved around two very material facets of radio as medium: on the one hand, the publicity of the substrate by which radio information was transmitted, and on the other hand, the room made available in that substrate by technological or technical apparatuses. The dual nature of radio as simultaneously public and crowded was familiar to Scott and others who engaged with the regulation of the airways. As Norbert Muhlen influentially argued in 1947, “Radio is monopolistic by nature. Since there is only a limited number of wavelengths that can be used for broadcasting, radio does not permit the free competition of ideas that is at least possible in every other medium of communication.” In the first instance, the publicity of radio hinged on the literally-ethereal nature of the medium through which wireless transmission took place. “The airways,” as they came to be called, could not be contained or controlled by any one individual, and thus constituted a part of the commons. As Scott summarized, “since every American broadcasting station’s medium of transmission, a medium which is commonly called ‘the airways,’ is owned by the American people as a whole, every American citizen is, in a sense, part-owner of every American broadcasting station

22 Ibid., 25.
23 Norbert Muhlen, “Radio: Political Threat or Promise?,” Commentary, March 1947, 201.

101
during the times it is in operation.”24 In this sense, the publicity of the airways is markedly different from that of print media. In response to the claim that the exclusion of atheism from the airways was no different from a publisher’s decision not to publish an atheist text, Scott argues, “publishers do not use, nor do they have to utilize, any part of the public domain.”25

This material facet of the airways – the *publicity* of their powers of distribution – necessarily combined with another feature – that of the technological *room* available for broadcasters to access and occupy those airways. While the airways enabled forms of distribution and consumption that were unrestrainedly public in their potential reach to any individual with a receiver, the technology of production was vulnerable to bandwidth crowding that hampered radio’s potential as a form of mass communication. There are only so many frequencies available for independent broadcasts, necessitating the FCC’s system of regulated licensing. In order to better understand the context in which Scott fought for atheism’s right to the airways, a brief digression on the history of broadcast regulation is in order.

### 3.1.1 The Atheist and the FCC

That the regulation of radio hinged on the simultaneous publicity of the airways and their potential crowding had been established as early as 1912, when the Radio Act,

---

25 Ibid., 35.
which established a rudimentary licensing system for radio broadcasters, attempted to
clear the air of amateur radio broadcasters who were interfering with the
communication systems of the US Navy. It was in 1922, when Herbert Hoover, then
Secretary of Commerce under Harding, oversaw the first of several radio conferences,
that we first hear calls for regulation predicated on the nature of the “ether” as a public
good. Equating the regulation of radio with the protection of a natural resource, Hoover
claimed that governmental control was required to “establish public right over the ether
roads that there may be no national regret that we have parted with a great national
asset into uncontrolled hands.” 26

This understanding of the radio as a public and natural resource remains to this
day the backbone of all broadcast regulation. Crucially, it also came to serve as the basis
for the FCC assuming a watchdog role in ensuring that the radio served as a conduit of
civic responsibility and neutrality. In the Radio Act of 1927, designed to once again
manage overcrowding of the national airways, the Federal Radio Commission,
progenitor of the FCC, established the “public interest” standard upon which all later
broadcast regulation would build. As one commentator notes, the 1927 act was the first
regulatory action that legally established the fundamental publicity of the airways: “The
new Radio Act put first things first. Although the 1912 Act had required a license to use

26 “Minutes of Department of Commerce Conference on Radio Telephony,” 1922, 4–5. (mimeographed)
Quoted in Marvin R. Bensman, The Beginning of Broadcast Regulation in the Twentieth Century (McFarland,
2000), 51.
the air, it had been silent on the issue of ownership of the airwaves. The 1927 Act was not. It bluntly declared that there could be no private ownership of the airwaves; they were public and use could occur only with the government’s permission.”

Furthermore, in equating the airways with a public utility, Congress declared that the standard by which licensing decisions would be assessed would be “public interest, convenience, and necessity.” The vagueness of this standard has been critical in enabling the regulation of broadcasting since 1927. As Cole and Oettinger note, “this vague standard has been used ever since by FCC commissioners to justify whatever they have chosen to do. The phrase carries more weight than any five words should have to, and its meaning has been modified and refined by years of FCC decisions, judicial interpretations, and legislative actions.”

The Radio Act of 1927 was largely reenacted along with the transition from the FRC to the FCC in the Communications Act of 1934, which reinforced the equation between the publicity of the national airways and the potential for radio to succumb to monopolizing tendencies. As former FCC chairman Nicholas Johnson put it:

“The theory of the Communications Act was that the inherently oligopolistic structure of radio use necessitated a system of license for a limited term with no property rights accruing to the licensee. The radio spectrum was meant to be a resource owned and retained by the people...Private interests could use the

---

spectrum as proxies for the public, but in return for the right to sue for private gain they were to ‘pay’ by performance in the ‘public interest.’

In other words, and in stark contrast to the medium of print, broadcast media from their invention were understood and regulated in terms of the public ownership of the national avenues of distribution and the simultaneous lack of available space in the technical realm of production, or occupation of the radio frequency spectrum. These two facets of broadcast media served to situate radio as a communication vehicle prone to monopolization and thus requiring a heavy regulatory hand in ensuring the fairness, neutrality, and diversity of its programmatic content.

Returning to Robert Harold Scott, then, it is precisely this understanding of broadcast media that gave Scott and others struggling against the ideological monopolization of radio a necessary regulatory foothold. What is more, the Scott decision serves as an important marker in understanding the relationship between radio and identity, as it is in Scott's engagement with the FCC that we can begin to see how the question of “public interest” on the radio becomes entangled with questions of individual identity. The Scott decision shows that the nature of radio necessitated that Scott and others articulated their pleas for an audience in terms tailored to a particular understanding of public discourse on the airways, and that part of this tailoring

consisted of an articulation of atheism not merely as a philosophy or system of beliefs, but as a minoritarian identity.

The relationship between the regulation of radio and questions of identity was established in part in the wording of the FCC’s decision. Whereas prior FCC statements like the more famous “Blue Book,” published only a few months before the Scott decision, primarily vocalized the FCC’s desire for the radio to serve as a civilizing force, the Scott decision more emphatically signaled that the FCC considered questions of public interest intimately tied to power dynamics in the realm of personal identity:

Every idea does not rise to the dignity of a 'public controversy,' and every organization, regardless of membership or the seriousness of its purposes, is not per se entitled to time on the air. But an organization or idea may be projected into the realm of controversy by virtue of being attacked. The holders of a belief should not be denied the right to answer attacks upon them or their belief solely because they are few in number. 31

The Scott decision, in other words, indicated that an idea or belief’s salience in public discussion was directly related to the societal position of those individuals holding such beliefs. Scott and others would seize upon this wording in the years following the FCC’s declaration.

In October 1946, only months after Scott’s broadcast, a sermon by Father Ignatius Smith, Dean of Philosophy at the University of America in Washington D.C. was broadcast over radio station WHAM in Rochester. Arthur Cromwell, President of the

31 Federal Communications Commission, In Re: Petition of Robert Harold Scott for Revocation of Licenses of Radio Stations KQW, KPO, and KFRC.
Rochester Society of Freethinkers, insisting that the sermon contained a number of passages criticizing atheism, requested that WHAM afford him radio time to respond, which it denied. Cromwell petitioned the FCC to refuse to renew WHAM’s license, and the FCC denied his request in August 1948. Here, then, was an opportunity to test the FCC’s claim that attacks on individuals merited defense. In a select committee of the House of Representative’s hearings on August 31 and September 1, 1948 on the Scott Decision and the House’s First Interim Report, the question was raised whether Father Smith’s sermon constituted an attack on atheism or atheists – that is, on a set of beliefs or on the individuals holding those beliefs. Father Louis Durell, representing the ailing Father Smith, in response to the question whether Smith “had intended to make a personal attack upon any group of individuals,” responded that Smith “had no individual in mind but was speaking of atheism in general.” 32 Scott’s shock is obvious, in response to the committee’s seeming ease in distinguishing between “atheism in general” and atheists as a group of subjects, when he criticizes the hypocrisy of denying “the Constitutional right of the atheist to express his disbelief on a parity with the believer both on and off the radio.” 33 For Scott, the fault of the FCC and the House was to fail to recognize that atheism was a subject-position in the same sense as Protestant or Catholic. “If radio-time is given or sold to religionists, atheists should also be sold or

given radio-time.” In the House Committee hearings, several others called to testify share Scott’s emphasis on atheists-as-subjects over atheism-as-belief. Kenneth M. Whitten, president of the Friendship Liberal League, claimed “the atheist has precisely the same right, no more, no less, as a bishop.” And Rabbi Paul Richman took it for granted that attacks on atheism were attacks on atheists when he claimed: “those who espouse atheistic or other God-less philosophies have a Constitutional right to present their views on the air, particularly where they feel themselves unjustly accused or improperly represented.”

This equation of the atheist with the religionist, however, raises a second issue that directly bears on the notion of atheist subjectivity. If “atheist” constitutes a subject-position akin to religionist, and thus deserves the same regulatory protection as a religious group, it must be simultaneously opposed to religion to avoid another line of exclusion. This form of exclusion was voiced in the House Committee hearing by Rosel H. Hyde, FCC commissioner. Hyde claimed that radio stations could reasonably deny atheists radio time if atheism was understood as a subset of religion, in which case, because there were so many diverse religious perspectives, it was inevitable that some would have to be excluded for the sake of time. Hyde’s logic attempted to establish a catch-22 for atheists like Scott: if atheism is merely a set of beliefs, then atheists do not

34 Ibid.
36 Ibid., 171.
37 Ibid., 207.
deserve protection according to the Scott decision because they are not implicated in criticisms of atheism. If, on the other hand, atheism was a religious subject-position perfectly analogous to Protestant or Catholic, then requiring radio stations to voice atheist beliefs would constitute a slippery slope culminating in the unreasonable expectation that every religious idea, no matter how absurd, was equally deserving of a place on the airways.

Scott's response to Hyde's double-bind is predictable and nonetheless significant. It is worth quoting in full:

Since Mr. Hyde added: 'The same principle would apply to the atheists,' I am led to wonder, and many other persons have wondered, whether he regards atheism as a form of religion or as a religious point of view, and hence that it is permissible for station operators to deny radio-time for atheism on the ground that the great number of religious bodies in the United States makes it necessary for them to pick and choose among proffered religious programs!...It should not be necessary to point out, even to a broadcasting station manager, that inasmuch as atheism is disbelief in or denial of the existence of a supreme intelligent being or God and, consequently, of a life after death, atheism is the direct and irreconcilable OPPOSITE of every religion and every religious belief or idea. Atheism, in fact, is an absolute negation of all religions and all religious concepts, past and present...Proposed atheistic programs as well as proposed religious programs would, admittedly, necessarily be subject to a selective process by station licensees; but the two classes of programs could never rightly be treated for purposes of selection as a single general class.  

Hyde's comment, though ultimately having little bearing on official regulatory actions by the FCC, provokes Scott to articulate an aggressive understanding of atheism as the

39 Scott does claim that radio broadcasters employed a logic similar to Hyde's in denying him airtime, indicating that it was not without regulatory significance: "If Mr. Hyde actually considers atheism a religion
“irreconcilable opposite of every religion and every religious belief or idea,” mutually exclusive with religion. Following the previous discussion of atheism’s status as a subject-position defining a significant group of American individuals, Scott has articulated the status of the atheist as a fully-bounded subject existing entirely outside the religious sphere. This simultaneously weakens and renders inarticulable claims for access to the medium of radio for intermediate positions between atheism and religion.

Hence, the early history of atheism’s engagement with the medium of radio and its regulation by the FCC demonstrates the close relationship between broadcast media and questions of subjectivity. In the late 1940’s, atheists’ fight for access to the airways contributed to two understandings of atheism that hold currency today: First, that atheism is more than a set of beliefs to be subscribed to – that atheism is a subject-position on par with religious identity, meaning in short that the link between an individual and her atheism is somehow deeper, more inherent, more permanent than its critics realize. In the coming years, this logic would be developed into a fully cultural or ethnicized understanding of atheism in starker contrast to the subscriptive treatment of religious criticism prevalent in the nineteenth century. Second, that atheism affords no overlap with liberal religion. While a negative understanding of atheism as a lack of

or a religious point of view, he makes the same erroneous identification which, either ignorantly or dishonestly, was made by the manager of KFRC in the autumn of 1946 when, even after the handing down of the Scott decision, he refused to accept atheistic programs.”Ibid., 141.
religious identity was not uncommon in the nineteenth century, Scott’s engagement with
the FCC serves as a pivotal moment in the articulation of the atheist’s existence outside
the bounds of the religious sphere as a means of generating the image of the atheist in
the public eye. This is, of course, not to say that Scott created the atheist in his
engagement with the FCC. Rather, it is to say that precisely as the figure of the atheist
emerged into the public sphere via the newly formed “mass media,” that figure took on
particular valences required and enabled by the material specificity of radio. In a
striking example of the co-constitutive relationship between individual subjectivity and
media, a handful of atheist individuals succeeded in shaping the most powerful medium
of their day at the same time that the medium enacted changes in their collective self-
understandings that still resonate today.

3.2 Madalyn Murray O’Hair

Madalyn Murray O’Hair\textsuperscript{40} is undoubtedly the most significant figure in the
history of American atheism. Today, a cursory glance at popular atheist literature might
indicate otherwise; a glance at the indexes of the most popular New Atheist works
reveals a deafening silence with regards to O’Hair.\textsuperscript{41} No figure remains as divisive

\textsuperscript{40} As Madalyn Murray adopted the O’Hair surname in 1965, I will alternate between employing ‘Murray’ or
‘O’Hair’ depending on the time period in question.

\textsuperscript{41} To name a few, Richard Dawkins’ \textit{The God Delusion}, Sam Harris’ \textit{The End of Faith}, and Christopher
Hitchens’ \textit{God is not Great} as well as his \textit{Portable Atheist}, an anthology containing the works of almost 50
among contemporary atheists, and the reasons are understandable. In the 1960’s and 70’s, O’Hair earned and relished the title bestowed upon her by *Life* magazine in 1964: “The Most Hated Woman in America.” America’s hatred of O’Hair owed not only to her involvement in the famous Supreme Court decision responsible for removing Bible-reading and prayer from public schools,\(^4\) but also to her tactics as a representative of atheist identity. She was vulgar, caustic, derisive, and wholly unapologetic.

O’Hair represents a figure so utterly complex and a life so riven with intrigue that it would be impossible to give her full treatment here.\(^3\) Much has been written about O’Hair’s various and mostly unsuccessful legal battles throughout her life, but O’Hair’s most significant legacy today consists of her lifelong cultural battle over the meaning of the term “Atheist.” This legacy is neatly summarized by Frank R. Zindler, member of the American Atheists Board of Directors and managing editor of *American Atheist* magazine:

> She did expend great effort to desensitize the nation to the “A-word.” She used the words “Atheist” and “Atheism” — capitalized, no less — over and over in every possible venue. Before Madalyn, most Atheists were afraid to use the word spokespeople for atheism, make no mention of O’Hair. This silence extends into their public discourses as well.\(^4\)


\(^3\) While there are several entertaining biographies of O’Hair which dwell primarily on her long fall in the 1980’s and 90’s from a certain kind of grace within the atheist community as well as her tragic and gruesome murder along with her son Jon Garth Murray and granddaughter Robin Murray O’Hair in 1995, the best academic treatment of O’Hair’s life and work remains Bryan F. Le Beau’s *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O’Hair* (New York: NYU Press, 2003)
other than in whispers. Things are much different now, thanks to her, although I can’t say the desensitization of society as a whole is yet complete. Nevertheless, Madalyn made it much safer — and much more natural — to call oneself an Atheist.44

This legacy – O’Hair’s popularization of atheist identity – was deeply intertwined with her own engagements with broadcast media and her lifelong struggle to rectify perceived distortions in that identity perpetuated by the media. For O’Hair, as for her predecessors, freedom of expression via the mass media was of critical importance for the progression of atheism. “Perhaps in no other area is collusion between the churches and the government more obvious, and the results so suppressive of independent thought, than in the broadcast media. Here one sees in its most blatant form the effect of religious influence when applied to the means of social communication.”45

3.2.1 O’Hair on the Radio

By the time Madalyn Murray filed suit in the Superior Court of Baltimore, MD on December 8, 1960 in what would become one of the most infamous Supreme Court decisions of the 1960’s, she had already catapulted herself into the media limelight. In October, The Baltimore Sun had published a front-page article by Stephen Nordlinger

detailing William and Madalyn Murray’s perceived discrimination as atheists.⁴⁶

Immediately, Murray’s story was picked up by myriad local, regional, and national news agencies.⁴⁷ But Murray, who “seized every opportunity to promote her cause before as large an audience as possible,”⁴⁸ was disappointed with her presentation. “I saw and heard myself and William on television and radio, with the words cut out, tapes edited, so that we said things which were incredible...Everything we did was misinterpreted – methodically, deliberately, and with premeditation.”⁴⁹ Whereas atheists and infidels before her sought to rectify the exclusion of atheist viewpoints from mass media, then, Murray’s enemy was not outright exclusion but distortion.⁵⁰

Throughout the 1960’s, Murray (then O’Hair) “appeared on dozens of radio and television shows hosted by the likes of Steve Allen, Mike Douglas, Joe Pyne, Pia Lindstrom, Johnny Carson, Phil Donahue, Merv Griffin, Tom Snyder, and David Hartman.”⁵¹ Deemed one of the most controversial figures alive, O’Hair found no difficulty booking appearances on television and radio, but expressed dissatisfaction

⁴⁶ Stephen Nordlinger, “Boy, 14, Balks at Bible Reading,” Baltimore Sun, October 27, 1960, 1.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 136.
⁵⁰ While the following biographical detail remains disputed, Ann Seaman forwards the possibility that Madalyn’s distrust of the mainstream media owed to her occupation as a cryptographer for the Women’s Army Corps during World War II: “One of her jobs in the army was to write detailed descriptions of battles that hadn’t been fought yet – down to the time of the day they marched down a specific street – and put the victory out in the newswires...the ability of those in power to manipulate the media, and to lie and get away with it, impressed her.” Ann Rowe Seaman, America’s Most Hated Woman: The Life and Gruesome Death of Madalyn Murray O’Hair (New York: Continuum, 2005), 27.
with her lack of control over her own image. Thus, even as Madalyn Murray O'Hair rose to prominence as the public face of atheism via her numerous television appearances, she felt more at home on the radio where she could be in control of her own self-presentation. On television, she felt pigeonholed – forced into a predetermined role as the antagonist in a merely-purportedly neutral debate with religious adversaries:

The format is always the same: there is one Roman Catholic, one Jew, one Protestant and one Atheist – me! This is a ‘balanced’ show. It means, of course, that I am reduced immediately to a fifteen minute presentation out of one hour of prime time of television, since three quarters of the program is given to religious representation. Then, as soon as I leave town, all three of the so-called denominations demand equal time to rebut anything I may have said, which is always easier to rebut when I am not there.52

The American Atheist Radio Series began broadcasting on KTBC Austin on June 3, 1968. Distributed to as many as 150 stations at its zenith, the broadcasts “constituted some of O’Hair’s most important work in reaching out to a widespread audience.”53 More significantly, from 1968 to 1977, when American Atheists stopped radio broadcasts and shifted attention to their public access cable show, American Atheist Forum, the radio offered O’Hair the opportunity, for 15 minutes once a week, to speak in her own voice


53 Le Beau, The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O’Hair, 179. While it is impossible to accurately quantify the size of O’Hair’s audience, her boasts would have us believe it was substantial. For example: “Recently I was on a ‘talk’ radio show in San Francisco and the popular personality who ran the show was bragging to me of the guests he had had there who had brought in 2,700 telephone calls during the show. He was staggered when the meter counter indicated that there were 30,000 calls during the time I was on the air.” (O’Hair, “Atheist Recognition.”) Radio transcripts were also published in omnibus volumes and every issue of American Atheist Magazine, increasing their circulation dramatically.
without interference from moderators or censors. At the outset, O'Hair proclaims, “I have had what is called 'a very poor press' and I intend to overcome that here in this city, on this radio program, in other cities on similar ones by saying directly to you what I really want to say, so that you can come to know the real me, and through me, what an Atheist really is.” For O'Hair, the radio seemed to offer her a directness in linking her to listeners that was impossible as a guest on someone else's television program.

Hence, it should come as no surprise that it was on the radio that she seemed most willing and eager to explore all the complexities of what she meant to say when she called herself an “Atheist.” In the introduction to the first volume of published transcripts of her weekly radio broadcasts, O'Hair elaborates her view of radio as the appropriate vehicle with which to clarify common misconceptions about atheism:

> When one speaks on radio, one finds a certain philosophy of thinking behind the production of programs. The idea current in America is that most people are idiots and that everything must be pitched at people with a mental age of twelve, and every program is loaded with the most obnoxious advertisements imaginable, which are insulting to the intelligence. When we began our radio series, I decided that I could not bring myself to treat people like that at all. Every program has been written with the idea in mind that the general intelligence of the listeners is the high school graduate level. We had to make other assumptions too: that almost no one knew anything about Atheism (even Atheists); that hostility directed by the religious community was great; that distortions in our position were constant, and that no one really had any access to any information about us anywhere.

---

55 O'Hair, What on Earth Is an Atheist!, v
O'Hair sought to use radio as a means to clean up a conceptual muddiness occurring, in her mind, when people misused the term “Atheist” to describe themselves and others. Where television failed to rectify common misconceptions about atheism, only radio offered O'Hair the opportunity to explain to fellow critics of religion what it really meant to call oneself an Atheist.

But first, it is important to recognize the striking continuity between Scott and O'Hair. By 1969, Scott's fight for access to the airways was long-forgotten by many, but two features of O'Hair's modus operandi that would appear obvious to an informed listener were her voracious appetite for Freethought literature and her impressive gift for historical research. O'Hair's first radio broadcast establishes her indebtedness to Scott's struggle:

Yet, let me tell you the curious tale of the very first broadcast by one of us. Beginning in 1941, in San Francisco, California, Robert Harold Scott began pester ing radio stations there to give him air time to speak on this subject of Atheism. He fought a five year legal battle with them right up to the Federal Communications Commission, which, on July 19, 1946, supported his right to speak in the famous 'Scott Decision.' However, the F.C.C. characteristically did not force the radio stations to answer his demands for time.56

Clearly, O'Hair considers Scott a rightful predecessor; he is both “one of us” and assumes one of her favorite roles – that of the pest. O'Hair’s descriptions of Scott occasionally border on the mythical. “Scott went on and he has been living in a cloud of

fury since!" Elsewhere, O'Hair situates herself as the inheritor of Scott's struggle to locate atheism within the public sphere. “I AM NOT ABOUT TO GIVE UP THE FIGHT TO SEE THAT ATHEISM TAKES ITS STAND IN THE PUBLIC ARENA. It is a valid philosophy of living and it has a good and honored place, historically, logically, philosophically and legally.”

Finally, O'Hair relied on the FCC's Scott Decision in her attempts to broaden her reach over the national airways. In redundant radio programs in 1971, O'Hair recounts her engagements with potential carriers of her program, situating herself as both carrying on Scott's tactics and superseding his achievements. “Back in 1965 the fight for radio time was begun in earnest when I challenged the license renewal of twenty seven radio stations which had refused to give or sell air time to me...Then, about four years back I tried again and this time I sued the Federal Communications Commission directly for having promulgated rulings in derogation of the rights of Atheists.” Failing to find favor with the FCC, O'Hair claims to have engaged in an aggressive campaign in which she sent letters to over 6,000 radio stations requesting airtime. Her letter illustrates her willingness to extrapolate the logic of the Scott Decision so as to enable a form of identity politics around atheism:

---

57 Ibid., 4.
58 O'Hair, What on Earth Is an Atheist!, iv
60 Ibid.
In the Scott Decision (F.C.C. 3 P & F – Radio, Reg. 259. 1946) it is noted ‘freedom of speech means freedom to express disbeliefs as well as beliefs. If freedom of speech is to have any meaning, it can not be predicated on the mere popularity of public acceptance of the idea sought to be advanced. It must be extended as readily to ideas which we disapprove or abhor as to ideas which we approve.’ The Scott Decision dealt with Atheism…The communications media is becoming more aware and appreciative of the striving for ethnic identity by members of minority groups. The need for complete assimilation into the dominant culture is no longer recognized as being absolutely essential to being a ‘Good American’.61

In contrast to Scott’s frustrated attempts to access the airways, O’Hair’s letter-writing campaign was met with surprising success. As she reports in 1971, “Of all the stations we have contacted 56% has agreed to sell time 9% has agreed to have me on talk shows, give us free time, or give local representatives free time, and only 42% has been evasive in reply.” By the time of this broadcast in October 1971, the American Atheist Radio Series was being broadcast in Arizona, Montana, Texas, Utah, Colorado, Iowa, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, Vermont, and Alaska. To O’Hair, the message is clear: “the moral of this is that where the time for an idea has come, in history, nothing can suppress that idea. And the time for atheism is now in human history.”62

There are surely myriad factors at play in accounting for O’Hair’s warm reception by radio broadcasters relative to Scott’s. Obviously, her reference to the question of minority assimilation into dominant culture demonstrates a much different social context from the 1940’s – a possibility recognized by Le Beau: “The years 1965

62 Ibid.
through the early 1980s were good to Madalyn Murray...She flourished in the more tolerant environment created by the political, social, and cultural unraveling beginning in the mid-sixties in response to challenges posed by radical civil rights leaders, feminists, antiwar demonstrators, homosexuals, and others.”63 At the same time, we can partly account for O’Hair’s success by noting changes within the radio industry since the 1940’s network era. While Russo has persuasively demonstrated the extent to which, already in the 1940s, the radio industry enabled and cultivated the expression of minoritarian and niche voices, these processes were vastly amplified in the transformative period between the “network-era” of the 1940s and the “format-era” of the 1960s.64 In part, this period saw a simple extension of the processes of listener individuation inaugurated in the 1940s. As the number of radios exploded, the culture of listening was increasingly individuated. “By the early 1950s the average home had more than two radios; by the early 1960s, more than three. This increase allowed the family audience to disaggregate into individuals with distinct tastes and listening habits,”65 enabling the possibility of less homogenous radio content.

At the same time, the ascendancy of television provoked more fundamental changes in the diversity of radio programming due to economic or industrial factors unaccounted for in Russo’s exclusive focus on the network-era. To the extent that Russo

63 Le Beau, The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O’Hair, 130.
65 Ibid., 378.
demonstrates, in contrast to a more traditional understanding of network-era radio as homogenous, that radio in the 1940s developed “specialized and segmented taste markets,” his analysis is limited in its applicability by its reliance on a particularly economic lens. To Russo, the primary actors in the development of radio are economic actors within “culture industries,” relegating content producers to a secondary status behind advertisers and producers, whose interests are purely economic. This perspective is particularly useful in understanding radio at its economic and cultural apex in the 1940s, but it means that the forces tending toward specialization and fragmentation remain limited by the profitability of niche markets. By the 1960s and 1970s, on the other hand, it is precisely the relative economic decline of the radio industry that unleashes those same forces of specialization as the threshold of profitability seems to decline and radio producers seem more willing to take risks in giving license to fringe content producers. As television surpassed and soon dwarfed radio in advertising income beginning in the early 1950s “the shift of network advertising money from radio to television, coupled with the explosion in the number of radio stations, led to a radical restructuring of radio industry financing.” In broadly economic terms, radio underwent a gradual shift in this transitional period toward a greater reliance on local sources of program content and advertising. In more specific

---

terms, as television assumed the role of the mainstream, radio came to offer a more welcoming venue for minority voices. Because “television siphoned off radio listeners during the prime-time evening hours,” “to attract evening listeners, programmers realized they needed to reach groups whose cultural tastes were not being served by television. Hence, most of the early minority programs (and, later, rock-and-roll shows) on radio were aired in the evening.” 68 O’Hair’s American Atheist Radio Series was one-such evening-hour minority programs. When Murray unsuccessfully petitioned the FCC to revoke the licenses of 15 radio stations out of Oahu in 1964, she demanded, as the president of the Freethought Society of America and of the International Freethought Society, airtime to discuss “Freethought” philosophy. 69 Now, discarding the emphasis on Freethought philosophy in favor of Atheist identity, she was beginning to break through.

Changes in the medium of radio serve as important context, then, in understanding O’Hair’s treatment of atheist identity. Rothenbuhler and McCourt helpfully summarize the effect of this transformed culture of radio on conceptions of identity:

As the number of radios increased and listeners became more mobile, the overall radio audience fragmented across time and space. Listeners became more isolated from each other; they could be found in a larger number and variety of situations, which yielded yet more variance in listening preferences and

68 Ibid., 379.
69 “Atheist Files Complaint against 15 Radio Stations,” Honolulu Advertiser, October 15, 1964, sec. B.
behaviors. These changes rendered the overall audience less predictable and made it profitable not to think of the audience as an aggregate...Radio now produced (and reflected) a fragmented and pluralistic culture.\textsuperscript{70}

In short, format-era radio enabled greater expression of those identities that positioned themselves in opposition to the mainstream or dominant culture. This context illuminates O'Hair's understanding of atheist identity. If O'Hair can be considered heir to Scott in terms of her understanding of radio as a necessary platform for the visibility of atheism, she goes further than Scott in the direction of understanding atheist identity as something inherent and deeply-engrained rather than purely conceptual or philosophical. As is immediately obvious in her letter to radio stations invoking the Scott decision, for O'Hair Atheism is boldly equated with an “ethnic identity.”

While O'Hair's radio programs demonstrate a consistent and long-standing concern with defining atheist identity, this equation of atheism with ethnicity seems to have developed over the course of O'Hair's radio career. In a 1969 broadcast, O'Hair claims, “In our quest for an ‘identity’ of Atheists, we have been looking into their history, their sociology, their personalities, their philosophy and their ideology generally.”\textsuperscript{71} The search for a singular “identity” here is nonetheless tempered by the plurality of voices considered and the use of the third person to indicate an unwillingness to subsume those voices under her own understanding of atheism. By 1972, O'Hair's understanding

\textsuperscript{71} Madalyn Murray O'Hair, “American Atheists and Freethinkers,” American Atheist Radio Series (Austin, TX: KTBC, December 1, 1969), In Vol. II of O'Hair's transcripts at CESAALA.
of atheist identity was markedly more assertive. “We seek ethnic identity and the right to be free from religion in our cultural milieu, a right now specifically denied us by law.”72 And again, in August 1972, O’Hair proclaims, “As every ethnic group seeking its own identity, American Atheists are attempting to uncover its history.”73 In O’Hair’s personal transcripts, the words “is” and “its” are handwritten over the now-crossed-out “are” and “their,” respectively – the plurality of atheist voices recognized in 1969 has been replaced with an understanding of history as the emergence of the singular ethnicity of atheism. To better understand this strategy of positing atheism as a personal identity, we must consider the specificity of radio as a tool for articulating subjectivity.

3.3 Listening Subjects

A particular relationship between radio, as acoustic medium, and the visibility of the subject has been noted by scholars within the field of sound studies. Beginning in earnest with Susan Douglas’ highly influential Listening In, radio has been understood as a medium predicated on techniques of listening that emphasizes and privileges an intimate relationship between the voice of the broadcaster and the ear of the listener – a relationship particularly suited to the articulation of subjectivity. As Douglas notes, “the act of listening...cultivates a sense of national unity and, at the same time, a

conspiratorial sense of subcultural difference, of distance from, even superiority to that national ethos.” For Douglas, the potency of radio lies in the physiology of listening. Citing the work of cognitive psychologists, Douglas argues that “humans find it useful – in fact, highly pleasurable – to use our brains to create our images.” In other words, as distinct from print media and its reliance on the visible word and image, it is precisely the lack of visuaity inherent to radio that generates feelings of intimacy. In turn, this intimacy based on the absence of imagery “allows people to bind themselves so powerful to this device. It is this feature of radio – its extension and magnification of the ear, of hearing – that defines its meaning to the imaginative transformations of American life in this century.” Hence, Douglas draws attention to the importance of invisibility and the voice in understanding the phenomenology of radio. “The fact that radio waves are invisible, emanate from 'the sky', carry disembodied voices, and can send signals deep into the cosmos links us to a much larger, more mysterious order.”

Building on Douglas' work, Kate Lacey, in *Listening Publics*, goes further in connecting acoustic space, as a “'resonant sphere' with no centre and no margins,” with the formation of subcultural identities. Pointing to the work of Stephen Connor, Lacey writes:

75 Ibid., 26.
76 Ibid., 28.
77 Ibid., 41.
It is not coincidental...that this destabilization and reconfiguration of the soundscape coincided with the reconceptualization of the modern self as unstable, malleable and fragmented. In fact, the qualities of the auditory resonate in a variety of ways with modernist, feminist, and postmodern conceptualizations of subjectivity, not least because privileging an acoustic subjectivity throws into disarray conventional distinctions between interior and exterior worlds, public and private, active and passive, even subject and object.⁷⁹

Again, as with Douglas, the quality that lends radio to the destabilization and restabilization of new forms of identification for listeners consists of a combination of the taken-for-granted nature of hearing and a kind of invisibility – though in this case, it is the invisibility of the audience rather than the message that proves most potent in constituting collective identity: “Somehow, the combination of an indiscriminate address sent into the ether, with the unknowability of an audience using the apparently universal and natural skill of listening, effected the conflation of the limited numbers of 'listeners-in' with the all-embracing fiction of 'the listening public.'”⁸⁰

In part, Lacey’s argument about the invisibility of the radio audience builds on – while departing with in significant ways – Jean-Paul Sartre’s analysis of radio in Critique of Dialectical Reason. There, Sartre argues that “the mere fact of listening to the radio, that is to say, of listening to a particular broadcast at a particular time, establishes a serial relation of absence between the different listeners.”⁸¹ Radio, for Sartre, relies on a “mystifying” function of the voice in that it seems to address the listener directly,

⁷⁹ Ibid.
⁸⁰ Ibid., 35.
implying discursive reciprocity, while actually disempowering the listener’s ability to respond. The “serial relation of absence,” for Sartre, means that the individual listener is placed into a horizontal relationship with other invisible listeners in her ability to reciprocate to the radio address. “I can write, protest, approve, congratulate, threaten, etc. But it must be noted at once that these activities will carry weight only if a majority (or a considerable minority) of listeners who do not know me do likewise. So that, in this case, reciprocity is a gathering with one voice.”82 Again, the publicity and invisibility of the radio as medium establishes, for Sartre and for Lacey, a situation in which the listener’s relationship to the medium can only be articulated in collective terms, even as the individual is individualized and privatized:

Yet I can, if I wish, turn the knob, and switch off the set or change stations. But here the gathering at a distance ends. For this purely individual activity changes absolutely nothing in the real work of this voice. It will continue to echo through millions of rooms and to be heard by millions of listeners; I will merely have rushed into the ineffective, abstract isolation of private life, objectively changing nothing. I will not have negated the voice; I will have negated myself as an individual member of the gathering.83

By this understanding, the radio broadcast fundamentally restructures the listener’s relationship both with other listeners and with the voice of the broadcaster. As a radio listener, I am split between an aggressive form of individualism, alone in front of my receiver, and a “lateral relation of indefinite seriality” with other listeners, who remain

82 Ibid.
83 Ibid., 272.
invisible to me and thus assume the identity hailed by the broadcast itself. In response to
the identifying address of the voice on the radio, I am either an impotent individual with
only the power to withdraw my attention, or I am a member of a collective of listeners
identified entirely in relationship to that address. While we can disagree, as Lacey does,
with Sartre's determinism in positing the voice on the radio as having an overwhelming
power to render the listener impotent and passive, there is nonetheless value in
recognizing the possibility that the relative invisibility of both the radio audience and
the means of radio's transmission has significant effects on the forms of identification
available to radio listeners.

As a final entry in the field of sound studies before returning to Madalyn Murray
O'Hair, Jonathan Sterne's *The Audible Past* serves as an important reminder about the
dangers of naturalizing the faculty of listening as it relates to the medium of radio.
Sterne draws attention to what he terms "the audiovisual litany," a naturalized
dichotomy common to media analyses that divide the experience of hearing from the
experience of seeing. Sterne's anxiety is that naturalizing a host of differences between
hearing and seeing as physiological differences (e.g. that hearing is immersive while
vision is perspectival, that hearing involves contact while vision requires distance, that
hearing is subjective while seeing is objective, that hearing is about affect while vision is
about intellect, etc.) "idealizes hearing (and, by extension, speech) as manifesting a kind
of pure interiority.” 84 In other words, while it might be tempting to follow Walter Ong and others in understanding the experience of listening as one physiologically suited for the articulation of authentic identity, Sterne reminds us that this notion of listening emerges by way of a long history of technologized practices. Thus, Sterne draws attention to the history of “audile technique, a set of practices of listening that were articulated to science, reason, and instrumentality and that encouraged the coding and rationalization of what was heard.” 85 While Sterne agrees with Douglas that an untold story of modernization is the conquering of the visual realm by an increasingly privatized and individuated acoustic space, for Sterne this story does not end with the supersession of Enlightenment instrumentality by affect, but with the instrumentalization of the acoustic and its deployment toward the advancement of scientific reason. More importantly, the qualities of the acoustic that lent themselves to this process were not natural or physiological, for Sterne, but at least partially socially constructed and enacted by way of disciplinary practices predicated on technological changes. With these caveats in mind, we are prepared at last to return to the question of atheism.

85 Ibid., 23.
3.4 Visibility and the Material Voice

Recall Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s philosophy of radio: “We had to make other assumptions too: that almost no one knew anything about Atheism (even Atheists); that hostility directed by the religious community was great; that distortions in our position were constant, and that no one really had any access to any information about us anywhere.”86 Here, we observe a common anxiety amongst radio broadcasters about whether “listeners knew how to listen, a feeling compounded by the invisibility and inaudibility of an audience whose reactions were impossible to gauge.”87 Faced with an indiscriminate audience and the transient nature of radio, O’Hair was keenly aware of a double-edged potential within radio – to efficiently constitute a “public” around atheist identity while running the risk of contributing to distorted understandings of atheism.

On the radio – defined by the invisibility of the medium of transmission, the lack of visible images, and the relative invisibility of the listening audience – questions of visibility and invisibility became paramount to O’Hair. This is evident in O’Hair’s difficulty in addressing the manifold history of freethought. In 1969, O’Hair’s treatment of freethought engages in a kind of encompassing logic:

Freethought goes under many names, depending almost entirely on the personal courage of the practitioners. We call ourselves heretics, iconoclasts, secularists, objectivists, rationalists, infidels, deists, ethical culturalists, realists, humanists, agnostics, unitarians, freethinkers, or Atheists. I prefer to call myself an Atheist, but let me recall to you one line of the poet, Rudyard Kipling. "The Colonel’s lady

---

86 O’Hair, What on Earth Is an Atheist!, v
87 Lacey, Listening Publics, 36.
and Rosie O’Grady are sisters under the skin.’ No matter what any one of us calls himself, a rose by any other name is a rose.\textsuperscript{88}

Here in her early broadcast days, then, O’Hair’s attitude is one of amusement and liberality; the plurality of titles for Atheists is a matter of personal taste. One’s choice of self-identification is generally harmless and politically inconsequential. By 1972, O’Hair’s attitude is less forgiving. In a radio program titled “Who Are Freethinkers?” O’Hair complains, “As we try to delineate who were Atheists and who were not in the history of our times, we run into the variable names ‘Rationalist’, ‘Humanist’, ‘Freethinker’ and it is very difficult to try to sort out those who were frankly A-theist and those who were Theists but who were ‘liberal’, whatever that meant at each stage of history.”\textsuperscript{89}

Elsewhere, O’Hair is clearly frustrated by the plethora of names used without rigor in the nineteenth century: “As an Atheist and speaking for Atheists as well as American Atheism, I try constantly to find out why we have hidden ourselves under diverse names during our history.”\textsuperscript{90} Here, one begins to see the underlying relationship between visibility and nomenclature – a conflation of visibility and audibility enabled by radio. In a mediascape defined by public visibility (or aurality), to fail to agree on a common title for a group’s identity is to remain invisible.

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item Madalyn Murray O’Hair, “Who Are Freethinkers?,” \textit{American Atheist Radio Series} (Austin, TX: KTBC, September 2, 1972), In Vol. V of O’Hair’s transcripts at CESAALA.
\item Madalyn Murray O’Hair, “Secularism,” \textit{American Atheist Radio Series} (Austin, TX: KTBC, November 25, 1972), In Vol. V of O’Hair’s transcripts at CESAALA.
\end{enumerate}
\end{footnotesize}
O’Hair’s emphasis on the unity of atheist identity is not purely a question of nomenclature, either; it is also infused with normative judgments. In one radio broadcast, “Types of Atheism,” O’Hair seems to indicate a willingness to tolerate diversity within the ranks. She declares, “Many people feel that Atheists are all of a kind. We have the public image of being a group of persons all of whom ‘deny God.’ This is so far from the truth, that I must pause tonight to talk to you about Atheists, and the different kinds of Atheists there are.”\(^1\) Specifically, O’Hair describes three types of atheists: the primitive, the philosophic, and the practical.\(^2\) Importantly, these diverse kinds of Atheism are far from equal in O’Hair’s esteem. The primitive Atheist, to O’Hair, “does a double-take at Christianity, finds it to be incredible, as any thinking person would, and announces, ‘I don’t believe that crap,’ and lets it go at that.”\(^3\) The primitive Atheist seems to represent a kind of apathetic atheist who abandons the most unreasonable of religious doctrines but without embracing an identity in opposition to religion. “These people usually join the Ethical Culture Society or the Unitarian Church and live happily ever after with substituted dogmas, creeds, and routines to fill a gap they imagine was left in their lives.”\(^4\) The philosophic Atheist, on the other hand, “does a triple-take at Christianity and gets hopelessly bogged down in reading the Bible in

\(^{2}\) O’Hair, “Types of Atheism,” 354.
\(^{3}\) Ibid., 355.
\(^{4}\) Ibid.
order to clarify that to which he is opposed.” 95 As O’Hair continues, her contempt builds. “These philosophic Atheists usually join the American humanists or Mensa and live happily ever after deeply immersed in obscurantism – reading in-depth the genteel, erudite, and completely worthless articles in the journals of those societies. They play the game of beating ideas to death with words. They usually, also, have Ph.D’s.” 96 Before addressing the third broad category of Atheists, O’Hair pauses: “I need to delineate another kind of Atheist, too – one I despise.” This is “the Atheist who has a hatred reaction to religion...” who “never gets beyond his hatred.” 97 Now, it becomes clear that O’Hair’s disagreement with these varieties of atheism is connected with disagreements over forms of communication and gathering. For example, hateful Atheists “belong to minute Atheist groups which meet in cellars and send out mimeograph sheets in opposition to religion.” 98 Again, the question of visibility rears its head at the heart of questions of identity. The “sectarian Atheist,” another subtype that seems to fall somewhere between the philosophic and practical Atheist, “flourishes only on bitter internecine warfare and factional strife. His entire energy is devoted to attacking other Atheist groups, and I know the head of one such group who claims to have absolute scientific proof that there is no god. These Atheists identify themselves as Freethinkers,

---

95 Ibid.
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 Ibid.

133
Rationalists, or Secularists.\textsuperscript{99} Between the lines, O'Hair's ongoing struggles to secure the reticent support of Freethought societies and presses bubbles over into outright scorn.

Finally, O'Hair reaches the "third large class – the practical Atheist, a Maslovian type – who just has a natural human thrust to what is healthy and normal in life."\textsuperscript{100} The disdain heaped on the first two types of Atheist gives way to glowing praise for the practical Atheist: "He is grounded in life and its natural rules. He has a free-wheeling, open-ended philosophy."\textsuperscript{101} O'Hair's normative vision of what an Atheist should be is staked in simultaneous opposition to both the stuffy rigor of philosophical consistency and the unbridled vitriol of emotional anticlericalism. The practical Atheist needs little in the way of a rational justification for his irreligion and nothing in the way of emotional motivation – "He is interested in the here and now, not in fantasy, and he sees religion – theism – as simply being irrelevant to human life. He has no negative emotion laden reaction to religion, because it isn't worth his time."\textsuperscript{102} But O'Hair isn't satisfied yet. The practical Atheist is clearly superior to the first two categories, but "there are several Atheists who go beyond this. They are the Atheists who realize finally that every aspect of living depends on the total living of mankind. They know that they are shaped by the culture and times into which they are born."\textsuperscript{103} Here, O'Hair's vision becomes

\textsuperscript{99} Ibid., 356.
\textsuperscript{100} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{101} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{102} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{103} Ibid.
unclear and seems to serve primarily to indicate an attitude of striving rather than an established goal: “I am trying to lead Atheists to become of this type in America today.”\(^{104}\) But what exactly distinguishes this final type from the practical Atheist is obscure. O’Hair seems to reduce the matter to a question of symbolism and taxation. “Religion wants money, special privilege, and power. We need to fight them – on the base of the symbolism and on the base of denying them any additional tax funds. The primitive Atheist can’t help. The philosophic Atheist can’t help. The practical Atheist can’t help. They have not matured enough in their thinking.”\(^{105}\) This issue of symbolism seems to be tied to the awareness of one’s being “shaped by the culture and times into which they are born.” In a later broadcast, O’Hair clarifies what she calls “the fight for religious symbols” and its connection to taxation: “There is a concerted legal drive to make us into a Christian nation symbolically – and it contravenes all the concepts of state/church separation with which we began the nation...They recognize that they can’t get what they really want: tax money – unless and until they can convince everyone everywhere that this is a Christian nation.”\(^{106}\) Tellingly, O’Hair immediately connects the fight for religious symbols to the question of broadcast media. “In our continuing confrontation with the Federal Communications Commission we are told over and over again that there is no controversy in respect to religion in America, that Atheists do not

\(^{104}\) Ibid., 357.

\(^{105}\) Ibid.

have the right to speak.”¹⁰⁷ For O’Hair, then, the apotheosis of Atheist identity consists of a willingness to struggle against the symbolic equation of America with a nation of Christians, and that means foregoing questions of philosophy and anticlericalism in favor of simply inhabiting a visible atheist identity. Being an atheist and being visible are the keys to winning the war against religion.

Hence, O’Hair’s response to the anxiety of invisibility consists, in part, of appealing to the voice as a form of visibility. “The biggest underground in America is Atheism. This group has never been organized before to have our voices heard and that is what we are trying to do now...You are not alone, not anymore.”¹⁰⁸ This emphasis on visible identity and the rhetoric of the voice goes hand in hand with radio’s quality as an indiscriminately public medium. It is not just that the radio gives atheists a voice, but that it carries that voice to culture at large, situating atheism as a subcultural identity defined in opposition to mainstream culture. As O’Hair declares, “one of the campaigns I have underway is to have people who are Atheists admit this and to announce to the world that they are Atheists, for we have much to offer the American culture.”¹⁰⁹ The visibility of atheism, in other words, is directly equated with the audible voice carrying over the crystal-clear airways of radio:

¹⁰⁷ Ibid.
Religion’s promoters...at all times have free rein to promote their falsifications and an especially clear radio and television field when one can, at any moment, hear several religious broadcasts, at any time. Some of these being the most imbecile or outrageous, poured into the air with no chance for sanity or reason to voice a reply...I think those days are gone forever. Our voices can be heard now, and especially if you will help us with a contribution toward this end.\textsuperscript{110}

The history of broadcast media is largely the story of the simultaneous proliferation of voices and ears – the fragmentation, individuation, and privatization of relationships of acoustic intimacy catering to increasingly diverse listeners. It is understandable, then, that O’Hair’s attempts to consolidate divergent understandings of atheist identity on the radio revolve around giving atheism a voice. If her deployment of identity-politics looks mundane in light of today’s common understanding of atheism is an oppressed minority, this is perhaps a testament to the receptivity of consumers of broadcast media to her rhetorical strategies, and thus a lesson in the power of broadcast media and techniques of listening to constitute and reconstitute widely-held notions of identity and group belonging. At the same time, the medium of radio is one that lends itself to a certain consolidation and dematerialization of the voice. Despite proclamations of the contrary, O’Hair rarely succeeds in giving atheists their voice – that is, of enabling self-identifying atheists to speak for themselves. As O’Hair notes in the introduction to \textit{Atheist World}, “Along the way I have tried to interview Atheists, but, when I got right down to it, they did not know as much as I did. So we sat there, awkwardly, my waiting

\textsuperscript{110} O’Hair, “Religion and Morality.”
on the interviewee to say something and he waiting for me to ask a question that would give him a clue.”

O’Hair’s priorities are clear; radio is an effective tool in amplifying a voice while divorcing that voice from the material networks that constituted atheist communication prior to the broadcast era. It is not atheists who are given their individual voices, but “The Atheist” – a disembodied idea representing an invisible community.

Radio, then, in large part owing to its own materiality – that is, the phenomenological experience of listening as well as the technological power of broadcasting – helps enact a dematerialization of atheist identity in the hands of O’Hair. The call for visibility on the radio serves to render ethereal, like the mythical substrate of radio itself, the networks of communication deployed in the print era in favor of transmitting the spectral voice of “the Atheist.” This is to suggest that the notion of atheist identity as a minoritarian community existing in cohesion despite a fundamental invisibility and internal disconnection is deeply connected to a media form that dematerializes the substance of communication in the form of the ethereal voice. In O’Hair’s broadcasts, the Atheist is an idea more than it is a collection of real individuals.

Put differently, we can speak of two voices in discussing O’Hair’s radio presence. On the one hand, there is the idealized and immaterial voice of “the Atheist” who speaks on behalf of all who listen. It is the voice of meaning, striving to define the


138
identity of an unseen collective. But on the other hand, this immaterial voice is necessarily predicated on the materiality of the transmitted voice. This voice, to borrow Mladen Dolar’s formulation, is “what does not contribute to making sense. It is the material element recalcitrant to meaning, and if we speak in order to say something, then the voice is precisely that which cannot be said.”112 This is the vibrational voice – the voice as it is experienced prior to understanding. It is composed not just of speech, but of the various “non-voices” – coughs, hiccups, screams, and laughs – that operate at the hazy edges of linguistic structure.113 If the immaterial voice aims at establishing an imagined community, the material voice “sustains an intimate link with the very notion of the subject.”114 These understandings of the voice resonate with two registers of the radio experience: the audile and the haptic. But if the audile tends to transmit meaning to the understanding listener while the haptic transmits vibrations to the feeling hearer, the relationship between these two registers is open to manipulation.

This is one of the lessons of Anderson Blanton’s pioneering work on the haptic healing practices of radio evangelists. Surveying historical examples of early Pentecostal radio pioneers as well as contemporary ethnography in the Appalachian south, Blanton highlights cases in which listeners are encouraged to make tactile contact with radio speakers during prayers. Recognizing radio as a medium of invisibility, Blanton

113 Ibid., 552.
114 Ibid., 546.
describes listeners in an experiential condition of “blindness” who “‘fill in’ the disembodied and distant voice” with their hands.\textsuperscript{115} Thus, Blanton’s work highlights the disjuncture between the audile and haptic registers of radio – one operating on the ear while the other operates on the hand. It is this “experiential gap between the haptic and the audile” that “allows the listener to experience the prayer in a profoundly different sensory mode than is possible in other worship contexts and media environments.”\textsuperscript{116} For Blanton, the immateriality of the audile relative to the materiality of the haptic is what renders the experience of their disjuncture so spiritually potent. The sensitivity of the skin “are able to register heat, pressure, and vibration that are ‘unheard’ by the ear,” signaling the presence of the Holy Ghost.

But the experience of radio described by Blanton contrasts with that encouraged by O’Hair, demonstrating the diversity of ends toward which the materiality of radio could be deployed. O’Hair indicates no interest in drawing attention to the hapticity of the radio, aiming instead to convey only the immaterial voice as a site of collective identification and meaning. But if hearing is touching at a distance,\textsuperscript{117} and if the voice is “the materiality of the body that springs from the throat,”\textsuperscript{118} then O’Hair’s effort to

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
consolidate atheism under the ethereal voice was haunted by the affects of her own voice. Her caustic sarcasm, her derisive and scornful laughter, sighs of frustration—all of these extralinguistic affects were used by her opponents to construct a caricature of a spitting and vulgar tyrant. Thus, the *Washington Post* noted that while Murray was not the only plaintiff involved in the 1963 court ruling on prayer in public schools, she was “the litigant with the loudest mouth.”\(^{119}\) Murray’s attorney, Leonard Kerpelman, continued to fight legal battles for nonbelievers but distanced himself from Murray in search of “a logical atheist, a dignified atheist, an intellectual, polite, and earnest atheist, who speaks well, who reasons brilliantly, who refrains from unfair emotionalism, who respects the beliefs of others, who, if he cannot persuade, will not impose,”\(^{120}\) establishing a distinction between the persuasive and the imposing atheist predicated on an implicitly vocal emotionalism, while Robert Liston at the *Saturday Evening Post* described Murray as “coarse of manner, broad of gesture, masculine of voice.”\(^{121}\) These characterizations of O’Hair’s voice were assuredly amplified on the radio. As Edward Cohen remarked, “[when] people would hear her speak live or on the air, their mouths would hang open.”\(^{122}\) O’Hair’s acceptance and deployment of her infamous public image suggests that her persona is germane to radio far more than to a medium like


\(^{120}\) Quoted in Jane Kathryn Conrad, *Mad Madalyn: Madalyn Murray O’Hair, Her Family, Her Problems, the Truth and the Lies* (Society for Humanistic Judaism, 1983), 10-11.

\(^{121}\) Robert Liston, “Mrs. Murray’s War on God,” *Saturday Evening Post*, July 11, 1964, 86

\(^{122}\) Quoted in Le Beau, *The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O’Hair*, 301.
print. So much of the Atheist identity deployed by O'Hair relies on affective qualities specifically wedded to the medium of radio – namely, the qualities of the voice and of laughter, which enable a kind of derision that moves atheist identity away from the logical and toward the personal.

But perhaps this ambivalence between the impersonal and reasonable voice of “the Atheist” and the highly personal and affectively-charged voice of O'Hair herself was too charged to maintain. By the early 1980’s, O'Hair's grasp on the atheist collective that she helped define was falling apart in catastrophic fashion. Chapter leaders began calling for her removal from power and defecting en masse from American Atheists.123 In no small part, the dissolution of O'Hair's empire derives from the same mediated logic that motivated O'Hair's rigid definition of atheist identity. From the start, O'Hair's attempts to give voice to an authentic atheist identity blended into a kind of personification in which O'Hair understood herself as the sole possessor of that identity. On her first radio broadcast, she claims, “I am not just any Atheist either.”124 Later, she would elaborate: “I am more than an Atheist. I am, in fact, the Atheist.”125 That O'Hair understood herself as the personification of atheism is attested to in her personal correspondences. “We are the leaders. We are the ones who count.”126 In part, this stems

123 Ibid., 282–283.
124 O'Hair, “History of Atheists' Fight for Radio Time.”
from O’Hair’s conviction that most Atheists misunderstood their own identities – a conviction manifesting as early as 1969 when she laments that “almost no one knew anything about Atheism (even Atheists),”¹²⁷ but which becomes more pronounced as her hold on power becomes more tenuous. In a diary entry from 1985, she writes, “This year it became clear to me that we are fighting for Atheism, the ideology, and for Atheists, who probably do not really exist outside of ourselves. Most persons who think they are Atheists are ass-holes and nit-wits.”¹²⁸ In 1983, her new motto for American Atheists was “Unity today, power tomorrow,”¹²⁹ but her image of unity clearly placed her at the center: “this is our fiefdom. It is Murray-O’Hair lock, stock, and barrel.”¹³⁰

Biographers and commentators make much of O’Hair’s increasingly ideological and desperate attempts to maintain her own power in an increasingly fragmented and divisive atheist community, but it is important to recognize the extent to which these tactics and presumptions – that O’Hair herself is the voice that speaks for atheist identity – resonate with O’Hair’s understanding of broadcast media. This understanding is lucidly elaborated by O’Hair’s son, Jon Garth Murray, in a 1979 essay titled “Religion and Media.” Murray begins by disempowering atheist identity absent engagement with media. “On your own you are limited to an insignificant number of persons with whom you cohabit or co-work or with whom you [sic] social or business acquaintances. With

¹²⁷ O’Hair, What on Earth Is an Atheist!, v
the aid of the media (radio, television, newspaper or magazine), on the other hand, you can reach very impressive sections of the population.” However, access to the media comes with a drawback: precisely at the moment that one’s power of expression is amplified by the media, questions of censorship arise that limit the speaker’s freedom of expression. “It is at the point at which you desire to reach these significant numbers of persons with your opinion that the restrictions of that preestablished spectrum of allowable expression steps in.” This resonates with something that Robert Harold Scott notes in his analysis of the House Committee hearings of 1948, when he remarks that the standard for what constitutes blasphemy seemed to change with one’s access to media: “It is significant that no one at the hearings...applied the epithet ‘blasphemous’ to atheistic statements off the radio. But if atheism would or might be blasphemous over a microphone, it is or might be blasphemous on the lecture platform and on the printed page.”

For Murray as for Scott, the question is: “How, then, can an Atheist partake of the ‘freedom of speech’ concept in this country above the level of personal interaction?” Murray’s answer speaks directly to the power of media in shaping atheist identity. “(S)he can’t. Not unless (s)he is willing to use the media within the

---

132 Ibid.
134 Murray, “Religion and Media (April, 1979),” 47.
media’s rules. That is what the leadership of this organization has been attempting to do for years – speak about the unspeakable, religion, within the rules laid down by the media and still be effective in broadcasting the viable alternative of Atheism.”  

And here, Murray begins to demonstrate the significance of O’Hair’s persona as a tool deployed precisely to take advantage of the medium of radio. Atheists need techniques, Murray argues, that establish atheism not as a set of ideas, but as an identity set in opposition to the traditional American subject. In other words, atheists need to embrace atheist identity as a novelty item rather than an unpopular opinion, and one technique for doing this “is to focus on the personality of the individual who maintains a certain opinion rather than the opinion itself.” Hence, when Le Beau for example argues that Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s “public persona may well have been her most original creation,” we are now in a better position to understand the marshaling of that persona as a political strategy deeply wedded to the materiality and regulatory contours of radio. O’Hair’s derisive laughter, the full affect of which is captured in stereo, serves to situate “the Atheist” in a position of opposition to the religious mainstream – an opposition that short-circuits argumentation and philosophy in favor of personality and subjective authenticity. In turn, the O’Hair’s novelty – her crass and coarse persona –

135 Ibid.
136 Ibid., 48.
137 Le Beau, The Atheist: Madalyn Murray O’Hair, 16.
prompts a kind of scorn and derision from her enemies, real or imagined, that cements this agonistic relationship. As Murray elaborates:

The media projects an image, like a slide on a screen, of the 'perfect' American; that is, one who does not deal with those subjects that are taboo...What happens, then, when someone spills the beans and announces to everyone that what they are laughing at is what they are? The system of constant projection of a false ideal fails to produce the desired emulation of that ideal and desire to reach it. That which is emulated is unreal, and that which is laughed at is real. The media system is backward. Just like the bible.\textsuperscript{138}

Radio then provides a forum and material apparatus through which the atheist identity is constituted not as a philosophy, but as a persona revolving around the affective qualities of the voice – namely, laughter. And critically, recalling O'Hair's fight for religious symbols, this persona serves as a visible contestation of the symbolic equation between American society and Christianity.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, it is little exaggeration to say that O'Hair did speak for atheism. Certainly, there were always those – particularly those who maintained affiliation to the societies of “Freethinkers” - who refused to accept O'Hair as the representative of religious doubt. But if the voice maintains an active function in articulating the hidden internality of the speaking subject, if the act of listening maintains a function in situating the listener as a passive subject receiving new forms of identification, if the radio magnifies these functions to an unprecedented extent, and if the history of infidelity provided ample resources with which to articulate the atheist

\textsuperscript{138} Murray, “Religion and Media (April, 1979),” 48–49.
identity as authentic and immutable, then perhaps it is no surprise at all that Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s legacy today consists of an aggressive – to the point of self-destructive – consolidation of atheist identity.

3.5 Print Resistance

Among those who called themselves atheists and Freethinkers, the emergence of atheism on the radio was not universally celebrated. E. Haldeman-Julius, in particular, was skeptical of Scott's 1946 broadcast. The flip side of Haldeman-Julius' utopian understanding of print was apparently a particularly cynical view of radio. In *The American Freeman* and in one of his Blue Books, Haldeman-Julius wrote, “[We] fear we cannot regard Mr. Scott's personal success as a significant victory.”139 This terse lack of enthusiasm at Scott’s success seems to stem in large part from Haldeman-Julius’ ambivalent outlook on radio. Marveling at the radio as technology, Haldeman-Julius was severely disappointed by the content of radio programs:

Lying on my library couch I would turn the dingimbob and listen in on what was being sent out from 'studios' in Kansas City, Chicago, Dallas, Cincinnati and half a dozen other points. I assure you, my friends, it was dismal. The marvel was the radio itself. I could never get over the thought of its marvelous effectiveness, despite the fact that the industry is still a baby. It is a wonderful thing. But there my enthusiasm ends. The radio is used by third-rate minds of the 'amusement' and 'education' of fourth-rate minds, which makes a depressing spectacle.140

Thus, even as the radio industry boomed, Haldeman-Julius made his technological allegiances clear: “All this came over the radio, and a good deal more that I cannot bear repeating lest I break into tears that will moisten and rust my typewriter.” Haldeman-Julius’ skepticism towards radio, along with Scott’s repeated recourse to print media as a foil against which to defend the regulation of radio, suggests that atheists were divided in their understandings of the progressive potential of various media.

Similarly, when Madalyn Murray O’Hair took to the airwaves, responses from the Freethought community were less than enthusiastic – particularly publications owned by Haldeman-Julius. For a number of reasons, O’Hair was distrusted from early on by the majority of the Freethought press. As Le Beau notes, “Freethinkers’ sought to distance themselves from Madalyn Murray because of the scandalous image she cultivated, and that they feared would be associated with them and their cause.” In large part, this distrust clearly stemmed from O’Hair’s persona and confrontational tactics. Thus, as early as 1964, members of the Freethought community wrote in no unclear terms about their stance with relation to Murray:

> Madalyn Murray has brought more discord to adherents of the free thought movement, more bad publicity in the press, more hatred by the public at large toward free thinkers, rationalists, secularists and humanists than have all the combined theologians from the beginning of man’s fight for freedom. As a public representative of atheism, Madalyn Murray’s general abnormal behavior has

141 Ibid., 47.
branded all atheists in the eyes of their antagonists as extremists, vulgarists, opportunists, and law breakers.\textsuperscript{143}

At the same time, the rift between O'Hair and Freethought, which only grew over the course of O'Hair's career, also had to do with perceptions of print and broadcast media. Throughout the time that O'Hair occupied the American airwaves, Freethought publications like Haldeman-Julius' \textit{American Freeman} took a harsh position with relation to the medium of radio.

Figure 12: James Erickson, Illustration, \textit{A Book of Freeman Cartoons} (Girard: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1949), 13.

\textsuperscript{143} Vitali Negri, \textit{The American Rationalist}, November 164, quoted in Conrad, \textit{Mad Madalyn}. 149
Criticism of radio from within the ranks of Freethought followed the same logic as a general distrust of all media censorship. In one of James Erickson’s cartoons, three figures representing movies, press, and radio kneel in reverence before a throne containing the musty bones of religion. These three media forms are often grouped together in Haldeman-Julius’ editorials, though the press in question clearly refers primarily to more popular and traditional publications. For example, Haldeman-Julius clarifies, “Hollywood, the standard newspapers and magazines, and the blatant, blaring radio are content to humble themselves before the cobwebby, dry, rattling bones of churchianity.” In press, at least, there is room for non-standard publications to spread the idea of Freethought. But, “so far as the radio is concerned, liberal theories of religion, let alone Freethought and Skepticism, simply don’t exist.” This distinction between press and radio is exacerbated by the “blaring” nature of radio. One can choose which publications to read, but the radio is always invading one’s acoustic space.

---

144 See for example E Haldeman-Julius, A Book of Freeman Cartoons: By James Erickson and Harry Fowler, Editorials by E. Haldeman-Julius (Reprinted from The American Freeman) (Girard, Kansas: Haldeman-Julius Publications, 1949), 26, 30.
145 Ibid., 12.
146 Haldeman-Julius, A Book of Freeman Cartoons: By James Erickson and Harry Fowler, Editorials by E. Haldeman-Julius (Reprinted from The American Freeman).
On the one hand, then, The American Freeman, constituting the closest marriage of Freethought and communism, primarily attacks radio for its commercialism – a fact which renders radio ineffective as a tool of education despite its potential. “The American radio, which could be a powerful medium for mass education and enlightenment, is a device of reaction, a voice of exploitation and special privilege, and a tool of salesmanship. Radio’s commercials are merely a sign and symbol of the innate corruption of a means of communication that could, were it freed of commercialism,
bring light into the darkest places.” 147 Radio represents a form of hypocrisy in that its purported freedom is belied by corporate sponsorship. “The big business interest, through their sponsorship of radio time, own the air waves, even though in theory the air belongs to the people.” 148 Corporate interests, then, explain the dominance of radio by religious programming, as The American Freeman’s primary criticism of religion revolves around its convergence with Western capitalism. Radio under capitalism is “nothing more than a megaphone for the pastors.” 149

147 Ibid., 40.
148 Haldeman-Julius, A Book of Freeman Cartoons: By James Erickson and Harry Fowler, Editorials by E. Haldeman-Julius (Reprinted from The American Freeman).
On the other hand, the criticism of radio goes beyond simply lamenting capitalism’s influence. In other instances, Freethought images focus on the experience of radio-listening in addition to radio content. One cartoon, while targeting the commercialism of radio, simultaneously emphasizes the passivity of the radio listener in ways reminiscent of Sartre’s earlier analysis. The aural annoyance of the radio aggressively erupts out of the receiver and antagonizes the listener, whose only defense is to cover his ears. Replicating the claim that the radio is only “a megaphone for pastors,” a 1970’s M. Wisecup cartoon shows the evolution of an evangelist as a literal
transformation into a phonograph, again emphasizing radio’s blaring nature as the evangelist’s words devolve into meaningless noise.

Figure 15: M. Wisecup, "Evolution of an Evangelist," Illustration, Secular Subjects #295, (October 1974), CESAALA Archive

These understandings of radio by champions of the Freethought press must be kept in mind when considering Freethinker’s distrust of Madalyn Murray O’Hair, whose brash and aggressive persona must have seemed uniquely suited for broadcast media. One of the recurrent themes of this study is the extent to which atheist engagement with
one form of media is predicated on and motivated by lamentations of alternative forms. Just as Scott used the unregulated openness of print media to demand fair regulation of radio, Freethinking publishers used the monopolization of radio by religious and corporate interests to posit print media as uniquely capable of facilitating diversity of thought. Where O’Hair lamented the fragmentation, individualism, and self-imposed isolation of Freethought publishing, Haldeman-Julius bemoaned the crude, aggressive, and ultimately self-defeating tendency of the radio to conflate entertainment with education.150 And where print media offered Freethinkers a networked space to share and debate ideas, radio offered atheists a voice with which to articulate a shared identity.

150 Michele Rosenthal has outlined similarly negative views of broadcast media (as vulgar, loud, and corrupted by entertainment values) expressed by American Protestants in the 1950’s in *American Protestants and TV in the 1950’s: Responses to a New Medium* (Springer: 2007), while Sally Promey has described the liberal Protestant critique of mass-culture images of Jesus in “Interchangeable Art: Warner Sallman and the Critics of Mass Culture,” in *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman*, ed. David Morgan (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996) 148-180. Hence, Haldeman-Julius’ and others’ resistance to O’Hair’s engagement with broadcast media may owe less to incompatible understandings of atheism than to a class-based or intellectualist attitude toward popular media shared by liberal Protestants and Freethinkers during the heyday of the broadcast era.
4. Irreligious Interfaces: Atheism on the Internet

[Software’s] combination of what can be seen and not seen, can be known and not known – its separation of interface from algorithm, of software from hardware – makes it a powerful metaphor for everything we believe is invisible yet generates visible effects, from genetics to the invisible hand of the market, from ideology to culture. – Wendy Hui Kyong Chun

What becomes of the subject in the digital age? If one of the primary legacies of structuralist and poststructuralist thought is the awareness that the subject has no essence separable from and sovereign to the passive object but is constructed out of discursive and textual practices, today’s theorists are increasingly concerned with articulating the effects of new modes of discourse and textuality enabled by digital media on the formation of subjectivity. Emboldened by pronouncements of the death of the sovereign subject by twentieth century literary theorists, Friedrich Kittler famously described the digital as the denouement of the process by which modern media technologies exterminated the subject over the course of the modern age. For Kittler, the process began with the mechanization of language enabled by the popularization of the typewriter at the end of the nineteenth century. Thus, “man simply died around 1900. It was a death to which the much-discussed death of God is a footnote.”¹ But if “man” – signifying the authentic and unmediated self – died at the beginning of the twentieth century, the ghost of the subject survives long into modernity, kept alive by increasingly

complex hermeneutical practices and fragmented media forms aimed at reviving it. It is the digital, for Kittler, that finally succeeds in eradicating these remains by converging all previous media forms into pure information:

And once optical fiber networks turn formerly distinct data flows into a standardized series of digitized numbers, any medium can be translated into any other. With numbers, everything goes. Modulation, transformation, synchronization; delay, storage, transposition; scrambling, scanning, mapping—a total media link on a digital base will erase the very concept of medium. Instead of wiring people and technologies, absolute knowledge will run as an endless loop.²

For Kittler, in other words, the digital eliminates the human by eliminating all space for embodiment. The subject is finally reduced to the status of a medium—a collection of information or noise qualitatively indistinct from everything around it, with no true externality against which to define itself.

Subsequent theorists less willing to abandon the subject wholesale have tempered these sweeping proclamations by emphasizing the effect of digital media on subjectivity as one of transformation rather than dissolution. Thus, theorists like Mark Poster have influentially described the digital as materializing a “self that is no longer a subject since it no longer subtends the world as if from outside but operates within a machine apparatus as a point in a circuit.”³ By this understanding, the digital largely eliminates the sense of externality that constitutes the subject as categorically distinct

³ Mark Poster, What’s the Matter with the Internet? (Minneapolis: Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2001), 16.
from forces of ideology and social construction. Yet, some notion of the self survives, albeit in new guises. Now, for Poster, traditional categories of subjectivity like “race, class, and gender, or citizen, manager, and worker” are not abandoned but disrupted and repositioned “in unforeseeable ways.”

The attempt to articulate the digital self that is not a subject is popular among theorists of the digital. Thus, for example, Alexander Galloway has argued that “profiles, not personas, drive the computer,” in effect inserting a greater distance and plurality between the self and the avatars that represent it. Along these lines, a handful of theorists have regarded digital media as ultimately post-identitarian, aiding in the radical obliteration of subjectivity. Emily Apter, in Continental Drift, sees cyberidentity as inherently fluid and thus the antidote to a kind of identity politics incompatible with the liberatory goals of postcolonial theory. Along similar lines Georgio Agamben argues against squandering the Internet’s ability to explode identity: “Because if instead of continuing to search for a proper identity in the already improper and senseless form of individuality, humans were to succeed in belonging to this impropriety as such...then they would for the first time enter into a community without presuppositions and

---

4 Ibid., 3.
without subjects, into a communication without the incommunicable.”7 Thus, while the Internet has the potential to radically disrupt traditional notions of subjectivity, that potential is counterbalanced by the production of new arenas for the formation of identity which may remain wedded to the notion of a “proper identity.”

In the service of maintaining the balance between the dissolution and reformation of identity, Mark Hansen has attempted to recuperate the sense of embodiment that Kittler saw as incompatible with digital media. For Hansen, on the contrary, “digital technologies, as the contemporary expression of the originary technical mediation of the human, broaden what we might call the sensory commons – the space that we human beings share by dint of our constitutive embodiment.”8 Thus, digital technologies possess a number of facets that, to Hansen, enhance the realm of prepersonal embodiment on which selfhood is established, transforming “the agency of collective existence...from a self-enclosed and primarily cognitive operation to an essentially open, only provisionally bounded, and fundamentally motor, participation.”9 It is this new relationship between the body and the subject – in the digital arena now more about motor participation than cognitive or intellectual identification – that “opens identity to new degrees of flexible determination.”10 It is important to note that Hansen’s

---

9 Ibid., 20.
10 Ibid., 144.
case studies in forwarding this argument consist primarily of digital media installations that require a much higher degree of embodied participation than more banal experiences of digital technologies. Hansen rightfully notes that the digital's potential to undermine traditional notions of identity is limited in those contexts where the digital replicates textual landscapes that “fail to capitalize on the excess of embodiment over interpellation.”\textsuperscript{11} Even so, Hansen’s insights pertain to the mundane use of the Internet. Particularly in online communities, the Internet’s “deployment of machinic means for facilitating the performance of identity beyond the constraints imposed by physical appearance” means that “one invents oneself and one knows that others also invent themselves, while each interpellates the others through those inventions.”\textsuperscript{12} Hence, the digital does not dissolve identity, but enacts novel configurations of identity. This is due in part to a kind of fragmentation and horizontalization of the act of interpellation, such that subjects are not imposed from above but distributed along digital networks. At the same time, this process is self-formation is also more visible in the digital arena: “Unlike earlier forms of mediated communication, digital authorship is \textit{about} the performance of self-constitution.”\textsuperscript{13} Any consideration of the formation of digital identity must keep these facets in mind – the contours and algorithmic workings of digital networks that

\textsuperscript{11} Ibid., 148.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid., 143–144.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid.
situate users in relation to one another, on the one hand, and the discourses that users deploy in performing acts of self-constitution, on the other.

This chapter examines the atheist community on the popular website reddit.com14 in order to address the question of digital identity. We have just seen how broadcast media contributed to the emergence in the Twentieth century of an atheist identity wedded to the notion of visibility and a kind of identity politics. What happens to that notion of identity when it is translated onto the digital sphere, where the division between visibility and invisibility becomes increasingly hard to define? In approaching this question, I investigate a particular controversy which occurred in June 2013 when reddit’s atheist community underwent a shift in the way content was moderated. This period, I argue, puts a number of issues pertaining to networked community in stark contrast. In particular, it points to the role of the image and visibility in general in generating and undermining boundaries around algorithmically-defined digital communities. The digital, I argue, undermines traditional notions of public and private in a way that contributes to a relocation of atheist visibility, such that “coming out” is replaced with “coming in” and the digital arena becomes the primary site of publicity. This sense of introspective revelation in the formation of identity is not radically new; I contend that it extends the kind of intimate confessionalism that Foucault saw as a

14 reddit, inc. officially uses the lowercase “r,” a convention I follow except when quoting those who use the capital.
central element of technologies of the self as far back as the medieval period. At the same time, the confessional impulse takes on new layers in a digital medium where authentic intimacy blends with anonymous publicity.

Furthermore, this chapter explores the discourse of deconversion, which now surpasses “coming out” as the dominant mode by which atheist identity is performed and established. I argue that deconversion narratives and related discourses express a preoccupation with – and ambivalent response to – the question of personal agency, and that this preoccupation is due in part to the difficulty of isolating sites of control and freedom in a mediascape that is increasingly dictated by invisible and impersonal algorithms. Drawing on theorists who attribute the novelty of digital identity to its reliance on overlapping networks, I argue that the complexity of algorithms that shape and regulate the interactions of those networks contribute to a heightened anxiety or confusion concerning the extent to which individual identity is imposed by unseen forces or freely chosen.

4.1 Understanding reddit

In February 2016, according to self-published statistics, reddit.com had over 230 million unique visitors from over 210 countries. Of those 230 million, roughly 3.4 million were logged in redditors as opposed to casual passers-through or unregistered lurkers. According to Alexa.com, a traffic-data-tracking website, numbers like that make reddit

the ninth most popular website in the United States, just behind Twitter.com and well ahead of Netflix.com and Instagram.com.\footnote{16} What reddit lacks in sheer numbers, it makes up for in visibility. On August 29, 2012, standing president Barack Obama engaged in an \footnote{17} AMA\footnote{AMA stands for “Ask Me Anything,” a thread in which a famous person, the identity of whom is verified by a reddit.com employee, answers questions asked and voted on by redditors.} that single-handedly put reddit on the map for anyone interested in the Internet as a venue for political and public engagement. Roughly 200,000 people simultaneously tuned in at peak times during the hour of the AMA. The page was viewed over 100,000 times a minute. By the end of the session, over 10,000 comments had been posted, 60 dedicated servers had been added to keep the website from buckling under the weight of unprecedented traffic, and president Obama had spent just 30 minutes answering questions.\footnote{18}

But if reddit’s size and importance are well-recognized by a growing number of media scholars, it is much harder to pinpoint exactly what reddit \textit{is}. Is it a social network? A forum? A message board?\footnote{Given the diverse forms of communication and interaction facilitated on the Internet, there are significant implications to the terminology used to describe reddit. In this section, I attempt to articulate reddit’s relationship to social media as well as traditional Internet forums in order to highlight.} For an exploration of the difficulty of these questions, see Adrienne Massanari, \textit{Participatory Culture, Community, and Play: Learning from Reddit}, 2 edition (New York: Peter Lang Publishing Inc., 2015).
its potency as a site for the cultivation of digital collective identities. But theorizing how reddit enables particular articulations of identity requires understanding what reddit is and how it works.

The structure of reddit is deceptively simple. Reddit’s “about” site defines reddit as “a type of online community where users vote on content.” As a content aggregator, reddit's backbone consists of links shared by subscribers, or redditors, which are then voluntarily upvoted or downvoted by other redditors. The result is something like the equivalent of an immense mob of people simultaneously giving a thumbs up or thumbs down. The net total of the number of upvotes minus downvotes that a given piece of content receives is called karma, and karma determines how visible that content becomes. At a basic level, all content is listed by default in order from highest to lowest karma, meaning that the content with the most upvotes (disregarding algorithms of decay) appears at the top where it is more likely to be seen.

Content, however, is classified in intersecting ways. Structurally, reddit is highly modularized. The community is organized into some 11,000 (active) areas of interest called “subreddits,” most referred to following an “r/” indicating their common url structure (reddit.com/r/[subreddit]). Subreddit purview ranges from the most broad and all-encompassing (e.g. r/funny, r/pics, r/science) to the most absurdly specific (e.g. 

---

20 “Reddit.com: About Reddit.”
21 There are many more inactive subreddits, often created as gags. Ibid.

164
Every subreddit is regulated with more or less strictness by one or more moderators—users with a wide range of powers and responsibilities, including: banning individual redditors; prohibiting the posting of content that is off-topic, offensive, illegal, or incorrectly formatted; controlling the appearance and content of the subreddit itself, etc. Moderators are typically selected by other moderators, beginning with the individual creator of the subreddit, and as moderators are often the most active members of reddit, they frequently moderate multiple subreddits. If reddit can be said to have an ethos, it resembles something like a radical democracy in which high-quality content emerges organically from a simple voting process engaged in by a massive population of users. Thus, moderation, which belies to some extent this mythical image, tends to function most smoothly when it is least visible—another signal of the importance of questions of visibility and invisibility in the digital sphere.

Subreddits may be viewed in at least one of two basic ways. Each subreddit may be explored in isolation so that only content submitted to that subreddit will be visible, or registered redditors may subscribe to various subreddits, in which case their

---

reddit.com homepage will present the most popular content from all of their subreddit subscriptions. This is the key to reddit’s power as simultaneously general and highly personalized. Unregistered visitors to reddit will find themselves faced with a universal feed composed of the most popular content from 50 default subreddits, overlapping largely with the 50 most popular subreddits, but registered redditors may spend great amounts of time perfecting a collection of subscriptions tailored exclusively to their interests.

Finally, one of the most significant facets of reddit is a commenting system that generates a particular structure of discourse. Each piece of content posted to reddit spawns a thread of comments, themselves upvoted, downvoted, and ranked according to karma. As many redditors attest, the comments are often more entertaining or illuminating than the content posted by the original poster, or OP. Unlike traditional message boards, the karma system reconstructs conversation not according to the chronology of when comments are posted, but according to various levels of popularity. Commenters may reply specifically to other comments, generating hierarchicalized and nested conversations within conversations according to a kind of arborescent structure, and every level of the structure is organized and reorganized as voting unfolds. Users who take the time to read the comments on an original post, in other words, will first read the single most popular comment responding to the original post, followed by the most popular response to that response, and so on until a conversation has run its
course. This will be followed by a return to the top of the conversational structure with the next most popular response to the original post and an entirely new nested conversation. Unpopular comments are hidden in order to streamline the comment structure, resulting in highly entertaining and self-referential forms of rapport, consisting of punning-contests, increasingly esoteric games of pop-cultural referencing, etc. At the same time, hidden comments may be unhidden for those users interested in fleshing out the entirety of the comment history. As we will see, this complex and variable layering of visibility and invisibility constitutes one of the most significant facets of reddit for the production of identity.

In many ways, reddit is the perfect site to explore issues of identity, community, and social interaction on the Internet. As former CEO Ellen Pao puts it, “Reddit is the Internet, and it exhibits all the good, the bad and the ugly of the Internet.” But reddit’s structure serves to facilitate and streamline communication between otherwise unmanageable numbers of loosely-related individuals while also providing a number of tools that aid in both rigorous and unorthodox scholarly analysis. On the one hand, reddit’s karmic system generates a proclivity for bringing the most popular content to the foreground, enabling us to easily draw out those opinions that resonate with the greatest number of users. But with the click of a button, we can instantly flip the sorting

---

algorithm on its head and see only the most universally reviled and unpopular opinions or content. More significantly, reddit enables users to see what is most controversial. That is, content with a karmic score close to zero, despite having a great number of votes, indicates that users were almost perfectly split between liking and disliking that content, allowing us to highlight those sites of controversy that push at the boundaries between and within digital communities. Similarly, the comment structure, while facilitating entertaining forms of communication between users, also facilitates nuanced analysis of variable levels of agreement and disagreement by algorithmically organizing otherwise unmanageable volumes of commentary by topic and interest.

More theoretically, reddit serves as a ripe locus for considering questions that have perennially troubled scholars of social interaction on the Internet. In terms of the question of identity, reddit serves as a convenient middle ground between social networks like Facebook, which remains relatively wedded to the notion of a one-to-one relationship between an online profile and his or her “real” identity, and forums like 4chan where pure anonymity reigns supreme. Adrienne Massanari is right to regard reddit as a platform for the expression of pseudoanonymity which, combined with reddit's open source structure, make make redditors uniquely interested in questions of
self-definition and community-formation. Thus, reddit is the perfect venue to analyze the contours of atheist identity in the digital age.

4.2 New Atheist Media: Accounting for the Digital

“The world’s largest atheist community is not found in any building or city, yet it serves as both a refuge for beleaguered secularists and a launching pad for attacks against religion and broadsides for atheist rights. With close to 2 million subscribers, this atheist community is just a click away on the social and entertainment website Reddit.”

Cimino and Smith’s characterization of reddit’s atheist population is useful but somewhat misleading. It is true that the subreddit r/atheism now has over 2 million subscribers. At the same time, the number of subscribers to a subreddit is far from a reliable indication of a community’s size, and there are a number of factors that tend toward overestimation of a subreddit’s true size. The ease of registering to reddit, which requires no email address to verify identity, means that redditors often make multiple accounts. As both positive and negative karma, received from comments and original posts, is permanently tied to individual accounts, redditors will often create new accounts to post things that they don’t want to negatively affect the karma on their “primary” account. This becomes especially relevant in particularly contentious subreddits like r/atheism, where karma can be fickle. Second, anyone can view the entire

24 Massanari, Participatory Culture, Community, and Play, 168.
history of any other account’s contributions to reddit, meaning that redditors run the risk of revealing enough information about themselves over the course of a career to triangulate, so to speak, their real-life identity. Thus, many redditors routinely generate new primary accounts simply as a means of periodically erasing their past history.

Third, retired redditors – former users who, for one reason or another, stopped visiting reddit despite having created an account – remain subscribed indefinitely, creating a conservative trend in subscriptions. This trend is compounded by the fact that r/atheism was a default subreddit from October 2011 to July 2013, meaning that all new users during that time period were automatically subscribed. When r/atheism lost its default status, these users were not automatically unsubscribed. Hence, redditors who stopped trafficking the site during the period when r/atheism was a default remain subscribed despite their nonparticipation.

These caveats in mind, r/atheism is undeniably large. As points of comparison, subreddit r/christianity claims roughly 100,000 subscribers, while one of the most popular atheist websites, Freethoughtblogs.com, receives less than 20,000 unique visitors each month versus r/atheism’s millions.26 And like reddit as a whole, what r/atheism might lack in size it makes up for in visibility, serving as a hub introducing users to more peripheral nodes on a digital network of atheist blogs, Youtube channels, and

podcasts. One of the more popular atheist bloggers, “Friendly Atheist” Hemant Mehta, recognizes this role when he writes, “r/atheism is arguably the most important website for atheists on the Internet. It’s the place teenagers go when they first have doubts about religion and the most popular forum in the world for discussing atheism-related issues. What happens on the channel makes a big difference for new atheists.” Thus, r/atheism is understood by some to be a kind of gateway for fledgling atheists to discover and explore atheist thought and community. If atheism today exists first and foremost on the Internet, r/atheism is the closest thing contemporary atheists have to a digital home-base.

Despite contemporary atheism’s heavy reliance on the Internet as the primary site of collective discourse and action, few scholars have seriously considered the implications of new media on atheist identity. This fruitful intersection is in-fact, occupied almost exclusively by sociologists Richard Cimino and Christopher Smith, whose work offers a productive starting-point for the consideration of the digital interface that follows. In a growing handful of joint publications, Cimino and Smith have increasingly focused on the monumental importance of the Internet in the cultivation of contemporary atheist identity. In 2007’s “Secular Humanism and Atheism beyond Progressive Secularism,” they elaborate – based on participant observation of

---

and interviews with members of atheist and secular humanist organizations along with content analysis of *Free Inquiry*, the bimonthly newsletter of the Council for Secular Humanism – an understanding of atheist identity that seems to neatly dovetail with that articulated via broadcast media. Atheists and secular humanists embrace, for Cimino and Smith, a subcultural identity predicated on opposition to mainstream religious culture. Like evangelicals, “secular humanists and atheists feel ‘embattled’ by a persistently religious society.” In fact, atheists have internalized the minority status so emphasized by Madalyn Murray O’Hair and others, taking up minority discourse and identity politics. For Cimino and Smith, this strategy, along with attempts to attract ‘secular seekers’ and the borrowing of rhetoric from evangelical Protestantism, stems in part from a widespread perception of the failure of progressive secularism in the United States. In departure from the past, when “optimism about the eventual victory of secularism … [was] the rule rather than the exception in organized freethought movements,” in 2007 “there is clearly a loss of confidence among secular humanist leaders regarding the victory of secularism, at least in American society.” This new sense of pessimism, then, contributes to a tendency to regard atheist identity as filling a subcultural niche rather than competing for the soul of mainstream America.

---

29 Ibid., 412–413.
Cimino and Smith's emphasis on the pessimism or optimism of atheists concerning the advance of secularism, however, gives way in later publications to an increasing focus on the importance of media. Already in 2007, the authors are careful to note that “it is the perception of being embattled rather than its reality that can drive subcultural formation,”\textsuperscript{30} pointing at least to the role of media in shaping perceptions. By the publication of 2011’s “The New Atheism and the Formation of the Imagined Secularist Community,” the role of digital media has taken center stage in Cimino and Smith's analysis. The widespread pessimism concerning secularism that the authors observed in 2007 has begun to dissipate – a change that they attribute in part to a diffusion of community enacted by new media:\textsuperscript{31}

The weak ties that comprise the secularist community in the United States allowed discussion and interaction on the new atheism, creating an atmosphere encouraging nontheists to be more outspoken and involved in group activity with like-minded freethinkers. Such interactions led to more optimistic attitudes about the progress of secularism in American society and the decline of the influence of religion.\textsuperscript{32}

More importantly, following our discussion of the previous generation's emphasis on the visible, the cultivation of informal organizational connections on the Internet seems to succeed, to Cimino and Smith, in generating unprecedented levels of atheist visibility:

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 418.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 31.
Such visibility both expresses and broadens the scope of participation for American secularists. This is especially important for secularists, since their public image has more often been constructed by others. This visibility and agency is inseparable from new forms of experience and publicity arising from the expansion of the communicative conditions of contemporary media.  

Cimino and Smith’s crucial point in “The New Atheism” is that the visibility generated by new media seems responsible for many of the tensions that today define atheist identity. Their earlier emphasis on atheists’ pessimism concerning the advance of progressive secularism as the root of atheism’s subcultural identity here gives way to a complexly mediated interplay of visibility and communal consolidation. Based on survey data, Cimino and Smith argue:

A generally negative view of the mainstream media stood in contrast to the support and affirmation the respondents found on the Internet (24 of the 34 respondents who answered the question about the mainstream media showed such negative views). The substantial transformations in our contemporary media-scape are creating a new space for atheists to come out, speak out, and “meet up” in a still largely religious society.

The transformative potential of the Internet, then, lies not in its ability to simply enhance the visibility of the atheist community, but in a kind of sensible proximity. As atheists continue deeper into digitally-networked forms of community, they simultaneously expose themselves more than ever before to the religious mainstream that they stand against. This, as Cimino and Smith recognize, is the fundamental insight elaborated by Joshua Meyrowitz in No Sense of Place – that “granting individuals and groups once

---

33 Ibid., 32.
34 Ibid., 31.
firmly separated (by geography as well as social status and roles) access to the same experiencial space is one of the principle agents for increasing 'awareness of physical, social, and legal segregation.’\textsuperscript{35} The bottom line for Cimino and Smith demonstrates the value of keeping an eye trained on media as a privileged explicans for the contours of contemporary atheist identity: “In this context, the formation of an 'atheist consciousness' can be seen as a consequence of atheists' heightened awareness of the increasing distance between their strongly held views and the views of the 'majority,' which is a product of diminishing distance due to increasing access to the same experiencial sphere.”\textsuperscript{36} The result is a striking tension within the online atheist community between simultaneous feelings of acceptance and exclusion, “both [emerging] from the same dynamics.”\textsuperscript{37}

We are already wading into the unstable terrain of the interface and its profound effects on personal and collective identities. For now, following the arguments of the previous chapter, it must suffice to consider the impact of digital media on questions of visibility and publicity. As Cimino and Smith argue:

\textsuperscript{35} Ibid., 43. quoting Joshua Meyrowitz, \textit{No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior} (Oxford University Press, 1985), 93.
\textsuperscript{36} Cimino and Smith, “The New Atheism and the Formation of the Imagined Secularist Community,” 33. The preceding chapters implicitly challenge Cimino and Smith’s characterization of the contemporary moment as the first awakening of an “atheist consciousness,” and we should be skeptical of the very notion of a singular atheist consciousness rather than a plurality of atheist modes of experience. At the same time, it is fair to point to speed and spatiality as ways of articulating how those modes of experience cultivated by Heston’s cartoons or O’Hair’s radio broadcasts take on new characteristics in different media forms.
\textsuperscript{37} Ibid.
Today’s secularists are not content to merely be represented or reading with one another; they also desire to present themselves to the public. This disposition toward self-exhibition is intensified with secularists appearing to themselves in a place in common (cyberspace), a place that consists not so much in discrete images and bits of information but also as the source of presentation itself insofar as being public today increasingly means being online.  

On one hand, then, r/atheism seems to constitute the fruition of earlier calls for atheist visibility, where individual atheists are finally given the ability to make themselves seen and heard. At the same time, this enhanced visibility carries with it the potential to alter conceptions of individual and collective identity in unforeseen ways. New media possesses the ability to profoundly disrupt notions that have been vital in traditional understandings of community-formation – notions like public and private, individual and collective, visible and anonymous. The following exploration of r/atheism, with its internal tensions and historical controversies, serves to add flesh to Cimino and Smith’s theories about the effects of new media on atheist identity. At the same time, we must be careful to characterize what happens on r/atheism as more than merely symptomatic of the determining characteristics of new media. Reddit is a highly complex virtual space constituted by myriad overlapping interfaces – constantly changing and interactive surfaces that simultaneously hide and reveal various scenes and forms of visibility. Thus, r/atheism provides a site to investigate the ways that atheists have begun to take up and deploy the nascent potentials of the interface.

38 Ibid., 34–35.
4.3 Imaged Community: Lessons from May May June

“What do you put front and center on the biggest atheism forum in the world?”

In June of 2013, r/atheism underwent a rapid and seismic transformation. The subreddit’s creator and lone moderator, u/skeen, was suddenly deposed and replaced with a duo of moderators who departed from u/skeen’s laissez-faire approach. Without warning, changes to the moderation policy were announced. The most notable change was this: users who wanted to post images would now have to post them under the “self” category – a category which operated outside the karma system. Unlike most posts, self-posts did not attach the karma associated with the post to that of the poster. In other words, while a user who posted a well-received news article, for example, would receive a boost to his or her user’s karma, while a user who posted an upvoted image would no longer receive that same karmic boost – the karma would remain attached exclusively to the image. The ensuing outrage is the stuff of reddit legend. The front page of r/atheism was flooded with popular threads decrying the changes to the moderation policy:

“Let’s make r/atheism free and open again,” “why I dislike the new

---

39 Mehta, “I Love the Changes to Reddit Atheism.”
40 Though it should be remembered that the content of the front page is not necessarily an accurate representation of popular opinions. In this case, there is evidence that an organized group of users was systematically downvoting all new content that was not critical of the moderation changes. Since reddit’s algorithms place more emphasis on early votes, such “downvote brigades” can effectively control what content makes it to the front page. See “How to Counter a Sustained Downvote Attack in ‘New’: TheoryOfReddit,” accessed March 4, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/1g7cbi/how_to_counter_a_sustained_downvote_attack_in_new/ and “PSA: A Small Group of Users (30-40) Are Currently Camping the New Queue and Downvoting Anything That Isn’t a Complaint about the Rules into the Negative. The Admins Are Looking
rules,” “I miss the old r/atheism,” “Just admit it. EACH and EVERY additional rule implemented is a creeping concession towards theists feelings on religion. We need to be clear about this.” Alternative subreddits were advertized as havens for disgruntled users on both sides of the controversy. r/atheism briefly became a digital train-wreck, and subreddits devoted to bathing in reddit drama encouraged the chaos. Thus, the events of June 2013 were dubbed “May May June - “May May” being a pejorative term for “meme - caricaturizing the debate as one between juveniles unwilling to part with their “May Mays” and self-serious killjoys attempting to purify their subreddit of all humor.

How could such a seemingly innocuous and minute algorithmic change so quickly generate such unprecedented outrage? Lurking beneath the seemingly

into It. In the Mean Time, Please Edit Your Preferences and Blank out ‘Don’t Show Links with a Score Less than X’ : Atheism,” accessed March 4, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1g4b53/psa_a_small_group_of_users_3040_are_currently/. See screencap of front page provided at “You Have Made a Mistake, Your Subscribers Have Spoken, It Is Time to Correct This Mistake: : Atheism,” accessed March 4, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fsl61/you_have_made_a_mistake_your_subscribers_have/. For those who supported the moderators’ attempt to encourage reasoned discussion but who wanted to avoid the vitriol of the debate, r/trueatheism offered its services. For those who longed to return to the heyday of atheist images, r/atheismrebooted was created. Today, r/trueatheism has about 55,000 subscribers while r/atheismrebooted has about 18,000.

e.g. r/subredditdrama and r/circlejerk.
“Intortus Comments on I Work at Reddit, Ask Me Anything!,” accessed March 4, 2016, https://np.reddit.com/r/IAmA/comments/1gx67t/i_work_at_reddit_ask_me_anything/caop2nt.
In an interesting connection, the term “meme” was coined by famous atheist and biologist Richard Dawkins in The Selfish Gene to refer to a “new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation.” [Richard Dawkins, The Selfish Gene, 2 edition (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 192.] The term has been taken up in Internet culture to refer to any bit of content – often a genre of captioned image – that spreads virally from user to user and that deploys a vitalizing balance of repetition and variation.
superficial controversy of May May June are a number of very real and divisive questions within the online atheist community. Is r/atheism a forum for the development of an internally-focused atheist community or an outwardly-focused advocacy group? When does the positive effect of group solidarity degenerate into the toxic negativity of self-congratulation and exclusivism? What is the role of the image versus that of the text in the cultivation of atheist identity? Do atheists share anything substantial in common, whether in the sphere of belief, practice, or discourse, or is atheism defined by its plurality and individualism? Where is the line between commonality and conformity?

4.4 Moderation and Ideology

At one level, May May June was about two approaches to content moderation. In the unfolding drama, r/atheism’s original moderator, u/skeen, represented an optimism that atheism contained a unifying “philosophy of r/atheism” that made strict moderation unnecessary: “It is therefore my privilege to ‘own’ this sub-reddit (insofar as that means anything), and I intend to keep it totally free and open, and lacking in any kind of classic moderation.”46 This ownership of r/atheism harkens back to the days of Freethought print media, where periodicals were understood largely as extensions of their founders. In contrast to the ideological pluralism found in many Freethought

periodicals, however, u/skeen’s vision of r/atheism demonstrates a kind of faith in the connection between freedom of thought and philosophical unity. “The tiniest of changes could irreparably damage what this sub is meant to be. Again: free and open. Many of us know just how important those virtues are.”47 Responses to skeen’s post were mixed, with some users celebrating the desire for openness and others quick to mock what they perceived as a claim for ownership that belied that very openness. Both sides of the issue noted a certain irony: as founder of r/atheism, skeen was could be revered as a creator or castigated for having a God complex: “Wait a sec, if skeen created /r/atheism... who created skeen?!?!?!?!”48 When skeen advocated for his reinstatement as moderator, one user replies:

This is a masterful allegory of religion you guys have crafted! First the creator makes everything, and tells us we can do whatever, then he joins in for a bit, then wanders off for what seems like forever, in his absence new spokespeople for the 'true meaning of what the creator meant' rise up and take over, then the creator returns and is pissed, the followers of each then go to war over what is the 'truth!' This is awesome, it has to be planned right? Brilliant work.49

These criticisms were similarly leveled at those who enacted the new moderation changes. Most notoriously, newly appointed moderator airmandan published a post in his/her official capacity as moderator which, like skeen’s defense of the lack of moderation, appealed to a philosophy of atheism that was quickly mocked for placing

---

47 Ibid.
too much emphasis on communal unity. Airmandan’s post was rife with statements that were widely regarded as hyperbolic at least:

While change is never easy, it's important to remember that as a default subreddit we have the responsibility of being the image of atheists around the world. As such, we have to be considerate of not just our own needs, but the needs of a practical, pragmatic, and effective ideological movement. We must work together to build a foundation of trust and innovation that continues to inspire future generations to ask questions and seek answers. We must be the people whose awe at the majesty of the universe inspires a continuing and unending quest to understand it for the betterment of all mankind.50

The response from those who opposed the new changes was visceral. “How Ironic that the Mod in charge of r/atheism has a God complex.”51 “Do you really think a community of skeptics and freethinkers is the kind of audience that is receptive of a statement dripping with buzzwords, hyperbole and political scummyness?”52 “This display of power is not moderation, it is an attempt to control a group of freethinkers.”53 Thus, questions of content moderation were rarely discussed in merely technical terms or solely with appeals to the betterment of the community. There certainly were discussions of algorithmic tendencies and their effect on community discourse, but

especially early on, the dominant mode of discussion traded in the kinds of iconoclastic rhetorical tools honed in debates between atheists and theists. In this debate, a lack of moderation exhibited a faith in a necessarily unspoken but nonetheless unifying philosophy of atheism – a faith that was easily mocked for ignoring the reality of a community tearing itself apart under the weight of division and disagreement. At the same time, heavy-handed moderation was equated with censorship based on divine decree. And lurking beneath this theological double-bind is a tension concerning digital media between ideals of free user-driven expression and the reality of the interface, largely determining and controlling the vectors of that expression based on an algorithmic logic that becomes most divisive when it becomes most visible.

4.5 Bounding Images

At another level, May May June is about the role of the image – a kind of belated return to the debate inaugurated in the Truth Seeker concerning Watson Heston’s cartoons. As with that discussion, the controversy in the case of r/atheism revolves around two primary understandings of the image as either a gateway or a trap.

It is important to note that complaints about the devolution of content on r/atheism, blamed primarily on the prevalence of images, had been steadily building prior to 2013. In June 2011, a now-deleted account posted a widely-upvoted image: a screen-capture of the front page of r/atheism, color coded to distinguish posts by category, under the title, “Seriously, r/Atheism? Let’s not allow this subreddit to waste
away like so many others.” Of the 10 visible posts, seven are comic macros – easily-produced comic strips in which users can insert their own text, often representing a humorous or frustrating conversation between an atheist and a theist – two are images of Facebook statuses, and one is a picture of a t-shirt with an atheist slogan on it. User alexanderwales elaborated on this tendency of subreddits to drift toward more and more images as opposed to text-based content: “/r/atheism is dealing with a problem that seems to plague reddit as a whole; the move from articles and long-form thoughts to things that can be consumed in a matter of seconds.”

Fundamental to discussions of the image on r/atheism is the question of whether the subreddit is better understood as a homebase for longtime atheists or as a platform for outreach to prospective new atheists. Is it “for us” or “for them?” Some users defended the abundance of images by claiming that the image is uniquely suited to appealing to potential deconverts who are unswayed by rhetoric and reason, directly echoing some of the sentiments expressed by celebrants of Heston’s cartoons in the 19th century. One popular post opposed the 2013 moderation changes for inhibiting the power of humorous images: “This sub was a catalyst to me finding truth-

54 “Seriously, r/Atheism? Let’s Not Allow This Subreddit to Waste Away like so Many Others • /r/atheism,” Reddit, accessed October 16, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/i6sro/seriously_ratheism_lets_not_allow_this_subreddit/.
56 “/r/atheism Tries to Figure out How to Deal with Shifting Content Focus • /r/TheoryOfReddit,” Reddit, accessed October 16, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/i7fyu/ratheism_tries_to_figure_out_how_to_deal_with/.
humor, which begot questions, research, analysis, soul searching...”

Another highly upvoted post critical of the moderation changes is titled simply, “There is something that made this sub 'the first step into a larger world' for tens of thousands of people, and you have taken that away. Congratulations.”

The text of the post, since deleted, is recoverable via The Internet Archive Wayback Machine.

In it, user 27394_days articulates a familiar notion of the image as uniquely able to bypass an individual’s obstacles to modes of persuasion based on rationality: “Religion grabs kids … and begins to build walls around their minds … You can hurl all the Evolution, Physics, Astronomy, Geology, Anthropology, Philosophy, and Logic you want at those walls for years, and it may not even make a mark.”

Deploying an extended metaphor around a castle-siege, 27394_days sees the image as the most potent weapon in the atheist’s arsenal:

So how do you take an impenetrable fortress? Surprise. Stealth. Treachery. All the science and arguments and logic, it's all too obvious! They see you building those ladders, trebuchets, and battering-rams a mile away and have all the time in the world to string their bows, boil the oil, and slam and lock the gates of their minds. You have to get them quick, so they never even see the blow coming.


58 “There Is Something That Made This Sub ‘the First Step into a Larger World’ for Tens of Thousands of People, and You Have Taken That Away. Congratulations. • /r/atheism,” Reddit, accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fru5l/there_is_something_that_made_this_sub_the_first/.


60 Ibid.
Humor and simple images are the key to this. It only takes a few words or a picture, but these have the potential to cut extremely deeply. Take an element of their religion that they revere, one for which they once heard a lofty, technical-sounding theological explanation, and whip back the curtain to reveal the funny little man spinning wheels and pulling levers. They may shut the eyes of their mind as fast as they can, but they cannot help that they still saw it.  

By this logic, the image is a gateway through which new deconverts pass on their way to the logic of atheism: “If you can get them to laugh or doubt, just for an instant...you have managed to put a crack in their defenses...Then you may bring the full force of the evidence to bear, and the walls will crumble like the ones in the story of Jericho they love to tell so much. Like me, they will finally realize that the walls were not that of a fortress, but of a prison.” The cornucopia of metaphors here indicate much about the image as possessing an affective force missing in textual discourse. Much of this discourse looks familiar in light of the nineteenth century debates around Watson Heston’s cartoons, but there is a crucial wrinkle here. In the former case, the image was seen as potent to the extent that it bypassed, unlike the text, the hardened reason of the believer. In this case, however, both the text and the image are described in affective terms – they are both weapons that assault the walls around the mind. To the extent that the difference between the image and the text here is qualitative, it is an effect enabled by the digital interface, where “quality is an emergent property of quantity.” The difference is speed; the image is simply too quickly consumed by the unsuspecting

---

61 Ibid.
62 Ibid.
63 Galloway, The Interface Effect, 137.
viewer. In this understanding, the image is a siege-weapon eliminating rigid borders between communities. The moderation changes of May May June, then, are seen in this light as rendering impotent r/atheism’s ability to quickly liberate potential new users with the weapon of imagery, producing a community that is stale and redundant.

To put this understanding of images in conversation with the above analysis of Heston’s cartoons, I suggest that in digital culture, speed has taken over for permanence as the affective quality most often associated with atheist identity. Where in nineteenth century print media the image was understood to bypass rationality and imprint atheist identity permanently on the mind of the viewer, here the image circumvents the rational through sheer speed. The image does its work before the unsuspecting religionist has time to process it cognitively – a textbook definition of certain understandings of affect. This is a departure from the sense of acculturation generated by Heston’s cartoons. Recall that Heston’s cartoons were seen as tools with which to fashion new infidels from scratch, or rather from the malleable and pristine minds of children who had not yet been indoctrinated into religion. This constituted to some extent a move away from attempts to convert believers. Here, however, we see a return to the ideal of conversion now that the digital interface enables exposure to atheist images at such a speed and unpredictability that believers may be caught unawares or lured into an affective trap. In fact, the question of speed in algorithmic culture underlies much of what has been discussed so far – the experience of a hive mind that precedes and prefigures individual
identity, the use of memes as visual shorthand for intellectual discourses and the ensuing backlash against images which can be too quickly consumed, and the feeling that processes of social filtering common to all media have somehow spiraled out of control. It is to this notion of filtering that we turn next.

4.6 Echochambers, Hive Minds, Circlejerks

In contrast to those who saw the image as a conversion tool, some users regarded the prevalence of images as something more like a trap rendering r/atheism redundant and generating self-isolation rather than productive outreach. To adequately understand this accusation, however, we have to verse ourselves in a context-specific language that gets to the core of the way that subreddits constitute interfaces which undermine and confuse distinctions between public and private. The ability for users to tailor reddit to match their personal preferences represents a particularly strong example of the Internet’s reliance on visible and invisible processes of filtering. Increasingly, individuals delegate more and more of the process of finding and selecting material that they find personally relevant to algorithms that rely simultaneously on invisible code as well as large collections of other individual media users. Eli Pariser has famously described the feedback loops created by Internet filtering in terms of a three-step model:

First, you figure out who people are and what they like. Then, you provide them with content and services that best fit them. Finally, you tune to get the fit just right. Your identity shapes your media. There’s just one flaw in this logic: Media also shape identity. And as a result, these services may end up creating a good fit between you and your media by changing ... you. If a self-fulfilling prophecy is a false definition of the world that through one’s actions becomes true, we’re now
on the verge of self-fulfilling identities, in which the Internet’s distorted picture of us becomes who we really are.\textsuperscript{64}

This description is helpful but simplistic. For one thing, the distinction between the “distorted picture of us” on the Internet and the implied authentic self existing outside digital media is untenable and ideologically-fraught. But more theoretically, too much emphasis is placed here on individual decision-making. It is true that users of reddit take an active part in selecting subreddits and refining their individual experiences, but those subreddits and their interactions are in turn largely affected by algorithms and data flows based on large populations of other users. In this regard, it may be more helpful to turn to Ted Striphas’ elaboration of Alexander Galloway’s term, “algorithmic culture.” For Striphas, this refers to the increasing ability and tendency of digital media users to delegate the task of “reassembling the social” (here borrowing Bruno Latour’s phrase) to algorithms and data aggregation.\textsuperscript{65} In comparison to Pariser, Striphas’ emphasis is far less anthropocentric. Algorithmic culture operates primarily by “using an array of analytical tools to discover statistical correlations within sprawling corpuses of data, correlations that would appear to unite otherwise disparate and dispersed aggregates of people.”\textsuperscript{66}

\textsuperscript{64} Eli Pariser, \textit{The Filter Bubble: How the New Personalized Web Is Changing What We Read and How We Think} (Penguin, 2011), 112.
\textsuperscript{66} Ibid., 406.
What is crucial about digital media’s ability to do the work of selecting and presenting information on the human user’s behalf is that it presents a double-edged sword of which redditors are keenly aware. On the one hand, the ability to personalize, particularly in the context of digital communities, can generate powerful feelings of solidarity and likemindedness. In those moments when users celebrate this ability, one often encounters language of the “hive mind” or “group think.” As one very popular post put it, “I rarely need to comment on reddit because the hive mind usually expresses my thoughts for me.” This is a striking testament to feelings of inclusion and active participation generated by the simple algorithmic process of the upvote/downvote system, even for those “lurkers” whose participation is limited to browsing. And these feelings of inclusion are enhanced by the element of speed. All media generate hive minds to the extent that they engage social bodies in shared practices of thought; what is unique about digital media is the element of time. The feedback loop between enough readers and the algorithmic structure of the interface happens so fast that it precedes the experience of the majority of readers. It is not that just a thousand other people are thinking the same thing as you – they have already thought it and already input that thought back into the feedback loop by the time you read the original post the first time.

“"I Rarely Need to Comment on Reddit Because the Hive Mind Usually Expresses My Thoughts for Me • /r/Showerthoughts,” Reddit, accessed October 16, 2015, https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/3lnmnt/i_rarely_need_to_comment_on_reddit_because_the/.

189
This is one of the tendencies of digital culture to destabilize the notion of the individual self: the individual is almost always late to the collective process of discourse.\textsuperscript{68}

A popular comment in response to the above invocation of the hive mind clarifies the relationship between these feelings of inclusion in a community and the individual’s role in constituting the borders of exclusion that serve to constitute such a community: “eh, you need to pick your sub[reddit] properly to get the right hive just for you. You have to search out the Group Think you want to wash over your brain.”\textsuperscript{69} This language of “hive minds” provides a fortuitous opportunity to dwell for just a moment on the question of identity. In their probing analysis of network culture in \textit{The Exploit}, Galloway and Thacker articulate modern subject-formation through the metaphor of bees and hives:

\textsuperscript{68} There are a number of peripheral examples that I think confirm this sense of lateness in formations of atheist identity online. Most notably, Daniel Dennett, in a speech called “How to Tell You’re an Atheist,” advocates imposing atheist identity on others against their will, and in part his logic is predicated on an awareness of intermediation. Speaking to online viewers of the talk, he says, “You might be an atheist if you’re reflective enough to be curious about us, so if you’re listening to me now somewhere, you might be an atheist. Before you, quick, move to another website, I’d like to point out that you might be an atheist if you’re afraid to listen ’cause of what you might learn about yourself. That pretty well covers everybody, I think.” (Daniel Dennett, “How to Tell You’re an Atheist,” Speech delivered at The Global Atheist Convention, Melbourne Australia (2012) https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0iVCxx-GkMg, Accessed 9/29/2016) Here, we see the emphasis on the speed of digital media as enacting the formation of atheist identity before the individual has time to conceptualize and reject it. This is to suggest that the sheer speed of algorithmic culture generates an increasingly fluctuating sense of identity, such that the emphasis is no longer on becoming an atheist, but on being made aware that you are already an atheist and haven’t realized it yet.

\textsuperscript{69} “TheScamr Comments on I Rarely Need to Comment on Reddit Because the Hive Mind Usually Expresses My Thoughts for Me,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/Showerthoughts/comments/3lnmn7/i_rarely_need_to_comment_on_reddit_because_the/cv7qyhr.
Individuation in the control society is less about the production of the one from the many, and more about the production of the many through the one. In the classical model, it is the hive that individuates the drone. Here, however, every drone always already facilitates the existence of multiple coexisting hives. It is a question not of being individuated as a “subject” but instead of being individuated as a node integrated into one or more networks.\(^70\)

In other words, the bee/hive metaphor provides a language with which to ask fundamental questions about networked identity. The emphasis on reddit on constituting a personalized hivemind through subreddits points to the complex interrelationships between identity and algorithmic interfaces, suggesting with Thacker and Galloway that digital subjectivity is predicated largely on the networking of multiplicities. For though the hivemind undermines the individual subject in the name of the collective, the individual user still enacts their own agency in choosing which hiveminds to participate in. This individual user still leaves the digital space and inhabits the world through their own body. This, along with the rancorous disagreement and critique on reddit, suggests that there are limits and countervailing tendencies to this emphasis on multiplicity and networked subjectivity. Perhaps the internet is only the latest version of a very human practice of negotiating between the collective and the individual, but I contend that what is unique about digital media is the extent to which this ambivalence between collective agreement and individual expression is rendered in stark contrast. In any case, the most pivotal question raised by this ambivalence is: how

do these changes to the process of subject-formation enact new understandings of individual and collective identity? Do they entail a fragmentation of identity, a reconstitution along new pathways, or something else entirely?

In responding to this question, it is important to note that while reddit’s algorithmic culture is capable of generating a sense of inclusion of diversity, it is simultaneously able to produce strong feelings of self-isolation, homogeneity, and conformity. In these cases, one hears less the rhetoric of “hive minds” and instead finds a recurring deployment of the pejoratives “echo chamber” and “circlejerk.” Where “hive mind” connotes the celebration of a kind of diffuse likemindedness – a similarity too superficial or mundane to threaten individuality – these latter terms tend to be used when a particular subreddit expresses a seemingly-toxic emphasis on conformity, and their ubiquity in the debates that emerge in the aftermath of June 2013 on r/atheism indicate the high premium placed on individuality in the face of an increasingly homogenous digital interface.

Discussions of whether r/atheism constitutes an echo chamber predate the June 2013 controversy. After Rebecca Watson’s highly-publicized indictment of r/atheism as a forum for misogyny,71 users were provoked to consider the relationship of r/atheism to the broader atheist community: “I think /r/atheism has about zero impact on the greater

---

world’s view of atheists. We are an echo chamber. I hardly think we should, as a unit, temper our male-oriented, misogynistic, and elitist ramblings because of how it will supposedly impact the broader atheist community. We should temper this stuff because we are moral, generous human beings and it’s the right thing to do.” The invocation of the “echo chamber” here serves to separate r/atheism from any larger movement by connoting insulation and isolation. One popular response by a now-deleted username offers a rebuttal based on a positive understanding of the echo chamber as a kind of laboratory for the development of rhetorical strategies that can be exported to other contexts:

I think that we can probably extrapolate that /r/atheism does have an impact on the world’s view of atheists. Sure, we are an echo chamber here, but in the rest of our lives we interact with the rest of the world. Here we can fine tune our ideas and gain confidence from the peer network to be visible as good people and as atheists in our day to day lives. I’m willing to wager that this will have an impact.

This exchange indicates the ambivalence of a term like “echo chamber” - the positive or negative valuation of the term depending in part on how one understands that interaction between the digital and the analog. If one remains pessimistic concerning reddit's impact on the world at large, r/atheism's status as an echo chamber renders it

---


impotent. If one thinks, on the other hand, that r/atheism provides a training ground for individual atheists to hone their real-world argumentative skills, then the echo chamber is a source of strength. The discussion here reflects an understanding of selfhood predicated on clear divisions between different media forms, implying that selfhood consists of the capacity to transcend a medium. This is an important reminder about the risks of arguing too forcefully for digital media’s implications for subjectivity, since passivity or collective identification in one media context can translate into activity or individuation in another. At the same time, we should not overstate the boundedness of different media forms at a time when mobile technologies are increasingly inscribed in and on human bodies and embodied habits. Again, the apparent proximity of passivity and activity in discussions of echo chambers suggests another ambivalence heightened by the materiality of digital media.

Any ambivalence inherent to the term “echo chamber” is lost in its more pejorative sibling, “circlejerk.” A vulgar reference to a practice in which men sit in a circle and masturbate themselves and/or others, the term serves throughout reddit to malign a subreddit when it places too heavy an emphasis on exclusivity or self-congratulation at the expense of tolerating diversity of opinion.74 That many users on reddit who advocate tolerance often deploy a term that refers to an exclusively male,

---

competitive, and simultaneously homoerotic and heteronormative collective masturbatory act indicates something important about toxicity on reddit. Until 2015, reddit frequently defended distasteful content on free speech grounds. It was only with widespread criticism of reddit following the publication of hundreds of illegally-acquired pornographic images of celebrities that the site began seriously regulating content in any way. Today, reddit has become more active in banning the most problematic subreddits, but toxic areas remain. In 2015, independent analysts compared subreddit toxicity by quantifying support or appreciation of comments expressing *ad hominem* attacks and the use of bigoted (racist, sexist, homophobic etc.) language. The analysts concluded that r/atheism was the third most toxic subreddit, behind only r/TheRedPill, the home of reddit’s Mens’ Rights Activists, and r/opieandanthony, devoted to notoriously misogynist radio shock jocks Gregg “Opie” Hughes and Anthony Cumia. In this context, one could interpret the use of “circlejerk” generously as a term designed precisely to demonstrate a self-defeating chauvinism attributable to the dominance of reddit by male users. It is worth noting, however, that the most popular subreddit dedicated to criticizing reddit for misogyny and other forms of bigotry proudly describes itself as a circlejerk and a circlequeef, indicating both a strategic endorsement of the self-empowerment disabled by accusations of circlejerking and an

awareness of the connotative power of terminology evidenced in the queering of circlejerk in “circlequeef.” Interpreting the use of “circlejerk” more pessimistically, then, one might argue that it points toward the limitations of calling for inclusivity with a shocking term in an arena that faces very real challenges in attracting diverse users.

As with “echo chamber,” redditors are strikingly cognizant of the role of media in perpetuating the tendencies that produce the self-congratulation at the heart of the circlejerk. Consider one illuminating exchange from a discussion of the relationship between self-referentiality and feelings of persecution: In June 2011, user alexanderwales started a thread warning of the danger that /r/atheism was devolving into image-based content. The most upvoted comment, by blackstar9000, begins a line of reasoning that dovetails perfectly with Cimino and Smith’s earlier discussion of the role of digital media in generating feelings of persecution:

The shift in /r/atheism’s content away from longer, more in-depth content and toward, well, mostly rage comics and Facebook caps is largely bound up with two tendencies: (1) self-congratulation, and (2) complaints about the atheist’s isolation in American society. And the more that others in reddit complain about /r/atheism as a circlejerk, the more defensive and insular the community becomes, as any number of self-posts about the subject will indicate. That’s a fire that feeds itself.

78 “blackstar9000 Comments on /r/atheism Tries to Figure out How to Deal with Shifting Content Focus,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/i7fyu/ratheism_tries_to_figure_out_how_to_deal_wit h/c21itss.
The emphasis on the role of the image is an important facet to which we will have to return. For now, it must suffice to point out the awareness of a feedback loop generated by simultaneous feelings of self-congratulation and persecution. This is very close to the ambivalence among secularists noted by Cimino and Smith between greater feelings of acceptance and exclusion fueled by new media.

A series of popular comments by user WeAreAllHypocrites demonstrates an even more prescient awareness of the relationship between digital media and the phenomenon of the circlejerk. In response to a thread complaining about those who accuse r/atheism of being a circlejerk, WeAreAllHypocrites writes, “This doesn't really get to the point of the circlejerk criticism, which is that compartmentalizations such as a subreddit (r/atheism in this case) lead to confirmation bias and self-perpetuating self-congratulation, which is a valid criticism no matter what the subject matter happens to be.” 79 The comment is well-received and provokes a debate about the role of digital media. One user responds that the criticism is valid of all subreddits, to which WeAreAllHypocrites responds, “You're assuming I'm not criticizing the entire Internet, or indeed even mass media, for this very reason,” 80 and then elaborates in a later reply:

80 “WeAreAllHypocrites Comments on Whenever Somebody Complains That R/atheism Is a Circlejerk,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/uiunr/whenever_somebody_complains_that_ratheism_is_a/c4vwy95.
“My opinion, and it is, yes, my opinion, is that the Internet and sites like reddit exacerbate these cloisters to our peril. More and more we associate in groups that think like we do, because we have the technology and wealth to do so. You can argue it’s a luxury humans have always wanted, but it has increased of late I think, with the Internet especially.”\textsuperscript{81} This is Pariser’s “filter bubble,” Strifhas’ “algorithmic culture,” and Cimino and Smith’s “acceptance and exclusion” all rolled into one. The algorithms that enable atheists on the Internet to assemble and form a collective identity are the same ones that generate confirmation-bias, self-congratulation, and feelings of persecution – a tendency that is particularly potent in the case of an “ideologically-oriented Internet community.”\textsuperscript{82}

Thus, debates over r/atheism’s status as an echo chamber or circlejerk predate and largely prefigure the turmoil of June 2013. When this tension resurfaces in May June, it appears closely wedded to the image. For those in support of the moderation changes of June 2013, the image is seen as a particularly potent source of the self-congratulation and homogeneity that plagues r/atheism. One controversial post neatly summarizes a common sentiment that image-based content served to dilute the

\textsuperscript{81} “WeAreAllHypocrites Comments on Whenever Somebody Complains That R/atheism Is a Circlejerk,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/uiunr/whenever_somebody_complains_that_ratheism_is_a/c4vx682.

\textsuperscript{82} “WeAreAllHypocrites Comments on Whenever Somebody Complains That R/atheism Is a Circlejerk,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/uiunr/whenever_somebody_complains_that_ratheism_is_a/c4vxgn3.
intellectual potential of the r/atheism: “This subreddit used to be for intellectual
discussion and not meme posts back when it was first started. It was intended for deep
articulation, not quick one-shot memes. There was more intelligent and thoughtful
conversation, and less of a karma-whore echo chamber.”

Here, “karma-whore” is an
evocative term used by redditors to describe other users who post content that is
intended not to enhance the overall quality of the site but only to earn karma for the
user. Image-based content is widely regarded as enabling this behavior due to its easy
consumption. Computer-scientist Paul Graham has influential referred to this as “The
Fluff Principle: on a user-voted news site, the links that are easiest to judge will take
over unless you take specific measures to prevent it.”

This is a tendency that affects
reddit as a whole, but becomes particularly pronounced in those subreddits that a
substantial contingent of users regard as properly intellectual.

The r/atheism moderation changes of June 2013 constituted an attempt to
alleviate “karma-whoring” by relegating images to the “self” category and thereby
severing the link between an image’s karma and that of the poster. r/atheism’s
moderation policy now begins by making this explicit: “Links to images or image-only
content (imgur or image blogs) are disallowed as direct links - instead please submit
these as self-posts and put the links within the self-post content. This policy is in attempt

83 “I Support the Changes to R/atheism and Here’s Why. • /r/atheism,” Reddit, accessed October 16, 2015,
https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fstpa/i_support_the_changes_to_ratheism_and_heres_why/.
84 Paul Graham, “What I’ve Learned from Hacker News,” accessed March 8, 2016,
to allow relevant images while cutting down on what are essentially karma whoring and cheap content posts.” Furthermore, the moderation policy provides a direct link to a thread in another subreddit in which the characterization of the image as “cheap content” is elaborated at length:

Meme comments by their nature attract upvotes easily, because they are short and can be read quickly, are funny and clever at first, inspire an ‘in joke’ sort of feeling (if you’re cool and get it, you upvote). We’ll call this LOW-EFFORT CONTENT. Longer, more insightful comments, the kind that makes this one of my favorite subreddits, take longer to read, you don’t always agree with them, and in general require much more effort from the reader to earn upvotes. We’ll call this HIGH-EFFORT CONTENT. So to begin with, even in a community that is naturally biased against memes, they have a competitive advantage over interesting comments. So even if most people in the subreddit are against memes, they can still rise to prominence, because it’s just easier to read and upvote them. Second, this effect is greatly exacerbated when new users who don’t get the ethos of the subreddit join. They are far more likely to engage in low effort upvoting behavior. Once a subreddit reaches a certain critical mass, low effort content beats high effort content, every time.85

The claim that the image is cheap, low-effort, or non-intellectual finds a lot of traction among r/atheism’s subscribers. Many users who supported the changes saw them as a necessary attempt to reclaim r/atheism’s intellectual depth from a devolution perpetuated by the consumption of images: “These images didn’t even depict legitimate discourse, they were always the lowest hanging fruit possible...I wanted a support network, debaters, anything that could show that atheism was progressing in the world.

Instead, what I got was an echo-chamber of how stupid and backwards religious people are.”

But while comments like these malign the purportedly superficial content of atheistic images, they operate in a particular context in which the sensory consumption of the image resonates with the algorithmic logic of the digital interface. Where on the pages of print media, the image was regarded as having a potent supratextual affect, here the image, in lending itself to rapid incorporation into the digital interface, has seemingly become too powerful. Thus, at the heart of the June 2013 controversy, under what appears at first glance to be a petty squabble over the category into which Internet memes fall, lurks a fundamental and perennial debate concerning the consumption of the image as it relates to the formation of community. In the digital arena, the danger of the image lies in the ease with which it can be consumed – consumption here being reduced primarily to the act of voting. The power of that voting act, in turn, relies on largely unseen algorithms at the heart of reddit’s interface, demonstrating the extent to which algorithmic culture inflects changing notions of the user and the appropriate methods by which the individual cultivates a sense of personal identity. The notion of “karma whoring,” at a basic level, indicates that the identity of the individual user ought

---

86 “Dear R/atheism, I Am Considering Subscribing to This Sub BECAUSE the New Rules Make This Sub so Much Better. Please Don’t Go Back. • /r/atheism,” Reddit, accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fwsyu/dear_ratheism_i_am_considering_subscribing_to/.
to be subordinate to the collective ethos of the subreddit. And by this reasoning, the image represents a violating insubordination.

The algorithmic logic at play on the digital interface incorporates the image into new feedback loops and networks that alters how it is consumed and understood. We have been adumbrating two seemingly-opposed understandings of the image – one that regards the image as a gateway bringing new members into the community and one that sees the image as a trap preventing the articulation of more complex ideas. But perhaps these two attitudes are flip sides of the same coin. That is, perhaps one thing that the digital interface enables is a more explicit understanding of the image as simultaneously both gateway and trap. Where digital communities overlap according to increasingly complex and autonomous algorithms, images become potent vectors of inclusion and exclusion – commonality and difference – and the question of balancing those tendencies becomes highly charged. The sheer vigor of responses to May May June indicates that the image is a double-edged sword – capable of simultaneously generating both self-isolation and open-armed pluralism – and that it is increasingly algorithms and hive minds with their hands on the hilt.

To summarize, the power of the image in this context has to do with its ability to conflate and contort the boundaries that define the atheist community on reddit – an ability enhanced by the general tendency of algorithmic culture to destabilize traditional lines of differentiation between collectives. This function of the image serves to generate
what Alexander Galloway has called the intraface, "an interface internal to the interface." For Galloway, the intraface is a function of a digital aesthetic, in which a traditional boundary becomes porous without losing a strong sense of exclusivity. "It is not a window or doorway separating the space that spans from here to there...It is no longer a question of choice...It is now a question of nonchoice. The intraface is indecisive for it must always juggle two things (the edge and the center) at the same time." The language of edge and center here roughly correspond, I am arguing, with the notions of the image as either gateway or trap. If the image is simultaneously a symbol of inclusion and exclusion – that which makes r/atheism both "for us" and "for them" - this is in part due to the ability of the digital network to establish intrafaces. The echo chamber, by this logic, is where the edge returns to the center – where the power of the image to bring in the outside ironically generates an isolating sense of self-referentiality. One popular comment shows this process well: "The five stages of atheism: 1. Dismissal as a circlejerk 2. Grudging acceptance of certain points 3. Full blown acceptance of all points 4. Boredom with reiteration of points 5. Dismissal as a circlejerk." In other words, the circularity of the circlejerk is characterized as a continuous movement from the edge to the center, at which point the center reveals itself to be identical with the edge.

87 Galloway, The Interface Effect, 40.
88 Ibid.
89 “Rasteri Comments on There Is Something That Made This Sub ‘the First Step into a Larger World’ for Tens of Thousands of People, and You Have Taken That Away. Congratulations,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fru5l/there_is_something_that_made_this_sub_the_first/cad93jt.
To point to the ability of the interface, or intraface, to contort traditional notions of community is perhaps to restate something that media theorists have known for some time. We have already seen Joshua Meyrowitz argue as much, long before the elaboration of complex digital algorithms, in his influential No Sense of Place: “As the membranes around spatially segregated arenas [have] become more informationally permeable, through television and other electronic media, the current trend is toward integration of all groups into a relatively common experiential sphere—with a new recognition of the special needs and idiosyncrasies of individuals.” If the May May June controversy adds a caveat to this analysis, it does so primarily by highlighting the importance of the image in marking the fraught permeability of digital space. But the question remains, how do these changes effectuated by algorithmic culture affect notions of individual identity and agency? How is individual atheist identity expressed in the digital arena?

4.7 Intimate Deconversions

In comparison to the emphasis on visibility and traditional identity politics espoused by Madalyn Murray O’Hair and others in the 20th century, reddit’s atheist community expresses a much more ambivalent approach to the question of atheist identity in the process of coming out. This is evident from r/atheism’s front page. A link at the top of the page asks, “Thinking about telling your parents? Read this first.” The

---

90 Meyrowitz, No Sense of Place, 43.
link directs users to a page devoted to offering advice to those who wonder “should I come out to my parents as being an atheist?” and “the short answer,” the page emphasizes, “is No.” Given the risk for young people still living at home that their parents might evict them from the home, “r/atheism will almost invariable respond that you should wait.” Such advice, it seems, stems from “the constant flow of submissions from people who discovered their parents were not nearly as understanding as they imagined,” some 100 examples of which are then hyperlinked. Thus, a skepticism about the value of coming out is endorsed by the official face of r/atheism. This skepticism is reflected in the most substantial subreddit devoted to the collection of coming-out stories, r/atheismcomingout, the majority of which describe feelings of being misunderstood, ostracized, or disowned. At the same time, another subreddit, r/thegreatproject, exhibits a more celebratory collection of deconversion narratives – stories of how individuals came to identify, often to themselves, as atheists.

The difference between these two facets of atheist identification – deconversion and coming out – I argue, gets to the heart of an important ability of digital interfaces to alter traditional understandings of the relationships between public and private. The general celebration of deconversion narratives in conjunction with the skepticism concerning public acts of coming out, in short, points to a conceptualization of the

---

92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
digital space as the proper site of the “deprivatization of disbelief.” Traditional notions of “coming out” are then replaced with a kind of “coming in” in which the digital arena constitutes the truly public—now a kind of pseudoanonymous publicity—and the traditionally public (IRL) sphere becomes a realm of enforced privatization. For many atheist users of reddit, in other words, the digital provides a more authentic form of publicity than the “real world.”

Thus, r/atheism offers a site for the cultivation of what Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner have described as a “counterpublic - an indefinitely accessible world conscious of its subordinate relation.” Warner and Berlant’s provocative elaboration of the relationship between queer culture and sites of counter-intimacies provide a useful lens with which to understand r/atheism. For Warner and Berlant, heterosexuality as a property of subjectivity is a myth to be replaced with the notion of heterosexual culture, which “achieves much of its metacultural intelligibility through the ideologies and institutions of intimacy.” Specifically, heteronormative conventions of intimacy “conjure a mirage: a home base of prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return in the (always imaginary) future after political conflict.” One of the goals of queer politics, then, is to

---

96 Ibid., 553.
97 Ibid.
generate new spaces of intimacy which are neither public nor private in the ways articulated by heterosexual culture: “Making a queer world has required the development of kinds of intimacy that bear no necessary relation to domestic space, to the couple form, to property, or to the nation.”

I do not wish to argue that digital atheism is queer in any substantial sense. While many atheists articulate a number of affinities between atheist identity and queer identity, the overwhelmingly white, male, and heterosexual makeup of the American atheist population along with a checkered history of problematic and exclusivist language necessitates restraint in taking these affinities too seriously. At the same time, there are noteworthy lines of connection between Berlant and Warner’s aims and my own. My project so far has been to demonstrate that atheism, as an attribute possessed by subjects, is an illusion best replaced with the notion of atheist culture. And this culture, like queer culture or any other, “indexes a virtual social world, in ways that range from a repertoire of styles and speech genres to referential metaculture.” And like the queer world-making project articulated by Berlant and Warner, there is some extent to which the users of r/atheism are engaged in the creation of forms of counterintimacy and counterpublicity.

---

98 Ibid., 558.
99 Ibid.
Indeed, many deconversion narratives published on r/thegreatproject exhibit a form of intimacy perhaps unique to the digital arena. Sharing a personal account of a momentous transformation in one’s identity is already a deeply intimate act. But this sense of intimacy is heightened by the ambivalence of reddit when it comes to personal encounter – that is, any contribution to reddit might be immediately lost in a sea of impersonal information or it might speak directly to another individual user. It is not uncommon for popular deconversion stories to end with appeals to this duality. One of the most popular deconversion narratives, an account by user makinwaffles, ends “Thanks r/atheism, for listening, and even if you didn’t (since this is way too long), thanks for existing. Its more than can be said for God.”100 Other stories end in a similar fashion – by facing up to the possibility that no one is paying attention or that any reaction will be negative: “Feel free to ignore this or downvote to oblivion, too. I just had to put it somewhere.”101 There is a similar anxiety here as seen in the era of radio, where it was entirely possible that no one is listening. But in comparison to broadcast media, the digital interface offers the audience a more direct avenue of response and a heightened visibility to any lack of response. Given the ease of voting and responding, it

100 “Too Fucked up to Care Anymore (x-Post from R/atheism) • /r/thegreatproject,” Reddit, accessed March 29, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/thegreatproject/comments/on45g/too_fucked_up_to_care_anymore_xpost_from_r_atheism/.
would be fairly obvious if a thread received no traffic; the audience in this case is not invisible but virtual, in that there is a simultaneous potential for any digital content to go completely unnoticed or to go viral and catapult a profile into high visibility.

Furthermore, users can respond to an original poster’s thread in public, or they can send them a private message, but the fact of that response takes on a significance proportional to the virtual size of the digital mediascape. If posting on reddit is something like whispering into a cacophonous roar of other voices, there is always the potential that your whisper might fall precisely on the ears of someone receptive to it. Thus, when makinwaffles’ thread receives supportive replies, their response is highly intimate:

When I posted this, I did it so that I could have a chance to write out my story in solid form and express what it meant to me. I did tell some friends in junior high, but didn’t include that in the original post since their reactions were just more of the same shit. After all that, I have a really hard time saying any of this out loud, and I figured I’d take a shot in the dark on a relevant anonymous forum to get some of it off my chest. I hardly expected such a supportive response, and I don’t know that people will begin to understand how much it means to me.102

Here, makinwaffles posits the digital space as providing more intimacy than their offline friendships. What’s more, this intimacy is connected in part to the very anonymity characteristic of the digital arena – the fact that the original post constituted a “shot in the dark” makes it that much more significant that the message was positively received.

102 “Makinwaffles Comments on Too Fucked up to Care Anymore (x-Post from R/atheism),” accessed March 29, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/thegreatproject/comments/on45g/too_fucked_up_to_care_anymore_xpost_from_ratheism/c3iqcrg.
If we recognize r/atheism and its affiliated subreddits as sites for the production of counterpublics, we must ask how the notions of intimacy generated there differ from those common to contemporary religion or to atheist engagements with other media forms. I am suggesting here that one key to this differentiation lies in the role of anonymity. The internet, more than other media forms, is capable of generating a close association between anonymity and intimacy – an association that lends digital atheism some degree of uniqueness. Where religious intimacy is commonly predicated on identity – of God, of the individual believer – atheist intimacy here is predicated on anonymity or pseudoanonymity. Where the intimacy of the radio was vertically tied to the voice and identity of the speaking/broadcasting subject, here it is tied horizontally between profiles, which are themselves imbricated in complex algorithmic networks.

To some extent, this constitutes a reimagining of the homology between public/private and social/personal. The traditional notion of the public sphere, as articulated by Jürgen Habermas, establishes a division between the secular public sphere as the site of the social and the religious private sphere as the site of the intimate. The most intimate relationship is a private one between the individual and God, whereas social participation in the public sphere requires bracketing personal religious beliefs. In the digital counterpublic I am adumbrating here, on the other hand, the public sphere

---

becomes more isolating while the private sphere becomes more social, and this transformation relies precisely on this changing experience of intimacy. The pseudoanonymity of the digital interface enables intimacies that are neither fully private nor fully public, but deploy elements of both in the creation of counterpublics.

4.8 Agency Confused

The reorientation of the public/private divide goes hand-in-hand with a complication of individual agency best understood by recourse to an analysis of the digital interface. In part because algorithmic culture obfuscates simple attributions of agency, rendering invisible and porous the processes that interpellate subjects, users tend to express a preoccupation with the question of agency. Put differently, as it becomes increasingly difficult in the digital arena to determine whether one’s identity is freely chosen or determined by machinations outside the self, digital atheists express increasingly complex understandings of their own agency in relation to their identity as atheists.

We can take one striking moment from the era of broadcast atheism as our point of departure. On March 31, 1969, Madalyn Murray O’Hair interviewed an atheist named Bill, eventually revealed to be her son William J. Murray III, on her weekly radio program. At a certain point in the conversation, O’Hair sets Bill up to outline his deconversion story, asking, “What kind of background would you say that you come from, that you have accepted the overall philosophy of life – Atheist thinking...in order
to improve the condition of human beings and therefore of yourself, I suppose, in living.” Bill’s response immediately pushes back against O’Hair’s use of the term “accept” in a way that foregrounds individual agency:

First we have to realize that an Atheist does not accept. An Atheist critically examines a situation and then does what he feels is right. So, I do not feel that I have accepted anything. I feel that I have come to an intellectual decision as to what my ideas are as to working in the society, and what I should do. I think that with myself, as with any Atheist, these things are completely individualistic and do not reflect acceptable or non-acceptable “anything,” really.

Bill’s ardent defense of his own agency, though obviously anecdotal, serves as a jumping-off point from which to analyze the rhetoric common to deconversion narratives on the Internet. As I have argued elsewhere, deconversion narratives are best understood as examples of what Colin Campbell calls “irreligious experience.”

Campbell’s “irreligion,” a departure from the intellectualist language of atheism or secularism, draws attention to the subcultural ethical and emotional underpinnings of nonreligious identity. The focus on experience implicitly draws attention to those moments in a story of deconversion where the subject is unable or unwilling to distinguish between immanent and transcendent, force and agent, and passivity and activity. Using terminology more popular today, one might say that “irreligious

---

105 O’Hair, What on Earth Is an Atheist!
experiences” occur in an affective register, referring more to the blurry arena of felt experience than to that of clearly-defined epistemology. This affective quality explains, then, the ambivalent rhetoric that saturates accounts of deconversion, as individuals struggle to articulate an irreligious experience using inadequate terminology. Digital deconversion narratives often exhibit language that celebrates individual agency while simultaneously expressing countervailing disavowals of agency that are lacking in Bill’s broadcast narrative. It is not uncommon to see, in stories of deconversion online, the very language of “acceptance” that Bill rejects. A number of popular threads on reddit emphasize a feeling that there is little agency at play in becoming an atheist. In a popular thread called “[does anyone else] think being atheist is not a choice,” user secme writes, “This is how it is with me at least, I don’t think I could even chose to be religious ever again.”

The most popular comments echo this sentiment: “Atheist is simply the default operating system every human is born with before the virus of religion is implanted.” “Belief is not subject to the will. You’re either confronted with evidence that obligates belief, or you’re forced to reject it as unsupported.”

“I do not think one can choose to (not) believe something. It is a response.”

Other highly upvoted threads

---

110 “Painordelight Comments on DAE Think Being Atheist Is Not a Choice.,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/gr75q/dae_think_being_atheist_is_not_a_choice/c1po0y7.
111 “dembones01 Comments on DAE Think Being Atheist Is Not a Choice.,” accessed March 8, 2016, https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/gr75q/dae_think_being_atheist_is_not_a_choice/c1pny8h.
and popular comments replicate similar discussions: “People do not choose to be 
atheists; they realize they are.” 112 “Atheism is not a choice.” 113 These disavowals of 
age agency – sometimes so aggressive so as to completely rule out any conception of will 114 – 
are accompanied by more subtle linguistic tropes common to deconversion narratives on 
the Internet.

One recurring trope in deconversion narratives is an account of a precise and 
instantaneous moment in which the deconvert was transformed into an atheist. The 
trope of conversion as a kind of sudden gestalt-shift or irreversible transmutation often 
implies a sense of passivity in relation to individual agency. In many cases, the 
instantaneousness of deconversion is connected to spiritual or quasi-spiritual language. 
Instant epiphanies, Damascene conversions, and bolts from the blue mark deconversions 
as events visited upon passive individuals. Terms like “epiphany” maintain pseudo-
religious trappings of “the time when the hand of the divine is most plainly visible...in 
which the individual feels guided, or coerced, or enraptured by a divine presence.” 115 

112 “‘People Do Not Choose to Be Atheists; They Realize They Are.’ • /r/atheism,” Reddit, accessed October 19, 2015, 
https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/3m04fe/people_do_not_choose_to_be_atheists_they_realize/.
113 “Atheism Is Not a ‘Choice’ • /r/atheism,” Reddit, accessed March 8, 2016, 
https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/kd06k/atheism_is_not_a_choice/.
114 See for example the discussion initiated in “Thesunmustdie Comments on ‘People Do Not Choose to Be 
Atheists; They Realize They Are,’” accessed March 8, 2016, 
https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/3m04fe/people_do_not_choose_to_be_atheists_they_realize/c vauq7p, in which users popularly espouse absolute determinism.
115 Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier, The Anthropology of Religious Conversion (Rowman & Littlefield, 
2003), xii.
The claim is often that deconversion ‘happened’ according to its own inertia and that the individual undergoing deconversion did little to consciously enact the transformation.

Deconversion narratives also tend to highlight the social and emotional upheaval which follows “coming out.” These descriptions of deconversion as a moment of crisis imply that it is a process which happens whether the subject wants it to or not. This is best understood as a reaction to a particular understanding of religion as a kind of ideology that preys on the agency of individuals. Because religion is constructed as wish-fulfillment – a corruption of agency in which normally rational individuals are coerced into believing what they want to believe – the claim that deconversion occurs against the individual’s desires serves to establish an understanding of atheism as somehow more true than religious identification. In these examples, truth is positioned in an inverse relationship to desire and, accordingly, agency.

In the past, I have interpreted these linguistic conventions in Foucauldian terms as confessional technologies of the self aimed at reinforcing the sovereignty of atheist subjectivity. Foucault's discussions of confessional practices in *The History of Sexuality: Volume One* as well as “Technologies of the Self” provide probing analyses of the ways that truth is inscribed at the heart of the individual subject. For Foucault, confession is one of most potent means by which individual truths are objectified by being placed deep in the body of the individual where they are purportedly out of reach of historical contamination:
The obligation to confess is now relayed through so many different points, is so deeply ingrained in us, that we no longer perceive it as the effect of a power that constrains us; on the contrary, it seems to us that truth, lodged in our most secret nature, ‘demands’ only to surface; that if it fails to do so, this is because a constraint holds it in place, the violence of a power weighs it down, and it can finally be articulated only at the price of a kind of liberation.\textsuperscript{116}

Confession thus constitutes, for Foucault, a disciplinary power which strips truth from sovereignty, attributing its obfuscation to repressive force. Foucault’s work on confession serves as a reminder of the way that deconversion narratives may serve to insulate truth from relations of power by removing the individual agent – the vehicle of cultural construction – from the technology by which atheist subjectivity is constructed. In those tropes in which deconversion strikes an unwitting and passive individual like a bolt from the blue, truth is positioned as something external to the individual, who is understood as the locus for all of those desires that contribute to religious ideology. The emphasis on truth as originating from an external reality or as emerging suddenly from somewhere deep within the subconscious of the confessing subject serves to mask that “its production is thoroughly imbued with relations of power.”\textsuperscript{117}

Of course, the disavowals of agency common to digital deconversion narratives are complicated by discourse which celebrates individuality and choice against the oppressive conformity imposed by religion. One area in which r/atheism’s users celebrate agency revolves around frequent discussions of LGBT identity. Given the

\textsuperscript{116} Foucault, Michel. The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction (New York: Random House, 1978). 60.\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
popular embrace of the rhetoric of “coming out,” it is perhaps no surprise that atheists on the Internet often find affinity with the queer community. But in these contexts, the understanding of agency expressed by users on r/atheism appears more celebratory. While it might seem intuitive that digital atheists would embrace wholesale the popular discourse that emphasizes the naturalness of queer identity in response to critics who regard sexual non-normativity as a choice, instead one finds atheists rejecting disavowals of agency. Consider the following: user Cleev, in 2012, started a thread called “Being gay is a choice,” in which they caricaturize the conservative understanding of homosexuality as a choice: “What is the gay agenda? Recruitment. Since no one is born gay, gay people have to try and indoctrinate and recruit the rest of us at an early age, before we have the wherewithal to figure out for ourselves that the gay agenda is a lie.” Cleev then asks readers to substitute the word “Christian” for the word “gay,” implying that it is precisely the issue of agency that renders religion problematic and divorces atheism from the realm of ideology. This replicates, then, a familiar logic in which it is only that which cannot be chosen (in this case, queerness or atheism) that is immune to criticism.

But the responses to Cleev’s post are hardly universally positive. The most popular serious comment isolates the issue of choice as a distraction: “What I want to

know is...Who really cares if it is a choice or not? What difference would it make if it was a choice? Are we not free men and women living in a free country with a guaranteed right to pursue happiness?”

In another thread, a similar conversation transpires in which user *dperr117* links to an image of comedian David Cross overlaid with the text of a quote from Cross, in which he argues for an exclusively genetic understanding of homosexuality. For Cross, we read, the humor lies in the absurdity of pretending that someone would choose to adopt an identity that made them the target of bigotry and hatred. Again, the most popular comments are highly critical: “So fucking what if it’s a choice. Why is that a reason to hate someone. Go about your life and don’t say or do mean shit to people.”

“Even if it was a choice, so what?” In other words, while *r/atheism*’s users often shun choice when it is said to underlie atheist identity, one sees simultaneous attempts to reclaim agency from those who would downplay it in the formation of identity. To account for this confused or paradoxical understanding of agency, we have to consider again the material specificity of the interface.

---

4.9 The Invisible Hand of the Interface

“...the spectral interface has come to stand in for the machine itself, erasing the medium as it proliferates its specters, making our machines transparent producers of unreal visions – sometimes terrifying but usual banal imitations or hallucinations of elsewhere, in which the uneasy relationship between human agency and dependency is negotiated.”

One of the themes that courses through the history of secularist media is the extent to which particular anxieties provoked by particular media partially shape the notions of identity articulated there. In the case of radio, I argued in chapter two, the primary anxiety had to do with visibility. The medium of radio trafficked in invisibilities – of the material substrate of transmission, of the experience of listening, of the presence of the consuming audience. This anxiety, I claim, contributed to the emergence of an atheist identity preoccupied with visibility. With the digital interface, the play of visibility and invisibility remains, but it is now relocated such that the digital becomes the primary site of visibility. Additionally, this anxiety concerning visibility becomes more than ever inflected by the question of control. This is the question that “algorithmic culture” attempts to isolate – is it possible any longer to differentiate between the free choice of the individual user and the determining machinations of invisible algorithms and aggregate data? On a pseudo-anonymous and highly

algorithmic interface like reddit, a traditional understanding of agency as free will appears hopelessly simplistic.

Thus, it is not adequate to theorize deconversion narratives on the Internet as simply confessional technologies of the self aimed at establishing the sovereign subject. Instead, the interface, as a mediator between the visible and the invisible, aims toward “the resurgence of the seemingly sovereign individual, the subject driven to know, driven to map, to zoom in and out, to manipulate, and to act.”¹²⁴ To an extent, neoliberal subjectivity has always relied on this interplay of the visible and the invisible. The freedom of the subject is always circumscribed and enabled by invisible forces (economic, genetic, cultural, ideological) that determine it. Foucault’s discussion of the economic subject, homo œconomicus, thus provides a more useful means to understand a conception of truth which removes truth from the reach of sovereignty. In The Birth of Biopolitics, Foucault engages in an unconventional reading of Adam Smith’s “invisible hand” metaphor for describing economic rationality. In Foucault’s reading, the invisible hand operates in a space where the forces that constitute subjects are invisible to the eye of the sovereign:

_Homo œconomicus_ is someone who can say to the juridical sovereign, to the sovereign possessor of rights and founder of positive law on the basis of the natural right of individuals: You must not. But he does not say: You must not, because I have rights and you must not touch them […] You must not because you cannot. And you cannot in the sense that ‘you are powerless.’ And why are

¹²⁴ Ibid., 8. emphasis original.
you powerless, why can’t you? You cannot because you do not know, and you do not know because you cannot know."125

This radical unknowability in the face of sovereignty is what, for Foucault, makes economics an “atheistic discipline […] a discipline without God […] without totality.”126 It is also what allows us to ask the inverse question – whether atheism as it is constructed in these deconversion narratives has affinities with a kind of economic view of truth. This would be a response to sovereignty in which truth is not simply objectified or historicized, but obscured. By analogy, when deconversion narratives undermine traditional notions of agency, what is rendered invisible is not the economic mechanisms that produce a collective good, but the very personal forces that constitute (a)religious identity. One can’t help what one believes because this facet of identity is mysterious and invisible, with its origins in the dark recesses of biology and the subconscious and rupturing the surface of consciousness in one brilliant moment. The denial of agency then produces an “indispensable”127 form of invisibility which prevents an association between atheism and sovereign subjectivity while maintaining some notion of truth. In the same way that economic rationality is “founded on the unknowability of the totality

126 Ibid., 282.
127 Ibid., 280.
of the process,” the atheist subject-position in these narratives is founded on the irrationality of atheist identity, which is partially synonymous with its truth.

Extending Foucault’s insightful divorce between the sovereign subject and impersonal truth, Wendy Hui Kyong Chun has framed digital media as providing a metaphor and arena with which to play out their relationship: “The linking of rationality with mysticism, knowability with what is unknown, makes it a powerful fetish that offers its programmers and users alike a sense of empowerment, of sovereign subjectivity, that covers over – barely – a sense of profound ignorance.” In the context of atheism, what the digital offers is an explicit recognition of the relationship between “rationality and mysticism, knowability with what is unknown.” That is to say, despite atheists’ frequent appeals to pure rationality, there has always been an element of mysticism to the question of subjectivity, wherein the self is simultaneously and paradoxically a free willing agent and a determined body. This is the paradox that “irreligion” is meant to illuminate – that the experience of becoming an atheist tends to exceed the language available to describe it. The digital provides the perfect interface for articulating this confusion of agency that simultaneously extends and undermines the sovereign subject. As Chun puts it:

[The] paradoxical combination of visibility and invisibility, of rational causality and profound ignorance, grounds the computer as an attractive model for the

128 Ibid., 282.
129 Chun, Programmed Visions, 18.
'real' world. Interfaces have become functional analogs to ideology and its critique – from ideology as false consciousness to ideology as fetishistic logic, interfaces seem to concretize our relation to invisible (or barely visible) 'sources' and substructures. The digital interface, by explicitly executing the power of the invisible, enables a more explicit engagement between traditional understandings of sovereign subjectivity and the invisible determining forces on which that subjectivity is founded. Hence, the confused understanding of agency articulated on r/atheism represents an accurate response to a “postmodern/neoliberal confusion” in which subjectivity is perpetually determined by invisible forces. In this regard, the digital arena offers “a simpler, more reassuring analog of power, one in which the user takes the place of the sovereign executive 'source,' code becomes law, and mapping produces the subject.” The atheist online, then, is caught in a paradox enabled by the digital interface – simultaneously more insistent than ever that her identity is absolutely true and more aware than ever that this identity is merely a result of a mapping operation executed by inhuman forces – simultaneously abstractly convinced that she is a free willing agent and specifically aware that her identity has been selected and imposed from a range of predetermined options.

130 Ibid., 59.
132 Ibid.
5. Conclusion

The aim of this project has been to provide a corrective to an overly cognitive understanding of atheism that emerges out of intellectual history. Media theory helps provide this corrective in part because it trains attention on objects and networks rather than ideas in explaining the contours of social movements and individual subjectivities. The radical potentials of media theory lie in the possibility of a post-hermeneutic understanding of how the materialities of media connect to human thoughts and experiences. By “post-hermeneutic,” I refer to the possibility of describing the role of media without subordinating the material to questions of meaning or intentionality. This is not to ignore the question of meaning, but to ask how meaning is drawn out of the relatively raw materials of lived experience. The question is how to talk about media experience and its implications for human affairs without completely translating those experiences into a terminology that presumes static and closed epistemologies – how to adumbrate the emergence of the new (through media forms) with old language. I do not pretend to have the answers to these questions, but I think that the thematic of noise at least points toward productive avenues of thought. Noise, the stubborn affectivity of media, provides a media-specific vocabulary with which to discuss the relationship between affect and ideology in the context of American atheism.
In Claude E. Shannon’ and Warren Weaver’s epochal *The Mathematical Theory of Communication*, noise is defined in relationship to information in the mathematical language of probability. Consider a medium transmitting entirely unorganized raw data – say, a string of random letters. Information, in this context, is inversely proportional to probability. If it just so happened that the letters transmitted spelled out a well-known phrase (e.g. “TOBEORNOTTOBE”), the sheer improbability of this occurrence would constitute a high degree of information. This definition of information thus bypasses the question of rational content – whether “to be or not to be” means anything to the human reader – it would be just as improbable that the medium transmitted a meaningless string of letters that matched a predetermined sequence. Noise, in this understanding, is the random transmission of data that has failed to produce significant information, or recognizable patterns. Crucially, then, noise is a kind of meaninglessness that makes meaning possible – it is a material substrate that exists prior to the generation of cognizable information. And if information is proportional to improbability or uncertainty, then increased noise actually enables increased information:

If noise is introduced, then the received message contains certain distortions, certain errors, certain extraneous material, that would certainly lead one to say that the received message exhibits, because of the effects of the noise, an increased uncertainty. But if the uncertainty is increased, the information is increased, and this sounds as though the noise were beneficial!

---

2 Ibid., 18-19.
3 Ibid., 19.
Thus, more noise means more information, and despite Shannon and Weaver’s protestations, the difference between desirable and undesirable information is up for debate.

In other words, to put noise at the center of our analysis requires relaxing the technical specificity of Shannon and Weaver’s model, which was concerned primarily with the purification of pristine meaning from noise pollution. For Shannon and Weaver, noise was primarily external to the transmission of information – an unintended and undesirable interference. Moreover, there are no feedback loops in Shannon and Weaver’s model; the transmission of noise and information in a one-directional process from a sender to a receiver. But while Shannon and Weaver see noise in starkly negative terms as that which interferes with the transmission of information, the placing of information and noise on a spectrum nonetheless enables more affirmative understandings of noise.

Consider the simple example of face-to-face communication. In Shannon and Weaver’s model, the mouth of the speaker is a transmitter, the sound waves of the speaking voice are a signal, and the ear of the listener is a receiver. In this example, noise would include any distraction or external stimulus that might prevent the listener

---

4 Ibid., 7. In Weaver’s popularization of Shannon’s model, “semantic noise” is distinguished from “engineering noise” with the former representing distortions of meaning prior to transmission and the latter representing interference during transmission, but both cases present an ideal of pure information purified of all noise. (Ibid., 26)
from hearing and processing the speaker’s message. But once the question of noise is raised in this manner, a host of implications follow. Listeners strain as they attempt to hear the speaker over the din of background noise, speakers notice the change in facial expression and wonder whether they are being misunderstood. They speak louder and with more force, giving listeners the impression that they are annoyed. Listeners begin to feel slightly nauseous and wonder whether it is a physical reaction to what they had for lunch or a somatic reaction to the tension emerging in their engagement with their interlocutors. Shannon and Weaver’s model is simplistic precisely so as to filter out all of this context as irrelevant to the transmission of the intended message, but why shouldn’t it be understood as noise? More importantly, it becomes increasingly difficult to distinguish the source of this noise – is it external to the process of communication or internal? Is the facial expression of the speaking subject divorced from the content of their speech, is the ambience of the room irrelevant to the reception of face-to-face information?

Shannon and Weaver’s model materializes communication while attempting to bracket questions of experience, but the question of experience is precisely what enables us to liberate noise from the restrictive domain of mathematical engineering. When we ask how noise is experienced, we come face-to-face, as it were, with a more creative understanding of noise as a sensory form of recalcitrance that bears on the affective presence of the medium more than the rational thought or communication transmitted
through it. Contrary to Shannon and Weaver’s apparent intentions, noise does not merely interfere with information but generates the embodied forms of experience that contextualize information and render it meaningful to living subjects. Noise enfleshes information, embedding it in the complex webs of material context that make information matter. If Shannon and Weaver’s ideal of the pristine or smooth transmission of information relies on the silencing of noise and thus effectively removes the question of mediation from the human experience to the realm of mathematics, noise stubbornly remains. Noise, like affect, generates the frictions that “link bodies to systems of power and to regimes of information.”5 It is thus an ideal fulcrum with which to push back against cognitivist understandings of atheist ideology.

By placing meaningfulness and meaninglessness in a codependent relationship, noise offers a radical tool for understanding religious and nonreligious practices and beliefs, from spiritualist divinations to abstract understandings of fate, chance, and agency. An emphasis on noise serves as a reminder that those practices which divine meaning from the seemingly random are engaged in a classical form of mediation, securing the possibility of randomness (noise) in order to create space for divine meaning (information). This form of mediation in which noise is deliberately generated so as to enable the organic emergence of information thrives in contemporary media practices. The proliferation of mediated white noise today has provided one of the most

5Schaefer, Religious Affects, 35.
prevalent sites for the emergence of the spiritual.\(^6\) Noise offers, in other words, a potentially post-hermeneutic way to think about media practices in that it frames meaning – perhaps especially ultimate meaning – as inextricably wedded to the meaninglessness of the material.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young has highlighted the notion of noise as integral to Friedrich Kittler’s post-hermeneutic reading of media. As Winthrop-Young summarizes: “All media of transmission require a material channel, and the characteristic of every material channel is that, beyond — and, as it were, against — the information it carries, it produces noise and nonsense.”\(^7\) The distinction between information and noise here is roughly analogous to that between content and form articulated by Marshall McLuhan;\(^8\) information is the representational or rational content of a media message while noise is the nonrepresentational material that subtends and enables mediation. Noise takes different forms in different media – it is the fuzz of analog TV images, the static on the radio, the scrape of the phonograph needle. In Kittler’s own words, it is “the impossible reality at the basis of all media: white noise, primal sound.”\(^9\) In the German, the word is “Rauschen” – murmuring, hissing, rushing – and it is borrowed directly from German

\(^6\)To cite just a few examples, a number of ghost-hunting practices operate by generating media noise as a site for communication with spirits, and popular films like *Poltergeist* and *White Noise* are built on the premise that the supernatural accesses the immanent world through the noise of media.


\(^9\)Kittler, *Discourse Networks*, 316.
physicists and mathematicians of the 1920’s, but Kittler’s notion of noise is
unsurprisingly indebted primarily to Shannon and Weaver. As Kittler reads Shannon
and Weaver in “Signal-Rausch-Abstand,” information is the filtering out of noise,\(^\text{10}\)
suggesting the mechanization of the process by which all discourse is divorced from
materiality.

Geoffrey Winthrop-Young again emphasizes the importance of noise in Kittler’s
thought when he writes:

And this is maybe the shortest, most economic way to summarize the switch
from the Discourse Network 1800 to 1900, and then on the Discourse Network
2000 (a term Kittler hardly ever uses): from Geist to Rauschen, from
philosophically promoted poetry and naturalized hermeneutics to stochastics
and information theory, from the guarantee of an always already meaningful
world to an environment of meaningless noise that can at best be momentarily
arranged into allegedly significant patterns.\(^\text{11}\)

For Kittler, noise is both an irreducible fact of material reality (as evidenced by the
“thermal noise” that radiates from all electrons) and the key to understanding media’s
effect on human discourse. The relationship between the noisiness of media and the
possibility of transmitting information necessitates the realization that discourse is never
the expression of meaning or spirit (Geist) but the mechanistic rarefaction of patterns out
of primal noise. Thus, as one translator of Signal-Rausch-Abstand puts it, “it is noise

\[\text{10} \text{“Nachrichten selber als Selektionen oder Filterungen eines Rauschens generierbar sind.” (‘Information}
\text{itself is generated by the selection or filtering of noise.’) Friedrich Kittler, “Signal-Rausch-Abstand,” in Materialitat Der Kommunikation, ed. Hans Gumbrecht and K. Ludwig Pfeiffer (Suhrkamp Verlag, 1988), 347.}
\[\text{11} \text{Geoffrey Winthrop-Young, Kittler and the Media (John Wiley & Sons, 2013), 81.} \]
which ties information to its materiality.”\textsuperscript{12} This is why noise is post-hermeneutic – it reduces meaning to information, now understood as arbitrary pattern-recognition executed by man and machine alike. Noise cannot be translated into meaningful language – it can only be converted into different forms which will nonetheless continue to be meaningless.

Also drawing on Shannon’s and Weaver’s theory, Mark C. Taylor has used noise to more explicitly undermine the notion of self-consciousness in discussions of religion. As Taylor puts it, “The activity of mind does not presuppose self-consciousness but involved information processes that are \textit{distributed} throughout natural, social, cultural, and technological networks. The buzz of noise is the murmur of life emerging. Though this murmur can never be figured, there is no art-iculation apart from its echo.”\textsuperscript{13} More-so than Kittler, Taylor emphasizes the codependence of information and noise. “Information and noise are not merely opposites, but coemerge and remain codependent: \textit{information is noise in formation}. Noise, in turn, interrupts by interfering with normative patterns. When understood in this way, information stabilizes noise and noise destabilizes information.”\textsuperscript{14} The bidirectionality of the relationship between noise and information – both stabilizing and destabilizing – is part of Taylor’s larger project to


\textsuperscript{13} Mark C. Taylor, \textit{After God} (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 346-347.

\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., 15-16.
describe religion as enabling both the construction and deconstruction of meanings, and it causes Taylor to alternate between seeing noise as the opposite of information\textsuperscript{15} and as a specific kind of “unpatterned” information.\textsuperscript{16} Ultimately, for Taylor more-so than for Kittler (or perhaps just less opaquely), “noise is not absolute but is relative to the system it disrupts and reconfigures, and conversely, information is not fixed and stable but is always being figured and refigured in relation to noise.”\textsuperscript{17}

This relativity and bidirectionality allows us to work a little more loosely with the concept of noise. Ultimately, the question is whether we can understand noise as roughly analogous to affect as it has been used over the course of this project. If noise is a universal material process underlying the emergence of information, affect is a universal material process underlying the cognition of meaning. If noise is necessarily primal while the patterning of information is necessarily representational, affect too operates on a certain kind of human animality preceding representation. That is, both noise and affect clearly operate on the senses, but in a way that resists or precedes organization. This is also to say that both noise and affect bear a close but not identical relationship to emotion, in that emotions serve as ways to describe, post-hoc, the effect of those primal sensations on the body.\textsuperscript{18} I want to seize on the understanding of noise as

\textsuperscript{15} E.g. Ibid., 327.
\textsuperscript{16} E.g. Ibid., 124.
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 324.
\textsuperscript{18} Both noise and affect also bear on the question of the distinction between the living and the non-living. When Taylor writes, for example, that “the buzz of noise is the murmur of life emerging,” (Ibid., 346-347) he
that which is constructed in opposition to information and vice versa, when information is understood as the logical, rational, representational, or meaningful. But I also want to maintain some of the vulgar connotations of noise as that which is grating or imposing on the senses. In what ways have irreligious uses of American media seized upon noise as a means of constructing atheist identities?

In chapter one, I showed how print media provided a set of metaphors that the loosely-knit American Freethought movement deployed in order to experiment with different modes of subjectivation. Drawing on contributions to *The Truth Seeker* during the last few decades of the nineteenth-century, I argued that textual print media provided an expansive sense of spatiality, such that individuals were discouraged from articulating exclusive subject-positions and encouraged to articulate inclusive and subscriptive affiliations. In printed text, there was room enough for everyone to negotiate intellectual disagreements without recourse to emotionality. With the 1879 trial of DM Bennett for the charge of distributing obscenity through the mail, however, the question of mediated visibility took center stage, with Bennett and others insisting on the visibility of infidelity as a bulwark against accusations of deviance or licentiousness. Analyzing the Freethought cartoons of Watson Heston, then, I argued resembles those affect theorists who simultaneously inject the mechanical into the living and offer a little vitality to animate matter.
that printed imagery contributed to a greater emphasis among some Freethinkers on irreligious identity as more exclusive, more emotional, and less freely-chosen than previously. Heston’s cartoons, along with mechanical metaphors of engraving, imprinting, etc., encouraged Freethinkers to understand their identities as acquired through acculturative practices rather than abstract intellecions. I argued that these twin emphases on visibility and acculturation provided a foundation for the kind of atheist identity politics that was to emerge in the twentieth-century.

Applying a Kittlerian understanding of noise to print media poses a difficulty, as Kittler seems to have regarded print media as technically silent. Because print media contains no “primal sound” for Kittler – no non-representational recordings of human activity – it affords no possibility of the transmission of noise.\(^\text{19}\) But if we loosen up our understanding of noise somewhat with Taylor and see it as existing only in relationship to information, then we can apply the concept to a number of our suggestions. First, the metaphorical and actual spatiality of print media constitutes a certain kind of noise to the extent that it framed and shapes the reception of printed subscriptions. Following Taylor in seeing noise and information as “distributed in cultural, social, and natural systems and networks,”\(^\text{20}\) then the sense of space generated by the expansiveness or looseness of those networks produces its own noise; to intentionally conflate the

\(^{19}\) Kittler, Discourse Networks, 317.
\(^{20}\) Taylor, After God, 308.
technical and nontechnical understandings of noise again, we might refer to different
degrees of reverberation generated by different media spatialities. By this reading, the
experience of receiving a letter through the mail constitutes an emergence of
individually-relevant information out of impersonal noise. At the same time, if we
recognize noise, following Taylor, as the process by which “new information disrupts
old patterns to create noise,”\textsuperscript{21} then the amount of “room” in a mediascape might
sometimes insulate information from potential disruption from other information.
Hence the prevalence of a plurality of identities in textual print media – there is enough
room in the mediascape that different viewpoints and opinions need not disrupt one
another; disagreement always produced negotiation rather than cacophony. Second, we
can describe the printed image as noisy to the extent that it stands in opposition to the
rationality of the printed word. The use of mechanical metaphors to describe the image’s
function – e.g. imprinting, daguerreotyping, or engraving subjectivity on the unthinking
mind – implies a “noisy” understanding of subjectivation. In analogy to Kittler’s
discussion of the primal sound of the phonograph, the image enacts a direct conversion
between the medium and the subject that bypasses rational understandings of
consumption or translation, as if because the image perfectly captures the sentiments of
the freethinking subject, it need not be understood to perform its magic. It possesses, at
least to some extent, a noise which can’t be translated because it contains no meaning.

\textsuperscript{21} Ibid., 115.
In chapter two, I showed how the medium of radio contributed to an emphasis in the middle of the twentieth century on the visibility of atheist identity as something inherent akin to an ethnicity. Drawing on Robert Harold Scott’s ongoing engagements with the FCC during the 1940’s in the pursuit of equitable access to the airways for atheist viewpoints, I argued that the material specificity of the electromagnetic spectrum partially encouraged Scott to articulate an understanding of atheism as a minority subject-position rather than an intellectual argument. Madalyn Murray O’Hair took up Scott’s project in the latter half of the twentieth-century and increasingly emphasized the Atheist subject position as inherent rather than intellectual. I argued that O’Hair’s project of making Atheist identity visible was encouraged in part by an anxiety stemming from the invisibility of the medium of radio, and both enabled and undermined in part by the affective quality of her speaking voice.

The theme of noise is most apparently applicable in the medium of radio where the hum and click of the electromagnetic spectrum is loudest. It was the problem of noise in the form of interference and bandwidth crowding that provoked the FCC to regulate radio programming in terms of fairness and equitability, and it was the nuance of these regulations that served as the material foothold for Robert Harold Scott’s demand for the transmission of atheist information. The invisibility of the medium of radio, which perhaps contributed to Madalyn Murray O’Hair’s anxieties about the visibility of atheist identity, can be understood as noise to the extent that it provided the
material substrate of the transmission of radio content. But the noise of the radio is not just the sounds of the ether or the workings of the receiver – it also consists of the non-representational qualities of the speaking voice and the phenomenological experience of hearing the invisible audio signal. The radio is not just noisy in the technical and common sense – it is predicated on a basic rarefaction of all the visual noise that comes with human experience. Keeping Taylor’s reminder of the bidirectionality of the noise/information relationship in mind, we might say radio silences the visual precisely by transforming the visual into noise – into that which is irrelevant to the information transmitted by sound. Perhaps this move is integral to O’Hair’s use of visual metaphors in describing the atheist voice – when the visual becomes non-informational, it is made available as a site for non-rational forms of subjectivity like O’Hair’s Atheism.

In chapter three, I showed how the speed and complexity of algorithmic culture has started to generate new forms of intimacy and identification among self-identifying atheists on reddit.com. By focusing on the backlash to changes to moderation policies concerning the publication of images, I argued that the affective power of the image is frequently described using metaphors of speed rather than permanence, as in nineteenth-century print media, suggesting an attendant shift away from theories of acculturation of atheist identity back to an emphasis on conversion (though maintaining to a large degree the notion that atheist subjectivity is unwilling). I argued, based on common discursive motifs used in both celebration and denigration of the tightness of
digital communities, that the prevalence and speed of algorithms on reddit.com has generated certain anxieties about the extent to which online identities are under human control. Finally, I explored popular language of deconversion on r/atheism, arguing that the digital mediascape generates forms of intimacy – based on chance encounters and a relative dissolution of the public/private divide – that constitute the digital as a counterpublic serving to replace the offline public sphere as the privileged site of atheist visibility.

The difficulties of applying Kittler’s notion of noise to print media are compounded in the context of digital media, where it is increasingly difficult to distinguish between noise and information. For Kittler, digital media constitutes the final dissolution of the human subject. This is because the digital enables the conversion of all noise into information as the primal sounds of all other media are converged and translated into mathematical data. What can we make of the algorithms of reddit, which take over from human subjects the work of selecting meaningful information out of the noise of pure data? They seem analogous to the machines described by Geoffrey Winthrop-Young – “machines able to read and write without human input,” which “optimize certain patterns of information processing that were also imposed on human beings and that subsequently were mistaken for innately human qualities.”22 This is to say that algorithms perform the work of undermining the hermeneutic understanding of

22 Winthrop-Young, Kittler and the Media, 80.
human beings as meaning-makers. Algorithms demonstrate, to a hyper-efficient degree, just how much meaning is an illusion generated out of pattern-recognition. And thus, algorithms retroactively deconstruct the sovereign subject that existed prior to mediation: “Where subjects were, there programs shall be – because programs were there in the first place.”23 But algorithms don’t just take over (and run into the ground) the processes of subjectivity; they simultaneously present the results of those processes to human users in heightened form and with lightning speed. If information is the patterning of noise, then algorithms enable users to navigate a digital environment which continues to grow noisier and noisier. Returning to the notion of spatiality discussed in the context of print media, we might say that digital media generates more noise in that networks of communication are less often addressed to an intended recipient. But unlike broadcast media, where the audience is invisible, collective, and relatively unable to respond, the potential recipient of the digital communication is often a specific individual who will erupt into visibility the moment he or she responds. Perhaps, then, it is this heightened noisiness of the internet – the random and ad-hoc nature of digital communication – that amplifies the sense of meaningful intimacy that occurs when information emerges in the form of the chance encounter.

Perhaps then, it is too simple to see noise as affect. To say that digital media is a supremely sophisticated way of turning noise into information would undermine an

23 Ibid.
affective reading of digital media. We have drawn affinities between noise and affect
around the question of user experience – noise, like affect, generates an encounter
between a subject and the material world that circumvents cognition or rationalization.
But noise, like affect, only exists in relationship to patterning or organizing networks.
Thus, it might be more productive to look for noise and affect not at the heart of media
but on the interfacial edges where different media forms or sensory experiences
intersect, for that is where the relationship between noise and information, affect and
cognition, will appear most dynamic. This project has provided a select few snapshots of
a dizzying array of intermediated atheisms. Future projects might look at the issue of
visibility and audience with regard to the increasing prevalence of atheist billboards and
advertising campaigns. Or ask how televisual practices honed on public-access
television during the 1980’s reverberate today on subscriptive platforms like Roku. Or
seek to explain the seeming toxicity of popular atheist voices on Youtube. These lines of
research would do much to reinforce the lesson aimed at throughout this project – that
atheism today is neither simply a set of rational ideas nor a political ideology, but a
complex arrangement of mediated practices, affective encounters, and material
networks.
Appendix

Figure 16: Percentage of Atheist/Infidel Language Used to Label Identity in *The Truth Seeker, 1880-1897*

This chart shows what percentage of language pertaining to atheism or infidelity was specifically used to label individuals from 1880 to 1897, when the most consistent data was available. The terms “atheist(s)” and “infidel(s)” were counted as a percentage of all words that included the roots “atheis-” and “infidel-.” It demonstrates that “infidel” was consistently more-widely used than “atheist” in describing identity in the last two decades of the nineteenth century.
Figure 17: Occurrence of Infidel/Atheist Language per Page of The Truth Seeker, 1880-1897

This chart shows the prevalence of terms that include the roots “atheis-” and “infidel-” from 1880 to 1897. The average occurrence per page was determined by dividing the total number of occurrences by the total number of pages published in each year. It shows “infidel” beginning to decline during the last decade of the nineteenth century while “atheist” remains relatively constant. There appears to be a moderately inverse relationship beginning in 1885 – as “infidel” increases, “atheist” decreases and vice versa – suggesting perhaps a mutual exclusivity in which individuals felt compelled to choose either one or the other. The spike in 1883 appears to be an anomaly related to the quality of the digital scans during that year enabling better text-recognition.
References


“Air for Atheists.” *Time* 48, no. 6 (August 5, 1946): 60.


“Atheism.” *Boston Investigator.* March 14, 1834.


“Atheist Broadcasts Talk; Protests Flood Studio.” Los Angeles Times, November 18, 1946.

“Atheist Files Complaint against 15 Radio Stations.” Honolulu Advertiser, October 15, 1964, sec. B.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/tilyc/being_gay_is_a_choice/.

http://catalog.hathitrust.org/api/volumes/oclc/4539128.html.


— — —. The Truth Seeker. August 30, 1879.


“blackstar9000 Comments on /r/atheism Tries to Figure out How to Deal with Shifting Content Focus.” Accessed March 8, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/i7fyu/ratheism_tries_to_figure_out_how_to_deal_with/c21itss.


Chilcote, Wm. A. *The Truth Seeker*. May 15, 1875, sec. Friendly Correspondence.


Clark, Davis W. *Death-Bed Scenes; Or, Dying With and Without Religion: Designed to Illustrate the Truth and Power of Christianity*. New York: Lane & Scott, 1851.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/q0dgx/david_cross_on_homosexuality_and_choice/.


“Dear R/atheism, I Am Considering Subscribing to This Sub BECAUSE the New Rules Make This Sub so Much Better. Please Don’t Go Back. • /r/atheism.” Reddit.  
https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fwsyu/dear_ratheism_i_am_considering_subscribing_to/.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/tilyc/being_gay_is_a_choice/c4mzesy.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/gr75q/dae_think_being_atheist_is_not_a_choice/c1pny8h.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1g98v0/policy_setting_a_positive_direction_for_the/cai1zwy.


http://search.proquest.com/openview/aec16e7fd186cebea0258bda4bfde04f/1?pq-origsite=gscholar.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1g98v0/policy_setting_a_positive_direction_for_the/cai8ih4.


— — — . “Jerked to Jesus, or Heavenward Hemp,” Illustration, *The Truth Seeker,* May 1, 1886.


— — —. “Which Shall We Hav?” Illustration. The Truth Seeker, December 1, 1888.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/czavs/how_many_atheists_has_the_internet_created/.

https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/1g7cbi/how_to_counter_a_sustained_downvote_attack_in_new/.

https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/1g7cbi/how_to_counter_a_sustained_downvote_attack_in_new/.


253


———. Speech of Abner Kneeland Delivered Before the Supreme Court of the City of Boston, in His Own Defence, on an Indictment for Blasphemy. November Term, 1834. J. Q. Adams, 1834.


“Makinwaffles Comments on Too Fucked up to Care Anymore (x-Post from R/atheism).” Accessed March 29, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/thegreatproject/comments/on45g/too_fucked_up_to_care_anymore_xpost_from_ratheism/c3iqcrg.


“Minutes of Department of Commerce Conference on Radio Telephony,” 1922.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/q0dgx/david_cross_on_homosexu ality_and_choice/c3tqtuh.


“My Sober Conversion to Atheism.” Accessed April 27, 2013.
http://www.salon.com/2013/03/03/my_sober_conversion_to_atheism_partner/.


“‘People Do Not Choose to Be Atheists; They Realize They Are.’ • /r/atheism.” Reddit. Accessed October 19, 2015. https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/3m04fe/people_do_not_choose_to_be_atheists_they_realize/.


“PSA: A Small Group of Users (30-40) Are Currently Camping the New Queue and Downvoting Anything That Isn’t a Complaint about the Rules into the Negative. The Admins Are Looking into It. In the Mean Time, Please Edit Your Preferences and Blank out ‘Don’t Show Links with a Score Less than X’. : Atheism.” Accessed March 4, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1g4b53/psa_a_small_group_of_users_3040_are_currently/.


“Rasteri Comments on There Is Something That Made This Sub ‘the First Step into a Larger World’ for Tens of Thousands of People, and You Have Taken That Away. Congratulations.” Accessed March 8, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fru5l/there_is_something_that_made_this_sub_the_first/cad93jt.

“/r/atheism Tries to Figure out How to Deal with Shifting Content Focus • /r/TheoryOfReddit.” Reddit. Accessed March 8, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/TheoryOfReddit/comments/i7fyu/ratheism_tries_to_figure_out_how_to_deal_with/c21itss.


— — —. “Letters.” Time 48, no. 10 (September 2, 1946).


“Shall We Illustrate the Truth Seeker?” The Truth Seeker. October 31, 1885.


264


Slenker, Mrs. Elmina Drake. The Truth Seeker. April 8, 1876, sec. Gems of Thought.


https://books.google.com/books/about/The_Art_of_Ill_Will.html?id=yJNEPgAACAAJ.


https://www.reddit.com/r/circlebroke/comments/zanht/the_difference_between_a_hivemind_and_a/.

https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/fqkuj/the_internet_has_sealed_the_fate_of_religion/.

https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/b7nca/the_internets_effect_on_religion/.


“There Is Something That Made This Sub ‘the First Step into a Larger World’ for Tens of Thousands of People, and You Have Taken That Away. Congratulations. • /r/atheism.” Reddit. Accessed March 8, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fru5l/there_is_something_that_made_this_sub_the_first/.


“Thesunmustdie Comments on ‘People Do Not Choose to Be Atheists; They Realize They Are.’” Accessed March 8, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/3m04fe/people_do_not_choose_to_be_atheists_they_realize/cvauc7p.


“Time for Atheism.” *Time* 48, no. 23 (December 2, 1946): 77.


267


“WeAreAllHypocrites Comments on Whenever Somebody Complains That R/atheism Is a Circlejerk.” Accessed March 8, 2016.
https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/uiunr/whenever_somebody_complains_that_ratheism_is_a/c4vv4ph.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/uiunr/whenever_somebody_complains_that_ratheism_is_a/c4vv4ph.


https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/i7a5p/why_i_am_not_bothered_by_the_volume_of_comics_and/.


“You Have Made a Mistake, Your Subscribers Have Spoken, It Is Time to Correct This Mistake. : Atheism.” Accessed March 4, 2016. https://www.reddit.com/r/atheism/comments/1fsl61/you_have_made_a_mistake_your_subscribers_have/.

Biography

Eric Chalfant was born on Whidbey Island, WA on April 1, 1986. He received a Bachelor’s degree in Religious Studies from Whitman College in 2008 and a Master’s degree in Religious Studies from Wake Forest University in 2011.