

Debating Freedom of Speech and Conscience



MAD TOM in A RAGE

Thomas Paine, the new atheism movement, and the European skeptic tradition

Something uncommon has been going on in the United States over the past four or five years: atheism has found its way into public discourse, and it has done so with a fair amount of success. This in itself is paradoxical enough, for self-identified atheists constitute but a small minority, concentrated mostly in the West, particularly, the Pacific Northwest. Figures vary, but according to the U.S. Religious Landscape Survey released by the Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life in 2008, they account for a mere 1.6 percent of the adult population (with agnostics representing another 2.4 percent). While the United States is well known all over the world for its high level of religiosity, it

also has a reputation for a widespread mistrust of people “without faith.” Polls and a few surveys bear out the stigma attached to atheism in the United States. Atheists—or “secularists” as they are sometimes misleadingly called—are the most distrusted minority, considered by many to be “deviant” or “a threat to the American way of life.”

This has not prevented a resurgence of militant positive atheism, as reflected in a series of books written by acclaimed authors and recently published in what is for some “the most Christian nation in the world.” These books, which explicitly deny the existence of God or gods and lambast institutionalized religion, have attracted a good deal of attention across the political and religious spectra, to the extent that four or five of them have made it on to the *New York Times* bestseller list or have won or been nominated for awards. Among them are Sam Harris’s *The End of Faith: Religion, Terror and the Future of Reason* (2004); *The God Delusion* (2006), by the British evolutionary biologist Richard Dawkins (2006); and *God is not Great: Religion Poisons Everything* (2006), by British-born columnist Christopher Hitchens. To these three most prominent titles we can add several others, including the English translations of two French hits, *Atheist Manifesto: The Case against Christianity, Judaism and Islam* (2007), by popular philosopher Michel Onfray, first published in 2005 under the title *Traité d’athéologie*, and *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality* (2007), by philosopher André Comte-Sponville. While we still need to learn more about the readership of this literature—its motives, socioeconomic status, and geographic distribution—the books’ amazon.com sales ranks seem to show that they are all selling extremely well. Most important, pundits have been speaking of a “new atheism movement.” This somewhat deceptive but cogent label has sowed the seeds for another one: “the new new atheism.” The latter was coined by Peter Steinfels only a few months ago in “Beliefs,” his biweekly column in the *New York Times*, to make sense of the publication of books such as *Living without God* (2008), by Ronald Aronson, or *The Little Book of Atheist Spirituality*.

The notoriety of Harris’s, Hitchens’s, and Dawkins’s anti-faith books has spurred animated debate on radio and TV programs, the Internet, and in dailies and magazines. Commentators, authors, and representatives of different religious traditions who have either praised those books—at times with a touch of condescension—or disparaged them outright, blaming them for their ignorance of the topic they address, as well as for the “irreligious intolerance” or “secular fundamentalism” they allegedly propagate. For Stephen Prothero, professor at Boston University and the author of *Religious Literacy: What Every American Needs to Know—and Doesn’t* (2008), Hitchens “assumes a childish definition of religion” and is “fundamentally unacquainted with his subject.” For Harvard professor Harvey Cox, Richard Dawkins is “the kind of Jerry Falwell of the atheists.” Vocal atheism has also produced works on religious belief and the related issue of religious tolerance and equality. A few, explicitly published in response to the provocations of the three polemicists, refute atheism. That is the case of John F. Haught’s *God and the New Atheism: A Critical Response to Dawkins, Harris, and Hitchens* (2008) or Thomas Crean’s *God*

is No Delusion: A Refutation of Richard Dawkins (2007). In *I don't Believe in Atheism* (2008), yet another provocateur, Chris Hedges—foreign correspondent and author of a book on the Christian Right entitled *American Fascists*—argues that the new atheism movement is as dangerous as religious fundamentalism. The “new atheists” have their defenders, too, including, among many others, Ian McEwan, the acclaimed English novelist; Salman Rushdie, who, in October 2007, signed with Sam Harris a *Los Angeles Times* opinion piece on Somali-born former Dutch legislator Ayaan Hirsi Ali, now under protection after she was threatened with death for criticizing Islam (their editorial was translated into French and appeared in the French daily *Le Monde* a month later); Nobel Prize winner Steven Weinberg, who published “Without God” in *The New York Review of Books* last September; and Bill Maher, comedian and political commentator, who hosts *Real Time with Bill Maher*, an HBO talk show.

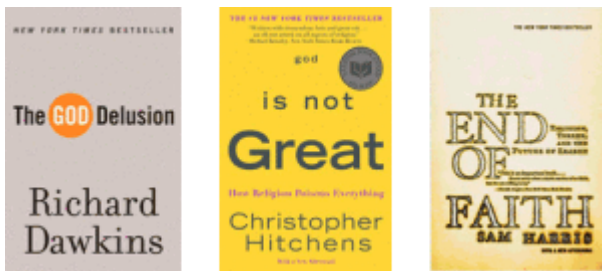


Fig. 1

I would like to offer some observations on the recent appeal of militant atheism in the United States, while linking it to the concurrent renewed interest in Thomas Paine in evidence over the last five or six years (no less than ten new books devoted to Paine have appeared since 2005). Indeed the “new atheism” derives from a long-established free-thinking tradition in which Thomas Paine has a key place. Paine was no atheist, but a plain-spoken anti-Christian deist, whose religious outlook is best summarized by his profession of faith as it appears in the first chapter of *The Age of Reason*, published in two parts, in 1794 and 1795, while Paine was in Paris (and partly in prison where he stayed from December 28, 1793, to November 4, 1794).

I do not believe in the creed professed by the Jewish church, by the Roman church, by the Greek church, by the Turkish church, by the Protestant church, nor by any church that I know of. My own mind is my own church. All national institutions of churches, whether Jewish, Christian, or Turkish, appear to me no other than human inventions set up to terrify mankind, and monopolize power and profit.

Hence, while Paine believed that the universe and mankind had been created by an impersonal, remote, and uninvolved God, he also insisted that “the most detestable wickedness, the most horrid cruelties, and the greatest miseries that [had] afflicted the human [had] had their origin in this thing called revelation, or revealed religion,” by which he meant Judaism, Christianity, and Mohammedanism (as Islam was called in the eighteenth century). Traces of

Paine's reasoning and prose appear in the contemporary books listed above—especially in that of Hitchens. At the same time, the nature of the current debate over the upsurge of interest in militant atheism shares many similarities with the heated controversies that erupted in Britain and in the United States following the publication of *The Age of Reason*.

Skepticism and the Enlightenment Tradition

The most vocal of the contemporary anti-faith books draw upon two of the European Enlightenment's radical strands—the attack on priestcraft and kingcraft on one hand, and on (mainly French) philosophical materialism on the other—both of which worked to undermine traditional sources of religious authority. This wide-ranging body of thought crossed the Atlantic over the course of the eighteenth century; especially in seaboard cities like New York and Philadelphia, readers could find the works of English freethinkers such as Matthew Tindal and John Toland and of French *philosophes* Voltaire, Helvétius, Volney, Condorcet, Rousseau, and Baron d'Holbach. Following the Revolution, ideas dispersed through print took institutional form in disestablishment, which eliminated state-sponsored churches, and in various experiments in church-state separation. By the 1790s, the ranks of deists, agnostics, atheists, materialists, and other skeptics active in the United States included Ethan Allen; Benjamin Franklin; Thomas Jefferson; poet and diplomat Joel Barlow; physician Thomas Young; Elihu Palmer, the founder of the Deistical Society in New York in 1794 and editor of two short-lived deist papers, *The Temple of Reason* and *Prospect; or, View of the Moral World*, which reproduced serially a number of French writings; and, of course, Thomas Paine himself. The beliefs and careers of such men attest to the young republic's capacity to absorb and adapt radical European thought. Indeed, the interest generated today by a form of atheism that has its roots in Europe—after all, Dawkins and Hitchens are both of British origins—shares the same pattern of absorption and adaptation.



MAD TOM in ARAGE

"Mad Tom in a Rage" (1802-1803?). In the context of partisan politics that followed the election of Thomas Jefferson, Tom Paine is shown pulling down a pillar representing the federal government. He is assisted by the devil, to whom he bears some likeness and with whom he seems to be intimately acquainted. His "Letters to the citizens of the United States, and particularly to the leaders of the Federal Faction", which were published in the Jeffersonian press between November 1802 and April 1803, as well as a "third Part," possibly of the *The Age of Reason*, and two manuscripts can be seen sticking out of his pocket. Courtesy of the American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

But that borrowing, that process of absorbing and adapting, has been obscured by media commentators who insist that the "new atheism" is quite new indeed. Pundits generally locate the origins of the "new" atheism in the early twentieth century and tend to connect it to H. L. Mencken's satirical send-up of religious "folly." Even observers who have questioned the newness of militant atheism, in the historical sense of the term, have scarcely acknowledged the Enlightenment and its aftermath, particularly its radical dimension, in their discussion of the resurgence of vocal skepticism. This oversight may reflect a general lack of interest in the Enlightenment. It may also reflect a suspicion of French influence among some American authors; certainly, the widely held assumption that the Enlightenment was dominated by an anticlerical France has not helped.

The Paine Connection

The failure to articulate the new atheism's filiation with the framers' stance on freedom of conscience, the skepticism of the 1790s, or that of the 1830s New England Free Enquirers—who, in line with Paine, advocated mental emancipation—is all the more remarkable given that Dawkins, Hitchens, and to a lesser extent Harris make constant reference to the early years of the

republic. Thus, Dawkins quotes no less an authority than Thomas Jefferson to buttress his arguments that the Bible is a work of fiction and to discredit the scriptural evidence of God's existence. Although Jefferson is known more for his deistic leanings than for his ferocious anti-Christian views, he was certainly capable of disparaging Christian doctrine: in a letter to John Adams in 1823, for example, the father of the Declaration of Independence predicted the day "when the mystical generation of Jesus by the Supreme Being in the womb of a virgin, will be classed with the fable of the generation of Minerva in the brain of Jupiter."

Such references to Jefferson may be predictable. But what is particularly striking are the commonalities in form, content, intention, and impact between modern-day atheist books and Paine's last best-seller, *The Age of Reason*. An explicitly deistic tract with Paine's trademark style, *The Age of Reason* borrowed heavily from the European skeptic tradition. To demonstrate that the Bible was not the word of God, and with an eye toward undermining the Christian religion, Paine drew from Thomas Hobbes's philological analysis of scriptures in *Leviathan* (1651) and the historical-critical method elaborated by Baruch Spinoza in *Tractatus Theologico-Politicus* (1670). He also took inspiration from the writings of English freethinkers such as Thomas Woolston, whom Voltaire copied at length, and Peter Annet, the editor of *The Free Inquirer*, a journal published in London in 1761, which encouraged readers to think by themselves and portrayed Christianity as "a mere cheat." The French *philosophes* also figure prominently among Paine's sources of inspiration. Voltaire is the most obvious possibility, but Helvétius and Volney are also likely candidates. And Paine was almost certainly familiar with Baron d'Holbach, who promoted atheism by printing tracts and whose own work, which was partly translated into English, appeared in the early republic under the pen names of Boulanger and Mirabaud. Paine may also have read the anonymous *Traité des trois imposteurs* (Treatise of the Three Impostors), a clandestine manuscript that circulated extensively in France from 1719 onward and was eventually printed under the title *La Vie et l'esprit de Spinoza* (Life and Spirit of Spinoza). This text also appeared in England, where the press enjoyed more freedom, before making its way across the Atlantic, where an edition, in French, appeared in Philadelphia in 1796.

Because his point was to encourage his readers to rely upon reason rather than to provide a gloss on the Enlightenment, Paine did not credit the authors who inspired him. And while it is hard to know whether or not Paine had direct access to all these works, there is no doubt that he depended on and contributed to the circulation of ideas in the eighteenth century and beyond, inspiring other freethinkers, deists, materialists, atheists, and humanists down to the present day. Then as now, Paine served as a conduit, bringing radical ideas to the broadest possible audiences. His controversial *The Age of Reason*, the first part of which was published in seventeen editions between 1794 and 1796 in the United States, provoked the publication of over one hundred replies in the young American Republic and in Britain from the mid-1790s to the late nineteenth century. A few were enthusiastic and

supportive, but most were scathing, disparaging, and at times condescending.

Since Paine's times, the scope of the dispute over skepticism has only expanded. New religious demographics and increasing diversity in the United States as in Western Europe have brought Islam and other faith traditions into the debate. The scrutiny of the errors of religion now includes references to international terrorism, Mormonism, Jehovah's Witnesses, new religious movements, the cult controversy, child abuse, the threat to women's reproductive and sexual rights, and creationism, among other issues. But through all this, Enlightenment reasoning and rhetoric have endured—the centrality of science to debates over religion, the critical fight against the alliance of politics and religion, the rationalist exegesis of sacred texts, to say nothing of the fundamental, epistemological Hobbesian question, "How can we know anything about God?" So too has persisted the theological response to heterodoxy, with its inevitable scorn, charges of shallowness, and its propensity to twist the polemicists' meaning.

The influence of eighteenth-century European free thought may be most evident in Hitchens's *God is not Great*, which is regarded by some critics as the most strident of the three contemporary books. Obviously modeled after Thomas Paine's pamphlet, Hitchens's book even plagiarizes it. This is fair game, since Paine himself plagiarized Spinoza, Voltaire, and d'Holbach, and most probably Thomas Woolston and Peter Annet, just as others had earlier and would later on. Like Paine and in the same spirited, incisive, and often humorous style, Hitchens directly addresses his reader, calling upon "the thinking person" to use her mind. As Paine did in chapters 7 and 8 of *The Age of Reason*, part 1, and again in the two chapters of part 2, Hitchens examines the various books of the Bible in two central chapters: "Revelation: The Nightmare of the 'Old' Testament" and "The Evil of the New Testament." Even Hitchens's wording echoes Paine's. Where Paine declared that "I have now gone through the Bible, as a man would go through a wood with an axe on his shoulder," Hitchens writes that "one could go through the Old Testament book by book," addressing one logical problem after another. Like Paine, Hitchens makes use of the model of the three impostors, Moses, Jesus, and Mahomet. Like Paine, Hitchens takes inspiration from Spinoza to demonstrate that the sacred books are not authentic, that they are not what they are supposed to be, namely, the word of God, and hence to suggest that revealed religion is man-made and based on an imposture. Like Paine, who called the Bible a "manufactured book," Hitchens provisionally concludes that "religion and the churches are manufactured, and this salient fact is too obvious to ignore," while adding the Koran to his concerns, "in the same spirit of inquiry." As the title of chapter 9 plainly states: "The Koran is borrowed from both Jewish and Christian myths." Hence, reiterating, updating, and thus completing Paine's work, Hitchens exposes the inconsistencies, absurdities, violence, hatred, and immorality of the scriptures. "If one comprehends the fallacies of any 'revealed' religion, one comprehends them all," he argues in the chapter on Islam. He does not credit Paine, but he occasionally mentions or quotes him. After commenting on the "lasciviousness" and "genocidal incitements" of the Old Testament, for example,

he acknowledges that “so thought Thomas Paine, who wrote not to disprove religion but rather to vindicate deism against what he considered to be foul accretions in the holy book.”

The success of *God is not Great* suggests that *The Age of Reason* remains not only relevant but compelling. Revised and adapted for our times by Hitchens (a former Marxist and an admirer and biographer of Paine), it still generates passion and polarizes readers. One fascinating indicator of the resurgent interest in *The Age of Reason* can be found in the customer reviews posted on amazon.com. The 2007 paperback edition “stands the test of time,” according to one reviewer, and “is the most remarkable book ever written,” according to another. After more than two centuries, the same old disputes over the authenticity of the Bible, the legitimacy of religious authorities, the morality of scripture, the power of reason, and the source of faith have once again come to the fore, in ways that were hardly imaginable some fifteen years ago. Religion per se is less important in today’s debates than two issues that would have been familiar to Thomas Paine: traditional religion as we know it (“faith-based” religion, as Sam Harris terms it, or religions with “supernatural gods” as Dawkins does) and freedom of conscience and speech. After all, the fact is there is a good deal of spirituality and Buddhist meditation in Sam Harris’s book, so much so that atheist readers have taken issue with him for not being a real atheist. By appropriating something of Paine’s strategy and style—although probably not his democratic appeal—Hitchens, Dawkins, and Harris have reinvented the genre of the antireligious pamphlet. Like others who call for a “new Enlightenment,” they are carriers of an intellectual tradition whose most direct influence may be confined to an educated elite but which has gradually contributed to the dissemination and popularization of skepticism in a transatlantic republic of letters.

Promoting Freedom of Speech and Conscience

Anti-religion hard-liners today are faced with an inevitable dilemma that recalls Thomas Paine’s difficulty in reconciling his forceful defense of religious freedom with his insistence on the superiority of deism and his assault on Christianity, which was unquestionably phrased in ways disrespectful of other people’s beliefs. As atheists who insistently deny the existence of any God—be it Jewish, Christian, or Muslim—Harris, Hitchens, and Dawkins perforce display various degrees of intolerance, ranging from irony and ridicule to rude simplification and anticlericalism. This is especially the case when they advocate disrespect for all organized religion, lump together the Muslim faith and forms of Islamism, and argue against religious moderation, which Dawkins and Harris claim “fosters fanaticism.” Sam Harris, who calls for nothing less than “the end of faith,” might appear to be the most intolerant of all, for he adamantly refuses to accept any religious tradition on the grounds

that "intolerance is intrinsic to every creed." At the same time, Harris, Hitchens, Dawkins, and their colleagues at the Council for Secular Humanism champion greater acceptance of the irreligious across the globe. They claim to speak in the name of all atheists—militant, organized, or closeted—who are themselves the victims of intolerance. And they do something else: their books have fostered reflection on the propriety of discussing religious ideas freely and critically, as the historian David A. Hollinger has argued. Connecting Hitchens and the like to Paine—and by extension to the freethinkers of the early republic, from the 1780s to the 1830s—helps us grasp the true nature of the so-called new atheist movement. In particular the comparison brings to the surface concerns about the role of religion in public life and freedom of expression in the United States today.

Ultimately, the philosophical basis for Paine's otherwise paradoxical critique of revealed religion and insistence on the superiority of deism rested on the free conscience of a freethinking individual. Paine expected a universal religion to emerge: "in the meantime," he wrote, "let everyman follow, as he has a right to do, the religion and worship he prefers." The same paradox appears in Hitchens's *God is not Great*. Although Hitchens professes that God poisons everything, he nonetheless claims that "what believers will do, now that their faith is optional and private and irrelevant, is a matter for them. We should not care, as long as they make no further attempt to inculcate religion by any form of coercion." *The Age of Reason* was designed to stimulate public debate, to encourage individuals to think and to speak their minds without fearing the consequences. After all, as Paine points out in *Rights of Man*, "it is only those who have not thought that appear to agree." In the early years of the twenty-first century, when religious diversity is on the rise and religious extremism constitutes one of the greatest problems facing the world, these bestselling atheist authors make no call for religious freedom—quite the contrary. Neither do they advocate total freedom of expression. In that sense, they differ markedly from Paine, who lived in more optimistic times. But like Paine, they make the case for a free conscience and encourage public discourse on crucial matters. Perhaps most important, they draw attention to "the demon of relativity" (Harris's phrase) within the context of religious pluralism. They ask: Can we really say whatever we want? Can all spheres be placed on the same footing? Can we teach our children creationism and other facts based on faith rather than science on the basis that all discourses should be granted the same freedom of expression? Like Paine and his followers, they are intent on restoring "the public use of reason," as Immanuel Kant put it in 1783, in our own age of unreason. They are similarly committed to the kind of "free inquiry" that utopian social critics of the 1830s—including Frances Wright, Robert Dale Owen, George Henry Evans, among others—viewed as the cornerstone of progress. In Dawkins's words, they are "consciousness raisers"—a phrase that could be applied to Paine—who uphold the right to discuss religion freely in the United States and in the rest of the world, as their involvement in the Danish cartoons controversy or their commitment to Ayaan Hirsi Ali's cause exemplifies. Indeed, their insistence on the right to discuss religion and their opposition to the notion that "it is taboo to criticize a person's

religious beliefs,” as Harris puts it, may be what ties these thinkers to each other and, eventually, to Paine.



Fig. 3

A New Atheism? Religious Transformations and Cross-Cultural Concerns

The publication of atheist books, together with the countless public appearances—conferences, talk shows, interviews—of their authors can be attributed in part to partisan politics. Yet there is something else involved in the publishing phenomenon that has brought the issue of atheism into the public arena. The current revival of articulated atheism also indicates profound religious transformations, which are obscured by the focus on the political dimension of the so-called new atheism movement. Undoubtedly, the recent rash of atheist manifestos and the popular interest it has generated result largely from the anxiety created by emerging forms of faith-based fundamentalisms in the wake of the 9/11 attacks and the anti-Islamic overtones of the media-hyped “war on terror.” They are also the consequence of the backlash against the cultural influence of the Christian Right in the United States, to say nothing of the disturbing convergence of religion and politics under George W. Bush’s administration, which jeopardized the separation of Church and State. Hitchens, Harris, Dawkins, and the like are political activists committed to three major battles that share a great deal with Paine’s concerns. They fight against terrorism based on religious faith, against the assault on science, and against attacks on individual rights. The current interest in atheism also reveals a significant change in the public perception of atheists, who are no longer perceived as lunatics, as Madalyn Murray O’Hair was in the 1960s when she zealously denied the existence of God. This is not to question the profoundly religious nature of American culture. But, as cultural anthropologist Frank L. Pasquale—a research associate at the Institute for the Study of Secularism in Society and Culture—has shown, there is a zone here where much is going on, a zone where lines are not so clear, where institutionalized religion as we know it has no place, but where the belief that there is no God can go hand-in-hand with rituals and sermons, Buddhist group meditation, or the framing of an ethic or philosophy in religious terms.

The Religious Identification Survey 2008 reveals that while Americans are historically reluctant to self-identify as atheists, 12 percent of Americans hold agnostic or atheistic beliefs when asked specific questions about the existence of God. So far there has been little empirical research on the topic and, as Ariela Keysar argues, scholars and commentators have tended to “lump together atheists, agnostics, and the ‘no religion’ population into an undifferentiated mass.” It is only recently that attention has been paid to unreligion, and hence irreligion, as such. The scholarship is the result of the awareness that the group of people who profess no explicit religious identity, known as the “none” or “unaffiliated” category, is growing in the United States—it has now reached 16 percent.

Finally, the revival of militant atheism and the renewed interest in radical Enlightenment literature, with its cross-cultural currents, parallel recent developments in Europe. British, American, and French atheist writers engage ideas relevant to other societies and reach out to an international audience. Similar controversies about the role of religion in society are in play on both sides of the Atlantic. In Italy, the pressure of the Catholic Church poses a serious threat to abortion rights advocates. Creationism is now making alarming headway in public education in the United Kingdom and, on October 4, 2007, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe adopted a resolution that promoted the teaching of evolution in schools. In France—where 30 percent of the population identify themselves as being “non religious,” a small majority self-identify as Catholics (with only 26 percent who are certain that God exists, according to an opinion poll in 2006), and where Islam has become the second most common religion—questions about the place of religion in society have become increasingly urgent. French president Nicolas Sarkozy has sought to introduce religion into the public sphere by infusing various speeches with “God talk” in ways that many French people find disturbing, especially because the president’s call for “positive” secularism and inclusion tends to exclude nonreligious people. In *La République, les religions, l’espérance* (*The Republic, Religions, and Hope*), published three years before his election to the presidency in 2007, Sarkozy, then minister of the interior, admitted that he found the certainty there was no God arrogant. Sarkozy’s standpoint on *laïcité*, a concept which was defined and institutionalized in 1905 by the Law on the Separation of the Churches and the State, is famously summed up in the controversial speech he made in the Palais de Latran in Rome on December 20, 2007, in which he asserted that “the school teacher will never be able to replace the priest or the pastor.” This statement drew sharp criticism for contradicting the basic principle of *laïcité*, whose close links with education derive from the Enlightenment’s appeal to reason and, more specifically, Condorcet’s idea that schools were the vehicle for emancipation, universal progress, liberty, and equality.

It may be no coincidence that *The God Delusion* and *God is not Great* have recently appeared in French, along with new editions of d’Holbach’s antireligious writings and of the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, to name but a few. French conflicts over *laïcité* resonate with the revived interest in the

Enlightenment paradigm as well as the resurgence of militant, even ideological atheism in the United States. At a time when stereotypes about national character tend to drive a wedge between the United States and France, our common concerns regarding secularization and religious revivalism are thus emphasized. More broadly, the ongoing European discussions on the presence of religion in public life resonate with those in the United States, which is witnessing, according to another recent Pew survey, an increasingly negative assessment of those who would mix politics and religion and less support for religious institutions that speak out on social issues.

Further Reading:

On the Enlightenment, see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity, 1650-1750* (New York, 2002); Margaret C. Jacob, *The Radical Enlightenment: Pantheists, Freemasons and Republicans* (second revised ed., Lafayette, La., 2006); David Lundberg and Henry F. May, "The Enlightened Reader in America," *American Quarterly* 28:2, Special Issue: An American Enlightenment (Summer, 1976); Henry May, *The Enlightenment in America* (New York, 1976); Paul Merrill Spurlin, *The French Enlightenment in America: Essays on the Times of the Founding Fathers* (Athens, Ga., 1984); Catherine Secrétan, Tristan Dagron, Laurent Bove, eds., *Qu'est-ce que les lumières "radicals"? Libertinage, athéisme et spinozisme dans le tournant philosophique de l'âge classique* (Paris, 2007). See also Ann Thomson, *Bodies of Thought: Science, Religion, and the Soul in the Early Enlightenment* (Oxford, 2008) for its thorough treatment of the historiographical debate on the varieties of Enlightenment. On the *Traité des trois imposteurs*, Silvia Berti, Françoise Charles-Daubert, Richard Henry Popkin, eds., *Heterodoxy, Spinozism, and Free Thought in Early-Eighteenth-Century Europe: Studies on the Traité des trois imposteurs* (Dordrecht, Boston, London, 1996).

On unbelief in the United States, see Penny Edgell, Joseph Gerteis, and Douglas Hartmann, "Atheists as 'Other': Moral Boundaries and Cultural Membership in American Society," *American Sociological Review* 71 (April 2006): 211-234. Barry A. Kosmin and Ariela Keysar, eds., *Secularism and Secularity* (Hartford, Conn., 2006); Susan Jacoby, *Freethinkers: A History of Secularism* (New York, 2004); Christopher Grasso, "Skepticism and American Faith: Infidels, Converts, and Religious Doubt in the Early Nineteenth Century," *Journal of the Early Republic* 22 (Fall 2002): 456-508; "Deist Monster: On Religious Common Sense in the Wake of the American Revolution," *Journal of American History* 95:1 (June 2008): 43-68; James Turner, *Without God, Without Creed: The Origins of Religious Unbelief in America* (1985). On freedom of expression, see David A. Hollinger, "Religious ideas: Should They Be Critically Engaged or Given a Pass?" *Representations* 101 (Winter 2008): 144-154. On Americans and the place of religion in politics, Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, "More Americans Question Religions' Role in Politics" (August 21, 2008). On French Catholics, "[Portrait des catholiques, sondage exclusif](#)," *CSA/Le Monde des religions* (9 janvier 2006) Quote from Stephen Prothero appears in the *Washington Post* (May 6,

2007). Quote from Harvey Cox was taken from "Religion and Ethics Newsweekly," PBS (January 5, 2007).

In addition to those mentioned in the text, new atheist books include Sam Harris, *Letter to a Christian Nation* (New York, 2006); Christopher Hitchens, ed., *The Portable Atheist: Essential Readings for the Nonbeliever* (New York, 2007); Daniel Dennett, *Breaking the Spell: Religion as a Natural Phenomenon* (New York, 2006); John Allen Paulos, *Irreligion: A Mathematician Explains Why the Arguments for God Just Don't Add Up* (New York, 2008); Victor J. Stenger, *God, the Failed Hypothesis: How Science Shows That God Does Not Exist* (New York, 2007); Bob Avakian, *Away with Gods! Unchaining the Mind and Radically Changing the World* (Chicago, 2008). On Hitchens, see Simon Cottee and Thomas Cushman, eds., *Christopher Hitchens and His Critics: Terror, Iraq, and the Left* (New York, 2008).

Literature on the French Radical Enlightenment includes Paul Henry Thiry, Baron d'Holbach, *System of Nature* (London, 1797); *Christianity Unveiled: Being an examination of the principles and effects of the Christian religion* (published in 1795 in New York, under the name of Boulanger); as well as Constantin-François Volney, *Ruins; or, A Survey of the Revolutions of Empire* (New York, 1796); *Common sense, or, Natural ideas opposed to supernatural* (New York, 1795; in fact *Bon sens du curé Meslier* by d'Holbach). The first English translation of *Le Traité des trois imposteurs* was published in 1844. Two years later, it was reprinted in New York by Gilbert Vale, a follower and biographer of Paine, who published a deistic paper from 1836 to 1846, called *The Beacon*. For a more recent translation, see Abraham Anderson, *The Treatise of the Three Impostors and the Problem of Enlightenment: a New Translation of the Traité Des Trois Imposteurs (1777 Edition) With Three Essays in Commentary* (Lanham, Md., 1997). Quotes from Paine come from Moncure Daniel Conway, ed., *The Writings of Thomas Paine*, 4 volumes (New York, 1967).

The author would like to thank Peter C. Mancall, Richard Wrightman Fox, Kirsten Fischer, Jeffrey L. Pasley, Edward G. Gray, Donna Kesselman, Élise Marienstrass, Andrew Diamond, and Christopher Robinson for their fine comments and encouragement.

This article originally appeared in issue 9.4 (July, 2009).

Nathalie Caron is the coeditor of the *Revue française d'études américaines* and professor of American studies at the Université de Paris 12-Val de Marne, France. She is the author of *Thomas Paine contre l'imposture des prêtres* (1999) and more recently of "Résurgence et pertinence de Thomas Paine," *Sources* 20-21 (automne 2008): 57-82. In 2003, she guest-edited a special issue of the RFEA on the American Enlightenment with Naomi Wulf. She has also published essays on

religion and its treatment in the media. This piece is a revised version of a paper given at a conference on tolerance and intolerance at the University of Southern California in April 2008.