AMERICAN ATHEISM:
AN ANALYSIS OF EIGHTEENTH-CENTURY STIGMA BORNE BY TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY CITIZENS

by

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ABSTRACT

ROBERT LEE. American Atheism: An Analysis of Eighteenth-Century Stigma Borne by Twenty-First Century Citizens. (Under the direction of DR. JOANNE MAGUIRE ROBINSON)

This paper analyzes the stigma that surrounds atheists in twenty-first century America, and shows that assumed moral shortcomings of atheists have remained mostly unchanged over the course of America's history. By outlining the development of a Christianized morality that would serve as a foundational piece of a forming American identity, the amoral atheist construct is described. Using two modern case studies alongside several polls of religious affiliation in the contemporary U.S., this paper shows that the stigma that assailed atheism in the early decades of America's history has seen little change over the intervening centuries, and that modern atheists are besieged by eighteenth-century stigma – validating questions to their moral worth.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

A common synopsis of what makes the United States 'unique' involves an admission of blemishes but a near unflappable confidence in the opportunity for advancement. For many, the story of the U.S. is not a story of an inherently perfect system with no need for fine-tuning, but a system which allows for upward mobility with respect to one's socio-economic or cultural status. Far too many minority groups have been oppressed over the relatively short history of the United States, but dramatic historical changes in perception and legal standing can be presented for several groups. This project will work with a group - atheists and the irreligious - whose stigmatization has seen virtually no change over the course of our country's history.

Barack Obama's farewell address will be remembered for many things outside the immediate context of his words. As the post-Obama years unfold, historians and journalists who return to the speech given by the President will be forced to analyze the transcript in light of the state of his legacy, with the Trump administration's accomplishments or blemishes always immediately in view and coloring any assessment of the speech itself. But even with the knowledge of how Obama must have been feeling during his farewell ceremony, given the outcome of the 2016 Presidential election, it is possible, though perhaps difficult, to imagine the words of the speech in a vacuum.

For anyone familiar with President Obama's 2008 campaign or the details of the political stumbling blocks he ran into during his administration's time on Pennsylvania Avenue, the speech he gave in his adopted hometown of Chicago eight years after his inauguration rings as surprisingly familiar. With memories of how insistent he was about President Trump's total lack of qualifications for office during the campaign offering context, he speaks with startling optimism of his faith in the American system, and in the ability of American democracy to bring positive change so long as the people who make up the citizenry are engaged and energized enough to push the country forward.

Obama makes this claim based not off his own intuition; he declares that his faith in the American system is based on how he views the history of the United States. He speaks in familiar metaphors and tempers his positivity with an occasional reality check (at one point he uses the ever recognizable 'two steps forward, one step back'), but the message of the farewell speech is clearly one of America's "long sweep" as being "defined by forward motion."[1]

The picture of America painted by Obama is likely the vision of our country shared by many Americans on both sides of the political aisle. Nearly anyone will be able to predict the sort of responses one should expect if asking a random citizen what makes the U.S. distinctive: America is the land of the free, the land of opportunity, and the place where ostensibly anyone can go and, with the right work ethic, become whatever sort of person they desire to be regardless of ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious affiliation, or social class. President Obama isn't afraid to wade into the potentially treacherous water that is a dialogue on American exceptionalism, but his version of this provocative idea touts the progress made by individuals fueling and forcing legislative change as what

[1] Obama. *Los Angeles Times.*

makes the country exceptional, rather than some inherently exceptional quality of the country making such progress possible.

Given the repeated hedging of his optimism throughout the speech, no one would be able to accuse Obama of writing his farewell address while wearing rose-colored glasses. It is clear that the former President has a grasp on a version of American history that isn't the white washed pro-America's-every-historical-move iteration we are so often fed. Obama has clearly read his Howard Zinn, if not lived out Zinn's version of American history first hand.[2] This isn't to take away from the former President's undeniable optimism or almost defiantly positive view of the likely future fortunes of the country, but merely an attempt to properly characterize Obama's account of America's development.

But given this, how should we characterize the history of a group whose past doesn't reflect the kind of progress that the archetypal narrative presupposes we should find? What exactly are we to do with our understanding of the American narrative if we find an example of a group whose story isn't one of the sorts we've come to expect?

The story of non-religious peoples in the United States is one such history. Despite what many interpreters of the Constitution conclude about the intentions of the Framers, it cannot be denied that the United States is a country predominantly peopled by believers.[3] Poll after poll shows that, among the most developed nations, the United States consistently reports the lowest number of religiously unaffiliated citizens as well as, among the religious respondents, extraordinarily low opinions of this fleeting

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[2] Howard Zinn's "A People's History of the United States" is famous for its focus on the darker side of our nations history.

[3] Pew. *Changing American Landscape.*

minority.[4] The work of authors like Susan Jacoby and Leigh Eric Schmidt have shed light on the largely untold history of important irreligious American figures. Jacoby, Schmidt, and others have chronicled the lives and careers of some of the ultimate mavericks of American history, showing how individuals like Robert Ingersoll, Samuel Putnam, Elizabeth Cady Stanton, and a host of others worked on behalf of the nation's stigmatized minority of unbelievers.

But what their work is unable to show (through no fault of the authors, but due to nothing more than simple and unfortunate historical reality) is that the work these and other famous American unbelievers contributed on behalf of their like-minded secularists made any tangible historical difference. In fact, at the end of her biography of arguably the most influential and important historical actor in this space, Robert Ingersoll, Susan Jacoby includes a letter to the New Atheists imploring them to consider and speak of Ingersoll's contribution to their project – largely because Ingersoll and his legacy has been nearly completely forgotten.[5]

In his speech, Obama mentions Selma and Stonewall, eliciting feelings of sorrow (at the difficult social circumstances that led up to and ultimately caused these momentous happenings) and optimism (as we reflect on how far we've come since their necessary eruptions). The very idea of progress insinuates a flawed starting point, one that is in need of progress in order to improve. Obama's America is one that generally sports a forward trajectory. But it is also one that has, on many occasions, been forced into this forward motion by the very groups whose disenfranchisement has made such progress necessary.

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[4] Ibid.

[5] Jacoby. *The Great Agnostic.* 192-202.

Our country's history shows that the obstacles different groups have worked to overcome are as varied as the groups themselves. American history is nothing if not nuanced, and this is reflected in the paths to liberation taken by marginalized and alienated groups. A comparison of the struggles and relative plight of any given group seems nearly impossible given the myriad contextualizing histories of each group's trudge to subjugation. But in the context of Obama's farewell address, individual struggles can be set tentatively aside. As laid out above, Obama's underlying understanding of our country's history isn't rooted in a belief that the country's exceptional quality is the system itself, but rather the progress and changes to the system that can be made by the people on behalf of the people. To our 44th President, the most impressive part of America's history isn't its accomplishments; it is the progressive push forward that resulted in its many accomplishments.

Give or take a few tweaks to the core message, it seems safe to present Obama's synopsis of American history as generally representative of how many Americans see their homeland. This isn't to suggest that the United States has reached some sort of ideal enlightened end. The idea of progress that serves as the thematic foundation for Obama's speech offers nothing to suggest that the former President is under the impression that any specific group has reached a sort of equality that would permit stasis. Instead, Obama seems to be insisting on a continued push forward, one of the same sort that has resulted in incremental progress for marginalized groups in the past, in the interest of continuing the progressive moves forward that have defined the country as he sees it.

This paper will show that the plight of the modern atheist, and the relatively stable, demonized place of the irreligious in the U.S. over the decades, runs directly

counter to this narrative. The descriptions of the stigma that has dogged atheists and secularists in this country since its founding will likely ring as familiar to those who have studied marginalized minorities of any kind; there turns out to be only a few philosophical moves to justify demonizing entire people groups. Broad generalizations, identity politics, and gross misrepresentations are all part and parcel to the process of 'othering.' This is not to suggest that the plight of the irreligious throughout the history of the U.S. is comparable to that of nearly any other group who has suffered injustice at the hands of dominant power structures. Such an attempt would surely prove counter-productive in an effort to paint a picture atheists as appallingly persecuted ideological minority.

What this doesn't mean, however, is that the either the stigma of being labeled an atheist at almost any time during our history, or the consequences of such a defamation of one's reputation, was and is not tangible. Whiteness or hetero-normative sexual orientation and gender expression can be argued to have caused so much anguish among non-members of these communities due to their connection with 'traditional' American virtues. To be an American, for much of our history, was to be white and straight. But from the beginning, and in an important foundational sense, American-ness has also required godliness. This thesis will show that not only do these roadblocks remain for the irreligious of our country, but that unlike many other minority groups whose fortunes who have positively shifted (at least relative to their starting points), modern atheists are largely battling with an eighteenth-century stigma. Given the amount of time that has passed since the founding of the U.S., the stigma surrounding the irreligious remains strikingly unchanged.

The argument will begin by describing the intersection of morality and patriotism that occurred almost immediately after the founding of the country. Here, we will see that, despite romanticized portrayals of early America as a haven of Enlightenment-influenced discourse, Christianity permeated the popular philosophical conversations of the time, effectively fixing itself as an integral part of one of the foundational virtues of the Enlightenment (and the soon-to-be-crafted American identity), morality. This will show that contempt for the atheist is not, and could not have been, an emergent outlier that arose in spite of the classical liberalism that so influenced our founding documents. The opening section to the argument will show that religion and morality were deeply knotted at the very forming of the American identity, thus making godliness a necessary component of a moral life. Because of this, the categorization of atheists as amoral by a classically American standard, or the claim that American-ness requires godliness, would be neither a misrepresentation nor a misunderstanding of history. It is simply how the atheist fits against the American identity that developed soon after the founding of the country.

In order to establish the continuity of the atheist stigma, some attention will then be spent on the intervening decades, tracing the skeptic's place in history after the authority of Enlightenment influenced thinkers declined. The maligning of influential lecturers and writers from the country's adolescent years - like Robert Ingersoll - and pivotal moments like the Scopes "monkey" trial will serve as examples of the continuous negative public opinion of the irreligious.

This argument will hinge on two case studies which will be introduced to establish modern examples of the still-powerful anti-atheist sentiment in the U.S.

Backlash that Barack Obama received after claiming the U.S. is "no longer a nation of believers, at least not just," during a speech in 2006 will serve as the first example.[6] Blowback from Obama's speech will serve as an example of how strongly the idea of America as a godly nation persists. In the speech, Obama never makes a reference to atheism, irreligion, or skepticism; he merely implies a plurality of faiths as a characteristic of a demographically evolving country.

Next, we will look at the email-hack of DNC officials prior to the 2016 Presidential election. A single email, in particular, will be of interest here. Clearly in the interest of damaging the election chances of then-Democratic primary candidate Bernie Sanders, former DNC CFO Brad Marshall plainly speculates about the religious convictions of the Vermont Senator. Marshall comments specifically on Sanders' rumored atheism, mentioning that such a revelation would rattle some voters in certain parts of the country. These emails, as well as anything ever could, show the unambiguous attempt at utilizing the stigma surrounding atheists. In only a few emails, Marshall demonstrates both the legitimacy, and - by virtue of the status of the individual who wrote the emails (a major officer in the DNC, no less) - the perceived effectiveness of weaponizing the 'atheist' tag.

These two examples, supplemented by several recent opinion polls showing that 'atheists' and 'nones' continue to fall below even tragically stereotypical religious others - like Jews and Muslims – in measures like trustworthiness and morality, will serve as the foundation for the analysis of contemporary American attitudes towards the irreligious, and the ever-present negative, disapproving eye cast toward atheists. With the historical background providing context, this paper will show that atheists and the irreligious suffer

[6] Obama. Sojourners/Call to Renewal address.

from a stigmatization that is damaging to one's reputation. Further, it will show that this stigmatization has persisted largely intact through our present moment.

Ideological minorities are nothing new to us now, and they are certainly not a novel discovery when rifling through historical texts. U.S. history offers a regrettably lengthy list of groups whose ostracization is deserving of academic study. This thesis will focus on the historical stigmatization of the irreligious in the United States. It will show that the stigma surrounding atheism as it existed just following the country's founding is almost wholly intact, that the social penalties for existing as an open atheist have been almost totally untouched, and that the general standing of the irreligious person has seen very little progress in the roughly 240 year history of the United States.

DEFINITIONS

Given the number of terms that can be reasonably thrown into a discussion about those who lack religion, some time must be dedicated to defining the terms to be used. The definitions and terms used here will borrow from those used by Phil Zucker (2009). Further, while specific definitions will prove quite beneficial in many uses of any given term, in several instances during this thesis the varied definitions as given here will overlap to such a degree that they seem to be merely distinctions without meaningful differences. For our purposes, for example, the terms irreligious and atheists may, at any given point, serve exactly the same purpose. Nonetheless, specific definitions will prove useful as they are needed.

Considering the strong political undercurrent of a conversation of this sort, some terms will be more appropriate than others depending on the immediate context - with

some cases calling for the use of a certain term without necessarily excluding the use of another. 'Atheist' and 'agnostic' are less political, dealing with personal beliefs (or a lack there of). These terms are more philosophical in nature, signifying an individual's position on questions of religious truth and the existence of some sort of ultimate or divine being or presence. 'Secularist' and 'none,' for example, are more political, indicating one's position on a religious question relative to a predominant position of the citizenry, or as it relates to questions of governance.

An atheist, for our purposes, is an individual who is unconvinced by arguments for the existence of a "God" or "Gods," and, consequently, any religious traditions purporting to offer reasons for believing in such a figure or figures. An atheist operates as if there is no such being or presence, doesn't believe in such a figure, and may find the very concept of God meaningless or incoherent. An atheist doesn't necessarily make any claims of his or her own about the existence of God; they don't have to assert, as is often assumed, that God does not exist. But they must reject or resist so-called established traditions, explanations, and proofs for God.

An agnostic is someone who is unsure or undecided about religious claims, or who holds no concrete positions not only on the questions of whether any given religious tradition is correct in its assertions, but on the matter of the existence of God him or herself. An agnostic may also claim there are some matters that are simply out of reach for humanity, rooting their agnosticism in a belief that assertions on the existence of God one way or the other are mistaken and necessarily unverifiable.

A 'none' is a term that relates to how an individual self-identifies on a survey on religious belief. Nones are identifiable only insofar as they reject organized religious

traditions.[7] Nones may still hold beliefs that would, by nearly any standard, be considered religious. Many still hold beliefs in God, an afterlife, divine intervention, etc. As it relates to this project, the category of 'none' is by far the broadest, both as it will be used here and as it is used in many surveys of religious affiliation.

A secularist is a term that describes a political position about the place (or lack thereof) for religion in government. A secularist is someone who rejects the influence of religious traditions when it comes to public policy. The tag 'secularist' doesn't necessarily reveal religious affiliation of any kind, as it only corresponds to a position regarding the place of religion and its legislative influence. A secularist may turn out to be an atheist just as easily as a devout Methodist so long as they resist the influence of religion of any kind onto governing bodies within the U.S.

Finally, the word irreligious here will serve as a term to describe any individual who has been stigmatized or denigrated due to their positions on religion both philosophically or politically. The irreligious and their consistent marginalization and demonization will serve as the subject of this paper, and the aforementioned terms will add necessary specificity as the context calls for it.

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[7] Lipka.

CHAPTER 2: SETTING THE STAGE: BELIEF AS AN AMERICAN VALUE

Opinions on the religiosity of our founding fathers, and thus their intentions as framers of the constitution, are extremely varied. Perhaps the most valuable thing to remember in a discussion regarding the religious convictions of America's founding fathers is that their positions on this matter, much like the complex lives and views of the men as a whole, are hardly a monolith lending themselves to pithy summations. The feuds and rivalries among the men that are so often exalted as shameless champions of freedom offer a glimpse into what was undoubtedly a messy and contentious fashioning of a young democracy.

However, as outlined by Susan Jacoby in *The Age of American Unreason,* the religion of the founding fathers, varied as it may have been, would bear little resemblance to the religion of the majority of Americans today. Our founders were true men of the Enlightenment; social and political elites who displayed this status in the way their thinking and writing reflected the bourgeois intellectual philosophy of the time. Liberty, freedom, and sovereign autonomy separate from theocratic or autocratic rule were extremely popular ideas in the late eighteenth century. The contemporary ideas and forms of democracy that so many 'free' countries define themselves by today are largely

products of this time period; some of it directly resulting from replicated and augmented versions of the American system.

It is the lack of religious references in our founding documents that so many secularists throughout history have pointed to when claiming that the country was founded on secular principles. And such interpreters of history are not wrong in their assessment of these documents.[8] But this summary of our history as proof of America's codified irreligiousness seems both short sighted and wedded to a somewhat arbitrary time frame. Jacoby notes that despite the undoubted secular nature of both the Constitution and the Bill of Rights – and, due in part to the class difference and philosophical separation of the founders from the general population of the colonies - that the secular nature of the country our founders envisioned was overtaken by conspicuously religious qualifications for American-ness within a generation.[9] The idea that the irreligious were not "up to the demands of virtuous citizenship" is one that developed out of the first generation of Americans.[10]

It would seem that the attitudes of the general public, if it ever reflected the thinking of the founders in any significant way, shifted quickly towards some recognizably contemporary form of the morality necessary for citizenship that reflects, at minimum, respect for the place of the bible and its teachings in the lives of decent citizens. Religion alone, it was supposed, was able to keep citizens moral and, as John Adams wrote, from "break[ing] the strongest cords of our Constitution as a whale goes through a net."[11] Exactly how religious our founding generation truly was is scarcely

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[8] As is often cited, there is no mention of God in either Constitution or the Bill of Rights
[9] Jacoby. *The Age of American Unreason.* 42-43
[10] Schmidt. *Distrust in Unbelievers Runs Deep in American History.*
[11] Adams.

accessible, let alone quantifiable. But it is hardly a stretch to guess that the deistic, "watchmaker" God of several of the founders represents the end of the spectrum[12] that coincided with the Enlightenment-rich education of our socially elite founders, and reduced largely to less obscure, more fundamentalist protestant influences as one descends down the social ladder.

The discrepancy between the attitudes of our founding fathers and the general public can be illustrated in the swift collapse of the reputation of one of the most influential revolutionaries, Thomas Paine. It was Paine who is often credited with influencing the most notable of early-American heroes (Washington and Jefferson were particularly close to Paine at different times), and his 1776 pamphlet *Common Sense* was extraordinarily influential to the revolutionary cause, due largely to its place as one of the most circulated books (in proportion to the population of the colonies at that time) of any published in American history.[13]

But it was his degradation of biblical literalism and contention that all religions are creations of men rather than God in another famous work, *The Age of Reason,* that would trigger the undoing of Paine's political standing in the eyes of many Americans. This, coupled with his support of the French revolution, which Jacoby describes as being associated with European freethought and alien, un-American philosophies which would become a part of the "permanent template that shapes American thinking about religion," would ensure the minimization of Paine's influence on American history (an issue that Robert Ingersoll, not incidentally to the purpose of this paper, would work to remedy).

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[12] Jacoby posits that, during this time period, outright atheists were "probably nonexistent" (*The Age of Reason, 43)*

[13] Conway.

From the very founding of our country, the irreligious have been portrayed as, at best, morally compromised. More likely, they have been seen largely as wholly unfit to the type of demands that virtuous citizenship requires.[14] Our country is one which from the founding tied morality, virtue, country, and religion into one large and complicated set of virtues; a set of virtues that is compromised entirely if even a single piece is missing from the whole.

This is not to suggest that the religion that would so influence future generations of Americans resisted the Enlightenment's sway entirely. While it is an oversimplification to suggest that all members of the revolutionary generation were simply philosophical reflections of our founders', it is also not the case that the founders were out of touch elites whose accomplishments and principles have overshadowed and whitewashed an otherwise conservatively devout public. In fact, the more familiar protestant religion of the earliest American middle-class that overtook (or remained dominant over) the Deism of many of the founders adjusted to the intellectual thinking of the time.[15] In *Conceived in Doubt*, Amanda Porterfield describes early Evangelicals as offering guidance to citizens growing distrustful of Enlightenment influenced skepticism, and Methodists as providing a release for "pent-up emotion" which resulted in the release of "torrents of emotion" which were then interpreted as signs of God's power.[16] This shift in focus from ritual to morality and emotional support is arguably what gave religious belief its tether to the early American's understanding of virtue.[17] Given the influence that we now know the Enlightenment had on Western thinking, and how Enlightenment

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[14] Schmidt. Ibid

[15] Middle-class here refers to the white land owners who could vote in early America, but who still weren't members of the social elites

[16] Porterfield. 101.

[17] Tuner. 32.

philosophy contrasted with religious institutions that preceded the movement, it should come as little surprise that the place of religion shifted during this time period; and even less at how its place changed. The religious belief that survived Enlightenment rationalist influence was de-mystified. That the shift towards rational and moral religion reflects Enlightenment principles is hardly a revelation.[18] But in parts of the world where Enlightenment thinking dominated (nearly anywhere in the West around the time of the Revolution) pre-enlightened religious belief was mostly forced to adapt or resist, and the adaptation largely involved linking religion and one of the dominant principles of the movement: morality.

This intermingling of morality and godliness did not start with the American experiment, nor is it unique to our history. John Locke, one of the most influential Enlightenment thinkers, lived and died a century before the Revolution. He was incalculably influential to almost any significant Enlightenment figure within a century of his death, with our Founding Fathers among his most notable followers. Locke's work focuses primarily on Enlightenment ideals like Liberty and Freedom, and his ideas of the natural rights of man influenced Thomas Jefferson, who penned the Declaration of Independence; a document rife with Lockeian language. Locke's language on men having, to borrow from the Declaration, which he influenced, "certain, unalienable rights" is one that still lends itself to fights for equality.

But even Locke, giant of Enlightenment thinking though he was, was not immune to equating godliness to morality. Locke was undoubtedly a godly man. In his *A Letter Concerning Toleration* Locke advocates for religious toleration as a necessary part of a functioning system of government. Locke's proposition is as well intentioned and as all-

[18] Turner. 36.

encompassing a philosophy of toleration as can be found from similar writers of the same era, but there is one major caveat to Locke's understanding of who should be tolerated. In the closing pages of the letter, Locke plainly describes atheists as a group that are "not at all to be tolerated," because, simply, "the taking away of God....dissolves all."[19] Locke's reasoning for such an unambiguous condemnation is both clear and familiar. Locke equates godliness with morality and values (he specifically mentions "covenants and oaths") that are common to any assessment of one's character. An atheist, according to Locke, is not beholden to any of the basic principles of morality that might allow one to function as a member of a moral community.

Thus, it cannot be maintained that the association of religion with morality originated with the formation of the American-identity. Locke's writing pre-dates the Revolution by about a century. Further, the writing of Enlightenment thinkers was not drafted as atheistic or deistic treatises, which were then hi-jacked by confused or malevolent religious lecturers and preachers. Writers of the time represented a range of spiritual positions. What makes the situation unique for the atheists in the U.S. is the timely correlation between the Enlightenment and the American Revolution, and thus, the formation of the American system. The founding of the country, and thus the forming of an American identity, coincided with Locke and Paine's zenith. The virtues that would come to represent Americanism were common talking points among contemporary thinkers. Because of this, deistic rationalism and the subsequent suspicion of skepticism, soon capitalized on and steered by Evangelicals, were foundational intellectual movements of a forming American identity.

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[19] Locke.

As a result of this "Christianizing" of the morality present in Enlightenment thinking by Evangelicals, religion and morality are tightly philosophically intertwined almost immediately following the founding of our country; thus virtually guaranteeing that this Christo-morality permeated the early American middle class.[20] This ensured that the Deistic elites weren't the only game in town when it came to claims of morality. But it also codified morality as a realm of the patriotic and the pious. An Enlightenment-influenced morality formulated with evangelical biblical influence leaves no room for the atheist. The Enlightenment offered rationality and human nature as a substitute for the 'divine' as a cause of, and reason for, everything. Early American evangelicals adjusted to the ways of thinking that were indicative of the time period, inserting belief in god into the definition of moral existence and where cold religious institutions were unable to provide for the emotional needs of the early Americans who lived such precarious and ever-changing lives. Soon after, as described by Porterfield, when the appetite for skepticism began to fade as the founding generation splintered along newly formed party lines, Evangelicals were able to equate the skeptic or disbeliever with amorality, sexual deviance, and social degeneracy.[21] Soon after the formation of the republic, skeptics found themselves with no claim to the morality of the Founders or their neighbors, no claim to the complicated and indissoluble set of virtues necessary for ideal citizenship, and thus no claim to Americanism.

But despite Paine's condemnation of biblical literalism or the Enlightenment-influenced Deism of many of the founders, it is not clear whether any of the most influential Americans were actually atheists. In fact, according to James Turner in

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[20] Turner. 82.
[21] Porterfield. 104.

Without God, Without Creed, it is not entirely certain that outright atheists actually existed.[22] Turner argues that, if we take the term atheist as described above, the number of atheists in the colonies less than a century before the revolution (1690) reduces to a "vanishing point."[23]

Such a low number of true atheists is attributable to any number of possible causes. Turner suggests it may be due to then still young and crude scientific fields which, coupled with less sophisticated education and communication methods, had only just begun to strain assumed and accepted biblical explanations for natural laws - thus forcing religious institutions to adjust or resist, but nonetheless splintering authority.[24] What this doesn't mean, however, is that detecting the stigma that has historically surrounded atheism is similarly difficult. It would be unreasonable to claim that there were no atheists before the Enlightenment. Outliers, contrarians, and an elastic historical definition of atheism - flexible enough to suit the needs of the accuser - all contribute to why such a definitive statement would be irresponsible. But atheism as a recognizable philosophical position as anything more than a fringe occurrence is a relatively recent phenomenon.

Instead, it seems that the morality of the time period was wedded to religion in a way that made the existence of actual atheists interestingly unrelated to the use of the term. An actual atheist would have no doubt been a pariah in most every town in the colonies before and after the revolution. But the use of the term necessitated no such tangible representation to justify the stigma that gave its use as a pejorative its sting. In a

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[22] Turner. 26.
[23] Ibid.
[24] Ibid 28.

young country where religion and morality were almost immediately inextricably linked, the atheist became the ultimate straw man almost by definition.

The academic study of religion is particularly self-aware field fixated on cultural respect, with an aversion to intellectual imperialism that might attribute a Westernized structure like the idea of 'religion' on a people that have no such concept, thus driving a wedge in the lives of a non-western people which might not have otherwise existed.[25] Such a philosophy is just as applicable to revisionist versions of western history, where contemporary scholars might draw distinctions relative to modern concepts that wouldn't necessarily apply to the past (referring to Galileo's work in a field that would become physics as 'Newtonian' for example). A similar idea must be applied to the connection between morality and religion for early American. The morality of any action was directly related to the godliness of the individual not because religion was a prerequisite of morality, but because godliness and morality were precisely the same thing. This isn't to suggest that the *only* facet of morality for the earliest Americans was a belief in God, but that religious belief was a fundamental part of existing as a moral being.

Thus, 'atheist' became the term that describes those who fall outside of the moral spectrum. An atheist was anyone who fell between moral behaviors. To risk being tagged an atheist wasn't as complicated an intellectual exercise as to reject God outright: it was simply to act immorally. To behave morally was to necessarily reflect godliness, and so to act in any sort of immoral way was to disclose a lack of morality and thus religion. An atheist was anyone who fell outside the norms of acceptable behavior. The atheist was the very definition of a non-American. Insofar as being an American meant respect for and

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[25] This methodological objective is, of course, formed response to such instances of cultural imperialism throughout the early history of the discipline.

deference to certain norms of morality, the atheist, for the early American, was the ultimate 'other.'

Next, we will see how the amoral stigma that enveloped characterizations of atheists and ungodliness continued relatively unchanged as the country swayed back and forth through dramatic social changes. The following chapter will show that, despite major transformations to America's social consciousness on several topics, the anti-atheist sentiment that developed alongside the country's identity would remain out of sight. In some cases, however, the stigma would operate stealthily yet effectively below the surface, using existing social issues as a proxy in some cases, to ensure its continuity. It is the perpetuation of the stereotype that will ultimately act as the support to the argument here, as the continuity of the stigma described above forces modern atheists to contend with antiquated perceptions of atheism.

CHAPTER 3: CONTINUITY OF A STRAW MAN

EVANGELICALISM, MORALITY, AND THE SLAVE TRADE

The notoriety of the most influential rational skeptics waned almost as quickly and entirely as their influence. Thomas Paine's historical footprint has largely been reduced, and, despite his enormous influence on revolutionary sentiment in the colonies and on the founders themselves, he is rarely brought up as one of the foundational shapers of the U.S. like Washington and Jefferson. Evangelicalism had taken hold by the start of the second decade of the nineteenth century, and what casual doubt and skepticism that had been accepted during the reign of Enlightenment thinking was scarcely tolerated.

This isn't to say that religion had a stranglehold on the psyche of the average American by 1810. Rather, Evangelicals, having shaped their influence out of the fusion of Enlightenment rationalism and biblical fundamentalism, were in a position to set the narrative. As Evangelicalism settled into a position of influence in the lives of many Americans, its scope of authority naturally ran into discussions on charged political topics. The number of people influenced by the growing evangelical denominations naturally incorporated demographics from varying geographical, political, and social backgrounds with correspondingly differing positions on political issues. The deftness with which Evangelical religion was able to successfully navigate intensely combustible

political topics, none more sensitive and complex than slavery, is a testament to either the political savvy of the movement's leaders or to the role that Evangelical religion played in the lives of Americans at the time. Because Evangelical religion was able to come out on the other side of the early decades of the nineteenth century largely intact, and with huge numbers of adherents, the rhetorical structures that kept the atheist on the margins of acceptable society also survived this period.

As for how Evangelicalism was able to thrive in a time with such divisive disputes, the filling of an emotional gap is not enough to explain the success of Evangelicalism on the lives of individuals who otherwise differed so completely on many topics. By the early nineteenth century, Baptist and Methodist churches across the country were the Sunday meeting place of abolitionists and slave owners, free blacks and slave traders (the importation of slaves to the U.S. was not outlawed until 1808); and, while not necessarily being worked through under the same roofs, these differences had the potential to strain and splinter Evangelical movements and churches across the growing nation.

Evangelical religion was, however, able to retain its influence on its varied constituents. Thanks in large part to the atheist straw man that was established at the forming of the evangelical-American morality, atheists and skeptics proved an ideal target for both sides of any political discussion on a charged topic. To be clear, this is not to suggest that atheism was somehow the true focus of the abolition movement; the Evangelical's atheist played a much more nuanced role in any such debate. Atheists and their skepticism were the presumed cause of moral corruption and social degeneracy that

so concerned the citizens of a newly formed republic.[26] Because atheists and skeptics had been set into the narrative as the opposite of morality and proper choice, atheism and skepticism would come to personify ills of any kind in the minds of many Americans. Whichever side of the slavery debate one agreed with, the other side was almost certainly framed as morally corrupt, ungodly, or abdicating basic American principles, and, thus, skepticism was often an implied factor.

The decline of tolerance for skepticism began at a crucial time for evangelical denominations. The debate over slavery was becoming an extremely volatile topic, one that would strain geographical regions of the country to a breaking point within a half-century. For largely Jeffersonian democratic slave states, the transition from a focus on the protection of individual liberty to a concentrated ideological effort *against* the encroachment of state's rights by the Federal government a decade earlier likely seemed a slight shift in philosophy. It would, however, have devastating effects on the slaves whose infringed liberty became fodder for a debate on state sovereignty.[27]

For many abolitionists, the push for the elimination of slavery within the United States was a moral imperative. But the morality of the many of abolitionists at this time was heavily influenced by evangelical moralism, which already had its manufactured 'other' to push against. An amoral institution like slavery called up visions of moral corruption and social degeneracy. Such undesirable societal evils were, consequently, the feared result of atheistic influences leading to the degeneration of the godly society. A direct connection to atheists and slaveholders would likely be difficult to expose, but the horrors of such an amoral institution wouldn't have been a far cry from the consequences

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[26] Porterfield. 104.
[27] Ibid. 74.

of a society run amuck with religious skepticism. In fact, the connection between religious skepticism and Satan was fairly common during this time in American history.

Religion would also play an important role in the life of both slaves and free blacks in the U.S., and in many cases both slaves and free black men and women saw a Christian social order as the best hope for advancement of racial justice.[28] The Evangelical construction that was the amoral, degenerate atheist was a part of the platform. Black Evangelicals inherited and helped to refine the narrative around skeptics and the threat they posed to polite society.

Lemuel Haynes, an African-American Vermont Calvinist preacher during the first two decades of the nineteenth century, is a particularly straightforward example of how the abolitionist clergy accidently used the pulpit to condemn skepticism while shifting the focus, if slightly, from slavery itself as societies greatest evil. He spoke in response to a Universalist preacher's skepticism on the existence of hell in 1805, and directly tied religious skepticism to Satan himself. Hayne's, whose work is characterized by strong anti-slave writings, denounced Universalism as a product of Satan's duping Eve to believe she might sin without fear of punishment.[29] Haynes' equating of the Universalist religious skepticism with sexual promiscuity and unrestrained behavior is an illustrative example of the cynical view of religious skepticism held by those who considered a godly life one's only hope for salvation, a demographic that would continue to rise sharply as the century unfolded.

Evangelicalism was not able to completely downplay the moral quandary that race relations presented. Rather than offer a solution, the promise of salvation and a

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[28] Ibid. 106.
[29] Haynes.

supernatural world removed from politics or racial injustice offered a common goal towards which whites and blacks could orient their actions. But such hold on the mind only persists if evangelical religion retained its authority and credibility. The campaign to stamp out skepticism and doubt worked to ensure the retention of the status quo. But the blurring of immorality of slavery and the shift in focus to skepticism also served to perpetuate the atheist-as-amoral stigma that developed with the ascension of Evangelicalism. Even in an era so dominated by racial injustices, the atheist remained a straw man, catchall descriptor for the morally compromised.

With respect to the question of slavery and racial injustice in the early nineteenth century, religion managed to serve the purpose of both sides of a mutually exclusive choice. While dialogs implying a direct connection between secularism and slavery generally aren't available, in playing to both sides of a divisive issue Evangelicalism was able to not only retain but also exponentially grow its influence during what should have been a trying time for religious belief in the U.S.[30] Further, Evangelicalism was able to successfully navigate a major hurdle present in the nineteenth century without foregoing its platform. In doing so, it ensured that the narrative of the atheist as a negative influence on proper society remained intact.

NINETEENTH CENTURY SKEPTICS

The influence evangelical religion boasted during this time, and the systematic de-legitimizing of the morality of atheists, causes the few outspoken secularists of the era to both dramatically stick out when compared to their historical counterparts and, at the

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[30] Porterfield. 101.

same time, to be reduced into historical obscurity. Robert Ingersoll is hardly a household name, though he's a historical figure that, once found, stands in stark contrast to casual summations of the time period in which he lived. But Ingersoll and his work, incalculably consequential to any project on American secularism though he may be, is not a useful subject for direct analysis for this paper. The reception of The Great Agnostic's lectures, and the hindrances that his condemnations of organized religion caused for his political life, are what will concern this project.

So the story goes for much of the work for a project tracing the stigmatization of atheists and secularists throughout American history. Atheism is rarely a direct cause or concern of those considering religiously charged topics. More often, it is the indirect, presumed, results of atheistic societies that are the concern. The life of Robert Ingersoll demonstrates some of the roadblocks faced by open secularists in many ways, though his biography is hardly one of sorrow and suffering on account of his rejection of religion.

Even among his contemporaries, Ingersoll is a unique figure in American History. At a time when public lectures were at their most popular, Ingersoll was a guaranteed sell-out nearly anywhere he visited.[31] Known as much for his oratory skills and generally likeability as his harsh critiques of biblical inconsistencies, Ingersoll's crowds were a notoriously mixed group, spiritually speaking. Ingersoll seldom found himself lecturing only to those who agreed with his points; he generally drew crowds of devout believers in any city he visited. Stories of the mixed nature of his crowds paints a picture of Ingersoll as, if anything, a curiosity among his more religious crowd members.

The relatively genteel nature of Ingersoll's standing among some percentage of the religious population does not expose the entire story. Ingersoll's oratory style and

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[31] Jacoby. *Age of American Unreason.* 65.

ability to spellbind a crowd were honed inside the courtroom where he made many powerful contacts as a successful lawyer. His successful legal representation of influential business magnates certainly earned him as many contacts as his speeches, and it was likely some combination of these contacts that landed Ingersoll a speaking engagement at the nomination of presidential candidate James G. Blaine at the 1876 Republican National Convention.

But Ingersoll's first foray into politics would not be his last. The Great Agnostic's popularity would make his endorsement extremely valuable to a number of Republican politicians during the latter half of the nineteenth century.[32] To the Republican establishment, however, Ingersoll and his oratory skill would prove useful as an election tool, but not as much else. Despite his popularity, Ingersoll's outspoken agnosticism would become a rallying cry for partisan Democratic newspapers looking to score points with a religious base by attacking the famous infidel. In response to Ingersoll's speech at the 1876 RNC in Cincinnati, the *New York Sun* commented that the party of Lincoln had better die a "quite death." The article went on to describe the "outrage" that was to "praise, [and] circulate his worthless wit," and that the only business the press had in publishing such a "moral pestilence" should be to exterminate it.[33]

Such language harkens back to the place of the skeptic as outside of acceptable moral establishment a century earlier. Ingersoll's popularity blossomed in spite of his outspoken secularism, not because of it. Despite his extensive contacts within the Republican Party and his popularity as a lecturer, it would not be Ingersoll's oratory style that prevented elected party officials from appointing Ingersoll to any office that would

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[32] Jacoby. *The Great Agnostic.* 59.
[33] *New York Sun,* August 26, 1876

require Senate confirmation. Neither political party had a monopoly on religious belief – the stigma that surrounded skepticism and the concern for the "moral pestilence" that was associated with atheistic influence would have been common both all sides of the political divide. Skeptics and secularists, consequently, had no party that they naturally gravitated to which reflected their values, and thus no skeptical constituent base existed for Republican politicians to justify the risk in nominating Ingersoll for office.

Ingersoll's case is unique even when compared to what might be expected of Gilded Age skeptical lecturers. The warm reception by a sell-out crowd that Ingersoll came to reasonably expect was not the norm for an individual of the same profession during his time. More often, speakers on the skeptical lecture circuit were unable to rent out theatres in which to speak, and thus were much more likely to lecture from large tents like what one would find at a religious revival.[34] C.B. Reynolds, a lecturer who once had to flee a stone-throwing mob who later shredded his tent in New Jersey, had to be defended by Ingersoll after his distribution of secularist pamphlet, also in New Jersey.[35] Reynolds was charged with blasphemy.

The trial that would result could serve as a metaphor for the secularists' history in the U.S. Ingersoll used his famed oratory skill to leave the spectators astounded by his defense, so much so that he was stopped on his way out of the court room by onlookers determined to offer him congratulations. A *New York Times* article from May 20, 1887 describes the trial of Reynolds (who apparently was the target of "ancient eggs and

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[34] Jacoby. *The Great Agnostic.* 132.
[35] Schmidt. *Village Atheists.* 191.

vegetables" being thrown by townsfolk angry at his presence), and, despite a spirited defense from Ingersoll, Reynolds was found guilty of blasphemy. [36]

In much the same way that the secularist has never been the direct target of organized or widespread violence in response to their skepticism, the judge in the Reynolds case resisted sentencing the lecturer to a jail sentence. Reynolds was spared from being forced to serve as a martyr for his cause. However, Reynolds' very presence in the courtroom as a defendant in a blasphemy case in the 1880's underscores his career on the margins. The Gilded Age Ingersollian lecture circuit sported several lecturers who made a career out of disparaging organized religion. While none garnered the notoriety of Ingersoll, that there was a market at all for such lecture tours indicates some tolerance of these ideas. Even when taking into consideration the necessity of tent lectures on the outskirts of towns due to the lectures halls not being made available to the lecturers, the stone-throwing mob that attempted to assault Reynolds seems to have been a relatively rare occurrence.

The relatively controlled toleration of infidel lecturers during the Gilded Age, however, does not necessarily indicate overhauled public opinion of secularists and atheists. For many of Ingersoll's powerful friends, he was an excellent campaign tool and defense attorney for businessmen, both of which made him invaluable for the mostly northern, industry-oriented Republican Party. But his outspoken critique of organized religion made him unworkable as a candidate for public office that would require Senate confirmation.[37] The most famous and likeable infidel in the U.S. can attribute much of his success to his skill as an orator and reputation as a sharp wit, though some of his

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[36] *New York Times* May 20, 1886

[37] Senators who are beholden to their constituents would have had a difficult time justifying a vote to confirm the most famous infidel in the U.S. to public office.

notoriety certainly came from the positions he was willing to hold as much as his ability to say them with charm. But his oratory skills are hardly what made him a liability to the party.

The understood narrative surrounding secularism and anti-religious sentiment in the U.S. made a victim the man who most completely rejected atheistic stereotypes in how he lived his life.[38] On several fronts, Ingersoll was the best case for a secularist to break through and overcome the stigma that secularists are burdened with; and in many respects he may have. But the political roadblocks that stood in the way of his climbing of the bureaucratic ladder in Washington were tied to his secularism. Ingersoll, perhaps the man best suited to break free of the stigmatization of secularists (and during a brief moment in history when skepticism was relatively tolerated), was still unable to overcome the public concern about the moral compass of a man who rejects religion. The relative open-mindedness towards secularism that emerged from some percentage of the population during the Gilded Age would soon be overcome by a revival of fundamentalism in the American south.

CULTURE WARS AND LEGAL BATTLES

Another court case with famous legal representation would take the country by storm forty years after the conclusion of the Reynolds case. This time around, a famous orator and representative of the Democratic Party, William Jennings Bryan, would wage a legal battle with another heavyweight on the opposing bench. Though not initially even

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[38] Much to the dismay of his would-be defamers, Ingersoll is famous for his loving, monogamous marriage with his wife until his death with her at his side.

a member of the defense team, Clarence Darrow would soon lead the defense of John Scopes in the famous Scopes 'Monkey' Trial.[39]

There may not be a court case with more celebrity firepower of the legal representation, relative to the time, in American History. Both Darrow and Bryan were national stars in their own right: Bryan as a three-time Presidential Candidate for the Democratic Party, and Darrow as the defense attorney for the Leopold and Loeb case in 1924. The legal minutia of the trial itself would wind up as a footnote to the spectacle that would unfold. Neither John Scopes himself, who was charged for violating a Tennessee statute that prohibited the teaching of theories contrary to accepted interpretations of the bible in public schools, nor the particulars of the verdict are well known.[40] The trial became a national sensation for the same reason it has become a metaphorical representation of the battle between science and religion in the United States today. The Scopes trial was the manifestation of a culture war that, while not new in the early twentieth century, was exasperated by Darwin's theory of evolution.

The controversy surrounding evolution in the United States can be attributed to a cultural shift taking place after the first World War as much as to the theory of evolution itself. Darwin's *On The Origin Of Species* was published in 1859, a full sixty-six years before the passing of the Tennessee statute (1925). While Darwinian evolution was controversial immediately following the publishing of *On The Origin Of Species*, the Scopes Trial emerged as a result of a 'second wave' of opposition to the theory that was as much a reaction to the encroachment on established, religious ways of life than an objection to the theory itself (as opposed to the mostly scientific opposition to the theory

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[39] Larson. 100.
[40] Ibid.

when at publishing of Darwin's theory).[41] By the 1920's the scientific opposition to Darwin's theory had mostly fallen into line in some form or another. While Mendel's genetic research and future fossil and geological discoveries would further entrench the theory in scientific catalogues, the case for evolution had converted many of its scientific opponents by the passing of the Tennessee statute.

The opposition to evolution during the 1920's in America was primarily grounded in religion and disputes over the use of taxpayer dollars - but these were not two equal and independent objections to the teaching of evolution in science classrooms. The concern for the curriculum of public schools funded by tax dollars was rooted in a religious objection to the theory of evolution. The wording in the Butler Act (1925) makes it clear that the aim of the bill is to restrict the teaching of any theory (evolution is specifically mentioned in the bill) that "denies the story of the Divine Creation of man as taught in the bible, and to instead teach that man has descended from a lower order of animals."[42] Evolution and its compatibility with religious life was a hot topic in the decades leading up to the confrontation in Bristol Tennessee. Aided by the lecture circuit, which would make the career of Robert Ingersoll, an enormous number of non-scientist citizens had more than a passing familiarity with the theory of evolution and in what ways it contradicted Biblical creationism.[43]

The confrontation between religion and evolution, by now an embodiment of the dreaded European, scientific, and religiously skeptical elites aiming to violate the lives of godly citizens by infiltrating the schools, is a familiar one by this point in American history. The prejudice surrounding secularism and atheism which had mellowed during

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[41] Ibid. 22.
[42] Butler Act of 1925.
[43] Jacoby. *Age of Reason.* 67.

the Gilded age were now in full swing; the famous athlete turned evangelist Billy Sunday draws a direct line between a lack of religion and criminality when, in describing the high-character of his religious school mates, wrote, "I never knew of a boy from either home to be an infidel or a criminal."[44]

The fundamentalism that would come to define the religious landscape of the first few decades of the twentieth century was more a revival of sentiments established a century earlier than a groundbreaking of new ideas. Rationalism and the opinions of the educated elites (now firmly entrenched in their ivory towers on university campuses rather than drafting constitutions) were enemies of morality - and religious skepticism, even moderate religious skeptics, were one of the countries "greatest curses."[45]

A fear of change is a common charge against fundamentalists by their more liberal counterparts. Whether 'fear' is the right word here, there can be no doubt that resistance to changes to the status quo is a hallmark of fundamentalist political intervention. Whether the early nineteenth century fundamentalists feared evolution and an increasingly secularized society, the political force behind their most pointed attacks reveal what group they thought would most benefit from a general de-moralizing of society. Irving Stone, in his biography of Clarence Darrow (the famously agnostic defense attorney for John Scopes), explained the sentiment towards evolution since its religious implications were first articulated, describing fundamentalists as "calling the scientists and educators tricksters, dupes, atheists, and liars, instruments of evil and destruction."[46]

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[44] Sunday. 22.
[45] Sunday. 84.
[46] Stone. 483.

As we have seen, the stigma surrounding atheism has proven to be nothing if not resilient. It's deft maneuvering into the spotlight during the abolition movement empowered and cemented the Evangelicalism's authority during the period. Ingersoll's stunted political career speak to the ceiling even the most affable secularist inevitably faces. And the casual anti-skepticism discourse of major figures in the early twentieth century speak to how deeply entrenched into the lexicon these sentiments were.

With this in mind, the next chapter will shift our focus. Recognizing the established anti-atheism built into the American moral structure, and remembering the continuity of the amoral equivalence with atheism as described above, we will now turn our attention to the modern day. In the following pages, two case studies, boosted by recent Pew surveys, will be highlighted as emblematic examples of the prevalent anti-atheistic sentiment within the United States.

CHAPTER 4: MODERN ATHEISTIC STIGMA

The stigma that defines atheists as 'outside' of the moral order has remained largely intact, if understated, throughout the history of our country. But if recent demographic trends continue, this stigma is likely to become an increasingly pertinent issue as the number of outspoken atheists grows. Survey respondents who identify as religiously unaffiliated are the fastest growing religious demographic in the country. Though atheists are a small part of a larger, often ill-defined, demographic trend, the number of admitted atheists in the United States nearly doubled from 2007 to 2014. The negative consequences of atheist stereotypes in the U.S. that have damaged the reputations and political clout of those tagged with the label will become more conspicuous as the number of atheists continues to rise.

The stigma surrounding atheists manifests itself most notably in the political arena, where atheists (often as a part of a larger conglomeration called 'none' or 'unaffiliated') are consistently underrepresented. Religious belief was mandatory for one to hold office for much of the history of our country (in some states until very recently), and surveys on the religious inclinations of elected officials shows that religious belief still serves as a metaphorical litmus test for those who would run for public office. Of the two major political parties, the modern Republican Party is most often associated with strong Christian belief. But according to the results of a Pew Center poll of the members

of the House and Senate, religious belief is bipartisan. Ninety-eight percent out of 535 members of the 114th Congress are members of a "specific religion."[47] There are zero outspoken atheists on the 114th Congress.[48] Only one member, Rep. Kyrsten Sinema of Arizona, identified as 'unaffiliated.' But in an unambiguous attempt to distance the Congresswoman from the unflattering perceptions of atheists, a spokesman told the *New York Times*, "Kyrsten believes the terms 'non-theist,' 'atheist,' or 'nonbeliever' are not befitting of her life's work or her personal character."[49]

Sinema's concern for perceptions of her 'personal character' in light of her lack of religious belief is not unfounded. Sinema's single 'unaffiliated' vote means only 0.2 percent of Congressional representatives are openly unaffiliated with a religious tradition, as opposed to some twenty-two percent of the respondents to a Pew Forum poll of the general public from 2015.[50] Pew notes that 'unaffiliated' respondents are the most underrepresented religious group by percentage when compared to the 114th Congress, a trend continued from the 113th.[51]

Polls like those referenced above only tell so much of the story at first glance. Many surveys on religious affiliation offer an 'unaffiliated' or 'none' option that is both broad and vague. *America's Changing Religious Landscape,* a Pew report on changes in religious affiliation among Americans, shows that of the 22.8 percent of respondents who identified as 'unaffiliated,' only 3.1 percent specified as atheist and four percent as agnostic.[52] The discrepancy here is likely due to a trend of "religious switching" noted in

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[47] Manning.
[48] Jaeger.
[49] Oppenheimer.
[50] Pew. *Changing Religious Landscape.*
[51] Pew. *Faith on the Hill.*
[52] Pew. *Changing Religious Landscape.*

the report, ascribing the gains made by 'unaffiliated' respondents in recent years to losses by Catholics and mainline Protestants. This switching from religious traditions likely explains why many 'nones' hold beliefs that directly contradict atheistic positions (many still hold beliefs in God or an afterlife) despite their being categorized together.[53]

But polls like these can only indicate a trend. To see where Americans' reservations about atheists show themselves today, two case studies will be introduced. Two prominent politicians' brush with the negative assumptions Americans hold towards atheists will be considered. In order to show that the stigma surrounding the irreligious that developed soon after the founding of the country is still a reputational burden, both Barack Obama and Bernie Sanders' brush with irreligious stigmas will be considered.

OBAMA'S CHRISTIAN NATION

In many ways, Barack Obama was the first real internet president. He broke ground by appearing on several YouTube channels, and made himself available to a younger generation in ways no other president has - and only one or two others would have been able to. But the access to so many people via the internet is a two-way street, and Obama is a president who likely dealt with as much slander and defamation as any before him. The advent of conservative news websites taking advantage of Facebook's algorithms by peddling false or deliberately misleading articles did not invent the market for libelous stories about significant political figures, but the internet has helped them to spread at light speed.

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[53] Pew. *Religious 'nones'*.

It also allows for single moments to be reused and revised repeatedly with particular efficiency, manufacturing relevance as needed. Obama's keynote speech at the 2006 Call to Renewal conference in Washington D.C. is known for a single line in the transcript. During a speech on his religious faith and his journey to come to terms with the roll of faith in politics, Obama claims that, "[W]hatever we once were, we are no longer a Christian nation – at least not just."[54] At the time, the relatively unknown Senator's remark caused no outrage. However, since his election in 2008, videos and quotes of the comment have become increasingly common in negative depictions of Obama and his political leanings.[55]

While more general disdain for Obama based on mostly conservative political principles would emerge out of the era of his presidency, the narrative had hardly been set before many critical articles on this issue were published. The concern over Obama's comment is largely based on a perceived threat to, as Freddy Davis wrote for marketfaith.org in 2009, the "very founding principles of the American nation."[56] For Davis and many others, Christianity, as the very foundation and support structure of our nation, is under attack in this speech. The principles that serve as foundational to the integrity of America are undermined when the primacy of Christianity is questioned.

A 2016 article by Martin Mawyer takes up this fight once again. In his response to Obama's comments, entitled, *Yes, Obama, we are a Christian nation,* Mawyer confronts Obama from a moral angle, questioning the intelligence of atheists and their allegiance to the very enlightenment virtues that were so inexorably tied to Christian belief during the

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[54] Obama. Sojourners Transcript.

[55] Nearly every article written in condemnation of the comments was published after his nomination as a Presidential candidate, most after his election.

[56] Davis.

formation of the country.[57] The slogan of the Christian Action Network website, where Mawyer is a contributor, immediately prompts the reader to consider the link between Christianity and morality in America's history - "Protecting America's Religious and Moral Heritage."

The direct reference to morality and American history in several of the responses are revealing. The outrage found in responses to Obama's comments is based in the same connection between religious belief and Enlightenment principles that Thomas Paine reached for in calling "[f]anaticism and infidelity, or that which is called atheism" the "principle enemies" or religion.[58] In 2014, nearly two and a half centuries after Paine's remarks, and five years after Obama repeated the sentiment from his original speech during a 2009 press conference in Turkey, Dr. Ben Carson would take up very similar language to Paine when rebuking the President. In a press conference with the Turkish President, Obama told reporters:

> Although as I mentioned, we have a very large Christian population, we do not consider ourselves a Christian nation or a Jewish nation or a Muslim nation. We consider ourselves a nation of citizens who are bound by ideals and a set of values. I think modern Turkey was founded with a similar set of principles.[59]

In response, Carson would invoke familiar language on America's 'freedom' and images of Revolutionary War soldiers as champions and defenders of that freedom, alluding to our founding principles and strong Christian roots as critical to our success.

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[57] Mawyer.
[58] Paine.
[59] Chapman.

Carson remarks that, "We as Americans have certain beliefs and cultures that led us to the pinnacle of the world." Taking Obama's comments as a threat to the system that led us to the "pinnacle," Carson says the American's are lucky that Obama isn't the one who gets to decide what sort of nation in which Americans live. That decision, according to Carson, is in the hands of the people.[60]

Obama's presidency was marked by intense loathing from many on the political right. His religious convictions and citizenship would be questioned many times during his eight years on Pennsylvania Ave., but the response to his comments at the Call to Renewal conference happened too early to be attributed to an anti-Obama narrative that developed during his time in office. Obama was rarely accused of atheism during his time in office (accusations of Islamic faith were much more common) but the backlash seen in response to his questioning the primacy of Christianity as a guiding force for the country shows the still unyielding tie between American-ness and Christianity.

WIKILEAKS, BERNIE SANDERS, AND ATHEISM

There are many reasons why the 2016 Presidential election will not soon be relegated to the index of history. In the age of twenty-four-hour news coverage, the most recent election showed that even a literal nonstop news cycle can feel as if it doesn't quite offer enough time to sort through an inundation of headlines and breaking stories. But lost among the near constant cascade of headlines, one story went mostly un-analyzed by much of the media.

In one of the several dumps of leaked emails from WikiLeaks, one message in particular sheds light on just how potent and usable the still-present atheist stigma

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[60] Ibid.

remains. In an email exchange with a subject line of "No shit," Brad Marshall, the former CFO of the Democratic National Convention, asks several Communications Directors if someone can ask Sanders about his religious convictions, presumably in a public interview. Marshall explains in a brief message that for his "peeps" in Kentucky and West Virginia, his rumored atheism could be damaging to his bid for the Democratic nomination. The entire message is as follows:

> It might make (sic) no difference, but for KY and WVA can we get someone to ask his belief. Does he believe in a God. He had skated on saying he has a Jewish heritage. I think I read he is an atheist. This could make several points difference with my peeps. My Southern Baptist peeps would draw a big difference between a Jew and an atheist.[61]

Both Kentucky and West Virginia are reliably 'red' states, with strong modern conservative bases. Marshall is clearly hoping to leverage the religious and strongly patriotic leanings common in conservative parts of the country against Sanders. The strong ties between protestant Christian belief and American identity are easily visible here. What's more, Marshall's email offers us insight into perceived aversion to atheists from more than one angle. Marshall states that Sanders has "skated" on his Jewish heritage. The several point difference Marshall is assuming is relative to Sanders' ability to garner votes as a Jew. The email gives no indication as to how much of a detriment Jewishness might be to a potential candidate, if at all. But its notable that in a December 2016 *New York Times* report on the recent rise in hate crimes, Jews were the "most

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[61] WikiLeaks.

frequent victim based on religion."[62] In the above email, Marshall is clear that to a Kentucky or West Virginia voter, atheism is far less acceptable than Jewishness.

By virtue of the profession and position of the author of the email, this message shows unambiguously that the stigma surrounding atheism is still alive and well. Marshall seems sure enough that the negative association his 'peeps' in Kentucky and West Virginia hold towards the irreligious will make a "several point" difference in these states. Here, Marshall is effectively weaponizing the existing construct that relegates atheists to the margins of respectable society to ensure that the social consequences of atheism are brought upon Sanders' run at the Democratic nomination. Marshall is strategic in his use of the antipathy many voters feel towards atheists, and his willingness to try to leverage the stigma that still besets atheists today speaks to both its presence and perceived potency.

Thus, we have seen that anti-atheistic sentiment remains, unambiguously, in today's political and social environment. This can clearly be seen in scientific surveys of both political representation, which ostensibly reflect voter preferences and dispositions, and surveys on opinions of the general population. We have also seen this anti-atheism, pro-Americanized moralism directly manifested in both the reaction to Obama's speech and the attempted undermining of Sander's campaign.

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[62] Lichtblau.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

The atheist found in writings from the Revolutionary era is a generic, non-specified construct that resides outside of the morality of a godly person. The evangelical morality that helped to formulate the American identity made room for the existence of an infidel on the margins of acceptable society as a foil to the ideal, moral American. The atheist became a stand-in for any person or group who stood beyond the Christo-American society as fabricated by evangelicals in the decades following the founding of the country. As the decades unfolded philosophers, Europeans, scientists, teachers, pro-government citizens, anti-government citizens, slave holders, and abolitionists would be cast as atheists. Because the power and influence held by religious belief established godliness as a shorthand for decency and virtue, the atheist construct similarly served as shorthand for infidelity, depravity, and corruption. The influence of Enlightenment figureheads would wane, but the ideals that they championed would not be completely washed out. They would, instead, be swept up by Protestant Christianity to form an American moral system that would prove extremely durable over the centuries. By keeping the focus on salvation and allowing the contempt of religious citizens to fixate on a vaporous 'other,' the flexibility of the atheist tag certainly played a part in the perseverance of the Evangelical-American morality.

What we are now seeing, however, is the consequences of leaving the stigmatized construct intact, as the ethereal atheist of the past begins to collide with actual atheist ideologies. The number of atheists has skyrocketed (relatively) when compared to their numbers during the Revolutionary era. Because the morality of an individual was tied directly to Christianity very soon after the founding of the country, to descend into 'atheism' was to either act immorally, thus revealing a lack of godly influence in one's life, or to reject God outright, which would reveal a basic lack of morality and guidance necessary for suitable life choices and trustworthiness. In a society dominated a Christo-morality, atheists aren't the presumed loser, they are the loser by definition.

Survey numbers from the Pew Research Center indicate that religiously unaffiliated citizens are grossly underrepresented by elected officials, and comments like those from Kyrsten Sinema's spokesperson show that even open unaffiliation does not preclude one from associating atheism with undesirable personal characteristics. The survey of the 114th Congress shows that the stigma that still surrounds atheism and atheists results in measureable political consequences.

Both the Obama and Bernie Sanders episodes show, in distinct ways, the first-hand backlash that can result from upsetting the Christo-American status quo. Obama's insinuation that the United States is a nation built on a plurality of beliefs occasioned harsh rebukes from ostensible patriots who both attacked the President's American-ness and questioned his loyalty to our founding principles. Obama's proclamation merely fails to acknowledge a privileged place for Protestant Christianity in his remarks, reducing it to one faith among many. No disparaging or demeaning comments can be found in his

comments. But even this is unworkable for the Christo-American morality as the short-hand for virtue.

Brad Marshall's emails openly speculating on Bernie Sanders' religious leanings are as direct a case for this project as could be hoped for. Marshall's actions indicate both and awareness of the stigma surrounding atheism in the U.S., and, as a major officer at the DNC, an understanding of the political costs such negative associations, when manipulated for political gain, could bring about. In hoping to weaponize Sanders' rumored atheism, Marshall demonstrates an understanding of how deeply the understood connection between atheism, amorality, and impropriety runs still today.

This project has aimed to shed light on the persistent and steady stigma that has surrounded atheists for the entirety of the history of the United States. The lack of progress on behalf of the nation's irreligious is particularly obvious when compared with the progress made by other ideological or cultural minority groups. Irrespective of the relative starting points of different oppressed groups, or comparisons of the degree to which any group suffers, the stasis of the atheist's place on the margins of society as a designated amoral actor is striking. Insofar as we are concerned with the broad generalizations that hinder any group of otherwise diverse individuals, we must be concerned with all groups who suffer from stigmatization.

In the United States, where morality and religious belief are intimately linked, the atheist is the defined outsider incapable of breaking through as both an irreligious and moral agent. The construct of an atheist as the representative of that which lies outside of acceptable behavior pre-dates actual atheists who merely reject religious traditions. For these atheists who are brought into a system with a pre-determined moral judgement

based off their religious leanings, a break from the Christo-American moral status quo is necessary. The static place for the atheists outside of this moral bubble will remain indefinitely, by definition, so long as the American identity as entwined with religious belief as morality remains intact.

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